

Bliss of Another Kind

by Agnus Castus

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Canon-compliant.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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She fidgeted on the outskirts of the dance floor, listening to the Weird Sisters' thumping bassline resonating through the Great Hall of Hogwarts. With the lights dimmed, the ice-palace themed room appeared resplendently gothic and cave-like.

A swirling mass of students jumped and gyrated to the beat of her favourite band, and she noticed one of the Weasley twins dancing exuberantly with a girl whom she recognised as the talented Chaser from the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

However, she had not attended the Yule Ball to watch youngsters partying the night away. The man she hoped to see had left the Great Hall some time ago, and she scanned the room fretfully, trying to discern a tall, black-haired wizard skulking in the shadows. She wondered if he'd escaped his duties to hide in the dungeons, away from the noise and the multitude of raging teenage hormones.

Soon she might reach the point where she'd have to make a choice – search the castle for the Slytherin Head of House or leave the ball before her desires got the better of her. If she departed now, she could return to her job in the Ministry's Department of Magical Games and Sports unruffled and unfulfilled, but that would be a disappointment of colossal proportions. She had been waiting years for this opportunity. Many years.

Just when the thickening raincloud of doubt was poised to quash her final ray of hope, Professor Snape appeared at the door to the Great Hall, striding in from the wintry snow outside. Igor Karkaroff followed several feet behind him.

The renewed sight of the Potions master stole the breath from her lungs. His dark, imposing form swept across the room, scattering students in his wake. He looked exactly as she remembered from long ago, and the black look on his features suggested he was in no mood for conversation, let alone frivolity. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

Presently, Snape arrived at the drinks table and helped himself to a Firewhisky. She watched his thin lips savour the first mouthful and his fingertips caress the crystal tumbler. Moments later Karkaroff caught up with him, breaking his moment's peace.

She didn't imagine Snape's countenance could darken any further, but as conversation resumed, his annoyance swelled like a gathering storm. It seemed Snape's patience was being pushed to the limit, and so when the Weird Sisters' song reached its crescendo, she decided it really was now or never. She could, at the very least, provide him an escape route. That thought alone gave her courage to traverse the dance floor and approach her former Potions master.

She held herself tall and walked resolutely towards the two men, mentally rehearsing the words she'd planned during the previous hour. The maelstrom of butterflies in her stomach seemed more akin to a swarm of moths fluttering around a lantern. She wondered vaguely if she would get burnt and be left wounded and stunned by the man in black. She had experienced his stinging rebuff years ago. Perhaps she was a glutton for punishment; time appeared not to have softened him.

Standing now in front of the two men, she heard Karkaroff's voice die in his throat. She thought she saw an expression of relief cross Snape's face as he turned to appraise her.

His bat-like form towered above her, around a foot taller, and his piercing black eyes studied her intently. A brief flicker of recognition crossed his ashen features: he remembered her. Some of her anxiety waned, knowing she had been memorable enough for this moment.

Realising the time had come to say something out loud, she opened her mouth, only to find her tongue as dry as parchment. For a heart-stopping moment she thought her voice would fail her, but somehow she managed, "Professor Snape, may I have this dance?"

Karkaroff almost choked on his newly-acquired brandy.

She offered Snape her hand, and the hairs on her arm stood to attention as her gesture crossed the divide. It was as though she had placed herself on an altar, exposed and vulnerable, and she expected his rejection as surely as a boom of thunder followed a lightning bolt. She, like many others, had been on the receiving end of his acerbic and brutal tongue too many times to count. But tonight she sensed things might be different. Her timing, for once, might be fortuitous; this could be her one and only opportunity.

Snape's eyebrows rose ever so slightly at her greeting, and his lips parted as he took a contemplative intake of breath. Glittering black eyes darted to his male companion and back towards her again, his gaze lingering on her russet robes and sweeping the curves of her figure.

