

# The Potion Master's Assistant

by ClayPotter

Snape can't decide if his new assistant will drive him crazy, or if he can't live without her. See how he uncovers the many secrets of this mysterious loner.

## The New Arrivals Pass the Test

Chapter 1 of 31

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**A/N:** I have been posting this story for the past several months and must admit my disappointment with the number of people who have read the first chapter but have not bothered to go on to chapter two. This is my first attempt at creative writing since my high school days (over three decades ago), so I have no one to blame but myself for the story's inadequacies. But I have since finished this rather long tale and am halfway through another, and I feel that my writing has greatly improved along the way. So, in an attempt to hold the reader's interest, I have made some significant changes to chapter one. But I ask that you have patience with me, because I feel strongly that if you like stories of a spiritual nature, and you can force yourself through the first three chapters, you may enjoy really enjoy the rest of this one.

Please let me know what you think. I am always open to constructive criticism.

### Chapter 1

#### The New Arrivals Pass the Test,

#### One Stands a Head Above the Rest"

*A transfer student... A fifth-year transfer student! Has Dumbledore lost his mind? Haven't we all got enough to worry about with the Triwizard Tournament coming up and the overblown tightened security? Now we must coddle some poor lost soul and help her along with her studies. "Home schooled," he said. Merlin knows what kind of education that might leave her with. She probably doesn't know a toad's toe from a newt's. Well, if he expects me to show her any more attention than any other student, he can take the Sword of Gryffindor and shove it up his...*

Tap, tap, tap.

"Enter," barked Professor Snape.

"Good morning, Severus. You look to be in your usual sour mood this morning." Professor McGonagall stepped through the door to his office. "What's the matter? Sore that you won't have the opportunity to lose the Quidditch Cup to Gryffindor again this year?" She chuckled under her breath.

"Oh yes." Severus sneered back at her. "Simply devastated. Did you come here to torture me, or are you on some kind of mission for our fearless leader?"

"I'm here as an Order Member, actually. I have a message from Albus." The light mood quickly evaporated as Severus gave Minerva his full attention. "It's about Sienna Kaolin."

"The new kid?" Severus asked with a grunt. "What about her?"

"Albus asks that we watch her closely."

"Why? Is she a troublemaker?"

"No, he's afraid others could try to make trouble for her. She could even be put in danger somehow, especially with the foreign students and all of the outsiders that will have free run of the place this year. Albus fears for her safety."

"What puts her in more danger than anyone else?"

"He didn't say. He simply asked me to relay the message."

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Later that evening the Great Hall was filled with students as they awaited the new arrivals. Severus watched in amusement as the dripping wet first years paraded past the staff table and waited to be sorted. One girl stood a head taller than all the rest. She looked old, even for a fifth year. Her long ebony curls cascaded down her back as the water dripped off. Her eyebrows swept back elegantly, revealing long black lashes over pale grayish green eyes that sparkled in wonder at the vastness of the Great Hall.

Severus watched as her eyes took in all the details of the room and its inhabitants. She seemed to be concentrating very hard, absorbing each and every face, as if committing them all to memory. But she spoke to no one.

Finally, her eyes found his. She raised her eyebrows at him, as if she already knew him. He raised his eyebrows in return with curiosity, and their eyes locked. *Well, well... At least you don't look like James Potter, so if I have to keep an eye on you, it won't be such an unpleasant task.*

She smiled broadly, almost as if she could hear his thoughts. Then, after a few moments, she broke the link and continued to observe the scene around her while she waited her turn to put on the Sorting Hat.

Sure enough, when Professor McGonagall got to the "Ks" she stepped forward to the stool, picked up the sorting hat, and sat down. A long silence followed, apparently indicating indecision on the part of the hat. Finally, it shouted out "Gryffindor!" The Gryffindor table erupted, and she walked briskly to join them. Severus groaned. *Not another one*, he thought. He could see that the other kids were all full of questions for her and wondered if she liked the extra attention.

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As the first weeks of school passed, Severus and the students fell into the school routine. The fifth year Gryffindors had double potions with the Slytherins. It was Severus' last class for the day as well as theirs, and by the end of class time everyone's nerves were usually wearing thin. Some people were frantically trying to get their potions completed on time. The tension always hung heavy in the air. Severus relished the feeling of intimidation. At least in his class room, he had the ultimate power to control every aspect of the situation. Each student shook in his or her shoes as he strolled by, glaring down his long nose into their cauldrons... except Kaolin. She was always calm and never looked flustered. But then again, she never gave him any reason to ridicule her work.

"Dismal attempt, Lotus. You forgot to add the frog spawn in step seventeen, didn't you?" Severus turned on his heels with a dismayed look. "Did you people forget how to read over the break? It's right here on the board. All you have to do is READ the instructions!" Exasperated and angry, he turned back to poor Lorenzo Lotus. "I don't need a phial to test. I can tell by looking, it will be completely useless. What a waste of perfectly good potion ingredients." He waved his wand and the cauldron emptied. "Zero," he sneered. "Everyone else, times up. Phials on my desk NOW!"

*It's going to be another long year*, Severus groaned inwardly. He walked back to his desk and, with a flick of his wand, piled the phials up in a basket as they were handed to him. When Kaolin brought hers up, Severus immediately noticed that it was the perfect color not the color it would have been had she followed the instructions to the letter but better. She had tweaked it, and he had not even noticed how. He made a mental note to watch her more closely. Had she somehow gotten hold of his old textbook? No, he thought. It was right where he had left it in the bottom of a cabinet in the closet. He was sure of it.

Yet, there she was, handing in a perfect potion, and this was not the first time. And unlike Granger, she did it silently, in the background. If it had only been "by the book," he may not have even noticed her existence at all. She never asked questions, never talked out of turn, never even seemed to socialize with the other students. No, she was definitely NOT an attention hound like Potter, Weasley or Granger. Thank Merlin's Beard! He didn't think he could take another one.

But she was such a loner and avoided trouble so effectively, that Severus couldn't imagine why Dumbledore insisted that she remained under the Order's watchful eye. Luckily, most of that chore had been delegated to Minerva, since the girl had been sorted into Gryffindor.

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A few days later, Severus caught Dumbledore in the hall after dinner. "May I have a few moments of your time, Headmaster?"

"Of course, Severus. Let's go up to my office." They weren't far and walked down the hall in silence.

As they settled themselves in Dumbledore's office, Severus looked around at all the fascinating gadgets whirring and sputtering on the various tables. Fawkes, the Phoenix, sat on his perch, preening his magnificent tail feathers. He looked up at Severus and let out a short, melodic greeting. Severus smiled. "Good to see you too, Fawkes," he replied. Then he turned to Dumbledore. "So what's the story on the Kaolin girl?"

Dumbledore looked at him innocently. Severus could already tell he was a wealth of information. The trick was always in how to get him to open up. "What do you mean? I told you at the start of school why she came to us late."

"Yes, yes, the Muggle school that her father had requested she attend before his death." Severus' lips and eyes both narrowed, "but I sense that there is much more to her story."

"Oh? Why do you think that?" Severus could see that Dumbledore wasn't going to give up any more information than he had to.

"Well, to start with, she never asks questions in class; I never see her wandering the halls or the grounds, alone or with other students. She sits at the end of the Gryffindor table at meals and barely speaks to anyone."

"Do you think she could just be a loner?"

"But she's in Gryffindor! They are, by and large, almost as social as the Hufflepuffs!" Severus definitely felt at this point that Dumbledore was giving him the run around.

"Wouldn't be the first time. After all, the sorting hat *did* have trouble placing her."

Severus was definitely not satisfied with that answer, but he hadn't divulged all of his information either.

"What else is troubling you about her?"

Yes, Dumbledore always knew. "I'm not troubled as much as amazed," admitted Severus. "She has an uncanny ability to produce the perfect potion. The first couple of weeks, she went by the book and her potions were always good, but then she started experimenting with stirring patterns and ingredient preparation. Sometimes, she even

adds items that are not in the recipe. Since then she has turned in a work of art at the end of each class."

"She sounds a bit like a Slytherin boy who used to attend school here."

Dumbledore smiled warmly. "Severus, I'll let you in on a little secret." Dumbledore finally opened up slightly. "Miss Kaolin is already 17 years old, thanks to her time at the Muggle school, and has already passed her Apparation test. The other fifth years are a bit uncomfortable around her because she's older, and the other 17-year-olds look down on her because she's a fifth year. So she has become a bit isolated socially. Her mother was afraid this would happen and asked me to keep an eye on her. So Sienna and I have a standing weekly appointment every Friday evening after dinner. We talk about her week and any concerns she has. She has taken to studying in Minerva's office instead of the Gryffindor Common Room. She told Minerva that the Common room was crowded and noisy and even the library had too many people in it most of the time."

"I thought that studying in her office was Minerva's idea, so she could keep close watch on her as you requested. I don't see the point really. Why does she need to be watched over anyway?"

Dumbledore absentmindedly pushed the papers around on the top of his desk. "Let's just say she's special."

Severus eyed Dumbledore suspiciously. Now he was sure that his friend was holding back on him. "That can't be all."

"Oh no," admitted Dumbledore. "There is much more to her than that. But I'm afraid it's not my place to reveal all her secrets. If she wants you to know, she'll tell you."

Severus opened his mouth to object but was cut off.

"I will tell you this much more," added Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Although she has top grades so far in everything, Potions is her favorite subject. She would love to know more. Perhaps you could talk her into being your assistant one or two afternoons a week. I know you could use the help."

Severus scoffed at this idea. "A student agree to help me? And a Gryffindor no less?" He snorted. "Not likely!"

"Well, suit yourself. It was just an idea." Dumbledore's eyes were still twinkling. Severus knew that look. What was he up to?

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October came and with it the Beaubaton and Durmstrang students. They took classes apart from the Hogwarts students and were taught by their own headmasters. Madam Maxime of Beaubaton stood taller than Hagrid, and he took an immediate interest in her. Professor Karkaroff, the headmaster of Durmstrang, was well acquainted with Severus, having been a Death Eater who turned states evidence after the fall of Voldemort. During the trial he had tried to convince the folks in attendance that Severus was still loyal to Voldemort. Thank goodness Dumbledore had managed to convince them otherwise.

The night was finally upon them when the Triwizard Champions would be revealed. To Severus' surprise, as well as everyone else's, Harry Potter's name flew up and out of the Goblet of Fire to make him the fourth Champion. Severus smelled a rat and at first assumed it must have been Harry. His father would have been proud to pull a stunt like that, fooling the age line and getting in illegally. But the look of horror that Harry had given him as he walked up to the front of the room made Severus begin to fear that someone else had planned this, someone with sinister ulterior motives. The rules were clear, however, so Harry was obliged to compete. Severus thought at first that this was a good thing; that as the events unfolded, the culprit could be flushed out into the open. But he knew it was also risky. What if something happened to Harry? Severus shuddered and tried to shake off the thought as he climbed into his four poster bed that night, with the evening's events fresh on his mind.

As he began to drift into a light sleep, he heard a voice...

"Severus," a woman's soft tone filled his lonely ears. "I've been waiting for you."

"Lily," he whispered anxiously. "I'm worried."

"I know, Sev. Me, too."

"Can you tell what has happened? Who's responsible?"

"No. But I do know it's not good. I feel something dreadful will eventually come of this."

Severus gazed into Lily's emerald green eyes. Usually, her face, her voice, her presence had a calming effect, but not this time. She was worried, and her look fed his fears. "What do you think I should do?"

"I don't know if there is anything you *can* do."

Severus wrapped his arms around her in an effort to comfort her, hoping to find some solace for himself as well. It didn't help much.

"I'll do everything in my power to watch over him, keep him safe."

"I know you will. You always have, even if sometimes you're a bit cruel about it."

"We've been over this, Lily," Severus said, letting her go and walking a few steps away. "You know why I must treat him this way."

"But he has grown to hate you, Severus. I never wanted him to hate you. I feel sometimes that the animosity goes both ways. It's gotten out of hand."

Severus pursed his lips. As he turned to look at her, she crossed her arms and furrowed her brow.

"We both know the Dark Lord is still out there... somewhere. It's only a matter of time before he returns. Harry must be ready. He must be hardened and experienced. I'm giving him a thick skin that will ultimately aid in his survival. You *know* that."

"Well, I hope it helps him survive this tournament," she said, a hint of desperation in her voice.

"You'll be watching, too, I'm sure."

"As always. Him *and* you."

"And you'll come to me if there's anything I should know?"

"Of course."

Severus nodded. He walked back over to her and wrapped his long slender fingers around her delicate hands. As he watched Lily fade from view, he drifted into a much deeper, dreamless sleep.

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Fall dragged on. Potter survived his first task in the tournament much to Severus' relief. He couldn't help but be reminded of James, however, with every daring move Harry made on his Firebolt. He got past the dragon on sheer nerve, outrunning and outmaneuvering her with some amazing moves that Severus had to admit were pretty

impressive.

It would soon be Christmas break, which also meant that the school would host the Yule Ball, a tradition that accompanied the privilege of hosting the Triwizard Tournament. The "Well Mannered Frivolity," as Professor McGonagall had put it, was not Severus' idea of a good time, but he reluctantly arranged for a dance instructor to give all the older Slytherins dancing lessons. He didn't think he could stomach it, however, and found some excuse to grade essays in his office. Presently, there came a knock on the door. "Enter," he said with a touch of annoyance in his voice at the interruption.

In stepped Sienna Kaolin. She peaked at him from under the dark locks that framed her face. As she tossed her head to clear them away from her eyes, Severus noticed that she was beaming. Most students didn't beam in his presence, but then again, she wasn't like most students. He raised his eyebrows at her and waited for her to speak.

"I thought you'd be with the Slytherins in their dance lesson. But they told me you were here."

"Yes, well, I know I won't be dancing, so I saw no reason to waste my time. These days it seems I have very little time to waste."

"I don't need the dance lessons either. I'm going home to be with my mum. I don't want her to be alone at Christmas."

"Admirable," he offered with growing impatience.

"Yeah, well, I don't feel comfortable in large crowds anyway."

Somehow Severus didn't think she had come here to talk about dancing. "What do you want? I have a lot of work to do."

"It's about your valuable time shortage... I have an idea that might help your situation."

"Oh?" She had his attention now.

"I would like to offer my services as your assistant. I could learn so much just from how you sort ingredients. And your time would be freed up for more important matters."

"Sorry, but I like to work alone." Severus saw the beaming diminish, but noticed that it wasn't extinguished all together. He decided to test her determination. "Besides, I couldn't stand the constant chattering of a feeble minded teenage girl."

Instead of getting upset, Sienna eyed him suspiciously. "I'm *not* feeble minded," she said quietly. "I'm already of age, and I would only speak when spoken to unless I had a very important question." Severus purposefully looked unconvinced. "Do I speak out of turn in class?"

He could tell she wasn't going to be easily discouraged. "Did Dumbledore put you up to this?"

"It was my idea, but he did encourage me to come to you."

Severus pursed his lips. "I had a feeling..." He sat thoughtfully for a moment. *Keep a close eye on her indeed.* Dumbledore had something up his sleeve, but Severus could see no reason not to take her up on her offer. "I must admit, you are the quietest student in all of my classes. And your potions so far have been..." he hesitated, searching for a word that would not let on to how impressed he was with her work, "...adequate for a fifth year." She smirked as if she could see right through his smoke screen.

"So I can start after Christmas?" The beaming was back in full force.

"Tuesdays and Thursdays," he said in a calm and unenthusiastic voice. "Right after class for one hour. We'll see how it goes in January. Then," his words slowed as he added drops of sarcasm, "I'll decide if you are worth the trouble."

"Oh, *thank you!*" she ran around the desk and hugged his neck. He was inwardly alarmed at her inappropriate behavior as he scowled and kept his arms relaxed at his side. She didn't seem to notice as she pulled away to look at him. Her eyes sparkled like moonlight on water. He noticed that they looked pale grayish green. Weren't they blue in class earlier?

"Have a happy Christmas, Professor." As if this revolting display of affection wasn't bad enough, she gave him a peck on the cheek, then turned and ran from the room.

Severus looked after her in silent amazement. Had a tornado just touched down in his office? He reached up and gently felt the spot where she had kissed him. *Merlin's eyebrows*, he thought, *what have I gotten myself into?*

## Eye of Newt

### Chapter 2 of 31

After trying his best to get rid of her, Severus finds himself impressed with Sienna's work - that is, until he suspects her of helping Harry steal gillyweed for the Triwizard Tournament.

Disclaimer: All characters you recognize are based on J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Book Series. I have written this as a parallel to the last four books of the series. Because of the parallel there are times when I recreate J. K. Rowling's dialog word for word, in order to conform to her canon. This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

I'd like to extend my deepest thanks to JenGeorge for her diligent proof reading and suggestions. She really helped to improve my story.

### Chapter 2

"Eye of Newt, Claw of Raven,

Passion Flower Pistol and Stamen"

After the first Potions Class in January, Miss Kaolin lingered, gathering up her books, as the rest of the students cleared out of the room. As Severus sat behind his desk busying himself with paperwork, he didn't even notice her standing there. She approached the desk, leaving her books in a stack on her worktable, but he continued to

ignore her. "So, did you have a good Christmas?" she asked hopefully.

"What are you still doing here?" he looked up, obviously annoyed.

"Don't you remember what we discussed right before the break? I'm to be your assistant Tuesdays and Thursdays after class for an hour."

"Oh," he replied very unenthusiastically, "right." He had decided over the break that he really didn't want an assistant, no matter what Dumbledore said, especially not a home-schooled teenage girl. So he leaned back in his chair and looked around, trying to decide what truly nasty task he could give her so she would never want to come back. Then it came to him, a perfectly disgusting task. He got up and strolled over to the storage room, feeling rather pleased with himself. He aimed his wand up on a high shelf and down floated a five-gallon lidded bucket that came to rest on a nearby table. Then he turned to Miss Kaolin with a gloating smile. "This is full of newts whole newts. I will need them each to be dissected and their various parts sorted into jars. You will find all the clean, empty jars you will need on the second shelf to the right in here," he said as his arm swept towards the storage closet. Then he turned to the chalk board and waved his wand. "There you will find the name of each part that needs to be sorted and kept. All the leftovers are to be put back in the bucket and taken to Hagrid. He always has something he can feed my leftovers to."

Miss Kaolin gingerly opened the lid to the bucket. An odor reminiscent of a three-day-old carcass in the summer sun wafted up, and she took a step back, waving her hand in front of her face. Severus' lip curled. "Too much for you?"

She turned her face towards him with a determined look. "No," she said defiantly, "but I've never dissected a newt before. Is there a book I can reference to see where all the parts are located and what they look like?"

Severus glanced towards his book case and flicked his wand. An old book escaped the confines of the tightly packed shelf and floated into his hands. He turned to a page with a diagram of a dissected newt, properly labeled, and laid the book down on her work table.

"Will I need any special tools?"

Severus was a bit disappointed in her determination to complete the task. He didn't hesitate to let it show on his face. "In this drawer you should find everything you need. Just be sure to return them clean and in good working order."

"Yes, sir." She looked hard at the chalk board and took a mental inventory of what she would need. Then she walked to the storage closet to retrieve the empty jars. She set them all out on the work table in a nice neat row, then turned to the drawer with the tools.

Severus watched from his desk chair until he was satisfied that she was at least going to give it a sincere try. Then he went back to his paperwork. The minutes ticked slowly by as Miss Kaolin worked silently. Still, it was a bit disconcerting to feel her presence in the room. She couldn't possibly want to continue after this. He felt sure he would be rid of her soon.

The hour came to an end, and Severus rose from his chair to check on her progress. He was nothing short of amazed to see that she only had two newts left to do from that entire bucket. The neat row of jars was full of tiny body parts, but still a scowl spread across his face. "I'm disappointed," he lied. "You've had an entire hour, yet still you haven't been able to accomplish your task." He clucked his tongue. "I guess I'll have to finish it for you and take the leftovers to Hagrid myself." He tried to muster as much disappointment into that last sentence as possible. He hoped she would get the impression that nothing she did would ever be good enough, that she could never please him. Then surely he would be rid of her.

"Please, sir, could I stay and finish?" Her eyes were wide with sincerity. "I only have two left and it'll just take a couple of minutes. Then I can take the leftovers to Hagrid, and you'll have some time to yourself before dinner."

Yes, Severus thought silently, *a little time alone before being subjected to all of those other people would be refreshing*. He knew Hagrid was a talker. It would be hard to pull away from him until it was time to go eat. He considered her offer thoughtfully for a moment. "Oh, alright, but hurry up about it." He felt irritated as he realized that she was not going to be so easy to get rid of.

A few minutes later she had placed all the little jars in their proper spots on the shelves, cleaned her tools and returned them to their drawer, and cleaned up her work space. She gathered up her books in one hand and the bucket handle in the other. "See you at dinner, then?"

"What?" Severus looked up as if he had not been paying attention, although he had observed her every move out of the corner of his eye. "Oh, yes, dinner." He nodded his head in acknowledgement. She turned and left the room. He heaved a big sigh of relief. She had actually done a great job for him, but he still wasn't sure he could get used to having her around. There was something very unsettling about her. He couldn't quite put his finger on it

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Severus suffered through the first month with Miss Kaolin as his assistant. He gave her toads, poisonous dart frogs, electric eels... He sent her to the greenhouses for the rare dragon dung beetles that turned Professor Sprout's dragon dung into better fertilizer. He sent her into the forbidden forest with Hagrid to harvest the roots, bark and flowers from various trees and plants, most of them carnivorous or poisonous.

Much to his dismay, she found every task fascinating. She would return from the greenhouses stinking to high heaven and grinning from ear to ear with enthusiasm over the number of beetles she managed to fish out of the dung heap. And no matter how nasty or how difficult the chore, she always did an exemplary job. These were the types of things he gave most students for detention. For her, they were fun! Her enthusiasm was so great at times, he almost felt sick. *There must be some way to get rid of her...*

He finally decided to change his strategy. Perhaps he could bore her into leaving... Something that she would feel was beneath her... Cleaning that was the answer! He knew he had plenty of house-elves at his disposal, but he was becoming desperate. Her positive attitude and enthusiasm simply rubbed him the wrong way. He was comfortable in his lonely misery and felt her nearness made him increasingly uneasy. True, he had a lot more spare time now, thanks to all her hard work and dedication. He had just about caught up on reading his healing journals. But she was simply too happy, and he found it almost more than he could tolerate. He knew Dumbledore would never allow him to simply fire her. No, it had to be her idea. She had to want to leave. So he gave her cleaning jobs the tools, the shelves and all their contents, dusting his book case, rearranging his books from alphabetical according to author to alphabetical according to subject... Surely she would soon tire of this. But he was wrong.

By the first week of February, he realized that he had run out of things for her to clean in the classroom as she approached his desk after class as usual. Severus looked into her pale gray eyes. She was one of the few people he couldn't always read. Her expression was calm, almost serene. There must be an ulterior motive, but what was it?

"What's up for today, Professor?"

"Not much left in here to do. I guess it's time I let you have a go at cleaning my office." Severus searched her face hopefully for a groan or rolling eyes, but saw no change in her expression. He pursed his lips and stood up, gathering an armload of essays. "I'll grade these while you clean."

He led the way out the door and down the hall. When they got to his office, he gave her a list of mundane cleaning chores. "This should keep you busy for a few days." He continued to search her face for signs of exasperation, but was sorely disappointed.

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The Thursday before the second Triwizard Tournament task they found themselves back in Severus' very clean office. He had, once again, run out of ideas to get rid of her, but he was finally starting to think that maybe he could get used to her after all. He wasn't sure why he had finally changed his mind. Perhaps she wasn't quite as perky

when she cleaned as she was when she did the more interesting chores. But she had calmed down considerably, which made her presence much easier to bear. So it was with a bit of trepidation that he told her, "It's back to dissecting, I'm afraid." He hoped against hope that she would keep her calmer attitude. He had, after all, begun to depend on her help, and at this point it would be difficult to go back to the way things were before she became his assistant.

He pushed a few things around on the shelves in his private store closet. "Here." He handed her a gallon jar. It contained a mass of tentacles from a Devil's Snare plant, but they were suspended in a stupifucus solution so they wouldn't crawl out and attack the instant the jar was opened. "I need these to be cut into more manageable sized pieces," Severus explained. "I shouldn't need more than ten cm for any potion. Here's a ruler," he reached into the top middle drawer of his desk and handed her a precision metal ruler. "If you have any trouble..." Severus searched his mind for just the right barb... "Don't come crying to me."

"Don't worry, Professor. I think I can handle it." And with a smile, she pulled out her silver potions knife. Before she opened the jar she began to hum a tune softly. Severus could barely hear it. His first thought was to request that she work in silence as usual, but the song had a very calming effect on him. He noticed, as she reached in and pulled out the first meter long Devil's Snare tentacle, that it had the same effect on the plant. Very impressive.

Just then, a knock came at the door. "Come in," said Severus, looking at the door with irritation.

"A message for you, sir," said a nervous third year, handing Severus the note. Miss Kaolin barely glanced in their direction and then continued with her dissecting.

"You may go, Creevey." Severus quickly read the note and stood abruptly. "My presence is requested in the office of the Headmaster." He thought for a moment. Someone had broken into his office during the previous night, but he had no way to prove how or who did it. He felt almost certain that it must have been Potter. After all, Filch had found Potter's Golden Egg from the first task on the staircase, and Moody had Accioed that old piece of parchment he found on the stairs close by, right out of his hand. It had to be Potter.

Could he trust this Gryffindor student in his office alone? His eyes narrowed. "This shouldn't take long. If anyone knocks, don't answer. I'll put a locking charm on the door. No one except me will be able to open it from the outside. You will be able to leave if you finish with the Devil's Snare before I return. Just close the door behind you and the locking charm will reset itself." She nodded in acknowledgement.

Severus turned on his heels and left the room, his cloak swirling around him.

When he returned over an hour later, Miss Kaolin was gone and the Devil's Snare was neatly cut into small pieces in its jar and back on the shelf in the closet. The place looked as if she had never been there. *Good job as usual*, he thought.

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The second task of the Triwizard Tournament came and went. Harry Potter managed an admirable performance in the Black Lake with the use of gillyweed, not a common plant. *Where could Potter have acquired it?* Severus asked himself suspiciously. Perhaps it was time for another search of his office stores. Severus marched down into the dungeon, went straight to his office and opened his store closet. Sure enough, some of his gillyweed was missing. But when could Potter have snuck into his office? Then a gut wrenching idea came to him. Kaolin, a fellow Gryffindor, had the perfect opportunity to help him because she was there alone on Thursday afternoon. If Potter had knocked, she could have let him in to help himself, and then let him back out again before she left. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. And he was also disappointed, not so much in her, but in himself for trusting her in the first place. What a fool he had been.

He sat down to his desk, pulled out a quill and a piece of parchment, and scrawled out a note in his uptight small handwriting. He folded the note into nice neat quarters, then went out to the hall to search for a Gryffindor student to deliver the message. It was Saturday afternoon, and the school in general was celebrating the conclusion of the second task and the fact that Potter and Cedric Diggory were tied for first place. Kaolin would probably be in the Gryffindor common room with the others. *Good, this will ruin her weekend. Serves her right.* Did she think he wouldn't put two and two together? Did she think he was stupid?

Severus waited in his office with the door open. By the time Kaolin appeared, he was fuming with resentment. As she stepped over the threshold, he flicked his wand at the door and it slammed shut, almost hitting her in the process. She jumped in alarm and glared at him.

"What was *that* for?" she demanded, scowling.

Severus ignored her question. "Are you aware that Potter used gillyweed to succeed in the second task?"

"Yes." Kaolin continued to glare at him.

"I happen to know that the gillyweed he used was stolen from *that* store closet" Severus pointed savagely towards the closet door.

"No!" Her anger dissipated and her eyes grew wide with concern.

Severus stared straight into her pale blue eyes. *Legilimens*, he said silently, trying to search her memories, but nothing useful was forthcoming. In fact, nothing at all was forthcoming. Was Dumbledore teaching her Occlumency? He would have to ask him later.

"The locking spell I used could only be broken with advanced magic, way beyond Potter's fourth-year abilities, I'm afraid, which leads me to only one possible conclusion."

Understanding began to dawn on Kaolin's face as she opened her mouth, no doubt to defend herself. But Severus cut her off. "He had *help*. And the only person who was in any position to help him late last week was you." His eyes narrowed as they bore into her, filled with resentment.

"But, Professor, *I swear--*"

"You let him in when I was called away." Severus' voice lowered almost to a whisper. He was trying to control his anger, as his nostrils flared. Daggers shot from his eyes to hers while he paused for a moment. "I trusted you," he said, almost painfully. It hurt. This was personal.

Kaolin pulled herself up as straight and tall as her petite frame would allow. Her eyes bore into him as hard as his were boring into her. "And I would *never* betray your trust."

She seemed to have nothing to hide. This made Severus a little less sure of himself. But there was no other explanation, so he stubbornly stuck to his theory. Her lower lip started to quiver. Was that water welling up in her eyes? Oh well, it wasn't the first time he had driven a student to tears. So what--she deserved it.

"You're wrong about me. I just hope that when you realize it, you won't let your pride stand in the way of asking me back." She swallowed hard and blinked. Sure enough, one lone tear found a meandering path down the side of her face.

"Get out," Severus said, through gritted teeth. He looked down at the top of his desk and started to shuffle papers. He didn't look up as he heard the door slam.

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March came and went. Kaolin appeared in his afternoon class, worked silently and continued to hand in perfect potions. But try as he would to catch her eye, she never seemed to look at him. She would gather her books and leave with the rest of the class, never the last one out.

The beginning of April came. Severus had miles of parchment to grade, but he had just gotten a fresh batch of ravens' feet in and had to remove the claws. It was a tedious task, and one that he definitely wasn't looking forward to, but if not done when the feet were fresh, neither the claws nor the feet were nearly as potent. He also needed to

take some leftovers to Hagrid, but he knew that would probably mean writing off the rest of the afternoon. He also needed to get more herbal ingredients from the greenhouses. He was beginning to run low on several essentials... And the dust in this place was starting to build up again. He could ask the house-elves for help, but they just didn't do as good a job.

What he really needed was Miss Kaolin.

As he lay in bed late one night, Severus heaved a heavy sigh. Someone had broken into his private stores again just the night before, because he noticed more Polyjuice Potion ingredients missing. He couldn't blame it on Miss Kaolin this time. Perhaps the person who had done this had also helped Potter get the gillyweed. Perhaps he was wrong about her after all.

He began to drift off to sleep when he heard a familiar voice.

"I like Sienna, Severus."

"Do you?"

"She reminds me of myself."

"Yes, she does, doesn't she?" Severus became thoughtful.

"She's smart," commented Lily. "And I know why the hat finally chose to put her in Gryffindor."

"Oh? Pray enlighten me, because the way I see it, she should have been placed in Ravenclaw. Although," he added, somewhat amused at himself, "she would look more attractive in Slytherin colors!"

Lily ignored his comment. "She's brave."

"How do you figure that?"

"She feels no fear. From day one, she wasn't even afraid of you!"

Severus chuckled. "Well, usually I get to strike fear into their little hearts at the tender age of eleven. It's far more difficult to intimidate a seventeen year old."

"True, but it's not just you. She fears nothing, not even death."

"How do you know?"

"I see her from a spiritual point of view. I can see into her soul. If you would open your heart to her, you could see into it, too." Lily gazed into the infinite depths of his coal black eyes. "She's earned your trust, Sev. Don't you think it's time you gave it to her?"

He eyed her suspiciously. "What are you playing at?" Severus knew Lily always had his best interests at heart. But this was the first time she had ever encouraged him to get to know another person, to let someone in. She usually left those decisions up to him.

Lily just smiled at him with her sparkling emerald green eyes.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that," he admitted when she didn't answer him. He turned away, looking down at his shoes.

Lily walked up behind him and placed a kindly hand on his shoulder. "You better get ready then, Sev. You'll need her strength, her friendship, and sooner than you think."

Severus reached up to touch her hand, but Lily had vanished. His movement pulled him up out of his light sleep. He rolled over and stared up at the ceiling and wondered if Miss Kaolin... Sienna missed their time together. Would she even want to come back after the way he had behaved? Probably not. Maybe that was her plan, to get him to come crawling back, then refuse to help him. That would be too humiliating. There had to be a way to get her back, but still save face in the process. Perhaps he could make it an order instead of a request. Yes, that was it. He would simply inform her that she needed to stay after class one day to help him with something. He would not give her any choice in the matter. That way she couldn't say no, and he wouldn't have to apologize either. It would have to be an interesting task this time, though, something that would make her want to come back for more. She could assist him in brewing a complex potion. They could put their heads together on how to tweak it for subtle improvements. Yes, that would pique her interest... That would bring her back.

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At the end of the following class, Severus walked up to Sienna and stood silently, but she didn't look up. "I require your assistance for a while after class today, if you don't mind," he said, trying to sound authoritative.

"Why don't you ask one of your *trustworthy* Slytherins?" she replied sarcastically, still not bothering to look him in the eye.

"Because it requires your... unique talents," he admitted softly, trying not to sound too anxious, just in case she refused to cooperate.

Finally, her eyes met his. They were sparkling again, like moonlight on water. She seemed to know that this was as close to an apology as he would ever give her. "Are you sure?" she asked, her expression full of hope.

"Yes," he said softly, nodding.

They stood staring at each other. He wondered what she was thinking, if she would hold a grudge or treat him differently now, but he needn't have worried. When the last student walked out the door, Sienna flung her arms around Severus' chest. This time he was relieved instead of offended, and he lightly patted her back.

"I always knew you'd see the light eventually." She beamed at him as she pulled away.

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For the rest of the term Sienna continued as Severus' assistant. Most of the time he still had her cleaning, sorting and dissecting, but every now and then they would work on something very interesting together. Severus would never let her know, but he was becoming more and more impressed with her instinctive way of preparing ingredients and stirring the smoldering liquids to make improvements. He began toying with the idea of re-writing the textbook. Perhaps next year, if he was still stuck in this job, she could help him with that project... something to think about over the summer.

# Fire Dragon

## Chapter 3 of 31

When Sienna doesn't show up for class one day, Severus finally tracks her down in the hospital wing. But her medical condition is the least of his worries as the final task of the Triwizard Tournament approaches.

Disclaimer: All characters and dialogue you recognize are from the brilliant Harry Potter Book Series by J. K. Rowling. I have written this as a parallel to the last four installments of the series. Because of this, there are times when I recreate J. K. Rowling's dialog word for word, in order to conform to her canon. This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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### Chapter 3

"Fire Dragon, Left Arm Riding,

Skull and Serpent, Nearby Hiding"

One Thursday afternoon near the end of term, Sienna didn't show up for class. While everyone was packing their things to leave, Severus inquired as to her whereabouts to anyone who might be paying attention. The Gryffindor girls looked at each other with apprehension, but remained silent, so Severus began to glare at them impatiently, looking from face to fearful face.

"Come on... Out with it, or it will be detention for ALL of you!"

"She's in the hospital wing," Katie Bell finally blurted out.

"Thank you," Severus scowled. He shook his head and muttered under his breath, "Was that really so frighteningly hard?" He didn't bother to ask them why she was there. As soon as the classroom cleared, he was out the door to see for himself.

He pushed the double doors to the ward open and strode between the rows of beds, his cloak billowing behind him.

"Good afternoon, Professor," Madam Pomfrey greeted him.

Severus nodded at her, but remained silent as he glanced at all the empty beds. His gaze finally came to rest on the last bed to the right. He gasped at the sight of Sienna, her face lobster red, and her eyelids were so swollen she couldn't even open her eyes. As he opened his mouth to ask how she came to be in this state, Sienna managed a smile.

"Hello, Professor Snape. So good of you to come."

Severus wondered how she could possibly have known it was him, then deduced that she must have been able to open her eyes just enough to see a figure dressed all in black. He was, after all, the only Hogwarts teacher that always dressed in black from head to toe.

He glided over to her bed side and pulled a chair around so he could face her as he sat. She looked awful! He glanced at Madam Pomfrey who was standing on the other side of the bed. Since she had no other patients, she had spent all afternoon doting over Sienna. He gave her a look of curious concern.

"Sunburn," she volunteered.

Severus raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had expected some sort of jinx to have caused this. He turned his attention back to Sienna's puffy crimson face. "You really did *roast* yourself, didn't you!"

Sienna chuckled.

"How on earth...?"

She didn't answer right away, and Severus wondered if she was trying to manufacture a lie. He couldn't swear to it, but he didn't believe that she had ever lied to him, and he hoped that she never felt the need to start. He finally decided that perhaps she would give him a straight answer if they had some privacy. He stared at Madam Pomfrey. When he finally got her attention, he jerked his head towards her office. "Do you mind?"

She turned and walked away in a huff.

"Thank you, Professor. She won't leave me alone. I just want to rest, but she keeps hovering over me, adjusting my pillows, getting me water or pumpkin juice, coating my face with this god awful grease... I know she's just trying to help, but she's driving me crazy!"

Severus stifled a snicker. "How did this happen?"

Sienna pursed her lips. "You're going to be mad at me."

"Why?"

"Because it was stupid."

"Things like this usually are caused by stupidity or at the very least, carelessness."

She hesitated, obviously out of embarrassment. "I was up on the Gryffindor roof this morning, and I must have lost track of the time. Next thing I knew, Hermione and Katie were up there fetching me. I had no idea so much time had passed, and my skin didn't hurt. It still doesn't. They insisted on bringing me here, though. And when they made me look in a mirror, I had to agree with them."



"What were you doing on the roof?"

Sienna hesitated again. He would have used Legilimency on her, but she couldn't open her eyes.

"I need quiet time in the mornings," she finally offered, "away from people. It's the only convenient place that I've found so far where I know I won't be intruded upon."

"A quiet place to collect your thoughts," Severus mused. "I understand perfectly. I do the same thing, before I must subject myself to the morons and idiots that fill most of the seats in my classroom." He saw a smile spread across her swollen face. He felt so bad for her. He reached his left hand down to hers, which was resting by her side, palm up. He gently wrapped his long, slender fingers around it and flipped it over. The back of her hand was not sunburned, but he saw red along the top edge of her thumb, and just a little ways up her wrist, until, he imagined, her skin had been protected by clothing. He flipped her hand back over, palm up and was about to let go, when he noticed something curious: on her inner left forearm, etched into her skin was an elaborate burn mark in the shape of a fire breathing dragon a Chinese Fireball, from the look of it. The burn pattern appeared lighter than the surrounding skin almost white. This scar had been there for at least a couple of years.

"I know it's none of my business, but what happened to your arm?" he asked, purely out of curiosity.

"I was branded when I left the Ashram."

"Ashram?"

"The Muggle school I went to before I came here. It was a fascinating place. I'll tell you about it sometime if you're interested."

"Branded? By a hot iron? Like they do cows and horses? How barbaric!" A grimace worked its way across his face.

"Sort of a ritual many of us chose to go through a test it's purely voluntary. Many of my friends chose not to try it. But I felt ready, and so I participated. One of the main lessons we were supposed to learn there was mind control. If you have total control of your mind, you can divorce yourself from pain even severe burns." She stopped suddenly and put her right hand over his left forearm and rubbed her hand gently over the exact spot that was decorated by the Dark Mark. Her eyes were still closed. It was a good thing too because a look of shock came over his face that he was glad she couldn't see. "Have you been branded too?"

Severus tried to recoil, but she had an iron grip on his left hand. As they sat there, he felt the Dark Mark beneath his shirt sleeve burn. It had been getting darker and the burning sensation growing more intense for the last couple of months. He knew something was going to happen soon where the Dark Lord was concerned, but he couldn't begin to guess what it would be.

"Why would you ask such a question?"

Sienna let go of his hand, and he pulled it back to the safety of his side with great relief.

"I don't know. I just got the impression that you knew what it felt like."

He sat quietly for a few moments, wondering how he should respond. Finally he replied, "I have been scarred for life by many things, but a red hot branding iron is not one of them." Sometimes Severus felt as if she could read his mind, see into his soul. Sometimes he was grateful for her insight. Other times, like this one, it made him very uncomfortable. He stood abruptly to leave.

"Don't go, not yet, you just got here!"

"The burn may not hurt, but believe me, when it starts to peel and heal in the morning, you'll itch like crazy. I'll brew you up something to ease the itch, and I'll be back."

"Thanks, Professor. I don't expect I'll get any visitors except you, and perhaps Professor Dumbledore, if he's not too busy."

Severus patted her hand. As he walked out of the ward and back to his dungeon, he thought about their conversation. How could she have gotten the impression that he knew what it felt like to be branded? He did know what it felt like, since the Dark Mark was burned into his skin by Voldemort's wand. But he hadn't lied to her. There was no red hot branding iron involved.

Then there was the comment that she would get no visitors. Were he and the Headmaster her only friends? Was she really such a social misfit? He didn't feel sorry for her, though. He remembered his first couple of years at Hogwarts. Hagrid was his only friend. He felt that the only reason Lucius Malfoy paid any attention to him was because he was smart and it had been rumored that he was already good at the Dark Arts. He wondered if there were any rumors drifting around the student body about Sienna. He got the distinct feeling that she, like he, preferred the loner lifestyle.

They really did have a lot in common.

When Sienna came to her Tuesday afternoon class the following week, her face resembled lizard skin. The potion Severus had brewed for her took care of the itching, but it did not stop the flaking. One of the Slytherin boys started to tease her, but a menacing look from Severus silenced him.

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Sienna took a break from her assistant job for the two weeks leading up to her O.W.L.S. She went to see Severus when she finished her Potions Exam. "I think I did pretty well, especially on the practical part."

Severus knitted his brow in a mock scowl. "You better have done well! Or have I been wasting my time with you?"

"Well, the examiner said something that I think was a compliment, but I'm not sure."

"Oh," asked Severus, now curious.

"Yes, he said, 'My, my, not since Lily Evans have I seen such a potion.' Who on earth is Lily Evans?"

Severus looked away with her question. He had been enjoying Sienna's company so much these past couple of months that he barely thought about Lily. He felt a sudden wave of guilt at this. As he tried to recall his dreams, he realized that she had been significantly absent from them since the night before he made up with Sienna. Was this Lily's way of encouraging his friendship with her? Lily had mentioned that he would need that friendship. She had never once steered him wrong.

"Are you alright, Professor?"

Severus turned back to look at Sienna. "Oh, yes," he smiled. "Lily Evans. She was a student at Hogwarts, in my class. Brilliant witch, especially at potion making." After a short thoughtful pause, he added, "Just like you."

Sienna was beaming. He had actually paid her a compliment. He had thought about it many times, but he realized that this was the first time he had said one out loud.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." He shook his finger at her, "and I mean that."

They both chuckled.

"Going down to watch the third task this afternoon?"

"I'll be there."

"See you then."

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Later that evening, Severus and Dumbledore settled themselves into the stands to watch the third task. Most of the other Hogwarts teachers were patrolling around the perimeter of the maze, so they sat surrounded by students as the stands began to fill.

"Why don't we save a spot for Miss Kaolin?" Dumbledore suggested.

"Don't you think she'll want to sit with the other students?" asked Severus.

Dumbledore looked at him curiously. "Do you know that the only people in the whole school who came to visit her when she was in the infirmary were you, me, and Professor McGonagall?"

Severus raised his eyebrows at this news. "Really? Professor McGonagall, too? More than she expected," he smirked. After a pause, he added, "Of course she can sit with us if she wants to."

They both scoured the crowd with their eyes, in search of flowing dark curls topping off Gryffindor colors.

As they gazed at the oncoming bodies, Severus leaned closer to Dumbledore and lowered his voice. "My little nuisance has been getting darker."

"Darker *still*?" asked Dumbledore. "You've mentioned it several times already this spring. What do you think it means? Is he calling you back?"

"Not yet. I'll know for certain if that happens. The sensation is painfully unmistakable."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at this and looked down at his own inner left forearm, as if he was trying to imagine the sensation.

"Well, keep me informed, will you?"

"Of course."

"If he returns, you know what must be done. It's the only way to ensure your safety... Well, relative safety."

Severus shuddered. "Don't worry, I'll do what must be done. Although I don't relish the idea, it's better than the alternative."

"I can't believe you joined in the first place."

"Not one of my brighter moments, I must admit."

"Ah there she is!" Dumbledore waved at Sienna. They both motioned for her to join them as they scooted apart on the bench to make room for her.

She was beaming at them. "My two favorite blokes!" she said with a huge grin. She radiated a joy that permeated both of them as the dark tone of their previous conversation evaporated.

"So, I hear you did well on your OWLs," commented Dumbledore, making light conversation.

"How would you know? I only took the last one this afternoon!"

Dumbledore smiled. His glacial blue eyes were twinkling. "I have my sources." He glanced over her head to Severus and winked. Severus tried not to smile, but the corner of his lip curled slightly.

Their attention was then drawn to Ludo Bagman as he announced the start of the third task. They watched as Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter entered the maze. A few minutes passed before it was Viktor Krum's turn and then finally, Fleur Delacour. Once the four champions had disappeared into the towering hedges, it was impossible to know what was going on, so everyone turned to each other in idle conversation to occupy the time.

Just as the band began to play a tune to entertain the crowd, a flare went up inside the maze. There were ooo's and aaah's from the people in the stands, as if they were watching a fireworks display. Then came the din of speculation as to who would be the first to bow out. They didn't have to wait long. Shortly, they were greeted by the sight of Fleur being led around the outer edge of the maze by Professor McGonagall. She looked very shaken, with the eyes of a trapped wild animal. A hush came over the crowd as she came into closer view and Madam Maxime rushed forward to take care of her. They headed for the hospital wing, just as a precaution.

The decibel level slowly increased again as the students in the crowded stands began to find ways to amuse themselves. Then suddenly, another red flare appeared, but this time the crowd became silent. After seeing the look on Fleur's face earlier, they all knew it was no laughing matter.

Moody and Flitwick finally emerged from the other side with Viktor. Karkaroff pushed his way through the throng of people in the stands and went to investigate. Viktor's eyes were glassed over, as if he were in a trance, but Karkaroff didn't escort him to the infirmary. Instead, he had one of the other students do it. As they walked slowly up the hill to the school, Karkaroff looked at Severus, worry etched deeply into the lines of his face as he reclaimed his seat. Severus knew this was not about Viktor's condition. Like Severus, he too had noticed the increasing discomfort of the Dark Mark. Several times throughout the year, Karkaroff had come to him, complaining, fearful, asking what to do if the unthinkable happened. Severus, unfortunately, had no good answers.

After a few more minutes, Severus thought he noticed a flash of light deep within the maze. He knew the Triwizard Cup was a portkey that would transport the winner out of the heart of the maze and back to the entrance where the crowd waited anxiously, but when no one materialized, he assumed that he must have imagined it.

Several more minutes passed as the crowd grew increasingly restless. Then Severus' arm began to throb. He grabbed it subconsciously, glancing quickly at Sienna to see if she had noticed. Suddenly, a searing pain shot through his arm, up his shoulder, and into his chest as terror welled up inside his heart to match the pain. The Dark Lord was back and he was calling in the faithful! Severus gasped and gave Dumbledore a terrified look that spoke volumes.

"Sienna, dear," said Dumbledore calmly, "would you mind switching seats with me? I need to speak to Professor Snape, and I don't want to shout over the crowd."

"Alright," she smiled at him, but she could tell something was very wrong. She looked back at Severus with concern written in her pale green eyes. He tried to look nonchalant, but he had a feeling that she could see right through him.

As Dumbledore silently cast a Muffliato spell, Severus noticed an irritated look cross Sienna's face when she realized that she was not going to be able to eavesdrop. "The Dark Lord has returned," Severus informed Dumbledore. "I haven't felt the mark burn like this in over 13 years! He's calling in his Death Eaters!" Severus looked towards the place where Karkaroff had been sitting, but he wasn't there. He searched the crowd and caught a glimpse of him as he was leaving the stands. Karkaroff stopped long enough to look back at Severus. His eyes were wild with fear. He knew Karkaroff was fleeing, but where could he go? He had a sickening feeling that he would never see Karkaroff alive again.

He turned back to Dumbledore, worry etched in his own face. "What do you want me to do?"

"I've been thinking long and hard about this, Severus, ever since Wormtail escaped. I knew this day would come eventually. You will have to go back to him if you want any hope of staying alive. But I may need you in the coming hours. Let's see Harry safely through this last task, and then you can return to him. He thinks you are a double agent. The fact that I ordered you back will make it seem all the more so."

Severus nodded. The pain had subsided somewhat, but it was still strong, still impossible to push out of his thoughts.

Dumbledore glanced down at Sienna. "Would you like to switch back now?" She was staring at the maze and ignored his question. Then he realized that he had forgotten to remove the Muffliato spell. With a wave of his fingers and a silent incantation, the spell was broken. "Sorry about that. School business, you know."

She just shrugged it off. They switched places so she was once again sitting between them.

A few more long minutes passed as the three of them sat silently. Severus wondered how many Death Eaters returned to the Dark Lord and how they were treated. He thought about the fact that Lucius was among those who never went looking for his old master. What fate awaited him and so many others who never bothered to search? At least Severus had an excuse. His duties at Hogwarts kept him too busy to search the countryside for a ghost who may or may not have existed.

He forced himself to relax his left arm. Sienna was sitting on his left side. In an uncharacteristic gesture, she slipped her right hand around his left arm at his elbow and slowly slid the palm of her hand down to the spot where the Dark Mark still burned. Severus was alarmed at first, but he didn't resist, and within seconds the throbbing pain had subsided. She looked up at him and smiled; then she withdrew her hand and returned it to her lap.

"A magical brand is still a brand," she said, smirking.

Severus simply looked at her in silent amazement as her gaze returned to the maze.

Suddenly, with a flash of light, Potter, Diggory, and the Triwizard Cup appeared sprawled out on the lawn in front of the packed stands.

The band began to play, Dumbledore and Severus began to clap, and the students were cheering. But Sienna stood up with a look of horror on her face.

"Oh, God!" she said in a low voice, so the people around them would not be able to hear. "He's dead! Cedric is dead!"

"What?" squawked Dumbledore.

"How do you know?" asked Severus, very alarmed.

"And Harry's in a state of shock. You'd both better get down there hurry -- before the other students get to them."

Dumbledore jumped up and, with the dexterity of a much younger man, hopped over benches and maneuvered around people with lightening speed, leaving Severus in the dust. He turned to Sienna, still perplexed. How could she know this?

"Go!" she said firmly.

