

Avada Kedavra

by herbologist

Severus Snape / Charity Burbage. One night, after the Yule Ball, she gets closer to him than any woman ever has. And in the end, that might make all the difference. A romance in the shadows of Darkness.

One Night Could Change Everything

Chapter 1 of 3

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It was an unusually animated staff meeting, Charity Burbage thought, but then it was shaping up to be a pretty unusual school year. Not that she had much to compare it to. After all, it was only her second year teaching at Hogwarts. But she assumed that it must be a very special occasion, given that there only was a Triwizard tournament once every four years, and the honour of hosting rotated amongst the three schools involved.

Flitwick and Sprout were still engaged in a heated debate about the best theme for decorating the Great Hall for the Yule Ball – an Ice Palace, or Fairies and Flowers? Pomona kept going on about how wonderful her singing snapdragons and glowing gladioli were, far nicer than the ones on display at Beauxbatons four years prior. It was getting a little tedious, and Minerva had started tapping her foot impatiently, anxious to get on to the remaining topics on the agenda.

"Well, we have two excellent proposals. Let's have a vote, shall we?" The headmaster finally intervened. "Hands up if you would like to see the Hall turned into an Ice Palace."

Charity raised her hand, as did everybody else in the room, apart from Sprout and Snape. The Herbology teacher seemed rather hurt by the lack of support for her idea. Charity felt a little sorry for her fellow Hufflepuff.

"Hands up if you want Fairies and Flowers," Albus continued, ignoring the fact that the outcome of the vote was already clear.

When only Pomona's hand went up, Charity felt compelled to raise hers, too.

"You've already voted!" cried Professor Vector accusingly.

"Err... yes... but I like both ideas equally," she stammered, blushing.

"It hardly matters, when it's ten to two," Snape hissed at the elderly Arithmancy professor.

Up until that moment, he hadn't spoken a single word throughout the meeting. He had been sitting in his chair, apparently in a foul mood, his eyes half-closed, pinching the bridge of his oversized nose between his thumb and forefinger, his face partially concealed behind curtains of lank black hair. The note of exasperation in his voice

suggested that his head would explode if he had to listen to one more argument.

"Calm down, everybody," Albus tried to smooth the waters. "Ice Palace it is. Pomona, let's save your idea for the graduation ceremony. On to the next topic..."

"Student discipline!" Minerva exclaimed, obviously relieved to finally get to the subject she seemed most concerned about.

Charity was hardly listening as the deputy headmistress lectured about the importance of exemplary behaviour from each of their students, such as not to embarrass Hogwarts in front of its guests. Her thoughts drifted away, visualising the Ice Palace that Flitwick would create, and herself in her gorgeous new dress. How she loved that dress... As the Muggle Studies teacher, she felt it was her duty to demonstrate some good Muggle fashion sense. And so, of course, her dress was Muggle style, made of purple shimmering taffeta, which complemented her pale skin and brown hair, and rustled when she moved, in a way that made her feel like a million galleons.

"... need to nominate one member of staff from each house to perform chaperoning duties on the evening..."

Well, she was not going to volunteer... Let someone else spend the evening playing the spoilsport. Pomona, for instance. She was the Head of House anyway, and she was too old to really care about balls. Charity, on the other hand, looked forward to the event with the same childish anticipation as the students. She had not been to a ball since her own graduation. Oh, how she longed to be admired in that purple dress, how she wished for nothing more than some gentleman to whisk her around the dance floor all night... but that was precisely where the problem was she needed a partner.

She envied the students, the girls in particular. Throughout all her classes for the older students, she could witness the excitement amongst them, the whispering, the little pieces of parchment passed around in secret, the gossip about who was going to the ball together... Ah, to be taken to the dance by one of the swashbuckling Durmstrang boys, but it was hardly appropriate for a teacher to go out with a student, even if she was not that much older than the seventh years.

She took a look around the staff gathered in the faculty room and sighed inwardly. There was Albus, charming and an impressive wizard by any standard, but unfortunately about a hundred and fifty years old... and she suspected that he would be going with Minerva. Well, in any case, he was preferable to Binns, who was dead! Or Filch urch! Flitwick, on the other hand, only reached up to her waist, and Hagrid was about twice her size not the perfect dance partners. What a shame that Lupin was no longer there. He had been a nice man, charming and with the romantic appeal of a struggling artist... His successor, however, with his wooden leg and oddly whizzing eye, was spooky, not to mention that he was completely demented.

Unfortunately, that left only Snape not exactly charming, and certainly not handsome, but at least young, tall, and able-bodied. And with that certain pureblood haughtiness that was sort of umh sexy. She didn't know much about Snape at all, including his blood status, but she imagined that, as head of Slytherin house, he would obviously be pureblood. She had hardly spoken a word with him during her time at the school, as he was totally resistant to all her attempts at being sociable. But she knew that he was acquainted with people like the Malfoys. And while he had neither the charm nor the looks of a Lucius Malfoy, and probably not the money either, he did have the style. There also was a new rumour spreading about the school... a rumour that Snape could dance!

As part of the preparations for the Yule Ball, each Head of House had been charged with teaching their students at least the basics of dancing. The stories of what had happened at the respective sessions for each house had been a great source of gossip and entertainment throughout the school. From the sound of it, the Gryffindors had been the only ones to actually learn anything, for Minerva had conducted her lessons with the same discipline and competence as her Transfiguration classes. Professor Sprout, on the other hand, had been somewhat out of her depth where dancing was concerned and had enlisted the help of Professor Binns to teach the Hufflepuffs. The result, however, had been a disaster... The Ravenclaws had fared hardly better. Professor Flitwick had kept his lessons purely theoretical and abstained from any practical demonstrations. Everyone had been most concerned about the Slytherins though, doubting that their Head of House even knew what a dance was. Minerva had offered her help, but Snape had refused with a sneer.

From what had transpired, Snape had pulled out Pansy Parkinson to dance with him to demonstrate the basic steps of a waltz. The girl had been slightly clumsy, stepping on his toes a number of times, for which she had been reprimanded with some scathing remarks that had left her in tears. He had then proceeded to pair his students up and told them to practice while he was watching and picking out their mistakes with his usual sharp-tongued sarcasm. As a result, the Slytherins had all been terrified and probably put off dancing for life. Well, there was no surprise in that... The really sensational piece of news had been that Snape could apparently dance with a skill and elegance nobody would have expected of the dour Potions master.

It sort of made sense though. He probably had been invited to many pureblood high society balls, giving him ample opportunity to practice. Maybe that's why he had looked so bored throughout the meeting because a Yule ball no longer held any of the novelty value and excitement for him that it did for her. Maybe Snape was not such a bad option, after all. She was an acceptable dancer herself, so she should be able to keep up with him, and she was also perfectly capable of dealing with his acerbic nature. And while she found all those theories of pureblood superiority rather abhorrent, maybe a touch of their glamour would be a nice thing to experience for one evening. Surely, Snape had not asked anybody out. So if only she could work up the nerve to ask him, the prize would be hers. She decided to approach him after the meeting.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, every point had been covered from the catering arrangements to the music to the timing of all the speeches. With a sigh of relief, Charity got up from her chair and positioned herself close to the door in order to intercept Snape. The darkly brooding Slytherin seemed just as pleased that the tedious affair had reached its conclusion. He was about to sweep past her out of the room, when she took a brave step forward to stop him.

"Severus I was wondering... would you do me the honour and go to the ball with me? I hear you enjoy dancing as much as I do."

His obsidian eyes looked down at her with loathing, and his lips pulled into a sneer.

"I see nothing enjoyable about it. And had you paid any attention during the meeting, you would know that I am on chaperoning duty all evening. Now if you would be so kind to get out of my way..."

Charity swallowed hard. She tried not to show how hurt she felt by his rebuff, being at a complete loss of what to say. Thankfully, Dumbledore had moved over and came to her rescue.

"Ah, Severus, of course you can take dear Charity out to the ball. Your duties won't hold you up all evening, and the two of you would make such a lovely couple."

If looks could kill, Dumbledore would have been dead on the spot. But as it was, Snape just gave her a curt nod and swept out of the room with his long, black robes billowing behind him.

"Does that mean he accepted?" Charity turned to the headmaster, uncertainly.

"Of course he did," the old wizard replied with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

She could sense her stomach flutter with excitement, still feeling a little light-headed from the adrenaline rush a moment earlier. Skipping down the spiralling stairs with a spring in her step, she rushed back to her quarters to try on that dress one more time.

On the evening of the ball, Charity regarded herself in her tall bedroom mirror with deep satisfaction. The dress fit her perfectly and was of a very flattering cut. It concealed her less attractive points while accentuating her slim waist, and the neck line presented just a modest but tantalising enough amount of cleavage and creamy-white skin. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders in glossy brown curls, thanks to the Muggle conditioner that her mother had sent her. She felt beautiful and couldn't wait to get out there on the dance floor. She sat down on the edge of her bed, awaiting the arrival of her date with nervous anticipation.

At precisely eight o'clock, there was a knock on the door, a sharp and demanding knock that could only announce Snape. She opened the door to find the austere Potions master standing outside. He was wearing the same black attire as always. She wondered if it was to demonstrate his disregard for the occasion or because he did not own any dress robes.

"Are you ready? I haven't got all day," he said, glowering.

If she had hoped he would show some surprise or appreciation at seeing her in her dress, she was disappointed, for his face remained perfectly stern and impassive.

"Yes, let's go!" she replied brightly.

He offered her his left arm in a gesture of old-fashioned formality. His body felt unexpectedly firm and taut underneath the rough wool of his coat as she wrapped her hand around his elbow and he led her on.

Her office and living quarters were on the first floor of the castle, only a short walk from the Great Hall, down one flight of stairs, which was just as well because Snape moved with such long strides that she struggled to keep up with him in her high-heeled shoes. She would have liked to make an elegant entrance, but his pace did not allow her to walk gracefully.

When they passed through the doors into the Hall, Charity's jaw almost dropped in awe, so beautiful was the setting. Icicles hung from every cornice and every joist, every pillar was frosted over with silver glittering rime, the floor appeared smooth and shiny like a frozen lake, and in the centre stood the most magnificent Christmas tree she had ever seen, decorated with silver baubles and tiny real snow fairies. She was so absorbed by the sights and sounds, taking it all in, watching the beautifully dressed young people, that she hardly noticed when the music started.

"And here I was, thinking you wanted to dance..." Snape's deep voice pulled her out of her stupor.

"Oh! I do!" she replied.

He smirked, placing his right hand firmly underneath her shoulder blade, and drew her closer to him, so close that her abdomen rested against his. She swallowed. This was closer than she had been to any man in a long time, no less the saturnine head of Slytherin. He took her right hand in his, holding it at shoulder level in formal dancing posture, while she rested her other hand on his upper arm, feeling the bulge of his biceps underneath the black fabric.

"Ready?"