She knew momentary triumph, until Snape's lip curled into his signature smirk. Then, just when she thought he was about to dismiss her, he nodded curtly and downed his Firewhisky in one mouthful.

Snape leaned towards her and whispered softly, "Severus will suffice."

His utterance was heavy and sensuous, like a rippling black velvet cloak, and it sent a glorious shiver down her spine. Oh, how she recalled that voice. It had the strength to extinguish every candle and oil-lamp in the dungeon, plunging her into a dark, bottomless cavern filled with nothing but the seductive timbre of his words.

She awoke from her trance abruptly when Snape's cold fingers wrapped around her hand like icicles. He led her briskly to the dance floor.

"You have cold hands, Severus," she murmured, a glimmer of a smile gracing her lips.

The Dark wizard heard her, and the corners of his mouth twitched, betraying amusement.

Behind them, Karkaroff turned on his heel and marched out of the Great Hall. Snape's satisfied smirk grew in intensity, and she realised he had only joined her as the lesser of two evils. But still, he was here, standing before her on the dance floor, belonging to her for the duration of one song. She intended to make the most of it.

She quickly caught the eye of the lead singer of the band and nodded her request to the stage. Her choice of partner clearly bemused the performer, but a cue was signalled to the drummer and bass guitarist, and the haunting bassline of the melody rumbled to life.

Since she had arrived in the castle that evening, she had heard a rumour that Severus Snape could dance.

Apparently, Slytherin House had been forced to undertake dancing lessons prior to the Yule Ball. It was said that the Potions master had arrived for the first lesson with Professor Sinistra and proceeded to dance a perfect waltz with her, to the shocked surprise of his House. And also, purportedly, to Aurora Sinistra; she had left the room straightening her hat and swaying giddily. Snape subsequently refused to dance again, and spent the rest of the lesson instructing the astonished Slytherins.

When she heard this tale related by a group of sixth years in the girls' bathroom, she hatched her plan to approach the Potions master and not merely watch him longingly from afar. To dance with him would be a dream come true, after all.

The soft, slow drumbeat interweaved with the bass guitar, and she glanced up at the inscrutable face of her dance partner. He took his free hand and slipped it around her waist, resting in the small of her back, inviting her to step closer. The tingle of her spine vibrated like a succession of tinkling bells, ascending all the way to her neck. She moved towards him and brushed her hand past his chest and onto his shoulder.

The dark, mysterious depths of his eyes captivated her, and she jumped a little when he began to move. She felt her cheeks burn and knew her complexion surely clashed with the colour of her dress robes. She looked away, attempting to control her nerves.

Snape moved in perfect time to the music, and he led her confidently, with a slow subtle start testing her ability to follow. She felt the warmth returning gradually to his hands and ventured to relax in his arms, following the direction of the music. Evocative lyrics drifted in and out of her mind as they danced.

... Wonder if I will wander out... test my tether to... see if I'm still free... from you...

She had chosen this song for him. And for her. She cast another tentative glance, only to be unsettled by his pale, steely face peering down at her. As their eyes met she had the fleeting suspicion he was reading her like a book. This time she returned his gaze with determination.

As the drumbeat marked the beginning of the chorus, Snape suddenly turned and let go of her waist, spinning her out onto the dance floor. Taken by surprise, she tried her best to look graceful as if it was all planned and spun quickly back into his arms. He pulled her close and their bodies touched, then she saw an expression of superiority cross his face. He was playing with her. Undaunted, she did not pull away.

When he repeated the sequence, she was ready to match him move for move, and they flowed together flawlessly. She had the satisfaction of watching his countenance soften to a glimmer of respect. For a moment, she had the distinct impression that he had noticed her for the very first time.

... Lately, I'm into circuitry... what it means to be... made of you but not enough for you...

The tempo of the music died down, and they slowed together. She slid her hand back to his shoulder, grazing his neck with her fingertips. She never imagined they'd be standing so close, let alone allowing a dark, ethereal melody to permeate their movements.

