

Ties That Bind Us

by Agnus Castus

Can Severus accept Tess for all that she is? A sequel to *The Unconditional Vow*.

In Darkness and in Light

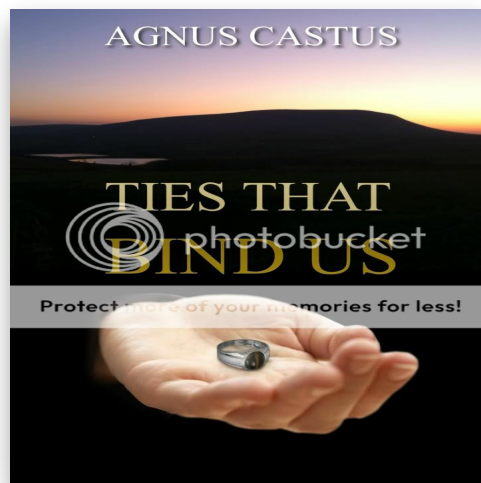
Chapter 1 of 24

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Author's Note:

Ties That Bind Us is a sequel to *The Unconditional Vow* and might never have seen the light of day if it weren't for the unwavering support of three amazing friends. Thank you to spikesbitch for stepping once more unto the breach, and to star_girl and nagandsev for discovering their inner Gryffindors! Thanks also to hexgirl for crucial feedback on the early chapters, and to WhiteGray for the fabulous book cover and banner.

Readers are advised that this sequel has shifting timelines, and characterisation takes the previous story into account.



Streaks of sombre sunlight broke through heavy, brooding rainclouds as Tess climbed a steep, cobbled street in the seaside village of Mevagissey. The wind was brisk, the air was salty, and seagulls cried overhead, circling choppy waters which boomed like thunder as they crashed into the shore.

At the top of the hill, around the corner of the street and tucked out of sight, she found a small white-washed terrace of three houses nestled behind a row of silver birch trees. A robin warbled its flute-like song as the branches rustled and swayed in the breeze. The terrace was neatly kept and well-loved.

After the events of the last few months, Tess expected to feel nervous, but she had found Bloom's End cottage in a quiet, idyllic corner of Cornwall; she unbolted the gate of the end-terrace house and knocked on the door without a second thought.

A tabby cat curled around her legs in welcome, and after a short delay, an older lady in her early sixties opened the door. She had a kind, round face and wore a floral apron, covered in flour. Tess smiled when the aroma of baking bread drifted out of the cottage.

"Isobel Snape?" Tess enquired.

The white-haired lady wiped her hands on her apron and stepped forward to get a better look at her house-caller.

"Yes, dear," she replied, squinting in the daylight. "And who might you be?"

"Contessa Marchbanks. But please, call me 'Tess'." She held out her hand in greeting.

Isobel wiped her right hand a second time and shook Tess's. "What can I do for you, Tess?"

"I'm here to see Tobias Snape. I have news of his son, Severus."

Isobel took a step backwards and let out a surprised gasp. After she'd taken a moment to recover her composure, the older lady stepped further inside and held the door open. "You'd better come indoors."

Chapter One

In Darkness and in Light

Severus had spent a great deal of time contemplating how it would feel to be brought back to life, and he remained unsure that a return to full corporeal form was even possible. Could the Dark magic previously used by Voldemort be successfully adapted, so that Light might be harnessed in the same way as Dark? How much of his former life might he remember? Would his physical attributes stay the same? And if so, would he experience pain or discomfort?

Answers to all of these questions resided in a cauldron of potion, bubbling away on the ninth floor of the Ministry of Magic, and the truth was that no-one knew for certain. Even the Unspeakable involved in his case could give no assurances. The magic was untried, with an infinite number of permutations, despite the Department of Mysteries having contributed their considerable weight of knowledge on the subject. It was one gigantic experiment, and one which held Severus's soul in the balance.

The outcome of Severus's choices would soon be revealed. There were countless possibilities and no certainties, and he had doubts, even at this late stage. He had chosen not to communicate his misgivings to Tess, as he did not wish to confuse or concern her, but his refusal to allow his Muggle father to be involved in the resurrection remained a source of worry. Would the magic be affected by this particular change to the Revivification Potion?

But it was too late for such reservations now. The time had come. Tess had said her anxious goodbyes on the riverbank and disappeared from sight, beyond the reach of the willow-tree branches which had been their leafy-green enclosure for the last three months. At least, Tess told him it had been three months; to Severus, the passage of time had only amounted to a week. They had discovered that periods of time could be distorted at will whilst Severus's soul resided in the Tiger's Eye ring, and he was grateful for the reprieve. He'd had plenty of time to himself and his thoughts, as well as blissful moments with Tess whenever she could snatch a few hours away from Hogwarts.

The riverbank had been light and breezy, in perpetual late spring, and the nights had been warm and dry with moonless skies. No rain had fallen, and no frosts had carpeted the floor. His sanctuary had been invented by his subconscious, and he knew the construct was fantasy, unrealistic and unsustainable.

Yet one element of this castle-in-the-air had been real: Tess's frequent visits to the riverbank had connected Severus to the world of the living, and her presence had nourished and comforted him. It could be said that these comforts were ephemeral in nature; other than their necessary discussions about the anti-Horcrux, there had been precious few words spoken.

During Severus's last year of life, they had spent the year denying and ignoring their attraction to each other, or pretending for both their sakes that romantic feelings did not exist. The depth of their feelings had eventually been revealed on the night before Severus died. Since then, there were certain things they'd wished to make up for during the opportunities afforded by the Tiger's Eye ring. He wondered if it would be the same when they were reunited in physical form.

Preparing to depart his emerald oasis, Severus attempted to banish his fears and focus his mind on his imminent return, but he found controlling his emotions and disciplining his mind much more difficult in this dreamlike place.

The edges of the luminous leaves of the willow began to blur and swirl into a pale green mist. The intensity of light increased and returned to the bright, white fog which had greeted him upon arrival. Severus experienced a sense of weightlessness, as if he were floating in a warm pool of water, and just as he was beginning to enjoy the sensation, he began to fall, slowly at first, like a feather drifting in the breeze, and then faster into an ever-darkening mist.

For a moment the darkness panicked him. He was aware of the irony; in life he had always drawn comfort from the dark, but now the gloom cloyed its clammy fingers against his skin. He began to wonder if Tess would feel the same way when they were brought back together, and his fears tracked his descent like a whirlwind of Dementors, obscuring his vision and chilling his skin. Would she still love him when the fantasy was over and he had returned to a living, breathing body? Could she still accept him unconditionally for all that he was?

Suddenly, inexplicably, his fall slowed as if he had been caught in a silken web, mere inches above the cold stone floor. Severus sensed himself hovering in mid-air with the black mist swirling around him, and he knew he was almost there. Some of his dread dissolved when he perceived the amber torchlight from wall sconces flickering in the periphery of his sight, marking out the extent of the large cave-like room in which his body was materialising.

As the vapours continued to disperse, he could make out a shape in the form of a robed witch. Her long, wavy brunette tresses tumbled over her shoulders, and tears threatened to spill over her dark eyelashes. She was absent-mindedly playing with a ring on her finger and biting her lip fretfully. The sight of her provided focus to Severus's world; his heartbeat became strong and steady, his feet landed on the floor, and his limbs flexed with newfound strength.

He barely had time to draw his first breath when Tess was upon him, arms around his shoulders, hugging him tight and smothering him in a desperate kiss.

The cadence of her embrace soon transformed into possession and then finally elation. Her tension subsided with the caress of his fingertips in her hair, and the warmth of his lips upon hers. As she relaxed in his arms, his qualms evaporated with a rush of relief. He had returned living and whole, and Tess had not balked at his appearance. It seemed he had worried unnecessarily.

Severus sensed rather than heard a movement a few feet away. When he opened his eyes briefly, he saw a wizard with a mop of curly brown hair closing the door behind him, discreetly leaving the reunited couple to their embrace.

It soon became apparent that Tess had been prepared for the experiment's success.

With his black cloak shrouding him from prying eyes, Severus hid beneath his hood as Tess led him up the fine-looking staircase of the Leaky Cauldron, towards a large suite at the end of the long corridor. During the time taken to leave the Ministry's underground enclave, hardly any words had been spoken; expediency was the order of the hour, to secure the privacy they both craved. Tess extracted a large, ornate brass key from inside her robes, unlocked door number twenty-one, and pulled her companion by the hand into the hotel room.

The space was similar to others in the establishment: creaking and time-aged, with evidence of centuries of wear and tear on the ornate fixtures and fittings. An ancient four-poster bed with black and gold curtains dominated one side of the L-shaped room. Adjacent to the large fireplace were a Chesterfield sofa and chair, and a polished oak table stacked high with parchments and leather-bound books. This room appeared to have housed Tess during the latter stages of her research, once she had been relieved from her incumbent duties at Hogwarts when the summer holidays commenced.

Whilst Severus had been taking in his surroundings, Tess had begun to de-robe him. His cloak was already on the floor, and her fingers were busying themselves unfastening his many-buttoned frock-coat. For a moment he cast his attention to his clothes; he had returned to his body wearing the attire he had worn at the Shrieking Shack.

Could that mean...?

His fingers rose instinctively towards his neck, groping for the injury responsible for his death. Severus felt the extent of the wound: two indentations in the supple skin of his neck. He flinched at the sensation, not from pain, but from the memory of a pair of fangs piercing his jugular.

Tess's fingers paused in their task, and her blue-grey eyes traced his neckline, her fingers meeting his own, intertwining, and caressing the slightly concave skin of the healed puncture. Severus gently removed her hand and walked to the mantelpiece mirror. He studied his reflection: a five o'clock shadow darkened his jaw, and his oily black hair fell in unkempt curtains around his face, contrasting his pale skin and dark eyes. He felt a shocked wave of revulsion. This was the man whom Tess smothered with kisses? This serious and sinister hooked-nosed man? The notion baffled and disturbed him. He forced his concentration upon the neck wound. Two alabaster scars contrasted his pallid complexion, revealing that his skin was not, in fact, devoid of all colour, but merely paler than most. The white, jagged circles were about the size of silver Sickie coins and they shone slightly in the candlelight, forever etched on his skin as a reminder of his mortality, sacrifice and bravery.

Tess stood behind him, watching him in the mirror, tracking his expressions, assessing his scar.

"I can disguise that for you, if you like," she offered.

Severus stared at his reflection for a long moment.

"No," he said softly.

Tess's smile was sad as she moved to stand in front of him, leaning forward onto her tiptoes and pressing her lips against his neck. As she did so, Severus noticed the frown lines of his mirror image slacken to reveal a man previously unseen by the world at large, a man whom Tess had discovered beneath a multitude of carefully-constructed layers, hidden behind his snarling, sarcastic and cruel façade. A man whom even Severus had doubted he could be: a man capable of loving again.

As pleasant as Tess's lips were against his neck, he lifted her head away from his scar, to look into the eyes he had longed to see, feel the warmth of the arms which had held him during his dying breath, and experience the strength of her astonishing love for him.

Severus had not known such love existed. Nor had he dreamed such love to be possible. He fought hard not to shrink away from this brilliant, dazzling emotion, which cast its light on hidden, dark crevices, upon feelings he had denied existed, actions he had despised, and guilt which had burdened him for so long. Tess loved all of those dark places. Acceptance such as this was, up until recently, something he had never dared to hope for. Even now, it was hard to believe that someone could love him for everything he was, in darkness and in light.

Tess gazed into eyes which glittered like black diamonds, and she marvelled at the depth of emotion contained within. She had yearned ceaselessly for his return. It had been an eternity of agonising hope and exquisite despair, wading through tortuous emotions and difficult decisions.

But he was here now, whole and alive, at last.

Kneeling naked together on the heavy blanket, an arm branded with the Dark Mark encircled her shoulders, and the cool night air blew in through the open window, sending a feathery caress over their exposed bodies. Her fingers drifted over his torso, down his right arm, and over his fingers, nudging his Tiger's Eye ring with her own. The vessel which had once housed Severus's soul resided on his little finger once more; it was the only remnant of the magic left over from the resurrection. The cauldron and its potion had vanished, leaving the ring behind, and Severus's corporeal form had sprung from it like a genie from a bottle. The connection between the matching pair of Tiger's Eye rings was gone for good: there was no tingle when the silver bands touched, and no connection between their respective minds. Tess and Severus would now have to learn to communicate the old-fashioned way, with words, gestures and actions.

She noticed a long silvery scar scored across his right shoulder. Her fingertips traced its outline gently, and she wondered who had inflicted this wound upon his body, and what had warranted the punishment, realising how much there was still to know about the man she loved.

Tess felt grateful that they now had the rest of their lives to hear each other's stories, and she knew she must eventually find courage to reveal the chronicles of her own past, some of which had already come back to haunt her since Severus's soul had become trapped in the anti-Horcrux. Tess had come to question all that she knew of herself, but in the end she had prevailed. She had been patient. She had been tested, and she had been true.

Severus leaned in, claiming her lips with his own, and Tess slid into the silky warmth of his embrace. Lips and tongues, hearts and souls fused into one long, powerful moment of connection. When they eventually parted, she studied his waxen complexion, his striking nose, his thick, dark eyelashes, and one eyebrow rising into a familiar expression, creasing his temple and widening his eyes. The warmth in her chest threatened to explode and shower the room with sparks of light, such were the feelings this man could rouse in her. That he was here with her, naked in her embrace, contented and trusting, gentle and loving, was life's greatest reward.

His body pressed into hers, radiating heat, enticing her to lie back upon the bed. Reaching for her wand on the bedside table, Severus snuffed out the lights. Tess gazed up at her lover, his face softly lit by the amber glow of the city's streetlamps which shone like fairy-lights outside the window. He was sitting on his knees, staring at her and smiling slightly, still the same man she had known and yet somehow different. His face seemed calm but not sphinx-like. His eyes seemed contented and yet hungry. He was a living, breathing paradox, and Tess was lured by his mystery like a honeybee drawn to nectar.

As he leaned forward, her hands slipped into his hair, pulling his head towards her. Her lips brushed against the stubble surrounding his lips, and her tongue delved to reconnoitre his own. Months of tension and weeks of waiting were released in a sensual kiss which brought together their bodies and minds, melding as one, like the scarlet and gold plumage of a phoenix soaring in the sky.

His warm skin felt luxuriant as his pleasing mass pressed her body into the mattress, and his long hair fell forward, tickling her face, whilst his lips devoured her mouth with increasing ferocity. Time began to accelerate, distort and fold, as flames of passion conquered and consumed, igniting suppressed instincts and desires.

Soon, Severus was inside her, filling her to completion, uniting their bodies.

Tess sensed the moment a few seconds before it arrived, one glorious, euphoric moment which transcended their souls to a new level of existence. The tribulations of the recent past dropped away as her spirit soared and they reached their zenith together. She knew this moment would happen only once, and that their relationship would feel different from now on.

And finally, tired and spent underneath the limp weight of Severus's body, Tess allowed herself to say the words she had wanted to say since the first kiss in the Headmaster's office so many months ago.

"I love you."

When she felt his smile against her cheek, it felt like home.

Unspeakable Reunion

Chapter 2 of 24

Prior to Severus's revivification, an Unspeakable is recruited.



Chapter Two

Unspeakable Reunion

One week after the Battle of Hogwarts, the Headmistress's office looked much the same as it had before Severus's death; evidently Minerva McGonagall had not yet found time to alter the room to her own taste. Seven days ago, Tess had kissed Severus for the first time in this very same office and then watched him leave to find Harry Potter. A couple of hours afterwards, she had found the Headmaster's body bathed in blood on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, his lifeless eyes fixed into the distance, his Tiger's Eye ring still on his little finger.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

The new Headmistress of Hogwarts was busy opening another batch of owl post, and Tess was sitting at the side of her desk, drinking the tea which Minerva had insisted upon providing. The Acting Minister for Magic had been due to arrive half an hour previously; Kingsley Shacklebolt was in demand now that the wizarding world had started to wake up from its official period of mourning, so it was to be expected that he was running late.

Dumbledore was dozing in his portrait behind the desk, undoubtedly poised for instant alertness once the Minister arrived, and there remained no commissioned portrait of the more recently-departed Headmaster. Given the enormity of the task of repairing the shattered castle, missing paintings were low on the Ministry's agenda.

Today, instead of feeling angry about it, Tess felt relieved not to see a portrait of the man she loved, when only last night she had been alongside him on the riverbank discussing his decision to be brought back to life. Perhaps it was fortuitous that no portrait had been procured; Sybill Trelawney might consider it a bad omen.

The door to the office flung open, and Argus Filch escorted Kingsley Shacklebolt inside. The Acting Minister for Magic was resplendent in indigo robes, and he smiled when he saw the room's inhabitants, both of whom were familiar members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Kingsley strode towards Tess, and she stood up to shake his hand.

"Congratulations on your promotion, Professor Marchbanks."

Tess grinned, reflecting his widening smile.

He planted a friendly kiss on her cheek. "Hogwarts is lucky to have you," he said, touching her arm gently.

"Thanks, Kingsley."

Behind them, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat in a business-like manner, and Kingsley turned to greet her. Tess forgave the Headmistress's impatience; the anti-Horcrux was not her main concern whilst there remained a school to be rebuilt and OWL and NEWT examinations to be organised.

After the shaking of hands, and the addressing of various portraits, Kingsley accepted a cup of tea from the tartan-clad teapot. "And now, to business," he said as he made himself comfortable in an armchair adjacent to the desk. "Tess, I'm happy to say that we've secured the services of the Department of Mysteries, who shall look into possible ways of restoring Severus's soul to physical form. I've assigned an Unspeakable to the case who has five years' experience on and off in the Death Chamber, and a particular interest in the complexities of Dark and Light magic."

"Thank you, Minister."

"You're most welcome." Kingsley paused to take a sip of his tea, and Minerva offered him a plate of shortbread. After Kingsley accepted two biscuits, the Headmistress passed the selection to Tess, who politely declined.

Minerva leaned forward. "Tess, I hope this now means you'll be able to focus your energies on teaching your OWL and NEWT Potions students, to prepare them for their examinations?"

"I'll certainly do my best," Tess replied, swallowing the ball of guilt lodged in her throat and reminding herself of the reason she had sought help from the Ministry in the first place.

Following the official sacking of the Carrows, Horace Slughorn and Sybill Trelawney had agreed to temporarily teach Defence Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies respectively. Since Slughorn intended to take his second retirement at his earliest opportunity, Tess had been offered the permanent position of Potions mistress. She wished she didn't feel so obliged to help at Hogwarts, when in reality she'd prefer to devote her time to Severus's resurrection.

"Can you disclose the identity of the Unspeakable you have assigned to the case, Kingsley?" asked Dumbledore's portrait.

"Yes, I can, but I must insist upon a Tongue-Tying Curse for those who know his name." Kingsley turned to the two witches in the room. "Do you give your consent?"

Tess and Minerva nodded their acceptance, and Kingsley performed the spell without delay.

"You shall only be able to reveal his name to those who are already aware of his identity," Kingsley explained. He then turned to answer Dumbledore's question. "You may

not know him, Albus, as he isn't a Hogwarts' alumni. His family sent him to the Durmstrang Institute. He is a fellow by the name of Clement Turnstone."

Tess gripped the armrests of her chair, starting to feel lightheaded and queasy.

"Clym?" she asked.

"Why, yes!" Kingsley replied. "You know him?"

Tess nodded, and the ball in her throat doubled in size.

"Marvellous! You can get to work this afternoon; he's expecting you in his office on the ninth floor of the Ministry at three o'clock. Look for the candelabrum which has thirteen candles and take the door to its left." Kingsley frowned slightly. "Is that convenient for you, Tess?"

Tess's conflicting emotions battled their way to the surface. "Yes, Minister. It's just..."

"Excellent," Minerva said brightly. "Tess, Madam Pomfrey is expecting you in the Hospital Wing at nine o'clock this evening. I'm sure you'll have plenty to discuss with Severus, but do try and get some sleep tonight, won't you? We have a full agenda tomorrow."

Tess nodded half-heartedly, unable to voice her fears. She shuffled glumly out of the office as Kingsley and Minerva pulled together their chairs and convened their meeting.

Tess stood in the circular Entrance Chamber of the Department of Mysteries, hesitating before she knocked on the aforesaid door. In truth, she had been in two minds about attending the appointment at all.

One part of her wanted to believe she could manage without Clym's help; perhaps Severus's resurrection would take a bit longer, but the whole business would be much less complicated. For her, at least.

Another part of her knew the Department of Mysteries would be Severus's best chance. Whatever her discomfort, Tess realised she had to do this *fohim*.

Her introspective contemplation lasted long enough to activate the chamber's defences, and the room began to spin like a dizzying carousel. Blue candlelight blurred into horizontal strobes, and Tess closed her eyes to steady herself against the vertiginous sight. She had been in this chamber once before and was prepared for its disorientating tactics. But this time she knew which door led to Clym.

When the rotating walls came to a halt, Tess opened her eyes and located the portal. She steeled herself to knock on its cool, black surface. The handleless door swung open immediately. The Unspeakable showed no hesitation. No reluctance.

Even in the flickering blue light of the chamber, Clym's eyes sparkled. Irises the colour of green olives transported Tess back in time, ten years or more. She had witnessed the sparkle of those eyes in the murky light of a lunar eclipse, in the dense fog of an autumn day, and in the candlelight of his Ministry office. At least now his office had moved. Once upon a time, she had been familiar with his place of work on the third floor, during her first job in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad.

"Tess, it's so good to see you." He smiled: a warm, friendly greeting, of the sort offered to a long-lost friend.

His brown, curly hair had a light smattering of grey, and the stubble on his chin was new; Tess's eyes traced its extent around his face and neck: a three-day old growth designed to look rugged. Nevertheless, she suspected it required arduous maintenance, much like the man himself.

Clym laughed, amiable and throaty, like always. He rubbed a stubbly cheek with the length of his fingers. "This is my new look," he said, a trace of hesitancy in his voice. "What do you think?"

"It suits you," Tess said, clearing her throat.

The words were out before she'd even realised their extent; already she'd bestowed a compliment upon him. Her heart thudded sickeningly against her breastbone.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Clym said as he ushered her into the corridor which led to the offices of the Unspeakables.

She knew he was fibbing. The week which followed the Battle of Hogwarts had been tiring and fraught, and strong emotions took her by surprise several times a day. Tess's life hadn't been her own; she had been assisting in the initial clearing up of the castle and attending funerals of friends lost in battle. The only calmness had been on Severus's riverbank, but this too had contributed to the dark circles underneath her eyes.

Despite knowing all this, she blushed.

Clym opened the door to his office. It was a bright room with a large enchanted window. Apparently, Magical Maintenance had chosen sunshine and showers as the weather of the day; a grey raincloud was disappearing and making way for white cumulus clouds and splashes of blue sky.

"The Minister for Magic has explained the brief," Clym said reassuringly as he leaned against his solid walnut desk and clasped his fingers together. "Do you have the item with you?"

"Yes," said Tess, her fingers reaching automatically for the Tiger's Eye ring hanging from the chain around her neck. As her fingers rubbed the edges of the silver band and gemstone, she found herself besieged by insecurity. Severus had worn the ring on the night of his death, using it to communicate with her during his dying moments. In that singular moment of self-forgiveness and love, his soul had healed, creating the anti-Horcrux which now held his essence.

Could she find it in herself to hand over her hopes and dreams to this man?

She watched white clouds racing across the artificial sky, spurred on by the invisible wind, and wondered what nature's plan would yield.

"May I see it?"

Clym's voice shattered her thoughts.

She knew she had to do it for him. For Severus.

Tess unhooked her necklace, and the anti-Horcrux slid from the chain into the cradle of her fingers.

Clym held out an upturned hand.

With her heartbeat thumping in her throat, Tess placed Severus's soul in the palm of her ex-lover's hand.

Clym accepted the Tiger's Eye ring, noticing Tess's tired and broken appearance, and he felt his heart breaking; the Tess he'd remembered was gone and had been replaced by a woman with hollows for eyes. She seemed like a little lamb lost, and he wondered what had happened to the energetic and vibrant woman he had once known.

Certain that she wouldn't want him to be overbearing, Clym hid his reaction. The passing years had taught him to conceal his feelings, and so he protected her from his concern, shock, and the ache in his chest.

Tess's distrust seemed to fill the room like a miasma, and Clym fought against the suffocating influence of her misgivings, understanding that she had good reason for not trusting him. After a decade of enforced separation, he also recognised what it must have cost her to arrive at his door and ask for his help.

Trying to ignore Tess's visible trepidation, Clym studied the ring which contained the soul of a man: a man whom Clym deemed to be a monster and whom Tess seemed to love. He reflected that it was just like her to see the light in a soul so dark.

The feel of the anti-Horcrux against Clym's skin seemed to burn a hole somewhere deep inside his stomach. He didn't recognise the feeling at first; he only knew he felt nauseous and a little lightheaded.

Neither of them spoke for several long seconds. Eventually, Clym placed the item on the bronze scales resting upon his bookcase. They didn't move. The magic was indeed Light, as Dumbledore had expected.

"What are you going to do with the ring?" she asked nervously.

Clym's heart felt as though it were being squeezed by an iron fist. He turned his back on Tess as he took the anti-Horcrux to his desk. He couldn't let her see his emotions. Not yet, at least.

"There are a series of tests I shall need to perform to investigate the magic surrounding the ring and build a theory of its inception."

He expected he *hoped* the tests would take some time, but he didn't voice this prospect to Tess. Not at first.

"We have a theory already," she answered abruptly. "Professor Dumbledore and I think we know how the anti-Horcrux was formed."

Clym turned to face her. "Forgive me, Tess, but your theories are based on conjecture. We can't risk revivification until we have a thorough grasp of the magic involved. If we were to miss something subtle, the soul contained within might be lost... or worse still, trapped in limbo. This isn't just an opportunity to study hitherto unknown magic; it's also the best chance we have to get it right."

This was the truth. And she knew it.

"OK," she agreed reluctantly.

"Don't worry; you're in safe hands, Tess."

Her eyes narrowed, and she cast them down upon the floor.

Clym realised then how hard this was for her. At that point, he had no way of knowing how hard it would be *for him*.

After their first meeting, Tess refused to visit Clym again at the Department of Mysteries, preferring somewhere more public.

They met for lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. The place was crowded. She couldn't have picked a more incongruous setting; how they would be able to discuss the private business of Snape's resurrection in a room containing so many prying eyes and potential eavesdroppers lay beyond Clym's comprehension.

Tom, the landlord, cheerily placed two bowls of spiced pumpkin soup and a plate of bread in front of them, whilst Tess sipped her water.

"Are you sure you don't want mead, or a Butterbeer, or something?" Clym asked.

"No, thanks."

He picked up his spoon and stirred the thick soup slowly. "It's going to be difficult to talk here. Why don't you come back to my office when we've eaten?"

Tess retrieved her wand, and Clym recognised it immediately: elm and dragon-heartstring, the only one she'd ever owned, purchased from Ollivander's when she was eleven-years-old.

With a swift flick, Tess muttered, "*Muffliato!*"

"What was that?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's a spell I learned from Severus," she replied, replacing her wand beneath her cloak. "We have all the privacy we need."

"Marvellous." Belatedly, Clym realised the word had probably sounded a touch sarcastic.

Despite the new-found confidentiality afforded by the charm, it took a long time for conversation to resume. They ate in silence, breaking bread and dipping it in the pumpkin potage, like long-time acquaintances with no need for words. Their appearance couldn't have been further from reality.

"So, what are your initial findings, Clym?" She met his eyes with a steely-grey stare, guarded and wary.

"The answers gleaned so far have been positive," he replied, wiping his bowl with a slice of bread to finish his meal.

She waited until Clym finished eating, watching him intently. "You've had the ring for a whole day," she stated.

He fished the anti-Horcrux out of his pocket and handed it over, watching her as she threaded the ring into her necklace and tucked it out of sight. "And?" she demanded.

"I can tell you that the magic is indeed Light, and the ring contains a whole soul."

"Anything I don't already know?"

Clym bit the inside of his cheek. "Not as yet, no."

Tess rolled her eyes before looking away.

"Tess, this will take time. You'll need to be patient. I can't provide all the answers straight away; magic as powerful as this will not yield its secrets in a hurry. We must be certain before we proceed."

She sighed, worn-out. "I know. Fortitude requires too much of me at the moment."

"How are things at Hogwarts?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, summoning resilience. "Crazy."

Her eyes focused on the bar, watching two hags attempting to procure Butterbeers.

Clym noticed that Tess's profile remained beautiful, even with the fine stress-lines on her face. Her wavy dark brown hair was longer than he remembered. So many years had elapsed since he'd said goodbye to her. She had aged. They both had. She turned to face him and caught his wistful gaze.

Clym was immediately and unequivocally undone. "It's been a long time, Tess. Too long."

A flash of anger appeared on her features: an old, suppressed resentment. "I can't believe you're saying that to me!"

He flinched, knowing he'd lost command of himself; Tess had unwittingly begun to unravel his defences, and he hadn't been able to prevent the breach. He wondered if they were destined to repeat this pattern forever. Clym considered what he was supposed to say in reply, but there was no coherent response. For the first time, he seriously questioned his ability to work alongside her without repeating the mistakes of their past.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Before she could pounce on the apology, Tom reappeared and cleared away their empty plates.

Clym took a sip of nettle wine, hoping she'd leave the topic alone. Tess, however, perceived his chastened and shamefaced demeanour, after uttering the apology she had always wanted to hear.

He was sorry.

After all the years she'd spent wondering, waiting, and trying to forget him, he chose now to show his remorse. Part of Tess stifled the urge to laugh. What emerged instead was a low rumble in her throat, barely discernible above the background noise of the Leaky Cauldron.

"Have you any idea how many years I longed to hear you say that, Clym?" she asked, scarcely in control of the words escaping her lips.

Clym, for his part, had the decency to appear embarrassed. Tess found this deeply satisfying. She had stopped yearning for his apology a long time ago, but now he exhibited repentance when none was sought.

Vaguely aware his request for forgiveness had meant more to her than she would have anticipated, Tess struggled briefly with herself. She knew it would be easier... safer... to deny the apology's importance, to brush it off as irrelevant. Her picture of herself would remain unblemished. But she also knew the cost of such a denial, and she had paid that price too often in the past.

Tess studied his face closely, trying to understand what had brought him to this juncture.

"My behaviour was reprehensible," Clym said quietly. "I know that now."

An old, broken part of Tess began healing in response to his words, and she took a moment to reconcile what she had just heard. However, his words ultimately led to more questions.

"Why did you make it so hard for me?" Tess asked. "Why did you leave in that way?"

Clym shook his head. "It seemed for the best."

"The best for whom?"

"For you, Tess. You needed a chance to move on, get away from me, and start afresh. You would never have done that if I'd hung around. We both know that."

Tess felt a flare of indignation. "You took your decision without talking to me first. Have you any idea how painful it was to discover you'd transferred to the Department of Mysteries without so much as a by-your-leave?"

"You have to understand that my only other alternative was to Obliviate you. It seemed the lesser of two evils. But by then, I'd taught you the basics of Occlumency, and I knew you'd fight me. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Sometimes, I think Obliviation would have served you better..."

"How dare you suppose such a thing?" Tess snarled, sensing the release of previously suppressed anger. "You dodge responsibility, even now?"

"No. I don't. And I didn't, not even then. I just wanted to ease your burden and make right all the times I wronged you."

"A convenient excuse." Tess became aware of her heartbeat thumping forcefully in her chest. She cast her bitter gaze upon the pub's stone floor.

Clym sighed. "I don't expect you to believe me."

This made her look up. His face seemed wearily sincere and full of shame. At least he wasn't deluding himself anymore, Tess reflected. After all that had happened between them, she couldn't be expected to believe him. And she knew this would pose a problem.

"Where does this leave us, Clym?" she asked softly.

His olive-green eyes searched hers for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"I'm asking you to help me resurrect Severus, the man I love, the man I intend to spend the rest of my life with." Sitting back in her seat, Tess opened her palms and rested them on the table. "How am I supposed to trust you?"

Clym didn't miss a beat. "You can trust me. I owe you that much."

Tess absorbed his genuine-sounding words and his earnest expression. His pledge seemed authentic, but she also felt the need to be as clear as possible.

"Will you do everything in your power to bring him back to life?"

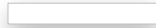
Clym's gaze lingered on Tess, and she sensed the turning of cogs, thinly veiled but present below the surface. Perhaps he squirmed at being pinned down, or perhaps he was planning his exit strategy. Tess could not be sure. However, when he answered, his voice was warm and assured.

"I will."

For Richer, For Poorer

Chapter 3 of 24

Severus returns to Spinner's End.



Chapter Three

For Richer, For Poorer

Spinner's End appeared more dilapidated than ever when Tess and Severus Apparated onto the dirty, cobbled back alley and then wandered onto the street.

Parched weeds withered by the roadside gutter, blasted by the summer sun's rays. With no trees to provide shady respite to passersby, the sunlight reflected mercilessly from the grey terrace walls, heating the stone surfaces until they shimmered like a desert mirage.

In the time he had known Tess, Severus's sense of shame regarding his childhood home in Cokeworth had multiplied, until he almost couldn't bear to return her to this place of unhappy memories, fearing she might somehow become tainted by its very proximity.

He wasn't embarrassed merely by his inauspicious beginnings in this grimy, rundown corner of northern England, a place he'd never truly escaped, despite all of his ambition. Of greater consequence were his father's actions toward his mother: a disgrace which hung like deadweight around Severus's neck. His own dubious deeds upon discovering the years of abuse suffered by his mother were also heavy on his conscience. As a seventeen-year-old wizard, Severus had slipped his father a Memory Potion and cast the Imperius Curse to force him to handover the family home to his wife and son. If he'd known that his mother's heart would break so irrevocably, Severus might have made a different choice. There were so many things he would do differently, if he had the chance to make those choices again. And therein lay his shame.