It hadn't been intended as a question, and he didn't wait for an answer before stepping forward between her legs to lead her into the first waltz. But the gentle pressure of his hand against her back and her palm was enough to guide her securely, so that she had no difficulty following him.

He was truly a competent dancer. His movements were precise and economic, just like his wand work. She relaxed into the gently rolling music, enjoying the sensation of relinquishing control and floating along in the strong arms of a man, covering the ground effortlessly. She realised that their performance on the dance floor probably looked rather impressive, as she noticed several pairs of eyes following them, and people moved out of the way to make space.

Snape's black eyes were staring at her relentlessly with an intensity that made it impossible to hold his gaze for longer than a few moments, so instead, she focused her eyes on his hand. She noticed how beautiful it was: large, but long-fingered and fine-boned, the nails short and well groomed. His palm felt warm and dry against hers. For a moment, she envisaged it cupping around her breast.

She was shocked by her own imagination; she had never thought of him that way. Nor would she! It was Snape, for Merlin's sake!

It wasn't made easier by the fact that she could smell him, though. He smelled good, not in a perfumed way, but a deep, musky, woody scent that she suspected was just him. If he was good at dancing, what other things might he be good at? As the music built to a crescendo, he started into a turn, swirling her around, and when he moved forward again, his thigh brushed against hers. Her pulse accelerated a little at the unexpected contact.

By now she found it impossible to look him in the eyes, trying hard not to blush. She glanced up at his mouth. His lips were full and just a shade darker than the pale skin of his face. He was cleanly shaven but for a slight shadow on his chin and upper lip. Deep lines ran from the corners of his mouth towards his nose. She wondered if his nose would get into the way. Oh, no! She must be going crazy if she considered Snape kissable!

The thought of his lips against hers was so distracting that for a moment she lost her rhythm, and stepped on his toes. He gave her a scathing look, making her blush furiously, but decided to let it pass instead, slowing down to allow her to find her step again. His hand slid slightly lower to give him more control over her movements. She was painfully aware of his eyes resting on her, of his hand on her waist, and the feel of his buttons rubbing against her belly through the silk of her dress. An ache spread outwards from her groin, making her breathing turn shallower. She imagined him naked, lying on top of her, between her legs...

Suddenly he leaned closer, his hair tickled against her cheek, and she could feel his breath warm against her ear as he whispered, "I think you'll find you can stop now."

Mortified, she realised that the music had stopped, and that she had been too entranced to notice. She feared the colour of her face was rivalling that of her dress. After a brief moment to ensure that she wasn't going to keel over, Snape let go of her and took a step back.

"One dance will have to suffice. If you would be so kind to excuse me," he said coolly, before turning and walking away, leaving her standing in the middle of the floor, bereft and wanting.

She watched as he reached into his pocket, drawing his wand, and marched from the Great Hall with long, purposeful strides, his black hair bouncing on his shoulders.

Feeling deeply disappointed, she decided to get a drink and sat down to watch the other couples dancing. Dumbledore seemed to have noticed that she had lost her partner and asked her to dance a couple of times, and she even had one rather awkward dance with Hagrid, but nothing compared to the waltz with the dark Potions master.

As it got later, the formal dancing came to an end, and the Weird Sisters took over the stage. Before long they had the crowd bouncing up and down in abandon, but Charity did not feel like joining in. Feeling oddly restless, she sat and watched, nursing her third glass of champagne, looking around in the hope that Snape might return, but he remained frustratingly elusive.

When it got close to eleven o'clock, the first couples started to leave the ball. She watched with more than a trace of envy as Miss Delacour and her partner walked past her, arm in arm. That girl was getting laid, for sure. Emboldened by the alcohol, she decided to go looking for the object of her desire. She passed Dumbledore out in the corridor, who was heading back inside.

"Severus is out there in the courtyard," he told her with a wink.

Shivering as she stepped out into the cold air, she soon spotted Snape a few yards away, checking the cosy spots between the rose bushes for any students snogging.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and the same from Hufflepuff, Ebbens," she heard him growl. A red-headed boy and an embarrassed looking girl crept out from their hiding place and hurried past her. Charity was not pleased at all to see her house losing points like that, and decided to confront Snape.

"Do you ever take points from your own house, Severus?" she asked pointedly.

"I don't have to, as I, for once, make sure my students adhere to high standards of behaviour," he replied. "You, on the other hand, wriggled out of your chaperoning duties, so it hardly befits you to criticise those who do uphold discipline at this school."

The sound of his deep voice made her skin erupt into goose flesh.

"For you it is hardly a duty. You just enjoy playing the Grinch Who Stole Christmas," she retorted.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It's a Muggle story about a grumpy, bitter, heartless creature, hell bent on ruining everybody else's fun," she explained.

He let out a derisive snort. "What are you doing out here anyway without a coat? You're going to catch your death."

"I just want to give you one more opportunity to appreciate me in this dress."

"I'm sure you'll find much more appreciation inside in the Great Hall, Charity."

"But I want your opinion. So what do you think?" she asked with a coquettish smile, twirling around in a rustle of silk.

"I think that you're going to catch pneumonia. Go back inside."

"Will you at least come with me? You've only danced with me once."

"I told you, I have to chaperone."

"Well, I'm sure you're no longer required here, as you've already scared everybody away. We could go inside and have a glass of wine."

He sighed, exasperated.

"No. I will however escort you back to your quarters, as you are obviously incapable of looking out for your own health."

He removed his coat, and placed it over her shoulders, revealing the white linen shirt he was wearing underneath. With his hand in the small of her back, he ushered her along towards the entrance. He accompanied her down the corridor and up the stairs to her room. Once there, she unlocked the door, holding it open for him as an invitation to follow her inside, but he remained standing where he was.

"My coat," he demanded with a stern look.

"Come and get it," she teased him, throwing him a flirtatious look over her shoulder as she turned to head inside.

Suddenly, he grabbed her wrist and spun her around, until her back rested against the wall next to the door frame.

"Stop playing games with me!" he hissed, with a dangerous undertone to his voice.

He placed a hand either side of her, effectively trapping her in the space within. His face was only inches from hers, his nose almost touching hers, while his obsidian eyes pierced her mercilessly. She wanted to lower her gaze, but could not. Like a deer caught in the headlights, she was unable to move and unable to think.

Memories and thoughts flashed in front of her inner eye in disjointed order. It was both confusing and disconcerting; she seemed to have no control over her own train of thought. Snape was the main subject of most of the images bubbling up in her mind, including some of the salacious fantasies she had indulged in during their earlier dance. Suddenly it occurred to her that he might be able to see everything that went through her head, that he might in fact be causing this mental haemorrhage, perusing her mind like an open book. It was a humiliating feeling of being powerless and exposed. When it finally stopped and he broke eye contact, the embarrassment she was feeling quickly gave way to indignation and rage. She lashed out at him in an attempt to slap him, but he caught her hand, holding on to it with a vice-like grip.

"How dare you!" she spat.

He looked at her with a mix of bemusement and condescension.

"You really are crazy," he scoffed.

For one long moment they looked into each other's eyes, her expression defiant, petulant, challenging, while his seemed to change from sneering to curious to almost predatory.

Suddenly, he leaned closer and claimed her mouth in a rough kiss, which was more a way of staking his claim, than an expression of tenderness.

Charity was completely stunned by his sudden attack, unsure quite how she felt about it. Until a moment ago, a kiss had been exactly what she wanted, although not really like this. She had imagined it to be more romantic. Yet there was something arousing about his forceful and possessive behaviour, and her body responded accordingly. She started to tentatively kiss him back, which increased his aggression, and sent her heart racing in a wild rush of adrenaline. She didn't know if he had pushed her or if she had pulled him, but a moment later they were inside her room, and the door banged shut behind her, drowning out the last faint sounds of music from the Great Hall.

It was as if the sound of the door closing had snapped him out of his frenzy, for he immediately let go and took a step back. His tall silhouette was barely visible before her in the darkness, but she could hear him breathing heavily in the silence of the room. With a pang of fear she realised that she was alone with him, wondering if it was a safe place to be, or whether the Slytherin in him might take advantage of her in unwelcome ways. Her heart thudded heavily inside her chest as she considered the possibilities. The room was only sparsely illuminated by a peaceful orange glow from the Christmas lights in the courtyard below. Once her eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, however, her worries dissipated, for it seemed that his audacity had deserted him. He suddenly appeared positively frightened, as if he would have bolted from the room if it had not been for the fact that she was standing between him and the door. He stood there as if he'd been petrified, staring at her. As the seconds trickled by, she realised that he would not make a move, and that if she wanted this to go further, she would have to take the lead.

She shrugged out of his coat and let it drop to the floor, before stepping forward tentatively, closing the gap between them, and placing her hands on his chest. His body felt incredibly tense under the thin fabric of his shirt, and she could feel him trembling slightly under her touch. Suddenly it occurred to her that this might be his first time. Was it possible? At his age? And yet there he was, seemingly unsure as to what to do with a woman who was obviously willing to sleep with him. She would have to be gentle and considerate.

She started to unbutton his shirt, slowly, one by one. He remained rigid, looking at her uncertainly. Finally, she reached the last button, and pulled the garment free from the waistband of his trousers. But as her hands slid up his torso, trying to brush it off his shoulders, he abruptly moved away from her.

"No!"

The forbidding expression on his face could not conceal the look of fear in his eyes. What was he afraid of? Rejection? Embarrassment? Why was he so self-conscious about letting her see him naked? From what she could tell, he had a nice body, lightly muscled and toned, with broad, masculine shoulders, and the pale skin on his chest was soft and almost hairless. She would have liked to see him fully unclothed, but decided it was wiser to give up on the shirt for the time being. His sudden movement had brought him closer to the bed, though, and seizing the opportunity, she gently pushed him the rest of the way. To her surprise, he complied and sat down on the edge, while she straddled his lap. His thighs felt lean and strong against her buttocks. At least this way he could not get away from her.

He looked at her questioningly, as she bent down and kissed his lips, slowly and tenderly, cradling his head in her hands, running her fingers through his soft, raven hair, until his eyes closed, and he relaxed, exhaling slowly and deeply. She let her fingertips wander across his face, caressing his cheeks, tracing the line of his brow, kissing his crooked nose, his slightly scratchy chin, without any urgency, in a manner devoid of anything sexual. When he opened his eyes again, they were filled with a deep yearning. She was moved by how much he seemed to be craving this form of human contact, like a man who had been starved of it far too long, or maybe never experienced any tenderness. There seemed to be such heavy sorrow and loneliness at the bottom of those black pools, and she so much wanted to alleviate some of it with her affectionate touch. He was no longer the formidable Potions master then, all air of aloofness and superiority gone, making him suddenly seem very vulnerable.

She caressed every accessible inch of his skin with her hands and lips, breathing in the masculine fragrance of his body.

"Touch me," she whispered against his forehead.

