

Rowan's Secret

by Owlbait

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Introducing Rowan Bourne

Chapter 1 of 29

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Chapter One: Introducing Rowan Bourne

Rowan picked up her quill and started making notes on the roll of parchment. Her Herbology paper was due in two weeks and she still had a lot of research to do. She was currently reading *Magical Properties of Swamp Plants*, trying to find what it was about the wetlands environment that made for so many strange magical plants. Rowan was in her seventh year at Hogwarts, and for her N.E.W.T. level classes was expected now to do real research, not merely rote memorization and repetition. Rowan wanted to work for the Department of Mysteries after graduation, to tease out more about the theoretical side of magic. As a Muggle-born, she found the whole magical world fascinating, but also contradictory. She wanted to understand why magical things worked the way they did, in a way that another person, born to Wizarding life, might take for granted.

Hermione Granger's entrance interrupted her note-taking, and she spent a productive few minutes comparing notes with her. Hermione was a year younger than Rowan, but Rowan had tremendous respect for her scholarly abilities and ability to recall obscure facts from her extensive reading. Suddenly she realized it was almost time for her N.E.W.T. Potions class; it was never a good idea to be late to Professor Snape's class and Rowan especially hated to annoy him.

"Oh, slugslime, I've got to run, see you later, Hermione."

"Later, Ro."

Rowan scrambled down the stairs into the dungeon and slid into Potions class, just barely on time. Snape looked up and raised a sardonic eyebrow at her hurried entrance, but since she was not actually late he let it pass. Rowan breathed a sigh of relief as she settled into her chair, tucked away her wand and set out her cauldron. Right on the dot, Snape stood and began to speak.

"You will no doubt recall that at the beginning of the year I told you that a research project would be due at the end of the year and that this project would comprise half of your final grade. I hope that you have all used these first few weeks to your advantage and have considered what topics you would care to research. You will tell me today what you have planned to study, and I will approve or deny the topic. If your topic is denied, and you have no other acceptable topic, you will be assigned one." The class erupted into startled indignation, which Snape swiftly squashed. "If you had any real interest in a particular topic, you would have begun thinking about it when I first

mentioned the project. Those of you who have not given it any thought should clearly not care if a topic is assigned to you. Mr Noctis, what is your proposal for a topic?"

Gregory Noctis, a Slytherin, spoke up. "I want to work on an anti-death potion, professor."

Professor Snape gazed at him narrowly. "As fascinating and worthy a project as that would be, Mr Noctis, I must remind you that only Defense against the Dark Arts is taught at Hogwarts; practicing it is forbidden. I must therefore disallow your topic. Have you another idea?" Gregory wasn't ready to give up though. As a Slytherin, he enjoyed -- if that term could be permitted in Snape's dungeon -- a slightly greater measure of freedom in questioning him.

"Why is it a Dark Art? It's not hurting anyone."

Snape looked annoyed at the interruption, but since he almost never docked points from Slytherin, he chose to answer the question. "Because, Mr Noctis, while drinking such a potion does no harm, at least that we know of, brewing it certainly does. The long-life potion, which Nicholas Flamel made from the Philosopher's Stone, is the only known recipe for abating death which does not require unicorn blood as an ingredient. With the destruction of the last piece of Philosopher's Stone five years ago it is no longer possible to brew such a potion without killing a unicorn."

Observing, with a sneer, the total lack of comprehension on the part of most of the class, Snape expanded his explanation. "Dark spells and potions gain their power from the spell-caster's own spirit; if that spirit is not sufficiently blackened, the spell has no power. Anyone can cast 'Crucio', but only a Dark wizard can torture the mind from his victim in this way. It is his hatred and malice which drives the spell. Simple anger and indignation is not sufficient. However, the attempt to cast such a spell Darkens the caster, the next time he tries it will come easier, be stronger."

By this point the students had all become extremely interested in Snape's lecture. Everyone knew about Professor Snape's Dark Mark, although very few had glimpsed it, as he was scrupulous about wearing long, close sleeves in any weather. Rowan hoped he would go on; she desperately wanted to know more about his past. She admired him so, and it was hard to reconcile the honorable, if harsh, man before her with the Death Eater of the time before he came to Hogwarts. What could have driven him to it? What made him renounce it?

"In a similar way," Snape continued, "Dark potions are brewed with ingredients most people find repellent. By this I do not mean simply foetid, slimy, or otherwise nauseating, but items which cannot be obtained without committing a crime against someone or something innocent and pure. A number of very powerful, very Dark potions require the blood of a virgin. A few drops are all that is required, but a simple scratch will not do. The victim must be killed, or, as specified in certain recipes, undergo what is colloquially referred to as 'a fate worse than death.'" At this Snape's icy black eyes swept the room to ensure no one sniggered. No one did.

"For anti-death potions," he continued, "the key ingredient is unicorn blood, for which the beast must be slaughtered. Neither the headmaster nor myself keep any stock of unicorn blood, and I cannot permit you to brew any potion which requires it. It is my duty as a Master at this school to prevent students from straying into the Dark Arts before you have gained the wisdom to discern where that path might lead you."

By this time the entire class was watching Snape, utterly rapt. Suddenly noticing their unprecedented level of attentiveness, he realized he had said more than he intended. Swiftly, he changed the subject.

"Miss Bourne, what is your proposed topic?"

Startled from her musings, Rowan sat up straighter. "I'm interested in studying how to make invisibility fabric."

"Invisibility fabric," Snape repeated, unencouragingly.

"Yes, sir, you know, for making invisibility cloaks. The secret has been lost. Everyone thinks it involves thestral hair but no one really knows."

"I know perfectly well what invisibility fabric is used for, Miss Bourne, but I fail to comprehend what you think it has to do with your Potions studies."

"You see, sir, I believe the trick to making the fabric is some variation of the Innocuous Potion which renders the drinker unnoticed. I think the potion, used as a dye on the yarn, will give it the invisibility property."

Snape, for once, did not exude derision... much. "Congratulations, Miss Bourne, I believe you may have conceived an original thought. Let us hope you are successful in bringing it to practice, or else your T will be all too visible as half of your final grade."

Rowan was so delighted at having clearly impressed Professor Snape that she actually grinned at this challenge. Snape's eyes widened ever so slightly in startlement at her reaction before he moved on to harass the next student. The rest of the class began to suspect she was off her rocker.

The truth was worse; Rowan hopelessly loved Severus Snape. She had only realized it this year, it had come on so gradually. Now she struggled to figure out what to do, whether to tell him and if so, when? How? If she really pulled off this research project, maybe she would have the courage to say something to him.

Meanwhile, Snape was going through the project topics for the rest of the class. At the end he handed out subjects dictatorially to those who had not presented an idea or those whose offered topics were rejected. There were only a handful of students, from all the Houses. There were not enough N.E.W.T. level students to make up more than one class so they were all mixed together. The class all tumbled out into the hallway. The moment they'd rounded the corner and were out of Snape's immediate earshot, the fascinated discussions began:

"Wow, that's the most he's ever said about the Dark Arts."

"Did you hear he was once a Death Eater?"

"Do you think he ever killed someone to make a potion?"

"He sure sounded like he knew exactly what he was talking about."

"They said Albus Dumbledore did something for him, saved his life or something, and he left You-Know-Who out of gratitude."

"I don't think Snape knows how to feel grateful."

"I don't think he ever really left You-Know-Who. I think Dumbledore's a fool to trust him."

"I don't know, Dumbledore's outfoxed everyone who ever tried to cross him before. Remember Umbridge?"

"Who could forget but that was the Potter kid, not Dumbledore, who made You-Know-Who show himself and pulled Dumbledore's chestnuts out of the fire."

"I still think Dumbledore's smarter than you are."

On it went as they all went chattering down the hall. Rowan thought about what she'd heard. The consensus was definitely not in Snape's favor, but that was no surprise. Severus Snape was a hard man to like, she sighed to herself, but liking and loving were different things.

Rowan Obtains Some Thestral Hair

Chapter 2 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a 7th year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned. SS/OC, of-age student, NC sex.

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Chapter 2: Rowan Obtains Some Thestral Hair

Rowan knew she wasn't going to get very far on her invisibility fabric project if she didn't get some help with the thestral hair. Problem was, she couldn't see thestrals. Hermione had told her that Luna Lovegood could see them. Luna was pretty weird, and several years younger, so she was not in any of Rowan's classes. She was a Ravenclaw though, so Rowan could try to talk to her at lunchtime. Rowan stopped Luna on the way out of the hall after lunch. It took a moment for those silvery eyes to lose their dreamy expression and focus on the current reality. When sure she had Luna's attention, she asked her for assistance with her N.E.W.T. project.

Luna turned her unnaturally large eyes towards Rowan. "Do you need powdered Crumpled-Horned Snorkak horn? I think my dad can help you get some."

"Actually, it's thestral hair I need, only I can't see them."

"Oh, that's no problem. I can. How can I help?"

"I have some brushes for harvesting the soft hair; would you do it for me?"

"Sure, that sounds like fun. Shall we go down to Hagrid's after dinner?"

"That's fine, Luna, you're a pal."

After dinner in the hall, they walked together down to Hagrid's cabin. Rowan explained to Hagrid about her N.E.W.T. final project, and why she needed thestral hair. "Well, I'd sure like to see you give Professor Snape some of his own back, Rowan. Wait here, I'll go put out some bait." He slung a sack of raw meat he 'just happened' to have around over his shoulder and headed towards the forest.

While they waited for Hagrid, Rowan gave Luna a big brush with a curved back and bent bristles like an oversized dog brush, and also a cotton sack. When they heard Hagrid make that eerie cry, they walked toward the sound, and Rowan explained to Luna what she should do. "You want to get the undercoat--it will be soft and fine, like cashmere. The longer guard hairs can't be spun. Just brush the thestral with this. When the brush is full, pull the hair off with your hand and put it in this sack for me. Hopefully I'll be able to see the hair once it's off the thestral, otherwise I'm going to have serious problems with this project."

"If it doesn't work out, there's still the Snorkaks," Luna offered.

"Um, sure. Thanks."

They found Hagrid waiting by the bait. Soon enough, hunks of dripping meat started flying up from the joints and vanishing in the air, to the accompaniment of carnivorous gulping sounds. Hagrid went and stroked one alleged creature on the neck and held it for Luna so she could brush its coat. Luna stuck her wand behind her ear, picked up the brush and began brushing the thestral. At least Rowan saw Luna moving the brush up and down. After a few strokes she turned the brush over, and Rowan saw a black cloud of downy hair clinging to the teeth. Excellent! The hair was visible after it was removed from the creature. According to theory, it still should have some of the thestral's magic as part of its internal structure. This inherent magic could then be harnessed by spells and potions to give the finished fabric permanent magical properties that would not come out in the wash.

Luna picked the fluff off of the brush and put it in the sack. After she'd done this a few times, she'd gone over the whole skeletal frame of her thestral. She showed Rowan the sack and asked if that was enough.

"That's plenty, Luna. I only have to make samples, not a whole cloak. Thanks so much, I owe you a favor."

"That's okay. I think the thestrals are neat. Not as exciting as Heliopath's, but I like to visit them, and brushing this one was fun."

The two ambled back up the hill towards the castle. It was still early in the school year, so the weather was relatively mild. On the way in, they passed Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Snape, deep in conversation.

"I wish I could dissuade you, Severus," Dumbledore was saying. "You know I value your efforts, but I think it has grown too dangerous."

Snape noticed the girls first and gave them a sharp look. They passed into the castle and out of view as quickly as possible, trying to act as if they hadn't heard anything. Rowan wished she could overhear the rest of the conversation. It sounded extremely interesting. She knew better than to try to sneak back though. Snape had seen them and probably suspected they had heard at least something. He would be on his guard. She thanked Luna again, then went back to the Ravenclaw dorm to stow her prize in her chest.

Outside, Dumbledore and Snape paused their conversation while the two Ravenclaws passed by. Snape turned and watched Rowan closely, under the guise of making sure the two continued on into the castle, before he or Dumbledore spoke again. Her stride was long and briskly businesslike, with only a hint of a feminine sway to her robes as she moved. Firmly he quashed the notion, and turned back to Dumbledore.

"I understand your reservations, Albus, but we simply have no other way of being certain of the Dark Lord's movements and plans."

"I am not convinced that we are certain now, Severus. I doubt that he trusts you or lets you completely into his confidence. He may even be feeding you false information to lead us astray. We cannot use anything we learn--if we do we will either let the Dark Lord know you have betrayed him, or we will be heading into a trap of his designing."

"He needs me, Albus; none of his other Death Eaters have remotely my skill at Potion-craft. If he wants my aid, he will have to tell me what he needs. Deceiving me would not serve his purpose."

"I'm afraid of what you might be forced to do in order to stay in his circle. You know perfectly well the Dark Arts are not something you can just pretend at, especially not--and forgive me for bringing it up, my friend--especially not for one who has practiced them in truth."

"You do not doubt my motives?"

"No, certainly not. I'm only afraid for you. You understand, don't you, why I have not given you the Defense Against the Dark Arts position? This is a far worse danger to you."

Snape looked particularly sour at that. "I cannot agree, Headmaster. I don't intend to give up now."

Albus sighed, relinquishing the point for the time being. The conversation turned to more mundane administrative items as they walked back towards the castle.

A/N: I don't see Hagrid in an adversarial relationship with Snape, but I do see him as a little bit indignant on Harry's behalf, even if he doesn't admit it to Harry.

Later That Semester...

Chapter 3 of 29

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Author's Notes: Rowan really loves textiles - so do I. I hope you find this part at least interesting. Here we start to get an idea what Rowan sees in a guy like Snape, and a hint as to his thoughts on the matter.

Many thanks to Verity Brown for her input and corrections.

Chapter 3: Later That Semester...

Rowan spent yet another Potions class considering the Potions master. There was something about the way he stood and moved. His stance hinted at his power. It was rumored that Snape had very few rivals in magical ability, and none whatsoever in Potion-craft. It was a heady aura; Rowan didn't understand why no one else seemed to feel it. She watched the clean, precise movements of hand and wrist as he demonstrated how to de-bristle and eviscerate a horklump. He did nothing flamboyantly, but everything competently. Rowan hated pretense of any kind; she was not one of the hordes of girls who had swooned over Gilderoy Lockhart in her third year. In fact, watching Snape send Lockhart spinning through the air to land on his arse, using nothing more than a simple Disarming Spell, had been truly impressive. From then on she had looked at him a little differently. Severus Snape didn't have the stunning good looks of Lockhart, but over the years, as admiration grew in her to become something deeper, gradually she stopped noticing his physical defects and began admiring his spare form, lean lines, and that sinful voice.

During demonstrations was the one time Rowan could indulge in staring at Professor Snape openly. During the rest of her lesson, she tried hard to keep her eyes on her own cauldron. She picked up her knife and set to cleaning her horklump, but her thoughts continued to wander. Snape passed down along the tables and passed out varying levels of criticism. Rowan's neck burned when she sensed his presence behind her.

"Miss Bourne, I devoutly hope you are planning to use that abysmally prepared horklump for stew-meat, as it is utterly unsuitable in preparing the Oncological Comotation which is today's assignment."

Rowan woke from her daydream and looked down at her work. Snape was right. It was pretty bad.

When he was sure he had everyone's attention, Snape continued. "I hope the rest of the class understands that care is of the utmost importance. This potion is intended to be given to the desperately ill. Your victim might not survive long enough for you to get it right.

Rowan looked up at him calmly and nodded. She bent back to her task, taking more care. She was upset, but couldn't deny that he was right--she had done a really lousy job while woolgathering. That was fine when someone as good as Snape was looking over your shoulder, but what happened when no one was watching, when someone's life depended on your magic working correctly?

Why did she waste her time daydreaming about Professor Snape anyway? He would never fall for someone whose abilities he didn't respect. If she could only impress him, then maybe she could tell him how she admired him. If he didn't brush her off at that, maybe she could hint at her attraction. The remainder of the class passed uneventfully, and she escaped with her classmates at the end of the session.

Snape watched Rowan's departing back as she left his classroom with the rest of the students. It was a nice back--shoulders straight and head high. It was a back that shouldered its burdens uncomplainingly and carried them well.

Over the years, Snape had made something of a hobby of sharpening his wit at his students' expense and observing their reactions. Some became even clumsier and lack-witted. Others became sharper and more careful, hoping to prove him wrong about them. Most feared him or despised him, or both. None had simply accepted his correction while allowing the invective to slide off, apparently unnoticed. None till her, that is. Hundreds of pretty young witches had passed through Snape's class in his fifteen years of teaching, but he'd never before been tempted to do more than look. In Rowan's case, a grudging respect for her had turned into a growing attraction, which he had only just realized he felt. Now the temptation to do a great deal more than look was strong, but not as strong as his sense of responsibility.

Rowan continued on, unaware of Snape's gaze following her. Rumors of Professor Snape's mind-reading abilities were almost as popular among the student body as the rumors about his past. Rowan really didn't think she wanted him knowing what sorts of things she had been thinking about him lately, and so avoided catching his eyes as much as possible.

After the day's last class, Rowan went with her best friend, Ariadne, to watch Quidditch practice till suppertime. Rowan brought her supply of thestral hair and her spindle so she could justify the time away from study. They took their seats on the bleachers and watched the practice. Gryffindor had the Pitch signed out this afternoon. Katie was setting the new Beaters to do various drills. Rowan didn't remember their names, but they were pretty good. Harry was zipping around, letting the Snitch go and zooming after it. With Umbridge gone and Fudge discredited, all the absurd rules of last year had been rescinded, so Harry was again Gryffindor Seeker. He was fun to watch; his flying was spectacular, and it was nice to see him so happy. Rowan had heard most of the gossip about what had happened to Harry at the end of last year. She thought he was nice, no worse of a jerk than most boys his age, and deserved to have a little fun. It was too bad this meant that Rowan's House, Ravenclaw, probably didn't stand much chance at the House Cup this year. Rowan wasn't a real die-hard Quidditch fan, though, so it didn't bother her much. She liked to watch the game, but didn't really care who won. She kept a low profile around her more enthusiastic Housemates; she didn't want to be singled out and teased about it.

While she watched the practice, Rowan spun thestral wool on her little spindle. In her left hand, she held a bit of fluff that she'd washed and carded. The thread she'd made so far emerged from it for a foot or so and the remainder was wound around the shaft of the spindle. She gave it an expert flick with her right hand that set it spinning, hanging from the already-spun thread. Pinching the thread near the top with her right hand, she drew her left hand, loosely holding the thestral wool away. New thread formed at the jointure of fluff and yarn, as if by magic. Rowan then released her pinch and allowed twist to run up into the new thread and brought her hands together to draw out a new length.

Before Rowan had gotten her letter from Hogwarts, to the complete surprise of her Muggle mother (it would have been to her father too, except that he had died when she was eight), spinning was the most magical thing she knew. It was like pushing back at chaos to create order and substance with her own two hands.

When the thread was so long that the spindle was in danger of landing on the floor of her bleacher, Rowan ran her hand down the thread and took it in her fingers. She flipped the half hitch over the hook at the top of the spindle, and keeping tension on the thread to keep it from tangling, she twirled the spindle and wound the new thread onto the shaft. When there were only a few inches between the fluff and the spindle shaft, she hitched the spindle and set it whirling again. Just as she used up the last bits of fluff, Rowan saw that the Pitch had gotten dark and practice was over. Everyone was heading away from the Quidditch Pitch, back towards the castle and dinner.

Rowan and Ariadne put their things away in their dorm and headed down towards the hall. They took their places among their other friends at the Ravenclaw table and dug in. The Northern winter was creeping in, along with the earlier sunsets at Hogwarts, and the hearty Hogwarts fare helped fend off the dark and the chill. Rowan chattered with Ariadne and her other friends around her about classes and homework till the meal was over.

On their way back to the Ravenclaw common room, Edgar Bracken, another seventh year Ravenclaw, stopped Rowan to speak to her. Edgar was good-looking, in that gangly way boys have when they have their final height, but haven't filled into it yet.

"Hi, Edgar, what's up?"

Edgar looked nervous; he took a breath and spoke. "So, Rowan, you know this weekend is the Hogsmeade trip, right? Going with anyone?" he blurted in a rush, then looked at her hopefully with puppy eyes.

Rowan tried to think fast what to say. Edgar was really cute and very nice. Lots of Ravenclaw girls thought he was a catch--not hot, but solid boyfriend material. The kind that treats you nicely, doesn't take liberties unless he's certain you want him to, and doesn't brag after to his buddies. Unfortunately, her thoughts were fixed on someone older, someone darker. Her mind just froze; she couldn't think of a way to refuse that wasn't rude, which he didn't deserve, or a lie, which just wasn't justified.

"No, I don't have any plans. Just a little shopping."

"Maybe we could have some butterbeer together?"

"Sure, Edgar, that would be nice. See you then."

Rowan scurried up to her dorm to escape the look of elation on Edgar's face. She hoped she hadn't made a terrible mistake.

Elsewhere, that same evening, Voldemort met with some of his most trusted and powerful Death Eaters. Wormtail, his rat-like toady, was also in attendance.

"I have learned of a spell," he began, eyeing them narrowly with his red eyes, "one which has the power to allow me to finally overcome Albus Dumbledore. Without his protection, Harry Potter," he spat the name, "cannot continue to avoid extermination."

"What spell is this?" asked Malfoy with an avid expression.

"It is actually a potion. It is called the Aversion Serum, and according to this text," he indicated a dusty tome with a bony finger, "it is not necessary to make your victim drink the potion. It is equally effective on skin contact. Which means, of course, that it may be thrown. An eminently useful feature in a potion.

"Under its influence, the target's friends will be consumed with hatred and will turn on him, and he on them. As you know, Dumbledore surrounds himself with his most powerful friends and most loyal allies. Thanks to the Aversion Serum, that trait will now work to our advantage; the stronger his friends, the more easily they will destroy him."

"That is truly brilliant, Master," groveled Wormtail.

"Wormtail is right, such a Potion is exactly what we need to get Dumbledore out of the way," said Malfoy. "How quickly can it be prepared?"

"Unfortunately, this text only gives the potion's name and describes its properties," replied Voldemort. "I am charging you, Malfoy, with discovering the formula. I have two agents in the Ministry of Magic who can gain you admittance to the research library there. If you go suitably disguised, you should be able to find the answer I need. It would not be wise to fail me, Lucius."

"Of course, I shall do as you command, my Lord," Lucius Malfoy replied smoothly. "But, may I inquire, why you have not set this task to Snape?"

"Patience, Malfoy. When you have reported to me with the formula, I will set Snape the same task. And I will not tell him that you have already provided the recipe. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, my Lord." Malfoy smirked, and Disapparated from the room with a dank pop.

Preparations Are Made, By All Parties

Chapter 4 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned. SS/OC, of-age student, NC sex.

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Author's Notes: Thanks to everyone who's taken time to review. Special thanks to Verity as always!

Chapter 4: Preparations Are Made, By All Parties

Rowan's first class that morning was Transfiguration. She slid into her favorite seat next to her friend Ariadne. When class began, Professor McGonagall walked around the room distributing pincushions from a box in her arms.

"Now, class, you might remember from your fourth year here that you transformed hedgehogs into pincushions. Well, some of you did," said Professor McGonagall, glancing at Rowan and a few others. "Today, we will do the reverse. I want you to turn these pincushions," she indicated the box of round orange-red objects, "into hedgehogs. As you might imagine, turning an inanimate object into an animate creature is considerably more difficult, which is why we save this lesson for N.E.W.T. level class."

Professor McGonagall then put a small handful of raisins and sunflower seeds on the desk next to her own pincushion. This was a tattered-looking tomato-shaped specimen with several dozen tarnished brass pins and a couple of needles stuck into it. The class watched attentively as she raised her wand and demonstrated the spell. As she gave the last complicated twist of her wand and pronounced the spell, "*Consutum Erinacesco*", the cushion quivered, then turned grayish brown and more oval shaped. The pins lost their heads and became pointed at the end, then filled in to cover the whole surface of the object. It gave a little start, then lifted its head and delicately sniffed the air. It waddled over to the raisins and seeds and began nibbling on them. McGonagall scooped it up and showed it around to the class. "Note the absence of dangling threads and other external signs of its couture origins. The fact that it eats indicates that its internal organs are correct and functioning. All right, class, please begin."

Rowan and Ariadne looked speculatively at their pincushions and referred to the notes on the blackboard. Ariadne waved her wand in the indicated pattern and cast her spell. Her hedgehog was passable, except for the jaunty little emery strawberry still hanging by a green cord from the back of its head. "Not a bad first attempt, Miss Galanis," McGonagall told Ariadne as she passed by, "but you need to keep your wand movement sharper, and 'Erinacesco' has a short 'i'. Keep trying. Full marks if you get it by the end of class."

Rowan tried next, but her mind was wandering again. She hoped neither Ariadne nor Professor McGonagall would notice the suspiciously beaky nose on her hedgehog or the somewhat greasy sheen to the spines. The professor collected all the hedgehogs, pincushions, and spiny something-or-others at the end of class, noted down everyone's grades--Rowan got full marks--then returned each to their original forms.

While Rowan was in classes, Lucius Malfoy was carrying out his own research assignment. Disguising himself by means of Polyjuice Potion as a wizard who had not yet been identified as being associated with Voldemort or his Death Eaters, Malfoy easily entered the Ministry of Magic and gained access to the research library. Ensuring that no one was looking, he murmured a charm and cast it at the card catalog. Five drawers slid open, and in each a card rose up from between its fellows. Malfoy copied down the pertinent information from the cards, then sent them back and shut their drawers with a negligent wand-wave. Strolling through the stacks, Malfoy examined each book on his list. In the last one, a particularly ancient book of Dark spells, was the formula he sought. After carefully copying down the ingredients and instructions, he misshelved the slim book inside an extremely boring volume on the care and feeding of Flobberworms.

Snape was seated already at the staff table as Rowan entered the Great Hall for dinner. His expression remained inscrutable, but his brilliant black eyes followed Rowan as she came in and sat down. He had been watching her covertly for most of this year. The grin she had flashed at him when he accepted her research topic had been astonishing. Students rarely smiled in his class, except to smirk when he criticized another student. Certainly they never smiled at him. Students looked at him with fear, loathing, or if they were Slytherins they toadied up to him.

He realized then that he had in fact been looking forward to Miss Bourne's presence in his classroom with anticipation each day for some time. She did her work well; she was circumspect. She never showed off or drew attention to herself. Of course, that amazing walk did it for her, though he did not think she realized it. She walked with her chin up and shoulders back, not hunched over clutching an armload of books like most of his female students. From what he had overheard of student conversation over the years, it appeared that young witches spent the first twelve or thirteen years of their lives desperately wishing they had breasts, then when they had them, standing as if they wished to hide them. No such pretense here: she did not flaunt them, nor did she wiggle when she walked as so many in her cohort did. She simply moved through the world, on legs that went on forever, as if she knew exactly where she was going and how she was going to get there.

With a bit of a shock, Snape realized that in a few short months, she would no longer be a student. After graduation, he could approach her without blame. Of course, he had no reason to suspect she would take such an idea favorably. On the contrary, she would probably be repelled, he thought with a grimace. Now there was another good reason to wait till the end of term: if she rejected him he would not have to endure the humiliation of her continued presence. Till then, though, she must be treated precisely the same as her classmates; there must be no breath of scandal to touch her. Wizarding society had rather old-fashioned notions regarding young witches, and her future prospects could become limited. She did not deserve that.

Unaware of Snape's musings concerning herself, Rowan chatted with Ariadne and her friends over dinner. They discussed their various plans for the coming Hogswatch trip. Ariadne was going to Dervish and Banges to have a leak in her cauldron repaired, and Rowan wanted to look into Gladrags Wizardwear. After leaving she would need a wardrobe more suited to an adult witch, and she wanted a chance to peruse the available options. At school, everyone wore academic robes and at home she lived with her Muggle mother; what was a young Muggle-born witch supposed to do anyway? The topic of post-school gowns and hats easily kept the conversation going for the rest of the meal.

Finally finished with dinner, Rowan went back to her dorm room to continue working on her project. She had finished spinning all the yarn. It was time to prepare the loom for weaving. She took half the yarn and measured it out on a warping frame. This was a rectangular wooden frame with sturdy pegs on all sides. Beginning at one side, she wound the thread back and forth across the frame till it was the correct length. She brought it over and under the two pegs at the end, then back the reverse way for the return trip. This made two measured warp threads with a cross in the loops at the far end. Continuing on the same path, Rowan measured all the threads required for the warp, maintaining the cross at the end on each pass. When all the ends were measured, she tied off the yarn at the first peg. She wrapped a length of cord through the cross and tied it firmly, then tied several 'choke points' in the new warp to keep it under control before she slid it off the frame.

Rowan had borrowed a small table loom from a Muggle friend back home before she left for school this year. The Wizarding community only seemed to know about the great floor-standing looms, suitable for weaving wide blankets or many-yard lengths of fabric, but most unsuitable for keeping in a dorm room. This cloth would only be about 6 inches wide and 2 yards long--good for a scarf, except that it would be cut into squares so that she could treat each piece with different potions and spells to test their effects.

Working from the cross at the end, she pulled each thread through a space in the loom's reed--a comb-like device that kept the threads the right distance apart. With another, finer hook, she then pulled each thread through one of the heddles. These were the parts of the loom that caused some warp threads to sink and others to rise. She would weave plain cloth for this project--every thread over one then under the next. When each warp thread had been pulled through a space in the reed and then through a heddle, she fastened the warps, in small bunches, to a rod attached to the back beam of the loom. Turning the beam made all the threads wind onto it at once, till the whole length of each thread was wound onto the back beam in a neat package and only a few inches dangled through the reed at the front end.

Next she tied the front ends of the warp to another rod attached to a beam at the front of the loom and turned the front beam to wind it forward. Happily she examined the newly dressed loom. The threads flowed from front to back through the heddles, smoothly parallel, glinting in the firelight. The thestral fiber had an unearthly sheen. She checked the threading of the heddles by lifting first one harness and then the other. All looked well, with no errors--that would never happen on a larger loom with hundreds and hundreds of threads and a complicated pattern! Her hands itched to finally begin weaving, but this task had taken the whole evening; it was long past time for Rowan to go to bed.

Late that night, after Rowan had fallen asleep, Malfoy returned to his Master with the results of his research. When the Dark Lord had studied the instructions, he became especially pleased. Back at Hogwarts, Harry Potter turned in his sleep as his scar pained him momentarily.

"My compliments on carrying out your task so efficiently," Voldemort said to Malfoy, who smirked as he bowed his acknowledgment. "I find these instructions exceedingly interesting. Have you considered how we might proceed?"

"Yes, Master, and I would be happy to procure the necessary... ingredient."

"Your willingness is commendable, Malfoy, but I have other plans. I think you will find them almost as gratifying as your own. Go now. Snape will be here shortly and I would prefer he did not see you tonight."

Malfoy bowed and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robe. "As you command, Master," he said, and departed.

"Well, Wormtail, have you guessed what I intend to do with this most intriguing recipe?"

"You have told us, Dark Lord: you intend to destroy Dumbledore."

"Of course, when the potion is made. However, I am not certain that I can entirely trust our distinguished Potions master."

"Will you have someone else brew the potion? It does not appear so difficult that you must trust Snape for it."

"I definitely want Snape to have a hand in it ... or some part at least." Voldemort laughed harshly. "If he is loyal, he is an extremely useful agent in the enemy's camp. He is too useful and too well-placed to destroy on mere suspicion. I must know where his loyalties lie."

"How will you do that, Master?"

"I will require Snape to provide the key ingredient, in our presence. He will not be able to counterfeit such an act. If he performs such an act of Dark Magic, he will be truly one of us. If he refuses, I will know how to deal with him."

"My Lord, your subtlety is an example to us always."

"Thank you, Wormtail. Now, I believe Snape has arrived. Please show him in."

Wormtail scurried through the entryway to the small side room where the Death Eaters were wont to Apparate. There he found Snape, who had just appeared.

"The Dark Lord has been expecting you. He wants to see you now."

Snape nodded and followed Wormtail into the larger room.

"You summoned me, my Lord?"

"I have a task for you, my loyal potion-maker. I am certain you will be delighted by this opportunity to prove your worth, and your continued loyalty."

"That is ever my only desire, my Lord," Snape answered silkily.

"Have you heard of a potion named the Aversion Serum?" Voldemort inquired.

"Yes, Master, I know of it. I do not know how to prepare it though; it is not in any book in my own collection."

"That is most unfortunate, Snape. You know that much of your use to me is in your potion-making ability. It would be entirely to your ... disinterest ... if you failed me in this."

"I understand you fully, my Lord. May I know to what purpose you wish to put the Serum?"

"When you have brewed me the potion, I will tell you. I think you will find my plan most entertaining. Go now, return to Hogwarts and check the library there. If you cannot find the formula in the school library, I will arrange for you to have access to the library at the Ministry of Magic."

It shall be as you command, Dark Lord." Snape bowed and departed the way he had come.

Author's Notes: I should mention at this point that I'm shamelessly abandoning canon wizard robes for the movie clothes. I am in total love with the "wear what you like from any period in history" effect. Weasleys are pretty modern albeit goofy. Lots of 19th century. Quirrel looks like Italian Renaissance to me. All in all kind of like SCA but more so. I just love it too much not to use it. Besides, you'll have to pry those buttons from my cold dead fingers ;^)

Warp and Weft

Chapter 5 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: I have no delusions about owning Harry Potter. I'm deluded, but not that way.

Author's Notes: Mucho thanks again to Verity for beta reading!

Chapter 5: Warp and Weft

Rowan spent Friday evening in the library researching potions for her invisibility fabric project. She would have the fabric soon and needed to have at least some of the dyes prepared. Hermione Granger sat across from her, taking extensive notes for an Arithmancy paper. Suddenly Rowan's eye was caught by a long row of jet black buttons as Professor Snape stalked past their table and went into the Restricted Section. Rowan and Hermione both turned curiously and watched his departing back. Unless there was a secret exit from that part of the library, he was still there, hours later, when Rowan and Hermione left for their respective dorms and some much needed sleep.

The next day was Saturday, the day of the Hogsmeade trip. Rowan wished she could hide behind the bed-curtains till suppertime, but that wouldn't really help anything. Anyway, if she got up, she could start weaving now.

She walked over to the loom on her desk and picked up the shuttle. The second half of the yarn she had spun would be the weft. She wound a long narrow bobbin full of the weft and placed it in the shuttle. When she lifted the first harness all the odd numbered warp threads lifted, making a space at the side. She pushed the shuttle through the space, leaving a trail of thread behind, then lowered the harness again. Finally, she pulled the beater with its reed sharply towards her, pushing the new weft thread through the warp to lie straight across and just ahead of the front beam. There was the first pick of weft, snaking over-under-over-under the warp threads. When she lifted the second harness, the even numbered threads lifted. She pushed the shuttle back through the warp in the other direction and beat a second time. This thread went over the warps the previous one had gone under. A few more throws of the shuttle, and she had an inch of actual fabric growing in front of her. Lift, throw, beat, lift, throw, beat. The rhythm was hypnotic and eased away her cares. The sense of wonder never left her, to watch the fabric grow under her fingers. She released some warp from the back beam and wound up an equal length of woven fabric on the front. Eventually her fabric would be all wound on the front beam and the back would be empty. Suddenly realizing the time, she put down her shuttle with a sigh and headed down to breakfast.

Weaving always made Rowan feel relaxed and happy, put her troubles at bay. It also kicked in her tendency to daydream--which unfortunately kept going, even after she put down the shuttle. The incessant background chatter of the Great Hall during mealtimes only served to lull her further. She was sitting towards the head of the room this morning where she could watch Snape out of the corner of her eye. She observed his hands as he idly played with his fork and imagined them instead on her, stroking her hip, playing with her hair. She picked up her pumpkin juice and took a sip, concealing her thoughts, with her eyes in her cup. She wondered what he would be like in intimate circumstances. Rough and demanding she imagined with a thrill; it was hard to imagine him tender and sweet, and she didn't really want to. Would he murmur acid comments into her ear, in a voice like honeyed wine? She smiled inwardly at the mental image: *If you cannot think of a position, Miss Bourne, you will be assigned one....* The sudden start of laughter which that thought brought on sent Rowan's juice flying through her nose and onto Ariadne, who was sitting across from her. She choked and apologized. She said some juice had just gone down the wrong way. Keeping her face firmly away from the staff table, Rowan resolved to keep a closer reign on her thoughts.

Snape noticed the disruption at the Ravenclaw table--his attention was rarely far from it at mealtimes anyway--but he had no idea what had occasioned the hilarity there. Miss Bourne had appeared to choke on her pumpkin juice for no apparent reason. He smiled inwardly at seeing her, for once, less than perfectly collected. He would like to see her really lose that cool gaze sometime and see those grey eyes turn smoky with desire. Would she beg him? He thought not, it didn't seem her style. Realizing how far his thoughts had strayed from the appropriate, he turned his face back to his breakfast and his mind firmly to other things.

Unaware of Snape's musings concerning herself, and firmly resolved to banish her own, Rowan slipped into the conversation going on around her. Ariadne had gotten *the Quibbler* by that morning's owl post and was getting plenty of laughs from them all by reading the sillier bits out loud. Fortunately, Luna was currently at the other end of the table, Rowan realized as she looked around guiltily.

Looking up at the ceiling, Rowan admired the early morning sky. Thin wispy clouds were whipping past, high in the stratosphere. It would be a clear, cold day, fine for walking. Suddenly Rowan wondered to herself, *why do they make us freeze our arses off up the Astronomy tower? We could be doing our observations here where it's warm, and have hot chocolate and crumpets to boot. Ah well, she sighed. I always suspected school is always at least half about torturing students for the fun of it. I guess Snape isn't the only one with that hobby.* She snorted affectionately, and poured herself another cup of pumpkin juice. Finally, it was time for all of them to put on their warmest cloaks and head out for Hogsmeade.

Edgar was waiting for Rowan at the gate. To make conversation as they walked, Rowan asked him about his plans after graduation.

"I'll probably go into the family business; my folks have a sheep farm and magical parchment making business."

"That sounds very nice. I'm from a Muggle family, so it's hard for me to know what to do after Hogwarts. I'm interested in magical research, kind of hoping that my Muggle background," here she glanced at Edgar to see how he took that, "will help me see problems in a different way. I want to apply to work in the Department of Mysteries."

"That's right, I remember your research project in Potions. That sounds really cool. How is it coming along?"

"I'm working on making samples of thestral-wool fabric to try my potion experiments on. You can't just buy the stuff. I got some of the hair from Hagrid's herd and made thread from it. Now I'm weaving it into fabric. When I'm done, then I can finally start dyeing it".

"You were really brave to talk back to Snape that way."

"Professor Snape," began Rowan, with a slight emphasis, "was worried that my project wasn't suitable for Potions. And as it turns out, he's nearly right; I'm spending hours just making fabric. I've barely started any actual Potion work yet."

"Still, lots of people would have backed down and let him assign a topic."

"Maybe I should have," Rowan answered glumly. "Right now I'm really out on a limb; if it works that's great, but if it doesn't, he's going to take off so many points, I'll probably fail."

Edgar looked sympathetic, but couldn't honestly disagree.

The two shopped together in Hogsmeade, mingling here and there with their classmates and gossiping. Ariadne and her boyfriend joined them for butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks. Rowan had a good time. She felt some of her tension ease, knowing her friends would stop wondering for a while why she didn't seem interested in boys and dating. For now, she was just one of the crowd. Late in the afternoon, she and Edgar walked companionably back to the castle along the lakeshore.

Snape, meanwhile, used the opportunity afforded by the students all absenting themselves to make a journey of his own. He had scoured the Hogwarts library Restricted Section thoroughly, but there was no information on the Aversion Serum to be found. Today he would visit the library at the Ministry of Magic. Taking up a handful of Floo powder, Snape approached the fireplace in his study. He threw the powder smartly into the flames, saying "Ministry of Magic," then stepped through.

At the library, Snape gave the signal Voldemort had provided him to the librarian on duty. He was swiftly ushered into the restricted section without being required to sign in. Proficiently, he charmed the card catalog and obtained the names of five likely books.

Snape found the first four books easily, but none of them had the Aversion Serum in them. After some hours of fruitless searching for the fifth book, Snape noticed a large and otherwise uninteresting book on Flobberworm husbandry protruding somewhat farther out of the shelf than seemed necessary. Pulling it out, he found the slim volume of Dark Potion recipes hidden within it. A brief inspection of this tome proved that it had the recipe he had been seeking.

Taking care that he remained unobserved, he studied it carefully. The preparation was rather finicky, but his experience was easily sufficient to the task. No surprise, the potion was very Dark magic indeed. It was similar to the Imperius Curse because it involved stripping people of their free will, making them behave in ways they would despise when they recovered. Just as he had described to his N.E.W.T. class earlier in the term, the key ingredient was entirely repellent: "reft virgin's blood." This was not good. If there were Unforgivable Potions, this ought to be one of them.

Carefully, Snape considered what he should do. Did he dare misrepresent the instructions to the Dark Lord? He would be blamed, of course, when the potion failed, but he had endured minor examples of the Dark Lord's wrath. He would be punished for failure, but so long as he was not suspected of betrayal, he would live.

Following a sudden thought, Snape picked up the Flobberworm text in which the potion book had been hidden and flipped to the inside cover. Published in 1995, it could not have been hiding the other book for very long. Perhaps only a few weeks. This was a very telling circumstance; it was certainly no accident that the book he needed had been hidden. Snape realized that he had better report the potion ingredients and instructions accurately--it was all too likely that he was being tested. Probably one of the others had been sent ahead of him. Malfoy. It would be just like him to sabotage Snape by hiding the book after he had found it. Snape carefully wrote down the precise instructions for the Aversion Serum. With a sardonic thanks to Malfoy's short-sighted craftiness, Snape returned the book to its proper place and returned through the Floo to his study.

Snape sat at his desk, gazing towards the jars of slimy things without focusing on them, and considered the problem of what to do now. He knew he should warn the Headmaster, but he also knew it would make difficulties.

Dumbledore had been very unhappy lately with Severus' double role. At first, Snape had taken on the task at Dumbledore's request. When that Potter creature had first brought back the news that the Dark Lord had regained a physical form, they both knew what Severus must do. He had known it already when the Dark Mark had burned on his arm for the first time in fourteen years. He had been terrified, but his duty had been clear.

Now it was nearly a year and a half later. Dumbledore (and Potter) had been vindicated and their story believed; Dumbledore no longer felt that the information Snape brought was worth the risks he took. He wanted Snape to cease pretending to be a Death Eater and to remain at Hogwarts. Severus himself felt that now that the Dark Lord's return was publicly known, he was more vulnerable and that he needed Severus too badly now not to risk trusting him. Severus felt the Order desperately needed to know what the Dark Lord planned to do with the Aversion Serum once he had it. So far, Dumbledore had not explicitly ordered Severus to cease spying, but when he learned about the Aversion Serum and what it involved, he most certainly would. No, better to find out the whole plan first. He could quit later, once he had learned what they needed to know.

He had better be prepared with the ingredients. He would have to at least begin brewing the potion in case the Dark Lord checked up on his progress. He looked over the lesser items and was satisfied that he had most of them in store. He would Floo over to Knockturn Alley soon and obtain the rest from the apothecary there. The 'reft virgin's blood' was going to be hideously expensive, especially on a teacher's salary, but Snape had few personal expenses; his savings would cover it.

It was too late to do his shopping now, though; that would have to keep for another day. Meanwhile, he had some errands to do around the castle. He had a fresh batch of Skele-Gro finished; Madam Pomfrey had told him her supply was getting low. Sometimes it amazed him that so many students managed to survive till graduation. He bottled the potion and went up to the hospital wing.

On his way back, he stopped to look out a corridor window and observe the students straggling back in from their Hogsmeade outing. His dark eyes immediately picked out Rowan and widened when he saw she was with a boy. They narrowed again as he observed the boy kiss Rowan on the cheek when they parted. The boy looked elated, and Rowan appeared flushed with pleasure.

Snarling to himself, he castigated himself for his foolishness. How many kinds of an idiot was he to imagine such a remarkable young woman would remain unattached the entire year? He was more of a dunderhead than that dolt Longbottom! His mood black, Snape stalked down the stairs to the dungeon, thoroughly alarming the students who saw him pass.

Snape's Dilemma

Chapter 6 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: The Potter world belongs to J.K.Rowling, as does all the money from it.

Author's Notes: Thanks again to Verity for beta reading, and to everyone who took time to review. This is fun :)

Chapter 6: Snape's Dilemma

On Sunday, the day after the Hogsmeade trip, Rowan was able to finish weaving her thestral fabric. Taking a bit of the leftover yarn and a needle, she fixed the top and bottom edges of the fabric with blanket stitching, then cut it from the loom. She held it to the light and admired the ethereal beauty of the thestral wool fabric. It had a stiff hand despite its softness, but that was because it was straight from the loom. It still needed to be washed to set the weave and allow the yarn to bloom. There was no need to do so before testing her potion dyes, though; the liquid dye bath would do that task for her.

Steeling herself, she picked up her scissors and snipped into the fabric. There was something about that first cut into handwoven fabric, it almost seemed like sacrilege. After the first snip, the rest were easy and she soon had a small pile of test swatches. She prepared a cauldron full of Innocuous Potion and dipped four of the squares into the murky liquid. She incanted different binding charms over three, leaving the fourth as a control, then set them aside to dry.

Snape made use of his day off to visit Knockturn Alley. Standing in front of the fireplace in his office, he threw a fistful of Floo powder into the fire and said "Borgin & Burkes." After alighting in the fireplace the far side, Snape bent low to clear the mantel and stepped out into the shop. He was accustomed to the array of Dark wizardry tools and items surrounding him here, so he wasted no time, but walked to the counter and rang the bell. Mr Borgin appeared in response to the summons and bowed obsequiously.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape, how good of you to visit our shop. I hope we can be of service to you."