She noticed their twirl on the dance floor seemed to have caught the attention of a few onlookers, and a space had started to form around them. Students were staring with varying degrees of amusement and disbelief. She caught sight of the red-haired Weasley twins whispering to each other and grinning furtively in her direction.

Severus turned his head to one side and pulled her closer, until her head rested against his chest. The aroma of clary sage and black pepper lingered on the wool of his frock-coat. She smiled inwardly as his scent evoked one word the title of the song to which they danced 'Bliss.'

The ghostly harmonies which mesmerised her now gave way to the seductive intensity of the chorus, but this time Severus did not let her out of his embrace. Instead, he swept her around, holding her securely, their bodies entwined in the song's thumping rhythm.

Ebony eyes shone down at her, and dark hair framed his face, shielding them from the outside world. She met his gaze unflinchingly, and the Great Hall seemed to dissolve around them as she became lost in the music, gliding around the dance floor in the arms of a tall, dark and fascinating man.

... Steady as it comes... right down... to you... I've said it all... so maybe we're bliss... of another kind...

Floating with happiness and unconcern, their bodies moved together through the dangerous and consuming current. She'd heard a similar sensation was experienced by those under the Imperius Curse, and she wondered with a jolt if she were under the curse now, if Severus had somehow... But no, his eyes were glazed and unfocused

too. Indeed, Severus seemed more relaxed than she had ever seen him, and she wanted to bottle the memory forever.

... I said bliss... of another kind... bliss... bliss... bliss of another kind...

Immersed in the sinister sensuality of the song, they barely noticed the guitar chord fading away. Lingered in his arms, it was several seconds before she realised the band had stopped playing. Their faces suddenly seemed very close.

Severus loosened his hold on her. A deep vertical line appeared on his forehead, and his heavily-lidded eyes pinched together; he seemed to be weighing up the possibility and appropriateness of another dance, feeling torn between staying and going. Obsidian orbs searched her eyes for an answer.

Her lips parted as the word 'stay' tried to find its way past the Bezoar which seemed to have lodged itself in her throat. However, Severus suddenly tensed, and his expression returned to a cool and impenetrable mask.

She felt a tap on her shoulder.

Looking around, she saw one of the Weasley twins standing behind her, smiling with bravado. Painfully aware of her proximity to Severus, she took a step back and let go of her dance partner.

The red-headed young man stepped forward and gave a small bow. He addressed Snape formally, "May I cut in, sir?"

Snape nodded graciously and swiftly turned around, stalking away from the dance floor without a backward glance. With her heart in her throat, she watched his billowing cloak retreating. Her body ached, yearning to follow. She tried hard to keep the disappointment from showing on her face as she met the gaze of the young man stood before her. His expression was victorious, mingled with... was it an ounce of sympathy?

Why on Earth would anyone pity her? She had just spent three enthralling minutes in the arms of Severus Snape.

The young man introduced himself as Fred Weasley, saying, "A beautiful woman like you shouldn't have to dance with that overgrown bat!" He then proceeded to sweep her off her feet with a flourish and winked cheekily at his twin brother.

From the look of conceded awe on George Weasley's face, she immediately knew there had been an exchange of money between the two Gryffindor Beaters. She was amused to find herself the subject of the wager and noted that several onlookers were laughing heartily.

As she danced with the audacious Fred Weasley, she caught sight of Snape slinking out of the Great Hall, heading for the stairs which led down to the dungeons.

Her heart plummeted like a raindrop falling from the heavens.

When the song finished, she thanked Fred Weasley for the dance and left the Great Hall, following Snape's footsteps.

She descended the spiral steps to the dungeon quietly, not wishing to be seen or heard. The temperature dropped a few degrees by the time she reached the bottom, and she arrived at the closed door of Snape's office shaking slightly. She wasn't completely sure why she had followed him.