Hesitantly, he reached up to stroke her hair. As his hand moved down to cup her cheek, she leaned into his touch encouragingly. His thumb brushed across her parted lips, slowly and sensually. She dropped her head back slightly as his hand slid down her throat, before trailing across her chest and stopping just above her cleavage. He looked at her as if asking for permission to touch. She held his gaze expectantly, indicating her consent, until his palm finally stroked across her breast and squeezed it gently. Reaching behind her back, his dexterous fingers made short work of the zipper of her dress. Then he pulled down the bodice, exposing the two pert mounds of delicate flesh. He swallowed, looking at them with wonder, as if completely astounded by what he had uncovered.

His eyes seemed to burn hungrily under their heavily hooded lids, like black coals in the semi-darkness. He bent down and buried his head against her chest, breathing in her scent. The feel of his calloused palms fondling her, and his warm, wet mouth ravishing her sensitive skin set her body on fire. She moaned with pleasure when his teeth grazed her nipple. This was everything she had imagined, and more. Avid to fan the flames of passion further, she raised her arms to allow him to pull the crumpled material of her dress over her head and expose her fully. He wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her close against his chest. She savoured the intimacy of his skin against hers, his fingertips tracing along her spine, his warm breath feathering against her chest as he followed the line of her sternal notch with the tip of his tongue. She wondered if he would be willing to give up his shirt now, but decided not to risk ruining the moment.

Reclining against the strong support of his arms, she arched her back, offering herself up to him. Thankfully, she had decided to wear her vanishing knickers, which simply disappeared when his fingers brushed over the fabric. Seeing her exposed before him seemed to be more than he could bear, though. Unable to contain his arousal any longer, he fingered at the fly of his trousers with frantic urgency. His hands were shaking when he finally freed himself.

Her mouth turned dry at the sight of his engorged member, and the thought of what would follow next momentarily made her stomach clench with panic. His eyes seemed to be pleading her not to deny him now, but at this point she no longer had the will, or the power, to stop things from running their course.

She spread her legs wide for him, holding on to his shoulders for balance. Feeling him slide against her aroused flesh in search for her entrance made her whimper with anticipation and need. And from the expression on his face and the unconcealed lust in his eyes, his desire matched hers. Then he breached her lips, sending a jolt of pleasure through her body. Grabbing her by the hips, he pulled her closer against his pelvis, and as he buried himself all the way inside her, powerless against the rush of pleasure flooding his senses, an unrestrained yelp escaped his mouth.

They rocked together in a slow rhythm, lost in a trance of raging passion. She rubbed herself against him, searching for satisfaction of the lust that threatened to consume her, while he clutched on to her like a drowning man, and his lips found hers in a desperate kiss. Then suddenly he froze, a shudder went through his body, his eyes closed and his features distorted in a silent cry, as he lost control.

When he opened his eyes again, he seemed mortified.

"I I'm sorry. I..."

She pushed aside her own disappointment and the hunger that now would remain unsatiated. Her main concern now was not to make him feel like a failure.

"It's O.K. Don't worry about it, Severus."

"No, it's not... I You..."

"Shhh... Next time... We'll do this again... For now, just hold me, just kiss me..."

She slid off him and crawled onto the bed, beckoning him to follow her.

For a long time then, they lay on the bed facing each other, engaged in a tender kiss. His lips felt soft and pliable, his breath smelled sweet and wonderful, and his nose did not get in the way. Finally she turned over and said, "Let's go to sleep. Stay with me tonight." He snuggled up to her.

For the rest of the night, he was holding her close, his body curved around her, his arm wrapped around her waist, his breath tickling her neck. She felt warm and safe.

Just before she drifted off to sleep, she realised that she had needed this far more than sexual release.

The next morning Charity awoke to find herself in bed alone. She had looked forward to waking up in his arms, to being greeted by a kiss, or maybe even his morning erection, and was disappointed that Severus had just left. It also made her slightly concerned regarding how he felt about what had happened between them.

As it was nearly lunchtime, she got dressed and walked down to the Great Hall to eat, hoping she would find him there. But his seat at the staff table remained empty throughout the meal. Later that day, after he had been absent at dinner as well, she decided to pay him a visit in his dungeon. She put on her favourite underwear, a skirt and a jumper (it was cold down there, but keeping it easy access seemed like a good idea).

Walking down into the bowels of the castle, along dark corridors lit only sparsely by the occasional flickering torch, made her feel increasingly nervous. The only thing keeping her going on her journey into the unwelcoming clamminess of the dungeons was the prospect of a warm fire and sinking into the arms of the alluring dark Slytherin she hoped to find there. A sliver of light penetrating from the gap under the door to Snape's office alerted her to his presence there. Her heart was beating fast, both with apprehension and excitement, as she stood in front of the forbidding heavy oak door. It took all the courage she could muster to raise her hand and knock clearly. The sound of her knuckles banging against the wood echoed eerily through the cavernous corridor, but for an excruciatingly long moment, there was no response.

Suddenly, the door flew open, and Snape stood towering in front of her. She could hardly make out the expression on his face against the meagre glow of light emanating from the room behind him, but she could almost feel the piercing gaze from his unfathomable eyes.

"What do you want?" he demanded, his voice as cold as the dungeon air.

"I I wanted to see you," she stammered.

A/N:

Can a story pairing Severus Snape and Charity Burbage end in anything else than tragedy? Yes, it can! If you love a happy ending and want to read more about these two, then read on and be surprised!

This story originally was going to be a tragedy. For an alternate, tragic ending you can read Chapter 3 of the story on Fanfiction. But be warned it's likely to make you cry. I'm not uploading it here, as I don't want to confuse the story line.

Finally, if you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review. It takes many days and hours to write a story like this, and a few words of appreciation is all an author gets in return. Thanks for reading!

Marked by Darkness

Chapter 2 of 3

Severus Snape / Charity Burbage. One night, after the Yule Ball, she gets closer to him than any woman ever has. And in the end, that might make all the difference. A romance in the shadows of Darkness.

Walking down into the bowels of the castle, along dark corridors lit only sparsely by the occasional flickering torch, made her feel increasingly nervous. The only thing keeping her going on her journey into the unwelcoming clamminess of the dungeons was the prospect of a warm fire and sinking into the arms of the alluring dark Slytherin she hoped to find there. A sliver of light penetrating from the gap under the door to Snape's office alerted her to his presence there. Her heart was beating fast, both with apprehension and excitement, as she stood in front of the forbidding heavy oak door. It took all the courage she could muster to raise her hand and knock clearly. The sound of her knuckles banging against the wood echoed eerily through the cavernous corridor, but for an excruciatingly long moment there was no response.

Suddenly, the door flew open and Snape stood towering in front of her. She could hardly make out the expression on his face against the meagre glow of light emanating from the room behind him, but she could almost feel the piercing gaze from his unfathomable eyes.

"What do you want?" he demanded, his voice as cold as the dungeon air.

"I I wanted to see you," she stammered.

There was a long moment of silence, in which he seemed to be trying to figure out what to make of her reply. His face remained stony, but she felt as if there was a trace of that longing in his eyes again. As he made no move to invite her in, she seized the opportunity to just walk past him into the dimly lit room. He did not protest, quietly shutting the door, watching her as she took in the surroundings.

So this was his office. The walls were lined with bookshelves upon bookshelves, giving the small room a crowded appearance. There was only a single small window, high up the bare walls, and underneath it stood Snape's desk. Unlike hers, it was free from any clutter, with nothing more than an ink jar, a quill, and a neat stack of parchments upon it. Her curiosity was roused by a cauldron that stood on a work bench in the corner, surrounded by jars and bottles of potions ingredients, drawing her closer.

"What are you working on?" she asked, well aware that it was seldom a good idea to pester the Potions master with unsolicited questions.

By now he had caught up with her, as if worried that she might touch or break anything.

"An experiment," he replied, surprising her with the lack of impatience or exasperation in his voice. So perhaps it was O.K. to keep probing?

"An experiment on what?"

"An antidote for Polyjuice Potion."

"Doesn't the effect of Polyjuice Potion wear off quite quickly anyway? What use would anybody have for such an antidote? Would you feed it to your students to prevent cheating in OWL exams, Severus?"

"That application had not occurred to me, but it's an excellent suggestion."

She laughed. "Even you would not go that far!"

"You underestimate me. I have a certain reputation to uphold."

A slight twitch around his mouth told her he was joking. It was nice to see that Snape was capable of humour in a way not meant to hurt or belittle.

"But surely you did not come here to ask me about my little project?"

"No. I came here to give you the opportunity to make up for last night."

She held her breath, watching him intently, wondering how he would take the open invitation she had just extended. Her directness seemed to have bewildered him and left him somewhat lost for words. She noted that he was dressed unusually casual, wearing only his black trousers and a white linen shirt. His hair appeared silky and soft, unlike the unkempt curtains that often framed his face. She concluded that, while her visit may have been unexpected, it had certainly been hoped for. Finally, he must have decided that a verbal response was not required, and instead stepped closer to her, placing his hands on her shoulders, drawing her towards him. She closed her eyes, tilting her head back, and slightly parted her lips in anticipation of his kiss. Then his mouth was upon hers, warm and soft, gentle and restrained. He seemed a lot more confident this time, here on his own territory, and she was only too happy to let him take control. She could feel his heart beating against his chest, hard, but unhurried.

It was a magical moment. His black eyes beheld her, their gaze unblinking and penetrating as always, but in the soft flicker of the fire, they appeared softer, more akin to black velvet than unyielding obsidian. His sharp features equally seemed to benefit from the low light. There was something attractive about them, although it was not beauty. Perhaps this creature of the dungeons was best appreciated in his natural surroundings, rather than in the harsh light of day. Or maybe it was that he was growing on her, the way dark chocolate did, bitter and almost unpalatable at first, but with repeated exposure, increasingly complex and satisfying, revealing a hidden sweetness. Yes, this man was an acquired taste, like a good Scottish whisky.

"Perhaps we should move somewhere more comfortable."

His voice, too, was deep, smoky, and mellow, like a well-aged highland malt, and caused a similar warmth to spread through her. She had no objections, letting him guide her towards a door she had not previously noticed, revealing the sanctuary of his bedroom. With a wave of his wand, flames sprang to life in the fireplace, filling the room with enough light for her to admire the place fully.

Apparently, Hogwarts did well for its Heads of Houses. His room was considerably more opulent than hers, furnished entirely in intricately carved dark wood and rich green fabrics. The centrepiece was a mighty four-poster bed, surrounded by a luxurious dark green carpet runner, whose ornamental pattern on closer inspection turned out to be made up of intertwining snakes. The only signs that the room was occupied were his black coat and robes hung carefully over the back of an armchair in the corner, and a worn leather-bound book on the bedside table.

Charity sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to decipher the faded silver lettering along the book's spine. *L'Art de Varier les Plaisirs de l'Amour*. 'She barely managed to suppress an astounded gasp. She wasn't sure what would surprise her more the thought that Snape's own collection of literature included such works, or for him to have picked it up from the Restricted Section of the library. Then the Slytherin seemed to have become aware of the subject of her preoccupation, and the book vanished from sight with a movement of his hand.