"Good afternoon, Mr Borgin. I require certain ingredients; specifically, this list."

Borgin took the list from Snape and perused it. Even that jaded shopkeeper raised his eyebrows at the last item. "I take it you are preparing something for a certain ... acquaintance ... of ours?"

"That is not your concern," Snape returned frostily. "Do you have the items?"

"Yes, sir, all but the last."

"I am disappointed. You are falling short of your excellent reputation."

"Well," Borgin said conspiratorially, "those of our customers who have need of it prefer to, ahem, obtain their own supply."

Snape gave the man his most withering look. "I'm sure you wouldn't wish me to report to our mutual acquaintance that you were not able to satisfactorily meet my requirements?"

Borgin looked truly frightened by that threat. "You must forgive us, sir, that sort of item has been interdicted by the Ministry. We would lose our license if we were to stock it."

"I see." Snape stared down his large, hooked nose at the squirming shopkeeper, with a look normally reserved for fifth year students who might be considering getting cheeky. "Kindly ring up the other items for me. It is to be hoped that you will do better in the future."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir." Borgin bowed and took the list from Snape. "It will take some time to gather everything on this list. Perhaps you don't wish to wait that long. May we deliver it to you?"

"I certainly do not wish to wait. Very well, you will deliver the order to me in my study, tomorrow after classes."

"Of course, sir. We are always very happy to have your custom." Borgin bowed again and ushered Snape to the door.

Snape asked in several other shops in Knockturn Alley, and even in Hogsmeade, but in the end he had to return to Hogwarts without the blood.

Rowan returned to her dorm that evening and examined her samples. All four of them were still depressingly visible. She decided that she would see Professor Snape the next day and ask him for advice. That would undoubtedly be a galling experience, but not nearly so galling as failing the project would be. Having made her resolution, Rowan got into bed and pulled the curtains around her to close out the chill.

Rowan did not have Potions on Mondays, so she determined to head for the dungeons after her last class of the day. She wound up being released a few minutes early that afternoon, due to an unfortunate incident next door, involving the supply of feathers used by the first years and a highly advanced Cheering Charm. Several nearby classrooms wound up having to be evacuated. Consequently, Rowan arrived in the dungeon just as the last Potions class of the day began spilling into the hallway. Ron Weasley was a little ahead of her, going in to the classroom to meet his friends.

As Rowan arrived at the door to the Potions classroom, she saw Snape, in his study, through the open connecting door. He was paying a strange man some money and accepting a package from him. The man bid Snape good day and left through the fireplace.

Suddenly, Rowan noticed an altercation had arisen in the classroom among some of the sixth-year N.E.W.T. Potions students: namely, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Draco Malfoy, and Malfoy's two cronies. Potter had to be the last person Rowan would have expected to sign up for Advanced Potions, with the possible exception of Longbottom, but there they both were. Rowan guessed both of them needed Potions for their intended careers and so had little choice in the matter.

It appeared as if Malfoy must have said something nasty to or about her friend Hermione again. Rowan didn't need to hear the remark to get the general idea--she'd heard a few before, from Hermione. Several hexes had already flown in the few seconds Rowan's attention was turned. Now Goyle was barfing fat, juicy slugs, and Weasley was dancing the tarantella. Longbottom was hopping up and down on one foot while singing "To Anacreon in Heaven" in strident tones. Crabbe was wearing a kilt and holding a distinctly nervous-looking sheep. Potter and Malfoy had their wands raised and were each on the verge of pronouncing curses. Hermione was trying to stop Potter from getting in more trouble, so Malfoy fired first, but missed when Weasley danced right into him. The blue fire that shot from the end of his wand went high and hit a cabinet, and an entire shelf full of beakers and alchemical glassware crashed to the floor. Potter was in mid-spell when Snape's voice cracked through the chaos.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he cried sharply. All their wands, including Rowan's, flew from their hands and came together in a neat bundle at Snape's feet. *That was bloody brilliant*, Rowan thought in amazement, admiring his control of the spell.

"*Finite Incantatum.*" At this, Weasley stopped dancing, and Longbottom stopped singing and stood still. Goyle's stomach settled down, and Crabbe was again dressed in school robes, sans sheep. Additional spells repaired the glassware and sent it all flying neatly back to the cabinet.

Snape looked angrier than Rowan had ever seen him. His nostrils were white and his eyes shot sparks. He drew himself up to an impressive height and glared at the combatants menacingly. "Twenty points from each of you," Snape snapped. "Including you three," he added, indicating the Slytherins.

Wow, he must be angry, Rowan thought.

"If you wish to hex Potter and his friends into oblivion," Snape continued, "you will have my heartfelt gratitude. Only do not even think about doing it in my classroom again!"

Rowan decided that she could see Snape about her project another time. She started oozing back towards the wall and tried to figure out how to unobtrusively get her wand back. Snape stalked angrily through the classroom, presumably to yell at Potter more effectively. Suddenly, he slipped on one of the slugs and his feet flew out from under him. He landed on another slug with a nauseating squish, and the package he was still holding went flying. Without thinking, Rowan bent over to pick it up for him. She didn't recognize name of Borgin & Burkes on the package, but she knew what an address in Knockturn Alley meant. There was a list affixed to the plain parcel, every item crossed off but one, which drew her glance. Her eyes widened in shock when she read it, but before she could blurt out anything, Snape wrested the package from her.

"And, twenty points from Ravenclaw, Miss Bourne. Hopefully, that will teach you to *mind your own business*. Now, all of you, take your wands and get out of my sight!" Rowan complied with alacrity and fled to the library.

Taking a secluded carrel, Rowan piled a big stack of potions texts next to her and began to research more potions and spells that might yield invisibility cloth. Maybe it was "Disillusion," or "Darkness," or "Avoidance," to make the eyes turn away. Perhaps a combination. Rowan was having a hard time concentrating. Her mind kept returning to the mysterious package Snape had had delivered.

It was fairly obvious that Professor Snape was preparing to mix a Dark Potion; 'reft virgin's blood' indeed. The question was, why?

The rumors about Snape were as wild and varied as imagination could reach. Many--if not most--students thought the Headmaster was a fool to trust Snape, that Snape had never really renounced Voldemort and was doubly a sneak, betraying Dumbledore to his enemies. Rowan had never believed this for a moment. She trusted Dumbledore, and after six and a half years of watching Snape, she trusted him too. She wasn't entirely certain why; perhaps it was only that she felt, deep down where things she didn't examine closely lived, that evil always tried to seem attractive. Snape's very nastiness, his seemingly complete disregard for what others thought of him, were signs of integrity to Rowan. She never trusted people who seemed too nice to be real.

Still, what could he be doing--what potion was he brewing, and for what purpose was it intended? Was this some weapon Dumbledore planned to use against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Rowan continued to fret but eventually had to come to the conclusion that she was unlikely to find out the truth of the matter. It was nearly curfew; Rowan packed up her books and her notes and went back to the Ravenclaw common room. She'd missed dinner, but that was just as well. Better to stay out of Snape's view until he'd had a chance to calm down. She snuck into the kitchen and let an elf bring her a snack to take back to her room.

When she got to the common room, Ariadne and Edgar were there along with a few other students, all studying.

While she ate her sandwich, Rowan told them what had happened in the Potions classroom that afternoon. Ariadne laughed so hard that she cried at the image Rowan described.

Edgar laughed too, but when she got to the last part, he exclaimed, "Twenty points from Ravenclaw? And detention? But you were only trying to help--he couldn't have thought you were involved in that duel!"

Rowan had a pretty good idea why Snape had been angry enough with her to dock points, but she didn't want to tell that part of the story. "No, I don't think so. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I mean, he took points from *Slytherin!* There was no way anyone was getting out of that room unscathed."

"He was probably mad at you for seeing him fall flat on his arse! You should complain to Flitwick--that's completely unfair!"

"Since when has Snape ever been fair with points, Edgar? After all these years of dealing with him, why get upset about it now?"

Edgar continued to bluster on her behalf. Ariadne just collapsed into giggles over and over again. Rowan gave up on both of them and went to bed.

Snape, still seething over the afternoon's events, walked down the road towards the gates after dark. He devoutly hoped Miss Bourne had not realized what the package she had picked up signified. He thought not; she had only held it for a second.

Once off the castle grounds, he Disapparated with a sharp crack. He appeared in the side room at Voldemort's abode and was shown in by Wormtail, to be greeted by the Dark Lord.

"So, my pet Potions master, have you completed your assignment?"

"Yes, My Lord, here are the complete instructions." Snape handed over the copy he had made in the Ministry of Magic.

"Very good, Snape, my faith in you continues unabated." The Dark Lord looked over the parchment, feigning that he was seeing it for the first time. "It says here that it must be prepared at one of the quarters of the year. I want it ready on the Winter Solstice."

"Of course, Master."

"Have you all the ingredients that are required?"

"All but the key ingredient," Snape replied, keeping his voice steady. "I was not able to find it for purchase."

"Well really, Snape, where would the fun be in just shopping for it? In fact, you deserve to be rewarded for so faithfully carrying out your research assignment. You may have the privilege of harvesting that ingredient. I trust you will find a suitable source at Hogwarts. You may take your pick, as long as she is qualified.

"The blood must be added as the very last step, so arrange to bring the girl here the afternoon of the Solstice. It might be detrimental to the potion to move it while it is still in progress. I will have Bella perform the initial steps in the workroom here. All you will need to do is take the girl and add the blood. I trust you find these arrangements satisfactory?"

"Of course, My Lord." Severus bowed out to the anteroom and Apparated back to the castle gates.

Professor Snape stood in the Headmaster's office, pacing before the fire, scorning the squashy chairs. Fawkes stepped back and forth on his perch, listening carefully to the discussion.

"I must report what I have lately learned, Headmaster. The Dark Lord has discovered the existence of an ancient potion, Aversion Serum. Its purpose is to turn one's most loyal friends into one's bitterest enemies. It is powerful enough to work on contact with the skin; therefore, it may be thrown. The Dark Lord has not revealed to me to what use he intends to put this potion, but I can only assume that you, as his most powerful enemy, are the intended target."

"Such a potion would certainly appeal to Voldemort; it works by twisting the power which he fears most into a weapon in his own hand. It is the sort of evil that is his very trademark. This is very grave news, Severus. Do you know if he has the instructions on how to prepare the serum?"

"He does; he required me to research it. I found it in the library at the Department of Mysteries."

"Was it wise to bring him that information?"

"I was not the only agent he sent after it. It was quite certain, from the situation in which I found the book containing the recipe, that another had been there not long before. Sending me was merely a test, which it seemed best to pass."

"If that is so, then I agree. There could be no further harm in bringing him information he already knew. I had an inkling, before this, that Voldemort had a new plan. A few nights ago, Harry Potter reported to me that his scar pained him and he had bad dreams. It seemed to him that Voldemort was particularly gleeful. I believe that this must have been the reason, that he had learned how to make the potion. How soon do you think he will be able to have it ready?"

"The potion is strongest when brewed at one of the year's quarters - either solstice or equinox. The Dark Lord wastes no time in this, he will have the potion on the Winter Solstice."

"That is only a few days away."

"Precisely," Snape paused and looked distinctly uncomfortable. "There is something else I must tell you, Headmaster. This is a Dark potion of a high order; it requires reft virgin's blood as its key ingredient." Dumbledore looked very grave, but not surprised, at that news. Fawkes stirred on his perch and ruffled his feathers.

"I attempted to purchase some, but my efforts have so-far failed. In any case, the Dark Lord has commanded me to produce a suitable victim for the purpose from among the students. I am required to collect her blood myself. I believe this is intended to be something of a reward," Snape said, his voice devoid of expression.

"Severus, you were not thinking of going through with such a thing?" Dumbledore asked, looking sharply at Snape.

"I admit that I considered it, Headmaster. Countless more innocents would be harmed, in far worse ways, should the Dark Lord ultimately conquer. If we cannot keep abreast of his plans, he may very well do so." Snape looked bleak and continued softly, "In any case, it would hardly be the worst thing I have done in my life. The girl could be Obliviated and need never know."

"Until she later had occasion to wonder why she was not a virgin," Dumbledore responded. "You know that sort of shock can break through the best memory charm. In any case, we cannot do such a thing to a student. They are under my protection. Even if it means much worse is to follow, I cannot allow it."

Professor Dumbledore sighed heavily and looked, for once, every one of his years. "I understand your point of view: one girl harmed to save many others. Still, those others are nameless and unknowable. They belong to the future, and disaster may be averted in other ways. The girl Voldemort wants--she would not be nameless, she would be one of your students. How would you choose?"

Snape went white, then flushed. He thought of a name; she would be strong enough to bear it. Still, Dumbledore was right, he could not sacrifice her. Not any of the others either, but especially not her. Those countless, faceless others would have to be saved another way.

Dumbledore went on, "Hitherto, I have only disagreed with you, Severus, but now I must insist that you cease your spying. You have brought us tremendously valuable information, but it is ended."

"Headmaster, you know that one does not resign from the Dark Lord's service. Right now the Dark Lord merely does not fully trust me. If I reject him, he will handsomely reward the one to bring him my liver on a salver."

"Of course, Severus. When he knows you have betrayed him, you will be marked for death. Still, I do not think you will be in worse danger than you are now. He could discover you at any time, or require something even worse than this from you."

"I have deceived him this long."

"I am not speaking merely of your life, Severus. You have practiced the Dark Arts before, you have felt their seduction. You cannot believe you could do such a thing as you have suggested, and keep your soul? I want your word that you will not oppose me in this."

"Very well, Headmaster. If you insist, I give you my word."

Fawkes gave Snape an approving look, then flew from his perch and settled on Snape's shoulder. As Snape stroked Fawkes's plumage, Fawkes opened his wings and flicked his feathers. One small fiery feather came loose and dropped to the carpet. Dumbledore stooped and picked it up. "Thank you, Fawkes. Take this, Severus, and keep it with you at all times. The Order continues to watch the Floo Network here, and after what happened two years ago, I had Professor Flitwick assist me to increase the spells warding the castle. If anyone Portkeys in or out of Hogwarts, it shall not go undetected. If, despite these measures, anything happens, Fawkes will be able to help us find you."

Author's Notes: "To Anachreon in Heaven" was a popular late eighteenth-century tavern song, popular in both Britain and the U.S., who's bastard offspring by an attorney-cum-amateur poet, grew up to be a certain well-known national anthem.

The Solstice

Chapter 7 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: If I owned the Potter-verse, I'd be sitting on a lounge chair in the Caribbean, drinking frozen drinks brought to me by handsome young men. And yet here I am. 'Nuff said.

Author's Notes: Thanks again to Verity for beta reading. Any remaining errors I snuck in afterwards!

Chapter 7: The Solstice

Despite her having observed his discomfiture the other night, Professor Snape appeared to be treating Rowan with the same level of disdain as everyone else in Potions class. On the whole, a good sign, Rowan thought.

Rowan noticed that the classroom floor looked especially clean now; not a speck of dust to be seen, glassware sparkling, floor spotless and completely mucus-free. Clearly detentions had occurred.

Following the directions on the board, which had appeared at a gesture of Professor Snape's wand, Rowan cut her caterpillars carefully into thin, even slices. While she did this, Rowan observed Snape. He seemed oddly distracted today. He barely sneered when Edgar had to confess to a caterpillar allergy, and he only took five points from Gryffindor the entire lesson.

The rest of Rowan's week progressed without incident. Preparations for the holidays were well underway. The Great Hall was festooned with holly and evergreen. Hagrid brought in several fine trees from the Forbidden Forest, and Professor Flitwick charmed them into festiveness. Rowan looked around with admiration. This was going to be her first year staying at Hogwarts over the holiday; she was looking forward to the Christmas feast. She had heard that even the staff got a little giddy. A tipsy Minerva McGonagall, that would be something to see. Rowan knew better than to expect anything other than a typically malevolent Snape.

Rowan continued working on her fabric samples each evening. She had found several leads in the potion books she had examined in the library after fleeing Snape's classroom the other evening. She tried all of them, in every combination she could think of. Always keeping careful notes, she set the the wet swatches in the evening near the fireplace to dry. In the morning, she checked them for signs of invisibility, but they all remained stubbornly opaque.

Friday night was her Astronomy lab. She and her classmates gazed at the heavens through their telescopes and shivered in their cloaks. Rowan thought longingly again of the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, hot cocoa, and crumpets. This was the last day of classes; the Hogwarts Express would leave tomorrow to take the students home for break. The moon was second quarter this evening; Tuesday it would be full. Rowan remembered that Saturday was the Solstice. She wondered if her luck would turn with the turning of the year. She didn't find any great revelations in the sky; not that she expected anything useful. At the end of class, Rowan put her telescope carefully away and handed in her lab notes for the evening. She went back down the staircase with the others and passed through the portrait hole into the Ravenclaw dormitory. She made one more batch of samples of her thestral fabric and set them out to dry.

That same evening, in another part of Britain, Voldemort conferred with his lieutenants. Wormtail, as ever, was in attendance.

"Well, Bella, have you prepared the potion?"

"Yes, Dark Lord, it is complete except for the final step, which must be done on the Solstice."

"You have not made any mistakes?"

"No, Master. I have compared the instructions returned by both Malfoy and Snape carefully. I am certain I have followed them correctly."

"I do hope that this is so, Bella; you know how I hate to have to punish you," the high-pitched voice said silkily.

Bellatrix looked fearful and bowed to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robe. "Master, I am not so sure that Snape can be trusted. It would be wise to make sure you have the blood tomorrow, or the effort will be wasted and you will have to wait another three months."

"Perhaps you are right, Bella. I think we shall ensure that Snape does not forget his invitation tomorrow. Boyle and Wart! I want you." Two hooded figures stepped forward expectantly.

"You both have children now at Hogwarts, am I correct?"

"Yes, Dark Lord," they both acknowledged.

"I want you both to pay them a visit. Perhaps there is some question about their Potions grades? You should pay a call on their instructor. If he has not arranged to have a student at hand, let him know he has incurred my displeasure, and select one for him. Bring them both here."

Here Voldemort took a small object, held his wand over it and murmured, "*Portus*." It quivered for a moment, then quieted. "Take this for your return trip. Now go." The indicated underlings departed on their errand.

Saturday morning, when Rowan checked the dried swatches from the night before, she saw one of them had actually worked! Her fabric swatch had seemingly vanished. She found it by feel from where she knew she had left it and picked it up with two fingers. Rowan held the fabric scrap up to the light yep, that was invisible all right. She realized she had better embroider a border or something on it in a brightly-colored Muggle yarn, or she risked losing it. Rowan draped the little piece of cloth over her hand and stroked it. The thestral wool had an unworldly feel to it soft like camel down but with a thrill like silk. She gazed at her bare hand through the fabric.

Oh.

No.

Arrrgggghh! Blistering Boggarts! Desiccated Doxy Droppings! Seasick Sea-serpent Snot! Rowan mentally ran through every exclamation she could think of, till she felt a little better. The endless supply of inimical and unendearing creatures in the magical world provided creative scope to her invective.

Rowan realized her error she had made invisible fabric, not invisibility fabric! Ugh. How was she ever going to face Professor Snape now? Ah, well, no help for it, she was going to have to tell him.

Not right this second, though; that ordeal could be postponed at least till later in the day. Today was the morning of holidays, the Hogwarts Express would be taking most of the student body back to platform Nine and Three Quarters right after breakfast. Rowan dressed and went down to the common room. All the other Ravenclaws were busy with their trunks and chattering about their plans for the holidays. Edgar came to say goodbye to Rowan.

"I'm wishing now I'd planned to stay. I hope you aren't too lonely."

"I'll be fine. I've got so much work to do, I'll hardly notice that no one is here."

"I'm just taking mine with me. The farm isn't quite so busy this time of year, so I'll have plenty of time to study. I'll owl you, if that's okay?"

Rowan looked at Edgar; she wasn't sure what to say, so she answered, "Okay."

Edgar smiled and shyly leaned towards her. Oh, what the heck, thought Rowan, and let him kiss her. He smelled nice; his kiss was warm and not soggy. Her experience was not wide, but she'd definitely seen worse. Edgar straightened up again before anyone noticed, and they all clambered through the portrait hole for breakfast.

After breakfast, everyone scrambled for the carriages to the train station with their trunks and things. Rowan saw them off and waved goodbye to Ariadne and Edgar from the front steps of the castle. When the carriages pulled out of sight, Rowan turned and re-entered the castle.

The few students who were remaining for the holidays gathered in front of the fires in the various common rooms and commiserated, aided by stocks of butterbeer and baked goods sent up from the kitchens. Lunch was an informal affair, and most of the students felt it was greatly improved by Professor Snape's absence. Rowan, though, grew concerned that he would not be around to consult on her project.

Since it was the holiday as well as Saturday, there were no normal office hours. Still though, Snape often had potions that needed attention and could usually be found in his workroom, so Rowan looked for him there. She dreaded barging in on him without an appointment for the second time, but not nearly as much as she dreaded failing at her final project. She picked up her samples, squared her shoulders, and headed for the dungeon.

She found him there, in his workroom, stirring something with a silver spoon. He held up one hand as she entered and motioned her to silence. She faded back a bit and watched him work. Snape continued stirring with an even and precise motion his right hand, while his left carefully sprinkled a dry powder into the cauldron. As he stirred, a lavender mist rose from the cauldron, slunk over the lip and faded towards the floor. At this, Snape gave a grunt of satisfaction and straightened up.

"To what, Miss Bourne, do I owe the honor of this unexpected visit today?"

Rowan winced, but presented her case in a steady voice. "I need some help with my project. I'm really sorry to bother you over the holidays, but I've tried everything I can think of and this is the best I got." Here she stepped closer to Snape and held up her invisible square of fabric.

Snape reached into the space where she appeared to be holding something and, encountering the fabric, took the square from her with two fingers. He held it up before the light of the fireplace and turned it around carefully. When he draped it over his palm, as Rowan had earlier, the corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

"I believe I comprehend your problem, Miss Bourne."

"I've worked so hard. Look: here are my notes on every experiment I tried. I can't believe I made such a stupid mistake!"

Snape took her journal and leafed through it. The first pages documented her fabrication process. Then each completed sample was affixed to a page, containing neatly quilled notes on which potions and spells had been applied, how they had been performed, in which order. Quite impressive for a student, really. It would be a pity to have to fail her for it. Hmm. He did have an idea that might help.

"I think perhaps you need to include some form of a Transference spell. You have successfully invested the fabric with the invisibility attribute, but you want it to extend its magic to its immediate surroundings. I believe I have come across a potion of this type in my reading. I will check for you and give you the instructions in class when I find them."

Rowan appeared startled at his response, so Snape continued:

"Students are permitted to request guidance on these projects, though very few do."

"I can't imagine why not," Rowan commented blandly.

Snape looked at her narrowly. Guileless grey eyes met his fearlessly. The effect was somewhat marred by the tiniest trembling at the corners of her mouth; was that a twinkle? The chit!

He handed her back the fabric. This time their fingers touched momentarily, and they jumped back as if shocked.

While their attention was fixed and both struggled to find something to say, two men walked into Snape's workroom. Rowan glanced over at their entry. They looked vaguely familiar; they were probably parents and she'd run into them on platform Nine and Three Quarters a few times. Snape wrenched his gaze from Rowan to the door. He knew at once who they were and what they were there for.

"Here is your project book back, Miss Bourne. We will discuss this further at another time."

Snape attempted to direct her out the door, but it was already too late. Boyle took out his wand, flashed it at Rowan and snapped, "*Impedimenta*." Wart caught her as she fell.

"Ho hoh, Snape, well done. The Dark Lord feared that you were not planning on making his appointment, but I see you have your assignment prepared. Allow me to compliment you on your taste," he said, looking over Rowan with an unpleasant smile. "Let's just see if she qualifies, shall we?" At this, he waved his wand again in a serpentine pattern and incanted, "*Probita Intacta*." A silvery aura flared briefly around Rowan, then faded. Boyle gave a satisfied smirk.

"This one should do nicely, Snape. Shall we go? Our Master awaits." At this Boyle and Wart made sure all the four of them were in contact, then Boyle touched the Portkey in his pocket.

In the Headmaster's office, an alarm sounded.

Author's Notes: So nobody really thought Rowan was getting out of this, right? If you haven't read the story warning flag, now would be a good time to do so. If that will upset you, you'll probably want to skip chapter 8.

Add Three Drops and Stir Widdershins

Chapter 8 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: Severus Snape, his job, and all his friends, belong to JKR.

Author's Notes:

This story has a warning flag, and this is the chapter it applies to. If reading about non-consenting sex is going to upset you, this would be a good time to step out for some fresh air. This chapter is a little short--I broke it up so that if you want to skip this part of the story, you can pop right in again at 9. Hope to see you there!

Chapter 8: "Add Three Drops and Stir Widdershins"

Rowan felt herself pulled through howling wind and swirling color, then suddenly dropped to her feet in a small room, along with Snape and the two Death Eaters. The Impediment Curse had worn off, but Rowan was now grasped firmly at each elbow by Boyle and Wart. These two let her go, then went through a small doorway into a larger room, leaving her, for the moment, alone with Snape. He took her arm and turned her to look at him. His expression was pained; she thought she saw pity and sorrow. He looked like he was about to say something, but they were distracted by sounds from the other room. There were apologies and audible groveling. Then Rowan heard a high-pitched male voice say "*Crucio*," followed by an agonizing sound of tortured screaming. Snape stiffened and gripped her arm tighter.

"There is no evading this. I will spare you what I can," she heard him say. That frightened her more than what she had heard, and guessed, so far.

In the other room, the screaming stopped. She heard the same voice saying: "I trust you will not fail me again," and further sounds of groveling, during which a rat-like man slunk in to fetch them.

"The Master wants you to bring her now, Snape."

Still gripping Rowan by the upper arm, Snape went through the doorway, pulling Rowan with him.

Rowan stared at her surroundings. A red-eyed being who could only be Lord Voldemort sat on a throne-like chair at the head of the room near the fireplace. An enormous snake lazed in the warm spot in front of the flames. A heavy wooden table had been placed in the center of the room. It was tall, more like a workbench than a table. Though she knew it was still daylight out for a brief while longer in this Northern latitude, the room was heavily draped with dark curtains, lit by candles and the flickering light of the fire in the hearth.

There was a group of Death Eaters, some in masks, others not. One masked, cloaked figure was shakily picking himself off the floor as Rowan came in. He then stepped to the back of the group and Rowan looked around the room. She recognized Lucius Malfoy from his visits to school, also the Lestranges and some of the others from pictures in the *Daily Prophet* accounts of the Azkaban breakouts and the battle at the Ministry of Magic. She supposed that was why they weren't bothering with masks: there wasn't much point.

Bellatrix Lestrange was holding a small cauldron in her gaunt but graceful hands. The potion inside had a not-quite-completed look about it--no smoking, no glowing, no mist pouring over the lip of the cauldron. It was rather more ominous that way.

While Rowan stared around, Snape mastered himself, to the best of his considerable ability. If the Dark Lord read the slightest hint of his true feelings now, he and Rowan would both be dead, and not quickly. He drew the occluding mask of his Death Eater identity across the surface of his mind. For both their sakes, he must not be weak.

Lord Voldemort looked at Snape with approval for the first time since Snape had returned, at the Dark Mark's summons, claiming loyalty.

"Ah, Snape, I see you have our final ingredient. As we discussed, Bella has begun the potion for you based on your written instructions. I was pleased to find that they agreed with Malfoy's." Snape sketched a brief sardonic bow in Lucius' direction. Lucius looked sour. "You have done well so far, Snape. Please allow me to compliment you on your taste," he said, leering at Rowan. "But then, you always liked tall women, did you not, Severus?" he said, glancing at Bellatrix Lestrange with a smug look.

Severus declined to mention that he had not chosen to bring Rowan here. He smiled nastily and bowed towards Bellatrix, who gazed languidly back at him. She, at least, was clearly looking forward to the proceedings, but then, she always had enjoyed watching pain, nearly as much as she enjoyed inflicting it.

At Voldemort's words, Rowan's eyes had widened, first with comprehension as she remembered Snape's 'shopping list,' then with fear as the implication dawned on her. She looked at Snape, but could find no trace of her snide, but fair, schoolmaster. Now all she saw was a lean hard form, old lines from an evil past drawn on his face.

Voldemort bent his piercing red gaze towards Rowan and spoke to her casually. "Well, my dear, welcome to our little party. I hope the entertainment is to your liking. At least you aren't among total strangers, since of course you know Professor Snape. In fact, the good professor is about to do me a favor. He is assisting me to prepare a very special potion this evening. For that matter," he said genially, "you, too, will have an essential part to play."

Merlin's Beard, he liked the sound of his own voice! Rowan thought, but she was not able to maintain her detachment at his next words:

"I need three drops of your blood to complete the potion. You are in luck, though: it will not be necessary to kill you. Perhaps you will even enjoy the process. But, probably not. Bind her."

At this command, Wart and Boyle pulled Rowan over to the table. They bent her forwards across it, brought her hands up above her head and bound them to the far legs of the table. Her hips extended over the edge of the table, and she could just brace herself on the floor with her toes.

She struggled as they bound her, but she quickly realized they were enjoying that. The Death Eaters circled around were watching intensely, one or two toying with their wands. The look on Bellatrix Lastrange's face was avid; she was clearly hoping they'd have an excuse to hurt her. Rowan stilled.

"Now, Snape, it is time to perform your task."

Severus stepped towards Rowan. He knew there was no way to avoid what must follow. If he refused, the Dark Lord would only command one of the other Death Eaters to rape the child for her virginity's blood. If he carried out his command, the Dark Lord might 'reward' him by giving Rowan to him for a plaything - he could then get her safely back to Hogwarts. She would hate him, but she would live - any other course led to her death. Trite phrases aside, he was pretty certain Rowan Bourne would prefer to live.

Rowan felt hands lift her robes and undo her clothing, followed by as cool a draft as the stuffy room had on offer. *Get a hold of yourself, Bourne!* Rowan told herself sharply. *This is no time to panic. There is no way you are getting out of this, but that is no reason to panic.* She peeked over her shoulder at Snape, who seemed to be having trouble with his buttons. She had a few moments longer at least. Turning her head the other way she looked at the cauldron with its nearly completed potion. What was it supposed to be? Dark Magic, obviously; trouble for Dumbledore and everyone on his side, certainly. Her thoughts flew in the next seconds, her fear made her a little silly, but her keen mind continued to analyze and make connections despite it.

Reft virgin's blood was required for the potion. Her blood. From her hymen. When Snape raped her. Which would happen as soon as he finished with those buttons. Funny thing was, a little while ago she'd been thinking of little else than her Potions professor and her chances of getting him to do more or less what he was about to. She stifled an almost hysterical giggle. *Stop that. This is not funny, not even a little bit.* So now what? She'd have been willing, if he'd asked. Did she hate him now? Oddly, no. She had known him, admired him too long; she still wanted to trust him although there seemed little reason to. She closed her eyes and lowered her head, letting her hair slide down to cover her face and hopefully mask her thoughts. Could she accept this? Could she trust him, even now? She felt Snape behind her, one hand on her backside. Bracing himself, without groping; his hand was warm and firm. She had watched his hands for hours in class. Somehow, she felt strength come to her through his hand and, strangely, a feeling of reassurance. She remembered the look on his face when they had arrived here. He had wanted to spare her. He had not intended this, she was sure. She could pity him.

Time's up. She squared her shoulders and braced herself against the table. Under the brown shadow of her hair, where no one could hear, she whispered her answer to the question that no one had asked her. "Yes, I will."

Ugh. The pain was worse than she had thought it would be. Rowan settled in to endure and tried to think about anything but what was happening. Thankfully, it was soon over. Breathing harshly, Snape stepped back. Rowan heard him adjust his clothes; she peeked out again. Malfoy stepped forward with a small glass vial and handed it to Snape. Snape took it, and with a flick of his wand the blood flew from Rowan's thighs into the container. He walked to Bellatrix LeStrange, who still held the potion cauldron between her two hands. Standing in front of her, Snape poured in three drops of the blood, then stirred widdershins seven times with his wand. The potion shimmered and gave off a dusky green vapor.

"The potion is complete, My Lord," Snape announced.

"Excellent, Snape. You may have the girl," he indicated Rowan, "as your reward for your faithful service tonight. I'm sure you have not forgotten the *advantages* of my company, all those long years at Hogwarts?" At this he laughed vilely.

Snape bowed and gave his thanks to Voldemort, then moved towards Rowan to unbind her. That moment, there was a crash and the door flew in. Outlined in the doorway, wand in his hand and in a towering rage, was Albus Dumbledore, with Fawkes on his shoulder. Flanking him were several Aurors -- among them Mad-Eye Moody (the real one she presumed), and a young woman with the oddest pink hair.

They burst through the door, hexes flying. Bellatrix still had the potion cauldron, now containing the completed Aversion Serum, in her hands. Moving as fast as a wildcat, she flung the entire contents onto Dumbledore, who was doused all over in envy-green liquid. Voldemort and the Death Eaters all froze to observe the effect.

Dumbledore's eyes flashed brightly as he advanced into the room. He gestured with his wand and a silvery disk emerged from the tip, which grew large enough to shield the table where Rowan and Snape stood, while his band of Order members rushed in under its cover.

Before Voldemort and his servants were certain what had happened, the pink-haired Auror and another female had swiftly released Rowan from the table with an unbinding charm, and helped her to stand. Meanwhile, Moody and another Auror hexed an unresisting Snape into immobility. The Death Eaters, by now, had recovered from their surprise and were forming to attack. Fawkes beat his wings and lifted from Dumbledore's shoulder; the remaining Aurors raised their wands to fight back, but Dumbledore stopped them with a swift order:

"No! There are not enough of us to win. Get Snape and the girl out of here. Quickly! I will follow when you are gone."

The Aurors gathered swiftly together, ensured all were in contact, and activated a Portkey. Rowan felt again the sharp pull behind her navel and the lifting, rushing, sensation as she was transported back to Hogwarts and safety.

Author's Notes: Not much humor here. What can I say? It's just not funny. The worst is over though. From here on, things start to get complicated...

Back at the Castle

Chapter 9 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned. SS/OC, of-age student, NC sex.

Author's Notes: If you skipped the last chapter, welcome back!

Chapter 9: Back at the Castle

The group appeared in the Headmaster's office. Rowan was helped down the circular stairs and taken the Hospital Wing at once. Haunted black eyes followed her till she was out of sight.

With a flash, Dumbledore and Fawkes appeared. Dumbledore had Fawkes' tail firmly in his grasp; Fawkes held a vial of some dark liquid in his claws. Dumbledore took the vial and handed it to Moody. "See that this is destroyed appropriately." Fawkes flew over and settled on his perch with a satisfied ruffle of flame-red feathers.

Moody nodded to Dumbledore and pocketed the vial. His scarred face was twisted further into an unnatural grimace. "So what next, Dumbledore? What do we do with that?" He nodded towards Snape.

"The first thing is that we debrief him. When we find out exactly what happened, and why, perhaps we can determine a course of action," Dumbledore told them. His rage had passed now that Rowan had been removed to safety, leaving him drawn and tired.

"And then? Are you going to bury this or turn him in? Frankly, I think the girl's entitled to see justice done, but I suppose you still need Snape?"

Dumbledore looked at the two Aurors, then included Snape in his gaze, and replied, "What happened tonight was a terrible crime. I do not believe it is something I have the right to cover up. Still, let us hear the facts of the matter, and then maybe we will know how to proceed."

Dumbledore sat in one of the soft chairs by the fire. Snape paced around the room, tense and anguished. Moody's face wore a look of disgust. Tonks appeared too shocked to register any expression, but her hair had changed from bubble-gum pink to puce.

Moody butted in, "You aren't going to just trust him, Dumbledore? Don't you want to dose him with a good slug of Veritaserum first?"

"I will leave it to the Ministry to waste their time and truth serums on Severus. I know he is too well defended against it. The only way to find out the truth from Professor Snape, Alastor, is to ask." Dumbledore turned from Moody to Snape and regarded him quietly for a moment before speaking.

"Severus, after we last spoke, I was under the impression that you would not be returning to spy on Voldemort again. You had agreed to cede to my judgement in the matter. Please tell me what happened today."

Snape's face was drawn and haggard, he held himself like an overwound watch, and when he spoke, his voice was closer to sandpaper than velvet.

"Voldemort did not summon me after our last conversation, and I did not contact him, Headmaster. I knew that things would start to go badly when he knew I had rejected him, but I did not believe that crisis would occur till after the Solstice." Snape paused sourly and spit out, "I was mistaken." Never one to easily admit error, Snape now had to confess to having been outmaneuvered, too.

"The Dark Lord sent two of his Death Eaters to Hogwarts to check on me that afternoon. Since they both have children here, they were able to simply enter without concealment."

Moody snarled that even parents shouldn't be trusted. Dumbledore looked extremely grave at having overlooked that weakness in the castle's defenses; he sighed but remained silent while Snape continued.

"Miss Bourne was at that time in my workroom, conferring with me about her Potions term project when they arrived. I had not been expecting her; she had not made an appointment. She had run into trouble that morning and sought me out for guidance." Tonks looked astonished that anyone would voluntarily go to Snape for help, but repressed her comment in favor of hearing the rest of the story.

"Boyle and Wart made the natural assumption that I had arranged for her to be there and that she was the victim I had selected." Snape's lip curled in a sneer of superiority. "Fortunately, they were too dim to notice my attempt to get Miss Bourne to leave. They ensorcelled her, then activated a Portkey, which they used to bring themselves, Miss Bourne and myself back to the Dark Lord. There was no opportunity to prevent this, or to send any message, but I believed you would guess what had happened."

"Yes, I heard the alarm when the Portkey activated, and I summoned the Order immediately."

He had arrived at the worst of the story, but Snape would not allow himself to leave any of it unsaid. Bleakly, he told the rest:

"When we arrived, it was clear I that would not be given any chance to help Miss Bourne escape or to find any other way out of the situation. The Dark Lord had everything in readiness. Bellatrix LeStrange had prepared the potion, all but the last step, which the Dark Lord had assigned to me."

"I understand, pray continue," Dumbledore said quietly.

"It is not likely that Miss Bourne would have escaped unscathed if I had refused to follow orders. There were others more than willing to perform the necessary step." Snape's features twisted wryly. "If I did my part convincingly, there was a chance that Miss Bourne would be allowed to live and I might be able to get her to safety afterwards. Nothing short of the danger to her could have impelled me to do what I did, but I will, nevertheless, regret it always."

As Snape completed his tale, he turned his face away, so it was curtained by his lank, black hair. Still, enough of the stern, hawk-nosed profile was visible by the glinting firelight to show a hint of his haunted and grief-stricken expression. Even Tonks could pity him and Moody looked a half a shade less stern.

After allowing Snape a moment to compose himself, Dumbledore spoke. "It is a terrible thing, Severus, but I can only agree that you made the right choice under very trying circumstances. Nonetheless," Dumbledore sighed, "it will be an extremely difficult thing to defend."

Snape looked sharply at Dumbledore. "There is no defense possible, Headmaster. Your testimony kept me out of Azkaban once before, but this time you should not interfere. I don't believe even you could withstand the criticism if you were to defend me."

"I know you take your duty to protect the students seriously, Severus. It has been quite plain to me from the many times you have protected them even ones you have not liked." At this there might have been the ghost of a twinkle. "It is deeply regrettable that you were not able to protect Miss Bourne, but I do not blame you for it. If anything, the fault lies at my own door. I failed in my own duty; both you and she should have been safe within the castle." Dumbledore stood and also paced the room. He walked over to his desk and began fiddling with the dish of lemon drops. He didn't bother offering them around, he knew no one wanted any.

"I am afraid of what would happen to you, Severus, outside the protection of myself and this school. I might add that the Order still needs your skill and experience very badly. In fact, I surmise that this was part of Voldemort's scheme. Either you must betray yourself to him as being loyal to me or you must perform an act which he believed must permanently divorce you from us and lose us your services. A plot as twisted as a serpent's path has always been his trademark."

"A game he wins at every outcome is always the Dark Lord's favorite," Snape replied wryly. "I should not have forgotten it."

"I, too, should have remembered it," Dumbledore sighed. "It is now left to us to salvage what we can. It appears that Voldemort has no reason yet to believe you were my spy. However, having 'captured' you, we must now carefully consider how to proceed to avoid having him learn it."

Snape turned in shock. "You can't be suggesting I should continue in that capacity. You have told me for months that the danger was too great. You ordered me to stop when I told you about the Serum. You believed that the price was too high."

"The price was too high," Dumbledore replied heavily, "but it has already been paid. We must not waste it. There is also the danger to you. It would have been bad enough to resign from Voldemort's service, but to have him know that you betrayed him--no where on Earth would be safe enough. I am convinced, the only way out is to go forward."

"And when I am convicted and sent to Azkaban? Shall I spy for you on the Death Eaters there?" Snape's voice dropped; he continued slowly and softly, "I still say it is only what I deserve for this night's work, but that cannot be much help to you."

"No, I really think we must try to get you acquitted," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. Snape, Moody and Tonks all stared at him in confusion--how was he possibly going to pull that off?

"Perhaps we can suggest that you, too, were kidnapped, along with Miss Bourne. You were, in a way; her statement should agree with that. Then perhaps you can claim you were under the Imperius Curse."

"You cannot believe anyone would believe such a thing?"

"There is precedent, they believed it of many others, including Lucius Malfoy."

Snape gave a snort of derision. "And now they have been extremely embarrassed to find he was in the thick of it all along. They won't buy it a second time."

"Perhaps. However, I believe Madam Bones is sympathetic to our cause, and my opinion of you will hold some weight with her. If she does not believe it, she may choose to proceed as if she did."

Moody looked at Dumbledore with new respect; Tonks looked as if she had been enlightened. Dumbledore stopped speaking for a moment and appeared deep in thought. When he started, he sounded as if he were reaching for an answer, just at teasing distance.

"There is a point, Severus, on which I am not clear, and I think that it may be important. I presume that the potion which was hurled at me upon my arrival was the Aversion Serum?"

"Yes. I had completed the preparation shortly before you entered," Snape said grimly. Tonks winced.

"Moody, Tonks, I told you earlier what the Aversion Serum would do. Did either of you feel any dislike or hatred for me?"

Tonks replied, "No, Dumbledore, I liked you as much as ever. Can't say the same for him." She nodded towards Snape. Moody also replied negatively, but watched Dumbledore sharply, convinced he was getting at something.

"I also did not feel any, er, aversion. The potion does not appear to have had any effect. Why do you think that might have been?" Dumbledore directed the question to Snape.

"I can only assume that Bellatrix Lestrange botched it somehow."

"That is certainly possible, although I recall Miss Black's Potions N.E.W.T. was Outstanding. I wonder.... Ah, well, in any event, it might help your case. We could make the argument that since the Potion was not brewed correctly, you were not guilty of performing Dark Magic."

Moody looked impressed at this bit of craftiness, but Snape snorted and his expression remained black.

"You know as well as I do, Dumbledore, that the result doesn't matter. Need I remind you that I raped a virgin for her blood?" Snape looked utterly appalled at having to say such a thing of himself. "Regardless of the potion's success, or lack of it, the Ministry would be entirely justified in condemning me to life in Azkaban."

"I have not forgotten it. But somehow, it does not seem to me that all is lost. I have a feeling that there is something we still do not understand about this. Perhaps when I speak to Miss Bourne, it will become clear." Snape did not look hopeful.

Moody growled, "It is getting late, Dumbledore. If you are going to turn Snape over to the Ministry, you'd best be doing it. Otherwise they're going to ask what took you so long." Moody took a swig from his flask; both real and magical eyes remained fixed firmly on Snape.

"Alastor is correct, it is time for you to go. Alastor, please see that he is held at the Ministry till tomorrow and that the matter is kept as quiet as possible. I will speak to Madam Bones the first thing in the morning and request that she take no action until I have had a chance to interview Miss Bourne."

They stood. Moody and Tonks escorted a dour and silent Snape into the fireplace and through the Floo to the Ministry. Dumbledore sat at his desk a long while gazing into space before he retired. The portraits lining the walls of his office, maintained a subdued silence in deference to his mood.

Author's Notes: Did I mention things would get complicated? Next up, Rowan wakes up and has something to say about all this.

You can all thank Verity none of you had to suffer the first six version of this and the next few chapters :*)

Rowan's Morning

Chapter 10 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned. SS/OC, of-age student, NC sex.

Chapter 10: Rowan's Morning

Sunday morning arrived. It had snowed in the night, but the storm had passed; the day was fine, but bitter cold.

Rowan slowly came to herself. Her first awareness was of lying comfortably on her back under a stack of fuzzy, warm blankets. Groggily she had an idea she'd been much less comfortable in the recent past.

Deciding it was safe, Rowan opened her eyes. Bright sunlight was pouring through the windows into the infirmary room. It must be pretty late in the morning then, this time of year. As soon as she noticed Rowan stirring, Madam Pomfrey came over to her bedside with a cup of hot chocolate.

"Well there, I see you're awake. Drink up."

Rowan thanked Madam Pomfrey and took the steaming cup from her. Now that she was awake, the previous evening began coming back to Rowan. When the group of Dumbledore's supporters had appeared in the headmaster's office last night, she had been hustled right up to the hospital wing. She had only had a glimpse of Snape, appearing utterly disconsolate, before she was helped down the stair. The Auror with her had explained the situation to Madam Pomfrey briefly, but bluntly. Madam Pomfrey had examined her, which had been intensely embarrassing, given her a salve to relieve her soreness, and a potion of Dreamless Sleep. The potion had done its job, and she had slept at least twelve hours through, unbothered by nightmares of Death Eaters, giant snakes, stuffy fire-lit rooms, or intimate moments that hadn't been intimate at all.

It was all too much to comprehend; she felt detached from her own memories. That was probably a good thing, Rowan reflected. She was sure she was not yet ready to own them, but she took them out to look them over, to try to make sense of them all.

How had it all happened, Rowan wondered? She had been talking to Professor Snape when those two men came. They had expected to find him with a female student, specifically a virgin. What had that comment been? His assignment prepared? But the Dark Lord had thought he might not make the appointment?