As she stood in the corridor, battling with a strong sense of foreboding, she noticed the office door was slightly ajar. She imagined Severus sweeping down the stone steps, his black cloak trailing impressively behind him, and banging the door shut with such ferocity that it sprang back open behind him.

The door to his inner sanctum seemed to be inviting her to enter, but the thought of crossing the threshold filled her stomach with a leaden weight.

The doorknob was delicately engraved with a serpent, and its emerald gemstone eye gleamed at her. With a trembling hand, she reached out and touched it, running her fingers over the patterned silver surface.

Silently, the door opened.

Steeling herself, she moved quietly into the room. A crackling fire in the hearth greeted her at one end of the office, but the space was otherwise unlit, and she made to pause until her eyes adapted to the darkness. The air felt warm, and she inhaled a heady, earthy aroma of herbs, with a faint chemical undertone. The smell of the dungeons filled her with vivid memories of schoolgirl crushes and wandering daydreams.

The firelight reflected eerily on the rows of glass bottles which lined the shelves around the room. In the gloom she could make out Severus's silhouette, standing with his back towards her. He stood in front of his desk, arms stretched out to his sides, hands holding onto the work surface as if for support. His head hung between his shoulders.

Elongated seconds ticked steadily in her eardrums, causing the heaviness in her stomach to twist and turn. Shadows shifted menacingly around the office, daring her to enter. She lingered at the doorway, but Severus did not move. She wasn't even sure he'd realised she was there.

As she moved slowly towards him, her leg grazed a wayward chair, and its wooden leg scraped against the cold stone floor, rudely announcing her presence. Severus merely raised his head.

She froze in place, knowing she was there without permission. Perhaps she should leave before he fixed those malevolent eyes upon her, struck her with a reprimand and commanded her to go... Yet still she was standing here, in the place of her fantasies, and she would have to muster enough courage and tenacity to see it through to the bitter end.

Severus spun around suddenly, as if stung by a bee. And then, appearing to have all the time in the world, he leaned back on his desk and spread his hands either side, supporting his body, lending him the impression of a spider waiting to ensnare its prey in the centre of its web.

He didn't look directly at her and stared steadfastly into the fire. The flickering light revealed him without his usual repression she saw embarrassment, anger and... Could it be guilt?

The latter emotion made little sense, but on some level she understood his feelings were nothing to do with her. Yet it seemed they had been precipitated by her actions. How could one dance be the cause of such conflict in a man? He wasn't married, she knew that much. A lifelong single, so she had heard.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice tight and constricted.

She tried to read him, but her attempts to comprehend what he was thinking could not explain the guilt etched on his features, threatening to engulf him. The man had always been intensely private and usually gave away nothing. She felt overcome with awe as she witnessed his downward spiral.

She did not answer his question but instead moved to stand before him, next to the hearth. The fire spluttered with green flames as she approached.

His eyes finally met hers, and he watched her closely. She felt a thrill of fear, wondering if he was extracting the information he had requested straight from her eyes. She met his gaze determinedly. She had nothing to hide.

Instinctively, she moved nearer and placed her hands upon his chest, her touch rising gradually upwards, tracing the outline of buttons and feeling the depth of his shallow breathing. His body remained taut and perfectly still. She looked into his glittering eyes and traced the contours of his face with her fingertips, caressing his brow and his cheeks, carefully pushing raven locks of hair away from his face. She touched his lips, finding them moist, and his mouth parted slightly. His breath rippled warmly on her

cheek.

The fire in the hearth hissed, shooting green sparks into the air. Snape reached inside his robes, and with a swish of his wand, the office door closed behind her.

Suddenly he took hold of her lower back and pulled her towards him, glinting black eyes ablaze with hunger. His lips claimed her, and she surrendered to the warm wetness of his tongue pushing into her mouth. He tasted of Firewhisky.

The kiss was long, consuming and passionate. She pressed her body tightly against his, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders, feeling the heat of his body and the caress of his hands roaming up her back.