She smiled inwardly. So Snape had read up on the subject... Well, he was more than welcome to practise his newly gained knowledge on her. She kicked off her shoes and slid back into the centre of the emerald sheets, reclining, looking at him expectantly. His intense eyes remained fixed on her, their black depths never revealing the mystery of what went on behind them, as he moved on top of her to kiss her passionately. She sighed deeply, relishing the sensation of having a man between her legs, the feel of his weight on her, substantial but not crushing. Then his lips moved on to her neck, making her squirm with pleasure. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, feeling the lean firmness of muscle and bone underneath the fabric of his shirt, wishing away those layers of garments separating them, yearning to feel him deep inside her. Then he freed himself from her embrace and sat back on his heels.

"What are you going to do with me, Severus?" she asked, looking at him flirtatiously, stretching in a way that gave him the best view of her curves.

"You shall find out soon enough," he replied in his deep, seductive voice as he pulled off her skirt and underwear and moved down between her legs. "But you shan't be disappointed."

And disappointed she was not. As his tongue, soon joined by a long, slim finger, transported her to a place of pure bliss, she couldn't help but thank the old French masters of erotic literature.

As the fire was beginning to burn down, the fierce flicker and crackle was replaced by a peaceful warm glow. Charity let out a deep contented breath, enjoying the pleasant tiredness weighing down her limbs. She couldn't recall ever having felt so completely satisfied. Severus really had made it up to her, first bringing her to climax with his mouth and hand, before making love to her hard until she came again.

She looked up at the dark green velvet canopy over the bed, admiring the silver embroidered crest of Slytherin in the centre. She'd never have imagined that one day she would find herself in bed with someone from that House. Representatives of the House of Salazar were said to be as opportunistic as Hufflepuffs were loyal, as cunning as Hufflepuffs were honest, and as ambitious as Hufflepuffs were easy-going, and any romantic association between these two Houses was believed to spell disaster.

And yet she felt strangely at ease in the arms of this particular Slytherin. She turned around to face him and snuggled up to his chest, burying her face against the crook of his arm, inhaling his intoxicating scent. She trusted him. Maybe it was because of the way he looked at her, as if she were the most amazing thing he'd ever seen, or because of how he touched her, with a sort of shy admiration that bordered on reverence. It gave her confidence that he would be as careful and gentle with her heart as he was with her body. And there was every chance that she would lose her heart to him.

It was astounding how her perception of him had changed in such a short space of time. Yesterday, he had still been the ill-tempered, uncongenial colleague, an asexual being except maybe for a certain element of dark allure. While she had enjoyed the thrill of going to the ball with him, she would never have considered him a prospective lover. Now, however, she wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of her life getting to know this fascinating man, to listen to the seductive timbre of his voice and lose herself in the intense black depths of his eyes.

She sat up and looked at him. He was still wearing his shirt. He had allowed her to unbutton it to expose his chest and abdomen, but she had respected the unspoken boundary to not take it off. But now she really wanted to overcome that last barrier preventing her from getting as close to him as possible; she wanted to not only feel, but see those sinewy arms and the broad expanse of his shoulders. What was it that he felt so reluctant to reveal, a disfiguring scar, an ugly skin mark perhaps? She reached out, gently stroking along his collarbone in an attempt to brush the fabric over his shoulder, but he recoiled, a look of alarm on his face as he inched away from her towards the edge of the bed. She sighed inwardly. Obviously, this was a very touchy issue; she would have to be patient and considerate.

"Please, Severus, I want to see you. Don't deny me..."

As she approached him once more, she could see the warring emotions inside him from the uncertain expression on his face. She kissed his forehead and his nose with all the tenderness she felt for him.

"You're the most attractive and desirable man I know," she whispered softly. "And nothing underneath your shirt could ever change that. Trust me..."

Again, she reached out to undress him, and this time he did not move away when she brushed the garment off his shoulders, ever so slowly, like one might approach a flighty animal, kissing the perfect pale skin as she revealed it. His muscles felt tense, but he did not flinch as she started to unbutton his cuffs. She pulled the fabric lower down his arms, and he hesitantly withdrew his right arm from its sleeve, the look in his eyes a desperate plea. Tugging on the cuff of the other sleeve, she pulled the shirt free and tossed it aside, but when she looked back at his left forearm she froze.

He had the Dark Mark. For a moment, her breathing stopped, before her heart went into overdrive. The world came crashing down around her as she stared at the black skull burned into his skin in a complete state of shock. There was only one possible explanation he was a Death Eater, an evil, cruel, murderous brute. It was like being in a bad dream, but there was no awakening. Fear and revulsion took hold of her mind as it circled around that fact, unwilling to believe, but only too aware of what it implied.

Suddenly, she was a little girl again, skipping back from the ice-cream vendor's carriage towards her family's tent. Only 20 minutes until the start of the game... She had to hurry back to her dad so that they could make it to their seats in time to watch England play against Germany in the quarter final. She felt giddy with excitement. It was the first time she had been to the World Cup. Mum had been dead against it, worried that it was too dangerous in the current political climate, but Dad had finally conceded. He had agreed, though, that it was better for Mum to stay back at home, fearing that she might encounter a fair bit of hostility in the wizard community.

Charity was in love with Quidditch. Well, not just Quidditch, but a little bit also with James Potter, the handsome Seeker on the England team, who smiled down at her from the poster hanging over her bed with a self-assured grin and a cheeky sparkle in his eyes. She couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts after the summer. As a third year, she would be allowed to trial for the Hufflepuff team. One day she would be like Imelda Staggering, the England Chaser. Never mind that her flying technique left much to be desired she would practice... and Dad had promised to help her.

Suddenly, a high-pitched roar ripped through the air, stopping her dead in her tracks. Everyone around her was staring at the sky, pointing their fingers at a black cloud wavering above in a shape that resembled a skull with a snake coming out of its jaws. There were hysterical cries and terrified screams. Then panic broke out amongst the crowd as people started to run in all directions like headless chickens. She could see a group of black-cloaked figures with hoods and gleaming silver masks march towards the camping area. They carried blazing torches, setting fire to everything in their path. People came scrambling out of burning tents, screaming, some only partly dressed, some clutching babies and children, running as fast as they could. Charity started to run, too. Her heart was beating fast in her chest with fear as she hurtled along as fast as her legs would carry her. Then someone moved past her, pushing her aside, and she fell. She ducked, shielding her head with her arms as the crowd scrambled and jumped over and around her. It was impossible to get back to her feet without being knocked over again. She received a painful kick to her side by a hurried foot and winced, afraid that she would get trampled to death.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she whimpered, close to tears, but nobody took notice of her; everybody was too preoccupied with saving their own skins.

Finally the stampede passed. When she wiped the dust off her face to open her eyes, about to scramble back to her feet, she caught sight of a hooded figure standing right in front of her. The empty eyes of its mask stared at her from within its grotesque face, while its wand pointed straight at her. For a moment, Charity was paralysed with fear. She desperately wished herself back inside the crowd, but they had all but gone. She was alone with the Death Eater, who now took a step towards her and crouched down, examining her closely.

"See, see, what do we have here? A little Mudblood, hehehe..." A lewd male voice sneered. He pointed his wand at the ballpoint pen sticking out from the breast pocket of her blouse, making Charity realize with a pang of fear what had given her away.

"I'm a half-blood!" she replied, trying to make her voice sound firm.

"Ye're only half filth then eh?" the man jeered with a dirty laugh. "Maybe if you're mated with a nice pureblood, you'll be almost fit for society, hahaha..."

His black-gloved hand reached out and groped the small mound of her breast that had started to bud on her chest during the last year, laughing lecherously when she shied away, terrified.

"Ye're old enough... hahaha!" he said, leering.

Then there were hurried footsteps coming towards them, and when she turned around, she almost burst into tears with relief.

"Dad!" she cried as her father approached, glaring furiously at the Death Eater, his wand drawn.

"Take your hands off my daughter, you piece of scum!" he shouted.

The Death Eater didn't waste a second before he attacked.

"Expelliarmus!"

Her father's wand flew through the air and landed somewhere between the flaming tents. A look of shock briefly registered on his face, but he didn't flinch, throwing himself between his daughter and the attacker.

"Run, Charity, run!" he whispered in a tone that betrayed his fear. He pulled her up from the ground and shoved her in the direction of a group of tents. Charity didn't want to leave him, but the urgency in his voice told her to obey. She ran away a short distance and took refuge behind a tent. She didn't carry her wand. She had no reason to, as she was not allowed to do magic outside school. If only she could find her father's. It had landed somewhere around there...

"You better watch yer mouth. We don't look kindly on yer sort with yer Muggle-lovin' ways," the Death Eater snarled. *"Crucio!"*

There was an earth-shattering scream. Her father collapsed to the ground, his face contorted in agony, convulsing in the dust. Charity cried out in desperation, tears flowing from her eyes. She hid her face in her hands, unable to watch, praying for it to stop, while her heart was torn apart by the sound her father was making, screaming with pain in a way that didn't sound human.

"That'll teach you respect, blood-traitor!" the cruel voice growled.

Then she became aware of another man in the vicinity, scanning the surroundings for the source of the cries. He was an Auror, wearing the robes of Magical Law Enforcement officials and a gleaming gold badge.

She jumped up from her hiding place, waving her arms in the air, and cried, "Here! Help!"

The Auror turned towards her and managed to assess the situation in a heartbeat, raising his wand.

"Stupefy!"

But as soon as the Death Eater had caught sight of the wand aimed at him, he had spun around, Disapparating in a whirl of black smoke, while the red flash of the Stunning Spell crepitated in the air.

Charity rushed over to her father, who was lying on the ground, panting. She clung on to him, crying hysterically, afraid that he might die or never be the same again. Meanwhile, the Auror had secured the surroundings and walked over. He kneeled down beside them, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Your father will be all right," he said softly.

She looked up at him through the veil of tears clouding her eyes. He was a young man, barely in his twenties, with curly dark hair and smiling brown eyes.

"Frank Longbottom, Auror," he introduced himself. "Are you hurt? Did he do anything to you?" he asked earnestly.

She shook her head, sobbing violently, "My dad, he hurt my dad..."

"Your dad is a brave man. He will be fine. It's too bad that scum got away, though."

Then the Auror helped her father get up. He managed to stand with shaky legs and a faint groan, but insisted he was fine. Charity hugged him fiercely, and he pressed her against his chest, sobbing helplessly.

"Charity!"

Dumbledore's voice was firm and commanding and brought her back to her senses. Only then did she realize that she had been running, in a manner hardly appropriate for a teacher, a role model and figure of authority. Remembering where she had just been, she blushed, but noted with immense relief that she had somehow managed to get dressed. At least she was wearing her skirt and jumper, though one stocking was missing, and her jumper was inside-out, a fact that would hardly escape the old wizard's keen perception. His sky-blue eyes looked down at her with deep concern, as always seeing so much more than other people would.