As they walked up the street with the sun beating down, Severus feared that Tess's picture of him might alter, and he might be viewed as a bad prospect for a single witch, encumbered by a history of neglect and abuse. He could not escape his childhood, and he could not change his past; he only hoped that Tess would continue to accept him unconditionally, as she had once vowed to do.

A gritty layer of dust crunched underfoot as they made their way towards his house. Weeks must have passed since the rain had washed the pavements clean. Tess seemed happy, if a little distracted, and wore a strappy summer dress adorned with pinkish-purple patterns of flowers. From the number of petals on each bloom, Severus determined they were hellebores, and they reminded him of the Draught of Peace. He might have benefitted from taking a few drops of that particular potion before leaving the Leaky Cauldron this morning.

Three days had passed since his resurrection, and he had undergone countless tests at the Ministry of Magic, most of which were at his own behest. He wanted to be sure the revivification of his soul had been free of glitches, so he had undertaken a variety of magical aptitude checks in the Department of Mysteries under the watchful eye of Griselda Marchbanks herself.

Tess's great-grandmother volunteered her services when the Unspeakable assigned to his case left the country unexpectedly, called abroad for an emergency. Tess hadn't seemed perturbed by the vanishing of their Ministry contact; if anything, she seemed relieved and had been pleased to introduce Severus to the matriarch of her family. Severus didn't mind the Head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority overseeing his assessment; he knew the elderly witch would have her great-granddaughter's best interests at heart and would ensure the tests were stringent and thorough. Severus desperately needed reassurance that the alterations to the Revivification Potion had not adversely affected him in any way.

Griselda maintained emotional distance from Severus throughout, and she concluded her investigations successfully. Severus then presented himself to St Mungo's for observation and examination. No anomalies were found, and the hospital discharged him with a clean bill of health. Now he anticipated a *Daily Prophet* reporter would soon land on his doorstep, despite the confidential nature of his rebirth. But they would have to find him first.

Severus intended to maintain his privacy until his final obligation was discharged: the Wizengamot would eventually call him to appear before them, hence the reason for Griselda's deliberate neutrality at this stage. He expected his evidence would help convict numerous Death Eaters previously unknown to the Ministry, but he also knew he would be called to account for his own actions, and there was a possibility he might face a prison sentence.

However, word had spread following Harry Potter's revelation of Severus's loyalties in the moments before the Dark Lord fell. His love for Lily Evans had become common knowledge, and so Severus had been forced to return to life without his erstwhile disguise. Now that the wizarding world knew of his love, and of his folly, he knew he could never return to teach at Hogwarts; his power over his students had evaporated. His life would take a new course, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer.

Severus raised his reclaimed ebony and phoenix-feather wand to point at the peeling paint of the front door, preparing to undo the enchantments cast by Tess when she'd visited his home the previous Christmas. Tess leaned against the stone jamb, allowing the sun to warm her face whilst she waited. Severus had convinced her to take a holiday when the Hogwarts' term ended, and she had returned lightly tanned and more relaxed, although she still appeared slightly preoccupied. He had feared for her sanity for a time, and he could only imagine the difficulties she'd faced whilst his soul remained trapped in the anti-Horcrux. His thumb rubbed the Tiger's Eye ring reflexively; he hadn't removed the silver band since he'd been returned to physical form. He didn't know why, but he found its presence comforting.

The door creaked open, releasing dusty, stale air from within the house, and several white envelopes spread across the doormat, awaiting his attention. Standing in the entranceway, Severus frowned at the peeling labels on the front of the hand-delivered correspondence. The letters were plainly Muggle in origin, and many appeared mangled and crumpled from being shoved underneath the door or through the cracks of the doorframe; the sender had not been defeated by the lack of a letterbox. Severus had not received mail since he'd Confunded the local council, and nobody else had ever shown an interest in the derelict street.

Tess pushed past him and started to gather the envelopes in her hands. "There are no postage stamps, Severus. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to contact you... Some of these have been here for months." She wiped a layer of dust from the oldest, most creased letter.

"Whoever brought them seems to have perfected the art of doorframe delivery," Severus mused as he picked up the newest envelope which was largely unscathed from its encounter with the narrow crevice underneath his door. He ran his fingers beneath the gummed seal, following Tess into the house as she opened windows to allow fresh air to enter the stuffy living room.

The letter was printed on thick, watermarked paper, headed with a geometrical corporate symbol of triangles and squares.

Dear Mr Snape,

Further to our previous correspondence, I am now able to make

an improved offer on your home. Our clients are anxious to

proceed with their plans to build a new supermarket, and yours

is the final property needed to secure the development.

I can offer £150,000 to purchase your house, a sum of money considerably higher than its current market value, and I hope that you will contact me as soon as possible with your acceptance.

Please do not hesitate to ring me on my direct-dial telephone number if you have any questions relating to the sale of your property.

Yours Faithfully,

John Bagshot

Sapphire and Gould Developments

Tess touched Severus's arm, concerned by the expression of shock on his face. "What does it say?" she asked worriedly.

Severus cleared his throat. "Read it," he said as he pushed the letter into her hands. He walked to the bookcase at the far side of the room and pushed open the hidden passage to the kitchen. Another wave of stuffy air assailed his nostrils, and he opened the back door from the kitchen and stepped out into the rear yard. Spiders' webs decorated the lintels, and dandelions bloomed in the edges of pavestones. He wondered if the sender of the letter had realised his home had been empty for a year.

Tess came to stand at the back door. "Severus," she said, "this is wonderful!"

"It is unexpected."

She paused. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to suggest that you should accept the offer. This is your home, and I imagine you'd be attached to the place where you grew up. I just meant that the amount of money is... very generous."

"I know. The value of this house has always been a pittance."

"The developers must be desperate," Tess replied, opening a handful of older letters.

They quickly discovered the offers had begun in February, starting with £20,000. Apparently, since the developers hadn't heard from the homeowner, the bid increased steadily in small increments, until last month when they more than doubled their previous offer.

"What are you going to do?" Tess asked as they returned inside and locked the door. "Can you accept this amount of money for your childhood home, knowing it will be flattened to make way for a Muggle supermarket?"

Severus watched her for a long moment, maintaining his stony façade whilst revelling in her ignorance. Her naïveté really was rather endearing.

"Saves me having to burn the place to the ground," he quipped with a slight smirk.

Tess's expression changed to bemusement, closely followed by a smile and throaty laughter. "Oh, Severus," she said as she wrapped her arms around him.

Her soft hair smelled of strawberries, tickling his nose as he embraced her lightly. Who would have thought he'd find someone who would appreciate his sense of humour? Who would have known someone could love him for all that he was?

He reached down to coax her chin upwards, and his lips met hers in a pleasing swirl of warmth. She responded readily to his touch, pressing her hips against his and sneaking her hands between the buttons of his shirt. He marvelled that she wanted him here, in this musty and gloomy faux library, amongst the dusty volumes of Dark Arts and Potions. Her fingers made light work of his shirt buttons, and soon he was pushing her back into the house and up against a book-shelved wall, hearing the leather-bound tomes thudding as they were forced to the back of the casing.

Gently, tantalisingly, he slipped the straps of her dress down her shoulders and kissed her neck and collarbone. "Who would have thought," he murmured into her ear, causing her a slight shudder, "that a woman would find wealth such an aphrodisiac?"

She laughed, and he smiled into the crook of her neck as he brushed his lips against her skin. He was well aware that Tess's wealth far exceeded his own, and he also knew the paucity of his Gringotts savings to be of little concern to her, yet she was willing to play along with his game of teasing.

In a darkened corner of his mind, he had a sneaking suspicion that Tess was trying to prove something, either to him, or to herself, but when Tess moaned his name into his ear, the thought slipped from his mind like sand through an hourglass.

As books toppled from their library stacks, Severus dreamed of other roles she might agree to perform willingly for mutual gratification.

One hour later, Tess began the task of packing up his collection of books, with roses blooming on her cheeks, and her hair slightly dishevelled. Meanwhile, Severus was feeding a Muggle public telephone-box with silver coins.

When he returned to Spinner's End with the deal sealed and the promise of £150,000 in the bank, his footsteps felt lighter as he crossed the threshold to his soon-to-be-sold home. He'd learned he would need to acquire a Muggle bank account, but knew that would be mere formality with use of a well-aimed Confundus Charm.

Severus had been hoping Tess might offer to live with him, as so far she had failed to invite him to reside in her home at Squirrel's Leap, the cottage which had been his safe-house last summer. Tess now had a permanent houseguest since her brother, Nathan, had arrived back in the country, and it was unlikely she would throw out her sibling to make way for a man she'd only been in a relationship with for three days, especially since Nate and Severus had not seen eye-to-eye when they first made acquaintance. Nevertheless, Severus ached for a sign that she might be willing to cohabit with him.

With his belongings packed quickly and securely by magic, Tess and Severus bought ice-cream cones from a corner shop and went for a walk by the rubbish strewn riverbank, searching for the spot where they'd spent time in the anti-Horcrux reality.

"What will you do with the money?" Tess asked, licking a drip of raspberry-ripple ice cream from the side of her thumb.

"Buy a new house, of course. I still need somewhere to live."

"Where do you want to move to?" she asked, sitting down on a park bench which marked the boundary of the more upmarket side of town. Lily's side of town.

"I don't know yet," Severus answered, throwing the remnants of his cone into the river. A paddling of ducks quacked loudly as they fought over the bobbing wafer, which drifted further downstream and out of sight. "Not here, though," Severus affirmed. "I don't want to stay here."

"Where would you like to live? You have the world at your feet, within reason. One hundred and fifty thousand Muggle pounds won't buy you a manor, but you can afford to live somewhere quiet where you won't be bothered too much. I know how much you appreciate your solitude."

Severus pondered the possibilities. He could imagine buying a house in the country with a garden for growing his own potion ingredients and a cellar for his laboratory. A quiet little country lane would be agreeable, he decided.

"Have you thought about that village in the shadow of Pendle Hill?" Tess asked, dusting crumbs from her dress. "You know: the place where you took me on my birthday? Don't your mother's family hail from around there?"

He nodded, and a small green shoot poked its head through the fertile soil of Severus's newly-acquired existence.

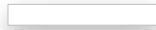
"Perhaps," he replied.

He took hold of her hand and lifted his face to the sun, drinking in the warmth of the day and the softness of her skin, wondering abstractedly if this was how happiness felt.

In the Shadow of Pendle Hill

Chapter 4 of 24

House-hunting in Pendle Witch country.



Chapter Four

In the Shadow of Pendle Hill

The mid-August sun dipped slowly towards the horizon, casting lengthening shadows throughout the village of Downham. A stream ambled lazily at the foot of the parish, thirsty from lack of rainfall, and the air was thick with the scent of geraniums which grew in oversized clumps in cottage front gardens and lined window boxes with vibrant splashes of crimson.

Summer had cast its hypnotic spell upon the rural community, lulling them into a trance of heedless tranquillity, and the few residents roaming the steep incline towards the local pub failed to notice the dark-haired, sallow-skinned man appearing out of thin air in the church graveyard with a female companion at his side.

Severus continued to hold Tess's hand after Apparating behind the largest tombstone in the churchyard, and she looked across the garden of remembrance towards the striking outline of Pendle Hill in the distance.

"This place is beautiful!" she said, drinking in the green, fertile farmland and the looming brownish haze of the infamous hilled landscape.

Overhead, a clattering of jackdaws could be heard from their tower-top nest, and a few juvenile birds ran along the church roof, awaiting the arrival of their next meal.

Tess seemed comfortable in the graveyard, for she lingered there, holding onto Severus as she meandered through the headstones, gaining a sense of history and context for the parish and its people. Severus watched her as she smiled at loving inscriptions and became tearful for the loss of the young. He still marvelled that her emotions could be so close to the surface and yet not entirely rule her actions; her openness was an encouragement to him, as guarded as he remained.

They had both lost people they'd loved. Severus remembered attending the funeral of Tess's fiancé, Alex, where he'd watched her weep for the man who had been missing, presumed dead, for over a year. He also recalled the day when Tess found him kneeling at Lily Potter's grave, unaware of the true reason for his visit to Godric's Hollow. Inadvertently, they'd helped each other grieve for their loved ones. The path their lives had taken since then had surprised them both by equal measure, and after spending almost every hour of the last two weeks in each other's company, Severus was slowly adjusting to their new life together.

"I hate to drag you away from your grave-spotting, but we're going to be late," said Severus when his interest turned to boredom.

"Of course. Sorry. I just like it here," Tess replied, tearing away her eyes from a gravestone and smiling. "Strange, I know."

Severus smirked. "I still think it strange that you love me," he commented wryly, pulling her hand and guiding her towards the path.

Tess laughed. "I notice your inferiority complex remains sufficiently intact."

Severus smiled inwardly at their continuing banter. "There's only one person alive who believes I regard myself as inferior."

"I know. I'm honoured." The smile on her face bore no sarcasm.

At the end of the paved path, she followed him through the gateway. Severus felt a thrill of anticipation as they walked down the steep lane.

"Where is it?" Tess asked, shielding her eyes from the sunshine. "I can't see any properties for sale."

"The house is at the end of this lane, following the line of the brook towards the field. It's the only property on the market."

"Popular location, then," Tess surmised.

"Yes, but apparently this particular place has been on the market for a few years."

"I wonder why?"

"I suspect we are about to find out," Severus said as they approached the picturesque footbridges which characterised the sandstone cottages of Lapwing Row. The trickling brook provided a soothing soundscape as it ran past the front of the homes, feeding the stream near the heart of the village.

"With all that water, there probably won't be a cellar," Tess contemplated.

"No, but I believe there is a substantial out-building at the rear."

"It's about time you escaped those dungeons, I suppose," Tess said, winking.

At that moment, a car door opened, and a woman stepped onto the road holding a clipboard to her chest, tottering on impossibly high heels. She was young and very nervous.

"Mr Snape?" she asked, approaching the couple and holding out a hand, which Severus shook cordially. "I'm Miss Stephens, but you can call me Tracey," she said, assessing the Goth-like man and his female companion. "You must be Mrs Snape?"

"Um, no," Tess said, clearing her voice slightly.

The estate agent quickly offered an apology, but Severus barely noticed; he was too busy assessing Tess's reaction to the faux pas. She gave little away, just a hint of awkwardness befitting the situation. Severus had hoped to witness blushing cheeks or the scraping sound of shuffling feet, but pinched lips were the only sign of her discomfort, and he found himself disappointed. He was desperate for a sign of her wish for a long-term commitment, and until that moment arose, he would not reveal the depths of his devotion. Before he could admit his desires to her, he needed to feel sure she wanted to be with him, to share a life and a home with him. Severus felt slightly queasy with anticipation as they crossed the footbridge.

"I'll open the front door for you, but I won't accompany you in, if you don't mind?" Miss Stephens said briskly.

Tess moved to fill the silence which followed. "That's fine, Tracey. Perhaps we can meet you in the back garden in a few minutes' time?"

"Perfect," the girl said with her first genuine smile. She turned the key then let herself through the side-gate and disappeared from sight.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Tess said as Severus opened the door and stepped inside.

The house was understandably stuffy, having been closed up for the majority of the summer, although it was clear that some attempts had been made to keep the place clean. There were no cobwebs and the carpets were unsoiled. The house smelt of old plaster, sandalwood, and a tinge of something almost imperceptible.

"Can you feel it?" Tess asked, closing her eyes to focus her attention.

"Yes," Severus replied, holding his hand out into the hallway, searching for a seam, a tear, any kind of clue. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not find the source. "This place has known magic, without a doubt."

Suddenly a loud thump resonated down the stairs, followed quickly by a rattling sound akin to kitchen pans falling from their racks.

"Ah," Tess said with a smile. "That pretty much confirms things."

They moved up the creaking staircase to the small landing area and opened the hatch to the attic. An old rope ladder dropped from the hole, and motes of dust spiralled free from their enclosure.

"Ladies first," Severus said, indicating the climb into the loft.

"Is this what they call Slytherin chivalry?" Tess enquired, retrieving her wand.

A piercing, high-pitched wail escaped though the open loft door, and Tess seemed to change her mind, hesitating at the foot of the ladder. Severus smiled. He was capable of being chivalrous; he'd merely wished to see how brave she was when it came to dark, enclosed spaces. With his wand in his hand, he stepped in front of her and ascended the dusty rungs, wobbling as the old rope stretched to accommodate his mass. Severus cast a precautionary Shield Charm and lit the tip of his wand as he poked his head into the crawl space.

In a cobwebby corner of the attic sat a pugnacious-looking ghoul, wielding a silver ladle and a rusty skillet as if they were weapons. When the ogre comprehended the wizard before him, he broke into a large smile and banged his frying pan merrily, overcome with joy.

"Severus!" Tess called from below. "What's up there?"

"Just a ghoul. Lonely, by the looks of him." Severus descended the rope ladder and stepped aside for Tess, who clambered up into the attic eagerly.

"Pleased to meet you," Severus heard Tess saying into the dark aperture. The banging of the ghoul's makeshift drum increased in intensity. The pair of them had probably made its century.

Grinning, Tess came back down and rolled up the rope by magic. "I think he's pleased to see us," she commented drily.

"That ghoul probably hasn't seen wizards in years. It certainly explains why the house didn't sell; the racket he's making would be enough to scare Muggles away. Without new Muggle owners, the Ministry wouldn't send the Ghoul Task Force to remove him."

"Poor soul," Tess said sadly.

"Hardly," Severus replied.

"Spirits have souls too, you know," Tess admonished.

Severus answered with a roll of his eyes. "It's a mystery why this house wasn't passed on to a wizarding family. Let's have a look around; I'm sure if we look closely enough we'll find some Undetectable Extension Charms and perhaps an extra room or two."

Ten minutes later, Tess and Severus exited via the back door and walked past the out-buildings into the large, overgrown back garden. The lawn area had been kept trimmed, but desiccated shrubberies lined the wooden fences and an old garden bench rotted at the bottom of the garden. The estate agent met them on the lawn, appearing anxious and intrigued by the length of time the unusual couple had spent inside the house. Tess smiled kindly at the young woman as she brushed past to examine the reaches of the grounds.

"Miss Stephens." Severus nodded in formal re-acquaintance.

"Err... How did you like the property, Mr Snape?" she asked apprehensively.

"It is adequate," Severus answered noncommittally.

The girl's large brown eyes bulged at the revelation. "You didn't find anything against your liking?"

"Only the carpets, but they can be replaced." He could not deny he enjoyed the young estate agent's surprise. Her mouth bobbed open like a fish, and she hurried to compose herself.

At the far end of the garden, Tess was looking skyward, her temple creased in concentration. She noticed the pause in their conversation and asked, "Is this garden south-facing?"

"Yes, it is," Miss Stephens answered, relieved to be of some use to the couple. "The whole garden gets the benefit of plenty of sunshine."

Tess smiled at the girl and addressed Severus. "It's perfect for my telescope."

His heart thumped so forcefully that he thought the muscle might break free of his ribcage. Whilst there was much he needed to learn about the woman he loved, he knew all he needed to know, for now. He turned away from Tess and escorted Miss Stephens towards the back door.

"We'll take it," he said quietly.

The young woman gasped. "You're making an offer?"

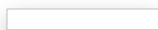
"An offer? Yes, I am. I'll pay cash. Can you negotiate a lower price with the vendors? Say, one-hundred-and-twenty-thousand pounds?"

"I'm sure they'll consider your proposal, Mr Snape."

Unspoken Past

Chapter 5 of 24

The Unspeakable makes a surprise visit to Hogwarts.



Chapter Five

Unspoken Past

The spiral stone steps which led down to Tess's dungeon classroom reminded Clym of his own schooling in wizardry. It was nearly thirty years since he'd graduated from the Durmstrang Institute, where the dungeons had been extensive and furs had been almost year-round attire.

Three weeks after the Battle of Hogwarts, the castle's exterior still bore hallmarks of brutal and bloody conflict. Parts of the interior, however, remained unscathed, and in these preserved areas, Clym found that Hogwarts School was quaint and ornate, and the Headteacher's office reminded him of a bazaar-like treasure trove. But Professor McGonagall was no surprise: a perfunctory and proficient Headmistress.

Escorted by the Astronomy professor, Sinistra, Clym proceeded towards the double doors at the end of the dungeon hallway, wondering how Tess would react to his impromptu appearance at her workplace. A bustling throng of fifth-year students exited the classroom, clutching their textbooks and making their way back to their Houses. Only a couple of the male students paid him any notice as they hurried past; he supposed that strangers had become commonplace with the ongoing repair work in the storeys above. Sinistra bade him goodbye at the classroom door.

Tess was busy wiping her writing from the blackboard when Clym entered the classroom, and he watched her for a moment moving effortlessly around the teacher's lectern in her formal robes. He remembered how she used to favour scruffy jeans and figure-hugging dresses, and how she used to laugh about his predilection for fur-lined robes. His memories were broken by the sound of her voice.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her tone bordering on waspish.

"I came to see Professor McGonagall," Clym answered, wandering towards her. "It seemed rude not to stop by and say 'hello' to you."

Tess didn't reply and continued to pack away her teaching materials in a manner which suggested his answer had neither satisfied nor reassured her.

"I have news," Clym continued, reading wariness and anticipation in her reaction. "Professor McGonagall has agreed to send an owl to Harry Potter, as I've had no response from him yet. Apparently, he's on holiday in Australia, whilst Hermione Granger makes contact with her parents and repatriates them. Can't really blame him for wanting to get away from all the attention."

Tess sniffed a little, as if unwilling to enter into conversation; perhaps she had already asked for McGonagall's assistance and been refused, or maybe she was merely indignant at his uninvited presence. He wondered if she would ever warm to him, let her guard down, or begin to trust him again. He wanted her to believe his best intentions.

"That's good," she said, after closing the cupboard door on the last of the Potions ingredients. With a flick of her wand they were thrown into semi-darkness as the candlelight extinguished.

Clym followed her hastily to the bright light of the doorway. "When Harry gets back, I'll let you know what I've learned about the potion which resurrected Voldemort."

Tess flinched, still not accustomed to hearing the name spoken out loud. Clym knew Voldemort had killed Tess's father when she was a student at Hogwarts, so mention of the Dark Lord was bound to cause her pain, but he had learned something else in the Headmistress's office for which he felt compelled to express his sympathy.

"Tess," he said, stopping as she closed and locked the double doors. "May I speak with you privately?"

He watched an eyebrow creep up her forehead, and her chin set contemptuously. "Here is as good a place as any, Clym."

He almost backed down and saved his commiserations for another time, but she had laid down the gauntlet, and Clym would never yield. "I saw your ancestor's portrait in the Headmistress's office whilst I waited. Charming lady," he added, trying to ease the tension. "Anyway, she brought me up to speed. She wanted to make sure I didn't go putting my foot in dragon dung and upsetting you."

Tess became defensive almost immediately. Clym knew he had to tread carefully, so he paused, trying to slow down the blathering tendencies which surfaced whenever he felt pressured. She cocked her head, appearing satisfied he had been wrong-footed. Her assuredness did not last, however.

"I'm so sorry to hear about Alex's death," he offered quietly.

Clym regretted his declaration almost immediately. Visible shock appeared upon her face at the mention of her former fiancé's name. Angry tears welled in her blue-grey eyes, and her features crumpled.

"I didn't know," Clym continued, unable to stop himself. She shuddered and looked away. "I never knew, no-one told me, Tess. I didn't even know you were engaged."

When she heard this confession, a change occurred, and she became emboldened once more. "Well, it just goes to show the world doesn't revolve around you, Clym. I never hid my engagement. You mustn't have been interested in what happened to me!"

"Don't say that, Tess! I've always been concerned for your welfare. That's why..."

"Spare me your excuses; I don't want to hear them. It took me a long time to find someone worth taking a risk for, and he died on a mission for the Order of the Phoenix. He didn't hide himself away in a Ministry cubby-hole, safe from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, like you did."

"That's hardly fair, Tess. I had my family to think about, my children..."

Clym's explanation died on his lips when Tess stormed down the corridor and ran up the stairs, her cheeks stained with tears. Her reaction hit him like a Bludger to the chest.

Sprinting up the dungeon staircase, Tess dodged the Ministry workforces who were rebuilding the Entrance Hall and courtyard, and she walked briskly out of Hogwarts Castle, attempting to hide her tears. Soon she was running down the grassy slope towards the lake, black crows scattering in her wake as angry sobs clawed at her throat.

She reached the pebbly shore and grabbed several large stones, hurling them unceremoniously into the water with gratifying splashes and plopping sounds. A solitary raven watched her from a pine tree overhead as she vented her confusion and distress, until she finally slouched onto a fallen tree trunk, child-like and ashamed.

Her loss of composure in front of Clym had taken her completely by surprise. She hadn't expected to see him at Hogwarts; indeed, she had tried to keep him at arm's length ever since their reunion at the Ministry. Once upon a time, she would have given everything she owned to be reunited with him, but more than a decade had passed, and her heart now belonged to someone else.

Whilst the strength of these old feelings troubled her deeply, they did not diminish the love she felt for Severus. She wished she could just slip on the Tiger's Eye ring to be with him, but she'd been given strict instructions to be supervised during her unconscious moments in Severus's haven, and it would be hours until the Hospital Wing would accept her for the evening. Tess knew a few minutes with Severus would wash away the turmoil of emotion burning inside her body, and she might find the courage to deal with the skeletons rattling inside her long-forgotten closet.

Tess had stopped loving Clym many years ago. Despite this, Clym's apology in the Leaky Cauldron had meant something; she could not deny his remorse had met a need: an old need, a need which had once been desperate and critical for her to fulfil. During an earlier period of her life, a dark and bleak time of despair and melancholy, she had looked to Clym to provide evidence that she was a good person. Moreover, a woman who deserved to be loved. But he hid himself away in the Department of Mysteries, and it took years for Tess's depression to lift.

She chose the hard road, searched for her self-worth on her own, without a man who loved her. But it had been worth the effort, worth the pain, because she had emerged stronger and more at peace. Eventually, she felt ready to make changes in her life. She transferred to the Ludicrous Patents Office and soon met Alex, the man who became her fiancé. Alex was a kind man who gave his love freely; he was calm, steady and solid. There was very little excitement in their relationship, but Tess craved none, for she had her fill with Clym. She needed someone in whom she could depend, someone who could love her without condition, and Alex met those needs.

They'd been together for just over a year when Alex was abducted and murdered by Antonin Dolohov, and Tess's grief had taken a long time to resolve. When Severus discovered the location of her fiancé's body, Tess was finally able to give Alex a proper burial and move on with her life. Even now, though, she still felt sadness, but that was to be expected.

However, when Clym had spoken of her dead fiancé, Tess had felt enraged to the point of tears. She felt Alex's memory had been sullied somehow, as though Clym had the power to taint a piece of her past which she held dear. Clym's final blow had been mention of his family, by way of excusing himself, yet again, for his behaviour. She had heard that justification too often in the past, and she felt incensed and belittled to hear those words again, all these years later. She realised she might be harbouring unresolved feelings, and no matter how distasteful, these emotions were real and vying for her attention. She desperately wanted to escape the tumult and lie safely in Severus's embrace, yet Tess also knew that running from her emotions would eventually cause more harm. The dichotomy of her situation meant the path ahead would be far from easy.

By the time Aurora Sinistra found Tess by the lakeside, she had regained her composure from her encounter with Clym, even though her wounds were still open and raw. Tess felt indebted to Aurora for the care she'd shown on the day Severus died, and the Astronomy professor had continued to offer her support and friendship in the weeks which followed the final battle; Tess doubted she would have survived intact without the kindness of this woman. She felt the gentle pressure of Aurora's hand upon her shoulder and the warm weight of her body as she settled down on the makeshift seat. The raven cried overhead and spread its wings, flying away like a dark spectre through the trees.

"Is this about Severus?" Aurora asked, gazing across the body of water rippling gently towards the shore.

Tess sighed. "No," she answered simply. She wanted, needed, someone to hear her, but was reluctant to confide the twists and turns of her unspoken past with Clym for fear of being criticised or judged.

"I can put two and two together, you know," Aurora said sympathetically. "It's clear you have history with Clym."

"How do you know his name?" Tess asked.

"He introduced himself properly in the Headmistress's office."

Tess nodded glumly.

"You don't have to tell me everything, but whatever went on between you is obviously causing you pain. Please don't suffer in silence, Tess."

"I'm embarrassed," Tess admitted. "I don't want you to think any less of me."

Aurora smiled sadly and placed an arm around Tess's shoulder. "It's OK. I think I've got the measure of you. I promise I won't condemn."

Words took a long time to find their way out, so long had they been trapped inside.

"I don't know where to begin," Tess whispered.

"Start at the beginning," Aurora suggested softly.

Tess stared at the rippling surface of the lake. "I was twenty-one when I met him," she remembered, shifting in her seat. "Clym was an Obliviator in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad when I was their trainee Potioneer. We hit it off when we realised we originated from the same part of Wales. He'd been at the Durmstrang Institute, and I was fascinated by his stories and knowledge; he'd been taught magic completely unknown to me. I'd never met anyone so exciting; he was ten years older, and he seemed to know so much about the world. He became my mentor, teaching me the basics of Obliviation and Occlumency. We became good friends and then..."

"Go on, Tess."

"He wooed me in secret, saying he didn't want people to gossip about a workplace relationship, and I enjoyed the thrill of clandestine communication and covert meetings. I was young and naïve; I trusted him and thought he loved me."

Aurora placed her hand reassuringly upon Tess's. "Quick to hope, and therefore easily deceived?"

Tess nodded, encouraged by her understanding. "The romance was thrilling; he took me to faraway places, expanded my horizons with new experiences, and made me believe... Well, anyway, I fell head-over-heels in love with him... and somehow I lost who I was, like he swallowed a part of me, a part of my identity. I only felt whole when I was with him. Twelve months into our romance, I began to ask searching questions, and I realised all was not as it seemed. I wanted the secrecy to end; I wanted Clym to meet my family, and I wanted to tell the world about us. He... He made empty excuses, and I started to realise I had been deceived..."

"Was he married, Tess?"

"Worse than that. Married, with a child."

"Oh, dear Merlin!"

"It turned out he'd wed a pureblood witch years before, an arranged marriage as far as Clym was concerned, to maintain the purity of the blood line, and when she gave birth to a Squib, their marriage fell to pieces. Sophia, his wife, couldn't bear the shame, and he was incapable of consoling her. She moved to the Welsh town of Newport and raised her child as a Muggle, and Clym took a Ministry home in London, going back to see his family once a week. When I confronted him, he told me he'd planned to divorce his wife when we'd started our relationship, but she resisted his wishes and begged him to stay. Then, she fell pregnant with their second child. Clym maintained she had used dishonest measures to ensnare him. I didn't know whether or not to believe him..." Tess paused. The next part of the tale would require strength.

"What happened when you became aware of the truth?" Aurora asked.

"I couldn't leave him," Tess said, her cheeks burning with shame. "I'd been in a relationship with him for so long, and I couldn't bear to lose him. But it was the start of a steady decline. Sophia gave birth to a little boy, Madock, and he soon began to demonstrate magical abilities. Clym's heart melted with pride. When it became obvious that he would never leave his wife, I found the courage to end our relationship. Clym was devastated but unrepentant of his decision to stay with his family, and the Accidental Magic Reversal Department became a very difficult place for us both. I was utterly heartbroken, and it was unbearable working so close to him. It would have been so easy for me to run back into his arms.

"But then, one day I went to work, and he was simply gone. I discovered his London dwelling vacant and learned he'd accepted a promotion to the Department of Mysteries and moved lock, stock and barrel to a hidden office. Years later, I also discovered he'd returned to live with his wife and family in Newport."

Both women sat in silence for a long time. Tess eventually arose and began to skim stones across the lake, watching them glide across the dark water before disappearing into the abyss. She felt a little bit calmer, a part of her soul unburdened.

"How do you feel about Clym now?" Aurora asked from the edge of the lake.

Tess laughed mirthlessly. "I'm not in love with him, if that's what you're thinking. Just at this moment, it's more like hate. I'm constantly on guard around him, wary of being manipulated, and... I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't know." Tess closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun. "He feels like a threat... A threat to who I believe myself to be. I thought I was over him, but if that were true, why does he polarise my emotions? And why can't I allow myself to be alone with him?"

Tess's eyes were open again, staring up at the clouds in the sky. She knew Aurora did not hold the answers to her questions.

"Have you told Severus any of this?"

Tess shook her head dolefully. "How can I? He's got enough on his plate, worrying about the revivification and what consequences might await him. How can I risk opening up this can of worms, knowing Severus might sit for hours on that riverbank fretting about it?"

Aurora remained seated, staring across the lake, deep in thought.

"Can you trust Clym?" she eventually asked. "Can you trust him with Severus's life?"

"Believe me, I've agonised over that... Agonised enough for the both of us. The answer is 'yes'. Clym has given me his word."

"Is his word good enough for you?"

"It has to be."

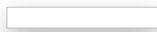
For Better, For Worse

Chapter 6 of 24

Severus faces the Wizengamot.

Author's Note:

Amata's experience in Beedle the Bard's *The Fountain of Fair Fortune* is precedent for the after-effects of memory extraction described later in this chapter.



Chapter Six

For Better, For Worse

Heels clicked on the black, white and gold marble floor of the Wizengamot.

A nervous-looking clerk walked steadily towards the podium, carrying several glass phials which Severus recognised as the kind he'd discovered stashed away in the

Headmaster's office almost a year ago. Wondering what might happen next, his stomach twisted in a tight knot, and his hands clenched on his lap.