Rowan sipped the cocoa and felt a healing warmth spread through her.

Clearly Snape was one of them, but was he really? He hadn't been expecting her; she'd just happened to come to him for help then. That certainly didn't happen often she'd even teased him about it!

When they came, he'd tried to shoo her out the door, but it had obviously been too late. How he had looked at her, those few seconds they were alone in that place! Then later... afterwards. She remembered his expression, back in the headmaster's office, as she was led away to the infirmary. Since Rowan had known him, he had always looked as if one really didn't want to know his worst memory. Just then he'd looked as if he had a new one.

Somehow, recalling Professor Snape's anguish snapped her back to her own current reality, and she could no longer feel detached. Instead she was nearly overset by a giddy kind of hysteria as she considered her new position.

Right now, Bourne, how are we doing? Well, for starters, virginity is history. Taken by Professor Snape no less. That would have been fine if we had had a few more pillows and a few less Death Eaters. Oh, and despite all that, I still have no idea what Snape looks like naked.

How on *earth* am I going to face Professor Snape next Potions class? For that matter, how will he face *me*? What can I possibly say to him? "Excuse me, Professor Snape, could we try that again this time with feeling?" Will there *be* a next Potions class? They grabbed Professor Snape and brought him back here, but where is he now? He must be in *unbelievable* trouble.

That last item was clearly urgent. Rowan realized she had no idea what had happened to him last night. She sat up and looked for Madam Pomfrey, who was just coming to pick up her empty cup.

"Madam Pomfrey, what happened to Professor Snape last night, after I came here?"

"Professor Snape can't trouble you anymore. Just you lie back and rest," Pomfrey responded, looking deeply upset.

Uh oh.

"I really need to speak with Professor Dumbledore."

"You need to rest, just lie back."

"I don't need to rest, I need to speak with the headmaster!" Rowan jumped out of bed and started searching for her clothes.

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips in disapproval, but showed Rowan where her things had been put away. "Miss Bourne, dear, please calm down. The headmaster told me he wanted to speak with you in his office whenever you were ready to leave here. Since you seem to be feeling well enough, I will take you to him as soon as you are dressed.

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey." Rowan settled to the business of getting ready.

Washed and dressed, Rowan arrived in Dumbledore's office a short while later. He took her hand and led her to one of two squashy armchairs, which had been pulled in front of the fireplace where it was cozy; Rowan sat down. Dumbledore sat down opposite Rowan. He looked very tired. She did not think he had slept well, if at all. Rowan mentally thanked Madam Pomfrey for the potion that had let her rest.

"Thank you, Miss Bourne, for coming to see me so soon. I am aware of the events that transpired last night. It is not necessary to recount them. I deeply regret that such a thing should have happened to a student in our care," he sighed heavily, looking entirely haggard.

Rowan wasn't sure how to start. She was upset, but not so much as he seemed to fear.

"I'll be okay, sir," Rowan began. "It wasn't ... so bad as it might have been." She knew she sounded lame, but the last thing she wanted to do was start telling Professor Dumbledore exactly how awful it was; that wouldn't help in the slightest.

Dumbledore looked skeptical, but somewhat relieved. "You are very brave, child. And very good, to try to spare me, when I know how badly I failed you."

Rowan was silent for a moment, not sure what she could say to that. She decided to change the subject, to the one she had come here to discuss.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir," Rowan hesitated, but Dumbledore looked expectant and encouraged her to continue.

"I need to know, sir, what is going to happen now to Professor Snape?"

Dumbledore looked at her questioningly, as if he wasn't sure what sort of answer she was looking for. His bright eyes met Rowan's clear grey ones without flinching, and he spoke with tremendous gentleness.

"Professor Snape has betrayed a great trust and broken our laws. He is being held by the Ministry of Magic. He will be tried in a few days time."

Rowan considered what to say now. Certainly Dumbledore believed she wanted Professor Snape to go to Azkaban. How could she convince him otherwise? What would he think of her if she did?

Dumbledore observed the confusion in Rowan's face. He could see that at least she had not come here bent on vengeance. He suspected that what she needed was to hear the truth.

"I spoke to Professor Snape last night before I allowed him to be taken to the Ministry. He told me, and I believe him, that circumstances overtook him yesterday when you happened to be with him; that to his deep and eternal regret he was forced to harm you in order to preserve your life, and that nothing other than a hope of saving you

could have caused him to do so."

Softly, Rowan let out the breath she had been holding. Somehow, this man understood, at least a little.

Rowan replied, "I could tell he was as startled as I was. He tried to get me away, but it was already too late. Once we were there, it was clear he had no choice. If it had not been him, it would have been another probably Malfoy's dad." Rowan shuddered at this idea. "What I don't understand is" She trailed off.

"Why it happened?" Dumbledore completed the question for her. "What Professor Snape was doing associating with Lord Voldemort?"

"Yes."

"Can you not guess?" Dumbledore asked her, feeling her out.

Rowan had heard the rumors of Snape's past, but only the most malicious gossips suggested he might still be involved in such a thing. "Was he ... spying? For you?"

Dumbledore answered her plainly. "In short, yes. Professor Snape was once a Death Eater and has been pretending to still be one, in order to gain information about Voldemort's plans. I tell you this in the strictest confidence, because having been there and suffered so much, I believe you deserve to know why."

Dumbledore continued, choosing his words with care. "Professor Snape learned that Voldemort had discovered and intended to make an old Dark Arts potion, the Aversion Serum. Had we been unaware of the plan, it could have been disastrous for our side."

"Was that the potion he made with my ..." Rowan hesitated, "with the blood?"

"That is correct. Professor Snape reported to me that reft virgin's blood was required to make the potion and that he would be expected to provide it from among the students. We agreed," Dumbledore glossed over their discussion, "that he would not do so and would quit Voldemort's service. Unfortunately, Voldemort outmaneuvered us by sending those two men directly into Hogwarts to meet Professor Snape. When they saw you there, they believed he had followed orders and arranged for your presence."

Rowan digested this; it made sense based on her memory of the event.

"How were you able to find us?"

"After what happened here two years ago, I had Professor Flitwick add an alarm to the castle's defenses. He was able to modify the spell the Ministry uses to track offenders of the Restriction on the Underaged Use of Magic. If a Portkey is used anywhere in the castle, I am alerted. Severus had on him, by prearrangement, an object with which we were able to locate him." Fawkes, who had been following the exchange, preened on his perch.

"So, if we both agree that it wasn't really Professor Snape's fault, can't he be released?"

"What he did was a crime, Miss Bourne; we are not entitled to acquit him of it. As much as I frequently disagree with the Ministry, I do not wish to live in a world where powerful wizards feel they can interpret or ignore the law as they see fit. I must abide by the laws we have, as must Severus." At this, Dumbledore looked very tired and extremely grave.

"Is there no chance he will be cleared?"

"I intend to speak on his behalf at the trial, and I will use what influence I have to persuade Madam Bones that Professor Snape had no choice, but I am by no means certain of the outcome."

Rowan digested that and considered what to do. She believed she had the power to exonerate Snape, if only she could find the courage to speak. She had to. She couldn't live with herself otherwise.

"What..." she stumbled then began again. "What if I said that it wasn't rape?"

Dumbledore stopped still and stared keenly at Rowan. He spoke carefully, not sure where such a question could lead, but sensing its importance, he drew her out further.

"The events as related to me could hardly be described as anything but. How could it be otherwise?"

Now the hard part. "If I said I was willing."

Dumbledore's blue eyes fixed on her with a deep blue intensity. "Were you?"

Rowan's complexion warred between scarlet and white. Eventually it settled on an even pink, all the way down to her toes, and she tried to answer. "You-Know-Who meant it to be rape, but I thought ... Professor Snape ... I didn't think he wanted it to be. I didn't want it to be."

The significance of this was not lost on the Headmaster, if the intensity of his gaze was any measure.

"I see. Did you not then believe that Professor Snape was truly in Voldemort's service?"

"I wondered, but, no."

"Miss Bourne, I hesitate to trespass on what I know must be intensely personal, but I assure you, it is extremely important. May I infer from this that you have ... feelings ... for Professor Snape?"

Now there was the question she had hoped to avoid. What must he think of her? Yet it had to be answered. Without meeting his gaze, she answered, "Yes."

Dumbledore nodded. "That is enlightening. Do you by any chance know if he returns them?"

"I have no idea," Rowan said to the carpet.

"Ah. I comprehend perfectly," Dumbledore said very gently, leaning back. "There is no need to explain further. Please forgive my impertinence in prying."

After allowing Rowan a moment to compose herself, Dumbledore continued, "Your statement makes a tremendous difference in the case. Since you are of age, if you claim you were willing, then of course the charge of rape must be dropped. That is quite simple. I also believe, based on what you have told me, that we will be able to clear Professor Snape of the charge of Dark Wizardry."

Rowan relaxed a little now, beginning to hope that all might be resolved, until she heard the rest:

"Still, though, we balance on the knife edge. Lord Voldemort *must* not know that Professor Snape has been our spy in his midst. On the other hand, the parents and Board of Governors will never sit still for having a current Death Eater on our faculty."

Rowan sat up again, worried. She hadn't thought all of that through. "How can that possibly work out?"

"I am going to need more than your assistance. I must also ask for your complicity."

Rowan was startled. What could he mean?

"What do you need me to do?"

"We will claim Severus was kidnapped from here, just as you were. So far that is no more than the truth. In order to clear him, and allow him to remain here, it must be publicly established that he was not acting of his own volition. It is not sufficient to have him acquitted. The parents and Board of Governors of this school must also believe that he is innocent. We will have to claim that he was put under the Imperius Curse by Voldemort, after he was taken from here."

"But ... You-Know-Who ... he knows there was no Imperius curse."

"Of course, but he will believe Professor Snape has convinced me otherwise. He will be given to understand that Professor Snape altered your memory, so that you would give that testimony."

Rowan's head spun, she was having trouble keeping track. Who could have thought the kindly headmaster was so devious?

"I will go to the Ministry and speak to Madam Bones as soon as we are finished here. I hope she will simply be able to take your statement, but it may be necessary for you to give your testimony at the trial. If she requires it, will you be able to do that?"

Rowan blanched, but answered firmly, "Yes, I will."

"Are you quite certain, Miss Bourne? Even if it is not necessary for you to speak at the trial, your statement will become part of the public record. An account will undoubtedly appear in the *Daily Prophet*; your reputation ..." Dumbledore trailed off, looking concerned for Rowan.

Rowan grimaced at that, but answered gamely. "I think my reputation is the least of my worries right now," she said with a grimace. Really, she thought, how bad can it be? It's pretty clear the whole thing wasn't my fault. It will be embarrassing, but that will pass.

"Just so, then. If that is your view, I can only say, 'Thank you,'" Dumbledore told her simply. "I will let you know what will happen as soon as I speak to Madam Bones." Rowan's stomach, with nothing in it since the day before but a cup of hot chocolate, gave an audible growl.

Dumbledore smiled. "It appears that you are ready for lunch. I will take that as an excellent sign of your well-being. Have you anything else you wanted to ask me?"

Rowan said, "No."

"If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask. You may come to me at any time, or to Minerva. She is my deputy and will, of course, know everything. You may go to her if you would rather speak to another woman."

"Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore stood and showed Rowan to the stairs. As soon as she was on her way, he stepped towards the fireplace and reached for the Floo powder.

Rowan walked into the Great Hall and sank gratefully into one of the places at the single table that was now set there for the staff and the few students remaining over the holidays. Everyone was eating already and ignored her entrance, for which she was grateful. The sun was still shining, according to the ceiling. The ritual of checking the weather while tucking into her food helped anchor her back into some semblance of normalcy.

She was starved, and concentrating on her food let her tune out the conversations around her and try to get a grip on what she had learned that morning.

It seemed as if she had an ally in Professor Dumbledore. She had been afraid of what he would think of her, confessing to 'having feelings' for Professor Snape what a way to put it! Still, he'd seemed to know it already, so there wasn't much point in hiding it. He'd also seemed to understand that that was as far as it went. She'd never said anything about it to Snape; they hadn't been carrying on or anything. Well, that much was obvious, or there would have been no blood!

Rowan finished her meal and looked around. No one seemed to notice Snape's absence. How long would he be gone? And how on earth was she going to face him when he came back? She didn't allow herself to consider the alternative possibility.

Author's Notes: Thanks again to Verity for being my beta.

You'll be relieved to know that humorous bits will start sneaking back in very soon!

The Wizengamot

Chapter 11 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned. SS/OC, of-age student, NC sex.

Chapter 11: The Wizengamot

The guard unlocked the small cell and allowed the tall, white-haired old wizard to enter. "Knock when you are ready to leave," he said as he locked the wizard in with the prisoner.

Albus Dumbledore beheld Severus Snape sitting on the small camp bed; glittering black eyes observed him silently in return. Dumbledore passed his wand over the door and all the walls while murmuring a spell. When he was assured they could not be overheard, he spoke:

"I had a very enlightening interview with Miss Bourne yesterday. She is made of sterner stuff than anyone could have realized. She will speak in your defense at the trial."

An utterly dumbfounded expression skillfully negotiated the unfamiliar territory of Snape's features. "What can she possibly say that would not guarantee I am convicted?"

"She will corroborate the story that you were also taken against your will and were put under the Imperius Curse."

Snape crossed his arms and eyed Dumbledore suspiciously. "She knows perfectly well that I was nothing of the kind!"

Dumbledore faced Snape calmly. "She knows it was against your will, she told me so. She will say, I think, some surprising things. Incidentally, I believe it would be safer for her if Lord Voldemort were to believe that you modified her memory before I returned to the castle."

Snape's features went suddenly blank and he asked, "Did you?"

"I did not," Dumbledore replied firmly.

"The child has been violated enough," Snape responded, unable to conceal his relief.

Dumbledore allowed a hint of a twinkle to escape. "I agree, but I would not think of her as a child."

Snape could think of no suitable retort to that and so was silent. Dumbledore, satisfied that Snape was now sufficiently armed, should any of Voldemort's supporters question him, signaled to the guard and departed.

For a long while after, fathomless black eyes stared pensively at the door through which he had left.

Late Monday afternoon, after returning from the Ministry, Professor Dumbledore asked to see Rowan again in his office.

He informed her that Snape's trial had been set for the next Monday, December 30, and that she would, in fact, be required to give her testimony in person. He was quite hopeful, though, that it would go well. Amelia Bones, as the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, would be presiding. She was sympathetic, but quite firm that all the forms must be observed.

"She feels that it will carry more weight with the parents and Board if he is acquitted in a public trial rather than a private hearing. That is undoubtedly true, but I am afraid it will be hard for you," Dumbledore told Rowan.

She reassured him that she would be up to it. Dumbledore sighed and thanked her again.

Despite Dumbledore's assurances, Rowan spent a worry-filled Christmas at Hogwarts. There were bright moments, though; she enjoyed opening the gifts she found at the foot of her bed on Christmas morning. From her mother she received her first grown witch's gown, to wear for job interviews in the spring. It was an elegant thing of wool crepe, high at the throat and long sleeved. The skirt just skimmed her toes and swept nicely behind her. It was Ravenclaw blue and trimmed with black grosgrain ribbon.

There was a lovely hooded robe to wear over it, a darker blue than the dress and lined in black. It was hard for kids with Muggle parents to fit in sometimes, but her mom was really proud of having a witch for a daughter, and pretty resourceful. She had taken Rowan's measurements over the summer on the pretext of knitting her a sweater, then secretly gotten Ariadne's mother to take her shopping in Diagon Alley. Ariadne had owed her mother notes on what Rowan had looked at and admired when they had gone shopping in Hogsmeade. It was a lovely gift and a complete surprise.

From Ariadne, she received a small pot of honking daffodils. They set up a delighted trumpeting as soon as she freed them from their paper wrapping. The silly things were so cheerful, Rowan couldn't help laughing. She knew some people thought they weren't nice but Ariadne had remembered they were her favorite flower.

True to his word, she had an owl from Edgar, wishing her a Happy Christmas. He'd had the tact not to send a gift, which she appreciated. She felt the parchment note in her fingers. It was a very nice quality, an even, soft white, and buttery smooth. It must have come from his family's farm.

Rowan set the daffodils in the window, then sat at her desk and cut a fresh point to her quill with her penknife. She would owl a note to her mother right away to thank her.

The Christmas feast she had been looking forward to was deeply marred for her by Snape's absence, although she was clearly the only one among the students present who felt that way. She pulled a cracker with a Hufflepuff girl sitting next to her and gamely wore her jester's hat for the rest of the evening. Minerva McGonagall didn't get nearly as tipsy as rumor had suggested she might. She looked distinctly out of sorts and toyed with her fork, pushing her plum pudding around the plate. Rowan suspected she was also worrying about Professor Snape.

After Christmas the reports started coming in: Voldemort and his Death Eaters had gone on a killing spree. Mixed Muggle/Wizard households were the favored targets. The Dark Mark appeared in the sky over burning homes. The staff and the few students at school huddled over copies of the *Daily Prophet* at breakfast. Clearly the Dark Lord was angry about something, but no one (at least no one on the staff of the Prophet) had any idea why. Rowan was relieved to have an owl from her mother, who had a subscription and knew Rowan would be worried.

The next few days she filled with the studies which had been her reason to stay over the holidays in the first place. She had several N.E.W.T. exams coming in the spring, and if she wanted that job in the Department of Mysteries, she had better do well on all of them. Hard work kept her mind busy and safely away from memory lane, which was currently a very rocky road.

On the morning of the trial, Rowan rose early and dressed carefully. She pulled the new dress she had gotten from her mother for Christmas out of the closet. Rowan was afraid she would be expected to wear her Hogwarts robes, but the last thing she wanted today was to look like a schoolchild. Making her decision, she donned the new garment, pinned her hair up neatly at the back of her head and applied some subtle make-up. *There*, she thought, surveying herself in the glass. She looked at least a little older and hopefully respectable.

In Dumbledore's office, a little later, Rowan gave a last twitch to straighten her gown and pulled the hood of her cloak carefully over her head to shield her from the curious. Dumbledore went into the fireplace and through the Floo first, then helped Rowan out of one among the great bank of fireplaces at the Ministry of Magic at the other end. There were guards nervously twiddling wands and scrutinizing everyone going in and out of the Floo network.

Dumbledore escorted her to the Security Desk to have their wands registered. There was a dark-haired young lady in line ahead of Rowan, who she thought she recognized. Sarah something, she thought, a Gryffindor. Left Hogwarts only last year, but Rowan had a hard time remembering her. She felt a strong dislike for the other girl, but couldn't for the life of her figure out why. Rowan was glad when Sarah accepted her wand back and headed off about her own business.

When their wand registration was completed, Dumbledore led Rowan to a lift, which they took down to the bottom level. From there, they descended further down some stone steps through a corridor and into a dungeon courtroom which seemed designed to make Professor Snape feel quite at home.

Dumbledore led Rowan to a seat in the middle of the second row of benches where she sat down next to him. When everyone was assembled, two guards, with wands at the ready, brought in Snape. Thankfully, there were no longer any Dementors under Ministry control, so the guards were otherwise ordinary, burly-looking wizards.

Snape was brought to the chair that was the focus of the room. When he sank into it, the chains that hung from it wound themselves around his arms and legs, binding him to the chair. His clothes looked slept-in, and his hair was lankier even than usual. He kept his eyes down, and Rowan could not see if he had looked around or noticed where they were sitting.

The trial began, and Madam Bones read the charges. Alastor Moody and Nymphadora Tonks were called as witnesses for the prosecution. They described the scene they had encountered upon their arrival. Rowan bound and with her robes askew; Snape disheveled and bloodstained, holding a vial containing a small amount of dark fluid.

"What happened to the vial?" Madam Bones asked.

"Snape dropped it when we grabbed him," Moody answered, "but Dumbledore's phoenix snagged it and brought it back."

"Was it in fact 'reft virgin's blood'?"

"We didn't test it. Dumbledore had me destroy it for the girl's safety. It's too dangerous a thing to have around."

"That is a pity, but Professor Dumbledore is correct. If that is what it was, it would have been a very powerful link to Miss Bourne," Madam Bones acknowledged.

Professor Snape's statement on what had occurred was then read to the court

it went pretty much as Dumbledore had described to Rowan in his office. As he had told her to expect, Professor Snape asserted that he had been placed under an Imperius Curse and that everything had happened against his will. Snape kept his face lowered, shielded by black, stringy locks throughout the reading. If the members of the court hoped to ascertain the truth of the matter from his expression, they were in for a disappointment.

Albus Dumbledore was then called and gave his statement. He attested that Professor Snape was no servant of Voldemort, and that he would never harm a student unless he were forced to.

Madam Bones then called Rowan Bourne to testify. She had already taken Rowan's statement so she spared her a lengthy repetition of it, and only asked her to confirm the facts of the matter.

"You are over seventeen years old, legally of age?"

"I turned eighteen in November, Madam Bones."

"And you state, for the record, that you willingly had sexual relations with the accused?"

Rowan kept her eyes fixed on Madam Bones' face, and off of Snape's. She would never be able to look him in the eye again after this.

Chin up, Bourne. "That's right."

"In that case, the charge of rape must be dismissed. So ruled." At this she banged the gavel, and the court clerk made notations and shuffled through his documents while the courtroom erupted into startled murmuring. Madam Bones silenced the talkers with a sharp look around the room and addressed Dumbledore:

"Professor Dumbledore, I understand you wish also to contest the charge of Dark Wizardry?"

Now Dumbledore stood and spoke up. "Yes, Madam Bones."

Rowan sat gratefully back down. Although she had kept her voice and demeanor cool and steady when it was necessary, now that the crisis had past, her face was bright pink and she was deeply embarrassed. She kept her eyes firmly fixed on her toes, utterly unable to look Snape in the face.

"Please state your reasons."

"Professor Snape is charged with brewing Aversion Serum. The key ingredient is 'reft virgin's blood'. The recipe clearly specifies that the 'donor' must be raped. Since, as Miss Bourne has made plain, there was no rape, her blood did not meet the requirement."

Now the murmuring in the courtroom rose to such a level that Dumbledore had to raise his voice to be heard clearly over it.

"Since the key ingredient was invalid, Professor Snape did not engage in Dark Wizardry. As evidence, I offer that the potion singularly failed to work. I assure you, I felt not the slightest desire to attack my friends. Aurors Moody and Tonks both told me afterwards that they also were not affected in any way."

Amelia asked them to confirm Dumbledore's assertion, which they did.

Madam Bones conferred with her peers; the discussion appeared energetic, but brief, after which she returned to her stand and gave the court's decision:

"It would appear that Professor Dumbledore's assessment is correct. There was no reft virgin's blood, and no Aversion Serum brewed. Therefore the charge of Dark Wizardry is dismissed. The prisoner, Severus Snape, is free to go."

At that the chains unwound themselves from Snape's arms and legs and slid to the floor. He stood and looked around, his gaze settled on Rowan with an utterly uninterpretable look before he turned and was escorted out the door.

Dumbledore stood. "Madam Bones, I have a request of the court."

Amelia Bones turned calmly to Dumbledore, as if she had expected this too. "What is your request?"

"Although Miss Bourne is of age, she is still a student. In order for her to complete her studies in peace, I ask that the records of this session be sealed till the end of term."

"Very well, Professor Dumbledore. So ordered."

Dumbledore gave his hand to Rowan to stand; she pulled the hood of her cloak carefully over her hair to shield the sides of her face and to offer her some privacy from the frankly speculative glances aimed at her from around the room. She followed Dumbledore past the clumps of excitedly chattering wizards and witches, out of the courtroom and back to the big Ministry transport Floo stations.

Rowan and Dumbledore emerged from the fireplace in Dumbledore's office. Minerva McGonagall had clearly been anxiously waiting there for their return, along with her Head of House, Professor Flitwick. McGonagall looked at Dumbledore questioningly. "Well, Albus?"

Dumbledore smiled his answer. "The charges have been dropped, and the records sealed till the end of the term."

Minerva let out a long breath and relaxed her stiff posture. "I'm beginning to think you can work miracles, Albus."

"In this case, I had very little to do with it, Minerva. Now, if you will excuse me, I will return to the Ministry. I would like to see Severus back to his rooms. The lemon drops are on the desk there if you need them." Dumbledore then took a handful of Floo powder and exited back through the fireplace.

Minerva McGonagall turned to Rowan and said earnestly, "I am very grateful that our Potions master is returned to us safely. I wouldn't have imagined it possible. I believe I really must have a word with that hat," she said, glancing sharply at the specified object. "You should have been sorted into Gryffindor."

"Nonsense!" asserted the Sorting Hat. "Of course she is brave, but she is more than that. She was clever enough to outsmart Voldemort. I stand by my decision."

Minerva snorted and turned back to Rowan. "That hat never will admit a mistake. I don't know why I bother."

Rowan blushed at the praise and apologized, with a glance at Flitwick, for being happy as a Ravenclaw.

"Well, my dear, I suppose that is just as well, seeing as you've been one for nearly seven years, and we're hardly going to re-sort you now."

Now that the trial was over, Rowan was looking forward to things getting back to normal. She wasn't at all used to being a public spectacle and had been very uncomfortable. She wondered how things were going to be when the rest of the students returned and classes resumed.

"Professor McGonagall ..."

"Yes, Miss Bourne?"

"What is going to happen now, I mean, the rest of the year?"

"Well, Professor Dumbledore said that the record would be sealed till the end of the term. That should allow you to complete your studies. The staff will, of course, know what happened, but it will be kept in the strictest confidence."

"What about Potions class?"

Professor Flitwick stepped forward to answer her. "That mostly depends on you, Miss Bourne," he squeaked. "If you wish to drop Potions that is entirely understandable. We will simply delete from your record that you began the class."

"But I'm going to need my Potions N.E.W.T., and I don't want to drop the class."

"I did say you were brave." Minerva smiled at Rowan.

Flitwick explained that Professor Dumbledore had conferred with Minerva and himself on how to handle the problem. "We have determined that if you wish to complete the course, and if Professor Snape concurs, we will let your N.E.W.T. result comprise your final grade. Since the test is given by outside examiners, there will be no excuse for anyone to question the validity of your grade."

Rowan thought that was a good solution, and a fair one. Professor Flitwick then added: "I believe Professor Snape will wish to speak with you as soon as possible after his return. You and he will have to work out how you will handle yourselves for the rest of the year, and after, when the records are released and the news breaks."

"Oh, my." Rowan realized that the summer was going to be a very difficult time; neither she nor Professor Snape was likely to enjoy the coming attention. "I think I will have one of those lemon drops now," Rowan said faintly, taking one from the dish Professor McGonagall held out to her.

Sucking on her lemon drop, Rowan went back to her room in the Ravenclaw dormitory. The daffodils greeted her return with a series of happy honks. Rowan laughed and brought them some water. She sat at the desk and wrote a note to Ariadne, thanking her again for the daffodils and telling her how boring it was at school with everyone gone. She somehow neglected to mention any of the recent events. Rowan didn't think she would tell anyone, ever. Of course, everyone would know in a few months, but maybe by then she could stand it. She was grateful for the reprieve, at least.

She also finally returned Edgar's note with a polite thank-you and a hope that his holiday was going well and was more fun than hers. She didn't think she'd ever written a sincerer word.

Author's Notes: Some of you may have recognized a visitor from "A Merciless Affection" at the Ministry (blows kisses to Verity Brown). Just so you know, this is the Sarah Darkglass of Rowan's world, to whom the events of AMA have not happened and a darn good thing from Rowan's point of view!

The Conversation With Snape

Chapter 12 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Author's Notes: Another chapter my charming beta Verity has endured endless versions of. Enjoy!

Chapter 12: The Conversation With Snape

The next morning, after breakfast, Rowan resolved to see Professor Snape. She picked up the notes she had written the evening before and the pot of daffodils and went down the stairs to the common room and out the Ravenclaw portrait door. First she went to the owlery to post her letters. She put a couple of Owl Treats in her pocket; it was cold out and they deserved a reward beforehand, as well as whatever the recipients gave them.

After sending off the second owl, Rowan mapped out her course as she descended down the stairs. The daffodils would have to go to the greenhouse they'd been lonely all alone in her dorm room, and there wasn't nearly enough sunlight for them coming through the tower windows this time of year.

First, though, the dungeon. Snape was probably expecting her, since she'd been told to see him. Best get that over with before she thought about it too much more. Rowan clutched her flowerpot as she descended the seemingly endless flights of steps to the dungeons.

Rowan knocked at Snape's office door. At his sharp "Come in," she opened it and glided silently to stand in front of his desk. There was a small carpet to muffle the sound of footsteps and keep the feet warm, and an unlit fireplace to her left. On the desk in front of her, there was a small sheaf of official-looking parchments and a stack of end-of-term Potions exams and essays. Of course, he wouldn't have been able to grade anything since the end of term. He must be behind on his work.

Snape considered her silently for a long moment, then gestured with his wand to the door behind her, which shut and locked with a 'snick.' He then stood and walked around the desk to stand at her side, facing the empty fireplace. Suddenly apprehensive, Rowan put the pot down on the edge of the desk and turned to face him.

He looked better than he had the day before washed and in fresh clothes. He had never looked so lank and unkempt before as he had that morning at the Ministry, no matter what the students liked to say about his greasiness.

He glared one of his most quelling glares and loomed over her. "It was not necessary for you to lie to save me."

Rowan, to her surprise, found that his near proximity still had the same effect on her as before. Her heart beat a little faster, and her palms felt damp. She tried to cover her confusion with a composed manner.

"No, it wasn't."

Snape searched her face, but Rowan had no idea what he was looking for or if he found it. His own features were purely impassive. When he continued, his voice was icy cold and exceedingly formal.

"Miss Bourne, when I was taken on the night of the Solstice, I believed that I had irrevocably forfeited my freedom, my home, and my good name. Through your offices, all these have been returned to me. Therefore, they are yours, if you wish them."

Rowan rocked back on her heels in shock. This was so far from what she had expected to hear not that she had had a clue what to expect that she was momentarily speechless. His tone was so strange, completely at odds with the apparent meaning of his words, that Rowan wondered if she had heard him correctly.

"What are you saying?" she asked carefully.

"I am offering you marriage, Miss Bourne," Snape replied coldly, as if explaining something utterly self-evident to a first year.

So she had heard him right, but it made no sense. Was this some Wizarding thing he'd taken her virginity so now he had to marry her?

"Why? Because you think you owe it to me?"

"Because, I think it will be necessary," Snape answered in the same icy tone.

Did he think she was pregnant? That would explain it, but you'd think he'd have waited to find out, Rowan thought. "There's no baby, Professor. Madam Pomfrey already checked."

"I did know that. However, there are other considerations besides pregnancy. I suggest you take some time to consider this carefully before you make a decision," Snape said sharply.

What on earth was he getting at? Rowan wondered. And why was he in such a snit about it? It wasn't like any of this had been her fault.

"Meanwhile," Snape continued, "you and I will behave towards each other precisely as before this happened. Do you understand?"

Well, that went without saying; there were still months of classes before the end of the year. "Of course," Rowan answered.

He went on in his most silkily authoritative voice: "You will speak of this to no one. I will not have my authority in class disrupted by the sort of juvenile remarks and pranks which would inevitably arise if the facts were generally known. If you do not comport yourself with the utmost discretion, I will be forced to drop you from my class."

Rowan didn't care for his tone, but since he was right, there was no sense arguing. "I understand."

"See that you do."

Rowan knew when she had been dismissed. There didn't seem much point to hanging around here. She picked up her pot from the desk beside her and turned towards the door.

The daffodils had been watching this entire exchange with great interest, their bright yellow trumpets turning from Snape to Rowan in turn. They did not appear to care for Snape's treatment of Rowan in the slightest. Three of them honked rudely and turned to give Snape the cold leaf, while the fourth blew him a long raspberry over Rowan's elbow.

Snape brushed orange pollen off his black wool coat with a look of revulsion while Rowan departed with what dignity she could muster under the circumstances.

Rowan stepped into the empty dungeon hallway and heard the door snick shut behind her. She had meant to go to the greenhouse next, but right now she really wanted to speak to Professor Dumbledore. Rowan suspected there was something she wasn't understanding, and she was sure he could clear it up. Then maybe she could figure out what that most bizarre proposal meant.

"Sit down, Miss Bourne. Have a lemon drop."

Rowan accepted a candy and sat in the squashy armchair in front of the fireplace where Dumbledore led her. He sat down opposite and listened patiently as she explained what had transpired in her meeting with Professor Snape. When she had finished, he sighed deeply and tried to explain.

"I fear, Miss Bourne, that you did not realize how much difficulty your gallant defense of my Potions master will bring you when the court records are unsealed. This is entirely my own fault. I knew you were from a Muggle household, but I forgot what that would mean. I failed to comprehend how little experience you would have with Wizarding society outside of Hogwarts."

"I don't understand, Professor."

"I know, you could not have understood, and there is the source of the problem. You see, the Wizarding world is small, insular, compared to the Muggle world, Miss Bourne. Many of our ways have remained unchanged or hardly changed since the Separation. There are certain conventions to which young witches are expected to adhere, and if they do not, the consequences can be ... uncomfortable."

Now Rowan started to feel alarmed. "What sort of consequences?"

There was a pause as Dumbledore tried to find a way of explaining that would be meaningful to her.

"May I ask, what were you planning to do after leaving school?"

"I'm planning to apply for an internship in the Department of Mysteries; I'm hoping to be a researcher there."

"I must warn you, Miss Bourne, that unless you are married, your application will certainly be rejected."

"What? That's ridiculous. On what grounds?"

"The Ministry has a moral standard which it feels all its employees must uphold. The details of Professor Snape's trial are sealed till the end of the school year, but since the Wizengamot is filled largely with Ministry staff members, it is highly unlikely that your story is not known. Even if it remained a secret and your application were to be accepted, it would be withdrawn when the records become public."

"You can't be serious! I could hardly have helped what happened."

"I know you are not at fault, but that has little bearing on the matter. What our society will not excuse is your statement before the Wizengamot. You must pardon me for being so blunt, but it is very necessary for you to understand. Nice young witches do not speak about sex in public. They definitely do not announce that they willingly had sex they may do so, but they never, ever talk about it."

Rowan thought she might be ill. Even the lemon drop seemed like it might have been a bad idea. "So, what you are saying is that my reputation is ruined?"

"Yes, entirely." Dumbledore sighed.

"I never thought I'd hear that phrase this side of a Regency novel."

"In many ways, Miss Bourne, Wizarding society is still living in the Regency period. I believe the Muggles have the better of us in this, but my personal belief does not change your situation."

"And this is why Professor Snape offered to marry me?" Rowan asked sharply. "Did you make him do it?"

"It is why I am very glad he has done so, although I was certain he would. If it aids your peace of mind, I did not speak to him about it."

"And if I do marry him, will that fix the scandal?"

"It would shorten its duration to something of a nine-day wonder. If you remained at Hogwarts for a further year after leaving school, you could apply for the Ministry position in the following year. By that time the entire thing would have blown over."

"I really find that extremely hard to credit."

"There is also the small matter that anyone who insulted you would have to deal with your husband." Dumbledore managed a twinkle.

Now *that* she could believe. Rowan enjoyed the highly entertaining image briefly before returning to reality. "This is going to take me a while to think through," she replied carefully.

"Of course, that is entirely understandable. Still, if you do choose to marry Severus, I would recommend you do so before the records are unsealed. When you have decided, please let me know. You will need some assistance with the arrangements," Dumbledore said kindly.

Rowan looked around the office; the portraits of the former headmasters weren't even pretending not to listen. They all watched her and Albus avidly, as if this were a soap opera to which they were all addicted.

Rowan thanked Dumbledore and left his office, still holding the flower pot. Thankfully the daffodils had been somewhat awed by the headmaster, or at least had had the tact to keep quiet for once.

So much had happened, she didn't know where to even begin thinking about it. Numbly, she carried the pot of daffodils to the greenhouse. She placed them next to Professor Sprout's specimens and left a note on the pot requesting to be able to keep them there till spring. The house-elves would see they were watered and fed along with all the other plants that weren't special projects of Professor Sprout or the advanced students. She left them hooting merrily with their new friends and went deeper into the greenhouses.

Rowan felt a need for someplace peaceful, where she could sit undisturbed and think about what Dumbledore had told her. If it had been warmer, she would have gone for a walk in the gardens. The dead of winter in Scotland made that a very uninviting prospect, so when she was blue, she went for the next best thing.

Hogwarts had several greenhouses; some of them were used for student lab projects, others for Professor Sprout's research. Several were dedicated to Hogwarts' collection of rare and interesting plants, which were available for study. One row of these greenhouses had been arranged so that each replicated a particular environment. There was the Desert house, the Cool Temperate house, the Tropical house, and the Hydrophyte house. This is where Rowan headed, slipping through several other houses on the route there. She carefully skirted the pots of Fanged Geraniums on her way past. The last time she had come here, she had harvested some leaves for one of her potions and gotten several painful nips for her trouble.

Finally she reached her favorite spot, the Hydrophyte house. This was arranged for the comfort of the water-loving plants which lived in it. Besides the mundane rice, papyrus, and water lilies, there were quite a few specimens she had studied earlier in *Magical Properties of Swamp Plants*. Here there was a small bench facing a filtered, circulating tank disguised as a little waterfall and stream with a patch of gillyweed thriving in the stagnant corner. The bench was carefully placed to be out of reach of anything with fangs, tentacles, or which squirted poison. There was a small plaque announcing that the bench was dedicated to the memory of a student who hadn't heeded the warning sign about the Devil's Snare.

The air was warm and moist in this room, and the glass roof let in what natural sunlight was still available. Here Rowan sat and contemplated the mess she was now in.

What, by Merlin's toenails, had she done to deserve to be in this predicament? As far as she could tell, nothing. She had been kidnapped and at least technically raped, then had to expose her feelings in public. She could have kept her mouth shut and let Snape go to Azkaban. If anyone was at fault, it was him. She understood what had compelled him, but if he hadn't been sneaking around, spying on Voldemort, playing a dual role, she wouldn't have been grabbed, and he wouldn't have been forced to make that choice.

Rowan felt angry and betrayed. She wanted to blame Snape, but an inner voice, a suspiciously snarky one, reminded her where the real blame lay. Voldemort had been responsible for all of it. It was his evil mind that set the whole plan in motion. Honest folk were never safe when a Dark Lord was rising in power, growing in audacity as his reach spread.

She took a deep breath of the warm, humid air, then let it out with a sigh and sat staring into the water of the artificial pond. Vegetative tentacles swayed in the slow flow of the water. The Devil's Snare twitched longingly in her direction, but it was kept well pruned and the bench was safely out of reach.

She went over her conversation with Professor Snape in her mind. That had seemed utterly unreal, but in light of Professor Dumbledore's explanation, it made more sense. Both his proposal and his attitude. He probably didn't like being forced to marry her either. That was a galling notion. Rowan squirmed uncomfortably. There had been a moment, right before those Death Eaters came, when she thought he might actually like her, find her attractive. Her heart had been in her throat as their fingers had touched, and she'd been on the verge of saying something anything to find out how he felt.

Now she had to face the unpleasant notion that, while he might have been attracted to her, marriage was not likely on his mind. Well, honestly, it hadn't been on hers either. That was supposed to be for well into the future, after she'd had a chance for a little fun.

Now she wasn't even sure about the fun part. She had been surprised, no, shocked, to realize she was still attracted to him when he had stood so close to her in his office. The notion of following through on that attraction was deeply disturbing now. There was so much baggage of awful memory and dismal emotion associated, could she ever break loose from it?

What was she going to do? Live in the Wizarding world as a pariah? What would she live on if she couldn't get a decent job? Of course, since she was Muggle-born, she had a place in that world. She could go home after school and live with her mother. What would she do there, though? She hadn't been home except for summers and Christmases since she was eleven years old. As far as the Muggle world was concerned, she didn't have anything better than a primary-school education. She couldn't earn her keep as a Muggle any better than she could in the Wizarding world.

No, that decision, at least, had been made a long time ago. A witch she was, and a witch she would remain.

Well, then, what were her choices? Dumbledore had made it abundantly clear she had to marry. The obvious candidate, and her only current offer, was Professor Snape, but did it have to be him? What if she encouraged Edgar? He liked her; could he be persuaded to marry her by the end of the school year? It seemed entirely possible. From what she had seen so far, it appeared that wizards and witches generally married younger than Muggles.

Rowan found she had a hard time working up any enthusiasm for this prospect. That told its own story; Rowan gave up the idea.

What if she accepted Snape's offer? Rowan tried to imagine it now what would life be like as Mrs. Snape? She supposed she'd continue to live at the castle during the school year. Did he have a home anywhere else?

What about children? Would he want them? She tried to imagine Severus Snape cuddling a soggy, gurgling baby, but the picture simply refused to coalesce in her mind. Would he not want to have any? Now there was a point that would have to be agreed on, or there could be no marriage, regardless of the consequences to herself.

The subject of marriage and children inevitably brought her back to the more physical aspects of marriage, and her only experience of it, the night of the Solstice. Rowan had been diligently avoiding thinking too much about it, but now she really had to face it.

That had hurt. A lot, although she hadn't made much fuss. There hadn't seemed much point, and she hadn't wanted to give them the satisfaction. It was good, knowing she had kept that from them.

It was really good knowing she'd ruined the potion. She'd been bound, helpless, violated, utterly humiliated. Still she'd set the Dark Lord back on his arse.

There it was, she could be at peace with herself over that at least. She hadn't done anything to make it happen, and she hadn't been helpless, no matter what. Could she be at peace with Snape and the choice he had made? Maybe, in time. He was working to defeat Voldemort, and that was a goal to which she gave her wholehearted approval. Was that enough? Could they have a real marriage? Rowan wasn't sure. If they didn't, she was going to be pretty stuck. So much for happily ever after. Fortunately, she didn't have to decide today.

Author's Notes: Rowan's favorite thinking spot bears a strong resemblance to mine when I was in college.

An Agreement Is Reached

Chapter 13 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 13: An Agreement Is Reached

Snape sat in front of his desk far into the evening. To his left was a pile of parchment, all graded and suitably endowed with the benefit of his objective, professional opinion in red ink. He'd worked all day at that task, hoping to take his mind off of his situation regarding Miss Bourne. Unfortunately, he'd finished the last of them over dinner, which he'd eaten at his desk. Now there was nothing between himself and his conscience except a bottle of firewhisky and whatever mindless task he could find for his hands. Currently he was playing tiddlywinks with a small pile of dried cockroaches poured from the jar on a nearby shelf, making them jump into the empty shot glass.

Plink! A shiny, brown bug jumped into the glass.

No matter what Dumbledore had convinced her to say at the trial, he'd raped a student. Not just any student, but the only one about whom he gave a damn what she thought of him. Whatever Miss Bourne's opinion of him had been before, right now it was undoubtedly quite low. *Plink!*

There were no women in his life, and it had been a long time since there had been. A very long time. No matter how much he had abhorred what he must do to her, Severus' body had been a more than willing participant. He tried to erase the memory of her smooth, tight bum bent over that table, but failed dismally. Even the memory was making him shift uncomfortably in his chair.

With a growl he threw the shot glass into the fireplace where it exploded into tiny shards, increasing the already substantial pile of glass on the hearth. Taking his wand off the desk, he snarled a spell and transfigured another cockroach, then filled the resultant shot glass with more firewhisky.

Severus leaned his head forwards onto the heels of his hands, elbows propped on the desk, and stared into the amber liquid, mesmerized by the firelight refracting from its surface.

What was he going to do if Rowan accepted him? He doubted she'd be able to stand his touch, and it was going to make him wild having her always near. What, in all the nameless levels of Hell, had she been thinking to make up such a story and trap him into this? She'd looked awfully collected in that blue gown. More mature, pretty sexy actually. Clearly that witch knew exactly what she was about. What a pity that he, Severus, had been left entirely in the dark.

What did she want him to marry her for anyway? For his sterling character and sunny disposition? Or maybe it was his unequalled skill in the bedroom, now that she'd had a sample. Surely she didn't think he was gentry? He tossed back the shot of firewhisky, slammed the empty glass back on the table and stared back into the flames.

What are you whinging about anyway, Severus? It's not as if lovely young women are lining up for a chance to win your heart and your hand. Why not enjoy the situation she snared you into? *Plink.*

What are you whinging about anyway, Severus? It's not as if lovely young women are lining up for a chance to win your heart and your hand. Why not enjoy the situation she snared you into? *Plink.*

Face it, idiot, if it weren't for her, you'd be pacing a cell in Azkaban right now, wondering if it's really possible for piss to freeze in mid-air. Don't even think of blaming any of this on her. You owe her everything, and all she's had from you is pain and humiliation. Whether she planned this or not, being married to you is not going to be good for her. She'll be lucky if she survives with her sanity intact.

You are going to do the honorable thing. You are going to give her the protection of your name. You are going to treat her with every courtesy and consideration. You aren't going to think a lascivious thought in her presence. Right. And dragons shit snowballs. Crash! The glass joined its fellows in shards on the hearth.

Rowan didn't see Professor Snape in the Great Hall at either lunch or dinner after their interview. This was probably a good thing, seeing as how the remaining students and the staff were all sitting in close proximity now. She really didn't think she was ready to handle seeing him publicly and having to pretend that everything was normal.

After dinner, Rowan climbed the stairs, dodging one that tried to switch her to the wrong tower, and answered the problem to enter her dormitory. She had the common

room to herself, so she sat in the comfiest chair in front of the fireplace, put her feet up on a needlepoint-covered footstool and watched the fire. She had a notion that this would be a fine time to take up drinking, but she doubted the house-elves would bring her anything stronger than butterbeer, so what was the point?

She stared, mesmerized by the dancing flames. She kept thinking she saw dark eyes staring bleakly back at her. She wished she could think of something dignified to say the next time she saw Snape.