"You and I need to talk," he said gravely. "Accompany me to my office."

Charity could do nothing but obey and follow him. As they walked along in silence, her mind went into overdrive, as if it had to make up for the black-out it had suffered earlier. For a moment, she wondered what the school rules stated with regard to the sort of intimate involvement amongst staff that she had shared with the Potions master, and whether it was sufficient grounds for dismissal. She was in no doubt that she was about to be reprimanded. But regardless of whether she would still have a job after the impending conversation with the Headmaster, her overriding concern was something else entirely.

Snape was a Death Eater! There was a Death Eater hiding at the school, and Dumbledore had no idea... It explained a great deal, including the strange occurrences earlier that term. Had Snape manipulated the Goblet of Fire? Had he tricked it into pronouncing Harry Potter a Champion so that he could harm him, kill him even, in an inconspicuous way? She had to warn Dumbledore, and the issue of how she had come by this information was secondary. If she was going to be sacked, so be it. The safety of the students was all she cared about.

Once inside the circular room of the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore motioned her to sit down in the visitor's chair opposite his desk. He lowered himself into his high-backed chair, facing her with a heavy sigh and a weariness that suddenly showed his true age. His eyes surveyed her from behind their half-moon spectacles without a trace of their customary twinkle. Charity wondered how to tell him, but decided it was best to wait and let him deliver whatever disciplinary action was waiting for her.

"Severus Snape is no Death Eater," he finally said, leaving her dumbstruck by just how perceptive he was. How did he know?

"But he has the Dark Mark! I saw it with my own eyes!" she protested.

"Yes, he has the Dark Mark," Dumbledore replied calmly, while his blue eyes fixed her sternly. "But Severus is no more a Death Eater than you or I."

"But I don't understand... He has the Dark Mark!"

The old man slowly rose from his chair, and walked over to the leaded window overlooking the grounds. He stroked his long white beard pensively as he stared into the

dark night with his back turned to her.

"Imagine a young man," he started, his eyes still fixed into the blackness beyond the window pane, "a boy of less than favourable upbringing, full of passion and anger... Imagine a young man, who is not only talented, but single-minded, and regrettably, somewhat arrogant and over-ambitious... Imagine this arrogance and ambition turn him towards the Dark side and lead him to make a grave mistake..."

Dumbledore paused, supporting himself against the window sill as if the weight of a million years rested on his shoulders. The tension in the room was almost palpable. Charity hardly dared breathe. How could he suggest that joining the Death Eaters was a mere mistake?

The old man turned to look at her, slowly walking back towards the desk. As he lowered himself into his chair once more, leaning forward and folding his hands on top of the table, his eyes bored into hers with a piercing look that rivalled Snape's.

"Then imagine this young man, through his own misguided actions, brings about a tragedy so agonisingly painful to him that he cannot bear to go on living. Imagine that he comes to regret his actions so utterly and bitterly that he fears not torture, nor death, finally turning his back on his Dark master at great personal risk..."

Dumbledore's clear blue eyes were holding her gaze in a way that made it impossible to avert her eyes. She stared at him transfixed, no doubt with a big question mark on her face. She remembered the deep sadness in Snape's eyes, sensing that there was a connection to the tragedy Dumbledore had mentioned, trying to imagine what horrors the past held for the enigmatic Slytherin.

"What... what happened? I mean... the tragedy?" she asked hoarsely.

"That I cannot tell you. Severus would not want me to divulge his secret. But rest assured that I... know everything." Dumbledore's eyes were looking at her unblinkingly. "And I trust Severus. Completely."

Those were strong words, especially coming from Dumbledore. The finality in the way he had said them told her that he would not discuss this matter any further or give her any more information. She would have to take his word for it. The wise old wizard trusted Snape and expected her to do the same. So how could she not? If only she knew his reasons though. It would make it so much easier. The image of the ugly black mark on Snape's pale skin was still vividly fresh in her mind. *Severus Snape is no more a Death Eater than you or I...* Dumbledore had complete faith in the Potions master, and nobody could fool Albus Dumbledore, something that had just been demonstrated to her most convincingly. It was a relief, of course. Harry and the students were not in danger, at least not from Snape. And her feelings for him... Well, they should just be the same, shouldn't they? There was no reason they should change. And Dumbledore didn't seem to mind... At least he hadn't said anything, even though he knew, for sure...

"I don't need to stress that what I have just told you stays between you and me," the Headmaster said, interrupting her thoughts, looking at her expectantly.

"Of course not," she managed to whisper, her voice still hoarse.

"Then we understand each other." Suddenly the twinkle was back in the blue eyes behind the half-moon spectacles. "You should try one of these. Honeydukes' Cinnamon Stars Christmas special my favourites," the old wizard said cheerfully, offering her a bowl of the sugar-glazed confectionary. "They are nicely warming, should you be heading back to the dungeons..."

Charity obediently took a sweet and put it into her mouth before thanking the Headmaster and leaving his office. The sweetness on her tongue was in stark contrast to the bitter dryness at the back of her mouth as the realisation sank in. Severus... What had she done? *You're the most attractive and desirable man I know, and nothing underneath your shirt could ever change that. Trust me.* These had been her words. And he had trusted her, maybe trusted her more than he ever trusted had anybody else. And she... she had screamed and run away in disgust... Oh, gods, oh, gods, oh, gods... She had hurt him.

Her heart started to race, and cold sweat formed on her skin as guilt and dread knotted around her stomach. What could she do now? She had to talk to him straight away. She had to try and fix this somehow. Oh, gods... Her knees felt weak and shaky. What a dreadful person she was. What could she possibly say to undo this damage? The poor man had been through unimaginable heartbreak. Then for the first time after years he had found the courage to open up to another person, and that person had rejected him, wounded him... Oh, gods... She had to make this right somehow.

The cheerfulness left Albus' expression as soon as the door had closed behind the young Muggle Studies professor. He felt tired. With a heavy sigh, he took off his glasses and placed them aside on his desk. Resting his head in his hands, he ogled the Cinnamon Stars longingly. Perhaps he would allow himself just one more... He really needed it, after all this. This latest development should really have added to the Christmas cheer. Who would have thought? Severus out of all people! He should be happy for him. If anybody's life needed a sprinkle of romance, it was the bitter Potions master's. The warm-hearted young woman would do him good.

He sighed again, rubbing his eyes. Then why did it feel like another concern had just been piled on top of all the worries that had rested on his shoulders ever since this wretched tournament had started? Something was in the air... Something was very, very wrong, but he just could not put his finger on it. Sometimes he felt as if he had an inkling, but the more he concentrated on it, the more he tried to explore it, the more it slipped away. It was maddening. And it scared him. The recent events could only mean one thing: Lord Voldemort was gaining power again. He had always known that the moment would come, but now that it seemed to be drawing closer, he felt utterly unprepared. So many questions remained unanswered. And Harry was still so young, too young.

He needed Severus. He hated what he would have to ask of him, but there was no other way. This was a task only he could do. But could he really rely on him? Would the young Slytherin be ready to risk his life for a cause that was not his own? Yes, he had made a promise, but years had passed since then. Was his commitment to Lily still strong enough, or might the lure of the Dark side win him over once more? And would he be able to fool the best Legilimens of the age? Over the years, Severus had mastered Occlumency like no other. He could only hope that it would be enough.

Albus had not failed to notice how tense Severus had been lately. He, too, knew the time was approaching of course. He would be able to see it come closer every day by the colour of the Dark Mark on his skin. Sometimes it seemed as if Severus didn't quite trust his own steadfastness. Albus wondered whether the fear the Potions master was hiding so carefully behind his mask of cold aloofness was fear of his Dark master, or fear of the darkness within himself. Would he be strong enough to face his own demons?

Only time would tell. Until then, there was only hope. Yes, he needed Severus. And Merlin knew the responsibility he would have to place on his shoulders was more than any man should carry. He wouldn't be able to afford any distractions, especially not those with warm brown eyes and a curvy figure...

Charity was once more standing in the poorly lit corridor outside the Potions master's office. She shivered, unsure whether the chill she felt was due to the clammy cold down in the dungeons, or her embarrassment about the manner in which she had left this place what could only be twenty minutes ago, but in reality seemed like another lifetime. Once more she raised her hand and knocked.

"Severus, I'm sorry, I got scared for a moment. Please let's talk."

There was nothing but stony silence on the other side of the door, but the small ray of light shining through the keyhole told her that he was still there.

"Severus, please... Open the door. I'm sorry."

Nothing but silence, a long, long silence, interspersed only by the sound of water dripping onto cold stone floors somewhere in the dank darkness of the dungeons.

"Severus, please..." She made another attempt. "Dumbledore told me everything."

Finally, the sound of footsteps, followed by a tortured creaking of the hinges, before the door opened a small amount to reveal Snape's dark form obscuring the faint light from the room behind. His face was stony, his eyes cold and hard.

"So you think you know everything? But what about the things he didn't tell you... "

His voice, dark and silky, was heavy with insinuation. Charity knew that she had only heard part of the story, but it didn't help to be reminded in this way.

"He told me that he trusts you," she replied firmly. "And so do I," she added with more conviction than she actually felt.

"Do you?" he sneered. "Why do you think it makes any difference?"

There was something in his eyes that reminded her of a wounded animal. She swallowed, searching for something more she could say, but not finding the right words.

"You don't know what I've done," he continued, his tone lowering even further, until there was a dangerous quality to it. "You have no idea what I'm capable of." His black eyes glared at her menacingly. "I am not a good person. Stay away from me."

She stared back at him, her mind drawing a blank. She knew she had blown it. Her reaction had hurt something deep inside him, making him slam shut like an oyster. She also noted with sadness that the spell seemed to have been broken. The magic that had existed between them for a short time was gone, and she could no longer look at him without seeing a hood and a mask.

Seeing that he had effectively silenced her, a triumphant glitter went through his eyes, and he closed the door in her face with a thud.

That night, alone in her bed, Charity cried for the gentle and sensitive man with the softly smouldering eyes and the witty sense of humour, and who now seemed forever lost to her.

Mulled Wine and Mysteries

Chapter 3 of 3

Severus Snape / Charity Burbage. One night, after the Yule Ball, she gets closer to him than any woman ever has. And in the end, that might make all the difference. A romance in the shadows of Darkness.

"Charity..."

It was her dad's voice, accompanied by a knock on the door.

"Hmm, yes?" she mumbled, sitting on her bed, staring blankly at the spot on the wall that, until a couple of weeks ago, had been adorned by a poster of the celebrated England Seeker.

The door opened, and her dad entered. He seemed to have more grey hair since his return from St. Mungo's, but he was smiling, and his voice was upbeat when he said, "I thought you wanted to do some Quidditch practice over the summer. The weather is great outside, and I polished up my old broom for you."

