

The Wine of Life

by *BulletTimeScully*

Two people, each wanting and needing the same thing, though neither one knows it yet. A story of life, love... and liquor.

The Start of a Beautiful Friendship... Maybe.

Chapter 1 of 10

Two people, each wanting and needing the same thing, though neither one knows it yet. A story of life, love... and liquor.

Disclaimer: Sadly, nothing recognizable belongs to me. Cara, however, is mine, and I warn you, she likes to talk to herself. I told her it was rather annoying, but she threw a book at me. Forewarned is forearmed.

Thank you to my most wonderful Beta, DelilahKelley, for looking over my butchery of the English language and for slapping me on the wrist every time I reached for that semicolon key!

Cara Benoit was bored ... utterly, painfully, resoundingly bored. Dear God, the woman could talk. Had she known Headmistress McGonagall could be so long-winded, she might have Polyjuiced some poor student and forced them to sit through the epic speech for her. 'Very tempting, that,' she thought to herself.

Reaching up, she pushed her long blonde hair back from her eyes... eyes that were the same piercing blue as the robes she wore. Caribbean blue, some may have called it, with a ring of darker blue surrounding them.

Speaking of blue, her legs felt like twin lumps of ice. 'Damn this Scottish weather!' she thought sourly.

Besides feeling as if her lower extremities were suffering from frostbite, Cara's back also hurt from trying to sit up straight. She was valiantly resisting the urge to simply bang her head against the table until she was unconscious, thus making herself unaware of the droning voice at the podium. She tried to look demure and interested while the old witch spoke... at length... of the coming school year, blah, blah... don't wander after curfew, blah, blah, blah... the new Muggle Studies teacher, blah... oh, that was her. Nod and wave, dear, nod and wave... and smile. So she did... with only a little effort.

Finally, before her subconscious was able to manhandle her into a drooling stupor, the speech ended and the food appeared. Her stomach grumbled at the wonderful smells that suddenly filled the hall. Quickly, she filled her plate with roast chicken, mashed potatoes, some squishy, green vegetable - 'Hmm, don't know about that one...' - and a small dinner roll.

As she was reaching for her cup, she heard the man to her right speak. "Would you pass the salt, please?"

"Mhmm," she replied through a mouth full of hot tea. Swallowing, and managing not to choke as the liquid seared down her esophagus, she grabbed the pewter shaker and handed it to her new colleague.

"Thank you," he replied in that monotonous, silky tone, taking the salt from her hand with his long, pale fingers.

She smiled politely and nodded. 'He's a strange one,' she thought, watching him delicately sprinkle salt over his own roast chicken.

She knew the basic facts about Severus Snape: he was a dreaded - she snorted, earning her a quick, sideways glare from the man in question - yet acclaimed man. He was a brilliant Potions master, as well as the current Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, feared by students, loathed by most of his colleagues. A more powerful Legilimens and Occlumens was not to be found. She also knew that he was a former Death Eater turned spy for the previous Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, whose life the Potions master had ended at the old man's insistence. He was also a war hero, albeit a reluctant one.

He was tall, she would have guessed six foot three, and thin, but not too thin. His skin was sallow and pale. 'Not an outdoors kind of person, obviously.' He had long, ebony hair that hung just past his shoulders, hair that was matched by his entirely black wardrobe. His features were striking, if not ordinarily handsome. He had a Roman nose, which somehow suited him, thin lips that turned up just so at the corners, and the most amazing eyes she had ever seen: black, like deep pools of glittering, liquid obsidian. When he turned his head a certain way, she could just make out what appeared to be a scar on his neck, barely visible above the high collar of his coat. She assumed it was something he had gained while fighting in the aforementioned War.

However, what intrigued her most was not that he had been, at one time, a loyal follower of the Dark Lord - 'Former Dark Lord,' she corrected herself - or the fact that he had basically murdered a man he had known for almost his entire life, a crime that he was found innocent of after the War ended. What intrigued her most was that while she had been here for more than two weeks (the teachers always arrived well ahead of the students), he was the only one of her new colleagues who hadn't formally welcomed her or introduced himself.

She only knew his first name from the few staff meetings that had taken place. Meetings in which he sat off by himself in the corner next to the staffroom fireplace. He never spoke unless spoken to directly. Occasionally, he took a 'covert' swig from a small, silver flask he kept hidden in his robes. A flask he now expertly palmed while reaching over his cup of tea.

"Getting a head start, are we?" she commented softly enough that only he could hear, as she casually cut into her food. She saw his hand pause abruptly, just as his fingers grasped the rim. As she speared the slice of chicken with her fork, he slowly turned his head in her direction, a blank expression - 'There's a surprise.' - on his face.

She looked right back at him, popped the piece of chicken into her mouth, and began chewing slowly, before using her fork to gesture at the hand he still held over the teacup. "Bad day?" she asked.

Not surprisingly, his response consisted of more blank staring, the raising of a single eyebrow, "How does he do that?!" - and the exaggerated tipping of the flask into his tea. 'Who knew hand gestures could be sarcastic?'

"Suit yourself," she shrugged, going back to her meal.

"If only," she heard him mutter under his breath.

He quickly stowed the flask back in his robes with barely a twist of his arm.

She paused and leaned her forearms against the table, fork in her right hand, knife in her left. She looked at him again, and both eyebrows rose in an expression of pure surprise. "My God! Was that a pure, unsolicited, non-self-serving comment?"

He stiffened, and his lipped tightened into a thin line. She had tried to speak to him in the days since her arrival, attempting, on more than one occasion, to introduce herself to him at the tri-weekly staff meetings. He was always out the door before she could even begin walking in his direction, much less speak with him.

He was never at dinner in the Great Hall. She assumed that showing up tonight was mandatory, being the first day of school and all.

Well, he couldn't escape this time. Taking the initiative, she leaned towards him slightly and smiled warmly. "I won't bite you, Professor Snape."

A shadow passed quickly across his face, and he lowered his head. His eyes clenched shut as his teeth ground together audibly. His fists tightened around his silverware, so much that she could have sworn she saw the metal bend. After a moment, he took a deep breath and placed his fork and knife carefully, deliberately, on the table.

The furious glare he turned on her then would have made a normal woman's blood run cold. Instead, it fired Cara's curiosity about the silent, solitary man. 'Curiouser and curiouser,' she thought.

His chair screeched against the cold stone of the floor as he pushed violently away from the table. She watched him leave, his black robes billowing behind him. If he hadn't been in such a hurry, and if she hadn't been watching him so intently, she probably would have never noticed that he limped slightly. Another war wound?

As he disappeared from the Great Hall, she realized everyone at the Head Table was staring at her with a questioning glare. Not one to incite gossip, Cara simply shrugged and turned back to her meal.

She was oblivious to the rest of the Welcoming Feast as she slowly finished her dinner. 'You don't scare me, Severus Snape,' she mused snidely.

She was going to figure him out.

He seemed like he needed a friend - or at least a drinking buddy. Alcohol she could provide. Friendship, now that was another matter entirely. That was up to him.

With one last dab at her mouth, she placed her linen napkin atop her plate and stood. She nodded her good evenings to her colleagues, and quickly exited the Great Hall. She had a liquor cabinet to visit... and a friend to make.

~TBC

Just Another Tequila Sunrise

Chapter 2 of 10

Severus is angry... Cara is determined.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

I'd like to point out that Cara is a bit of a potty-mouth, as is my version of Severus. You've been warned - liberal usage of swear words ahead!

Thank you, DelilahKelley, for being so wonderful and patient with me!

"God-damned, fucking, insufferable, pestering, blue-eyed harpy!" Severus Snape roared violently. He had been purposely avoiding the new Muggle Studies teacher since her arrival at the school just over two weeks ago. She seemed to be the 'let's-be-friends' type. He was undoubtedly not.

Severus knew that he had been exceedingly rude. He had yet to truly speak to the woman, let alone welcome her or introduce himself, but he really didn't give a damn. He also knew that she had been trying - unsuccessfully he might add - to speak to him for days now. Probably to prattle on about how much she appreciated his 'efforts' in the war against Voldemort, his sacrifices for the Light.

He snorted.

Sacrifices... What did anyone really know about his sacrifices? He had lied, cheated, and committed sins that would surely send him straight to the deepest recesses of Hell - do not pass Go, do not collect 100 Galleons.

He had put his life, the life he had *wanted* to live, on hold for nearly twenty years for the sake of the world, damnable place that it was. What had he gotten for it? A six-month stint in St. Mungo's, a mangled neck, and a limp.

No, she was certainly just like all the rest.

The news of his role as Dumbledore's spy along with his verdict of innocence from the Wizengamot in the case of said man's murder - had hit the front page of the Daily Prophet barely a month after the Dark Lord's downfall. Since he was now a 'war hero,' he had literally become the most popular bachelor in Britain. The women - he used the term loosely - had literally come out of the woodwork. He had received numerous letters proposing marriage, many more whose senders wanted to -- he shuddered at the thought-- bear his love child, and a few that he had thrown into the fire immediately, having detected the reek of cheap, love potion-soaked parchment before ever opening them. It was a farce if he ever saw one.

That was more than a year ago, and still he was hounded wherever he went by every over-coiffed, over-perfumed, painted, corseted, simpering cow in the country.

He smiled evilly to himself.

He had, of course, been smart enough to get a few good shags in along the way. What kind of Slytherin would he be if he didn't partake, at least a bit, in what was so freely offered? Besides, a covertly cast 'Oblivate' cleared up all problems of 'the morning after.' A Prophet headline detailing all his coital shortcomings was not something he wanted littering the streets of Hogsmeade.

Still, what did it matter, really? No woman would ever want him for who he was. His past held proof enough of that.

Dwelling on that past only increased his anger as he stormed down the hallways leading to the dungeons. His rooms were still located in the cold, damp bowels of the castle, even though he no longer taught Potions. He would have stormed faster, but his leg was giving him a bit of trouble tonight. Usually, he was able to keep his infirmity - as he called it - hidden and walk normally, but tonight he had been in a hurry to get away from that blond Jezebel and her sarcastic little comments.

"I won't bite you, Professor Snape," he said snidely, mimicking her higher pitched voice as he repeated her words from earlier. "Getting started a bit early, are we?" he parroted again.

Her voice played over and over in his head, as did her golden hair and sea-blue eyes, with their ring of royal blue circling the iris. Shaking his head to clear himself of her image, and just to spite her, he pulled his flask out of his robes and drained it, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I have not yet begun to defile myself, you Anglo-Saxon swot," he spoke to no one in particular. As he finally reached his quarters, the wards lowered automatically, sensing his presence. The heavy oak door smashed loudly against the stone wall as he crossed the threshold. Torches lit themselves as he paused briefly to discard the silver flask and black teaching robes on the sofa. He then moved quickly to the liquor cabinet across the room. With a swift slash of his hand over his shoulder, the swaying door closed itself with another resounding boom.

He smirked as he heard the bottles within the cabinet clink together from the vibration of wood against stone. He reached for the twin glass doors with one hand, as the other harshly undid the buttons of his coat. After much rummaging, cursing, sliding, reaching, more cursing, and several bouts of glass on glass violence, he found what he was looking for:

Tequila.

Beautiful, golden, mind-numbing tequila.

He held the bottle up and smiled, watching as the torchlight made the amber liquid shimmer, beckoning him to drink himself into oblivion. "Oh, I shall, my Hispanic friend... I shall."

With that, he twisted off the top and tossed it behind him. 'Won't be needing that,' he thought, before turning the bottle up and taking a long, slow drink.

A thin line of the toxic liquid slid slowly over his bottom lip and down his chin. He caught it with the backside of his hand, grimacing as he finally pulled the bottle from his lips. Not his favorite poison, but it certainly got the job done. Feeling the liquid run smoothly down his throat, followed by a line of fire that brought a barely discernable flush to his pale cheeks, he resisted the urge to cough - barely.

His countenance changed slightly as the liquor warmed his body. His features softened slightly, and his eyes closed as he leaned his head back, taking a deep breath in through his nose and letting it out slowly.

Still limping slightly, he made his way slowly back to the sofa, arranged as it was in front of the hearth. Another wave of his hand, softer this time, and a roaring fire soon filled the grate. He knocked the previously discarded flask onto the rug before sitting down on the middle cushion.

Severus groaned as he stretched out his left leg and sat his bottle on the table in front of him. Slowly, he leaned down to massage the protesting limb.

"Fucking snake," he swore. "I've not yet seen forty, but thanks to that scaly sack of shit, I feel as old as Minerva." Despite his mood, he smirked as he imagined the look that would cross the old bat's face if she had heard his insult. He could imagine her beet red countenance and stuttering Scottish brogue even now. He chuckled darkly.

After a few more minutes of deep tissue massage and imagining more ways to enrage the Headmistress, Severus reached down to pull off his boots. One after the other, the black dragon-hides slid from his long legs, to be tossed unceremoniously into a pile by the fire, followed by his socks.

He reached out again to grasp the bottle of liquor, turning it up once more as he fell back heavily against the cushions of the couch. The tip came away from his lips with a wet 'pop.' He held the bottle up, examining it. "Half gone, already," he sneered to himself, giving the bottle a small sideways shake. "This shouldn't take long."

With that, he turned the bottle up for a third time and welcomed the coming oblivion with open arms.

'Clink.'

"No, not that one..."

'Thunk.'

"Definitely not..."

'Crash!'

"Fuck!"

Cara bent down in front of her liquor cabinet, staring in distress at the shards of broken glass that had recently been a rather expensive bottle of elf-made wine. "Shit!" she swore again. Slapping her hand to her forehead, she groaned before getting rid of the mess with a wave of her hand.

With a dramatic sigh, she pushed back to her feet and stood staring at the cabinet full of bottles, hands petulantly on her hips.

"It's all your fault, you nasty piece of work," she said out loud. The 'nasty piece of work' in question was two floors down, holed up in his rooms, so it was very unlikely that he would hear her.

"Probably pulling the whiskers off kittens, or some other sadistic garbage," she cracked out, sarcasm lacing her voice. "Why am I even bothering with this? It's not like the man actually wants to talk to me. He'd probably rather pull out his own toenails than even say hello - bastard."

She rolled her eyes as her conscience shook its mental finger at her. "Fine... I don't know him well enough to call him such things... yet." Her foot began tapping as she narrowed her gaze murderously at the bottles in front of her.

Covering her eyes with one hand, she stepped forward, reaching randomly amidst the chaos of the cabinet. Her hand closed around the hard neck of a tall bottle, and she gently pulled it out, her other hand still over her eyes. Opening them quickly, she looked down at the bottle in her hand and laughed out loud. "Ha! What fuckin' irony! Not only am I about to literally drag myself across the coals to try and make a horrible man's life slightly less miserable, I'm going to waste my favorite poison on him, as well!"

With a frustrated growl, she tossed the bottle onto her bed - yes, her liquor cabinet was in her bedroom - and went to change out of her horribly uncomfortable teaching robes. "Itchy bastards," she mumbled, moving to her wardrobe after discarding the robes in a pile on the floor.

After much deliberation, she decided on a comfy pair of old jeans, a black sweater, and a pair of black, low-heeled boots. It's not that she was trying to look nice or impress him - 'Fat chance...' - but she didn't want to look like some frumpy old cat lady either. Casual but nice was just a means to an end: the less ammunition she gave him, the less likely he was to scream at her. She had heard rumors of his quick, sarcastic, hateful tongue.

"Well, Mr. Snarky, I've got one of my own. Care to trade blows?" She laughed out loud at the mental picture her mind gave her of that one.

Shaking her head, she dressed quickly and, tucking her wand safely into a side pocket, checked herself in her mirror. She ran her hands through her wavy hair, arranging it about her face. She had done her makeup earlier that evening for the Welcoming Feast, so she simply touched up her lips with the slightest hint of color. After a quick adjustment of cleavage - 'Can't have the girls looking bad, now can we?' - she gave her reflection one last, sarcastic smile, snatched the bottle of Jose Cuervo from the bed, and exited her room, blonde hair flying behind her.

"Well, girly," Cara's enchanted mirror said to itself just as the door had shut behind its owner, "he may not want to be your friend, but he'll certainly want to fuck you."

~TBC

A/N: Thanks to anyone who's reading! Leave me a review and tell me what you think! :)

And So It Begins...

Chapter 3 of 10

Cara and Severus finally get acquainted... in their own way.

She almost lost her nerve halfway to the dungeons almost. I don't even know the man! she thought to herself. I don't even know him, and yet I'm about to knock on his door on a Friday night, a bottle of liquor in my hand, and try to make friends?

She shook her head as her steps slowed. I'm making a mistake... a huge mistake. She swung the bottle nervously in her left hand, the liquid inside making a soft sloshing noise in the silent hall.

He'll hate me even more if I just come barging in, uninvited. She started to turn around, but stopped as a devious thought crossed her mind. But... what if Minerva had asked me to check on him? Make sure things were alright after his abrupt departure from the feast? She tapped the bottle thoughtfully against her thigh, running her tongue over the bottoms of her top teeth, as was her habit when she was thinking. My quarters are closer to his than any of the other teachers. It makes sense that Minerva would ask me to check on him... sort of.

She huffed, now tapping her other hand against the adjoining thigh, in rhythm with the bottle. "Fuck it," she stated with resolved finality.

She started walking, faster this time, lest she lose her nerve again. The soft heels of her boots made a soft 'thup' as she continued down the winding hallway. Coming at last to the staircase leading down to the dungeons and Snape's rooms she paused.

There were no torches.

It was dark completely, utterly, dark. Narrowing her eyes and huffing at the inconvenience, she pulled her wand from her pocket and silently illuminated the tip. Moving slowly *A broken leg is the last thing I need* she descended the narrow, spiraling staircase.

She didn't think it possible, but the air grew even colder as she descended further into the depths of the castle. "No wonder he's so pissed off all the time," she said to herself. "I'd be moody if I had to live in an icebox, as well."

After spiraling down for ages, she made it to the bottom of the stairs, sans broken limbs. Pausing for a moment, she leaned against the cool stone wall to catch her breath before continuing down the long and once again torchless corridor that marked the actual entrance to the dungeons. She passed what she knew to be the Potions

classroom and walked another fifty or so feet before turning a corner to the left.

She paused. In the utter darkness of the passage, she could see that there was a light near the end of the connecting corridor. As it was coming from the only door she could see, she figured this must be the place. Curious, she started forward again, taking no notice of anything but the sliver of light spilling into the hall.

