

Winter Dance

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Chapter 1 of 1

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As he had every winter, on the first full moon after Yule, ever since he was a scrawny second-year student and had seen that clearing in the Forbidden Forest and the beings slowly dancing on the frozen earth until it was black, compact and hard as the sky above. He had been the only one to see them; the other young miscreants doing detention with Hagrid hadn't noticed anything.

He stopped in the bushes at the rim of the clearing. The Thestrals were already milling around, heads dipping and rearing, wings fluttering, but the steady nuptial dance hadn't yet begun.

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As a pair of black wings folded in front of him, opening a brief gap in the whirl of darkness, the Headmaster caught sight of something in the middle of the circle and felt his body stiffen. She shouldn't be here. She couldn't be here.

In a few long strides, he was upon her, but she turned with a tranquil smile, almost as if she knew of his presence. In the moon flood, her face was utterly unafraid, and her hair shone almost as white as the Thestrals' opal eyes.

"They are beautiful, aren't they?"

He stared in the silvery eyes, and there were no secrets behind their calm light.

Around them, a shiver ran through the Thestral ring.

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The unbroken circle of Thestrals began to move smoothly, widdershins, wings folding and unfolding rhythmically in a dancing spiral, winding towards the centre of the moonlit clearing where the dark figure still faced the light.

With a jolt, the Headmaster came out of his trance.

The whirling wall of bodies was now three rows deep, and nothing – no spell, no curse known to wizard kind – could have broken it.

Severus let his wand arm fall. It was too late, and it was almost a relief.

"Don't worry," said Luna. She was still smiling.

As she spoke, the oldest mare, the queen of the herd, with the ashen mane, detached from the ring and bowed before them invitingly, wings lowered.

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The Headmaster caught his elusive charge by the waist and heaved her on the mare's back. And then he saw.

Her feet were white as milk against the slate-dark, leathery skin of the old Thestral. She had been barefoot in the snow.

"People enjoy hiding my things," she smiled.

He couldn't help it and took her naked feet in his hands. They fit like almonds, fresh and quiescent in their shells.

She leaned over the mare's neck, holding out her arms to him.

"I don't need shoes."

As he mounted behind her and wound his fingers in the coarse, graying mane of the skeletal horse, Severus was smiling.