He was trying to cheer her up. But any cheerfulness just felt fake after what had happened. Her enthusiasm for Quidditch had vanished. Instead, she had spent the best part of the holidays brooding in her room. It was all her fault. If she hadn't been so insistent about going to the World Cup, if she had listened to her mum....

"Hm... not now," she grumbled. She didn't feel like going outside and sitting on a broom.

The smile on her father's face faltered. He looked at her with sadness in his eyes, his brow furrowed into worry lines. With a sigh, he sat down on the bed next to her.

"We were lucky, you know. Neither of us was seriously hurt. We should be grateful for that. But if you let it affect your life like this, the damage done will be much greater."

Charity bit her lip, not looking at him.

"These things are much better dealt with by fighting back," he continued, protectively placing his arm around her. "Don't be a victim, Charity. Don't let them win..."

When Charity woke up, drowsily checking the clock on her bedside table, it was three in the morning, yet she was wide awake. She remembered every detail of her dream, perhaps because it was not a dream at all, but a memory.

In a heartbeat, her thoughts had returned to Snape. Had it been like that for him? Had fighting against his former master been the only way he could live with the things he had done, with his guilt, with the tragedy that Dumbledore had alluded to? And what might they have done to him for being a traitor? If marrying a Muggle was enough reason to torture well-respected wizards, how would the Death Eaters deal with a defector from their own ranks? Surely, it took a great deal of courage to do what Snape had done courage and probably just as much desperation. Didn't a man like him deserve a second chance? Where was her own courage, her own will to fight?

She recalled the excitement she had felt about going to the ball with him, the strange attraction, the unexpected intimacy, and then, the exhilarating feeling of falling in love, the hope that maybe, just maybe, she had finally found that special someone. When had she last felt so alive? But now she had lost it again, had been thrown back into her life of solitude and unfulfilled longing by the shadow of events so long ago. Yet, it was in her power not to let them spoil this. She just had to be stronger, braver, and not let them take what might be her only chance of happiness. It was her choice to take fate into her own hands and not to become a victim. No, she would not give up so easily, not without getting to know Severus first.

Slowly, her resolve hardened. She put on her slippers and, for the third time that night, made her way down into the dungeons. Dressed in nothing more than a thin white cotton nightshirt, she really felt the cold, but it just made her walk faster. And so, yet again, she found herself outside the heavy oak door sealing off Snape's realm from the rest of the castle. This time, however, there was no light on the other side. It appeared that he was asleep, like every other sensible person at this time of night. But Charity didn't care. She had come this far; nothing would stop her now.

Raising her fist, she banged loudly against the unyielding wood, again and again. She would talk to him, even if she had to wake up the whole school. It wasn't long before the door flew open, and the Potions master, his lit wand in hand, stood before her with a scowl that would have sent any student running. But Charity did not budge.

"What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing? Have you gone completely insane?" he spat.

"I'm waking you up because I need to talk to you, and it can't wait," she replied calmly.

His mouth opened but for a moment, he seemed lost for something to say at such insolence. She seized the opportunity to push past him, heading straight for his bedroom. She could hear him cursing under his breath as he closed the door and followed her. The room was lit only by the flicker of a single candle on the bedside table, making frightening shadows dance across the walls. Taking a deep breath, she sat down on the edge of the bed, watching him stand in the doorway, seething with anger.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" he hissed.

"About four in the morning, I'd say," she replied, completely unperturbed.

"Exactly! And now you will leave my quarters! Get out!" he snarled, pointing into the darkness behind him.

"Not until you have listened to my explanation."

His features froze in cold fury as he seemed to be considering his next response, a malicious glitter in his eyes.

"Are you really that desperate for a fuck?" he finally asked, his voice now silky and controlled, carefully delivering his venom. "Or does it arouse you to spread your legs for a Death Eater? In that case I could introduce you to some of my former associates. Perhaps you'd stop accosting me then."

For a moment, she was left speechless by those awful words, deliberately calculated and chosen to hurt. She looked at him incredulously, trying to reconcile his spiteful behaviour with the affectionate man she had known only hours before, in this very room, in the very bed she was sitting on. Suddenly, perhaps because she had had a glimpse of that shy and vulnerable man, it became crystal clear to her. The anger, the aggression, the sarcasm, the harsh words they were a mechanism of defence by which he kept people away, probably fearing the very rejection he had experienced earlier that night. Now even more than before, she wanted to reach out to him, past the barbed wire fence he had erected around himself. She realised that if she wanted to win back his trust, only the truth would do, the whole truth. She would have to tell him everything, no matter how frightening and uncomfortable that might be.

"I know you're just saying that to make me go away. But it won't work. I'm not going to leave until you have heard what I have to say. Sit down, please."

He muttered more obscenities but in the end seemed to decide that hearing her out was the quickest way to get rid of her and sat down opposite her with a look of extreme irritation on his face. He was wearing an old grey flannel nightshirt, not exactly becoming for a man of his age. She noticed that it, too, had long sleeves, wondering if it was because of the cold in this part of the castle or because he himself could not bear to see the Dark Mark on his skin.

"The reason I reacted so strongly... the reason I ran away," she started hesitantly, "is that I had a traumatic experience once, involving a Death Eater."

She kept watching his face as she spoke. His expression seemed to change subtly, from annoyance to trepidation. It was difficult for her to talk about those painful memories, but she forced herself to continue.

"I When I was thirteen, I was... nearly raped... by a Death Eater."

She took a deep breath, relieved that she had got those words out. From the look on his face, it seemed just as difficult for him to listen to her, but she did not stop until she had told the whole story. When she had finished, the silence that followed was truly uncomfortable.

"I I'm sorry," he finally said, his eyes lowered, as if he could not bear to look at her.

"It was not you. You don't need to apologise," she replied, watching him attentively.

"No, but it could have been me. I was there... I set tents on fire, I enjoyed spreading terror and fear," he said softly, staring at his hands.

"But you didn't rape little girls, did you?" she asked, praying that he had not.

"No." As he looked up to meet her inquiring gaze there was a hardness in his eyes that was almost brutal. "But I have tortured. I have killed. People are dead because of me. Although perhaps you think that's acceptable as long as I'm not a child molester?" The sarcasm could not conceal the undertone of self-loathing in his words.

"No! Of course not. But But you changed. You regret those actions now?"

It was more a question than a statement. She really wanted to hear the truth from his own lips, to know the reason why he had switched sides.

"That does not make them undone or bring anybody back to life," was his bitter reply.

"No, it doesn't. But I think I could accept whatever you may have done in the past. What matters more are the choices you'll make in the future."

"What makes you so sure that those will be any better?"

"I trust you."

She had told him the same before, a few hours earlier, but this time, she actually felt it.

"Pah!" he spat derisively. "Because Dumbledore told you to?"

"Yes... But also because I want to. Because I don't want this... us... to end. Because I think it's worth the risk."

"You have no idea what that risk is!" he snarled. "When the Dark Lord returns and he will return there will be no escape for me. I will have to rejoin him or die."

"But Dumbledore said..."

"Dumbledore intends to use me as a spy," he interrupted her harshly. "I will have to act as a Death Eater would. I will have to spend a great deal of time in the Dark Lord's presence. And he is the most accomplished Legilimens of our age."

"Legilimens? You mean he can read minds?"

"Yes, if that's what you want to call it."

"Like like what you did to me?"

"Yes." He frowned. It appeared that he didn't like to be reminded of that little incident in the corridor outside her room. "Only he is far more accomplished than I am. To him, it's second nature."

"But then how can you hope not to be discovered?"

"By being an even better Occlumens." He moved closer to her, taking her by the shoulders while looking her in the eyes with a seriousness that was almost frightening. "Do you understand how dangerous that is though? You don't want to associate yourself with me. What if he finds out about this, about you? What if he orders me to kill you,

just for the sake of testing my loyalty?"

"You wouldn't..." she replied meekly.

"I would have to."

The firmness with which he said it left her in no doubt that he meant it. She swallowed. Still, the danger he was describing was no deterrent. She had already decided that she would rather risk her life than not live at all, safe and protected as that might keep her.

"I'm willing to take that risk," she said firmly.

"Why?" he asked, seemingly aghast at her response.

"Well, why would you risk your life, trying to double-cross your Dark master?" she challenged him.

"My reasons do not concern you," he replied, again avoiding the question.

She felt disappointed by his lack of trust and openness; after all she had just divulged her most painful memories. But maybe one day he would tell her... She would be patient, she could wait...

"Fine, you don't need to tell me. But I have my reasons, too," she replied defiantly.

"Whatever the reasons for your... insanity I don't deserve it. And I cannot return it."

His words hung in the air like a knife above her head. Was she making a mistake by allowing herself romantic feelings for this man? Was she just setting herself up for heartbreak and pain? But the answer to that question didn't matter; she wanted him too much to care.

"Can you hold me though, the way you did last night?" she asked hopefully.

The feeling of longing, the need to feel his arms around her was so strong that she cast away any remnants of pride or dignity. He looked at her uncertainly. It seemed that, while he shared the same desire for closeness and human warmth, he was held back by the very concerns he had just raised. Finally, he gave a small nod but remained sitting where he was on the bed, somewhat stiffly and looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"That's all I want for now," she whispered, but still, he did not move.

She reached out to place her hand on his in an attempt to bridge the gap between them, to alleviate the awkwardness that hung in the air. He glanced at her shyly, leaving his hand in place, yet it was clear that he was not going to make any attempt to hug her. Once more, she would have to be the one to take the initiative. Taking courage, she climbed onto his lap, somewhat clumsily, straddling his legs, and slung her arms around his neck. He put an arm around her, tentatively at first, but then pressed her against his chest with obvious need.

"Severus..." she exhaled in a sigh that was almost a sob.

It felt so right to be in the embrace of this man, who was nearly a complete stranger for all intents and purposes, and not only that a stranger with a dark and mysterious past, and possibly an even more sinister future. She had no idea whether it was wise to trust this feeling, or whether it was just an unhealthy infatuation coloring her judgment. All she knew was that she wanted this so badly being sheltered in the warmth of his body, feeling his strong arms around her, his hands in her hair, hungrily clutching at any part of her they could get hold of that she had no choice but to throw caution to the wind and hope for the best. With every deep breath she took, drinking in the scent of his body, some of the anxiety of the past hours fell off her. She started to relax, feeling totally at peace despite the danger and darkness associated with the man holding her.

She felt the tickle of his breath against her neck as he buried his face in her hair, warm puffs of air caressing her skin, hoping they would soon be followed up with kisses. Suddenly, she realized that there was a strange wetness against her ear where his face was resting. Was he crying? His hands stilled, but his breathing seemed hitched and irregular, as if he were trying to suppress the sobs. She made no attempt to look at his face, sensing that it was better to spare him the humiliation of someone witnessing his tears. Instead, she held him close, gently stroking his back. She wondered what had caused this sudden loss of composure. Was it a sign of how much she had hurt him, or was it something different altogether? Perhaps their conversation had brought back memories of a much darker time in his life. How much pain and loneliness might be hidden beneath the Potions master's usual appearance of cool aloofness? And could it be a good thing that some of it was now bubbling up to the surface? Perhaps being able to cry would help to lighten the burden of his sorrow.