Sometime in the middle of the night, she opened her eyes on darkness; she had fallen asleep in front of the fire, which had burned down to red embers. The room had gotten cold and her temperature had dropped while she slept. She shivered all the way up to her room and into bed. She didn't feel warm again until she'd pulled the curtains closed and huddled under all her blankets. Finally, she drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

Snape continued to avoid meals in the dining room for the next several days; Rowan didn't see him at all. A part of her was relieved, but another part became increasingly nervous. The longer it was put off, the harder it was going to be to face him. She really didn't want her next sight of him to be her first Potions class after school resumed. She didn't think she'd be able to cope with that without some practice.

Rowan decided to suck up her courage and go see him again. There was also something very important to ask him that she needed to know before she could make her decision.

She realized she had no idea where his private quarters were. If he was holed up there, she'd never find him. Rowan thought a bit. She'd look for him in the workroom first; if he wasn't there and didn't answer her knock, she'd send an owl. It seemed kind of silly to be sending owls from one part of the castle to another, but if he kept hiding, there wasn't much choice.

Fortunately, that level of initiative didn't turn out to be necessary. Snape was, in fact, in his workroom and the door was ajar. Rowan knocked on the doorframe out of politeness and entered at his acknowledgment. Snape was in the middle of preparing ingredients for something. He had a wooden cutting board set on the workbench and was mincing something purplish with fuzzy tentacles. Rowan wondered what it was; she thought she would recognize all the usual ingredients. She waited while he finished then scraped the minced bits into a waiting bowl, which he covered with a cloth. He washed his hands carefully in the sink, then cleaned the board and knife with a spell and put them away. When he was done, Snape ushered her into his office via the adjoining door.

Rowan turned to face him and took a deep breath before beginning, "I went to see Professor Dumbledore after," Rowan stumbled *after you proposed to me?* "after we spoke the other day."

"And?" Snape's impassive expression wasn't giving her any assistance.

"He explained to me how I got us in this predicament. I'm sorry, I had no idea that would happen."

Snape's lip curled and his expression darkened. In a chilling voice, he asked her, "You are trying to tell me, you had no idea what would come of a young witch making such a public statement? You weren't intending to force me to marry you?"

"Of course not!" Rowan cried, aghast.

Of course not, what a ridiculous notion that such a girl would be so desperate for you she'd maneuver like a Slytherin to have you. Snape's conscience sneered at him. He ignored it.

"I find that rather hard to believe; you presented quite the image of an assured young witch. One who knew precisely what she was doing."

"WHAT? You have the gall to accuse me After what happened ... what you DID!" Rowan flushed red and grew almost incoherent with rage.

Snape still wasn't on speaking terms with his conscience; it was making him feel far too guilty for his liking. He decided to stay on the offensive and gave her his best sneer. "If you really felt that way, you could have let me get sent to Azkaban. All it would have taken from you was silence."

"I bloody well SHOULD have! How can you stand there and even FACE me? You should have protected me; I should have been SAFE!" Rowan yelled at Snape until her fury passed to a range where there were simply no words to express it. She snatched a shot glass from his desk and hurled it at his head with all her strength. Snape flinched aside and it crashed into the stone wall behind him, exploding into a shower of fragments. Even more angry at having failed to hit him with the glass, Rowan launched herself, nails bared, at his face. She didn't bother with her wand; she couldn't have spoken a hex right now if her life depended on it. Snape caught her wrists above her head, pulled them down and pushed them around behind her back, winding his own arms around her in the process and holding her tightly against him.

Rowan went spare when she found she was trapped. She howled and writhed every way she could. Eventually her shrieks turned to hysterical sobbing, and she sagged against his chest, where he continued to hold her firmly. In time, her emotion wore itself out and she simply cried on his shoulder, which was conveniently at eye level. Finally, when she could speak again, she hung her head and sniffed. "I'm a Muggle, Professor. I mean, my family is. How could I have known?"

By this time, Snape's conscience had regained the upper hand. He regretted his harsh words and murmured gently in her ear, "I didn't realize that. Of course you couldn't have known. I should not have thought it of you." She sighed and he patted her awkwardly, increasingly aware that he should be stepping back a little, or she would soon be rather shocked. Rowan gave a great sniff; he took the opportunity to let go of her and hand her a plain linen handkerchief from his pocket. She blew her nose into it gratefully and offered it back.

"Keep it. Please." Rowan smiled wanly and stuffed it into a pocket of her robe.

While Rowan collected herself, Snape cleaned up the broken glass with a quick *Evanescio*. He did not try to repair it - it would have been restored to its original form of dried cockroach, and he did not care to see her reaction to that.

Conscience firmly in charge and libido kept under admirable restraint, Snape spoke to Rowan in a much gentler tone, "I think, Miss Bourne, that I did not make myself fully clear the other day. I am offering you the protection of my name. It is not necessary for you to cohabit with me or to engage in any other activities usual to the married state in order to have that protection."

Rowan tried to read Snape's expression but found herself unequal to the task.

"Let me get this straight," she said slowly and carefully. "You are offering to marry me, live apart, and never touch me again?"

"Essentially, yes." *No!*

Rowan was silent a long moment. Why did that idea make her so sad? Was it only because as long as she was married to him she wouldn't be able to have another relationship, a loving one, or was there something else?

"There is something I need to know first."

Snape looked at her and answered cautiously. "I will answer, if I can, but be very careful what you ask."

Rowan guessed he was referring to his past. "No, not about that."

"What then?"

"I want to know if you want children. Or rather, if you definitely don't want them."

"I never imagined I would have the opportunity, so I haven't thought about it much. I take it this means you do want them?"

"Yes."

Snape considered his reply carefully, while trying to ignore the part of him that was dancing with glee. *Yes! She'll have to let me into her bed for that!*

"Right now, while the Dark Lord lives, it would be too dangerous. Any child of mine would be a lever, a pawn. Worse, the blood of a child of my body would have certain properties" Rowan gasped, horrified at the implication, but Snape continued quietly:

"Later though, if he is defeated, children would be welcome. Is this acceptable to you?"

Rowan was startled, he almost looked ... hopeful. "I can live with that."

"Is that all that you wished to know?"

"For now." Rowan smiled.

"Are we agreed then? You will wed me?"

"Yes."

Snape let out his breath with a sigh. "I will speak to Albus then. We should have the ceremony right after Leaving. Before the news is published."

"All right." Rowan felt awkward and foolish; this should have been a tender moment, but the circumstances really didn't qualify. She murmured a goodbye and slipped out the door and crept quietly out of the dungeons.

Author's Notes: Greetings to readers and especially reviewers! This is my favorite chapter so far; hope you liked it too. We'll have a couple more mostly quiet ones to let things unwind a bit. As ever, many thanks to Verity Brown for being my favorite (ok, only) beta.

Happy Birthday, Professor Snape

Chapter 14 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: I haven't mentioned it lately, but nothing has changed. I still don't own the Harry Potter world. What a pity.

Chapter 14: Happy Birthday, Professor Snape

Rowan found that, after things had been settled between them, she saw Snape at mealtimes fairly regularly for the rest of break. Without discussing it, they fell into the habit of sitting on the same side of the table, several seats apart, so they did not have to face each other. One morning, though, Snape was late to breakfast, and the only seat left was directly opposite Rowan and next to Dumbledore. He sat in it without comment and began picking at his breakfast. Rowan got the impression he was trying very hard to ignore the Headmaster, and that ignoring her was just a side effect.

Choosing his moment carefully, so that Snape had a mouthful of cinnamon bun, Dumbledore winked at Rowan and wished Snape a happy birthday. Rowan wasn't sure if she should say something, out of common politeness, or just act as if she hadn't heard. Judging by the way Snape was scowling at Dumbledore, she opted for the second plan and attacked her scrambled eggs with apparent single-mindedness while keeping her ears peeled for the ensuing conversation.

"Thank you," Snape replied sourly, after he had swallowed.

"Any plans for the day?" Dumbledore asked him cheerily.

"Yes. I plan to organize the classroom cupboards and recheck my lesson plans for the next term."

"Weren't you telling me the other day you needed to buy some supplies in Hogsmeade?"

"I did," Snape replied quellingly.

Dumbledore was not quelled. "It's going to be fine today. This time of year you shouldn't miss such an opportunity. I think it is supposed to storm tonight and over the weekend."

"Very. Well." Snape had a pretty good idea where the Headmaster was going with this, but short of jumping up from the table and stalking from the room, there was no way to avoid it. He stayed. He wouldn't make it away in time, and he hadn't finished his breakfast anyway.

"Fine. Fine. Excellent idea," Dumbledore commented as if Snape had made the suggestion. "You should bring Miss Bourne with you; I think she is the only N.E.W.T. potions student staying over break. It would be an opportunity for her if you allowed her to assist you."

Snape looked up to observe the young lady in question. He was just in time to see her eyes jump from his face back to her plate, and her ears turn pink.

"I will leave at one p.m. sharp. If you intend to accompany me, be at the front entrance at that time," Snape said to the top of Rowan's head.

Rowan nodded wordlessly and finished her breakfast as calmly as she could.

At one o'clock, Rowan was standing by the great door wearing her warmest cloak and robe and thickest socks under stout boots. She had a little money in her pocket in

case she saw something she wanted to buy in the village. She hoped she'd have a chance to go into Honeydukes. She felt a craving for something sweet, but she was getting awfully tired of lemon drops; the taste had bad associations for her now.

Snape came up the stair from the dungeon at one promptly. He acknowledged her presence by holding the great door for her, after which he strode swiftly down the path to Hogsmeade on his long legs leaving Rowan scrambling to keep up. So much for having a chance to get to know her intended!

There was a thin, hard layer of snow on the ground that crunched underfoot but muffled other sounds. The air was crisp and clear, the sun bright, but it did not provide much warmth. The lake was frozen, except for a spot in the middle where the squid had been breaking it up, so it could keep an eye on things, Rowan guessed.

When they reached the town, Snape ushered her in to The Hog's Head, which rather surprised her. She'd never dared to go inside before, so she hung at the back wall and tried to see through the darkness while wrinkling her nose at the smell of goats. Snape spoke a few minutes with the proprietor. Some money and a box with several corked bottles exchanged hands. Snape carried the box under one arm and opened the door for Rowan with the other. She glanced into the box on the way past. So this is where he got the fermented nanny-goat's milk they had used in sixth year.

Their next stop was Dervish and Banges. Snape had a list of items he needed, some for the school and some for himself. There were several bits of alchemical glassware on the list. Snape explained to Rowan why he preferred one maker or another for each piece, then showed her the best way to wrap them for transport as his order was boxed up. There was also a magical timepiece Snape used for managing various phases of potion preparations. He had left it here for repair the other day (the arrow had been permanently stuck on 'boil till cauldron melts'), but it was not yet ready. Mrs Dervish said her husband was working on it right now, and would they mind waiting?

Snape looked inquiringly at Rowan, who said that she would like to do some shopping of her own.

Rowan stepped out into the village street and went to Honeydukes. She stocked up on chocolate frogs, Fizzing Whizzbees and a few other things. Next she went in to Scrivenshaft's; she needed some fresh parchment. They carried 'Bracken's Best' "that must be Edgar's family", she thought. She bought a few rolls and some spare quills. When she went to the register, she saw a beautiful display of black swan quills. She looked at them admiringly. They were sleek, elegant and black, black, black. They made her think of Snape. She wondered if she dared; it seemed presumptuous to give him a gift, since he hadn't seemed to want anyone to know that it was his birthday. Still, they were going to be married, and she felt bad about the way she had torn up at him the other day. She bought a set of three and had them gift-wrapped in green paper.

On her way back to Dervish and Banges, Rowan looked up at the sky; it was getting dark, although still well before sunset, and the wind was picking up. It looked like Dumbledore hadn't been kidding about a storm coming in, and it was arriving sooner than predicted. She hurried inside to warn Professor Snape.

"It looks like that storm is coming in very soon. Is the clock ready?"

"No, not yet. I really must pick it up today; I am going to Diagon Alley tomorrow, and I need the clock back for the weekend."

Snape walked to the door and looked out. "Miss Bourne, some of the items I have purchased will not stand a wetting, and there are too many to keep them all dry under my cloak. Would you be so good as to take them back to the castle for me now? I will remain and bring the clock. Unfortunately, the clock is too delicate to take by Floo."

"You'll get soaked."

"I assure you, I will not melt."

"All right, then." Rowan took the packages, and bidding Mrs Dervish a good day, she hurried down the road back to the castle. She made it into the great door just moments before the sleet started falling. Snape would have locked all the dungeon rooms, so there was no way to drop off the packages. She took them with her to her dorm room and changed into more suitable indoor clothes. She peeked out the window. Ugh. No point in handing Snape the packages the second he walked in the door; he'd want a chance to dry off before she came barging in. With that notion, she put away her candy and other things and studied till dinnertime.

There was once again no sign of Snape at the dinner table, which wasn't a huge surprise. Rowan found her appetite keen after the walk in the cold air. She stuffed herself with beef stew and potatoes, then went back up to her dorm.

"He must be back by now", Rowan thought. She stowed the package with the feathers in an inside pocket of her robe, picked up the professor's packages and headed down to the dungeon. She realized, suddenly, that if he'd gotten wet, he'd have gone to his own rooms to change and might still be there. If he didn't happen to be in his workroom or office, she'd have to go back to the owl plan, although she doubted she could get one to fly out on a night like this even if it was only going to another part of the castle.

She reached the bottom of the steps and turned the corner to the hallway. There she saw a light coming from his office door. She knew he must be expecting her, since she had his packages, so she knocked and went in without waiting.

Rowan was quite startled to find him sitting before the fire, drinking firewhisky from a shot glass. For some reason she failed to comprehend, there was a pile of dried cockroaches on the desk next to the remains of a plate of dinner. He must have eaten here so he could warm before the fire, and he must have been waiting for her why else wasn't he in his rooms, which would surely be more comfortable?

"I have your packages."

"You can put them down on the desk."

Rowan walked over and put down Snape's items. She hesitated, unsure what to do now. She still had the package with the quills, but didn't know if she could give them to him now that she was here.

Snape looked at her inquiringly, clearly wondering why she hadn't just left.

"May I stay a little?" Rowan asked quietly.

"Whatever for?" Snape sounded startled.

"I thought maybe we could talk. I mean, once school starts, we won't be able to be alone together. Then we'll be married. That seems so strange. I don't know anything about you outside of class."

Snape was not drunk, he'd only had a little of the firewhisky to chase the chill from his icy soaking on the way back from Hogsmeade. Still, he was feeling just a little less reserved than usual, and the girl had a point. He stood and brought the other chair around from behind the desk so they were both in front of the fireplace.

"Sit."

Rowan complied. Snape looked at her speculatively, then transfigured another glass from one of the cockroaches on the table. He poured a small amount of firewhisky into it and handed it to Rowan. "You are if age, yes?" he asked her with, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes," Rowan said, taking the glass. *Ick. Still, it looks like a perfectly good glass. I always wondered what this stuff is like.* She took a small sip. "Oh my," she said appreciatively. It tasted like oak-wood, Madeira wine and smoke, and left a trail of fire down her throat that then curled around and warmed her stomach. She had another sip and smiled. "Thank you."

Snape sat down in the other chair with his glass and looked into the flames.

Gathering courage from the warm spot in her belly, Rowan reminded him she knew it was his birthday and asked his age.

Snape turned his eyes from the fire to the girl. He looked like he'd been expecting the question. "I will tell you, but only if you answer a question of mine in return."

Rowan had no clue what he might want to know, *would he ask about Edgar?* That was safe, there was nothing there. "All right."

"I'm 37. That is more than twice your age, in case you haven't figured that out." He grimaced and waited to see how she would react.

"That's not so bad, I mean, you are younger than I thought."

"You mean I look much older, don't you?"

Rowan went pink.

"Your turn now," Snape reminded her.

Rowan looked up at him and waited nervously for his question.

"Why did you lie at the trial, when you said you were willing?"

Rowan felt the bottom drop out of her stomach, and all the pleasant warmth went with it. She took another sip of the firewhisky while she thought. She hadn't expected that question. Still, she'd agreed, so she had to answer.

"I wasn't lying."

Snape stared probingly into her eyes. She was telling the truth, which could only mean she had not lied then. That was a revelation. Perhaps the potion's failure was not Bella's fault after all. She'd been punished for it, but that didn't bother Snape. Besides, Bella liked it, he thought to himself with a twisted smile.

There had been a few students, mostly Slytherins, but also the occasional Ravenclaw, who had attempted to barter 'favors' for better grades. He had never gotten the impression from any of them that they felt any real attraction for him, so it hadn't been particularly difficult refusing them. He'd usually lowered their grades and docked points out of spite.

A number of other Slytherin girls (and more than a couple of boys) had made passes that weren't quid pro quo. Slytherins, in general, were attracted to power, and Snape was a very powerful wizard. He declined those offers too, but didn't dock points for them. You might as well punish a snake for slithering.

This, Snape could sense, was different. What would have happened between them, if events had gone differently? *Really now, Severus, you're getting maudlin.* He closed the bottle and put his glass on the desk. *Just because a witch is willing doesn't mean she has anything more in mind than a spot of fun.*

"Should I take it you had something of a crush on me?"

Rowan bridled at that characterization of her feelings, but didn't feel up to arguing about it. She looked down into her glass in embarrassment and left his assertion unchallenged.

"But you weren't planning on marrying me."

"Truthfully, no." Rowan blushed hotly. Had she really *said* that? Rowan stared into the amber liquid remaining in her half-empty glass. Who needed Veritaserum, when you had this stuff? She put the glass down on the desk next to Snape's.

Snape's face was inscrutable. She hoped she hadn't offended him. He stood and took her hand and pulled her to rise. "I think you'd better go back to your room now."

Oh dear, she had offended him. And she'd forgotten the quills.

"Oh, I forgot something." Rowan reached into her robe for the package. "This is for you."

"A birthday present?" Snape lost his unreadable expression, his face clearly showed his surprise. He didn't seem displeased.

"Yes." She handed him the package. Snape opened it and took out the swan quills slowly. He didn't look like he hated them.

"Thank you. They are quite pleasing."

Rowan smiled, gratified.

"Still, you really should go." Snape took Rowan's hand again to lead her to the door. There was an awkward moment. She looked down at her toes; Snape breathed in the scent from her hair. He leaned down and kissed the top of her head, and, before she could react, gave her a shove out the door.

The next day, Rowan didn't see Snape at either breakfast or lunch. She remembered then, he had said he would go to Diagon Alley today. She was sorry she couldn't have gone along on that trip, but she supposed it would have been harder to make it look good. She spent the afternoon in the library; she had an Herbology paper due in February, this would give her an even better excuse to hang out in the nice, warm greenhouse.

In the late afternoon, Snape returned to the castle. After disposing of some purchases, he wrote down some instructions on a sheet of parchment and Floo-called the Headmaster's office. "Headmaster, a word with you, please?"

Dumbledore's voice answered from the green flames. "Of course, come right up." Snape stepped into the green flames and into Dumbledore's office.

"You went to Diagon Alley today for more supplies, is that right? Did everything go well?"

"Yes, Headmaster, I was able to satisfactorily complete all my errands. This is what I wished to speak to you about."

"Very well, Severus, what do you wish to discuss?"

"I visited Gringotts and added Miss Bourne's name to my account. I also saw my attorney and had a will drawn up naming her my beneficiary."

"I thought the wedding wasn't for several months; I never knew you to be so trusting." Dumbledore commented with an especially bright twinkle.

"It is entirely possible I will not live to see my wedding day," Snape replied. "If anything should happen to me before the end of the year, Miss Bourne will be even more in need of whatever I can offer her. I have no other family living to be discomfited by the change of arrangements, so there is no reason not to make them now."

"I am gratified you feel this way, Severus. It is only part of why I know I can rely on you in any circumstances."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Snape replied. "There is one more matter I wished to discuss."

"What is it?" Dumbledore saw Snape was really concerned and so did not tweak him for his seriousness.

"If anything should happen to me, I want your word she will be protected."

"You have it, Severus. I guarantee, I will see that she is safe."

"Thank you."

Next chapter: return of the plot and the rest of the students, as the holiday break comes to a close.

Classes Resume

Chapter 15 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Author's Notes: Thank you again, Verity!

Chapter 15: Classes Resume

It was Saturday night. Rowan sat in a window-seat in the Ravenclaw common room, dressed in a thick flannel nightgown and with a blanket drawn around her, watching the driving snow through the leaded glass. There was a fine view of the walk up to the great doors from this window, although right now Rowan couldn't see more than a few feet into the night. Earlier in the evening, before the storm blew in, she thought she had seen a figure, cloaked in black, headed down the path with brisk strides. Now she hoped that whoever it was, and she guessed who it might be, had gotten to wherever he was going safely ahead of the storm.

Rowan had kept busy during the holiday. She'd gotten a good leg up on studying and on some assignments due after the start of term. Generally, she enjoyed solitude, but there was a limit, and she had been getting lonely. Nothing else could explain her seeking Snape out for company yesterday!

She was glad everyone would be returning tomorrow. With a great yawn, Rowan clambered up the stairs and into her bed. Drawing the curtains closed to keep out the chill night, she snuggled down to sleep. Late in the night, she awakened to the feeling that she had had some awful dream, but could not recall any of it. Taking the blanket with her, she climbed out of bed and peeked out the window. The storm had passed. The moonlight that now shone through the broken clouds turned the castle, the frozen lake and the forest into a haunting faerie landscape. She saw a trodden path along the walk to the entrance of the castle. It would appear that whomever it was who had gone out earlier had returned safely. Oddly comforted, Rowan went back to sleep, not to waken again until daylight.

In Dumbledore's office, the headmaster was also wakeful, but he had not slept as he kept watch during the night. When he heard the staircase rising, he heaved a thankful sigh and stood from his chair to open the door for Severus. He was doubly grateful to see the man himself walking in on his own feet, not in any noticeable pain, and bearing no obvious marks.

"Severus, sit down. Is there anything you wish? I will send for tea."

"Thank you, Headmaster, tea would be appreciated."

Dumbledore signaled a house-elf and ordered tea and a variety of breads to be sent up. She was back in seconds, bearing a tray larger than herself, which Dumbledore took from her and set on a side table. Snape had meanwhile lowered himself gratefully into one of the squashy chairs and waited until they were again alone.

"I see you are well and whole still. I take it that the meeting went well?" Dumbledore asked as he poured out.

"Much better than I had feared. The Dark Lord knew, of course, what had happened at the trial. He asked me how it had come about."

"Did you tell him what we agreed?"

"More or less, yes. I told him that, in the moment when we reappeared at the castle, before you returned, I modified Miss Bourne's memory. I said that I caused her to believe that I had been put under the Imperius Curse by him. This led her to support the story I gave you, namely that Miss Bourne and myself were taken unawares by Wart and Boyle, and that I was operating under his control when I ravished Miss Bourne."

"And did he believe all that?" Dumbledore asked. His amused curiosity belied how very important it was that Voldemort accepted Snape's version of events. The fact that he had returned safely made the answer plain.

"He seemed skeptical, at first, that you should believe it. He well knows of my ability to resist the Imperius Curse, but I reminded him that you were a senile old fool who would grasp at any excuse to believe the best of those you cared about. Also, I pointed out that Miss Bourne had backed up my story to you. In the end, the tale played so well to his prejudice that love is weakness that he accepted it entirely."

"Excellent work, Severus. Did you learn anything of note during the subsequent part of the meeting?"

Snape's serious expression did not clear. "There was more regarding Miss Bourne, Headmaster."

Dumbledore put down his teacup and sat up straighter. "What else was said?"

"The Dark Lord was very curious about her declaration at the trial. He wanted to know why she said that she had been willing. I had not claimed to have planted that story in her mind; I would have been hard pressed to convince him of that, since of course I would realize the consequences."

"What did you tell him then?"

"I said that I had been shocked to discover that the silly chit had fancied herself in love with me. Knowing I would never willingly marry outside Slytherin House, she deliberately made that statement in order to trap me into marriage. She knew, you see, that you would threaten to dismiss me if I did not propose to her."

"Terribly astute of her," Dumbledore said with a twinkle. "I trust Voldemort believed that tale, but that you do not."

"I am ashamed to confess that I did think that at first. I have since come to realize my error," Severus said, thinking back to the scene with Rowan the other day.

"I am very glad to hear you say so, Severus. She is a remarkable young woman, is she not?"

"Entirely so," Snape agreed. "Unfortunately, I may have inadvertently increased the danger of her situation."

Dumbledore looked grave and put down his sticky bun. "Please explain."

"The Dark Lord was offended on my behalf that I should be forced into an unsuitable marriage. He offered ~~to~~ *take care of the matter* for me. He suggested that young girls are notably clumsy, and sometimes things just happen."

Dumbledore was now entirely alert and putting his mind to work on the problem. "How much danger do you think she is in? Must she go into hiding?"

"I believe she is safe, for a while, at least. I told the Dark Lord that an accident would look particularly bad and might jeopardize my position with you. I also pointed out that she was an extremely attractive young witch, and that he had himself offered her to me for a plaything. I requested that he kindly wait until I was done playing with her before making any such arrangements."

Dumbledore's blue eyes sparkled merrily at that. "Something tells me that it will take you a very long time to tire of her. If she is safe until then, I am content. How did he take that?"

"It went over well. The Dark Lord was amused; he took it as a compliment that I was gratified by his gift. Fortunately, he does not realize that she is Muggle-born. She looked like quite a plausible witch at the trial. It is rare for children of Muggle families to really look like they fit into Wizarding society until they have been out of school for at least a year or two. I was fooled, and, thankfully, so was whoever reported on it to Dark Lord. Suggesting that she deliberately trapped me into marriage also implied that she is familiar with our ways as only a child of a Wizarding family would be. I pray that it will be a long while before he finds out the truth."

"Excellent, Severus. I am glad that she will be able to complete her schooling here. We will all keep careful watch to ensure her safety."

Sunday afternoon, shortly before dinner, the coaches bringing the returning students from Hogsmeade Station rolled up to the entrance. When they came to a stop, the students climbed out and headed for their various common rooms to unpack. They were all subdued, some visibly upset. Most of the students had read the *Daily Prophet* over the holidays and knew about Voldemort's rampage. Those that did not had heard about it on the train on the way up. There were several empty seats on the carriages which had been meant for students who would now never return.

There was no time for more than a quick greeting in the common rooms before it was time to head back down for dinner. The long tables had been restored to the Great Hall, and the students sat themselves at their House tables again. The full staff oversaw the meal from the staff table.

Three of the four Houses ate quietly at their tables and murmured amongst themselves. Much of the food remained on the platters. Slytherin table was rowdy enough to make up for all the others. The elder students, especially, embraced the news of Christmas week with joy. They felt it was a sign that they and their families would be in the ascendant in the near future, and that the Wizarding world must soon acknowledge their clear superiority. Eventually a food fight broke out that got completely out of hand in a very short time.

When a mashed-potato missile landed on the table in front of Snape, he stood and walked to his House table. "Which of you would like to spend your first night back slicing pickled frog's brains?" he inquired, in a tone suggesting that he had no greater desire in life than to spend the evening supervising slicing activities.

As soon as they noticed his stern shadow, the instigators put down their weapons and began industriously and innocently shoving food into their mouths.

"None of you? Excellent choice," Snape said crisply. He returned to his seat at the staff table and resumed his meal. When dinner was over, and the students headed back to their rooms, Minerva McGonagall cornered him before he could leave.

"Why didn't you take any points for that brazen show of disrespect during dinner?"

Elated at such a chance to needle Minerva, Snape gave in to the impulse. "Because it wasn't necessary. My House is fortunate to have a Head who can keep order without resorting to such tawdry artifices," Snape answered loftily.

Minerva all but choked. "I can't remember when I have been unfortunate enough to witness such a blatant display of favoritism!"

Snape replied in his silkiest tone, "I know you are getting on in years, Professor McGonagall, but you should perhaps not let on so easily that both your memory and your eyesight are failing. Good evening." He turned and swept down the dungeon steps with his head held high and robes billowing smartly.

McGonagall whirled in fury and bumped into Albus, who had been standing right behind her. "Professor Dumbledore! You aren't going to let him get away with that, are you?"

"Now, now, Minerva. The boy is going to have a very difficult job this term. Let him have his fun."

Clearly not about to get any satisfaction from Albus, McGonagall marched irately back to her chambers. On the way, she passed Neville on the stairs. "Twenty points to Gryffindor, Longbottom, for not getting lost on the way back from the station."

Back in the Ravenclaw common room, friends were all greeting each other. There were two Ravenclaws missing, a first year and a third year. Both had been Muggle-born and had been killed by Death Eaters. Professor Flitwick had kindly invited the close friends of the victims to his rooms for a talk.

Rowan and her friends finally had a chance to sit together comfortably, away from the crowd. Ariadne and Edgar had been worried about Rowan, knowing she was from a Muggle family. She assured them that she had been perfectly safe at school, and that her mother was well. Rowan squirmed at the lie. At least the second part was true!

"I have so much to tell you!" Ariadne said to Rowan. *And I have so much to conceal*, Rowan thought wryly to herself.

"How does the dress fit? Did you get a chance to try it on? My mom was just busting with the secret, and she finally told me when I got home and couldn't slip up and tip you off!"

"It's wonderful; it fits perfectly, and the color is really becoming."

"Just don't gain any weight for the rest of the year!"

"I'll try not to," Rowan laughed. "So how was your Christmas, was it happy? Did you like your gifts?" Rowan had snuck some time in around her thestral project to spin and knit Ariadne a muffler. She'd blended chocolate-milkweed fiber in with natural brown wool to make the yarn. The scarf felt warm and silky and had an aroma of hot-cocoa that was supposed to provide the wearer some protection against hexes. She'd had a hard time letting it go, but in the end she sent it off to Ariadne's mom to put under the tree.

"I love the muffler, Rowan. Thank you so much!"

"What else did you get?"

"I got some clothes too. My mom took me shopping in Diagon Alley after New Year's Day, so I could pick and we'd be able to get more because of the sales. My dad gave me a tiny Remembrall on a chain, like a necklace. It's supposed to remind me when I haven't written home." Rowan laughed; how like a father. Hers had been like that, she remembered fondly.

"I brought you something from the farm," Edgar chimed in. Rowan looked up startled, then she noticed a largish, lumpy sack on the floor next to him. "I saw the scarf you gave Ariadne, and I felt like an idiot for not thinking of it before Christmas." He handed her the sack; it was light for its size and had a familiar aroma. "It's a fleece from one of last spring's lambs: her name is Cocoa."

Rowan untied the sack and peeked in. There was a whole lamb's fleece, exactly as it came off the sheep. It was just the shade of hot cocoa, and it felt soft, with very little vegetable matter stuck in it. It smelled warmly of sheep. *When had he seen Ariadne's scarf?* "Thank you, Edgar, this is really nice. I'm sorry I don't have anything for you."

"That's ok. I mean, I didn't think we were going to exchange gifts, but like I said, when Ari' came to visit, and I saw the scarf you made her, I remembered we had a whole farm full of wool and figured you'd probably think that was really cool."

"Edgar invited me to come for a few days at the end of the holidays," Ariadne said. "I'd never seen a real farm before. It's really neat, they have lots and lots of sheep. The babies are so cute. I kept away from the parchment building, it stinks pretty bad. Oh, excuse me a minute, I just saw Cassie, and I need to ask her something." Ariadne jumped up and ran over to catch the dark-haired girl just headed out the portrait hole, leaving Rowan and Edgar alone together in their corner.

Edgar shifted uncomfortably for a moment. "I hope you don't mind, Rowan. I owed Ariadne a note for Christmas, same as you, and she wrote back how she'd never seen a real farm. She seemed so excited; it would have been rude not to ask her for a visit." His ears turned a faint shade of pink.

Aha, so that was the way the wind blew. *Good thing she hadn't decided to depend on him marrying her,* she thought with a smile. Rowan had hinted to Ariadne before Christmas that she wasn't serious about Edgar, so she wasn't upset that Ariadne had taken it upon herself to write to him. Now she was just relieved that he'd be distracted. "That's ok, Edgar, it sounds like she had a really good time. I'm happy for her."

"Thanks, Ro," Edgar answered. Ariadne finished her conversation with Cassandra and returned. The three of them compared notes on their class schedule for the next term and gossiped peacefully until bedtime.

Surviving Potions

Chapter 16 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 16: Surviving Potions

Monday was the start of classes, after the end of the holiday break. Mondays were again a Potions-free day for Rowan. She was grateful for a whole day to settle back into a normal routine before facing her first class with Snape.

Her most difficult class today was double Charms in the afternoon. The class was long to give them extra time to practice for the practical portion of their Charms N.E.W.T.

Rowan sat in Charms class and listened to Professor Flitwick explain advanced mending charms. He told them that this was very likely to come up on their N.E.W.T. practical, not to mention being a valuable skill for everyday life.

"Simple charms, such as *Reparo*, are used for simple items made from non-organic or mostly non-organic substances. They work best on plain glass, metal and ceramics, and cause the broken edges to fuse as if they had never parted.

"Repairing items made from organic substances, such as wood or textiles, is more difficult, because the inner structure of natural organic substances is so complex. Plant and animal fibers must be aligned precisely and each individual mated to its original counterpart, or the repair will be easily visible. You will recall that we began working on charms to accomplish this last year.

"The task is still more exacting if the item is decorated. A torn piece of tapestry or brocade is much more difficult to mend invisibly than a plain linen bed sheet. Another complication arises if the decoration is of a different form or substance than the main body of the item. A wooden item may be painted with solid colors or complex, subtle designs. The paint may be a combination of animal, vegetable and mineral substances.

"Very few witches and wizards are able to master the complexity of performing this sort of repair. Your practicals will not require the most difficult combinations. If you find, however, that you have an aptitude for this sort of work, you might consider requesting a more advanced test. Extra credit on the repair practical could offset lost points in an area where you are weak."

When he had finished his explanatory lecture, Professor Flitwick refreshed their memory of the various mending charms they had learned in previous years. He then described how these charms could be used effectively in combination, in order to effect a more complete repair. Finally, he described an advanced seeking charm, which could be used to make each individual fiber of a broken or torn item attracted to only its former partner on the other side. "When all the bits are properly lined up, the mending spells will be more effective," he told them.

Finally, he passed out torn bits of brocade from some old upholstered sofa cushions and told them to practice. The class got to work in a storm of swishing and flicking. Ariadne chewed her lip in frustration as the mended edges of her pieces showed a clear seam. Rowan found, though, that she did have an affinity for difficult repairs; her mend was nearly invisible.

"Excellent work, Miss Bourne. Five points to Ravenclaw," Flitwick said happily, when he passed their table.

Snape appeared in his usual spot at the staff table at both lunch and dinner on Monday. Rowan picked a spot deep in the Ravenclaw table, facing the other way, so that she wouldn't have to work at avoiding looking at him all through her meal. Her position also meant she couldn't tell if his eyes strayed to her more than they should have, or whether he was better able to master himself, or, most likely, she thought glumly, if it were just no trouble for him at all.

Inevitably, Tuesday dawned and Potions class was on her schedule. Sucking in a deep breath, Rowan entered the classroom and sat down in her usual spot next to Edgar. She set out her cauldron, put her wand away and practiced thinking calm thoughts while she waited.

Right on schedule, Snape strode in through the connecting door from his office and sat at the desk in front of the class. Rowan picked up her quill and concentrated on taking notes while he lectured on today's potion. She avoided looking at him, but she found that deep, velvety voice insinuating itself into her consciousness. Would she really be hearing that voice, speaking for her alone, every day? What would it be like to wake up and hear him bid her good morning? Go to sleep with his goodnight in her ears?

Guiltily, Rowan looked up when she felt Edgar's elbow digging into her ribs. There was Snape, standing right in front of the desk. Judging by his expression, he'd just asked a question, and she hadn't the foggiest notion what he'd been saying.

"Five points from Ravenclaw, Miss Bourne, and may I suggest that you pay attention from now on? Mr. Bracken, perhaps you can answer the question for Miss Bourne?"

Clearly Edgar had been paying attention and not fantasizing about the Potions master. He answered calmly and accurately. "The Potion of Hallucination is used to help identify and treat certain kinds of mental illness. It is very important to take the subject's wand away before giving them the draught, because if they attempt to do magic under its influence they can muddle the spells and get unexpected or even dangerous results."

Snape looked disgruntled that he could find no fault with this response, so moved on to a new set of victims in the next row. Rowan breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed. Her relief was short-lived, though; when Snape returned down the row towards his desk, he paused and spoke to her. "Miss Bourne, a word with you after class." Uh oh. Not good. Edgar gave her a look of sympathy but there was nothing he could do to help.

When he finished his lecture, Snape flicked his wand at the board, and the instructions for brewing the Potion of Hallucination appeared on it. He sat down and began to grade homework while the class set to work. Glancing up, Rowan saw he was using one of the black swan quills she had given him and smiled a little. Edgar followed her eyes and whispered in her ear. "I've never seen him use anything but a plain white quill before. What gives?"

"Maybe it was a Christmas gift," Rowan whispered back.

"Who'd give that git a present?" Edgar snorted.

Thinking fast, Rowan made a joke of it. "Filch?"

Edgar snickered and they both got back to work. When class was over, and everyone else had left, Edgar giving her an apologetic glance on his way out, Rowan went up to Professor Snape's desk.

"You wanted to speak to me, sir?"

"Yes, Miss Bourne. I recalled recently that you had requested assistance from me on your project at the end of the last term. I had promised to give you some suggestions which might further your research. Here is a list of three potions which might have the required effect, and the names of the books where you can find the instructions." He handed her a sheet of parchment with the information written on it in his spiky handwriting.

Rowan had all but forgotten her request, especially since it appeared her project would not be part of her grade for the class. She took the list from Professor Snape and looked at it, but her confusion must have been apparent on her face.

"You are, I believe, quite close to accomplishing your stated goal, Miss Bourne. It would be a pity to have to fail you for it now."

Rowan was startled, at first, then understood. Now that the students had returned, Snape would never speak unguardedly about their circumstances, unless he was certain they could not be overheard. He meant to tell her that it would be suspicious if she stopped working on the project now. Truth to tell, Rowan really didn't want to abandon it. She'd worked so hard; she wanted to see it to the end. "Thank you, Professor. I understand."

"Good. I look forward to seeing the results. One more thing, Miss Bourne," Snape added, as Rowan appeared about to escape. "I sincerely hope that today's display of inattentiveness is not an example of how you intend to conduct yourself for the rest of the term. Your work to date has been quite acceptable, despite your tendency to daydream in class. I would rather see an improvement in your final term than watch you sink into complete catatonia. Do I make myself clear?"

A keen instinct for self preservation suggested to Rowan that her situation would not be improved by confessing she'd been daydreaming about him. "Yes, Professor."

"Very well, you are dismissed." Rowan grabbed her things and skedaddled.

After that first class, Rowan got a grip on herself and did a better job of concentrating -- at least in Potions. She and Professor Snape settled into a pattern that worked well enough. Snape was no more or less sarcastic to Rowan than he was to anyone else; Rowan did her best and avoided daydreaming in class. She still slipped up sometimes, but she didn't think Snape minded too much; it gave him an opportunity to deduct points and make sure she didn't look like a favorite. If Rowan went too long without an error or obvious inattentiveness, Snape would find something absurd to dock a point or two for anyway, just to be on the safe side. She mentally dubbed these "for being my fiancée" points and ignored them.

January passed into February. Rowan kept busy at her classwork, her studying, and also her invisibility fabric project. She had looked up the potions which Professor Snape had suggested in the library. Several of them were lengthy processes, so she organized her notes carefully and began assembling ingredients. Professor Snape allowed her a spot in the student workroom, where she could leave potions in progress when they required lengthy boiling or setting time.

There was a Hogsmeade trip the weekend before Valentine's Day, as there was every year. This time Edgar and Ariadne went together. Rowan decided to stay behind; the weather was iffy, and there wasn't anything she needed to buy. She slept in, then had a late breakfast or possibly an early lunch, made up of random bits of food toasted over the common room fire.

In the early afternoon, she went to the student workroom to check on one of her potions. She found it had set to the gelatinous consistency described in the instructions and turned the correct shade of grey. She warmed it, and added two tablespoons of alcohol, which made the potion again liquid. She then checked the instructions carefully and prepared for the next stage.

Snape, meanwhile, had been checking over the more isolated corners of the dungeon and paying a visit to the Slytherin dorm. When the majority of the students were out of the castle, those remaining had a tendency to take advantage of the lack of witnesses. He found two first-years hexed and stuffed into closets, and a second year hanging by her ankles behind a banner in the common room. After rescuing them, and making a note to himself to have a word with the perpetrators, he headed back towards his own rooms.

As he walked back along the empty corridor, he wondered what Rowan was doing that day. He scowled to himself as he remembered spotting her and Bracken walking back from Hogsmeade the last trip day and having to watch that snot kiss her. It occurred to him to wonder, for the nth time, what she felt for Bracken. It had been bad enough before, when he had merely assumed that it meant he had no chance with her. But what now? Was he about to marry a girl in love with someone else? What, he stopped suddenly in the middle of the hall, what if it occurred to her to marry Bracken instead of himself? He'd be off the hook, free to stop worrying about her, and no need to be concerned what she thought of him. Maybe he should suggest it to her. This idea did not raise his spirits; gloom settled on him as he resumed walking.

Turning the corner, he saw Rowan just ahead of him, headed towards the student workroom. He slowed and silenced his footsteps, so he could watch her. Something had changed in her step since the end of last term. She still had that lovely carriage, but she didn't move with quite the same confidence she used to. Guilt sidled up to join gloom in Snape's mood. They settled in together for a nice visit while Snape watched Rowan working on her potion from the doorway.

When he saw that she had finished what she was doing and had started looking up the instructions, he asked her, "What are you doing here?"

Rowan turned and raised an eyebrow. She'd have thought it was obvious. "Tending to my brewing. This one was due for the next step."

"I thought you'd be in Hogsmeade. Today is the Valentine's trip, is it not?"

"And who, exactly, would I be going with?" *I didn't notice you inviting me to Madam Puddifoot's for ice-cream and a snog* Rowan struggled to keep her laughter at that notion from escaping. She had been feeling down, and she found it rather wretched that there would be no such scenes during her engagement, but amusement won out, and her eyes sparkled mischievously.

"What about your Mr. Bracken?"

So he *had* noticed, Rowan thought. And that was last term too, before any of this happened. She felt her spirits lifting a little.

"He's hardly *my* Mr. Bracken. I believe Edgar is in Hogsmeade with Ariadne."

Snape frowned and observed her narrowly. She didn't sound particularly upset by this. Gloom stood up to take a powder, relief took his place, but guilt stayed put; she still didn't look herself.

"Are you going to be busy here for long?"

"Only a few minutes more; I want to be sure I'm ready for the next step. Did you want to lock the room?"

"No, take your time. I wanted to speak with you, if you could spare a few moments?"

"Certainly, Professor." Rowan wondered what that could be about. She couldn't think of any reason she might be in trouble.

"Please come to my office when you are through," Snape said, leaving the room.

When Rowan had finished and cleaned up, she went to Snape's office and knocked on the door. He ushered her in, then closed and warded it behind her. She looked at him in some surprise. What could he have to say that required this level of caution? He seemed faintly embarrassed and was holding something in his hand.

"I have been wanting to give this to you, Miss Bourne, but it has been difficult to find a suitable time. With most of the students out in the village, we should be able to have a few minutes undisturbed."

Rowan was now wildly curious. Snape opened his hand and held out a small box to her. She took it and opened it. Inside was a ring of silver, or perhaps white gold, shaped like a snake with its tail in its mouth. Its eyes were two tiny emeralds. There was also a long chain, the ring strung on it like a bead. It was lovely. Rowan looked up at Snape, questioningly.

"The ring was my mother's. I intended it to be your wedding ring, but it will serve as an engagement ring as well. Wear it on the chain for now; it is long enough for the ring to remain hidden." Snape paused for a moment, as if unsure whether to continue. "I have placed some charms on it for your safety."

Rowan caught her breath and looked up into Snape's face. She wasn't entirely sure what she was looking for, or even if she'd recognize it if she found it.

"Thank you.... Would you put it on?"

Snape dipped his long fingers into the box and lifted out the ring and chain. Setting the box on the desk, he took the chain in both hands and slipped it over Rowan's head. She cupped the ring in her palm to look at it more closely. It looked worn; likely his mother had not been the first wearer. Rowan liked that; she was so new to the Wizarding world, the feeling of connection to its past comforted her.

"It's lovely." She tipped her head back to look at Snape again, her eyes were wide and lips slightly parted. Would he kiss her now?

Snape looked down into her face. Rowan had every appearance of a woman expecting to be kissed. It had been *avery* long time since he had seen one of those, except as an unwelcome intruder into an illicit student liaison, but he still recognized the species. He wanted to, very much, but his dratted conscience was reminding him that she was still a student. Also his remaining common sense warned him against frightening her with the intensity of his desire. After what she had endured from him, it seemed almost miraculous that she should want him to kiss her. If she knew what he was feeling, she would surely bolt.

Rowan took his hesitancy for disinterest, or worse, and pulled back, looking hurt.

"You are still my student, Miss Bourne," Snape said, to fill the empty space that had suddenly grown between them.

"I know," Rowan answered softly. "But couldn't we set that aside for a few minutes? You could at least call me by my first name." She had a sudden thought. She'd been woefully ignorant of Wizarding customs in this area before; was she committing some horrible gaffe now? "Is it normal, then, among wizards, to marry a near stranger? Without any sort of intimacy at all beforehand? It seems very strange to me."

"No, it isn't usual," Snape answered her, sliding into his teaching voice. "Except in the very upper classes of society, and not common among them either."

"Then, is it that ... does it bother you that I'm a Mudblood?" Rowan used the ugly term, looking for a reaction. He was a Slytherin, after all. It wasn't that she'd forgotten that, but she'd never felt that he shared the general prejudice of his House.