He turned and followed Dumbledore through the crowd. Just as Sienna had stated, Diggory was dead and Harry was sobbing, clutching his body. The wide, horror-stricken eyes of someone who had suffered the Avada Kedavra curse stared up at Severus as he approached. Dumbledore was trying to pry Harry off of Cedric's cold body. As Severus glanced around, understanding was beginning to dawn on the faces of the crowd. The band stopped playing, someone screamed; the applause died and was replaced with sobs and moans. Diggory's parents were making their way through the crowd, descending from the stands and onto the lawn. Severus went to meet them to brace them for what they were about to see. Professor Sprout, head of Cedric's Hufflepuff House, came rushing in from the side. She hugged Mrs. Diggory as Severus grabbed Amos by the arm; he was looking shaky on his feet.

The teachers who had been patrolling the perimeter of the maze had made it back to the stands and were helping with crowd control all except Moody. He was trying to console Potter as Dumbledore turned from Harry to speak to the Diggorys.

Severus searched the stands for Sienna's face. How was she taking all this? She didn't know Cedric, even though they were the same age. He was a seventh year, she a fifth year, and in a different house. He finally saw her, right at the spot he had left her. She hadn't moved like the rest of the crowd. She was sitting alone, rocking back and forth with a pained look on her face. Her teeth were clenched, her fingertips pressing against her temples, as if she were suffering from a severe migraine headache. She looked up at the night sky and closed her eyes. Was she crying? It was hard to tell from this distance.

Severus brought his attention back to the people around him. The Diggorys were now sobbing over their son's dead body. Severus didn't even recall letting go of Amos' arm, there was so much commotion. He strode over and removed his cloak, then gently draped it over Cedric's body as the Diggorys were led away by Professors Sprout and Hagrid.

"Where's Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"I was about to ask you the same question," replied Severus. They both frantically searched the sea of faces. "The last time I saw him, he was with Moody."

Dumbledore looked back at Severus with alarm. "Come with me quickly. Minerva!" he shouted over the din, turning to Professor McGonagall.

The three of them walked briskly up the hill to the school. "The real Moody would never have taken Harry out of my sight, not after what happened. This man is an imposter. I just hope we're not too late."

They raced through the halls and up to Moody's office, where Dumbledore blasted through the door without bothering to see if it was locked. The Moody imposter flew backwards onto the floor, knocked unconscious by the blast. Severus could see himself, McGonagall and Dumbledore in the Foe-Glass, staring into the room. And there was Potter with a dazed and confused look on his face. They had made it just in time, thank Merlin's Beard.

The heat of Dumbledore's anger made Severus shudder. He was glad, as he stared at himself in the Foe-Glass, that he and Dumbledore were on the same side.

Dumbledore retrieved Moody's hip flask for further investigation. Then he turned to Severus and McGonagall.

"Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid's house, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, then come back here."

Severus gave a slight nod and quickly left the room. He was glad to be away from the angry energy radiating from Dumbledore. He hoped the Headmaster would calm down by the time he got back.

McGonagall was right. They should not have let Potter compete. He was almost killed tonight. Cedric was killed, and Severus felt somewhat responsible. He should have fought harder to get Potter disqualified. There must have been a way around the rules; they just didn't look hard enough.

As he rounded the corner to his office, he was surprised to see Sienna waiting by the door. Her hair was wild and her eyes were swollen from crying. She seemed to be in a state of exhaustion.

"Miss Kaolin, are you alright?" Severus asked with true concern.

"No," she admitted. "I had to get away from everyone; it was too depressing. I even tried the Gryffindor roof, but people kept coming up there, crying, looking for Harry."

"You can stay here if you like," he said gently as he waved his wand at the door. It swung open and they both entered hastily. "Make yourself at home."

"Thanks... What happened tonight? How did Cedric die? What happened to Harry?"

"I'm not sure yet. And I don't have time to explain. All I know is that the Dark Lord has returned, and Potter played a significant, albeit unwilling, role in his resurrection. I assume Diggorry simply..." He hesitated for a moment, swallowing hard to regain control of his voice, "...got in the way." He walked over to his store closet and grabbed the Veritaserum. "Tragic waste," he added thoughtfully. "A bright and brave young man with his whole life ahead of him." With that said he turned back to Sienna, concern spreading across his face. "There is a Death Eater here in the castle. He has been apprehended, but there could be more. Stay here." He felt a sudden twinge of anxiety. He couldn't let anything happen to her. He would never be able to forgive himself. "You'll be safe in here. I'll put a locking spell on the door. Don't open it for anyone. You understand?"

She nodded, but she didn't meet his gaze. She seemed to be in a trance.

"It may be some time before I return hours perhaps."

She nodded again. "OK... I'll be OK."

He reached out and touched her gently on the shoulder, then turned and swept out the door.

He then obediently retrieved Winky from the kitchens, over Dobby's loud objections when he wasn't allowed to come along. He returned to Moody's office where he found Harry, Dumbledore, and to his great surprise, an unconscious Barty Crouch, Jr., still sprawled out on the floor. He handed the Veritaserum to Dumbledore with pleasure. Dumbledore then proceeded to revive Barty and ask him all the right questions to reveal his many secrets: how his mother sacrificed herself to help him escape from Azkaban, how he escaped his father's control with Voldemort's help, and how he captured Moody and impersonated him with the Polyjuice Potion. Severus had to admit that they were all quite brilliant ideas. If Voldemort had succeeded in killing Potter tonight, it would have been perfect. He wondered with quiet amazement how Potter could have possibly escaped the Dark Lord's clutches, and with Cedric's dead body in tow, no less. Of course he knew he could never show it outwardly, but his respect for Harry was growing.

Dumbledore then turned to Severus and asked him to fetch Madam Pomfrey, to help the real Alastor Moody out of the trunk and into the hospital wing, and to bring Fudge up to Moody's office to question Barty Crouch, Jr. As Severus obeyed, his mind turned to the ordeal Harry had just been through. He tried to imagine the resurrection of the Dark Lord and the torturous things he had done to Harry. He wondered how Cedric had died. Did he die as he had lived, bravely and with dignity? Severus sincerely hoped so.

He reached the hospital wing and briefly explained the situation to Madam Pomfrey. Then he headed outside to search for Fudge. He didn't have to look far. Fudge was with Ludo Bagman and Madam Maxime. They were arguing over the situation its tragic ending and who should be held responsible. Karkaroff was, of course, significantly absent from the conversation. Severus took Fudge by the elbow and led him away from the other two.

"What is the meaning of this, Snape?" Fudge barked roughly as he shook himself free of Severus' grip.

"We have apprehended the party responsible for tonight's tragic events. The Headmaster assumed that you would want to interrogate him yourself. He is currently under the influence of Veritaserum, and I believe you will find him quite cooperative."

"Who is it?" asked Fudge, very apprehensive.

"Barty Crouch, Jr."

"It can't be Crouch is dead!" Disbelief spread across Fudge's face.

"Apparently, reports of his demise were premature," said Severus, matter-of-factly.

"How did he manage to escape from Azkaban? Who was buried in his grave?"

As Severus filled him in on some of the details, Fudge's fears grew larger and more irrational with each word. He stopped short of the huge oak doors at the front of the castle.

"He's insane... unpredictable. Who knows what he's capable of?" He glanced up at the sky and drew his wand.

"What do you think you're doing?" Severus' eyes narrowed.

"I dare not go in without an escort, Snape."

"He's under sedation incapacitated. He's harmless, at least for the moment. There's no need. Besides, the Headmaster will never allow it."

"I don't give a rat's rear end whether Dumbledore approves or not." He glared at Severus and raised his wand in the air. A strange dark blue-grey puff of condensed smoke rose into the sky where it burst, radiating outward. A wave of low frequency sound resonated through the air like distant thunder, along with the smoke rings. When the sound wave hit Severus, it sent a strange chill down his spine. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared a dementor. It floated down alongside Fudge.

"Shall we?" Fudge turned to Severus.

He looked at Fudge in disgusted disapproval as he followed the two of them through the front doors. McGonagall was waiting for them in Moody's office. Madam Pomfrey had already come and collected the real Alastor Moody.

"What is THAT doing in here?" squawked McGonagall. "You have no business bringing that thing onto school grounds..."

"I'll do as I please. I'm the Minister of Magic, and if I feel an escort is necessary, by Merlin I'll have an escort!"

McGonagall marched over and stared Fudge in the face. "I refuse to let you interrogate the prisoner with that thing present!" she insisted, raising her voice to a new level.

"It's not your place to tell me under what circumstances I am allowed to interrogate prisoners! Now, out of my way this instant!" Fudge had balled his hands into fists. His face was turning quite a shade of purple.

As the two of them yelled at each other, Severus silently watched the dementor swoop down on Crouch like a vulture who hadn't eaten for a month. It happened so fast he didn't have time to warn them. Without hesitation and without warning, the dementor had performed the kiss. Barty lay on the floor with a slack, dull expression on his face and drool dripping from his half-opened mouth. Severus shuddered. His eyes were empty and out of focus. Severus knew there was no mind, no soul left to interrogate... only an empty shell being kept alive by the instinctual impulses of the Medulla Oblongata. As horrible as the acts were that Barty had committed, Severus wasn't sure that even he deserved this fate. Perhaps no one did.

As the dementor moved away, Winky screamed, bringing Fudge and McGonagall to their senses. They both turned to look and realized simultaneously what had just happened.

"Now you've done it!" screeched McGonagall, even more angry. "Dumbledore will have your head for this. This is an OUTRAGE!"

"I suggest, Minister," Severus spoke quietly, "that you remove your... body guard, since it is no longer necessary."

"Very well," said Fudge, unceremoniously. He turned to the dementor and ordered it away.

"We'll see what Dumbledore has to say about this!" bellowed McGonagall, and she stormed out of the room leaving Fudge and Severus in her wake. As they made their way down the hall, he could hear Winky's distant wails fading into the background. The last of the family she had served was lying in her arms, worse than dead. Severus knew Dumbledore had already told Dobby that she was welcome to stay at Hogwarts. The school could always use another house-elf. But she had been such a loyal servant. It would not be an easy transition for her.

They made their way to the hospital wing in silent fury. But as they neared the doors to the ward, McGonagall fired up again.

"He should have had a trial. He should have been brought forth to give testimony. Now there is nothing left to do with him."

"Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva--" Fudge continued to defend his actions.

"You should never have brought it inside the castle!" she yelled. "When Dumbledore finds out--"

They burst through the door to the ward. "Where's Dumbledore?" Fudge demanded of Mrs. Weasley.

*As if she would know, you moron!* thought Severus, even more disgusted than before.

"He's not here," said Mrs. Weasley angrily. "This is a hospital wing, Minister, don't you think you'd do better to--"

But the door opened, and Dumbledore came sweeping up the ward.

"What has happened?" said Dumbledore sharply, looking from Fudge to Professor McGonagall. "Why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I'm surprised at you. I asked you to stand guard over Barty Crouch--"

"There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumbledore!" she shrieked. "The Minister has seen to that!"

Severus could not recall McGonagall ever looking so angry. He felt the need to help calm things down. "When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight's events," he said in a low, smooth voice, "he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question." But Severus felt that Fudge had acted irrationally and that there would have been much more to gain by keeping Crouch intact. So as he continued, a touch of irritation crept into his tone. "He insisted on summoning a dementor to accompany him into the castle." He glared at Fudge accusingly. "He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch--"

"I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!" she interrupted him. Severus stood quietly annoyed while McGonagall and Fudge verbally duked it out in front of Dumbledore and the others. He glanced at Harry as she tried to describe the dementor's kiss. He could tell by the look on Harry's face that he shared the same sentiments concerning that form of punishment.

As the conversation turned to Voldemort, however, Severus became increasingly concerned with Fudge's desire to turn a blind eye. Harry even started naming the Death Eaters who had returned. When he spat out the name of Lucius Malfoy, Severus turned with a start. So Lucius did come back. Had Harry actually seen Lucius' face? Hoods usually stayed on at meetings. Masks were usually worn. Names were not usually named, unless Voldemort was certain of everyone's loyalty. It was truly a miracle that Harry escaped with his life.

As Harry continued to name off the old crowd, he made no mention of punishment. Severus concluded that there would be no one left but Wormtail if the Dark Lord had killed all who had abandoned him. Perhaps when he had to return, uncharacteristic leniency would also await him.

It became increasingly evident to everyone in the room that Fudge was in complete denial and was willing to take the word of the mud-slinging reporter Rita Skeeter over Potter's and Dumbledore's. *What a fool!* thought Severus. *If he thinks putting blinders on will make the situation heal itself, he is as stupid as he is foolish!*

Finally, Severus could take no more of Fudge's denial. He strode forward, past Dumbledore, pulling up the left sleeve of his robes as he went. He stuck out his forearm and showed it to Fudge, who recoiled like a frightened child reacting to a vicious dog.

"There," said Severus harshly. "There. The Dark Mark. It is not as clear as it was an hour or so ago, when it burned black, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into him by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of summoning us to him. When he touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to Disapparate, and Apparate, instantly, at his side." Severus felt odd indeed, revealing all of this in present company, but he felt that the Minister of Magic must be convinced of the truth, and if this is what it took, then so be it. "This Mark has been growing clearer all year. Karkaroff's too. Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. We both knew he had returned. Karkaroff fears the Dark Lord's vengeance. He betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be sure of a welcome back into the fold."

Fudge stepped back from Severus, shaking his head. Severus could see, even after his speech and revelation of the Dark Mark to all those present, that it wasn't enough. Fudge was still unconvinced. He was amazed that anyone that blind, that arrogant, could have reached such a high office in the Ministry. But then again... politics was an art form he had never been inclined to learn.

After Fudge unceremoniously handed Harry his Tournament winnings and stormed out the door, Dumbledore immediately sprang into action, making requests of people left and right. There was not a moment to lose in the fight against a Voldemort who was back to full power. Severus took a deep breath. He knew he would have to return soon to face the Dark Lord. The thought made him shudder. How would he be received? He was not as young as he used to be. In his youth, the Cruciatus Curse was at best difficult to recover from. But he was 13 years older now. How would his body endure the punishment? He knew his tardiness would not go unnoticed, nor be forgiven. He just hoped he would survive to tell the tale.

The room cleared of most of the adults. The only people left were Harry, Ron, Hermione, Molly, himself and Dumbledore. Oh, and the odd black dog that sat next to Harry's bed. Where did that thing come from? It looked amazingly like a dog that used to hang around the school when he was a student here. But dogs don't live that long. So he knew it couldn't be the same one. Perhaps it was a descendant.

Then Dumbledore turned and addressed the dog as "Sirius." To Severus' horror, it transformed before his very eyes into the one person he hated even more than Voldemort himself. Severus was incensed. Dumbledore knew about Sirius all this time and had kept him in the dark. This would be a hard thing to forgive.

"Sirius Black!" shrieked Molly. Ron quickly placated her.

"Him!" snarled Severus. If looks could kill, they would have both died on the spot. "What is he doing here?"

"He is here at my invitation," said Dumbledore, looking between them, "as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other."

Severus felt in his heart that he could never forgive or trust Sirius. The mangy git had, after all, tried to kill him when they were both students.

"I will settle, in the short term," said Dumbledore, with a bite of impatience in his voice, "for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side now. Time is short, and if the few of us who know the truth do not stand united, there is no hope for any of us."

As Severus absorbed Dumbledore's words of wisdom, he calmed down enough to quickly shake hands, even though the idea of actually touching Sirius for any reason other than strangulation turned his stomach. But Dumbledore was right. They had to put the past behind them if there was going to be any hope of defeating Voldemort.

After Dumbledore sent Sirius on his mission to find Lupin and the old crowd, he turned to Severus to make the request that he knew was inevitable, but he dreaded it just

the same. He would have to return to Voldemort's side tonight and beg for forgiveness. He could only hope that Voldemort inherited a degree of mercy along with his newly acquired physical form.

"Severus, you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready... if you are prepared..."

"I am," Severus replied, trying to hold his voice steady. He felt the blood leave his face as he psyched himself up for what was to come. He knew that if he didn't return, he was a dead man. *But there are some fates worse than death*, he thought to himself, remembering Barty Crouch, Jr.

"Then good luck," said Dumbledore. Severus turned and swept from the room. He made his way swiftly down the hall, the stairs, and back into the dungeon to his office. With a wave of his wand, the door opened to reveal Sienna, asleep in his chair with her head on his desk. He had completely forgotten about her. She woke up groggily as he gently touched her on the shoulder.

"Sorry. Your chair's much more comfortable than that thing," she said, pointing to the hard wooden chair across the desk.

"No problem," he replied hastily as she moved out of his way. He began to open the drawers and retrieve items from them, filling his pockets. "There were no other Death Eaters. Everyone should be asleep by now, so you should be able to go back to your dormitory." He stopped searching the desk for a moment, as he thought about what else he wanted to tell her. He knew he couldn't tell her everything, so he chose his words carefully. "In light of what happened tonight, the Headmaster is sending me on an important errand. I may not be here when you leave tomorrow." His eyes met hers. She looked much better than before. Her hair was still wild, but the swelling in her eyes had gone down. Now she only looked tired. He knew how she felt. He was afraid to think about how tired he would feel, or what condition he would be in, when he got back if he came back at all. It took a great deal of concentration to keep the panic that was welling up inside of him from overtaking him altogether. Her silvery green eyes changed from fatigue to concern, as she seemed to mirror his feelings.

"Can I help?"

He could feel her sincerity. He could see it in her eyes. A warm wave washed over him, even though he knew there was nothing she could do. But just the knowledge that she had a true desire to help him was enough to strengthen his resolve. "No, I must do this alone," he said as he shook his head. "But since I won't see you tomorrow, I just wanted to say..." What *did* he want to say? For the first time since Lily's death, his own life mattered to him again. He had something to look forward to. Sienna. He had not realized the joy she brought him until that moment. He wanted very much to come back alive, so he could spend more time with her. As he realized this for the first time, words escaped him. Was it inappropriate for him to feel this way? Was this about her? Or was it more about how she made him look at himself? He decided that it didn't matter. Dumbledore was sending him into the lion's den, and he may never see her again. She must have felt his rush of anxiety because she closed the gap between them in two steps and flung her arms around him, sobbing softly into his chest. What a night. And for him it was far from over. He wrapped his arms around her tightly, as if he were holding on for dear life. Perhaps, in a way, he was. He felt an energy force radiating from her. The longer he held on, the more hopeful he became.

He pulled away and gazed into her face. His eyes bore into hers as she returned his stare with equal intensity. "I'll see you, *alive and well*, in September." It was as if her will could make it happen. Somehow he knew, beyond a doubt, that her statement would come true. But how could she tell that his life was in danger?

"I've got to go," he whispered painfully. She nodded. With a hand on her shoulder, he gently steered her out the door, then he quickly closed and locked it with a wave of his wand.

"I'll write to you about my OWL results."

"Don't expect a reply." This goodbye scene was getting way too mushy for his taste.

She smirked and waved as he disappeared out the huge oak front doors and into the misty night.

## Mysteries of the Mind

*Chapter 4 of 31*

Severus returns to Voldemort on Dumbledore's orders but brings back more than just an unpleasant memory.

Disclaimer: All characters and dialogue you recognize are from the brilliant Harry Potter book series by J. K. Rowling. I have written this as a parallel to the last four installments of the series. Because of this, there are times when I recreate J. K. Rowling's dialogue word for word, in order to conform to her canon. This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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Chapter 4

"The Mysteries of the Mind Unveiled,

The Sanity of the Mind Derailed"

Several hours later, Severus Apparated back to Hogsmeade Station. He fell to his knees as he stopped spinning. Every muscle, every bone ached as if he had been run over by the Knight Bus. And although he had no severe injuries, his body was covered with the scrapes and bruises that were caused when he was writhing on the ground under the influence of the Cruciatus Curse. He hit his head on one of the grave stones as he fell for the third time. After that, he lost count. He didn't realize the body could endure so much pain. He began to understand how the Longbottoms could have ended up in the long term mental ward at St. Mungo's. If Voldemort had kept it up much longer, he feared his new home would have been somewhere between them and Gilderoy Lockhart.

As he recited the complicated incantation to unlock the front gates, he wondered if he had the strength to make it up the long path to the castle. He slowly hobbled along, finding a new meaning for the word "agony" with every step. He finally reached the front entry way and collapsed against the door. A few seconds later it opened as Argus Filch peered out to see what made the noise. Severus poured himself into the front hall and onto the hard stone floor. Its cool surface felt soothing to his aching muscles. He let out a huge sigh. He had made it. He was home.

"Professor Snape!" exclaimed Filch. "What on earth?"

"Could you help me to my quarters, please, then go fetch the Headmaster?"

"Shouldn't you be going to the hospital wing, sir?"

"No," insisted Severus, whose voice had become hoarse from the gasps and screams of pain he had suffered earlier. "Tell no one of my condition. I must get to my quarters before I'm seen."

"Alright, sir, stay calm." Filch helped him up with some difficulty. But they maneuvered their way down the staircase without incident or excess noise. Filch deposited him in his four poster bed and ran out to summon Dumbledore.

As Severus lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the events of his visit with the Dark Lord began to replay in his head. He remembered their conversation, how he offered an explanation for his tardiness as waiting to return on Dumbledore's orders to keep up his cover. He told Voldemort about the apprehension of Crouch and why he would never again be of any use to Voldemort, or anyone else for that matter. He told him of Harry's safe return and Fudge's disbelief. Fudge's reaction greatly pleased Voldemort. But then he told him of Dumbledore's actions to resurrect the Order of the Phoenix. In a flash, this news squelched the Dark Lord's charitable mood. Since there was no one left to vent the night's frustrations on, Severus bore the brunt of his full wrath.

"*Crucio!*" spat Voldemort in Severus' memory. Suddenly, the ceiling in his room vanished and he was back in the graveyard, staring up at the night sky, writhing and screaming in pain! How could this be? He had made it back to Hogwarts. Filch had helped him to his room. He couldn't be back in the graveyard. But the pain was so real it wasn't just a memory.

As he felt the curse lift and the pain subside, the ceiling came back into focus. He searched his body in amazement, just as he had done in the graveyard, as he realized that the pain had all been in his mind! He still had his toe and fingernails. His ribs and groin were still intact. He could move his legs, so they could not be broken as he felt surely they were just moments ago.

Suddenly, the door burst open and Dumbledore swooped in. "Severus, it's alright. You're safe now."

Severus just stared at him, still out of breath from the pain.

"You were screaming in agony just now. I could hear you all the way up in the entrance hall!"

"I was back in the graveyard..." Severus tried to sit up, but his sore muscles had other ideas.

"You must have been reliving the memory of the Cruciatus Curse. It is a common aftereffect for someone who has suffered it multiple times in succession. You don't just remember it, you *re-live* it."

Understanding began to dawn across Severus' face as he grasped the full meaning of Dumbledore's statement. He had heard that this could happen, but to experience it first hand was quite another matter. "How long do these lingering effects last?" he asked with trepidation.

"A week or two, if they are not permanent," Dumbledore replied with more than just a touch of concern in his voice.

"Permanent?" A feeling of horror began to well up inside him as flashbacks of the night's events began to surface again. He saw Dumbledore turn towards the door and cast a Muffliato spell. Then the door faded, and all he could see were two pairs of boots and the base of a grave stone. All he could hear were his own distant screams as his toenails ripped themselves off. Dumbledore was right it wasn't just a nightmarish memory. He was experiencing it all over again.

Wave after wave of excruciating torture ebbed and flowed across his consciousness until, after what seemed like hours, the pain finally began to subside and only the memories remained. He felt lips press against his forehead as a light fragrance of lavender caressed his nostrils. A gentle hand lifted his head, and he drank heartily from a ceramic cup. Was that a sleeping draught? Finally, in a state of utter exhaustion, he drifted into a deep dreamless sleep.

When Severus woke up, Dumbledore was sitting by his bed, reading a book named Unique Talents of Witches and Wizards Documented Through the Ages by Jonathan William Williamson. He looked up from the book and smiled widely. "Back among the living, I see!" he exclaimed with a twinkle in his eye.

"What time is it?" asked Severus, still very groggy.

"I think the more pertinent question would be, 'What day is it?'"

Severus' eyes grew wide. He simply stared at Dumbledore in silence, waiting for an answer.

"You've been out for three days."

"Three DAYS!" Severus sat up, then groaned. He was still quite sore. "What did you give me?"

"Me?" asked Dumbledore with mock innocence, "I didn't give you anything. Miss Kaolin nursed you back to health. She brewed you up a dreamless sleeping draught after she used a Muggle hands-on healing technique I had never seen before. I've read about it, but I've also read that 99% of the Muggles that practice it are fakes, taking advantage of people for their own personal gain. She was amazing, Severus. If it weren't for her, you'd be in St. Mungo's now, and probably in no better shape than you were when you got back three days ago."

"How did she find out?"

"The morning of your return she came here looking for you. It was very early. She could tell the Muffliato spell had been cast on the door, so she started pounding on it, demanding answers. I had to let her in to keep her quiet. The instant she saw my face she knew something terrible had happened. She didn't ask for an explanation. She just wanted to help you. I was at a loss as to what to do, so I let her try. While all the other students were eating breakfast and getting on the train, she was in here with you. Since I had to oversee the loading of the students, I was grateful for her help. When all the commotion was over and I returned, you were sleeping. She said you should be much better when you woke up, but, as you have already discovered, your muscles would still be sore."

"Where is she now?"

"She Disappeared home yesterday. She offered to stay, but I told her I could take it from here...sorry to disappoint you!" Dumbledore added as a sad look crossed Severus' face.

"Will you kiss my forehead and wear lavender perfume?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Not likely."

"It wouldn't be the same anyway." A few moments of silence passed between them.

"She kissed you on the forehead?"

"I believe so, but I may have dreamt it."

"She probably did, but don't flatter yourself. From what I've read about her hands-on technique, it's part of the healing process. Since your mind needed to be healed, that was the most effective way for her to transfer her energy to the affected area."

Again, disappointment spread across Severus' face.

"Oh, don't worry, Severus. Miss Kaolin cares for you very deeply. She never even asked me how you came to be in this state. All that mattered to her was your well-being." Dumbledore gave him a few minutes to bask in the warmth of that knowledge, then he continued. "Now, perhaps you can tell me what happened that night without screaming in agony."

Severus recapped the information he had relayed to Voldemort. Dumbledore agreed that it was nothing he wouldn't have found out about sooner or later from other sources, so no harm was done in revealing it.

"But something in him snapped when I told him you were starting the Order back up. After the third Crucio, I lost count. He stopped short of driving me to insanity, because, as he put it, my usefulness is not yet expended. Then he simply Disapparated to points unknown, leaving Wormtail to help me off the ground. Wormtail explained with mock regret that it seemed, with the exception of a groveling Avery, none of the other Death Eaters who had returned that night suffered anything more than a lecture. It seemed I was the only one who had born the total weight of his wrath."

"And what wrath it was," added Dumbledore thoughtfully, "all for the daring escape of Harry Potter."

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Later that day, Severus forced himself out of bed and sank his aching muscles into a hot bath. He felt much better afterwards and managed to get dressed and do some end-of-year paperwork in his office. He still felt tired, however, and after a couple of hours he went back to his quarters to rest. He still had a lot of recuperating to do before he would feel like himself. As he lay in his bed to catch a nap before dinner, he drifted into a light sleep.

"I told you that you would need her." Lily's soft, sweet voice floated up to his waiting ears.

"More than I ever imagined," Severus had to admit. "Did you know this was going to happen? Did you know she was a healer?"

"I can't tell specific events of the future, but I can see the spiritual energies of people. Your energy blends well with hers. When you're together you feed off of each other, compliment each other. You need her, Severus. She'll be the best friend you'll ever have, if you let her."

"Just my friend?" he asked with a touch of disappointment in his voice.

"Aahh, so you *have* taken a fancy to her. Good!"

"I don't know if I'd go so far as to say that," he insisted.

She ignored his denial. "All good relationships must have a foundation of true friendship if they are to last." She radiated a wisdom that made him feel the logic of her statement.

"Of course," he agreed.

"Don't you think you should thank her? She did save you from a fate similar to the Longbottoms'."

"Would I have ended up like them?" he asked, alarmed at the thought.

"It's possible. At the very least, she saved you from months of memory charm therapy."

He hadn't looked at it that way. He hadn't thought of the alternatives at all. Suddenly he realized that he had taken her actions for granted. Guilt spread over him like a Devil's Snare vine. "What should I do?"

Lily laughed. "Are you such a social misfit? Send her an owl. Nothing fancy, keep it simple. It will mean the world to her."

Severus looked into Lily's sparkling green eyes. Such a comforting sight, even if they were only in his dreams. "I'll send her a letter after dinner," he promised.

"She'll like that, Severus. It will be worth the trouble." Lily reached up and caressed his cheek. "Let her in," she pleaded as her face, her eyes, her touch faded from his senses.

Severus fell into a much deeper sleep and found himself fully clothed on his bed the next morning. He woke with a start as he looked at his watch and realized it was already 6:30 a.m. He took the growl in his empty stomach as a good sign. As he slowly crawled off the bed with aching muscles, he remembered his dream with Lily. He would freshen up, go to breakfast, then come back and write to Sienna.

An hour and a half later, Severus sat at his desk with quill and parchment at the ready. His belly was full and he felt content, but the daunting task of writing a letter to Sienna lay ahead. He truly didn't know what to say to her. She may have just saved his life! But it wasn't exactly a life debt situation because his physical existence wasn't threatened. But something he held much more dear his sanity was on the line. She helped him keep it. How do you thank someone for that?

And then there was the matter of appropriate behavior. She was a student, after all. He felt odd writing to her for any reason, even this one. But a "Thank You" note was acceptable as etiquette would dictate, so he forged ahead with his task...

My Dearest Sienna,

(Crumple, toss -- *too personal...*)

Dear Miss Kaolin, (*much better*)

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart... (*What am I thinking? She's a student. My heart can't enter into any of this!* Crumple, toss)

Dear Miss Kaolin,

Thank you so much for all your energy and hard work. I couldn't have recovered without you. (*LAME!* Crumple, toss)...

Severus wrote several drafts before he finally came up with just the right combination of words to convey his sentiment without sounding too personal. It was a difficult balance. He inwardly wished that the student/teacher barrier wasn't there because he felt more than he could allow himself to say. As he realized this, he struggled even more. They had two years left in their roles as student and teacher. He felt a very strong responsibility to keep his professional distance, even though his heart, Lily, and sometimes even Albus Dumbledore seemed to encourage him to do otherwise.

Dear Miss Kaolin,

Words cannot express my gratitude at your efforts on my behalf earlier this week. Although I was not even aware of your presence in the room (this bend in the truth helped to add a bit of distance between them), I certainly felt your effects.

I have been informed that you saved me from months of emotional therapy, or perhaps worse. As I am very interested in different types of healing, I hope you will consider sharing your techniques with me sometime.

I shall look forward to teaching you (and perhaps learning from you) in the coming year.



I am Sincerely,

Your Professor,

Severus Snape

Potions master

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

P.S. I also look forward to receiving a report on your OWL results, but as I stated earlier, don't expect a reply.

Severus read the letter over and over, tweaking it to perfection. He finally copied it onto one of his finest pieces of 100 percent papyrus, slipped it into a matching envelope, and stamped it with the Hogwarts seal. By the time the letter was ready for mailing it was lunch time. In the hopes he would be able to talk one of the remaining staff into walking it up to the owlery to save his aching muscles the trip, he decided to have lunch in the Great Hall.

As he, Dumbledore, and the few staff members who planned to stay the summer settled into their seats around the staff table, a barn owl swooped down through the rafters and landed on the table in front of Severus. It took him by surprise. He couldn't remember the last time someone had sent him an owl. He untied the box of chocolates that was attached to its leg and offered it food from his plate. As it ate heartily, he read the accompanying note.

My Dear Professor Snape,

Hope this helps to speed your recovery, so I can see you *alive and well* in September.

Fondly,

Sienna Kaolin

*Perfect*, thought Severus as he pulled out his note. Since it was already sealed, he turned it over on the back and wrote, "Thanks also for the chocolates." Then he tied the note to the barn owl's waiting leg and sent it on its way.

Yes, Severus thought with satisfaction, for the first time, he was actually looking forward to September.

## When All Alone to Meditate

*Chapter 5 of 31*

Sienna begs Severus for private lessons in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Disclaimer: All characters and dialogue you recognize are from the brilliant Harry Potter book series by J. K. Rowling. I have written this as a parallel to the last four installments of the series. This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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### Chapter 5

"When All Alone to Meditate,

Professor Snape Will Have to Wait"

The summer flew by for Severus as he walked a tightrope between completing requests for Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix and doing Lord Voldemort's bidding. At one point in late July he got an owl from Sienna, and although he didn't bother to write back, he was pleased to hear that she had received an Outstanding in every one of her OWLS. When they crossed paths on Order business, Professor McGonagall informed Severus that Sienna's chosen career goal was to become a healer. After all she had done for him, it came as no surprise to Severus.

The school year was upon him before he knew it, and much to his horror, the Ministry of Magic had appointed a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dolores Umbridge. Her voice sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard to Severus. She behaved shamefully at the start-of-term feast, interrupting Dumbledore's opening speech. Severus was so obsessed with removing this new thorn in his side that he barely noticed Sienna as she tried to draw his attention from the Gryffindor table. He glanced at her with tired eyes. What a dreadful way to start the year. It was not at all what he had hoped it would be. The look she gave him was one of sympathy. Did he look as tired as he felt?

He didn't see her again until Gryffindor had Double Potions with the sixth year Slytherins on Tuesday morning. She hung back, taking her time packing her books and scales. When the room had cleared, she walked up to his desk.

"You look like a man who could use an assistant." Her eyes sparkled at him. He noticed that they looked grey today.

"Oh, I could use one, certainly. But Umbridge will probably have to approve it," Severus said with as much resentment as his voice could muster. "So I'm not sure if you'll be allowed to do it this year."

"Why does she even need to know?"

"She made it very clear at the staff meeting that her nose will be in everyone's business." Severus screwed up his face as if he had just eaten a lemon as Sienna moved towards him. "And there will be no outward displays of affection!" He had thought long and hard about their relationship over the summer. He couldn't let himself get distracted by her. He found it difficult to push his memories of her to the back of his mind. If Voldemort found out he felt even the tiniest... He cleared his mind of the mere thought of what could happen.

"Why not?" she insisted as she took another menacing step in his direction.

"If someone sees us, you could get kicked out of school and I could lose my job!"

"It's just an innocent HUG," she scowled. "Stupid rule," she muttered under her breath, as she acquiesced to his new insistence in physical distance between them. Sienna was obviously upset. Severus got the feeling that she had been waiting all summer for another hug. If he could be truthful with himself, so had he. But he pushed the temptation out of his mind, and the room remained uncomfortably silent for a few moments.

"So what do we do?" she asked as she seemed to recover her usual calm.

"I guess we can act as if we don't know any better." Severus' expression became mischievous.

A smile began to spread across Sienna's face as they decided between both of their schedules that Tuesday and Thursday afternoons would be best.

Sienna was beaming at him now. "Did Professor McGonagall tell you what I'm majoring in?"

"Muggle Studies," he lied.

Sienna curled her lip. "I want to be a healer. And she DID tell you." She glared at him in mock irritation as he leaned back in his chair, feeling content. He realized that he hadn't felt this good since last spring, just before the final task of the Triwizard Tournament, and that he had been with her at the time. She always seemed to know just how to pull him up out of a sour mood. She would really have her work cut out for her this year though, with Umbridge around.

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As the weeks progressed it became more apparent that Umbridge was the ultimate control freak. She banned clubs of any kind, even gatherings of more than three people. Severus was a bit tickled by her harassment of Harry Potter, but thought it sad at the same time that the Ministry of Magic was so blind to the dangers that were growing even stronger in the form of Lord Voldemort and his followers. And it was happening right under their noses.

He noticed a scar on Potter's right hand as it became clearer and clearer with each passing day. When he finally realized that it said, "I shall not tell lies," he knew Umbridge must be behind it, and he was appalled. *He's not lying this time, you puffy haired toad!* Severus thought to himself. But he wanted to keep a low profile for obvious reasons, so he stayed out of it. If she bothered Potter enough, there was always Dumbledore for him to cry to.

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One day, just to hear her reaction, Severus asked Sienna her opinion of Umbridge's Defense Against the Dark Arts class.

"What a total waste of time!" Sienna began to rant. "She starts every class with 'Wands away' in that sugary sweet voice of hers," she said as she waved her hands in the air. Severus had never seen her angry before. He sat back in his chair and folded his arms. This was going to be amusing. "Then she makes us read and take notes. If that's what the whole year is going to be like, all the students will be sitting ducks if any Death Eaters ever manage to break in here."

"That good, eh?" Severus smirked.

Sienna shook her head, then a serious look crossed her face, and she lowered her voice to a whisper as she approached Severus' desk. "Do you think Harry Potter is telling the truth? About Lord Voldemort, I mean?" Severus winced at the name. "I still have my weekly meetings with Professor Dumbledore, when he's here anyway. He sure does put a lot of faith in Harry's story."

"I normally don't believe a word Potter says, he has lied to me so many times. But in this instance, I'm sure he is telling the truth." Severus looked deep into Sienna's eyes for signs of fear. She seemed more curious than worried.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked.

"Let's just say... I have my sources." His tone told her that to ask more would be a waste of time.

Her eyes narrowed. "Well, if Voldemort's really back, we will all need to learn some defensive spells. And not just what they are, but how to use them, and we'll need to practice!"

"Could you please refrain from using the Dark Lord's name in my presence?" Severus asked, with a touch of irritation in his voice.

"Why? Professor Dumbledore says we shouldn't be afraid to say his name. The fear we associate with him gives him more power over us."

Severus sighed. "The Headmaster is the most powerful wizard of our time. He can afford to take chances. The rest of us must show more caution." He felt as if he were speaking to a child for some reason. She seemed so incredibly naive. It must have been her sequestered upbringing.

"Oh, all right."

"And as for practicing defensive spells, that would be all well and good," Severus reminded her, "but our dear Professor Umbridge has banned groups or clubs that don't meet her approval first."

Sienna's lips pursed. She appeared to be in deep thought. "Could you teach me, Professor? If you show me a few moves, I could--"

"I don't think so, Miss Kaolin," Severus scoffed at her idea.

"But you don't want me to be an easy target for the Death Eaters, do you?"

"Of course not, but..."

"And I promise I won't tell anyone where I learned it from." She was almost on bended knee. Concern permeated her voice. She reached for his shoulder and touched it gently. "Please?"

Teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, right under Umbridge's nose... It was an appealing thought, but... *Just don't hug me if I say yes,* thought Severus to himself... "On one condition."

"Anything."

"You should never say *'anything'* to a man like that. It could get you into trouble." The words had snuck out. Severus surprised himself. Was he that concerned about her? Sienna blushed.

"The condition?"

Severus snapped back to reality. "Yes, that you don't tell *anyone* what we are doing, and you don't try to teach it to anyone else."

"Why not?" She crossed her arms defiantly.

"Because I don't want to lose my job," he retorted as his lips stiffened. "And I would hate for you to be expelled because of me," he added under his breath.

"But you'll teach me?"

"If you promise not to--"

"Yes, yes, I promise." She had stopped whispering, and was now quivering with excitement. "When do we start?"

"How does Saturday morning sound?"

Sienna nodded.

"Here in my office? Nine o'clock too early?"

"No, not at all. I'm usually up at 5:00 a.m., even on weekends."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Severus, a bit impressed by her statement. "What on earth for?"

"I go down to the Common room to do my yoga routine while everyone is still asleep."

"Yoga?" Severus lifted one eyebrow. He didn't think much of Muggle practices.

"Yes, it's a great way to stay fit, as well as clear the mind for meditation," she explained.

"Oh, you can't be serious *meditation*?" He looked at her in disbelief, a touch of disgust in his voice. Sienna didn't seem phased by his reaction. Perhaps she had heard it all before.

"It's an ancient spiritual practice, very beneficial on so many levels. It helps to bring peace of mind, gives one patience, and builds the ability to concentrate."

Severus' look softened, but he still inwardly scoffed at the idea.

"I don't expect you to understand. People from the West usually have their minds closed to anything out of the ordinary. I would have thought wizards would be different, but since it's a Muggle practice..." Her voice trailed off and she shrugged.

Severus felt a twinge of guilt. She was right, of course. His mind had been closed to the mere idea of yoga or meditation. But the idea of peace of mind sounded inviting. He made a mental note to look in the library for any books on the subject.

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Saturday morning at breakfast, Severus didn't see Sienna at the Gryffindor table. He went back to his office and busied himself wading through what seemed like miles of parchment as he awaited Sienna's nine a.m. arrival. But the clock ticked past nine and she didn't show. *A fine way to show her gratitude*, thought Severus. She had acted so anxious two days ago. He decided that he would leave at 9:15 if she didn't show up. He had rearranged his whole morning... Severus was fuming now, and as soon as the clock showed 9:15, he bolted out the door in a huff.

Later at lunch his anger turned to concern when once again, Sienna didn't appear at the Gryffindor table. *Where in the world is she?* He looked up at the ceiling as it reflected a thunder storm raging outside.

When Dumbledore stood up to leave, Severus jumped up to join him and they headed out the door together. "Headmaster," Severus nodded his head.

"Severus, is something troubling you?" Was it that obvious?

"Have you seen Miss Kaolin today, sir?"

"Now that you mention it, no, I haven't. Was she at breakfast?"

"Not that I saw. And," Severus glanced over his shoulder to make sure Umbridge was nowhere around, "she missed an appointment we had for this morning... Something I know she very anxiously wanted to do."

"I see," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. He raised his eyebrows. Silence followed as they walked slowly down the hall towards Dumbledore's office. "Why don't you ask one of the Gryffindor students to check in her dormitory to see if she's taken ill. She may be in bed or had to go up to the Hospital Wing. With this dreadful weather, it's a wonder half the school isn't up there."

"Very well, sir. Thank you." Severus turned back towards the Great Hall in search of a lingering female Gryffindor student. He found Hermione Granger sitting alone, her nose buried in a book. She was the only one left at the table. *Oh great*, thought Severus. Did he really need to know the whereabouts of Miss Kaolin this badly? He reluctantly approached her and stood by her side, waiting to be noticed. She was so into her book that she didn't look up.

"Where are your partners in crime today, Miss Granger?"

Hermione jumped and almost fell off the bench. "Oh! You startled me, Professor." She commented as she struggled to regain her composure. Severus stifled a chuckle. "If you're referring to Ron and Harry, they are at Quiddich practice."

"I see," Severus hesitated. He didn't like the idea of owing anyone a favor, especially a student, but he forged ahead with his question. "Would you have a few minutes to help me with something, then?"

Hermione's face seemed to flip back and forth between fear and suspicion. She acted as if she was about to object, to offer some excuse that she was too busy. Finally she spoke. "What do you need, sir?"

"Do you know Miss Kaolin?"

"Yes, sir, a sixth year. She was your assistant last year, if I'm not mistaken."

"I don't need a lecture on her history," Severus said with a touch of irritation. "Have you seen her today?" His eyebrows knitted themselves together. His black eyes became hawk-like. He searched her face for evidence of deception. Then he reminded himself that she was not as big a liar as Potter. She usually tried to steer Potter away from trouble. Yes, he could trust her to tell the truth at least, although, after the way he had treated her for the last four years, he couldn't blame her if she wasn't keen on the idea of helping him.

"I saw her first thing this morning. She was in the Gryffindor common room doing her exercises. Why?"

Severus was relieved that Sienna had at least been spotted earlier in the day. But could he trust Granger with more information? "She was supposed to help me with something this morning, and she didn't show up. I thought perhaps she had taken ill. You haven't seen her since then?"

"No..." Hermione was searching her memories. "But I think I might know where to find her. Come on." She jumped up, grabbed her book on Ancient Runes and headed out the door. Severus walked beside her in silence as they made their way up the stairs to the Fat Lady.

"Password?"

"Mimulus mimbletonia." The portrait swung open, and Hermione started to climb through the hole. She looked over her shoulder and called out, "Well, come on, Professor."

Severus felt uncomfortable at the thought of going into the Gryffindor Common Room, but he approached the hole. Apparently, the Fat Lady didn't like the idea either, because she slammed shut suddenly, right in his face. He became enraged. "What is the meaning of this? OPEN UP!" She didn't budge. "MIMBULUS MIMBELTONIA!"

"Nope," said the fat lady defiantly, "You're a Slytherin. The password has changed."

"I'm a TEACHER!" Severus stifled the desire to use Sectumsempra on her.

Hermione's muffled voice came floating out from behind the portrait. "Open up. He is a TEACHER, and he is with ME. This is an EMERGENCY!"

"Oh, all right." The Fat Lady begrudgingly swung open. "But I'm changing the password as soon as you leave!"

"Sorry, Professor Snape. Since the Sirius Black incident two years ago, she's been overprotective."

They emerged in the Gryffindor Common Room. Several students gasped when they saw Severus. He could hear them whispering about him. He was sure that what they were saying was not complementary, and that once he was gone, Granger would have a lot of explaining to do.

"I'll check quickly in her dorm room to be sure she's not napping." A few moments later Hermione returned shaking her head. "Nope," she mused. "That leaves one other possibility."

"And that would be?" Severus raised his eyebrows and waited impatiently for an answer.

"The roof, of course!"

*"The roof?!"*

"She usually meditates up there after she does her yoga exercises," Hermione said softly so the other people in the room couldn't hear.

"You know about that?" Severus was surprised that Hermione knew so much about Sienna. After all, he thought they were close, and he had only just found out about her meditation practice a couple of days before.

"I'm usually up early, too. I like to read down here when it's quiet. Sometimes she's finishing up her exercises. Sometimes she's coming back from her meditation. So I've known for a long time. But you're right; she doesn't usually tell people about it."

"Why is that, do you suppose?" He was following Hermione up a tight spiral staircase that led to the top of Gryffindor Tower. In all his years at Hogwarts, he had only been in the Gryffindor Common room once, and he had never been to the roof.

"She says most people think it's 'nambie pambie Muggle mumbo jumbo.'" Hermione's head bobbed up and down with each word. She and Severus both chuckled. Was he actually enjoying Granger's company? He decided not to let her get too comfortable.

"This had better not be a wild goose chase you're taking me on. I've got ten thousand things I need to be doing," he growled.

"You asked *me* to help *you*," she reminded him, exasperated and a bit hurt.

They had reached the top of the stairs and were standing in front of the door that led to the rooftop of the tower. They could hear the wind-driven rain beating against the door in torrents.

"You don't think she's really out there, do you?" Severus scowled first at Hermione, then at the door in disbelief.

Hermione shrugged. "There's only one way to find out."

## Out of Body

*Chapter 6 of 31*

With Hermione's help, Severus finds Sienna under very odd circumstances.

### Chapter 6

"Out of Body, Out of Mind,

Explain Quickly, Out of Time"

The wind was blowing so hard that the door flew open as soon as Hermione turned the latch. Rain immediately pelted them in the face, but as he peered through the biting droplets, Severus couldn't believe his eyes. There was Sienna, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the tower roof! Her hands rested on her knees, and her eyes were peacefully closed, even though she was soaked to the skin. They both ran over and Severus knelt down in front of her, shouting over the storm. "MISS KAOLIN!" She didn't respond. He grabbed her shoulders. "Miss Kaolin!" As he shook her gently, her head fell forward. Just as his hand reached her neck to feel for a pulse, she opened her eyes, looking bewildered and confused. "What are you DOING out here?" Severus asked angrily. "You'll catch your death!"

Sienna looked at him as if she had just realized he was there and smiled slowly. "Did I miss our meeting this morning?"

"Yes," Severus snapped, immediately irritated with her and all the trouble she had caused him. "And breakfast, *and* lunch."

"We were worried about you, Sienna. Have you been here the whole time?"

Before she could answer, Severus interrupted. "I wasn't worried, just concerned for your safety. It's not like you to miss an appointment, especially one you suggested." He shot a sideways glance at Hermione, hoping that Sienna would take the hint not to elaborate in front of her.

"Can we please get off this roof?" Hermione was shivering. They were all soaked at this point. Severus jerked Sienna to her feet rather aggressively, and they all walked quickly to the door and went inside. "Poor Ron and Harry have Quidditch practice in this mess. Can you imagine?"

As they walked back down the spiral staircase, Severus started the interrogation. "What on earth were you doing out there in that weather?"

"Well," admitted Sienna, "when I came up here first thing this morning, it wasn't raining."

"What difference does that make?" Severus started to rant. "Don't you have the sense to come in out of the rain? I thought you had more than two brain cells to rub together, but I guess I was mistaken."

"I didn't realize it had started to rain," Sienna tried to explain calmly. "I was meditating."

"Oh, *PLEASE*...That's *no* excuse," Severus barked. "I rearranged my entire weekend to accommodate your request, and you didn't even bother to show up." He was fuming, now that he knew she was OK. He had been worried sick for nothing. She made a fool out of him and in front of Hermione Granger of all people. He wasn't sure if he could forgive her for this. *And to think I had even started to like her.*

"No, really, Professor," Hermione added helpfully. "When someone goes into deep meditation, they quite often don't realize what is going on around them."

Severus stopped dead in his tracks. Hermione almost bumped into him. He turned and looked menacingly into her eyes. Since she was a step above him, they were face to face, and poor Hermione shrank in fear.

"This is between me and Miss Kaolin," he spoke softly between gritted teeth. "So mind your place." This was good, he thought. From the look on her face, Hermione was back to being petrified of him.

"It's true, Professor," interjected Sienna. "This has happened to me a couple of times before. I had an out of body experience."

"A what?" *What a bunch of bunk*, thought Severus.

"Did you really?" asked Hermione, obviously fascinated. "Is it anything like a near death experience?"

"Similar," explained Sienna, "but in a near death experience, the spirit leaves because it thinks it has to. Then it realizes it has made a mistake, and it is drawn back. In meditation, it leaves because it chooses to. And then it chooses to come back."

"My mum had a near death experience when I was very young. She had an operation and almost died on the table. When she finally came round, she could describe what the doctors did to her, what they said, what they were wearing. She saw things she could not have seen from the operating table. It was really weird."

"That's absurd," insisted Severus.

"Not really," explained Sienna. "When I leave my body I often see it from a distance. Sometimes I go to another plane of existence. It's an extraordinary feeling. There are no words to describe it."

"This is RIDICULOUS!" Severus had obviously had enough.