So, it was to her great surprise that a cold hand suddenly gripped her by the throat, its owner forcing her up roughly against the cold stone wall. When she felt the hard press of a wand underneath her jaw, she reacted instinctively. The stinging hex she fired at the barely discernable body in front of her was enough to release the vice grip at her throat. As the figure fell back, clutching a wounded wrist, she heard *his* voice yelp in pain.

Oops... she thought, mentally cringing.

In the light from her wand, she could see him clutching his injured limb to his chest as he straightened. His face contorted in anger when he saw her. "You!?" He closed the distance between them. "You... *fucking harpy!*" he snarled, pointing viciously at her with his uninjured hand.

Okay, now she didn't feel bad about hexing him. "Harpy!? You attacked me, you raving lunatic!" She accented the last word with a jab of her wand in his direction. He flinched. "Oh please," she said, sarcasm lacing her voice, "do you really think I'd hex you again?"

He raised that infuriating eyebrow at her, giving her a wide berth as he circled slowly back towards the doorway, which had become a lot closer during their brief exchange. He shook out his injured wrist as he put himself between her and what he knew to be her destination.

She kept her hand tight around her wand, lest he get any more notions to manhandle her.

"It wouldn't be the first time," he countered, eyes fixed on the glowing tip of that wand. This close to his door, there was enough light spilling into the corridor that she could get a good look at him. He looked...

He looks like shit, she thought pointedly.

His normally starched and pressed white shirt was un-tucked and unbuttoned, with the occasional wet stain dotting the front *Into his cups, already, I see.* He was also barefoot. His long, pale feet stood out against the dark stone of the corridor and dark fabric of his trousers trousers that rode low on his lean hips, the top button lying open.

Oh my... her traitorous mind whispered. *Stop staring, you shameless twit!!* she screamed at herself, removing her eyes from the line of dark hair that she had spied peeking above the waistband of his trousers. *I wasn't staring...* her inner voice replied unconvincingly.

She huffed at herself as she continued her appraisal: his hair was disheveled and fell about his face, obscuring most of it. His sleeves had been rolled back to his elbows, and... and... okay, now she knew she was staring.

The Dark Mark.

There it was, imprinted into the flesh on the inside of his left forearm. It was not black, but faded, almost gray, and it did not writhe, alive with dark magic, as she had heard people whisper. She saw his fists clench together, especially the one grasping his wand, but was so transfixed that she never noticed his dark eyes move over her, before pausing on the bottle in her left hand.

After a heartbeat more of silence, he slowly and deliberately placed his left arm behind his back, effectively blocking the tattoo from her vision. Cold eyes turned back to meet hers. "Goodnight, Miss Benoit," he said, turning away dismissively.

"Now hold on just one God-damned minute!" she exclaimed. "You're not going to leave me standing out here after you nearly throttled me to death!"

He paused, his body turned halfway towards his door. "Am I not?" he asked, turning his head to look at her out of the corner of his eye. "I did not invite you down here, Miss Benoit. I do not want or need your company. Or anything else..." he raked her with his eyes again, "you may wish to provide. Good night!" He turned back to his doorway again.

She narrowed her blue eyes at his back. *When in Rome...*

She sighed dramatically. "S'alright, Snape. They told me I was a fool for coming down here anyway." He paused, his hand on the doorjamb.

"Let me think... what were the exact words they used?" She tapped her lips with an index finger, a pensive expression on her face. "Ah, yes," she said finally, gesturing at him with that same finger, "Snape is too much of a coward to invite any woman into his rooms... especially one that he won't be able to Obliviate."

Again with the fist clenching.

She waited. *Come on... you know you want to,* she thought. Finally he turned back to face her, leaning on the doorframe, his arms crossed defensively across his exposed chest.

"And what makes you think, Miss Benoit, that I would be... unable... to Obliviate you if I so chose?" His voice had a dark, sinister edge to it, and she could see his fingers twitching around his wand. She wasn't buying it.

"Oh, I don't know," she shrugged, walking slowly towards him, a slight womanly sway in her step. "I suppose it could just be my unwavering faith in the rumors of your uncommonly good manners and sense of fair play."

A sarcastic smirk.

She tilted her head to one side, looking thoughtful once more. "Perhaps it's your friendly, welcoming nature that I find so hard to resist?"

A bark of laughter from the doorway.

She smiled ruefully before continuing slowly. "Or... perhaps it's the fact that I'm hardly scared of a thoroughly sloshed wizard..." he opened his mouth to reply, but she cut him off, "... who has yet to realize, despite his... keen... intellect and sharp reflexes, that I've got my wand trained on his bits."

The smirk vanished as his eyes shot downwards. She did indeed have the tip of her wand aimed straight at his most tender parts. He opened his mouth again. "You treacherous bit..." but shut it just as quickly as a shower of blue sparks sprayed from the end of the dark, ebony wood. He jumped back reflexively, giving her the room she needed to quickly move past him into his sitting room.

Severus was so involved in frantically slapping at the front of his trousers that he didn't notice her take one look around the room and shrug before inviting herself to sit in his spot no less on the sofa. "Bit cold down here, don't you think?" she asked, setting her bottle on the table next to an identical, empty one.

"I think," he growled, "that you should get the hell out of my rooms," he looked up, and his face grew even more angry, "and my seat... before I hex you out."

She turned around on the sofa, draped one arm over the back and looked at him as he stood there fuming literally. "Really, Professor? You would hex an innocent woman?"

He snorted, swatting irritably at the last wisp of smoke that drifted from his nether regions.

She continued. "I only came down here on the Headmistress's orders, thank you very much, to make sure you hadn't drunk yourself to death." A mask of innocence covered her face. She didn't think he would believe her little white lie. Truthfully, she didn't really care, but it was worth a shot.

"Innocent..." he muttered, taking one last swipe at his trouser front before moving around to stand in front of the fire.

"Yes," he continued, absently removing the ash-tipped iron poker from its stand in order to stoke the flames. "I'm sure you're just as innocent as the droves of other pathetic witches who strive for my company. What is it this time?"

Poke.

"My good looks?"

Poke, poke.

"My charming personality?"

Poke.

"My bank account?"

POKE!!

When she did nothing but cross her arms and look at him like he was some first year complaining about how much homework had been given, his scowling countenance fell slightly.

With a huff of irritation, he tossed the poker back into its stand. Waving his hand to shut the still open door, he stormed forward, grabbing the bottle she had set on his table. Not even bothering with a glass, he popped the top off, tossed the useless thing into the fire, and took a long drink.

"Ugh!" Cara shouted, as she shot from the couch and snatched the bottle from his lips. "Get a glass, you disgusting wretch!"

Snape nearly choked to death as he snorted tequila into his nasal passages.

His eyes welled up with tears, and his entire nasal cavity was set on fire. He braced his hands on his knees and bent double, gasping for breath, hacking and sputtering. She didn't even blink an eye in his direction, but set off in search of two glasses. *Where the hell... ah!*

Seeing the open liquor cabinet on the far wall, she made quick work of finding two unbroken shot glasses.

Walking back towards the fire, where Snape was still coughing and hacking, she wiggled the little glasses at him. They clinked together musically, clasped as they were between her index and middle finger. "Care to try it the right way?" she asked.

By this time he was squatting, his head clasped in his hands. She thought he might fall over. All she had to do was give him a bit of a nudge with the toe of her boot. *Stop that! The poor man's drunk. Besides, they'll be time enough later to torment him.* She smirked.

Finally, he found the fortitude to look up at her. His face was flushed red, and his teeth were clenched together as he spoke slowly. "Don't... ever... do that... again!" He coughed once more and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What? And allow you to infest my last bottle with your man germs? I have no idea where your lips have been..." she said, earning her another sarcastic eyebrow, "nor do I care. Besides, it's much more fun this way." She raised the hand holding the two glasses before reclaiming her seat on the sofa. She plunked the glasses down on the table.

"Come on, Professor, let's see if you can hold your own against a silly little witch like me."

He just stared at her. "Of course, if you're too chicken, I'll just take my bottle and go home." She started to get up, but his voice stopped her.

"I will not be outshone by some... blue-eyed tart."

She gave him her best 'offended' look. "So now I'm a tart? Tut, tut, Professor. I don't believe I have yet to make a play for..." she flapped her fingers in his general direction, "... whatever... it is you keep beneath all that black fabric."

She was utterly surprised when his face flushed.

"Let's do this," she said, ignoring his embarrassment and pouring a generous shot into each glass.

Instead of getting up, he simply sat down where he was and extended his hand with an indignant huff. Cara raised both eyebrows at him, to which he raised one of his. *Touché, Professor.*

She leaned towards him, drink extended, but when he reached for it she pulled it back, just out of reach. He continued to hold out his hand, looking at her with an expression that told her she was already overwhelmingly lucky not to be on her way out, hexed within an inch of her life, so she had best not push it. A one-sided smirk was all he got in return as she offered the glass once more, letting him take it this time.

She raised her shot out towards him. "Here's to you, and here's to me... the best of friends we'll ever be..." He laughed out loud at that, some of his drink sloshing over onto his hand.

Cara continued, smirking: "But if you and I should disagree..." She indicated him with her glass again, "... Then fuck you buddy, here's to me!"

She tossed back the warm liquor with a grimace, slamming her glass down as she swallowed.

Snape simply sneered back. He narrowed his eyes at her, contemplating, before tossing back his own drink and slamming the glass down with a force to rival her own.

A sly grin split her face as she poured them each another. *And so it begins...*

~TBC

A/N: Thanks so much for R&R!

Baby Steps

Chapter 4 of 10

Nothing is ever easy...

Severus remained sitting on the floor, watching as Cara poured them both another shot of tequila. They had not talked much. The occasional scathing comment had been passed between them, but nothing deep or noteworthy. He was still confused about her appearance in the dungeons. Besides the fact that she obviously sought to annoy the life out of him, he wondered what she could possibly want coming down here, and on a Friday night no less. Surely she had better places to be?

The amber liquid shimmered in the firelight as he watched her pick up the now full glass and hand it to him. He reached out to take it, his fingers brushing hers. Their gazes met, and she smirked at him. *Insolent chit!* he hissed to himself. "What, pray tell, is so humorous, Miss Benoit?" he asked, tossing back his drink without taking his eyes from her.

She tossed hers back as well and grimaced as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Well," she began, sitting her glass carefully on the table and filling it once again, "I was just wondering how you'll feel when I drink you under the table, Professor." She held the mouth of the bottle out towards him, ready to refill his glass as well.

His eyebrow rose, and he held out his empty glass. With that one simple gesture, he let her know that there was no way in the nine Hells that she, *woman*, was going to out drink him. He was a fully grown wizard, an ex-Death Eater and spy - bane of the Wizarding world (second in line behind the former Dark Lord, of course). There was no way this stupid chit would...

Her shot was gone and another was being poured. "You had better get a move on, Professor... I'm one up on you already." He glared at her. She simply smiled back. "I think that makes five for me and," she sat the bottle down and proceeded to count out loud on her fingers, "one, two, three... *four* for you."

Infuriated that he had not even noticed her down the drink, Severus raised his glass to his lips for a fifth time, swallowed quickly, and slammed it back down on the table. "Another," he ground out.

"That's the spirit!" she laughed.

"Indeed," he said, as he watched her gleefully pour him another round. "And you are not *one up* on me, Miss Benoit. I had already finished over half a bottle before you even *thought* about ruining my evening."

"Aahh," she said, gesturing at him with the hand that now held her sixth shot, "but that doesn't count. *This*," she indicated the two of them and the bottle in between, "is our game. Anything else is forfeit."

He picked his sixth shot up as well, examining it closely before looking back to her, moving only his eyes. "I do not *play games*." He paused, contemplating something, and scrutinized her closely for a few moments. "Are you sure you weren't a Slytherin?" he said finally. "That is a very devious tactic, using my prior indulgences against me."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Slytherin?" When she looked back at him, she realized that he wasn't joking. Her free hand went to her chest. "Me?" She downed her shot, shaking her head as she swallowed. "Mmm... no, I don't think so, Professor." She sat the glass down again. "I'm American."

"American?" His lip curled as he said the word, as if he had just smelled something particularly unpleasant.

"Yes, *American*. You know... sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll?" She held her hands up in front of her face, index and pinky fingers extended, thumbs and both sets of middle fingers curled into her palm.

Both eyebrows rose this time, indicating that, no, he had supposedly never seen the *frist of rock*. Her hands fell to her lap as she exclaimed, "Oh please, don't try and be thick... it doesn't suit you."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he said evasively, as he cast his gaze back towards his glass. He squinted at it before throwing back the shot. As soon as the liquid fire finished its journey down his throat, he realized that his fingers had started to tingle a bit and he felt... light. Yes, he was definitely starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. If he was a Muggle, he'd have passed out ages ago. Thank God for magically increased alcohol tolerance.

Magically increased tolerance or not, Severus suddenly felt the need for a bit of support. He set down his glass and slid away from the table to lean against the raised hearth. Closing his eyes momentarily against a sudden wave of lightheadedness, he let his head fall back slightly. His long, dark hair brushed against the warm stone.

After a moment, he heard an irritated huff. He opened his eyes slightly to find Cara staring at him expectantly, her arms crossed across her chest. *Persistent little tart, isn't she?* he thought.

He sighed, realizing that it would probably be easier to tell her what she wanted to know, instead of being vague and having her hound him anyway. *Self-preservation... yes, that's all it is.*

"Have it your way," he said, throwing his hands up in supplication as he rolled his eyes. "I will only admit to a *lingering* interest in Sabbath and Zeppelin."

"Aha!" she exclaimed, pointing at him. "I knew you weren't a total flake!"

He blew an exasperated breath through his nose, and sat up straighter in order to glare at her better. "For your information, there are many things about me that put me far outside the classification of 'flake.'"

"Uh-huh." she drawled skeptically, nodding her head. "Such as?"

Severus' urge to choke someone hadn't been this strong since the days of Neville Longbottom. He took a deep breath and let it out, trying to control the overwhelming impulse to throttle her.

"For one," he began, "every single student in this school," he gestured to the ceiling, "and nearly every witch and wizard in Great Britain," he swept his arms out in a wide arch, "is absolutely terrified of me. Mothers use my name to scare their children into obedience. 'If you don't behave, Professor Snape will get you.' Pub-goers tell their two-faced, lying, cheating drinking mates, 'Don't be such a fucking Snape!' Despite what that piece of offal the *Prophet*, or *Harry-fucking-Potter*, may have claimed, I am still, and always will be, the most reviled man alive, Miss Benoit." He glared at her as he crossed his arms and returned to leaning against the hearth.

Cara stared at him as her brows bunched together. "You're proud of that, are you?" she asked.

His voice had a cold edge to it when he spoke. "As I'm sure you know, beggars are not allowed the liberty of choices."

"Bullshit," she countered, earning her a huff of disdain. "Everyone has choices. Not every beggar is a foul-tempered, cold-hearted git, whose only delight comes from scaring the life out of small children and being the namesake of crude euphemisms."

He was getting awfully good at glaring daggers at her. "It is who I am, Miss Benoit. I am not a nice man."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because I'm simply not, that's why!!" he bellowed, slamming his fist against the floor. He drew a deep breath before speaking. "Miss Benoit, you are either stupid, thought that *seems* unlikely, seeing as how you have managed to secure a place amongst the staff of this school, or you have no real notion as to *who actually am*."

If he was trying to be intimidating, it was lost on Cara. Severus seethed for a moment, infuriated that he could get no reaction from her.

She raised her eyebrows at him, before leaning back into the sofa and crossing her arms petulantly. Clearing her throat theatrically, she said: "I know the basics: your full name is Severus Tobias Snape. You attended Hogwarts from 1971 to 1978 and were a member of Slytherin House. In 1981, you became potions Professor as well as Head of Slytherin House. You held this position until 1996, when you were given the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, a post you had been after for years." Cara took a breath; Severus was still seething quietly.

"In June of 1997," she continued slowly, lifting her chin and looking him right in the eye, "you used the Killing Curse on Headmaster Dumbledore*as per his request*, after which you were on the run, a supposed fugitive from the Light. In August of that same year, with the Death Eaters in control of the Ministry, you were appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts, a position which you as a consummate Slytherin naturally used to your advantage. You protected the students from the likes of Alecto and Amycus Carrow, and without your help and protection, Harry Potter would *never* have defeated the Dark Lord."

Cara was stunned when Severus actually broke eye contact, choosing instead to look at the floor. She continued cautiously. "I assume you were wounded during the Final Battle. I've overheard talk of how you almost died in St. Mungo's."

His hand moved involuntarily to rub at the ragged scar on his neck, lingering on the marred flesh as if he was deep in thought.

Cara wasn't even sure if he was still listening. "Afterwards, you were cleared of all charges against you, thanks to the testimony of Harry Potter, and awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, for your heroic efforts during the War. You're currently teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, while also serving as Deputy Headmaster to Headmistress McGonagall."

She still watched him, chin now propped in her hand. If looks could kill, Cara would have been instantly incinerated when Severus finally raised his eyes to hers. A bit afraid that she had overstepped her bounds, she bravely ignored the obvious glint of malice in his eyes, and waved her free hand at him. "Your turn," she said.

She could hear his teeth grind together. He hadn't expected her to know anything about him, much less his fucking life history.

His voice was neutral now. "Well, it seems you have done your homework, Miss Benoit, however superficial it may be," Snape drawled. "I, on the other hand, only know what I have garnered from our... unfortunate... encounters."

He had intended to insult her, but she simply waved at him to continue. He huffed forcibly through his nose before leaning once again against the hearth. His arms stretched out to either side, elbows propped on the stone, and his forearms and hands hung freely. "You are blatantly American," he began, to which Cara laughed, "and you have absolutely no sense of propriety. You have a bad habit of cursing *like a sailor* when you are frustrated or angry. Your hair is blonde, your eyes blue. You are of average build, if a bit on the tall side... I'd say 5' 9", and your age is somewhere between 29 and 34. Oh, and you obviously enjoy your drink," he finished, gesturing to the bottle and glasses between them.

She waited. He glared.

"That's it?" she asked.

"What else is there?"

"Many things."

"Such as?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"No, not really."

"Liar."

"Chit."

"Spoilsport."

"Harpy."

"Git."

He opened his mouth to send out another scathing remark, but closed it. She could probably go on like this indefinitely.

Noticing his lack of a comeback, Cara laughed throatily to herself. *Score one for me!* she thought triumphantly.

Sighing irritably, Severus rolled his neck, trying to relieve some of the built up tension. He was not a social person, and such prolonged interaction was giving him a headache.