There was nothing dirty or common about this young woman, Snape thought angrily. She shouldn't have to think such a thing of herself. "No, it doesn't. I admit that in my youth I believed ... many dangerously foolish things. I learned some hard lessons, Miss ... Rowan. I hope that I now know better."

"Well, then?" Rowan looked tentatively up at him again. Snape decided that further objection served no useful purpose. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. Lightly at first, then more insistently as he felt her welcome it.

Rowan felt her stomach start to levitate up her chest; her breath came faster and her knees felt weak. Snape's arms wrapped tightly around her and he pulled her close. Rowan wanted to fix everything about this moment in her memory, but desire interfered with coherent thought. She could only register random impressions: strong, wool-covered arms holding her up, a line of hard buttons pressing into her sternum, straight black hair brushing her cheek, warm lips pressing hers, teasing them open. She sighed a little and melted against him.

Responding fervently to this evidence of her sensuality, Snape's kiss now grew hard and demanding. Snape moved one arm up her back and wound his fingers into her hair. He held her head immobile with the hand behind her head and kissed her again, deeply.

Rowan found herself putting her arms around his shoulders and kissing back for all she was worth. She felt him groan, the vibration of it against her chest, and hold her still tighter. His breathing was harsh and his eyes, when he let up kissing her to look at her, glittered fiercely. *Her eyes do go smoky*, he thought with satisfaction, as her eyelids opened momentarily, wondering why he'd stopped.

He leaned down again, but passing her lips, kissed her along the jaw-line and down her neck. She felt him taste her sweat that had pooled in the hollow there, dripping down from her hair.

Dazed as she was, she didn't immediately recognize how thoroughly Snape was aroused. When she became aware of the hard lump where her abdomen pressed against him, and realized what it meant, she chilled suddenly. The sultry haze that had been filling her mind cleared, and she became aware that she was in a near-empty castle, behind warded doors, with a man who was both much older than she and clearly more experienced. A man who she knew, for a fact, must once have been much more evil than good. Where was this going to go?

Once that aura of danger surrounding her professor had secretly thrilled her. That was before she understood that threats were sometimes followed by action and that peril was more likely to result in pain than pleasure.

Snape felt her stiffen and forced himself to break off the kiss, as his body screamed in protest.

"Is that what you had in mind?" His voice and his question were harsh, but he made sure she was balanced on her feet before he let her go.

Glad to be released, Rowan looked up at him, shocked at herself for responding to his ardor so easily.

When he'd taken her that night, he had remained himself, controlled, as she'd always known him. This side of him was new to her. It held a promise of something wonderful, thrilling, but it frightened her too.

She couldn't answer him; she barely recalled that he'd asked a question.

Snape stood, breathing harshly, as he collected himself. He had known this would happen once he started. He should not have allowed it to begin.

"I told you that I would not approach you this way, and I meant it. If you come to me anyway, I cannot promise to be gentle. Do you understand?"

Rowan thought she was beginning to. He had known he would frighten her; his distance had been to shield her. Her breathing was slowing, and the pounding of her heart gave way to a mere desperate thudding. "I think so."

"It's time for you to go. Past time, I should think," Snape told her, unwarding the door. He guided her towards it by the elbow. Before he could open it, she turned to face him. She realized the ring still hung outside her blouse. She took it in her hand, dropped it under her shirt and felt it slide down out of sight.

She appreciated Snape's gesture in giving her his mother's ring, and spelling it for her. She wondered what charms he'd seen fit to place on it. Feeling the cool metal between her breasts reminded her that he had taken thought for her safety. It calmed her alarm and brought her a measure of peace. He must care, at least a little, she thought to herself.

Seizing her courage in both hands, she reached up and kissed him quickly on the mouth before she opened the door and headed back through it towards safer waters. Coal black eyes observed her departure along the corridor and noted with pleasure that her stride was more as he remembered it.

Author's Notes:

This was the last chapter written before HBP was published. I chose to keep with my original plot arc even though it had become entirely AU. I do bring in details of the Potter world that we learn in HBP and DH, and some events that don't conflict with my story.

Major thanks are due to Verity if this chapter isn't awful. :*)

Quarrel and Estrangement

Chapter 17 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: It has never been more clear than it is now that I do not own Harry Potter, or Severus Snape or even the honking daffodils.

Chapter 17: Quarrel and Estrangement

Rowan spent the evening of the Valentine's Hogsmeade trip listening to Ariadne give a blow-by-blow account of her date with Edgar, including ice-cream and snogging at Madam Puddifoot's.

At first, she was a little annoyed with Ariadne. Of course, she'd let it be known she didn't consider Edgar her property, but it was still a bit off-putting to hear the details of him kissing her best friend. After listening for a while, though, she found herself feeling happy for Ariadne, but even happier for herself.

"He was really sweet. He kisses nicely, not like those guys who are all hands and want to lick your tonsils." Rowan remembered what it was like when Edgar kissed her, and she agreed with Ariadne's assessment.

"He kissed me for a long while, and it was, like, he could have sat there forever just kissing me, without making a whole bunch of moves. I felt so safe with him, you know?"

Rowan didn't know. She certainly hadn't felt safe being kissed by Snape. Still, even though it had frightened her, she didn't think she'd trade that wild thrill for any tamer variety. She wished she could tell Ariadne about it, compare notes, but she kept sensibly silent.

"I'm glad you had a good time, Ari. Do you think he's going to be the one?"

"Maybe. I think so. Maybe," Ariadne answered, blushing. "You're a pal for listening, Ro'," Ariadne said, giving her a hug. "I'll do the same for you any time."

Rowan plastered a grin on her face and hugged her friend back. "I'll remember that when the time comes."

After they'd both turned in to bed, and Rowan had pulled the curtains safely shut, she lay back on her pillow and examined her recollections more closely.

Wow, that had been a kiss. Even in the darkness and solitude, Rowan blushed thinking about it. In the safe space of her own bed, Rowan could take out the memory and

examine it in detail. She remembered the faintly salty taste of his mouth, the rasp of wool on wool as his arms slid around the back of her robes and the feel of those strong arms about her. She grew warm again, reliving those sensations. She wondered what would have happened if she hadn't become frightened then. Would events have continued to their ultimate conclusion?

Severus (she had a hard time thinking of him as 'Snape' when she was imagining such intimacy) had kept his distance from her physically until then. She had been afraid that he wasn't interested in her that way, or possibly that he was so appalled at the idea of being forced to marry her that it overwhelmed any interest he might feel. Now she felt she'd been granted a glimpse of a part of him normally kept extremely well hidden. She sensed that underneath that cold, mocking exterior there was a passionate, sensual streak, which he struggled not just to keep hidden, but to subdue.

It would make him miserable to be bound to a woman whom he could not touch. Yet he had offered her just that.

Was what he had done to her, that day, the worst thing he had ever had to do? Viewed dispassionately, if that were even possible, it seemed unlikely. Rowan shied away from trying to think of what might qualify as worse. *Just take it as given that there is.* She wondered, then, why he had chosen to make such a sacrifice for her. Why was it so important to him that she shouldn't be afraid to accept his protection?

Was it because he felt that doing this for her also balanced some past sin? Perhaps there was no one else living to whom he *could* make amends? Or maybe, her heart skipped a beat, he felt something more for her than just guilt. Maybe he also hoped, despite all the odds against it, that there *could* be something real between them.

With that thought, Rowan slid down into the warm space under the covers. After allowing her imagination, and her hands, to run wild for a while longer, she fell into a sound and contented sleep.

February blew into March. There might have been some resemblance to early spring in more southerly latitudes by now, but at Hogwarts, winter still held sway. Still, spring rituals continued on schedule, end of term exams, then the Easter holiday. Quidditch resumed. Sunset gradually moved later; it crossed passed teatime and started closing in on supertime. Everyone was working feverishly. Even the most lackadaisical of Rowan's classmates had figured out that N.E.W.T.s were fast approaching and had begun to crack books.

One afternoon, Rowan received a note to go to Professor Dumbledore's office. She gave the owl half of her cookie and pocketed the scrap of parchment, then set off in the direction of the headmaster's office. Professor Snape was waiting for her at the gargoyle stair. He did not give her any hint what the meeting was about, but ushered her into the Headmaster's office and shut the door behind them.

"Thank you for coming to see me, Miss Bourne," professor Dumbledore said as she entered uncertainly. "Please, do sit down." He offered her the dish of lemon drops, but she declined with finality.

"I wanted to speak to you and Professor Snape for a few minutes regarding your wedding plans. I understand from him that you two have not yet discussed them. It would be best if some sort of arrangements were made now. The usual ceremony between a wizard and a witch is a form of Handfasting. This is probably not what you were brought up on, Miss Bourne, but since the purpose of having this marriage is to appease wizarding society, it would be the best course. Is that agreeable to you?"

Rowan was startled. Here was yet one more thing it had never occurred to her to think about. So much for the idea of being married in the pretty little parish church she'd been christened in. Dumbledore was right, the ceremony was to satisfy the wizards, not the Muggles. Rowan hadn't been attending church services, except during the summers, for so many years that she found it didn't make much difference to her; married was married. "Yes, that would be okay, I guess."

"Excellent. I have the authority to perform the ceremony myself. We could do it right here, if that is also all right with you. This would allow you to marry as soon after Leaving as possible, so you will have at least a little time to yourselves before the news breaks."

Rowan glanced at Severus and saw him nod at her. He had already agreed to the plan for his part, so she saw no reason to object. "That is all right too."

"Very good, then. Shall we have it in the late morning, or perhaps the afternoon, after the Hogwarts Express has departed?"

"Afternoon, I think," Rowan answered. "I'd like a little time to change and dress up a bit." She looked at Severus shyly. "I know it's kind of silly, under the circumstances, but I'd like to wear a gown and have some flowers."

Dumbledore looked at Snape inquiringly. "I certainly have no objection, if that is what Miss Bourne wishes."

"That's almost it then," Dumbledore told them happily. "Besides performing the ceremony, I will arrange for the necessary paperwork to be filed with the Ministry. There is only one last arrangement to make: Severus has no family living, Miss Bourne, but I daresay you would like your mother to be there. We will arrange for her to be brought to Hogwarts shortly after the students have departed." Dumbledore was going to say more, but he stopped when he noted Rowan's ashen complexion.

"Is something wrong, Miss Bourne?" Dumbledore asked her.

"My mother. What on earth am I going to tell her?"

Snape looked sour and turned away.

"You mean you haven't told her anything about this yet?" Dumbledore asked Rowan.

"I ... no. At first I didn't want to upset her; there were so many horrible things going on and she was so worried about me. That was before I knew I'd have to get married, so there didn't seem any point to upsetting her further. Then it seemed like such a long way off, and I hadn't told her about ... what happened ... so I didn't know how to tell her about the results. Now, of course, it's been so long, ..." Rowan trailed off wretchedly.

"Well, I can understand why you would not want to put such a thing in an owl," Dumbledore told her not unkindly, "Nevertheless, she must be told. I will have someone bring her here. You can tell her in privacy, in my office. If you wish me to stay with you, naturally, I shall."

Rowan didn't look much less miserable at this idea.

Snape turned around again. "Miss Bourne, as much as I am not looking forward to the inevitable scene with my future mother-in-law, I would infinitely prefer to get it over with before our wedding day."

Rowan felt ready to sink. She hadn't thought about how hard that would be for Severus. Certainly, she had to get it over with now.

"All right, Professor. I'll send her an owl to let her know she'll be hearing from you."

"That would be for the best, Miss Bourne. I will have Minerva arrange for her transport..."

While Dumbledore was speaking, Snape suddenly winced and clenched his left hand into a fist. Dumbledore stopped and looked at him in concern. "Are you called, Severus?"

"Yes, Headmaster. Are we through for now? I should leave right away."

"What do you mean 'called,' Professor?" Rowan looked at Dumbledore, then at Snape, in alarm.

"He means," answered Snape, "that the Dark Lord has commanded my presence, along with his other Death Eaters, immediately."

"What? You can't mean you are still ... that you haven't ...!"

"What were you expecting, Miss Bourne? We all went to a great deal of trouble to keep my position with the Dark Lord viable. Yourself included, I might add."

Rowan felt sick. Of course he was right. She'd never followed it through to its logical conclusion. She was, for all practical purposes, going to be married to an active Death Eater. It made no difference that he was now on Dumbledore's side; he still had to answer his Master's call and do Merlin-knew-what at Voldemort's orders.

Dumbledore, seeing her growing upset, attempted to reconcile her to the necessity. "Professor Snape is the only one of the Death Eaters who has genuinely come back to us. Without the information he has provided, many additional lives would have been lost."

Grief and fear had too tight a grip on Rowan for her to accept any such thing rationally. She rounded on Snape in a fury. "How could you still be doing this? Why didn't you tell me? Or were you not going to say anything until we were married 'Not tonight, dear, I just raped a virgin, and I'm really not up to another round'?"

Snape turned pale and drew himself up stiffly. "I didn't think I had to tell you; I hardly thought you were such a fool. Miss Bourne, I spend my entire day babysitting sniveling schoolchildren. Please do not tell me I shall also be coming home to one." Without waiting for Rowan to reply, Snape departed from the office in a few long strides and shut the door behind him.

Rowan sat down hard into one of the armchairs; its squishiness did not allow for the sort of satisfying thud which would have eased her feelings. Instead, she sank hopelessly into its marshmallow softness and wept.

Dumbledore sat in the other chair and waited patiently for her to run down. Eventually she drew a plain linen handkerchief from the pocket of her robe and blew her nose.

"I am sorry to learn that you had this misunderstanding, Miss Bourne. I feel partly to blame, for not making it perfectly certain that you understood the current situation." He gave a sigh. "Shall I take it you are reconsidering marrying Professor Snape, Miss Bourne? I still believe it would be for the best if you did marry him, although I completely understand that you might find his situation hard, maybe impossible, to bear."

Rowan gave a great sniff as she wiped her eyes. "I'm not sure. I'm going to have to think about it a little."

"Well, there is time yet. We will not, I think, need to bring your mother here right away."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry for being such a mess."

"Quite understandable, my dear. Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes, and I guess I'd better go." Rowan stood and shook out her robes. As she pocketed the handkerchief, she realized, with a pang, that it was the same one Snape had given her the last time she'd fallen to pieces at him.

The daffodils set up a welcoming chorus of honks in greeting as Rowan went past, on her way to her favorite sitting spot. She smiled wanly at them and promised to take them back to her room soon, now that the sunlight came in the window for more than the scant couple of hours it did in midwinter. Escaping past them, Rowan went on and plopped herself down on the bench by the artificial pond.

Now what? Rowan thought to herself, twisting Snape's hanky in her fingers. Am I going to go through with this? I was such an idiot not to realize what it all meant. Of course Snape is still a spy; why else did Dumbledore insist on a trial? Voldemort must trust him now; he did what he was ordered to do and almost went to Azkaban for it. After so much grief, they should reap the benefit of Snape's being again a trusted member of the fold. That doesn't mean I want to be around to see it happen, to have to wonder, every time he comes home, what kind of terrible things he has been forced to do.

I'm still stuck with no way to earn a living if I don't marry him. There's always the option he offered me. It wouldn't matter so much then, what he did, would it, if he never touched me?

Rowan shuddered; she couldn't tell whether the idea of Snape touching her, or not touching her, was worse. He had been *so* angry. *Well, no wonder. What I'd said to him! Worse, it might be true. No.* He might be forced to do such a thing, but Rowan was certain he would not fling it in her face like that. She'd been completely beyond the pale to suggest it. Nothing Rowan had seen about Snape led her to believe he was a forgiving man, and he was undoubtedly deeply insulted. He had probably been speaking only the plain truth when he said he didn't want to have to live with a schoolchild.

Would he still have her? She didn't think he'd take back his offer, no matter what she said to him, but she was suddenly very afraid that he no longer wished her to accept.

Why does that upset me? If I'm so disgusted by him, by what he does, why should I care what he thinks of me? *But I do,* her heart whispered, *and now it's too late.*

Softly Simmering

Chapter 18 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: Checks sock drawer, sofa cushions, lint trap: Nope, no deed to the Potterverse. Guess I don't own it.

Author's Notes: Extra special thanks to Verity Brown, beta reader extraordinaire.

Chapter 18: Softly Simmering

Snape walked down the path with a stiff and rapid stride. White knuckles gripped his wand, and the more self-aware of the local vegetation rustled quietly as it shrank back to avoid annoying him with root or vine.

How dare she insinuate that I would ever do such a thing to her? Snape thought to himself as he walked through the night towards the boundary of the grounds. *When have I treated her with less than perfect respect?*

Well, at least once, a sarcastic voice from the back of his head cut into his mental diatribe.

I was forced as much as she was, and well she knows it he answered the voice.

And you might be again, and she knows that just as well, the voice pointed out, undaunted by his fury.

But I would never throw it up at her like that. My wife the tone of his thoughts making it plain he meant the role and not the person *would always command my respect.*

Wouldn't you? You've never said anything uncalled for, or even cruel?

That is different. Students need toughening up. The world is cruel.

She's going to be your wife a lot longer than she'll be your student. Wouldn't it be nice if that were on speaking terms? Besides, she's pretty tough already; look how much she's had to take, and she's still got her spirit.

What she has is a temper, which she'd better learn to keep under control. I am forced to listen to quite enough of that at school; I won't have it in my home.

So she should defer to your every whim? You know you don't like submissive women.

I insist on being treated with respect. That is hardly unreasonable.

How much do you insist? If the price of keeping her happy enough to shag you were a little groveling?

I'm not that desperate.

Really?

Really. I'm only risking my life and whatever might have passed for my good name every day, possibly for years to come, in order to defeat that monster. She doesn't have to like it. Merlin's toenails, how could she possibly like it? but it pays a debt for which no other coin will serve. If she cannot live with that, she will not be able to live with me. I hardly thought she would want to in the first place.

That kiss suggested she might. Oh well, I suppose after the last few years, being married to a woman who can't stand you won't cramp your style much, after all...

Snape tried valiantly to glare that sarcastic voice into submission, but since it resided well behind his eyeballs, this was not the most effective tactic. The best he could manage was to pretend to ignore it, until he reached the point from which he could Apparate. After that, in the Dark Lord's presence, dire necessity coupled with years of practice kept it well and truly silent.

By the time he reported back to Dumbledore and returned to his quarters, his temper had cooled somewhat. Enough, at least, that injured pride no longer ruled him completely.

Rowan was expecting Potions class to be an embarrassment or a disaster. It was worse: nothing happened. Snape entered the classroom on schedule. He taught class, criticized potions, handed out points in his usual miserly fashion and removed them generously. In short, business completely as usual. He showed no sign of either avoiding Rowan or of watching her more closely. She paid attention and made no errors. He deducted no spurious points. She was miserable. The only sign that gave her the slightest scrap of hope that things were not utterly ruined between them was that he continued to use one of the black swan quills she had given him to mark grades while the class brewed. Rowan wasn't sure what that meant, except that it was clear he hadn't burned them.

Rowan wanted to speak to him, but wasn't finding him either in his office or workroom. He seemed to always be busy elsewhere, or he had at least one or two Slytherins with him. Discussing the news with Ariadne over lunch, she found out why he was so preoccupied now.

"Look at this, Rowan: Susan and Peter Noctis were killed in their home by Death Eaters Saturday night. Aurors investigated when the Dark Mark was sighted over their home and found them together in the living room, victims of the Killing Curse. Aren't those Gregory's parents?"

"Gregory Noctis? But he's a Slytherin. Why would Death Eaters go after his family?" Rowan asked.

"His dad's pureblood, from an old line, but his mom's a Muggle. That makes his dad a blood traitor. No big mystery there," Ariadne answered her.

"How'd he wind up in Slytherin then?"

"I don't know, but he seems a good fit, don't you think?"

"Ick, yes I do," Rowan answered, thinking back to Potions class. He'd always been a typical Slytherin ambitious and clever. His first choice of final project, which Snape had shot down, was typical.

"He's not the first Slytherin to lose family in the war either. Remember Carol Parks?"

"I remember she went home for a while, but I didn't know why," Rowan answered.

This was the kind of world Voldemort was bringing, Rowan thought to herself. *No one was safe, no one knew who to trust. What would happen to me and the other Muggle-borns, if he should win in the end? Could they drop out of the wizarding world and try to make their way as Muggles? Would they be rounded up and killed or enslaved, bound like house-elves to serve pureblooded masters?*

"It says here that the Ministry is working around the clock to protect mixed wizarding families and prevent attacks," Rowan commented, handing Ariadne the paper.

"They aren't making much headway, are they?" her friend retorted. Ariadne looked around the garden; they were alone, but she lowered her voice anyway.

"My parents think that You-Know-Who has agents in the Ministry. Very high up. That's why the Ministry is doing such a miserable job catching them."

"Your parents read *The Quibbler*, don't they?"

"You have to read *something* besides the *Prophet*," Ariadne said, throwing that publication down on the ground. "Otherwise you are just going to read that *Any day now, The-Boy-Who-Lived will be invading He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's headquarters with a crack team of Ministry Aurors at his back and reduce it to rubble.*"

Rowan stifled a laugh; Ariadne's imitation of a standard *Daily Prophet* article was pretty close to the mark. She only wished she could believe it were true.

Ariadne checked the time and said it was almost time for class. She picked up the paper and said she had to leave to get her books. Rowan had brought hers outside with her, so she told her friend she would meet her there. She took the extra few minutes to sit in the spring sunshine and think a while longer.

Ariadne is right: the Ministry is nearly useless. There were rumors around school about a secret Order dedicated to fighting Voldemort which was being at least somewhat more effective. Rowan had a shrewd idea that Dumbledore had something to do with this, and that this was the group to which Professor Snape reported, rather than to the Ministry. At least, Rowan hoped so. Judging by the way things were going, she had much more confidence in a shadowy group that included her Headmaster than in anything the Ministry could put together.

Considering Snape's role continued to leave Rowan confused and divided in her own mind. Rowan felt sick thinking about their fight. She regretted her words, but the core of reality behind them still frightened her. What kind of a man was he really? Not just a spy, but an active Death Eater, and she would have to marry him.

Well, how else could they get any real information about Voldemort's plans, if not from an insider? He wasn't likely to just blab them to random strangers, and he would be well defended against magical spying. Useful intelligence could only come from someone he trusted. Getting and keeping Voldemort's trust would not be an easy thing for an outsider, for someone who hated him. Logically, it would appear that, at one time, Snape must have been a genuine follower. It was equally apparent that Dumbledore implicitly believed that Snape was no longer loyal to Voldemort. What could possibly have brought about such a change, Rowan had no clue. Nonetheless, she was certain it was a true change. For all his formidable, unapproachable, sarcastic exterior, Professor Snape had treated her with respect and consideration, even kindness. Even though he had frightened her when he'd kissed her, he hadn't harmed her. She still owed him an apology, even if it was too late. The question was how, and what to say?

It was time for her to go to class now; Rowan picked up her books and headed into the castle to meet Ariadne. She resolved to catch Snape before Potions class began and beg an appointment on some pretext. She couldn't quite bring herself to do anything to force him to give her detention. He'd probably have her scrubbing armor for Filch anyway, having lost House points to no purpose.

Charms class took all Rowan's concentration that afternoon. They were still working on advanced mending charms. They'd finished with fabrics and were practicing on wood today. Professor Flitwick had a piece of a tabletop which had once been decorated in a complex pattern of marquetry. The design was now rendered nearly unrecognizable from the various stains and marks of dry rot, wet rot, scorching and woodworm. Rowan didn't have quite the affinity for this work as she had for the brocade they had worked with the other day, but she performed creditably on her piece, as did Ariadne. The double Charms class flew by, and they both scored decently.

Rowan left Charms class and headed towards the dungeons at a fast walk. She was in luck; the last class had completely left. She was the first of her N.E.W.T. Potions class to arrive, and Professor Snape was sitting at his desk, making sure all the flasks from the previous class were properly labeled for grading. When Rowan walked directly to his desk instead of taking her seat, Snape raised his eyes from his task and looked at her.

Rowan knew that her classmates could start walking in at any moment, so she had to be circumspect. "I wondered if you had a moment to speak with me after class, Professor, about my project?"

"Is there a problem, Miss Bourne?"

"I think maybe there is, sir. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Yes, if we can speak while I work. I have a number of potions brewing for the Infirmary which I must bottle this afternoon. You may come to my workroom before dinner. Now, please take your seat for class."

Rowan heard the rumble from the hallway which presaged the bulk of the class approaching.

"Thank you, sir," she said. She went back to her seat, set out her cauldron, and greeted Edgar as he slid into his place next to her.

Rowan marveled at how time could slip past when you were dreading something. Her classes were over in no time, and she was knocking on the door of Professor Snape's workroom before she knew what had happened.

"Enter."

Rowan opened the door and slipped inside. Snape was examining the milky-blue contents of one of the several cauldrons which were lined up on the workbench. There were three other cauldrons: one had a fire going under it, one (still steaming) must have just been removed from the heat, and the third was empty. There was a case of neatly packed and labeled flasks of reddish-orange potion next to the empty cauldron. Snape appeared satisfied with the blue mixture because he reached for a pouring ladle and a clean funnel.

Wordlessly, Rowan picked up flasks one by one and held them while Snape poured. The flasks were already labeled for a potion to ward off infection. Rowan corked each flask and packed it carefully in the waiting case. They were finished with the full two-dozen doses in just a few minutes.

"Thank you, Miss Bourne. Now, what was it you wished to see me about? Do you, in fact, require further assistance with your project?"

"No, Professor, I'm working on the potions you suggested; they will be ready for testing in a few more days."

"Well then? As you surmised, I am very busy lately." Snape pushed his hair back from his face and glanced in the direction of the Slytherin dorm as if he expected disaster from that direction at any moment.

Rowan took a breath, pulled back her shoulders, and met Snape's eye. "I wanted to apologize for what I said to you the other day. It was totally uncalled for."

Aha! Groveling will not be necessary, Snape thought with relief. He could stop having arguments with himself now. The realization put Snape into an almost charitable frame of mind. Even so, Rowan had best understand the way things stood. There could be no benefit to deceiving her.

"Thank you," Snape answered. "You were correct, though, in believing I will continue to have to follow instructions which are, at best, distasteful."

Rowan wondered whether Snape considered what he'd done with her distasteful or not. She didn't ask; she knew there was no good answer.

"Has it always been ... so terrible?"

"Very rarely, and now that the Dark Lord again considers me trustworthy, he will prefer that I am able to maintain my position at Hogwarts. Nevertheless," he reminded her, "the time will come when he will give an order and I will have to obey, or risk losing everything I have sacrificed to gain his trust. Make no mistake, I will do what is required of me."

Rowan shivered and lowered her eyes. "I know."

Snape looked at her downcast face. He could not see her eyes, but he could read her thoughts quite clearly from her posture. "You do understand. But you aren't prepared to live with that reality. Am I correct?"

Rowan had no answer for him. He was right, she wasn't prepared for it. To live with him, never knowing what he might have to do, would either drive her mad or break her heart. How could she ever bear it?

Correctly interpreting her silence, Snape turned away from her and busied himself lifting the boxes of vials into his arms. "It is nearly dinner time, and I must deliver these to Madam Pomfrey," he told her without looking at her.

Rowan went to the door and held it while he passed through, since his arms were full. She looked at him inquiringly as she stepped into the hall.

"The wards are active; they will seal when you shut the door."

Rowan nodded and pulled the door firmly closed behind her. She started after him towards the stairs, walking slowly enough that he would keep ahead of her and she could think.

She had done what she came to do and apologized. She was somewhat comforted that he had accepted it, but it was clear there could be no more than civility and courtesy between them if she could not accept what he was. *Could that be enough?* Rowan hoped so. She tried to convince herself as she walked, but a whisper of his scent lingering behind made her remember the feel of his arms around her and his kiss on her throat.

By the time she reached the ground floor, with its bustle of hungry students and promising scent of dinner, she was more uncertain than ever.

Author's Notes: Coming up Rowan finally creates visible invisibility fabric!

Invisibility Fabric

Chapter 19 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: Rowan, Edgar, and Ariadne are mine; the rest belong to Jo. Well, Ariadne thinks Edgar is hers, but he's mine, I tell you!

Author's Notes: Kudos to the ever-patient Verity Brown.

Chapter 19: Invisibility Fabric

Ariadne and Edgar both noticed that their friend seemed out of sorts since the Christmas holidays. Studying together in the Ravenclaw common room, they discussed their observations. Ariadne remarked that she hadn't seen Rowan knitting in front of the fire in the evenings in weeks. Edgar thought she was eating less; she looked like she'd dropped some weight.

"I didn't know you were looking at her figure that closely..."

"I wasn't. I mean, I'm not. I mean, have another chocolate frog?" Edgar was just the sensible type, who knew the only right answer to certain questions.

Mollified, Ariadne accepted the frog. She opened the package and looked at the card inside. "Ethelred the Ever-Ready. Do you have that one yet, Edgar?"

"Nope."

"Well, here then."

"Thanks, Ari," he said with a grin, taking the card.

Ariadne kept a firm grip on the frog's body, so that it couldn't jump away when she bit its head off. When she had completely consumed the amphibian confection and then wiped her hands so she wouldn't stain her homework, she returned to the topic of Rowan.

"Has she said anything to you about what's bothering her?"

"No. I'm a bit afraid to ask. I mean, I'm hoping it isn't you and me," Edgar said, a little shyly.

"I don't think it is. I know what you mean, and I was worried too, but she really does seem to be okay with it. How is she in classes? I've got Charms and Transfiguration with her. We always sit together, and she seems the same as ever."

"She's my partner in Potions; I think she's been a little quieter. That's why I thought it might be me, I mean us. She seems pretty normal in Arithmancy, but there's no lab for that class, so it's harder to tell."

"Maybe there's someone in your Potions class. Do you see her looking at anyone?"

"No, but then it's Potions, isn't it? We all just pay attention to Snape, if we know what's good for us."

"All but the Slytherins, right?" Ariadne asked. Edgar had complained to her more than once about their preferential treatment. The Ravenclaws had shared Potions classes with only Hufflepuffs through O.W.L. level, so it hadn't been an issue before.

"They pay attention too; they like Snape."

Ariadne shuddered. "I am so glad I dropped Potions."

"I know what you mean. If I didn't really need to know advanced Potions for the farm, I'd have dropped it too."

"What are you studying tonight?"

"Care of Magical Creatures."

"How's that going?"

"Pretty good," Edgar told her. "We're helping Hagrid with the thestrals. That's kind of wild since only a couple of students in the class can see them. The rest of us are just

brushing and hoping we don't miss bits of them, and checking their hooves for stones by feel."

"Do you wish you could see them?"

"Sometimes, but if not seeing them means I don't have to watch anyone die, I can just live with them invisible." Edgar's expression became grim, and his voice dropped to match. "I'm guessing more of us will be seeing them sooner or later, once we've left school."

Rowan joined them then and, dropping her armload of books onto the table with a grunt, sank down into the nearest available chair.

"How are things going?"

"Not bad," Ariadne answered her. "I've just about finished my Transfiguration essay. Want to practice for the Charms quiz tomorrow?"

"I was hoping you'd ask." They'd finished advanced mending and had moved to the next topic on the syllabus, with which both girls were now struggling. Rowan took her text, *Something out of Nothing: Practical Conjuring for All Occasions* from the pile on the table and picked a question to quiz Ariadne:

"Why is conjuring food a dangerous practice?"

"It's only dangerous if you eat it because when the spell wears off you'll be hungry again, and you'll starve if you do it all the time."

"Right. Your turn..."

Edgar continued his Care of Magic Creatures homework, and the remainder of the evening passed productively until bedtime.

Rowan didn't notice her friends' concern. She worked and studied and kept plugging at her invisibility fabric project. The potions which Professor Snape had suggested were complex and had several steps which required aging. At last, though, she had them completed, and they each looked exactly as they were described in the book.

Rowan took another few squares of fabric and dipped them into the potions. She tried a few combinations of potion and charm, labeling each sample with a hangtag and noting the specifics of each in her project book. When she had prepared all the combinations she planned, she had only three pieces left; if none of this batch worked, she was going to be out of chances very soon.

She rolled up all the samples into a towel to remove the excess moisture and carried them up to her room. She unrolled the towel on the stone hearth so the heat would dry them sooner. Saying a small prayer to whatever spirit was responsible for magical textiles, she left them there and went to look for Edgar and Ariadne they were probably watching Quidditch practice.

As she walked through the grounds, a cold wind whipped the edges of her cloak up over her knees, making her shiver. It was spring now, but the weather was changeable and today was windy and cold. The dungeons retained a fairly constant level of damp chilliness, but the temperature in the rest of the castle went up and down with the outside, although not to the same extremes.

Rowan was very pleased that she would pass no more winters wearing little skirts and knee-socks. Once she left school it would be floor-length skirts and as many flannel petticoats as it took to keep out the drafts and chill. Of course, this might not matter so much if she weren't still living in the castle next winter. Rowan sighed; the uncertainty of her future depressed her. While she knew it would involve being married to Snape, that was just about the only thing she knew. If she didn't live with him, she had no idea where she would stay or what she would do.

Halfway down to the pitch, Rowan met her friends on their way back to the castle. She turned around and walked back in with them to dinner. She ate quietly while they chattered, not noticing the looks they exchanged over her head. Rowan glanced up at the staff table, but Snape appeared occupied with his own dinner. Able to eat no more, Rowan started pushing gravy around her plate with a bit of bread until the meal was over.

Back in the common room, she sat with her friends and took out her homework. Edgar and Ariadne both had essays to write and were mostly quiet. The problems she had to do for Arithmancy were hard enough to keep her mind occupied the rest of the evening, for which she was thankful.

In the morning, Rowan got out of bed and crossed the room to the hearth to check her samples. All were still visible, but one had a shimmery ethereal sort of look to it. She picked that one up first and held it across her hand. She was thrilled when her palm vanished. She could still see the tips of her fingers where they extended past the edge of the sample. She wiggled them experimentally; the disembodied fingertips danced in the air. She'd done it.

Rowan was ecstatic. All her hard work had actually paid off, and she had accomplished something both difficult and significant. She picked up the sample and went hurrying down the stairs towards Snape's dungeon, to show him.

He was in his workroom with the door open. Well, it really was rather early in the morning for even Slytherins to be getting into trouble. Rowan imagined Snape must have guessed this would be so, and that he had taken advantage of the relative peace to get some work done.

Clutching the scrap of fabric, she knocked and entered.

Snape straightened from his task of mincing Doxy toes. He looked annoyed at being interrupted until he saw that it was Rowan, then his expression became carefully blank. "Yes, Miss Bourne, is there something you need?"

"Look, Professor!" Rowan held the scrap of fabric over her hand. Snape could see the floor straight through where her fingers were. He looked up from her hand to her face, alive with the joy of success.

"Well done, Rowan," he told her softly. Rowan looked up at the sound of her given name. Severus was looking at her so oddly, she almost thought he was sad.

"I don't know why I'm so happy about this. It seems like such a useless thing to have spent so much time on lately. I mean, since it can't affect my grade or anything," Rowan said smiling, then she laughed and admired her missing fingers. "Still, it's nice to have accomplished something I set out to do. It gives me confidence for the future."

Rowan paused, her joyful glow dimmed. What was her future anyway? She was going to have to be tied to this man. She thought back to the beginning of the year when she'd started this project. She had wanted to impress Snape so that maybe she'd have a chance at catching his interest. She'd gotten better than his interest now; he would marry her, and he did seem impressed but it was all upside down and in the wrong order.

"I would not say it was pointless." Snape's reply broke into Rowan's thoughts. At her puzzled look, he slipped unconsciously into his teaching voice as he explained.

"I think you have not fully appreciated the magnitude of what you have done. Invisibility Cloaks are extremely rare and monstrously expensive. You are now the sole person capable of making new ones."

"I suppose that is true. I hadn't exactly thought of setting up shop; I was just interested in the problem." Rowan laughed a little.

"I suspected you hadn't considered the ramifications beyond the technical issue. How like a Ravenclaw. The essential point, which has clearly escaped you, is that you now possess a significant amount of power."

"Power? I don't understand. The cloaks are useful, but they don't give you any stronger magic."

Snape's tone betrayed a hint of impatience at her lack of perspicacity. "Half the wizarding world would like to have such a cloak, Miss Bourne. Since there are not currently any new ones being made, few have them. Mostly Aurors, because few but the Ministry can afford to buy them when, occasionally, one comes up for sale."

"You think I should make a career of this?" Rowan asked in confusion. "It's not exactly what I had in mind. I was hoping to go into research and work for the Department of Mysteries."

"If you were to make and sell new cloaks, no one would be able to afford to refuse to do business with you. Wizarding society could not snub you, no matter what scandal might surround you. Not if offending you meant that you might sell a cloak to one's enemy and not to oneself," Snape told her pointedly.

Rowan was shocked. "I couldn't behave that way. It would be so..."

"Devious? Manipulative? Shrewd?"

"Slytherin."

"Exactly," Snape replied. "Of course, it is not necessary for you to do so. You will benefit simply because people think you might."

Rowan looked ill. "That's even worse."

"Is it?" Snape's mouth curled into a sardonic smile. "You may do business as honorably as you choose, and you will still have this power. You are hardly responsible for how others behave if they misjudge you."

What an appalling idea! Or was it? Really, it had a certain innate justice if people who thought such a thing of me were afraid to treat me badly, what fault was that of mine? Was this how Slytherins always viewed the world? Rowan eyed her professor with speculation.

Snape's face became serious again, and he drew himself up straighter. "You would have a reliable income, one that provided a decent living, even some luxury. If you still wanted to work for the Ministry, they would not dare refuse you a position. Not if they wanted control over the source of new Invisibility Cloaks, or anything else you might invent in the future."

Suddenly the pieces fell into place for Rowan. "You mean we wouldn't have to marry, don't you?"

"Precisely," Snape replied, seeing that she had finally grasped the essential point. His face betrayed no emotion, but he observed hers minutely for a reaction.

"Oh." Rowan felt oddly empty. Her feelings for her professor had swung so wildly in such a short time that winter months of unrequited longing had been replaced by shock and violation, then despite all common sense she found herself fearing for him and even protecting him and, finally, agreeing to marry him.

Although she had had no choice, she had become reconciled; that kiss they had shared seared her more than she had even imagined it would. Even now, just remembering made her feel warm and woozy. She had been certain he had also been affected and, up until they had fought, things had looked quite promising.

Since that terrible argument, all her thoughts and energy had been taken up with trying to find a way to cope with the frightening reality of his position with Lord Voldemort. He had been distant, cool, clearly disappointed in her.

Now, she perceived that it was suddenly all moot. He could not honorably retract his proposal, but he was showing her a way out. Rowan felt numb and desolate. She looked up into Snape's face but could not read it any better than she ever could when he wished to be unreadable.

What sort of a mind could foresee such a situation, plan for it? Rowan looked up at Professor Snape, wide-eyed. How long ago had he realized what it would mean for her to succeed at her project? Was that why he had instructed her to continue working on it?

She must have been gaping like a fool, because Snape finally lost patience waiting for her to say something. "If you must stand around with your mouth open like that, I suggest you do it in the Great Hall, where there is food."

That was it then, it was too late. Rowan might have had a chance with him, but she'd blown it. He didn't want to marry her, and he'd made sure she knew she didn't have to marry him. "I suppose you want this back, then." Rowan said, pulling the ring on its chain from under her shirt.

Snape stopped her before she could lift the chain over her head. She started at the touch of his fingers on her wrists and looked up again into his eyes. His expression was still unreadable, but he spoke less harshly: "Please keep it. It is spelled to protect you, and you may need that for a while longer."

"All right, then," Rowan said softly, then added, "Thank you."

Author's Notes: So does this count as making Rowan's life less complicated or more so? Hopefully you'll all let me live to post the rest of the story.

Ring and Revelation

Chapter 20 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Author's Notes: Huge thanks to my charming beta, Verity Brown, and to Lady Whitehart for her input on this chapter.

Chapter 20: Ring and Revelation

"How come the vinegar to wine thing is a Charm, not a Transfiguration?" Ariadne asked Rowan as they started down the stairs together, headed towards the Library.

"According to the book," Rowan answered, "it's because Transfiguration is about changing a thing's shape, and liquids don't have shape."

"That's just absurd. You change a rat into a teacup, it's a teacup, not a teacup-shaped rat. You can pour hot tea into it, for Merlin's sake. Assuming you aren't a sorry excuse for a third year, that is, and it doesn't still have a tail or something."

"I didn't say I agreed with it, I said that's what the book says," Rowan retorted. "If you asked me, they did it so there would be another class – they can't make *everything* a Charm or the classes would be three times as long to fit it all in, and poor Flitwick would be worn down to nothing."

"Don't let McGonagall hear you say that about her subject."

"Do I *look* mental?"

Ariadne laughed; it was good to hear Rowan's sense of humor perking up. Rowan had been subdued lately; Ariadne wished she knew what was wrong, but her friend had refused to admit why she was sad. Ariadne had some suspicions, but with nothing concrete to go on, she didn't have much leverage to pry with.

At the bottom of the steps, a figure in black school robes blended in with the shadow behind a suit of armor. Herman Boyle had just learned a new trip jinx from another third year and wanted to practice – and if he managed to send some girl arse over heels and got to see up her skirt, so much the better. He heard voices and crouched further into the shadows. He saw two older Ravenclaw girls descend into view. One of them had spectacular legs, which he wouldn't mind seeing more of. The other girl was on the far side and a little behind. The taller girl was looking at her feet and couldn't see him. He had a clear shot. He aimed and zapped her with the whispered jinx.

Ariadne heard Rowan gasp and suddenly go flying down the remaining steps to land in disarray on the stone floor below.

"Rowan!" She ran down, praying her friend wasn't hurt.

Rowan picked herself up with a grunt. She didn't know why she'd tripped, but while in midair she had been certain she would be seriously hurt when she hit bottom. Somehow her landing had been softer than she had expected. She was unharmed, albeit in much disarray. Rowan glanced around before picking herself up. Her bag had gone flying, her robe and skirts were around her hips, and Snape's ring had flown out of her shirt! She looked around quickly as she grabbed for it, but a boy's hand got there first. She looked up.

It was a younger Slytherin, third or fourth year. She'd bet anything he had tripped her, she thought darkly. She did not care for the interest he was showing in Snape's ring.

"This is a Slytherin ring; where'd *you* get it?" he demanded.

Oh no! Rowan blurted out the first lie that came to her: "It was my grandmother's."

"Your grandma was a Slytherin? Was she mad when you were sorted?" Boyle asked her with a sneer.

"No, she was a Muggle, all my family are. I don't know where she got it," Rowan babbled.

"Oho, so maybe she had a friend. Wonder if she slipped one past your grandpa, and that accounts for you." Boyle laughed nastily and let the ring drop on its chain. Boyle laughed his way smugly up the corridor; he'd found her thighs were quite as good to look at as he'd imagined.

Ariadne, meanwhile, had gathered Rowan's books and handed them to her after Rowan had finished straightening her clothes and dusting herself off. She looked curiously at the ring before Rowan could tuck it away. "I've never seen that before, Rowan. Don't try telling *me* it was your grandmother's."

Rowan looked up, at a loss. She didn't want to lie to her best friend, but the truth would simply not do.

"Is it from a boy?"

"Yes." *Well, a male at least*, Rowan prevaricated slightly. Snape's boyhood was well behind him.

"I thought Slytherins didn't date outside their own House, and definitely not Muggle-borns."

"They don't," Rowan answered, relieved to have an excuse to keep mostly silent on the subject. "That's why it has to be a secret – you know what they'd do to him if they knew!"

"When have you had time to see him? You're with us most of the time when you aren't in classes."

"I see very little of him outside of class, and in class we have to pretend like there is nothing," Rowan answered truthfully.

"Is that why you've been so down lately?" Ariadne asked her with sympathy. "It must be hard having to keep that kind of a secret."

"It's worse. We had this *huge* fight the other day. I said something really awful to him. I wish I hadn't, but now it's too late. It's just over," Rowan said, tears coming to her eyes.

"But you still have the ring," Ariadne pointed out.

"I offered to give it back, but he said I should keep it."

"Then it's not over. He still loves you," Ariadne said definitely.

Rowan looked at her friend wonderingly. *How can he still love me, if he never did?* Still, her friend's certainty was something to which she could cling. Rowan was not at all sure what she wanted now, but she was pretty sure being rejected by a man she found undeniably attractive was not it.

After dinner that evening, Rowan, Edgar and Ariadne sat around a small table in a corner of the Ravenclaw common room. After the discussion with Snape, she had felt too upset to talk gaily about her success with her project, so she had kept silent. Now that she had had a chance to absorb it all and was feeling better, she wanted to share it with her friends.

Shyly, she took the sample out of her book bag and handed it to Ariadne. Edgar leaned forward to see. They both stroked the soft fabric and laughed at Ariadne's missing hand.

"I knew you'd do it, Rowan!" Edgar exclaimed. "Snape can't fail you now."

"Well not for that anyway," Rowan answered. "Now I'd like to try repeating the process, maybe find a more efficient way. And maybe make a whole cloak: that would be so cool to have."

"Won't that take a lot of time? What about your plan to work for the Ministry?"

"Well," Rowan said carefully. "I could make a lot of money making Invisibility Cloaks. People really want them, and there's currently a finite supply."

Edgar looked startled. "That's right, I'd never thought of it that way."

"That's because we're all Ravenclaws," Rowan said with a laugh. "We only see an interesting challenge, not the implications of solving it."

"I guess that's true," Ariadne said, giving Rowan a speculative glance. "Hey Edgar, tell Rowan your plan for the thestrals."

"Oh, right." Edgar turned to Rowan. His eyes were bright, and he spoke in a rush. "I asked Hagrid if he'd let me take a breeding pair of thestrals back to the farm with me to start a herd. He wasn't so sure, since I can't see them, but I told him my mum and dad can and probably some of the farmhands too. We're in a pretty rural area, and they are great for getting around. You know, not everyone can Apparate or tolerates Floo travel well." Edgar's eyes flicked briefly to Ariadne while he was speaking, making it clear to Rowan whose comfort he was concerned with. "Problem is, they are going to be pretty expensive to keep, what with an all-meat diet."