"But Professor," pleaded Sienna, "I can bring you a couple of books on accounts of near death experiences real life accounts, extensive research compiled by a Muggle doctor, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross--"

"Rubbish. I wouldn't waste my time." They had made it back to the Gryffindor common room now and were trying to get warm in front of the blazing fire. "Clean yourself up and report to my office." Severus' eyes became slits. Sienna kept her cool and returned his menacing look with a calm, innocent gaze. This made Severus even angrier. "I'll decide on an appropriate punishment." He turned and stormed out of the room. As he crawled through the portrait hole, he could hear the two of them talking about Muggle books on the subject. *What a farce*, he thought. He had searched the school library. Not one book condoned the practice. Did she take him for a fool? *Another arrogant Gryffindor. What a disappointment.*

As he stormed, fuming and dripping (it's hard to billow in a soaking wet cloak), back towards the Slytherin dungeon, he ran into Dumbledore.

"Enjoying our lovely weather?" He chuckled with a twinkle in his eye.

"Not hardly," Severus growled. "I had to retrieve Miss Kaolin from the Gryffindor roof!"

"So what's the problem?"

"She fed me some cock and bull story about," he rolled his eyes and splayed his fingers, "an out of body experience." Steam was almost coming from his ears.

"It's not cock and bull, Severus," Dumbledore said soothingly. "Do you think she would have stayed out in that dreadful storm if she was aware of her surroundings?" Severus' look evolved from anger to skepticism. "It doesn't happen very often, but last spring she missed all of her morning classes and got a terrible sunburn, she was out there so long."

"I remember that sunburn." Severus began to realize that Sienna might actually be telling the truth. "She had to go to the hospital wing."

"I can't imagine anyone doing that to themselves on purpose," Dumbledore eyed Severus hopefully. "Can you?"

"No," Severus reluctantly admitted, "I guess not." He thanked Dumbledore for the enlightening information and continued to his quarters. He had to change and clean up before Sienna came down.

When he got to his office, he was surprised to see her already waiting for him in the hall. She was carrying several books that he didn't recognize.

"Punish me however you like." She searched his eyes for some sign of softening. "But *please* let me still be your assistant!"

This caught Severus completely off guard. He thought that surely after the events of the past hour she wouldn't want anything to do with him anymore. He was relieved to find out that he had been mistaken. But his stony expression didn't change as he removed the locking spell from the door in silence and motioned her in. He enjoyed having the upper hand. They each sat down and she rested the books on his desk.

"I brought you some light reading, if you would consider opening your mind," she said hopefully. "One is by that Muggle doctor I told you about earlier, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. The others are on eastern philosophy and explain the value of meditation. The books in the school library have it all wrong. They say it's rubbish. If that's where you got your information, it's no wonder you think I'm a nutter."

Severus leaned back in his chair, putting his fingertips together in a pyramid where he rested his chin. "I ran into the Headmaster on my way back here," he said slowly.

She lit up at the mention of Dumbledore. "He enlightened me as to your situation and assured me of your sincerity. He mentioned your sunburn incident from last year."

"Yes, well, since then Hermione does me the favor of fetching me if she doesn't see me at breakfast. But that's only during the week when I could miss a class. I didn't tell her about our meeting."

"Why Miss Granger?"

"She seemed more open-minded than most people. And she is Muggle-born. She has read about yoga and meditation, eastern philosophy. She doesn't seem to have a problem with it."

"Yes," sneered Severus. "I think she's read every book in the school library that's not in the restricted section. I'm beginning to think she's read just about every book available in the English language!" He pursed his lips, then continued. "She lets you know it, too... insufferable walking encyclopedia." There was a pause. "Well, I've had enough for today. You can still be my assistant at the usual times. But I'm not sure about the lessons any more. This incident has left a bad taste in my mouth."

Sienna was obviously crestfallen. "I'm very, very sorry if I inconvenienced you in any way. That was surely not my intention, sir. Please forgive me." She paused, searching his face for any change. He remained silent. He was curious to see how much groveling she would do. "Let me make it up to you, Professor. Perhaps I could do some chore for you that you were really dreading." Her eyes began to smile again in anticipation.

"Well, unless you could give Potter Occlumency lessons for me, there's not much you could do, outside of your usual work."

"Occlu...what?"

Severus felt a little annoyed. "Occlumency. It's an ancient and obscure branch of magic that most people don't practice any more. Legilimency is used to break into someone else's memories. Occlumency is the art of protecting your mind from being broken into. The Headmaster requested it. I have to start giving him lessons right after Christmas break. But don't mention this to anyone. If someone asks, he's taking Remedial Potions."

Sienna smirked, "Remedial Potions? That's funny. Oh, he'll hate that."

"I know," Severus finally returned her smile. "Almost makes the whole thing bearable."

Late that night, Severus lay in bed flipping through the books Sienna had brought him to read. *Journey of Souls, by Dr. Michael Newton, a hypnotherapist? Oh, please!* He pursed his lips and tossed the book on the floor. *The Spiritual Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi...Looks interesting. He placed that one on the bed beside the Elizabeth Kübler Ross book. Autobiography of a Yogi? Oh, you've got to be kidding. By Who? Paramahansa Yogananda? I can't even pronounce it. How am I supposed to read it!* He joined *Journey of Souls* on the floor. Muggle authors all, with Muggle theories on how the afterlife works. Even if it wasn't rubbish, Severus had his doubts as to how much of it applied to Wizards. Then he thought about Legilimency and how one person could see into the memories of another like looking through the pages of a magazine. That must have been similar to the telepathic link one book mentioned.

As he read about meditation techniques and their supposed benefits, he couldn't help but notice the similarities to the methods he had used to become an adept Occlumens. Perhaps this eastern philosophy did merit a closer look.

Then he turned his attention to the book on near death experiences. As he began to read about the accounts from Muggles who had died, but were somehow resuscitated, some after several minutes, he couldn't help but think about Lily. Right after she died, he felt her presence so strongly. He knew she must have been hovering around him, watching, trying to communicate. He imagined these people went through something similar before they found their way back.

At least Lily finally figured out a way to communicate. One nightmare after another since the night she was murdered invaded his sleep, to the point that he dreaded closing his eyes. Until finally, after what seemed like weeks without a good night's rest, she came to him in a dream. It was such a beautiful dream. She was whole and happy, with those magical green eyes that made his heart tingle with joy. She had told him she was alright, but she couldn't move on until she knew he and Harry were both safe.

And so it had been for the past 14 years. She would appear, and they would talk about whatever might be worrying either of them. Sometimes he thought it had to be his subconscious playing tricks, but all his other dreams faded. Hers remained forever etched in his memory, so vivid, so real.

Tonight was no different. He drifted off with Elizabeth Kübler Ross staring up at him from the back of the book jacket on Death and Dying... And there was Lily, smiling at him, her green eyes dancing with his.

"Expanding your horizons, I see."

"What do you think of all this?"

"All of what?"

"This near death and out of body Muggle mumbo jumbo?"

"I think you already know the answer to that, don't you?"

"You don't think it's ludicrous?"

"I've lived it, Severus. Although I didn't get to come back, I've seen others who have. They were with me for a short while, then they were pulled back to their bodies. The two books you tossed on the floor are at least as worth reading as the two you kept on the bed, by the way."

Severus felt a twinge of guilt. He had gotten so angry with Sienna, and all because of a little inconvenience.

"You were worried about her, weren't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"The way you reacted. You took it personally. You care for her." Lily's expression was more playful now.

"I do not." Severus puffed himself up defensively. "She's a student. I was concerned for her safety. That's all."

"You can't lie to me, love. I can see into your soul. Remember?"

Severus' look softened. He let himself relax and the defensive posture disintegrated.

"I'm not sure how I feel about her, really. There is something about her that makes me a little uncomfortable. She knows things. And I don't understand how she knows them." He began to pace around the room. He was glad to have Lily to talk to. He really needed to think out loud about this, and he hoped she could give him some insight. "Dumbledore told me at the beginning of last year that she had secrets. But he wouldn't tell me what they were."

"And he shouldn't. It's not his place to reveal her secrets."

"Do you know them?"

"Perhaps... But it's not my place either."

Severus scowled.

"I think you're uncomfortable around her because you have feelings for her."

Severus became defensive again. "She's a student. That's ridiculous!"

"She's a remarkable young woman. You see her in both lights, and your conscience doesn't know how to resolve your dilemma."

Severus glared at her. Had she found the truth? Was he really that easy for her to read? He looked away, guilt and anger welling up inside. He felt guilty because he still loved Lily and he didn't want to hurt her. He felt angry at himself for having feelings for a student a very inappropriate notion, as far as he was concerned.

As always, Lily could see right through him. She felt his inner conflict. "Well, I can help you with one aspect of your problem don't worry about hurting my feelings. I want so much for you to be happy. I see you happy, or at least content, when the two of you are together, and that warms my heart, more than words can say. Let yourself care about her, Severus. She won't be a student forever."

As he gazed into Lily's eyes, they melted from bright green to grayish green. Her long auburn hair curled up and turned almost black. As she reached up to caress his face he realized he was staring at Sienna! Dreams are so strange sometimes. This startled him so much, he gasped and jerked back, waking himself up out of his light sleep. He heard a loud thud as the book fell from his lap to the floor. The noise jolted him. He bolted upright and reached for his wand, always at the ready on the bedside table. Then he realized what had happened and sighed... It was only a dream.

He put the wand back on the table, waved his hand in the air to put out the two oil lamps that were still burning, then rolled over and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A/N: The books I mentioned in this chapter are real, if anyone is interested in some rather "out-of-the-box" reading.

Thanks once again go out to my wonderful betas JenGeorge and NervousAboutAngels.

# Crackling Fire

*Chapter 7 of 31*

Severus shares a Christmas cognac with Sienna and things get out of hand.

Disclaimer: All characters and dialogue you recognize are from the brilliant Harry Potter book series by J. K. Rowling. This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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Chapter 7

"Crackling Fire and Sparkling Cognac,

Slip Through My Arms, When Are You Coming Back?"

As fall progressed, Severus didn't regret his decision to rescind his offer to teach Sienna Defense Against the Dark Arts. Umbridge was in everyone's business, just as she had promised, and Severus felt that at some point they would surely have been caught. She was even trying to tell Dumbledore how to do his job. What a fool. Severus knew that Dumbledore put on a cooperative face for the Ministry of Magic, but behind the scenes he was working hard to lay the groundwork for a full assault against Lord Voldemort when he finally came out into the open.

Sienna continued as Severus' assistant on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Her performance in class continued to be flawless, and her duties as his assistant became more interesting. Severus had her conducting experiments with complex spells and trying different methods of preparing ingredients and stirring combinations, just to see if they would make any improvements to the basic recipe. Although the average student would have hated every minute, to Sienna it was fascinating work.

Christmas break was upon them, and Severus braced himself against what he thought would be a request for a hug before going home, but Sienna didn't even show up at his office door on the last day of school. This took him a bit by surprise, and deep down he admitted to himself that he was somewhat disappointed. But his feelings were short-lived. When he went up to dinner that night, there she was, waiting for him, at a very small table with Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid and Flitwick, and a handful of students from each of the other houses who were staying over the break. Thankfully, Umbridge was nowhere to be seen. It might be a decent Christmas after all, and such a pleasantly quiet change from last year.

"I thought, since there are so few of us here that it would be much cozier if we all sat together. I would not want Miss Kaolin to sit all by herself at that long, lonely Gryffindor table, would you, Professor Snape?"

"Of course not, Headmaster," Severus agreed as he approached the table. Sienna was sitting on the end, across from the only empty spot. He had no choice but to sit there. All of the other students were at the far end of the table. Why did he feel uncomfortable? If it had been a Slytherin, or any other student, for that matter, he wouldn't have thought twice. He realized that they had never shared a quiet meal in a somewhat intimate setting before. It almost felt like a date... or perhaps, an outing with friends. Yes, that was more accurate. So why was he so self-conscious? He pushed the question to the dark inner recesses of his mind and forced himself to eat.

After a few mouthfuls Severus looked up at Sienna. "Why aren't you going home to be with your mother over the holiday?"

"Because, when I found out that all the Gryffindors were leaving, I thought it would be nice to have the entire tower to myself for a couple of weeks. And besides, the Headmaster told me that she could come here if she'd like. She can stay in the dorm with me."

"So, is she coming then?" asked Dumbledore, who had overheard the conversation.

"Oh, yes, she's very anxious to come; she's never been here for Christmas. I'm sure she'll love the way the place is decorated. But she has some last minute things to do, so she won't get here until Christmas Eve. Then she has to go back to work at St. Mungo's on the 26th. She's a Healer. So we won't have much time together."

"But if she's working, you wouldn't have much time together at home either," commented Professor Flitwick.

The idle chit chat continued for a bit; then people started excusing themselves as they finished their meals. Hagrid was first. He used the excuse of feeding his many creatures, but Severus knew that there was something else going on. He had a feeling that Dumbledore was in on it, but wouldn't tell him.

The students got up in twos and threes, and left for their respective common rooms. Sienna was the only Gryffindor, and at this point, the only student left. She and Severus were still eating when Flitwick and McGonagall got up.

"I know Sibyll is still here. Probably up in her tower. I think I'll take her up a brandy," said Professor McGonagall, and she wandered off in search of Trelawney. Flitwick said his goodnights and left with her.

"Well." Dumbledore looked first at Sienna, then at Severus, with a smile that betrayed his pleasure at the current situation. He stood up, just as Severus had taken a rather large bite of treacle tart. "I think I'll retire for the evening."

Did Dumbledore plan all this? With a flick of his wand, the lights dimmed and Dumbledore left the room. It was as if half the candles blew out all at once. Now Severus was really uncomfortable. Yes, it definitely felt like a date now. He noticed that Sienna had been playing with her last bite of pudding, pushing it around in the bowl, making interesting patterns with her fork and spoon. She wasn't looking at him, thank goodness. Perhaps she felt as awkward as he did. Perhaps he would be doing both of them a favor if he just got up, said goodnight and walked out. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. It was as if his feet had grown roots.

She finally looked up into his waiting eyes. He swallowed hard, finishing the last of his treacle tart. He left his hand near the center of the table where her hand rested right next to his, almost touching it. Did he dare to reach for it? He didn't know what to do. His life was so complicated, and he knew it would get much worse before it got better. If it ever got better, if he lived through what he knew was to come. He was usually so sure of himself, but at this moment he had no answers, no plan. He felt helpless.

Sienna put her hand on top of his. Severus had been so lost in thought that her touch startled him. He jerked, but didn't pull away. They just stared at each other. What was she thinking? In his mind he uttered the word *Legilimens*, but no memories were forthcoming. She seemed to be concentrating only on him. She was calm and unreadable, as usual.

Severus finally decided to follow his heart just a little, and flipped his hand over. His long slender fingers gently wrapped around her small delicate hand.

"Will this get me expelled?" Sienna broke the silence with a grin.

"I don't think we have to worry about it. Umbridge isn't here for the holiday."

"Thank Merlin's Beard!" Sienna heaved a heavy sigh of relief.

Severus noticed that the butterflies in his stomach had started to dissolve.

"I've never been in here when it was completely empty before," commented Sienna. "This room is huge. It feels more like a large cathedral. Bigger, actually. And I just love the ceiling, don't you?"

Severus looked up. It was dusted with stars. He could see the Milky Way strewn across the sky. It was lovely and very romantic. He looked back down at their two hands. Well, they couldn't just sit there making small talk all night. Should he ask her back to his quarters for a drink? She was of age and could legally drink if she wanted to. But that would be too intimate. She was a student after all. No, his quarters were definitely out of the question. Perhaps his office. There was a raging fire in there no doubt. The house-elves stayed busy in the castle, even over breaks and holidays. The chairs weren't very comfortable, but that was probably for the best. But in his quarters by the fire there was a love seat... *No, she's a student*, he reminded himself.

"Would you like to come back with me to the Gryffindor common room? I'm sure there's a nice fire going in there, and we have several cushy arm chairs to sit in. We could discuss the next few potions you want to test. I'll take notes."

*Comfortable cushy arm chairs, only big enough for one person each. Perfect.* "I think I could be persuaded," Severus admitted with just the hint of a smile. "Perhaps, when you're not busy with your mother, we could take all this free time to continue perfecting the potions."

"That's a great idea!" They let go of each other's hands and stood up to leave.

"I want to fetch something from my quarters. I'll be up in a few minutes."

"I'll wait for you at the portrait. The Fat Lady would never let you in if I'm not with you."

"Yes," Severus sneered, a touch of irritation in his voice, "well, she's only doing her job."

They took separate paths as they headed out the door of the Great Hall. When Severus got to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Sienna was standing there waiting for him. His arms were loaded down with two glasses and a bottle of cognac.

"Here, let me help you with that," she took the items from him so he could manage his way through the portrait hole, then she turned to the Fat Lady. "Wither Wings." The portrait swung open. "After you, Professor," Sienna motioned him to go first. Hermione must have told her about his last attempt at getting through. He eyed the Fat Lady suspiciously as he reached the entrance to the hole, and although she peered down her nose at him through narrow eyelids, he got no trouble from her as he started to crawl in. When he was through, he turned and Sienna handed him the glasses and the bottle, then came through herself.

He was alone, in the Gryffindor common room, with a beautiful young lady, at her invitation. This is exactly the way it had happened once before, so long ago. He and Lily Evans... stuck here by themselves one Christmas break... such good memories. *Don't expect the same thing to happen this time, old chap* Severus thought to himself. *She's a student, you're a teacher. Keep your distance.*

They found a couple of cozy chairs and pulled them up to the fire. "I'll run and get my Potions book." She was back in a flash from the girls' dormitory with the large heavy book. It had been brand new only four months earlier, but you'd have thought it was an antique to look at it now. Severus poured each of them a cognac. She sat the book on a small table in front of the two of them.

"I've been saving this." Severus held up his glass.

Sienna took hers and looked through the rich brown liquid to the firelight. It sparkled like gold. As she passed it under her nose, her eyes grew wide and she looked at him with a mock scowl. "Are you trying to get me drunk and take advantage of me?"

Severus glared at her, obviously offended. "I would never think of such a thing!" He stood up in a huff. "That's probably what the rest of the castle is thinking, too."

"How can they?" Sienna asked, trying to calm him down. "No one knows you're here except me. Besides, I was only joking. I only said it because this is pretty strong stuff, and to tell you the truth, I've never had any alcohol before. Two sips and you'll probably have to carry me up to my bed."

"I should leave." He felt increasingly uncomfortable as he took a swig. "The Fat Lady knows I'm here, and you know what a rumor mill those portraits have going out there. It'll be all over the castle by morning."

"If you leave after a respectable amount of time, they'll have nothing to talk about."



Severus stood there, not yet convinced. He took another swig in an attempt to calm his nerves.

"Please don't leave yet. I'm sorry I said it. I was only joking, I swear. I'm sure your intentions are strictly honorable."

He could see the regret written across her face. She stood up and reached for his hand, and his anger melted with her touch.

"Please stay," she whispered.

"Oh, all right." Severus slowly lowered himself into the chair. "But only for a little while." He let go of her hand and refilled his glass. He noticed that she hadn't touched hers. "Well, aren't you even going to try it?"

"OK, but don't say I didn't warn you." Sienna took a sip and started to cough. "Oh, my GOD!" She sputtered. "How do you drink this stuff?" she asked amid more coughing and sputtering. "I think I'll stick to butterbeer, thanks." And she put the glass down next to Severus' bottle.

Severus, in an effort to save the evening from complete disaster, called for a house-elf to bring her up a glass of water and a butterbeer. She gratefully thanked him and they began to discuss the next few potions that they would be working on over the break. It wasn't long, however, before that one sip of cognac had taken its toll, and Sienna had to say goodnight. They stood together, and he started to reach for the bottle and empty glasses, but she stopped him.

"I'll hand them to you after you crawl through," she said.

"Oh, right." Severus hadn't realized it while he was sitting down, but he wasn't very steady on his feet. He didn't usually drink, and then it was almost always oak mead or a touch of firewhiskey. Sienna was right, the cognac was strong stuff. He had consumed two glasses of his own, then emptied her unwanted glass into his and finished that as well. No wonder he was tipsy. Perhaps tomorrow night, he would also stick to butterbeer.

He turned towards the portrait hole, but lost his balance. Sienna reached for his arm to keep him from falling, and he grabbed her waist for security. Before he knew it they were wrapped around each other in an embrace. *She's a student, she's a student, she's a student...* This didn't feel like just another innocent hug. Perhaps it was the alcohol. Yes, tomorrow night it was definitely butterbeer for him.

"I'd better go," he whispered as he managed to untangle himself. She was looking at him with a touch of disappointment in her pale green eyes. "Would you be so kind as to hand me the glasses?" He crawled through the hole and turned around. She passed the glasses and the bottle to him.

"See you at breakfast," Sienna called after him as he weaved his way down the hall and into the darkness.

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus woke up the next day with the mother of all hangovers. He lay in his bed, flat on his back, looking up at the ceiling, cursing his foolish behavior. What was he thinking last night taking cognac up to Sienna? Was he out of his mind? What if they had both gotten drunk? Merlin knows what could have happened. The hug at the end of the night was bad enough, but the thoughts that had entered his mind at the time were shameful! He embarrassed himself just thinking about them. *She's a student, for goodness sake. Of course, she is of age already but the student/teacher relationship must not be taken advantage of.* Besides, what if Voldemort found out how he felt come to think of it, how did he feel? Wasn't it just the alcohol that took over last night? Severus searched his mind, then his heart. He felt a physical attraction, of course, although he wasn't quite sure what she could possibly see in him, since he was old enough to be her father.

He remembered wrapping his arms around her tightly, caressing her with a spark no, a fire! He remembered burying his face in her hair and breathing in deeply to relish the warmth, the softness, and the light aroma of lavender. Did her lips touch his neck? He thought surely they did, and he reached up to lightly feel the spot as it tingled with the memory. And he remembered the look of disappointment in her eyes as he came to his senses and pulled away. A warm wave washed over him. Yes, she had definitely wanted him to stay.

But he felt, as logic took over, that it would not only have been dreadfully inappropriate, it would have been inexcusable. He couldn't let it happen again. He had to make sure she knew it was a fluke, a mistake. As hard as this was to admit, he would have to apologize for his behavior. But unlike the incident the previous spring when he had accused her of something she hadn't done, he felt this was different. This was completely on his shoulders. It was his behavior that was out of line... *Oh, who am I kidding?* Severus finally admitted to himself. *It was my behavior then as well.* What had changed were his feelings for her. He had grown to care for her deeply. And if an apology would get him back on the right path with her, he felt it was a small price to pay.

He put on his bathrobe and headed slowly out the door and down the hall to his office. He knew exactly which book contained the best hangover potion, and he prayed that he still had all of the ingredients. As he struggled down the hall, he found to his surprise that the door to his office was already open. Sienna was inside with a potion brewing.

"I figured, with the condition you were in last night, you'd need something this morning. I found three different recipes, but I thought this one held the most promise." She pointed to the recipe he had planned to use. She was stirring a small cauldron over the leftover coals from the previous night's fire. They were just hot enough to simmer the potion effectively, and she ladled some out into a large ceramic mug.

"Give it a minute to cool off."

"How did you get in here?" Severus tried to put on a face that was less miserable than he felt on the inside.

"I figured in your condition last night, that you either forgot to put the Locking spell on the door, or your spell was not properly executed. Either way, I could get in." Sienna looked quite pleased with herself.

Severus sat down and took a deep breath. "About my behavior last night," he began rather sheepishly. "I apologize. It won't happen again."

"Yes, I think from now on we should steer away from the strong stuff." Sienna donned a coy smile. "Otherwise, you never know. I might try to get you drunk and take advantage of you."

Severus started to chuckle, but his head hurt so much he had to stifle himself. Sitting there in her chair, calm and happy, Sienna looked like an angel to him. "Why on earth are you so determined to be my friend, no matter what I say or do?" He was truly puzzled now. He had been asking himself that question for quite some time. What did she see in him that none of the other students saw? That he didn't even see in himself?

"Just a sucker for lost causes, I guess," she laughed. Severus wasn't amused. At this point, he felt like she could have been serious. "No, really, just before I left the ashram, when I was 15, I had a vision. I saw myself older, walking with a man beside a beautiful lake. There was a huge castle up on a hill behind us. We were talking and laughing. He was obviously someone I cared for very deeply." Severus tried to picture the scene in his mind, as Sienna continued. "The first night I came here, the night I was Sorted, I saw you at the staff table. I recognized you immediately. You were the man in my vision. I knew then that someday we would be great friends, and I've just been doing what I can so far to help make that happen."

Severus was looking directly into Sienna's grayish green eyes. He didn't mean to do it, but subconsciously he wanted to see her vision for himself, because it sounded so beautiful. *Legilimens*, he thought. And then he was there, by the Black Lake, Hogwarts Castle rising behind him, watching a slightly older version of himself, with a touch of gray running through his shoulder length black hair. He was walking alone with Sienna. She had forgotten to mention that they were holding hands. They started laughing. Then the vision Severus pulled Sienna to him and they kissed. A long, passionate kiss! The real Severus gasped and blinked hard. When his eyes came back into focus, he was looking at the real Sienna. She was furious. He could feel the power of her anger radiating from her. It reminded him of Dumbledore when he was really furious. He had not known that she was that powerful. Severus knew immediately that he had overstepped his boundaries.

"What...just...happened?" Sienna growled through gritted teeth.

"I..." Severus stammered. He didn't know what to say. He just wanted to share the memory. But it was odd, too. He had never seen a memory of a *future* event before, much less one that included him. "I didn't mean to...I couldn't help myself."

"You saw it, didn't you?" Her voice was calm and quiet, barely above a whisper, but the rage was still there.

"Yes," Severus was still looking into her eyes.

"All...*all* of it?" Her anger was beginning to mingle with distress.

"Yes," with this he looked down to the papers on his desk. He felt two inches tall.

Sienna was shaking now. He could still feel an incredible energy field radiating from her. "You were not supposed to see that. Not *yet*. You're not ready yet." An angry tear streamed down her face. She pushed it aside with the back of her hand. She seemed irritated with herself for crying. "This changes *everything*." She pushed the mug towards him from across the desk. "Here's your potion." Then she turned as another tear found a path down her face, and stormed out.

"Miss Kaolin," Severus pleaded. "*Sienna!*" He had never called her by her first name before. He had hoped that it would help, but she was gone.

## Christmas with Mum

*Chapter 8 of 31*

Severus asks for Dumbledore's advice to smooth things over with Sienna.

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Chapter 8

"Christmas with Mum, What a Treat,

But Dumbledore Should Be Discrete"

Sienna was right, of course, Severus had not been ready to see the scene with the two of them by the lake. He didn't know what to think. It was only a vision after all, so that didn't mean it would really come true. It could be like a dream. Sometimes dreams were prophetic, sometimes they weren't, but with the exception of his dreams with Lily, they usually dealt with symbols. This was so real. Could he have just seen his future? It was an appealing future. He honestly didn't think he would live long enough to see gray come into his hair, with the precarious position he had put himself in between Lord Voldemort and Dumbledore. It was nice to think he could come out alive, after all.

Severus sipped his hangover potion. A touch of ginger! That wasn't in the recipe. *Another one of her finishing touches*. He drained the mug, walked over to the fire and ladled more into it. Then he took the mug, locked the office door (effectively this time), and slowly made his way back to his quarters. He would ask Dumbledore about the vision. Dumbledore could help him sort things out.

Severus didn't make it to breakfast. He lay in bed, giving the potion plenty of time to work. Then he slowly made his way to the shower and got dressed. By then it was time for lunch. He dreaded seeing Sienna again, since the table was so small he knew it was unavoidable. But he needn't have worried; she didn't show up. When she didn't show at dinner either, Dumbledore asked Severus if he knew why.

"Yes, well, if you have a few minutes after dinner, I think I can explain."

So when dinner was over they headed up to Dumbledore's office where they settled into their respective chairs. "Brandy?" offered Dumbledore.

"No thanks." Severus took a deep breath and started talking. He decided to tell Dumbledore about the previous night as well, so Dumbledore would know that nothing naughty had transpired.

"You mean you had her alone, with a bottle of cognac, and you didn't take her back to your quarters?"

"Of course not, sir. I wouldn't dream of such a thing," Severus said stiffly.

"Well, you're a better man than I am, Severus. If I was 50 years younger, you'd have some competition for her."

"Headmaster!" Severus looked very surprised. He had never seen this side of Dumbledore before. There was a twinkle in his pale blue eyes, a very mischievous twinkle.

"You know, I think she fancies you, Severus."

"I know, but she's a student and I am her teacher. Anything beyond a mild friendship between us would be... inappropriate."

"Not necessarily," Dumbledore informed him. "There are several examples in *Hogwarts, A History* where it is noted that teachers have actually married their students, who have come of age, of course. The first was in 1435 when Dilbert Dinglebatt, the Transfiguration teacher, married Emmaline Mayberry. There have been several others. The last as recent as 1939. You can look them up for yourself, if you like.

"Yes, well, that brings me to the rest of my story. It's not just that I found out that she fancies me this morning, but the *way* I found out." Severus continued, giving Dumbledore the sordid details. He was not usually this candid with anyone, and found himself very uncomfortable describing the scene, but he was in the dark on what to do. He knew he had really screwed things up between them, and he didn't trust himself to do the right thing on his own.

"Well," Dumbledore grinned from ear to ear. "Now I know why she came to me this morning asking for Occlumency lessons."

"You saw her this morning?" Severus became alarmed. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing. She only asked for the lessons. I suggested that she ask you, but she insisted that she wanted to learn it from me instead. So I gave her her first lesson this morning right after breakfast."

Severus grew curious and had to ask, "How did she do?"

"Excellent. She's a natural. I think it's all that meditation that makes it very easy for her to clear her mind and concentrate. It only took her about three tries to keep me out. And I was really trying hard to get anything I could out of her. Very impressive."

"Will you be teaching her Legilimency as well?"

"She didn't ask. Maybe after the two of you kiss and make up, she'll ask you." Dumbledore chuckled.

Severus scowled. He didn't like the reference to kissing. He was here, after all, for some advice on the subject of making up, not making out.

Dumbledore could sense Severus' irritation and growing impatience. "Severus," his tone changed to a serious one, "if I were you, I'd give her some space. Let her cool off a bit."

Severus nodded in silence. He felt the need to study his shoelaces. "How long should I give her?"

"Well, I know she is taking her meals in the Gryffindor common room until her mother comes tomorrow night. Maybe after her mother leaves she will return to the Great Hall to eat, and it will be a sign that she's ready to forgive you."

Severus heaved a heavy sigh. Several silent minutes passed.

"She believes that true friendship is the purest form of love," Dumbledore informed him.

"Another product of her life at the Ashram?"

"Most likely," affirmed Dumbledore. "And she told me that any kind of lasting relationship must have a true, unconditional friendship as its foundation, if it is to last."

Severus had heard those words before. "She's wise for one so young." Yet another trait he had grown fond of.

"Don't worry, Severus," Dumbledore assured his friend. "Her friendship for you *is* unconditional."

Severus looked up, tired and still sad, but very grateful for the unconditional friend who sat before him. "Thank you, sir." He got up to leave.

"You're a lucky man, Severus. A friend like that is a rare and beautiful gift."

Severus nodded again in silence. "Good night, sir."

"Good night, Severus. Sleep well."

Severus descended the spiral staircase.

Later that night, as Severus lay in bed, he thought about Sienna's vision. As he drifted off into a light sleep, he dreamed of himself kissing Sienna by the Black Lake. But as his sleep grew deeper, Sienna dissolved and Lily materialized in her place. They pulled apart enough to gaze into one another's eyes.

"Hello, Severus, my love."

"Lily." He looked at her with joy and amazement, but then remembered that he had started out kissing Sienna, and a wave of guilt hit him so hard he let go of Lily altogether and turned away. He was confused. She had been absent from his dreams for so long now, he had thought perhaps she had abandoned him. How would she feel about his desires for Sienna?

"Are you angry with me?"

"Why on earth would I be angry?"

"Because of Sienna, of course."

"Well, I must admit that when you used Legilimency on her I felt that was out of line, but I'm not angry about it. She has a right to be, though."

Severus stared at her in disbelief. "You saw that? You know about that?"

"Of course."

"Then you must know how I feel about her."

"Yes. I hope you're planning to apologize to her. Otherwise, you'll ruin everything."

"So she doesn't bother you?"

"Of course not, silly. All I've ever wanted was for you and Harry to be safe and happy. I think she's wonderful. And if you don't apologize and make it up to her, you're a real BONEHEAD!"

"But, what about you?"

Lily smiled. Her emerald green eyes sparkled with love for him. "I'll always be with you, Severus." She reached up with her hands to gently hold his face. They gazed deeply into each other's eyes. Severus noticed a look there that he had seen before... an infinite wisdom, that gave him the feeling of protection... that no matter what happened, it was all for the best. "We are all one in spirit, Severus. If you let yourself go, you will feel me inside you; you'll be able to see me in her as well."

"Is she why you have been away for so long? You wanted to give me a chance with her?"

"You have been living in the past too long, holding on to me too tightly. Sienna has the ability to make you very happy. But you have to let her in. I searched a long time before I found the right girl. Who do you think planted that vision in her mind?"

"You planned all this?"

"Right from the start." Lily looked gloatingly pleased with herself.

"But I love you. How could you push me into someone else's arms?"

"Because I want you to be happy. Living in the past, in love with a ghost, has made you bitter, angry. You're not the Severus I fell in love with. You need someone to pull the good back to the surface. Sienna can do that."

"She can, can't she?" he smiled as he remembered the many times Sienna had pulled him out of a sour mood.

"I'm going to stay in the background for a while, my love, in hope that you can put your love for me in its proper perspective and move on with your life. You need something to look forward to, something worth surviving this war for."

Severus nodded. "Sienna," he said simply.

"Things will get much darker for you before they get better. You'll need something much more tangible than me to get you through it."

"Sienna," he whispered again.

"If you give her a chance, you'll find all the love I ever gave you wrapped up in her eyes. Trust me, Severus"

"Sienna," he mumbled.

"Go to her, apologize. Win her back. You already have her heart in your hands. Take care of it, nurture it, and feel it grow one with your own."

"One heart?"

"Yours and Sienna's."

"Sienna," he whispered, over and over, as his sleep grew deeper, and Lily slowly faded from view.

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Christmas Eve arrived, and with it Sienna's mother. She was an attractive older woman with curly salt and pepper hair, hazel eyes, and a warm smile for everyone when Dumbledore introduced her around the dinner table. For old time's sake, Sienna had given her a tour of the castle during the afternoon. Somehow, they never made it to the dungeon to see where Sienna and Severus had previously spent so much time together. He wondered painfully if those days were over.

When Dumbledore introduced Severus, he bowed graciously. "Oh, Professor Snape!" exclaimed Mrs. Kaolin. "What a pleasure to finally meet you!"

Severus noticed that Sienna looked uncomfortable. She obviously had not told her mother what was going on.

"Charmed." Severus forced a smile, then stole a glance at Sienna, but she wouldn't look at him.

"We ran out of time on our tour today. Sienna wanted to save the best for last, I'm sure. You don't mind if we come down tomorrow, do you?"

"You're welcome any time, ma'am," Severus said sincerely.

"Oh, I can hardly wait. Sienna has told me so much about you."

Severus forced another smile. He could tell that Sienna was in as much pain as he was. There had to be a way to make it right.

He noticed that the other students at the far end of the table were whispering, but he could only imagine what the conversation was about. Did they know something? Had the portraits blabbed?

Once everyone settled into their seats, Sienna was across from Dumbledore, flanked by her mum and Flitwick. Severus sat on the end, next to Mrs. Kaolin and across from Hagrid. Although Sienna barely said two words, her mother kept the conversation going through most of dinner. Mrs. Kaolin insisted on telling anyone who would listen about the Muggle Ashram in India that Sienna had attended, their philosophies, their rituals, their rules. Although Dumbledore seemed to hang on her every word, Severus listened politely, but found much of it too far-fetched for his taste. But until that night, he hadn't realized that Sienna was a vegetarian. He just never paid attention to what she was eating.

When everyone seemed nearly finished with their meal, Dumbledore stood up to say a few words and tapped the side of his glass with his spoon to get everyone's attention. "Now that our bellies are all full," he said as he looked from face to face, his sky blue eyes twinkling, "I would like to propose a toast to our guest, Mrs. Kaolin." Dumbledore's eyes landed on her, and she smiled widely back at him, beaming as Severus had seen Sienna do on occasion. "We want to thank you so much for making the long journey to visit us, but we also especially want to thank you for sending us your daughter. She is a true delight." He held up his glass and looked around for everyone to do the same. He noticed that several glasses were empty, but with a wave of his hand, that was remedied.

"Here, here," came the general murmur from the teachers.

Another wave from Dumbledore's hand and the dirty plates were replaced by crackers down the center of the table. From the way they were facing, each was to be pulled by the two people sitting across from each other. Severus rolled his eyes and let out a low groan. *Not this again.* And there was no avoiding it.

"Guess I got you, Severus," Hagrid chuckled.

"Grab one end of your cracker, everyone." Sienna grabbed one end of hers, Dumbledore grabbed the other. "On the count of three. One, two... three!"

Explosions erupted around the table as the crackers went off all at once. The one between Severus and Hagrid let out some fireworks that looked like they could have come from Zonko's Joke Shop. They zoomed around the room throwing off little sparks and squeaky sounds, but nothing that anyone needed to run from. Some of the fireworks from Zonko's were known to be carnivorous! Mrs. Kaolin's and Professor McGonagall's let loose a flock of tiny silver birds that fluttered around the room. Dumbledore pulled hard on his end while Sienna pulled on hers, but the thing wouldn't break apart. Then suddenly it finally popped, almost sending the two to the floor. Sienna's end turned into a bouquet of red roses and Dumbledore's turned into a bottle of cognac. Severus couldn't help but see the hint he felt Dumbledore was trying to give him, and he almost smiled.

After the room calmed down a bit, Dumbledore leaned over towards Sienna and said something that Severus couldn't hear. Sienna smiled and nodded. Then he asked Mrs. Kaolin if she would like to come with him up to his office for a nightcap. She accepted. Hagrid, McGonagall, Flitwick, and the students all got up to leave at about the same time, and Severus was there alone with Sienna once again. They sat there staring at their shoes for a moment. Severus wasn't sure what he should do. Dumbledore had suggested that he give Sienna until after her mother left. Should he say something now? He looked at her face, in hope of finding some guidance there, but she still seemed fascinated with her shoes. After what felt like an eternity, she stood up to leave.

"Wait!" Severus reached across the space that her mother had occupied only a short time before. He was aiming for Sienna's hand, but she pulled it out of reach. "Can we talk for a moment?" He continued to search her face.

She turned to look at him in icy silence. Her eyes were expressionless. That was an Occlumency face if he'd ever seen one.

"Once again, I would like to offer my deepest apologies for my unforgivable behavior." Severus held his breath. Apologizing, something he had never done in the past, was lately becoming a habit.

"I felt... *violated*."

The resentment that resonated in her voice sent a chill down Severus' spine. This wasn't going to be easy. "I know how invasive it can feel, believe me. But I didn't mean it that way." He chose his words carefully. He knew he was treading on thin ice. "I was hoping to share the memory, not steal it."

"Then ask permission next time." She glared at him.

"You're right, of course, that's what I should have done. But I just wanted to share your moment. After all, I was part of it. I wanted to feel the beauty that you were feeling. I have very few beautiful memories of my own to draw from." He was hoping for a little sympathy from this last statement, even though it was unfortunately very true.

Sienna's expression remained combative. Severus waited anxiously for a softer reply, but none was given. He sighed heavily, feeling defeated.

"Well, I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry. Take it or leave it. Happy Christmas," he mumbled as he got up to leave the room.

This time it was Sienna's turn. "Wait!"

He turned towards her, the slightest ray of hope in his heart.

Her expression had melted from ice to warmth, and she was shaking her head slowly back and forth. "I just can't stay mad at you. It hurts too much."

*Thank you, God*, Severus thought to himself. He held out his arms and she rushed into them. "We'd better not get used to this, you know," he told her. "It has to stop when Umbridge gets back."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," she smiled up at him. "You know, when I was storming out of your office yesterday, you called me by my first name."

"Sorry."

"No, actually, I rather liked it. I would prefer that you call me by my first name. You're not just my teacher, you're my best friend."

A warm wave washed over Severus. Only Lily had ever referred to him as "best friend." "Only when we're alone. Then you may call me Severus. But no one, I mean NO one must hear you refer to me that way. Understand?"

"Yes," she glanced quickly around the room and then added, "Severus."

A faint smirk spread across his face. "Butterbeer, my office?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

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On Christmas morning, Severus woke up to find two presents at the foot of his bed. He had only expected one. Dumbledore gave all of his staff a little something every year. But this year there were two. Curious, he reached down and pulled them both up on the bed. The first one was soft and squishy. He knew right away that this was from Dumbledore. A package of black socks. Every year. He didn't even have to open it. He smiled as he pushed it aside to pick up the second package. This one was very heavy, about 18 inches square and three inches thick. It must be a book, he thought as he tore into the package. Yes, his favorite gift. But he had so many already, would this be a duplicate? No, he realized as he flipped it over to see the front cover. It was leather bound and very, very old. This came from an antique book store. It was a potions book, *Deadly Potions and Their Antidotes* by Marcus Gilberton. He gently started to turn the pages. Sure enough, on the delicately aged parchment within were dark potions on the left and antidotes on the right. Some of them he was familiar with, others not. It was fascinating. And he knew it would be useful. He saw no card, but he knew who it must be from. Only Sienna would know how much he would love this.

As Severus flipped through the pages of his new old book, he came across a note after all. It was in Sienna's handwriting. It read:

*Dear Severus,*

*In History of Magic Class, Professor Binns mentioned this book. He said that the wizard who wrote it was a dark wizard and quite a controversial figure in his day. Upon its release, the book was touted as a milestone, and the information in it was supposed to save many lives. But although the title is accurate, it is also misleading. The deadly potions are not necessarily across from their antidotes. The order is all mixed up. It is up to the reader to do his own experimentation and testing to see which antidotes go with which deadly potions. Many people have died relying on this book for help. I thought it would be a fun challenge to try and match up the proper antidotes with each of their deadly counterparts, and publish a "key," so to speak, for the book. But even if the prospect of that project doesn't interest you, I hope you still enjoy looking it over. Just remember not to rely on the information inside.*

*With Love,*

*Your Friend,*

*Sienna*

Severus' interest was piqued. He could hardly wait to start testing. He could actually look at the ingredients of some of the antidotes and know that they wouldn't work with the deadly potion on the opposite page. But for others he had no idea. This would definitely take some time, and what a fun way to spend the hours. This was the perfect gift. But then he started to feel guilty because he had only bought her a box of chocolates.

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At breakfast, Severus sat next to Sienna. He noticed that her mother sat next to Dumbledore. He wondered how long she had stayed with him last night. Sienna hadn't left his office until just after midnight. They had spent the time talking and laughing, telling stories about growing up. Most of the stories came from Sienna. Sometimes they were not so happy. But after the years pass, one can usually find humor in almost anything.

Everyone was talking about what they had found at the foot of their beds this morning. Sienna had also received socks from Dumbledore, and of course the chocolate from Severus. Her mother had given her a new sweater. She had written about how cold the castle was becoming as the winter set in. Mrs. Kaolin announced that she had received a rare bottle of cognac and an invitation to share it with the person she received it from, Professor Dumbledore. As she said this she started blushing. Sienna leaned over and whispered to Severus that her mum didn't get back to the dorm until two a.m.! Severus raised his eyebrows at this and glanced at Dumbledore like a father would look at his misbehaving son.

When Severus thanked Sienna sincerely for the book, she admitted that it was hopefully for both of them, because she would have just as much fun trying to decipher its contents as he would.

"How on earth did you find it?" Severus asked.

"Actually, I had help from Hermione Granger," Sienna explained. "I had already exhausted my possibilities in Great Britain and had to search abroad. I believe that once it was discovered that the book was killing people, it was banned here and all the copies destroyed. So I asked Hermione to see if Viktor Krum could look around in Bulgaria."

He came across one in an antique bookstore there, and he sent it to her."

Severus looked a little irritated at this. "So we both owe Granger yet another favor. Her, of all people."

"I know you don't like her because she's a know-it-all, but she really is nice once you get to know her, and she's always willing to help if she can."

"A little too willing, if you ask me."

# Thank Heaven for Chocolate

*Chapter 9 of 31*

Severus asks Sienna to teach him her hands-on Healing technique.

## Chapter 9

"Thank Heaven for Chocolate, Both Dark and Light,

But Even Chocolate Can't Put Everything Right"

Mrs. Kaolin regrettably left the next day, but she and Dumbledore promised to keep in touch. Sienna told Severus that she didn't get back to the dorm again until two a.m., and she seemed to be glowing, even though she insisted that nothing romantic had transpired. Dumbledore gave her a quick kiss on the lips when they said their goodbyes, which tickled Sienna. Her mum had never dated after her father died.

The rest of the break passed way too quickly. At one point Severus had to run an errand for Dumbledore, but the rest of the time they busied themselves making loose copies of all the deadly potions and antidotes in the antique book. Severus' experience let him match up several pairs right away, and there were many that he thought he could match up just by looking at the ingredients, but they would still need to be tested. That left almost half the deadly potions with no known antidote, which meant that they had a lot of work to do.

Umbridge returned from the break with a freshly renewed desire to meddle and control. She put so much pressure on Trelawney and Hagrid that they could no longer do their jobs effectively. She warned Severus that his students were "too prepared" and advanced for their years, and reminded him to stick to the Ministry of Magic's approved program.

One Tuesday afternoon, Umbridge was snooping around in Severus' classroom and checking out the school's Potions equipment. He stayed to watch her every move, and the time slipped by him. It was after 3:30 when Sienna wandered in, and Umbridge was concealed from her view inside the storage closet. Severus stood in the closet doorway, with his back to the classroom entrance, so he didn't see Sienna come in.

"There you are," she remarked casually. "I thought we were supposed to be working in your office today."

Severus turned on his heel to face Sienna and motioned with his hands to be quiet. But it was too late. Umbridge heard her comment and emerged from the closet.

"Working?"

Sienna was mortified.

"And what might you be working on with Professor Snape, dear? Miss Caroline is it?"

"Miss Kaolin," Severus corrected her through clenched teeth.

"Ahhh... I was having trouble with one of my potions, and he offered to help me figure out where I'm going wrong," Sienna lied.

"How good of you, Professor Snape, to take the time. My students don't *need* to ask me for extra help." Umbridge smiled her sickening little smile. "I guess I'm a more effective teacher than you are."

Severus' blood began to boil. *They don't ask for your help because they know you're incapable of helping them... They don't ask for your help because you haven't taught them anything... They don't need help because they can all read... They don't want your help because they can tell that you're a moron...* He could think of a hundred retorts, but he held his tongue and addressed Sienna. "I wasn't aware that Professor Umbridge would be inspecting my class stores this afternoon, Miss Kaolin. Perhaps we can do it on Thursday afternoon instead."

"Very well, sir." Sienna smiled at him. He didn't smile back.

"Run along, dear," dripped Umbridge. "We're busy."

"Right, later then." When she left the room, Severus let out an inaudible sigh of relief.

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By the time February arrived, Umbridge didn't seem interested in Severus anymore. She had zeroed in on Trelawney. Severus had a feeling that Sibyll's days were numbered. Sienna was much more careful when she came in from then on. She made sure she wasn't followed by anyone, and she quietly caught Severus' eye before she spoke. He began to think that giving her Legilimency lessons would be a good idea so they could communicate nonverbally, but he was afraid to bring up the incident from Christmas again.

As the next Hogsmeade weekend was Valentine's Day weekend, the older students all seemed to be pairing up. Severus' curiosity finally got the best of him, and he asked Sienna who she was going with, hoping of course that the answer would be "no one." When that indeed was her answer, he pushed a bit further and volunteered to brew her up a love potion to slip to someone.

To his pleasant surprise, she gave him a shy smile and said, "It would be a waste of time, unless you are willing to slip yourself a few drops."

She was flirting with him! And although that was the answer he had inwardly wished for, he was not expecting it and didn't know quite how to react. To flirt back would be inappropriate in his opinion, so he smiled inwardly and remained silent.

After an uncomfortable pause Sienna added, "I was just going to Honeydukes for some chocolate. I've never been to Hogsmeade. And I've heard that the chocolate from Honeydukes is the best anywhere. As you know, I love chocolate."

"You've been here for almost two years and you've never been to Hogsmeade? Won't your mum sign the permission slip?"

"Oh, no, I just turned 19. I don't need a permission slip."

"That's right. You've been of age since you came to us. Just turned 19? When was your birthday?"

"February third."

"Mine was back in January. The ninth actually."

"Can I bring you back some chocolate? I know you use it in some of your remedies."

"I'll have to check my stores, but I think I'm set for now. Thanks anyway."

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Two days later, Sienna was standing in line with the rest of the students who were waiting for Filch to check them off the list so they could go to Hogsmeade. When he got to Sienna, he noticed that she was not on the permission slip list.

"That's because I'm of age and I can come and go as I please. I don't need a permission slip!"

"Likely story – prove it."

"Ask Professor Dumbledore, or McGonagall – I'm 19 years old!"

"Sorry, both of them are busy at the moment. No slip, no trip."

"I'm here, Filch," came a familiar voice from over Sienna's shoulder, "and she's coming with me. Let her through." Severus came around the line to face Filch. "She *is* of age, by the way."

"So sorry, Professor Snape. I'm sure the Headmaster will clear all this up when he's free."

"He doesn't have to – I just DID!" Severus leaned closer to Filch's face with the word DID. Filch backed down, cowering slightly. "Come on, Miss Kaolin."

The students still in line stared in disbelief. Severus had never gone out of his way to help a student before. He usually tried to add to their misery.

They walked out the door and up the hill towards Hogsmeade. "Thanks so much, Professor. I owe you one..."

"Not at all, Miss Kaolin. I found myself running low on chocolate and thought a trip to Honeydukes was in order after all."

And so they headed to Honeydukes where Sienna was amazed at the selection. She sampled several varieties and bought a box with four different kinds within. To her surprise, Severus purchased a box of her favorite kind and handed it to her.

"Happy belated birthday," he said, trying to look as if buying chocolate for a young lady was an everyday occurrence. He felt that to use Valentine's Day as an excuse for the gift would be inappropriate. He then purchased another large bag for his stores. As they exited the shop Severus suggested a trip across the street to Zonko's. "I have to keep up with the latest gags so I know what to expect from the troublemakers. Know your enemies, I always say."