After a while his breathing became calm and regular again. She closed her eyes and sighed, suddenly overcome with a heavy tiredness as her body seemed to realise it had received far too little rest during the last two nights.

"Let's go to sleep..." she mumbled into his hair.

Without a word, he gently rolled them over on the bed. She snuggled up to his chest as he pulled the covers over them, placing his arm around her, protectively, or possessively. A content smile spread across her face, setting in place as she drifted off into slumber.

Charity awoke from an awareness of someone moving around the room. She reached out, instinctively checking the side of the bed where Severus had been lying but found it to be empty. As her eyes flew open in alarm they were greeted by the dim light of a grey winter dawn that filtered through a small window beneath the ceiling, telling her that it was morning, though still rather early.

Snape was standing beside the bed, fastening the belt of his trousers. His dark eyes were resting on her without giving any hint as to the thoughts going on behind them. She watched, propped up onto her elbow, as he adjusted the cuffs of his shirt, shrugged into his heavy black coat and did up the long row of buttons with practised, nimble fingers. There was something surreal about seeing the man whose bed she had shared last night transform back into the stern Potions master. The unfamiliarity inherent in the situation made her acutely aware of how little she really knew him, something she was determined to change. It wasn't enough for her to just sleep with him; she wanted more than that.

"So, what are we going to do today?" she asked, as he carefully fastened his neck tie.

"I have no idea about your plans," he replied, raising a questioning eyebrow, "but I have work to do."

"Are we not going to have breakfast first?"

"Your attire is hardly appropriate for attending the Great Hall, nor should you be seen wandering the corridors this way. Use the Floo in my office to go back to your quarters."

"Well, I was thinking we could have breakfast here. You could call a house-elf. We could have breakfast in bed."

"Absolutely not!"

"Why not? It's Sunday! Surely we can have a break and spend some time together?" she insisted.

"No! Were you not listening last night? How do you suppose I am to keep the Dark Lord unaware of these... occurrences... if you insist on behaving like a couple on honeymoon?"

She could see his point, and it was the only thing that lessened the hurt she felt at his words, even though she preferred not to take it as a given that You-Know-Who really would return as Snape had claimed. Surely Dumbledore would be able to prevent that from happening? She climbed out of bed, feeling decidedly underdressed in her nightshirt, compared to his formal attire. He turned away to leave the bedroom, but she grabbed hold of his arm to stop him.

"Please, Severus. I just want to spend some time with you. Talk... get to know each other. We could go somewhere outside Hogwarts, somewhere we won't be recognised."

"Why?" he asked, seemingly puzzled by her insistence.

"Maybe I'm hoping I'll enjoy your company, unlikely as that may seem," she replied teasingly.

"Unlikely indeed," he growled.

She wondered whether the look in his eyes had softened slightly or whether she was just imagining it as it was really impossible to tell just what he was thinking. But then his next words completely took her by surprise.

"If you need proof, meet me outside the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade an hour after lunch, wearing Muggle attire."

Now there definitely was a little twitch around his mouth. She stood there flabbergasted as he marched out of the bedroom. A moment later, she heard the sound of his office door and realised that she had been left alone.

With a big smile on her face, she made her way to the fireplace to Floo back to her rooms.

Back in her rooms, Charity immediately started to go through her closet, trying to pick an outfit for the afternoon. Her wardrobe was well stocked with Muggle clothing as Muggle fashion was one of her passions. Unfortunately, she rarely got to wear any of those things, so she was determined to take full advantage of the opportunity at hand.

Pulling out piece after piece and arranging them on the bed in various combinations, she wondered where Snape was going to take her. Most wizards were completely at odds with the Muggle world and didn't want anything to do with it. Charity knew this attitude only too well from her students, especially the Slytherins. So the last thing she would have expected from their Head of House was to suggest a type of activity that required Muggle attire. And she couldn't quite picture Snape in anything other than his long black wizard robes.

By the time she had decided on a long, grey wool skirt, knee-high boots, and a soft, purple jumper, it was way too late to have breakfast. She spent the remainder of the morning in excited anticipation until it was finally time for lunch in the Great Hall.

Snape arrived at the staff table several minutes after her. He didn't acknowledge her presence in any way, choosing a seat at the opposite end. Charity felt slightly irritated by his distant behaviour. When he left again after the meal without so much as a look or sign in her direction, she started to worry whether he had forgotten about their date. She left immediately after him, but when she passed through the heavy double-winged doors into the entrance hall, he had already disappeared down the corridor leading to the dungeons. All she could do was turn towards her own quarters and hope for the best.

She changed into her Muggle outfit, anxiously watching the clock to make sure she was not late, applied just a touch of make-up, threw on her warm coat and hurried down towards the path leading to Hogsmeade.

Outside, it was a glorious winter day. The sun had finally won the battle against the heavy grey clouds, making the snowy valley glisten like a sea of diamonds. The fresh snow on the path down to the village was still pristine and almost untouched. Soon her anxiety started to dissipate. But she needn't have worried. When she reached the Three Broomsticks, Snape was already standing outside.

Charity didn't know what she had expected. In general, wizards were notoriously lacking of any Muggle fashion sense, which was especially true for those from the old pureblood families. They usually ended up looking like scarecrows when they did try to dress as Muggles, probably attracting more attention than if they had just donned their wizard clothes. Snape, on the other hand, would not have looked out of place anywhere on the streets of Muggle London. He was dressed all in black, wearing formal trousers and a fine knitted turtleneck jumper underneath a long woollen coat, which was a flattering cut for his tall, slim build, exuding a sort of understated elegance. His hair was tied back in a ponytail, making his nose look even more prominent. He could not have been described as handsome by any definition of the word, but his look was certainly striking, and when his black eyes met hers, her stomach fluttered with a tickly sensation, similar to what she had sometimes felt as a child when going as high as she could on the playground swing. She wanted nothing more than for him to greet her with a kiss.

"Hi, Severus."

Unfortunately, he did no such thing. He looked her over with his intense gaze, making her feel increasingly self-conscious about her appearance. She was anxiously watching his face for a sign of approval, but his expression was completely unreadable. And when he finally spoke, his words were about the most alarming thing he could have said.

"How is your long-distance Apparition?"

Charity felt her palms go sweaty and her knees turn weak. She had failed her Apparition test three times. When she had finally passed it at the fourth attempt, it had probably been more due to the examiner taking pity on her than the level of skill she displayed. Even after she got her license, she never felt confident. She hated the sensation of being squeezed through a narrow tube, always worrying that she might get stuck and disappear into nothingness. So she had never made use of this form of magic, preferring to walk for short distances while taking the Floo or even Muggle trains and buses for longer travels. Apparition was a skill adult wizards and witches generally took for granted, just like the ability to read and write, so Charity had always felt greatly embarrassed about her handicap, keeping it a secret even from her closest friends. She had developed a host of excuses and pretexts to avoid situations where her impediment might be discovered. One thing she loved about Hogwarts were the Anti-Apparition charms covering the entire grounds, so that she was at no disadvantage compared to anybody else while she stayed at the castle.

"Eh, hm, alright, I suppose," she lied, trying to sound confident. "How far do we have to go?"

She was feverishly trying to think of a way to suggest an alternative form of transport, without having to own up to the fact that she could barely Apparate across the street, and least of all to somewhere across the country. But Snape seemed to see through her as if she were a student who hadn't done her assigned reading.

"Never mind. I happen to be rather good at it. You'll just have to trust me," he said, offering her his left arm like he had done when he had led her to the ball.

Hesitantly, Charity took hold of his arm. She was not looking forward to this at all, but there was no way to refuse without losing face. She nervously squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for the sensation she hated so much. Then she remembered that there, underneath her hand, hidden by several layers of clothing, was the Dark Mark branded into his skin. *'I must be crazy,'* she thought, *'He's a Death Eater, and I'm allowing him to Disapparate me to some unknown place! Crazy or maybe just madly in love.'*

Snape was very good at Apparition indeed, as she had to concede with a little envy. The whole experience was so swift and smooth she hardly realised that they had already reached their destination. When she opened her eyes, she found herself in a cobbled little street of some historic Muggle town. The medieval half-timbered houses with their snow-covered ridges and the Christmas lights suspended across the street were a picturesque sight indeed, but Snape didn't allow her much time to admire the surroundings. He led her down the street at his usual ground-covering pace that made it difficult to keep up with him even now that she was wearing entirely sensible

footgear. When they emerged onto the town's market square, she almost squealed with delight.

"A Christmas market! Oh, Severus, look! There's a Muggle Christmas market there!"

"Yes. It is the reason I brought you here. I thought you might enjoy it."

Charity couldn't wait to join the crowds pressing themselves past rows upon rows of wooden stalls, each sporting their own unique Christmas decorations, huddled at the foot of the majestic old cathedral that towered over the colourful scene. There were all sorts of things on offer, from local crafts and pottery, to fine food and drink. It was the perfect place for some last-minute Christmas shopping. She bought a bottle of orange and cinnamon liqueur for Dumbledore and a jar of "Gardener's Hand Cream" with lavender and goat's milk for Pomona. She would have loved to get Severus a gift, but she absolutely could not think of anything he would like, especially not as he followed her around with a dour expression, obviously not sharing her enthusiasm.

Suddenly, the delicious smell of caramelised sugar and roasted nuts wafted into her nostrils, wetting her appetite for something sweet and drawing her closer. She followed the tempting odour and had soon identified its source – a stall selling all sorts of traditional carnival treats, nestled beneath the massive Christmas tree in the corner of the square. She had a hard time choosing from all the little indulgences on offer but finally settled on one of the gorgeous red toffee apples along with a bag of candied almonds to have later. Snape refused politely when she asked if she could get him something. She chose a spot a little distance away from the hustle and bustle to enjoy her treat. The apple smelled delicious. It was wonderfully sticky, juicy, and crisp when she took the first bite.

"Hm, yummy. You should try some, Severus."

She offered him the apple, but he just stared at her with a truly odd look, as if she were trying to poison him, making her feel a little offended by his disregard for such genuinely good Muggle food.

Once she had finished eating, Charity suggested they leave the market behind and wander about the village's streets for a while. It was rare that she had the opportunity to submerge herself in the Muggle world like this, and she was keen to explore a little, having a look at the shops and observing the people. As a half-blood, she had never actually lived the life of a Muggle, like her mother had before she married her father. She often wondered what it would have been like. When she spotted a large, red object across the street, she could hardly contain her excitement. She moved towards it with almost childish joy and started to examine it.

"Look, Severus! You'd never guess what this is!" she told her glowering companion, keen to show off her knowledge.