"That would be just brilliant, Edgar," Rowan answered. "You could sell me the wool for my cloak business. That would make it more economical to keep them."

"That's a great idea! But are you really sure you want to do this instead of working for the Department of Mysteries? I thought that was really your dream."

Rowan struggled to explain without giving too much away. She was going to have to live with everyone knowing what had happened very soon; she wanted to cling to her anonymity as long as she could.

"Money isn't just about buying things. It means having more choices, being able to do exactly what I really want to, and not having to do things I don't like. You know, the Ministry really needs Invisibility Cloaks for the Aurors. If I set up the business first, I'll have a lot more leverage for getting the job I really want later."

Now Ariadne's speculative look was replaced with one of amused certainty. "That's an ambitious plan. You've been talking to a Slytherin, haven't you, Rowan?"

Rowan blushed. Edgar looked at her with a look of sudden understanding which made it clear to her that Ariadne had let him in on everything that had happened earlier. She looked at both of them; it was plain there were no secrets between them now nor ever would be. They had an air of easy understanding that she envied.

"Um, yes. But he's right. I could even sell the business later if I didn't want to keep doing it."

"And having money and prestige would make it more acceptable for a Slytherin to have a Muggle-born girlfriend, right?" Ariadne asked pointedly.

Rowan mentally thanked Ariadne for her amazing talent for handing Rowan acceptable excuses and nodded her agreement. She didn't have to fake embarrassment.

Edgar then proceeded to grill Rowan for information on how much fiber could be gotten from one thestral, how much waste there was in the spinning and weaving process, and how much yarn by weight would be needed to make a cloak. He then forgot the other two girls entirely as he busily calculated how quickly he could breed thestrals, how much he'd have to charge for the wool to break even and all the other myriad variables that could make or break a farmer.

Ariadne watched him for a while with amusement, then busied herself studying Transfiguration with Rowan until bedtime.

In the Slytherin dormitory that same evening, the young Herman Boyle was dutifully writing a letter home. This was a hated chore, but his parents insisted on hearing from him from time to time. His folks had made it plain that requests for additional spending money had better be included as part of an actual letter with actual information about life at school, i.e. whom he was spending time with and how his studies were progressing.

Nowadays, his father was in hiding. Herman didn't know the details, but there had been some incident over the Christmas holiday which had compromised his father – who had lit out just hours ahead of the Ministry Aurors. Come to think of it, he had heard that Ravenclaw's name at home in connection with it. Rowan someone, the witch's name had been, was it the same girl?

He thought his mom would be glad to hear he'd hexed her, and she should know the girl was a Mudblood; they had thought she was a real witch.

When Herman had finished his letter, he "borrowed" an Owl Treat from a skinny first year and took it off to the owlery to send it off.

Post owls being magical creatures with a special mission in life, neither Severus Snape's nor Albus Dumbledore's wish that this particular bit of information remain obscure in any way slowed down the owl entrusted with Herman Boyle's letter. His mother read it over her morning tea. In her indignation, she sent a letter in turn to her husband. She did not know where he was hiding, but the owl post always got through. Her husband was delighted to be given a piece of information which the Dark Lord would certainly reward and wrote back his deepest thanks to his devoted Lucretia.

Not many days later, Dumbledore was once again waiting up in his office until he knew that his Potions master had returned safely from his latest meeting with Voldemort. On hearing the familiar footsteps on the stair, he set out tea and biscuits.

The door opened, and Severus Snape entered Dumbledore's office. He appeared unharmed to Dumbledore's eye, but clearly something troubled him.

"Welcome, Severus. Sit down."

Dumbledore waited a polite few moments while his spy settled in front of the fire and poured himself a cup of tea before questioning him.

"Did you learn anything significant?"

"I did, but not anything useful to the Order. It has come to Voldemort's attention that Rowan's parentage is Muggle."

Dumbledore became instantly concerned. "How did that come about? It is no secret among the students, but it seemed unlikely any of them should have a reason to mention it to their parents."

"There was a mishap on a staircase; a Slytherin student happened to see the ring I had given her. She then gave him a story that it had been her grandmother's. He found that amusing enough to mention at home. His father is a Death Eater, one of the two who came here the night of the Solstice. The father is now in hiding, but his wife is in communication with him and passed on her son's remarks. He unfortunately made the connection between this girl and my affianced bride."

"And he told Voldemort."

"Which of us would miss such an opportunity?"

"What was Voldemort's reaction?"

"He was incensed that you would force me to marry a Mudblood. He was most particularly outraged that I should be forced to suffer the indignity of a Muggle mother-in-law. I tried to point out that I would find it considerably more convenient to be able to hex the battle-axe with impunity."

"I surmise that this did not resign him to the situation?"

"Hardly; he thinks it is beneath his dignity, as I am in his service. He said he would have her killed, as a wedding gift to me."

"I feared that he would take it that way. We must move to protect her."

"That would be wise. I believe we should fetch her tonight, at once."

"Do you think they will move so quickly?"

"Yes; once the Dark Lord makes his wishes known, there is a scramble among his servants to please him without delay. It is likely they are even now secretly searching the Ministry records for her mother's address."

"Then we will have to fetch her by Apparition, or we will be too late. I will send for Miss Bourne; we will escort her off the grounds. You will have to get a fix on her home from her in order to Apparate directly into the house."

Snape privately did not think she would care for that process with the way that things now stood between them, but there was no help for it. He told the headmaster he would meet them on the road off the grounds and departed to his own office via the fireplace. Meanwhile, Dumbledore sent a house-elf with instructions to quietly fetch Miss Bourne.

Back in his chambers, Snape stowed away his mask and straightened away the things he had left out when he had departed to answer the Dark Lord's call. Snape was not looking forward to the coming encounter with Rowan. Hitherto, it had seemed possible that the breach between them might have been reparable, given time. Their argument had shown him that his hopes had been misguided. She was correct; his position as a Death Eater would forever be causing her new pain, and he could not prevent it. Not until the Dark Lord was permanently defeated – and who knew when that would be. Severus had long since resigned himself to an endless wait before that swaggering, insubordinate, undisciplined child, Potter, scraped together enough power and cleverness to release them all from the Dark Lord's rule.

Now it no longer mattered how long or short a time that was. Rowan might, amazingly enough, have overlooked that harm he had done her, but she would never forgive him for putting her mother in danger. It was time to go. Grimly, Snape threw on his cloak and headed out towards the grounds.

Back in Dumbledore's office, Rowan entered behind the house-elf who was escorting her. She had no clue why she had been wakened in the middle of the night by the tiny creature tugging at the sleeve of her nightgown. Dotty had only told her she must dress and go to the master's office right away and to bring her cloak. Sending Dotty to wait for her in the common room, she had thrown off her nightgown and flung on her rumpled clothes as quickly as she could. Now she looked to Dumbledore for an explanation.

"Miss Bourne, I apologize for interrupting your sleep so rudely. It was, however, entirely necessary, as I am in need of your assistance."

"Me? What can I do?" Rowan asked in amazement.

"Professor Snape must go to your house to bring your mother here immediately."

"Why now, in the middle of the night?" Rowan felt a rising alarm which the midnight summons itself had not generated. "Is she in danger?"

"We have just now learned that it is likely that your mother may have been put into some danger by your impending marriage to Professor Snape."

"My mother? Why?"

"Voldemort is not pleased that one of his servants should be endowed with Muggle relations. I think it would be best if we could bring her here tonight."

Rowan was glad of that; at Hogwarts she would certainly be safe. "For how long?"

"I'm not certain. We may have to keep her in hiding for some time. I have just the place in mind, but I will have to go and prepare the way. Meanwhile, I want her brought here to Hogwarts. Now, this evening. That is where we need your assistance."

"You need to know how to get to my mother's house?"

"Precisely. Professor Snape will Apparate there and bring her back."

"Professor Snape?" Rowan said faintly. "She's never met him. Isn't there someone less ... alarming ... to send?"

"Professor Snape is the best qualified to get her here safely."

"All right, then." Rowan accepted Dumbledore's judgment, but she still wasn't looking forward to the encounter. "What do you want me to do?"

"Come with me now. We will meet Professor Snape at the edge of the grounds. He will learn from you how to get there."

Even Rowan's long legs had a job keeping up with Albus Dumbledore's brisk stride. They reached the edge of the grounds. Darkness had fallen long past, and the night chill had set in. Rowan shivered in her cloak, then jumped as a tall black form suddenly loomed from the shadows.

"Professor Snape," Rowan said, recognizing his outline.

"Miss Bourne," he acknowledged in turn. "The Headmaster has explained to you what we are doing?"

"Yes. He said you are going to go bring my mother here."

"Very well then." Snape stood before her and put his hands on her shoulders. Their weight grounded Rowan, making the midnight adventure seem less unreal.

"I want you to think about your mother's house. Fix it firmly at the very front of your mind."

"You're going to read my mind?" Rowan cried, alarmed.

"It is the only way I can safely Apparate somewhere I have never seen. I promise, I will touch nothing but your memory of your home."

"Would I know if you did?"

Snape looked into her face, at the worry there. She would certainly have thoughts she wouldn't want him to see. Still, he would not lie to her. "Very likely not."

Snape saw some of the tension go from her face. It appeared that the plain truth was the right way to deal with her. He was glad to know she would not have preferred a sugar-coating; he was very bad at that.

"I guess there's no help for it anyway," Rowan answered. She thought hard about her childhood home – its location, its appearance and layout. "Go ahead."

Snape removed one hand from her shoulder to retrieve his wand from its concealed pocket. Gently he touched the tip to her forehead and murmured, "Legilimens," while looking into her eyes.

Rowan felt the barest touch of another mind on hers; then she saw many views of her home through her mind's eye: toddling through the living room on her first baby steps and into Daddy's arms, falling down the stairs, pinching her baby fingers in the front door, playing in the back yard, coming up the front walk on her way home from primary school, hauling her trunk out with her mother, on the way to King's Cross Station, helping her mother in the kitchen on her last holiday home. It all went past in a rush; then it was over and the other mind was gone.

Rowan blinked and looked up at Snape; his eyes were still on hers. It was hard to see his features in the deepening night, but she thought she saw a softer expression

than she had found there before.

"I should be back with your mother shortly. Wait here with Professor Dumbledore for us."

Rowan felt a whisper of air on her cheek and, without a sound, Snape was gone. She looked up at Dumbledore in startlement. "How did he go? I thought he would Apparate, but that makes such a noise."

Dumbledore's smile was apparent in his voice, even if Rowan couldn't see his face in the darkness. "Professor Snape is highly adept at Apparition. He can go so slowly, even over a long distance, that the air fills the space he was in, making no more sound than a whisper."

"That must be difficult; why bother?" Rowan asked Dumbledore. She herself had been happy to manage to Apparate with all her body parts intact. Silly details, like noise, were not something to worry about when you wanted to make sure your spleen continued to be an internal organ.

"There is a certain cachet, in some circles, to suit the sound of your departure to your mood." Dumbledore told her with some amusement. "On a more practical note, it is also much less likely to alert those around to your appearance if you aren't accompanied by a crack like a gunshot."

"Oh, I can see how that would be important to a spy."

"I wouldn't try it myself," Dumbledore told her. "I'd likely splinch myself from Scotland to Dover. Perhaps," Dumbledore added, apparently as an afterthought, "you can get Severus to teach you, when you are married."

Rowan blinked up at him and smiled wanly. That actually sounded pretty cool. What a pity she was unlikely to be getting those lessons.

Author's Notes: It is likely Dumbledore is not being entirely truthful with Rowan about not being able to Apparate silently. He does so at the beginning of Book 1. This is my explanation.

Laurel Bourne Arrives at Hogwarts

Chapter 21 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: In the intervening time since my last chapter, I have not inherited rights to Harry Potter.

Author's Notes: No chapter is complete without a big thank you to Verity Brown for critique and punctuation wrestling.

Chapter 21: Laurel Bourne Arrives at Hogwarts

Enveloped in darkness, Rowan and Dumbledore stood waiting on the road between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. It was fully spring now, but the night air was cold, especially near the lake. A narrow crescent moon, low in the sky, cast its reflection on the still, black water.

After a long and silent time, during which Rowan was certain she would explode from worry, she felt a brush of air. There stood Snape with Rowan's mother standing alongside, her arm through his, wearing only a familiar white, flowered flannel nightgown and a pair of house slippers.

"Oh!" She staggered a moment from the shock of Apparition, but Snape steadied her by the elbow so she didn't fall.

"Mom!" Rowan cried in relief and flung herself into her mother's arms.

"Rowan! I'm so glad you're safe."

"Of course I'm fine. I'm so glad you got out in time!" came Rowan's voice, muffled in her mother's hair.

"Me? I've been worried about you all year. So many terrible things have happened. Then your Professor Snape appeared and said he had to bring me to Hogwarts immediately; I thought something must have happened to you."

The last part of this speech was difficult to make out from the sound of Mrs. Bourne's teeth chattering. Snape slid his cloak off and placed it over her shoulders without comment. She wrapped it tightly around herself; her shivering slowed.

"Thank you."

Rowan observed Snape's gesture with gratitude, but it did not ease her panic at the prospect of explaining to her mother why she had been brought here. *Why, oh why, did I not demand that Voldemort just kill me? It would have been so much easier.*

"We should not linger here outside the grounds, Mrs. Bourne," Professor Dumbledore interrupted gently. "I know you have many questions and that there is much which Miss Bourne is eager to tell you, but I must ask you both to remain silent until we are within the wards. There will be ample time for explanations when we reach my office. Severus, please go ahead and have the house-elves prepare a guest room for Mrs. Bourne."

Snape gave a brief nod of acknowledgment and walked off into the shadows in the direction of the castle. Dumbledore took Mrs. Bourne's arm, lit his wand to light the way and led her up the road after Snape. Rowan looked around into the dark. She gave a shiver, took a grip on her wand and stuck close behind her mother and headmaster on the narrow road. Mrs. Bourne looked back to be certain that Rowan was close behind before she allowed Professor Dumbledore to lead her towards the castle.

They were only a short way off the school grounds and reached them quickly. In the daylight a telltale shimmer gave away the boundary to the sharp eye, but in the near darkness the only clue was Laurel's short gasp as she crossed it.

Ordinarily, a Muggle such as Mrs. Bourne would not see more than a decrepit old ruin, but escorted by Albus Dumbledore, the wards parted for her and she entered the

school grounds. The prospect from the village road was not so dramatic as that from the lake approach which was the first years' first sight, but even in the faint moonlight it was impressive. A few windows were lit here and there, mostly in the towers, enough to give a hint of the castle's size and complexity. Rowan heard her sigh of wonder and smiled; her mother had always wanted to see Hogwarts.

Although silence was no longer strictly necessary now that they were within the protective wards, Rowan was grateful for every minute in which she did not yet have to begin explaining things to her mother. She continued to follow quietly, just behind her mother and the headmaster, until they reached Dumbledore's office.

"Here we are, then," Dumbledore told them. "You must excuse me now for one moment. Please, sit down and make yourselves comfortable." Dumbledore turned away from them towards the darkened window. He lifted his wand, and a silvery, birdlike shape shot from it, which flew out into the night.

When it had gone, he turned back to the Bournes and got them settled into the squashy armchairs by the fireplace. A quick order to the kitchen saw the cold tea and stale biscuits still on the table replaced with fresh. The house-elf who appeared with the tea tray bowed after setting it down on a low table near the fireplace and addressed the headmaster.

"Tippy has prepared the third guestroom on the seventh floor for Professor Dumbledore's guest; there is a fire and fresh linens. I has removed the mirror, sir, as it is very rude to Muggles. Is there anything else Professor Dumbledore wishes?"

"No, Tippy, that will do excellently. Please have breakfast for two sent to the guestroom in the morning at 10 o'clock; thank you. You may go."

Tippy's ears perked with pleasure. She bowed her stumpy form gracefully, then vanished.

Dumbledore turned to Laurel and explained to her, "I think it would be unwise to let anyone for whom it is not strictly necessary learn of your presence here. That is why I took the liberty of ordering breakfast sent to your room; you should not appear in the Great Hall."

"What about that creature, Professor?" Laurel sounded curious. "What was it?"

"Tippy is a house-elf, Mrs. Bourne. There is little point in attempting to keep anything hidden from them, as they do all the housekeeping. In any case, they will keep their silence and my secrets; it is their nature."

Just then, a bright silver thing in the form of some strange sea creature flew in through the window and swam back and forth in front of Professor Dumbledore. Although Rowan could hear no words, Dumbledore appeared to understand its message and seemed pleased with it. When he dismissed the thing, it faded to nothingness.

Dumbledore turned and apologized to Rowan and Laurel, "I beg your pardon, but I must leave you here in my office for a little while. I trust Miss Bourne will be able to relate to you the circumstances which made it necessary to bring you here. When I return, I will escort you to your room and Miss Bourne to her dormitory."

Without waiting for a response, Dumbledore then departed through the fireplace. Rowan, wild with curiosity, strained to hear, but was not able to make out his destination.

Laurel Bourne looked on with widened eyes and an amazed expression as the flames went back from green to the more normal yellow-orange in the wake of the headmaster's departure. Rowan observed her mother's awe with a smile, remembering her own first days at Hogwarts. It was one thing to hear of such things, but quite another to sit in an enchanted castle and see them happen with your own eyes. The only magical person in the family, as far as they knew, was Rowan. For her first five years at Hogwarts, she had been underage. Since then, Rowan had continued to do things the Muggle way at home because she hadn't wanted her mother to feel alienated from her. The result was that her mother had seen very little magic before now.

Stalling for more time, Rowan poured out the tea and offered her mother the biscuit tray. With a smile, she offered a biscuit to Fawkes, who had begun stepping from side to side on his perch. While she performed these comfortingly normal tasks, her mind worked feverishly. She could not explain to her mother that Professor Snape was a still a spy. The public story was that he had been captured with her and placed under the Imperius Curse. The school governors and parents must not find out that he had actually regained Voldemort's trust and continued to pretend allegiance. While she trusted her mother implicitly, she had not been given permission to reveal this secret.

Laurel, appearing anxious and tired, did not wait for Rowan to begin, but asked her own questions.

"What happened, Rowan? Why was I brought here in the middle of the night? Professor Snape wouldn't say only that I had to come right away. I see you aren't hurt; what is going on?"

"You were in danger, at home, but now that you are here, everything is fine."

Rowan handed her mother the teacup and saucer. She saw some of the tension go out of her mother's face at the brush of their fingers. Her mother seemed to draw calm from the touch of her daughter, alive and safe before her.

"I don't understand. Why was your headmaster worried about me?"

"This is such a long story; I don't know where to start..."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Which beginning? When I started lusting for my Potions professor? When I started my term project? When he raped me? This is not going to go well Rowan thought in despair.

Fawkes finished gobbling his biscuit. He shook his feathers to de-crumbs and settle them, then gave Rowan a soft croon of reassurance.

"You got the handout the Ministry sent, right, Mom?"

"Do you mean the one about protecting against the Dark Forces? It seemed a bit ... melodramatic," Laurel commented. She had always had a healthy distrust of businesses or government offices which used fear to increase their influence. Rowan knew her mother probably thought that this had been one of those attempts.

"Yes, that one. They weren't kidding, Mom. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is really dangerous, and his servants they call themselves Death Eaters can really do all that stuff the handout talks about. Most of all, he wants to kill Dumbledore so he can get to Harry Potter. You know about him, right?"

"He's the Boy Who Lived, right? Although I hear now they are calling him the Chosen One. What has he got to do with you or me? He's a year younger than you, isn't he? I didn't think you even knew him."

"You-Know-Who has been trying to kill Potter since he was a baby something to do with a prophecy. Nobody knows what it says, but it has You-Know-Who worried. As long as Professor Dumbledore has been protecting Potter, he's been safe, so You-Know-Who wants to get Dumbledore out of the way in order to get Potter."

"I understand, Mrs. Galanis told me something about that. She was glad Ariadne is still here with Dumbledore. But, I don't understand, how are you mixed up in all that?"

"You-Know-Who found out about this potion which he thought would help him get rid of Dumbledore. It's a really Dark potion. That means you have to do something horrible to make it."

Laurel waited for Rowan to continue, then prompted, "What kind of something ...?"

"It depends on the potion. Usually kill someone or some creature, like a unicorn, and use their blood. It's the killing that gives the potion power."

"All those deaths after Christmas, was that to make some potion?"

"No, that was because You-Know-Who was angry. He tried to make this potion, but it didn't work, and he was furious."

Rowan paused and took a breath. "I started in the wrong place, I have to back up," she explained. After a moment she began again in a low voice.

"Years and years ago, Professor Snape used to be a Death Eater. I don't know why, but he changed his mind. You can't quit the Death Eaters, not and live, so instead, he became Dumbledore's spy. Professor Dumbledore gave him the Potions job at Hogwarts, I guess so he could get his reports easily. Then You-Know-Who disappeared, and all anyone knew was that Snape was the Potions master here. He really is a genius at Potions," Rowan added.

Laurel leaned back into the armchair and waited in silence, with widened eyes, her tea forgotten.

"A few months ago, You-Know-Who came across an old recipe for a potion called Aversion Serum. It would make Professor Dumbledore's friends turn against him. Twisting the will, turning loyalties, that is Dark magic. To make it though, he had to ..." Rowan faltered, "hurt someone."

"He was angry that Professor Snape hadn't returned to him with the others. He sent a couple of Death Eaters who had children here at Hogwarts to find Professor Snape and bring him back, to make him help with the potion. I was in his office when they came; I had a question about my term project. They took me, too."

"No!" Laurel gasped softly, but Rowan continued.

"When we got there, You-Know-Who cast the Imperius Curse on Professor Snape. That's a kind of mind-control spell. He forced Professor Snape to ... made him ..." Rowan trailed off.

And here we are. What can I possibly tell her? Rowan knew her mom would feel terrible that she could not have protected her daughter. She would happily have spared her mother this, keeping her silence until her dying day, but none of the subsequent events made any sense without it. Still, the words would not come.

Softly, without attracting either woman's attention, Fawkes began a low humming. Rowan felt her cares lift just a little. Her mother looked less afraid, but suddenly sad.

"He had to hurt you," Laurel filled in for her. "Oh, Rowan."

Laurel's face told Rowan that she understood what Rowan couldn't find the words to say. Rowan slid from her seat to her knees and laid her head in her mother's lap. Laurel abandoned her tea, leaned over and held her daughter.

"It ... wasn't as bad as it might have been. And it's kind of complicated."

Laurel stroked her daughter's hair. Rowan, her face buried in her mother's lap, strengthened by the softly crooned phoenix song, found it a little easier to speak.

"I'm a pretty good Potions student, so I figured out what You-Know-Who wanted. I didn't know what potion he was making, but I guessed what ingredient he needed, and I fixed it so it wouldn't work."

Rowan said this with some pride. It was no small thing to have ruined one of Voldemort's plans. Knowing she had done that had gone a long way towards helping Rowan feel at peace with what had happened. She hoped it could help her mother too.

"How could you do that?"

"It's kind of hard to explain. I guess I just knew Professor Snape wouldn't have hurt me if he could have helped it. I trusted him, and I ... accepted it." Rowan had no intention of going into the details. In unconscious imitation of her professor, she slipped into a lecturing tone that let her distance herself from what she had to say.

"Dark Magic works on fear and pain and hate. It is weakened by trust, sacrifice, or love. In this case since I was able to be ... willing, even though I didn't have any choice, that meant that the ... ingredient ... wasn't potent. They made the potion, and it looked like it was supposed to, but it was useless and a good thing too. Dumbledore came crashing in with a bunch of Aurors to rescue the both of us, and the Death Eaters threw the potion right on him. Since it didn't work, the Aurors were able to grab us and get us back to the castle before You-Know-Who figured out the Aversion Serum hadn't worked."

Rowan sat back on her heels and looked up at her mother. There were fine tracks of tears on her mother's cheeks, but she looked proud. Laurel took Rowan's hands and held them tightly in her own.

"Go on."

"When we got back to the castle, I was taken to the hospital wing. The next morning I found out that Professor Snape had been arrested and taken to the Ministry. I explained to Professor Dumbledore what had happened, and, well, I had to testify at the trial. I told them that the professor had been under the Imperius Curse, and Dumbledore told them the potion hadn't worked, so Professor Snape was found not guilty."

Rowan stopped again for thought. As much as she wanted to rail at Snape for everything that had happened to her, she couldn't stand the idea that her mother would hate him for it. She was glad she couldn't tell her mother that he was still a spy and might yet have to do such things.

Laurel reached forward and tucked back a lock of Rowan's hair which had dropped forward onto her face. "I'm proud of you, Rowan. It must have been hard to stand up for him after what he did to you even if he couldn't help it."

"Thanks, Mum," Rowan answered gravely, but she blushed whether from the praise or her own uncomfortable awareness of the elisions in her story, she wasn't sure. She disentangled herself from her mother, stood, and paced a little to unwind her feelings.

Laurel looked up at her from the armchair, she sat up straighter and placed her hands on the chair arms.

"Is this why you are in danger? Is this wizard angry at what you did?"

"Something like that, but it's not only me. He's after you, too. That's why you had to come here."

"Me? But I'm not part of any of this," Laurel waved her hand vaguely at her surroundings. "I can't do magic; why should he care about me?"

"He, You-Know-Who, is ... I'd say he's insane, but that's not far enough. He's not even really human anymore. His face looks like a snake, and his eyes..." Rowan shuddered and Laurel's eyes widened.

"I don't think anyone normal can really understand why he does anything. You-Know-Who and his followers are big into blood purity. They don't approve of people like me, magical kids born into Muggle families. They don't think we should be allowed into their world. They don't think 'pureblood' wizards should marry us. You-Know-Who built up his power and his following by promising to keep the Wizarding world clean from my kind."

"You're kind is worth a hundred of them, any day!" Laurel said angrily.

"You're my mother; that's what you are supposed to say," Rowan said with a small smile. "Most witches and wizards don't care about blood. It's just a few, but they can make big trouble."

Rowan turned and gazed into the fire. The flames were bright orange; no hope of being interrupted there.

"There's more. It turns out there were ... consequences ... to my speaking at the trial. I hadn't realized this, but the magical world is pretty old-fashioned about a lot of things."

"Things like..."

"Women, and sex, and talking about it in public."

"Oh. Oh, dear."

"Exactly. Professor Dumbledore got the Ministry to seal the records until the end of term so I could finish school in peace. When the school year is over, though, it gets unsealed, and there is going to be a terrific scandal. He warned me that I probably wouldn't be able to get a job. He apologized; he said he thought I'd understood what would happen, but, of course, I didn't and by then it was too late. I don't know what I could have done differently anyway."

"Rowan! Isn't there anything you can do? You had your heart set on a research career. Ugh, and that was a government job; those are the worst for stupid rules."

"Professor Snape offered to marry me. Professor Dumbledore said if I married, the scandal would blow over and in a year or so I'd be able to try for that job."

"Marry? Professor Snape?" Laurel looked thoroughly horrified.

"But now it looks like that isn't necessary," Rowan continued quickly. "Remember that term project I was working on? The reason I was in Professor Snape's office that day? Well, I finished it. I found a process for making invisibility fabric for invisibility cloaks. No one knows how to make them anymore, and they're really expensive." Rowan paused for a moment and continued shyly "Professor Snape told me if I go into business making them, no one could afford to snub me. I could do whatever I want."

"So, what happens now?"

"I don't know," Rowan cried. Now, overwrought from reliving the entire story and the release of finally being able to reveal it to someone, she lost her battle for self-control. She knelt back onto the floor and again buried her head into her mother's lap. Her mother just stroked her hair to the slow rhythm of the phoenix's song until her sobbing subsided into hiccups and finally stopped.

The Dark Mark

Chapter 22 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: Rowan, her mother, and her troubles are mine. Her world is only borrowed, but she doesn't have to know that.

Author's Notes: Thanks, as always, to my endlessly patient beta, Verity. Thanks also to my endlessly patient readers. Thank you for sticking with me and for reviewing!

Chapter 22: The Dark Mark

A fire burned merrily on the kitchen hearth of a well-kept and comfortable old farmhouse near the village of Tideswell. The kitchen was equipped with an icebox and stove ("Boyle & Hoar's Kitchen Magic: let our charmed equipment heat your cauldron and frost your pumpkin, the easy, modern way.") but the owners had kept the old hearth in working order through all renovations. A peek into the perfectly ordered parlor would show that the inhabitants rarely sat there, preferring the homey comfort of the well worn kitchen table and chairs.

Professor Dumbledore sat in one of those chairs, deep in conversation with the owner of the farm. This worthy man wore a nightcap and a dressing gown over a plaid flannel nightshirt. He looked to be in his mid forties and had an honest, weathered face. Two empty cups of tea, a plate of crumbs and an air of agreement between the two wizards suggested that their business together was very nearly concluded.

A sharp crack, as of a hasty Apparition, sounded from the yard outside, startling them from their conversation. Professor Dumbledore did not appear surprised, but Adrian Bracken jumped up and opened the outside door, which led into the yard, to investigate. He recognized the rather excitable man outside and drew him into the kitchen, shutting the door behind him. The visitor was wearing a violet top hat, which was threatening to topple right off his head in his obvious distress.

Dumbledore spoke first from his seat at the table. "Diggle, you have news to report? Did they come?"

"You were spot on, Professor," Dedalus Diggle replied quickly. "They came all right. I was there maybe an hour when I heard several other people pop in close by. I cast a concealment charm, and I went over to where the noise came from. Sure enough, it was a clot of Death Eaters; they were wearing robes and masks, the cowards. I stayed hidden and only watched, just like you told me to."

Adrian drew up another chair for Diggle, but he was too agitated to sit. Adrian gave up, sat back in his own chair and listened to Diggle's report.

"I followed them down the street. They were going slowly, checking the numbers on the houses. After a few blocks, they must have found the one they were looking for, because they stopped and went in."

"And then? What did they do?" Dumbledore prodded.

"I'm wishing now I had disobeyed orders and done something to stop them," Dedalus responded, with a heavy sigh. "They came out again after only a little while, set the Mark over the house and torched it by wand-fire. The Muggle firemen came in their trucks, but of course they couldn't put it out. The house burned. They said a woman died inside. When Magical Law Enforcement started popping in, I Disapparated in the hubbub," Diggle reported. He removed his hat and lowered his eyes, grieved for the stranger he'd been ordered to watch.

"I am sorry for your distress, Dedalus, but it is very well that you did exactly as instructed and did not interfere. It is extremely important that Voldemor~~thears~~ that the lady in question is dead," Dumbledore told him with a pointed look. No more was said, but Diggle's shoulders straightened a touch and he met Dumbledore's eye.

"Thank you, sir. Is there anything else you need from me tonight?"

"Not tonight, Dedalus. You have done an excellent job. I will convey your report to the rest of the Order. Go home, and try to get some sleep."

"Good night then, sir." Diggle straightened his hat, nodded to the owner of the house and departed the way he had come. After he had gone, Dumbledore sat back in his seat at the table and heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

"That went as well as I'd hoped. The way looks clear now."

"You'll be bringing her soon, then?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, I should think. She will need some time to rest, and matters will have to be explained to her."

"We'll be ready here. Does my nephew know?"

"No, but he might well recognize her, so you may tell him when he comes home."

Adrian Bracken nodded and stood when the headmaster started to rise. He shook Dumbledore's hand, then held the pot of Floo powder for him. Professor Dumbledore cast a handful into the fire, said "Hogwarts, my office," and stepped into the flames.

The change in light from yellow to green drew Laurel and Rowan's attention to the fireplace. They both stood as Professor Dumbledore emerged and straightened his hat.

"Well, then," Professor Dumbledore said, addressing Rowan, "I trust that you and Mrs. Bourne have made good use of the time while I have been gone?"

Rowan nodded faintly and Laurel answered for her, "Rowan has been explaining to me all that has happened."

"I am very glad to hear it. Mrs. Bourne, you have every right to be proud of your daughter. She has shown courage and clear thinking, despite her youth, that few could boast of."

"Thank you, Professor, but ... what happens now? It would appear that Rowan is still in a very difficult position and apparently I am also in danger. I have no magic; how can I protect either of us?"

"I and my associates will not let you be harmed," Dumbledore told her. He walked around and sat at his desk with a weary sigh before continuing.

"Things should not have come to this pass, Mrs. Bourne. I feel myself to blame; if I had not underestimated both our enemy's cunning and Miss Bourne's courage, we would not be where we are. I have already given Professor Snape my word that I would see Miss Bourne safe, and now I give it to you."

"You will watch out for Rowan?"

"Yes. And for yourself as well, Mrs. Bourne."

"We can't go back home, can we? When those – what are they, Death Eaters? – find me missing, they'll keep looking, won't they?"

Dumbledore answered her gravely, "No, you cannot go back home. A group of Death Eaters arrived at your house, not long after you left it. They burned the house, believing you in it, thanks to an illusion left by Professor Snape. By now, they will have reported your death to their Master."

Laurel sat abruptly back down. "My home, burned?"

Rowan knelt at her mother's side and put her arms around her. She looked up at Dumbledore, worry on her face.

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Bourne. The Death Eaters have little regard for property which is not theirs. I am very grateful to Professor Snape for getting you away in time."

Laurel sat back and digested this in silence. Rowan stayed where she was, holding on to her mother. She flashed back to the memories of her home and her childhood which Professor Snape had seen. Her mother had figured in most of them – she was surely remembering many of those same scenes now. It had been months since Rowan had been back home, but it was hard to believe that it was now gone.

After a time, Laurel appeared to recover herself. Her usual response to any crisis was to take stock and evaluate the situation, and tonight was no different.

"You are sure they were fooled, Professor Dumbledore? Wouldn't they check? What if You-Know-Who finds out it was a mistake?"

"Voldemort's tactics do not yield the best class of minion," Dumbledore told them, with a hint of a smile. "He has taught them, painfully, that reporting failure is a bad idea. Since he can detect lies, they much prefer not to know about anything that might have gone wrong. Furthermore," he added more seriously, "he would not have wasted his most trusted followers on a task so trivial as killing a single female Muggle."

Laurel looked somewhat offended at being considered trivial by anyone. In the normal order of things, she was anything but.

"I have friends, a job. People are depending on me!"

"Mrs. Bourne, I am very sorry, but they too will have to believe that you have died in the fire – and it is utterly necessary for your safety that they do."

Laurel looked completely at a loss. She had been a busy woman in the last few years; with her husband dead and her daughter away at school, she had thrown herself into her job and also into volunteering at a local hospital and at her library. She made a soft sound of distress and leaned back into her chair, closing her eyes.

"You will have to go into hiding, Mrs. Bourne," Dumbledore told her. "The fewer people who know you are still alive, the safer. I have arranged for you to stay with a wizarding family. One I know to be completely trustworthy. They will make you welcome and cover for your presence."

Rowan, who had had never seen her mother unsure of what to do in any crisis, now saw her cast adrift; the sight pained her. She would have to leave everything she knew and enter a world which must seem very strange. Rowan was sympathetic; she had done the same, nearly seven years ago – but she at least had had magic of her own; she belonged in this world. What would her mother do?

She realized, too, that her mother's absence would leave quite a gap in her community. Voldemort might not have succeeded in killing her, but he had caused more pain and damage than he knew.

Laurel's concern, however, was mostly for her daughter. "What about Rowan? What will happen to her?"

"She must stay here to finish school," Dumbledore told her with certainty, "and, incidentally, to be seen to grieve for your 'death.' After Leaving, she may decide what she wants to do. I shall do my best to assist her. If she wishes to join you in hiding, I shall arrange for that as well."

"And, if she doesn't hide? What will she do?"

"Professor Snape's idea that she could become a maker of Invisibility Cloaks is an excellent one. It will make her of strategic importance to the Ministry, ensuring that they

are as concerned for her safety as we are."

Laurel, reassured somewhat, seemed to gather herself together. She rose from her chair and stood in front of Professor Dumbledore's desk. She glanced at Rowan, who also stood.

"Professor, it is terribly late. Don't you think Rowan should be getting back to her dorm?"

Dumbledore took the hint. "Yes, of course. Miss Bourne, will you be all right walking back by yourself?"

Rowan had realized at once that her mother wished to speak to Professor Dumbledore alone. From the tone of her mother's voice, Rowan decided she would be wise to comply.

"I'll be fine, Professor. Good night, Mom."

"Good night, Rowan." Laurel kissed her daughter and gave her a fierce hug.

Dumbledore walked her to the door. "You should try to sleep. Tomorrow, we must all behave as if you have lost your mother. When the news comes officially, I will send Flitwick for you. We allow those who have suffered losses some privacy in the Infirmary while the rest of the students learn the news. It is terrible that such a thing can happen so frequently that we have a standard procedure," he sighed heavily, "but it will assist us now."

"I will bring you to your mother in time for you to share breakfast with her before she leaves."

"I understand. Thank you, Professor."

When Rowan had left and closed the door behind her, Laurel turned to Professor Dumbledore and said, "Professor, there are some things I still don't understand."

Professor Dumbledore was expecting her questions. "Yes, of course."

"You appear to know a great deal about what this wizard and his followers are up to. You were able to rescue Rowan so quickly after she was kidnapped, and you brought me out in what was certainly the nick of time. What is going on?"

"You are very perceptive, Mrs. Bourne. The fact of the matter is that Professor Snape is still my spy in Voldemort's camp. Miss Bourne was right to conceal what she was told in confidence, but I believe you should know."

"Rowan said that this wizard ... Voldemort? I don't think I've ever heard his name before. She said he sent men into the school after Professor Snape."

"Never fear to name a thing," Dumbledore told her. "Your own fear lessens you. It limits your freedom, and it gives power to what you fear."

"After Professor Snape's report on Voldemort's plans, I ordered him to cease his spying and remain at Hogwarts. I believe Voldemort suspected this, and he sent his Death Eaters here to get him."

"It should not have been possible, except I overlooked a weakness in the castle's defenses. Parents of students are permitted to come here, to speak with teachers or visit their children."

"And Rowan was in his office when they came," Laurel stated, shoulders stiff.

"That is correct, on a matter of her term project."

Laurel took a deep breath and glared at Professor Dumbledore. "And they took her too. She was under your protection. How could you let something like that happen to a student? To *my* daughter?"

"It happened so quickly," he told her, sighing heavily. "Professor Snape had no opportunity to fight them. These Death Eaters believed that Professor Snape had chosen Miss Bourne and had arranged for her to be there. When they appeared before Voldemort, Severus recognized their mistake and used it to advantage."

"Wait – did Voldemort know he was disloyal, or not?"

"He did not know for certain, and the circumstances allowed Severus to continue to deceive him."

"But then why did Voldemort use that ... what was it? Imperius Curse?"

"He did not. That was a story which I suggested to Miss Bourne and which she has agreed to maintain."

Now Laurel looked shocked. "What? Why would you suggest such a thing? Why should she go along with it?"

Dumbledore rose from his chair and walked around the desk to stand before Laurel's accusing glare and answer her.

"Professor Snape believed that Miss Bourne would be killed when they had no further use for her. He has had, after all, some years of experience in observing them. There have been others whom ... he could not help. He hoped that if he was able to convince Voldemort of his loyalty, he could induce Voldemort to spare her life."

"Mrs. Bourne, I trust Severus, and I know that nothing less than the belief she would otherwise have been killed would have induced him to harm her so. I know it may be very difficult, but can you believe that?"

Laurel lowered her eyes and envisioned the stern, spare man who had suddenly appeared in her house earlier that night. He had looked frightening, had offered no reassurances, had, indeed, spoken barely a handful of words to her. Yet she had gone with him when he asked her, without hesitation. Why?

She started to blurt "Yes," but caught herself. "Maybe. But if you believe what he did was right, why lie about it?"

"It was too late to conceal what had happened from the Ministry. Professor Snape had to go to trial, and it was imperative that he be acquitted. Having paid so dearly to regain Voldemort's trust, that price could not be wasted. An acceptable excuse was needed. Others, far more guilty, had claimed Imperius and been proved false, but if Miss Bourne spoke for him, the court would believe her."

"You said that your Professor Snape has again gone back to spying on this Voldemort. Do you mean to tell me, that you used my daughter to make that possible?"

Dumbledore answered her without flinching. "I did."

Laurel whirled around and walked away from Dumbledore. Distraught, she looked everywhere except at him – at the spindly tables, the shiny instruments, the desk, the windows.

She was so angry that she saw the entire office through a red mist. Fawkes disappeared entirely into the color; she no longer heard his soft crooning. Only a few small objects shone brightly enough to penetrate the haze and attract her attention. Without thinking, she grabbed one and hurled it with all her strength at the wall.

One of the portraits *why did Dumbledore have a roomful of portraits of sleeping people?* almost seemed to flinch when the shining glass sphere shattered against the wall

right next to its frame.

Dumbledore, making no comment, stepped back out of the way.

Feeling slightly better, Laurel grabbed another and did it again. This time she actually struck a portrait frame and knocked a chip off the corner. The figure in the painting jumped up, now wide awake. Glaring at her, he walked out the side to reappear in his neighbor's picture. The lady in that frame also woke and, while Laurel watched them, dumbfounded, the two figures began an animated conversation which seemed to revolve around Laurel herself; it did not sound complimentary.

Startled back to her senses, Laurel looked down at the third bright and fragile object she had picked up, which she still held in her hand. There was something in it like a top which glinted but did not move. She looked up from the shiny ball to Professor Dumbledore, suddenly aware of the impropriety of smashing up his office, no matter how justified her anger.

"That is quite all right, Mrs. Bourne," he told her gently. "If your feelings have been relieved, then it was entirely worth some small destruction. I assure you, you are not the first visitor in my office to wish to throw things at me, nor even the only one to have done so."

Feeling slightly shamed by his mild tone, Laurel put down the little ball. What use was throwing things? She needed help and she needed information; venting her anger at the headmaster would gain her neither.

"I apologize for losing my temper."

"Do not be embarrassed; it is entirely understandable. You are quite right to be angry, and if destroying anything of mine is of any help to you, you are more than welcome to continue."

Laurel laughed awkwardly and said, "No, thank you. I'm quite done."

"Very well, then. Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"There is so much I don't understand, but I don't know where to begin asking, and I'm very tired."

"Would you like to go to your room now?"

"Yes, thank you." She looked down at herself and suddenly realized that this entire interview had taken place with her wearing nothing but a blue-flowered nightgown and fuzzy blue slippers. "At least I'm already dressed for it."

Dumbledore smiled at her, but did not in any way indicate that she was not dressed entirely appropriately for the occasion. "I daresay you are of a size with Miss Bourne; she can lend you something fresh to wear tomorrow."

With that, Dumbledore ushered her down the spiraling staircase and escorted her to her room.

Laurel found it surprisingly comfortable-looking after the drafty halls and more formal public spaces. There was a cozy fire in the fireplace and the bed was turned down, ready to climb into. There was no mirror, *that's right, that elf thing said she'd taken it down*, but Laurel supposed she didn't really want to see herself right now anyway.

Laurel blew out the candle and sat watching the fire numbly for a while before she climbed into bed and fell into an exhausted slumber.

Meanwhile, Back With Our Heroes...

Chapter 23 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Disclaimer: I Dis anyone who claims I own Harry Potter.

Author's Notes: With this chapter, TPP is now caught up to the other archives where I originally posted this WIP. I'm sure you are relieved to know that there is now more coming; I've worked the story out to the end.

Super thanks to my most truthful beta, Verity Brown.

Chapter 23: Meanwhile, Back With Our Heroes...

At the headmaster's request, Severus strode ahead towards the castle. Relieved to have avoided the unpleasant scene which was certain to ensue between Miss Bourne's mother and the headmaster, he hurried on ahead, ignoring the chill.

Upon entering the castle, Severus went first to the kitchens to pass on Dumbledore's request for a guest room. That duty discharged, he returned gratefully to his own quarters.

The Heads of House each had a small suite of rooms, comprised of a bedroom, sitting room with a fireplace and private bath. Severus accepted the luxury as his due for putting up with an entire House full of Slytherins getting up to no good at all hours of the day and night.

Severus started a fire in the fireplace with a quick gesture, crossed to a cabinet where he picked up an empty glass and bottle of Ogden's, and then eased himself into his favorite chair in front of the hearth.

What a night it had been! Early in the evening, as soon as he could have been expected to be free of his duties, he'd been called to the Dark Lord. He had then spent half the night listening to *Him* rant on about Severus's Mudblood intended and her Muggle mother.

Severus had known that the headmaster would need to be informed of this development and that he would be impelled to take action immediately. What he had not known

was that Albus would send him personally to pick up Rowan's mother.

You would think, he said to himself, while pouring two fingers of firewhisky into the glass, that after catering to the whims of a Dark wizard for so long one Muggle woman couldn't possibly hold any terror for me.

So, why had he suddenly felt like he'd swallowed an entire nestful of tiny snakes when Albus told him he must go?

Well, for one thing, he'd been afraid she would become hysterical when an ugly stranger suddenly appeared in her living room. He could hardly Stupefy the woman, no matter how foolishly she behaved; Rowan would have gone spare if he'd popped in holding her mother's unconscious body in his arms.

In the event, though, his fears had been groundless. Mrs. Bourne had turned out to be an entirely sensible woman. A rarity and a gem, she had neither made an unpleasant scene, nor insisted on packing any useless fripperies. He had told her she must go, and as soon as he had set the illusion, she had left with him.

By now, Mrs. Bourne must know everything. Rowan would not have concealed his part in her woes; her mother would not trust him so again.

He drank from his glass and grimaced into the fire. It might not matter how Rowan's mother felt about him; he was unlikely ever to see her again. He did not know where Dumbledore intended to hide her, and Rowan would surely take her release from the necessity of marrying him gladly and go as far from him as possible.

Well, she was a Ravenclaw, wasn't she? She was certainly not stupid enough to link herself with him, if she could avoid it.

Severus frowned as he stared into the fireplace, then took a drink from his glass.