After an amazing inspection of Zonko's, they headed back to Hogwarts. "I made a Valentine's Day card for you, Professor."

"A homemade card?" He replied, a note of disgust in his voice.

"I can see you're waiting on pins and needles for it." Sienna laughed. "Perhaps I should just chuck it in the fire when I get back to save you the trouble."

"N--no," he stammered. "I didn't mean anything – I'm sure it's fine. Did you create it with magic?" He started to turn slightly pink and tried to think of a graceful way to change the subject.

"Nope, no magic. A Muggle method I learned at the Ashram. It's called 'one stroke painting.' It's an ancient Chinese technique."

"Then I'm sure it's lovely. I look forward to seeing it," he said with relief. Another awkward moment. This romance stuff was hard work.

As they made their way up the hill towards the castle, a thought suddenly came to him. "Remember the end of last year when you used a hands-on technique to heal me?"

"How could I forget? You were in such a state! It was frightening. The letter you sent said you hoped I would teach you."

"You do remember."

"Since you hadn't mentioned it, I assumed you were either too busy, or not as interested as your letter implied, so I just let it go."

"Oh, no, I'm very interested. I had thought at one time that I might become a Healer, and I still read the trades. But from what Dumbledore described, this is something unfamiliar to the wizarding world."

"No, it's a Muggle technique that involves concentrating your mind and directing your life force energy into a specific area to speed its healing."

"How does it do with tense back muscles and headaches?"

"Quite well, actually. Why do you ask?"

"Because I may have use of your services when we get back, if you can spare a few minutes."

"A demonstration? With you as the patient?"

"If that doesn't make you too uncomfortable."

Sienna smiled a coy smile and began to blush. "It doesn't bother me, but I'm not the one who has to take my shirt off!"

Severus scowled with alarm. "That would be totally inappropriate!" he insisted as his posture stiffened.

"You didn't seem to mind last spring when I helped you through whatever was causing your nightmarish hallucinations."

Severus became even more alarmed. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "You mean to tell me that you've seen me without my shirt on?"

"I had Filch and Dumbledore strip you down to your underpants."

Severus was mortified. "Was that really necessary?"

"Every inch of your body was in pain," she said matter-of-factly. "I needed access to all of it."

Severus turned pink, then red, then added just a hint of purple for good measure. He was so embarrassed he was speechless. He had no idea she had seen, much less touched, every inch of him. The ideas that began to run through his head caused him even more embarrassment, and more than a touch of shame. Deep down inside, he wished he had been awake for the procedure. Now he had to fight his conscience to decide if it would be allowable to take his shirt off once again, so she could teach him the technique and ease his aching head and back in the process. He finally decided that last spring was an emergency, and he was out of the decision making loop, so the situation was very different. It would be grossly inappropriate to take his shirt off in her presence this time.

"No one will be taking any clothes off this afternoon," Severus stated emphatically.

"Well, you won't get the full effect on your back muscles, but I can still get rid of your headache." She sounded detached and professional, which helped to ease his embarrassment.

"Will this work in my office?"

"If I am to do anything for your back, you have to be laying face down somewhere comfortable. So you tell me."

Severus gave her a sideways glance. Was this some kind of ploy? She seemed totally nonchalant, as if she couldn't care less one way or the other. "Then I guess it's my quarters," he admitted with great apprehension.

As they approached the door to his private quarters, he looked both ways to be sure no one saw them enter together. He was still very uncomfortable about this. *Why did I have to open my big mouth?* They entered quickly, and then he locked the door with a very complicated Locking charm, then added a Muffliato spell for good measure. He finally turned to her as his face began to redden. "Since my love seat isn't long enough, I guess it's the bed chamber. If you ever tell anyone about this..." He looked at her threateningly, but she didn't flinch or bat an eyelash.

"Do you want to feel better or don't you?"

The headache had been lingering for days, even with the aid of pain medication from Madam Pomfrey. The backache had been with him for months. He was tired of feeling this way. It was as if he had forgotten how to relax. He finally let his guard down just a little. "Yes," he said simply.

"Then take your shirt off! If you were at St. Mungo's and I was a professional Healer, you wouldn't hesitate. I've seen your tattoo. It's almost as ugly as my brand. Get over it. Let's move on!"

Severus was surprised by her candor. He obediently removed his black shirt, then his white shirt, and laid them on the bed. Then he laid himself face down as she climbed up and sat on the bed beside him and started to work her Muggle magic. At first it felt like a simple massage. But then he realized that there was much more to it. Everywhere her hands met his skin, the pain drained out of his body. As she pushed his muscles around with her surprisingly strong fingers, they immediately relaxed and the knots untied themselves. He had been so uptight with Umbridge around and the Dark Lord calling on him, he could hardly walk from the pain.

When she finished with his back, she started on his neck. That was the first step in getting rid of the headache. Then she asked him to turn over. He felt a bit self conscious in doing so, and pulled his black shirt up over his chest. She ignored his modesty and worked his collarbone area, then his neck, and finally his face. He closed his eyes and tried to relax. It was much easier after the back had been worked on. She caressed and massaged his face, his temples, and his eye sockets. Then she moved her fingertips to the top of his head. Ahhh! Relief at last! Did her lips touch his forehead again? Yes, they were definitely planted firmly just above the bridge of his nose. After a few moments she lifted her lips off of his head and lightly brushed them over his cheek.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Severus," she whispered. His eyes were still closed. He assumed at this point that she would quietly let herself out, but he suddenly felt her lips on *his* for just a brief moment.

His eyes popped open in alarm.

"I--" she stammered. "I'm sorry. I thought you had fallen asleep." This time it was her turn to become embarrassed.

"I was afraid something like this would happen," he replied sternly. He sat up in the bed and let his shirt fall into his lap. As he stared deep into her pale blue-gray eyes, he felt the warmth of her love wash over him. He had forgotten what it felt like to be truly loved by a woman. The love he felt from Lily in his dreams was like an echo of the love they had shared when she was still alive. More than anything he wanted to pull Sienna to him and keep her there all night. But his conscience wouldn't allow it.

As all of these things were running through his mind, Sienna reached towards his bare chest. He quickly intercepted her and brought her hands together in his. He glared at her, not with anger, but with concern. He could see the longing in her eyes as he felt drenched in years of pent up desire. He knew his will power wouldn't last much longer. Without breaking their intense eye contact, Severus slowly shook his head. Then he brought her fingertips to his lips, and he noticed that she was trembling. "You had better leave before we do something we will both deeply regret."

"I could never regret being with you." He could tell she wanted to stay as much as he wanted her to. But one of them had to be strong.

"You are a student. I am your teacher. That is the way it has to be, at least until you graduate," he said firmly.

She looked so disappointed it was almost heartbreaking. He decided the best course of action was to change the subject and give them both something else to focus on.

"Do you have any books on this Muggle healing technique that you could loan me?"

"Oh, yes. I think you will find one in particular most helpful. But I learned most of it at the Ashram, with hands on practice and training."

"Perhaps next time we can find someone in the hospital wing in need of your services."

She sighed and nodded sadly. She somehow knew there would be no more one-on-one sessions between them. Severus watched her with a heavy heart as she gathered her cloak and her chocolate from Honeydukes. He had just finished buttoning his black top shirt when she turned back to him.

"I'll bring the books to dinner tonight."

"Thanks."

"Thanks for the chocolate."

"Don't mention it."



Sienna looked once again into the infinite depths of his coal black eyes. She reached up and gently caressed his face. "Severus, I want you to know that I'm in lo--"

"Don't say it," he interrupted her as he put his fingers to her lips. "You're only making it harder." He mustered his emotional fortitude and steeled his resolve. "This is the way it has to be. Someday you'll understand that I have your best interests at heart. You'll see. I promise."

He opened the door and peeked out. "All clear," he said with a faint bittersweet smile. He watched with deep regret as she swept out the door in silence.

## Umbridge on the Rampage

*Chapter 10 of 31*

After Dumbledore disappears, Umbridge gets even more power hungry.

Disclaimer: All characters and dialogue you recognize are from the brilliant Harry Potter book series by J. K. Rowling. This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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### Chapter 10

"Umbridge on the Rampage, Gets Into Trouble,

Help on the Way, But Not on the Double"

As winter turned to spring, the situation worsened at Hogwarts, with Umbridge actually firing Trelawney and putting Hagrid on probation. Then the worst possible scenario played itself out: the defensive club that Harry, Ron and Hermione had started, nicknamed Dumbledore's Army, was discovered. As a result, Dumbledore took the blame and was forced to disappear into the underground. This entire development irritated Severus to no end. He had told Sienna that meeting for that purpose was a mistake, and this new development illustrated why. Although McGonagall, as Deputy Headmistress, should have been made temporary Headmistress, the Ministry of Magic put Umbridge in charge instead, and there was nothing Severus could do about it.

On her first day with this new authority, Umbridge requested Veritaserum from Severus to get information out of Potter. And although he would have enjoyed being a fly on the wall during the interrogation, he knew that Harry must not be made to reveal his many secrets. So Severus gave Umbridge fake Veritaserum, and after a pleasant afternoon tea with Potter which should have had him spilling his guts to her, she came up empty-handed, but none the wiser about Severus.

As much as the Weasley twins usually annoyed Severus with their antics, he was actually quite impressed to see the homemade fireworks display that kept Umbridge and Filch busy for an entire afternoon. He made a mental note not to torment them in class as long as they kept up the good work creating mayhem in the corridors.

Severus had been attempting to teach Potter Occlumency since Christmas break, and he continued with limited success even in Dumbledore's absence. As usual, at the beginning of each lesson, he removed a few of his most private memories to the Pensieve before they began. But when Severus was called away to help Umbridge get Montague out of a toilet on the fourth floor during the next lesson, he never dreamed he would return to his office to find Potter invading the memories he had left in the Pensieve. He was so enraged that he threw Potter out of his office and told him never to return. He knew that was not what Dumbledore would want, however. It was of the utmost importance that Harry learned to keep the Dark Lord out of his mind. But Severus felt, after that humiliating episode, that he could no longer teach Harry anything one on one. It would be bad enough suffering through Potions class with him for the rest of the year.

He had to do something, though, because Dumbledore wouldn't want him to give up. Perhaps he could ask Sienna for help. His opportunity came on Friday evening after dinner. Severus was leaving the Great Hall when Sienna walked up beside him. She looked over her shoulder to be sure Umbridge was nowhere around.

"You know, now that Professor Dumbledore is gone, I have no one to talk with on Friday nights."

Severus looked down at her. He knew where this was leading. He was still in such a bad mood from what Potter had done that he didn't want to risk taking it out on the only friend he had left at Hogwarts. But Sienna did have an uncanny way of lifting his spirits.

She continued, "Do you think you could suffer through the constant chattering of a feeble-minded teenage girl?"

"No," he replied, raising his eyebrows, "but I could listen to you."

Sienna grinned broadly as they made their way down to his office.

She told him of her encounter with the Weasleys' fireworks, how she was doing in all of her classes, and what little she knew about Dumbledore's Army. "I think they kept me in the dark about it because I spend so much time with you. They thought I might tell you, or something."

"Would you have told me?"

"No in fact, I would have been glad to be part of it. You yourself said that you didn't want me to be an easy target for the Death Eaters."

Severus couldn't believe his ears. He cocked his head slightly and narrowed his eyes. "You mean you would have gone behind my back and not said a word?"

"Oh, come on, Severus. We NEED to learn to defend ourselves. Especially Harry. Look what he's already been through."

Severus started to brood. It must have shown on his face.

Sienna reached in her back pack and pulled out a bar of dark chocolate. She broke it in half and handed him some. "Here, it'll make you feel better."

Severus graciously took it and had a small bite. Silence followed for a few moments as they both consumed some of the delectably bittersweet bar.

"Why do you hate him so much?"

There was an even longer silence between chocolate bites as Severus weighed the pros and cons of telling Sienna about his relationship with Harry's father and the

Marauders. Those particular stories he had left out of their Christmas conversations. Finally, Severus decided he could fill her in somewhat but leave out the gory details.

"His father was my arch enemy in school here. He and his mates were arrogant fools who found pleasure in torturing me just because I existed. From the moment I saw Potter, I felt like his father had come back to haunt me, they look so much alike. I had hoped he would turn out more like his mother, Lily, but he seems to be just as arrogant as James."

"Lily? Lily Evans was Harry's mother?"

"Yes," Severus was a bit surprised that she knew the name.

"You went to school with her."

"Yes, but how did you--"

"Remember after OWL's last year?"

"That's right." Severus was relieved. He thought Sienna could read his mind. "The wizard who tested you on Potions compared you with her. I remember now."

"You think Harry is arrogant?"

Severus became indignant. "Don't you?"

"No, not really." Sienna looked at Severus in a very curious fashion. "He looks a bit unsure of himself to me. Sometimes he tries to overcompensate for that insecurity. But he cares deeply for his friends, and I believe he would give his life to save them if they were ever in danger. Does that sound arrogant to you?"

Severus pushed the papers around on his desk. Of course he had seen Harry act heroically on several occasions. And the only time he had seen Harry try to hex someone he had been duly provoked. But he was a reckless rule breaker, just like James. If he wasn't careful he'd get himself killed, along with the people who loved him *just like James!*

"There's a side to him that you don't see," continued Sienna when Severus didn't reply to her question.

"What do you mean?" Severus was curious, but skeptical.

"Well, I don't know what happened during your Occlumency lesson last night, but he's felt really horrible ever since."

Severus became very alarmed. "What did he say?"

"Nothing. I was in the library looking for a book I needed for an essay in Transfiguration when I overheard him telling Ron and Hermione that you said he didn't need any more lessons."

"That's all?"

"He said you figured since he had the basics down he didn't need to come back. When Hermione pressed for more, he told her to drop it."

Severus was relieved. At least Potter wasn't talking. James would have had it all over the school, not caring about the consequences.

"How do you know he feels horrible?"

"I--" Sienna suddenly looked worried about something. "I can just tell. He feels guilty, distressed, disgusted... He hasn't been the same person. It's like his confidence is shaken. With Dumbledore gone and the D.A. discovered, I can understand why."

Severus became very quiet and thoughtful. Why had Sienna looked worried? There was something she wasn't telling him, but he didn't dare use Legilimency on her. That reminded him of what he wanted to ask her. "Sienna," he began trepidatiously, "I'm not at liberty to tell you what happened during the Occlumency lesson, but Potter still needs help, and he won't be getting it from me. Do you think you could give him a few pointers? Professor Dumbledore said you were a natural."

"Oh, so that's why you haven't tried it on me since Christmas! He told you about my lesson."

"I wouldn't have tried anyway," Severus said with a touch of resentment in his voice.

"Did you use Legilimency on me before then?" Her eyes narrowed.

He felt the truth would be the best course of action. He had a feeling she would know if he was lying. "Yes, twice."

"But you didn't see anything, did you?"

"No." Severus met her gaze. He felt relieved to see that she seemed more curious than angry.

"I remember that same strange sensation, but because my mind was concentrating on the present moment, you couldn't pull anything up."

"Yes, you must clear your mind and concentrate on something in particular. You can actually communicate nonverbally with someone if you learn to bring up the memories that you *want* them to see."

"Fascinating. Perhaps we can try it sometime."

Severus sighed with relief. She didn't seem angry with him about that incident anymore, thank goodness. "Back to Potter. Do you think you can help him?"

"Me? I'm afraid he wouldn't listen to me."

"Why not?" Severus felt personally offended by that statement, as if Potter had insulted him instead of Sienna.

"I've overheard them talking about me. They all think I'm *mental* because I hang out with *you* so much. Hermione tries to defend me sometimes, but her pleas fall on deaf ears. I'm afraid your hatred for Harry is mutual."

Severus shook his head. "He's an arrogant fool, just like his father."

Sienna's face grew sad. "It's not healthy to hate like that. Holding grudges for so long... It's such a waste of energy. Can't you let it go?"

"Every time I try, he does something dreadful, like yesterday, to add fuel to the fire."

"What did he do that could possibly be that bad?"

"Never mind," Severus became irritated with himself for saying too much. "I think it's time you leave. We don't want Umbridge finding you down here."

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O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. testing weeks had finally arrived, so Severus' class load lightened a bit. Since Sienna was a sixth year, she still came to class, and although Severus told her she could forgo her lab assistant duties to study for finals, she still usually ended up hanging around and chatting with him for at least half an hour or so. And lately, she had even taken to studying in his office more often than McGonagall's.

Severus was not looking forward to summer break. Two months without Sienna would drag on like two years. But he knew deep down that it was just as well that they spend some time apart. He had grown way too attached to her and didn't need the distraction in the difficult times ahead. No one knew what was going to happen in the coming months. He might not live to see her graduate. Every time the Dark Mark burned and he was compelled to go to Voldemort's side, he knew he was taking a chance. But to not show up would mean almost certain death.

Then there was Sienna's vision. As mad as she had gotten at him for seeing it, he was glad he had. It gave him a ray of hope to hold on to. He saw himself happy and in love. He had felt love before, but the true happiness and contentment within the vision had so far eluded him in this life. Lily was right. He needed that vision of the future to get him through the present.

Severus was lying in bed reading himself to sleep on Wednesday night, the second week of O.W.L.s, when he heard a frantic pounding at the door. He bounded out of bed and threw on his bathrobe as he flicked his wand at the door. It swung open to reveal a tiny and very upset Professor Flitwick, similarly dressed.

"Umbridge is at it again!" he spewed angrily. "She and her cohorts from the Ministry tried to attack Hagrid!"

"Attack HAGRID?!" Severus became very alarmed. He had always gotten along with Hagrid. Hagrid was one of the kindest people he knew and one of the few friends he had made during his first year as a student here. He had learned more about magical creatures from hanging around with Hagrid than he had ever learned from the Care of Magical Creatures teacher. He remembered being quite pleased when Dumbledore announced that Hagrid would be taking over the position.

"Something about being reasonable and coming quietly."

"Where is he now?"

"Ran off, left the castle grounds. He could be anywhere by now. He put up a good fight, though, knocked several of 'em out cold."

Severus felt a bit of relief. At least they couldn't send him to Azkaban on some trumped up charge as they had done once before when the Chamber of Secrets had been opened. No doubt Hagrid would seek out Dumbledore. Severus made a mental note to send Dumbledore a message as soon as he could.

"But that's not the worst of it," continued Flitwick. "Come with me, quickly."

Severus put on his slippers and tied his bath robe more securely. They headed down the hall. He was really worried at this point. He wouldn't put anything past that Umbridge woman.

"When Minerva tried to stop them, all four of them sent stunners at her hit her right in the chest!"

"Where is she now?"

"Out here," Flitwick walked ahead toward the huge oak doors that led outside.

Severus followed Flitwick out and onto the grounds as several teachers gathered around the fallen Professor McGonagall. They all talked at once as they tried to describe to him what had happened. Umbridge and her cohorts, looking worse for wear, came marching up from Hagrid's cabin. She glanced at Professor McGonagall on the ground and a stiff simpering smile slithered across her face.

"Serves her right for meddling in official Ministry business. I may have to press charges... if she recovers."

The teachers were incensed. Professors Sprout and Flitwick yelled, "OUTRAGEOUS!" and "She should press charges against YOU!" But Severus remained silent. He knew arguing with her was pointless. The best course of action was to lay low and undermine her in secret, something he was good at. He had, after all, had years of practice.

Umbridge and the other officials marched back up to the castle with an air of triumph. Severus levitated Professor McGonagall up the lawn and into the castle. With navigational help from Sprout and Flitwick, the three of them maneuvered her up the stairs to the hospital wing.

Severus didn't get much sleep that night. He spent part of it brewing Madam Pomfrey a potion to give to Minerva, and the rest of the night pacing in the hospital ward while he waited for it to start working. When four a.m. arrived and she had shown no sign of improvement, he and Madam Pomfrey agreed that St. Mungo's would be the better place for her.

He sent word to St. Mungo's via his silver doe Patronus, knowing full well that Umbridge couldn't stop or censor that once he sent it on its mission. He then woke Professor Flitwick at five a.m. and they levitated her out of the castle and over to Hogsmeade Station where the St. Mungo's people met them. He and Flitwick looked down at the sleeping McGonagall. Flitwick patted her hand. "It'll be alright, Minerva."

Sienna had given Severus a couple of books to read about Hands on Healing, but he had had so much going on throughout the year, he hadn't gotten to read much. What he had managed to learn however, he attempted to put into practice as he gently placed his hand on her chest where the four stunners had hit her. He closed his eyes and imagined that spot back to good health. As he concentrated deeply, he felt a surge of energy flow from his hand to her chest, and then he gazed down at her. For just a moment, he thought he saw a faint smile flicker across Minerva's face, but she didn't open her eyes. He looked up at the three St. Mungo's emergency staff. "Take good care of her," Severus said in earnest. "We need her back as soon as she's able."

"She'll be fine, sir," replied the head attendant. "We'll have her back in no time."

In a flash they were gone. Severus and Flitwick walked slowly and with heavy hearts back down the path to the school.

"What a night, eh?" commented Flitwick.

Severus shook his head. "I'm afraid it's going to get worse before it gets better."

## Into the Forest Forbidden

Severus is forced to pursue Harry and his friends into the Forbidden Forest after they escape from Umbridge's office.

Disclaimer: This chapter contains dialogue copied word for word from "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix," by the brilliant J. K. Rowling. To stay true to canon, I felt it necessary to do so. All direct quotes appear in italics.

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## Chapter 11

"Into the Forest Forbidden,

With So Many Secrets Hidden"

The following afternoon, Severus was sitting in his office listening to Sienna describe her plans for the summer holiday when Draco Malfoy came bursting in, all out of breath and very excited.

"Professor Snape!" He shot a quick glance at Sienna. "Oh, sorry if I interrupted anything," he said with a smirk.

"What is it, Draco?" Severus was obviously irritated at the rude interruption.

"Umbridge needs to see you in her office right away. She caught Potter and Granger trying to talk to someone in her fireplace!"

Severus shook his head. "When will that boy ever learn?" he asked no one in particular as he bolted out the door behind Draco. "Lock up when you're finished, will you?" he called over his shoulder to Sienna.

"Right," her voice floated out the door behind them.

"You sure do spend a lot of time with her, Professor. Is there something going on with you two?"

Anger began to rise in Severus, but he decided that the less he made of the question, the better. "She's my assistant. That is *all*."

"Then why is she always in your office? She didn't look like she was working on anything just now."

"It's none of your business, Draco, but if you must know, she studies in my office sometimes." Severus was becoming more annoyed. "She studies in Professor McGonagall's office sometimes, too. Would that make you think that she had something *going on* with Professor McGonagall?"

"No, of course not." Draco looked embarrassed as they marched up the stairs. "It's just that the two of you always seem to be together. Millicent Bulstrode told me about how you two carried on during Christmas break. I saw you coming out of Honeydukes with her on Valentine's Weekend. And you'd think she's a Slytherin the way she's always down here. I'm not the only one who suspects something, sir."

Severus could barely contain his irritation. "It just so happens that because she is older and more mature, she can carry on an intelligent conversation for more than two minutes which is more than I can say for you and your Neanderthal friends."

"Hey, watch who you're calling Neanderthal! My dad wouldn't like that very much."

"I'm not afraid of your father," sneered Severus, turning to face Draco. His menacing gaze made Draco cower slightly.

"Maybe you should be," Draco tried to bolster himself under Severus' icy stare. "He's got something very special going on sometime in the next couple of days. He's about to make You-Know-Who very happy."

Severus' eyes grew wide with fear. "Quiet, you little fool, someone might hear you. Besides," he lied, "don't you think I already know about that?"

"All right, all right, keep your knickers on," stammered Draco. "I was just starting to worry that you might let your guard down. Kaolin might be a Dumbledore spy, you know. Did you ever think about that?"

"Of course I've considered that. I know I can trust her."

"You left her *alone* in your office."

"I would know if there was anything *anything* out of place when I got back. Besides, I keep items of any real... significance in my quarters," he sneered.

They were almost to Umbridge's office. "Enough of this nonsense," Severus insisted. "If you could quell these ridiculous rumors for me, Draco, I would be most grateful."

"Sure, Professor." Draco seemed amused.

He entered Umbridge's office, followed closely by Severus. What met Severus' eye when he entered the room would have seemed quite comical under different circumstances. Potter was standing in front of the fireplace, looking guilty and crestfallen. Warrington, a Slytherin thug and one of Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad, had Ron Weasley in a half nelson. Neville Longbottom's face had turned a delicate shade of purple thanks to Crabbe's iron grip around his neck. Granger was making feeble attempts to throw Millicent Bulstrode off her. Ginny Weasley's footwork was admirable, but still didn't help to deter the sixth-year girl who had both of her upper arms in a tight grip. Luna Lovegood was the only one standing there looking calm and serene. Did she realize that to struggle was to waste energy? Severus wasn't sure about her. Sometimes she hinted at brilliance. But usually she just seemed clueless. Severus still had to stifle a laugh. "You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" he inquired, trying to look as completely indifferent as possible.

"Ah, Professor Snape," said Umbridge, smiling widely and standing up again. "Yes, I would like another bottle of Veritaserum, as quick as you can, please."

"You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter," he lied, surveying her coolly. "Surely you did not use it all? I told you that three drops would be sufficient."

Umbridge flushed. Severus knew that she not only couldn't brew her own, she wouldn't know what to look for if she searched his private stores herself.

"You can make some more, can't you?" She said, her voice becoming more sweetly girlish as it always did when she was furious.

"Certainly," said Severus, trying not to smile too much. He was going to savor every syllable of his next sentence. "It takes a full moon cycle to mature, so I should have it ready for you in about a month."

"A month?" squawked Umbridge, swelling toadishly. "A month? But I need it this evening, Snape! I have just found Potter using my fire to communicate with a person or persons unknown!"

"Really?" said Severus as a thought came to him. Potter had been so easy to read during Occlumency lessons. Perhaps... He looked around at Potter, who was staring directly into his eyes. "Well, it doesn't surprise me. Potter has never shown much inclination to follow school rules."

Just as Severus suspected, Potter didn't look away. *Legilimens*, he thought. Images began to float to the surface... the Dark Lord... a man on the floor in the shadows.

"I wish to interrogate him!" repeated Umbridge angrily, and Severus had to break his link with Potter to look at her instead. "I wish you to provide me with a potion that will force him to tell me the truth!"

"I have already told you," said Severus smoothly, trying not to lose his temper with this most unreasonable and idiotic woman, "that I have no further stocks of Veritaserum. Unless you wish to poison Potter and I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy with you if you did. I cannot help you. The only trouble is that most venoms act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling..."

Severus looked quickly back at Potter, who stared at him with desperate eyes. *Legilimens...* "*Crucio!*" he heard the Dark Lord's voice ring out. The shadowy figure on the floor lifted his head and screamed in pain. Severus could see it was Sirius Black. And although he would have almost enjoyed watching Voldemort torture Black after all he had put Severus through, he also knew that this was exactly what Dumbledore had been trying to prevent. He knew it might be a trick, a trap. But he would have to get away from Umbridge before he could find out for sure.

"You are on probation!" shrieked Umbridge. Severus raised his eyebrows at this, but it didn't really surprise him. "You are being deliberately unhelpful! I expected better; Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you! Now get out of my office!"

Relieved that he could get off so quickly, Severus bowed with mock gratitude and turned on his heel towards the door.

"He's got Padfoot!" shouted Potter suddenly. "He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden!"

Severus turned back to Potter. What on earth had he blurted that out for? Couldn't he tell when the spell was used on him? Couldn't he feel its effects like Sienna could, like he could when the Dark Lord used it on him? Potter was about to blow everything. Severus knew his only hope was to play dumb.

"Padfoot?" cried Professor Umbridge, looking eagerly from Potter to Severus. "What is Padfoot? Where what is hidden?" What does he mean, Snape?"

"I have no idea," he replied, keeping his voice steady and cool. "Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage. And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little, if Longbottom suffocates it will mean a lot of tedious paperwork, and I am afraid I shall have to mention it on your reference if ever you apply for a job."

Severus left the room, closing the door behind him with a snap and a sigh of relief. He walked as fast as he could back to his office without looking alarmed. Sienna was gone, thank goodness. He didn't have time to deal with her questions at this point. He closed the door and locked it, putting a Muffliato spell on it for good measure.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Severus lifted his wand in the air, and the silver doe emerged triumphantly from its tip. "Go to Headquarters and find out if Sirius Black is still there and safe. Come back with your answer. Talk *only* to Sirius. Take no one else's word for it. I want to know that you have seen him." As the doe reared up and started across the room, he added, "And tell him to stay there!" It disappeared through the stone wall. Severus knew it would arrive in London at the speed of light. He would have his answer in a few moments.

Severus busied himself by pacing the floor and poking the fire. Even in the spring, it was so cold down in the Slytherin dungeon that he still needed the house-elves to keep the fire going. Finally, the doe Patronus returned. The message was conveyed as if he was hearing a memory of the conversation Sirius had had with the Patronus. Good, Black was safe at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and had no plans to leave. The Patronus dissolved into thin air and Severus sat down in his chair as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

This was perfect. Umbridge would keep Potter detained so he couldn't do anything *stupid*, like trying to rescue Sirius. Maybe tonight, finally, Severus could get a good night's sleep...*NOT!*

Someone was pounding on his office door. *Merlin's Beard! What now?!* He pointed his wand at the door. It swung open to reveal Malfoy moaning about something, but Severus couldn't understand him very well because his face was covered with flapping bat wings.

"*Chiroptera Removo*," Severus said casually with another flick of his wand to return Malfoy's face to normal.

"That wretched little Weasley girl put a Bat Bogey Hex on me!"

"Obviously."

"They got away!!"

Severus jumped up, almost knocking over his chair. "Where did they go?"

"Granger said something about a weapon in the Forbidden Forest. Said they'd been working on it for Dumbledore. She and Potter led Professor Umbridge into the forest. My guess is that's where the rest of them went, too."

Severus' mind was racing. He and Malfoy ran upstairs and checked on the others. He took the impediment jinx off Crabbe. The rest didn't seem the worse for wear.

"Go back to your dormitories, all of you. I'll go look for them in the forest. You can't come. It's much too dangerous."

Malfoy looked disappointed, but a bit relieved at the same time. He didn't want to miss out on anything, but then again, the Forbidden Forest had never been one of his favorite destinations.

What in the world was Potter up to? Did he know what Hagrid had been doing all year and why he always looked so badly beaten up? Could they have been working on something that Dumbledore didn't want him to know about? No...Dumbledore wouldn't keep something like that from him. Dumbledore would have asked him to help, too. This must be only Hagrid's doing. But now, Hagrid was gone. Perhaps he had asked Potter to continue working on it in his absence. *Well, I will soon find out*, Severus thought as he waded into the undergrowth, following the path they had made before him.

After about 20 minutes, even his wandlight seemed to dim in the stifling darkness. Severus finally came to a clearing where just a bit of starlight managed to filter through the trees. He could see from the marks on the ground and the snapped and broken trees around the clearing that a great commotion had taken place here recently. He saw what appeared to be a wand split in two on the ground. As he reached down to pick it up, he heard a twig snap behind him. He stood slowly and turned to face about 20 centaurs, all with bows drawn and aimed right at him.

Severus' heart began to pound. He wasn't ready to die yet. There was too much left to do. He wanted his death to mean something. He took a deep breath and tried to calm his nerves. "I mean you no harm."

"Who are you, human?"

"I am Professor Severus Snape, the Potions master at Hogwarts."

There was a general murmuring among the centaurs.

"We have heard Hagrid speak highly of you."

"And I have heard Hagrid speak highly of you all." Severus figured it would be prudent to return the compliment.

"What need do you have to trespass in our forest, Severus Snape?"

"I came in search of the other humans who wandered in here earlier this evening." Severus chose his words carefully. "I know you feel that helping humans is beneath you, but you would be helping yourselves if you could enlighten me as to their whereabouts, for I could remove them from your midst so they would trouble you no longer."

"He speaks with wisdom," said Magorian to the others. "He means us no harm." They began to lower their bows.

"But the woman, she insulted us!" cried Bane.

"Yes," agreed Magorian, turning back to Severus. "You may not have the woman. She is OURS!"

"She must PAY for what she said and did," hollered Bane, becoming even more agitated. The others all started getting restless again. Some even raised their bows towards Severus.

"The woman doesn't concern me," Severus said hastily. "She's an ignorant fool, who does not understand or appreciate the beauty and wisdom of your people. Do what you wish with her."

With this comment, the Centaurs relaxed their arms and lowered their bows. Severus closed his eyes and gave an inner thank you to the powers that be, then continued cautiously. "But I am concerned about the children, the foals that were with her. Do you have them as well?"

"No," replied Magorian, "We do not harm foals."

"Do you by any chance know where they went?"

"Why should we help you, human?" Bane had stepped forward in an attempt to intimidate Severus, but he stood his ground, holding his head high, but keeping his wand lowered.

"I am most concerned for the safety of the one called Harry Potter. I believe you know of him, of his significance?"

"Yes." One of the others stepped forward from the crowd. His posture was not threatening like Bane's. He looked at Magorian, as if to ask for permission to continue. Magorian nodded.

"I am called Ronan." Severus gave him a short but respectable bow. "I stayed behind as Hagrid's little brother, the giant known as Grawp, attacked us."

Severus looked surprised for a moment at the thought of a giant loose in the Forbidden Forest. So that was Hagrid's little secret.

"The two foals who came with the woman were left behind," Ronan continued. "One of them was the human known as Harry Potter. I wanted to be sure they did not trespass even deeper into our territory. I watched as others joined them."

"How many others?"

"Four."

Severus thought back to the scene in Umbridge's office. Longbottom, Lovegood, Ron and Ginny. Merlin's Beard Potter didn't stand a chance with that bunch against the Death Eaters. He felt a sense of panic begin to rise in his chest.

"The first two attracted Thestrals with the blood of Grawp on their clothing. Then each mounted one and flew away."

*Oh, God, what have they done?* thought Severus. "Did you by chance hear where they said they were going?" He held his breath, hoping his hunch was wrong.

"I heard Harry Potter tell his Thestral, 'Ministry of Magic, visitors' entrance, London.'"

Severus' heart was pounding somewhere in the general vicinity of his throat. He knew what he was about to do was risky, but he had to try. "Listen to me please, Magorian. I need to send a message. Every second counts. I know you don't like wizards or their magic in your midst, but if I take another twenty minutes to get out of here before I send this message, it could be too late. Potter and his friends are headed for a trap set by the Dark Lord He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." Severus looked from centaur to centaur in hopes of some approval or recognition. They all stared at him, stone faced. He raised his wand to summon his Patronus. Twenty bows pulled twenty arrows taught and ready.

"Magorian... *Please*."

There was no response.

Severus steeled his resolve. "Alright, do what you must with me, but let me send my message first. The sending of this message will not harm or alter anything in your forest. You have my word."

"You would sacrifice yourself in the hope of saving Harry Potter?"

Severus closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened them again to look Magorian in the eye. He almost couldn't believe what he was about to say.

"Yes."

There was another general murmur in the crowd. Several of them looked up through the treetops to the stars above. "Mars looks red tonight," said one.

"And Jupiter is in line with Neptune," said another.

"Yes, I see it, too," said Ronan. A few more agreed.

"Very well," concluded Magorian. "Send your message, Severus Snape, then leave us."

Severus nodded. "Thank you. I am forever in your debt." He bowed deeply to Magorian, then turned away from the centaurs as they began to disperse.

"*Expecto Patronum*." He gave his message to be taken to Headquarters. He watched as the glowing silver doe disappeared through the trees; then Severus headed out of

the forest and back to the castle. When the doe returned, he was back in his quarters, getting ready for bed. He wasn't surprised to find out that Sirius had insisted on going with the other Order members to rescue Harry, even though he had specifically asked him to stay behind to wait for Dumbledore. That chore was delegated to Kreacher, Sirius's vile house-elf.

Somehow, Severus knew, this was all going to end badly.

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Severus didn't sleep well that night. He kept tossing and turning with nightmares about those misfit children in Umbridge's office battling the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. Would any of them live to tell the tale?

When he awoke the next morning, he gratefully found out that they all had indeed returned, and although most of them ended up in the hospital wing, they would all make a full recovery. Many of the Death Eaters had been captured and were on their way to Azkaban, including Lucius Malfoy. *This is good*, thought Severus. Draco's ego was getting a bit out of hand. This would bring him down a peg or two. And although the Dark Lord had escaped, the world now knew without question that he was back with a vengeance. And best of all, so was Dumbledore!

The end of year feast was extravagant as always, but Severus didn't feel much like celebrating. He was relieved, of course, that all of the students had returned alive, but now WWII was about to go into full swing. Life was not going to be fun. He would definitely need to push his feelings for Sienna into the dark recesses of his mind until the war was over. Besides, she would graduate next year and get on with her life. He tried to convince himself that, in spite of her vision, he would probably never see her again after that anyway. Better get used to the idea sooner rather than later.

As the feast ended and throngs of people began to exit the Great Hall, Sienna caught up with Severus. He was heading down to his office. Dumbledore had asked him to research a particularly deadly potion which he thought he remembered seeing in the book Sienna had given him for Christmas. She wanted to help so he agreed to let her accompany him. He decided to wait until fall to push her away, so she could enjoy her summer break.

They looked up the potion in Severus' old book. It was one that they had not found the antidote to yet. They used the loose copies that they had made at Christmas and compared that potion to all of the antidotes that were not already matched up with something.

"Is this important?"

"Apparently. The Headmaster asked me to find the antidote as soon as possible."

"I can stay and help you, if you want. I don't have to take the train tomorrow. I can Apparate home later."

"Oh, I think I can handle it on my own," Severus said reluctantly. He would have liked her to stay, of course, but he knew he was only postponing the inevitable.

"Well, I can help you get started. Is there anything we need that I can go fetch for you?"

"Sienna..." Severus felt depressed. There were so many things he wanted to say. But he couldn't find the right words.

"You want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Is this about Sirius Black?"

"What about Sirius Black?"

"I know you went to school with him. He was Harry's godfather. He got killed last night. His own cousin killed him. Imagine that. But Harry blames you for some reason. Do you blame yourself?"

"Of course not," Severus became indignant. "I had nothing to do with it."

"Then why would Harry say that?"

Severus took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He stood lost in thought. Perhaps he was partly to blame. He looked deep into Sienna's sparkling blue-gray eyes. He remembered what Lily had said in the dream about all the love he would find there. He remembered finding that love in her eyes on Valentine's Day in his quarters. He wanted to get lost in them, get away from this bizarre life he found himself in.

"Remember last Christmas break when I had to run an errand for Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes."

"Well, I went to deliver a message to Potter. He was staying at Black's house. I saw Black while I was there, and we had a little... disagreement."

Sienna could tell that he really needed to think out loud about this. "A disagreement?"

"He was in hiding, as you know, because he had escaped from Azkaban. He was in there for a murder that he didn't commit."

"I remember reading about it. I've been overhearing snippets of conversations between Harry, Ron and Hermione that led me to believe that he was wrongly accused."

"Yes, well, after 12 years in Azkaban for something he didn't do, he had been forced to hole up in that dreadful house of his family's for the last two years. It's worse than my house on Spinner's End, and that's saying something."

Sienna chuckled. "I didn't know you had a house."

"It's nothing. Just an old rundown Muggle house in a dilapidated Muggle neighborhood. It belonged to my father."

Severus stopped. He wasn't sure how he could get across what happened without telling Sienna about the Order of the Phoenix. After a few moments of silence, he continued. "I goaded him into wanting to get out of the house, to risk being discovered," Severus said with a touch of guilt in his voice. But then he thought about school, about how Sirius was always pushing the envelope, breaking the rules, living on the edge.

"Harry didn't know his godfather like I did. I knew he would rather die defending his best friend's son than rot away in that awful house, listening to his mother's portrait scream vile obscenities at him. I just helped *him* realize it, that's all. So in a way, I did him a favor." Severus sat back in his chair. He really believed what he had just said. Somehow he knew that Black was happier, wherever he now was.

Severus genuinely felt better. How did Sienna know that this conversation was just what he needed? This was not the subject he had in mind when they started their conversation.

"It's getting late," Severus said to Sienna with a sad tone in his voice. "We had better say our goodbyes now. You know how chaotic it will be around here in the morning."

"Will you please write to me this summer?"

"Sorry, I don't do pen pals."

Sienna scowled. Then her look changed to concern. "I don't know what you'll be up to this summer, but do be careful, won't you?"

"That is always my intention." He hadn't told her the details about his jaunt into the Forbidden Forest just the night before.

"Just think, no Umbridge next year," she said with a broad smile.

"No," he replied with caution, "but things could get much worse, for different reasons."

"I guess you're right." Her smile was replaced with a look of concern. "I'd better go finish packing... Do I at least get a hug?"

"Of course." His austere surface melted as he opened his arms to her.

They wrapped themselves around each other. This felt much like that night over Christmas break in the Gryffindor Common Room, but this time there was no cognac to blame it on. He followed his heart just a little and brushed the top of her head with his lips. Her curls felt soft and smelled of lavender. He didn't want to let her go, and he could tell by her tight grasp that she felt the same way. They pulled apart just enough to meet each other's anxious gaze. He felt that same warm wave wash over him that he had felt on Valentine's Day, and she was giving him that same look of longing. Could he justify a kiss? The mere thought made his heart race. It took every ounce of willpower he had to resist. Instead, he settled for planting his lips firmly on her forehead, just above the bridge of her nose. When he pulled away, she looked a little disappointed, but not heartbroken.

They managed to pull themselves apart and say goodbye. He watched her go with a heavy heart. He knew that next year would be very, very different.

## Fire in the Hearth

*Chapter 12 of 31*

Severus must concoct a potion to save Dumbledore's life.

Disclaimer: This chapter contains dialogue copied word for word from "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," by the brilliant J. K. Rowling. To stay true to canon, I felt it necessary to do so. All direct quotes appear in italics.

This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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### Chapter 12

"Fire in the Hearth, Ice in the Veins,

Everything to Lose when Evil Reigns"

The students had all finally left Hogwarts for the summer. Severus knew he would also be heading back to his home at Spinner's End for the next two months, but first he needed to find the antidote to the ancient and obscure dark potion that Dumbledore had asked him to research. After a quiet dinner in the Great Hall with the few remaining staff members, Dumbledore accompanied him back to his office to survey his progress.

"It will take me at least a couple more days of testing to be sure. Hagrid gave me a few bowtruckles. If I can manage to keep them alive, he said I could try a few blast-ended skrewts."

"That's still a far cry from a human guinea pig, though," commented Dumbledore, "and the blast-ended skrewts could probably eat the dark potion like it was candy!"

"I'm sure I can talk him out of something more mammalian to test it on."

"Good. I have an errand to run which depends upon your findings, but I can postpone it for a few days," Dumbledore spoke casually, but there was an undertone of concern in his voice. "When I get back, we may be in need of the antidote."

"I'll work day and night, sir," Severus assured him.

"You should have let Sienna stay, Severus. She would have been a big help to you."

"Perhaps next time," said Severus, wondering if there would ever even *be* a next time.

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Late the next afternoon, Severus received an owl. The note attached was in a messy scribble, and he had trouble deciphering it.

*Dear Severus,*

Our mutual friend wants to see you. Ten o'clock tonight. The usual place.

See you there,

Your Favorite Rat.

Severus took the note and sent the bird on its way. He didn't need to reply, for he knew that to not show up meant almost certain death. He took the note to show Dumbledore.

"Severus," Dumbledore pleaded as he gently reached out to touch his arm, "be careful. Come back safely. I need you too much."



"I'll do my best, sir."

As Severus headed back to his office to prepare for his meeting with Lord Voldemort, he thought about what Dumbledore had just said. "I need you too much." No one had ever said "I need you" to Severus Snape. It felt good to be needed. Lord Voldemort used people and threw them away when their usefulness had been exhausted.

Dumbledore *needed* people. And if someday, they outlived their usefulness, he would still take care of them, so they could make him feel needed. What a wonderful way to show love. No two people could ever be so different as Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore. He dreaded the upcoming meeting even more.

A few hours later, Severus found himself in an upstairs bedroom in the old Riddle house. Even with summer in full swing, there was a fire in the fireplace. Nagini, the snake, was curled up like a gigantic dog, warming herself in the flickering light. A high-backed padded chintz chair sat facing the fire. As Severus walked silently up to the chair, the man seated in it stood up, his long, flowing black silk robes floating like smoke behind him. He turned to face Severus, who immediately knelt down before him.

"You wished to see me, your Lordship?"

"Yes, Severus. Get up, get up. I had not heard from you for over a month." Voldemort began to pace the room. "School's out now. I just wanted an update."

Severus noticed Wormtail standing in a dark corner of the room. He nodded nervously at Severus, who raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement.

"As I'm sure you've heard, half of my staff is in Azkaban. As a result, I shall be relying more heavily on those who have the intelligence to remain free."

"Yes, my Lord," Severus replied mechanically.

"This means that you may be asked to perform certain tasks that... up until now... you have conveniently been able to avoid."

"I am at your service, my Lord." Severus felt his armpits begin to perspire.

"Good. I've been thinking about what happened at the Ministry." There were several moments of silence. Severus held his breath. He knew from experience that this wasn't going to be good. "The only reason Harry Potter is still alive is because of that meddlesome Dumbledore. Once he is out of the way, Potter is easy pickings. I must say, he has nerve. He won't go down without a fight. But without Dumbledore's help, he doesn't stand a chance."

"No, sir."

"My goal is to see Dumbledore dead by the end of the coming school year."

"Do you wish me to do it?" Severus said hopefully. He knew it would be so easy to go back to the castle and fake Dumbledore's death. "He is old and too trusting. His reflexes have slowed, as I'm sure you noticed at the Ministry. I could go now, when no one is around, and finish him off for you."

"That is a tempting offer, my greasy friend, but I have something else in mind... A test, for an up and coming Death Eater."

"Oh?" said Severus, trying not to sound worried at the prospect of a new recruit.

"Yes. After the incident at the Ministry, Draco Malfoy voiced a desire to avenge his father's capture. He has graciously volunteered to finish off Dumbledore for me."

"Really?" Severus found it highly unlikely that Draco would "volunteer" for such a mission.

"Yes." Voldemort rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "He vowed to finish off Dumbledore, or *die trying*." He began to laugh maniacally.

Severus felt an icy chill go up his spine. Draco was not a killer. This was Voldemort's way of punishing Lucius for botching the Prophecy job at the Ministry.

"And if he fails?" asked Severus, a touch of foreboding in his voice.

"Well, you'll do it, of course," Voldemort said, very matter-of-factly. Wormtail snickered in his shadowy corner.

Severus suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He didn't think Draco could ever do such a thing. He was a bully, but like most bullies, he didn't really have the guts to do anything life-threatening. And Albus Dumbledore was the one person who Severus would trust with his own life. Until this last year with Sienna, Dumbledore had been his only real, unconditional friend. He could never kill him. He would rather sacrifice himself.

"What else can you tell me, Severus? Anything of significance happen this year that I don't already know about?" Before Severus could answer, he added, "Let me see for myself."

Severus knew what this meant; he was about to have his memories invaded. He pushed certain ones deep down and began to bring the insignificant ones to the surface.

"Legilimens," spoke Voldemort softly as his snake-like, red eyes bore into Severus'.

Images began to float to the surface. Sienna handed in a perfect potion... The Great Hall was filled for the Halloween feast... Umbridge gave Potter a lifetime ban on Quidditch... Sienna sat sorting potion ingredients in his office... Christmas Eve dinner at the table with the staff and Sienna's mother... The vicious argument with Sirius Black in a kitchen somewhere... Sienna turning in another perfect potion... Potter receiving a zero for his potion... This went on for several minutes until Voldemort was satisfied that no significant events had occurred that Severus forgot to mention.

"I see the same young woman popping up in many of your memories, Severus. Draco informed me that you have taken a fancy to someone. Could this be her?"

Severus felt a panic well up inside him. He knew he couldn't allow himself to let it show on his face, however, so did his utmost to appear nonchalant. "Draco is a typical teenager with overactive hormones and an imagination to match," he explained. "Dumbledore insisted that I take her on as my assistant. I feel the need to keep an eye on her as she works, so as a result, we end up spending a great deal of time together. But she is *only* a student, nothing more."

Voldemort pressed on. "Draco tells me she even studies in your office. Sounds pretty cozy to me."

"She took to studying in my office after Professor McGonagall was injured and had to be sent to St. Mungo's. Before that, she studied in her office." Severus wanted to strangle Draco with his bare hands at this point.

"And did I see you enjoying a meal with... her mother?"

Severus' heart moved up to the vicinity of his throat. "That was Christmas Eve at the castle. It was a small group, and by the time I got to the table, there was only one seat left. It would have been rude of me not to speak with her." He thought he was going to throw up. He could feel the nervous perspiration starting to build up on his forehead, and he was thankful for the semi-darkness in the room. He knew he had to pull himself together. He must never let Voldemort know he had feelings for Sienna.

"So, tell me Severus, is she any good at Potions?"

"Adequate," he lied.

"And as your assistant?"

"The chores she does are rather mundane and take only patience, but no real skill or talent."

"But she performs them to your satisfaction?"

"Yes." Severus was afraid he knew where this was leading, and he didn't like it.

"Good. When will she graduate?"

"At the end of this coming school year."

"Perfect. Keep an eye on her and continue to get close to her. After she graduates perhaps you can persuade her to continue on as your assistant when you take on your position for me full time."

"I don't need an assistant here, sir."

"SILENCE!! Did I ask for your opinion?"

"No, my Lord," Severus cowed slightly, bowing his head.

"If all goes as planned next year, my love-sick friend, you'll be needing an assistant."

After discussing several other plans, Severus was finally allowed to leave. He left the house, walking away from the structure so he could Disapparate, and found himself back in Hogsmeade. He started to shake from frayed nerves as he made his way down the path to the school. He needed to go check in with Dumbledore and tell him what had transpired.

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When Dumbledore returned to the dungeon office several days later, Severus was ready for him. He had tested his antidote on several roosters and a ferret, and luckily, they came away unscathed.

The cauldron over his office fire was bubbling. Dumbledore stood looking at the thick gold liquid. It didn't smell very appetizing. As the bubbles popped, a purple haze rose into the air. "Excellent, excellent," he said with a smile. "It may not be necessary." He turned to head out the door. "If I need you, I'll send for you."

"Very well." Severus nodded. As Dumbledore's footsteps echoed and faded down the hall, he ladled some of the potion into a large ceramic pitcher, so it could cool a bit before it was consumed.