Cara glanced up at the movement. In his slightly inebriated state, he had obviously forgotten that he was wearing only trousers and a shirt, and that his shirt was unbuttoned, completely exposing his stomach, chest, and neck. With his head thrown back, chest bare, and arms outstretched, Cara found herself thinking that he looked very similar to an effigy of Christ she had seen once. She also found herself thinking that she was probably going to Hell for that comparison. She chuckled darkly. *I'm probably headed there anyway... might as well have a good time while I'm at it.*

An hour later, they had finished the bottle and were about to start on another. Well, Cara was. She rummaged through Severus' cabinet while he lay face down on the rug in front of the fire. He was humming to himself, drumming his fingers along to the tune. Cara thought that it sounded like some old Zeppelin fare.

Stairway to Heaven? Oo-kay...

She shoved another bottle aside. "Have you nothing else of merit in this deplorable excuse for a drinks cabinet?" When he didn't answer, she looked back over her shoulder to find his arm raised, middle finger extended. It lingered for a moment before dropping back to the floor unceremoniously. The humming continued.

Chuckling, she walked back to where he was laying and stood looking down at him with her hands on her hips. "Are you out?" she inquired, poking him in the arm with the toe of her boot.

"Mmmpphhh," was his muffled reply as he swiped lazily at her foot.

She poked him again... another lazy swipe.

Another poke... *swipe*.

Poke...

With lightning speed, his hand shot out and latched onto her ankle. In a surprising show of drunken strength, Severus proceeded to snatch her feet out from under her. "Wha-!" she exclaimed before landing hard on the floor in front of him. His fingers remained around her ankle even though his face remained pressed to the floor. She was laid out flat on her back, hands covering her head.

"For fuck's sake!" she screamed at him, slamming both hands palm down onto the floor. She kicked his hand away, grazing his forehead with the heel of her boot in the process.

"Fuck!" he yelled, rolling onto his back as he clutched at his face.

"Serves you right, you mean-ass drunk!" Cara yelled right back. She sat up, rubbing the back of her own head. "Now I have a headache." When no scathing remark came forth, she glanced back to Severus and gasped.

Blood was running from underneath the hand clutched to his forehead. "Shit! Are you alright?" she exclaimed, scrambling to his side.

"Do I fucking look alright, you murderous Harridan!" he yelled at her.

"Well," she said, crossing her arms across her chest, "if that's how you're going to be, I'll just leave you here to bleed to death. It shouldn't take long with all the booze running through you."

He opened one eye and looked up at her, trying his best to scowl. The effect was more like an exaggerated blink, but for some reason, Cara suddenly didn't feel the need for sarcasm.

Sighing, he closed his eye and motioned off behind her to her right. "There are some cloths and dittany through there, first door on your right."

Nodding, she scrambled to her feet, paused a minute to get her balance they had just finished off an entire bottle of tequila, after all and then proceeded to the door, located to the right of the hearth.

When she entered, she had to stop and stare for a minute. *How lovely!* she thought despite herself. The room his bedroom if she were to judge by the enormous four-poster canopy occupying the far wall was gorgeous.

The bed itself was covered in a crisp, white comforter, with two large white pillows occupying the space against the headboard. *Who has a bed that huge and only two pillows?* she found herself wondering as she scanned the rest of the room.

It was paneled in the darkest cherry hardwood, with wood floors of a matching color. The wall to her left held an enormous fireplace, and situated in front of that fireplace was a beautiful, white sectional sofa. There were a few tasteful pillows, in varying shades of blue, black, and white, thrown randomly about the cushions. A plush white rug lay on the floor in the middle of the 'U' made by the sectional.

She took note of the table situated behind the sofa, also in dark cherry upon which sat several books, some parchment, a quill, and a pair of black-framed reading glasses. Cara found herself smiling faintly at the thought of Severus Snape wearing reading glasses. *Perhaps he is human, after all,* she thought.

Bookshelves lined every inch of wall space, separated occasionally by beautiful brushed silver wall sconces. "Who would have thought such a vile man would have such good taste in décor?" she mumbled.

"I heard that," he called snidely from the floor behind her.

"And?" she replied, ignoring the verbal jab and continuing through the doorway. She headed towards the door to her immediate right. *This must be the bathroom.*

She opened the door and was once again astounded at the décor. The tile was a muted brown, the color of mocha, with darker veins running throughout. Off to her left was a walk-in shower, deep enough that no curtain was needed. It was tiled with what looked like real stone, *Slate?* and its faucets and multiple showerheads were done in brushed nickel. She could see a little shelf of stone that held several small, white, glass bottles, which she assumed were his shampoo and such.

Off to the other side was a garden tub, the likes of which she had never seen. It was huge. Four, possibly five people could fit easily. There were no faucets, but she did spy a slit in the stone wall at one end of the tub. Curious, she walked towards it. When she got close enough, she waved her hand in front of the slit and water instantly started pouring into the vast tub. "It's like a miniature waterfall!" she said delightedly, running her fingers through the warm stream of liquid.

She looked around again and noticed that a myriad of plants and vines were placed around the edges of the bathroom. They spilled over from recesses at the top of the shower and sat on the floor in corners and niches. There and there were even black Cala lilies and a few small palms arranged around the entire edge of the tub, adding to the 'rainforest feel.'

Curiouser and curiouser, she thought to herself. She swiped her hand at the running water a second time, to turn it off before returning to the task at hand.

Turning to her right, she spied a set of doors set into the wall. Assuming this was the linen cabinet, she opened the doors and found exactly what she was looking for: several large stacks of white towels and hand-cloths. She pulled out several of the smaller ones and quickly closed the cabinet.

She then moved to the other cabinet over the sink. Taking a moment, she leaned against the white porcelain basin, hands braced on the sides as she looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was thoroughly disheveled, her lipstick rubbed off, and her pupils were dilated slightly.

"If I didn't know better, dear, I'd say you had just been shagged... thoroughly," said a male voice.

"Jesus!" she squealed, dropping the towels -- and nearly loosing her grip on the side of the sink as well -- as the enchanted mirror's voice broke the silence of the room. "Damn this castle and its *fucking* mirrors!"

"Such language!" the mirror replied. "Really... you could give Severus a run for his money with that mouth of yours... and I don't mean only in the verbal sense." She stood

there aghast, wondering why she felt like the mirror had just wiggled its eyebrows at her...

"Whatever," she said, shaking her head as she snatched up the towels from the floor. She flung the cabinet open, revealing several small bottles, one of them full of the dittany she was looking for. Grabbing the bottle, she slammed the mirror shut, giving her opinion of its statement, and turned back towards the sitting room and Severus.

He was lying just as she had left him: hand clutching his forehead, long trickles of blood running from underneath.

She actually felt bad that she had caused him pain, but it was his fault! "Here," she said, kneeling next to him with her supplies. She reached out to pull his hand away from his forehead, but he jerked away from her, rolling slightly to the side. "Really?" she chided, reaching out again.

He remained still for a moment, as if trying to gauge the extent of her medical skills, and whether or not it was worth it to let her 'help' him, before sighing loudly and rolling back towards her. This time he let her remove his hand, setting it to rest on his chest. His shirt had fallen open as he lay on his back, and she could see that his chest was covered in scars, some small, thin, and cleanly made, others large and jagged.

She felt her face heat up as she looked him over. He wasn't an overly muscled man, but he was strongly built and lean like a swimmer. The black hair that she had spied earlier ran in a fine line down from his chest and disappeared beneath the loosened waist band of his trousers.

He took a deep breathe and let it out. For an instant, Cara caught a glimpse of pale skin and dark hair underneath that waistband. A thought flitted across her mind, wondering what that skin would feel like underneath her fingers...

"Miss Benoit?" he called, bringing her back to the situation at hand.

She jerked her head back towards his face, flushing as she silently hoped he hadn't notice her checking him out.

"My disfigurement, Miss Benoit?" he reminded her, one corner of his mouth twisted in a small smirk.

Oh, he definitely knows you were looking him over, girl! her inner voice said in a matter of fact tone.

"Shut up," she said under her breathe, not knowing whether she was talking to her conscience or to Severus. She took one of the towels, applied a bit of dittany, and placed it over the gash on his forehead. The cut was rather small, barely an inch long but being on his head it bled profusely. Cara pressed down, gently but firmly, trying to stop the flow of blood.

"Let me know if I'm hurting you," she told him.

He huffed. "I've been through much worse than this, I assure you, Miss Benoit."

A pause, and then: "Cara."

"What?" he asked. She could feel his brow furrow beneath the cloth.

"Cara. My name is Cara."

"I realize that," he said snidely.

"Then why don't you use it?"

"Why would I?"

"You call Minerva and every other teacher at this school by their given names, so why not me?"

He closed his eyes. "I have not known you for nearly thirty years, as I have the others, therefore, such familiarity would be rude."

She let loose a bark of laughter. "Rude?! You're telling me that you won't call me by my first name because you don't wish to be rude?!"

She poked him in the ribs with her free index finger. "You, **poke** have barely **poke** spoken to me, since I've **poke** been here!"

His body jerked away from her with each poke, so much that she almost lost her grip on the cloth at his head.

"Stop that, woman!"

"Stop what?" She raised her finger again, in a mock poke. He jerked away again, pulling his arms in to protect his ribs.

A slow, sly smile spread across her face. The look on his own was murderous. "Oh my God," she laughed, "Severus Snape is ticklish!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said dismissively, quickly taking the cloth from her and sitting up. If she didn't know better, she would have said that he suddenly seemed uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. "I believe I can handle things from here, thank you, Miss Benoit," he stated, bracing his free hand on the table as he attempted to stand.

"Cara," she repeated, standing at the same time. He wobbled a bit and she reached out to steady him. Her hand grasped his left forearm... his Dark Mark.

He froze, cloth still pressed to his head, and looked down at her hand. Her eyes followed his, but she did not jerk away when she realized where her hand lay. Instead, after a pregnant pause, in which she could feel his tension level rise considerably, she took a step forward, turning his arm over in her hand.

She was emboldened when he did not pull away. Slowly, she reached out with her other hand and paused, her fingers poised just above the tattooed skin. "May I?" she asked softly, looking up at him.

His brow came together, and she heard his jaw crack. She knew he was debating whether to acquiesce or to scream. In the end, he sighed wearily and turned his face away as he thrust his arm towards her. *Self preservation, that's all it is...* he assured himself.

She gave him a small smile before letting the tips of her fingers touch his skin, brushing lightly over the fading mark. His face was still turned away, so she did not see how his eyes closed, or how his lips parted slightly at the feather-light caress.

"Is it the same now?" she asked, tracing the graying serpent with her index finger. She saw goosebumps rise along his pale skin and felt a small tremor go through him. Strangely, Cara found herself wondering how long had it been since the man had felt a kind touch one lacking ulterior motive.

He turned his face back to her, his brow still bunched with indecision. "Is *what* the same?" he asked quietly.

She turned her gaze to his, and there was an entirely new emotion in her eyes *No, not pity*, he thought, slightly taken aback, *something else entirely...*

She continued slowly. "Does it... cause you pain... now that he's gone?"

She could see him consider something for a long moment, before finally speaking. "No... but some marks never fade, no matter how long their makers have been dead." He gave her a tight-lipped, yet genuine, smile before pulling his arm away gently. He then walked towards the main door, opened it wide, and stood patiently.

Her humor returned quickly, and she smirked at him. "So... you're kicking me out?"

"Not technically. But I could... if you wish."

"Oooh... kinky..." she drawled, raising her eyebrows suggestively.

Severus narrowed his eyes at Cara, and for a moment she saw something there, behind the emotional repression and the bitterness. Whatever it was, something in the sudden, blazing heat of his gaze left Cara momentarily speechless.

Before she had a chance to react, it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Severus seemed oblivious as he made a sweeping gesture towards the corridor.

Slightly bewildered, she walked towards the open door, coming to a stop in front of him. His head had stopped bleeding, and he was now holding the bloody cloth in his left hand while he held the door open with his right. His forehead and chest were smeared with his own blood, as was his shirt. She had a feeling that it wasn't the first time.

She looked up at him again, and this time was met with an unmistakable look of impatience.

She knew she was pushing her limits, but regardless, she reached out a hand and ran the backs of her middle and index finger down his tattooed forearm once again. His fist clenched, but he was otherwise motionless. "You know," she said, startling him when she reached up with the same hand to cup his cheek, "the thing about marks like that... is that you must simply make new ones to cover them up."

His mouth opened slightly, as if he wanted to speak, but wasn't quite sure what to say. If he had been startled when she touched his face, he was absolutely floored when she leaned up quickly, and boldly pressed a quick, chaste kiss to his cheek.

She grinned broadly at the shock on his face, knowing what a rare sight it must be. Also knowing that she had just reached her limit, she gave the same cheek a quick, good-natured pat, and quickly took her leave before he could hex her.

"Goodnight, Severus... until next time," she said as she walked quickly down the corridor. She removed her wand from her pocket and lit it with a flick of her wrist.

She left him standing there in his doorway, and was gone so quickly that she never saw him raise a hand to the cheek that she had graced with a friendly kiss. Her quick departure also meant that she didn't hear him say, softly and with a pensive look on his face as he closed the door, "Goodnight... Cara."

~TBC

A/N: For anyone that's reading, sorry this took so long. RL is a cold, fickle biatch... Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter! I have one more totally written and looked over by my Beta, and another that's about... oh... 75% finished, give or take. Hopefully, I'll be able to get a little more writing done now that the semester is over.

Thanks so much for the R&R!!

One Fine Day Part I

Chapter 5 of 10

Severus tries to take some time for himself... Cara has other plans...

Disclaimer: Not mine, except for Cara.

Thanks, DelilahKelley, for your thoughtful insight into Cara's character and her personality.

Severus didn't see Cara again until Sunday.

Now that he was no longer a pawn with two masters, his cup of free time literally runneth over. For once in his life he had started to feel *almost* free. 'Almost' being the pertinent word. He was still slaving away during the week, trying to fit the square pegs of knowledge into the round holes that were the minds of Hogwarts' most recent batch of dunderheads

He had not dined in the Great Hall this weekend, as those meals were not mandatory for teachers unless it was their day to chaperone the students. The hideous task of overseeing the gorging spawn of the Wizarding world had fallen to Minerva and Filius this weekend, thank God. Instead, Severus had taken all his weekend meals in his rooms, where he had graded essays, worked on lesson plans, and simply taken some time for himself. He thought no, he *knew* that he deserved a little piece and quiet after nearly twenty years in the service of others.

Not to mention the fact that he had had a raging hangover on Saturday morning.

Two Sober-Up potions along with an entire pot of *very* strong tea had done the job of returning him to his senses. *Damn that infernal woman...*

It was now around 8 o'clock on Sunday morning. Severus was caught up on his grading, and his lesson plans were completed through the Christmas holidays. He could be extremely productive when he didn't want to think about something... or someone.

In an attempt to keep such thoughts at bay and truthfully having nothing better to do, he decided on a walk around the Black Lake. He dressed in his usual black trousers but decided to forego his usual boots for a pair more suited to trudging the paths around the waterfront. His normal linen dress shirt was also substituted with a light, cotton one. As he stood in front of his wardrobe buttoning his cuffs, his traitorous thoughts wandered once again to Friday night and to Cara (as his inner voice had taken to calling her).

He remembered how she had touched him, or more specifically how she had touched the abomination on his forearm. She hadn't been repulsed, but she also had not treated the mark as if it didn't exist. Instead, her fingers had been almost tender, as if she were trying to soothe the tainted flesh. He shook his head it was nonsense. He

barely knew the woman, and now after one night as 'drinking buddies,' he was getting ridiculous notions in his head notions that she might *not* be a gold-digging, fame-seeking swot. If she wasn't after the notoriety that would most certainly come from an 'association' with him, then what was she after? Could she actually give a damn about his well-being? About him?

"Rubbish," he snarled. He finished with the cuffs and grabbed his light, floor-length traveling cloak from his wardrobe. "Utter rubbish." He tucked his wand into the holster strapped to his left forearm and slammed the wardrobe door shut.

Folding the cloak over his arm, he exited his quarters through the door connected to his office. Crossing to the far wall, he snatched open the supply cabinet and tucked several small, cotton bags, along with a glass vial or two, into his pockets, in case he came upon anything interesting while walking. *Better over-prepared than under*, he thought to himself.

There was no one about this early on a Sunday. Breakfast wasn't served until around nine, so the students were undoubtedly still asleep, as were most of the teachers. As Severus reached the top of the stairs and entered the main corridor, he threw the cloak about his shoulders, fastening it with a practiced hand. It wouldn't do for anyone to see him out of uniform, lest his reputation be damaged.

Exiting the front doors of the castle, the warm, late-summer sun beat down upon him as he walked leisurely towards the lake, his hands in his pockets. It was rare that he ventured outside the castle for his own pleasure. He was not usually the outdoors type. Nearing the lake, his eyes roamed over the black surface of the water. It was motionless, looking for all the world like a pool of liquid obsidian.

The morning sky was clear, with not a cloud in sight, but a light breeze from across the water brought with it the smell of rain. Severus estimated that he had at least two hours before the summer thunderstorm made its way to Hogwarts. A gray sky would suit his mood much better than the startling blue of early morning. A color that to Severus' extreme annoyance drew his thoughts, yet again, to Cara. He was almost to the point of self-Obliviation.

His associations with women had been few and far between, with most being associations of the carnal nature. He wasn't a eunuch, after all. However, at thirty-eight years old, he had never been in a real, intimate relationship with a woman. It was not that he had never wished for those things there was simply no time when one was risking life and limb for the greater good. Besides, what sane woman would ever want to pursue a relationship with a man like him? He was not attractive, at least not in the normal sense; his temperament had been compared to that of a wing-clipped Hippogriff; he was a murderer, a Death Eater, and a right nasty git.

Why in God's name would she have sought me out? He found himself thinking... again. He absolutely hated not knowing something, especially something as inane as the motivations of a blonde nuisance from the States. His brow drew together as he continued walking, studying the path in front of him. He had to admit that he was intrigued, if only to make sure she wasn't trying to pull one over on him. Although the Dark Lord had been truly dead for more than a year, a lifetimes worth of being suspicious of anything and everything could not be overcome in such a short amount of time, if ever.

As for Cara, she and Severus had spent the better part of four hours together on Friday night, and she had said nothing that had made him think she had ulterior motive. Hell, the last time he had spent so much time with a woman had been... well, he couldn't remember the last time. Every woman he had met in the past year or so had been after one thing: seeking fame vicariously through him. Not a single one had given a rat's ass about him, other than his 'war hero' status. One didn't need to be a Legilimens to realize their intentions were anything but noble.