What woman with a choice would link herself with him, bound as he was to two masters? He had indentured himself for life when he followed Bella's lead and took the Dark Mark. He had still been a student then, full of his own genius, with no idea how many kinds of an idiot he was being.

It had taken years before he had seen how empty the Dark Lord's promises were, how everything he touched became corrupted.

When that realization had finally come, he had feared it was too late to ever free himself. Dumbledore had helped him find a way to repay the debt, and he had done as Albus asked. Fifteen years later, he was still doing so, but the stain was not yet gone.

Sometimes he felt as if he were no better off than his poor Muggle grandfather. His father's father had spent his entire life working himself to a thin, bitter shadow, raising a thin, bitter son and owing an ever larger share of his meager paycheck to the mill for rent on the little house they lived in and for the rot they were forced to buy at the Tommy store. His own father had been hardly better off.

Then that wondrous day had come. A letter, handwritten in green ink and addressed to Severus Snape, had been left on the doorstep, and everything had changed!

After he'd read the letter, his mother had told him the truth about herself and about him. Suddenly, he'd envisioned a bright new future for himself. Severus was going to be different from his father—he was a wizard! He would have power, command respect! No living in a tiny hovel and wearing threadbare, old clothes for him!

His dreams had lasted until his arrival at Hogwarts. His ambition had gotten him sorted into Slytherin House. There, he had learned that nothing had changed—he was still second class to all his peers. The bile that had risen in him at that discovery had threatened to choke him.

Now, close to thirty years later, where was he? He owed his life, his very soul, to Albus Dumbledore. Although Severus knew it was kindly meant, better than he deserved, he felt as trapped as his grandfather had been. It did not matter that he only feigned allegiance and was working to bring the madman down. Each time he answered the Dark Lord's call and submitted to his service, he felt his debt mount.

He had thought that in marrying Rowan, he might actually have been able to buy back some of that debt. Just this once, he could stand up and protect someone, take her under his wing and keep her safe. For a brief while, he had even believed she might want him, too—to be a real wife to him. Then, she had come to her senses, and so, necessarily, had he.

Severus did not believe in any almighty power; he only believed he owed Albus all that he could give and more. His was the endless duty and never the reward. Only, for one brief moment and dimly, as if through a smoked glass, he had glimpsed the possibility that such a mercy could exist.

Severus's eyes focused back on the flames in front of him. It was late, but he should speak to Albus and find out what had been done about Mrs. Bourne before he slept. He stood, put the bottle away, and left the glass on the table for a house-elf to clean.

Checking that his coat was straight, he walked up the stairs to the headmaster's office.

After leaving her mother and the headmaster to their discussion, Rowan closed the door softly behind her and headed down the stairs. She nearly jumped out of her skin when a shadow detached itself from the wall at the bottom and addressed her.

"Miss Bourne."

"Professor Snape!" Rowan cried.

"Sshhh," he hissed. Taking her arm, he guided her firmly away from the base of the stairs.

"Why are you here?" she asked, more quietly.

"I was going to see the headmaster, but I did not wish to interrupt."

"I think he'll be a little while, my mother wanted to speak with him alone," Rowan told him, glancing nervously back at the guardian gargoyle. "I'm going back to my dorm."

"In that case, I shall escort you; perhaps they will be through by the time I get back here."

He turned and started towards the stairs, but the touch of Rowan's hand on his elbow checked him. He turned back with a questioning expression.

Rowan had been wishing to speak with him and hadn't expected to have the chance so soon. There was a lot she wanted to say, but it was all tangled up in her head, and Snape was looking impatient. She settled on a simple, "Thank you," and waited to see his reaction.

"It is no trouble," he responded, "since I must wait anyway. Furthermore," he asserted, "students shouldn't be wandering around alone at this hour." He made as if to usher her along, but Rowan knew he had misunderstood and tried again.

"No, Professor. I meant, thank you for rescuing my mother. We found out a little while ago that you brought her just in the nick of time."

Snape drew himself up stiffly. Not usually slow to accept gratitude, this time he did not welcome it. "Your mother would have been in no danger, if not for me," he told her finally, his discomfort obvious.

Rowan hesitated, uncertain what more to say; he looked so very prickly. "I'm still glad she's here safe. And I'm glad not to be walking back to Ravenclaw alone."

He nodded acknowledgement, relaxing slightly. "Let us go, then."

Rowan picked up her nightgown from over the chair where she had tossed it earlier that night and changed quietly into it. She climbed into bed, undoing the bronze tiebacks and drawing the blue velvet curtains shut. There couldn't be more than a couple of hours remaining till dawn; expecting Flitwick to wake her wouldn't help her get to sleep. Rowan sighed and fluffed her pillows, then lay down flat on her back.

Twenty minutes later, Rowan's eyes still stared up into the darkness. It was becoming obvious that trying to sleep was useless. After a few more minutes she gave up the attempt and quietly climbed back out of bed. The clock read nearly three a.m.; no wonder it was so cold in the dorm.

She couldn't sleep, and she couldn't go anywhere. She was far too upset to read. There was only one thing to do till dawn. She slid her feet into her slippers, stood and slipped on a robe, then fished around for her knitting and crept down to the deserted common room.

Rowan built up the fire in the fireplace, dragged her favorite comfy chair and an afghan into the warm circle in front of it, and settled herself in with her knitting. It felt a little like those days over the winter hols, when she had had the entire Ravenclaw tower practically to herself.

She thought she'd been worried and upset then, but for all her stewing, it had never occurred to her to fear for her mother's safety. She'd been so wrapped up in her own pain and grief, and her fear for Professor Snape, that she hadn't paid attention to anything else. The *Daily Prophet* stories and the bereaved and missing students should have warned her.

Rowan had a great deal to think about and was grateful for the solitude. She had a sense that something had changed within her tonight, but she did not know what. She only knew she felt different somehow than when she had first lain down to sleep that night, now many hours ago.

She settled herself to wait out the remainder of the night. She pulled up her feet and sat cross-legged in the chair, with her legs tucked under the afghan, and pulled her long-neglected knitting from the bag.

Now, that it was spring she wasn't especially motivated to have the new winter socks she had started months before, but she didn't want to have to think about a new project; she only wanted the soothing peace that knitting on something easy and familiar could bring. She picked up the half-formed sock, untangled the ball of yarn from the five double-pointed needles, and set it to rights. *How long has it been since I've touched this? How long has it been since I knitted anything?* Rowan wondered to herself as she counted the stitches on the needles. Two had slipped off the needles and had started to ladder from the bag being kicked around her dorm the last few months.

Brow wrinkled briefly in concentration, Rowan picked up and re-knit the dropped stitches. When it was sorted, she slipped the yarn over her finger and began deftly forming stitches. Now, only her hands were needed for the task, and her mind was free to return to her troubles. The gentle rhythm of her knitting took the edge off of grief and worry and let her examine her own soul most effectively.

Hours before, the evening had started off normally: she had done her homework with her friends in the common room and then gone to bed. She had lain awake for the usual restless period worrying about her life and then dropped off to sleep.

She had been awakened, softly, from a dream in which she had been floating alone in a small boat on the lake. She had opened her eyes to see a house-elf holding a lit candle. The creature had apologized for disturbing her and told her she was summoned to the headmaster's office. Still shaking the image of the lake from her head as she followed the little elf through the castle, Rowan thought that the night had felt no more real than her dream.

When she had seen Professor Snape waiting with Professor Dumbledore, she had felt as if a great swell had just come under the boat from her dream, tipping her into the icy water.

She had not wanted to see Snape just then. She was still confused, torn between relief that she would not have to marry him and hurt that he had maneuvered her so neatly to get out of it. If she had known that she would be required to allow him into her mind, she would have told that elf to sod off.

No, Rowan decided. With her mother in danger, she couldn't have backed out.

She had been distrustful and frightened, but the touch of his mind had not been distasteful. He had been as good as his word and had not rummaged, but allowed her concentration to guide his touch. He had said she would likely not know if he probed further, but she felt entirely certain that he had not.

What had he thought of all those scenes of Muggle life? Rowan smiled to herself, remembering again the memories that had risen up in her mind at his touch. Scenes so intimately tied to her memory of her home that they all drifted to the surface just because she had been concentrating on it. With a pang, Rowan remembered that that home was gone forever.

She lowered her hands, still wrapped in the yarn, to her lap and let her eyes close. A tear ran down her cheek, leaving a warm track which turned cold even before the drop splashed onto her wrist.

She gave a great sniff, then twisted around to dry her cheek on her shoulder without untying her hands from the needles. She would not sink into pathos now, no matter how much she deserved to. With determination she lifted her knitting again and counted stitches 'aloud' in her mind as she worked them so that the sound filled her mind, precluding other thoughts and distracting her until her composure returned.

From fifth year, when a witch could reasonably be expected to do such things magically, if she did them at all, Rowan had been teased about her hand knitting. Tiring of the jibes finally one day, she had taken out two sets of needles and balls of yarn. She had picked up one set of five needles in her hands and had spelled the other set to working in midair next to her, in perfect syncopation to the movements of the needles in her hands. She had done this for four nights straight and had finished both the left and right socks of the pair simultaneously. Having proved her point, she had done it the way she preferred from then on.

There had been some trouble with her friend, Hermione, after that story had gotten around, some matter about wanting hats for house-elves. Rowan eventually convinced her that her time was already committed to projects for her family and friends, and she couldn't take on any more but the friendship had suffered.

Smiling to herself, Rowan tried to imagine herself knitting for Severus Snape. What would he like? Certainly not mittens! Socks, or a muffler in plain black. Not that she was likely to be taking up any such project!

And there, she realized, her thoughts had come around again. All paths, no matter how unlikely, led to Professor Snape.

He had almost said he was sorry for what had happened. He had said her mother wouldn't have been in danger except for his actions. Clearly, he felt that the whole sorry state of her life was his fault. *Well, wasn't it? He'd raped you after all, her subvocal 'voice' grew strident with anger. So, what should he have done? Refused? Let you be killed?* a more rational part of her asked.

He shouldn't have gotten me into the situation where that was the only choice in the first place!

Rowan felt suddenly how her breathing had grown harsh as she grew more upset, and her fingers hurt from gripping the needles too tightly. She took deep, deliberate breaths and forced her hands to relax. Putting down her knitting, she alternately stretched and stroked her stiffened fingers as she struggled to find calm again. She'd been through this whole discussion with herself hundreds of times before and never found a resolution. She was tired of going around and around and always coming to the same place.

Now, when she was exhausted and discouraged, the still, small voice spoke to her, and in the quiet of the predawn, she listened.

Professor Snape blamed himself for everything that had happened, but many others just like her had been killed or lost family that year. Attacks were random and

widespread. How could anyone be certain that she or her mother would have been safe, even had they had not come to You-Know-Who's special attention?

Her mother had nearly been killed, and her childhood home was burned down. Why? Because He-Who no, Professor Dumbledore was right: *call him by his name*, *Voldemort*, she winced slightly even at sounding the name in her head was annoyed. He hadn't done it out of anger, or envy, or lust, or any other reason that was no justification, but was, at least, within the normal range of human motive. There was no reasoning, or predicting, such insanity. Plenty of families had been killed already, adults and children. Who could say that Rowan or her mother would not have been among them?

This realization allowed Rowan to let go of some of the anger she felt towards Professor Snape. If Voldemort won, every single wizard or witch who defied, or even just annoyed him, would be punished or killed. Her kind Muggle-born would be first on the list.

And what about Professor Snape Severus? He had chained himself to that monster when he was young, no older than Rowan was now, and possibly younger. Rowan sat up and tucked her feet further under the afghan. She hadn't added that up before, but it must be so. It was strange to think of Severus at her age; was he as frightened and unsure then as she was now? It gave her some perspective to think of him making his choices with little more wisdom or experience than she knew she now had.

Rowan's fingers started moving again as she gazed into the fireplace, her deft fingers making the simple knit stitches without requiring further attention from her mind.

What had driven him to such an allegiance, so young, and what had happened to make him change his mind? Was he required to do something more terrible than he had imagined, or had the everyday, casual cruelties finally added up to an unbearable burden? Did his own conscience wake from within, or did some external influence manage to reach deep inside him?

The fire popped, and a tiny burning ember landed on the stone hearth.

He had known, he must have known, that there could be no backing away once he had agreed to join; service to a Dark Lord was for life. When he knew he could not continue, was it courage or cowardice that governed his choice to turn spy for Dumbledore? Did he do it because he could not stand for such an evil to continue to gain power? Did he have to do what he could to thwart it, no matter the risk? Or, was he simply unable, too afraid, to escape by ending his own life?

Rowan doubted she would ever have the courage to ask him, but she felt what his answer must be. Severus Snape might be many disagreeable things, but he was no coward. He was strong, and he was brave. She had thought, months ago, that she was in love with him, but now she keenly felt how silly she had been then. She no longer attempted to force her feelings into such a romantic mold. She only knew that she admired and respected him, and she desperately wished he could know how much and maybe be healed a little.

She counted her stitches up again, calmer, and feeling more sure of herself than she had in weeks.

She had completed the leg and was turning the heel of her sock by the morning sunlight, which was peeping through the windows, when she heard a thin, squeaky voice answer the Ravenclaw riddle. Rowan turned her head at the sound and saw the door swing open, giving a cheery "Good morning, Professor." In another moment, Professor Flitwick struggled through the portrait hole into the common room.

"Miss Bourne, I came to speak with you, but I did not expect to find you awake," he said on entering.

"I couldn't sleep, Professor, so I just came down here."

"You know already, then?" he asked delicately, in his tiny voice.

"Yes, sir. The headmaster found out last night and told me. He said I should try to get some sleep if I could, but I couldn't."

"No wonder, my poor child," Flitwick said kindly, taking her hand in his tiny one and patting it gently with the other. "Such a terrible thing and such a shock. The Headmaster told me he has received the official notification from the Ministry. I'm sorry, but the story will be in the morning papers. We both feel you would be more comfortable if you had some privacy while the rest of the school hears the news. I am taking you to the hospital wing. You need rest, and I hope you will find your grief easier to bear when you have slept a little."

Flitwick's gentle speech sounded slightly rehearsed. *Well, no wonder, he's probably given it a dozen times already this year*, Rowan thought, pitying him.

"Thank you, Professor," Rowan said, standing. "I'd like to change first, though."

"Of course. I'll wait for you here, Miss Bourne."

Rowan went up to her dorm room, put away her knitting, and quickly changed from her nightgown into clean robes without waking any of her dorm mates, then hurried back down. She followed her Head of House out and to the infirmary.

When they got to the hospital wing, they found Madam Pomfrey already awake and aware of the situation. She took Rowan in hand and hustled her into a bed in no time. "You look as if you haven't gotten a wink of sleep and no wonder. Lie down, and I'll give you something to help you sleep for a bit."

Rowan lay down with a tired sigh and allowed herself to be fussed over. A short while later, she was fast asleep.

A/N: I've picked up what we have learned of Snape's background in HBP, but DH was not yet out when this was written, and I'm letting it stand.

Goodbye and Hello

Chapter 24 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 24: Goodbye and Hello

A/N: At long last - the first new chapter.

I have some very pretty banners which demonstrate beautifully how bad I've been about updating this story. If you are among those who read this story years back and had given up, take heart. I've worked through the sticking bits and have drafted all the way to the end. I'm so excited, I can't wait to finally show you how they wind up.

Wishlist banner is by Southern_Witch_69. Haunted banner was made by fizzabella. Thank you both very much!



Edgar and Ariadne looked for Rowan when they met in the common room to go down for breakfast.

"She's not in her dorm," Ariadne reported as she came down the stairs. "Looks like she left early, without making her bed."

Edgar raised an eyebrow. "She makes her bed?"

"Usually she does; she must have been in a hurry today because she even left her nightgown out. Let's go downstairs; maybe she's at breakfast."

They did not find Rowan in the Great Hall, so they saved a spot, keeping an eye out for her as they tucked into their breakfasts.

When the post owls arrived, Edgar took his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and fed the delivery owl a scrap of his bacon.

"Anything interesting?" Ariadne asked him, scooping a bit of egg onto her last bite of muffin.

"Mmmm. Not really. There's a petition gotten up to get the Ministry to certify the Floo network. And an article about a sharp increase in deaths by Lethifold in South America."

"Turn the page, they never put real news on the cover anymore; people might see it," Ariadne said, rolling her eyes.

Edgar obligingly flipped the page. Sure enough, there had been another Death Eater attack. There was a photo of a bare chimney sticking out of a smoldering ruin, starkly outlined against the pre-dawn glow. One could just make out the green light of the Dark Mark still floating above where the roofline must have been, before the rising sun overpowered its feeble light.

Ariadne grabbed his arm, and her hand was shaking. "Edgar! That picture ... I know that street! What does the paper say whose house was it?"

Edgar scanned the few lines of the article rapidly and gave Ariadne the gist of it: "It's a Muggle home, in Clapham. The Department for Magical Law Enforcement logged a number of suspicious Apparitions into the area in the middle of the night, but by the time the Auror team arrived, nobody but local Muggles were there, trying to put out the fire. Of course they couldn't, since it was magical, but they didn't know that."

"You're right! You do recognize that house," Edgar told her. "Listen:

"The Ministry determined that the house was the residence of Mrs. Bourne, a Muggle woman, who was found dead. There is no known reason for the attack, other than the circumstance that she had a daughter who is a witch. Miss Bourne is currently attending Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft."

"Rowan's Mum!" Ariadne gasped. "That was her house. But why?"

"They don't know," Edgar answered when he finished the article. "There've been other attacks on families of students, Muggle-born students."

"Edgar, Rowan is missing! What if she's hurt too? We have to tell someone!"

Edgar put his hand over Ariadne's and gave it a squeeze. "Don't worry. I think they must have sent for her in the night, so they could break the news to her before the post came. I'm sure she's safe."

Ariadne sat back, relieved. "Of course, that's why she wasn't in her dorm." She looked back at the paper, trying to find any information beyond what Edgar had already read to her.

"My mum will be devastated," she told him. "They were friends and we visited; that's why I recognized the street in the picture." She shuddered, thinking of the Mark floating over a house she'd been to many times during the summer hols. "Look," she said, pulling Edgar's arm. "Flitwick's gotten up from the table. Let's ask if we can see Rowan."

"They might not want her disturbed." Edgar warned her.

"We can ask. Let's go." Ariadne looked sick with worry.

"All right, then." They both rose from the table and caught up with their Head of House at the end of the hall.

"It's true," Flitwick told them sadly. "Miss Bourne has lost her mother and her home, poor child. She's resting in the Infirmary now; Madam Pomfrey has given her something to help her sleep."

"Will we be able to see her?" Ariadne asked.

"Not just yet; the Headmaster specifically requested that she not be disturbed. When she wakes, she may go back to the common room, or stay in the Infirmary if she wishes the privacy. She is excused from classes for today, and as much longer as Madam Pomfrey thinks advisable."

Edgar and Ariadne nodded their understanding.

"I will make sure she knows you were asking for her as soon as she wakes," Flitwick told them. "If she is ready for company, you may see her then."

"Thank you, Professor," Ariadne answered.

Edgar took Ariadne's hand and led her away. "Why don't you owl your mother," he suggested. "She'll have read the news by now and she'll want to know that Rowan is ok."

"Good idea," Ariadne answered. "Will you come with me and help me pick an owl? We still have some time before class."

"Sure," Edgar said and walked with her towards the owlery.

Rowan muzzily opened her eyes to streaming sunlight. She recognized her surroundings; she was in the infirmary again. Startled, she sat up. How long had she been here? When had she come? Where was Snape? They had taken him away and she was ... no, that was before. Rowan gave her head a shake; the confusion from her potioned sleep gradually faded.

Rowan swung her feet over the edge of the bed and poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher left there for her. Blinking in the bright sunlight as she drank, it came back to her.

Snape was safe. She was safe. Her mother was unhurt and was here, in the castle.

Madam Pomfrey, noticing she was moving, came over to check on her.

"How are you feeling? Did you have a good sleep?"

"Yes, thank you," Rowan answered. She had been mortally embarrassed on her way to the infirmary with Flitwick. Would Madam Pomfrey say anything about her last visit there? In the event, though, Poppy's calm practicality had soothed her right away. She gave no sign of recalling Rowan's previous admission and did only what was natural in seeing to the comfort of a newly bereaved student, the latest of several that year.

Nor did she trouble Rowan with uncomfortable remarks or questions this morning.

Dumbledore entered the infirmary, and after speaking a few words quietly with Madam Pomfrey, he greeted Rowan. "I hope you were able to get some rest, Miss Bourne?"

"Yes, thank you. I couldn't sleep in my dorm earlier, but Madam Pomfrey gave me a dose of sleeping potion after Professor Flitwick brought me here. Is my mum still in the castle?"

"Yes, although she will need to leave later today, as soon as preparations for her stay are completed. You may visit with her till then. I have come to bring you to her."

Rowan hesitated. "Won't everyone wonder where I am? What should I tell them?"

Dumbledore smiled at her reassuringly. "Your friends have been asking about you. Professor Flitwick has told them you are under Madam Pomfrey's care today and shouldn't be disturbed. We will travel to the guest hall by a back passage. I do know of a few," he told her with a wink.

Dumbledore then ushered her out the infirmary door. Nearby was a statue of Cliodne, who appeared to be standing on a windswept shore with a cluster of seabirds crowding at her feet. Dumbledore pressed the beak of one of the gulls, and Rowan turned with a start as a passage opened behind her. Dumbledore lit his wand and calmly gestured for her to follow. There was a steep staircase going down, a long twisty corridor, and a spiral case up. At the top of the spiral staircase, a small door opened into an alcove behind another statue.

Stepping out of the alcove, Rowan found herself in the middle of a corridor flanked by doorways. She herded a stray spider off her robe back into the dark passage and looked around.

She didn't recall ever seeing this part of the castle, but then she wouldn't have had reason to if it were only guest rooms.

The end of the corridor opened onto a wider space with sofas and low tables, and a staircase going down, which looked as if it led to the main stair tower with the portraits and switching staircases.

Dumbledore led her to the last door but two, towards the stair end of the hall. There was a number three on the door, carved in serpentine vines. He knocked politely and, after a brief delay, Laurel opened the door looking underslept, but not overwrought.

Rowan gave her mother a fierce hug and sat next to her in front of the breakfast tray. Dumbledore excused himself and left them to speak in private.

Rowan knew her mother wasn't going to be happy with what she had to tell her; despite the wonderful smells coming from the tray, Rowan could stomach no more than a cup of tea and a few nibbles of toast.

Playing with the toast in her hands, she tried to explain to her mother about Professor Snape. She told her how he had always been cold, distant and generally nasty to students and teachers alike, somewhat less so to students in his House.

Although he was unpopular, Rowan explained he had never harmed a student before now. She told him how he had helped her solve her invisibility fabric problem; she wouldn't have succeeded without his expertise.

Laurel listened, but she also watched. She saw Rowan's embarrassment and confusion, the faint pink wash on her cheeks and ears, and the hesitant glow in her eyes. "Rowan, you have feelings for him, don't you?"

"I do."

"Do you *want* to marry him?"

"I do." Rowan stopped. Her mother looked hardly more surprised than she felt to hear her own answer. Last night, she'd been thinking about how much she admired and respected him...she hadn't though in terms of love and marriage, but she'd been deceiving herself. She wanted him in her life. She wanted him for his intelligence and power, his deft touch and silky voice, the way he took her ideas and showed her how much more she could make of them, and the way he believed in her. She wasn't forced now; she could wait, go slower, but it was a war and he was a spy. This could easily be the only time there was. Then again, it might already be too late for her; she'd been so childish and treated him so badly.

Rowan faced her mother earnestly. "I do, but it may be too late. I was upset, and I said some awful things. I'm not sure he'll forgive me. Even if he did, I don't know if he would have me, now that there is a way out."

"If he's as smart as you say he is, of course he will," Laurel answered promptly.

"You have to say that, mum," Rowan answered, smiling.

"I can't say I like it," Laurel continued. "He's so much older than you, and from what your Headmaster has told me, being close to him seems to be terribly dangerous."

"Everywhere is dangerous nowadays, Mum," Rowan burst in. "Especially for a Muggle-born like me."

"Don't interrupt, dear."

"Sorry." Rowan bit her lip and waited for her mother to finish.

"I'm saying, I don't like it but it isn't about what I like or don't like." Laurel told Rowan gravely. "If you've chosen him, and you are certain well, I think you have turned into a sensible young woman. I'll have to trust your judgement, and I'll try to see his better qualities. He does have some, right?"

Rowan choked back a laugh and threw her arms around her mother.

They broke apart at the soft knock at the door. Rowan went to answer it and admitted Professor Dumbledore.

"The arrangements for your accommodation are ready, Mrs. Bourne. It is time for you to leave us now."

"Where is she going?" Rowan asked Dumbledore.

"To your friend Edgar's family," he answered. "Their farm is remote enough that it should be safe. I have known the family for years, and I trust them. I believe she will be happy and comfortable there, for as long as is necessary. I am afraid it will be too dangerous for you to communicate regularly," Dumbledore told her. "Voldemort is growing in power. He has people within the Ministry. I am not certain how much longer the Floo Network or the Owl post will be trustworthy."

Rowan stood and took her mother's hands. "Edgar is really nice; I'm sure his family is too. You should like it there."

"I did always like the country, at least for vacations. I guess we'll find out how it goes full time," Laurel said with a rueful laugh.

"Good bye, be safe." Rowan hugged her mother goodbye.

Wiping the tears away, Laurel kissed Rowan. She then turned to Dumbledore. "No time like the present."

Dumbledore smiled his approval. "Indeed there is not. Please please put this on, Mrs. Bourne," he said, offering her a full length violet cloak. "It will cover your clothes. Yes, and pull the hood up. There. We will need to walk to the edge of the grounds so that I can Apparate you to the farmhouse. Shall we?" He offered her his arm and escorted her from the room.

Rowan waited a few moments, checking to make sure her mother hadn't left anything behind by accident, and stepped into the hall.

A few minutes later, she was in the dungeons and knocking on Professor Snape's office door.

"Miss Bourne?"

"May I speak to you a few moments, please?" Rowan asked circumspectly as a trio of Slytherins were walking past en route to their dormitory.

"Certainly. I have heard the sad news about your mother, and I have been notified, along with your other teachers, that you are excused from classes for a while. I presume you wish to learn what will be covered in your absence?"

"Yes, please."

The Slytherins had heard about it too there was a muffled snickering as they continued down the corridor.

"Step in then," Severus responded, walking back to his desk.

"We are covering the use of magical fungi as ingredients this week," he started to say, pulling some parchments from his desk, but Rowan stopped him.

"Excuse me. I didn't really want to talk about the class schedule."

Severus stopped stiffly.

"There is something, I have to say. I ... is it safe to speak now?" Rowan looked back at the door nervously, twisting her fingers in the fabric of her robes.

Severus observed her intently, unreadably. He shut and warded the door and brought her to a chair by the fireplace.

"I think I'd rather stand." Rowan took a deep breath. *Now or never. You're sure? I'm sure*, she answered herself, then lifted her chin and looked Severus in the eye.

"I wanted to apologize. I'm sorry that I was so upset when I found out you were still spying," Rowan told him firmly, then, watching him closely, added, "I had no right."

Whatever Snape had been expecting her to say, that was not it. His sallow skin paled, and his brows drew together. "You have already given me an apology, which I accepted. No more is necessary."

"Yes, it is." She paused a moment. "Before, I apologized for what I said. Now, I want to say that I'm sorry about how I felt."

"Miss Bourne," Severus began, more gently, but Rowan interrupted him.

"No, please. I have to say this before I lose my nerve."

Severus stopped, leaving whatever he was about to say unsaid, and waited.

"I was afraid, and I was being childish. After ... what happened ... You-Know-Who terrified me. I wanted to stay as far away from him as possible. If we were going to be married, and you were going to have to go to him all the time, I didn't think I could stand it." Rowan hung her head, embarrassed. She poked at the carpet fringe for a

moment with the toe of her shoe.

Severus moved forward as if to take her hand but stopped, not touching her, only listening as she resumed speaking.

"Attacking my mother, burning our home. That made me think harder about things. He kills, tortures, destroys, for no reason. Not for gain, not even for hate. He would have killed my mother, he destroyed our home, out of nothing more than *pique*." Rowan's voice started to rise in her agitation, and she no longer looked shy. "He is a blight, a cancer, and I only wanted to hide someplace safe while other people tried to stop him. Now I'm ashamed," she admitted and hung her head again. "You are doing so much, taking such risks, and I'm only making it harder for you. I'm sorry," she said, in a very small voice.

Now Severus did touch her, putting a hand on her arm and moving closer to do so. She smelled his scent, an odor of whatever arcane things he'd been working on that morning mixed with the sharp tang of his own nervousness. She breathed it in while she waited to hear what he would say.

"You," Severus started, his voice tight with the rigidity apparent in his whole body, "you are barely more than a girl, not even out of school. Yet you have already done more to thwart his plans than many trained Aurors. You have *nothing* to be ashamed of." Rowan felt his hand tighten painfully on her arm, stressing his words.

"I do. I'm ashamed of how I treated you." Rowan reached out her left hand to touch his wrist tentatively. "May I ... may I see your arm ... please?" she asked softly.

There was no need to tell him which one. With a grimace Rowan didn't see, because she still could not look at his face, Snape dropped his right hand from her arm, took a half-step back and raised his left to her.

Rowan took his wrist in her left hand and undid the first few buttons of his sleeve with her right. Not daring to think of what she was going to do, she focused on the fabric under her fingers. The wool of his coat was smoothly spun with a firm twist that gave it a harsh hand, but would be long wearing. Even so, the edge of the hem was beginning to go threadbare.

When his coat sleeve was open to midway up the forearm, she opened the buttons of his shirt cuff and pushed the smooth linen back to reveal the ugly red lines of the Dark Mark. Reverently, she traced the shape with her forefinger. When she finally lifted her eyes to Snape's face, he saw tears there. He scowled, and he moved to pull his arm back, but Rowan did not let go.

Now her voice was roughened and thick. "No, you don't have to hide it from me. I can't imagine anyone being as brave as you, going back to Him, never knowing what may happen. If you hadn't, my mother would have been killed."

"Taking it was about the stupidest thing I've ever done in my life." Severus growled back at her. "If I didn't have it, your mother you would never have been in danger."

"I know a bit about being young and stupid," Rowan responded, with a catch in her voice. "You've spent your entire adult life making up for that, haven't you? And who is to say if we would have been safe otherwise? If you hadn't been reporting to Dumbledore, You-Know-Who might have won by now. Myself, and everyone like me, dead. Can you forgive me for being so stupid?"

"Of course." His voice sounded strangled, and he stood frozen. She quailed when she saw disbelief in his face, but she looked deeper and read the longing that was there too, and took heart from it.

"I have to know," she said in a small voice. "If none of this had happened, if you hadn't been forced into it, would you still have wanted to marry me? *Now I'm in for it.* She held her breath and waited through the thick silence while Severus stopped motionless.

Who was the last person to ask me what I wanted? Severus wondered. *She is so young; she's still a student. I have no business even thinking such things. But, oh Merlin! I do want her.*

A lifetime of reticence was no easy habit for Severus to break, and his embarrassment looked to be nearly physically painful. When he finally spoke, his voice was hesitant, but deep and certain.

"After Leaving, when you would have no longer been a student, I meant to ... I would have spoken to you. I would have asked if you would allow me to see you."

Rowan let out her breath in a deep sigh. That was as much of a declaration as any woman could expect to hear from Severus Snape. It was enough.

She took the one step closer that put her right against him and laid her cheek on his shoulder. She heard his breath catch. His arms hesitated a moment, then slipped around her and embraced her tightly. She sighed again in contentment.

"I was going to ask you the same thing, right before I got on the train, so I could run if the answer was no." Hearing his breath catch, she smiled into his coat.

Severus held Rowan there for a long moment, only breathing. She stood in the circle of his arms, outwardly calm, inwardly wild to know what he was thinking and what would happen next.

Finally, he loosened his arms and moved his hands to her shoulders, stepping back a half-step to look in her face and ask, "Does this mean you will keep my ring?"

A few days ago, Rowan would have thought his frightening, somewhat constipated expression meant he wished she would not. Now she could tell that he was afraid to hope she would. Her mouth dried and her throat became too tight for speech; she could only nod. It was enough. He pulled her close again. He kissed her deeply, wrapping his arms around her, catching her weight in them when her knees became jelly.

A/N: Well, now. About time.

From the Harry Potter Wiki: Clodne was a famous Irish druidess who lived in Medieval times. An Animagus with the ability to turn into a sea bird, she was aided by three magical birds that cured the sick by singing them to sleep.

In Rowan's Absence

Chapter 25 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 25: In Rowan's Absence

"Well, that's everything," Rowan said, closing up her small travel bag.

"Are you sure you haven't forgotten anything?" Ariadne asked her.

"What's to forget? I've only got the one set of Muggle clothes I wore to King's Cross last September. I'm planning to buy what I need in London."

"Will you have enough Ounces? What if you have trouble with the Muggle phrobait?" Ariadne asked in somewhat muddled concern.

"They're called Pounds," Rowan answered, laughing, "and I'll be okay for money, at least for a few days. My mum had my name added to her checking account in case I had an emergency. That means I can use it without waiting for her will to be probated."

"Wow, my mum would never trust me with all her money like that." Ariadne told her.

"It's not all her money; there are stocks and things that are in her name only, and I'll have to wait for those. It's just she was worried with all the frightening events the last couple of years and me being so far away at school," Rowan answered her seriously. "Remember, you have a whole big family. With me and my mum, it's been just the two of us for ten years now. She wanted to be certain I'd be okay if I got into real trouble and couldn't reach her."

"Your mum was really smart, Rowan," Ariadne said, then stopped. She wasn't sure how much her friend wanted to talk about it yet.

"Yes, she was." Rowan smiled awkwardly. *She still is; I hate lying like this. Hiding a secret fiancée was nothing compared to hiding a not-actually-deceased mother.*

"What is round as a dishpan, deep as a tub, and still the oceans couldn't fill it up?" They heard the voice of the door knocker query, followed by Professor Flitwick's distinctive voice in answer:

"A sieve."

"Welcome, Professor," the knocker acknowledged, opening to him.

"Are you ready, Miss Bourne?"

"Yes, Professor. I have my things right here."

"Very good, my dear. I'll take you to the Headmaster's office then. You can use his fireplace to travel to the Leaky Cauldron. Are you certain you will be all right on your own from there?"

"Oh, yes, Professor. I have phone numbers for my mother's friends. I'll call; I'm sure one or the other of them will be able to put me up for a few days while I get things sorted out. If nothing else, I can take a room at the Leaky Cauldron."

"You are just amazing, Rowan." Ariadne hugged her goodbye. "Remember, if you need anything the Muggles can't help you with, send a note to my mum; you know she loved your mother. She'll want to come to the service."

"I'll be sure to let her know as soon as I have the details. Bye, Ariadne." Rowan hugged her friend back, hugged Edgar, and left after Professor Flitwick.

While Rowan was away, her friends continued with their classes. They were getting close to N.E.W.Ts, and everyone was a little frantic. Transfiguration class was especially hard. They were working on human transformation now, and Ariadne needed Rowan for practice. She was working now with a girl named Ellen Spatz, whose regular lab partner was in the infirmary with a case of scrofungulus.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I have no idea how that happened ..." Ariadne said to Professor McGonagall. She looked sadly at Ellen, who was supposed to be a hat rack. She did somewhat resemble a hat rack. If you had a unusual number of very oddly shaped hats, or your decor ran to antlers.

McGonagall restored Ellen, who looked rather put-out, and said, "Try once more, Ariadne. You have to be more precise in your wand movement, and you must not allow your concentration to waver."

Ariadne lifted her wand again with a sigh and tried to concentrate. She hoped Ellen wasn't too annoyed; she didn't much care for being transfigured into a hat rack in her turn, but preferred that to whatever she might become by mistake. Plus, she was going to have to help Rowan work on this when she got back.

N.E.W.T level Potions class also proceeded in Rowan's absence. Frantic students skinned, sliced, chopped, stirred, sweated, and prayed. Potions blended, bubbled, boiled, and stewed. Some lay flat, some boiled over, and one exploded. Professor Snape expounded, oversaw, sneered, and removed points. The students didn't notice, but it somehow didn't seem quite the same to Professor Snape without her presence.

There was no getting around it; he missed her. The kiss they had shared had been a revelation. Every time he thought about it, he wanted more. He wanted her. It was time to accept the fact. He was not merely acquiescing to necessity, he wanted to be married to her. He wanted to have the right to touch her everywhere. Anywhere. At great length and with attention.

Rather unbelievably to Snape, Rowan wanted him too. It seemed almost miraculous considering their history and how very awkward their positions now were. *She should have had flowers and chocolate and quiet times together.* Luckily for him she was a practical sort who cut to the essentials and didn't require all sorts of nonsense. *Just because she didn't require them didn't mean she shouldn't deserve them, deserve to be wooed.*

He couldn't take her out anywhere, he couldn't buy her expensive gifts. But, there was perhaps something he could do...

"Twenty points from Gryffindor." Severus had no idea what had just been said, but he was confident that removing points from Gryffindor would pass for his normal response. He really couldn't afford to let his mind wander like this while teaching.

The next Hogsmeade weekend happened during Rowan's absence. Edgar and Ariadne shopped for extra quills, parchment and sweets -- the essential study supplies.

They stood outside Honeydukes munching on peppermint toads and looking up and down the street.

"Anywhere else?" Edgar asked Ariadne.

"I wanted to go to Zonko's, to see if I can find something silly for Rowan. You know, to maybe cheer her up, but it's closed."

Edgar frowned. "That was a good idea; too bad they're closed. I heard shops are closing on Diagon Alley too." He stopped. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"Let's go; I don't want to stand crying in the High Street."

Edgar took Ariadne's arm and walked her briskly down a side street. "Shall we go back, then?"

"Yes, please, Edgar."

They followed the side street as it wound around and eventually rejoined the High street, then started back down the road towards Hogwarts, mostly silent, not quite touching. Students didn't have to be back for two more hours, so they were by themselves. The spring weather meant they didn't have to hurry to keep warm.

"I'm sorry I was such a goose." Ariadne said suddenly. "I've been scared, but it suddenly got more real, seeing the shop closed."

Edgar reached out his hand and took Ariadne's. "I know just what you mean; you aren't being a goose. I'm scared too."

"We'll be leaving soon, and everything is just awful, and ..." Ariadne sniffled and waved her free hand helplessly, her remaining words unspoken.

"Ssh, hush, Ariadne. It's okay. Look, why don't we ... I want to ... I mean, let's just be scared together?"

Ariadne looked, and by the shining earnestness on Edgar's face, she understood what he was trying to say.

"Do you mean it? Isn't it too soon?"

"I don't care. I love you, and I don't want to be separated after Leaving. I know we're young, but ... I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you and I wasn't there."

"Neither could I," Ariadne answered quickly. "I mean, I'd want to be there for you, too."

"Will you marry me, then? This summer?" Edgar asked. His voice was timid, but his hands on Ariadne's were warm and firm.

"Yes, I will." Having said just those few simple words, Ariadne felt her tension lift and her heart soar. Their world was still terrifying, but they would be facing it together.

That fact established, they walked hand in hand back to the castle making plans and dreaming dreams.

Laurel carried the bucket of slaked lime down the hill into the tanning shed. White puffy clouds skidded across a cerulean sky, and the land tumbled away to one side towards a valley with a small stream. There were farms and meadows and patches of wood here and there. It all looked and felt and smelled glorious.

Parchment making was hard work, even with magic. Laurel wanted to help out this family that was taking her in, and parchment making was fascinating, so she dug in wherever she was needed. She was not squeamish. She could watch the spring lambs gamboling in the sunshine on one side and go in to tend the skins stretching on their frames without batting an eye.

This batch wasn't stretching yet. It was soaking in a lime bath, and it was time to change the water. Edmond Bracken came up behind her and removed most of the liquid from the tub with a quick *Evanesco*. He took the bucket of lime and, while Laurel refilled the tub with water from a pump that stood by it, added in a measured amount. That done, they both took poles and pushed the wet skins about, making sure the fresh limewater circulated well among them.

After this, the animals must be fed and the kitchen garden de-gnomed. Laurel could do those things while the Bracken men saw to preparing the fields where they would grow next winter's feed for the sheep. It was hard, sweaty work, and Laurel was loving it.

Best of all was the end of the day when the family sat in the farmhouse by the fire. Adrian Bracken sometimes played the fiddle and Edmond's wife, Bertana, was teaching Laurel to knit. Laurel's own mother had taught Rowan, when Rowan was a child, but so far this skill had skipped a generation. Laurel had never had the time or patience for it before, but time was different here. She was also up to her armpits in wool-on-the-hoof; it seemed crazy not to use it. So, she knitted and listened to Adrian's fiddling until weariness and peace overtook her, and she slipped off to her bed.

A/N: Thanks to Lady Whitehart for checking this chapter for me.

An Interlude

Chapter 26 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 26: An Interlude

"Canary Cream," said Rowan; it would appear Professor Dumbledore was a fan of the Weasleys' shop. The gargoyle moved aside for her to reveal the spiral stairs, and Rowan rode up. As the door was partly open, she knocked at the doorframe.

"Yes, Miss Bourne?"

"You asked me to report to you when I had returned, Headmaster."

"Ah yes, is everything settled in the Muggle world for you now?"

"Pretty much. One of my mother's friends let me stay with her. She also helped with the funeral. I met with the solicitor; we've put the property on the market. The house is destroyed, but it was in a good location so the land is worth something. Also, the insurance company is paying the fire claim."

"Will you leave the money in the Muggle bank or transfer it to Gringotts?"

"I'm not sure. I'll leave it in the Muggle bank for now. You'll let me know if she needs anything? I can change to Wizard money, but I don't know how to get it to her. It's in my name, as her beneficiary, but of course, it is her money."

"Your mother is all right for now. She can't have her own Gringotts account since she is supposed to be deceased, but I will see that she has money of her own, if you will trust me with it?"

"Certainly, Professor."

"While we are discussing plans, have you given consideration to where you will live, as you can no longer go back to your own home?"

"I don't know what Professor Snape's plans are for after we are married. I haven't heard of any teachers' spouses living at the school; surely some of them are married?"

"None at the moment, but there have been married teachers in the past. The most usual arrangement is for the spouse to live in the teacher's home, which is connected via Floo to their living quarters. You would be welcome to eat in the Great Hall whenever you wished. During the summers, the castle is closed and all teachers return to their homes."

Rowan wondered suddenly what Severus' home could possibly be like. Before she could ask, Dumbledore continued.

"You should, of course, discuss the matter with Severus, but I believe his home has a tenant at the moment, and it would not be convenient for you to live there. You might consider renting a flat in Hogsmeade."

"That sounds like a good idea, thank you."

"I'll tell your professors you have returned and will recommence classes tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'm ready to be back."

Dumbledore then called Professor Snape's office through the Floo to tell him that Miss Bourne had returned, and would Severus please come to his office for a moment?

Professor Snape stepped from the fireplace and greeted Rowan formally. Rowan wished they could have met in private, at least for a few moments. Stepping into his arms for his kiss didn't seem quite the thing in Dumbledore's office. She settled on a shy smile and returned his greeting, then repeated to him Professor Dumbledore's suggestion that she rent a flat in Hogsmeade.

"That would be best." Severus agreed. "I do have a home, but you would not care for my housemate. It is to be hoped I shall be rid of him before much longer, and then you may decide where you prefer to live. I don't have a strong attachment to the place; another would be equally satisfactory."

"I'm not sure how we could arrange to look at places. There isn't much time, and I have to catch up on all my classes from being away."

"You may choose as you see fit," Severus told her simply. "You will be spending far more time in it than I. When the lease is up, we can choose another together."

Rowan nodded, glad that Severus was putting the choice in her hands. She'd become accustomed to being responsible for such things while winding up her Muggle affairs, and she felt competent to handle the matter.

She made her goodbyes to Severus and Professor Dumbledore and returned to her dormitory to unpack her traveling things and get herself ready for classes.

Ariadne gave her a big hug as soon as she walked in and told Rowan her mother had owed her that the funeral service had been lovely and fitting Mrs. Bourne's memory.

"I'm glad your mum liked it. It was Connie really, my mother's friend, who put it together. They were close, and she knew just the music and readings to pick. She was afraid I'd be upset at first, but I told her I was so glad not to have to do it; she was a big help."

"I'm glad it went well. I've been dying for you to get back; I've got news," Ariadne told her with a grin.

"Good news? Spill it. I'd love to hear good news right now."

"The best news...Edgar and I are getting married."

"Really?" Rowan practically squealed.

"Yes, really," Ariadne said, shining. "This summer. It's going to be small; we don't want to wait to plan anything big. With things as they are, we just want to be sure we're together. But, you'll come, right?"

"Just tell me when and where," Rowan told her, grinning.

"And if you wanted to bring someone," Ariadne hinted broadly, "that would be fine too."

Oh my, that will be interesting, won't it? "I guess I might just; I'll have to let you know," Rowan teased.

"You'd better! I'll send you an owl. Or...Rowan, have you figured out yet where you are going to live after leaving? I think you could stay with us at our house for a while if you need a place. I'm sure my mother will agree."

"Thanks, Ari," Rowan said, giving her a hug, "but I think I won't need to. I'm going to take a flat in Hogsmeade and work on setting up a magical textile business. You can owl me there when you have the wedding plans set."

"It's a deal, Rowan."

Rowan spoke with each of her teachers in their offices to find out what she had missed and what she needed to do to catch up. It was natural, therefore, that she visit Professor Snape in the same way. There were two Potions labs she would have to make up...they might show up on her N.E.W.T. practical, so she should not miss the chance to practice. They agreed on a time when the classroom was available and neither were busy. There wouldn't be time to brew both potions at once; she'd do one tomorrow, and the other the next day.