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Several hours passed. Severus busied himself by putting away the many potion ingredients he had used to create the antidote and generally cleaned up after himself. But he felt a slight twinge of pain as he thought about Sienna. She would have gladly done all of this for him had she been allowed to stay.

Then it happened. The phoenix Patronus appeared through the stone wall. A feeble version of Dumbledore's voice emanated from the glowing image: "Come quickly... my office... Bring... antidote."

Severus lunged forward, grabbing the pitcher and mug, and ran out the door. The voice had sounded desperate. What had Dumbledore done to himself?

Screams of agony echoed through the halls and increased in volume as Severus drew closer to the gargoyle. He hollered the password from a distance so he could bound up the spiral staircase without breaking stride. Once inside, he surveyed the scene. The Sword of Gryffindor lay on Dumbledore's desk beside a curious ring with a black stone. The stone was cracked down the middle, but there was such a sinister evil energy emanating from it that Severus gasped as Dumbledore let out another wail. Severus turned and stared at him in disbelief. Had he actually been foolish enough to put the ring on? He soon had his answer. Severus watched in horror as his right ring finger began to smolder; then within two seconds, the entire hand burst into flames.

Severus snapped back into emergency mode. "Here!" He grabbed Dumbledore by the back of the head and pushed the cup to his quivering lips. "DRINK – QUICKLY!"

Dumbledore swallowed and sputtered as he moaned.

"Don't look at it, just *drink!*"

The smoldering effects were beginning to move up his arm. Dumbledore stopped drinking to take a breath. Then he screeched in pure agony.

"*DRINK!*" screamed Severus, whose emotional agony was about to match Dumbledore's physical pain. "You MUST finish it!" He tilted Dumbledore's head back and kept pouring the potion in. When the mug was finally drained, Severus turned hastily to the pitcher and refilled it. Then he grabbed Dumbledore's head again and started to feed him some more. "Here, for good measure. We must be sure we have stopped its progression."

Dumbledore nodded amidst a sob and began to drink again as Severus took a sideways glance at his hand. The flames had gone out. They seemed to have been extinguished from the inside. The smoldering continued on his hand, but had ceased to advance up past his elbow. The antidote worked – thank Merlin's beard!

He began to mutter incantations as he continued to force feed the potion to Dumbledore, who at this point was only semiconscious. But he somehow managed to finish the second mug of antidote with Severus' help. His every breath was released with a faint cry of pain. Severus had suffered the Cruciatus Curse many times, but he had a feeling that its effects would pale in comparison to what Dumbledore had just gone through. *After a moment or two, Dumbledore's eyelids fluttered and opened.*

"Why," said Severus, without preamble, "why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

Dumbledore grimaced.

"I... was a fool. Sorely tempted..."

"Tempted by what?" Severus felt outraged. He wondered if the old man had gone senile. *"It is a miracle you managed to return here! That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one hand for the time being--"*

Dumbledore raised his blackened, useless hand, and examined it with the expression of one being shown an interesting curio.

"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"

They discussed the extent of the damage and his somewhat shortened life expectancy. Then the conversation turned to Draco's morbid task. As Severus slowly realized that in the end he would be expected to kill his best friend, he began to feel sick again. But when presented with the alternatives of Greyback, Bellatrix, or a slow deterioration of his body from the curse, Severus understood that he would actually be doing Dumbledore one last favor.

It still was not something to look forward to.

*Dumbledore seemed satisfied.*

"Thank you, Severus..." He began to fall over from exhaustion. Severus jumped up and cradled Dumbledore's slumping body in his arms. He eased his dear friend down onto the floor, then got up and reached for a pillow off the elaborately carved arm chair behind the desk. He gently put it under Dumbledore's head.

"Now, Severus, if you could please go fetch some burn salve and a pain relief potion from the hospital wing, I would greatly appreciate it."

"I'll be right back." Severus jumped up off the floor and made his way out of the room. The castle was deserted. Even Madam Pomfrey had gone home for the summer. *What an eerie place this huge stone structure is with no one in it* he thought as he ran through the halls.

He reached the hospital ward and made a beeline for the storage closet. Madam Pomfrey had put a locking charm on the door since the house-elves were known to make off with some of the more entertaining supplies from time to time. He quickly figured out the counter charm and opened the door where he found an ample supply of what he was looking for. With all the candles and oil lamps in the castle, burns were pretty commonplace. And the painkiller potion was the most popular of all her remedies. He was not the only one who developed headaches. He figured he had caused his share over the years, at least as many as the students had given him.

Severus grabbed what he needed and took off at a run back to Dumbledore's office. His friend still lay on the floor, but he had gone into shock and was beginning to shiver. Severus knew he had to get Dumbledore to a bed and under some covers.

"Come on. Let's get you to your quarters. You need to rest somewhere more comfortable."

"I don't think I can get up at the moment."

"I'll help you. I'll levitate you if I have to." Severus knelt down beside Dumbledore and pulled his left arm over his shoulder, being careful not to touch the right arm. They struggled to their feet. Severus almost had to drag Dumbledore the length of his office to the door that led to his private quarters. In there, they passed a cozy sitting room with a fireplace, a well equipped private bath, and finally his bedroom where a large, soft, four poster bed awaited. Severus lay Dumbledore down gently and removed his shoes. Dumbledore felt as cold as ice. Severus covered him in a thick down comforter and then went back to the office for the pain and burn medicine. After administering those as best he could, he found a book that looked interesting from Dumbledore's extensive private library (*Bringing Down Dark Wizards Through the Centuries* by Jameson Muto Johansson) and pulled up a chair beside the bed. It was going to be another long night.

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Over the course of the next few days, Severus slowly nursed Dumbledore back to health. The pain in his hand began to subside, but it would never heal properly, and he would not have full use of it again. Dumbledore had also acquired several new internal aches and pains he had never experienced before. This worried Severus. He knew that the antidote had merely slowed down the effects of the ring. It was, after all, an antidote for a potion, not a curse. There could be subtle differences that the antidote wouldn't be able to stop. But there was no way to know for sure.

## Two Dreaded Tasks

*Chapter 13 of 31*

To keep her out of the Dark Lord's clutches, Severus must make Sienna believe that he hates her.

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize is from the Harry Potter book series by the brilliant J. K. Rowling. I have written this as a parallel to the last four installments of the series.

This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

As always, I'd like to extend my deepest thanks to my two wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for their diligent proof reading and suggestions. They really helped to improve my story.

Chapter 13

"Two Dreaded Tasks Lay Ahead,

A Love Severed, a Best Friend Dead"

The next day Severus spent the morning working on something to give Dumbledore the strength to continue as Headmaster for the coming year. Although he could come up with nothing to counter the deadly curse, he did succeed in finding something that he believed would slow down its advancement. Only time would tell. He ladled some of the potion into a large pitcher, grabbed a mug, and headed for Dumbledore's quarters.

By late afternoon Dumbledore was up and around; by the next morning he seemed to have a new lease on life.

"Well, I don't know what you put in this stuff," he said cheerfully, "but I feel like a million Galleons!"

Severus finally smiled. "Good, sir." But his smile was short-lived. "Oh, I forgot to mention that the Dark Lord noticed Sienna in my memories. With that, and the information he extracted from Draco, he has taken an interest in her. I will have to create a surplus of memories to feed to him that our relationship has changed for the worse. I don't want her involved in any of this."

"Nor do I. Thanks for the warning, by the way. I'm sure I'll get an earful at our weekly meetings if you start to treat her badly."

"If I succeed, by Christmas she'll find me as revolting as the rest of the Gryffindors do."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I doubt that. But I know of one way I can help put some distance between you two."

"Oh?" Severus would have given almost anything to make this particular task easier.

"Yes, why don't you plan to become our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this coming year? If you end up doing me in, you'll surely need to flee. Besides, the Potions position will be easier to fill since it's not cursed.

"Lovely idea. I can set straight all the misinformation the students were fed by Umbridge last year. They'll need rigorous training in defense if they are to survive the dark

times ahead... Although," he added thoughtfully, "the students who fought the Death Eaters did an amazing job considering their lack of training."

"You won't want to hear this, but Harry Potter was training them behind Umbridge's back. That's what the D.A. was all about."

"Sienna told me. He never ceases to amaze me," admitted Severus rather reluctantly. "Sienna insists there's a side to him that I never see."

"And she's right. But it's just as well."

Severus looked curiously at Dumbledore, waiting for him to make his point.

"The more hateful memories you have of Harry that you can feed to Voldemort, the better."

Their conversation turned to the mechanics of Severus as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and possible candidates for a Potions master replacement. Once a list of possibilities was compiled, Severus excused himself, reminding Dumbledore that he needed to return home to Spinner's End for the remainder of the summer.

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Spinner's End turned out to be a busy place, which greatly disappointed Severus. He could usually look forward to being alone for two months and found large crowds of people to be a bit of a drain. But Voldemort had decided that Severus needed the company and sent Wormtail to live with him for the rest of the summer. Severus had an anti-Apparition charm on the house so that he could screen his potential visitors through the door, but since Wormtail was an Animagus, he managed to squeeze in through a small hole in the utility room wall after changing himself into a rat. To Severus' anger and disgust, Wormtail had taken up residence and made himself at home in one of the spare bedrooms by the time Severus made it back to the house.

Then Bellatrix and Narcissa showed up. And, although Severus felt the visit another unwanted intrusion, he did learn a great deal in a short time. He learned that Draco was indeed saddled with the task of doing in Dumbledore. He learned beyond a doubt that many of the Death Eaters doubted him, and from this he could infer that the Dark Lord also didn't quite trust him, which is why he had been chosen to finish Dumbledore should Draco fail. The Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa sealed the deal. Severus would have to see to it that Dumbledore ended up dead, or he would die as a result. This was Voldemort's perfect plan. If Severus was loyal to him, he would be happy to see the plan through, or die trying. If not, Voldemort would be rid of Severus because he dared to break the vow. Either way, Voldemort would end up the winner.

So the die was cast. Dumbledore would be dead by the end of the school year, and most likely at Severus' hand. He knew Dumbledore would never let him sacrifice himself for Dumbledore's sake. But Severus didn't think he could live with himself once the deed was done. He would have to do some real soul-searching.

There was also Sienna. For her own safety, he would have to turn the warmth he felt for her to ice. He would have to make her hate him, and he knew that in the end he would hate himself for doing it. She could have been such a comfort to him this year, and he was going to need some comforting. But no, he would have to face the horrors of this year alone.

So it was with a heavy heart that Severus returned to Hogwarts at the end of August. He barely spoke to anyone, and his temper was usually so short that he would almost bite their heads off. He finally had the job he had wanted for so many years, and he couldn't even enjoy it.

Severus moved his classroom up to the Defense Against the Dark Arts space, but his mood was so bleak he decided to keep the atmosphere macabre and dungeon-like to reflect it. It was as dark and depressing as the inside of his mind. But he had lived through worse times, and he would make it through this too, somehow.

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When the first day of classes arrived, Severus was amused to find that the students seemed even more afraid of him as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher than they had as the Potions master. It was the one pleasant thought in his mind the entire first week.

When Sienna's class came in, he gave the same speech he had given to all the other classes. But this time he added a bit more. "I know you studied nonverbal spells last year under Umbridge. And although I'm sure, thanks to her expert tutelage, you will excel in the written portion of your N.E.W.T.s, you will also, thanks to her, fail dismally in the practical application. So, before we make our way to wandless defensive spells, we will need to review and learn to apply nonverbal spells defensively."

There were a few groans and some very apprehensive looks from certain members of the class.

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Would you prefer to get a Troll on your N.E.W.T.s or worse..." he growled as he turned on his heels, his black cloak swirling in a circle as it wrapped itself around his long legs, "...find yourself helplessly lacking in skill when faced with a Death Eater?" He could see that this particular scenario hit home with everyone, especially after the stories had circulated about what happened to Potter and his friends at the Ministry last spring. A slight smirk spread across Severus' sallow face.

"I see that the importance of what I will attempt to teach you is finally sinking into your rather dense cranial protective layers..."

"Why can't he just say 'thick skulls'?" whispered Lorenzo Lotus to one of his classmates.

Severus whipped around again with clenched teeth and fire in his eyes. "I will need a *volunteer*," he sneered. "Lotus front and center you will need your wand."

Lorenzo Lotus cursed under his breath as he rose slowly from his chair, his wand at the ready. He cautiously made his way up to the front of the class, eyeing Severus suspiciously as he went. The class held its collective breath and watched. They knew he was about to be made an example of in true Snape fashion.

"I am assuming that you at least remember the theory behind nonverbal spells and their uses from the dribble that Professor Umbridge fed you last year?"

"Yes, sir," Lorenzo answered shakily.

"Very well," Severus said matter-of-factly with an evil glint in his eyes. "On the count of three you will attempt to disarm me with a nonverbal defensive spell. *Defensive only*."

Lorenzo stood shaking with his wand aimed at Severus from across the front of the room. He nodded nervously. He was definitely not ready for this.

"One, two, three..."

A bright red light shot out of Severus' wand and hit Lorenzo's hand. His wand went flying as he staggered backwards. Severus flicked his wand again and Lorenzo's came quickly into his outstretched hand. He sighed, shaking his head in frustration, and walked towards Lorenzo with his cloak billowing behind him.

"Did you even try, Lotus?" Severus asked as he returned the boy's wand. Before Lorenzo could answer, Severus continued in a quiet, sarcastic tone. "I suppose, if your Potions performance is any indication, the art of concentration escapes you." He turned to face the rest of the class with narrowed eyes as he surveyed their nervous faces. Most of them were staring at their books or shoes. Severus could almost hear the prayers that they not get picked. The only person daring to meet his gaze was, of course, Sienna. He had seen her the night before in the Great Hall at the start of term feast. When she had caught his eye, he nodded but did his best to avoid her and left for his quarters as soon as he could gracefully excuse himself from the table.

So here she was in class obviously ready, willing and able. Should he pick her? Would she do it right? Of course she would. If anyone could concentrate it was her. But he couldn't let her get the best of him, not in front of the whole class. He figured he may as well start to alienate her from day one. This was as good a time as any.

"Miss Kaolin."

She beamed at him, her eyes sparkling like moonlight on water. This was going to hurt him more than it did her. Wand at the ready, she silently walked up to the front of the room.

"Miss Kaolin, you have not spent your summer in a fog, I trust?"

"No, sir," she replied.

"Very well. Let's hope your performance exceeds that of Lotus. Of course..." he shot an impatient glance towards Lorenzo, "... that wouldn't take much."

He looked back into Sienna's eyes, hardening his heart for what he was about to do.

"One, two..." Severus didn't say three. Instead, he threw a defensive spell at her so fast and so hard that she flew against the wall as her wand spun into the air. A look of horror and surprise splashed across her face. He had succeeded in embarrassing her in front of the class. He knew he had not fought fair, but what mattered to him most was that he had really teed her off. *Perfect.*

But Severus did not expect Sienna's next move. She held out her hand and, without saying a word, she knitted her brow in deep concentration. Her wand began to move back towards her outstretched hand even before it hit the floor. It almost reached her by the time Severus realized what she was doing and flicked his wand to get it to change direction and come back towards him. When she realized what he was doing, she closed her eyes tightly and the wand started to move back towards her. The class watched in silent fascination as the wand went back and forth between the two of them, undecided as to its destination.

Finally, Severus uttered the spell out loud, giving him the extra power he needed to overpower her wandless nonverbal spell. "*Accio wand!*" he barked with stubborn determination. The class let out a collective sigh, obviously disappointed in the outcome.

"I would have expected better of you, Miss Kaolin," he spoke curtly as he walked over and handed her the wand.

"You didn't fight fair, *sir*," she replied, obviously perturbed.

"Do you think the Death Eaters will fight fair?" he retorted with a sneer as he turned abruptly to address the class. "You must be ready for *anything!* ANY situation! Don't *ever* expect a Death Eater to fight fair." He glanced from face to face, a look of exasperation mixed with despair on his own. "They are cruel, cunning, and heartless. They will cut you down, *piece by nasty little piece*, and take bets as to how long you will last." His eyes bored into each and every one of them as they shrank in fear. He wished he could feed the technique to them intravenously, or make them all drink a potion that would let it sink in. He wondered how many of them would not survive this war. "These techniques could save your life if you take the time to learn them well. But they are *not easy*. So don't expect this class to be."

Sienna made her way back to her desk. She watched Severus as he gave his speech, then took out some parchment and the Defense Against the Dark Arts book for note taking. The entire class was given an essay assignment on the advantages of non-verbal spells in combat situations, due the following Friday.

When class was over and the bell rang, everyone left except Sienna. She made her way slowly up to the front of the room. Severus spotted her out of the corner of his eye and sat back in his chair. He tried to act impatient, even a bit annoyed, but inside he was dreading what would come. He had rehearsed his lines over and over, but that didn't make her responses any easier to hear.

"Have a good summer?" she asked casually.

"Delightful," he lied, "and you?"

"I went to the ashram for most of the summer. I really needed to recharge my spiritual batteries, be around people of like mind. It was wonderfully refreshing."

She was so cheery Severus began to feel nauseous. He looked through the piles of books and papers on his desk, trying to seem uninterested.

"I searched for you after the feast last night."

He didn't look up.

"I went to your office. I even went to your quarters. I know you were in there, but you wouldn't answer the door. I don't understand why you're trying to avoid me."

"Yes. Well, there are many things you don't understand, which became obvious in class today," he informed her with as much frost in his voice as he could summon.

"Oh, I thought I did pretty well, for someone *without* a wand!" said Sienna with a touch of annoyance in her voice.

He could feel her gaze, but he didn't meet it. She began to walk around the desk, no doubt in hopes of a hug. Severus stood with a sudden lurch and stepped back away from her.

"Severus, what's wrong?"

His eyes narrowed as they finally met hers, but he didn't answer.

"Why are you acting this way?" She tried to reach for his hand, but he recoiled again.

"I need to make something clear." Severus finally decided to say what had to be said and get it over with. "You will address me as Professor Snape or sir at all times. I don't care if we are alone on a deserted island, there will be no more first names."

Her look of pain reflected what was coming from his heart. But he could not afford to let it show.

"And another thing. There will be NO hugging, NO hand holding, NO touching of any kind! Do I make myself clear?"

"But..." She looked dumbfounded and crestfallen, perplexed and heartbroken, all at the same time. "Why? Why are you doing this?"

Severus took a deep breath. He had to keep going for her own good. "I regret that I let things get a bit out of hand last year. I should never have led you on like I did. If I gave you the wrong impression, I apologize." There, he had said it. He hoped it would be enough, but he was wrong. He should have known that she would never just walk away.

"*Wrong impression?* You're my friend. At least I thought you were. Was I wrong to think that?"

"Perhaps," Severus held his breath and searched her face for the same heartbreak he felt inside. But she suddenly became unreadable.

"Are you in need of a teacher's assistant this year, then?" she asked, stone-faced.

"Not this year. Besides," he added, hoping this would help focus her mind elsewhere, "you sit for N.E.W.T.s at the end of the year, so you'll have quite a lot to be getting on with."

Sienna's face turned to a scowl. "Is that what this is all about? You want me to focus on N.E.W.T.s?"

Severus remained silent for a moment. "I'm sure if you feel you have plenty of extra time, Professor Slughorn would benefit from your services," he finally forced himself to say, although the thought of her working for Slughorn turned his stomach.

Sienna's face screwed up as if she had just taken a swig of some foul-tasting medicine. "Professor Slughorn's a... well... I shouldn't judge or criticize. Let's just say I don't have much use for him or his Slug Club parties."

Severus finally chuckled. "You're not on the guest list, so you don't like him?"

Sienna glared at him. "First you humiliate me in front of the whole class, and now you *insult* me!"

Severus smirked. It almost felt like old times. "Insult you?" he asked innocently.

"I almost got sucked into his party on the train. He apparently got my name from Professor McGonagall because I did so well on my O.W.L.s. I couldn't care less about his parties. I'll probably spend the rest of the year trying to avoid them."

Her face turned serious and she took a step closer. This time, he didn't back away. "Why are you acting like this?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "What happened over the summer that you're not telling me?" Her eyes searched his. They were filled with so much love and compassion.

He felt that his heart was about to break. What could he tell her? Certainly not the truth. The less she knew about his situation, the better. His heart felt like it was made of lead. "My life has become more... complicated," he replied gravely. "Please don't ask me to explain further." There was a finality in his tone that made her understand that that was all she was going to get out of him.

"Not even one little hug?" she reached for his hand with hope in her eyes.

He balled his fists and began to shake. She was making this so very difficult for him. "NO!" he said sternly through clenched teeth. "In fact, if you do anything more than accidentally brush up against me in a crowded hallway, I shall put you in detention!"

She opened her mouth, Severus guessed, to assure him that it would be a good excuse to spend more time together, but he cut her off. "...with SLUGHORN!"

After a brief flash of sorrowful disappointment, Sienna's face became stony once again. She turned slowly and walked back to her desk to gather up her books. He knew that inside she must be crying, just as he was. But outside, she was inscrutable, just as he was trying to be.

"See you at dinner," she said, almost too calmly, and walked out of the room.

## Mask of Stone

*Chapter 14 of 31*

Severus decides to humiliate Sienna in class.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Harry Potter Book Series by the brilliant J. K. Rowling. It was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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### Chapter 14

"When One Wears a Mask of Stone,

One Must Face the World Alone"

Severus was truly amazed by Sienna's performance in class with the wandless nonverbal spell. He had been holding his wand and she had almost overpowered him anyway. She had quite a mastery for one so young. He wondered if Dumbledore had been coaching her the previous year. Her power was truly impressive, so he would have to be careful about using her as a guinea pig in class. He didn't want Lord Voldemort to see how powerful she was through his memories. He would have to find other ways to humiliate her.

When Friday came, she handed in her paper with the others. He put hers on the top of the stack, and then pushed them all so that they slid violently against a neighboring file cabinet. A precariously perched ink well teetered unnoticed and fell onto the stack of papers, and its abundant contents poured and splashed all over Sienna's nice, neat essay. She stayed calm, assuming she could siphon off the excess ink, but to her dismay, it didn't budge.

"Oh, dear," Severus commented softly when he noticed her struggle. "It must be wand-proof ink. Sorry." His lip curled ever so slightly.

She glared at him.

"I'm afraid you'll have to re-do it. I'll give you until the end of the day tomorrow."

"But it took me three days to do the research for that essay!"

"Then you'll know just where to look for the information again, won't you?" Severus smirked. He had talked himself into enjoying this. He was convinced that this torture would help to see her out of the hands of the Dark Lord. "It's either that or a zero."

She snatched her essay from the pile and stormed back to her desk. Her brooding didn't last long, however. She put on her stony face during his lecture and stayed that way throughout the rest of the class. He watched her leave in silence. The taunts were amusing in a way, but he really missed her company much more than he thought he would, and his heart sank as she left with the other students.

The next day she handed in the essay again. He was surprised at how historically accurate it was, how in-depth. Most students wouldn't have managed it in a week's time, much less a day.

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As the weeks turned into months, Severus found new ways to torture Sienna. She seemed determined not to let it bother her on the outside, but she definitely had changed her approach to him. He began to be concerned that he still had no real memory of them having a heated argument to feed to the Dark Lord. He had to get her riled up... but how to do it? He decided to use her as a guinea pig in class again and really fight dirty. He would make an example of her. They were about to move on to wandless spells. He would have to be very careful. He knew she would be a natural in this category.

When the day arrived for him to introduce wandless spells, Severus smiled a simpering fake smile as the class settled in. "Wands away," he said with a smirk. When the class groaned collectively, he reassured them, "No, I've not been taking lessons from Umbridge. We will be moving on now to wandless spells. Miss Kaolin, if you will assist me." She made her way up to the front of the room, leaving her wand behind. "Today I will demonstrate the necessity of learning wandless spells, a skill many of you will no doubt never master. I just hope you don't run into any Death Eaters in a cold dark alley some night."

Several of the students looked obviously shaken. They all seemed grateful that Severus had chosen Sienna. She was the only one who showed no fear of him. But she eyed his every move and considered his every word with suspicion. She had learned her lesson well last time.

"As you will notice, I *do* have a wand. You can bet the Death Eaters never travel without one. I showed you at the beginning of the term how easy it is to disarm your opponent. But if you learn to concentrate efficiently, you *may* be able to buy yourself enough time to escape." He surveyed the class. They were actually hanging on his every word. It was an exhilarating feeling.

Suddenly, Severus pivoted around on his heel and pointed his wand at Sienna. He had used a nonverbal spell on her. It should have made her stiffen and fall over on the floor. But the split second before he had pointed his wand, just as he was turning, she tightened her fists and closed her eyes. The spell he cast bounced off of her and hit one of the other students in the first row. He stiffened in his seat and fell over on the floor in a fetal position. The class took a deep breath, looking first at Sienna, then at Severus, then back at Sienna, as if they were at a Muggle tennis match.

Severus was completely taken by surprise. How did she know what he was about to do? In an instant, Sienna extended her hand towards him, and with eyes that were hawk-like, threw a fiery red light at Severus. He was suddenly staggering backwards, and his wand was flying swiftly into her outstretched hand.

The class began to cheer and clap. Sienna was breathing hard, as if she had just run a race. Her eyes were ablaze with the pride of triumph.

Severus was furious.

While Sienna's classmates distracted her with their cheers, he shot a wandless stunner charm at her that was powerful enough to knock her into the wall, but not strong enough to knock her out. As she hit the wall, his wand flew back into his own hand. Then, with a flick and a spell he uttered under his breath, a body binding curse sent her to the ground, unable to move or speak. The class looked disappointed again, but Sienna wasn't finished. She was still conscious. The binding curse only held her for a moment because she had used the wandless nonverbal counter curse without moving. But instead of standing up and drawing attention to herself, she stayed still on the ground, barely moving her hand to summon her own wand from among the books on her desk.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" she bellowed, with fire in her eyes, the instant her wand reached her hand. Severus was observing the class' reaction to their duel and had no idea that she had acquired her wand. He was feeling rather pleased with himself when the curse hit him. A look of outrage mixed with embarrassment crossed his face as he fell over onto the floor with a thud. His head was already throbbing. His blood was already boiling.

She flicked her wand towards him as she got up off the floor, bringing his wand effortlessly out of his hand and into hers. Then she walked up to him, staring unblinkingly through very narrow eyelids. Her look was of loathing. As angry as he was, he was relieved and grateful for her wrath. He finally had what he needed, a really bad memory to feed Lord Voldemort.

Sienna poked her wand into the side of his upturned shoulder. "I think you can see from our little demonstration how important wandless spells are, and how handy they can be in a pinch."

She gazed out over the students. They were all on their feet with their mouths open, looking almost as stunned as Severus. "I hope you also figured out that you should never take anything or *anyone*," she glanced down at Severus, "for granted." She walked over to his desk and laid his wand down. Then she walked calmly back to her desk and collected her books. The class watched in silent amazement as she casually strolled out of the room, releasing Severus from the binding spell with a nonverbal counter-curse just before she disappeared out the door.

Severus jumped to his feet. He was red with rage as he made his way to his desk and picked up his wand. He slowly tried to gather his self-control, then continued his teaching as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He assigned them all an essay due the very next day, knowing full well Sienna probably wouldn't talk to anyone to get the assignment.

At the beginning of the next class, however, he was annoyed to see her turn in her assignment anyway. He assumed one of the other Gryffindors must have told her. As the students were all packing up to leave, he called Sienna to his desk.

"I'm sure you can understand why I cannot allow you to turn my classroom into a stage for your personal performances," he said coldly, but with plenty of volume. She visibly stiffened, steeling herself for what must be coming. The rest of the class slowed their packing. They were obviously eavesdropping, and Severus wanted them all to hear. "I think a month's worth of detention, every Thursday evening after dinner should do it."

"And what shall you have me do?"

"You can sort potion ingredients for Professor Slughorn; go back to your old job. I'm sure he will find any number of fascinating tasks for you." Inside, Severus' stomach was turning somersaults at the thought of Sienna spending so much quality time with Slughorn. On the outside, he feigned indifference.

Instead of seething, she painted a very faint smile on her face. "Professor Slughorn. How charming." She raised an eyebrow. "If I play my cards right, I may even get a party invitation."

Severus' insides were tied in knots. He knew how she really felt about Slughorn's parties. Was this show for the class' benefit? With very mixed emotions, he watched her turn and walk back to her desk, gather her books and leave.

The next day Severus handed back the graded homework assignments. Sienna's had a "T" for "Troll" at the top. She had never received anything lower than an "E" for "Exceeds Expectations" from any teacher at Hogwarts. Severus knew that this paper was no different. He just wanted to make her mad.

"A 'T'?!!" Sienna was obviously outraged. "With all due respect, Professor, I don't believe this paper deserves a T."

"Very well, then, I'll be glad to change it to a zero," he calmly responded.

She scowled, but remained silent. He could almost see steam shooting from her ears, but she didn't say another word to him for the rest of class or for the rest of the term, for that matter. Severus figured that no matter what the outcome of the war, he had lost her as a friend or anything else forever. But he took great comfort in knowing that she would be alive and well by the end of the war, which was more than he could say for himself. Yet his heart still sank at the end of every class, as she avoided his gaze and left in silence.

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The night of Slughorn's Christmas party crept up on Severus. And although he would rather get one of his molars drilled, it was unavoidable. He wondered if Sienna would

be there. She had been invited to every party, but so far had managed to come up with a legitimate excuse to avoid each one. Lucky girl... Sure enough, tonight was no different. Severus searched the crowd but came up empty-handed. So he painted a faint smile on his face, which he had a difficult time maintaining, and tried to relax and enjoy himself. When Slughorn dragged him into a conversation with Potter about Potter's brilliance in the Potions classroom, Severus immediately became suspicious. But he could prove nothing, and with so many more important things to think about, he soon put it out of his mind.

Then Draco was caught lurking around and was presented to Slughorn like a trophy by Filch. Severus was mortified. What if Draco had been expelled? There were so many things that could go wrong. And his own life was hanging in the balance. As he escorted Draco down the hall to an empty classroom for a private conversation, his anger and anxiety grew. He interrogated the boy, but still got nothing out of him of any value. Draco was afraid Severus might try to steal his glory. He was determined to somehow kill Dumbledore himself.

After Draco stormed out of the room, Severus took a moment to compose himself. He would be expected back at the party, the last place in the world he wanted to be.

As he stepped back into Slughorn's smoky, noisy office he surveyed the scene. Potter was significantly absent. For just a brief moment he feared that he and Draco might have been followed. But he put the possibility out of his mind and pushed his way back into the room. He reached down to one of the wandering trays and retrieved a glass of mead. He drained the glass to calm his nerves and took another, but the memory of Sienna and the cognac incident from last year crossed his mind, so he nursed the second one more slowly.

"Ah! Good to see you back and enjoying yourself, Professor Snape!" bellowed Slughorn gleefully. "I was hoping to see Miss Kaolin here tonight, but she said she was working on a special project for Dumbledore which had to be finished before break, and she couldn't afford to take the time. Shame, shame."

"Yes," agreed Severus sincerely. He had hoped to see her tonight and at least try to smooth things over a bit. He had missed her more than he had imagined he would. Her silence, both in class and after, was deafening, but he knew it was ultimately for the best... At least that was what he kept telling himself.

"I must tell you, no matter what task I give her, no matter how nasty, she actually seems to enjoy it! I know you requested that I try to make her life miserable in detention, but I'm beginning to think that it's not possible. She is always so cheerful. I can't imagine how she could have ended up in detention in the first place."

"She deserved it, believe me," Severus replied simply. He wasn't about to elaborate.

"Wasn't she your assistant the past couple of years?"

"Yes."

"I've been trying to talk her into being my assistant..."

Severus' stomach lurched.

"...but she keeps making excuses. Do you think you could put in a good word for me?"

"I'm afraid I am not in her good graces at the moment, so there's not much I can do to help you." *Thank goodness*, thought Severus. Her comments in class about Slughorn and his parties were just to get under his skin.

"I must say, her potions are also brilliant. I didn't mention her when we were talking with Harry earlier, because I knew she had been your assistant, so I assumed you had given her pointers and shared some of your many secrets."

"She has plenty of her own," Severus admitted. "She actually taught me a few things."

"Really!" exclaimed Slughorn enthusiastically. "Then I'll watch her more closely from now on. And if I can't talk her into becoming my assistant, please feel free to give her detention with me anytime."

"I'll keep you in mind." Severus faked a smile. Inside, his heart was aching.

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Just before Christmas break, Severus received a note from Dumbledore. He had been making the Headmaster the potion that was keeping him up and running all term, but Severus could see little signs that the dark curse from the ring was taking its toll within him. Dumbledore rarely made it to meals, usually because he was ailing, but sometimes, when he felt like his old self, he would leave to run mysterious errands, keeping Severus in the dark in regard to his goals or destinations.

Severus made his way to Dumbledore's office, sure that the conversation would be about Draco and his feeble attempt earlier in the year at assassination via the necklace. Sure enough, they spoke of the technical side of security and how to be sure no one else would get hurt as a result of Draco's task. Unfortunately, Severus still had not been able to get any more details out of Draco about what he was working on or even where he was working on it. Draco was still convinced that Severus wanted to hog all the glory.

When Severus assumed that the meeting was winding down, Dumbledore surprised him and continued in a different direction.

"Sienna told me about your little duel in front of the class and her detention sentence as a result."

"Really," Severus was curious, "What was *her* version?"

"She told me you were a sore loser."

Severus chuckled. "How would you have handled it, sir?"

Dumbledore hesitated a moment. "Well, I'm not trying to get her to hate me, so my approach would have been quite different."

"You know why I must treat her this way." Severus wasn't sure he even wanted to talk about it. He was too depressed as it was.

"You know, Severus, after all that you have put her through, she still loves you."

"That's her problem," Severus said, trying to sound indifferent. "I only hope it does not become her misfortune."

"I wouldn't worry too much if I were you, Severus," chuckled Dumbledore. "I believe our girl can take quite good care of herself. Did you know that she spends even more time in deep meditation now than last year?"

Severus raised his eyebrows. He still wasn't ready to believe in all of the eastern philosophy, but he had to admit that she could focus her mind better than anyone he had ever met. Her performance in their little duel gave him new respect for her and her beliefs.

"She has come to the conclusion that your actions, at least on the surface, are totally illogical, and since she knows you to be a very logical man, you must have a good reason for treating her this way."

Severus just shook his head.

"You know, at some point you may need to explain everything to her."



"That would only put her in more danger."

"Oh, I think that if she knew what your goal was, she would be happy to play along."

"You know why I don't think that would be a good idea. At the end of this year, I will be out of her life forever."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. She seems determined to make her vision come true."

Dumbledore smiled at Severus. His eyes were twinkling. Severus felt sure Dumbledore was picturing the two of them together, a scene he had refused himself the joy of imagining. His heart began to ache.

"I wish I could be as sure of the future as she is."

\*\*\*\*

Christmas break was soon upon them. Sienna went home to her mother for the holidays. There was nothing but a package of socks at the foot of Severus' bed Christmas morning. He went down to breakfast and sat at the table with Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, Hagrid, and a handful of students. This was one of the smallest groups he had ever seen for Christmas break. After the necklace incident, Severus was surprised that there were any students left at Hogwarts at all.

Suddenly, a Barn Owl came through an upper window. It swooped down and, surprisingly, landed in front of Severus! He untied the package, and after a few mouthfuls of food from his plate, the owl flew off. Severus looked around curiously at the other teachers who all looked back at him with eager faces. He had never received a package by owl on Christmas morning. Severus tore into it. He found a pound of his all-time favorite dark chocolate truffles with liquid cognac centers from Honeydukes. There was no note, but the only person he had ever told about this particular weakness was Sienna.

"What do you have there, Severus?"

He had a feeling that Dumbledore already knew the answer, as well as who sent it. "Oh, just some chocolate from Honeydukes."

"One can never have too much chocolate."

"Just as one can never have too many socks." They nodded at each other in agreement. For the first time since last spring, Severus actually felt happy. He didn't offer any of his fellow teachers a piece of his prize, however. He hoarded it and rationed it to himself. He wanted to make it last as long as possible.

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When January arrived along with the students, Severus eased up on Sienna. He felt like the chocolate was an effective peace offering. He also contemplated the idea that Dumbledore had suggested: to confide his situation and let her help him stage arguments. But he ultimately decided against it.

One day, after the rest of the class had left, Sienna lingered behind. She didn't approach his desk. Instead, she spoke from her desk as she continued to pack.

"You haven't used me for target practice lately," she began gingerly. "Do you think I can handle myself against the Dark Lord?"

Severus looked up, a bit surprised by her question. "I think you stand a better chance than anyone else in the class," he admitted. "But, that's not saying much."

There was a long silence as she finished packing. Those had been the first words she had spoken to him since last November.

"Let us hope we never have to find out," he added, with a feeling of relief that he had enough negative experiences to draw from to accomplish that goal.

A strange look dawned across Sienna's face with his statement. First curiosity, then recognition, then finally something that resembled anger or irritation. "So that's what all of this has been about! You've been treating me like this for my own protection!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Severus lied. But the alarm in his voice was real. How could she have found out? Dumbledore would not have gone behind his back and told her... No, he knew better.

"Now I understand... Now it all makes sense. But...I still don't know..." she looked into his eyes. Even from across the room he could feel the deep penetration of her stare. "And now, it upsets you that I know the truth."

Severus was almost in a panic. She shouldn't know. They should NOT be having this conversation. Another memory he would have to bury. How could she tell what he was feeling? He thought his poker face was flawless.

"But since the last thing I want to do is upset you..." she dropped her gaze from his worried eyes, "I'll just leave." And she turned in silence, leaving him staring after her, speechless.

*How could she know?*

## Questions of the Heart

*Chapter 15 of 31*

Severus finally finds out some of Sienna's best kept secrets.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Harry Potter book series by the brilliant J. K. Rowling. It was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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"Questions of the Heart Resolved,

## Past Mysteries Finally Solved"

The morning of February third, Sienna was sitting alone at the end of the Gryffindor table as usual, when a rather large Great Horned Owl arrived with an even larger package. Severus always marveled at the owl's capacity to carry heavy loads. From his view at the staff table, it looked like a book. Severus was not surprised. It was, after all, her birthday. She offered the owl some pumpkin juice and some fruit from her plate. Even though owls are carnivorous, it ate and drank heartily as she opened the book and perused its pages. Severus imagined all sorts of possibilities for its contents. He wondered if she would tell him about it later. Probably not.

She found a letter between its pages. While she was reading it, a Screech Owl showed up, carrying a much smaller package. She took the second package, offered the Screech Owl the juice and whatever it wanted from her plate, and it went on its merry way. She opened the small package to reveal a cylinder about the size of a perfume bottle. Severus noticed that her interest in the book waned, as instead, she read the card or letter or whatever it was, over and over again. As breakfast was winding down and Dumbledore got up to leave, Sienna jumped up and ran to join him. They spoke briefly, then went their separate ways down the hall.

Classes progressed as usual and Sienna went through another class in silence. He had hoped that she would talk to him afterwards, but it didn't happen. He felt disappointed and a bit resentful as he watched her leave the room with the rest of the students. Perhaps Dumbledore was right. Perhaps he should tell her the truth.

Later that night Severus sat in his office grading essays. The drivel he had to sift through was always daunting, but tonight the minutes turned to hours as he couldn't seem to find the bottom of the pile. Presently, there came a knock on his door. "Come in." He looked up in anticipation, but was sadly disappointed once again. "Oh, it's you. What can I do for you, Draco?"

"I have a message from the old geezer." He seemed out of breath, as if he had run the whole way.

"You will not refer to the Headmaster that way in my presence!" Severus snapped.

"Sorry, sir, I forgot you actually respect the man. He wants to see you in his office right away."

"Very well," Severus replied wearily. "Good night, Draco."

Severus got up and walked out, using a locking charm on the door behind him. He headed straight for the Headmaster's office, uttered "licorice jelly beans" to the gargoyle, and dragged himself up the spiral staircase. The door swung open just as he reached up to knock.

"Good evening, Severus. So good of you to join us." Dumbledore beamed at him. Sienna was already sitting in one of two chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk. The other awaited his arrival.

Severus settled himself into the hard empty chair and shifted uncomfortably.

"Since it is late, I'll get right to the point," continued Dumbledore. "Severus, I think it is time that Sienna knew the truth."

"The truth, sir?"

"About you and what you do for me."

Severus' mind was reeling. Why on earth would he have to reveal his spy status to Sienna? "May I ask why, Headmaster?"

"Yes, Severus; you see, I feel that she needs to know everything relevant before she decides whether or not to share her father's memory with you."

Severus glared suspiciously back and forth between the two of them. For one of the few times in his life, he was confused and unsure of himself. "Her father's memory?"

"Her mother sent her a letter written by her father many years ago. He intended her to read it on her 20th birthday. She also sent a memory of his for her to view in the Pensieve."

"I see..." Severus contemplated the situation. "And this memory has sensitive material in it?"

"Very sensitive and very important."

Severus took a deep breath and readied himself for her reaction. "Very well." He was silent for a moment as he picked through the information in his head and decided what and how to tell her. If he omitted anything relevant, he was sure Dumbledore would mention it.

"I am a former Death Eater," he began slowly, choosing his words with great care. "I joined at a low period in my life when I was young and foolish. I later saw the error of my ways and turned on the Dark Lord in the months leading up to his first downfall, becoming a double agent for Professor Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix. When the Dark Lord rose again two years ago, I returned to him on the Headmaster's orders, claiming to still be a loyal servant. Since then I have been feeding him misinformation and some semi-useful tidbits so that he doesn't realize that I have betrayed him. It's the only way I can stay alive until his permanent defeat has been achieved. I risk being discovered every time I must return to him.

"He is a skilled Legilimens, therefore, I must be very careful to tuck away memories that may tip him off to my true loyalties. If I am discovered it would mean certain death. So I hope you understand, Miss Kaolin, why, in spite of everything we have been through, I have never revealed that particular side of my life to you." Severus sighed. The cat was finally out of the bag. In a way, it was a relief.

In the shocked silence that followed, he decided to elaborate further. "Over the course of last summer, I was subjected to one of the Dark Lord's Legilimency sessions. Since you and I spent quite a bit of time together last year, you kept popping up in my memories. Nothing special, just doing your job as my assistant, handing in your potions, et cetera. But he took an interest in you. He is toying with the idea of persuading you to be my assistant after you graduate."

At this thought, Sienna gasped. Her head began to move slowly back and forth. "I would rather die than help him."

"By mistreating you this year, I was hoping to generate enough bad blood between us that he would be forced to abandon the idea."

Sienna's eyes grew wider and wider as he told his tale. Sorrow filled her face. "Professor Snape, I had no idea. I knew you were hiding something from me, but I didn't know what or why. This explains a lot. No wonder..." Her voice trailed off. She looked down at her shoes, apparently deep in thought.

The long silence that followed was broken by Dumbledore. "Now, Sienna, it's your turn." He looked as if he had arranged a blind date, and the two people didn't realize it until it was too late to back out.

Sienna looked up in surprise. "Me?"

"Not the memory, not yet. No, just the other, why you came to us so late."

"But I already know about the ashram and her mother home schooling her," defended Severus.

"One important detail was left out," said Dumbledore, now resembling the Cheshire cat.

She glared at him with irritation and a touch of resentment in her eyes. "Is this really necessary?"

"Yes," insisted Dumbledore.

"Oh, all right... I'm an *empath!*"

Severus gasped. His mind raced through two and a half years of memories. No wonder she could read his moods. No wonder she always knew just the right thing to say and do, no matter what was happening. No wonder she didn't like being around all the other students. Feeling others' feelings would be maddening in a room full of teenagers with raging hormones. How on earth did she manage during regular class time? He felt betrayed. He wondered what she was reading from him now. Did she know how he really felt about her? This new information complicated his perception of their relationship considerably.

"The first empathic witch on record for over 150 years!" Dumbledore announced proudly.

"That's why my parents felt the need to send me to the ashram," Sienna informed them. "Before the training I received there, I would actually live other people's emotions, not just read them. It was horrible. I would be in the grocery store with my mum, and some poor soul in a depressed mood would walk by us, and I would just start crying. It really disturbed my parents until they figured out why it was happening. Good thing my mum is a healer. The ashram taught me how to meditate, concentrate, and control what I was exposing myself to. It can still be a bit unsettling to be immersed in a large group of people, but I am much better off than I used to be. I could never have gone to school here if it hadn't been for my training at the ashram."

"No wonder you meditate so much and go back there for summer break," concluded Severus.

"Now, my dear," Dumbledore continued, "you can see why Severus' situation makes the notion of showing him the memory very risky."

"Yes, sir, but I know he is a skilled Occlumens. I'm sure if he really doesn't want Voldemort to see it," Severus winced at the name, "he can hide it effectively." She looked hopefully at Severus. "Can't you, Professor?"

"There are many memories I keep hidden on a regular basis, but I also discourage situations which would create new memories that need to be hidden. It takes a great deal of control, especially when dealing with the Dark Lord. His methods can be very... persuasive."

Severus felt a chill go up his spine with the memory of the last time Voldemort had used the Cruciatus Curse on him and the ordeal that took place afterwards. "If this is something I shouldn't see, Headmaster..."

"It's completely up to Sienna."

"I want him to see it." She looked at Severus with a trusting smile. "I know you will never tell anyone what it contains, not if your life depended on it."

"The Dark Lord has ways of extracting information. I may have no choice."

"I'll take that chance. I need you to know. I need to be able to talk with you about it. *Please.*" She looked at Dumbledore anxiously.

"It's your call, Sienna."

"Thank you, sir."

Severus and Sienna stood and approached the Pensieve. "You two go ahead. I've seen it. And Severus, pay close attention to the man in the background who takes off his shoe."

Severus gave Dumbledore a puzzled look, then turned to Sienna. "Ladies first."

Severus stood beside Sienna and peered through the silvery liquid as it sucked him in. He landed feet first, next to her, in the middle of Hogsmeade, right in front of the Three Broomsticks. It was a bright, sunny spring day, and a light breeze tickled Severus' cheek. Sienna gently took him by the hand and led him across the street.

"Over here. My dad will be coming out of this shop; she pointed to Honeydukes. "He must have been buying Mum some candy."

As they stood there, an attractive middle-aged man with dark hair exited Honeydukes. He looked around the street, apparently trying to decide where to go next when Sibyll Trelawney walked up to him.

"Carter?"

"Sibyll, is that you?"

"Look at you! You look fabulous!"

"And you haven't aged a day since Hogwarts!"

Sibyll grinned from ear to ear. "How's Hazel?"

"Oh, she's fine. She had to work today, crazy hours at the hospital. People don't get sick just during regular business hours, you know."

She laughed. "So what brings you to Hogsmeade?"

"I wanted to surprise Hazel with some of her favorite chocolates, and I figured if I bought it here, she'd be less likely to find out."

"I hear you've been trying to have a baby."

"Yeah, for several years now. No luck yet, but we're having a lot of fun trying."

Sibyll swatted his chest with the back of her hand. "You cad!" She winked at him and they both started laughing.

Then suddenly her eyes rolled up into her head, her body stiffened, and she began to speak in a freakish voice with what sounded like several sets of vocal cords at once.

*"You will receive a gift in the coming months."*

As Sybill began to speak, a short balding man with beady eyes was walking by. His steps slowed as he realized that a prophecy was being given.

*"The gift is already in your midst, though you may not know it yet."*

The man turned to the bench in front of Honeydukes and began to fiddle with one of his shoes.

*"The gift will leave your hands after five years. Its new keepers will help it develop and become more powerful."*

The man dumped out one of his shoes, as if it had a rock in it, and then began to tie it back on.

*"Whoever is holding the gift when it reaches its full potential will become invincible."*

Just then, another man, taller and quite handsome with long, dark, straight hair, came running up to the first man. "Wormtail!" he shouted. "There you are. We've been looking for you. James and Remus are already in Zonko's. We've got to come up with something really good to play on that git, Snivellus. Come on!"

Severus had been distracted by the scene of Wormtail and Sirius Black, so much so that he almost missed the last line of the prophecy. He suspected that Wormtail had missed it completely.

*"The gift will be delivered to you in the second month of the coming year, when the full moon rises."*

Sibyll took a deep breath and seemed unsteady on her feet. Carter Kaolin grabbed her arm to keep her from falling to the ground.

"Are you OK?"

"I don't know what got into me," she admitted. "Suddenly I feel dizzy."

Carter led her to the same bench where Wormtail had just been sitting. They began chatting again and the scene faded.

Suddenly Severus felt a pull upwards and landed with a thud next to Sienna in Dumbledore's office once again.

"I saw Wormtail and Sirius Black in the memory," Severus informed Dumbledore.

Dumbledore nodded in agreement.

"A gift?" asked Severus, turning to Sienna, "Did your parents actually receive a gift?"

"There's more," Dumbledore informed him.

"Daddy wrote me a letter on my fifth birthday, a few days before he died." Sienna handed Severus the letter. *So this must have been what she was reading at breakfast over and over again.*

*February third, 1982*

*My Dearest Sienna,*

*If you are reading this, it means that you are turning 20 and will soon be graduating from Hogwarts, if your mother followed the schedule we discussed for your schooling. It also means that I died long ago. I'm so sorry I wasn't there to see you grow up, but I know by now you are an amazing young woman.*

*As I write this, the war is winding down. Lord Voldemort has been defeated and his followers are scattered. But I don't believe we have seen the last of him. The enemy can take on many forms. Use your abilities to sense if someone is lying or trying to deceive you. Choose your friends carefully. Perhaps that boy whose parents were killed would be a good one to seek out if you haven't met him already. His name is Harry Potter. If Voldemort has returned, Harry will be instrumental in permanently defeating him. I know you can help him. I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that you will play an important part in the outcome.*

*Accompanying this letter is a phial that contains a memory of mine. It is a prophecy made to me many years ago. I believe that there is a Pensieve at Hogwarts that you may be able to use. Ask the current Headmaster for permission. View it alone first. Then use your instincts to decide who else, if anyone, needs to know its contents. If you do decide to share the information, be very selective. The fewer who know about this, the better.*

*Your mother was pregnant with you when I saw Sibyll Trelawney that day, but we didn't know it at the time. Exactly nine months after the prophecy was made, you were born. Your mother had been in labor for six hours at St. Mungo's, but you were finally delivered healthy and strong in the early evening. I remember looking out the window with a sigh of relief and seeing the full moon peaking up over the rooftops. That was the happiest day of our lives. After years of trying, we finally had a child. What a wonderful gift you have been to us!*

*May you have a healthy and happy life, my precious daughter. You will make some man very happy one day. I hope he deserves you. Use your unique skills wisely, and your life will turn out well.*

*I will always love you,*

*Daddy*

Severus read it and looked up, first at Sienna, then at Dumbledore, his eyes wide with amazement.