Severus frowned, perplexed.

Cara hadn't made a single advance upon him. She seemed like she *wanted* to talk to him, to get to know him. She had certainly been interested in his Dark Mark...

The Mark! That had to be it.

She was an American, therefore mostly unaffected by the War. Of course she knew of the Dark Lord and Harry *bloody*-Potter who didn't? Their story was part of Wizarding legend now. Severus himself was simply a footnote in that legend a means to an end. He was also one of the only former Death Eaters not currently serving a life sentence in Azkaban. He was a side-show freak something to be gawked at and then tossed aside when the novelty wore off.

That is the only reason he could think of for her being so interested in him. He would admit to himself that he thought her attractive, if only marginally so. She was very close to his age as well. Now that he actually thought about it, she was the *only* staff member who wasn't older than him by at least 30 years. If she were single *is she?* *She wears no ring, but she could have some shaven-headed, tattooed, Harley riding boyfriend that no one knows about...* then logically she would be drawn to him. As the only man in her age group, he would be the last resort if she were looking for a fling.

His good mood now ruined beyond repair, Severus continued his trek around the lake. He trudged faster, taking his malice out on the dirt beneath his boots. After a half mile he took a path off to the right, heading up into the foothills of the mountains. Perhaps he could find some late summer fungi growing in the edges of the forest there.

He walked for quite a while, lost in his thoughts, brooding over all the questions about Cara that had no answers. As he was puzzling over the possible implications of the kiss she had given him which had startled him tremendously he became aware of a sound in the distance. He stopped, listening intently as years of espionage training took over.

Da-da-dup, da-da-dup, da-da-dup, da-da-dup...

The rhythm seemed familiar, yet he could not place the sound. It was a soft, quick, staccato rhythm, never breaking pattern as it got louder and closer. Realizing that whomever or whatever was making the sound would be upon him in a matter of moments, Severus stepped off the path and into the enclosing shade of a nearby oak. He leaned against the trunk, silent and still... waiting.

In less than a minute, the sound came to a crescendo as its maker rounded the bend. Severus' eyebrows rose into his hairline.

"Speak of the devil..."

It was Cara.

Well, *technically* it wasn't Cara making the sound, but the black horse that she rode upon. The animal was enormous and... well *black*. Black as pitch there wasn't a single light hair on the beast, as far as he could tell. It sported long black hair upon its lower legs *Feathers*, Severus recalled randomly and its mane and tail were both long and wavy. They whipped about in the wind created by the animal's forward motion.

Severus couldn't help but be slightly impressed. He was not an animal person, let alone an animal lover. He had ridden a few times over the years, but he wasn't what one would call an accomplished rider. He watched Cara gallop up the path, completely at ease on the back of her charging mount. Her hair flew wildly behind her, and he could see a slight flush to her cheeks. She struck an impressive figure.

Strangely enough, he soon realized that his mood had lightened almost as soon as she had appeared. Shoving that realization to the back of his mind, sorted under **Bothersome Things To Think About Later**, he pushed away from the tree. Walking slowly back to the edge of the path, he crossed his arms and put himself in her line of sight, still ensuring that he was well out of harm's way. It would be just his luck to have survived Nagini and then be trampled to death by some careless swot running at breakneck speed aboard a 2,000 pound animal.

Cynical thoughts aside, Severus stood his ground. Dirt flew in all directions as Cara raced towards him... and went straight by. An eyebrow rose as he turned his head and watched her gallop up the lane a bit. After a moment or two she slowed down, turned her mount sharply on his haunches, and loped slowly back in his direction.

"Severus!" she called out, smiling as she raised a hand in greeting.

"Miss Benoit," he replied, giving her a nod.

"Cara," she said immediately. She brought the sweaty horse to a halt about ten feet from him. "I was hoping I'd catch up with you."

Severus eyed the black beast as he spoke. "And why is that, Miss Benoit? Trying to run me down with this black behemoth?" He gestured at the animal, which pawed the ground with a front hoof, impatient to be off again.

"Who? Onyx?" She gave the beast's sweaty neck a hearty pat. "He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Indeed," Severus said, taking a quick step back as the animal in question took a moment to clear its nasal passages. His bridle jingled merrily as he shook his head quickly from side to side.

Cara simply smiled down at Severus, ignoring the horse. "So... would you care to have a go?" She looked at him expectantly.

"A 'go'?" he repeated, praying that she wasn't asking what he thought she was asking.

"Yeah, 'a go.' As in, would you like to take a ride with me?"

He looked at the horse and then back at her. "Miss Benoit, I hardly think that..."

She interrupted him, holding up an index finger. "Sorry... hang on just a sec." Severus was left gaping while Cara put her thumb and index finger to her lips and whistled, long and loud.

After a moment, he heard the same sound as before, quicker this time. When its maker rounded the bend, he found himself once again stunned. Running up the path towards them was another horse. This beast was white and grey, its coat dappled with smoke-colored spots the size of thumbprints. His mane and tail were long and wavy, just like Onyx's, and he also sported a small, black, English saddle just like the one Cara rode in.

All Severus could do was watch, dumbfounded, as the beast came to a sliding stop in front of Cara, rearing on its hind legs as it snorted. At this point, he had taken a few more steps back, still hoping to avoid being trampled.

"There's my other beautiful boy," Cara said, reaching out to lovingly stroke the beast between the eyes.

She's raving! Severus thought.

"Well?" Cara asked, turning back to him.

"Well what?" Severus replied crossly.

She gave a long-suffering sigh. "Will you ride with me? He's quite safe." She tipped her head in the direction of the white horse now standing calmly beside Onyx.

Severus sighed as well. "Why would I want to climb aboard that death-trap, when I'm perfectly capable of using my own two feet?"

"Must you make everything into a debate?" she exclaimed, moving both horses closer to where he stood. "Just get on the damn horse."

His jaw clenched involuntarily. No one spoke to him like that! How dare she order him about?

"No thank you. Good day, Miss Benoit." With that, Severus started back up the path, leaving her scowling at the back of his head. He had walked about 100 feet before he heard the sound of hoof beats behind him again. Irritated, he turned back around to give her a piece of his mind, but was met instead by the galloping figure of the white horse.

Severus was a second away from drawing his wand when the beast swerved abruptly to the right. It went around him and spun on its haunches, facing back the way it had come. The animal was, in effect, blocking Severus' exit route. He looked back over his shoulder to where Cara was still sitting. She was examining her nails while Onyx stood lazily, resting one hind foot.

He turned his glare back to the white monstrosity before him. The beast was watching him, its ears pricked forwards, alert for any movement or sound Severus might make. As he made to step around the animal, the horse leapt to the side, tossing his head as he blocked the exit once more.

Severus tried again in the other direction, with the same results. When he tried for a third time, he was met with a nose to his middle, shoving him back down the path. This time Severus did draw his wand, pointing it at the beast's forehead. It stood passively, though it watched him intently.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," Cara called.

Severus looked back over his shoulder at her, his wand still trained on its target. "I do not believe I asked for any advice, Miss Benoit." He saw her shrug. He was about to send off another scathing comment when he suddenly realized that his hand was empty.

Infuriated, Severus turned back to the horse, only to have it race past him, his wand held firmly between its teeth.

He lunged for the beast, hoping to catch it by the bridle, but he never came close. The animal sped back to Cara, its tail held high as it snorted in delight at this fun new game.

Positively fuming, Severus stormed back to Cara. She had taken the wand from the animal and was now spinning it casually between her fingers. He stopped next to Onyx and glared up at her. She continued spinning the wand, a smirk slowly taking over her face as she pointedly ignored him. He held out his hand. "My wand, Miss Benoit."

"Hmm?" She looked down at him from atop Onyx. The top of his head was level with her knee, and he could see the play of muscle in her thigh under the fabric of her breeches.

He forced his eyes back to her face. "I said, my wand!"

More spinning. "What about it?" she teased.

Cheeky bint! Severus thought. Well, if she wouldn't surrender it willingly...

Severus lunged for the wand, but Cara had the advantage of height and held it out of his reach, smirking. His hand had come into contact with her leg as he leapt at her narrowing his eyes, he let his hand slide down until it clenched tightly around her booted ankle. "Give it back now, or I'll not be responsible for my actions."

She feigned fear, placing a hand to her chest. "And what actions would those be, Professor? Going to unhorse me?" She glanced pointedly at the hand around her ankle and then back at him.

"If I must."

"There is an easier way."

"I have already taken the liberty of asking you three times, Miss Benoit."

"Actually, you only *asked* me twice. You *threatened* me the last time."

"And I will make good on that threat if you do not give me back my wand... now!"

"Hmmm... that's *two* threats," she held up as many fingers, "and yet here I sit."

Severus was growing weary of this banter. He could feel the vein in his forehead start to throb. His fingers tightened on her ankle as his other hand started towards her left arm, preparing to snatch her to the ground.

Cara's smug smile came only seconds before she spoke softly, yet quickly: "Imithe, Onyx." The horse obeyed her instantly, bounding forward so quickly that Severus was almost snatched to the ground himself.

He staggered forward a few steps as Cara loped away a bit before bringing Onyx around and trotting back towards him. There were now several hexes sitting on the tip of his tongue, waiting for the moment when his fingers were once again wrapped around his wand.

"Don't look so put out, Severus," she said as she trotted back up to him. "All you have to do is say please."

"Why the hell should I?"

"Because it's the nice thing to do."

"As I've told you before, I'm not a nice man."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it. You'll be better off for it."

"How so?" she asked petulantly, dropping her reins as she crossed her arms.

"Why the hell does it matter?!" he spat, taking a step towards her.

She studied him for a second, tapping his wand against her upper arm. "It doesn't," she sighed heavily. "Be a wanker if you want. I don't care."

Severus thought he saw something pass across her face as she tossed his wand at him. Disappointment? Surely not.

He caught the wand with one hand and quickly tucked it back into the sheath on his forearm.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to ride with me?" Cara asked again.

He sighed and ran a weary hand over his face. "Surely there is someone else?"

She looked first to the left and then to the right. "Nope, no one else," He scowled at her. "Besides," she continued, "Oberon seems to like you." She tilted her head in the direction of the white horse now grazing contentedly along the side of the path.

"Is that so?" he asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

"Yes, that's so, Mr. Sarcastic. He normally doesn't tolerate anyone but me."

Severus thought that sounded an awful lot like himself of late. No one else would dare speak to him the way Cara did, let alone get away with it. For some reason, he saw fit to tolerate her smart mouth and sarcastic humor.

When he continued staring at the grazing animal, but didn't speak, she narrowed her eyes at him. "Fine, if you're too scared, then I guess I'll just go back..."

"Hardly," Severus interrupted.

"I'm sorry?" she said innocently.

"I am hardly afraid of some snorting, frothing, wand-stealing, four-legged monstrosity, Miss Benoit."

"Cara," she reminded him again. He scowled up at her.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she asked, sweeping her hand dramatically towards the other animal.

"Fine," he said, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of thinking he was afraid, which he most certainly wasn't.

He walked boldly up to the white horse Oberon she had called him. The animal looked up expectantly as Severus took the reins in his left hand. Grabbing hold of the saddle with his right, he placed his left boot in the stirrup and gracefully swung himself up onto the animal's back, his cloak billowing behind him. He found the other stirrup and quickly settled in. He was more than slightly relieved when the horse did not bolt as soon as his backside touched the seat.

"Impressive," Cara said, clapping her hands together lightly.

"I am not totally ignorant of horsemanship, Miss Benoit."

"Good to know, because these boys need some exercise." She patted Onyx's neck again.

What had he gotten himself into? "What did you have in mind?" Severus asked grudgingly.

"Well, I was hoping that you might show me around."

"So I have now been delegated to the role of tour guide?" he sighed.

She grinned at him as if she had known he was going to do it before she even asked *Damn her, damn her, damn her...*

"If it's any consolation, I brought lunch." She reached back and gave a pat to the small satchel hooked to the saddle. "The house-elves made enough food for five or six people. I can't eat it all by myself."

He thought for a moment, weighing his options. *Bloody Hell, man, you're already on the damn horse... might as well get a meal out of the deal. Self-preservation, remember?*

Yes, self-preservation, indeed.

"Alright, Miss Benoit, I'll play tour guide for the morning." He pointed at her, narrowing his eyes. "But you owe me."

She beamed at him. "Of course; what kind of Slytherin would you be if I didn't?"

"Indeed," he replied, giving his horse a light squeeze with his calves and heading him up the path. Cara quickly fell into place beside him, riding so close that her leg bumped his on occasion. Severus watched her out of the corner of his eye, but she seemed oblivious to the contact. Instead, she was looking around, taking in the scenery. She held her reins loosely as she sat deep in the saddle, looking utterly relaxed atop her huge mount.

As they rode on, Severus began to wonder if he had somehow been mistaken, and Cara *wasn't* after anything. Was it possible that she simply wanted to be his friend? Well, he was going to find out... one way or another.

A/N: Up next... Severus' rainstorm makes an early appearance.

'Imithe' is Gaelic for 'move forward.' I used an online translator, so feel free to correct me if need be!

Before you cry BS, yes, horses will do things like this... I've seen it! My own two horses will steal food straight from your pocket if you turn your head for too long. I'm just embellishing a little!

Also, thank you so much to those of you who have read, reviewed, and favorited my little story! I love you all!!

One Fine Day Part II

Chapter 6 of 10

A conversation, a rainstorm, and a bit of unexpected fun...

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Thank you, DelilahKelley, for your thoughtful insight!

The rating is simply for a bit of language. Thanks!

They rode for a while, taking in the sights and sound of the forest. Nothing of consequence was said. Cara asked the occasional question about one thing or another, and Severus using his very best lecture voice followed with the explanation. Eventually, Cara complained of being hungry, so instead of listening to her complain, Severus led the way up a side trail to an ancient oak that he frequented. Its branches spread themselves out invitingly over the hilltop, creating a lush, green canopy.

"This is lovely, Professor," Cara said as she admired the towering tree.

"Yes. I find that it offers *solitude*... for those who seek it."

Cara chuckled. "I suppose I'm depriving you of that today, aren't I?"

He huffed and looked off into distance. "Among other things," he muttered. Cara squinted thoughtfully at the back of his head, but chose to ignore the comment.

"I'm starving!" she said, changing the subject as she dismounted. She dropped Onyx's reins and reached quickly for the satchel of food. Without waiting for Severus, she walked up the slight rise and sat heavily at the base of the tree.

"Are you coming?" she asked Severus, who still sat atop Oberon.

He sighed and dismounted, pausing momentarily before dropping his reins as Cara had. The two horses moved off to graze lazily but made no attempt to run away.

Severus walked up the rise to Cara, who had lain down on her back. His shadow fell across her face as he came close. She looked up at him and grinned, holding out the satchel. "Would you mind?" she asked.

There went the eyebrow. Cara smirked, shaking the satchel at him. He snatched it from her hand. "I would think, Miss Benoit, that after all the leniency I've shown you this past hour, you would not dare ask me for anything more."

Cara ignored him and propped herself up on her elbows, looking absently off into the distance. She could see the dark towers of storm clouds approaching from over the distant lake. A cool, wet breeze blew her hair about her face as she cut her eyes to Severus. He had transfigured a small branch into a low table and was currently pulling bread, cheese, fruit, and a small bottle of orange juice from the satchel.

"But I have, Severus... and once again, here you are." She saw him pause in his ministrations.

"Yes, well... I only see it as a means to an end. You *will* owe me a *very* large favor for taking such liberties with my personal time."

Cara rolled over on her stomach, grinning playfully. "Oh, come off it Severus... you seem to be enjoying yourself. Why not admit it?" She propped her chin in her hand and raised her eyebrows at him, waiting for a response.

He glared at her momentarily noting the carefree way her feet moved back and forth in the air behind her before tossing the empty satchel onto the grass and helping himself to a piece of cheese. "I will say that it has been... different."

Cara laughed, eyeing him thoughtfully. "You're so reserved." She stood up and walked to where he was sitting. She jostled him as she flopped down in the grass next to him, and he moved away slightly, scowling in annoyance. Cara didn't notice and continued talking. "I mean, really... I know you're British, but that doesn't automatically mean that you have to be so anal retentive all the time." She reached for the bottle of juice, twisted the top off with a flick of her hand, and took a long sip.

Wiping her hand across her mouth, she held the bottle out to him. "Want some?"

He eyed the saliva-covered lip of the bottle disdainfully. "No, thank you," he said.

"It didn't seem to matter much when it was a bottle of booze," she commented casually, taking another small sip.

Taken slightly aback by her statement, he proceeded to take his annoyance out on the grass between his knees, ripping up the blades and tossing them one by one into the wind. "Need I remind you that the circumstances were entirely different. I was not myself. Had I been, you would have been out on your arse before you could say 'cheers'."

Cara laughed. "How's your head, by the way?"

"I am no longer disfigured," he said dryly.

"Good. I'd hate for you to have a permanent reminder of the night I out-drunk you."

"You did no such thing."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Yes, I did."

"No, you most certainly did not!"

"Did."

"Did n..." he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Christ... you have me arguing like a petulant child. How else could you ruin such a peaceful Sunday morning?" Severus snarled as he threw the handful of grass off to his left where it swirled away, caught up in the now constant breeze.

Cara sat the bottle down and turned to him, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Well," she drawled, scooting closer, "I don't think I'd classify it as *ruining* the morning, but we are an awfully long way from the castle..." She nodded her head in the direction they had come, where the turrets of Hogwarts were barely discernable in the distance.

He huffed.

She moved even closer. Her shoulder brushed his as she reached out to pull a stray blade of grass from his pants leg. Once again, he turned a disapproving scowl her way. Once again she ignored it. "And we are pretty much..." she leaned in to whisper suggestively, "*alone*."

As her warm breath tickled his ear, Severus stiffened in more ways than he would freely admit before literally jumping away from her.

"What are you doing?" he said as he stood, pulling his cloak protectively around himself.

She snorted at his reaction. "Good grief! I was just teasing, Severus."

He glared.

She sighed and shook her head. "You really can't take a joke, can you?"

His lips thinned, and his tone of voice quelled her humor a bit. "No, I cannot."

"Oh," she said softly. "Well, don't let it be said that I never say sorry."

More glaring.

"Sorry!" she said, holding up her hands in resignation.

Severus exhaled a long breath through his nose as he watched her. She seemed sincere.

"Will you please sit back down?" she asked, patting the spot next to her on the grass.