The jurists of Courtroom Ten remained eerily silent, sitting in their raspberry-coloured, high-necked robes, their fifty-two cone-shaped hats following the progress of the clerk until his cargo was placed down upon the table at the foot of the pedestal. The glass flasks rattled in their circular wooden stand, and the white wisps contained within turned momentarily. Everyone's gaze was transfixed by the evidence on display as the young clerk exited the oval room.

Rita Skeeter was sitting alongside the Court Scribe, her beady eyes absorbing the scene unfolding around her. She noticed Severus's tension, the rapt attention of the jury, and the stern gaze of Kingsley Shacklebolt, presiding in the black robes of Minister for Magic. The only sound came from the scratching of her Quick-Quotes Quill.

"Mr Snape, as testimony to your true allegiance, I present your memories, given to Harry Potter at the time of your... death. These have been viewed by the Wizengamot at a prior hearing."

Shacklebolt paused in his delivery, and Severus's stomach lurched to somewhere in the region of his Adam's apple. Apparently, his most private memories had been examined and dissected by the Wizards' Council, and he wondered how many other people had had occasion to study these deeply personal scenes from his life. By the smug expression on Skeeter's face, he presumed she'd already had the pleasure.

Damn and blast!

"From these memories, it is clear that your first priority was the safety of Harry Potter, in order to repay your perceived debt to his mother, Lily. As such, you acted on the side of the Light, and this redeems certain of your actions. Do you have anything to add, Mr Snape?"

"No."

"Your memories remain your property, and the Wizengamot hereby returns them to you."

Severus swallowed, his mouth dry. In the corner of his vision, he witnessed Tess fidgeting in her seat and her brother, Nathan, squeezing her hand.

"This court also takes into account the testimonies of Harry Potter, Minerva McGonagall and Contessa Marchbanks. In addition, Albus Dumbledore's portrait corroborated the chain of events depicted in your memories and confirms the verbal accounts offered by the witnesses." Shacklebolt paused, shifting his focus towards the chair at the centre of the proceedings, and addressed Severus once more. "Since your return, you have been cooperative in supplying information about Voldemort's inner circle."

The scratching of stenographic quills continued long after Shacklebolt's monologue had ended, until finally silence reigned once more. Severus was aware of his dull, aching heartbeat and the sensation of sweat beading on his palms.

Shacklebolt looked Severus squarely in the eye and then declared. "The Wizengamot therefore makes no charges against you."

The words rang in Severus's ear like a cacophony of bells, and he felt a chill underneath his frock-coat and cloak. Tess squeaked her jubilation and jumped from her seat, hugging her perplexed taller brother behind the railings.

After a slight pause, Griselda Marchbanks stood up from her newly-reinstated chair and began to clap her hands, slowly and loudly. One by one, the others rose from the benches to join the applause, until the standing ovation echoed like thunder around the arches of the courtroom.

Severus could not move from his singular seat at the centre of the marble floor's swirling pattern; he seemed paralysed from the waist down. The noise banged his eardrums, dried his throat, making him dizzy. He surveyed the scene, noticing Skeeter's shrewd aspect; she was not clapping, although she had risen from her seat.

And right at the back of Courtroom Ten was the dark figure of a man, previously unnoticed but now visible, owing to his defiant decision to remain seated. When Severus made eye contact, the wizard arose and slipped out through the side door.

From the mop of curly brown hair, Severus recognised him as the Unspeakable who was present at his revivification.

In the corridor outside the courtroom, Tess hugged Severus so tightly he thought his lungs had compressed. He did not feel the joy which she so obviously felt.

"Severus, I'm so happy for you! You've finally been recognised as a hero!" She loosened her grip and looked into his eyes, radiant and smiling, no longer preoccupied, no longer troubled.

He heard a derisory snort from Nathan, who stood in the shadows of the dark hallway, holding the precious load of memories which had just been returned to Severus. Although he knew Nathan's inherent dislike to be the reason for his mockery, Severus nevertheless concurred with the sentiment.

"I'm no hero," Severus asserted, holding Tess by the arms in an attempt to coax her away.

"Never a truer word passed his lips," Nathan remarked.

Severus shot Nathan a look which could have slit the throat of a basilisk, and Tess stepped away warily.

"For Merlin's sake, you two!" she said, exasperated. "Maybe you ought to view those memories, Nate; then you'd understand."

"That will not be necessary," Severus countered, reaching out for the circular wooden stand which housed the phials of his past.

Nathan sneered slightly as he returned them to their rightful owner.

Tess sighed her annoyance, but Severus didn't care; he wasn't about to let another person view his memories, especially not someone who sought further ammunition against him.

"Maybe they'll honour your contribution to the downfall of the Dark Lord, Severus," Tess speculated. "They might grant you the title of Warlock."

"Heaven forbid," Severus muttered.

"Imagine the party!" Tess beamed. "All those people who decried you as a traitor would have to eat their words and raise their glasses to you. It would be very... satisfying."

"There shall be no parties and no celebrations on my account," Severus snapped.

"Oh, Severus, you're being a party-pooper!" Tess chided gently, as Nathan wandered towards the Ministry lifts, smirking nastily.

Severus glared at her brother's broad-shouldered back as they followed him into the lift. Nathan stated their destination, and the metal cage flew into action.

En route to the Atrium, Severus inhaled a deep, anticipatory breath. "There are bound to be reporters waiting by the exit. You two should leave together before I step out into the Atrium. Tess, take my memories and go back to the Leaky Cauldron. I'll meet you there when this is over." Severus handed over the memories to the one person alive whom he felt he could trust.

"Are you sure?" she asked, nervous and afraid for him.

"I am," Severus said calmly. The motion of the lift ended abruptly, and the doors flung open. "Go!"

Nate led Tess in a dash toward the Floo.

Severus stepped out moments later, diverting the attention of the wizarding paparazzi, hoping to ensure a clean escape for his companions. Severus witnessed Xenophilius Lovegood handing Tess an envelope before she stepped into the emerald flames of the fire, and then she was gone.

Severus arrived on the outskirts of Ottery St Catchpole later that afternoon, arriving at Xenophilius Lovegood's solid black front door and rapping the eagle-shaped door knocker three times in quick succession.

As the door slowly opened, the white-blond hair of *The Quibbler's* editor appeared in the narrow crevice, eventually revealing a pair of suspicious eyes.

Recognising his visitor, Lovegood threw open the door and greeted Severus with a broad smile. "Professor Snape! What a surprise! Forgive my vigilance it is said that Death knocks three times when he comes to carry off a soul..."

Severus clasped his hands behind his back. "That is a Muggle superstition and only applicable at Halloween."

Xenophilius's eyes narrowed. "Who would have thought a former Death Eater would know so much about Muggles?" he pondered out loud.

"I paid attention in Muggle Studies," Severus said crisply, before his tone softened. "And I was well-acquainted with Charity Burbage."

"May she rest in peace."

"Yes." Unconsciously, Severus tapped his foot on the wooden stair.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, please do come in, Professor Snape."

"Thank you," Severus said as he ascended the remaining steps and entered the rook-like building. "And please call me 'Severus', as I am no longer a professor."

"Of course, of course," Xenophilius said, shuffling his feet as he closed the door. "Naturally, my Luna has always called you 'Professor'... Now where is she? Luna!"

Severus grimaced. "That will not be necessary, Mr Lovegood. I came here to see you, in reply to your proposal."

Xenophilius wasn't listening. "Luna! Professor Snape is here!"

An upstairs door creaked open, and the seventeen-year-old witch trotted down the stairs excitedly, pausing to smile at the bottom of the stairway as she looked her former teacher up and down. Before Severus had chance to react, Luna flung herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist. Unable to move, Severus made eye contact with her father, who was watching the comical sight of the rigid ex-professor being hugged by his past student with a fatherly expression of satisfaction.

"Oh, Professor Snape, it's good to see you!" Luna's voice sounded characteristically dreamy, muffled by Severus's velvet jacket. She stepped away, ignoring his discomfort. "I'm so glad you survived the battle; I always knew, you know, that you were good."

Severus cleared his throat. "That is a matter of opinion, Miss Lovegood."

"No, sir, it isn't. I knew there was more to you than met the eye. After Ginny, Neville and I broke into your office to try to steal the sword of Gryffindor, you gave us detention in the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid. I knew the punishment could have been much more severe. And I don't think it was a coincidence that I was kidnapped on my way home aboard the Hogwarts Express, when I was away from your protection at the castle. You looked out for me, didn't you?"

Her logic was immaculate, and Severus was impressed with her insight and also a little bit unnerved. "All of those things are true, Miss Lovegood."

Luna smiled brightly and skipped towards the front door, grabbing a trowel and a pair of gardening gloves. "I'll go and weed around the Snargaluff, Daddy."

"OK, but be careful," her father said as she stepped out into the afternoon sunshine. "Would you like a cup of Gurdyroot infusion, Severus? We make it ourselves."

"No, thank you. Your letter said you would be interested in publishing my story in your magazine, and I would like to accept your offer, so long as I may have final editorial discretion on the article."

"Certainly, and I'd be delighted to publish whatever you'd like to share."

"I shall give you a synopsis of my life story, to pre-empt a revelatory and inaccurate account by a certain *Daily Prophet* reporter with an acid-green quill. You shall have the whole story, no omissions, no fabrications, just a concise account of pertinent facts about my choices and my loyalties."

"I would be most honoured, Severus. When would you like to schedule our first meeting?"

"Today. Now, if convenient for you, Mr Lovegood? I'd like to get this over with in one sitting and have the magazine published this evening, if possible."

Xenophilius's eyes bulged, and he nodded vigorously. "I'm sure that can be arranged. Let me get my quill and parchment."

"Do you own a Pensieve?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do. Why?"

Severus unbuttoned his coat and retrieved several glass phials stored safely within an inside pocket. "I believe we should begin with these."

On the evening following Severus's court appearance, for better or for worse, *The Quibbler* released a special-edition magazine featuring an interview with Hogwarts' last Headmaster. The scoop took the wizarding media by surprise and displaced the publication of inferior and inaccurate editorials, leaving Rita Skeeter ravenous for a new angle. For the remainder of the week, the *Daily Prophet* led with a series of interviews from a variety of sources, each speaking of their reaction to the news of Severus's reappearance.

Severus and Tess stayed in their room at the Leaky Cauldron, reading these articles with amusement, their location kept secret by use of a Fidelus Charm, protecting them from the hullabaloo. Rita Skeeter was hot on the trail of Severus's love life, and Contessa Marchbanks had been named twice in the press because of the evidence she gave to the Wizengamot. Speculation was mounting that the pair were involved, but Severus and Tess had no intention of revealing their relationship so early in its development. So they stayed mostly in their room and only ventured outside with the assistance of Polyjuice Potion.

The time spent together helped Severus to feel more assured about their connection, and since he had escaped trial and been declared a free man, he felt better able to contemplate his future. Their future. A future which had now begun with Spinner's End being sold and would continue with the completion of the purchase of a new home in Downham.

However, six glass phials had been sitting on the dresser ever since Severus had returned from visiting Ottery St Catchpole. For some reason, Severus had struggled with

the concept of their return, and the white wisps remained corked inside their bottles. Every time he saw them, his newfound confidence would transform into insecurity.

"They're your memories, Severus, no-one else's."

Severus tore his eyes away from the stored memories and turned to face Tess. "That doesn't mean I should take them back."

They had reached a familiar stalemate, but Severus knew he had to make a decision. Eventually.

"Why do you place so much importance on them?" he asked.

"Because they're a part of you. They are a *huge* part of you. Without these recollections, you're incomplete."

"What if I don't want to remember these moments of my life? What if I'd prefer to forget them?"

"You've never chosen to forget them before, Severus. You could have wiped your memory, taken Hate Potion, all kinds of things to take away the pain. You chose not to."

Severus knew she was right, but he still didn't feel comfortable reinstating memories which had caused so much hurt. Without clear recollection of the time he'd called Lily 'Mudblood', his regret seemed easier to bear.

Although there were gaps in his memory, Severus could fill in the blanks for himself. He knew what he had done on that afternoon by the Black Lake, because he remembered the after-effects of the mistake. The same was true for most of the missing memories.

He feared experiencing these moments again with raw clarity, and he was scared the pain would consume him once more.

"Severus." Tess's voice was quiet and comforting. "You forgave yourself in the Shrieking Shack. Give yourself some credit. You can deal with this."

"What about you?" he asked.

"What *about* me?" she replied, confused.

"What will you think of me for taking these memories back?"

Tess paused, her forehead creasing in a frown. "I'll love you just the same, if that's what you're worried about. And I'll know just how brave you truly are."

"Brave," Severus contemplated.

"Yes, brave."

He stood up and walked slowly towards the dresser, his finger nudging the phial which contained his worst memory.

"It takes bravery to accept the past. And it takes courage to move on," Tess reassured.

"Dumbledore once said something about Sorting taking place too soon," Severus remembered, and he felt certain that was one of the memories in the phials. He remembered the impact the Headmaster's words had had upon him.

Tess smiled. "He may have been right. But then again, nobody is the exact reincarnation of their House founder. Every student at Hogwarts has a little bit of each House in them. Bravery might be an established Gryffindor trait, but that doesn't mean a Slytherin can't be courageous."

"Bravery does not make one a hero."

"True," replied Tess. "But I think I know a hero when I see one."

Severus flinched, closing his eyes. "You are mistaken."

"I don't think so. You have shown remarkable courage and resolve, and without you the Dark Lord would not have fallen."

Tess's words were spoken softly and evenly, and Severus could hear her genuine faith in him. If only he shared her conviction.

"That still does not make me heroic," he replied. "I helped Dumbledore protect Potter to assuage my guilt. My loyalties had nothing to do with the 'Light', or the Ministry's agenda." Severus flicked the wooden stand with his finger, sending the phials of memories spinning.

"You did what you did for *love*," Tess said as she arose to stand by his side. "That's heroic enough for me."

She slowed the revolving carousel of memories gently with the palm of her hand, and Severus felt the final embers of his fear begin to fade.

When Tess kissed him, his apprehension turned to ash and blew away on the breeze.

Merlin's Order

Chapter 7 of 24

Severus receives a Ministry summons.

Chapter Seven

Merlin's Order

Severus shifted his feet on the grubby London pavement, impatient and uncomfortable. He hadn't worn his formal robes since the day of his resurrection, and he felt

suffocated and hot inside his frockcoat. Perhaps it was the warmer climate of southern England which made his attire so ill-suited; he'd worn these exact same clothes during northern summers in his hometown without any difficulty.

At his side, Tess looked equally uneasy in her formal robes. Neither of them knew the reason for this sudden summons, and being forced to wait outside the public entrance to the Ministry of Magic seemed undignified. She squeezed his hand gently as they waited for the ring of the public telephone.

Three weeks had now passed since his resurrection, and surprisingly, Severus felt ready to meet the glare of publicity which would surely follow this little excursion. Since he'd reinstated his memories, his perspective had altered; whilst he still treasured his childhood memories of friendship with Lily, he'd also consolidated the events of later years, reinforcing how fortunate he had been to find Tess. He'd never before experienced someone who took the time to understand him and meet his needs as she did.

However, it remained difficult for him to comprehend why Tess wanted to be with him. Even though the sale of Spinner's End had completed, they had not yet discussed their living arrangements because Severus was scared she'd decline his invitation to move in with him. No matter how hard he tried, he could not identify the qualities which she seemed to find so attractive, and despite her multiple reassurances, insecurity and self-doubt continued to inform his actions.

As such, Severus noticed Tess's nervousness as they baked under the heat of the midday sun. He hoped this was merely a sign of stage fright, rather than underlying uncertainty about their relationship. The spotlight would soon shine on their romance, and if she were going to run, she would have to do so now, before passing this imminent point of no return.

Seeming to sense his turmoil, Tess pulled down on his hand, drawing his attention.

"This is the first time we've left the Leaky Cauldron to be seen together as a couple, Severus," Tess said, biting her lip. "How do you feel?"

He couldn't vocalise how he was feeling, not without revealing the tumult within, so instead, he deflected with conversation. "I'm glad I didn't wear my cloak. The city heat is stifling. You, however, look bewitching. Far too classy for this neighbourhood."

His digression worked; Tess blushed and rose onto tiptoes to kiss him... in public, Severus realised. Well, almost in public, if the tramp lying asleep and snoring from intoxication on the other side of the road could be regarded as an adequate witness.

Their moment of connection ended with the insistent ring of the telephone. Severus held down a nauseating swirl of anticipation as he opened the door to the red telephone box and picked up the transceiver.

"Severus Snape speaking," he said into the Muggle device.

"Hello, Mr Snape," replied the welcome witch. "When you and Professor Marchbanks are inside the cubicle, please close the door and hang up the handset. Welcome to the Ministry of Magic."

The ting of the handset sounded as he replaced the device and turned to Tess.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She smiled. "I think so."

They stepped awkwardly into the tiny booth, and their warm bodies pressed together in the tight space. Severus caught the aroma of Tess's favourite perfume: jasmine. Closing his eyes, he tried to compose himself.

Their descent took less than a minute, and soon the door to the cramped telephone box was opening to the sound of thunderous applause from hundreds of people. They were surrounded, front and back, by rows and rows of witches and wizards, all turned to face the newcomers, clapping their hands, whooping and whistling with delight.

In a moment of blind panic, Severus turned back to the cubicle, hoping to make a hasty retreat, but the telephone box was already ten feet above, receding into the arches of the tiled ceiling. Severus felt a paralysing rush of nausea, and his robes became unbearably hot.

A long aisle in front of him led to the heart of the Atrium, where the Fountain of Magical Brethren stood fully restored. At the foot of the golden statues, he could discern several Ministry officials, including the Minister for Magic wearing striking violet robes. Shackbolt was smiling, laughing, and beckoning Severus forward.

Tess recovered first from the shock. She tugged Severus's hand and took a step forward, prompting him to move. As they transcended the aisle, he noticed numerous familiar faces lining its edges. Walking past the audience and staring straight ahead, ex-colleagues and students stepped forward to slap him on the back, smiling, cheering, and some even wiped tears from their eyes.

Utterly perplexed by the unexpected heraldry, Severus noticed Tess seemed tense; she clung to his hand, shaking slightly. When she glanced up at him, she appeared unnerved, searching his expression for signs of his reaction. He fleetingly wished the connection between the Tiger's Eye rings could tell him what she was thinking and feeling. Had she known this was going to happen?

When they reached the front row, Nathan Marchbanks stepped forward and offered Tess his arm, and as he led her away, he sneered at Severus. An immediate suspicion flooded Severus's mind... Tess's brother knew how much he would hate the pomp and circumstance and had probably arranged the whole thing just to make him squirm.

Severus made a pact with himself to behave with grace and dignity; he may not want the wizarding world to applaud him for his actions, but he could deprive Nathan of the satisfaction of seeing him ill at ease.

Shackbolt pressed the tip of his wand into his throat, magically amplifying his voice above the noise of the crowd, and they quickly cowed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to welcome Severus Snape to the finale of this, our third awards ceremony since the fall of Voldemort."

Severus twitched, and when he looked around, he noticed a dozen-or-so people, many of them Aurors and Ministry officials, wearing silver and bronze medals around their necks. Suddenly, his heart threatened to punch a hole in his ribcage...

Forcing himself to stand steady, his eyes widened at the sight of Harry Potter, appearing from behind the Minister for Magic, carrying a velveteen cushion upon which lay a golden medal. Shackbolt picked up the medallion and freed the black ribbon, displaying the award like a chain of office. Potter was the first to applaud when Severus stepped forward and allowed the Order of Merlin to be placed upon his chest. The Atrium's onlookers followed with deafening applause.

Severus looked around for Tess to find tears of pride leaking down her cheeks, and suddenly the enormous gathering of witches and wizards ceased to matter. Severus didn't notice that Harry Potter had approached him, offering a handshake. He didn't see Hermione Granger in tears, or Ronald Weasley at her side, clapping loudly. And he didn't see Neville Longbottom dressed in the robes of an Auror.

What he plainly saw was the love and adoration upon Tess's face, and in that moment, he felt like he could slay dragons. His feet propelled him forward, and within moments, she was safe in his arms, gazing giddily into his eyes. There was no need for the Tiger's Eye connection; Severus could sense her feelings as loudly as his own, and his courage sprung forth like a phoenix in full flight.

"Tess," he said, loud enough for her to hear over the celebrating crowd. "Will you come and live with me?"

She smiled, touched his cheek, and answered him with a kiss.

"I had no idea you could dance like this," Tess whispered into Severus's ear. He felt the tickle of her warm breath against his ear lobe, and he tried hard not to show any outward emotion to onlookers. When she withdrew, her face beamed with happiness which fell like sunlight upon his face.

Tess hadn't stopped smiling since they'd shared their first kiss in public a little over an hour ago. Despite the formal setting, cracks were now developing in his well-practised, taciturn manner, and he realised the woman in his arms had melted away some of the iciness he usually displayed in public.

"Being friends with the Malfoys had some advantages," Severus replied, guiding her gently in his arms. "They taught me the basics."

Tess's smile became teasing. "They took a young man from the wrong side of town and introduced him to the wizarding elite. I bet the Malfoys taught you Received Pronunciation, table etiquette and how to sneer at the lower classes."

"Unlike you, who learned such things from birth." Severus swept Tess around with a flourish, preventing her from mounting a defence. From her expression, he could see she had accepted the remark in good humour.

Severus's gaze wandered to the periphery of the Atrium, through the throng of cavorting couples who led the first dance of the Order of Merlin celebration. The weight of the gold medal felt strange against his chest.

"Have you heard from the Malfoys since they were pardoned?" Tess asked, noticing his expression.

"Not a dicky bird," Severus replied contemplatively.

Tess's laughter broke away his gaze from the crowd. Her eyes were shining.

"We've been in London for less than an hour, and already you're speaking Cockney Rhyming Slang. The Malfoys would not approve."

Severus felt his lip quirk. "I'm more concerned that I'll absorb your Welsh lilt. I could never teach again, let alone be seen in broad daylight."

Tess nudged him gently in the ribs. "I think you're more likely to pick up a northern accent when you return to live in Lancashire. I can't wait to hear you shortening your 'a's and saying 'luke' instead of 'look'."

Severus attempted to evoke the dulcet tones of his primary-school years, whispering in her ear, "When yeh move in, we'll speak proper, together."

His effort made Tess giggle. "I'm on pins and needles now, although we'll have to wait to until my first week at Hogwarts is finished before I move in. Hopefully, I'll get weekends off."

"Only the Heads of House need reside at weekends," Severus confirmed.

"So, we'll get three nights a week at home together in Downham," Tess contemplated. "Oh, just wait until I tell Nate I'm moving in with a Death Eater." She pulled a face of mock horror.

Severus couldn't restrain an amused chuckle, but his levity was cut short by a tap on the shoulder. Realising the music was fading, he turned to see Minerva McGonagall standing beside him expectantly.

"May I have this dance, Severus?" Minerva said, her usual primness contrasting strangely with nervousness.

Tess let go of him and stepped away. "Be my guest," she said generously and flitted away into the waiting arms of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Minerva stepped awkwardly into Severus's arms and waited for the music to begin. Severus felt detached as he watched Tess chatting to Kingsley, as though his sense of happiness had been stripped away. He stared longingly over his dance partner's shoulder, until Minerva suddenly moved, and he realised the orchestra were playing. He quickly restored his composure and moved mechanically to the music.

"Severus," Minerva began awkwardly. "I feel the need to apologise."

Inwardly, he cringed. His eschewal from the wizarding world had meant he'd avoided such uncomfortable conversations, but now he was being inextricably dragged into the mire.

"I should have trusted you," his ex-colleague said. "I never should've doubted you."

Severus cleared his throat. "Minerva, it was essential that you doubted me. If you'd continued to trust me, the Carrows would have been suspicious."

Minerva seemed to absorb this slowly. "I still wish I'd known. I could've helped you. Instead, I hindered you. And my interference led to your death. I'm... so sorry."

Hearing the sincerity of her words, Severus ached with a sorrow which reminded him of the consequences of his own actions... the ones which had led to Lily's death.

They spent the rest of the dance in silence. As the song came to an end, Severus searched for a response, but he found no words.

Minerva's hand brushed his chest and touched the medal hanging around his neck. "You deserve this, more than anyone I know."

"Thank you for looking after Tess," Severus managed to say.

"It's the least I could do," she replied with a small smile. "I don't suppose I can persuade you to return to teaching? Defence Against the Dark Arts is yours if you want it."

Severus was surprised by the sadness in his voice when he replied. "I once coveted that job, but my circumstances have changed; my life has changed. I'll never return to teach at Hogwarts, Minerva, or anywhere else, for that matter. I've been given a second chance, and I intend to make the most of it."

"In that case, I wish you well, Severus Snape."

"And you, Minerva."

Hogwarts' newest Headmistress disappeared into the crowd, leaving Severus momentarily alone. He looked around for Tess, but then a manicured hand softly grasped his elbow, and a svelte, blonde witch led him away from the dance floor and into an alcove so shadowy it might have been the result of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder.

His eyes took some time to adjust to the dimness, but soon he could make out the long blond hair of Lucius Malfoy standing beside his wife, Narcissa, who was busy casting privacy charms all around them.

Lucius looked much healthier than the last time Severus had cast eyes upon him. He had lost his unkempt air, and he stood straight-backed and proud, but his expression was haunted, and his eyes searched Severus hungrily.

"Severus, my old friend," Lucius began with a hint of a grimace. "I trust I may still regard you as my friend?"

Severus clasped his hands behind his back. "I don't consider us enemies, Lucius."

Narcissa wound her fingers around Lucius' arm and smiled warmly. "Lucius has some things he'd like to say to you, Severus."

"Yes," Lucius affirmed, grateful for her prompting. "You know I'm forever in your debt... I cannot thank you enough for taking care of Draco whilst I was imprisoned in Azkaban. You've done so much for our family. I feel... I feel I've repaid you poorly."

"I'm unsure of your meaning, Lucius."

Lucius shifted his weight and leaned more heavily onto his cane. "I feel... responsible for your death... It was I who delivered you into the Dark Lord's hands during the Battle of Hogwarts."

Severus sighed. Was this how every encounter was going to be? He fought the urge to flee.

"If I had chosen differently," Lucius continued, "nailed my colours to the mast sooner..."

"Then the Dark Lord would've surely killed you," Severus finished testily. "I'm getting tired of people blaming themselves for my death. What's done is done. Nobody can change the past."

Narcissa took a step forward. "I think Lucius is trying to say that we're grateful for your loyalty to our family, and we wish we could demonstrate our gratitude in some way."

Severus gripped his hands tightly behind him. "There is no need."

"But, we..."

"I do not wish to become embroiled in your manoeuvring, Narcissa. Plainly, you want something from me. Spit it out, so that I may respond directly."

Narcissa's gaze dropped to the floor, crestfallen.

Lucius took hold of her dainty hand. "We find ourselves outcast, despite having received a pardon. We were hoping you might assist us in... rebuilding the Malfoy family status."

Severus gritted his teeth, emotions coiling in his stomach like rattlesnakes. Lucius and Narcissa were his longest-surviving friends, having known him for twenty-seven years, and having evaded the Ministry of Magic's rounding up of Death Eaters when the Dark Lord first fell. He could not turn his back on them now, despite his wish to begin life anew. However, he would not risk becoming beholden to them once more.

"I believe you are assisting the Ministry in tracing those loyal to the Dark Lord, by way of redeeming yourself?" Severus asked.

Lucius shifted uneasily. "We are."

"Then I see little reason for my intervention."

"You are a celebrity, Severus," Narcissa began, noticing his discomfort. "You may not wish for this kind of prominence, but it is yours nonetheless."

"I have no intention of using my standing for personal gain," Severus stated, immediately realising the folly of his words.

"You were Sorted into Slytherin, Severus," Lucius reminded him with a twisted smile. "You won't be able to resist the lure of power."

Severus knew Lucius spoke the truth, and for the first time in his life, Severus felt troubled by the notion.

Narcissa made the most of the ensuing silence, gathering herself to her formal regal heights. "We merely seek a small public endorsement, Severus. A gesture to show the wizarding world that the Malfoys are not shunned by the man who helped defeat the Dark Lord. That is all."

Her request sounded reasonable. Severus took a few moments to deliberate, before offering his hand to Narcissa.

"I offer you one dance, Narcissa, here, for people of influence to witness. After this, you alone shall determine your fate. Do you accept?"

Narcissa smiled gracefully and accepted his hand. Lucius' lips pressed together tensely, but he nodded his assent.

As Narcissa revoked her privacy spells, Lucius glanced at the formal dance and asked Severus, "What about I?"

"Find a dance partner, if you wish. Or watch us graciously from the sidelines. Either way, be a Slytherin, Lucius, and make the most of your opportunity."

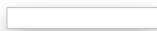
Severus ignored the occasional gasp from the crowd as he led Narcissa into the centre of the dance floor, and he passed Tess, who was dancing with family-friend Neville Longbottom. Catching her eye, he attempted to communicate without words. She simply smiled and continued to chat with Longbottom.

The next time Severus caught a glimpse, Lucius Malfoy was being led onto the dance floor by Rita Skeeter, appearing quite uneasy in the journalist's clutches. Severus couldn't restrain his smirk.

Heroes and Villains

Chapter 8 of 24

The Minister for Magic offers a proposal.



Chapter Eight

Heroes and Villains

"Thank you for coming to see me, Severus."

"I could hardly decline an invitation from the Minister for Magic."

Kingsley Shacklebolt reached out to shake Severus's hand. His grip was firm, his hands were warm, and dark eyes sparkled when he smiled.

As they took their seats either side of the ministerial desk, Severus surveyed the room. He'd never been called to the official office of the Minister for Magic before, and he immediately noticed the absence of predecessors' portraits.

Severus reflected how valuable the provision of aid from former Headteachers of Hogwarts had been during his internment as Headmaster, and he wondered how the lack of advice from ministerial forbearers impacted upon the decision-making of the highest wizarding authority.

The office was large in size, clad in darkened oak panels with an elegant marble fireplace worthy of Malfoy Manor, all very different to the greenish tiled surfaces found elsewhere in the underground government hub.

"For someone who has won a first-class Order of Merlin, you remain decidedly modest," Shacklebolt remarked.

The warmth in his slow, deep voice conveyed layers of hidden meaning, and Severus was momentarily unable to meet the minister's eye.

"I'm sorry about hoodwinking you into attending the award ceremony last week," Shacklebolt continued, and his apology sounded truly genuine. "I had it on good authority that you'd do anything to escape such publicity, and I admit I used your appearance at the ceremony for political reasons."

Severus had suspected as much. "It seems you learned a few things during your time as secretary to the Muggle Prime Minister. I assume you realise the Muggle government is far from a paragon of virtue?"

"Without a doubt, I witnessed many things at number ten, Downing Street, and being privy to all of their Prime Minister's communications was incredibly informative." Shacklebolt leaned back in his chair, resting his hands on his lap.

"So, what were these political motives for my public outing?" Severus asked, betraying no emotion in his voice.

"The initial euphoria from the fall of Voldemort had died down, and the ministry needed to boost morale. Your return was... timely."

"As I understand it, my return shortly followed your official inauguration as Minister for Magic."

"Yes, indeed it did. And over the past few weeks I've had to make many difficult decisions, Severus. The ministry employs hundreds of people who served Voldemort because it was safer or easier to do so, and a great many more employees who were puppets, doing as they were told for fear of dire consequences. But there are also a substantial number whose allegiance is dubious, including those such as Dolores Umbridge who took advantage of the situation for personal gain."

"I believe that the Madam Undersecretary is spending her days at Azkaban, awaiting trial for crimes against Muggle-borns," Severus remarked with satisfaction. "Perhaps the Dementors will cure her irritating cough."

Shacklebolt didn't even flinch. He leaned forward solemnly. "You have struck upon the nub of the problem, Severus. I can't take punitive action against everyone who served Voldemort. We don't have enough cells in Azkaban. Nor can we punish people for acting out of fear for their families and friends. I don't wish to encourage further discrimination. We need to bring the wizarding world back together to heal our wounds."

"And so the reincarnation of a heroic wizard who subversively assisted in the Dark Lord's downfall has become an exemplar for the Ministry masses?"

Shacklebolt fiddled with his gold hoop earring. "Yes, you could put it like that."

Severus almost spat.

"There's a fine line to be drawn between those who willingly committed serious crimes under Voldemort's rule and those whose actions fall within the shades of grey between Light and Dark. Take Lucius Malfoy, for instance. The decision to pardon the Malfoy family was controversial; nevertheless, if they hadn't switched sides, the outcome of the battle might have been very different."

"Malfoy motives are byzantine at best," Severus replied.

"Indeed. They made so many enemies because of their quest for power and status. But they also had other motives: shame, and deep love for their family. The problem is that people simply see their villainy and don't notice the good in their actions." Shacklebolt paused for a moment, tilting his head. "However, your motives were easier to understand, Severus. And because of this you are viewed as a hero by some. Me included."

Severus shook his head and muttered wearily, "I'm not a hero."

"I'm not surprised that you disagree, knowing you as I do."

This statement caused Severus to lift his head, and he noted the understanding air with which Shacklebolt regarded him.

"I've seen your memories. I know why you protected Harry Potter, why your allegiance changed. It wasn't because you chose Light over Dark."

"Finally, someone who appreciates me," Severus said, his voice laced with sarcasm.

Shacklebolt continued undeterred. "This is why you don't like being called a 'hero' you don't believe your motives were heroic."

Severus held his gaze levelly. Shacklebolt had identified the nugget which had so far evaded society's notice. Not even *The Quibbler's* article had revealed this deeply-held personal truth.

"Don't worry, I'm not about to reveal your insecurities to the world at large, Severus. But I do want you to know that I admire the strength of your commitment to protecting The Boy Who Lived, years after the death of the woman you loved. You could have chosen a multitude of different paths, but you honoured Lily Potter until the day you died and placed yourself in mortal danger for her, and that, in my opinion, is what makes you heroic."