"Does this mean what I think it means?" he asked slowly, carefully.

"Her mother is very wise. If the letter had fallen into the wrong hands, no one would have known the true nature of the gift or the prophecy. If the memory had fallen into the wrong hands and been viewed without the letter, the viewer still may not have been able to realize the truth. Both items are necessary to understand the true identity of the gift."

"Thus the reason for the two separate owls this morning," deduced Severus.

Dumbledore turned to Sienna. "Didn't you tell me that you witnessed your father's murder, but no one would believe you?"

"Yes. Everyone said he just dropped dead. There was no sign of forced entry or a struggle, and the coroner's report said that he was in perfect health. No obvious mortal wounds or poison. No reason for him to have died."

"Sounds like the autopsy on Tom Riddle's father and grandparents," added Dumbledore. "They couldn't charge anyone with murder because they were all in perfect health when they died."

"I remember my mum sitting at the dining room table reading the autopsy report over and over. She kept shaking her head and saying that there was nothing wrong with him. Why did he die? He was in perfect health."

"Would you like some help in solving the mystery of his death?"

"Oh, yes, very much so."

"I suggest that we view your memory of that night in the Pensieve, if you don't mind sharing it with us. You don't have to watch if you don't want to. Just think about it, put your wand to your temple, and pull it out. Then drop it in the Pensieve."

"I'll watch it with you. I really want to know who did it. I could answer any questions you might have. If I can help you figure out who killed him, it would be worth the pain of seeing it all over again."

"OK. Go ahead." Dumbledore motioned for her to approach the Pensieve. He and Severus watched as she took her wand and pulled the silvery strand out of her temple. It

floated down into the misty liquid surface and disappeared. "Very well, Severus, are you ready?"

Severus nodded. This time Dumbledore went first, then Sienna, then Severus. They found themselves standing in the Kaolins' living room, the usual family photos on the wall, a piano on one side of the room, a Muggle TV on the other side. It was a modest house in a middle class Muggle neighborhood. But, as far as Severus could tell, it looked welcoming and comfortable.

Someone was approaching the front door from the outside. The door opened, and in walked a tall, attractive middle-aged man with short, dark brown hair, a slightly older version of Carter Kaolin. Holding his hand was a small girl with dark, curly hair and pale, grey eyes, around the age of five.

Carter spoke. "Don't worry, Sienna, Grandma will be fine. Mum just wanted to stay at the hospital tonight to keep her company. It's best that we didn't stay. Grandma needs her rest."

The little girl approached the stairs to go get ready for bed when her father suddenly grabbed her, looking up at the ceiling, his eyes wide with fear. Severus could hear footsteps from above. Someone was upstairs. "SHHH!" He held his finger up to his lips, and then he picked her up and carried her to the front hall closet where he stuffed her behind some boxes so she could not be seen. He knelt down and whispered to what looked like a big box, "Be very still and don't make a sound, no matter what happens." There was an urgency in his voice that Severus knew from experience meant life or death. The man stood up and quietly closed the closet door. Severus noticed it had slats in it, so the little girl would be able to see what was going on. Her father turned around and drew his wand, just as someone was coming down the stairs.

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted the intruder, and Carter's wand went flying across the room. "Well, well... Kaolin, is it?"

"Recognize him?" asked Dumbledore.

"It's the man who overheard the prophecy, on the bench with his shoe," answered Sienna, looking first at Severus, then at Dumbledore. "What was his name... Wormtail?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"I've been occupying myself while you were gone by looking at all of the wonderful trinkets you and your wife have collected over the years. But I'm especially interested in anything you may have received as a gift, around the time your daughter was born."

Carter acted surprised. "Oh, why is that, sir?"

"Let's just say I heard a rumor that it may help me out in the days to come. Besides, I know you won't be needing it anymore."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do... Think about it. A gift. You've had it for about five years now. It could be a Muggle artifact, or one from a magical relative. I know you and your wife have plenty of both kinds on both sides of your family. Two half-breeds begetting another half-breed. Poor child. Not worth bringing into the world," Wormtail snickered.

Carter Kaolin glared at the man. "Take what you want and GET OUT!"

"Come, come now, Mr. Kaolin," sneered Wormtail, "Where are your manners?" He strolled over to the china cabinet in the dining room, opened the cabinet doors, and began to lovingly caress the objects inside as if he could physically feel their magical potential.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Mr. Kaolin. It's up to you."

"Then I guess it's the hard way," Carter stated, "because I know of nothing in this house that you would have any interest in."

Wormtail walked towards Carter with a look of mock regret across his face. Then his eyes became slits, he lifted his wand over his head and hissed, "*Crucio!*" Carter immediately fell to the floor, writhing in pain, moaning and shrieking. Severus grimaced, knowing full well what Carter was going through. Sienna looked away, burying her face in Severus' sleeve as Dumbledore laid a kindly hand on her shoulder.

"Are you sure you want to see this?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and looked into Dumbledore's face. *What a kind face*, thought Severus, *full of wisdom and compassion*.

"Yes." She seemed to harden herself. "I need to see it. I need to know."

"You can either give it to me and I'll leave you unharmed, or I'll kill you and take anything even remotely magical from the house. Either way, I'll have what I want. At least if you cooperate, your family will still have you."

Carter stood up and shrugged, looking helpless and defeated. "Then I guess you'll have to kill me."

"Pity. OK, have it your way ... *Avada Kedavra!*" The green light flashed across the room, and Carter was thrown against a small end table. His body, the table and the small family photo sitting on top of it all came crashing down like a rock slide.

Severus glanced at the closet where the little girl was hidden, but there was no noise, no movement. *Good girl*, thought Severus. No use in her getting killed, too.

Wormtail moved through the house picking up objects and assessing their magical potential. After thoroughly investigating the downstairs, he had a few treasures which he piled together in the middle of the dining room table. He didn't look in the closet. Severus deduced that he must have searched there earlier. There were already several things there, probably collected from upstairs before their arrival. Wormtail gathered them all up in the table cloth and Disapparated. There was still no sound or movement from the closet.

The older Sienna finally spoke. "When he was hit by the curse, I could feel my father's horror as my own. I stayed in that closet, hiding among the boxes, until next morning when Mum came home from the hospital. I was so horrified that I didn't even come to her when she called for me. She finally heard me whimpering and the sound led her to me."

Severus and Dumbledore looked at each other in disbelieving silence. Then they both turned to Sienna with immense looks of sympathy. Severus' face also reflected a touch of admiration.

"I've been waiting 15 years for someone to believe me when I said that my father didn't just drop dead. So, you both know him?"

"Yes," Severus said reassuringly. "His name is Peter Pettigrew, AKA Wormtail. Good thing he was after an object and never realized that he really should have been looking for *you*."

"But since Wormtail didn't hear the last line of the prophecy that told when you would be delivered..." interjected Dumbledore.

"He came to the house looking for a thing, not a person," added Severus finally. "He faked his own death the night the Dark Lord was first defeated. If you had described him to anyone, they would have probably thought you had imagined it, because by this time, everyone thought he was long dead. He's an Animagus. He must have transformed after he got into the house somehow."

"Rats don't need but a small hole to crawl through," added Dumbledore. "He probably never even told Voldemort about the prophecy, hoping he could find the gift and become the invincible one."

"Yes, that would be like Wormtail," commented Severus.

"I'm so sorry, Sienna. That had to be really hard for you," Dumbledore apologized.

"I'll be OK. Besides, I know now, finally. That means more than words can say." They all popped back out of the Pensieve and found themselves once more in Dumbledore's office.

"So the Avada Kedavra Curse, the killing curse, that's what Wormtail used to kill my father?"

"So it seems," stated Dumbledore flatly.

"But if a person is in perfect health when he dies, what kills him?" Severus asked. He was just as curious as Sienna at this point.

"To my knowledge, no one actually knows," Dumbledore admitted.

"Perhaps it simply scares the spirit right out of the body," Sienna offered. They both stared at her dumbfounded.

"That's what my father felt just as the spell hit him, *incredibly intense fear*."

"Sounds as plausible as any other explanation I've ever heard," said Dumbledore.

Severus simply shrugged.

"Well, it's getting late. I don't know about you two, but I need my beauty rest," he chuckled. "You can let yourselves out. Oh, and Severus," he added with a twinkle in his eyes, "you have so many memories to bury from tonight, one or two more won't make much difference, don't you agree?" He winked and tilted his head slightly in Sienna's direction, then disappeared through his private door.

Severus and Sienna stood looking at each other in awkward silence. Finally Sienna spoke.

"You know if you want more bad memories about me to feed to Vold sorry--The Dark Lord, I'll be glad to pick fights with you in front of the class. You can even put me in detention, but *please*, Professor McGonagall instead of Slughorn."

Severus chuckled. "But, they have to look genuine. You have to really *hate* me."

She looked at him with sad eyes. "I could never hate you, I--"

"Don't say it," Severus interrupted. He knitted his brow with worry. "You only make things harder that way."

"I was *only* going to say," Sienna glared at him, a little annoyed, "that I *caract* like I hate you."

Severus eyed her suspiciously. He doubted if that was really what she was going to say. Then he remembered her memory in the Pensieve, and he softened. "I had no idea you experienced such horrors, and at such a young age. That sort of thing would scar most people for life."

"I don't look upon death the way most people do," Sienna admitted. "I'm not afraid of it. It's not the end; it's just the next phase of life."

Severus thought about his future and the immensely unpleasant task that awaited him and decided to change the subject. "So, you think you can convince everyone that you hate me?"

She smiled. "Just treat me the way you treat Harry Potter and it'll be easy."

Severus smiled back at her. "It could get ugly."

"It already has." She faked a glare.

"There's something else you should be prepared for," Severus added with great seriousness. "If, somehow, the Dark Lord realizes your importance, you will be in grave danger. If he captures you, he may use me to get you to cooperate."

"What do you mean?"

"He may torture me, even kill me to coerce your support. He knows most decent people care less for their own lives than they do for the lives of their loved ones."

"I will never cooperate with him. I would rather die. I'll sacrifice myself if I have to."

"I understand, and I hope it never comes to that, but if he tries to use *me*, you must act as if you don't care whether I live or die. You must watch me suffer with totally convincing indifference." Severus looked deep into her eyes. He hoped that her ability to read emotions could help her understand the gravity of his words, the sincerity of his statement.

She nodded slowly. She seemed to understand. He held out his arms and she wrapped hers around his waist. He pulled her closer with one hand and stroked her long, soft curls with the other.

"I've missed our time together," Sienna whispered softly.

Severus wasn't sure if he should reply to this, but of course he had missed her more than he ever would have imagined. Once again, he steered the conversation in another direction. "You know, perhaps if you learn Legilimency we could communicate nonverbally."

"That's a great idea. I'll ask Professor Dumbledore to teach me, so you won't have more memories to bury."

"Right."

They pulled away just enough to gaze into each other's eyes. Hers were definitely blue tonight. "Friends again?" he asked hopefully.

"I never stopped."

\*\*\*\*

Class time with Sienna became very interesting after her birthday. Severus began to look forward to her prickly responses when he would insult her in front of the class. He didn't use her as a guinea pig anymore, however. She promised him that to make it look genuine, she would try as hard as she could to defeat him, and he didn't want any more scenes like the one back in November.

For practice, Severus would make people pair up and try to disarm each other. They would each take turns having and not having a wand. Sienna almost never needed a wand anymore. Even as the spells became more advanced, she seemed to master them quickly and easily. The other students began to dread being paired up with her, so Severus couldn't ridicule her performance. But her essays and written homework were another matter. Although her papers were well researched and written, the rest of the class had no way of knowing their contents, so Severus was free to criticize and pick them apart.

It only took Sienna a couple of weeks with Dumbledore to master Legilimency. She would look Severus in the eye as he handed her essay back to her. He would pull up the memory of writing her real "O" or "E" in the grade book, then hand back her paper with a "D" or a "T" on the top. So she knew the truth, but she would always react badly. Sometimes he would take points from Gryffindor, but sometimes she would end up in detention.

One class towards the end of February got particularly ugly. As Severus handed Sienna's essay back with a "T" scrawled across the top, he made an observation.

"Isn't your career goal to become a Healer, Miss Kaolin?"

"What do you care, *sir*?" she remarked snidely.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I don't like your tone. Five points from Gryffindor."

The other Gryffindors groaned; the Slytherins snickered.

Sienna scowled, but remained silent. She knew from experience that he wasn't finished.

"I only ask because I believe you must pass both the written and practical parts of this class to achieve that goal, and at the rate you're going, you'll be repeating it next year!" Severus obviously stifled a chortle.

Sienna's eyes turned to slits, and she stood to face him. "Will *you* be teaching it next year?"

"Most likely," Severus drawled. He could hardly wait for her response.

"Then I may as well not even bother."

"What do you mean by that?" His lip curled.

"That if you knew what the *hell* you were doing, I wouldn't *need* to take it over!" She glared at him in pure defiance. Several of her classmates gasped. They all looked horrified.

Severus walked right up to her, trying to intimidate her, but she didn't back down. They were nose to nose as their eyes bore into each other. Both of their faces were covered with contempt. Severus was having trouble holding onto his, however. He wanted to laugh out loud and had to concentrate to think of a really good retort.

"I could have you expelled for speaking to me that way." His voice was barely above a whisper. "But, fortunately for you, I doubt the Headmaster would ever agree to it. So, 50 points from Gryffindor, and detention every Thursday afternoon for the rest of term. I'll have to talk with the other teachers to see who has the most dirty work, but I imagine Professors Hagrid, Sprout and Slughorn will find ways of keeping you busy." He turned on his heel, his cloak swirling around his legs. "Oh, and by the way," he glanced back over his shoulder as he headed up to his desk, "you happen to be the only person in class who is now teetering between Dreadful and Troll in the written part of your grade. So either I *do* know what the *hell* I'm doing, or everyone in the class is simply..." he glanced around at their fearful faces, "...smarter than you." He smiled at Sienna, daring her to say something. He could almost see steam coming out of her ears, but she sat back down and remained silent. The show was over.

At the end of the classes in which they had staged a fight, Sienna and Severus had taken to sharing a pleasant memory, just to be sure there were no hard feelings. It was usually just a quick outwardly resentful glance and the memory of a hug or them holding hands, or going to Honeydukes on Valentine's Day the year before. Today they went through the same ritual. Severus said *Legilimens* in his mind as they glared at each other from across the room, and the hug he gave her on her birthday came up. Then it was her turn to think *Legilimens*. Severus usually sent back the same memory she had just sent to him, but today, to Severus' surprise, the memory of her vision came up, and to his embarrassment, it was the part where they were kissing!

He looked away quickly, turning beet red in the process. How did *that* happen? Was she that good at cutting through his defenses? He had only just thought about it last night as he was falling asleep, but she should not have been able to access it if he didn't want her to. Perhaps, Severus concluded, on some subconscious level, he did want her to see that again. He knew that with what would almost surely transpire in the weeks ahead, it was the only hope he had to hold on to.

"What are you smiling at?" Severus overheard Lorenzo Lotus ask someone. He didn't dare look up to investigate.

"Oh, nothing," he heard Sienna's voice say.

*Thank God*, he thought. *The notion still brings a smile to her face.*

## Out of the Frying Pan

*Chapter 16 of 31*

Severus must finally face his destiny and kill Albus Dumbledore.

Disclaimer: This chapter contains dialogue copied word for word from "Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince" and "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," both by the brilliant J. K. Rowling. To stay true to canon, I felt it necessary to do so. All direct quotes appear in italics.

This story was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

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## "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire,

### Death Eaters Loose, Situation Dire"

Towards the end of February, Severus requested a meeting with Dumbledore on the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. As Severus interrogated Dumbledore about his meetings with Harry, he became more and more irritated about being kept in the dark. But he, of all people, understood the need for secrets. The less information Severus had, the less he could reveal to Voldemort if he was ever discovered.

But when they met later in Dumbledore's office, Severus was horror-stricken with the new information he had been entrusted with. As Dumbledore closed his eyes and spoke, Severus couldn't believe his ears. When the time came that Voldemort's snake, Nagini, was kept safely out of the fray under magical protection, Severus was to inform Harry that he had to sacrifice himself. What kind of insanity was this? Severus was incensed! He had risked his life over and over again to keep Lily's son alive, only to find out that he had been raised like a pig for slaughter! He felt used and betrayed, like a knife had just been thrust into his back.

*"But this is touching, Severus," said Dumbledore seriously. "Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"*

*"For him?" shouted Severus. "Expecto Patronum!"*

*From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe: she landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office, and soared out of the window. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded he turned back to Snape, and his eyes were full of tears.*

*"After all this time?"*

*"Always," said Severus.*

"But what about Sienna? She loves you...even now, after all you put her through this year."

"As I have told you before, that is *her* problem."

"But you love her too, Severus. I KNOW IT!" Dumbledore sounded desperate, as if he were pleading for himself.

"I don't know HOW I feel about her. All I know is that if it weren't for Lily, I wouldn't have given her a second look!"

"That's NOT TRUE!" Dumbledore was genuinely angry now. "How can you say that?"

Severus hesitated. After being kept in the dark by Dumbledore about so many things, he wasn't sure he wanted to share this next bit of information. "Lily haunts my dreams at night..." He stared deep into Dumbledore's eyes "...since just after her death. The dreams are all that have kept me going."

Dumbledore shook his head slowly and wiped his eyes. "I had no idea." There was a pause. "But what does that have to do with Sienna?"

"Lily saw how lonely I was... how bitter I had become. She wanted so much for me to find happiness again."

"A true sign of unconditional love."

"Remember Sienna's vision?"

"Yes," nodded Dumbledore as he dabbed away the last of his tears with the lacy hanky he kept in a side pocket.

"Lily told me she planted that vision in Sienna's mind so she would take an interest in me when she came here. Then she encouraged me to open my heart to Sienna, to let her in."

Severus stopped and stared out the window at the spot where the doe had disappeared. Several moments passed before he continued.

"It doesn't matter how I feel about Sienna now, anyway. She'll hate me after I *kill you!*" He turned and glared at Dumbledore with intense resentment.

"So you care nothing for her? You were just trying to please your dream version of Lily?" Dumbledore's voice carried its own share of resentment.

"I didn't say that," Severus said softly. "I care for her..." Then he stiffened with determination. "But I have ALWAYS loved Lily, and I ALWAYS WILL!"

"No one is expecting you to stop loving Lily," Dumbledore explained patiently. "But there's no reason you should have to go to your grave a bitter, lonely old man." He put his good hand on Severus' shoulder. "Lily wouldn't want that."

Severus remained silent, but his face was bathed in the pain of old and new memories and thoughts of the nightmarish times yet to come.

"Promise me something, Severus."

"What?" Severus peered at him suspiciously, his eyes narrowed.

"Promise me that you'll find Sienna when things calm down."

Severus looked skeptical. "And do *what?*" he snorted.

"That's between you and her," he finally smiled, with a twinkle in his eyes. "I'm sure you'll come up with something."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He could feel Dumbledore reaching into his soul, tugging on an affirmative answer. "Oh, alright, but I can't guarantee what will happen once I find her."

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Three days after Severus' clandestine meeting with Dumbledore, Ron Weasley was almost poisoned to death inadvertently by Professor Slughorn. It was Ron's birthday and he had offered Ron and Harry a drink from an unopened bottle of oak-matured mead that he was supposed to have given Dumbledore for Christmas, but decided instead to keep for himself. If Harry hadn't rammed a bezor down his throat, Ron would surely have died. How could the inattentive brat have managed to remember that tip from Severus' opening lecture at the start of his very first year? Severus had his suspicions about Harry's sudden brilliance in Potions class. He couldn't help but wonder what had changed to improve Harry's performance so drastically. But after this incident with Ron, he had too many other things to worry about to investigate further.

So now everyone in the castle was on edge again. Security was tighter than ever. People wondered who on earth would have wanted to kill Ron or Slughorn, but Severus and Dumbledore knew who the bottle was really meant for.

As the weeks turned into months and Severus could get no more information out of Draco, he became more and more irritable. He basically ignored Sienna in class. He handed her papers back with the real grade at the top and didn't even look at her most of the time. He was possessed with the upcoming task and how to possibly change the outcome.



But by the end of May, Severus could see a definite change for the worse in Dumbledore's health. Even after tweaking the potion, it seemed to make no difference. The cursed ring was taking its toll.

One night he received a note: a request for his presence in Dumbledore's private quarters. As he hurried through the corridors, he felt his stomach tighten. Was Dumbledore dying? Would he be too late?

"Toffee éclairs," Severus called out as he approached, and the gargoyle leapt aside. He bounded up the spiral staircase, bolted across the office, and opened the private door.

"Headmaster!" he called out hopefully.

"In here," came a weak voice from the bedroom.

Severus ran to Dumbledore's side, his cloak billowing behind him. Dumbledore lay in bed under a thick layer of blankets, but he was still shivering. Severus removed his cloak and placed it over Dumbledore. He looked down at the old man, pale and gaunt, with a gray tinge to his skin. The sparkle had gone out of his eyes. Severus had never seen him so ill.

"You look terrible."

"Thanks for the encouragement."

"You need more than my current potion can offer you."

"No kidding," Dumbledore tried to force a chuckle, but it sounded more like a groan. "Severus, I know I should be asking Horace for this, but I don't want him to know what's going on. I'm sure you understand."

"Certainly, sir. I will be happy to do it for you. I'll come up with something. Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere."

Severus had a feeling that Dumbledore wasn't kidding. He turned on his heel to head back to his office. He would have to do some research overnight. He had kept his private stores to himself and moved all of the rare ingredients that he had collected over the years into his quarters. Hopefully, he would have everything he needed without having to bother Slughorn for anything extra.

"Severus," Dumbledore added.

Severus stopped in his tracks and turned slowly. There was a desperate tone to Dumbledore's voice. Severus already knew he wasn't going to like what the old man was about to say.

"I am obviously running out of time. I need this as fast as possible. I must run an important and possibly dangerous errand as soon as you can get me back on my feet."

"Sir, you're in no condition..."

"Harry Potter will accompany me."

"What?!" Severus felt betrayed. "Potter is reckless and foolish," he informed his sick friend. "He almost killed Draco last month with a curse that he had never tried and didn't even know what it would do. If I hadn't been close by, Draco would have bled to death!"

"I am aware of the incident, Severus. Harry would never have used it if..."

"Perhaps I should go with you," Severus insisted.

"No," stated Dumbledore emphatically. "He needs to see what he will be up against. He won't have me to guide him much longer. He needs the experience."

"In your present condition, you could both be killed." Severus became both agitated and alarmed. Potter was still just a young and impulsive boy. This had disaster written all over it.

"Well, if I end up dead, you and Draco are both off the hook!"

"Headmaster--"

"Severus, Harry needs to come with me."

"I don't like it, sir."

"Just find me a potion to get me through the next few days, *please*," Dumbledore implored him.

Severus nodded reluctantly. He knew there was no further use in arguing. "I'll bring it as soon as I have something." Severus began to turn when Dumbledore spoke again.

"Ask Sienna to help you."

Severus whipped back around, this time glaring.

"She was just here before you were. She knows, Severus. I told her everything."

"*You what?*" he whispered in horror-stricken disbelief.

"I didn't want her to think you had turned on me, and I fear you will have no time to explain yourself when the deed is done. But don't worry," Dumbledore added hastily, "I made her promise not to tell anyone, and not to interfere, before I divulged our secret."

"How did she react?" asked Severus, still in shock from this new development.

"She was upset, of course, but she knows how sick I have actually become. She has been using her hands-on healing technique on me since she got back last fall. She would work on me during our weekly meetings. Here lately I have needed her help every few days. Your potion has kept me alive; her healing powers have kept my misery to a minimum. It has taken both of your efforts to keep me going this year. She never asked me what caused my hand to blacken, or why I was suddenly so sick. She just wanted to help in any way she could. She couldn't dispute my worsening condition, so she could see the logic in our little plan, and she offered to help both of us if there was anything she could do."

"She needs to stay out of it that's how she can help. I have enough to worry about without her on top of everything."

"Call it the foolish desire of a dying old man. I wanted to gaze into those beautiful serene eyes and receive one more of her warm wonderful hugs..."

Severus thought he saw a hint of the old sparkle in Dumbledore's eyes for just a brief moment. But it was soon gone. Of course Dumbledore loved her. He just hadn't thought of that before now. He was so wrapped up in his own emotions he didn't have the energy to consider anyone else's at the time.

"She can help you find the right potion, Severus. I know it."

They stared at each other for a moment. Why was Dumbledore always right? Severus nodded curtly. "I'll send for her. We'll work through the night."

"Thank you, my old friend. I would be lost without you."

*And what will I do without you?* wondered Severus to himself as he turned and weaved his way back through Dumbledore's office and down the stairs to the corridor. *I will surely be lost.*

Severus headed towards Gryffindor Tower. At this hour, however, he found no one who could deliver a message to Sienna. He stood in front of the Fat Lady's snoring portrait, but knew that waking her and trying to persuade her to let him in was a complete waste of time and energy. He didn't have a moment to lose, so he did the only thing he knew for sure would work. He took out his wand and summoned his Patronus. The beautiful silver doe of light emanated from the tip of his wand and began to circle the corridor.

"Go find Sienna. Tell her I need to see her in my office straight away. Tell her to bring her potions book and anything else that might help the situation. Speak only to Sienna. Tell her it's an emergency. Go!" With that last word, the doe did not go through the stone wall into Gryffindor common room. Instead, she headed in the other direction, towards the library. Severus thought this odd, but headed back to his office, trusting that his Patronus would find her. He missed his cloak, but he knew Dumbledore needed it more than he did right now. A penetrating chill went down his spine as he realized that he would soon be losing his best friend forever.

Before he reached his office, he could hear footsteps in the distance. Someone was coming. Just before he rounded the last corner, he glanced behind him and there was Sienna, running to catch up as she juggled an armload of books.

"Where were you?" Severus was understandably curious.

"Professor Dumbledore gave me a blanket pass to anywhere in the school, including the Restricted Section of the library. He divulged the charm that would unlock the door."

"Professor Dumbledore sent you to the Library?"

"He knew you would need help and he asked me to start researching possible ingredients."

Severus pursed his lips. He felt a little annoyed that Dumbledore insisted on her help, since he knew that he could have done it alone. He surmised that this was Dumbledore's way of playing matchmaker one last time.

He opened the office door and they hurried inside. She plopped the large cumbersome books on a desk near the front of the room and began to move towards him. With a wave of his wand, he lit the candles and oil lamps to their full brightness. With all of his gruesome decorations in plain view, he had hoped that the thought of romance would evaporate from her mind. But the bright light also revealed that she had been crying. Her eyes were puffy and red. Dumbledore's revelation had obviously hit her hard. As much as he also felt like crying right now, he knew that they didn't have the time to waste not even on a short hug. Dumbledore's life was hanging in the balance. As she made her way around the desk, he abruptly helped her up and splayed his fingers.

"Stop!" he said with determination. "I know this situation is difficult for you... for myself as well," he added softly, "but now is not the time to wallow in our emotions."

Severus noticed a wave of sorrowful disappointment wash over her face, but in a flash it was replaced by a businesslike exterior.

"Yes, sir. Where do we start?"

They worked tirelessly throughout the night, searching through books and making test potions. Sienna was sent to wake up Hagrid for creatures to try them on. He was a bit disappointed that she could not divulge why she needed the test animals, but she still had her blanket permission slip from Dumbledore that included instructions for any teacher to cooperate with her without question. So he rounded up a few ferrets for her to experiment on.

Two more trips to the Restricted Section of the library and three dead ferrets later, they had finally managed to come up with a potion that held promise. It would be daylight soon and people would be waking up, so there was no time to lose.

"I'll take this to the Headmaster. You return the books and get back to Gryffindor Tower."

"Yes, sir." She began to gather the books.

"Remember *no one* is to know about what we did here tonight."

"Yes, sir. Good luck." She turned to leave.

"Sienna," Severus finally realized that although he could have managed without her, her help saved him at least three hours of time, which could very well have meant the difference between life and death for Dumbledore. And she did have a few fresh ideas to throw in. "Thank you for your help," he said softly.

Sienna's bottom lip began to quiver. Tears started to well up in her eyes. She simply nodded at him. Could she feel his heartache in this horrible situation? He was sure the answer was yes. But he knew she must have her own heartache to deal with, since he knew that her feelings for Dumbledore ran deep. He watched her disappear out the door in silence. Then Severus snapped back to the task at hand. He ladled the bubbling potion into the large ceramic pitcher, grabbed a mug, and followed Sienna out the door.

After the potion had worked its magic on Dumbledore, he felt good enough to eat lunch in the Great Hall, where he returned Severus' cloak to him. By dinner, he almost seemed like his old self. As he and Severus were leaving the room, Sienna came up beside them, smiling from ear to ear. Severus was glad to see her change of mood.

"You're looking quite handsome this evening, sir," Sienna beamed at Dumbledore.

"Thank you, my dear. And I hear you had quite a bit to do with it!" Dumbledore shot a quick glance towards Severus.

"I only did the footwork, sir. Professor Snape was the genius behind the recipe."

Severus gave her a little nod. "I could not have done it without you."

"Well," Dumbledore exclaimed, his eyes twinkling, "it's wonderful to see the two of you back on good terms. I was tired of being caught in the middle."

"You know, Severus, I feel so good, I believe that later, I may run up to Rosemerta's for a drink!"

"Oh, really?" Severus knew that that was Dumbledore's way of saying that he would take his dangerous little side trip with Potter tonight. Somehow, Sienna figured it out as well, because the beaming switched off like a light. He could almost see her heart breaking along with his own.

Sienna suddenly threw her arms around Professor Dumbledore's neck and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around her as well. Severus was a bit taken aback by this

public display of affection. A few of the other students and teachers appeared to have a similar reaction, but no one made any comments as they passed by.

Sienna whispered something in Dumbledore's ear and kissed his cheek. He nodded, and then his lips gently touched hers and lingered there for just a moment. "I love you, too," he replied softly.

Severus could see tears running down her face. She wiped them away quickly, then turned and disappeared into the crowd of people who were exiting the Great Hall. Somehow, Severus knew that would be the last time Sienna would ever see Dumbledore alive.

Dumbledore turned to Severus as they looked into each other's eyes for a moment. The sentiment was there, but Severus just couldn't find the right words to express it. He had never been very good at outwardly showing love. But that was exactly what he felt for Dumbledore. Love, admiration, friendship, gratitude... How could he ever bring himself to kill the man who stood before him?

As usual, Dumbledore's penetrating stare seemed to read Severus' mind, and he spoke: "Don't worry, when the time comes, you'll realize that there is no other way... that you are doing me a favor." He gently placed his left hand on Severus' right shoulder and patted him softly. Severus tried to smile, but a look of pain spread across his face instead.

They finally turned away from each other in silence, each taking the path he knew destiny had carved out for him.

To Severus' surprise, Sienna was sitting in the hallway outside of his office door. He had very mixed feelings when he saw her because they both knew what was coming later. He needed to be alone to gather his thoughts, to steel himself for what he would have to do. He wasn't sure if the distraction of her presence was such a good idea. It must have come across to her because her look turned from hope to worry as he approached.

"I really don't think you should be here right now," Severus informed her matter-of-factly.

"May I please just have few moments of your time, sir?"

"Very well," he said with impatience. "Come in." They both entered. With a wave of his wand the door closed and locked. With a wave of her wand, a Muffliato spell was cast on it.

"Make this quick," he pursed his lips and glared at her.

"I just wanted to see you again before... Well, I imagine you'll be leaving in a hurry. It may be a very long time before we see each other again."

"If ever," he added coldly. "If you are simply here to say 'good bye,' then be done with it and get out. I really need to be alone right now." His heart was hardening. He knew that for the Avada Kedavra curse to work, his heart had to be filled with hate. He was trying to psych himself up, and the last thing he needed was to get all mushy.

"How will I know where to find you?"

Severus stared at Sienna in disbelief. "*Find me?*" He became irate. "You need to *distance* yourself from me. You *know* what I am about to do. You must completely disassociate yourself from me. You should *never* have had any knowledge of this whole thing in the first place. I can't believe that Professor Dumbledore told you."

"He knows I love you," she said quietly. "He wanted me to know the truth so you wouldn't be left without a friend in the world."

Severus became even more agitated. "I have enough to worry about without you adding to it!" The anger rose in his voice. "Can't you see what I'm going through here? I have to *murder my best friend* and leave behind *forever* the only real home I've ever known. I thought you could tell what I was feeling."

"I can tell in fact," she added with desperation, "your feelings are so strong, I can't distance myself from them. I'm *living* your horror, your sadness, your resentment... your *self-loathing*."

Severus turned from her with that last line and walked over to the bookshelf. It was true. He already hated himself for what he was about to do. But he also knew that he needed that hate to make the curse work.

"And," Sienna added, "I have my own feelings piled on top of yours."

Severus turned back to her, glaring with contempt. "*Oh please!* What could possibly be hurting you?"

"Don't be so selfish or quick to judge, Severus," she glared back. "Do you think it's easy for me to sit back and do nothing?"

Severus dropped his gaze. He was being selfish. He had not considered her feelings at all in this.

"I have to sit idly by and watch while the man I love murders someone who has been more than a father to me and then runs off to live with the Death Eaters. And I've sworn an oath not to interfere. You think that doesn't hurt? You think I feel no pain here?" Her bottom lip began to quiver, and tears began to trickle down her cheek again, but this time out of anger.

Severus softened. He took a deep breath and let out a sigh. There was a long silence. Finally, he looked into her eyes and spoke softly. "I promised Dumbledore that when things calmed down I would find you."

Sienna's anger began to subside. "Find me?" She raised her eyebrows out of hope.

"If I don't end up dead or in Azkaban."

"Oh, Severus." She looked at him from across the desk. He could tell she was aching for his arms to hold her. But he needed to feel angry now, not affectionate. He still felt that the timing of this visit was dreadful.

"But war has a way of changing people," he warned her cautiously, "and not usually for the better." He paused for a moment, letting her absorb his words. "You may not want anything to do with me by the end of all this."

"That's not true," she began to move around the desk.

Severus held up his hand, shaking his head. "Please keep your distance..."

Sienna's face became a sorrowful puzzle.

"I really need to be alone. I would prefer that you just leave."

She stared at him in disbelief. But he stood his ground and did not soften this time. He convinced himself it was easier this way. He would probably never see her again, and even if he did, how could she possibly still love him, with all that he knew he would have to do just to survive this war?

"All right, I'll go. But before I do, I just want to say..." as if Sienna could read his thoughts as well as his emotions, she put his fears to rest, "...that no matter what you choose to do, I will always love you, and I will always be your friend."

Severus could see the sincerity in her eyes. She meant every word of it. "Don't expect anything," he said softly, "but if I ever need to contact you, I'll send my patronus, like I did last night."

"All right." A hint of a smile surfaced on her face. "Be safe," she whispered, and without another word, she disappeared out the door.

Finally, Severus was alone. He had plenty of papers to grade, but he really didn't see the point. He knew that Draco's mood had definitely lifted, which meant that he had accomplished his goal whatever that was. And all he needed was a castle without Dumbledore to execute his secret plan. So it would almost certainly happen tonight. What could Draco be up to? Well, he couldn't kill Dumbledore if Dumbledore wasn't here, but he could set the wheels in motion. Even if Draco did nothing, Severus had to be ready for anything. He couldn't even guess what shape Dumbledore would be in when he and Potter returned later, *if* they made it back at all.

He could only wait. It was maddening. And he knew that if circumstances forced the issue, he would have to kill Dumbledore. Once again, his logical mind brought him back to the realization that in order for the Avada Kedavra curse to work, he had to build up an immense amount of hatred and resentment. But did it have to be for Dumbledore, or could it be for himself? He could just channel all of that negative energy into the curse. He could easily muster up enough self loathing to kill someone. Perhaps that was the answer.

He began to take his memory back to Lily how his foolish desire to score brownie points with the Dark Lord had cost her her life. He had tried to stop it. He had turned spy for Dumbledore as soon as he found out that Lily and James were the targets. But it didn't help in the end. He felt so guilty about her death that he had contemplated taking his own life. But Dumbledore convinced him that the best way to serve penance was to continue to spy for the Order, to not let his life be wasted. So he clandestinely helped bring other Death Eaters to justice, and then faded into the Hogwarts landscape after the war was over.

He had been content to live out his life in lonely misery until the Dark Lord had risen again two years ago. Now the nightmare was replaying itself, but Dumbledore's life and perhaps even Sienna's life were both at stake. How could he let this happen? How could he have let down the only two people in the world who believed in him? How could he live with himself?

Severus had worked himself into a terrible state of depression. This wasn't good, either. He had to keep his wits about him. There had to be a balance that he could find and hold onto.

He decided to grade essays. Yes, that would clear his mind. He could find perverse pleasure in putting Ds and Ts on the tops of all but the very best ones. That way he would leave Hogwarts knowing everyone hated him and was glad to see him gone. He figured that most of them would wish him dead or worse. He could live with that. But could he live with himself after killing Dumbledore? That was the big question. Would the right side win in the end? Or would Dumbledore's sacrifice be in vain? Only time would tell.

As the clock on the wall slowly marched past the minutes, Severus graded essays, probably, he assumed, for the very last time.

Several hours inched by before he was disturbed by a frantic Professor Flitwick who burst into his office, rambling on about Death Eaters up on the Astronomy Tower and needing Severus' help. Severus knew immediately that this was it. He didn't want anyone to get hurt or killed, so he figured the more people out of harm's way the better, and he hit Flitwick with a heavy jinx that knocked him out cold, then ran out the door.

To Severus' surprise, Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood were standing in the hallway outside his office. So he sent them in to attend to Flitwick *Good, two more out of harm's way.* He ran up the stairs in the direction of the Astronomy Tower, wand at the ready, his black robes billowing behind him. He could hear the commotion ahead, and as he approached, the dark scene was illuminated by flashes from wands giving off curses. He thought he saw Neville on the floor, but he was still groaning and moving. *Alive, but out of commission. Good.* He caught a glimpse of Gibbon, a Death Eater, sprawled out, his eyes wide with fear, but dead as a door nail. *Must have gotten hit by a stray Killing Curse.* Another flash *that looks like a Weasley down. Too big to be Ron. His hair is long and in a pony tail, but he's still moving Good.* Another jinx flashed by, this time from a huge blond Death Eater. Severus avoided it easily, but whirled around to see Ginny Weasley duck just in time.

The big blond seemed to be guarding the staircase. Severus ran past him and bounded up the stairs two at a time. He burst through the door to the tower roof and hastily surveyed the scene. There was Dumbledore, slumped against the wall. Their eyes met for a brief moment. *Legilimens,* he thought. A snapshot of Potter force-feeding Dumbledore a potion from a basin came into view. Immediately, Severus knew that whatever it was had stolen all but the last few hours of Dumbledore's life. He had to act quickly. There were two brooms in the corner but he had not seen Potter down below. Potter would never shrink from a fight. He was still here, probably under the Invisibility Cloak and disabled somehow. Dumbledore must have stupefied him before the others got there. In order for it to be convincing, Potter had to see the whole thing and hate him for it. Severus glanced quickly at Malfoy and the other Death Eaters. Yes, they all had to believe it. Dumbledore would be dead in a matter of hours anyway...

*"We've got a problem, Snape,"* said Amycus, one of the Death Eaters, *"the boy doesn't seem able--"*

Then Severus heard another voice, softer, kinder, gentler. *"Severus..."*

It was time. Severus could avoid his destiny no longer. All the anger and self loathing for what he was about to do, combined with contempt and animosity for Dumbledore himself, for letting it come to this, sent the adrenalin coursing through his veins. He walked forward with heavy anger etched across his face. He pushed Draco roughly out of the way, since he was, after all, part of the problem. Severus' eyes met Dumbledore's again, but this time Severus saw the inferi floating just below the surface of the water. Then it skipped to Potter dipping the cup into the lake and bringing the inferi to life. Was this a warning from Dumbledore that Voldemort had an army of inferi at the ready? The thought sent a wave of horrible revulsion across his face. Then suddenly, the scene changed again. Dumbledore was struggling, begging...

The real Dumbledore interrupted his own memory, *"Severus... please..."* Severus knew he must have been in unimaginable pain.

The memory continued to play itself out. "KILL ME!" Severus saw Dumbledore wail to Harry.

Severus did the only thing he could do under the circumstances the only logical thing just as Dumbledore had planned it. Inside, Severus' heart was screaming in an agony that grotesquely manifested on his face. He raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

*A jet of green light shot from the end of Severus' wand and hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest.* Severus felt his heart rip apart as he watched Dumbledore blast up into the air. He held him there for a moment. He couldn't bear the thought of Dumbledore's lifeless body crashing down on the hard stone. But to show too much respect would throw suspicion on him, even though the deed was now done. So with a silent *Levicorpus*, he lifted up Dumbledore's body, over the ramparts and gently sent it towards the ground below.

As hard as it was to maintain his composure, Severus knew he had to act quickly if he was going to get himself and Draco out alive. He pushed his emotions deep into the recesses of his heart and let his logical mind take over. Dumbledore was dead he couldn't let such a huge sacrifice be wasted.

*"Out of here, quickly,"* said Severus, grabbing Draco by the scruff of the neck. He pushed him through the door as the others followed behind them.

Severus and Malfoy bounded down the staircase and into the fray. The students and Order Members ceased fire, just as Severus knew they would, giving him and Draco a chance to get away unscathed. They had no idea what he had just done; they thought he was trying to escape the Death Eaters. They picked their way through the rubble that used to be the ceiling and made it to the other end of the corridor, but as soon as they were clear, the fighting resumed. Amycus, his sister, and Greyback joined the huge blond engaging the Order and the handful of brave students who had joined them. Severus was still unsure as to Potter's whereabouts. He didn't want him to get hurt, or anyone else for that matter.

"It's over, time to go!" Severus shouted over the din as he and Draco were about to disappear around the corner. They bolted down a secret passage. Severus remembered to avoid the vanishing step in the concealed staircase, but Draco was unfamiliar with this particular short cut. He stumbled, shouting in pain as the step cut into his leg.

"Come on!" Severus grabbed his arm and pulled him up roughly. "You alright?"

"I'll live," Draco tried not to whine.

"Not if we don't get out of here!" Severus said, with more than just a touch of urgency in his voice. They continued down the staircase and threw aside the tapestry that hid the bottom entrance.

Several sleepy Hufflepuffs had just begun to trickle into the corridor from their dormitory. "Get back to bed all of you!" Severus shouted, hoping they would return to safety.

This entire event had taken way too much time and woke up most of the school. The sooner he led the Death Eaters out of here, the less likely anyone else would get hurt. And Fenrir Greyback of all people here at Hogwarts! How could Draco do such a thing? He put his own friends in danger with this stunt. If any one of the students ended up dead... Severus just couldn't bear to think about it, not right now.

He blasted open the huge oak front doors. Draco slipped and fell on the leg he had cut open earlier, smearing blood on the flagstones. Severus grabbed his arm again and dragged him down the remaining steps. He heard the huge blond Death Eater take a potshot at an objecting student. He missed, but the Gryffindor hourglass in the Entrance Hall shattered, rubies cascading all over the floor.

"Come ON!" Severus shouted at both Draco and the blond. He was still worried about Potter. He still had not seen him. Was he alright? Had he been hurt? It didn't seem so from Dumbledore's memory.

Hagrid suddenly emerged from his cabin and began to pursue the big blond Death Eater. As their flying curses lit up the night, Severus wasn't worried for Hagrid's safety. He knew that the half giant's thick skin and huge size would protect him from almost anything. They would make a good diversion as he and Draco made their way towards the gate and safety.

Then suddenly, a flash of red light soared past Severus' head. "*Run Draco!*" he shouted and turned to face the unknown assailant. It was Potter! Well, at least he knew where he was and that he had made it through the night's events relatively unscathed. They stared at each other for a moment, hatred intensely etched across Potter's angry, contorted face.

*Legilimens*, Severus thought to himself. He immediately saw Dumbledore's murder on the Astronomy Tower. Potter had seen everything. No wonder.

This wasn't going to be easy for Severus. It had always been a love/hate relationship for him. He loved Harry because he was Lily's son. But he hated the way the boy reminded him so much of James: his looks, his mannerisms, his arrogance, his foolish disregard for the rules, and tonight especially, his recklessness. He imagined that tonight's events, more than anything Severus had ever done, put an end to any hope of ever forging a friendship with the boy. Well, if he was going to lose him forever, he may as well make the best of it.

They raised *their wands simultaneously*.

"Cruc..."

Severus saw it coming, of course. He parried it away, hitting Harry in the chest with a light stunner, knocking him off his feet. He knew that in order to escape, he would have to put Potter out of commission, hopefully without really hurting him.

"Incendio!"

Severus looked over his shoulder to see an explosion over Hagrid's cabin. His first instinct was to run help put out the fire make sure Hagrid was unharmed. But that was impossible now.

"Fang's in there, yer evil--!" Hagrid bellowed.

"Cruc--" yelled Potter for the second time. Severus was beginning to tire of this. He had to get out of there.

"No Unforgivable Curses for you, Potter!" yelled Severus over the din of the fire and the yelping dog, as he blocked the curse. "*You haven't got the nerve or the ability...*"

"Incarc..." Potter roared, but Severus deflected the spell again. Potter had never mastered the art of nonverbal spells. He was about to get a quick lesson on their importance.

"Fight back!" Potter screamed at him. "*Fight back, you cowardly...*"

He had sounded and looked so much like James with that last remark that Severus couldn't just let it pass. "*Coward, did you call me, Potter?*" he shouted. "*Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?*"

"Stupe..."

When would Potter learn? He would never stand a chance against the Death Eaters, much less the Dark Lord himself, by shouting spells aloud. With a simple flick of his wand, it was deflected.

"Blocked again and again and again, until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!"

Severus quickly surveyed the scene. He had to get that huge blond off the grounds before he did any more damage. "*Now come!*" he shouted at the blond. "*It is time to be gone, before the Ministry turns up...*"

"Impedi..."

Severus had moved to block the spell, but suddenly realized that Potter never completed it. He was writhing on the ground, screaming in pain. Alecto had hit him from behind with the Cruciatus Curse. "*No!*" roared Severus, almost in a panic. This was getting way out of hand. "*Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord...*" He knew that to bring Harry alive and kicking with them would have probably pleased Voldemort, but Severus needed an excuse to leave him behind, and the way Voldemort had given the order, it could have been interpreted two ways. "*...we are to leave him! Go! Go!*"

Finally, Severus watched with relief as the brother, sister and huge blond Death Eater ran towards the front gate. He heard Potter howl with rage and turned yet again to face him.

"Sectum...!"

Severus flicked his wand and the curse was repelled yet again. The curse that had almost killed Draco... The curse that he, himself had invented so long ago. How dare

this boy use his own inventions against him *just like James*. He was about to return to Lord Voldemort permanently to lay his life on the line in the hopes that Potter could somehow find a way to destroy the Dark Lord, a cause that Dumbledore had given his life for just moments ago. His contempt for Potter grew to enormous proportions. He glared as the hatred on Potter's face mirrored his own. He could see the wheels turning in his little mind.

*"No, Potter!" screamed Severus*. He blasted the boy with another stunner, this time combined with an Expelliarmus charm that sent his wand flying as he hit the ground. Severus thought of James as he approached Harry. How so many times James and his marauding friends had put him in the very position that Harry was now in, flat on his back, wandless and defenseless. All thoughts of Lily had evaporated from his mind. All he could see was James. All he could feel was hatred and resentment. If it wasn't for James, none of this would be happening. If it wasn't for James, Lily would probably still be alive, and Harry might have been his son.

*"You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd turn my inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you? I don't think so..."*

*Harry had dived for his wand.*

*"No!" Severus shot a hex at it and it flew out of sight into the darkness.* Now at last, he could finally get out of here. He began to turn on his heel.

*"Kill me then," panted Harry*. Severus turned again to face him, even more malice etched across his face. Kill him? He was about to enter the depths of Hell for him. Potter had no idea no appreciation for his sacrifice for all the things he had already done.

*"Kill me like you killed him, you coward..."*

Something in Severus finally snapped. Hadn't Dumbledore told him that he, Severus, was the only person he could trust to do it? Hadn't he, Severus, subjected himself over and over to the Dark Lord's scrutiny, his mind probes, his wrath? Hadn't he faced death every time he was called back? And all for the Order of the Phoenix, to avenge Lily's death, to keep Harry Potter alive? Yes. And this last insult after all the pressure of the last few months as well as what was surely to come was just more than he could bear.

*"DON'T..."* he heard himself scream as all the bottled-up emotions from the entire year came gushing to the surface..*"CALL ME COWARD!"* His intense pain and anger manifested in a spell that sent a white-hot whip through the air. It hit Potter in the face and slammed him backwards into the ground. But with the release of all that negative energy, Severus regained his wits. He had to get out of there before he completely lost his temper and did any real damage to the boy.

Just then an enormous figure blocked out the stars above Severus as it let out an unearthly screech. It was coming towards him, talons outstretched. Buckbeak! Severus turned and ran for his life. After everything that had happened to Hagrid that night, he didn't have the heart to kill Buckbeak. There had been enough killing.

But Buckbeak was relentless. Severus fired off a stunner over his shoulder. He missed, but it sent the hippogryff off course enough to give him the few extra seconds he needed to make it through the front gate and Disapparate.

## Draco's Tongue

*Chapter 17 of 31*

Severus learns that he will be taking over the position of Headmaster, and he enlists someone very special to help protect the students.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Harry Potter book series by the brilliant J. K. Rowling. It was written strictly for fun; no profit has been made in the writing or sharing of this story.

As always, I'd like to extend my deepest thanks to my two wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for their diligent proofreading and suggestions. They really helped to improve my story.

AN: Since Book 7 contained very little of Severus Snape, I have had quite a bit of fun filling in the pieces of his life that last year. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Please, please, let me know what you think. I highly value your reviews.

### Chapter 17

#### "Draco's Tongue, the Truth Revealed,

#### Potion Master's Lair Concealed"

Severus Apparated onto the grounds of the old Riddle house where he noticed several rooms lit from the inside. He walked around to the back of the house, tapped his wand on a spot in the thick ivy that covered the wall, and a door swung open. The instant he entered the cavernous kitchen, he became extremely uncomfortable. The atmosphere in the room was almost festive! He had never felt anything more positive than subdued apprehension in this house. It seemed most unusual to find a party atmosphere. He immediately became suspicious of the situation. Even though the only wizard that Voldemort had ever feared was now out of the way, Voldemort must have had an ulterior motive for throwing a party. He probably thought the alcohol would loosen people's lips and let unintended secrets out into the open.