He didn't move, but raised that thrice-damned eyebrow at her once again. Cara rolled her eyes before theatrically placing her hand over heart. "I, Cara Benoit, being of sound mind and body, do hereby swear *not* to accost Professor Severus Snape against his will. Your virtue is safe with me, Severus." *For now*, her inner voice added of its own accord as she dropped her hand back to the grass.

Cara watched him expectantly. He had crossed his arms as he listened to her little speech and was still glaring at her suspiciously. Cara patted the grass next to her again. Slowly, he unfolded his arms from across his chest and made his way back to the recently vacated spot. "You do realize that making such promises may get you into a fair bit of trouble, Miss Benoit. Count your blessings that you weren't holding your wand at the time, or we may never have seen each other again." He summoned an orange from the table.

Cara watched it fly towards him, peeling itself as it came to float in front of the dark wizard. Another flick of his wrist and the orange had separated itself into slices. Cara plucked one out of the air and proceeded to bite it in half, much to Severus' annoyance. "I figured you'd be happy about that," she said around the piece of orange in her mouth.

Damn, Severus thought, realizing too late that his choice of words had probably lead her to believe that he actually wanted to spend more time with her. **Do you?** his inner voice commented, to which he surprisingly had no immediate answer.

Uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, Severus cleared his throat and proceeded to redirect her attention. "So," he said, grabbing a piece of orange for himself, "what manner of beasts are they?" He indicated the two grazing stallions with a slight tilt of his head.

Cara finished her orange and wiped her hands on her breeches, to which Severus gave another disdainful sneer. *Equus caballus*: first domesticated around 3000 B.C. in what is today known as Kazakhstan. They are what the common man calls a horse, Professor."

Cara could feel his glare burning a hole into the side of her head. She loved baiting him. It was quickly becoming a favorite pastime.

"The wit of the Yanks never ceases to amaze. The breed, Miss Benoit?" he sighed.

"Well, why didn't you say so? You should really learn to be more specific, Severus. I am just a dumb Yank after all." He cut his eyes at her as he bit into his second orange slice.

Cara pointed to the black horse and smiled. "Onyx is a Friesian. The breed is originally from Friesland, a province in the northern Netherlands. They were used in medieval

times to carry knights into battle. They're always black although you will on a very, very rare occasion see one with a dark chestnut coat and are considered to be somewhat of an endangered species."

Severus chewed his orange and nodded as Cara continued. "Oberon is an Andalusian. They originated on the Iberian Peninsula in Spain. Until around the 18th century they were the preferred mount of Spanish royalty the 'Royal Horses of Europe.' During the 18th century, war in Europe caused their numbers to decline close to extinction. In order to reestablish their breeding programs, exportation of an Andalusian became illegal without Royal consent. The penalty for exporting them was death."

Severus nodded in genuine interest. "So how is it that you have come by the both of them?"

Cara smiled softly. "Not by my own means, that's for sure. A friend back home owned both of them, and when she passed away... well... here we are." She flicked a hand absently.

"Ahh..." He nodded. "Just for curiosity's sake, how much would one have to give up in order to purchase such an animal?"

Cara laughed, pulling at the grass between her knees absently. "More than I could ever afford. I'm blessed that Joanne chose me to care for them."

"You must have known each other well," Severus commented. The soft, warm breeze was interrupted as another cool gust blew violently up the rise, rustling the leaves of the old oak and bringing with it the sharp, wet scent of rain.

Cara nodded as she pulled a stray strand of hair from her eyes, closing them as the wind blew against her face. "Mmm... we did. I practically grew up at her place. She was a good friend of my parents like a second mother to me. She raised horses for a living mostly show jumpers."

Severus glanced over. Cara had a wistful look on her face one of things gone, but never forgotten that almost made him want to smile. *almost*. He looked away quickly, lest she provoke any more unwanted responses from his traitorous body.

"As far back as I can remember," she continued, lost in her thoughts, "I would spend every moment I could in her barn. I cleaned stalls, washed tack, fed horses... I even washed and cleaned her truck and trailer, if only to get a lesson out of her. She was the nicest person I've ever met except for my parents of course and probably would have given me lessons for free, but I wanted to earn it."

Severus nodded. He could appreciate that, having never been one for charity himself.

"Anyway," she went on, "when I was eighteen and had just graduated from school in Atlanta Joanne knew I was a witch... she was a Squib herself I was home visiting. I went over to the barn just in time to see a trailer pull in. Even at that age I was excited and still would be today of the arrival of a new horse at Joanne's. She was so excited to see me... and I asked her what was in the trailer. She just shook her head and told me to go see for myself."

Severus felt himself pulled into her story. Her tone of voice held a reverence that he had long forgotten one could possess. Absently, he leaned back on one elbow and turned towards her. His cloak fell back over his shoulders, allowing the breeze to ruffle the loose, white cotton of his shirt. Cara's eyes were still unfocused, and she twirled a long stalk of grass absently between her fingers as she spoke. Though he fought against it, Severus felt the corners of his mouth lift slightly.

"I'll never forget the first time I laid eyes on them." Her gaze focused and shifted to the grazing animals. "I was without words."

Severus found himself chuckling. "A monumental feat, indeed."

Cara cut her eyes at him offhandedly noticing his new position, the way his black trousers hugged his waist, and how exceedingly long his legs were before raising her own eyebrow. "You like that do you? Well, it doesn't happen often, so you're pretty much SOL, my friend." She continued with her story, oblivious to the pensive look Severus gave her at the use of the casual endearment. "The driver of the truck came around and let the trailer ramp down. He went in and I heard a bit of stomping and grumbling before he came out leading Onyx. He was prancing and tossing his head, blowing through his nose at any and everything. God, but he was gorgeous."

Like you, Severus heard his traitorous inner voice say. Threatening his mutinous subconscious with Obliviation, he quickly looked away from Cara, focusing instead on the animal in question.

"I didn't think it could get any better until the other man led Oberon down the ramp. I have never in my life seen a horse as angry as he was: his ears were laid back, his eyes were rolling back in his head, and he was stomping and kicking at everything. He even managed to bite the handler."

Severus chuckled darkly.

Cara's voice held an angry note as she continued. "Well, the man raised a hand to him, and before I knew what I was doing, I had shoved the asshole out of the way and snatched the lead line from him."

"So, even at the tender age of eighteen, you were impulsive and pushy?"

"Yep. The jerk didn't like it one bit either and started to curse at me, but Joanne told him to get his ass back in the truck and get the hell out of her barn. In a manner of speaking, that is."

"Would this Joanne happen to be where you received your extensive vocabulary of swear words?"

She nodded. "Most definitely. My parents... God love 'em... I can't remember them ever saying a curse word, but Joanne..." Cara shook her head and laughed at the memory of her friend. She tossed her blade of grass towards Severus, but it missed him and whipped away on the breeze. "I think you would have liked her. She was every bit as sharp-tongued as you are maybe even more so."

"What happened to her?" Severus found himself asking.

She paused, dropping her gaze as she ripped up another handful of grass. "Cancer," Cara said after a moment.

Severus frowned. "I'm sorry."

One corner of her mouth lifted in a wry smile as Cara turned towards him, stared for a moment, and then reached a hand towards his face. He pulled away before she could touch him. "Miss Benoit..." he said in warning.

"Sorry... I was just wondering if you were running a fever."

He looked at her questioningly.

She smirked and waved him off. "Nothing," she said. "Anyway, I was twenty when she was first diagnosed breast cancer. She beat it the first time... was in remission for *eight* years before it came back." Cara paused again, and her voice had lost a bit of its spunk when she finally spoke. "She died a week before my thirtieth birthday. It's been just over four years ago."

Severus found himself making a mental note that her birthday was probably somewhere towards the end of August.

Cara sniffed and wiped at her eyes absently. "She had always told me I was like the daughter she never had. She left everything to me in her will: the house, the farm all

100 acres of it the horses... even her old truck and trailer."

Severus sat up, suddenly confused. "You're telling me that you own a 100 acre plot of land *and* a home in the States, yet you're living and teaching at Hogwarts? How did that come to pass?"

He thought he saw a shadow cross her usually bright countenance, but it passed too quickly to be sure. Either way, she brushed his question aside with a wave of her hand. "By happenstance. Now, what about you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You are the only other person here. What was your childhood like?"

Severus cleared his throat. This was not something he felt comfortable talking about. However, he barely knew Cara, and she had just told him about someone very dear to her... about a significant part of *her* life.

Self preservation, remember? Save yourself the trouble...

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "There is not much to tell."

Cara shrugged. "So? I'm interested in anything you're willing to give, Severus."

The connotations of that statement whether intentional or not were not lost on Severus. If Cara hadn't been watching the rapidly approaching storm clouds, she might have seen the slightest hint of pink tint his pale cheeks. He sighed and cleared his throat. "My father... was a Muggle a mill worker and my mother was a witch. My father despised her for it... along with *me*, for the simple fact that I was like *her*."

"I'm sorry," Cara said.

"Don't be," Severus replied. He was about to continue when another breeze, this one laced with drops of moisture, whipped around them, startling the horses as it made the branches of the tree snap and pop in protest.

He sighed, relieved but surprisingly disappointed as well that it was time to return to the castle. He stood, brushing the grass from his clothes before reaching a hand out to Cara.

She eyed it suspiciously for a moment, before grasping it and letting him pull her to her feet. His skin was warm and soft, and she could feel small calluses on the tips of his fingers.

"It appears that our little tête-à-tête is at an end," he said, releasing her as soon as she was upright.

She shook her head. *Poor man... he's such a hard-ass, but he acts like a God-damned virginal school boy when it comes to human contact. I wonder if he's ever... No... he's nearly forty. Surely he's had a fling or two in his time... Oh, for fuck's sake!*

Cara had to force her mind away from the subject of Severus' virginity or lack thereof before her mouth got a notion to speak before her mind could think things through, and she ended up asking him when the last time he got laid was.

"It appears that way, doesn't it?" Cara replied quickly, turning away to whistle for the horses. They came at a trot, eager to be back to the stable before the storm hit. "Buachaillí éasca," she crooned as they came up to her.

"Why do you speak to them in Gaelic?" Severus asked as he flicked his hand at the satchel. It repacked itself before floating back to its place on Onyx's saddle.

"Oh, that. Well, Joanne was originally from Ireland, so she spoke to the animals that way. I just picked it up over the years. Besides, I like being able to talk around other people without them knowing what I'm saying."

Severus found himself chuckling again. "You show more Slytherin tendencies than you realize, Miss Benoit."

"Which is a totally unbiased opinion coming from you, of course."

"Of course," he said, acknowledging her comment with a nod.

"Well, others would say I show more Gryffindor traits the brave and the bold, or something like that."

There was no mistaking the sneer in Severus' voice as he said, "Yes, well... America is the 'home of the brave', is it not? You'd probably be right at home in the lion's den."

She laughed out loud as she pulled Onyx's reins over his head and remounted. "I like to think that I'm an island unto myself, Severus, instead of being stereotyped for the rest of my life by the opinion of an antiquated dust-catcher." As she pulled Onyx around, Severus had also mounted and was moving Oberon to stand beside her.

He opened his mouth to fling out a comment about founders, tradition, and other rubbish, but was cut off. At that moment, the clouds that had been slowly approaching as the day wore on chose to release their contents. Accompanied by a very dramatic, well-timed roll of thunder, the world grew blurry as the onslaught of rain unleashed itself upon them.

"Shite," Severus muttered, reaching for his wand.

"What are you doing?" Cara asked as Onyx gave a little hop beneath her. "Easca," she murmured absently, still watching Severus.

"Casting shielding charms, of course," he said raising his wand.

"Don't!" she cried, reaching out to grip his wrist.

"Wha...?" he sputtered.

"Let's make a run for it!" she cried, a mad glimmer in her eye as Onyx pranced beneath her again. Before Severus could state his opinion on the matter, she was off, digging her heels into the black horse's side as she urged him forward into the deluge. Onyx's hooves threw clods of dirt into the air as Severus struggled to hold Oberon back. The white horse was eager to join his friend in a mad dash for the stables.

As he watched her form grow smaller in the distance, Severus' annoyance was suddenly pushed to the side, overtaken by a sudden, unexplainable urge to beat Cara at her own game. If she thought she was going to get one up on him, as she liked to call it, she was mistaken. He thought it over for a moment, weighing both sides before making a decision. "Come on, old man," he said, tucking his wand away and giving the prancing horse's neck a solid pat, "let us show your mistress a thing or two." He released the pressure on the reins and leaned his body forwards. The white stallion surged forward, his white mane whipping about Severus' face.

Severus Snape was not a man that was experienced in moments of pure abandon. However, sitting on the charging stallion's back and feeling the powerful muscles surge beneath him, the wind rush past, and the warm, late summer rain soak his clothes as he and Oberon fought to overtake Cara and Onyx... to say it was a thrilling experience was an understatement.

They raced at breakneck speed down the dirt path, the trees on either side whipping by in a blur of green and brown. Severus swiped at his face with his sleeve as specks of mud flew into his face as the pair slowly drew closer to their quarry. Finally, after several tense moments in which neither horse made nor gave up ground, the onslaught of wet earth stopped as Oberon finally drew alongside Onyx.

Only when he could see her profile did Severus dare turn his head to look at Cara. Her blonde hair was plastered to her face and neck as she leaned forward in her saddle. She did a double-take, and the mad glimmer in her eyes was replaced by one of surprise as she realized that Severus had decided to follow her. She opened her mouth to speak, but shut it in shock as Severus shot her a quick smirk before giving Oberon another powerful squeeze with his calves. The horse could feel his excitement and surged forward with another burst of speed.

As he pulled ahead, Severus heard Cara growl in frustration. He chuckled as he heard her curse in English before saying something unintelligible in Gaelic. Whether she was swearing again or trying to urge Onyx faster, he wasn't sure. Either way, her efforts were futile. The smaller horse was quicker, even with Severus' heavier weight.

Slowly, their lead increased. It had taken them an hour to walk the mile and a half to the oak on the hill. Severus knew that the time to return would take a fourth of that at this pace. He looked back over his shoulder to see Cara come over the rise. She was soaking wet, and there were specks of mud on her face and shirt, as well as across the black horse's chest and legs.

Who's got one up now? he thought triumphantly. He pulled Oberon up a bit, so the animal wouldn't be winded too much by the run. They were far enough ahead that he could afford to slow down a bit. They galloped easily back towards the castle, finally passing the spot where Cara had met him earlier that morning. Rounding the bend, the stallion seemed to get a second wind and pulled on the bit, eager to be off again. Severus gave him his head, glancing back at Cara and watching with malicious glee as he pulled even farther ahead.

Oberon carried Severus into the stable grounds at least fifteen horse lengths ahead of Cara and Onyx.

He slowly pulled up his frothing mount and trotted briskly towards the stable entrance. Once inside, he dismounted and gave the animal a good-natured pat. "Good lad," he spoke softly, rubbing Oberon's nose. The animal gave him a good-natured head butt, to which Severus gave a one-sided smile. Soon, an ear-ringing whinny and the clop of hooves told Severus that their companions had finally entered the stable.

Cara glared at Severus as she dismounted and led a winded Onyx towards him. "Traitor!" she hissed good-naturedly at Oberon as she came to stand next to him. Onyx was blowing hard and was covered liberally in mud and white foam. Severus smirked. The horse's response was to thoroughly shake his entire body. Water, mud, and foamy sweat flew everywhere as his tack jingled noisily. Severus glared at the horse as he swiped a speck of foam off his shirtsleeve.

Cara laughed as two stable elves appeared, offering to take the horses. She and Severus each gave their mounts a good pat before handing the elves the reins. They watched as the little creatures walked the animals down the aisle for a cool down, a bath, and then a rest in a nice, freshly cleaned stall.

"I think he just let you know how he feels about being beaten," Cara laughed.

"So you admit it," Severus said.

"Admit what?" she said absently.

"That I was the clear winner, even with your *sovery* underhanded head start."

"If you say so."

"It's simply the truth."

"According to you."

"According to...?! For fuck's sake, woman! I was in the stables and off the bloody horse before you even crossed the threshold!"

"Alright, Severus, I concede. You win."

"You're damn right, I do," he mumbled to himself as he watched her struggle to tame her wet hair back into a ponytail.

"What?" she asked slowly, when Severus continued to stare at her.

"Nothing of consequence," he said, raising an eyebrow at her again as he strode past her towards the covered walkway leading to the castle.

She pulled on her hair one last time before moving to catch up with him. "No, really... what?"

"Nothing." She could see the corners of his mouth twitch. "Only," he began again, cutting his eyes at her, "the next time you plan to go barreling about in a maelstrom, I'd choose my wardrobe accordingly." He let his eyes drop to her chest, where they lingered for an *almost* inappropriate amount of time. "However... black does suit you." With that, he shot a one-sided smirk at her and exited the stables.

Cara stood open-mouthed for a moment, wondering what in the hell he was talking about, before it finally hit her. She looked down at her t-shirt. Riding through the torrential downpour had soaked the thin, white cotton until it was practically see-through. As for the black bra, well, she simply couldn't find her other one this morning. She quickly cast a cleansing charm over herself after noticing him do the same, and ran to catch up with him.

She smirked to herself. At least there was *one* thing about her that the dour man seemed to appreciate, and pretenses be damned, Cara planned to use it to her advantage.

~TBC

A/N: This was just a bit of a transitional chapter, but damn was it hard to write. I hope you enjoyed it! Also, my Gaelic translations come from an online translator, so if anything is incorrect, please let me know! Thanks for reading!

Buachailí éasca: Gaelic for 'Easy boys.'

Just a little bit of trivia concerning the horses' names:

Oberon is a legendary king of the fairies in medieval and Renaissance literature. He is best known as a character in William Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written in the mid-1590s, in which he is Consort to Titania, Queen of the Fairies.

To see a picture of Oberon, go here:

http://i119.piczo.com/view/4/2/w/h/n/p/h/r/8/7/o/p/img/i283571171_82636.jpg

Onyx is a form of quartz, with the most common color being black. It was known to the ancient Greeks and Romans and appears in the art of Minoan Crete, notably from the archaeological recoveries at Knossos. Onyx was used in Egypt as early as the Second Dynasty to make bowls and other pottery items.

Onyx is also mentioned in the Bible at various points, such as the priests' garments and the foundation of the city of Heaven in Revelations.

To see a picture of Onyx, go here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Friesian_Stallion.jpg

Sources:

Google Translator

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Another School Year Begins

Chapter 7 of 10

Another school year begins...