"And this is why you awarded me the Order of Merlin?" Severus asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"Yes."

Silence followed for the space of a few uncomfortable heartbeats as Severus processed the Shacklebolt's insight and wisdom.

Feeling slightly queasy, Severus glanced around the office, looking for distraction. "Now that an attempt has been made to stroke my ego, perhaps the Minister for Magic will reveal the real reason for the summons? Plainly, you want something from me."

Shacklebolt smiled briefly and held Severus's gaze.

"Let me see," Severus continued, twisting his entwined fingers. "Perhaps you're inviting me to return to Hogwarts?"

The Minister for Magic gave him a patient look, but it only served to add fuel to his fire.

"Or maybe I could head up the Auror Department?" Severus's voice became harsher with each passing sentence. "Then again, perhaps I should take my rightful place on the Wizengamot? Obviously, a wizard of my calibre and distinction should have all his ambitions immediately realised." Severus paused, noticing Shacklebolt's increasing discomfort. "I'm sure you can convince society that I can be trusted with such power," he finished bitterly.

"I see your sarcasm survived revivification intact." Shacklebolt smiled crookedly, but then his expression became business-like. "I'm sure I could find a suitable position for you at the Ministry, should you be interested..." He let the implied question hang in the air for a moment, and when Severus gave no reply, Shacklebolt continued earnestly, "But I rather hoped you could be persuaded to work as a consultant."

Severus watched as the Minister rose from his chair and walked ponderously around the room. "We have need of your experience, Severus. Further assistance in tracking down the most loyal of Voldemort's remaining supporters would be very useful."

"I have no intention of working alongside your Aurors, Kingsley, so you can set aside that notion with immediate effect."

"That's not what I'm looking for, although, naturally, any information you can provide would be most welcome. I'm pleased to say that Lucius Malfoy has been more than willing to redeem himself of late, and he's liaising with the Aurors to uncover hidden accomplices."

Severus's interest piqued. "So, what *do* you want from me?"

Shacklebolt stopped pacing and regarded him seriously. "I want you to write a book, Severus."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We have need for an updated training manual for Aurors. I've worked alongside you in the Order of the Phoenix, so I know you have the skill, the experience and the intelligence for such an endeavour."

"I'm not a writer," Severus said in a clipped voice.

"No, but you are, or rather *were*, a teacher. You are pragmatic and concise, and you have extensive knowledge of the Dark Arts. Let us learn from you, Severus. Help us trace Voldemort's sneakiest supporters. You know their tricks. Share your knowledge; not only can you help our Aurors, you can also assist me in rooting out the extremists in our midst."

Severus considered the proposal. "And what will you do once they've been identified? Sack them? Imprison them?"

"Not unless they've committed a serious crime," Shacklebolt replied with a degree of impatience. "I'll reassign them if necessary, but ultimately I want people to have a second chance: an opportunity to re-enter and engage with society rather than hide themselves away."

"That all sounds very noble, but how am I to trust you'll use this information wisely?"

The minister ceased pacing the room, saying, "All I can give you is my word. And I offer it to you, unequivocally."

Shacklebolt sounded sincere, and Severus was well acquainted enough with the new Minister for Magic to feel certain he would strive for equality and diversity. Nonetheless, Severus needed time to contemplate the offer.

"I shall think about it."

"You will be well-compensated, I can assure you." Shacklebolt leaned against his desk, preparing to resume his seat. "There is, of course, another matter which we need to discuss."

"Oh?"

Shacklebolt sat down and clasped his hands upon the desktop. "You're aware that receivers of first-class Orders of Merlin are offered three wishes which the Minister of Magic endeavours to grant?"

"Ah, yes." Severus had heard of this, but had not set much stock to the rumour.

"Any thoughts?"

Severus thought carefully for a moment. "Just one."

"Proceed, and I shall endeavour to assist you."

"I wish to request that your door remains open to me, Kingsley, at any time."

Shacklebolt smiled broadly. "A wise choice, Severus, as I would expect from you. I shall be honoured to make it so."

Severus nodded and gathered himself to leave.

"Anything else?"

"I'll get back to you, if I may?"

Shacklebolt arose to walk his visitor to the door. "Whenever you're ready."

Unknowingly Given

Chapter 9 of 24

The Unspeakable hatches a plan.

Author's note: Where I have quoted from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked the passage with an asterisk.

Chapter Nine

Unknowingly Given

Tess read the wording on the parchment spread across the table, taking a bite of her sandwich, and Clym studied her intently, ignoring the bustling trade of Saturday lunchtime at the Leaky Cauldron. This was the fourth time they had met at the pub, and Clym noticed she'd gradually thawed and become more open since his blunder in Hogwarts' dungeons. He hoped this was a sign of her forgiveness.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son.

Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master.

Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe."

"This is everything Harry Potter could remember?" Tess asked, glancing his way before continuing her meal.

Clym's sandwich lay untouched upon his plate. "Pettigrew made this incantation after placing Voldemort's body into the cauldron. First, he extracted Riddle's bone from the grave. Then, Pettigrew severed his own arm in sacrifice and forced Potter to provide blood."

Tess visibly shuddered. "Could Harry remember anything about the potion?"

"He said it was brewed in an oversized cauldron. At first the potion appeared like water, but when heated it sparked, and upon the addition of each ingredient the liquid turned blue, red and then blinding white."

"I'm amazed Harry could remember such detail," Tess commented with a touch of awe. She picked up her tankard of Butterbeer and swirled the golden liquid around the rim.

Clym paused. He'd worked hard to obtain this information. Harder than Tess realised.

"I convinced him to let me view his memory inside a Pensieve. Understandably, he didn't want to relive the experience, but I needed as much detailed information as possible."

"I'm surprised he agreed to help you at all," Tess mused, rolling up the parchment and handing it back to him. "The details of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's resurrection could be dangerous in the wrong hands."

"That's why I needed Professor McGonagall's help to convince Potter," he explained, hoping Tess would value his attempts on her behalf. "When Potter realised we were attempting to resurrect Snape, he agreed at once. The boy even called him a 'hero'." Clym laughed under his breath, only to be immediately chastised.

"He *was* a hero," Tess snapped. "He... *is* a hero."

Clym refrained from further comment, knowing he'd tripped over his own feet again. Astutely, he watched her expression of annoyance transforming into a flicker of shame, then he reached across the table to touch her hand.

She responded by moving away to adjust her napkin. Avoiding eye-contact, Tess took another bite of her sandwich. Clym snatched his Butterbeer and took a long gulp, feeling as though he'd made a fool of himself.

Tess deflected the awkwardness by changing the subject. "Any idea what the potion was?"

Clym nodded, relieved. "Some. There are a couple of possibilities, and I suspect the same potion could be used, but with Light incantations and offerings instead of Dark."

Tess considered the approach whilst she chewed her food, seemingly in agreement. "So the question is how to turn this into Light magic."

"Well, the first one is easy," he said confidently. "Bone of the father,*knowingly* given... Assuming Snape's father is still alive?"

A frown creased Tess's forehead. "As far as I know, he's alive, but I don't know how to find him. Severus once told me his father's last known whereabouts were in Cornwall, but he's a Muggle, and Severus might not let me trace him; there's a lot of bad blood between them."

Clym's curiosity immediately piqued, realising this could be his chance, if he played it carefully...

"Well, it sounds as though you've identified the first challenge."

"Yes, you could say that." Tess appeared uncomfortable, but not unconvinced.

"I'll leave the father business up to you," he suggested. "I'll focus on the potion and the other two elements."

Tess took a final bite of her sandwich and pushed her plate to one side. "Leave it with me," she confirmed as she stood and shrugged on her cloak.

"You're not staying?" Clym asked, feeling peeved that the hours he'd lavished upon resurrecting Snape were not to be rewarded by Tess's continuing presence.

"I've got to get back to Hogwarts."

"But it's Saturday; surely you can have an afternoon off?" He hoped his voice didn't sound too pleading.

Tess cast him a quizzical expression, noticing his untouched plate of food. "The OWL and NEWT exams are next week, Clym. I'm running Potions tutorials all afternoon, and then Nate is coming for dinner."

"Nate," he remembered out loud. Clym had almost forgotten about Tess's older brother.

"Yes, *Nate*," Tess replied sardonically. "And he wouldn't be too pleased to learn you're the one who's helping me with Severus's resurrection."

"Undoubtedly not," he mused, glad of his anonymity.

"Thanks for lunch," she said courteously. It was the first time she'd been anything other than frosty, and it did not escape Clym's notice. "See you next week? Same time, same place?"

He hoped to see Tess again sooner, but he nodded his goodbye and was left alone to eat lunch and percolate his plan.

An owl arrived at Clym's family home the following afternoon, and he was grateful for the interruption. He wanted to see Tess, so he Apparated to Hogsmeade and met her at the Three Broomsticks, as requested. Clym found her nursing a goblet of mead in a quiet corner of the inn.

She looked tired and sad, but when her eyes met his, she smiled briefly and arose from her table to greet him.

"Do you mind if we go for a walk?" she asked, picking up her summer cloak. "I was stuck indoors for most of yesterday; I just need some fresh air."

"Of course," Clym replied, welcoming any excuse to get away from a public place to be alone with her.

Outside, the sky was overcast with heavy clouds; one of those peculiar summer days when the temperature was neither cold nor warm, suggesting the season was about to change, ahead of time.

"I talked to Severus last night," Tess said as she led him out of the village and down a sloping hill.

The silence which followed seemed to stretch into minutes. She appeared despondent, her head dipped, and her gaze focused on the ground at her feet. Clym resisted the urge to reach out for her hand.

"He said 'no'," Tess eventually stated.

"No?"

She nodded. "He told me he didn't want his father to be involved and that he had no wish to be beholden to him. He made me promise that I wouldn't go knocking on his father's door."

"I see," he replied.

Although he was conscious of Tess's inner turmoil, his mind had already skipped several steps ahead. Clym told himself that he was only trying to help Tess; at least that reason *sounded* justifiable.

"Severus told me we have to find another way, Clym."

"I'm not sure there *is* another way."

He was telling the truth.

Tess slowed her pace as they reached the end of the incline, and they trudged to a rickety fence with a broken gate, behind which an old wooden shack with boarded-up windows stood in the distance. Clym wondered what this ramshackle building was doing in the middle of nowhere, and he struggled to understand why Tess had brought him to this place.

Tess leaned over the fence, on the verge of tears. "He died here."

Clym liked to think that her sorrow compelled him to utter his next words.

"I want to help you, Tess. Forget about 'bone of the father' for now. I'll make some enquiries; see what I can find out. You've got enough on your plate with your students' exams. Take today off. Rest. I'll contact you later this week."

Her eyes met his, and for the first time since they'd been reunited, he felt their connection renewed. Clym didn't know if he was responding to her sadness, her gratitude, or her beauty. Perhaps it was all of those things. All he knew was that the warm ache in his chest had returned with surprising intensity, and as he watched her walk back to Hogwarts on her own, his throat constricted, holding the warmth inside his body.

Clym knew that feeling. He remembered how it felt all those years ago when he'd first laid eyes upon her. And he remembered how he'd felt when it had all ended.

He knew exactly where he was.

His emotions had crept through an unlocked gate whilst no one was looking and were slowly and surely leading him astray.

Clym forced himself to behave like a Muggle when he arrived at the Old County Hall in Truro. The denim he wore felt harsh against his skin, and the polyester shirt made him hot and sticky. Why people wore such ridiculous clothing was beyond him, and he yearned for his fur-lined Durmstrang robes, despite the warmth of the morning sun.

With his wand tucked safely inside the back of his jeans and underneath his shirt, Clym's fingers twitched impatiently as a middle-aged lady with dyed blonde hair led him through the archives and extracted the first of a series of large, bound books which contained Cornwall's census records for the year 1991.

"It could be a long day, Mr Turnstone, if you don't know roughly where Tobias Snape lived, but don't worry; I'm not busy this morning so I don't mind lending a hand."

The woman smiled kindly, and Clym knew he should fake a smile to show some gratitude for her offer of help. In reality, his wand would have made short shrift of the work. Years ago, he'd developed a spell to search literature for key words or phrases; the charm made his studies at Durmstrang easier, but he'd never revealed his invention to anyone. Knowledge was power, so why would he share?

A second tome was placed on the desk in front of him, and they spent the next half-an-hour or so leafing through pages of meaningless names. Mercifully, when the office telephone rang, his assistant left him to his own devices, and Clym surreptitiously extracted his wand and cast a charm upon all volumes of the 1991 census.

One book eased itself to the edge of the shelf, and when placed under the reading light, it fell open at the correct page. Magically illuminated in ultra-violet, he found Tobias Snape's entry listed alongside his wife, Isobel Snape, at an address in Mevagissey on the southern coast of Cornwall.

Hurriedly, Clym cancelled the charm, concealed his wand, and scribbled the address on a scrap of paper. The cheap plastic biro almost snapped when he heard the footsteps of the archive administrator heading towards him.

"Ah, I see you've skipped ahead!" she said, her curiosity evident in her smile. "Did you find what you were looking for, Mr Turnstone?"

"Yes," he replied, folding up the piece of paper and stuffing it into his jeans pocket. "Thank you for your assistance today; this information will be most useful."

As Clym left the census office, he pondered how best to use his newfound knowledge in his quest to win back Tess's heart.

One week later, Clym offered Tess the scrap of paper bearing Tobias Snape's address, but she refused to take the information. Instead, she stood up and walked around the office, making light conversation.

"I miss those weather walls," she commented, gazing into the magical window behind his work desk and watching candyfloss clouds eclipsing the sun. "The dungeons at Hogwarts can be dark and oppressive during the summer months. I was glad to escape from them this evening."

Absent-mindedly, she tipped the brass scales on his bookcase with the edge of her fingernail. Clym knew she would be reluctant to take Snape's father's address, so he

decided to alter his strategy.

"I've identified the Revivification Potion and ordered the ingredients from Slug and Jigger's apothecary. Today, I've been to St. Mungo's and persuaded one of their potioners to brew the formulae for us."

"That's good news," Tess said, smiling for the first time.

"The potion takes a full lunar-cycle to brew, and will be ready in five weeks' time. Then there's the 'flesh of the servant' component. As far as I can tell, the Headmaster's house-elf was the only servant Snape ever had."

Tess nodded. "I can talk to Binky when I get back to Hogwarts. House-elves will do anything to please their masters, but I'll check with Minerva McGonagall first, seeing as Binky is her elf now."

"Just tell him we're not looking for a sacrificial limb; one of his Hogwarts tea-towel togas will suffice."

"I'll try and remember not to offer him clothes in return," Tess replied ruefully. "What about 'blood of the enemy, forcibly taken'?"

"That one's a little bit trickier," Clym admitted. "Snape's enemies are all dead; but that aside, I'm not sure that such a component fits with Light magic."

"I've been thinking that too," Tess confided. "The Dark Lord used Harry Potter's blood as a means of strengthening himself against his enemy, increasing his power and control over Harry. It's Dark magic by its very nature. An enemy isn't appropriate for Light magic."

Clym nodded. In truth, he hadn't yet progressed any further than this.

Tess realigned his scales and took a seat at his desk, frowning her brow in thought. "If we're going to adapt the incantation to Light magic, we need to flip this element on its head. The opposite of being an enemy is being a friend. We need to focus on love rather than hate."

He agreed with her hypothesis and immediately felt a rush of emotion coursing through his body. He'd always valued her intelligence, and Clym now realised how much he'd missed her insight. He was so lost in admiration that he was unprepared for her next words.

"It needs to be me, Clym," she stated. "I am his friend. I love him. I should be the third element of the potion."

He rose to standing, and his chair leg screeched loudly on the stone floor. "I'm not sure about that."

"Why not?"

Tess had asked a reasonable question, and if he'd chosen to answer honestly, Clym would have told her that he didn't want her to be tied to that man, for if she were to contribute towards Snape's resurrection with even so much as a hair from her head, then she would be bound magically to him forever. Clym wanted Tess, and he would fight Snape for her, hand over fist if necessary. But he wouldn't relish battling through further magical complications. That could get very messy indeed.

"I don't know," Clym answered somewhat pathetically, unable to reveal his motives. "My gut instinct says 'no'."

"I don't see why that should be," Tess replied, already leaping several steps ahead. "I'm the only person who can do it. I'm by far the strongest candidate."

"What about asking Harry Potter instead?"

Tess spluttered and choked away a cough.

"I'm sure he'd be willing to help," Clym ventured.

"Yes, he probably would. That's not what I'm worried about. Severus will never agree."

Clym's heart pressed like a cold stone into his sternum; he could see his chance slipping through his fingers.

"I will do this, Clym. I must."

He leaned forward onto his desk, positing a challenge. "Before you make a final decision, please know this, Tess. If you give of yourself, then this tie will bind you to Snape for the rest of his life. It's not a decision to be taken lightly."

Clym tried to swallow the lump in his throat, but his tongue felt as coarse and dry as sandpaper in his mouth. Tess considered his words seriously; her beautiful blue-grey eyes held his gaze, simultaneously assessing his sincerity whilst processing her own vicissitude. Clym willed her to change her mind. He wanted her to notice how much he cared for her. He needed to feel as though he stood a chance.

"I'm going to do it, magically binding or not." Tess stood up, expressing the finality of her decision. "I'll do anything to bring him back."

He wanted to ask if she were sure, but Clym knew from her tone that she'd made up her mind. His options were becoming fewer by the minute, so he picked up the piece of paper on his desktop and offered her the bait.

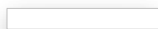
"Take this, then. You're going to need it."

Tess's lips pressed together as she accepted Tobias Snape's address, and Clym smiled, confident that his hook would hold long enough for him to catch her.

Across the Threshold

Chapter 10 of 24

Severus sets up home in Downham.



Chapter Ten

Across the Threshold

The village of Downham was green. This was the one thing about Severus's new home which took the most getting used to. When the sun shone, the fertile landscape luminesced with natural beauty. He felt as though he had never inhaled so deeply, not even in the Scottish Highlands where lakes and mountains stretched as far as the eye could see. There was something invigorating about the shadow of Pendle Hill which inspired him, instilling a sense of harmony.

Since moving into his new home, he'd made his new house on Lapwing Row untraceable, so he could not be located by the wizarding world. However, he had stopped short of casting an Unplottable Charm on his location because his house was part of a Muggle community.

Severus knew he would inevitably meet his new neighbours whilst out in his back garden, which was perhaps why he'd procrastinated about setting foot outdoors. After a few days spent unpacking his belongings and arranging his house to his liking, he could no longer busy himself indoors, and the time came to venture outside and turn his hand to Mother Nature.

Within half-an-hour, a voice called over the wooden fence as Severus laboured, turning over soil with a spade.

"Hallo!" the voice sang.

Severus kicked the spade into the sod and shielded his eyes from the sun as he wiped his muddy hands on his shirt and straightened to greet his neighbour. Leaning over the fence was an old man, probably in his early seventies, with white, wiry hair and tortoiseshell glasses. He wore a flat-cap and a beige shirt with braces, and his pale blue eyes held a sparkle which reminded Severus fleetingly of Dumbledore.

The neighbour held out his hand, and Severus stepped forward and wiped his hand on his trousers before accepting the handshake.

"How do yeh do?" said the old man. "Name's Dawson, Albert Dawson. And you are?"

"Snape. Severus Snape."

The neighbour's eyes widened with curiosity. "Interesting name yeh got there, if you don't mind me sayin'."

"My mother was fond of the Romans," Severus replied.

"Aye. Mothers have a lot to answer for. Take my wife. The poor lass were named Ermintrude. Course, we all call her Trudy. What do yeh go by, my lad?"

"Severus."

Albert's silvery eyebrows twitched slightly. "Severus it is, then."

Severus picked up his spade and recommenced digging the plot from which he'd Vanished weeds and dead plants the night before.

"You've been busy this morning, eh? Cleared the garden quick enough. Keen gardener, are yeh?"

"Not really."

The older man didn't miss a beat. "Yeh got some interestin' shrubs there. Wormwood, Meadowsweet, Monkshood, and, by the 'eck, is that Belladonna?"

Snape stopped digging and looked at the potted Deadly Nightshade which was about to be treated to a new home. "Yes, it is. Why do you ask?"

"Well," Albert said with an air of solicitude, "yeh want to be careful with that kind of stuff. Folk round here, some of 'em still get twitchy 'bout witchcraft."

"Twitchy?" Severus asked, faking innocence whilst leaning on his spade.

"Yeah. Only the older families, mind. The ones descended from the old stock. Some folk round here think the Pendle witch story is a good little money-spinner, brings in visitors, sells a few books and knickknacks; other people think it's a tragic part of our past, but there's one or two still superstitious 'bout things. They say Belladonna was used to kill some of them men, back in the seventeenth century."

"You seem very knowledgeable about such things, Mr Dawson."

"Call me Albert."

"Albert."

"Well, I grown up in the village, see? Been here all me life. Seen a lot come and go."

"You knew the previous owners of this house, then?"

"Yeah. A bit." Albert seemed to hesitate. "Yeh never met the vendor, did yeh?"

"I was told they lived in Australia."

"Aye, that they do. The old lady what lived here, she died years back and left the house to her sister. Bit of an odd thing, that, seeing as they hadn't spoke for decades. But then she didn' have any other kin to leave it to."

Severus nodded but said nothing.

"Yeh had any problems since you moved in?"

"None to speak of."

Albert looked as if he doubted what he had heard. "So, do yeh live on your own, Severus?"

"Yes. Well... no. My... lady-friend teaches at boarding school. She'll be here at weekends."

"And is she... like you?"

"Like me?"

Albert frowned, as if he'd said something he'd regretted, but seemed to recover quickly enough. "Fair of skin, with dark hair and eyes?"

"None of those things."

"Good, good," Albert said distractedly. "Well, I'll let you get on with it, Severus, nice day for gardening. Make the most of it. When it rains, it doesn't stop for days!"

Washing his hands at the kitchen sink, Severus admired his work through the kitchen window, pleased that his freshly watered and planted garden would provide him with potion ingredients, reducing the need to visit apothecaries.

As he scrubbed his fingernails, he noticed his Tiger's Eye ring had become caked in mud, so he removed the band from his little finger and employed a small brush to clean the grit from its crevices. As he repositioned the band on his finger, he made a mental note to remove the ring before any future outdoor labour.

The ghoul in the attic made a strange sound of strangled giggling, seeming to mirror Severus's own feeling of nervous excitement. Very soon he would hear the sound of the Doorbell Charm. Severus went upstairs to make himself presentable, and then opened the loft door and let loose two large house spiders which he'd found in his outhouse; the ghoul quickly fell quiet. He hoped the arachnids would provide the house guest with sufficient distraction for the evening.

When the long-awaited sound of a wind chime rang through the house, Severus glanced at himself in the bedroom mirror, straightened his black waistcoat, and nervously pinched the cuffs of his deep plum shirt.

Casting his final assessment on the room, he quickly smoothed out a crease on his bed linen, and then marched downstairs to the front door. The rapping of the brass doorknocker raised a swell of warmth in his chest. She was here.

Tess smiled broadly when he opened the door, and she dropped her trunk onto the stone footbridge to fling her arms around him. Severus leaned in, claiming her lips in a kiss which expressed the deep longing he'd felt ever since she'd left for Hogwarts. She responded passionately, pushing him inside the house and up against the wall of the hallway. With the tips of his fingers, he flicked the door shut then ran his hands through her long wavy hair, massaging the nape of her neck with measures of insistence and tenderness.

Tess felt, tasted and smelt absolutely delicious; his plan to sit down and eat the meal he'd prepared evaporated quickly into the air. Soon he was carrying her up the staircase and kicking open the door to his bedroom. Their bedroom.

When Tess's feet touched the floor she drew an audible intake of breath, immediately noticing this room to be the product of an Undetectable Extension Charm. The window, which Muggles would not be able to discern from outside, faced the front of the house and overlooked Pendle Hill. At her feet were polished wooden floorboards, and whilst they looked stunning, she imagined they'd be cold if she were barefoot. One solitary piece of furniture dominated the room: a king-sized mahogany four-poster bed.

Severus let go of her hand as she stepped closer to take a look at the unusual bedstead. There were no curtains or canopy, and the pillows and eiderdown were dressed in plain, albeit luxurious, white cotton. Severus's style of simplicity and practicality were obvious, and she made a mental note to add some soft-furnishings to her shopping list.

The vertical posts at each corner of the bed were about as wide as dinner plates, made from solid wood, and adorned with beautiful carvings of ivy. Tess reached out and touched the climbing, leafy pattern, which felt silky to the touch, and quickly realised the piece of furniture had been fashioned by master craftsmen, and probably cost at least six months of a Hogwarts professor's salary. She realised Severus had splashed out on this impressive bedstead with the money he had saved on the house purchase.

Tess turned to smile at him and noticed he was holding his ebony and phoenix-feather wand in his hand, poised to cast a charm. He seemed slightly nervous and unsure of himself, as though he were concerned she would not like his choice.

"Severus, this is the most beautiful bed I've ever seen," she reassured him. "Where did it come from?"

"The bed came from Indonesia, via Borgin and Burkes. Special request."

"I'm so pleased we have similar tastes," Tess remarked, laughing with relief.

"I hoped you'd like it."

Severus walked over to the bed and tapped the frame with his wand. In response, the ivy leaves shivered as though caught in a gentle breeze, and Tess giggled as the heart-shaped leaves brushed against her fingers.

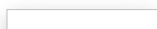
When Severus's gaze caught her attention, his eyes were smouldering. His lips were soon upon hers, encasing her in a kiss which left her in no doubt of what was to follow.

His body pressed her back against one of the bedposts then he took hold of her hands and restrained them behind the wooden post. Tess felt a flutter of excitement as he pushed his tongue firmly into her mouth and silken branches of ivy encircled her wrists, holding them in place.

Housewarming Gifts

Chapter 11 of 24

Tess settles in quickly.



Chapter Eleven

Housewarming Gifts

Tess blushed as Severus dragged her discarded trunk from the footbridge at the front of the house.

"I can't believe we just left it there," she said, still feeling slightly shocked by their wanton behaviour. "Anyone could've run off with it."

Severus pulled the heavy case over the threshold and closed the front door. "That seems unlikely, given the weight of it. What have you packed in there? A Stupefied Death Eater?"

Tess found her wand and levitated the trunk up the stairs, smiling. "I haven't seen a Death Eater all week... More's the pity." She slipped her hand into Severus's, and his lip

quirked.

"Well, *this* Death Eater had prepared dinner. Let's hope a Warming Charm can resurrect it."

He turned and grasped the door handle, and Tess realised she was about to be treated to a tour of the rest of the house. So far she'd only seen the hallway, bedroom and bathroom, and she remained childishly giddy about the turn of events.

The opened door to the front reception room revealed a small library of floor-to-ceiling books, lovingly and neatly stacked, and an old armchair which she recognised from Spinner's End.

"I'm going to get some new furniture," Severus explained. "A couple of leather armchairs, like the ones we had in our Potions laboratory at Hogwarts."

"Sounds good," Tess agreed.

Severus pointed at a stack of books on the floor. "Maybe when you've unpacked your belongings, you can fit those into your Hogwarts trunk? I saved them for you."

Tess smiled and squeezed his hand. She knew this meant he'd been thinking about her whilst cleaning and cataloguing his book collection.

The next door led into a large room in which a small, rickety table had been set for dinner for two. The candles had already burned down half their length, having been lit prior to Tess's arrival. Behind the table, and in front of a pair of French doors, was a dark green Chesterfield sofa, which looked exactly like the one in Severus's old Hogwarts quarters. As he wandered off into the kitchen, Tess wondered if Severus had somehow managed to retrieve his old settee before the start of term.

Whilst sounds of clinking crockery and pans sounded from the kitchen, Tess opened the glass doors and stepped outside. The sun had dipped low on the horizon, and the temperature would soon dip to a pleasant autumnal coolness. Over the fence, Tess could see an old man tipping vegetable peelings into his compost heap. She stepped onto the lawn, noticing Severus had been busy in the garden, and waved at the neighbour.

"He's a jovial fellow, that neighbour of yours," Tess commented in between mouthfuls of summer pudding. "He'd sized you up in no time at all!"

"I beg your pardon?"

Severus felt Tess's quizzical gaze upon him and immediately knew he'd missed something. And that 'something' seemed quite crucial.

"He knows you're a wizard, Severus."

He took a moment to recover himself. "But... How?"

Tess chuckled and took a sip of coffee. "I can't believe you didn't notice."

"Notice what?"

"He's a Squib!" Tess laughed softly at Severus's bemusement.

"How can you know that? You've spent all of ten minutes talking to him tonight..."

"It took me five minutes to observe his body language and notice the way he questioned me, and soon realised he suspected I was a witch. I asked him if you'd tried to slip him some Gregory's Unctuous Uncction, and he burst into fits of laughter."

Severus's eyes widened.

"Albert seemed relieved that you're magical. I bet he's been on tenterhooks ever since he met you, Severus!"

"You mean he'd already worked out I'm a wizard?"

"Of course he had. You've razed the garden quicker than any Muggle could ever manage, and planted more potions ingredients than Professor Sprout's greenhouse. Plus, he says you've got the hair and complexion of a family who used to live locally."

"You're kidding me? He knew some of my distant relatives?"

"Apparently. I didn't get the details because you called me inside for dinner."

Severus pushed his finished plate to one side and picked up his black coffee, his lips quirking into a small smile. "Quite incredible."

Tess winked and finished her coffee.

"I shall have to send you out there more often. Give you another week and you'll have traced my entire family tree."

Tess's gaze suddenly dropped, leaving Severus to ponder her change in composure. Her tension lifted when the ghoul in the attic let out a peal of laughter and started banging his frying pan with a spoon.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I've brought you a couple of housewarming gifts."

Severus cleared the table whilst Tess ran upstairs to retrieve something from her trunk. She returned a minute later with a fruit-laden specimen of Lovage. Severus inspected its shiny yellow-green leaves with satisfaction and remarked, "This will come in useful if I have to befuddle the neighbours."

Tess grinned. "I'm glad you like it."

Severus took off his Tiger's Eye ring and placed it on the dining room table. "I'll go and plant it now."

"Not before you get your second gift," Tess said with a hint of mischief.

"I do believe this will be my third gift of the evening," Severus said, stepping forward and leaning in for a kiss.

Tess cleared her throat and gently pushed him away. "Maybe later."

Severus frowned as Tess clicked her fingers, and with a muffled popping sound, a small, pale-brown house-elf appeared at his side, bowing deferentially.

"Fogle is pleased to meet his new master," the elf said in a manner which reminded Severus of a well-heeled Maître D'.

When Severus didn't reply, Fogle assessed the situation and trotted into the kitchen to clean the dishes. Tess giggled at Severus's expression.

"Do you like him?" she asked.

"You bought me a house-elf?" he asked, trying to hide his incredulity without success.

"I did." Tess attempted earnestness, but her eyes were shining. "Every wizarding home should have one. Plus, I've always wanted a house-elf but couldn't justify keeping one when I lived on my own. Now that we're living together..." Her voice drifted off nervously.

Severus felt warmth rising in his chest as he realised how serious she was about sharing a home with him; a house-elf was a considerable investment, not to be undertaken lightly. His expression must have softened because Tess now looked more hopeful. She grasped Severus by the hand and led him to the French doors.

"Let's leave Fogle to the washing up. It's going to be a clear night. We can set up my telescope and spend the evening under the stars."

Sitting at the top of the stone steps leading down into the garden, Tess and Severus waited for astronomical dusk. The sky was deep indigo, and a waning gibbous moon had risen in the east, tracing its way across the night sky.

"We could use some sort of bench or comfy seat out here," Tess remarked, shifting her weight on the threadbare rug which Severus had laid down for them.

"You might have to wait. My first remittance won't come for months," Severus reminded her. "I've not started on the project for the Auror Department yet."

Tess reached out and took hold of his hand. "Don't forget, I'll be living here too, and Fogle didn't deplete all of my savings. I'll contribute towards the furniture. How are you getting on with your new Potions laboratory, anyway?"

Severus's gaze shifted to the old outhouse at the side of the property. He could see the moon reflecting on one of the window panes. "It's almost ready. I've cleared the space, re-housed dozens of spiders and transfigured the workbench; I just need to buy some cauldrons and then I'll be ready to start brewing again."

Nestling into the crook of his arm, Tess wrapped her arm around his back. "I can't wait for the experiments to begin. I've really regretted not having time to continue our Imperius curse-breaker research."

"I'm looking forward to testing my concoctions on you again," he whispered into her hair. "Remember that last trial we did together?"

Severus felt her smile as she leaned into his chest. "Oh, God, don't remind me," she said, chuckling. "I was mortified about forcing you to slow-dance with me."

"You didn't force me into anything. Remember, *you* were the one under the Imperius Curse. I came so close to kissing you that day. You had no idea."

"I still can't believe you kept your feelings hidden for so long," Tess said quietly.

Severus moved and pulled her towards him, enveloping her in a passionate kiss which took them beyond nautical dusk. When she came up for air, she ran her fingers down the side of his face. "I've missed this so much," she whispered. "I've missed you ever since I left the Leaky Cauldron for Kings Cross station."

As she threw her leg around him, straddling him on the top stair, Severus felt his last piece of tension melt away. He sank his fingers into her hair and claimed her lips once more. She tasted like warm, dark cherries, heavy and sensuous on his tongue. He almost cried out when she withdrew her kiss, but then exhaled audibly when her lips made contact with the skin of his neck.

She nibbled her way to his earlobe and murmured, "Have you missed *me*, Severus?"

"Oh, God, yes," he replied without thinking, soon realising his blood seemed to have diverted away from his brain, pooling in the part of his anatomy where he could exert little control. But he didn't mind. He *had* missed Tess.

"How much did you miss me?" she coaxed, twisting her weight in a most pleasurable way.