Rowan came to the Potions classroom at the appointed time, ready to work. Severus stayed and supervised her while she brewed two potions. Rowan wasn't sure why at first, he didn't offer her any help. He didn't speak to her at all while she worked. As she was finishing the potion and was about to blurt out something, anything, to break the silence, he spoke.

"I missed you."

Rowan turned, stirring rod still in her hand. Quickly she wiped it to avoid dripping on the floor. "I missed you too," she answered quietly, but with shining eyes.

"Are you entirely comfortable, choosing a flat and making the arrangements yourself?"

"Yes, I think so, thank you. Only, I'm not sure how much I should be spending. The money from the house and the insurance is really my mother's; she'll likely need it at some point."

The potion was done. Rowan picked up a flask and transferred a sample into it. She placed it on the bench. Severus wouldn't be grading her, but he would give her written comments to help her on her upcoming practical exam.

"Don't be too concerned. I'm not wealthy, but I have lived very frugally. I don't believe anything you find in Hogsmeade will be beyond our means for the next year or two. After that, we'll see. Perhaps you will be keeping me," Severus told her, with a quirk of his lips that could only be a half of a smile. Rowan laughed, then quickly stopped...the sound of laughter from the Potions classroom would definitely make people wonder if anyone were walking by.

"Is there anything I can do, or get you?" Professor Snape asked her.

"Only what you want for yourself. I'm going to get myself new clothes, and I have to replace the loom and things that were burned with the house," Rowan said with a sigh.

"I'm very sorry about that."

"It's all right, they are only things. I can replace them."

"I'm sorry that I can't..."

"Can't what?"

"Take you out to dinner, or walking, or do anything couples generally do."

Rowan was surprised and touched. It would have been lovely to have a proper courtship and times like that, but it did seem incongruous with the rather stark man before her. Rowan smiled and walked to him, taking his hand in hers. "There's nothing stopping us later, is there?"

"There will be little time between my duties to school, and whatever the Dark Lord requires," he warned her, but let her continue holding his hand and placed his other hand over hers.

"I understand, but sometimes maybe?"

"Definitely." Still holding her hand in his, he kissed her gently. This time it did not deepen, but remained gentle. A quiet promise.

"I'd better go," she said, regretfully. "I'll be late for my dinner."

"Yes, it is getting late. Take care, Rowan."

Rowan had missed a Hogsmeade weekend while she was away, but she received permission from Professor Dumbledore to make a special trip to view flats with Professor Flitwick accompanying her. He did not look like an especially imposing bodyguard, but Rowan wouldn't have wanted to be the witch or wizard to cross him in a wand fight.

The real-estate agent showed her a cottage on the edge of town which was lovely, but she didn't want to take on that much housekeeping just yet. The first flat she saw was too close to the Hog's Head, and she didn't think she'd care for the clientele being that nearby, nor the smell of goat drifting up from the back.

The second flat was perfect; it was above Gladrags and faced the lake and Hogwarts. The flat was on the third floor and looked over the top of the smaller building on the other side of High Street. It had a view of the lake and the castle from the living room, and there was plenty of natural light for her weaving.

The first few days there, it would be rather bare ... she wasn't going to have time to buy all the things necessary to furnish it and set up housekeeping while still studying for her N.E.W.Ts.

She and Severus had discussed their plans after she had said she did really want to marry him. Okay, nodded that she wanted to marry him, Rowan laughed to herself. That kiss, it still gave her shivers, and she looked forward to more. They were marrying now by their own choice but had decided to do it as they had initially planned, just after leaving. The day after that, the court records would unseal and the news would break. Hogsmeade was a small town, and Rowan would be more comfortable if she was known to be married. This irked her. More than irked, but since she was going to marry him anyway, there was no reason to put it off just to be contrary. Her mother was supposed to be dead; there was no way to put on a big wedding. She might as well follow her heart without delay.

Rowan was in the Potions lab, working on the second of the two potions she'd missed. Professor Snape was overseeing while grading papers at his desk.

"Is this the right color, sir?"

"Not quite, I think you should add just a pinch more of the beetles."

Rowan did so, and the potion turned a deeper red. She noted the addition and the result. Severus rose from his desk and walked around to stand behind her and examine her cauldron more closely.

"Now it is right, very good. Let it cool and we'll test it."

Leaning closer to Rowan, Severus spoke low in her ear.

"There is something I've always wanted to do, if you would join me. Meet me by the front door at midnight."

Rowan could hardly breath, *oh gods, that voice* "All right."

"Don't get caught, or you will get detention, and not with me," he warned her sternly.

She couldn't wait.

It was close to midnight and the Ravenclaw tower was silent. Rowan put on her cloak and tiptoed through the deserted common room. She went to the main stairs and slipped quietly down the wide curving marble stairs to the flagged stone floor of the entrance hall. Severus was waiting for her there, a blacker shadow than the rest.

Severus opened the great front door and held it for her as she passed through, then closed it silently behind himself. He took Rowan gently by the arm and, lighting his wand, led her down a side staircase to the underground harbor where the fleet of small boats used for the first-year students' arrivals were kept.

He took Rowan to one of the boats and helped her in, then seated himself beside her. It was awkward fitting two fully grown people into a boat that was made for four eleven-year-olds, but they found a more-or-less comfortable sprawl that would not put them in danger of tipping. Severus cast a Disillusionment Charm over them, in case anyone was awake and looking out at the lake.

"Forward," he said to the boat, which then slipped down the passageway to the lake opening. Rowan ducked her head as she felt ivy tendrils brush her face, then they were out on the still, black lake.

Snape murmured instructions to the boat that set it gracefully cruising, leaving the barest ripple on the glasslike surface. When he was certain all was working as it should, Snape drew Rowan under the warmth of his cloak.

Wordlessly, they looked up at the full moon. They admired its sparkling reflections on the water of the lake and the rooftops of Hogsmeade. The entire world seemed

wrapped in a still and silent beauty. There was a cool earthy scent, carrying the perfume of the night blooming flowers.

The moonlight was bright enough to make out Snape's features when Rowan turned to him. "I never would have guessed you were a romantic," she said, smiling.

"I am not, but I do appreciate beauty. And silence."

Oh. Guess I should shut up then.

Idiot! "I meant," Severus said, "a castle full of children is a very noisy place."

Rowan laughed. "It must be, and even the dungeons can't be quiet with the Slytherins living there."

"Slytherins are thankfully quieter than most. Of course that is because they are almost invariably up to something."

"So just how Slytherin are you?"

"Very. And I am most definitely up to something," Snape said, drawing her closer to him and into his kiss.

Oh, my. Rowan felt her heart race and her stomach start to float away. She could just see his dark eyes in the moonlight when she managed to pry her eyelids open for a moment. It felt wonderful. She sank back into his kiss, reveling in the strength of his arms holding her. His passion, just held in check, the low growl he made as he kissed her, even the firmness of the erection she felt pressed against her didn't frighten her now. Not that there was really much to be frightened of in the little boat where they'd tip into the water if either of them shifted at all. Rowan sighed and kissed back, running the fingers of one hand in the hair at the nape of his neck, stroking the wool of his coat with her other. She drank in his scent which was captured and warmed in the cloak they shared.

Eventually, when they had made a slow circuit of the lake, Severus kissed her forehead and said, "The sun will rise soon; we have to go back."

"Unnh?" What Rowan lacked in coherence, she made up in languor. She wished the night could last forever. "We can't have been here all night."

"It is nearly June in Northern Scotland; the night is brief."

"Oh, right." She sighed and sat up. Rowan held Severus' hand and looked at his sharp profile in the light of the sinking moon.

Severus spelled the boat back to the harbor, then stroked Rowan's cheek and her hair as they rode. Stepping lightly out of the boat, Severus helped her out with a firm hand and walked her back to her tower in silence.

A Snape of Her Own

Chapter 27 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 27: A Snape of Her Own

Exam week was frantic. Everyone was distracted and wearing a bit of a wild, frantic look. Rowan and her friends sat their N.E.W.T.s and found them to be just as nasty and exacting as advertised.

After their last exam was completed, Rowan and Ariadne went back to their dorm room to pack their things and get ready for the leaving feast. Their other roommates were in the common room, which relieved Rowan; the time had come to tell Ariadne about her Slytherin.

"I guess we won't be on the train together for the last trip?" Ariadne asked Rowan.

"No. I suppose I could take the train and Apparate back to Hogsmeade, but it's a long way, and I'm pants at Apparition. Besides..."

"Yes?"

"Well, after tomorrow it won't be a secret anymore. I want to tell you now, so you don't think you should be sorry for me."

Ariadne eyed her narrowly. "With a lead in like that, I hope it means you are finally going to tell me what the heck has been going on with you for the last six months, Rowan. Okay, spill."

Rowan smiled. "I'm going to be married, tomorrow."

Ariadne grinned back. "To your secret Slytherin, I presume?"

"Yes. After the train leaves. Just a private ceremony."

"Are you going to tell me who, or just let me expire of curiosity right now?"

Rowan laughed. She took Ariadne's hand and led her to the side of the room far from the door. "It's Professor Snape."

Ariadne stared. "What? You can't be serious."

"Oh, dear. You are my one hope of being believed. Ari, I'm serious. I ... I love him, and I'm going to marry him."

"Professor Snape?" Ariadne's voice rose in a bit of a squeal.

Rowan put a finger over her mouth. "Shhh. Everyone will know in a couple of days, but I'd like to keep it quiet till then."

"How long have you? Wait, what happens in a couple of days?"

Rowan rolled her eyes. "The court records are unsealed, then it's sure to be in the *Prophet* next morning."

"Court records? Rowan, what happened?" Ariadne took her friend's hands and stared into her eyes, her concern obvious.

Rowan quietly gave the general gist of the story to Ariadne, who was understandably shocked and appalled. Rowan eventually convinced her friend that it was really her own choice, even in the teeth of every good reason otherwise.

"Is it all right if I tell Edgar?"

"Yes, but later, after the feast, okay? I'd like things to stay normal for a little while longer."

"All right, Rowan." Ariadne shook her head but followed Rowan down to the common room to meet Edgar, and the three of them went to the Leaving Feast together.

Gryffindor won the House Cup the Ravenclaws were mostly just glad it hadn't gone to Slytherin. The feast was delicious; all the seventh years were sad that it was their last one but excited because their lives were beckoning. Rowan caught Severus's eye and saw a look there she interpreted as halfway between possessiveness and pleased anticipation. Or maybe he just really liked his treacle tart. She gave a half-smile and turned back to her own pudding.

In the morning, after breakfast, she hugged Ariadne and Edgar goodbye. Edgar grinned at her and whispered, "Good luck."

She slipped away to the library while the rest of the students boarded the carriages for the train station. Ariadne had tipped off Edgar so neither of them started any inquiries as to her whereabouts.

When the last carriage had pulled down the drive, Rowan went back to her dorm room and changed out of her school robes for the last time. She put on her blue gown and brushed her hair till it shone, then she walked quietly to the headmaster's office. She found Severus waiting for her there with Professor Dumbledore. Rowan took the chain from around her neck, undid the clasp to slide the ring off and place it on Severus's palm.

The three of them walked together out of the castle and down the grounds to the lakeside. There, Rowan and Severus joined hands. The silence was almost tangible now that the students had gone. The only sound was the birdsong and the rustle of the grasses in the breeze, which brought the scent of the wild scottish moor to them.

Under the open sky and the sun, standing on the earth, beside the lake, Severus and Rowan took each other by the hand and solemnly vowed to take and to keep each other, until parted by death.

Severus then took the little ouroboros ring from his pocket and slipped it over the fourth finger of Rowan's left hand. Rowan in turn brought out the plain gold band she had bought for Severus in Muggle London from her pocket and slid it onto his ring finger.

While they held each other's hands, Albus pronounced the words of the spell that would join them. When he completed the spell, streamers of light flew from his wand and flitted about them and their joined hands.

Rowan felt a vibration ringing through her, as if a large bell had been struck nearby but without sound and it was done.

Rowan tipped her head back to look into her husband's face, then her lashes swept down as he leaned over and kissed her gently.

When, after a long, blissful moment, they stepped apart again, Albus put his hands over both of theirs. "You will both have a difficult road ahead, in different ways, but I believe that fate has brought you together for a reason. Help each other, strengthen each other, and when Voldemort is defeated, you will have each won the greatest prize imaginable in each other. Now, I know better than to bore you young people with an old man's blather." Dumbledore twinkled mightily, shook Severus's hand, gave Rowan a kiss on the cheek, and returned to the castle, leaving the new couple alone by the lake.

Rowan blinked, a little stunned at how quickly it was over. Severus also looked a bit puzzled at what to do next. It was rather early in the morning for a wedding night, after all.

"I guess I should show you the apartment," Rowan said suddenly. "There isn't any furniture yet do you think we can get it set up this afternoon, or is there somewhere else we can stay tonight?"

"I suppose we could transfigure a few things for tonight, then fix it up more permanently in the next few days," Severus responded.

"The Headmaster told me I should have the house-elves move our things. You are packed?"

"Yes."

Severus summoned an elf, who appeared promptly and bowed till the tips of her ears touched the ground. "Professor master is needing something?"

"Yes, please move my things, and Mrs Snape's things," Rowan blinked *oh, right*, "to ... where is the flat, Rowan?"

"Third floor flat over Gladrags," Rowan filled in for him.

"We'll also need to borrow some furniture a bed, table and chairs for a little while. Find something from the storage rooms that will fit."

"Right away, Professor Snape, sir, Mrs Snape." The elf bowed again and popped away.

"I'll want to get a few things from my house. You definitely won't want to stay there, but you can see it if you like."

"Oh, yes, please." Rowan was agog with curiosity to see what Severus's home would look like.

"Let's walk outside the grounds, and I'll Apparate us, if that is all right."

"That's fine," Rowan said, as they started walking. "Um, I should warn you, I don't Apparate very well."

"Do you have your license?"

"Yes, but just barely," Rowan admitted. "I managed to do it for the test, but I don't like it and never practiced since. It feels awful, and I hate the noise. I noticed how quietly you did it when you went to get my mother," Rowan told him shyly. "Do you think you could teach me?" Rowan suddenly blushed. "I'd understand if you don't want yet another student, and one you can't get rid of."

"In a bit, perhaps. If you don't pay attention, at least I'll have rather more leeway in the detention department."

Rowan choked with laughter and couldn't stop giggling till they reached the edge of the school grounds.

"It wasn't that funny," Severus said, looking bemused.

"Ask me about it after we've been married a few years."

Severus now looked at her with one eyebrow raised. "I'll make a point of it. Ready?"

Rowan held his arm snugly and said, "Ready."

With a funny sideways wrench, Scotland disappeared, and Rowan found herself standing on a doorstep of a rundown narrow little house in what looked like a mill town, possibly in Yorkshire. Severus opened the door and ushered her in.

Stepping into the living room, Rowan looked around her and grinned hugely. "Like books, do you?"

Severus looked a bit embarrassed, but not very. "A bit, yes. I told you there is someone staying here. I'd rather he didn't meet you, but he tends to nocturnal habits and won't wake before the afternoon as long as we are reasonably quiet."

Rowan waited while Severus retrieved the books and things he'd come for, packed them into a small satchel, then Apparated with Rowan into Hogsmeade.

They had lunch together at the Three Broomsticks. Rowan knew they would immediately become *the* hot topic of conversation in the tiny village of Hogsmeade, so they might as well get it over with. Rosmerta didn't recognize Rowan at first, dressed as a grown witch instead of a student, and with a Snape on her arm.

They figured that by the time they finished lunch, the house-elves would have done their work in the flat, so they went there next. Rowan unlocked the door with the key in her pocket. Before she could go in, Severus scooped her up, carried her in, and set her on her feet again.

Rowan smiled, and they looked around. It was a small flat with one bedroom and a bathroom. There was no electricity, but there were wall sconces and a candelabra. The kitchen had a stove which ran by magic, and food cabinets with preserving spells. The house-elves had found a sofa somewhere and set it facing the fireplace. There was a dining table with two chairs, the bedroom held a fourposter bed and a wardrobe. Rowan found her school trunk and another trunk that must be Severus's placed together against the wall.

It didn't take long to survey everything and bring them to the supremely awkward moment.

Severus, never the one to get past awkward moments gracefully, nevertheless managed this one through sheer force of motivation. He took Rowan gently by the hand and pulled her near, but not yet close. He put both hands to the side of her face and, watching her eyes for any flicker that meant he should stop, he stepped nearer, leaned his head down, and kissed her.

"I told you once, I wouldn't touch you if you didn't wish it, but I very much want to touch you. Will you, can you?"

Rowan, warmed and dazed slightly from his kiss, nodded. "I do want to, but I am a little nervous."

"We'll go at your pace then, as you like it." He kissed her again, this time holding her close to him. Then, with one hand in her hair, he trailed kisses from her temple to her jaw. He smiled to hear her breathing quicken and a small sigh escape her.

Rowan placed her hands on Severus's shoulders and slid them down his arms as he kissed her. With her eyes closed she felt the input from her other senses. She smelled his scent, a little sweat from the warm weather mixed with residual spices clinging to his clothes, she heard the slight ragged edge to his breathing and sensed the rein he was keeping on himself. Her fingertips felt the fabric of his coat, lighter than his winter one, but still wool, and bumped over the neat row of small buttons running down his forearms. She stifled a laugh, then looked up at him when he stopped kissing her chin.

"Something funny?" He didn't sound upset; was that a corner of a smile? Rowan was encouraged.

"It's only ... you have no idea ..." Rowan stopped and laughed at herself.

"What?"

"It's those buttons; you have no idea how long I've been staring at them. I've been dying to undo them all." Rowan laughed in embarrassment at actually telling him that.

Oh, Merlin! Yes. "If you wish to undress me, I am entirely at your disposal," Severus murmured into her ear, then lowered his hands and stepped back.

Rowan hesitated a moment, then, with a chortle of glee, set to unbuttoning. She blushed hotly and didn't dare look him in the face but concentrated at the task at hand. Even with her deft fingers it was a very slow job.

Severus was being driven slightly mad but didn't dare move. "You do own a wand, yes?"

"I do, but it wouldn't be as much fun," Rowan answered with a grin. She had finished the closure buttons, and the right arm, and was working her way down the left.

If she's enjoying undressing me, I will simply allow myself to go mad and be carted off to St Mungo's before I do anything to stop her.

At last she finished and slid the coat off his shoulders. Severus pulled his arms out, folded the coat and placed it on the table, and his wand next to it. Then he stood in linen shirt and wool trousers. Rowan put her hands on his chest and slid them over the cool linen. She heard him groan, felt the vibration of it through her fingers, and looked up at him shyly.

"There are more buttons, you know."

Are there? Where? Oh. Rowan looked down at his trousers, crimsoned, then back up at his face, which was looking a little strained *Now or never.* Rowan looked down again and started on the trouser buttons. This was somewhat complicated by the pressure of his erection, and her fingers slipped off the buttons. Severus stood very still with his arms at his sides. There was a noise as of teeth grinding. With the placket on both sides unbuttoned, the trousers slid down Severus's hips and stuck there. She'd forgotten his shoes. He took his wand up, and with a small movement, the shoes vanished from his feet and appeared neatly together under the table. Replacing the wand, Severus let Rowan finish sliding his trousers down till he could step out of them and place them with his coat, then stood before Rowan in only his shirt and drawers.

Severus moved close and kissed Rowan again. There was little to disguise his desire from her, but she found a man in his underwear rather less threatening than one dressed to the chin in wool and buttons, although logically the threat was greater as he was now. She kissed back and felt warmth rising within her. With a deep growl, Severus scooped her into his arms and sat her on his lap on the sofa. One hand slipped around her waist, and the other tangled in her hair and pushed her head into his kiss.

Oh, Circe. Severus's kiss felt wonderful, and this time there was no need to fear being caught or interrupted. Rowan slipped her own arm over Severus's shoulders and kissed back with innocent enthusiasm. This brought a still deeper growl from Severus, who tightened his grip fiercely on her waist, slid his other hand up her skirts to stroke her thigh and started trailing kisses down her throat and clavicle. Rowan gasped a little and slid a hand from his shoulder into his hair. Next she felt his hot breath on her breast, through the fabric of her clothes, and the hand under her skirt moved to stroke her bum, then slid under her knickers and stroked her there. She knew he could feel the moisture growing there and was suddenly embarrassed and also supremely aware of how her hip was pressing against his hard cock.

Rowan stiffened and shifted a little. Severus looked up into her eyes and, seeing the fear growing there, he removed his hand from her skirt and put it back on her shoulder. His breathing and heartbeat were very fast, and he looked at her with an intensity, a longing, that was painful to see.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to frighten you. Should I stop? We don't have to do this now." *Although stopping will kill me, and then you will be the Widow Snape.*

"No, I want to get it over ..." Rowan almost bit her lip at Severus's visible wince. "Wait. I mean, I'm going to be scared no matter how long we wait. Don't stop. Just ... help me?"

Severus attempted to think rationally under difficult circumstances. *She wasn't frightened undressing me*, he recalled. "Why don't you explore, touch me. You must be curious, I daresay."

Rowan was, and also thrilled to have a Snape entirely at her disposal. She slid off his lap and helped him take off his shirt. Hesitating again, looking to his face for permission, Rowan undid the ties on his drawers, which he then removed. There he was, entirely naked, obviously aroused. Narrow chest, sallow skin, scars, Dark Mark, and all. Hers.

Rowan took her time over exploring his body, touching, kissing, even tasting where she willed. Severus concentrated on holding still, not grabbing her, and not shoving her to the floor and having her right there. The Dark Lord could have learned a lesson from her on slow torture.

Gradually, she grew more accustomed to him, and her touch grew firmer. Less exploratory and more caressing. Rowan touched him, stroked him, looked to see how she pleased him. She could tell by the small sounds and movements that he wasn't able to check when she was getting it right.

"Like this?"

"Oh, Merlin and Circe, yessss," Severus gasped. Finally, "You don't have to stop ... but ... oh," another gasp, "it will get messy, very soon."

Rowan chuckled, low in her throat. The feeling of power was heady and this was something she was very curious about indeed. She didn't stop. *Oh*. Severus's final eruption, his incoherent groan and the shudders of his body, his gasping sigh as he relaxed, it was all a joy to behold. He was right, though. *It was messy*. Rowan surveyed her dress, her hair, and, following Severus's bemused gaze upward, the ceiling. She snickered.

"Amused, are you?"

"Mmmhmmmm."

Severus stood and reached for his wand. He Vanished the mess, then pulled Rowan to her feet. "Your turn." He led Rowan to the bedroom where he undid her gown and slid it off. She felt slightly ridiculous standing there in her Muggle underthings but lost her embarrassment under the heat of his gaze, which quickened her own breath. Severus removed her bra and knickers, put everything neatly on a chair, then stopped to just look at her body. Fair skin, brown hair, matching brown curls lower down. Breasts small, but high. She still had the delicate bones and vestigial adolescent awkwardness of very new womanhood.

Severus walked around behind her, one hand on her hip keeping her still. Rowan shivered and all but felt his gaze on her back, her legs, her arse.

Finally, he took her by the hand, brought her to the bed and laid her down. Lying next to her, he repeated on her similar explorations as she had made on his body. Having just spent some of his own need, he was more easily able to progress slowly, gauging her readiness before advancing to more intimate caresses, kisses, delicate dippings and firmer rubbings.

Rowan's passion rose in her under Severus's fingers. It was not quick the amazing intensity that came from someone else's hands instead of her own warred with the embarrassment of being seen in this state, but when she finally did climax, it was shattering.

In a few seconds, as her breathing slowed, Severus rose and knelt between her legs. "Now, Rowan, please."

"Yes."

"Ohhh..."

"Ow!"

Severus stilled. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I didn't think it would hurt the second time, but it's not so bad."

"Ssh, relax. I'll try to ..."

"It's okay, I'll be fine." Rowan reached up and ran her fingers into Severus's scalp, pulled him down to kiss her.

It was too much for Severus. He had reached the place where his body took control, and he could only cry out her name and hope for the best. In a few moments, he collapsed limply on her, rolling to the side, panting and with his heart thumping. *Oh, Merlin, please! Don't let me have screwed this up.*

Rowan felt him slip out with some relief but turned and snuggled happily into his arms and nuzzled him in the neck.

"Are you all right? I didn't hurt you?"

"A little, but it's fine. What you did before," Rowan whispered shyly, "that was wonderful."

Thanking every benevolent spirit that ever blessed a marriage bed, Severus relaxed and held her close.

AN: Just a few more chapters to wind up the loose ends now.

Thanks to Juno Magic and Lady Whiteheart for saving you all from my grammar.

Early Days

Chapter 28 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 28: Early Days

The next day's *Daily Prophet* carried the story of Rowan's attack and rescue and of Severus's subsequent trial. Not, thankfully, on the front page, but prominently enough. Trust Rita Skeeter to put the worst possible interpretation on the facts and, where facts failed her, to create salacious new ones.

Severus tossed the paper into the fireplace after the briefest glance and torched it. Rowan smiled and poured him another cup of tea.

"I take it that you've read it?" He asked.

Rowan nodded, nose wrinkled in distaste. "I figured I'd better know what was being said."

"I can guess, I don't need the details."

Severus drank his tea, then put the cup down and said suddenly, "Let's just get away today. Tomorrow is soon enough to have to deal with it."

"Where would we go?"

"Nowhere special, just away from nosy idiots with newspaper subscriptions. How does a walk on the moor sound? We could pack lunch."

"It sounds perfect."

Rowan changed out of her dressing gown and into jeans, a light, long sleeved shirt and sturdy shoes. Severus wore his black trousers and linen shirt but left off the coat. When they were ready, with sandwiches packed and sunscreen charms placed, Severus Apparated them to the wilderness north of Hogsmeade to ensure they wouldn't run into anyone en route.

They spent a quiet peaceful day hiking together. Severus pointed out various plants that were useful for potions ingredients. Rowan collected lichens for dyestuff. Under the endless open blue dome of the sky, it was hard to feel that problems were significant, and they opened to each other. Even Severus's habitual reticence cracked a little, and he told her something about his childhood at Spinner's End.

Rowan in turn told him about her lifelong fascination with textiles. "My mother used to read Grimm's fairy tales to me. There were so many stories about girls who spun flax, and then magical things happened. I thought if I could just learn to spin well enough, then magic would happen to me too. I wanted it so much; I made a spindle out of some toys and took the fluff from a medicine bottle." Rowan peeked up at Severus, who was smiling at her.

"My mother used to laugh at me about it ... until the letter came," Rowan told him, grinning, and Severus laughed delightedly, imagining her moment of vindication.

Rowan adored the sound of his laughter. She never thought she'd see him so lighthearted and easy to be with. Taking his hand, she lifted her nose to the air and widened her nostrils a moment. "Mmmmm, smell that?"

"It smells like cocoa. There must be a stand of chocolate milkweed nearby."

"Yes, no wonder we feel so peaceful here. Pity it's the wrong time of year to get the fiber."

They crested a small rise and went down into the dell below. Suddenly, the scent of cocoa grew stronger, and they were surrounded by a cloud of brown-tan-black butterflies rising into the sky Chocolate Monarchs. Rowan gasped and both of them stood stock still in wonder at their beauty. When they had gone, Severus turned to Rowan and kissed her. She closed her eyes and felt the sun on her back, listened to the breeze rustle the milkweeds, smelled their chocolate perfume and tasted happiness.

When evening came, they Apparated back to their flat and had dinner together from the remaining food that the Hogwarts house-elves had provided them. There was enough for dinner and breakfast, then they would have to shop.

After dinner, Severus and Rowan shared a bottle of elf-made wine he had brought with his things from his house the day before. Warmed by the wine and their day together, Rowan took great delight in furthering her explorations of her new husband. She found a spot on his thigh that always made him gasp when touched and learned that he could not keep his eyes open when she kissed his clavicle. When he could take no more, he scooped her into his arms, carried her to the bedroom and undressed her there.

Lying naked on the bed, Rowan watched Severus undress himself. What was it about an erect penis that drew the eye so? It should really look rather ridiculous, sticking out as it did from a thin, sallow, scarred man. Somehow, though, it transformed that man into a figure of strength and passion. Gladly, she opened her arms to him.

This time there was almost no pain; by tomorrow, she was sure, there would be none at all. Only the amazing pleasure his touch brought her and took from her in turn.

She'd been right when she watched his hands working so deftly and imagined them on her body, how they would feel and how it would make her nerve endings sing.

She'd also been right when she imagined how his voice would sound purring endearments in her ear. It was so sexy, the sound alone nearly sent her over the edge.

She hadn't been right because she hadn't thought to imagine it how tremendously powerful it would make her feel to have him go tumbling over the precipice himself, brought there by *her* touch and the sounds of *her* voice, but it was so, and that was perhaps the best part of all.

The next day it was time to set forth and face the world. At least, the Hogsmeade portion of it.

Severus frowned at Rowan, who was smiling at him across the breakfast table.

"Hogsmeade isn't entirely safe. You will have to assume reports of you, of your behavior, will make it back to the Dark Lord."

Rowan swallowed thickly. "I don't want to cause you any trouble. What does You-Know-Who think of all this? Or rather, what should he think?"

"He does not know about your invisibility fabric project. As far as he knows, I was forced to offer you marriage, and you accepted out of necessity. It would be best if you appeared diffident, even a little frightened of me. Can you do that?"

"I'll try imagining I don't have my Potions essay ready," Rowan suggested, straight faced.

One eyebrow lifted, and a hint of a smile showed at one corner of his mouth. "When have you ever not had your assignments prepared?"

"Never, because as soon as I'd imagine what you'd be like if I didn't have it, I got scared into working," Rowan told him, grinning.

Severus snorted. "Very well, if that will work for you. We'd better go."

Rowan needed to buy groceries, and Severus to be fitted for new teaching robes. They walked down the two flights of stairs together and stepped into the High Street.

Immediately, eyes were upon them, and conversations stopped dead as they approached. Rowan felt eyes on her back as she chose vegetables and tried not to notice the butcher boy's smirk while the proprietor weighed her purchase. She wanted to sink when she saw the stack of *Prophets* at the checkout counter in the third shop. She drew strength from Severus's presence, a forbidding shadow at her back, but she did not show it. Instead, she looked fearfully to him for approval of her choices and stepped back deferentially while he paid.

Back in their flat, she flew into his arms as soon as their purchases were put down.

"Ugh, that was awful. How long do you think it will take before it wears off?"

"I suppose it depends on what else happens to divert attention."

"I was glad you were with me. Did I manage to look like I wasn't?"

Severus closed his eyes and held her. "You did. You had me worried for a bit."

On the one hand, Hogsmeade was a small village, so the entire population was fascinated by the scandalous history of their newest residents. On the other hand, Hogsmeade was a small village, so there were a limited number of people Rowan had to endure staring at her in lurid fascination.

Severus spent the next several days with her, helping her shop and arrange the flat. Since there were very few residents who were not terrified of him, even among those old enough never to have studied under him, this shielded Rowan from the worst of the impertinence.

By the time he had to return to Spinner's End to deal with his tenant and attend to his duties there for a while, she was accepted as Mrs. Snape with only a little wonder. When she went among her neighbors alone, she was treated with a kindness that suggested they pitied her. It was irksome, but much better than frostiness, so Rowan responded politely.

It was a good thing Rowan got a chance to meet the lighthearted and tender Severus who had taken her out on the moors the first day of her marriage, because very soon after the stresses of his position returned him to his more normal disposition. In addition, he was really not used to living with anyone else, having to accommodate their habits, or take their feelings into account. When things weren't exactly as he liked them, he had a tendency to revert to his classroom demeanor. Only his very fervent desire to sleep in his own bed with his wife, and not by himself on the couch, kept him from driving Rowan completely around the bend.

Severus arrived at the flat just as Rowan was taking a roasted chicken from the oven. Potatoes stood ready for mashing and veggies were in a pot. Rowan's wand was safely on the table in the living room. She wore an apron over Muggle jeans and t-shirt, beads of sweat hung on her forehead.

"It smells wonderful, but..."

"But?" There was a dangerous note in Rowan's voice.

"Why are you doing everything by hand? You do know you are allowed to use magic out of school now?"

"I did use magic; I started the stove," Rowan commented. It was a wizarding flat; there was no electricity or gas. "I've been helping my mother cook since I was twelve, no magic allowed. I haven't learned any other way. I didn't notice you teaching us any useful peeling or chopping charms. We had to do it all by hand in class."

"That's Potions; magic in the preparation can interfere. Cooking is different. I'll show you tomorrow."

Rowan started carving awkwardly, until Severus nudged her aside and took over.

Rowan picked up the flour, then turned as Severus made an indecipherable noise. He had his Potions classroom face on; she suspected he'd just wisely swallowed a sharp remark.

"Let's take it as given you've subtracted five points from my house which is now yours by the way. What is it?"

"Would you consider arrowroot instead of flour in the gravy?"

"I've never used it; we don't have it. Next time? I'll pick some up."

"Thank you."

After dinner, which was delicious even if the gravy did taste of flour, Severus charmed his wife's good mood back by charming the pots and dishes clean and by providing afters in the form of a box of chocolate cauldrons from Honeydukes.

Rowan ordered her equipment a spinning wheel, bobbins, winders, cauldrons and glassware for potions, and the new pride of her heart a golden-wooded Swiss counter-marche loom. It took most of the living room and blocked the view from the window, but since Rowan wasn't planning to entertain much company, that didn't matter. When she sat at the loom bench, natural light fell on the web, and she could see the lake and the castle through the corner of her eye. When the sun went down, she could spin by the fireplace. It was perfect.

Severus spent the summer shuttling between Spinner's End, the flat in Hogsmeade, and wherever he was required to go on the Dark Lord's behalf. The first time Severus was called through his Mark, Rowan was sick with worry. She sat up the night, trying to spin but mostly watching the fireplace for his return. He would report first to the Headmaster, if he could, and Floo home from there. When the green flame flashed at last, she rose and made room for him to come through, all but weeping with relief that he was unharmed.

"Hush, hush," Severus murmured into her hair. "It's all right. You needn't worry. Mostly these are business meetings, reports and planning."

"Mostly. But, not always?"

"No, not always." Severus had to agree. "Come to bed, you look exhausted."

"Does You-Know-Who trust you now?"

"More or less. Mostly more, I think. Others have failed him recently and been punished. That raises my own standing somewhat."

"That's safer, I suppose."

"Rowan, you won't like this, but..."

"Yes?"

"Call him the Dark Lord. Make it your habit."

Rowan's face eloquently expressed her distaste for that idea. "Why?"

"It would be safer for both of us. Hogsmeade has ears."

She took a deep shuddering breath but only said. "Very well."

AN: Thanks to Juno Magic for beta reading this chapter.

Another wedding

Chapter 29 of 29

Severus believes he has his double-role under control, but Dumbledore thinks it is becoming too dangerous. Rowan, a seventh year student with a crush on Severus, falls victim to the ensuing events. How can it come out right for either of them? Begun pre-HBP, now AU, but will be completed as originally planned.

Chapter 29: Another wedding

Severus came home to the flat one afternoon unexpectedly to find his wife sitting underneath her loom. Twisted in a way that could only be comfortable to a teenager, she fiddled with little knots connecting the treadles to some moving levers, squinting every so often at a piece of parchment before her. In her concentration, she hadn't yet noticed his entry.

Merlin, she is beautiful. How can she possibly be mine? His blood heated as he watched her silently. The lines of her leg and bum in the Muggle jeans she wore around the house, the bottom curve of her breast where her top had twisted up to reveal it – all his to touch and taste where he would. Giving in to temptation, Severus lowered himself to the floor behind her and touched his wife.

Clunk. "Ow," she said, crawling backwards from under the loom and onto his lap. "You could have said something."

"Are you always so heedless that you wouldn't hear an intruder?" Worry made his voice sound harsher than he meant.

"Are your wards so thin anyone else could have entered without my notice?" Rowan retorted.

"Point taken." Severus slipped his wand from his sleeve and healed the bump she was rubbing, then kissed her.

"Why are you doing this the hard way?" he asked her. "It can't possibly affect the fabric to use magic for this step, can it?"

"Probably not, but I haven't learned any loom tie-up spells."

"I know you took Charms at N.E.W.T. level; I've seen your grades. Does Flitwick teach nothing about crafting new charms?"

"He does, and I liked that part very much, but it is an awful lot of trouble – much more than just doing it by hand," Rowan answered.

"It's not that difficult ... what are you trying to do?"

Rowan showed him the parchment. "Connect the treadles to the lower lams, that's these levers here, wherever you see an X on the grid."

Severus thought a moment. "Didn't you tell me you'd knitted a sock by charming the needles? Is this so different?"

He saw her eyes widen as she caught the idea, then look around the room for something. Severus Summoned her wand and handed it to her. He nodded in satisfaction when she frowned in concentration and murmured the knitting charm. Her grin of pleasure when all the little knots tied themselves at her command was lovely, but distracting. He recalled how concerned he'd been about her.

"You aren't really practicing magic much, are you?"

"Here and there, plus of course the Thestral project."

"I'm worried about your reflexes, and that you've never really learned silent spellcasting. You haven't taken Defense past your fifth year, have you?"

"The curriculum was so scattered, across all those different teachers, it didn't seem worthwhile."

Severus sighed. She had a point, but she was going to need to be able to defend herself. He couldn't always be with her. Silently he looked at his lovely young wife. He was never going to get the D.A.D.A. job, but he did have one captive student. "Tomorrow, we're going to the moor."

"You must learn to concentrate. It is not necessary to pronounce a spell out loud to cast it. If you focus your mind correctly, you can cast any spell silently. This will give you an advantage over your enemy, who will not know what spell to expect."

"Is there a speed advantage as well?" Rowan asked. "I imagine you can think a spell faster than you can say it out loud."

"Yes, exactly. Two points to Ravenclaw."

Rowan snickered. There were no points over summer, and in any case they no longer applied to her. He could give her hundreds of points if he wanted to, with no harm to his precious Slytherin.

Severus had her drill stunning spells and other jinxes useful in wand to wand combat. They practiced out on the moor where they wouldn't damage the flat. Rowan had worried at first that she might hurt her husband, but it quickly became obvious that this wasn't likely. She could cast the spells silently, but with nowhere near the same strength as when she spoke them. He deflected everything she could throw at him efficiently, with no apparent effort and always without speaking. Rowan realized then that he only ever spoke spells aloud when he was demonstrating.

Panting, she flopped down into the soft heather. "If the other Death Eaters are anything like you, I'd better just not get into a fight."

Smiling, he sat beside her and transfigured a leaf into a sunshade.

"Staying out of trouble would be the best course of action, but I am pleased to see that you are improving markedly. Practice around the house – whenever you need to start the stove or Summon the salt, do it silently. You'll have it mastered in no time."

"That's a good idea, I'll try that."

Concentrating all her will, Rowan plucked a dandelion clock and sent it silently levitating towards him, where it stroked down the side of his face. Smiling, he turned and blew it as it hung in front of him. Rowan felt a brush of magic as he blew, then a wind came up, taking all the little wisps away and leaving the stem bare in one breath. "She loves me," he whispered. She did not deny it.

Occlumency lessons were carried out in their living room. They didn't go quite so well as jinxes and counter curses. While Rowan could summon enough annoyance with Severus to throw a creditable jinx at him, she had trouble really wanting to block him from her mind. When he stared into her eyes, she wanted to fall into his deep black gaze and offer him all of herself. The images he pulled from her memory and imagination tended to distract him from the task at hand.

Severus lay back on their bed and pushed his hair out of his eyes, while his heartbeat slowly returned to normal. "I sincerely hope no one else has occasion to practice Legilimency on you, Rowan, if they see what I do. You aren't supposed to want to touch me, let alone ..."

"I'm sure it's just you," Rowan answered, snuggling up under his arm. "I don't think those things about anyone else."

"There isn't anyone else to practice with you except Albus, and I don't care for him to see those images in case you are wrong."

Rowan shuddered. She liked the Headmaster, but not that much. "Um, right. Let's keep trying."

Rowan and Severus stepped out of the sun together into the cool shade of the quiet village church and sat in a pew on the bride's side. There were very few people – Edgar's and Ariadne's parents, and Edgar's uncle and his wife. Although the church was Muggle, they all wore robes. Whether the vicar was also a wizard, or was simply used to people dressing oddly for weddings, Rowan couldn't say.

The ceremony was brief and elegant. After Edgar and Ariadne spoke their vows and exchanged rings, the vicar wrapped the ends of his stole around their joined hands, pronounced them to be husband and wife, and declared: "Whom God has joined together let no one put asunder." At these words, Rowan saw a flare of magic turn thrice around their joined hands, and sensed an echo of the internal ring she had felt at her own marriage. It seemed that this wedding was both religious and magical at once. Rowan wondered again if the vicar were also a wizard, or if this always happened when lives were joined but only wizarding folk could sense it.

Edgar's family helped the other guests Apparate to the farmhouse where there was food and a small wedding cake.

Ariadne and Edgar exclaimed over the lovely blanket Rowan had woven for them for their bed.

"I used some of your own wool, Edgar, from the fleece you gave me after the holidays," Rowan told them, laughing.

"We'll have to send you home with more wool then," Adrian Bracken said. "You should get to make something for yourself," he told her with a smile.

Edgar drew Rowan aside for a moment while Severus conversed politely with Edmond and Adrian about the Hogwarts Thestrals.

"When I got home from the train, my father told me we have someone new staying with us."

Rowan looked at Edgar, eyes wide. He could only mean her mother.

"She's a distant cousin, a squib, and my father and uncle said she was welcome here and could help out on the farm. There are several stages in the parchment making where things need to be done the Muggle way, and she could be a help. There's a shepherd's cottage down the hill a way that's been empty since Eli died two years ago."

Rowan understood. Ariadne would know, of course, or soon would, because the couple would be living in the farmhouse, but the secret should not extend to her parents; Laurel would be keeping out of sight.

"Your family is very kind, Edgar. It sounds like your cousin is lucky to have you," Rowan told him earnestly. "Is she ... happy?"

"I think so; the country seems to suit her. If you come on business some time, you may be able to meet her."

"I'd like that Edgar, thank you."

After they'd all had cake, Edgar proudly brought Rowan and Severus down to the pen to show off the mated pair of Thestrals Hagrid had sent him. At least Rowan assumed they were there, and Edgar wasn't just putting her on. He gave her a small sack of their hair that he had collected to take back with her.

Rowan tested various blends of wool and Thestral hair to see how much she could stretch the limited supply without diluting the magical properties. By the time the summer ended, she had done enough sampling to have her production process worked out. When the school term started at Hogwarts and kept Severus from her during the day, Rowan spun her thread. By the end of October, she had nearly enough to warp her loom. Then, the Ministry fell.

Rowan had not seen Severus for several days. He had been called and he had gone. He had not told her anything that had happened previous times, and he didn't say anything now. He only told her to Floo to his quarters at Hogwarts and stay there until he came for her.

Worry kept Rowan from properly enjoying her opportunity to poke around Severus's private rooms at leisure, and only made her notice the loneliness and cold the more. School was in session, but she felt strange mixing with the students. She spent some pleasant time with Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall, who tried to make her feel comfortable, but mostly she stayed in her husband's quarters and read. And froze. She pulled a blanket around herself more snugly and wondered how she had ever managed years of potions classes in the dungeons wearing short skirts and school robes.

At last she heard the door open, and Severus came in. He looked worn and haggard, but unharmed. Rowan ran to his embrace. When he let go, he took both her hands and said, "Rowan, the Ministry has been subverted, the Dark Lord has placed his people at the head of all offices of the government."

"What happens now?"

"I don't know. There is talk about rounding up all the Muggle-born folk." Rowan gasped and clutched at him.

"Shh," he murmured in her ear. "I believe you are safe with me. The Dark Lord will not withdraw his gift."

"Is there any hope of defeating him?" came Rowan's strangled query from somewhere near his armpit.

"I can't say. Dumbledore has a plan, but he can't share it with me. I believe Potter will not return for his seventh year; Albus will withdraw from the school to work with him in freedom."

"Dumbledore ... leave the school?"

"The Ministry will send Aurors to arrest him on some made up charge. He won't allow himself to be arrested. He has ordered me to do all I can to protect the students and the staff. And you. We believe the Dark Lord will make me Headmaster."

"But everyone will think..."

"Yes," Severus said tiredly. "And you mustn't tell them or show them any differently."

"I can't be seen to love you, can I?"

"Nor I you," he said, pulling her into his embrace. "But I will spend every moment we are alone making sure you know it."

Rowan rested her head on his chest and considered the coming year from the circle of his arms. What would happen with the Dark Lord running the Ministry?

"I don't think I should work on my invisibility fabric any more. If I make the cloaks, they will only help the Dark Lord."

Severus let out a soft breath of relief. "I had meant to suggest the same thing. He does not know about your project, and it is definitely best to keep it that way. The less he remembers you, the better."

Rowan pressed herself into his arms and shook as fear overcame her. So much for all her planning; now she had no work she could safely do, almost no identity anymore. It was terrifying. "Hold me, Severus."

Severus held her, and kissed her, and laid her down on his bed and tried to give her the comfort of his body since she wanted it. He reached for his wand to undress, but she stopped him. Rowan still loved the button ritual. He tolerated this odd quirk in his wife and lay back so she could undress him with her own hands. Buttons undone, coat removed and trousers going the same way, Rowan stopped suddenly. "What," she asked, "are these?"

"What do they look like? They are warm underwear."

"Woolen long johns?"

"Of course. Otherwise, I'd freeze, spending all my time down here," Severus told her.

"That explains the smirk on your face when you told us warming charms would interfere with the potions. You rotter!"

"I would assume any sensible person would take that as an indication that they should dress warmly."

"That's fine for the boys, but what are the girls going to do with those stupid uniform skirts, hmmm?"

"I did not set the uniform, and what my female students wear under their skirts is not something I should be thinking too closely about, is it?"

"Hmmm," Rowan growled at him, unable to find a good answer. She returned to undressing her husband, but at the back of her mind, she was ticking over the possibilities.

Thanks to Juno Magic for tenderly betaing this chapter. Only one more to go!