But the tall Slytherin just mockingly raised one eye-brow. "It's a post box, quite obviously. Don't tell me you have never seen one before."

Charity blushed, a little embarrassed and put out that she had failed to impress him. To even out the score, she continued.

"Of course I have, they have them everywhere in Muggle villages. But do you actually know what they're used for? It's quite ingenious. You see, Muggles don't use owls like we do, but instead they write an address on their letter and throw it into one of these boxes. They have quite a sophisticated system to make sure the post boxes are emptied on a daily basis, and each letter is delivered to the correct destination. It only takes about a day to send something almost anywhere in the country!"

"Yes, but only if you have affixed a stamp," he remarked dryly in response.

Now she really was gobsmacked. How on earth did he know these things? As she was lost for anything to say, they walked along in silence for a while, their breath fogging up in front of their faces in the cold winter air. She could tell he was amused by her confusion, secretly enjoying her attempts to figure him out. It annoyed her. She didn't enjoy solving riddles. Why did this man have to be such an enigma?

The sun was already starting to go down in these northern exposures, even though it was not yet four o'clock, and in the absence of its warming rays, it felt rather chilly. After taking a turn into another cobbled street, they came past an old pub, calling itself "The Farrier's Arms", advertising the sale of traditional mulled wine on a large blackboard set up on the pavement by the door. Charity stopped to read the sign, tempted by the promise of a warm drink and the opportunity to rest her feet.

"Oh, look, Severus, how about stopping for some mulled wine? I haven't had any in ages."

Snape gave her a long-suffering look but nonetheless proceeded to hold the door open for her in old-fashioned gallantry, inviting her inside. They found an empty table by one of the leaded windows. He went up to the bar to get the drinks while she sat down with a languorous sigh, watching him across the room as he placed his order with the barman as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Where had he learned to move about the Muggle world with such confidence? Soon after, he returned with two steaming mugs and took a seat across from her.

Snape took a sip from his mug of mulled wine. It was far too sweet for his taste and an abominable waste of a perfectly good wine, but for some reason he had decided to humour her. And not just by agreeing to stop for some mulled wine – this entire outing was something he would normally never have contemplated. Normally...

The warming and relaxing effect of the wine was beginning to lull his senses but did not go so far as to stop his mind from analysing the situation with its usual sharpness. His eyes swept the dimly lit interior of the old pub, observing the other customers. Most of the tables were occupied by couples of all ages, from a young boy and girl who were studying a map over their coffees to a group of elderly husband and wife pairs, chatting noisily at the centre table. And the strangest thing of all was how well Charity and he himself fitted in. There was a peculiar sense of normality about the whole scene, a type of normality in which he had never before partaken, but which he had always longed to experience.

Severus Snape has a girl-friend. The thought almost made him smile. For once, he was not the odd one out. For once, he was not the loner, the ugly git nobody wanted anything to do with. It seemed like a miracle, but the attractive young witch sitting across the table was smiling at him, and there was a fair bit of admiration in the glances she threw him. It was like a balm for his soul. He just wished that certain individuals who had always sneered at him could see them now. *She slept with me.* That fact was even more marvellous and filled him with a totally immature sense of pride. He watched her attentively, satisfied that she seemed to be having a good time.

At first, he had wondered whether it would be a mistake to bring her here. He was a complete novice when it came to entertaining a lady. He never did anything for fun. Everything in his life always had a distinct and often dire purpose. There had only been one time really, a long, long time ago, that he had had a taste of what other people did to enjoy themselves. It was the time when Lily had invited him along to a family outing, and they had come to this village.

He recalled every detail of it with crystal clarity. It had probably been the happiest day of his life. He recalled how Lily had bought a toffee apple from her pocket money. He recalled her laughter, so bright and cheerful, bubbling to the surface like the fumes of a well-brewed Amortentia potion, and her eyes, vivacious and sparkling like the emeralds keeping track of Slytherin's house points. She was so beautiful with her hair like spun copper and her perfect creamy skin, as soft as the petals of an English rose. He had been unable to take his eyes off her as she bared her teeth towards the glossy red apple and took a bite out of its juicy white flesh.

"Hm, yummy. Here, Sev, try some."

It had been at that moment that he realised he wanted more than her friendship, that he wanted nothing more than to kiss that mouth merrily chewing on a piece of toffee apple. It was the moment he had fallen in love with Lily Evans.

He had not wanted to compare. Nobody could ever compare to Lily, and certainly not Charity Burbage. Except for her annoying attempts to befriend everybody when she had first joined the faculty, which he had duly ignored, he had hardly taken notice of her until that fateful night of the Yule Ball. While she was pretty enough, though in a rather common way, she possessed none of Lily's striking beauty, none of the doe-like grace with which Lily had moved, and none of Lily's outstanding magical talent, so astonishing for somebody born into a Muggle family. No, Charity was more the sturdy type, always appearing a little clumsy, and had never struck him as particularly bright, witty, or knowledgeable outside her field. From her reaction earlier that afternoon, it was also clear that her Apparition skills were lacking. But then Lily had never been his, had never wanted him, whereas this young woman, for some unfathomable reason, clearly did. And that fact alone was surely worth making some allowances.

Yet, despite all their differences, at the moment when she took a bite from the apple, she had reminded him of Lily so strongly that something had painfully clenched in his chest. There was one trait they did share. It was a certain zest for life and the ability to find beauty in everything and everyone. It was a trait he himself lacked completely. And he knew that, for this reason, he could never find happiness without somebody else shining their joyous light into his life. It was so incredibly seductive that he could not stop himself from selfishly indulging and taking what was offered he needed it too much.

But he also needed to be in control. He pondered the ruby reflections of the wine in his hand. Perhaps the key lay in the exercise of restraint. Perhaps it was not dissimilar to the enjoyment of alcohol, where overindulgence was detrimental, a contemptible sign of weakness, but complete abstinence was not required either. Yes, he decided he would only allow himself occasional, strictly limited doses of this sweet intoxication. The practice of self-denial was essential if he wanted to stay in command of his feelings, something he knew would soon become a matter of life or death for him.

"You're a half-blood!" she blurted out, her face alight with sudden realisation, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He smiled inwardly, a smile that outwardly only managed to tuck slightly on one corner of his mouth. *Perhaps she wasn't so dim after all.*

"Now that took you a long time to figure out. Ten points to Hufflepuff," he mocked.

"Was it your mother or your father?"

"My father."

"Oh!" Her eyes widened, and her hand flew to her mouth. "He must have been a right bastard, and that's why you hated all Muggles, and that's why you became..."

"No," his dark voice interrupted her firmly. "It is true that he was not the most endearing representative of the species, but that was not the reason."

He could tell that she felt the urge to ask what the reason was, but his trademark scowl warned her not to.

"And besides, I don't hate Muggles," he added with a smirk.

He downed the remainder of his mulled wine, pulling his face into a look of disgust.

"Drink up. It's time to go back," he told her.

A few minutes later, they emerged from the pub and walked down a quiet side alley. He glanced around to make sure nobody would see them Disapparate, but the street was completely deserted. He felt her tug on his sleeve and turned to see her smiling up at him with a flirtatious look.

"Kiss me," she whispered sensuously.

He studied her half-parted lips, plump, soft, and inviting like a ripe fruit. Marvelling at the fact that he was allowed to do this, he drew her up against his body, one arm around her waist, the other hand cupped around the back of her head. She fitted into his embrace so snugly, like a nut into its shell, as if she belonged there. As he brought his face close to hers, their hot breath intermingled in a heady perfume with notes of sweet wine and spices. He inhaled it deep into his lungs, feeling its intoxicating effect on his brain. Then he moved closer still until their mouths met in a hungry kiss. The sensation of her warm, moist lips hit him like a shock wave, such that he could hardly repress a deep groan. His arm pulled her harder against his abdomen. She felt so incredibly soft and feminine, so alive. He clenched his hand in her hair, grabbing a fistful of her brown curls, feeling how silky and springy they were. She let out a soft moan in response, which fanned the flames of his passion further. His mind and body were engulfed by a desire so strong, he wanted nothing more than to draw her into a dark corner between two houses, back her against a wall and make love to her. From the entranced look in her eyes he suspected that she would have no objections, and the relevant part of his anatomy was already readying itself at the thought.

But at the same time, a small voice at the back of his mind was protesting, berating him that he would so easily throw his earlier resolution overboard. He knew he had to stop, even just to prove to himself that he still could. It was hard, incredibly hard. This feeling was like a wild horse that just wanted to run, rearing and fighting against his attempts to rein himself in. It took all his concentrated will power to pull back, break their kiss and loosen his grip on her. With a deep breath, he took a step back and straightened himself. Charity moved as if to follow him, but he held up a hand to stop her. The look of disappointment on her face gave him a certain degree of satisfaction. At least he was not the only one suffering.

"It's time to go back," he said in the most matter-of-fact tone he could manage.

She opened her mouth as if about to protest. He really didn't want to argue. It was difficult enough just to resist the spell she seemed to have him under; he didn't want to have to come up with reasons as well. Before she could say anything, he offhandedly grabbed her arm and Apparated to the edge of the Forbidden Forest with her. It was the closest they could get to the castle by Apparition. He didn't want her to walk all the way back from Hogsmeade in the dark, as she had apparently done on her way there, another sign of her obvious reluctance or inability to Apparate. They would have to walk up to the gates separately so that they wouldn't be seen together. He would stay behind her at a distance to ensure she got there safely.

Charity let out an outraged yelp, seemingly struggling to find her bearings after the unexpected manoeuvre. Coming from the warmly lit street to the pitch black night that had already fallen over the Scottish hillside, it took his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the lack of light before he could make out the threatening shade of the line of trees. This was no place to go dawdling. He took her by the shoulders and turned her in the right direction.

"There is the castle. Go on, you go up first," he ordered, his voice lowered so as not to attract the attention of any creatures dwelling beyond the darkness.

He sensed as much as saw the look of hurt and confusion on her face. Her eyes were glittering suspiciously in what little light the starry sky could offer. It seemed that she was completely unable to conceal her emotions. Perhaps he had been too harsh; he really did not want to aggrieve her. To smooth over his rough behaviour, he pulled her back and pressed her against himself in a brief hug, placing a chaste kiss on her hair.

"Thank you for the pleasant afternoon," he said softly, hoping that this would do as a conciliatory gesture. "If you'd be so inclined, I would like to spend some time with you again in the not-too-distant future."

Her face seemed to light up with a smile.

"I would like that, too, Severus," she replied, wiping her hand across her eyes. "Against all predictions, I did enjoy your company."

She briefly squeezed his hand before she turned and walked away. Her little compliment filled him with a warm glow. As he watched her small figure trudge up through the deep snow towards the welcoming lights of Hogwarts Castle, his heart was thrumming with a dizzying cocktail of emotions. There was happiness in there, and excitement, a new sense of self-worth, and vindication. But most of all, there was fear.