"Every single day," he muttered before forcing his lips onto hers once more.

Thoughts of astronomical observations soon disappeared, like wispy clouds obscuring the moon. Severus removed his wand and flicked a non-verbal spell at the rug, trying not to be distracted by Tess unbuttoning his shirt. The spell didn't fire, so he tried again.

Tess giggled softly. "You're all in a muddle. Here, allow me."

Severus withheld for a moment, but soon Tess had coaxed his wand from his hand to direct a Cushioning Charm upon the worn fabric. Before he could object further, she had pushed him onto his back and unbuttoned the remainder of his attire.

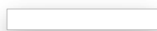
As he immersed himself in the sensation of making love by starlight, he thought the sight of her silhouette against the starry night sky would remain imprinted on his memory for as long as he lived.

Inside the house, Fogle busied himself with his duties and discreetly placed Severus's Tiger's Eye ring on the bedside table. Turning down the sheets, the little elf was curious to know why the precious stone glinted at him in the darkness.

Unveiled Emotions

Chapter 12 of 24

Aurora Sinistra helps Tess with her predicament.



Chapter Twelve

Unveiled Emotions

At the end of the summer term, Tess followed the path which led back to Hogwarts, fiddling absent-mindedly with Severus's anti-Horcrux and pulling the silver band back and forth along the chain of her necklace. Whilst waiting for St Mungo's to brew the Revivification Potion, Clym had returned the ring to Tess for safekeeping, and rarely an

hour passed when she didn't touch the ring for reassurance.

The summer sun had dipped beyond the hills, and the partly-rebuilt castle loomed as a black silhouette on a purple horizon. Tess hoped the long walk back from Hogsmeade might reinvigorate her before she visited Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing, slipped the Tiger's Eye ring onto her finger, and snatched a few hours by the riverbank with the man she loved.

"Hagrid really knows how to put them away," Tess remarked as she stepped over a tree root on the pathway. "He must be Madam Rosmerta's favourite patron."

Aurora lit the tip of her wand as the daylight continued to fade. "You should've seen him at last year's end-of-term gathering. Filius Flitwick had to levitate him home! Rosmerta really should've called time, but this time last year we were all knocked for six by Dumbledore's death, and nobody noticed how intoxicated Hagrid had become. I'm sure those three bottles of Ogden's Firewhisky would have given him terrible heartburn."

Tess grimaced. "Not to mention the hangover."

They walked for a while in silence, picking their way through the woodland and enjoying the fresh air. By the time they reached the castle, the school would be empty; earlier that day, the teachers had escorted the remaining students to Hogsmeade and seen them safely aboard the Hogwarts Express, freeing Tess's time to focus her energies on Severus's revivification.

"What are you doing next week, Tess?"

"I don't know, actually," she replied. "I can't decide. Last night, Severus practically ordered me to go on holiday. He says I look completely drained. It's really no wonder; each unconscious hour I spend in the Hospital Wing doesn't seem to count as sleep. But I choose to be with him on the riverbank, rather than lying in bed, alone in my quarters."

"He's right. You do need a holiday."

Tess groaned. "Not you, too. I've never been under so much pressure, not even when I was spying for Severus and lying to my colleagues and the Carrows."

"Which is why you need a break," Aurora said, smiling. "Why are you feeling pressure about taking a holiday?"

Unable to answer at first, Tess brushed her hand through the leaves of a nearby sapling, wishing life could be simpler. "Clym offered me his summer home in Slovenia for a week."

To Aurora's credit, she continued to keep pace at Tess's side. Eventually, she asked, "And why aren't his wife and family using this summer home?"

"He says that Sophia is taking the kids to see their grandparents in the Isle of Skye. The summer house will be empty."

"And where will he be?"

"At work," Tess replied, kicking at a stone on the edge of the path. "I know what you're thinking."

"What am I thinking?"

"That it's a trap. That I'll be there on my own, and he'll be Flooing in at the first opportunity..."

"Clym's offer of a holiday feels premeditated to you?"

"Yes. I've noticed the way he looks at me. I'm not as naïve as I used to be, and this time I'm taking responsibility for myself. So I've declined his offer."

"That sounds very wise," Aurora commented.

"Besides, I can't go on holiday; when I'm wearing the anti-Horcrux to visit Severus I have to be supervised. I don't want to be separated from him."

Aurora shook her head. "He's already given you his permission. He knows you need a break, and I think some time away from him might do you good. You haven't stopped since the Battle of Hogwarts. You need some time and space to look after yourself."

"I don't know. I'd rather be with him." Tess looked through a gap in the trees and could make out the bright, shining planet of Venus in the darkening sky above. She wished she could take Aurora's advice. "I know where I am when we're together."

Aurora quickly untangled the sentence, asking, "So, where do you think you are the rest of the time?" She turned her head to scrutinise Tess's reaction.

"When I'm not with Severus?" Tess contemplated her reply. "Lost and confused. And scared." The unveiled emotions seemed to float in the cool air around her.

"What are you scared about?"

Tess's footsteps slowed. "I can't answer that. My fear is ephemeral. Whenever I reach out to grasp it, the feeling slips away."

Aurora continued to walk, and Tess followed, her eyes fixed upon the ground.

"When do you feel afraid?" the older witch asked.

Tess knew the answer to that particular question. "When I'm with Clym."

"Clym scares you?"

"No, he doesn't scare me, as such. I think I scare myself."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I'm with Clym, I feel like everything I do or say carries great risk. I live in fear of leaving a false impression, of leading him on."

Aurora considered her reply. "So you're afraid that your behaviour is an open invitation to him?"

"When we're in the same vicinity, I'm overwhelmed with fear. It's stupid really, but I'm scared that whenever I open my mouth, or look him in the eye, Clym's going to be lured in, like a sailor to a Siren's call. And we'll both end up shipwrecked."

"So it seems everything you say and do carries a consequence, almost as though it's inevitable that Clym will be drawn in."

"Kind of, yes," Tess replied. "But it's not as though I'm inviting his attention, or even that I'm particularly confident about myself. It's more that I feel I'm dangerous to him."

"Do you feel like you were dangerous to him in the past?"

Tess swallowed down on a dry throat. Aurora had stumbled upon something which had been on the edge of her awareness and up until now had been left unrecognised.

"Yes. I was."

"How were you a danger to him?"

"By being there. When I joined the Ministry, our attraction was instantaneous. I admit: I flirted with him. Every day at work I would find a reason to speak to him and seek him out, and eventually I made sure we worked together by requesting he teach me Occlumency. I was the one who suggested we went out for a drink. I initiated our first kiss. It was all me."

"You didn't know he was married."

"That doesn't matter, Aurora. If I hadn't been so flirtatious, he would never have cheated on his wife."

There was a long pause, and Tess felt a hot, sticky nausea creeping through her stomach. She realised she was holding herself responsible for Clym's infidelity, and she felt as though she'd uncovered a monster.

Aurora stopped by a bed of wild garlic and inhaled the tangy aroma, pointing her illuminated wand at the pretty white flowers carpeting the floor. "I'm hearing you say that you held all the power," she reflected.

Her words struck Tess like a gust of wind through the trees. Power was something she hadn't previously considered, and the word seemed to reverberate through her body. "There is something about power," she said, trying to pin it down. "But I'm not sure."

"There was a power imbalance in your relationship with Clym," Aurora ventured. "He was much older than you, an experienced Obliviator in a senior post, and married with a child. However, he was aware of all those things when he entered into a relationship with you."

"But if I hadn't..."

"Regardless of how much you may have flirted, he was a grown man in a position of power."

Tess watched Aurora's expression carefully in the bluish wand-light. She could sense what was coming next.

"So you're saying that he abused his position?"

"I'm saying that he made a conscious decision to cheat on his wife with a younger, more naïve woman. And he hoodwinked you into thinking his love was pure."

Tess shivered. "He did love me, Aurora."

"That may be so, but your love for him was based on a lie."

Tess ran her fingernails down the rough bark of a nearby tree trunk, scratching away a strip of moss, her nose scrunched in concentration. "Even after he told me about his wife and child, I still loved him. I'm so ashamed that I didn't walk away."

"He'd already ensnared you. He'd taken you past the point of no return. By then, you were defenceless."

Tess wrapped her cloak more securely around her shoulders, appreciating the warmth of the garment. She had never thought of herself as defenceless. But perhaps she *had* been...

"I never realised Clym wielded that much power. I always thought I'd been the immoral one. I blamed myself for his unfaithfulness..."

"He chose to betray his marriage vows, Tess. He made a decision to be with you. He used his maturity and his position to impress and attract you. His disloyalty to his wife is not your fault."

"But I stayed with him, even when I knew."

"Yes, I know." Aurora touched Tess's shoulder gently. "But you were not responsible for *his* decision to continue the affair. Clym is equally accountable. After all, he held a fair proportion of the power."

In the silence which followed, Tess sensed the stillness of the woodland and heard the distant screech of a barn owl. Her sense of accountability for their disastrous affair had shifted. When once she had shouldered the full burden of responsibility, she now bore a lighter load, for Clym had his own share to carry.

"I understand my confusion and fear now," Tess said, tracing her fingertips down the tree-bark crevices. "Whenever I've seen Clym, the situation has felt dangerous. I've been scared that I'd lead him astray, that somehow my actions would make him love me again."

"You thought him defenceless."

Tess brushed the moss from her fingernails. "Yes. But he wasn't. He isn't. I hadn't appreciated that before."

"And how do you feel about working with him now? Does it feel dangerous?"

"No, not dangerous," she considered. "I suppose it's only dangerous if I choose to pursue him. Or if I accept the offer of his holiday home."

"Sounds as though you've found some clarity," Aurora said, her voice full of warmth. "How about you come to Switzerland with Friedrich and I? We've got a spare room in our chalet. We'll be out for most of the day, and I can supervise if you want to see Severus at night."

"That's awfully kind, but I couldn't impose."

"You won't be imposing at all. And anyway, you've already said the Revivification Potion won't be ready for another two weeks, so what's left to stop you?"

Tess smiled, and tears of gratitude fell from her eyes. Their conversation ended with a hug, and Tess returned to Hogwarts Castle contented and rejuvenated, looking forward to the summer holidays and being reunited with the man she loved.

Family Affairs

Severus learns more about his parents.



Chapter Thirteen

Family Affairs

Pendle Hill was often covered in low-lying cloud, or blotted out completely by dense fog, and large swathes of countryside had turned brown, red and gold by the time Severus had completed the first section of his Dark Arts manual for Aurors.

As autumn's colour palate daubed the trees and covered pavements with crisp leaves, frost began to claim the newly-planted perennials in his garden. Whenever the weather was dry, Severus spent his time outdoors, pruning and preparing the garden for winter. During the spells of rain and drizzle, he applied himself to potion-making or writing for the Ministry. His pattern was punctuated by Tess's arrival on Friday evenings and their lazy weekends in front of the fire.

Contentment occasionally sneaked in through the back door, and during the long weeks of the autumn term, Severus began to appreciate how much his life had changed. He did not miss being duty-bound and dancing to the tune of two masters, and he coveted his freedom to live each day as he pleased, away from the stress, strain and tedium of teaching. The only time he longed to be at Hogwarts was when he thought about Tess. Often, by her third or fourth night away, he caught himself moping around the house.

On these days, Severus would usually relocate to the potions laboratory in his outhouse, light the fire, and settle into his brewing to escape the incessant chatter of Fogle the house-elf. Severus had never before owned a house-elf, but he'd always thought elves were not meant to be seen or heard, and so he began to suspect Tess had primed Fogle to ensure his master never went hungry, to tend to all his creature comforts, and prevent the house descending into untidiness: one of Severus's foibles. When the house-elf inevitably wore through Severus's patience, Fogle would punish himself with worrying degrees of masochism. At first, Severus had found the elf's repertoire of self-punishment quite amusing, until he began to realise that Fogle had done nothing wrong and was merely bearing the brunt of Severus's bad moods. At least once a week, Severus took the decision to send Fogle next door to serve his neighbour, Albert. This seemed to please all concerned parties and gave Severus much needed respite.

One Thursday afternoon, Severus was raking leaves from his garden lawn when Albert called to him over the fence.

"Afternoon, Severus," he said jovially. "Thanks for sending Fogle. He's cleaned the house like a whirling dervish, and he's made a cream tea for Trudy. She's just sent him back home to yeh."

Severus left his rake leaning against the outhouse and wandered towards the fence.

Albert assessed him curiously. "Horrible job, that, clearing leaves. Can't understand why yeh don't just... yeh know..." His sentence ended in a wink.

"Gardening is best done the old-fashioned way, Bert. The less magic I use, the fewer gnomes chew my plants and spoil the grass."

Albert nodded. "Makes sense. Plus, yeh wouldn't want anyone seeing yeh, would yer?"

"Definitely not. I like my anonymity, and I'd prefer not to Confund the villagers."

"I notice the fire's lit in the outhouse," Albert remarked, pointing to the smoke from the newly-built chimney. "Been busy?"

"I have," Severus said, knowing that his neighbour was poised to invite himself around to share a pot of tea, as had become their custom on such afternoons. "Shall I put the kettle on?"

"Aye. I'll bring biscuits. Chocolate digestives alright with yeh?"

"Only if they're plain chocolate," Severus replied. "The side gate's open. See you in five minutes."

Once inside his outhouse laboratory, Severus checked the small cauldron's progress, noticing that the potion was brewing to schedule. He filled a kettle with water, placed it upon the stove, and then retrieved a teapot, cups, saucers and a plate. Albert knocked and entered just as Severus was pouring the tea.

"Well timed," Severus commented as Albert pulled up a chair.

Albert opened the biscuits and tipped them onto the plate, then wrapped his fingers appreciatively around the warmth of the teacup. "I'm glad we've seen each other today," he said, pausing to take a sip. "I got some news for yeh."

Severus submerged a biscuit into his tea, then enjoyed the sensation of sweet biscuit and melted chocolate disintegrating on his tongue.

"Aw, yer not supposed to dunk 'em, Severus," Albert remarked, tutting.

"Why ever not? Dunking enhances the flavour."

"Yeh're showing your roots again, lad," said Albert. "Yeh can take the boy out of Cokeworth, but yeh can't take Cokeworth out of the boy."

"Some things remain sacred, Bert. That's why I still take two sugars in my tea."

"Well, I got some more information about yer mother and father from Mrs Grimes, the Muggle-born witch who runs the newsagents in Newchurch. It's not exactly a pleasant story, mind."

"Most things about my upbringing were unpleasant," Severus replied. "I have no intention of ever resuming contact with my father."

"Well, I don't have to tell yeh what I heard."

Severus sighed. "Go on."

Albert paused for another bite of biscuit and a sip of his tea. "Well, we already know yer mother was disowned by the Prince family soon after she turned nineteen. Apparently, generations of the Prince family lived in Barley village, but when yer mother left, so did the rest of 'em. Eileen had two older brothers, and they left home when they were seventeen, moving all over the country. Seems they were the last wizarding family in Barley, not counting the offspring of the Pendle Witches, which we both know weren't real witches or wizards at all.

"Anyway, seems Eileen was fawning after some strapping mill-worker from Cokeworth, who she'd met at a summer fête. Followed him around like a lost puppy, she did, pretended to have a job nearby and walked with him on his way home from work, that sort of stuff. Locals were surprised when all of a sudden she fell pregnant. Apparently, nobody was more surprised than the fella himself."

Severus felt his eyebrows creeping up his head. "Are you saying...?"

"That she tricked him? Slipped him a Love Potion? Who knows."

"Certainly, that would explain a few things," Severus commented, remembering how his father rarely showed his mother any affection, talked resentfully about 'doing his duty', and told him he was an unwanted child.

"Well, they say he only wed Eileen 'cos she was pregnant, but locals never could work out why her parents were so mad about their marriage. Your grandparents moved away from the area after the wedding."

"Perhaps they disowned her because she'd married a Muggle," Severus pondered. "They were probably a pureblood family."

"That would explain it, I reckon."

Albert helped himself to another biscuit whilst Severus considered the repercussions.

"How long have you lived here, Bert?" he asked eventually.

"Since I were a nipper. Me mum was a Muggle, but me dad went to Hogwarts and everything. We lived here together, this were our family home. When I were old enough, I left home for a bit and tried to fit in to the wizarding world, but it turned out it weren't right for me. Or I weren't right for it. The old woman who lived in yer house was also a witch, but she kept herself to herself, she did. Took me years to work out she were magical."

"Tess told me you knew me to be a wizard from the first moment we met."

"Aye. Gave yourself away, yeh did. Better now that yeh've stopped using magic on the garden."

"I learned my lesson the hard way. I hate de-gnoming gardens. However, I also hate raking leaves."

"Yeh're tidying up the back yard before Tess comes back tomorrow?"

"Trying to keep myself occupied."

"Ah," Albert said with a crooked smile. "Yeh're missing her."

With a hissing intake of breath, Severus closed his eyes. "Am I so obvious?"

Albert chuckled. "Yep, but I wouldn't worry about it. Experience tells me that women like their men to show these things from time to time."

Severus grimaced. "I'll take your word for it."

"Why don't you visit her at Hogwarts during the week? Surely yeh could just Apparate there?"

"I could Apparate to the main gate, but I'd be escorted inside and see people to whom I don't wish to speak. I can't bring myself to do it."

"Can't yeh take the Floo Network?"

"Only by prior invitation to specific locations in the castle. There's no privacy."

"Yer house used to be connected to the Floo Network," Albert continued. "That's how old Maud used to come and go without me noticing."

"I hadn't thought about using the Floo," Severus admitted, realising it had been a long time since he'd needed that mode of transport.

"Well, I'd best get back, Severus. Here, let me help yeh clear up these plates."

As Albert gathered up the crockery, he knocked Severus's Tiger's Eye ring across the workbench.

"Oh, what's this, then?"

"That's mine," Severus replied, placing the silver ring into his pocket. "I take it off when I'm gardening."

"From the size of it, I thought it might be an engagement ring for yer lady." Albert winked, swilling the teacups under a running water tap.

Severus smiled inwardly at the older man's charm. He knew Albert had already coaxed more information from him than he'd ever intended to share. "I thought you said you were leaving?"

Albert laughed gruffly, leaving the crockery to dry. "That I am. Thanks for lending us Fogle again. See yeh soon!"

Severus watched as the wiry-haired man shuffled through the leaves on the lawn and closed the gate behind him.

By the time Severus had tended to his cauldronful of potion, the light outside had dipped, and fog had descended upon the village. Feeling tired and ready for his evening meal, he locked the outhouse and retrieved his wand from inside his coat sleeve. He knew he'd regret using magic to clear the garden of fallen leaves, but Albert had given him an idea, and he'd decided he'd pay Kingsley Shacklebolt an early visit tomorrow instead of working on his garden.

Checking first for twitching curtains and nosy neighbours, Severus swept his wand around the lawn, intending to Vanish the leaves.

Nothing happened.

He executed the same charm again, this time with a verbal incantation.

And still nothing happened.

Severus stood for a moment, perplexed, wondering if he was simply too tired or preoccupied for the task.

After one more failed attempt, he stomped through the back door of the house, washed his hands, and returned his Tiger's Eye ring to its usual place on his little finger. Fogle greeted him with a warm and creamy Shepherd's Pie, and Severus settled down at the table.

"Fogle?"

"Yes, master?" The pale-brown elf reappeared by the dinner table with a wine bottle, poised to top up his goblet.

"I want you to go outside and clear the fallen leaves from the lawn."

Fogle's large copper-coloured eyes betrayed his confusion. "Fogle has been banned from going outdoors; Fogle doesn't want to get into trouble. But Fogle will follow his

master's orders..." The elf scratched the back of his hands anxiously as he processed the contradiction.

Severus sighed, seeing the need for an explanation, but not wanting to make an admission. "I usually prefer to do my own gardening, but tonight my wand let me down."

The elf's expression changed from bemusement to curiosity, the latter of which made Severus flinch.

"The neighbours won't be able see you outside tonight; the fog is too thick. Just this once, remove the leaves from the garden."

Fogle nodded and scampered away, leaving Severus on his own with a plate of food and a quietly crackling fire. He took out his wand and laid it down upon the table, his mind preoccupied with its failure.

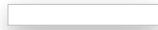
Eventually, when his plate was empty and his goblet drained, he tentatively cast *Incendio* at the fireplace. He felt a spike of relief when large flames leapt forth as usual. His wand's failure appeared to be intermittent.

In the morning, he decided, he would see the Minister for Magic to make a request, present his first manuscript, and then pay a visit to a professional on Diagon Alley.

Magical Malady

Chapter 14 of 24

Severus visits Ollivander.



Chapter Fourteen

Magical Malady

Hidden beneath his black, hooded cloak, Severus read the freshly-painted gold lettering of a shop he had not visited since he was eleven years old.

Ollivander's: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.

The premises had been refurbished since Death Eaters had kidnapped its proprietor; for perhaps the first time since the wand-maker's shop had opened, the woodwork was beautifully painted in black and gold, and the windows were so clean that they sparkled.

A solitary wand displayed in the window on a plump, vibrant purple cushion reminded Severus of the first time he'd peered through the once-murky windowpane, and he smiled sadly at the memory.

Brown leaves swirled in circles by Severus's feet as he opened the door, and a bell tinkled, announcing his presence to an otherwise empty shop. The space remained tiny: a spindly wooden chair and the counter area lay only two paces away. Severus remembered that the wand-maker's emporium had felt small to him as a young wizard jingling his mother's Galleons in his pocket, but now the shop front seemed so miniscule that he wondered just how far into the back of the building Ollivander's shelving stretched.

Severus lowered the hood of his cloak when the sound of shuffling footsteps announced the arrival of the proprietor, and he peered into the pale blue eyes of the celebrated wand-maker, marvelling at the older man's healthy complexion.

"Mr Ollivander, you're looking well."

The wand-maker assessed Severus with an astute expression and took a long moment to reply. "I feel well, Mr Snape. I was lucky enough to have recuperated by the seaside for a few months, and then the lovely Miss Lovegood helped me restore this place to its former glory. Shame I can't persuade her to become a wand-maker... Quite the flair, that young woman has."

"Miss Lovegood is talented, but lacks the necessary focus for your profession."

"Indeed. But you didn't come here to discuss your former students, I gather? I must say I'm surprised to see you."

"I'm surprised to be here, Mr Ollivander."

"Are you in the market for a new wand?"

"No." Severus let the word linger in the air whilst he steeled himself. Reticently, he plucked his wand from his sleeve and placed it upon the counter.

"May I?" Ollivander asked, and upon Severus's nod, he immediately slipped the wand into his grasp and ran his fingers along its length. "Ebony. Thirteen-and-one-quarter inches. Phoenix-feather core. Firm." For a moment, the wand-maker held the wand against his cheek, appearing to listen carefully. He then quirked an eyebrow and placed the wand down upon the counter. "I remember selling this wand to you at age eleven, and I also recall a pretty red-headed witch standing by your side when the wand chose you."

Severus flinched, and his cheeks reddened.

"How little did I appreciate how important the two of you would become in the fate of the wizarding world." Ollivander pinched his lips together, before continuing, "A witch and wizard of immeasurable talent... You would have made a formidable pairing, no doubt about it."

"My private life might be public knowledge, but I'm not here to discuss the past, Mr Ollivander."

The older man tipped his head to one side. "Indeed not. What can I do for you, Mr Snape?"

"The wand's allegiance?" Severus asked brusquely.

"Remains yours," Ollivander answered evenly.

Severus struggled to hide his disappointment. "I hoped that would explain it," he muttered to himself.

"Explain what?"

"Is there anything unusual about this wand? Anything which might cause it to fail?"

Ollivander's eyes narrowed, but then he picked up the wand for a closer examination, scrutinising the dark wooden surface by the light of the window. His expression flickered with several emotions: eagerness, surprise, admiration and... covetousness. He seemed thrilled to be holding the wand which had killed Dumbledore.

"This wand has created new spells and performed powerful and extraordinary magic." Ollivander's voice sounded scratchy and hoarse as he continued, "You've harnessed the phoenix-feather core to your benefit; you intuitively understand its innate personality. Few wizards ever have the time and patience to work with these sorts of temperamental wands..."

Severus listened to Ollivander's words, noticing the answer to his question had been evaded.

Perhaps Ollivander sensed his impatience, for he quickly brandished the wand and cast three perfect smoke circles from its tip. The wand-maker smiled. "Pristine condition. You've obviously taken a great deal of care with this wand."

"It performs satisfactorily?"

"More than satisfactory. Your wand is well-seasoned. A powerful wand for a powerful wizard... And yet you seem... unsatisfied?"

"I'd hoped for another answer, that is all."

"Ah," Ollivander replied, sensing the end of the conversation and offering the wand to its chosen wizard.

"Thank you for your assistance, Mr Ollivander. I assume my visit will remain... confidential?"

"Naturally," the wand-maker said, holding open the door. "Good day, Severus Snape."

Inclement weather settled in for the month of November, forcing Severus to work indoors in his potions laboratory, or at his living room table, writing his second manuscript. Ever since the Ministry of Magic had granted his wish for a direct Floo connection from Lapwing Row to Tess's Hogwarts quarters, he'd felt tempted to pay her a surprise visit. However, he'd also become insecure about his magical abilities after his meeting with Ollivander and didn't want to get stranded in an unfamiliar fireplace at the other end of the country with no way to return home.

As the woeful grey, rainy weather further drained his spirits, the muddy bog of his back garden caused further irritation. He would often stare out of the window, willing the murky clouds to dissipate so that he might return to his gardening hobby.

"Would Master like Fogle to go outside again tonight to Vanish the rest of the leaves?" the house-elf offered helpfully one afternoon.

Severus looked away from the dreary window, shifted his position on the sofa, and caught sight of his wand lying on the coffee table. In the wet November weeks, Severus had performed magic without any difficulty, leaving him to mull over several possible explanations for the intermittency of his magical abilities. However, he had yet to form a satisfactory conclusion.

"That won't be necessary," Severus replied, realising he'd not informed the elf of his visit to Ollivander. "My magic seems to have returned."

Fogle glanced at the ebony wand. "Master's wand is not faulty?"

"No."

"Does Master know why his wand didn't work?"

"You ask a lot of questions, elf," Severus replied caustically.

Suddenly fraught, Fogle ran towards the fire and placed his hand in the flames.

The smell of burning flesh prompted Severus to leap from his seat and drag the elf away from the hearth, shouting, "In Merlin's name, Fogle! Are you mad?"

Tears formed in the elf's large, orb-like eyes. "Fogle displeased his master. Fogle deserves to be punished!"

"Wait there," Severus commanded in tones to brook no argument.

He then opened the French doors and squelched into the garden, rain soaking his clothes almost instantaneously. His wet hands slipped as he unlocked the door to the outhouse, and soon he was darting back into the house clutching a bottle of potion, which he applied to Fogle's burnt fingers. The essence of dittany hissed when it made contact with the elf's skin.

"Don't ever do that again, do you hear me?" he ordered.

Fogle bit his bottom lip and nodded without enthusiasm.

Feeling uncomfortably soggy in his rain-soaked clothes, Severus picked up his wand and charmed his robes dry. He noticed the elf watching him with keen interest.

"Master's wand works when he is indoors," Fogle commented.

The following seconds seemed to pass very slowly as Severus recalled the first time his magic failed him: trying to cast a Cushioning Charm during the first night Tess stayed at the house. They had been outdoors, underneath the stars.

Each subsequent failure had been outdoors, or in the outhouse. Severus mulled over this insight for a moment, and then decided to reopen the French doors and step outside into the fading light of the dreary autumnal afternoon. He flicked his wand and successfully cast a Shield Charm around him, keeping himself dry. Turning on his heel, he marched back into the house and sank down on the sofa, hunching his shoulders.

"It was a good theory," he muttered to himself.

"Master's magic seems to fail him after he's been gardening," the elf continued, undeterred.

Severus looked up, holding Fogle's coppery gaze. "Not always," he elucidated. "The first failure was months ago, sitting outside after eating dinner with Tess. On your first night here, as it so happens."

Fogle shook his head fearfully, "No, Master, it wasn't Fogle's fault! Fogle didn't steal your magic!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus snapped, more harshly than he intended. "Elves can't steal magic," he added.

The house-elf seemed visibly relieved. "Then why did Master's magic stop working on Fogle's first night here?"

Severus had mused over this very same question time and time again, but now Fogle gave him chance to scrutinise the events of the evening with fresh eyes. Tess had arrived from Hogwarts, and they'd made love on the new four-poster bed... Severus had charmed the ivy, and afterwards he'd magically warmed their dinner. Later, Tess presented her two housewarming gifts: Fogle took to work in the kitchen whilst Severus had intended to plant the specimen of Lovage *outside in his back garden*...And so he'd taken off his Tiger's Eye ring before they'd gone outdoors, as had become his habit prior to gardening...

The silver band housing the golden-brown gemstone currently resided in its usual place on his little finger. Presciently, Severus slipped off the ring and placed it on the coffee table in front of the house-elf.

"Fogle saw this ring shining in the darkness on his first night here." The house-elf picked up the ring reverently. "Fogle wonders if this is important."

"Anything is possible," Severus murmured, raising his wand and attempting to cast an Aguamenti Charm on an empty goblet. No jet of water issued from the wand, and the goblet remained dry. No magical activity at all.

Fogle frowned at the conundrum, and then picked up the ring and offered it to his master. Severus placed the former anti-Horcrux onto his little finger and repeated the charm. Immediately, water filled the goblet to the brim. The house-elf squeaked with delight.

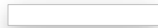
"Master's magic works when he wears his ring!" he sang, happy to have solved the mystery.

But for Severus, the mystery of his magical malady had only deepened.

To Have and to Hold

Chapter 15 of 24

Severus visits Hogwarts.



Chapter Fifteen

To Have and to Hold

Through a leaded window, Severus watched the full moon casting its silvery glow on the surface of the Black Lake, imagining the vista from Ravenclaw Tower would be stunning at sunrise.

Empowered by the knowledge that his magic would not let him down whilst he wore his Tiger's Eye ring, Severus now felt confident enough to Floo to Tess's quarters at Hogwarts, and at first he thought there had been a mistake. Her quarters were not as he'd expected. However, he'd quickly established that he was in the correct room when he found a photograph taken during the Order of Merlin ceremony in the summer, displayed on the writing desk next to the window.

Tess had failed to mention her relocation from the dungeons, leaving the space which Severus had previously occupied for a larger, more auspicious lodging which had once belonged to Professor Merrythought and latterly Professor Slughorn. Idly, he started to wonder what other things she'd failed to share.

From the amber glow of the Great Hall's windows, Severus ascertained that staff and pupils were nearing the end of their evening meal and would be retreating to their dormitories imminently. He had timed his first unannounced visit to coincide with Tess's downtime, hoping to catch her unawares and carry her forthwith to the bedchamber. Since his mood had improved considerably, he now waited patiently for her arrival, assured that his wizarding skills were intact.

Severus had started to use periods of inactivity to ponder the riddle of the Tiger's Eye ring, but since he'd arrived here early, he'd noticed a large stack of parchments awaiting marking, a half-written Potions exam, and an incomplete order form for Slug and Jigger's apothecary. The work laid out on Tess's desk caused him to reminisce over fifteen years of Potions master duties, and from the sinking ache in his chest, he realised he missed not the dunderheads, but those who possessed the predisposition for Potions and went on to great accomplishments.

When Severus had left Hogwarts at the age of eighteen, he'd hoped to become a wizard of high-standing and respected intellect, to create magic which changed the wizarding world, but within three years he'd been forced to return to teach at Hogwarts, fulfilling the bargain he'd made with Dumbledore to keep Lily safe.

His dream of fortune and glory had died a slow, painful death in the dungeon classrooms, and his only pleasure was seeing a handful of pupils making successes of their lives. The Potions master's simple ambition had been to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts: a post denied to him until the last moment. Then, during his final year as Headmaster at Hogwarts, he gained not acclimation but notoriety.

Now, his high prominence in wizarding society was the result of those selfsame years of service as a triple agent and for sacrificing his life for the 'greater good'. Severus remained uncomfortable with this accolade, wishing he'd received plaudits for magical discoveries instead. Perhaps all that would change.

The potion flagons in his pocket tinkled slightly as he retrieved them. Dragging a supper table to the side of an armchair, he displayed the small glass bottles on the polished teak surface, hoping this latest concoction would become as famous as Wolfsbane Potion.

Angling the armchair to provide views towards both the fireplace and the door, Severus settled down to wait for Tess's return.

Tess navigated the spiral stone staircase to her quarters whilst carrying three heavy Potions textbooks and a large pot of coffee, trying to avoid getting knocked by stampeding Ravensclaws. How the students had enough energy to run up the stairs at this time of night seemed incomprehensible, and as she struggled to cast Alohomora and other charms at her doorway, Tess hoped she could plough through her marking and retire early to bed.

Like birds from a dovecote, her thoughts of work took flight when Tess opened her door and caught sight of a dark-haired man sitting in her favourite chair, tapping his fingers on the armrest, fighting to suppress a smile. At the quirk of his lips, Tess felt a thrill of desire. She kicked the door backwards into its frame, hastily deposited her night's work on the floor and darted across the room.

Straddling him on the chair, she inhaled his familiar scent and tasted the warmth of his lips. At first the kiss was feverish, but as her body responded and her mind adjusted to his presence, their embrace relaxed into something more gentle and loving.

"I can't believe you're here," she mumbled, using her nose to nudge away his hair to nibble his earlobe. Tess felt his hot breath against her neck, and she shifted to loosen her formal teaching robes.

"Careful with the merchandise," Severus chided when her elbow almost toppled the supper table.

Tess then noticed the two potion flacons sitting side by side on the surface. Torn between curiosity and desire, she bit her lip. The sound of Severus's soft laughter made her smile. "You're such a tease," she whispered, kissing him once more.