Then Severus broke away, as if he had been wrenched from her forcibly. His breathing had become ragged, and he rested his forehead against hers with his eyes closed.

The fire was roaring and had changed to a more natural amber colour. She felt its warmth on her skin and watched the flames dancing on his face, which appeared flushed, slightly hidden by his curtains of hair.

Her fingers followed the contours of the numerous buttons on his frock-coat, and she began the slow, unnerving process of unfastening them. She reached the topmost button, her hands shaking, and opened his black robes to find a crisp white dress-shirt beneath. Carefully, she loosened his necktie and felt his warm breath on her hands as she started to unbutton his shirt.

When the final button yielded, his open shirt revealed a lean, hairless chest. He responded to her touch with a shudder as she stroked the pale skin of his sternum and traced his chest upwards, her fingers tracking a long white scar across his shoulder. His slight frame was bathed in the luminescence of the fire like some ancient Greek Adonis, white as marble, trembling at her touch.

Severus reached for the back of her head and sank his fingers into her hair, pulling her roughly towards him. The heat from the fire burned into her cheek as she was encased in an intense, fervent kiss. He pushed his body so close to hers that she could feel his hardness forming, pressing insistently into her. She felt dizzy at the prospect of what might happen.

With their lips locked together, Severus seemed to hold on for dear life, and he lifted her up and swept her around, placing her down upon his leather-topped desk. With her heart thudding in her throat, she slid her hands towards his shoulders to remove his shirt. The kiss ended abruptly when Snape grabbed hold of her wrists and yanked them away, flinching as if he had been burnt. Intuitively she knew he was self-conscious about the Dark Mark, rumoured to be burned into the skin of his left arm.

He leaned over her with his eyes tightly shut and his powerful grip restraining her hands against the desk, forcing himself to regain his composure. He jerked gruffly when he opened his eyes and realised she was still pinned to his desk. Severus quickly released her hands, cast an apologetic glance, and looked away into the fire.

When he spoke his voice was guarded and measured. "Now is your chance to leave."

She almost laughed out loud before realising he was serious. The last thing she was about to do was leave. She gazed into his tormented face, intrigued by the mysteries playing out on his pale features. If she was going to stay, she'd better start making the most of the opportunity. She felt giddy as her fingers found his belt and unbuckled it.

There was a strong sense of walls crashing down around them as he turned to face her, and she knew there was no turning back. His hands located her calves and rose steadily, caressing the back of her knees and sending delicious shivers up her spine. She gasped when his fingertips pinched into her thighs, forcing them apart, and felt the cold leather of his desktop against her bare skin.

When Severus pulled her towards him, she wrapped her legs around his hips, aching to feel him inside her. She reached for the back of his head and captured his lips, sucking gently on his tongue as it penetrated her mouth. Then his hands were on her thighs again, rising up past her stockings, and squeezing her buttocks as he pulled her even closer, pressing her into his hardness.

His thumb rubbed against her as he pulled aside her undergarments, and deep within her hidden depths a warm quiver erupted, spreading outwards like the heat of the sun breaking through the clouds. Their kiss paused as her moan escaped.

Severus bit softly on her ear as she returned her attention to him, and then all of a sudden he thrust inside her, filling her, making her gasp with surprise. He moved quickly, almost clumsily, making love to her with the ardent vigour of a man more accustomed to abstinence. The fire in the hearth matched their coupling, blazing red and roaring with intensity.

His lips burned into her neck as their bodies established a rhythm. His hands tore into her hair, making her scalp prickle as he held her firmly in his grasp. Her hands explored the taut muscles of his abdomen and seized his buttocks as they thrust faster and harder.

She felt her body tightening as her orgasm built, and Severus's breathing came in sharp, moaning gasps as he reached his climax. Through their crescendo their bodies convulsed and trembled, bringing forth sighs and whimpers which would have given them away to passing eavesdroppers.