"There's the man of the hour!" hollered Amycus jovially, raising a glass of Firewhiskey at Severus as he entered the room.

"Congratulations, Severus," squeaked Wormtail excitedly, also raising a glass. "Care for a snort?"

Severus ignored him and glanced around the room. Alecto was chatting with Bellatrix. They both acknowledged Severus' presence with a respectful nod, which he returned.

Just then, Lord Voldemort himself floated into the room, Nagini slithering behind him. Voldemort was grinning with glee. Was it possible? Even the snake looked happy!

"My Lord," Severus knelt down and kissed the hem of his robes.

"Welcome, my greasy friend! You are to be commended and rewarded!" the Dark Lord exclaimed with sincerity. "Although from what Amycus tells me, Dumbledore was sickly and wandless. Not exactly a challenge, eh?"

"Not like that Kaolin girl, huh, Professor?" came a familiar voice from behind him. Severus turned on his heel to see Draco strutting in through a side door, the big blond Death Eater in his wake. His eyes grew intense with anger the last thing he wanted was to remind Lord Voldemort of Sienna.

Draco returned his menacing glare with an amused mock grimace. "What's the matter, Professor," he snickered, "bit of an embarrassment for you?"

Severus knew that Draco would be angry and resentful because Severus had finally done what Draco was supposed to do. Perhaps this was his way of getting revenge. Whatever the reason, however, the damage was done, because Voldemort's curiosity was piqued.

"Kaolin girl?" he hissed. "Do tell me what happened, Severus."

"I used her in a demonstration for the class, your Lordship. I'm ashamed to say... she got the better of me."

"Why didn't I see this in your memories, Severus?" Voldemort's tone became a touch menacing.

"I suppose..." Severus searched for a convincing cover, knowing that to outright lie would lead to detection. His answer had to be carefully crafted and at least partially true. "...I subconsciously buried that particular memory because I wanted to forget it."

"Why is that, Severus?" Voldemort approached him, scrutinizing his every movement, every breath, every word.

"As Draco just mentioned," Severus admitted honestly, "it was... embarrassing."

"Show me what happened. I want to see for myself."

Their eyes met unblinkingly. He obediently brought up the memory in question. At least, thought Severus, it ended with the absolute certainty that they now hated each other.

"Interesting, interesting," pondered Voldemort. "She does indeed seem to be a formidable adversary." He paused for a moment, apparently deep in thought. "I wonder, Severus, just how many more memories you have hidden from me over the years, out of... *embarrassment*... I wonder."

A deathly silence filled the room. What should have been a victorious evening for Severus, for once with no worries in the presence of the Dark Lord, had suddenly become one of terror. He had just killed Dumbledore. What else would he possibly have to do to prove his loyalty?

"I hide no secrets from you, my Lord," Severus lied, consciously forcing his heart rate to slow.

"Do you take me for a *fool*?" sneered Voldemort. "Of course you hide secrets from me. We *ALL* have our nasty little secrets that we tuck away deep inside." Severus was afraid to show relief. He had a feeling this statement was made just to set him up for a fall, and he knew better than to take the bait. He stood like a stone statue, silent and unflinching, as his gaze never left those glowing red, snake-like eyes. This apparently impressed the Dark Lord enough that he looked away and began stalking the room like a predator. Severus watched with inner relief as everyone else in the room shifted uncomfortably.

"I could extract them, of course, but most of it is emotional drivel that wouldn't interest me in the least. So why should I waste my time?" A few moments passed as the crowd began to relax a bit, but not for long. "Just remember that I *can* extract them if I so desire, and if you do not fully cooperate... Well, let's just say, I hope St. Mungo's has a bed for you on their long-term ward." He started to laugh maniacally as the Death Eaters looked at each other, suspicion mixed with fear on their faces. Perhaps, thought Severus, Draco wasn't the only one who couldn't keep his mouth shut about a comrade.

"So, who wants to tell me their version of the night's momentous events?" asked Voldemort cheerfully.

Amycus was happy to elaborate. As the story was told, the room began to liven up again. They each took turns talking excitedly, sometimes all at once, about how Draco had gotten them all in through the vanishing cabinet right under Dumbledore's nose; how Draco had even disarmed Dumbledore by the time they had all arrived on the tower. The atmosphere became jovial again. Draco even seemed to be enjoying himself, his arrogance returning, despite the fact that he had not actually been the one to do in Dumbledore. He did get them into the castle after all. He did play a very important role.

Severus stood silently, forcing a smile and a nod when someone made reference to him. But he was subdued with worry about Sienna. He knew the Dark Lord wasn't finished yet where she was concerned.

The outside door opened and in walked Fenrir Greyback. Everyone stopped talking and looked at him. It wasn't a full moon, and they all knew that with Voldemort there he would surely behave himself. But he was mistrusted just the same, and with good reason.

"About time you showed up," said Amycus. "What took you so long?"

"Don't you worry about it!" snapped Fenrir, who smelled of sweat and blood. He licked his lips and wiped his chin on his dirty sleeve as he eyed Draco's injured leg. It reminded him that he barely got a taste of Bill Weasley earlier. Then he turned to Voldemort and knelt down to kiss his robes. "Your Lordship."

"Don't touch me, you filthy beast!" hissed Voldemort as he took a step back.

Fenrir had to make a conscious effort not to look angry with Voldemort for his rude comment as he stood and walked over to the counter. He shoved Wormtail aside and poured himself a Firewhiskey. "You know, little Draco there couldn't bring himself to kill the old man," he informed Voldemort. "If you'd like, I could take care of him for you... Master." He licked his lips again, eyeing Draco with heavy desire. "Delicious," he whispered, breathing through his yellow, pointed teeth. The smile that spread across his face sent chills up Severus' spine. Draco looked downright horror-stricken.

Voldemort looked at Draco as if sizing him up for a casket. Of course, there wouldn't be anything left to bury if Fenrir had his way. He clucked his tongue and Draco's expression turned to panic. Severus wondered if he might have thought of bursting through the door and trying to Disapparate. But where would he go? There was no hiding from Lord Voldemort. Draco was already beginning to learn that there were terrors much worse than the Cruciatus Curse.

Voldemort could read him like a book. "Oh, don't worry, Draco. Although Fenrir is right, you did leave the killing up to Severus, you still came in quite useful tonight. Yes, without you and your Vanishing Cabinet, Draco, I fear Severus may not have been able to manage it." Then Voldemort turned back to the werewolf. "So sorry, my blood-thirsty friend, but as long as I deem him of some value, you'll have to find your tasty morsels elsewhere."

Draco let out a sigh of relief. Severus simply shook his head. He knew from experience that that was a mistake.

Sure enough, with the sound of Draco's sigh, Voldemort's attention returned to him. "But you *did* disappoint me, Draco. And I simply cannot let a disappointment of such magnitude go unpunished... *Crucio!*" Voldemort thrust his wand point-blank into Draco's chest. The sudden move took everyone but Severus by surprise. They all tried to contain their pained looks. Draco was barely of age, still so young, so much to learn. Severus had a feeling that everyone in the room, with the obvious exception of Voldemort and Greyback, actually felt sorry for him as he fell to the ground screaming in agony, a pain Severus knew all too well.

After only a few seconds, though seemingly much longer, Voldemort lifted the curse. Bellatrix bent down and helped Draco up. *What a naïve fool*, thought Severus. The boy had no idea of the life he was in for the shadow of a life full of hate, deception, back-stabbing, fear... a never-ending vicious cycle serving a Master with insatiable desires. Perhaps, Severus thought hopefully, before Draco sank too deeply into the quicksand that was Voldemort, he could be turned to the side of good.

Eventually, everyone grew tired as the stories wore thin. Severus asked to be excused, but Voldemort took him aside instead. Severus was informed that Voldemort's new headquarters would be Malfoy Manor and that Severus could make plans to be the new Headmaster of Hogwarts! But until this was accomplished, he would hide out at

Spinner's End. Voldemort had already put concealment charms around the place so that the Order members couldn't find it. He would be safe there for the time being.

His fears of being a wanted man were quelled as he learned of the Dark Lord's many spies already in place at the Ministry, as well as half the staff of the *Daily Prophet* who were under the Imperious Curse. Harry Potter would be isolated from the Wizarding World at his aunt and uncle's house until the end of July. He was the only one who knew the truth, besides the other Death Eaters who were on the tower that night. It would be easy to implicate him and exonerate Severus. Once the Ministry of Magic fell under Voldemort's control, the puppet regime could announce Severus' new position as Headmaster and the Carrows as new teachers.

"In the mean time, work on finding out when the Order will try to move Potter. Somehow, I don't think it will happen on his birthday. That would be too obvious."

"Yes, my Lord. In spite of what has happened, I believe I can extract the needed information from Mundungus Fletcher, one of the less resistant Order members. I know where he likes to lurk. A few drops of Veritaserum in his mead, and he will tell me anything I want to know."

"Excellent. You should be able to get back into Hogwarts by the end of next week. I expect the information about Potter by our next meeting, which should happen shortly afterward."

Severus gave a curt nod.

He was finally allowed to leave.

As he headed out the door to Spinner's End, he began to contemplate the future. Hogwarts Headmaster... He had promised Dumbledore to do all in his power to protect its students, and this new position of authority made it infinitely easier to keep that promise in spite of the Carrows joining his staff. He just hoped McGonagall and the others would not resign in protest. He would have to convince them that for the sake of the students they needed to stay.

He was not looking forward to facing McGonagall again. He wished that he could tell her the truth, but at this point he felt she would never believe him anyway. So it was with very mixed feelings that he planned his return to Hogwarts at the end of June.

Headmaster Snape... He had not even dared to dream it; now he was about to live it.

Severus Apparated from the gardens of the old Riddle house to the polluted river's edge at Spinner's End. He slowly and wearily made his way up the side of the bank. As he put some distance between himself and the river, he was grateful to get away from the pungent smell of the contaminated water. He let himself into the house, forced himself upstairs, and flopped down, fully clothed, on the bed. But he couldn't fall asleep. He kept seeing the images in his mind that Dumbledore had sent him just before he died. *What was in that horrible potion that he drank? Why was he compelled to drink it? What purpose did it serve? And all those Inferi... What could Voldemort possibly be planning?*

When sleep finally overtook him, it was filled with instant replays of the nightmarish events on the tower earlier that night. Severus aimed his wand at Dumbledore, said those horrible words, and just as the curse reached him, he turned into Sienna! It was her body that then floated over the ramparts. "NOOOO!" Severus sat up with a start, panting and sweating. He looked frantically around the room but no one was there. Good, no one had heard the scream. Had he screamed? Or was that just part of the dream? His heart was racing. He had to clear his mind. He couldn't let that happen again.

As he stood up and paced the room, he realized that he felt warm. He was still fully clothed in his usual black garb, and whenever he tried to sleep and became overheated, he was invariably consumed by nightmares. He went to the bathroom and poured himself a glass of cool water, then drank it down. He returned to the bedroom where he stripped down to his underwear and crawled into bed, only a light cover over him. He then put his head on the pillow and stared up at the ceiling, afraid to close his eyes. But eventually fatigue overtook him and his lids grew heavy.

As he fell once again into a light REM sleep, he started to dream. This time he found himself back at Hogwarts, walking by the Black Lake. It seemed like a replay of Sienna's vision, but where was she? He looked towards the castle and could just make out a figure running towards him, calling his name...

"Severus!" She came closer. "Oh, Severus, I'm so glad I finally found you!"

To Severus' surprise, it was Lily who greeted him, all out of breath. She hugged him and kissed him gently on the lips, then took his hand in hers and led him along the shore.

"Don't get me wrong," he began, a bit confused, "but I don't understand. Why are you here? You always have a good reason when you seek me out in a dream."

"And tonight is no exception."

He stopped walking and turned to look into her sparkling green eyes. "Do you know what has happened? Do you know what I have done?"

"Yes," she smiled. "Don't worry, I've seen Albus. You have no idea of the pain he was in when you released him. He is free of it now, and you are in an ideal situation to protect Harry and help the Order. You did what he asked you to do. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

He nodded. Hearing her say the words lifted an immense weight from his already strained shoulders. "But now I'm worried about Sienna. The Dark Lord has taken an interest in her despite all my efforts. Can you get a message to her? Can you tell her to go into hiding?"

Lily shook her head. The look in her eyes was the same as the last time she came to him, full of infinite wisdom and protection. "Don't worry about Sienna. Our girl can take care of herself."

"Our girl... That's exactly the way Dumbledore referred to her once. It's as if she belongs to both of us."

"All of us," Lily corrected him. "And we belong to her. It will all work out for the best. You'll see. Trust me. Trust Sienna. Don't be afraid."

Severus felt himself drifting into a deeper sleep as Lily and the Black Lake dissolved around him.

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The next morning, Severus rose, feeling rested and refreshed. He knew he had a long day ahead of him tracking down Mundungus Fletcher. He showered and dressed and, with tea cup in hand, began to check his potions stocks. Yes, plenty of Polyjuice Potion and Veritaserum on hand. Both would be necessary for what he was about to do. He checked his many hair samples, trying to decide who he wanted to look like while he was at the Leaky Cauldron. Slughorn? No, too heavy. He had no clothes that would fit. Fudge? No, the real Fudge could likely walk through the door at any given moment. Stan Shunpike and Lucius Malfoy were supposed to be in Azkaban, although Severus knew better. Then a thought occurred to him... Right size and shape and Severus could be relatively sure that he would not walk through the door of any London pub any time soon: Aberforth Dumbledore.

He reached up and pulled down the phial with Aberforth's name on it. Then he went back upstairs and changed into clothes suitable for an older wizard that fit with a bit more room than his lean frame required. Back downstairs for a traveling cloak, then he stashed a phial of Polyjuice Potion, the phial containing the hair and, just in case, some Veritaserum in his pockets. He quickly added Muggle money in his left pants pocket and a few Galleons in his right. He had not eaten anything and his stomach was growling, but it would have to wait. As foul as Polyjuice usually tasted, he decided it would be easier on an empty stomach. Even though it was a warm June morning, he pulled the hood of his traveling cloak up over his head and past his face so no one would be able to see who he was. Then he headed out the door.

After making his way to the riverbank, Severus Disapparated to London. Once there, he ducked into an alleyway near the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron and dropped the hair in the phial. It bubbled and steamed, looking like green mud. Severus' face contorted as he let out a sigh.



"Bottoms up!" he whispered to himself and forced the thick goo down.

After suffering the usual discomforts that went along with the transformation, he realized that Aberforth may not have been a great choice after all. Severus had forgotten to take into account his advanced age. His skin felt dry and leathery. He felt his body sagging in places that he never knew could sag. His joints ached, he felt stiff... Every move was an effort. *Is this how it feels to get old? Maybe living to be 147 isn't all that it's cracked up to be.* But what was done was done, so he made his way in awkward silence to the Leaky Cauldron.

"Oh my word! If it isn't Aberforth Dumbledore!" exclaimed Tom, the barman, as Severus hobbled through the front door. It was early in the day, but a few customers were scattered amongst the tables with tea and crumpets. Several of them looked up briefly. No one else seemed to recognize him, likely because they were much younger.

Severus leaned against the bar and held out a friendly hand to Tom who grasped it warmly.

"How are things at the Hog's Head?" asked Tom.

"Oh, fine. The usual riff raff in and out. You know how it is."

"What brings you to London?"

"Just here to round up Mundungus Fletcher." Severus leaned closer to Tom. "Official Order business," he said in a low voice.

Tom's eyes grew wide. "I haven't seen him lately. Woulda thought he was at your place."

"Not for a day or so," Severus informed him. "Well, thanks anyway. Gotta get back." And with that, Severus turned to leave, but as he looked up, he saw Aberforth's reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Until that moment, he had not realized how much Aberforth looked like Albus. As those glacial blue eyes stared back at him from behind his spectacles, his heart skipped a beat. Aberforth... Of course. Dumbledore's brother. Perhaps he knew the truth. Perhaps he could help.

As soon as he was out of sight in the alley, Severus Apparated back to Spinner's End to give the Polyjuice Potion time to wear off. He ate some much needed breakfast while he waited, then headed back out the door once again. Although he kept his hood well over his head to hide his face, he didn't feel the need for another disguise. Hogsmeade was already crawling with Death Eaters. No one would question his appearance or business there.

Severus found the Hog's Head's doors bolted shut, even though it was well into the early afternoon by the time he got there. He knocked softly on the door. Suddenly, a small clean spot began to form on the window by the door. Severus could see an eye peering out, a sparkling, crystal blue eye. The eye disappeared as the unmistakable sound of chains and bolts being removed reached Severus' ears.

"Why do you bother with Muggle locks when all it takes to open them is a simple 'Alohamora?'" Severus asked as he stepped quickly into the barely opened door.

"I don't have the talent with protective enchantments my brother had. So I know there's no chance I can ever keep anyone out with a spell. But at least with all this Muggle gear on the door, when they use Alohamora I can hear them coming. It all makes such a racket as it unlocks."

A faint smile flickered across Severus' face.

"Are we quite alone?"

"I think so," said Aberforth. "I have several Death Eaters renting rooms upstairs. But they all left early this morning. I used to open at noon, but I can't stomach those people more than a few hours a day, so now I don't open 'til six p.m."

Severus nodded; he understood just how Aberforth felt.

"I need to speak with you in private."

"I knew you'd come sooner or later." He led Severus upstairs to a sparse room with a few chairs, a small table, and a fireplace. Severus noticed the portrait that hung over the mantle. It was the only decoration in the entire room. The teenage girl's smile was benign and her expression was vacant. But her eyes seemed strangely familiar. Pale grayish green? Or were they blue? And they sparkled like moonlight on water.

Severus threw off the shiver that crept up his back and cast the Muffliato spell on the door, remembering all too well the night he had listened just outside this very door and overheard the prophecy which had cost Lily her life. Then he turned back to Aberforth. "How much did your brother tell you about me?"

"My brother..." Aberforth shook his head slowly as he stared lovingly at the girl's portrait. "He loved his secrets." A long silence followed, as if he were prioritizing his information, deciding what to divulge and what not to, not unlike his older brother would have done.

He finally looked Severus in the eye, and with that same piercing stare that felt almost like a mind probe, he said, "My brother told me that things would not always be as they appeared. He said that you had saved his life on several occasions, and that no matter what happened or how, I should still trust you and help you in any way I could."

Severus' stare was equally piercing as he tentatively asked, "And do you plan to honor his request?"

"I do."

Severus closed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. "Thank you," he whispered sincerely. "I have an additional request, and I think under the circumstances it would be prudent for you to do so."

"Oh?" Aberforth raised an eyebrow.

"You must tell no one of our accord, and give everyone the impression that you dislike and mistrust me, even other Order members and especially Harry Potter!"

"Why Potter? Doesn't he know? I thought he and Albus were close."

"They were. But this is necessary. He and everyone else must believe that my loyalties lie with the Dark Lord. It is essential for his ultimate defeat as your brother and I planned it."

"Where does Potter fit into all this?"

Severus' face flushed slightly as he remembered the conversation in the Headmaster's office when he'd found out that Harry must sacrifice himself. He felt a familiar anger well up inside of him, but he kept his cool. "I am not at liberty to say... As you admitted earlier, your brother loved his secrets."

Aberforth let out an angry grunt. "Agreed," he said gruffly.

"It seems that I will soon become the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. There may come a time when the students turn to you for help in some way. I will gladly turn a blind eye to anything you help them with, but for their own sake, if you get wind of any scheme that could cost them their lives, would you please inform me immediately?"

"Sure, Severus. I promised Albus I would try my utmost to protect his students should anything happen to him. Seems he knew his days were numbered."

"He did," admitted Severus. "And I made him a similar promise."

"I take it you two worked out the whole death on the tower scene beforehand?"

Severus simply smiled as he gazed curiously at the girl in the painting.

"I hear you put on quite a show... Well, at least he didn't suffer."

With that statement Severus realized just how in the dark Albus had kept Aberforth about his condition. Didn't suffer? For almost 12 months he had suffered unimaginable pain day and night. But rather than burden Aberforth with this heavy bit of news, Severus remained silent.

"Well, if there's nothing else I can do for you, I better get downstairs. Got a lot to do before I open up."

"Oh, I almost forgot. There is one more thing you might be able to help me with."

"What's that?" asked Aberforth, almost irritated.

"Mundungus Fletcher... Have you seen him lately? Do you know where he is?"

"Not here, not with all the Death Eaters around. But last time I saw him, I overheard him talking about a little town on the east coast. Robin Hood's Bay. You might try looking there."

"Thanks," said Severus, and he swept out the door and down the stairs.

He made his way outside and was just about to Disapparate to Robin Hood's Bay when a sharp pain shot up his left arm. A detour to Malfoy Manor was apparently in order.

Upon arrival he found that he was the only one summoned. A pale, sickly-looking Draco Malfoy met him at the door. Not his usual arrogant self, he kept his head down and barely spoke.

"In here, Professor." Draco's voice was shaky.

"My Lord." Severus knelt to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"I'll make this quick, Severus. I have much to do. Dolores Umbridge has cleared the paperwork for you to be appointed new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Interesting woman. She was easily persuaded. No torture was necessary, only a promise of promotion when our people take over the Ministry. Here is a letter confirming your appointment. If the other teachers give you any trouble, kill them like you killed Dumbledore."

Severus tried not to appear alarmed. "I don't believe they will give me any trouble, my Lord."

"I'll have the Carrows cleared to join you shortly."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Any news on when the Order plans to move Potter?"

"I was on Fletcher's trail when you summoned me, sir."

"Very well, then. After you move back into Hogwarts Castle and lay down the law with your new staff, you can get back to it. I expect answers, Severus. I'm counting on you. We meet next week."

"Yes, my Lord."

So it was back to Hogsmeade and the long lonely walk down the path to Hogwarts. With confirmation letter in hand, Severus entered the front door. As usual for the summer the ancient castle seemed deserted. The mess from the battle that had taken place the night Severus fled had all been cleaned up and repairs made. If he didn't know better, he would have thought it was all just a bad dream.

As Severus made his way down the hall to the Headmaster's office, Filch came up behind him.

"What are *you* doing here?" he barked.

Severus turned on his heel and glared with contempt at the frail old man. He said nothing but shoved the letter in Filch's face. He knew he would have to play his role convincingly to the staff. Yes, they all had to hate him.

Filch read the letter and met Severus' intense gaze. "So that's it, is it? Just march back in here like nothing happened?"

"Were you on the tower that night?"

"No, but I heard..."

Severus cut across him. "Then you don't know what happened." He turned back towards the office and walked on in silence.

"Siamese," he said to the gargoyle as he approached. Being an expert with Legilimens could definitely come in handy sometimes. Filch hadn't even realized what he had done.

As the spiral staircase lifted him to the office level, he took a deep breath and steadied himself for the confrontation that he knew was about to take place.

Professor McGonagall looked up from the desk. She was gathering her things together, getting ready to vacate the office. This caught Severus off guard.

"I got the owl from the Ministry just an hour ago. You don't waste any time, do you?" Her look was calm, but her voice was shaking with rage.

"I merely thought it prudent under the circumstances to see if I need to make further staff changes. It seems that the Carrows will be filling the two vacant positions." He stopped and watched Minerva pack. The roughness with which she stored her possessions betrayed her cool exterior. She could have used magic to pack, but somehow, he guessed, it was more satisfying to physically shove the items into the box.

"Two positions? Which two positions? And what makes the Carrows qualified to teach anything?"

"The Ministry seems satisfied with their credentials; therefore, you should be as well. And the first opening should be obvious: Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"And the other?"

"Charity Burbage has resigned. We will need a new Muggle Studies teacher." Severus had to make a conscious effort to steady his gaze. He knew Charity had been abducted by Death Eaters. She was now merely a source of amusement for the Dark Lord. Severus knew that unfortunately, her days were numbered.

"Charity said nothing of resigning when she left for the summer. There must be some mistake. There is no need to replace her with one of your... your..."

"I regret to inform you that she will definitely not be coming back." Inside, Severus felt a touch of nausea. Charity had been an adequate teacher and a good and decent human being. A kinder soul would have been hard to find.

McGonagall's eyes reflected her concerns and suspicions. "How could you?" she asked in disgust.

"I assure you I had nothing to do with it."

"You had *everything* to do with it! Anyone who sits idly by and lets things happen is just as guilty as the perpetrator, as far as I am concerned." She kept her voice low, but he could hear the contempt loud and clear.

"Are you simply vacating my office, or will you be vacating the school as well?"

"If I resign, who might my replacement be?" Her steel-grey eyes bore into him.

Severus held his head high and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I don't know... Bellatrix perhaps?" He figured that a little reverse psychology never hurt.

"Then I suppose, for the sake of the students, I'll be staying," she said stiffly.

"Good," said Severus sincerely. "Staff changes require such a mountain of paperwork."

When McGonagall finally got out of his way, he closed the door and immediately changed the password to "Albus." Then he faced the supposedly sleeping portrait.

"I know you have heard every word of the previous conversation... She's gone. You can open your eyes now."

Dumbledore's portrait smiled down on him. "This is a pleasant turn of events."

"I must admit, it makes things a bit easier to be here in this very office." Severus glanced over at the Sword of Gryffindor in its glass case.

They caught each other up on the latest information, and then Dumbledore urged Severus to find Mundungus Fletcher and Confund him into suggesting that the Order use duplicate Harrys as a diversion on the night they relocate Harry to the Weasleys' house at the Burrow. Then Severus sat down in the chair just to see how it "fit" him, but he sprang up almost immediately. "I didn't earn the right to sit here," he scowled. "It doesn't feel right. This should be Minerva's chair."

"It will be, once Voldemort is defeated," Dumbledore offered wisely. "In the mean time, I have no doubt that, under the circumstances, you are the best person for the job."

Severus took small comfort in Dumbledore's statement as he headed back out the door and up to Hogsmeade where he could Apparate to Robin Hood's Bay.

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Once on the outskirts of the small coastal town, it wasn't difficult to find Fletcher. There was one lone concealed pub, only detectable by the magical community, "Maid Marion's Mug." Severus pulled the hood of his traveling cloak even farther over his face and slipped through the door. He knew that if Mundungus saw him before Severus found him first, the trip would be in vain, but he needn't have worried. There was Dung leaning into the face of some poor, unsuspecting witch, while trying to sound suave and worldly. She was obviously uncomfortable as she tried to lean back and away from his bad teeth and subsequent goat breath.

With his wand concealed under his cloak, a quick nonverbal Confundus Charm turned Fletcher's eyes glassy and his attention away from the girl. Severus sidled up to his other flank and Fletcher smiled at him. Severus noticed a grateful look from the little witch as she silently slipped away into the crowded, smoky pub.

Severus doubted that any news of his deeds on the tower had reached this sleepy little town. It had not been in the *Daily Prophet* after all, which only offered news of Dumbledore's death, with suspicions thrown on Potter. He pulled his hood back and nodded at the bartender.

"Another round for my friend here."

"Thanks, Severus," said Dung, smiling benignly.

"Don't mention it."

As the drink was presented, Severus pulled it from Dung's greedy grasp and added three drops of Veritaserum. He knew that Dung would have probably told him the truth anyway, but this way there would be no mistake. He couldn't afford to take chances if he was to stay in good standing with the Dark Lord.

Severus extracted all the information he needed from the very cooperative thief and then proceeded to suggest the duplicate Potters.

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In a few days time, Severus had settled into the Headmaster's office and quarters, quite a comfortable step up from his previous space. Headmaster Snape... this was going to take some getting used to.

When his Dark Mark burned again, Severus knew it would be a full blown meeting of Voldemort's council. It didn't pain him to be surrounded by some of the most unsavory characters in the history of the Wizarding World, but to sit at the table and calmly watch as Charity Burbage begged him for help was almost more torture than his soul could bear. But what could he do? The conversation with Dumbledore came to mind from that fateful night when he had learned of Harry Potter's ultimate fate. Dumbledore had asked him how many people he had watched die. *Lately, only those whom I could not save.* He sat at the right hand of the Dark Lord himself and was surrounded by Death Eaters. To attempt a rescue would only result in both of their deaths. What purpose would that serve? After years of practice, it was shamefully easy to keep an inscrutable exterior, but inside he felt sick... again.

Just as he felt sick the next week when he accidentally cut off some poor Harry look-alike's ear as he and the other Death Eaters raced through the night in pursuit of the many identical Potters. At least the distraction had saved Lupin's life.

His next unwanted chore would be to return to number twelve Grimmauld Place for a thorough search. He figured the sooner he got that over with, the better. They would be expecting him to search the place, so he assumed it would be a waste of time. The Order would have removed anything of real value immediately after they heard the news of what had happened. But he had to try. Voldemort insisted upon it. In their haste to vacate, something of value might have been left behind.

He wondered what sort of protective spells may have been put in place. He thought he was ready for anything... Anything except what he found.

# Yesterday is a Memory

Chapter 18 of 31

Severus searches number twelve, Grimmauld Place, then reports to Voldemort on what he found there.

## Chapter 18

"Yesterday is a Memory,

"Tomorrow's Future May Never Be"

Severus tapped his wand on the door and stepped into number twelve, Grimmauld Place. When Moody's voice said, "Severus Snape?" he defiantly replied, "What if it is?" The cold blast of air passed over Severus, curling his tongue up inside his mouth. With a flick of his wand and a nonverbal spell, the effect was eliminated. He raised an eyebrow, a bit disappointed at Mad Eye's feeble attempt at keeping him silent.

As he cautiously moved forward, the ghostly image of Dumbledore flew up in front of him. As it pointed its decaying arm in his face he rolled his eyes. "Oh, *please!* I didn't *murder* you and you know it!"

With the word "murder" the ghostly figure disintegrated, and the dust returned to its original resting place in the filthy carpet on the floor in the entrance hall.

A few more cautious steps led him to believe that he had encountered all the resistance that Mad Eye had had time to conjure. The crusty veteran must have been slipping. Perhaps that was why the Death Eaters managed to get the best of him on the night Potter was moved. In his prime, Moody could have taken on a small army of Death Eaters alone. Severus had admired Moody on so many levels. *Another senseless death*, he thought.

Severus wasted little time reminiscing as he ripped the house apart searching for something ... anything ... he could use. But the Order had stripped the place bare of any and all information of value, just as Severus had suspected they would. If there was one thing Moody still was, right up to the end, it was thorough.

He went from room to room, going through cabinets, wardrobes, and dressers. He pulled out books and flipped through the pages to be sure nothing was hidden in between them. He had been there for a couple of hours when he finally made it up to Sirius' old bedroom. In his younger days, Severus would have gazed on this spacious room with a touch of envy with its long velvet curtains, the beautifully carved headboard on the over-sized bed, and the silk wall coverings. An obscene amount of gold had been spent to furnish and equip this room. He got the impression that Sirius had taken it all for granted. Severus' own beginnings had been so much more humble. But now he no longer valued the lavish finery he saw before him. If a bed was comfortable and large enough for his long frame, he was happy to sleep in it. He had learned long ago that fancy "things" could not bring happiness.

He pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind and began searching. He pulled the bedspread and sheets off the bed, lifted up the mattress, stooped to look under the bed... nothing. He continued with the wardrobe, checking the pockets of all remaining clothing, going through the dresser drawers... He finally turned to the book case and started shaking out the pages of each book. When he got to *A History of Magic*, by Bathilda Bagshot, two loose pieces of paper and a small photograph drifted to the floor. The handwriting on the paper looked vaguely familiar, so he knelt down to investigate.

With a flood of emotion, he realized he was holding a letter from Lily to Sirius. It had been written while they were in hiding. He started to gasp for breath like a man drowning in his own sorrow. After graduation, she had never written him a letter. They had lost touch completely, and he only heard snippets about her life through the grapevine.

In an instant, Severus saw his life flash before his eyes... all the mistakes he had made and all of the love it had cost him... Lily, Dumbledore, and countless good people like Charity Burbage, Bertha Jorkins, and Mad Eye Moody, among others. And perhaps soon, even Sienna. Then he thought of Harry and the flood gates opened, not so much because he knew Harry would have to give up his life to defeat Voldemort, but that he, Severus, had failed Lily by putting her son in mortal danger in the first place.

Through tear-streaked vision he read the letter, then crumpled the first page and let it fall to the ground. Then he carefully tucked the second page, where Lily had signed her name with love, into an inside pocket of his robes next to his heart. Then he turned his attention to the photograph. He ripped it in half and, with bitter resentment, threw the half with James and Harry to the floor. Then he gazed lovingly at Lily's face just hers, no one else's to ruin the memory. Then he tucked it away with the letter and swept from the room.

As he stood at the front door, Severus tried to compose himself. Soon, perhaps even now, there would be Death Eaters watching the Square, even if they didn't know exactly where the house was. But they couldn't see his tear-stained face. He took a deep breath, but for some reason all of the other good people from the original Order of the Phoenix began to float to the surface... Edgar Bones, Gideon Prewett, Benjy Fenwick... and the Longbottoms... a fate worse than death.

Then he thought of Wormtail. How did that rat ever end up in Gryffindor? *Sometimes I think we Sort too soon.* Dumbledore's words rang heavily in his ears. As he fought back another flood of tears, he tried to compose himself and think of something happy, not an easy thing to do in this dreadful house.

His thoughts finally turned to Sienna. He had been so busy all summer that she had barely crossed his mind at all. When school started and he finally got back into a routine, he would try to contact her, perhaps even see her. Maybe Aberforth could be of some help in that regard... a secret room just for them? It wouldn't hurt to ask.

Because of Dumbledore's death and funeral, the N.E.W.T. exams had been postponed. Severus knew they would take place at various spots throughout Great Britain sometime during the summer. She probably had to go to Flourish and Blotts for hers. He wondered how she had fared. Probably "Outstanding" marks across the board.

With the idea of putting his arms around her again at the top of his mind, he smiled inwardly and stepped out the door at last.

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Several evenings later, Severus sat at his desk in the Headmaster's office reviewing the lesson plans that the Carrows had submitted. They had both griped long and loud at being forced to come up with actual lesson plans, but Severus had decided that if he was going to be Headmaster, he was going to do it right. All the other teachers submitted lesson plans at the beginning of each term; they would be required to do so as well.

As he flipped through the pages, he realized that "Defense Against the Dark Arts" had turned obviously into simply "The Dark Arts." And "Muggle Studies" seemed to have morphed into "Bloodline Bashing 101." Severus detested the whole idea of the bloodline cleansing that was going on under Voldemort's clandestine rule, but to keep up his façade, he had to outwardly go with the flow.

Just as he was finishing up and could finally contemplate the warm, soft, four poster that called to him from his quarters, he felt his left arm burn.

"Damn!" he snarled. *Why does it always have to be so very late?* He obediently rose and grabbed his cloak, then headed out the door to Hogsmeade.

As Severus marched down the long lane to Malfoy Manor, he assumed that this would be about his findings from number twelve. He had not immediately reported to Voldemort because he had not found anything of significance. But the Dark Lord liked to stay informed.

Lucius greeted him at the door this time with an odd look on his face. He seemed to be hungrily anticipating something. There was a greedy gleam in his eye and a bounce

in his step that Severus had not seen in a long time.

"What's going on?" asked Severus tentatively.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough," came the cool, smooth reply.

Severus eyed Lucius suspiciously as he was led to the sitting room where Voldemort awaited his arrival.

"Good evening, Severus," came the familiar, high-pitched, sinister voice from a padded chair by the fire.

Severus walked around to face Lord Voldemort. Their eyes met as Severus got down on one knee before him. He bowed his head to kiss the silky flowing robes. "You sent for me, my Lord?"

"Yes, Severus. Get up, have a seat."

Severus obeyed, taking the hard wooden chair to Voldemort's right.

"I take it you searched the former headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"And I suppose you found nothing?"

"Nothing of any value, My Lord."

"I'm not surprised." There was a pause. "And the Carrows are settling in at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, My Lord. They just submitted their lesson plans. I brought copies for you to review if you like. I believe they will meet with your approval."

"Good. It's touching that you are taking such care with the proper education of our young people. That fool Dumbledore spent too many years ruining generation after generation. We have a lot of work to do to get the general population back on the right track. I'm counting on you, Severus. The earlier they learn, the better it all sinks in. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course, My Lord."

For a few moments, Voldemort was silent as he scrutinized Severus, studying the lines on his face, his posture, his breathing patterns, his hair. Severus could almost feel Voldemort's eyes touching him. It was a very uncomfortable experience.

"There is actually something else of great importance that I would like to discuss with you tonight."

"Oh?" replied Severus tentatively. "And what might that be?"

"I brought you here to talk about the Kaolin girl."

Severus shifted in his chair. His heart jumped up into his throat. The adrenalin began to course through his veins.

"If I recall, last summer I asked you to take her under your wing, become more friendly with her, so perhaps when you came to be with me full time, she could join us as your assistant."

"Yes, sir, I remember."

"But from that memory you shared with me the night you killed Dumbledore, I saw nothing but contempt on her face for you. Draco tells me the two of you had a bit of a falling out this past year. What happened? Why didn't you follow my orders?"

Severus could still feel Voldemort's stare as he searched, no doubt, for signs of deception. "When I was moved to the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, I no longer needed an assistant. So I had little opportunity to see her outside of class," Severus explained. "And it became evident after the first essay assignment that Defense Against the Dark Arts was not exactly her favorite subject." *So far so good*, thought Severus. He had memories to back up all of those statements. "So, we just drifted apart. After a couple of bad grades, she must have begun to resent me. But since most of the students at Hogwarts resent me, I didn't think much about it." Everything he had just said was true. Relaxed and confident, he looked Voldemort directly in the eyes, inviting a Legilimency session.

"What a shame, what a shame," tasked Voldemort. "A job is always so much more enjoyable when you get on with your co-workers."

"What do you mean?" Severus scowled. "I am Headmaster now. I have an army of house-elves at my beck and call. Surely I don't need an assistant."

Voldemort immediately became infuriated. He jumped up from his chair and put his angry face right in Severus'. "Did I ask your opinion?"

Nagini, who had been coiled comfortably in front of the fire, raised her head and eyed the two of them with intense interest.

Severus pulled back slightly. "No, My Lord. I apologize." His mind was reeling. What did this mean? Was he going after Sienna anyway?

Voldemort began pacing the room, thinking out loud to Severus. "If she is as clever and talented as Draco indicated to me, she must never be left to join the opposition. Besides, Draco told me that the two of you were so cozy the year before, it seemed very odd to him that she could do such a complete turn around so fast."

"Young girls can be very fickle," Severus offered in her defense. "And I hate to admit this, but she was very close to Dumbledore. I have a feeling that she will never cooperate," he added with an inward hope that Voldemort would drop this idea.

Voldemort turned suddenly in response to Severus' words. "Then she will die!"

Severus' chest tightened. He had to get word to her. He had to tell her to go into hiding. Perhaps if he could excuse himself he could send his Patronus...

"Let's hope for your sake, as well as hers, that her fickle heart can be turned back in your direction...WORMTAIL!"

"Yes, Master," came a voice from just outside the door.

"Bring our guest, would you?"

"Certainly, Master."

He tried to keep the expression on his face casually curious, but inside, Severus felt like his stomach had his heart in a half nelson. Was she already here? Was it too late?

A few moments of silent agony passed. Then in came Wormtail, guiding a hooded figure with arms and legs bound. The head tilted on the neck as if it were asleep. Wormtail maneuvered his prize into position in front of Voldemort, then lowered her feet to the floor.

Voldemort flicked his wand and removed the hood to reveal Sienna, apparently unconscious. Her long, dark curls fell over her face like a lacy veil. Severus could see her chest rising and falling, so he knew she was still alive. But what was her condition? What might they have already done to her?

"I had Wormtail follow her after my conversation with Draco. He found out where she lived and got to know her routine. He followed her to the make-up N.E.W.T. exam on the second floor of Flourish and Blotts in Diagon Alley last week. My sources tell me she had the highest scores of anyone in the whole school on both the practical *and* written portions, *including* Defense Against the Dark Arts. So if it was not her favorite subject, you couldn't tell by her scores."

Severus squirmed a little in his seat. He noticed Voldemort smile at his sudden discomfort. He would have to be more careful of his reactions.

"When I was satisfied that she could be an asset to me, I sent Wormtail, Bella and Rookwood to bring her in. It was a good thing, too, because even with the three of them, she almost escaped. Since her capture we have had to keep her sedated, she is so good with wandless nonverbal spells. You'd think we were trying to capture Dumbledore himself."

Severus felt a hint of pride for Sienna at that last statement. What bigger compliment could be given? But at the same time, he felt ill. What worse situation could she have found herself in? And, once again, it was all his fault for bringing her to Voldemort's attention in the first place.

"She's just too good, too talented to let the other side have her, Severus. I'm sure you understand. Let's hope she will listen to reason. Wormtail, untie her and wake her up."

Wormtail obeyed with a nod, mumbling a spell to remove her bindings. The ropes loosened their grip like a snake who had squeezed its prey to death and then had to let it go to consume it. They fell to the ground and evaporated into thin air. Then he mumbled another spell to revive her. She began to rub her eyes, looking dazed and confused. As the room came into focus she looked around, first at Wormtail, then at Voldemort. Recognition dawned on her face as she realized her precarious situation. She raised an eyebrow at the huge snake in front of the fire, then finally, she turned to Severus and their eyes met.

*Legilimens*, he thought instantly. He could tell she had cast the same spell because two different pieces of the same conversation bubbled to the surface. It was her birthday and they were in Dumbledore's office.

*I'll sacrifice myself if I have to*, he saw her say...

*You must watch me suffer with totally convincing indifference* came his reply to her.

So, the two of them understood each other. No matter what, she could not fall into Voldemort's hands. *Which one of us will die? Probably both*, he thought. At the moment, no avenue of escape presented itself. Severus held his breath, not knowing what to expect next.

"Good evening, my dear," serenaded Voldemort, "and welcome to Malfoy Manor."

Sienna remained silent. Severus noticed there was no sign of fear on her face. In fact, she looked quite calm, almost serene. He wondered if that was a smoke screen, then he remembered that she, like Dumbledore, had no fear of death.

"I apologize for the way you were brought here, my dear, but you didn't seem to want to accept my cordial invitation. You will soon learn, however, that when your master calls, you come. It's as simple as that."

Sienna stared at him, her gaze unflinching. "You will never be my master."

"I thought you might say that." The polite smile suddenly vanished from Voldemort's face as he began to show his true colors. "But perhaps your dear friend and former teacher can persuade you. Why don't you go say 'hello' to Severus, give him a kiss for old time's sake."

Severus was repulsed. He knew this humiliation was strictly for Voldemort's amusement. As much as he wished he could scoop her up and escape this place forever, the last thing he wanted was for her to be forced to show him any affection in front of Voldemort. He needn't have worried.

"I'd rather kiss the snake," she said simply, calmly.

"Oh, I think you'll reconsider," insisted Voldemort as he gave a flick of his wand to invoke the Imperius Curse.

Sienna stiffened, but did not step forward. She was resisting. And, although Severus once again was proud of her, he knew that her insolence would surely invoke the Dark Lord's wrath.

"Have you no feelings of affection for Severus, here?"

Severus knew where this was leading, so he braced himself.

"None." Her look was inscrutable.

"So, I guess you won't mind if I amuse myself for a moment with my favorite Headmaster?"

"What you do to him is your own concern, not mine." She seemed to have ice running through her veins.

"Very well." Voldemort turned to Severus. "All for the cause," he said with an evil red glow in his eyes. "*Crucio!*"

Severus fell to the ground. He tried not to wail from the pain. He didn't want her to feel it, to let it show on her face, which he knew Voldemort must be scrutinizing with great intensity. He held it in as long as he could, but the pain was too great. Severus finally let out a scream that shook the rafters. Then, just as suddenly as it started, the pain stopped. Severus lay on the floor, panting with exhaustion, as he turned his head and looked up at Sienna, who was meeting his gaze. Her mask was still convincingly apathetic. She turned to look at Voldemort as Severus slowly, painfully, struggled to his feet.

"You really *don't* care about him anymore, do you?" Voldemort asked her, in a tone that sounded as if he were genuinely impressed with her lack of feeling. "Oh, well... Someone with your skills... There are many ways you can be of use to me."

"Of use to *you*?" Sienna said incredulously, "I don't think so."

"We have ways of making you cooperate, my dear," Voldemort said quietly, but Severus could tell that his wrath was building again, "and insubordination is *not* tolerated."

Their eyes were locked in a staring contest. Severus could tell that Voldemort was invading her memories. But after only a few moments he broke the connection in a fit of rage!

"*What is the meaning of this?!*" he shouted at her. "How *DARE* you throw my own memories back at me? No one can do that!"

"It seems that I just did," Sienna stated, again with icy calmness. "And no one invades my memories if I don't want them to," she added defiantly.

Severus' admiration for her was growing in leaps and bounds. But he feared she would never live to tell him how she had managed it.

"*Crucio!*" yelled Lord Voldemort as he pointed his wand at her chest.

Sienna stiffened, but she did not fall. She took in a quick breath, but held it instead of letting out a wail. Severus and Wormtail stared in disbelief as she took a very labored step towards Voldemort.

"No...that's impossible...*CRUCIO!*" he screamed with red rage. The extra energy this brought to the curse made Sienna wince, but she did not falter. Instead, her face became even more determined as she took another menacing step in Voldemort's direction.

"Pain is a thing of the mind," Sienna hissed through tight lips. "One need only learn how to control it." She took a slow, deep breath and let it out, calming herself in the process. Her eyes were boring into Voldemort's. Severus could tell she was concentrating on reaching him, blocking out every other thought. A quick glance at Wormtail showed that he was also staring transfixed on the unimaginable scene that was playing out before them. They both seemed rooted to the floor. Deep inside Severus knew that Wormtail, like him, wished to see the permanent downfall of Voldemort.

Then Severus thought of the prophecy. Had Sienna finally reached her full potential? Although many, himself included, had the willpower to resist the Imperius Curse, certainly no one had ever been able to resist the Cruciatus Curse before. He knew the pain she must be going through. How could she just block it out?

Suddenly, Sienna lunged at Voldemort, closing the gap between them. She grabbed his wand arm and he screeched in agony as his knees buckled beneath him. They both fell to the floor as the curse was lifted. But Sienna still had an iron-clad grip on his arm. His wand was pointing into her chest, touching it.

"Curse me, curse yourself," she said softly, calmly, in triumph.

"Unhand me, you *vile creature!*" Voldemort spat as he struggled against her grip. But she had him with both hands now and managed to hang on in spite of all he could do to free himself.

"Don't just stand there, you FOOLS! **GET HER OFF ME!!**"

Severus and Wormtail sprang into action. Severus grabbed Sienna's arms, Wormtail heaved at Voldemort's. But the instant she felt Severus' touch, Sienna let go, sending the other two into a tangle on the floor. At first Severus thought she would take this opportunity to flee, but instead she turned to look him in the eye. She knew full well that if Severus was touching her when the killing curse hit, he would die too. The look she gave him was of deep love mixed with sadness.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

In an instant, Sienna radiated a Repelling Charm with such force that it threw Severus across the room, and he hit the floor with a thud as he heard those words he feared most...

A/N: I don't want to forget to thank my wonderful betas JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, who have helped me so much along the way.

And my story is based on the *Harry Potter* book series by the talented J. K. Rowling. I make no money here. This is all just for fun.

## From the Depths of the Night

*Chapter 19 of 31*

A grief stricken Severus carries Sienna's lifeless body back to her mother's house. But something happens that gives him hope after all.

### Chapter 19

"From the Depths of the Night,

The Gift's Potential Comes to Light"

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" screeched Voldemort.

Severus watched in horror as the jet of green light shot from Voldemort's wand and hit Sienna squarely in the chest. Her body flew up and away in a spiral, hit the wall on the other side of the room and slid down to the floor like a limp rag doll. Severus jumped up and ran to her side where he knelt down. In hope against hope, he felt for a pulse. Nothing.

Sienna was dead.

Once again, just as it had been long ago, it was his fault. He had delivered her to Lord Voldemort on a silver platter. And as horrible as he felt inside, he could not show it outwardly. He took a deep breath and hardened himself for the moments ahead.

"You have an uncanny knack for picking meddlesome, uncooperative love interests, Severus. So sorry, my broken-hearted friend, but you saw her. I couldn't allow her to live after treating me that way. Besides, you should be grateful. She obviously didn't give a damn about you anymore."

"What a waste," added Wormtail who was staring at her, misty-eyed. "So beautiful." There was a slight pause. "Why don't we take her body to her mother's house? We could leave her there and torch the place making it look like an accident."

"What if her mother is home?" asked Severus as he stood up.

"Kill her, of course," said Voldemort, as if suggesting the squashing of an insect.

"Can't I just modify her memory?"

"I never trusted those Memory Charms," said Voldemort. "Besides, she's lost her husband, now her daughter, and she's about to lose her home. You'll be putting her out of her misery." He let out a high-pitched laugh that made Severus' blood run cold.

He knelt back down and gathered Sienna's lifeless body into his aching arms. As he struggled to stand with the extra weight, he prayed under his breath that her mother would still be at St. Mungo's.

"I would rather do this alone, my Lord."

"No, Severus, I would rather Wormtail go with you in case there's any trouble."

Severus tried not to let his disappointment show on his face. "Very well. Wormtail?"

They made their way down the staircase and out the back door through the kitchen so they could Disapparate. Luckily it was a moonless, overcast night. No one would see them Apparate into the backyard of Sienna's house. It was quiet in her neighborhood, but they still had to hide behind a hedge as one lone Muggle walked by with his dog. Then it was clear for them to make their way into the house.

Severus was relieved when they reached the back door and found that it was secured only by a Muggle-style deadbolt, easily opened with the flick of a wand. They walked through the kitchen and into the living room. Severus remembered this room from Sienna's memory. There were a few more photos on the walls and on top of the piano, and the rug in front of the couch was different, but other than that, it hadn't changed much in the 15 years since her father's death.

Severus wondered what Wormtail would do, now that they were about to burn the house and all of its contents to the ground, erasing any hope of him finding the elusive "gift" that Severus now held in his arms. He laid Sienna's body down on the couch and tried to ignore the intense ache in his heart.

"I'll go upstairs and look around," said Wormtail, "and make sure her mother's not up there."

Just as Severus had suspected, Wormtail wanted to make one last search of the house before they set it on fire. He nodded and watched Wormtail disappear up the staircase.