When she stepped away, he watched her with an expression of amusement. "~~do~~ enjoy torturing Ravenclaws," he said, noticing her fidgeting hands. "Which question to ask first? What's in the bottles, or how did you enter Hogwarts without anyone knowing? Quite the dilemma."

"You forget the third option, Severus," she answered drily. "How to put those questions on hold until I've had you naked in my bed."

Tess felt a whirl of anticipation as Severus sprang from his chair, forcefully captured her lips, and pushed her up against the nearest stone pillar.

"Or the fourth option," he growled softly as he unbuttoned those parts of her robes which would allow him access, continuing, "Of being taken here and now."

She gasped as he lifted her onto the footstone of the pillar, grasped her legs until they were wrapped around his pelvis, and entered her in one swift thrust.

Their coupling was fast and explosive, satisfying a fantasy which Tess had been nurturing during lonesome nights in her cold bed, imagining the svelte silhouette of her lover moving through the shadows, rescuing her from the drudgery of duty, enticing her to submit to his every whim.

When her feet slid down to the ground, they kissed tenderly and held each other close. Severus's caress softened as he rubbed his thumb across her cheek.

"I've missed you," he murmured huskily.

Tess smiled at his declaration and leaned in for another kiss, knowing Severus was not often inclined to reveal his feelings. In the four months since he'd returned, Tess had learned to watch for signs of sentiment in his actions, rather than his words, understanding that verbal immediacy was rare, authentic, and to be savoured.

Eventually, Severus released Tess from the confines of the stone pillar, and they collapsed onto the settee by the fire. Tess Summoned the coffee pot and served two strong black coffees.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said as she stirred sugar into her cup, "but I think an explanation for your presence is long overdue." Tess smiled, settling on the sofa and draping her legs over his.

"The Ministry of Magic granted my second wish: a two-way Floo link from Lapwing Row to your Hogwarts quarters." Severus cast his gaze around the large, palatial room. "I was somewhat surprised when I arrived."

"Yes, it seems Minerva remembered my reluctant acceptance of your old dungeon quarters last year, and she took the liberty of allocating Horace's quarters to me when he retired. Now that I'm here, I quite like them, even if they're a little bit fancy for my taste."

"Slughorn always sought to ally himself with the elite echelons of the wizarding world; I believe he demanded these quarters when he returned as Potions master."

"This space does fit his personality and aspirations. Me, though, I just like the view." Tess smiled as she sipped her coffee.

"I thought as much."

"So you requested the Floo link because you *missed me*," Tess said, pressing her toes into his thigh.

Severus began to look uncomfortable. "It was Albert's idea, actually."

"Ah," Tess replied, knowing she'd overstepped the boundary. "I'm glad the two of you are getting along. I thought you'd be good for each other."

Severus scrutinised her for a moment, and Tess grimaced slightly.

"You set the whole thing up, didn't you?"

Tess felt a fleeting stab of indignation. "I asked him to be friendly and talk to you, if that's what you mean."

"And invite himself round for tea and biscuits?"

"No," Tess said with amusement. "He's been around to the house? Wow. I never thought he'd get that far."

"Not the house, precisely. The outhouse."

"You've let him into your laboratory?"

"Yes."

Tess took a moment to process the revelation. "I'm speechless."

"Not as speechless as I was the first time he proposed it," Severus countered. "I didn't respond quickly enough, and by the time I'd found words, he'd let himself in through the garden gate."

Tess laughed. "He's a lovely man. I'm glad you've made a friend." She gave him a playful nudge with her heel.

Finishing his coffee, Severus hid his expression behind his curtains of hair. Tess knew not to press any further.

"So, what's in the bottles?" she asked instead.

"My ticket to fame and fortune."

"Really? You think you've cracked it this time?"

Severus shrugged. "There's a distinct possibility."

"Have you tested it yet?" Tess's feet dropped to the floor as she leaned towards the supper table and collected the two bottles of potion in her hand.

"Of course not," Severus answered, bemused.

"Oh, it's just you sounded confident. I thought maybe... you'd tried it out on Albert."

"Our... relationship... has not yet developed to that level of intimacy," Severus said wryly.

Tess laughed. "So you've brought the potion tonight for a trial?" She threw him a smile, "And there was I, thinking you were here because..."

"There are several reasons why I'm here. The potion is incidental."

"Glad to hear it," Tess said, pulling out the stopper from the bottle. "Shall I?"

Severus withdrew his wand, but then studied its polished veneer and seemed to falter. "Actually, I'd prefer if you cast the Imperius Curse upon me."

"Oh, goodie," Tess said, laughing. "Let's see how resistant you are to certain... persuasions."

"Try to keep it clean. We don't need any bias in this trial."

Tess wrinkled her nose. "Spoil sport."

Severus kept the bottle of antidote close by, and then swallowed a mouthful of the curse-breaker potion in one gulp, wincing slightly at the taste. "Gritty, like soil," he explained.

"Nice. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Calm." He hunched his shoulders. "Slightly cool."

"Ok, then." Tess prepared herself, lifting her wand. "*Imperio*"

The curse hit Severus full in the face, but his expression remained unchanged. "Send the command, Tess," he prompted.

Tess frowned. "I sent it non-verbally, Severus. I told you to sing."

Severus scoffed. "I don't sing, not for anyone."

"Pity, I always wondered how your singing voice might sound."

"You don't want to know."

Tess paused. "Maybe I should try again."

Severus nodded, and when the second curse struck, his reaction remained absent.

"Nothing," he clarified, looking at the bottle in his hand. "Nothing at all."

"Could that mean...?" Tess's voice drifted away as she searched his features for a sign.

"It looks promising," Severus agreed. He picked up his wand contemplatively. "I think we should try again, but from a different angle."

"OK. What do you have in mind?"

Tess, however, had no time to prepare.

"*Imperio!*"

A flash of light shot from Severus's wand, and she immediately felt fuzzily warm and slightly drunk. Inspired, Tess began singing, "Believe... that magic works... don't be afraid... of being hurt..."

Severus snorted in amusement.

"... Don't let this magic die... the answer's there... oh, just look in her eyes..."

A bottle of curse-breaking potion was thrust into her hand, and she obediently swigged its contents. Cool clarity pervaded her senses, and she stopped singing. The spell had been broken.

She smiled, slightly bemused, and remarked upon the song's title, "*Magic Works ?*"

"The song must've been your choice." Severus tapped his wand in his palm, ruminating. "I'm glad you didn't fight the curse."

They looked at each other for a long moment, neither daring to make the pronouncement. Eventually, Tess's composure broke into a grin.

"Severus, I do believe you've invented the world's first Imperius Curse-Breaker. Congratulations!"

"Finally," he replied. Severus replaced the cork in the bottle's neck and positioned the potion next to its unopened antidote on the table, feeling a sense of satisfaction.

"Great discoveries often take a great deal of time," Tess affirmed. "You know yourself how the slightest alteration to a potion can have the profoundest effect."

Severus absorbed her words slowly, twiddling the anti-Horcrux ring on his little finger. He'd considered many possible explanations for his magic being bound to the ring: they could have missed something crucial in their preparations and part of his soul might have been left behind in the anti-Horcrux. His mind drifted to the Revivification Potion which had brought him back to life. St Mungo's had brewed the life-giving liquid, following the strict instructions which Tess and the Unspeakable had devised, with Severus's consent.

But what if someone had tinkered with the potion? What if there had been a deliberate alteration to the formulae by someone who wished him harm?

Severus didn't know who might harbour such an intention, nor was he ready to confess his magical deficiency to Tess. If possible, he resolved to shield Tess from the knowledge of his affliction and solve the mysterious malady without her help.

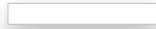
Author's Note:

Where I have quoted song lyrics from the Harry Potter film, I have marked them with an asterisk

Trail of Discovery

Chapter 16 of 24

Severus sets about uncovering the truth.



Chapter Sixteen

Trail of Discovery

"Severus! What a surprise!" Shacklebolt beamed as he held out his hand for a handshake; however, when he noticed his visitor's expression, his smile faded.

Severus closed the door to secure their privacy, and then crossed his arms, forgoing the pleasantries and coming straight to the point.

"I wish to know more about the Unspeakable you appointed to oversee my resurrection."

Horizontal lines on Shacklebolt's forehead deepened as he appraised Severus's demeanour. "Certainly," he said, gesturing for Severus to take a seat. "His name, as you are probably already aware, is Clement Turnstone, and he's worked in the Department of Mysteries for ten years. What more do you wish to know?"

"His background, his history. Anything you can tell me."

"Well, he graduated from Durmstrang, but I believe his family originate from Wales. That's all I can recall."

Severus absorbed this information in a trice. "I'd like to see his Ministry records."

"Those records are confidential, Severus. I can't disclose them."

"Then I shall make my final Order of Merlin request if I must."

Shacklebolt let out a small sigh. "I don't suppose you're going to enlighten me as to why you want this information?"

"You suppose correctly. Be assured, I have good, personal reasons for making this request. Don't forget, this is the man who brought me back to life; I believe I'm entitled to know more about him."

Lifting his quill and scratching a few words onto a piece of violet-coloured parchment, Shacklebolt replied, "As you wish." Within moments, the inter-departmental memo was dispatched through the Floo.

They waited for the reply to arrive in awkward silence. Shacklebolt offered him a cup of tea, but Severus declined. Eventually, the Minister for Magic resumed working at his desk whilst Severus paced the room, feeling as though his stomach were being ground by mortar and pestle. When a scroll of parchment finally deposited itself on the hearth, Severus leapt forward to unfurl the confidential document. Shacklebolt held his hand up in protest, but soon realised the futility of this intervention.

Severus darted through the extraneous information, confirming that Turnstone had indeed been born in Newport, Wales, and his pureblood family had sent him to board at the Durmstrang Institute. Turnstone graduated with honours in Charms, Dark Arts and Arithmancy, and had been snapped up by the Ministry of Magic as a trainee Obliviator. Assigned to Arnold Peasegood, the young recruit progressed quickly through his apprenticeship and gained the title of Obliviator within two years: a notable achievement. Turnstone used his Durmstrang contacts to form networks across Europe, eventually travelling extensively around the world in the name of magical co-operation.

Then, just over ten years ago, Turnstone seemed to settle down, choosing to resume his post of Obliviator within the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad and taking responsibility for mentoring new recruits. After two years of living in relative obscurity, he accepted a career change in the Department of Mysteries, where he worked on-rotation in the Death Chamber and made notable advances in the Time Room before it was destroyed by Dumbledore's Army. More recently, he had been assigned to the resurrection of a former Death Eater.

Something about Turnstone's period in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad didn't make sense to Severus; why would such a high-flying Obliviator settle for a mentorship role at the Ministry? Why would he allow his wings to be clipped at such a crucial time in his career?

"Does Arnold Peasegood still work as an Obliviator?" Severus asked, cutting through the silence of the last few minutes.

Shacklebolt jumped, as though he'd forgotten Severus were there. "Up until recently, yes. He's now a Hit Wizard for Magical Law Enforcement."

"I'd like to speak to him."

The offices of Magical Law Enforcement were located on Level Two of the Ministry of Magic. Severus had requested a late meeting with the Hit Wizard, so that he would not bump into any Aurors or people he might know. He wasn't in the mood for chit-chat. As he passed through the crowds of employees heading for the Floo at the end of their working day and stepped into the lift, he felt queasy with anticipation.

Severus wandered through empty corridors until he located the office of the former Obliviator. In response to his knocking, a tall, thin man, perhaps sixty years old, opened the door to greet the visitor, and when Severus dropped his hood and offered a handshake, Peasegood drew in an audible gasp.

"So it's true, then. Severus Snape arisen from the dead." The Hit Wizard's voice sounded thready, as though his vocal chords were weakened and thinned.

"Tales of my demise were greatly exaggerated, Mr Peasegood," Severus remarked with what had quickly become a stock phrase.

The Hit Wizard chuckled amiably. "Please, call me Arnie. And do follow me!" He led Severus into his office and offered him a seat. "The Minister for Magic tells me I must answer any question you pose, and I find myself curious to know what has brought you here."

Severus decided humour would be the best deflection to the unwanted question. "If I told you, I would have to Oblivate you."

"Touché, Severus may I call you Severus? touché." Peasegood's laughter turned into a raspy cough. He poured a glass of water from a carafe, took a sip, and then offered Severus a drink.

Severus declined politely and waited until the wizard's attention returned. "You once trained an Obliviator by the name of Clement Turnstone."

"Clym Turnstone? Why yes, I did."

"I'd like to know more about this... Clym... Turnstone, if I may?"

"Of course. Clym was one of the best Obliviators I ever trained. I never understood why he didn't progress within the department he had leadership material written all over him. But he always seemed to enjoy gadding about, meeting foreigners, forging new links with other wizarding cultures. I must admit, I was shocked when he requested life in the slow lane; mentoring was never really his style, you see."

Severus considered the information before asking his next question. "So he chose to be a mentor?"

"Yes, he did," Peasegood confirmed. "And pretty successful he was, too. He mentored two Obliviators, and he even took on one of our Potioneers, despite not needing to. She was a cracker, though, and well worth developing, so I gave him my blessing when he requested the assignment."

Hot needles pricked on the back of Severus's neck. "And who was this new Potioneer?"

"Why, that was Griselda Marchbanks' great-granddaughter. As I recall, her name was Contessa."

The following afternoon, sitting patiently on the wooden bench outside Squirrel's Leap in the fading autumnal daylight, Severus watched a blackbird sifting through a pile of brown leaves, searching for juicy morsels.

As his mind drifted, he recalled the summer he'd stayed at the cottage, the awkward silences and spiky exchanges with Contessa, and the long days spent alone, contemplating Dumbledore's death. At first, the cottage had been the last place he'd wanted to be, but when the time came to go back to Spinner's End, he'd felt sad to leave. Looking back, he now realised why.

He remembered sitting with Tess in the shade of the oak tree, drinking elf-made wine after Dumbledore's funeral, and the long night spent stargazing together after he'd returned from the battle above Privet Drive. With the benefit of hindsight, Severus could trace back his attraction to the woman he now loved. However, during those first months at Squirrel's Leap, he'd been so focused on his duty to Lily that he hadn't allowed himself to feel anything for Tess.

Severus reflected how fortunate he had been to be given a second chance, to live and to love, and be happy. But his newfound happiness had been tainted by loss. The mystery of his inability to perform magic without wearing the Tiger's Eye ring haunted every waking moment, and he'd spent the night mulling over the information he'd gleaned from his trip to the Ministry. As a result, he'd had very little sleep. He was determined to find all the pieces of the puzzle, and to learn as much as he could about the man he suspected of sabotaging his resurrection.

The crack of a nearby Apparition roused him from his reverie, and Severus turned to see Tess's brother ambling towards the cottage, wearing scruffy jeans and a flannel jacket, looking much like a countryside Muggle. Unaware of Severus's presence in his garden, Nathan Marchbanks entered the cottage and kicked off his shoes, slouching in front of the fireplace and lighting the logs on the fire with his wand.

Severus pushed open the front door gently and walked quietly into the front room.

Nathan jumped onto his stockings feet and groped for the wand which had just been stowed away. "Jesus, Snape! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm not here to duel with you, if that's what you're thinking," Severus replied caustically, hoping to avoid a magical confrontation.

Reluctantly, Nathan tucked his wand into the back of his jeans. "There'd better be a good reason for being here, or I'll have you for trespass."

"I think the welfare of your sister is reason enough."

"Tess?" Nathan's voice wavered. "What's wrong? Is she alright?"

"She's safe at Hogwarts," Severus confirmed.

Nathan's tense shoulders dropped, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Then why are you here, Snape?"

"I have a question."

"Oh, really?" Nathan remarked. "Well, it best be a bloody good one. Out with it, then, before I hex you."

Severus sneered, noticing that his and Nathan's height were now comparable, since the man had taken off his boots. He caught a whiff of alcohol on Nathan's breath.

"You had some involvement in my resurrection, I believe?"

"Only a bit. I just watched over Tess when she wore the anti-Horcrux at night, from time to time. She never talked to me about how it was being done. I never got involved. Never wanted to." Nathan smirked, underlining the subtext of his words.

Severus ignored his insinuation. "I'm sure you are aware there was an Unspeakable assigned by the Ministry."

"Yes, she told me that," Nathan answered neutrally.

"Were you aware of their identity?"

"No. The Tongue-Tying Curse prevented Tess from telling me."

Severus paused, preparing to get down to the brass tacks. "I assume you've heard of a man by the name of Clement Turnstone?"

Nathan's hazel eyes narrowed, and his hands balled into fists inside his jeans pockets. "Clym?" His voice trembled with anger. "Are you joshing with me? I'm sure Tess would have told me if..."

"No, she wouldn't. Not if she were Tongue-Tied."

Severus waited for Nathan to process the revelation.

"But it can't be... There's no way she'd allow that man closer than a country mile! Not after what he did to her." Nathan turned to look through the window and muttered, "Bastard!"

"What did he do to her?" Severus asked quietly.

"Broke her heart, of course," Nathan replied without thinking. "Selfish git."

Severus's throat constricted, as though he were held hanging by a noose. Whilst he struggled for breath, Nathan took a moment to notice what had happened.

"Wait... What? You didn't know?"

The intensity of Severus's loathing was inscribed across his face as clearly as words on parchment.

"Shit!" Nathan kicked the coffee table and immediately regretted the outburst. He grasped his throbbing toes and fell back into an armchair.

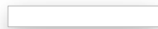
"You have performed a wonderful job of protecting your sister," Severus bit out. "How can I ever thank you enough?"

Nathan hobbled onto his feet, but Severus had already cut and run, Disapparating from the doorstep, knowing exactly where he needed to be.

Blood of the Enemy

Chapter 17 of 24

Severus confronts the Unspeakable.



Chapter Seventeen

Blood of the Enemy

A whirlpool of blue lights spun around Severus, making him dizzy.

By the time the atrium stopped revolving, Severus had fixed his line of sight onto the orbicular floor, shielding himself against disorientation. He scanned the room quickly, looking for the door to the left of the candelabrum which held thirteen candles, then sprung forward, pushing through the portal which led to the Department of Mysteries' inner sanctum.

The corridor stretched out before him like a tunnel carved from bedrock, lined with purplish-black wooden doors protecting the offices of the Unspeakables. Unmarked alongside its neighbours, the fourth door gleamed proudly in the candlelight, and Severus paused before knocking on its polished walnut surface. He desperately wanted to blast the door from its hinges and enter Turnstone's office with his wand raised, ready for a duel, but he knew this course of action would not assist him in uncovering the truth.

And so he politely knocked.

"Come in," said a subdued voice which reminded Severus of a mournful clarinet.

Upon entering the room, he was instantly struck by the dark, overcast skies magically replicated in the office window. Casting a gloomy silhouette in front of the scene was a man with curly brown hair and a growth of stubble close to becoming a beard if it were left unattended. He looked younger than Severus had expected, boyish for a man of forty-four years of age; the lines under his eyes were the only giveaway.

Severus assessed the wizard who had purportedly broken Tess's heart a decade ago, noticing how his smart dress-sense contrasted an apparent lack of grooming. He was a good-looking man with an unfettered air about him, the sort of person who seemed confident and at ease. These first impressions served to unsettle Severus, as he recognised few of these attributes in himself. He wondered how much importance Tess placed on these traits.

The Unspeakable placed down his quill and appraised his visitor keenly.

"And who might you be?" he asked, somewhat impatiently.

Severus removed the hood of his cloak and stepped into the pool of light in the centre of the room. Turnstone's irritation quickly morphed into a horror so burlesque that Severus almost laughed.

"Snape," Turnstone said, his voice cracking.

Severus merely nodded, holding on to a coiling twist of schadenfreude as it pressed its cool metallic edges against his body. He allowed himself a satisfied smirk as his prey arose to its feet, clutching the desk to embolden itself.

Seconds ticked by, tangible like the sound of military drums. Turnstone gazed warily at his visitor, unsure of the etiquette befitting this unforeseen occurrence.

"How did you find me?"

"The Minister for Magic is an old friend of mine."

"I see." Turnstone's fingernails clipped out an irregular beat as he strummed the desktop in contemplation. After a few moments, he manoeuvred cautiously around his desk and asked, "What can I do for you?"

Severus tried to keep his voice noncommittal. "You can start by answering a few questions about my revivification."

"Oh? I thought Tess kept you informed throughout the process?"

"She did," Severus replied. "But I wish to hear of the things which you neglected to tell her."

The Unspeakable appeared perplexed. "I don't know what you mean..."

"Let's start with the Revivification Potion, shall we?" Severus interrupted, fast losing patience with the cat-and-mouse game. "The decision-making process was examined by myself, Tess and St Mungo's, so... mistakes in the formulae are... unlikely."

Standing in front of his desk, Turnstone remained stoical.

"Bone of the father..." Severus continued, warming to his theme. "That one caused some heartache, I can tell you. Lucky that my earthly remains had been laid to rest instead of being cremated, wouldn't you say?"

Turnstone's cheek twitched.

"And then, 'flesh of the servant'... How fortunate that I'd benefitted from the services of a personal house-elf at Hogwarts." Severus took in a deep breath before he continued. "Blood of the *enemy*," he inflected ominously. "Regrettable, indeed, that all of my enemies had perished..."

"Little did I know that a snake in the grass was slithering around the base of the cauldron which resurrected me."

Clym blinked slowly. "I've no idea where you're leading with this, Snape, so why don't you just spit it out?"

"Really? Not even an inkling? You disappoint me."

Severus closed the distance between them and uttered a growling whisper. "I know that you tampered with the potion's active ingredients."

At this, Turnstone stood bolt upright, steadily returning Severus's pernicious gaze and crossing his arms against his chest. His lack of verbal response began to uproot Severus's certainty.

"Nothing to say?" Severus enquired with a hint of annoyance. "You must've been disappointed when I returned to corporeal form and your little plan seemed to end in failure."

Severus noticed Turnstone's quizzical squint and decided to press the advantage. "Wanted to keep her all for yourself, didn't you *Mister* Turnstone?"

The Unspeakable balled his fists, but Severus didn't notice; his anger acted as a blinker.

"Do you deny it?" he snarled, circling to stand directly in front of his prey.

Turnstone spoke slowly with a clenched jaw. "I don't deny that I wanted her. But I didn't sabotage your resurrection. Your standing here is living proof of that."

"You play your part well, Turnstone, innocent and sincere, just as you probably were with Tess, all summer long, hypnotising her with your charm, luring her until she was close enough to sink your fangs into. But she resisted you. And I'm here now to make you pay for what you've done to me."

"I've done nothing to you, Snape!"

"Oh, but you have, Turnstone, you have. Even the Healers at St Mungo's missed it. Perhaps you intended for the consequence to be delayed? That would have been cunning indeed. Allow me to slowly discover my magical powers were waning... That's one way to destroy a wizard's reason for living..."

"Having problems with your magic, are you?" asked Turnstone, his face lighting up with delight. "What a pleasant surprise! Never in my wildest dreams would I have conjured that scenario."

"Damn you, Turnstone!" Severus struck the desk with his fist, causing it to lurch. "You altered 'blood of the enemy', knowing there would be consequences! In one fell swoop, you thought you'd render me impotent and try to steal Tess away from me!"

"How *dare* you." Turnstone glowered, his eyes alight with hatred.

Before Severus could react, Turnstone grabbed him by the shirt, threw back his mop of curly hair and headbutted him.

When Turnstone's forehead smashed into his nose, Severus heard the cracking of bone. Staggering backwards, he felt warm trickles of blood escaping his nostrils and pouring down his face. His fingers went instinctively to the bridge of his nose, trying to stem the blood flow, and he flinched in pain.

"You want to know what happened?"

Turnstone's voice came from above, and Severus realised he'd dropped onto his knees. He reached out for a chair and hauled himself into a sitting position, gagging on the metallic taste of blood.

"You really want to know?" Turnstone waited for a response which never came. "'Blood of the enemy' was Dark magic. You know that. We needed Light magic. We needed the *opposite* of an enemy. I told Tess that I didn't want her to contribute to the potion. *I* told her that she'd be magically tied to you forever if she did."

Severus dared to meet Clym's eye and saw revulsion in his features. Severus's humiliation was tempered by his intellect, though, which devoured the new information like a starving manticore. *Tess had chosen to be bound magically to him?*

"But she insisted," Clym continued. "I couldn't dissuade her. Only then did I realise how much she loved you fool that she is and I knew that bringing you back was the only thing which would make her happy... So we proceeded as planned. And here you are."

The disgust on the Unspeakable's features sent a bilious trickle of shame creeping through Severus's guts. Whilst Turnstone had confessed his plan to steal Tess from him, he had not used nefarious means to neuter his rival. Severus realised the Unspeakable was not as he appeared; Turnstone had given up Tess and relinquished his claim, and more importantly, Tess had accepted a binding magical tie to Severus for the rest of her life.

Severus remained seated, utterly dumbfounded.

"If you're having problems with your magical ability, I suggest you look elsewhere for your answers. In the meantime, get the hell out of my office."

In Sickness and in Health

Chapter 18 of 24

Tess rushes back to Lapwing Row.

In Sickness and in Health

Tess ran up the spiral stone staircase to the Headmistress's office, her mind whirling in a vortex of emotion.

"Professor McGonagall!" she spluttered as she pushed open the door.

Looking around, the office appeared empty. Tess's heart sank, leaving a numbing ache in its place. "Where are you?" she muttered to herself.

From behind the desk, a silver tabby cat with distinctive black marks circling its eyes padded softly towards Tess, watching her inquisitively. Within moments, the animal Transfigured into the Headmistress, standing tall and wearing magnificent green tartan robes.

"My apologies, Tess," Minerva said briskly. "When someone arrives unannounced, I've found my Animagus can be useful for spying." The Headmistress frowned. "Whatever is the matter?"

"I need to be excused," Tess replied, trying unsuccessfully to conceal her embarrassment. "Something... personal... has come up..." Her voice trailed off.

"Is it something to do with your brother? He said he needed to speak to you, but I asked him to wait until the end of your lesson. Was it urgent?" Minerva asked.

"In a way, yes," Tess replied. "He's just left the castle, but I really need to get home to Severus... I can't really explain... I'm sorry."

"Go," Minerva said, shooing her towards the door. "I'll take your next Potions class; it'll do me good to get back in the saddle. I'll speak to you by Floo tonight."

"Thanks, Minerva," Tess said, feeling able to breathe properly for the first time since Nate had arrived.

Tess returned to her quarters and took a handful of Floo Powder from the urn on her mantelpiece. The glittery, silver substance leaked through her fingers as she stared at the fireplace, preparing herself for what might follow. Realising that her delay of the inevitable only served to increase her anxiety, she tossed the powder onto the fire and stepped onto the hearth.

"Lapwing Row," she stated clearly. Within moments she was plucked from the fireplace and whisked into oblivion.

When she arrived at the house in Downham, she stepped out of the hearth, straight into the living room, and found Severus sitting crumpled on the Chesterfield sofa. Bright red blood trailed from his nose, staining his white shirt collar, giving Tess a fright. He looked up at her, startled and abashed, and covered his face with his hand. He groaned in pain as the gesture placed pressure on his nose.

Tess immediately dropped to her knees and placed a hand on his arm, finding it difficult to believe that her brother would stoop low enough to throw a fist at Severus. She felt sure that Nate would have confessed such a crime.

"Severus!" she whispered. "Severus, are you alright?"

He nodded slowly.

"What happened?"

"It's just a broken nose," he replied thickly.

Tess took a moment to assess the situation. If it were just a broken nose, Severus should have been able to fix it with a quick *Episkey* spell. She noticed his wand lay discarded on the floor, and her line of sight soon found the pale-brown bare feet of Fogle, their house-elf.

The servant trotted forward with a relieved smile on his face. "Fogle is pleased to see Madam Tess," he trilled. "Master Severus would not let Fogle anywhere near him. Fogle didn't know what to do for the best."

"Please go and find a towel, and bring us a bowl of warm water," Tess asked him kindly.

The elf scampered away.

Tess retrieved her wand, saying, "Here, allow me."

Severus's shrouded dark eyes dragged themselves to return her gaze. His hand dropped away from his face, revealing the full extent of the injury: his impressive hooked nose now appeared crooked, reminding Tess of Dumbledore. Last year's Rita Skeeter exposé, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, revealed that his brother, Aberforth, had been responsible for his bent nose, and Tess wondered whether or not her own brother had resorted to fisticuffs with the man she loved.

She tapped Severus's nose with a gentle Healing Spell and guided the charm carefully as the bone reset.

"I can't believe Nate did this to you," she said as she stepped away and took a seat on the armchair adjacent to the settee. "I'm so sorry."

Severus took a moment to reply. "It wasn't your brother."

"But... Nate has just been to Hogwarts to warn me..."

"And I have just returned from the Ministry of Magic."

Tess noticed Severus returned her gaze without malice, and she sensed her mouth gaping slightly. "You mean..."

Severus stared at her calmly. "A man by the name of Clym Turnstone broke my nose. I believe you know him."

"I..." Tess began, but abandoned her sentence as the house-elf walked gingerly into the room with a porcelain bowl of water and a small, fluffy white towel.

Setting the bowl down on the floor, the little elf squinted at Tess. "Would Madam like Fogle to...?"

Tess pushed words past the swelling in her throat which threatened imminent suffocation. "Leave it with me, Fogle. You are excused."

Fogle executed a formal bow and trotted away.

The Unspeakable name hung in the air of a living room like a veil of smoke. "You know who he is," Tess said, her voice trembling.

Severus nodded. He didn't reach for the towel, he simply continued to stare at Tess, studying her reaction. Tess mobilised herself to kneel on the floor, soak the facecloth, wring out the water, and wipe the damp cotton gently underneath Severus's nose.

He allowed this, but when she rinsed the bloodstained linen, he said, "He's still in love with you."

Tess felt her eyebrows arching. She watched as the red stain bled into the water and then twisted the towel once again in her hands. "I doubt he ever truly loved me,

Severus."

Dabbing the creases of his mouth and chin, removing the evidence of his injury, Tess wondered what had possessed Severus to go straight to the Department of Mysteries to pick a fight with the Unspeakable who'd resurrected him.

"Why did you go there? What were you thinking?"

Severus placed his hand over hers, coaxing the towelling away. "There's something I haven't told you, Tess."

Tess peered at him quizzically. "And here I am, thinking I owe you an explanation or two..."

"I should go first," Severus affirmed. He cast his gaze upon his ebony and phoenix-feather wand, lying discarded on the hearth rug, and seemed to embolden himself. "For the last few months, my magical abilities have been transient and unpredictable. At times, I find myself unable to... perform."

Tess found his words hard to believe. "But I've seen you perform magic; you've Apparated, you've cast charms, you've..."

"Like I said, my magic has been transient," Severus continued patiently. "I couldn't rely on my abilities anymore. Ollivander has checked my wand, I've been back to St Mungo's, but there seemed to be no explanation."

Struggling to keep up, Tess tried to make sense of what she was hearing. "I don't understand; I've seen you! I've..."

Severus interrupted her with his deep, soft voice. "I've deliberately hidden this from you, Tess."

"But..." Tess stopped mid-sentence, suddenly understanding his meaning. Taking hold of his hand, she gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. "Why? Why didn't you tell me?"

There followed a long pause. Severus looked intently at their intertwined hands, gathering the strength to reveal his hidden torment.

"Because I'm ashamed," he said quietly. "This cuts deep into the very core of being a wizard. It's who I am. I was worried that..." His voice drifted away, leaving behind echoes of doubt and vulnerability.

"Worried about what?" Tess pressed softly, shifting her weight as she kneeled by his side.

"Worried you wouldn't love me anymore," he mumbled.

"Oh, Severus," she chided, standing up and nudging him to move to the middle of the sofa so that she could sit next to him. Feeling his warmth upon her side, she wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "I'd still love you if you'd been resurrected a Muggle. I'd even have loved you if you'd come back with Voldemort's nose!" She laughed lightly. "I don't love you because you're a wizard. I love you for who you are as a person... who you are as a man."

Severus furrowed his brow and took a moment to take in this information. Eventually, he seemed to find a measure of solace in her words.

"Why did you seek out Clym?" she asked, flinching a little bit at the sound of the name spoken out loud.

Black curtains of hair fell about Severus's face as he dipped his head. "I believed him responsible for my affliction... I thought he'd deliberately disfigured me."

Tess's breath felt dry in her throat. "Oh, no, Severus. Clym may be many things, but he'd never have harmed you. I wouldn't have accepted his help if I thought that."

Severus nodded to acknowledge this. The light in the living room had begun to wane as the setting sun dipped below the horizon, accentuating the contrast between his pale skin and dark hair. He held her gaze openly as he asked his next question.

"Why didn't you tell me about him?"

Tess removed her arm from around his back and smoothed a crease in her teaching robes. "I didn't want to worry you," she replied with saturnine remorse. "Whilst we were working on your revivification, I thought it better that you didn't know."

"And what about when I came back?" Severus asked, his voice impartial.

"Well, I think the Tongue-Tying Curse gave me a good excuse: I couldn't give you any information which might have led to his identity... But I admit I felt nervous about you knowing about that piece of my past, and I often wondered what I'd have done if you'd directly questioned me about my romantic history."

"Why?"

Tess looked away. "Because I'm ashamed."

Severus gave a hollow laugh. "I've disclosed my darkest secrets to you, Tess. After all we've been through, I don't understand why you couldn't tell me."

His genuine bewilderment seemed to throw light upon a tenebrous place in Tess's heart, helping her to recognise why she'd withheld the truth. "I was scared that you'd love me a little less, that your image of me would be tarnished. I was embarrassed by my own actions. But being Tongue-Tied was a convenient excuse; I convinced myself that you didn't need to know."

The air in the living room seemed heavy with confession, but when Tess risked a glance at Severus, his features were placatory.

"I think I need to know now, Tess."