As their rhythm faded they became calm and still. Severus held her close for a long time, until their breathing returned to normal and their bodies came to a rest. Her cheek rested on his chest, and she watched the amber firelight flickering as it started to fade.

Sensing he was about to move, she turned to place a parting kiss on his chest, but he took her head in both hands and removed her lips from his warm skin. He held her head tenderly, his eyes closed and his features relaxed.

When he opened his eyes again he seemed to be in another place, his expression peaceful in the fire's dying embers. It took a few moments for his vision to refocus on the room and upon the woman in his arms. She reached up to push his hair away from his face, but he appeared confused and recoiled as if he had just woken from a dream.

Snape removed himself suddenly, turning to sit next to her on the desk, buttoning up his attire with fast, adept fingers. He didn't speak.

She held her breath, unsure of what would happen next. She straightened her clothing self-consciously.

Snape stood up and walked towards the small mirror over the fireplace and fixed his necktie and frock-coat. He caught sight of her in the mirror's reflection and looked away with an awkward grimace. He stared into the crackling embers of the fire for a long moment, and a shadow of sadness and regret crept across his face.

Her eyes wanted to shut out the conflicted image, to subdue the thump of the fist which bruised her abdomen from the inside. Surely he wouldn't walk away?

Snape took one final look in the mirror and tightened his expression to the cold, hard mask of old. Then, without a word, he turned and marched to the door, leaving the room without looking back.

In shock, she remained in the office, half expecting him to reappear. Her heart thudded against her ribcage with such force that she almost threw up.

She'd spent so many years yearning for his touch, his scent, and the taste of him, and now that she'd seduced him, he had cast her aside like an empty Chocolate Frog box. She didn't want to believe he could be so cruel; the man had to have a heart in there somewhere.

After several minutes of waiting, her hope began to die. Memories of sarcastic comments, cutting remarks and pithy put-downs reminded her of the teacher she had once known. She had hoped, as a woman, he could be the man she wanted him to be.

As the last gasp of the fire issued a puff of smoke into the air, she knew he would not return. It seemed he was a hairy-hearted wizard, after all.

She arose gingerly. Her heart was black-and-blue and her legs wobbled beneath her. She made her way out of Snape's office, closed the door behind her, and climbed the steps out of the dungeon.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she found the Yule Ball was over, and students were making their way out of the Great Hall in various states of merriment. She was hit by a cold wave of resentment when she observed their laughing, shining faces.

She turned the corner to the Entrance Hall and was confronted by the image of Snape, deep in conversation with the Headmaster. They spoke in hushed undertones, and she began to shake uncontrollably, suspecting their actions had been found out. It seemed Snape was being reprimanded.

She moved closer to get a better view and realised that Snape was in fact speaking about Karkaroff. She relaxed, knowing their secret was safe.

As the exchange of words came to an end, she heard the Headmaster say, "You are a braver man by far than Igor Karkaroff. You know, I sometimes think we Sort too soon..."*

Professor Dumbledore walked away, leaving Snape looking as though he'd been physically wounded. His eyes clouded briefly with bitter comprehension, and his head dropped with regret.

She had no idea why such a remark would hurt him so, but in that moment she knew, with crushing certainty, that she would never see him again.

She watched Snape regain his self-control and stride out of the Entrance Hall in search of stragglers outside. Her heart sank as she watched his tall, black figure disappear into the night.

Behind her she heard a young girl sobbing, and she turned to see several female students sitting upon the stairs in various states of disarray. Some had their arms around each other, and one girl was sitting alone, weeping.

She knew how the girl felt... She almost joined her.

It was two-and-a-half years later when she truly comprehended what had happened on that fateful Christmas Day.

By then both of the men with whom she had danced at the Yule Ball were dead.

She came to realise she'd been allowed closer to Snape than many women had, but she also knew her romantic notion of their encounter was unfounded.

On that night, Severus had not made love to her, but to someone else.

Author's Note:

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

Thanks to Tori Amos for the song and the title of the story.