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

Thank you, DelilahKelley, for all your help!

~*~*~*~

The following Monday dawned rainy and dreary. The storm from the day before had continued through the night and showed no visible signs of stopping anytime soon. After their outing on Sunday, Severus and Cara had parted amiably. Severus had merely nodded and wished her a good day while Cara had grinned madly at him before giving him a playful shove and trotting off before he could chastise her. He had settled for scowling viciously at her back. *Impertinence!* He had scowled even harder at her face doing his best not to drop his eyes to her chest when she turned around and gave him an entirely too cheerful wave as she called, "See you soon, Severus!"

Either she didn't notice his murderous glaring, or she didn't care. *Probably the latter*, he thought to himself. Severus had always been a quick study, and he was learning all too quickly that his scowls did not work on Cara. In fact, his sour demeanor seemed to make her even more... enthusiastic.

Now, with the first day of classes looming like a dark, suffocating cloud, Severus was wearing one of his deepest, most threatening *don't-fuck-with-me* scowls as he walked down the corridor to the Great Hall and Merlin be praised a large mug of hot, black, caffeine-laced coffee.

The dull ache in his right hip and leg along with other, slightly more... *delicate*... places pulled his mind back to Cara. Even after taking one of his strongest painkilling potions the strongest he could take and still be coherent enough to teach he was still limping slightly when he entered the Great Hall for breakfast. Damn his stubborn pride he'd ache for a week after that little equestrian escapade.

The crowd of students milling in the entranceway parted quickly as the dark wizard strode through the double doors, robes billowing behind him. He looked up at the Head Table and was irritated when the first thing he noticed was Cara's absence. He became even more irritated when he couldn't decide whether he was irritated that she wasn't there or simply irritated because he was irritated about it... if that made any sense. He scowled as he silently shushed his inner voice.

A few minutes later, when he had settled in and wrapped his hands around his first blessed cup of steaming black coffee, the object of his traitorous thoughts came sweeping into the hall. Severus raised an eyebrow at her disheveled appearance: her black teaching robes were thrown haphazardly over a pair of black dress pants and a red blouse; her blonde hair had been pulled back into an unruly ponytail; she also appeared quite agitated as she walked briskly up the aisle between the House tables. Several students' heads turned as they gave her curious glances.

Severus watched her with only his eyes, lest he be accused of more interest than was proper. He did, however, hide his smirk behind his coffee mug as she stepped up onto the raised dais and made her way to her seat next to him, her heels clacking loudly against the floor.

She sat with a huff, immediately reaching for the coffee and pouring herself a large, fortifying cup. Severus watched in horror as she took up the creamer and started pouring it into the steaming liquid. She poured, and poured... and poured. At the point where Severus was about to reach out and stop her himself, she seemed satisfied and set the jug of liquid down sharply. She then moved on to the sugar, with the same results. Severus' hand actually left his cup this time in an unconscious effort to salvage what was left of the drink's dignity but Cara finished with the sweetener and set it down just as sharply.

The fact that she hadn't spoken by the time she started eating the eggs she had so viscosly spooned onto her plate intrigued Severus. He couldn't help himself. "Something vexes?" he asked, sipping his coffee and looking absently out into the student-filled hall.

Cara paused with a forkful of eggs halfway to her mouth. She cut her eyes at him. "No," she said shortly, before shoving the eggs into her mouth. "Why?" she asked as she chewed.

"Nothing in particular you simply have a general sense of disarray and irritation about you this morning. Quite the contrast to your usual demeanor, wouldn't you say?" He set his cup down and started on his own breakfast of dry toast and eggs.

Cara stabbed violently at her plate, but remained silent for a few more bites. "I am not irritated, thank you very much," she finally replied. "I simply have a lot on my mind at the moment." She took a long sip of her coffee.

"Mmm," he grunted noncommittally around a bite of toast. He chewed slowly as he watched a bit of mocha colored coffee dribble from the side of her mouth. She wiped it away with a flick of her hand.

They ate in silence for a while when Cara suddenly paused and turned her head to peer at him thoughtfully. "Severus," she began, setting her fork down and leaning towards him slightly, "you've been teaching here forever..."

He stiffened at her remark and set his fork down slowly. "Contrary to popular belief, I am neither a vampire nor a decrepit old man. 'Forever' is a bit of a stretch, don't you

think?" He scowled at her.

Cara scowled right back, her mood darkening even more at his caustic remark. "I meant it as a compliment, you rude, self-conscious git!" she whispered vehemently. Unsurprisingly, her voice carried, and Severus thought he heard Minerva choke on her tea from two seats down.

He snorted. "Resorting to name-calling are we? Now who's being rude?"

"Arrgh!" she growled as she threw her napkin angrily onto her plate. "I must *bènsane* to have even *thought* of asking for *your* help!" she whispered again. Several students at the tables in front of them looked up worriedly as Hogwarts' newest professor traded verbal blows with the school's most reviled and feared one.

"My help?" Severus asked suspiciously. "Whatever for?"

"Never mind. I'd hate to burden *acolleague* with my school-related problems. It's my own damn fault anyway." She stood to leave, her chair screeching angrily across the floor.

As she swept by, Severus sighed and turned back to his breakfast.

He was halfway through his second cup of coffee, watching as the students slowly began to filter out of the hall, headed to common rooms, first classes of the day (his first period was blessedly free), and who knows where else, before he felt the small pang of an irritatingly familiar emotion: guilt, pure and simple.

He squeezed the bridge of his nose. Why should he feel guilty? So he and Cara had spent several surprisingly tolerable hours together over the past few days. Did that give her license to ask him for favors? So she had spoken to him like a friend, and not just someone that she was forced to interact with. Did that give her the right to assume she could speak to him anyway she saw fit?

"*Bugging hell...*" he hissed to himself as he rose from the table. He nodded to Minerva who raised her eyebrows at him before exiting the hall with his usual tempestuous billow. After all, it wouldn't do to have anyone assume that he was actually going after the witch.

Even if that was exactly what he was doing.

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Severus waded through the milling students, glaring at those who didn't move out of his way quickly enough, and casually made his way towards the Muggle Studies classroom.

Muttered swear words and rustling parchment greeted him as he came to the door. He took a deep breath and composed himself a bit before knocking. "Come in," Cara's voice called.

The door squeaked a bit as he entered. Cara looked up from her position behind her desk, where she was frantically sorting through stacks of parchment. "Oh... it's you. Come to gloat?" She turned back to her papers.

Severus walked casually between the rows of desks, trailing his fingers along the edges of the aged wood surfaces. The fabric of his teaching robes rustled softly over the stone floor. He cleared his throat as he looked casually around the room. "Actually, it struck me," he commented, "seeing as how you left so... dramatically... that you never made it clear what it was that you so desperately needed my personal assistance with."

Cara laughed to herself, shaking her head. Severus thought he heard the words 'arrogant' and 'bastard' used in rapid succession but chose to ignore it. He continued moving towards her desk, folding his arms over his chest as he did. He stopped and watched as she continued to fidget with the parchment shuffled, stacked, reshuffled, and stacked again, all the while muttering under her breath. After a moment, she looked up again. "Are you still here?"

"Obviously," he drawled, looking at her expectantly.

She sighed and stopped her manic rearranging. Walking slowly around the edge of the desk, she stepped off the dais and crossed her own arms as she came to stand in front of him. Even in her heels she had to look up. She tried to frown at him, but her mouth quickly transformed itself into a satisfied smirk.

"Do I amuse you?" Severus asked, the own corners of his mouth twitching rebelliously.

She didn't reply, but continued smirking at him for a moment before finally reaching out and laying a hand on his arm. He looked down his nose at her hand, raising an eyebrow at the casual touch. "Apology accepted," she said, giving his arm a friendly squeeze before turning back to the chaos of her desk.

"I beg your pardon?!" he exclaimed. How dare she assume that he had come down here to... wait... why exactly had he come down here?

She chuckled. "It's alright. Just the fact that you're standing there and not being verbally abusive or threatening to hex me must mean that you feel bad for being such an ass earlier."

His scowl returned.

She looked at him and smiled genuinely. "Thank you."

His brow drew together in confusion, but he found himself nodding his ascent and turning to leave. Just before he reached the door, he realized she still had not told him what she needed help with. "Miss Benoit?" he asked as he turned back to her.

"My rooms, 5:00, if that's alright?" she replied.

After another moment of confused silence, he simply nodded again before exiting the rooms in a swirl of black.

Cara watched the spot where he had disappeared, the peacock feather of her quill rubbing pensively at her lips, before turning back to her parchment with a satisfied smirk.

~*~*~*~

That evening found Severus trudging up the stairs to Cara's rooms. He was rather early, but he wanted to get this over with. How hard could helping the chit with... well, with whatever it was be anyway?

After unconsciously straightening his cuffs and brushing invisible lint from his spotless frock coat, Severus gave the door two brisk knocks. He thought he heard shuffling coming from the other side, along with a few muttered curses. When no one answered after several moments, he raised his hand and knocked again.

This time he heard the unmistakable but muted sound of breaking glass and a very clear, irritated voice saying, "Fucking shit!!!"

A few moments later, footsteps stomped irritably towards the door and it was thrown open by a very irritated witch. "What?!" she screamed, before realizing who it was.

Severus took a step back, raising both eyebrows at the woman before him. He allowed himself a moment to take her in. She was wearing the rattiest pair of Muggle blue jeans he had ever seen ripped at both knees, frayed at the edges, as well as in multiple places along the legs. She wore a black tank-top that looked like it had seen better days as well. Her blonde hair was hanging in a disheveled mess around her face, which was streaked along one side with dark blue ink, and she was barefoot.

"Well, if that's how you treat people whom you invite to your quarters, I believe I'll just be going," he remarked as he made to leave. He stopped when Cara reached out and grabbed his arm.

"No! I'm sorry, Severus... I didn't realize it was you. You're very early. Please," she said, releasing him and stepping back into her sitting room, "come in."

After letting out a long-suffering sigh, to which Cara responded by dramatically rolling her eyes, he moved past her into the room. It's true that old habits die hard as soon as the door shut behind him, Severus quickly took stock of his surroundings. The room was nothing special... just standard staff quarters. There was a large fireplace against the far wall, in which a small fire popped and crackled even in September the castle was cold and drafty. Several ornate picture frames sat upon the mantle. Family and friends from the States, he assumed. On the left wall sat her desk. It was full to the brim with parchment and quill. A small stack on the edge was the only organized bit he could make out. On the floor beside the desk was a broken ink bottle, its dark contents spreading slowly over the flagstone floors.

As he inspected the room, Cara brushed past him, headed quickly towards the fireplace. Grabbing the iron poker from its stand, she gave the fire a few good pokes. It popped viciously as the flames found new wood to devour. As she replaced the poker, Severus couldn't help but notice that she stealthily snagged one of the larger frames off the mantle, while at the same time turning away from him and heading to the other side of the room.

He narrowed his eyes at her back, curious, but, once again, chose not to comment.

He watched as she entered the only other door in the room her bedroom he assumed. A few moments later, he heard her call from somewhere inside, "I was about to pour a drink. Would you like something?"

"Yes, thank you," he replied, pulling his attention from the bare space on the mantle as he casually walked about the room. He noticed the bookshelves lining the wall beside her desk. Curiosity got the better of him, and he walked closer to look over the titles: *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Sense & Sensibility*, *Gone with the Wind*... Her shelves were full to the brim with Muggle fiction.

Cara reentered the room, holding a small, blue wine bottle. "How does a 50-year-old bottle of elf-made wine sound?"

He turned away from her books as his eyebrows rose to his hairline. "Elf-made wine? 50-year-old elf-made wine? Christ woman, you really must be desperate."

"More than you know," he heard her mumble to herself.

Once again, Severus chose not to comment. He walked to where she was standing next to a small table beneath one of the large windows that occupied the same wall as the fireplace and watched with barely concealed amusement as she attempted to remove the cork from the bottle manually, with little success.

Not wanting to impose, Severus watched her struggle with the corkscrew for a few moments before shaking his head and stepping in. "Are you a witch or not?" he asked as he took the bottle from her and waved his palm over the cork, which disappeared instantly. The aroma of rich, red wine filled their noses.

"Show off," she teased. A raised eyebrow was his only reply.

"Ought to let it breathe for a bit," she said, taking the bottle and setting it on the table.

He nodded. "Now... what is so important that you would sacrifice a 100 galleon bottle of wine just to get my assistance?"

Cara sighed and ran a weary hand over her face. "You're going to think it's stupid."

"Most likely."

She shook her head. "This is the part where you're supposed to give words of encouragement, not demean me before you even know what it is I need help with!"

"Then by all means tell me, so I may unburden my conscience."

"Jesus..." she sighed, moving to slump on the sofa in front of the fire.

Severus reminded himself that no, he did not notice the way her breasts swayed enticingly underneath her black top as she dropped heavily into the cushions. He cleared his throat. "Well?" he asked, moving to stand in front of the fire, more out of the need for something to do than the need for warmth.

She scrubbed both hands over her face, looking up at him as she dropped them dramatically to her lap. "My lesson plans and syllabi... I haven't finished them!" she said frantically.

She was wrong he didn't think it was stupid. He thought it was ludicrous. Severus rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "And why in Merlin's name are you in such a predicament?"

"Well," she said, looking sheepish, "I started on them last night, but... um... something came up."

Severus ran a hand irritably through his hair. "Did you not think that you would actually need said lesson plans if you were to in fact teach any lessons this week?"

"Oh, I finished the ones for this week... but the rest of the month, well..." She shrugged sheepishly.

"The universe is punishing me, I know it," Severus mumbled to himself.

"You're not the only one..." he heard Cara say.

"Indeed."

They stared at each other for a few moments.

"Soooo..." Cara said finally, tapping her fingers against the couch.

Severus gave a long suffering sigh. "Show me," he said, indicating the overflowing desk with his hand.

Cara beamed at him and rushed to grab her things from her desk. Severus had settled himself onto her sofa just as she came back with a tower of parchment.

Christ... what have I committed myself to?

"Here," she said, thrusting a piece of parchment under his nose, "this is the syllabus so far."

He took it cautiously, as if her procrastination would rub off on him if he weren't careful, and quickly looked over the contents. After a moment, he sighed heavily, set the parchment down, and stood.

"Where are you going?" she asked, sounding slightly alarmed.

He waved her off. "To order some tea. If I'm going to have any chance of helping you finish this mess, and keeping my sanity in the process, I must be able to focus properly."

Cara shook her head, chuckling as Severus sent an order for tea through the Floo to the kitchens.

It was going to be a long night.

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It was two hours later before either of them noticed the time. "Shit," Cara exclaimed, "looks like we missed dinner."

"Mmm," Severus mumbled, not looking up from the piece of parchment in his hand.

Cara sat down her own parchment and stood from her place on the hearth rug. "Are you hungry?" she asked absently, moving to pour another glass of wine. They had finished the tea in record time and had then turned to wetting their palettes with the contents of the blue bottle. It was now almost empty, and she had to admit she was feeling slightly... buzzed. It was a good thing the bottle was small, as it wouldn't do to be hung over on a school day. Still, let no arguments be given against the elves and the potency of their wine.

She picked up the glass and walked back to Severus. His wine glass sat empty on the side table, so she refilled it for him, pouting a bit as the last drop of blood-red liquid dripped from the lip of the bottle. She set it on the table and sipped from her own glass, peering over its rim at the man on her sofa. It had to be the wine talking when she said, "You should do that more often."

"Do what?" he asked absently from behind his parchment.

"The coat... you should lose the coat more often." She tilted her glass in the direction of his frock coat, which lay over the back of the sofa. "You look almost approachable without all that armor."

He had divested himself of it about an hour ago, as the warmth from the room and quite possibly the wine had finally become too much. He sat in a white shirt and black waist coat, both buttoned to the brim, looking thoroughly at ease on her couch.

If he was surprised at her comment, it didn't show. She huffed softly. What would it take to shock this man? Cara found herself thinking that she could probably be standing before him stark naked, doing cartwheels while singing the "Star-Spangled Banner," and he would do nothing more than raise an eyebrow at her. She giggled at the mental image.

This time he did drop the parchment. "Something funny?"

She simply smirked and shook her head. "I asked if you were hungry. It's an hour past dinner and I'm starving!"

He sighed and set the parchment aside. "I suppose I could do with something as well. Shall I order?"

"Be my guest," she said, indicating the fireplace behind her.

He rose and an order was quickly sent. A few moments later, two plates of chicken stew and a loaf of fresh bread with butter appeared on the table in the corner. The smell made Cara's mouth water. "Shall we?" she asked, indicating that he should go first.

Appearing only slightly uncomfortable at the prospect of dining *alone* with a woman, Severus made sure to snatch up the parchment he had been surveying moments earlier. He seated himself across from Cara, who wasted no time in starting in on her own meal.

"You know," she said after they had both sated their hunger a bit, "if we weren't at Hogwarts, this could almost be considered a date." She pulled her bread apart and dipped it in her stew, totally missing the look of shock that passed over Severus' face at the mention of the word 'date.'

"I do not date, Miss Benoit," he commented dryly.

"Why not?" she asked around a bite of bread.

He scowled at her for a long moment, his long fingers absently pulling apart his own bread, before looking away out the window. "Lack of choices," he said softly.

Cara snorted loudly. "Lack of choices? That sounds like a load of garbage. From what I hear there are women literally knocking down your door to get a piece of you."

He swirled a piece of bread thoughtfully in his stew, elbows propped on the table top. "Not choices of women, Miss Benoit..." He sighed, wondering once again why he found himself talking to her so freely. "Life choices," he said bitterly.

Cara stopped chewing abruptly. "Life choices? What life choices... wait... you don't bat for the other team, do you? Because, if you do, that's perfectly accept..."

He glowered at her as he cut her off. "If you're asking if I'm a queer, Miss Benoit, then the answer is 'no.' I was talking about the choices I have made in the past bad choices that have left me with no hope for any type of happy ending in my future."

Cara swallowed and shook her head. "Bullshit."

Up went the eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"Bull. Shit. People can change. We're not always the same people from day to day, let alone year to year, decade to decade. Our past does not completely dictate our future."

Severus thought she had emphasized that last sentence with the air of someone who had first hand knowledge of such things, but chose not to comment again.

"Is it not our past that makes us who we are?" he asked instead.

Cara took a sip of her wine. "To a point," she said, nodding her head, "but to say that it controls the rest of our lives is utter bullshit. The past is nothing but a memory, Severus... the present is where we truly live."