"Yes, you do." She nodded and breathed deeply. "Let's put the kettle on, and I'll tell you the whole story."

Fan-art by star_girl

Forsaking All Others

Chapter 19 of 24

Tess reveals her past.

Chapter Nineteen

Forsaking All Others

Severus listened intently as Tess recounted her past with Clym, and he observed the detail from an analytical perspective, as one might solve a puzzle or build a theory. He also noticed Tess's eyes shining as she reminisced, her tears welling as she recalled her heartache, and her features crumple when she explained her decisions and her regrets, but he struggled to translate these emotions. He understood she suffered some pain; however, Severus tended to favour examining concepts and determining dynamics, rather than interpreting feelings. Empathy was not his strongest suit; he felt uncomfortable talking about his own emotions, let alone someone else's.

When the tale was told, Severus prepared his response whilst Tess conjured her own handkerchief and blew her nose. Her eyes were downcast as she poured herself another cup of tea, and her features were doleful when she wordlessly enquired of his wish for a second cup.

He nodded, and she poured.

Adding two spoonfuls of sugar to his tea, she asked, "Are you going to say anything at all?"

Severus cleared his throat. "I was just musing over our differences," he said by way of reply, feeling awkward about addressing her emotional needs. "Your greatest shame is of knowingly continuing an affair with a married man. Mine is of attempting to trade the lives of James and Harry Potter so that I might take Lily for myself." He paused to take a contemplative sip of tea, examining their past predicaments by judging each contributing factor, and ignoring the clenching knot of tension in his chest. "We are equally accountable for our decisions and have gone to great lengths to conceal them."

His observations did little to ease Tess's tension, and tears threatened to spill down her cheeks once more.

"You're upset," he noticed, unsure why his words had not provided some comfort.

Tess drew in a deep breath which appeared to make her shudder; she seemed then to give up, resting her forehead on her upturned palm and shaking her head.

Severus wanted to understand, but didn't know how to respond. "What's the matter?"

"You don't seem to care, Severus!" Tess blurted, her hands open wide in exasperation.

Stunned by her outburst, Severus realised his mouth was gaping. Pressing his lips together, he hesitated, at a loss for words.

Imploringly, Tess explained, "This can't be solved by logic and rationalisation. Feelings can't be dismissed so easily."

The knot of tension tightened in his chest as he realised how difficult he found responding to Tess on this level. He'd spent his whole life covering up his feelings and controlling them with Occlumency; he believed revealing his emotions for the world to see was tantamount to showing weakness. Whilst it was true that Tess had never judged him whenever he'd expressed his emotions, he felt inadequately prepared for discussing the complexities of their relationship. How could he be sure that she would approve of him? How could he trust she would still want to be with him?

He knew his next sentence would come at great personal cost. He might as well lie on a cold stone altar and offer himself up for sacrifice.

"Then tell me what you're feeling," he said, his mouth dry with apprehension.

Tess bit her lip, fixing her line of sight at the ceiling. Her voice was tremulous. "Exposed, fragile, ashamed... Worried you don't love me anymore."

Her words punched a hole in his chest, releasing tension and flooding him with the knowledge that she had experienced the same insecurities which had haunted him for months. In his relief, he placed his arm around her shoulder, and she collapsed into his embrace, sobbing quietly.

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I still love you," he whispered into her hair.

She clung onto his arm, dissolving into floods of tears.

Not knowing how to console her, he quipped, "That is, of course, unless you'd prefer I didn't love you?"

Almost immediately, Tess laughed, snivelled, and squeezed his arm gently. "Now *you're* being ridiculous."

She folded her hanky and blew her nose again.

Severus realised that after years of avoiding his feelings, he seemed a complete novice at navigating the emotional currents of a relationship. How would he be able to offer solace when he lacked the ability to soothe himself? There seemed to be much to learn.

Tess, however, leapt ten steps ahead, able to make sense of what had just occurred as though it were second nature.

"All this time, both of us have been concealing things, believing our secrets would jeopardise the way we feel about each other."

Severus felt awed by her ability to comprehend the crux of the problem on an emotional level. "It seems so."

"And yet," Tess continued, "we fundamentally know how the other feels because of our own experiences of guilt, shame and rejection."

As Severus listened to her words, he appreciated her ability to understand and empathise, knowing her wisdom lay in a different arena to his own. Theoretically, their differences might complement each other and make their partnership stronger, but at the same time, he wondered pensively if their disparity might become divisive. His sense of inadequacy made him curdle.

"Something's troubling you, Severus."

He pinched his lips together, noticing the trail of blood had leaked further down his shirt, diluted by Tess's tears. Somehow, he needed to communicate his fear.

"You're so much more... experienced... than me," he said.

"Experienced?" Tess asked, with a disbelieving gasp. "I hope you're not inferring..."

Severus sensed he'd unwittingly caused offence, and he almost shrunk away. "You've had more than one long-term relationship," he tried to explain.

The sound of scoffing alerted him further to the danger ahead, but before he could elaborate, Tess bit back, "I'm thirty-five years old, what did you expect? Did you think I was a virgin before I met Alex?"

"I wasn't referring to your sexual exploits," he answered, trying not to show irritation, and hoping he wouldn't lose his thread. "Although, having just come face to face with your ex-lover, it did make me wonder..."

He trailed off, afraid to reveal his self-doubt. Maybe it would be better to retract, hide, and not admit his insufficiency. Perhaps he could save himself by putting distance between them. Did he really want Tess to see him so vulnerable, so low in confidence, so...?

"Wonder what, Severus?" she asked. Her words sounded strangely strangled.

When he eventually spoke, his voice croaked. "I don't know if I can be enough for you."

For the space of several heavy heartbeats, Severus waited for her reply, not daring to shift his gaze from the floor. Part of him hoped she would read the subtext and assume he was not cut out for a relationship. That might save them both a cauldronful of pain further down the line. Another part of him wanted her to reassure him, even though that might take them down the path less travelled.

After what seemed like eternity, but was mere seconds in reality, Tess's soft hands wound around his forearm, tugging him gently.

"I love you, Severus. You're the one I want to be with, not Clym."

A flicker of hope danced in front of his eyes, enticing him to surrender, but the uncertain part of him needed to be sure.

"That man is nothing like me," he replied, stating fact, looking for affirmation.

"That is true," Tess conceded.

"He schemed to win you back whilst I was gone."

"He told you that?"

Severus nodded.

"I suspected as much." Tess sighed. "But Clym failed to realise, as you fail to realise, that my heart belonged elsewhere. It belongs to you, Severus. I'm here because this is where I want to be. I just wish I hadn't been so secretive."

Severus assimilated her words, slowly realising that Tess had given him everything he needed to feel secure. He couldn't quite comprehend why he deserved such a commitment, and there remained a worry that he might unintentionally fail her with his lack of aptitude in relationship subtleties. However, he immediately understood one thing which needed to change.

"We shall have no more secrets," Severus resolved.

"No more secrets," Tess agreed.

She touched the silver band on Severus's little finger and caressed the golden brown stone with the pad of her fingertip. "I've often thought it would've been easier for us to communicate if our rings helped us understand each other's thoughts and feelings, like they once did."

Reminded of his magical malady, Severus let go of Tess and removed his ring, placing it on the table next to his cup and saucer. "That ring may have lost its connection to yours, but it remains inextricably linked to *me*."

Tess perceived the ominous tones in his voice. "How do you mean?"

"Watch," Severus instructed, picking up his wand from the floor, authoritatively conducting a classic swish and flick. *Orchideous!*"

Predictably, nothing happened, except that the silver band on the coffee table glinted in the candlelight.

Tess gasped, looking to Severus for an explanation. He then replaced the ring on his finger, cast the same charm, and a dozen orange roses sprang forth from his wand, landing in Tess's hands. She smiled at the gesture, her curiosity piqued by the evidence on display.

"I don't understand how that's possible," she said, her voice breathless.

"Nor do I," Severus replied.

As if on cue, Fogle the house-elf trotted into the living room, carrying a vase full of water. Tess gave the bouquet to him and watched the elf skilfully arrange the flowers whilst avoiding the prick of the thorns.

"Master Severus's magic is magnificent when he wears his ring," he commented as he worked.

Tess's eyebrows crept further up her forehead, and Severus felt obliged to explain. "Fogle helped identify the connection between my magical ability and the anti-Horcrux. What I don't yet know is why I remain tied to this ring. At first, I thought the problem was caused by an alteration to the potion which revived me; I suspected Clym had sabotaged it in some way."

The sweet, silky-smooth fragrance of roses drifted across the room as Tess frowned in thought, shaking her head. "Clym didn't interfere with the potion; I know that for certain. He followed our instructions, and I watched him as he added the final three ingredients... Of course, we are forgetting there was one ingredient which we altered, against Clym's advice. After you'd refused me permission to seek out your father, we used your earthly remains instead."

Severus felt a sickening lurch in his stomach. He had almost forgotten his own concern about that alteration; he'd convinced himself that the choice was justified, and in the process, effectively distorted his memory.

"Are you saying that 'Bone of the Father' served another purpose which I failed to foresee?"

"Perhaps," Tess replied, deep in thought.

"But my father was a Muggle who despised magic," Severus appealed. "How could that influence my credibility as a wizard?"

"I don't know, Severus, but from where I'm sitting, it's the only logical conclusion."

In the silence which followed, Fogle cleared away their teapot, cups and saucers, and Severus contemplated his conclusion.

"So you're saying we must track him down?" he asked. "Discover what purpose he serves?"

"That would seem sensible."

Trepidation crept through his abdomen like a scuttling spider. The thought of contacting his father filled him with dread; he'd had good reason for banishing the man who'd made his life a misery, yet despite his hatred for his father's actions, a small part of Severus felt ashamed about sending him to exile with his memory wiped clean. He may well have written the man's death sentence.

"I don't know where to begin he could be anywhere alive or dead."

"He's still alive," Tess said. "I know where to find him."

A ripple of confusion obscured his sense of relief. "But you promised me that you wouldn't go after him," Severus stated, suspicion edging his voice.

"I didn't," Tess reassured. "Clym found his address on the nineteen-ninety-one census. I've still got the slip of paper in my desk drawer at Hogwarts; I never contacted him."

The news that his father was alive and traceable caused Severus more consternation than he might have anticipated. Yes, there was now a chance to solve the mystery of his magical malady; however, he would have to confront long-buried bitterness about his childhood and make contact with the man he'd condemned. Even if he could bring himself to speak to his father, how would he ever persuade the man to help him?

Tess picked up the vase of roses and placed them on the mantelpiece. With her back towards him, she said quietly, "I can go to him, if you like? I'll test the water, find out what we're facing."

Some of his dread dissolved, leaving behind heavy warmth and gratitude; Tess had become so tuned-in to his needs that she was able to sense them, without him having to ask.

"I'd like some time to think about it," he said softly.

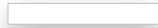
Tess nodded, turned to him, and smiled. "Whenever you're ready."

Ties That Bind Us

Father's Footsteps

Chapter 20 of 24

Tess visits Mevagissey.



Chapter Twenty

Father's Footsteps

Streaks of sombre sunlight broke though heavy, brooding rainclouds as Tess climbed a steep, cobbled street in the seaside village of Mevagissey. The December wind was brisk, the air was salty, and seagulls cried overhead, circling choppy waters which boomed like thunder as they crashed into the shore.

At the top of the hill, around the corner of the street and tucked out of sight, she found a small white-washed terrace of three houses nestled behind a row of silver birch trees. A robin warbled its flute-like song as the branches rustled and swayed in the breeze. The terrace was neatly kept and well-loved.

After the events of the last few months, Tess expected to feel nervous, but she had found Bloom's End cottage in a quiet, idyllic corner of Cornwall; she unbolted the gate of the end-terrace house and knocked on the door without a second thought.

A tabby cat curled around her legs in welcome, and after a short delay, an older lady in her early sixties opened the door. She had a kind, round face and wore a floral apron, covered in flour. Tess smiled when the aroma of baking bread drifted out of the cottage.

"Isobel Snape?" Tess enquired.

The white-haired lady wiped her hands on her apron and stepped forward to get a better look at her house-caller.

"Yes, dear," she replied, squinting in the daylight. "And who might you be?"

"Contessa Marchbanks. But please, call me 'Tess'." She held out her hand in greeting.

Isobel wiped her right hand a second time and shook Tess's. "What can I do for you, Tess?"

"I'm here to see Tobias Snape. I have news of his son, Severus."

Isobel took a step backwards and let out a surprised gasp. After she'd taken a moment to recover her composure, the older lady stepped further inside and held the door open. "You'd better come indoors."

Tess stepped inside the cottage with the cat at her heels and found a cramped yet cosy living room with a small, artificial Christmas tree adorned with baubles and tinsel, standing in the corner by the window.

Noticing Tess's interest in the early festive decorations, Isobel kneeled down and located the electricity socket, turning on the multi-coloured fairy lights. Rising onto her feet again carefully, Isobel straightened the angel on the top of the tree.

"Toby is out in the back garden, in his vegetable patch, digging up parsnips for dinner," the older lady said, making her way to the kitchen door. "I'll call him inside. I've a pot of tea brewing... Would you like a cup?"

"Yes, please, Mrs Snape."

"Make yourself at home, duck, we'll be with you shortly."

Isobel walked into the adjoining kitchen and closed the door behind her, leaving Tess on her own. The cat rubbed against her legs as though they were old friends.

The room spoke of warmth and companionship and had a lived-in feel. A wood-burning stove cast a warm amber glow around the room, and Tess found herself curious, taking in the smattering of Christmas cards on the mantelpiece, a faded photograph of a couple at their wedding, and some pictures of two children at various stages of growing up. Tess brushed past the coffee table and accidentally knocked a seasonal television magazine onto the floor. Sitting down, she replaced the guide next to the remote control on the small table. The cat narrowed its eyes and purred when Tess stroked between its ears with distract fingers.

Eventually, Isobel returned with a tray laden with a blue and white china teapot, cups and a plate of biscuits. She placed the tray on the table and sat down next to Tess, waiting for her husband to return.

The sound of boots being removed and hands being washed drifted in through the open door. Then, wearing socks, woollen trousers and a navy-blue Cornish fisherman's jumper, Tobias Snape walked into the room, stooping to avoid knocking his head against the low beam of the doorway.

Severus's father was in his mid-sixties, long and lean in stature, and with a strikingly similar nose. His full head of hair had turned mostly grey and had been blown about in the wind; his complexion was ruddy, suggesting he'd spent a great deal of his years outdoors. Whilst he shared Severus's physique and hooked nose, Tobias's facial features were nothing like his son's. He had warm brown eyes, silvery stubble on his jaw, and his full, wide lips made his smile seem large and pronounced; Tess suspected he'd been a good-looking man in his youth.

Tobias offered a handshake, betraying both suspicion and fear.

Tess rose to standing. "Hello, Mr Snape. My name is Tess. I'm a friend of your son's."

His large, rough hand grasped hers. "Severus?"

The man's voice was sonorous, as though he were speaking from inside a cave. The sound was remarkably familiar to Tess.

"Yes," she replied.

Tobias nodded nervously and then dropped into an armchair, his hands fidgeting.

Isobel leaned towards her husband's chair and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "We've been hoping someone would arrive and explain it all to us," she reminded him.

Her husband responded by patting her arm.

Isobel turned to face Tess. "We've been waiting for you to come for about six months now."

"May I ask what happened six months ago?"

Tobias bit his lip, unable to reply.

Isobel rescued him, her voice wobbling with apprehension. "We were hoping you might have an explanation... One morning, early in May, Toby woke up after a lucid dream and started to recover fragments of his memory."

"Fragments?" Tess echoed.

"Yes," Isobel replied. "You didn't know? Then, let me explain. The first time I met Toby was twenty years ago. I worked for the Salvation Army in St Austell, helping the homeless to find employment. Toby had arrived in Cornwall a year earlier with amnesia."

Tess nodded. "I was aware of that."

"He knew his name," Isobel continued, "and he had a week's wages stuffed in his pocket, along with his payslip from the mill in Cokeworth. Toby emphatically refused to return home, yet he couldn't explain why he feared going back. He just couldn't remember. It was assumed he'd suffered a trauma, and the Salvation Army helped him find his feet again. I helped him rediscover his skills for repairing machines, and he found a job maintaining engines for the fishermen of the village. Eventually we got married, but in all those years his memories never returned. Not until six months ago."

Tess turned to face Severus's father. "What do you remember, Mr Snape?"

Tobias breathed in through his nose and fixed Tess with his brown gaze. "I remember working in a cotton-weaving mill, maintaining the looms. There was a terraced house on a steep cobbled street. I was married to a woman with black hair. And we had a son."

"That's right." Tess smiled encouragingly.

Tobias, however, seemed troubled. "I remember other things, too."

"Sssh!" Isobel touched his arm in warning.

"It's alright," Tess tried to reassure them. "I think I can help. What else do you recall?"

"Being unhappy... Being angry." Tobias shuddered. "And I remember my wife and my lad... They could do impossible things." The older man's face contorted in fear, as though he expected straitjacket restraint if he elaborated further.

"Your son is a wizard, Mr Snape," Tess explained carefully, knowing she would be covered by the Statute of Secrecy under these circumstances. "And your wife was a witch."

Tobias pursed his lips and closed his eyes.

Isobel, on the other hand, raised her voice for the first time. "I'm not having any of this nonsense in our house!" She turned to Tess, her previously kind face revealing frightened abhorrence. "Look, I don't know who you are or what you're playing at, young lady, but I'm not going to sit here and let you take advantage of a vulnerable man."

Tess replied calmly. "Please, Mrs Snape, there's no need to be afraid; I'm not here to hurt anyone. I only want to help."

When Tess retrieved her wand from the sleeve of her coat, Isobel scrutinised the stick of wood in astonishment, watching as the witch swished and flicked purposefully into the air.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The tea tray levitated at eye-level, Tess holding her wand steadily to avoid spillage.

Isobel's eyes were wide with alarm, but as her curiosity came to the fore, she held out her hand, searching for the invisible force which held her tea service mid-air. Then, with a gasp, she leaned back into her seat, flabbergasted.

"See, I told you, Izzy. My first wife and my kid could do magic." Tobias seemed relieved to have the evidence irrefutably displayed in front of his eyes.

Tess guided the tray back down onto the table and charmed the crockery to serve the tea. Isobel watched the spectacle, enraptured, but Tobias didn't seem impressed as he watched the drinks serving themselves.

"What's the matter, Mr Snape?" Tess asked. "You look upset."

"I don't know what it is, but I feel bitter about it. What you've just done is a miracle, but it irritates me."

"Perhaps I can explain?"

"Aye. I'd appreciate that."

Helping herself to the nearest cup and saucer, Tess took a sip, indicating that it was safe to drink. Isobel looked as though she would have preferred a strong brandy, but she tentatively picked up a cup, added a spoonful of sugar, and smiled when she tasted the soothing tea.

"You were married to a witch named Eileen Prince, who came from Barley in the borough of Pendle," Tess began.

"Is that the big hill I keep dreaming about?" Tobias asked.

"Yes. You lived a few miles away in Cokeworth, owned a house on Spinner's End, and worked in the mill. You and Eileen met at a summer fête. She befriended you, posed as a local, and walked the same route home with you each night. We don't know exactly how it came about, but she fell pregnant with your child."

"I remember her telling me," Tobias said regretfully. "I didn't believe her. I'd not slept with her, see? But then her belly got bigger and bigger, and when the baby was born, I knew he was mine."

"You got married when she was six months pregnant, and you lived together at Spinner's End."

Tobias nodded. "I remember that now. The house was cramped. I worked all the hours God sent, bringing in money for the family, paying the mortgage. But I never touched anything she ever made for me no food, no drink and I spent lots of time down the pub." Tobias held Tess's gaze on an even plane. "I never loved her. It were a

miserable life."

Tess paused, reflecting on his despair and the effect it had on his wife and son. "Severus eventually went to Hogwarts that's a school of magic, Mrs Snape and I'm sad to say he'd been a neglected, unhappy child who'd grown up resenting his father. When Severus was seventeen, he came home from school for the Easter holiday to discover his mother had a black eye and his father bore a bruised knuckle. He put two and two together..."

"And no doubt came up with four. I did hit her sometimes, when I were drunk." Tobias winced at his confession. "I'm not proud of it."

Isobel became tearful, lowering her eyes to the floor.

"But it's not who I am anymore, Izzy. You know that."

She withstood the denouement with courage. "I do, Toby. I do."

"The next part of the story will be hard for you to hear, Mr Snape," Tess warned.

Tobias seemed to brace himself. "Go ahead. I've wanted to hear the truth for a very long time; I might as well hear it all."

Tess admired his resolve. "Severus was angry. He'd become a very powerful wizard by then, dabbling in the darker aspects of magic, and when he discovered his mother had been beaten, he saw red. Severus did what he thought he needed to do to protect himself and his mother. I'm sorry to say that he cursed you, Mr Snape, so that you would sign divorce papers and hand over the deeds of the house. After he'd released you from all of your commitments, he gave you a Memory Potion which made you forget about seventeen years of fatherhood and marriage. Severus brought you here, to Cornwall, to live out the rest of your days."

The room fell silent for several long seconds, eventually broken by the sound of the mantel clock chiming its way into the new hour. Only the cat sitting at Tess's feet seemed unperturbed.

"That all makes sense to me now," Tobias finally replied. "The bits I remember they fit with what you've said." He paused to contemplate the new information. "When Izzy and I got married, we discovered my first wife had died and so I was actually a widower. What can you tell me about that?"

"Two years after you'd been sent away, Eileen died from an illness which was left untreated," Tess replied solemnly.

Seeming to rouse herself, Isobel placed down her teacup, asking, "Why did Toby start to get these flashbacks six months ago?"

Tess dragged her fingertips along her legs. "That's a bit more complicated to explain. You see, it coincides with Severus's death on the second of May this year."

"Oh, dear God," Tobias muttered.

"But it wasn't a Muggle death, Mr Snape. We were able to revive him four months ago, and he's now healthy and well."

"He came back from the dead?" Isobel asked incredulously.

"You could put it like that, I suppose, but I'll explain that part later. The important thing for you, Mr Snape, is that after Severus died, his magic was undone, terminating the curse he'd placed on you. The potion and the curse had previously acted in unison, but then you were left with the effects of the Memory Potion alone. The dissolution of the curse is probably why you started to recall fragments of memory."

"That makes sense," Isobel said, surprising Tess. "Memories are laid down in all kinds of ways. Disrupt part of it and the whole system becomes erratic, like in Alzheimer's Disease."

Tess had very little idea what the lady was talking about, but she smiled and said, "I'm glad you understand... I'm so sorry I've brought you such an unhappy tale."

Tobias picked up his cup of tea and took a large gulp. "Well, as shaming as it is to be told I was a violent man who neglected his only son, at least I know how I ended up here. Severus might not have meant for it to turn out as well as it did."

He patted the back of Isobel's hand appreciatively, and his wife gave Tess an explanation. "Toby is a very determined man, Tess. He came here with little more than a hundred pounds in his pocket and no memory of his past. In the end, he became a successful engineer running his own business, and he's been a good husband to me and my two children. I'm a divorcée, you see. Toby helped raise my kids for ten years before they left home."

"I'm glad things worked out well for you both," Tess said, relieved that she would not be relating another unhappy tale when she went back home. "Severus shares your determination, Mr Snape. He's a remarkable man and a talented wizard."

"What does my lad do for a living?"

"He was a professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for sixteen years, then became Headmaster and died protecting everyone from the greatest Dark wizard who ever lived. Four months ago, he was awarded a first-class Order of Merlin that's the equivalent of a knighthood."

"Bloody hell," Tobias breathed out heavily.

"He's a son to be proud of," Tess affirmed.

"Sounds like my boy done good, Izzy. You hear that?"

"I did, Toby." Isobel smiled. "And what's your relation to Severus, Tess?"

"He and I are together; I'm his girlfriend."

Tobias grin was so wide it seemed to touch his ears. "My lad found himself a beauty."

Tess laughed, her cheeks flushing. "I don't know about that."

Isobel touched her hand conspiratorially. "Toby can be a bit shallow, Tess. He has a soft spot for pretty women."

Tobias laughed, reaching for a chocolate digestive and dunking the biscuit in his cup of tea.

Family Traits

Chapter 21 of 24

Severus learns of his father's story.



Chapter Twenty-One

Family Traits

"He wants to meet you."

Tess removed her Muggle winter coat, draped it over the back of Severus's Chesterfield sofa and took a seat, warming her hands by the fire.

During the time she'd been away, flurries of snow had arrived, blanketing Pendle Hill and the surrounding countryside. The white, wintry landscape resembled a picture-postcard, stark and bleak, and several degrees cooler than the southern coast of Cornwall.

When Severus heard Tess's proclamation, the two mugs of hot chocolate he carried almost met with a premature fate. He muttered an expletive when frothy foam dribbled onto his new mahogany table.

"You must be joking," he responded, *Tergeoing* the polished surface clean with a flick of his wand.

Choosing one of the cups, Tess savoured the aroma of warm milk, dark chocolate and a hint of chilli; Severus's concoction was particularly welcome on a cold December afternoon.

"I'm completely serious," Tess affirmed, relishing the nip of chilli as it warmed her mouth and throat.

Severus shot her a defensive glare. "I take it you explained that I deliberately wiped his memory, not caring if he lived or died?"

"If you didn't care, you wouldn't have left him with one week's wages, his payslip in his pocket, in a town with a Salvation Army church."

"I didn't know there was a Sally Army place nearby; that was pure fluke."

Tess decided not to rise to the bait. Instead, she reflected, "You can't understand why your father would want to meet you."

Severus regarded her with a look which could have soured and curdled a gallon of milk. Fortunately, Tess had become accustomed to his distraction techniques and so she ploughed on.

"Your father says he can forgive you your sins... He's found religion; he and your stepmother are practicing Christians. It seems he found solace and meaning through the church, and I think you'll find he's a very different man to the one you remember. Perhaps a much better man."

"I don't see how that's possible," Severus said bitterly.

Tess shrugged her shoulders and took another sip of decadent hot chocolate. Feeling comfortable, she leaned back into the sofa and relaxed. "You essentially gave him a fresh start, Severus."

"I didn't mean to," he muttered into the rim of his cup.

"You could've inflicted a much worse punishment, but you chose not to."

Severus huffed, but he reluctantly realised the truth. Nevertheless, the lure of disparagement proved hard to resist. "It seems I turned my father into a God-fearing man who slavishly follows a religious doctrine, conveniently relieving him of all culpability."

"He doesn't avoid responsibility for his past actions, quite the contrary. The church helped him when he was down-and-out, providing a crutch of sorts, and giving him some meaning. He feels indebted to them, and I think he has continued to find solace there since his memories resurfaced."

"He remembers?"

"Some of it, yes. The Imperius Curse lifted when you died. He's now left with the effects of the Memory Potion."

"Perhaps he'll change his mind about meeting me when you administer the antidote."

"Actually, he refused the antidote, and I don't blame him. He remembers more than enough already, and he feels deeply ashamed."

"So he should." Severus was aware he sounded childish.

"Your father is a successful and determined man, and those traits have stood him in good stead, helping him rebuild his life."

Severus stared out of the window at his snow-covered garden, deep in thought. "I never thought he'd flourish," he contemplated. "The man I knew was bitter and vicious."

Watching a red-breasted robin hopping around the lawn and then flying off into the leafless trees, Tess meditated on his choice of words.

"I knew a man like that," she reflected quietly, "once upon a time."

Severus clunked his half-empty cup onto the coffee table, swivelling viperously at Tess. *Do not* compare me to my father."

Patently, Tess stroked the smooth warmth of her china mug, unruffled. "Your father was the product of a working-class upbringing; he worked hard and fought for all he achieved. Then he was tricked into marriage with a woman he did not love."

"And conceived a son he never wanted," Severus interjected.

"Yes," Tess concurred. "And despite all of this, he hung around and did his duty."

Severus's left nostril flared as he arched his upper lip. "You're painting him as if he were a saint."

"No, I'm just telling the story from his point of view. He's mortified and penitent, knowing he was an abusive and neglectful husband and father. But, Severus, you should have seen the pride on his face when I told him about your Order of Merlin..."

In the centre of his chest, Severus felt the injurious blow of a Beater's bat; his father had never once been proud of him, no matter how hard he'd tried to win his praise.

"When I was a kid, my father never seemed to notice me and spent all his free time at the pub," Severus remembered. "I used to wish he'd take me with him, teach me how to throw darts and play pool, anything to spend time together. But he'd come home drunk, uninterested in anything I'd accomplished. He'd send me to my room, and I'd listen through the crack in the doorframe... All the arguments, all the fights..." Severus's gaze dropped to the floor, unable to continue.

Tess moved towards him and wound her hand around his arm reassuringly. "You were a neglected, unloved and vulnerable child."

"And he was the cause," Severus saw fit to clarify.

Tess noticed the dominance of his distorted thinking. Carefully, she mirrored, "You blame your father."

"Of course I do," he stated.

Entwining her fingers gently around his whilst steeling herself for a change of direction, Tess asked, "How do you feel about your mother?"

In the silence which followed, a fresh squall of wintry weather arrived, hail and sleet rapping against the French doors like bristles on a snare drum. The sound encouraged Severus to recoil into a warmer memory.

"My mother raised me. She taught me magic and looked after me."

Tess gently manoeuvred with formless footsteps. "Your mother cared for you. Yet she was also the one who hoodwinked your father, forcing him to marry and spend the rest of his life with someone he didn't love."

Severus's jaw tightened. "Don't criticise my mother."

"I'm not criticising. I'm simply stating facts."

"My mother did what she could to look after me. I'm more like her than my father."

Tess smiled sadly. "Actually, I see both of them in you."

Severus turned, looking at her sharply for a long moment. "And what exactly do you see?"

"Well," Tess began, "when you were young, you befriended and fell in love with a witch. Your relationship never blossomed into romance, although perhaps it may have done, given time. The difference between you and your mother is that *you* chose differently; you became a Death Eater, hoping to impress Lily and win her back. Your mother, on the other hand, decided to bewitch your father, forcing him to be with her. Your father gave up his hopes and aspirations in order to raise a boy whom he didn't even remember conceiving."

Severus's head twitched in defiant discontent. "Yes, I chose differently. I didn't want to force Lily to love me, because it wouldn't have been real."

"Exactly. And this is where you differ from your mother."

A pensive, deep vertical line scored his forehead. "But when Lily's life was threatened, I wanted to trade her husband's and son's lives to make her mine."

Tess understood. "Even though she would never have truly been yours."

Severus's gaze lifted to the fireplace, considering the axiom from a new angle. "You're right. Had Dumbledore not brokered the deal to keep her safe, I would've forced a life upon Lily which she would never have chosen. And she wouldn't have loved me if she'd known what I'd done to her husband and child."

Seeing the divergence clearly, Severus began to comprehend a new arraignment. "You said you see both of my parents in me?" he asked, his voice tentative.

Tess nodded, took a final sip of hot chocolate, and placed her cup down on the table. "When you were a boy, your father was cruel and vicious... I was taught Potions by such a man." Tess paused for impact, giving space for the parallel to unfold. "And yet, your father also exhibited a high degree of determination, rebuilding his life from scratch, becoming successful in his career, finding a wife he loved, and leaving some of his old ways behind him. He's more like you than you realise, Severus."

Surrendering finally to the precision of her logic, Severus took his time to process what he'd heard. He picked up their empty cups and took them back into the kitchen, ran the hot water tap and began to wash up.

It pained him to attribute flaws to his mother, but he could not deny the similarities between himself and his father.

Tobias Snape had begun life anew after his son had freed him from the ties that bound him. However, despite his son's crimes, this same father now offered his son forgiveness and a chance to reconcile.

Severus felt a sharp stab of pain, understanding he would have to rise above their differences and accept responsibility for his own dubious actions.

Was it worth opening the door, not knowing where it might lead?

Yuletide Gatherings

Chapter 22 of 24

Christmas Day arrives.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Yuletide Gatherings

Adjusting the knot in his black cravat for the third time, Severus frowned at his reflection in the mantelpiece mirror. Overhead, he could hear the clanking of Tess's high heels as she traversed the bedroom floorboards, punctuated by the wail of the ghoul who seemed to have decided to sing carols now that Christmas Day had arrived. Severus made a final assessment of his appearance, straightened the ripples of wool around his frock-coat buttons and fitted his warm winter cloak.

As he left the living room, he glanced at the solitary Muggle Christmas card sitting conspicuously on his sideboard and felt tempted to read its inscription once more. It was a futile exercise since he'd now memorised his father's Christmas greeting. He left the folded cardboard standing proudly next to his red poinsettia and trudged up the stairs.

"Are you ready yet?" he called.

"Almost," Tess replied, opening the door.

Severus stepped into their bedroom, noticing a pungent haze had transformed his sanctuary into a lady's boudoir. He wafted his hand through the air in irritation.

Tess stepped into the centre of the room, wearing a classy, bottle-green gown which left her shoulders bare, matching long-armed satin gloves and perilously high stilettos. Her long hair was scooped into an elegant braided bun, revealing her gloriously enticing neck.

Severus almost choked on the smoggy fumes as he took a deep intake of breath.

Fastening her long, sparkling earrings into place, Tess did a little twirl and asked, "How do I look?"

"You're wearing Slytherin green," was all that Severus could manage.

Her hands went straight to her hips. "I am *allowed* to wear green, aren't I? I don't think Salazar Slytherin would mind."

"Salazar Slytherin would have you up against a bedpost if he saw you wearing that dress."

Tess threw him a smirk. "I heard Salazar was only really interested in men."

Severus's jaw twitched. "Very funny." Without warning, he swept forward in a dizzying swirl of sable cloak, grabbed Tess by the waist and spun her around until her back rested against the four-poster bed. "I'll halt your traitorous tongue," he murmured, pressing his lips against hers and pushing fervently into her mouth. Severus felt her body enervate into his.