His lips thinned as he took in her words. He felt something shake loose inside him, something that had been tightly fastened, corroded shut with the rust of nearly twenty years. To his utter horror, he suddenly felt the outermost layer of rust start to chip away... and it scared the hell out of him.

Yes, it was definitely time to go.

He stood to take his leave. "Thank you for the wine, but it's getting late."

"We haven't finished yet," Cara commented casually.

"We've finished out the next month, which should suffice for now."

Cara nodded.

His next words left his mouth before he even realized it. "However, if you still require help, I... might be able to spare a bit of time next weekend."

Cara smiled. "It's a date then."

He scowled at her word choice and made his way to the door. Cara was right behind him, holding the coat that he had almost forgotten in his haste to leave what she knew was fast becoming a very uncomfortable situation for him.

She opened the door, and he stepped gracefully into the hall before turning back to face her. Cara leaned against the doorframe as she watched indecision play over his face. Finally, "What of the future?" he asked quietly.

Cara narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, wondering if there was any double meaning behind the question. "The future?"

He nodded slowly as she looked into his dark eyes.

"Well, the future is entirely up to you, Severus." She smiled and held out his coat.

He took it slowly and gave her another small, calculating nod. "Thank you again for the wine," he repeated softly before sweeping away.

Yes, Cara thought as she watched him walk away, *entirely up to you...*

~TBC

A/N: Hmm... I believe Severus thinks there may be more to Cara than she lets on. Perhaps he's right...

Thanks for reading!

A Mistake

Chapter 8 of 10

Anger is just a cowardly extension of sadness...

~*~*~*~

"Anger is just a cowardly extension of sadness."

~ Tom Gates

~*~*~*~

With the school year now in full swing, the following weeks passed quickly. Severus didn't see Cara at all except at meals and when they occasionally passed in the halls between classes. She thanked him repeatedly for his help with her syllabi and lesson plans, even though she seemed to have gotten the hang of things and had finished out the term by the beginning of October.

This, along with the fact that he was still unable to keep his mouth shut when in her presence, and was therefore inclined to offer up information about himself that he would never have told anyone, said to Severus that his presence would no longer be required on Saturday nights, even if he had begun to enjoy their encounters. He admitted this grudgingly, and only because he took pride in always being honest with *himself*, if not others.

He... *liked* Cara, and it scared the hell out of him. A coward he was not, but the unease he refused, *absolutely refused*, to call it longing or, Merlin help him, arousal that settled in his center whenever she touched him had simply become too much. Her touch was never sexual, not really only a slight brush of her fingers over his hand, his arm, or back but it was becoming a distraction. A distraction he did not need... or want.

Liar...

When he nearly let himself get hexed one Friday morning as his seventh-year Defense class was having dueling practice, he finally put his foot down. She would not drive him to such distraction.

Better to cut things off before I kill myself... or her.

So, as a result, Severus declined every offer of dinner, walking to Hogsmeade, going for a ride, or just patrolling the halls together. She took it with good grace, but he could tell she was becoming increasingly disappointed. It tugged at him, the look that crossed her face when he declined again and again, more often than not with a scathing remark attached, and her discomfiture more than anything began to wear on his nerves. He shouldn't give a damn whether or not the nosy American chit had her feelings hurt.

He was not a nice man, he kept reminding himself, and finally her constant nattering combined with the stress of preparing for mid-term exams, his Head of House duties, the impending Samhain festival, and the fact that there was no sausage for breakfast was too much.

He snapped.

Slamming his fork down on the High Table hard enough to make the glassware in his vicinity shudder, he turned to her. "What part of 'I am disinclined to acquiesce to your request' did you not understand, Miss Benoit? Was it the large words, or perhaps your attention wandered in the time it took me to say it? It means 'No,' or do they not teach you to communicate above a third-year level at whatever second-rate American school you had the misfortune to attend?" All this was said in a vehement whisper, but he still managed to attract the attention of a few of the students in the front row, as well as that of the teachers sitting to either side of them.

Cara simply stared at him, her coffee poised halfway to her lips. Her jaw dropped at the abrupt ferocity of his outburst, before clamping shut again. Setting her cup down slowly lest she be tempted to toss the steaming liquid into his lap and therefore onto his delicate bits she smiled tightly. "Fine then, you pompous ass, don't come."

A flick of her hand, and she turned her glass coffee mug into a Muggle-style portable one, complete with slotted top. She stood and leaned over him in order to whisper in his ear. "They may not have taught much of your Queen's English at my *second-rate* school, Severus, but I am very articulate when it comes to saying 'go fuck yourself.'"

This time it was Severus' jaw that gaped open at Cara's ferocity. Before he could fling anything back at her, she grabbed up her portable cup and exited the hall, her long hair and teaching robes flapping behind her. She missed the shocked stares of the students who had been close enough to see and hear her exchange with Severus. Heads turned in unison to watch her walk out, then turned back to stare open-mouthed at the fuming Potions master. A sweeping glare was enough to make them all suddenly very interested in their food.

As the usual breakfast chatter picked back up, a mirth-filled cackle came from his left, where Madam Hooch was sitting. She leaned in conspiratorially, nudging him with her elbow. "Why don't you just shag her and be done with it, Severus?"

Severus slowly turned his murderous glare on the flying instructor. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. A good rodgering would probably do her a world of good as well. She's a lovely girl, but she's been so...*harassed*-looking of late. You'd be doing her a favor." The older woman winked at him before turning her yellow eyes back to her meal, leaving Severus to gape, once again, in fury. It only got worse when Minerva leaned forward to speak around the grinning flying instructor.

"She's right you know... the poor woman is in desperate need of... well, of stress relief, if you would." The Headmistress raised her eyebrows at him.

Severus thought the old bat must be going daft in her post-war days. "Bloody harpies... the lot of you!" he spat, which earned him another cackle from Hooch and a smirk from Minerva. He shoved away from the High Table, his appetite lost, and exited the hall. The frantic whispers of the students caught his ear as he passed between the tables. The rumor mill was going to literally overflow after this one.

Bugging hell...

~*~*~*~

As it turned out, Severus did show up at Cara's door that next Saturday evening. He fully intended to give her an earful for the way she had spoken to him the day before. He knocked briskly and waited... and waited... and waited a bit longer. Just as he had pulled his wand to unlock the door himself, he heard a tiny voice, "Mistress Cara is not here, Professor, sir."

Severus turned to find one of the school elves looking up at him with a frightened expression. He raised an eyebrow at the trembling creature. "Really? And where would... *Mistress*... Cara happen to be?"

The elf only shook its wrinkly head, its drooping ears flapping softly against its cheeks. "I does not know, sir. I only know that she is not in her rooms, as I be the one that cleans them."

Severus' brow furrowed in irritation. "Was she here this morning?"

Again, the elf shook its head. "No, Professor, sir... and she wasn't here last night either."

The furrow in his brow deepened, and he grunted an absent thank you as he stormed away from Cara's door, robes billowing behind him. The tiny elf could only nod and shake his head in confusion. Humans really had no clue...

~*~*~*~

Later that night, Severus sat in front of his fire, alone, holding a tumbler of whiskey and brooding over the fact that Cara had left without telling him.

And why should it bother you? his inner voice asked. *It's not like you have the right to keep track of her... she's not your witch after all... and even if she were, do you really think she'd stick around and wait on your sorry arse after the way you spoke to her this morning?*

With a growl, he threw his glass into the fire and ran his hands through his hair. He'd been distracted all evening, wondering where the hell the infuriating woman had gotten off to. He'd even gone down to the stables to see if by chance she was with her horses. He had found Oberon and Onyx munching contentedly on their dinner of hay and oats, but no Cara. "Where is your mistress?" he'd muttered to himself as he let Oberon give him a good sniff. The Andalusian had whuffed at the pockets of Severus' robes, hoping for a treat. Having none, Severus had given him a scratch under the jaw instead. "Incorrigible equine," he said softly, giving him one more pat before leaving the stables.

He'd been in his rooms ever since and had worked himself into a fit of pique. She was messing with him... yes, that had to be it. She was off with some bloke, having a night on the town, and he was stuck here in the dungeons, forced to drink alone... *again*.

No one's forcing it down your throat, mate... his inner voice supplied snidely.

"Shut up!" he hissed between gritted teeth. That was it... he'd had enough. Grabbing his wand from the side-table, he stormed from his rooms not even bothering with his cloak and headed up the stairs to Cara's quarters.

A few minutes later, he pounded on her door in a drunken fit of anger, pulling his wand when she didn't answer immediately. The fact that he already knew she wasn't home never registered with him as he flicked the length of ebony at her doorknob. The silent Alohomora unlocked the latch, and the door swung in on itself. Even in the clutches of too much drink, Severus was cautious and kept his wand at the ready as he stepped slowly into her sitting room.

"Miss Benoit?" he called sharply.

No answer.

Shutting the door behind him, he stepped further into the room. When nothing unexpected happened, he lowered his wand and proceeded to look for any reason for Cara's irritating absence. Her desk was in surprisingly good order parchment stacked neatly, oil-well tightly corked, the peacock quills she seemed to favor standing neatly in their holder, and a stack of books propped neatly on one corner.

Suppressing an irritated sigh, he walked to the fireplace and knelt down, holding his hand over the ashes.

Cold.

There had been no fire for at least 24 hours. He pondered the grate for a few moments before standing with a growl. He leaned his forearm against the mantle, his wand tapping against his thigh as he tried to think of anywhere she could be that he hadn't looked. Well, he hadn't gone into town to look for her...

No... I do have some dignity left...

Lowering his arm, his gaze was instantly drawn to the naked space on the mantle that had once held a photograph, a photograph that Cara obviously had not wanted him to see on his first visit to her rooms. Feeling only slightly vindictive, he narrowed his eyes as his head turned in the direction of her bedroom.

No... he shouldn't.

What would Cara say?

Oh, she'd probably have plenty to say, much of it consisting of four-letter words and colorful descriptions of his person. Maybe she wouldn't hex him too severely...

His anger and irritation overriding his common sense, Severus walked towards the door, his wand held casually in his hand. He leaned against the doorframe, and one silent spell and a half-hearted, "Oops..." later, he was standing in Cara's bedroom.

It was appointed with the standard Hogwarts furniture: large four-poster canopy bed complete with curtains, twin side-tables, fireplace, a chest at the foot of the bed, an armoire against the far wall, a small sitting area with sofa, armchairs, and coffee table, and a large floor mirror. The bath was off through a door to his right, and there was a large, stained-glass window directly across from that door, which lead to a small balcony overlooking the grounds.

The staff quarters could change to suit the preferences of their occupants, so Cara's décor was as unlike his own as night was to day, which was, of course, unsurprising. Where his quarters were outfitted in dark, masculine colors and tones, Cara's rooms were like her, light and seemingly carefree. A white goose-down comforter lay across the bed, complete with matching pillows, and a white bear-skin rug lay in front of the fire. The fabric of the sofa and chairs had changed to match the white of the rug and comforter. Even the bed curtains were white. It was entirely too cheerful for his taste. Much too... *virginal*.

He chuckled. 'Virginal' and Cara were not two things that belonged in the same sentence... at least in his opinion. Not that he would know anything about that aspect of her life... as he certainly wasn't involved in it. Actually, if he thought about it, he didn't know much about her at all, aside from what she had revealed over the past few weeks.

He pushed such thoughts aside for the moment, lest he lose his nerve. Turning back to the task at hand, he scanned the room again, but saw no photos.

Hmm... he thought. "*Accio hidden portrait!*" he said, flourishing his wand drunkenly.

A rattle resounded from the trunk at the foot of Cara's bed. Stepping slowly forward, he pointed his wand at the lock, immediately sensing several levels of protective enchantments and wards. Well, he hadn't been a spy for almost twenty years without learning a thing or two...

Not thinking of what a huge invasion of privacy it was, he flicked his wand at the lock on the trunk, disabling her wards and counteracting the enchantments in less than a minute. Another flip of his wrist unbuckled the leather straps binding the trunk closed. The lid flew open, and the rattling ceased as a silver-framed portrait flew at his head.

He snatched the frame out of the air and held it face down in his hand. A wave of guilt passed over him as he stood in Cara's bedroom, about to breach her trust in him. He could still turn back... save himself from her ire when she found out, as she was bound to. No... he had come this far... and dammit he had to know what she was keeping from him.

Slowly, as if whatever was contained in the photo would suddenly fly at him in a rage, he turned the frame over. His brow drew together as he took in what he was seeing. The black and white picture was unmoving... a Muggle photograph. In it sat a younger version of Cara. Her hair was shorter, and she had a look of... *innocence*... about her. Neither of those facts shocked him. What shocked him was the tiny, swaddled bundle that Cara held in her arms: the soft, round cheeks, tiny nose, and cupid's bow lips of a tiny infant peeked from the cradle of her arms.

Severus let the hand holding the photo drop to his side, his brow furrowed in both hurt and confusion.

Cara had a child.

~ TBC

A/N: Well now...

I'm very unsatisfied with this chapter as a whole, but I don't think there's anything else I can do to it. It is what it is. Please be kind... the Muse is suffering...

Thanks for reading though!

Betrayal and Truth

Chapter 9 of 10

Hindsight is 20/20...

Disclaimer: Nothing recognizable is mine.

So sorry for the long wait! I thought I had posted this one already. It's rather short, but the next one is nearly finished and is rather long.

Enjoy!

~*~*~*~*~

Cara had a child.

A child she had never even mentioned, not once.

He raised the photograph once more, features tightening as he looked at the smiling woman holding the baby. Something twisted in his gut; it felt like fear... but not any fear he had ever faced. He knew the fear of death, the fear of hopelessness, even the fear of those he cared for coming to harm, but this... this fear was new.

How could a woman who so obviously loved such an innocent being ever love a man like him – a scarred, broken murderer with absolutely no redeeming qualities?

He blinked. Love?

Oh, Severus... you fool...

In a flash of frightening clarity, he realized that he shouldn't be here. Cara trusted him. Merlin knows why, but she did. His very presence was betraying that trust. What if...

"You fucking bastard!!"

Severus spun around at the sound of Cara's utterly furious voice. She stood in the doorway to her bedroom, a suitcase in her right hand and a traveling cloak dangling from the other. Her face was a mixture of emotions that Severus was unaccustomed to seeing. There was anger, which he had seen; and sadness, which he had also seen; but the one emotion that he was entirely unfamiliar with when displayed across her features was the look of utter hurt and betrayal that glared back at him now.

"Where have you been?" he said without thinking, his ire matching hers.

She didn't answer him. Instead, she dropped her things and stormed up to him. She snatched the picture from his hand and looked down at it. Something passed over her face, but it was gone before Severus could decide what it was. However, when she looked up, there was no mistaking her anger.

She held up the frame.

"You went through my things?!" she whispered. "You came into my room while I was gone, went through my personal things, and now you have the audacity to question me about something that is absolutely none of your fucking business?!" Her voice rose as she finished the sentence, and her ire was so great that the air practically sizzled with angry magic.

"Miss Benoit..." Severus said again, trying to talk her down, even though he knew that he was most definitely in the wrong.

"Goddamn you, Severus..." she growled, running her hands through her hair. "Where's my wand?" she said suddenly, frantically patting the pockets of her jeans before rushing back to her dropped bag. "Where is my wand?!" She turned back to him, finger pointed accusingly. "I should hex you... no... I should *kill* you! Of all the ungrateful, underhanded, sneaky, malicious..."

"Cara!" he bellowed.

His use of her first name stopped her for a moment, and she simply stared at him in disbelief for a moment. "No..." she hissed, shaking her head. "Don't you dare use such familiarity with me, *Professor!* Get out! Get out, or I swear to God I'll hex you out!" She pointed her newly found wand at him, the tip shaking with rage.

He raised his own instinctively. "You wouldn't dare—"

His robes were on fire before the words had left his mouth. He frantically waved his own wand to put them out, but not before getting badly singed. He opened his mouth to swear at her, but was unable to as she half sobbed, half screamed, "Out!" one last time. He found himself on the other side of her door, which was then slammed violently in his face.

The fact that he could hear her sobs through the thick English Oak did nothing to quell his anger. Well... nearly nothing.

Fucking hell...

Who was he kidding? He now felt like a complete and utter ass; he knew he was in the wrong, but how dare she speak to him that way? And she had set him on fire! He had just purchased these robes, and now they sported a quaffle-sized hole in the leg. Not to mention the second-degree burn he now sported on his upper thigh.

Another heart-wrenching sob came from the other side of the door, followed by the sound of breaking glass.

Shite...

The little angel on his shoulder prodded him... telling him that he should apologize at once. This was entirely his fault after all; he had no business snooping in things that were none of his concern.

Severus told the angel to shove it.

The third time he heard her anguished cries, he actually raised his hand to knock, intent on begging – yes, begging! – forgiveness, but when the sobs cut off abruptly, he knew she had silenced the room. Growling, he kicked the door with all his might before turning on the spot and leaving her rooms. He would deal with... *this...* later.

However, despite his anger as he stormed his way to the dungeons – smelling of burnt wool, his pride wounded, and his leg hurting like hell where Cara had hexed him – he could only wonder if she hated him now... and desperately hope that she didn't.

~ TBC

Confessions

Chapter 10 of 10

A talk, a ride, and another talk.

"Deep in my heart I'm concealing things that I'm longing to say. Scared to confess what I'm feeling - frightened you'll slip away."

~ Madonna

~*~*~*~*~*~

The Samhain bonfires burned hot and bright across the grounds below as Cara made her way up the winding staircase of the Astronomy Tower. She'd had enough of the dancing, the singing, and the absolute lack of decorum amongst the students attending the yearly celebration. She herself had broken up four make-out sessions...one of which included more than two people...six fist fights, two cat fights, and had stopped no less than twelve students from spiking the punch.

Even if her shift had not been nearly finished, she was done babysitting, and she had been none too subtle when she let Minerva in on that fact. The erratic twitch in her right eye as she had dragged two students to the Headmistress – two students who had managed to accidentally charm themselves into a very awkward position – may have clued the Headmistress in to Cara's current state of mind.

Thankfully, Minerva had merely taken the two unfortunates in hand and waved Cara off with the other. The younger witch had taken her leave quickly, lest she be asked to assist in untangling the pair.

Now she was on her way to a beautiful, if slightly chilly, view of the stars. Sadly, she would be alone in her stargazing venture. She had wanted to invite Severus, but their altercation earlier in the week had put a damper on those plans. Besides, she hadn't seen him at all tonight, or during the rest of the day for that matter. He must be off doing...

"Whoever you are... I suggest you leave."

Cara squealed, clutching her hand to her chest. Her rapidly beating heart threatened to burst from her ribcage as she hissed, "Jesus Christ! Severus Snape, I could murder you!! *Fuck...*"

She had just taken a deep breath to steady her nerves when she heard a strange, unfamiliar sound.

It was like dark chocolate wrapped in velvet, heavy, rich, and thick. Soon enough, she realized he was laughing at her, the bastard. Oh, he must be well into his cups.

Severus' mirth ended just as quickly as it had begun. It was replaced with a resigned sigh. "What do you want?"

She shook her head. "Nothing," she replied, walking towards the alcove that his voice drifted from. She found him sitting alone, save for a small silver flask. He was peering out through the rails of the banister at the festivities below, but something told her that he wasn't seeing anything.

A noncommittal grunt was his only reply as he raised the flask to his lips and drank deeply.

Despite the anger she still felt towards him for his earlier trespasses, Cara's brow furrowed in concern. He seemed... off somehow. Gone were the biting sarcasm and the razor-sharp tongue; instead, before her sat a man who seemed... sad.

Sighing, she moved forward and bumped his arm with the back of her hand. "Scoot."

After a long, slightly off-kilter glare, Severus gave a deep, put-upon sigh and moved over, allowing her to settle down beside him. The wall was warm from where his body had pressed against it, and she smiled slightly as she pulled her legs up and sat back. She wrapped her arms around her knees in an attempt to shut out the chilly night air, cursing herself for leaving her cloak in her rooms.

When Severus remained stubbornly silent, Cara decided to cast the first stone. "It's beautiful tonight, don't you think?"

He glanced away from the flask, his eyes flicking briefly to the blanket of stars twinkling in the cold night air, and shrugged. "I suppose... if one enjoys such things."

Cara snorted at his response, only to get a glare in return. "Don't look at me; I came up here to look at the stars, not get sloshed."

"Indeed." His features tightened after a moment, and he appeared as if he were going to say something. It never came, however, and he stood abruptly and walked away from her. He stopped at the next alcove and leaned heavily against the outer rail, looking straight down the side of the tower. His dark hair shimmered with blue highlights as he rocked his weight back and forth from his hands to his feet.

Cara watched him with a certain level of concern. Being sad and being drunk were never a good combination, at least in her experience. Still, she was angry with him, she reminded herself, and the petty child in her couldn't resist.

"If you're going to fling yourself over, better to get a running start, don't you think?" she said dryly.

He stopped his rocking, and she saw his hands tighten on the bannister. "Why are you here?" he asked, repeating his earlier question.

"Like I said, to look at the stars. Besides, if I have to pull another pair of students off each other, I was going to murder someone before the end of the festival."

She saw him flinch at her statement, his head bowing between his arms, and wondered at the reaction. "Festival," he said after a moment, shaking his head. "What a bloody waste of time."

"Everyone else is enjoying themselves," she said with a wave of her hand. "Anyway, why are you up here, Severus?"

He spread his arms, and the moonlight glinted off the flask in his hand. "Enjoying the stars," he replied, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Cara simply glared at him before bowing her head in resignation. Now was obviously not the time to try and lure him into conversation. She stood and brushed herself off. "Alright then... enjoy your evening."

She swept past him quickly enough that she didn't hear him sigh, nor see him pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration. She also didn't hear him call to her softly as she started down the stairs.

It was not until she heard him call, "Cara!" from the top of the stairs that she stopped. In all the time they had spent together, he had only used her name once, and he was furious at the time. This alone made her turn and look back. He was nothing but a slim silhouette in the darkness, backlit by the moon.

She watched as his hands moved to the railing, his head bowing as he reluctantly waited for her to reply.

What if he wanted to talk to her, but simply didn't know how? Stomping down on her pride, Cara slowly made her way back to the top of the stairs. Her hand came to rest on the railing, so near his that she could feel the heat radiating from it.

She waited, simply standing with him as he worked up the courage to speak. Finally, when Cara was starting to think she had misjudged the situation, he said, "I lost someone... someone I... cared for very much... on this night, many years ago now."

"Who was she?" she asked quietly, truly interested in the kind of woman for reasons best left unsaid that could tear down this harsh man's defenses so easily.

Severus stared at her for a moment, as if considering what to say, but instead of answering Cara's question, he chose to turn away and walk back to the rail. "Who is the child?" he countered.

She knew she was being utterly selfish with her next words, but she was still well and truly angry with him. "That's none of your business, Severus."

He snorted and took a pull from the flask, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "Then neither is she."

Something tightened in Cara's chest, something that overrode the anger, and it frightened her because she didn't want to feel it... had absolutely no right to feel it.

Jealousy.

She was jealous of a woman she had never met, a woman she knew nothing about except for the fact that Severus Snape had cared deeply for her had loved her even.

Unable to bring herself to leave again, and selfishly wanting to satisfy her own morbid curiosity at the same time, she asked, "Why do you care? You had no right... to go through my things, Severus. It was none of your business... and if you had taken the time to stop and think for one minute, you might have realized that I didn't want you to know about her yet!" Cara's chest heaved with emotion.

"Yet?" he asked, his voice tinged with something Cara didn't want to name, even as he continued to stare out into the night.

Fuck...

She had pretty much admitted her intentions towards him with that one statement. He was a clever man, after all.

"Yes, Severus, yet." Cara ran a frustrated hand through her unruly hair. "Jesus... if you must know... and I can't believe I'm telling you this since it's entirely your fault we're angry with each other..." Cara sighed loudly. "She's my daughter. Her name is Charlotte, and she's six years old."

Severus stood and turned to face her. His expression was angry, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Instead, and it may have been the darkness playing tricks on her, but Cara thought they held a look that could only be described of as hurt.

"Why have you never mentioned her before?" he asked softly, his gaze locked with hers.

Cara laughed cynically. "Why does it matter, Severus?"

She saw his eyes change at her statement; the hurt was replaced by a look of utter bewilderment. His mouth opened, but shut just as quickly, as if he feared what he might say next. Turning sharply on his heel, he stormed to the edge of the tower and threw the flask out into the darkness with all his might. A low growl ripped from his throat as he gripped the railing once more, his head bowed deeply between his outstretched arms.

She took a cautious step towards him. "Severus?" she asked again, pointedly this time. "Why does it matter? Please?"

It was the 'please' that did him in. He threw up his hands in exasperation, a manic laugh escaping in a loud rasp. "Merlin, Cara... because she's yours!"

"What?" Cara said, truly taken aback by his statement.

His hands had dropped to his sides, and he wouldn't meet her gaze. Instead, he stared at the flagstones of the tower floor, moving back and forth like a nervous teenager. He sighed, giving himself over to his fate. "I care... because she's yours. Because for some strange, inexplicable reason I..." He started to turn away again, but she stepped forward and grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at her.

"You what, Severus?"

Don't be a coward, Severus thought to himself. Do it while you have the courage. "I am... fond... of you, Cara. Very much so... but there's..."

"Who was she?" Cara asked again as understanding washed over her. Her hand remained on his arm, but her grip loosened, her fingers resting lightly against the black wool.

After a long moment, so long that Cara didn't think he was going to answer, he spoke softly, "She was... everything."

Cara's heart clenched in her chest, and again her unexpected reaction frightened her immensely.

"I'm so sorry, Severus," she whispered, dropping her hand from his arm.

"Are you?" he sneered back.

"Yes," she said forcibly. "You are not the only person in this world who's lost someone, you know... only I quit wallowing a long time ago."

"I am not wallowing!" he bellowed, pointing his finger in her face.

She slapped it away, and she would have laughed at the expression of utter shock on his face had he not been so furious. "Bullshit!" she said. "Why don't you just throw yourself over the edge, and save us all the trouble of watching you feel sorry for yourself."

His face was furious. He slowly brought his finger back to its place beneath her nose. "I. Am not. Wallowing." He said each word with deadly clarity.

She poked her own finger back into his chest. "Yes. You. Are."

They stared at each other, both breathing hard. Surprisingly, he broke away first, his anger leaving in a rush that seemed to deflate him at least three inches. He turned away with a dismissive wave. "Leave, Cara. I find that I'm no longer in the mood for company."

Cara opened her mouth, the urge to flay him alive for his rudeness barely containable. She shut her mouth, forcing her words back down.

Instead, she looked to the rational side of herself. What would make her feel better if it were her in the situation? Well, she and Severus were hardly the same people, but...

Hmm, she thought. I wonder...

Making up her mind, she rushed forward and grabbed him by the hand. "Come with me. We have a lot to discuss, and I refuse to do it up here," she said as she turned to pull him back down the stairs.

"Are you mad?!" he hissed. "Let go!" He tried to pull his hand from hers, but she held fast, and before he could stop her, she had pulled him down the stairs and into the main corridor.

"If you want to know about Charlotte, you'll come with me," she said as she pulled him down another set of stairs.

Hoping that he was too surprised and drunk to stop her, and that he wasn't simply biding his time so he could more easily hex her, she pulled him along until they reached the stables. Once there she pulled her wand and unlocked the doors.

Surprisingly, Severus simply stood behind her as she worked, watching with a raised brow. His curiosity had obviously outweighed his ire. Once finished, Cara slipped inside for a moment before sticking her head out and beckoning to him. "Come on!" she whispered.

He came slowly, warily slipping inside as Cara shut the heavy door behind them. "What exactly are we doing?" he said softly.

"Nothing forbidden, Mr. Deputy Head, sir," she whispered back. "We are teachers at this establishment, aren't we?"

A noncommittal grunt was his only reply.

The man could communicate in grunts alone if he had to, she thought.

A moment later, and she had stopped in front of one of the stalls and was talking softly to the beast therein. Severus came up and leaned against the stall opposite, watching her speak to Onyx. The horse snorted softly at her before pricking his ears in Severus' direction, as if suddenly taking an interest in the wizard. Cara looked over her shoulder to where Severus stood. She smiled.

"Yes, him too," she said to the beast.

Severus narrowed his eyes at Cara. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like what she had in mind. It was confirmed when she opened the stall and slipped inside, snagging the horse's bridle from where it hung on the door. Faster than he could blink, she had the bridle on and had somehow managed to fling herself up on his back. The horse walked out at Cara's urging, snuffling at his shirt briefly. Severus took a step back.

"Uh-uh... come," Cara said as she held out her hand to him.

Both eyebrows hit his hairline this time. "You're joking..." He eyed her warily from where she sat bareback atop Onyx. Her robes had ridden up as she straddled the beast; her thighs were ghostly pale against his dark coat.

She shook her head, her hand still extended. "No, not at all. A midnight ride is just the thing to take our minds off our troubles."

"I think not," he said, and moved to step past Onyx.

Cara sighed and shook her head. "Why must you always do things the hard way," she mumbled to herself. Reaching up her sleeve, she pulled her wand, murmured a short spell, and then quickly secured it back up her sleeve just as Severus found himself unceremoniously planted behind her on Onyx.

"What the bloody hell..." he started to say, and moved to swing down off the horse.

Cara was faster, however. "Imithe," she whispered quickly. Onyx surged forward, causing Severus to grab reflexively for Cara's waist, lest he end up on his back on the cobblestone floor. The far doors opened for them and Onyx galloped into the cool night air.

"Are you insane, woman?!" Severus yelled in her ear, even as his hands tightened around her waist.

Cara only laughed madly and urged the horse faster. Onyx complied, and they tore down the path to the lake. The night air whipped her hair around her face, and her legs were soon chilled to the bone where her robes had ridden up. She knew he must be cold as well, but she didn't stop the horse. It would do him good to get away from the castle tonight.

As they rounded the far end of the lake, she turned Onyx to the right, and headed him up the path that led to the oak they had shared those many weeks ago. Cara slowed Onyx from a gallop to a slow lope as they came over the hill. The tight crush of Severus' hands around her waist loosened a bit, but he still held on rather tightly. She could feel the heat from his body where he pressed against her, his hips rolling into her backside as he moved with the motion of the horse, and... oh.

Oh indeed, she thought wickedly. Apparently the motion of the horse and the close proximity she had forced them into had taken its toll on the poor man. Apparently he had noticed his... predicament as well, as he was making a decided effort to not touch her with anything other than his hands. He was failing miserably. Smirking to herself, she slowed Onyx to a walk, granting him the reprieve he so desperately seemed to need.

That's not all he desperately needs, her inner voice quipped as he pushed as far away from her as he could get and still stay on the horse.

"Alright there, Severus?" she asked, looking back over her shoulder at him.

"If you call being kidnapped on horseback by a deranged witch and then freezing my bollocks off in the process, then yes, I'm fine."

She simply couldn't help herself, and the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "Well, they didn't feel frozen to me..." she said innocently.

His discomfiture was obvious even though she couldn't see his face. Thankfully, they made it to the oak tree before he found his voice. As soon as the horse stopped, he slid off and stumbled up the hill. He sat down heavily, watching her slide down and give the horse a pat before moving to sit next to him.

Onyx moved off to graze quietly, and Cara turned to him.

"So," she asked, "do you come here often?"

He could only shake his head and look away. Cara huffed at him and turned to look out at the view before them. The sky was crystal-clear and sprinkled liberally with thousands upon thousands of tiny glittering stars. "How can you say that's not beautiful?" she asked, indicating the view with a wave of her hand.

He was silent for a moment, his eyes scanning the heavens, the stars glittering in his dark eyes. "I never said it wasn't," he answered finally.

"You said you didn't enjoy such things. Is that not the same thing?"

"Of course not."

"How so?" She looked back out, oblivious to the calculating look he was giving her.

"The fact that I do not particularly enjoy something, or fawn over it like some idiot teenage boy, does not mean that I do not think it beautiful." He continued to stare at her, whereas she continued to stare at the stars. "I think the view is breathtaking."

"I'm glad you can at least appreciate it, even if you don't particularly enjoy stargazing."

They sat in silence for a while before Cara spoke again.

"What do you enjoy, Severus? Besides frightening students and getting smashed?"

He snorted at her, wishing like hell he hadn't thrown his flask away in a fit of pique. Maybe it was for the best; he really was a bit drunk now. He must be, otherwise he would have never said the words that sprang to his lips. "Sex," he answered.

She sputtered and choked on her wine, and Severus was forced to slide closer and give her a few swift pats on the back.

"Well, that's a first. A man usually buys me dinner before propositioning me."

He shrugged. "A bloke can try..."

She laughed good-naturedly. She sobered after a moment, looking at him again. "Really though... what do you like to do in your spare time?"

The urge to talk was once again overwhelming. He was still angry with Cara for her secretiveness, but he knew that she would not betray his confidence. Perhaps it was the alcohol, perhaps it was his guilt for betraying her trust, or perhaps it was just the fact that no other person on the planet cared about him... truly cared, that made him start talking.

"I wasn't lying; I really do enjoy sex."

She snorted at him. "Okay, fair enough. Sex is... good," she nodded. "With the right person," she emphasized. "Other times..." She trailed off, shrugging as she sipped her wine again.

Severus cocked his head. "Other times... what?"

She shook her head. "Other times it's just a quick fumble and a half-hearted 'thanks' afterwards. Nothing to brag about."

"Mmm..." he said noncommittally.

"What?"

"Nothing... only it sounds like you have a bit of experience with the... other times." Yes, he was definitely drunk or he would never have been so forward.

"Really?" she replied, turning to face him fully. "And are you implying that all your sexual experiences were earth-shattering moments of orgasmic bliss? No quick, sloppy blowjobs in secluded alcoves? No five-minute shags in a dingy hotel room? No hand jobs behind the greenhouse?"

Surprisingly, all Severus heard was 'five-minute shag' out of everything Cara said. "Five minutes? I'm not a decrepit old man, I'll have you know. No..." He pointed his finger in her face. "...each and every witch that has sought me out over the last year has gotten exactly what she bargained for."

"And what is that exactly?" Cara fought to suppress a grin; how the conversation had gone off in this direction, she had no idea.

"A damn good rogering, that's what..."

She laughed. "Ah, so you're a ladies man."

He snorted. "No... more like a ladies disappointment."

"But you just said they got what they came for?"

"Oh, they get what they initially came for... but then they want... other things." His lip twisted in disgust. "They want to... stay... to talk... as if I'd divulge my deepest, darkest secrets to them just because they let me have a bit of trim."

Cara cocked her head thoughtfully, a wry smile splitting her face. What did that say about the two of them then? He had probably talked to her more in the last couple of months than any other woman he'd encountered recently.

"Now Severus, there's nothing wrong with a cuddle. Psychotherapists say that it's good for the soul to have human contact." She slid a bit closer.

He saw her coming, but deigned not to move. When her shoulder pressed against his, he stiffened momentarily, before relaxing and leaning against her. He sensed that this was the moment he needed to say something to her.

"Cara..."

"Yes?" she replied, still unused to the sound of her name on his lips.

"I'm... sorry. I'm sorry I broke into your rooms and went through your things." He bent his head, long fingers pulling at the slightly moist grass. "I was simply upset that you had left without saying anything, and I was... hurt."

Cara didn't say anything. When he started talking like this, it was best to let him finish, or else risk him walling everything up again.

"I've been very... confused... over the last few weeks. I find that... surprisingly... I enjoy our talks, and even your blasted company." He huffed, shaking his head. "You have succeeded in making me give a damn about another person again... and in truth, it scares the hell out of me."

She turned to face him then, reaching out to push his hair back behind his ear in order to better see his face. "Do you think this is easy for me? I haven't been this close to a man since..." She trailed off, sighing, and let her forehead fall against his shoulder.

"Since?" Severus prodded gently, while secretly relishing the feel of her weight against him.

"You know, I just realized how much you don't actually know about me, or I you."

"Isn't that what you dragged me out here for; so that we could divulge our deepest and darkest secrets to one another?"

"Are you offering? And to think... I didn't even offer to sleep with you yet."

"Were you going to?" he asked, managing to sound innocently confused.

She chuckled and slapped him on the leg. "No, you ass... besides, it's way too cold for shagging on the grass."

"You seem to forget that you're a witch..." He waved his hand and a warm, cozy feeling settled over the both of them.

"Oh, much better."

They sat in silence once more.

"So, who goes first?" she asked after a while.

"Well, since it was your idea, I would say you have the first go."

"Fair enough." She settled herself more firmly against him, not protesting when he moved his arm hesitantly around her shoulders as she started to speak.

~ TBC

A/N: Geez, it's been forever. Seriously. I'm a derp. But I love you!

Next up: Cara's story.