"We're going to be late," she whispered when he moved his attention to her neck. Her voice continued weakly, "Do you want to make a bad impression?"

Severus groaned, brushing his cheek along the edge of her ear. "I'd rather not make *any* impression. We could just stay at home instead."

Tess straightened her back and ran her hands through his hair, raising his head to look into his eyes. "But I'll have wasted this dress."

"I assure you, that won't be the case." Severus's lip curled, and his eyes shone.

Placing a gentle kiss on his lips, Tess pulled away. "We can't back out now. My great-grandmother is expecting us. Anyway," she continued playfully, "if you get bored, you can spend time constructing elaborate ways to remove my dress and try them out when we get home."

Before Severus could reply, she'd taken his hand and led him from the bedroom.

The Marchbanks' family manor in the Brecon Beacons stood like a stone monument against the rolling green hills of the National Park. Not a single snowflake had fallen in the south of Wales, making the landscape look very different from Hogwarts at Christmastime.

As they walked up the pebbled driveway, Severus counted no less than twenty windows on the front exterior of the house. Next to the double-fronted door stood a hansom-cab drawn by a Thestral, grandly depositing two more guests into the arms of the indomitable Griselda Marchbanks.

In his five months since revivification, Severus had managed to avoid the majority of Tess's extended family, but as Christmas Day approached, he found he had run out of excuses for meeting one of the wizarding elite's foremost families. The irony that he'd not yet met with his own father had not passed him by, but he continued to convince himself that there remained plenty of time to arrange the reunion. He'd decided it would happen when he felt ready to build that particular bridge.

Griselda met Severus with a firm, bony handshake.

The family's matriarch was one-hundred-and-thirty-three years old, wizened, wrinkly and petite, with a chronic stoop. Despite her appearance, the former Wizengamot elder retained an astonishing memory and a formidable temperament.

Severus already knew Tess's great-grandmother from her visits to Hogwarts in her capacity as Governor of the Wizarding Examinations Authority and had met her again more recently when he'd submitted to magical aptitude tests after his revivification. Unfortunately, the elderly witch had not discovered the fatal flaw in his magical ability.

Unconsciously, Severus rubbed his thumb along the silver band of his Tiger's Eye ring, reassuring himself of its presence.

Grabbing him firmly by the arm, Griselda led Severus inside with Tess following behind. To the left of the main hallway was a large, high ceilinged reception decorated with dozens of Marchbanks' family portraits and two spectacular marble fireplaces at either end of the room. Severus balked at the number of guests already assembled for the Christmas feast.

The gathering quietened and dozens of people turned to stare at the new arrivals. Severus felt icy needles pressing into his chest as Griselda picked up a champagne flute, tapped it with her wand, amplifying its crystal resonance.

"I'd like you all to welcome Severus Snape into our family," Griselda requested in an unassailable tone.

Tess's hand snuggled into Severus's elbow, offering support.

"I'm delighted that my darling Contessa has found love with such an accomplished wizard," Griselda continued, making eye contact with every single houseguest.

Severus had the distinct impression that the matriarch was stating the terms for his position in her family, and he choked down his unease, hoping he would be able to live up to her expectations.

"Only last week, Severus was honoured for his invention of an Imperius curse-breaker, the most notable advance in Potioneering since Damocles devised Wolfsbane Potion. Without doubt, his discovery will prove a significant new defence against the Dark Arts. Furthermore, Tess's beau has also been awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his heroism during Voldemort's reign."

Several people flinched at the mention of the Dark Lord's name; plainly, Griselda had no problem uttering Tom Riddle's pseudonym.

She continued, "I give Contessa and Severus my blessing for their union, and I know that you will all do the same."

Pointedly, Severus searched the reception room for Nathan Marchbanks, but he was nowhere to be seen. He felt the bolster of Tess's hand slipping into his, and he turned to see her face beaming with happiness. Before he could resist, she'd placed a chaste yet lingering kiss upon his lips.

The audience broke into ragged, broken applause; however, when Severus glanced around, he noticed most of the onlookers were smiling.

Severus thanked Griselda, shook her hand again, and then Tess led him to a table overflowing with fountains of drinks rivalling those he'd seen on display at the Yule Ball.

"My second cousin owns a vineyard in the Loire Valley; you must try his Saumur," Tess said, thrusting a crystal flute into Severus's hand.

He took a sip of the sparkling white wine, grasping the glass as if it were a lifebuoy. "Are you really related to all of these people?" Severus asked, making a mental note of the number of heads in the room. He'd counted fifty-three so far.

Tess cleared her throat, slightly embarrassed. "These are about half of them. One or two branches of the family do their own thing on Christmas Day, and some just don't turn up, or turn up late, like Nate, for instance."

"I'd wondered where he was."

"He didn't attend the party last year; apparently, he had a better offer in Australia. But he said he was coming this year..." Tess's voice drifted off as she scanned the room.

"There he is," Severus commented darkly, gesturing to the main hallway.

Nathan Marchbanks, dressed in a Muggle suit, greeted his great-grandmother with a bear hug which looked comical, given the difference in their stature. Beside Tess's brother stood a gorgeous blonde-haired lady wearing a sparkly red party dress. Her voluminous mane appeared naturally curly and her body was curvaceous, lending her the aura of a bundle of fun.

"Who's his plus-one?"

"Merlin knows," Tess replied. "Whenever Nate attends, he brings a different partner. Gran stopped bothering to introduce them after the number of different women reached double figures."

"I hope they broke the mould when they made your brother," Severus sneered.

"Oh, he's one on his own, no doubt about that," Tess replied.

They watched as Nathan and his mystery woman sauntered into the reception room. Soon, Severus found himself forced into shaking hands with Tess's brother.

"Great job on that Imperius curse-breaker, Snape," Nate said.

He sounded genuine.

Severus merely nodded then turned to make contact with a pair of caramel-brown eyes. "And who might you be?" he asked graciously, offering the lady his hand.

"Tara," she replied, smiling nervously as she shook his hand daintily.

"Tara, this is Severus Snape," Nate said, suddenly realising his faux pas. "And this is my sister, Tess."

"Pleased to meet you," Tara said, accepting a glass of Saumur from Tess and taking a long gulp. "I've never been anywhere like this before. This house is simply stunning!"

"I told you the family were big movers and shakers in the wizarding world," Nate bragged.

Tara giggled. "Do you do magic too, Tess?"

Severus looked enquiringly at Tess, noticing her bemusement.

"Yes, of course," she replied.

"I'd love to see," Tara said excitedly.

Severus thought Tess's raised eyebrows might hit the chandelier above them. Full of hopeful innocence, Tara beseeched Tess with her amber-brown eyes. Severus felt rather than heard Tess's inward groan.

Removing her wand from the back of her dress, Tess conjured a corsage of lime-green orchids and white freesia. Tara whelped with delight when the arrangement landed safely in her hands.

"It's beautiful, thank you! Everything's just so amazing!"

The young woman's eyes were alight with wonder as Tess replied, "There's a mirror in the hall which you can use to attach the flowers to your dress."

"Thanks." Tara fiddled with the pin as she walked away, searching for the looking glass.

Tess's tone was far from amused as Tara slipped from sight. "Nate! How could you?"

"What?" he replied defensively.

"You've brought a *Muggle*! Do you even *remember* the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy?"

"Calm down, Tess, it's alright. I'm going to Obliviate her in the morning."

Severus set down his glass, ready to escort Tess's brother outside. Tess, however, held him back.

"You're joking, aren't you?" she asked uncertainly.

"Of course I am!"

Severus almost hissed as he let out the breath he'd been holding.

"If you must know, we've been dating for three months now."

Tess's breath came out in a breezy whistle. "And you applied for permission?"

"The Ministry of Magic informed me yesterday. That's why Tara's so overawed; I only told her last night. At the moment, I think she'd believe that Father Christmas really does exist."

"Better not tell her about house-elves just yet, then," Severus quipped before he could help himself.

"Well, what do you know? Severus Snape has a sense of humour." Nate smirked as he sipped his wine.

"It only stretches so far."

"Boys, boys, let's keep it polite. Tara's coming back." Tess greeted the Muggle woman kindly, fussed over the corsage, and then said, "You've got lots of people to meet; maybe we'll talk again a bit later on."

"That would be nice. Thank you for making me feel so welcome," Tara said, smiling.

Severus couldn't help but admire the woman's ability to fit with whatever bizarre situations she found herself. Secretly, he wished he were able to do the same.

Nate and Tara wandered off, leaving Severus alone with his lover.

"Pretty, isn't she?" Tess asked.

"Yes. But she's got nothing on you."

Tess laughed. "Nice recovery. Come on, there's something I want to show you."

Back in the main hallway, Tess led Severus into a private corner, and Severus slipped an anticipating hand onto her derriere. Tess removed it quickly, chuckling.

"Later. Much later," she chastised.

"My, my, Severus," said a familiar voice. "Who would've thought you'd be such a smooth operator?"

The portrait of Albus Dumbledore gazed down from its final resting place; Severus had almost forgotten the third portrait of the Headmaster had chosen its retirement in the home of Griselda Marchbanks, after it had fulfilled its duty last summer in Contessa's home.

"I'm surprised you haven't been to visit me before now," Dumbledore said without resentment.

"I needed a break. No offence, Dumbledore."

"None taken. You deserve your freedom. I trust you're using it wisely?"

"I daresay," Severus replied ambiguously.

"He's not accustomed to big families," Tess commented. "I think this is all a bit much for him."

"Excuse me, but I'm standing right here," Severus said icily.

"Am I wrong?"

Severus sighed. "No"

"You can't expect him to take to family functions like a duck to water," Dumbledore advised Tess. "Severus hasn't had a family to speak of for about twenty years."

"Again, I'm standing right here."

Dumbledore continued undeterred. "Even when they were both alive, they weren't much of a family."

Severus gritted his teeth. "My father is not dead, Dumbledore."

The former headmaster's blue eyes lost their twinkle as he frowned. "Oh, really? I did not know."

"He's alive and well, remarried with stepchildren, living in Cornwall." Severus admonished himself for providing such unnecessary detail.

"You've been in touch with him, then?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Yes. Well, no," Severus admitted. "Tess has been to see him."

Dumbledore's beard twitched as he quirked his lip, addressing Tess. "You've asked for permission to propose marriage to his son?"

Tess pinched her lips together, trying to contain her amusement.

"No," Severus replied haughtily. "I plan to meet him, that's all."

"Ah," Dumbledore said, smiling. "A reunion at Christmastime. That sounds rather nice."

"We haven't yet set a date."

"Why ever not?"

Severus wanted to tell Dumbledore it was none of his business, but part of him felt ashamed at his indecision and inaction. He realised it was absurd that he'd met Tess's family before meeting his own.

He looked away from the portrait and said, "Tess, might I borrow your family's owl?"

Tess's expression quickly turned from enjoyment to inquisitiveness. "Of course you can."

"Now?" Severus pressed, mentally preparing the note to his father.

"Yes," she said, lifting her skirts in an attempt to hasten her movement. "On the third floor, there's a small aviary. I'll take you there."

As they departed for the owlery, Severus noticed Tess casting a knowing smile at Dumbledore's portrait.

Following her up the staircase, his eyes searched for the seam in her gown. He planned to retaliate by removing her robes ahead of schedule in a secluded corner of the Marchbanks' family Manor.

Tabula Rasa

Chapter 23 of 24

A long-awaited reunion.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Tabula Rasa

Clear blue skies heralded the arrival of New Year's Day, and frost encrusted the leafless trees with a sprinkling of albino feathers. Downham had been spared its share of snow, and the village's muted, icy colours shimmered in the sunlight whilst Pendle Hill loomed cold and white in the distance.

Severus and Tess walked off their hangovers in the crisp, countryside air, aware that Tobias and Isobel Snape were currently travelling up the motorway, making the seven-hour journey from Mevagissey. They knew the hour would be late by the time the couple arrived at the village's bed-and-breakfast accommodation, settled in, and made the short walk down an icy road to Lapwing Row.

Low-lying mist had begun to settle across the valley by the time the inevitable knock on the door reverberated through the house. Severus glanced through the library window and caught a glimpse of the fading, peach-coloured sky and its orange orb setting in the west. Adjusting to the glare, he could see two people standing on the footbridge in front of his house.

A wodge of cotton wool pressed into Severus's throat, and he noticed the house-callers appeared equally nervous, shivering in the cold outside his front door.

Tess wound her hand around his, gentle and reassuring.

"Shall I get the door?" she nudged.

"No," he replied, swallowing his misgivings and straightening the ballast of his black waistcoat. "I'll do it."

Tess's hand brushed against his burgundy shirt sleeve as Severus passed through the door to the hallway, feeling as though his steps were heavy enough to splinter and crack the floorboards beneath. His hand paused on the brass door-handle, and he took in a steadying breath.

As much as Tess had helped prepare him for this moment, his trepidation remained, in abject defiance of his attempts to control his emotions. Severus knew he would be opening the door to his father without his feelings being contained under lock and key, and the thought filled him with dread.

Opening the door let in a blast of ice-cold air. Tobias and Isobel Snape stood with their faces partially disguised by hats and woollen scarves, their gloved hands rammed into their pockets for warmth. Realising their discomfort, Severus wordlessly stepped aside, allowing them entry into his home.

They nodded in gratitude and moved quickly indoors, shaking their arms as though to dislodge a covering of snow.

"Brrrrr," Isobel commented as she removed her red knitted hat and scarf. "I know they say it's grim up north, but I never knew it could be so cold!" She smiled as she removed her gloves and stuffed them into her coat pockets.

"Izzy's not used to the frost," Tobias explained, looking in Severus's general direction. "We don't get these low temperatures on the south coast of Cornwall."

Severus caught his father's eye, felt the wedge in his throat loosen a little bit, and nodded to communicate his understanding. Words, however, remained out of reach.

Tess stepped into the hallway and offered to take their winter coats, and in the tight space of the corridor, the guests peeled off their outdoor layers and handed them over. Severus moved and gestured for them to follow him into the library.

Isobel's eyes soaked up the wall-to-wall bookshelves, whilst his father looked surprised by the first reception room of Severus's home.

"This is an impressive selection of books," Tobias remarked with a tinge of awe, glancing at the tomes lining the room whilst inhaling the aroma of old parchment and leather. "You must be quite the scholar."

Before Severus could reply, Tess returned, her arms empty from depositing the winter garments in the cloakroom. Knowing he'd not yet spoken, she looked at him expectantly.

He quietly cleared his throat, and with a rigid posture, he turned to his father and said, "Welcome to Downham."

Tobias nodded, put his hands in his pockets, and cast a smile at Tess.

In the awkwardness which followed, a dissonant, jangling sound akin to goblets falling on a stone floor invaded the silence, causing the houseguests to cast their jittery eyes to the ceiling.

As the noise continued for several seconds, Isobel turned to Tess in fright. "What's going on?"

"Oh, it's just a ghou, Mrs Snape. Nothing to be scared of," she explained.

Isobel's voice trembled. "A... a *ghoul*?"

"Ghouls are actually considered good luck in wizarding homes," Tess said, smiling sympathetically. "They're not a threat at all."

Isobel looked dubiously at Tobias. "Did you ever have a ghou, Toby?"

He shook his head, questioning Severus with his gaze. "Never heard of them before now."

"My father knew very little of the wizarding world," Severus elucidated in a neutral tone.

"I have much to learn, it seems," Tobias replied.

Severus could sense his father attempting to build a bridge, and he knew he held the power to make the process easier. If only he knew how.

He was saved from his procrastination by another gasp from Isobel. Through the door to the living room, she had seen their house-elf placing a tray of drinks on the coffee table and subsequently vanishing on the spot. Isobel covered her gaping mouth and flailed for Tess's reassurance.

Tess took hold of Isobel's arm. "It's alright, that's just Fogle, our elf. He helps us with housekeeping. He's really quite friendly, Mrs Snape."

Leading her by the arm, Tess took Isobel through to the living room and sat her down, helping her recover from the shock and leaving Severus and Tobias standing alone in the library.

"It's been a lot for her to take in," said Tobias, rattling his keys in his pocket.

"Undoubtedly," Severus replied.

After a moment's contemplation, Tobias remarked, "Tess seems to have things under control. What say we head out to the pub? Have a New Year's drink whilst these ladies get acquainted?"

Severus noticed the wool which had been lodged in his throat had now moved to reside in his stomach; his dread had dissipated into a new manifestation, reminding him of the nervousness he used to feel before his OWL examinations: an aberrant mixture of fear and excitement.

Realising he needed to respond, Severus forced himself to speak. "I'll get our coats," he said, leaving the library for the sanctuary of his cloakroom under the stairs.

Shrugging on his warm, black winter overcoat, he passed his father's recently-shed garments back to him then located his green-and-silver scarf and gloves.

Tess looked at him in surprise when he entered the living room, wearing his combination of Muggle and wizard winter clothing.

"We're going to the pub," Severus declared. "It'll give you chance to tell Isobel a bit more about the wizarding world." He turned to his father, who stood at the doorway to the library, affixing his brown woolly hat over his ears. "We'll be back soon."

"OK, that's fine," Tess replied, recovering her composure quickly. "We'll keep the home fires burning."

Arctic air greeted Severus and his father as they took their first steps outside. The temperature had plummeted as the sun diminished beyond the horizon, illuminating clouds with a lugubrious glow and plunging the village into amber twilight. Severus pulled out a battery-powered torch from his coat pocket and switched it on, lighting the path ahead.

"Can't you use magic for that?" Tobias asked.

"I could, but I'm the only wizard in the village, and I'd risk being caught in the act. However, the main road is lit by streetlamps just around the corner."

They set off in the direction of the pub.

"It's a beautiful village," Tobias remarked after a short silence. "We noticed there're no overhead cables, television aerials, or even any double yellow lines on the road. It's like the land that time forgot."

"Downham is part of a Muggle conservation area. They purposefully keep it looking this way." Severus turned off his torch when a pool of light ahead signalled their arrival onto surer pathways. As they passed by a terrace of houses he commented, "The place looks a lot like a wizarding village from the outside, but inside the houses are just as Muggle as everywhere else,"

"Except for yours," Tobias commented. "I noticed you had no electricity."

"It seems our house has always been inhabited by magical folk. We're not even connected to the electricity grid."

They turned on the street corner, trying to keep to the stone pavements which had been gritted to make them passable. Rock salt crunched underfoot as they ascended the hill into the heart of the village, and their conversation lulled from the exertion. As they reached the top of the hill, Severus noticed his breath burned his throat. They paused briefly, looking over the road towards the village's only public house, which doubled as a bed-and-breakfast establishment. The windows of the Assheton Arms gleamed a warm welcome into the night.

"It's a lovely old building," Tobias commented. "Rooms are comfy, and the bar is proper oldly-worldly." He headed across the road, his hands stuffed in his pockets. "You coming?"

Severus mobilised his limbs, realising his trepidation had rooted his feet to the frost-covered ground. Carefully, they navigated their way across the icy traffic-free road and passed frozen wooden tables and benches as they arrived at the pub's front door. An outdoor electric lantern lit the entrance.

"You've never been in here, have you?" Tobias asked, scrutinising Severus's expression.

Severus stared through the window panes. "No. I've never been inside a Muggle pub before."

"Never once?"

"Nope," Severus replied, bouncing slightly on his heels, feeling the chill.

"Blimey."

His father reached for the door handle and led them inside.

Their nostrils were immediately assailed with warm air and the aroma of beer, cigarette smoke, and spices of mulled wine. The scent was a riot to the senses after the stark, Siberian air outside.

Unbuttoning his coat and walking straight to the bar, Tobias caught the eye of the innkeeper and placed an order for a pint of stout. "What'll you have?" he asked his son.

"The same," Severus replied, unravelling his scarf and locating a table in the corner, adjacent to a snooker table.

Signalling his direction to his father, Severus walked past a grand fireplace with an old stone surround dated '1765' and claimed the free table, pulling off his gloves and folding his coat over the back of a worn chair. In another corner of the room hung a dilapidated dartboard with two older gentlemen locked in competition. Severus noticed the red rectangle below the number twenty was so worn away that it barely retained its colour, and yet the red spot at the centre of the board appeared almost pristine.

He wondered why the players would direct their shots in this manner, and he watched as the man throwing the yellow darts kept missing his target. Severus deemed alcohol to be a curious beverage to consume whilst participating in a game which required excellent hand-eye co-ordination.

Presently, his father appeared, carrying two pints of stout in glasses which were etched with a golden harp. He placed the drinks down, and the frothy white head dribbled down the edge of one of the glasses.

Severus ran his finger up the side of the glass to prevent further spillage and then sucked the foam away, sampling the burnt tang of beer. The flavour was similar to the dry stout served at the Hog's Head, reminding him of Hogsmeade at Christmastime.

He continued to watch the darts game unfold as Tobias hung his coat on a hook and then took the seat across from him. As they waited for their pints of stout to settle, Severus noticed he felt strangely calm; he'd always deemed Muggle pubs to be his father's environment, hence his reason for never setting foot in such a place before.

Tobias watched as the player with the yellow darts failed to secure the coveted area on the circular board, and then lost the game to his opponent. The competitors wandered off to the bar to refill their glasses.

"Cheers," Tobias proposed, raising his pint of dark stout.

Severus picked up his own glass, aware of how peculiar this situation seemed; he'd never have predicted he would be sharing a salutation of alcohol with his father after less than an hour.

"Cheers."

Their full glasses clunked mid-air, and they both took a large gulp of cool, refreshing beer.

As taste-buds responded to the unique flavour, his father grinned, prying for a reaction.

"It's good," Severus offered, wiping the froth from his upper lip.

"There's nowt like a good Guinness. Not many places serve it at the right temperature, but this place they've got it spot on."

Severus took another mouthful. "I expect I'll be coming back for more in the not too distant future."

"Bring that lovely lady of yours," Tobias suggested.

"Tess hates stout," Severus replied. "She'd probably enjoy the mulled wine, though."

"They'll only serve that here at Christmas, so you'd best be quick," Tobias remarked, knocking back another gulp and smiling with satisfaction. "When you goin' to marry her?"

Taken aback, Severus balked at the question.

"You can't let a beautiful lady like that slip through your fingers," his father advised. "She won't wait forever, you know."

"I wasn't aware she was waiting for a marriage proposal." Severus sniffed, turning his head away.

"She might not be, but I wouldn't bet on it. Best to take the bull by the horns, I reckon."

Severus listened to his father's words, feeling a shard of insecurity. Fiddling with the Tiger's Eye ring on his little finger, he knew the root cause of his hesitancy.

"It's not that simple," he replied quietly.

"You're both single, aren't you?"

"Yes," Severus bit out. "But there are things... There is something I need to sort out first."

"Anything I can help you with?"

"Possibly," replied Severus.

The two darts players returned to recommence their game with full pints of bitter, and Severus used the distraction and refocused on the dartboard.

After a minute or two of watching the game and observing the scores chalked up on the blackboard, Tobias asked if Severus knew the game's rules and offered to explain them to him. Drawn into the darts match, they spent the next fifteen minutes spectating.

During the conversation hiatus, Severus considered his predicament. Even if he could make amends with his father, he still didn't know to incorporate the missing element of 'bone of the father' ex post facto; Severus had no idea where to start in restoring the fullness of his magical abilities.

Tobias must have noticed his pondering, for he didn't speak, waiting patiently for his son to re-enter the conversation.

Eventually, Severus tore his gaze from the dartboard and realised their pint glasses were both empty; he'd been so entertained by the game that he'd lost track of time.

Tobias looked at his wristwatch and frowned. "We'd better get back, Izzy'll start worrying. I've enjoyed this, though."

A surreal moment passed, wordless, yet obvious to both men. Neither knew the content of the other's thoughts, but both knew they'd gravitated into an unprecedented place, an area of uncharted territory between father and son. Neither had uttered a word of apology or offered outward forgiveness, but the mood had unmistakably altered.

They stood up together, and suddenly Tobias offered out his hand. "What say we wipe the slate clean?" he suggested, tilting his head.

For a moment, Severus held back. "Tabula rasa," he muttered under his breath.

"Pardon?" Nonplussed, Tobias withdrew his hand a little.

"Tabula rasa," Severus said more loudly. "It means 'scraped tablet' it's essentially the same thing." He held out his hand and met his father's eye. "Clean slates," he offered.

As his father's hand firmly gripped his, relief cascaded through Severus like a mountainside waterfall.

After two shakes, their hands parted, and they found themselves stunned by a bright flash of white light emitted from the Tiger's Eye ring, momentarily blinding all occupants of the room. Startled, their fellow patrons looked to each other for reassurance, but Tobias recovered first.

"Flash of lightning," he announced to onlookers.

Nodding their heads, the punters turned away, leaving Severus and Tobias studying the Tiger's Eye ring, knowing they needed to quickly find some privacy.

"Best get outside before they realise there's no thunder," Tobias suggested.

Fumbling to fasten their coats, Tobias and Severus quickly wrapped up and stepped out into the frostbitten night.

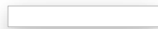
"What happened just then?" his father asked, fixing his gloves as they stood by the pub's lantern.

"I'm not sure," Severus replied, his voice croaking. "But I need to get back to the house straight away."

From This Day Forward

Chapter 24 of 24

The anti-Horcrux is tested.



Chapter Twenty-Four

From This Day Forward

In his haste, Severus nearly tripped through the door to Lapwing Row. Stripping off their outer layers, he and his father swiftly deposited their coats on the library chairs and greeted Tess and Isobel in the living room.

The women studied them keenly, and their curiosity piqued when Severus declared, "Tess, I need to speak to you in the kitchen."

Tobias ushered Tess from her seat and claimed the place on the sofa next to Isobel. Tess followed Severus through to the kitchen, and he closed the door behind them.

"How did it go?" Tess asked warily. "You look worried."

Severus took off his Tiger's Eye ring and placed it gently in the palm of Tess's hand.

She focused on the ring, turning it over, and raised her eyes, brimming with questions.

Withdrawing his wand from inside his shirt sleeve, he replied, "It went fine. But something happened. Something I didn't anticipate."

"What do you mean?"

"We shook hands," Severus replied.

"That's great!" Touching his arm, Tess beamed.

"No, what I mean to say is, we shook hands and then there was a flash of light... It came from the ring."

Looking down at the anti-Horcrux, Tess said, "Oh!"

"Oh, indeed."

"Could that mean...?"

"I don't know. But there's only one way to find out." A leaden weight filled his belly, and Severus trembled as he picked up a green apple from the fruit bowl and placed it on the kitchen work-surface.

Wide-eyed, Tess watched as he held his wand aloft and brandished a perfunctory jab.

"*Diffindo!*" Severus uttered.

The Severing Charm cleaved the apple into six equal segments which fell apart in slow motion like flower petals opening to receive the sun.

They stared at the white flesh of the fruit, neither daring to speak. Unconsciously, Severus rubbed his little finger with his thumb, exploring the exposed area of skin normally covered by the silver band. Unexpectedly, inexplicably, his soul had been fully restored, reuniting him with his magic once more.

After a moment, tears began to stream down Tess's cheeks.

Severus pulled her into his embrace, and they held each other, consumed by a crashing wave of profoundest relief. The heavy weight in Severus's stomach quickly morphed into an aching tumefaction of warmth in his chest. He could feel tears welling in his own eyes, and his bottom lip quivered as he tried to contain the emotion.

Sensing the surge, Tess held him closer, pressing her cheek into his chest. "Oh, Severus," she whispered.

His tears landed on her scalp, and his body shook. In the solace of her embrace, Severus stroked comforting fingertips through her hair, his thumb pressing close to her ear and his fingers finding the nape of her neck. Gently, he guided her chin upwards and placed a soft kiss upon her lips.

Tess reached to wipe her thumbs across his face, smudging away the tracks of his tears. Smiling again, she pressed her lips against his for a soothing kiss.

"You did it," she affirmed. "I'm so pleased for you."

He couldn't speak, and so he kissed her again, his movements strong, empowered with newfound dignity. The joy in his heart seemed to flow through him like a river of gold, infusing his body and propounding himself as both a wizard and a man, from this day forward, restored and whole again.

Just over a week later, Severus Apparated to Cornwall, several miles from where he'd abandoned his father more than twenty years previously. Greeted by an affable

tabby cat, he found Bloom's End cottage hiding behind four silver birch trees in the picturesque town of Mevagissey. So much had happened since New Year's Day that he wondered if he might wake up one morning to discover it had all been a dream.

He'd spent much time mulling over why his Muggle father's handshake had been the catalyst for the restoration of his magical abilities. Tess had her own explanation for this antithetical outcome; perhaps, in order for Severus to become a full wizard again, he'd needed to accept his Muggle ancestry and embrace being a half-blood, as he had been born. She'd also murmured something about the value of forgiveness, but Severus had not yet decided upon an explanation which fitted for him, preferring instead to focus on the present and what the future might hold.

The tabby cat curled around his legs as he knocked on the front door, a welcome reminder that not all felines were as hostile as Mrs Norris. As he waited, his thoughts drifted to Tess, called back to Hogwarts for a staff meeting before the start of the new spring term.

He wished she'd been able to accompany him to Cornwall today, but also knew she would be home with him again tonight, and if they could wangle it, for an extra night per week during the school term. His lip quirked at the thought of Tess attempting to Confund McGonagall into supplication; last night, she had jokingly suggested using the charm as a last resort. He entertained himself with the thought that if Tess got sacked, he would at least have her all to himself.

Tobias Snape greeted his son and welcomed him into his home, escorting him to the cosy lounge area and turning off the television set with the remote control. Severus noticed how Muggles seemed to be catching up with their own form of magic with their time-saving contraptions and wondered how long it would be before they could match the convenience of two-way mirrors.

After sharing awkward, stilted conversation and a cup of tea with his stepmother and father, a small wrapped parcel tied with a ribbon found its way out of his father's pocket and into Severus's hands. His heart almost ground to a halt in his chest.

"Happy birthday, son."

With unsteady fingers, Severus untied the bow and peeled away the wrapping paper to reveal a rectangular metal tin. Looking up at his father and observing his smile, Severus opened the clasp and uncovered a set of three chrome darts with emerald green flights. His breath stalled in his throat, the significance rendering him speechless.

"I got the colours right, didn't I?" Tobias asked haltingly.

"Yes, you did, Dad."

"Slytherin, wasn't it? The group you were in at school?"

"Slytherin House. Yes." Severus gulped down the emotion which threatened to explode from within.

"I'd like to take you down the pub and teach you how to play," Tobias suggested. "That is, if you want to?"

Severus's voice wavered like an errant note from a Flügelhorn. "I'd like that."

The chilly staffroom at Hogwarts remained stubbornly resistant to Warming Charms, forcing the professors to huddle around Bluebell Flames conjured by Filius Flitwick as they awaited Professor McGonagall's arrival. The teachers had returned to the empty castle two days ahead of term, muttering discontent about the suspension of heating during the Christmas holidays. Even Hagrid, well-known for his tolerance of the cold, appeared uncomfortable, tucking his hands beneath his girth to keep them warm.

With a fizzing whoosh from the empty fireplace, green flames deposited the Headmistress gracefully into the cold hearth, and she stepped out, Vanishing ash with a flick of her wand.

She greeted them with her brisk, Scottish accent. "Welcome back, and thank you for coming."

Taking in the scene of shivering scholars warming their hands against magical lanterns, McGonagall sniffed the air and scowled. "I told that blithering idiot to light the staffroom fire this morning... Must I do everything myself?"

After casting her feline Patronus to send a curt reminder to the caretaker, McGonagall took a seat within the large circle of chairs and appraised her motley team, taking in the short and the tall, the austere, the quirky and the downright bizarre, and feeling proud of the diversity of her staff.

She caught Tess's eye and nodded briefly, a flicker of a smile curving the corner of her mouth.

"Happy New Year to you all," the Headmistress said, adjusting a pin in her tightly-bound bun and crossing her tartan-robed legs. "Before we begin, I have some good news to share with you all."

Even Sybill Trelawney looked up from her enchanted flames as every pair of eyes in the room focused on their leader.

McGonagall's broad smile softened her harsh features, and her eyes twinkled. "I'm pleased to announce that we'll soon be having another Professor Snape teaching Potions at Hogwarts."

Tess's insides somersaulted at the announcement.

"Severus is coming back?" Sybill asked, her magnified eyes pinched in confusion.

"No, dear," McGonagall replied, smiling sympathetically at the Divination professor.

"Then my Inner Eye has not deceived me," Sybill replied, sighing with relief.

Septima Vector rolled her eyes, and Aurora Sinistra giggled, nudging Tess with her elbow.

McGonagall, to her credit, contained her smirk, continuing, "Tess, would you like to explain?"

"Um, well, Headmistress, I'm not sure that there'll be another Professor *Snape* in the dungeon; I haven't yet decided if I'll take his name."

Her heart thudded noisily, and a collective gasp spiralled around the staffroom. Moments later, solid oak doors creaked open to reveal Argus Filch carrying a stack of firewood.

"Ah, Mr Filch; not a moment too soon!" McGonagall indicated towards the empty hearth with a long, bony finger.

"Sorry, Ma'am," the caretaker rasped as he quickly set to work on the fireplace with Mrs Norris hot on his heels.

"You're getting married?" Aurora asked Tess, her eyebrows raised, creasing her forehead.

"Yes, we are," Tess confirmed, presenting her sapphire engagement ring to the Astronomy professor for inspection. "Severus proposed two days ago."

Eyes watering, Aurora took hold of her hand and studied the large oval gemstone in its diamond and silver mounting. "It's beautiful, Tess. Congratulations!"

Crackles of nascent flames took hold in the hearth and began to warm the air as a round of applause circled the staffroom. The boom of Hagrid's clapping thundered through the air, matching Tess's heart, beat for beat.

THE END