When at last he heard footsteps overhead, he heaved a heavy sigh, knelt down beside the couch and started to silently cry. As the tears streamed down his contorted face, he pushed her soft curls gently away from her forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so very, very sorry." There was a painful pause, and then he continued, half talking to himself, half hoping somehow she could hear him. "I should have known better... I should never have let you get so close... I should never have let myself love you." Had he actually just admitted it? Yes, he had indeed just said the words out loud. He had felt it for months, but had been afraid to admit it to himself for just this very reason. He laid his head on her chest and wrapped his arms around her. He was openly sobbing now and didn't care if Wormtail overheard him. At this point, if such behavior got him in trouble with the Dark Lord, he would welcome death.

Suddenly, between his sobs, he heard what sounded like a heartbeat! Sienna's chest rose like it was taking in air. He jumped up from beside the couch and drew his wand just as her eyes popped open. Could Voldemort turn her into an Inferi from a distance? The thought repulsed him.

"What is the meaning of this!" he barked, very alarmed. A mixture of surprise, anger, and disgust flashed across his tear-stained face. "Who are you?"

"Shh! Severus, it's me," whispered Sienna's voice, but Severus was afraid to believe it. Her body was breathing normally and the color was returning to her cheeks. "Don't let Wormtail hear you. He mustn't know I'm alive."

"This can't be," Severus lowered his voice, but continued to look and feel suspicious. "You were dead. There was no heart beat. I carried you – you were growing cold." His logical mind made this scenario seem impossible. "*Who are you? What kind of sick trick is this?*"

"It's not a trick – it's really me. Use Legilimens if you don't believe me."

Severus thought for a moment as he eyed her warily, his wand still aimed at her head. Finally, he decided to chance the spell. *Legilimens*, he thought. It was as if time stood still. In an instant he saw every memory of every moment they had spent together, in chronological order. Her vision was even in there at the moment in time when he had first viewed it and again when she had seen it in his thoughts. Even if Voldemort had been able to access her memories, he would not have known the order in which they occurred. Could this really be Sienna back from the dead? She had only been dead for about eight minutes. The books she had given him to read about near death experiences spoke of people being resuscitated after an even longer period of time without ill effects. But he still eyed her with suspicion.

She could read him, as always, and could tell he needed more convincing. "Ask me something only you and I would know. Go on."

Severus thought for a moment. "What do I always keep in the top right desk drawer in my office?"

She didn't hesitate with her answer. "A generous supply of Honeydukes chocolate and at least two bezoars just in case of emergency. I could do with some of that chocolate right now. I wonder if Mum's got any in the kitchen." She started to get up, but Severus, wand still at the ready, took a menacing step in her direction. She stayed calm, and an amused look crossed her face. "Hey, if I know where Mum keeps her chocolate, then this must be my house too, right?"

He scowled, then motioned that she could get up. He silently followed her into the kitchen, his wand still pointed in her direction. She went straight to the candy cabinet and pulled out a dark chocolate bar, broke it in half and offered one of the pieces to him. Finally convinced, he lowered his wand and took the broken pieces of chocolate and placed them both on the kitchen counter. Then he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her so tightly that she might have imagined he was Hagrid. When he finally loosened his grip, he looked down into her eyes and realized he was crying again. But this time the tears were from joy, a joy with an intensity that he had never felt before. By some miracle he was getting another chance.

"How? How can you be standing here?" He still couldn't bring himself to believe it.

"I'm not sure if I can explain it," she started slowly, "but I'll try. When the curse hit me, I felt the same intense, pure fear that my father felt. Remember I told you about that?"

Severus nodded.

"And my spirit jumped from my body to save itself... sort of an instinctual reaction. So technically I was dead. But I didn't leave. I didn't see a tunnel or anything. My spirit was still in the room with you three. I heard everything that you all said, and I felt what you were feeling. It was fascinating. But then something extraordinary happened: my consciousness began to expand."

Severus looked at her with skepticism. He wondered if eight minutes without oxygen to the brain had caused some damage after all.

"Hey, have you ever died?" she said, looking irritated.

"Not that I can remember," he admitted.

"Then cut me some slack!" she exclaimed, as if she were reading his mind. "I became aware of my oneness with the Universe – I know it sounds ridiculous, but I could really *feel* it – I can *still* feel it. *I'm part of you*, Severus, and *you are part of me*. We are *all* connected. I don't need Legilimens to communicate nonverbally, and I don't need eye contact either. And I believe that the distance between us will make no difference. Time and space are both illusions when viewed from a spiritual perspective.... You'll feel it too, eventually."

Severus stared at her with worried eyes. He still wasn't sure of her sanity, but kept his mind open.

"I've been taught, since I was five years old, that we are like waves on the ocean of spirit. The ocean creates us, sustains us; without it, we wouldn't exist. We are all one through the infinite ocean of spirit, Severus. But we can't see it because we look at the world through our physical eyes. When I died, I could no longer do that. I had no choice but to experience existence from a spiritual point of view!"



Severus observed her with a knitted brow. "I think – I'm trying to understand," he groped for the words.

"It's as if I merged with you – all three of you, even Voldemort!"

"*What?*" asked Severus in disbelief – now *heknew* she must be delusional. "You possessed the Dark Lord?"

"No—no—I had no control over anyone's actions or thoughts, but I could sense what you were all thinking, knew what you were going to do before you did it, what you were going to say before you said it – even Voldemort!"

Severus raised his eyebrows at this. To be able to get inside Voldemort's head could be an incredible asset to the Order. "Really?"

"And of course, I could still feel what you were all feeling." Sienna stopped and put her hand on his chest, right over his heart. As she rubbed the spot gently, she said, "The depths of your pain were almost unbearable. I love you too much to let you suffer like that. I was determined to let you know somehow that I was OK. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get your attention. So, when you Apparated here, I came. Not sure how, I just willed myself here, and here I was.

"But coming here triggered the memory of my father's autopsy. There was nothing wrong with him, remember?"

Severus nodded again.

"No reason for him to have died," she said.

"Just like the Dark Lord's father and grandparents," he added.

"Exactly." Her voice trailed off as she tried to find the right words. "I guess it's my years of meditative practice. As you know, I have left my body and come back on several occasions. And in meditation I always feel peaceful and happy. But in death, I felt incredible joy – bliss – I can't describe it. To be honest, at first I didn't want to come back. But I could sense your horror and the intensity of your sadness. I could feel the depths of your love for me more strongly than I ever felt it when I was alive. I knew then that I had to at least try to come back. I would do anything to ease your pain. And if my body was still in perfect health, there was no reason why I couldn't just *will* my spirit back into my body. So... I did, and here I am!"

"So that's the key to surviving the curse, you have to love someone enough to give up eternal bliss for them?"

"Not give it up, just postpone it for a while." She smiled up at him, beaming. "But yes, I guess that is essentially the key."

"So why do you suppose no one has ever come back before?"

"Well, people don't realize they have a choice, I guess. How many wizards do you know that meditate?"

Severus shrugged, shaking his head.

"If I hadn't been meditating all these years, I wouldn't have known. I'm sure I would still be dead."

"But what now? Wormtail will be back down any minute."

"There's so much I want to tell you... But it will have to wait. I'll get back on the couch and pretend to still be dead. When you Disapparate, I'll be out the next second." Sienna started to reach for her chocolate, but Severus grabbed her arm and brought her close again.

"I was informed that you took your N.E.W.T.s."

"Yes."

"So you're through with school?"

"Well, I don't know how I did, yet"

"I have it on good authority that you passed all subjects with flying colors."

"Really? That's nice to know. Well, then I guess I *am* through with school."

"Good," he gazed into the depths of her silvery green eyes. He wanted to get lost in the love that was radiating from them. "I've been waiting to do this for months..."

Severus gently cupped her face in his hands. As he bent down to finally kiss her, he felt his heart start to race. Her hot breath caressed his cheek as his parted lips met hers in silent ecstasy. His heart was beating so hard he thought it would explode right out of his chest as her soft wet mouth danced with his. *It must be the Tango*, he thought. *Such passion... such expression.* As his mouth explored hers with reckless abandon, he felt the kiss grow deeper. His hands slid down and wrapped around the small of her back. He pulled her closer as her hands moved up and around his neck. She was running her fingers through his hair! No one had ever done that before! He made a mental note to wash it more often.

To have finally found love again after so many years, so much lonely misery... it seemed almost too good to be true. He wanted this moment to last forever. It was everything he had hoped it would be.

"Severus!" Wormtail's voice floated down from upstairs.

They broke apart like two magnets whose south poles had been forced together. She ran to the couch as she took a bite of her chocolate.

"Severus, could you give me a hand up here?"

"I'll be up in a minute," Severus yelled. He took a bite of his own chocolate and strode over to the couch, sitting beside her as she swung her feet up.

"You must reach Potter and teach him what you told me. If he can learn to survive the Avada Kedavra Curse, he will truly be invincible just as the prophecy said. Perhaps you can teach them all."

"I'll find him. But I'm worried about you. Can you make yourself come back if you get hit?"

"I've never meditated so I don't have your experience, but I'll try."

"You're strong-willed and have great powers of concentration. That's more important. That's all it takes. Use your *will power*. I know you can do it, Severus."

"I'll do my best. But know this," he gazed once again into her shimmering green eyes, "that no matter what happens I love you... to the depths of my soul."

"I know." She smiled. "I think I knew it before you would even admit it to yourself."

"Severus, what's taking you so long?" cried Wormtail from overhead.

"Be right there!" Severus shot an irritated glance up at the ceiling. Then he turned back to Sienna. They shared another passionate kiss. Who could know when they would get another chance?

"Severus! Who are you talking to?"

"Just trying to rig the stove to blow up."

"Well, get up here already!"

"In a minute! I don't take orders from you!" Severus glared at the ceiling. He turned and flicked his wand at the stove, and it pulled away from the wall. *Good, a gas line hookup. This would be easy.* He could create a gas leak and ignite it from a distance after they had Disapparated.

"You must leave within seconds of us. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

He looked one last time into Sienna's eyes, caressing her cheek with his hand. "I'll send you my Patronus if I can meet you somewhere." She nodded. Their lips melted together once more, and then he bounded up the stairs. She lay back down, closed her eyes, and waited.

After helping Wormtail open a trunk that had a tricky Locking Spell on it, they returned with several items in hand. Severus walked over to the stove and rigged some nearby electrical wires to look like they had shorted out, causing a spark to ignite the fire. Then he created what the Muggle investigators would think was a tiny stress crack in the pipe to cause the leak.

"That should do it," he insisted confidently as he moved the stove back into position. "Let's get out of here," Severus instructed Wormtail, and they ran out the back door into the yard. From there they Disapparated to the park down the block, so they could watch the place burn from a safe distance.

Severus wanted to be sure that Sienna had enough time to get out the back door and Disapparate to safety, so he hesitated just a moment before casting the Incendio spell.

"What's the hold up?" asked Wormtail. "Not having second thoughts, are you, Severus?"

"It just seems a waste, that's all. A perfectly good house."

"You want me to do it? I know she meant something to you, mate."

Severus tried not to show his irritation with Wormtail's pitiful attempt at compassion.

"No, I'll do it. I feel it's my duty." He tried to show sorrow on his face, but inside, he was jumping for joy. Not only was Sienna alive, but Voldemort believed she was dead, which kept her out of danger. If Voldemort saw her again in his memories, he would assume the incidents had happened before he had killed her. And if she could teach Potter and the other Order members her new-found skill, Voldemort would surely be defeated. *"Incendio,"* he said while stifling a smile as he directed the ball of fire down the chimney and into the kitchen. The house suddenly exploded, but Severus felt in his heart that Sienna had escaped unharmed. They would be together again as soon as he could slip away for a while. Yes, things were definitely looking up.

A/N: Believe it or not, I wrote the previous confrontation scene and this resurrection scene before DH came out. Somehow I just knew that Harry would need to survive the Avada Kedavra curse. JKR made it perfectly clear that the bodies of Voldemort's father and grandparents showed no sign of trauma; therefore no one could be charged with their murder. Of course, her situation was a bit different from mine, but Harry had Dumbledore to inform him of his choice to return or move on. Sienna had her meditation and deep love for Severus to motivate her to at least try to come back. What was the worst that could happen if she didn't succeed? She was already dead.

## There Must Be an Easier Way

*Chapter 20 of 31*

Severus finds a new ally in Winky and enlists Aberforth's help to spend time with Sienna.

### Chapter 20

#### "There Must Be an Easier Way,

#### Elfin Magic Saves the Day"

Severus let Wormtail report back to Voldemort about the house fire. He felt that his time would be better spent at Hogwarts getting ready for the onslaught of students that would inundate him in a few day's time. He also was sure that Voldemort would take great pleasure in Wormtail's embellished description of his sorrow over the loss of Sienna. *Let them have their little laugh,* he thought to himself as he walked up the path to the school.

As he walked through his office to get to his quarters, he heard a voice. All of the portraits had appeared to be sleeping when he entered, so the voice took him by surprise. He turned abruptly on his heel, his cloak swirling around his legs.

"So, what was all that about?" asked Dumbledore's portrait.

"Can't I tell you in the morning?"

"The morning will bring constant interruptions. Now is better."

"Oh, if you insist." Severus sighed and sat down in the throne-like chair behind the desk. He began to push the papers around absent-mindedly. If he had been honest with himself, he was bursting at the seams to relive the night's events.

"The Dark Lord finally captured Sienna."

"Sienna?" Dumbledore stood up, almost jumping out of his frame. "Is she alright?"

"Calm yourself. She's fine, she's safe." Then he closed his eyes and said in a dreamy whisper, "She's incredible."

"What happened? I want to know every last detail!"

Severus proceeded to recount the night's events, but left out the part where they had kissed and his admission of love for her.

"The Dark Lord even compared her to you at one point. It took three Death Eaters to bring her in."

With this, Dumbledore was bursting with pride. "That's our girl."

"May I be excused now?" asked Severus with very tired eyes. "I have a busy day tomorrow."

"Don't you mean 'today?'"

"Don't remind me," Severus said with a groan and headed off to finally get some much needed rest.

But as he lay in the bed staring at the ceiling, he found that all he could think about was Sienna. He wanted to be with her more than anything. But how could he manage it? Somehow he felt that an occasional meeting at the Hog's Head would not be enough. But it was at least a start. He had already come to an understanding with Aberforth. He would go talk to him tomorrow evening and try to arrange something.

The next day, a very tired Headmaster Snape faced one problem after another between the Carrows and the rest of the staff. They just couldn't seem to understand the meaning of the words "Tradition," or "Orderly," and McGonagall was up in arms about the discipline changes that they insisted on making. Severus had to take her aside and calm her down. Without actually coming out and saying it, he tried to make her understand that each teacher could keep order in their own way in their own classroom as long as the Carrows didn't find out about it. He also tried to convey to her the importance of getting that message out to the students since he couldn't exactly announce it at the start of term feast.

After dinner in the Great Hall, he slipped quietly out of the front door and up the path to Hogsmeade. The Hog's Head Inn was as grimy and dingy as ever, and Aberforth stood in his usual spot behind the bar using an already filthy cloth to wipe out dirty glasses. Severus wondered if the rag had ever been washed, or the glasses either, for that matter.

"Evening, Headmaster Snape. What can I get for ya?"

"Oak mead," he replied as he tossed his coins on the counter. Then he leaned closer and added, "I'd also like a word in private."

Aberforth glanced around the room. Everyone seemed content with the contents of their glasses and bottles. He jerked his head towards the back room, and they both ducked in. He closed the door and Severus cast the Muffliato spell.

"I'll make this quick," Severus whispered. "Do you have any rooms left that I could rent for just one night?"

"Nope, sorry. All filled up, and they all look long term. What'd you need a room for? Aren't your fancy new quarters big enough?"

"It's not that. I need to meet someone, and I can't chance trying to sneak her into the castle."

"A woman, eh?" Aberforth's face warped into a crooked boyish grin.

Severus felt himself blush.

"Do I know her?"

"No, and it's probably better that you don't."

"Gotcha," Aberforth winked. "Well, I'm afraid that, with the exception of a broom cupboard upstairs, there's not much I can do for you."

"What about the room where we had our previous conversation, with the portrait of the girl over the mantle?"

"Off limits. You don't want to know why."

Severus shook his head. "If the two of us had any more secrets, we wouldn't be able to talk at all."

They both chuckled at the thought.

"Well then, when can I have the broom cupboard?"

"That's available twenty-four, seven. Just let me know you'll be in there so I don't interrupt anything. I walked in on my parents once when I was about seven years old. Couldn't look either one of them in the eye for a couple of months. Don't ever want to do that again!"

"I doubt you'll be walking in on much, not in a broom cupboard anyway." Severus motioned towards the door as he lifted the Muffliato spell.

They went back out to the bar where Severus finished his mead. Then he leaned over towards Aberforth and said, "Thanks. I'll let you know," and he headed out the door back to Hogwarts.

Once back in his office, he conjured his doe Patronus. "Find Sienna. Tell her I want to meet her at the Hog's Head tomorrow night at nine p.m. But the place is crawling with Death Eaters and she will have to be very careful."

As the silver doe bounded across his office and disappeared out the window, he sat down to wait for her reply. Sometimes he felt that a Muggle telephone wouldn't be such a bad idea, since it was much easier to carry on a conversation over distances with that device than with letters by owl, or messages by Patronus. School started in two days. This would probably be the only night he would have time to meet her for a long while. He hoped against hope that she could make it by then. He was not sure where she had gone into hiding, but he had a feeling it was the ashram in India, quite a long trek to take in just one day.

After a few minutes, a silver streak of light shot through his window and transformed into a lively mongoose on his desk top. It spoke in Sienna's voice.

"I'm in India, but if I leave right now I should probably be able to get there on time. I can hardly wait to see you. Be careful. Remember I love you."

The last sentence seemed almost comical coming from the mouth of a mongoose, even though it sounded like Sienna. He wondered what motivation would make her choose a mongoose for her Patronus. He made a mental note to ask her later.

Good. He would have her back in his arms in less than 24 hours.

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As all of the last minute preparations were being made for the arrival of the students the next day, Snape made his way around the school surveying everyone's progress. The teachers were checking their supplies. Madam Pomfrey had plenty of healing potions in stock (Severus had a feeling that she would really need them this year with the Carrows in charge of discipline), and Hagrid had lined up the creatures he would need for all of his classes. Filch kept himself busy polishing trophies in the trophy room and cleaning the giant hourglasses that kept track of house points in the entrance hall.

Severus made his way down into the kitchen to check on the house-elves. They were all busy with food preparation. Many things could be made a couple of days ahead and kept refrigerated. As he watched their busy little faces deep in concentration, he noticed that there was someone missing whom he had distinctly remembered seeing earlier in the summer: Kreacher. He was, after all, Potter's house-elf. Sirius had left him everything in his will, which included number twelve and the elf that went with it. But Kreacher's absence triggered a memory in Severus's mind: the fact that house-elves could Disapparate and Apparate anywhere in or out of the castle, even with Anti-Apparation Charms in place that prevented wizards from doing the same thing. Could a house-elf get Sienna into the castle unnoticed? It would be worth asking. But, he still had no place to hide her.

As he searched the room for the right elf to ask, he noticed two elves over by the fireplace. One was sobbing as she sat in her tiny chair. The other was on bended knee patting her hand. Winky and Dobby. As usual, Winky was lamenting the fact that she no longer had a family to serve. Severus remembered how she had howled with sorrow over Barty Crouch Jr. after the dementor had performed the kiss. Dobby was proud to be a free elf, but Winky felt only shame.

Severus strolled over to the fireplace and knelt down to be on the same level with the elves.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked with silky smoothness. He didn't want the tone to sound too sympathetic.

Winky jumped up from her chair and, she and Dobby immediately bowed low to Severus, addressing him as "Headmaster Snape."

"Winky still feels shameful that she is a free elf, Headmaster Snape," explained Dobby.

"Winky's life is wasted," sniffed Winky. Then she started to wail, "Winky's life is OVER!"

A flood of tears came streaming down her face. Severus reached into his inside cloak pocket and retrieved a white lace hanky, which he handed to Winky. As she shyly took it from his outstretched hand, an idea struck him. Could he ask Dobby and Winky for help? No, not Dobby. Potter had tricked Lucius into freeing him. Dobby's loyalty was certainly with Potter, even if he was under the employ of Hogwarts. No, his idea would have to involve Winky and Winky alone.

He thought perhaps a different approach would be necessary to help her regain her composure. Severus stood up and looked down his long nose at her.

"This is no way for a Hogwarts elf to behave," he said gruffly. "Winky, get hold of yourself, freshen up and report to my office right away!"

"Should Dobby come too, sir?" asked Dobby anxiously.

"No, you do an exemplary job for us, Dobby. I need to speak to Winky alone."

He turned and swept from the kitchen, leaving a now frightened Winky in his wake.

By the time he got back to his office, she was sitting there waiting for him. Her short little legs dangled off the wooden chair, not even reaching half-way to the floor. She looked so scared; she was trembling. Severus thought she might burst into tears again.

"Please, Headmaster Snape, sir." She jumped up and threw herself onto the floor in front of him as he entered. "Don't send Winky away. Winky will be better. Winky will work hard for Hogwarts. Please, please..." And she broke into hysterics.

Severus looked down at her and started shaking his head. She was clinging to his leg now, so he couldn't even move. He reached down and gently pulled her off of him and sat her back on the chair. Since he wasn't sure what had happened to his first hanky, he conjured another one and handed it to her.

"I didn't bring you here to scold you, Winky. I brought you here to make you an offer."

She looked up at him with tennis-ball-eyes. "An offer? Winky?"

"Yes, Winky," he said quietly. Thank goodness, she was calming down at last.

"I was in the room the night your last remaining master suffered the dementor's kiss."

"Poor Master Barty," she said, looking forlorn. "What a horrible thing."

"It was horrible, Winky. And although I feel he deserved to go to Azkaban for what he did, he didn't deserve that." He held his breath. He thought she might start crying again, but she didn't. With a sigh of relief, he continued. "I saw your reaction, and I knew right then that you were a loyal and good servant, who deserved a family that would treat you with dignity and respect."

Although Dumbledore had always shown her kindness, he had never talked to her this way. Winky looked at Severus with a touch of relief. Finally someone understood and appreciated her. She smiled at him. He smiled back.

"I was wondering if you would consider becoming my personal house-elf, an assistant, if you like."

"Oh YES! Headmaster Snape, Winky would--"

"You are technically a free elf now, Winky," he interrupted her, "so you can choose to accept or decline my offer. But before you decide, I must make certain things clear."

"Yes, sir." Her enthusiasm waned a bit.

"If you chose to accept my offer, you must swear with your life that you will keep my secrets, of which I have many." She didn't seem to mind that condition. He assumed that was a standard house-elf requirement.

"If you ever chose to leave my employ, you must *still* keep all my secrets, even if you must give your life to do so."

"If Winky is Headmaster Snape's house-elf, Winky would do that anyway, sir," she informed him, as if that was the first thing she learned in elfin kindergarten.

"Winky," his voice became much more serious, "this means keeping my secrets from Dobby also. No one, and I mean *absolutely no one*, can know what I tell you, what you do for me, what goes on or what is said inside my office, or my quarters. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir. Winky understands perfectly, sir."

"Good. Now as for payment--"

"Oh, Winky won't accept payment, sir. Dobby shames himself by accepting payment. Winky would never think of such a thing! Just having a family to serve again will be payment beyond Winky's wildest dreams, sir!"

Severus' lips curled just slightly at the corners. "I am honored to have you as my house-elf, Winky. You start immediately."

"This is the happiest day for Winky in many years, Headmaster Snape, sir. THANK YOU!" She rushed over and bowed at his feet. "What is Winky's first task, sir?"

"Someone has already been in my quarters to make the bed and tidy up this morning. But from now on, I would like you to be the only house-elf allowed into my office or quarters for any reason unless I say so. Once you are through with the morning chores in here, you can go to the kitchen to see where they might need you. If I need you for something else, I will call for you. If you hear me call your name, you can Apparate from anywhere in the castle, right?"

"Winky can come from anywhere immediately, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"Excellent." He nodded, then paused for a moment. "Even somewhere *outside* of the castle?"

"Yes, sir."

His eyes narrowed as he became lost in thought. Then slowly, carefully, as if he was afraid what her answer might be, he asked, "Could you take me with you in side-along Apparation?" He held his breath as he waited for her reply.

"Oh, yes, Headmaster Snape, sir."

The wheels of his mind began to turn at warp speed. "Could you take two people at once?"

She nodded. "All they have to do is hold Winky by the hand, sir."

This bit of news opened up an entire avenue of possibilities. And Winky's kind would go unnoticed by Voldemort. He considered house-elves "disposable." Another foolish mistake born of arrogance on the Dark Lord's part. Such a loyal house-elf as Winky could end up becoming one of Severus' greatest assets before this whole ordeal was over.

"Winky, you're a life saver!" Severus smiled broadly at her. The little round face and tennis-ball eyes beamed up at him. "Now, get back to the kitchen. If I need you, I'll call you."

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir. Thank you, sir." She bowed deeply and with a pop she disappeared.

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Later that night, Severus made his way to the Hog's Head. Anyone out on the street after dark was subject to harassment by the legion of Death Eaters that patrolled the streets, but since they all knew Severus he passed without question.

He slipped in through the front door and sidled up to the bar.

"What'll ya have, tonight, Headmaster?" asked Aberforth.

"Oak mead." Then he leaned in and added, "And the broom cupboard, if you don't mind."

Aberforth nodded. He served Severus a mug of mead. Then they both searched the room for signs of anyone that didn't look familiar. Even though Aberforth knew better than to ask questions, he was still curious who Severus was planning to meet.

One small figure caught both their eyes. What appeared to be a woman, dressed in long, flowing, black robes and a hood that partially covered a face that was wrapped in dingy gray bandages, sat at a nearby table. She slowly rose and made her way laboriously towards the bar as if walking was extremely painful.

"Can I help you?" asked Aberforth warily.

She remained silent, but reached into a pocket and pulled out something small that remained concealed in the palm of her hand. Then she slowly slid it along the surface of the bar until it was right next to Severus' hand. He looked down with great curiosity at this point. She pulled her hand away to reveal an individually-wrapped dark chocolate truffle with a liquid cognac center from Honeydukes. Severus quickly covered it with his own hand before anyone noticed. Then he leaned over to Aberforth and whispered, "Bring her up to the broom cupboard in a minute or two." With that, he took his mug of mead and headed up the stairs.

He found the broom cupboard and let himself in. "*Lumos*," he said quietly as he surveyed the scene. If he had thought the bar rags downstairs were dirty, he was really grossed out by the contents of this four-by-five closet. Brooms and mops full of cobwebs adorned the back wall, looking as if they had been hanging there untouched for decades. Several buckets were stacked in a corner, some with even dirtier rags hanging over their sides. A shelf full of cleaning solutions had been left undisturbed long enough to build up over an inch of dust.

Severus sneezed violently. He knew his allergies wouldn't be able to stand this room for long. He hoped Aberforth would bring Sienna up soon. He fished around in the pocket of his robes for a hanky but remembered he had given it to Winky. He put out the light so he could conjure himself another when the door opened, and in walked the mysterious person wrapped in gray bandages.

"Have fun, you two," teased Aberforth, "and let me know when you leave." Then he closed the door behind him with a snap.

The little room became pitch black.

"*Lumos*," said Severus again as he stifled another sneeze.

"Severus, it's so good to see you," said Sienna. They wrapped their arms around each other for a moment, and then she began to unwrap the bandages to reveal a grotesquely contorted face that appeared to be suffering from severe burns.

"My God! What happened to you?"

"Nothing!" She laughed as she cast the Muffliato spell at the door.

He sneezed again, but his wand was being used to light the room, so he couldn't conjure a hanky.

"Here," having read his mind as she could so easily do now, she silently conjured one for him. Then she reached under her chin with the fingers of both hands and pulled off the latex mask she was wearing.

Severus was quite relieved to see the beautiful, vibrant young face he had been expecting. "That's quite a disguise you've got there."

"The mask is from a Muggle Halloween costume shop. It fit me well and seemed pretty realistic when I put it on. I covered it with bandages to make it look more real. When I got here it was still daylight. I was stopped a couple of times by the Death Eaters. When they insisted I show my face, I would start to unveil myself, but as soon as they could begin to see the burns underneath, they would make some snide or ugly comment and send me on my way. I didn't even have to answer any questions. It worked perfectly."

Severus smiled down at her in the wand light. "I'm just so glad you arrived safely."

He bent down and began to kiss her like there was no tomorrow. They tangled themselves around each other like a Devil's Snare vine. Severus felt blood rushing to parts

of himself that it hadn't rushed to in many years. He could tell that she was full of the raging hormones of youth as her hands began to explore his body and made their way down towards the erection that was so strong, he feared it would pop the buttons off his trousers.

Suddenly, he pulled away and sneezed violently again, jarring himself back to reality.

"Oh, you poor thing. Allergies?"

"Yes. All the dust in here."

"Can't you mix yourself up a potion for it?"

"Well, I could have if I had known, but I didn't check the place out when Aberforth offered it. I just assumed... I never dreamed it would be this bad in here."

"Is there somewhere else we could go? Your house at Spinner's End, perhaps?"

"Too risky. Wormtail feels free to come and go there as if he owns the place. I objected at first, but since I'm never there, it doesn't really matter."

They began to intertwine again and things really started to heat up. She pushed his cloak off of his shoulders, and it fell to the dirty floor in a rumpled heap. Then she reached to unbutton his shirt, but he grabbed her hands in his own and pulled away from her with a scowl.

"What's wrong?" She obviously looked puzzled and a bit hurt.

"It's a broom cupboard, Sienna. We're in a broom cupboard, for goodness sake!"

"So?"

"You don't want your first time to be in a dirty, dingy, very dusty broom cupboard, do you?"

"It's better than the back seat of an automobile, which is what usually happens with Muggles."

Severus pursed his lips. "Well, we're not Muggles, are we?"

She started for his buttons again. Again, he stopped her.

She didn't hesitate to show her disappointment.

"I'm not going to do this. Not here, not like this. Don't you want it to be special?"

"It *will* be special, as long as I'm with you. Every moment I spend with you is special. It doesn't matter where we are."

Severus sighed deeply. He thought for a moment. "What about the ashram?"

"Even if you had the time to spare to make the long journey, my guru, Babaji wouldn't let us sleep together unless we were married."

Severus didn't reply. He simply stared at their hands clustered together between them. *Unless we were married... Would that be such a horrible thing?* In the midst of this war he wasn't sure it would be wise. But the Dark Lord thought she was dead. If he only could find a place to hide her in the castle so they could spend time together as husband and wife, he would consider it. He wanted her. He loved her more than anything in the world.

"What about your private quarters?"

"Too risky. Several of the teachers already have the password to my office. If they can get into the office, they can get into my quarters. The system was really designed more to keep the students out than the teachers. When I change the password, the heads of each house are automatically notified."

"Well, I guess it wouldn't help anyway, since there's no way I can get in there undetected."

"Ah, now *that* little problem I have already taken care of." Severus announced proudly. Then he sneezed again.

"This is ridiculous!" She turned away from him to the room at large and began to whirl her wand through the air. "*Scourgify!*" The dust and grime began to lift off the objects, the floor, the walls and shelf, and disappear into the tip of her wand. Another wave brought forth a roomy padded chair, just large enough for both of them to squeeze into.

Severus took a deep breath. "Thank you." He cocked his head in her direction with a slight bow. He sat down and motioned for her to join him. As she nestled herself into the chair, he savored the sensation of being relaxed and happy with her by his side. When was the last time he had felt this way? Perhaps never. Her presence was food for his starving soul.

He proceeded to tell her about Winky and all the wonderful things she could do that wizards couldn't, and then they began to catch each other up on their separate goings on since the last time they had seen each other they hadn't exactly had a chance to talk much.

Finally, even with a cleaner environment, the dark, closed-in space began to wear on both of them.

"It's getting late. I'd better get back. I'm so sorry you came all this way for such a short visit."

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. "Don't worry about it. As far as I'm concerned, it was worth the trouble just to feel your arms around me."

"When I find a better place to meet, I'll contact you. I wish there was someplace in the castle. I would suggest the room of requirement, but the entrance is too far from my quarters. Anyone could pass by in the hall, and if someone else is using the room you can't get into it."

Sienna gazed at the wall dreamily. For a moment, Severus wondered if her mind had wandered elsewhere.

"Earth to Sienna..."

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about something Albus said to me once."

"What's that?"

"He said that whenever he had a problem he couldn't solve on his own, he voiced his concerns in the peace and quiet of his bed chamber, and a solution would almost always present itself." She smiled up at Severus. "You might want to try it. You never know."

"Couldn't hurt, I suppose." He stood to put his cloak back on.

"Are you ready to meet my new house-elf?"

"Sure."

"Winky!"

She appeared with a loud POP! Sienna jumped back, startled, but also to give her some room.

"Winky at your service, Headmaster Snape, sir." She tried to bow deeply, but the room was so cramped her head hit the wall in front of her.

"Do be careful, Winky. I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself," Severus said, trying not to smirk. "Sienna, meet Winky. Winky, meet Sienna."

Winky turned to Sienna and tried again to bow, just not so deeply this time. "Pleasure to meet Miss Sienna, ma'am."

"The pleasure's all mine." Sienna smiled and held out her hand to shake.

"Winky, if you would please, take Sienna wherever she needs to go, and then return to my quarters. I'll walk. People saw me walk in here. They need to see me walk back."

"Where would Miss Sienna like to go, ma'am?"

"Well, I need to get to India, but I guess if you just get me past the town limits I'll take it from there."

"India, ma'am?" those huge tennis-ball eyes stared up at her like she had always wanted to go there.

"Yes, but--"

"Where in India?"

"The ashram where I'm staying."

"If Miss Sienna closes her eyes and concentrates hard on the place, Winky can take her straight there!"

Severus' jaw dropped. "You mean you can take her all the way to India in the blink of an eye?"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"But Winky *did* tell Headmaster Snape, sir. Winky said, 'Winky can come from anywhere immediately,' Headmaster Snape, sir."

Severus looked at Sienna and nodded slowly. "She did say that. I remember now. I just didn't think she meant *any* where." They both looked down at Winky and started laughing.

"And once Winky knows where the ashram is, Winky can go there and bring back Miss Sienna."

"That's wonderful, Winky." Sienna was beaming at her.

"As I told you before, Winky, you're a life saver! Now you two better get going."

Severus kissed Sienna one last time with such passion that it made Winky blush. Then she took Sienna by the hand, and with a loud POP they were gone.

## Student's Injuries

*Chapter 21 of 31*

Snape has Winky bring Sienna to Hogwarts to help him take care of the injured students.

Once again, my thanks go out to my wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, who have generously donated their time and effort to make this a better story.

Everything you recognize is the creation of the amazing J. K. Rowling. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this story.

### Chapter 21

#### "Students' Injuries Need Extra Care,

#### A Gifted Healer Can Repair"

September first finally came, and with it, the onslaught of students to Hogwarts. Severus noticed that several people were significantly absent besides Potter, Weasley, and Granger. All of the Muggle-borns had the good sense not to come. If their parents were wise, they would have all left Great Britain. He thought about how so many of them had strong magical abilities and what a shame it was that they would not be able to develop them fully. He inwardly hoped that, before too long, the Dark Lord would be vanquished and they could all return.

Severus knew that the Sorting Hat had its own way of giving advice each year when it sang its song. He threatened to burn the Hat if the song was too defiant, in the hopes that the Hat would sing a song that would not encourage the students to cause trouble. But he knew that, if there was going to be sorting, there had to be a song first. And the Hat had a mind of its own.

Severus held his breath as the Hat began to sing.

*The Founders of this fine school treated with respect,*

*Every magical student, not one did they neglect,*

*Although some pureblood classmates may have looked down their noses,  
At Muggle-borns and half bloods, their lives no bed of roses.  
But over time they proved their worth to all who would observe,  
With magic just as powerful, respect they did deserve,  
Though narrow minds still harbored feelings ill and wrong,  
The less than pure showed talent, grew prevalent and strong.  
No less deserving are those who have the gene,  
That creates the magical abilities I've seen.  
No matter what their bloodlines, if they can cast a spell,  
They have the right to lessons learned, if they learn them well.  
Some things are worth learning, some things are not,  
Some things will turn to dust if you give them time to rot.  
Some folks can't do magic, but like you, they all bleed red,  
Your next life might be Muggle, so get that through your head!  
Some say Dumbledore was misguided, some say he was a fool,  
One thing is for certain, he loved his students and this school.  
So before you bash his memory, keep this in mind,  
The morals that he taught you will stand the test of time.  
As the full moon rises, dark times lay ahead,  
Some of you will graduate, some will end up dead!  
Search your hearts, search your souls, for an answer true,  
No matter what they teach, feel what's inside of you.*

*Much shorter than usual,* thought Severus as he let out a sigh of relief. *But not likely to go over big with the Dark Lord or the Carrows.*

As the Sorting Hat finished placing the last first-year student, Severus noticed that an unusual number of children ended up in Slytherin House. He wondered if more of them mentally asked the Hat for that house (probably out of fear), since he knew that the Hat does take one's wishes into consideration.

After the feast, Severus stood up and announced the usual items that Dumbledore had always mentioned such as staying out of the Forbidden Forest. Then he announced the appointment of the Carrows and the subjects they would be teaching.

Then, to the horror of most of the students, he announced that the Carrows would also be in charge of discipline and that each teacher would be required to refer their detention cases to them. Most of the kids knew that they were Death Eaters, and therefore also knew that they could expect almost any kind of torture from them. They would make Filch's desires for shackles and chains look tame.

Severus knew he had to play his part well, but it didn't make the end of his speech any easier to deliver. "This is the dawn of a New Era. We have been misguided for too long. It is time we wizards take our place in the natural order of things. Soon, we will no longer need to hide our abilities from Muggles. They will come to understand that we are a superior race, and they will learn to accept it and bow to our great power.

"I look forward to watching each of you grow in your experience, your understanding, and your abilities, as you take your proper place in the New Order."

By the end of it he felt sick to his stomach. He would have much preferred to reiterate the Sorting Hat's message, but he knew that was impossible.

He was hoping to be the first to leave, but Aleto stopped him and began to spout off about the Hat's song.

"I have absolutely no control over what the Hat sings, and you know that. It is guided by the consciousness of the Founders. There was nothing I could have done if I wanted it to get to the task of Sorting." He scowled at her and walked out in a huff.

As he made his way through the entrance hall, he saw Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle at the top of the stairs that led to the Slytherin dungeon. Crabbe and Goyle were laughing as Malfoy continued his tale.

"... and he began to weep over her dead body. Can you believe it? Now *he's* our Headmaster! What a crock!"

Crabbe and Goyle could see him coming and stopped laughing as Severus came up behind Malfoy.

"Come with me, Mr. Malfoy," he said softly, with silky smoothness.

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged worried looks as Draco turned to follow the Headmaster. His usually pale complexion became an even ghostlier white.

As they stepped into a nearby empty classroom, Severus closed the door and cast the Muffliato Spell.

"Professor, I..." Draco stammered.

Severus interrupted, "You *failed* in your mission to kill Dumbledore last spring, did you not?" he said gruffly.

"Yes, sir."

"Your father *failed* to retrieve the Prophecy from the Department of Mysteries the previous spring, did he not?"



"Yes, sir."

"The only reason you and your family are still alive is because you are related to Bellatrix Lestrange. I have no doubt that she pleaded for your lives. The Dark Lord does show mercy on rare occasions."

Draco was beginning to cower and tremble.

Severus' eyes narrowed. "But somehow I doubt that he would mind if he found out I was using you for target practice. Do you, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes, sir I mean no, sir."

"I have spies throughout the school, Draco." His voice was almost a whisper. "I will know if you speak disrespectfully of me again. And next time I will not be so lenient. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal clear, sir," Draco muttered quickly.

"Good," Severus sneered. He removed the Muffliato Spell, and they both headed back out to the Entrance Hall. Severus stood silently and watched Draco rejoin his friends. With a fearful glance over their shoulders, they all descended the staircase to the Slytherin Common Room.

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As the week progressed, it became clear to Severus that the majority of the students didn't like the "New Order," or their place in it. The older kids were defiantly contradicting the Carrows in the middle of class without fear of the consequences. This truly concerned Severus as the hospital wing was filling up at an alarming rate. Some of the injuries were so severe that they should really have been sent to St. Mungo's, but the Carrows said that they needed to suffer so they would better learn from their mistakes. Severus was afraid that the Dark Lord would agree with this painful philosophy, so he took to haunting the ward at night, making sure Madam Pomfrey had all the needed supplies and doing what he could to cast spells that would ease their pain and help them to sleep.

One evening, Madam Pomfrey sent a student to bring Severus to the hospital wing. When he arrived, she was almost in hysterics.

"They just brought Neville Longbottom in here," she said frantically as she led Severus over to Neville's bedside. "He is severely injured. I don't know what they did to him, but he has an immense amount of bruising, especially to his lower back. I'm afraid his kidneys have been damaged. I haven't got the equipment or the knowledge to help him. He could DIE! We MUST get him to St. Mungo's!"

"I saw what they did to him," said a weakened Seamus Finnigan. "They interrogated both of us about the graffiti on the walls; you know, about Dumbledore's Army?"

Severus scowled. "Do you know who did it?"

"No, sir, but they were determined to get the answer out of Neville. He was acting real defiant, see. They tortured him until he passed out. Then they started kicking him. It was horrible."

Madam Pomfrey glared at Severus.

"He's staying here, and that's final!" Severus turned on his heel and swept from the room. He knew, of course, that Madam Pomfrey was right. But he also knew that he had an ace in the hole. He would send Winky for Sienna tonight. If she could not help him, he would get Neville to St. Mungo's himself. In the meantime, he would need to speak with the Carrows. The Dark Lord encouraged the torturing of insolent students, but even he didn't want any purebloods to be killed.

Later that night, he checked back in with a still-fuming Madam Pomfrey. As he watched her attend to her many patients, he slipped a strong sleeping draught into her evening tea. He pretended to check her storage closet as he watched her drink enough of the tea to assure him that she would soon be sound asleep. Then he cast a sleeping spell and an ache-easing spell over the room at large and headed out the door.

He reached his office and sat down in his chair. "Dumbledore! Wake up!"

The sleeping portraits all grunted and groaned, objecting loudly to the rude interruption.

"What is it, Severus?"

"I need Sienna's help in the hospital wing. Can't you think of any place I could hide her safely?"

"No place that I can tell you about."

"Does that mean that there *is* a place, but you just can't tell me where it is?"

"Perhaps."

"Dumbledore! What do you think you're doing?" shouted Phineas Nigellus.

"Keep quiet!" insisted Dilys Derwent.

"You know the rules," said Everard sternly. "They've been in place since before my time."

"Yes, yes, don't worry, I remember," Dumbledore assured them.

"So there is a place? Where? For the sake of the students, I need to know."

"Do you love her?"

"I don't think that's any of your business. And besides, what difference does it make?" Severus was losing patience and becoming desperate.

"Sienna *is* my business. *You* don't care about her. *I* love her," Dumbledore stated stubbornly, "and she loves me!"

"Oh, *please!* I didn't know portraits could go *mental!*" Severus began to pace the room, glaring at Dumbledore. "Unless, of course, the subject was mental when the portrait was painted!"

"That's not fair!" Dumbledore insisted. "You know it's true you saw her in the entrance hall the night you killed me. She kissed me. She told me then that she loved me."

Severus continued to mutter as if he hadn't heard a word Dumbledore had just said. "Perhaps you *were* mental and Potter and I must be *mental* to have listened to you... risking our lives over and over, just because you asked us to. I must be going out of my mind..." His voice trailed off as he drifted deep in thought. Then he looked up again, from face to anxious face.

"Do you know where I can hide her?" he pleaded with Phineas Nigellus. "Do you?" He turned to Armando Dippet, who was pretending to be asleep. "Any of you?"

They all remained silent.

"Why won't you help me?" he was truly pleading with them now. "The Carrows have been working overtime torturing people. They even have other students practicing the Cruciatus Curse on people in detention! I need Sienna *they* need her. There are lives at stake." He was desperate. "But I can't keep her here if I've no place to hide her."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore suggested gently, "if you voice your concerns in the quiet solitude of your bed chamber, a solution will present itself."

"I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR RIDDLES AND MYSTERIES!" he shouted angrily and stormed out of the office to his quarters.

"WINKY!"

"Winky at your service, Headmaster Snape, sir," she bowed low as usual.

"Go get Sienna. Tell her she is urgently needed in the hospital wing. Bring her directly back here," he pointed into his private bath. "I'll have Polyjuice Potion ready."

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir." And with a loud POP, she was gone.

Severus went out to a closet off of his office that he kept under a complicated Locking Charm. Once opened, he retrieved the Polyjuice Potion and a phial with Madam Pomfrey's name on it. As he headed back to his quarters, he heard the return POP. He hurried into the bathroom, closed and locked the door, then cast the Muffliato spell, just in case.

"Winky told me what's been happening. This is awful!" Sienna closed the gap between them. "How can I help?" she asked as they gave each other a quick hug and kiss.

"Here. Polyjuice Potion. He dropped the hair into the beaker. It began to boil and turned a thick chartreuse. "It will transform you into Madam Pomfrey, so if any of the students see you, they won't think twice."

"But where's the real Madam Pomfrey?"

"I slipped her a deep dreamless sleeping draught. It shouldn't wear off for at least four hours."

Sienna nodded then looked disgustedly at the vile liquid. She made a face that reminded Severus of a little kid who was being forced to eat Brussels sprouts. He tried not to laugh as she poured it down, gagging in the process. As she began to transform, her clothes tightened as she took on the middle-aged woman's physique, but since they didn't have any of Madam Pomfrey's clothes handy, she figured she could suffer through it for an hour. Then Winky took them both by the hand and Apparated directly to the hospital wing.

Sienna went from bed to bed, assessing the damage. Then she gave Severus and Winky both tasks with the less severely injured students while she zeroed in on the worst cases. She started with Neville. It was true, his kidneys were badly damaged. It took her almost half an hour of deep concentration to get them to function properly. They were still damaged, but they would heal over time. She then went to several others as Severus fed potions and Winky changed bandages and applied ointments.

She had finished up with everyone who really needed her special technique, and had just gone back to Neville to see what else she could do for him, when the Polyjuice began to wear off. It was a good thing he was lying on his stomach when his eyes opened.

"Wow! I don't know what you did, but I feel so much better!"

Severus and Winky both looked up. The kids were all supposed to be under a spell to keep them asleep. Sienna was almost completely back to normal. Severus aimed his wand at Neville and quickly re-cast the spell.

"We'd better get you out of here before anyone else wakes up!" He looked urgently at Winky. They came together in the middle of the ward and instantly joined hands and Disapparated with the usual POP!

Seamus groaned and sat up in his bed. "Was I dreaming? Or did Snape just feed me a potion?"

"That wasn't a dream," commented Colin Creevey, who was still recovering from the torture he had received two days before, "that was a nightmare!"

Back in the Headmaster's private bath, the three of them stood clustered together, discussing the night's events and what the future might bring.

"Well, I still don't have a safe place to keep you, but the other Headmasters alluded to something. For some reason, they can't flat-out tell me. It's maddening. And they know how important it is that you stay. I don't understand it. I thought they were there to help me."

"I'll just come back at night if you need me, and we can continue to do what we just did." She smiled at Winky, then at Severus. "I do wish Madam Pomfrey would lose a bit of weight, though."

Severus chuckled. "Perhaps I can get Winky to bring one of her uniforms when she sends them to be laundered."

"Winky knows all the elves that work in the laundry, Headmaster Snape, sir. Winky can get them to replicate one for Miss Sienna."

"That would be perfect," Sienna smiled at her. "Thanks, Winky."

"I'll go back and collect some hair from Madam Pomfrey. If you need more time on the ward, I'll simply have extra potion on hand for you to drink."

Severus looked at Sienna with sad eyes. He wanted so much to keep her there. "Well, you'd better be getting back." They wrapped themselves around each other.

"Did you try my suggestion?" she asked as she buried the side of her face in his chest.

"What suggestion?"

"To find a place to hide me. Did you voice your concerns in the peace and quiet of your bed chamber?"

Severus pulled away just enough to look into her sparkling greenish grey eyes. He furrowed his brow. "That's almost word for word what Dumbledore just suggested before I brought you here tonight."

She gazed into the infinite depths of his coal black eyes. As she stared at him, he felt a peace wash over him, and he could see a wisdom there that he had not seen since the last time Lily came to him in his dreams.

"Try it," she whispered. "You never know."

He scowled skeptically, then gave her a quick kiss. "Can you come back tomorrow?"

"I was just thinking that that would be a good idea. They could use more of my help, especially Neville."

Severus nodded. "Tomorrow, then." He raised his eyebrows at Winky. With a POP they were gone.

Severus sighed heavily and walked to his bed chamber. He slowly undressed himself and slid under the covers. Then he remembered the instructions both Sienna and Dumbledore's portrait had given him. He sat there for several minutes, concentrating on his need for a place to hide her, but no solution popped into his head. He finally concluded that perhaps an idea would come to him in a dream, or a solution would present itself in the morning when he was rested and refreshed.

But the following morning brought only more problems with defiant students. More graffiti was found on the walls, more students were sent to the Carrows for cheek in class, and more teachers were voicing their concerns loud and clear.

It was only the first week of school. What would he have to do to restore order?

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That night, Severus sent Winky to retrieve Sienna again. And again they Apparated to the hospital wing after she had transformed into Madam Pomfrey. Severus brought some extra Polyjuice Potion this time so she could stay for three or four hours. By the time she was finished, she felt confident that most of them could go back to their dorms the next day. Neville would need to stay until Sunday, however. His kidneys were much better, but he still had a lot of bruising. She had decided not to speed up the healing process of the bruises for two reasons. First, she hoped that by feeling the aches and pains of those bruises Neville would be discouraged from speaking out again, and second, that the Carrows wouldn't think that they had let him off too easy.

Winky took them both back to Severus' quarters.

"I still have no place to hide you," he admitted sadly. "I tried your suggestion, but no ideas were forthcoming."

Sienna looked at him with surprise at that bit of news. "Really? Well, keep trying. Don't give up."

"I guess since there are no classes over the weekend, we probably won't need you for a while. I'll send Winky if that changes."

After watching them Disapparate, Severus once again walked wearily to his bed and began to disrobe. He concentrated on his dilemma while he climbed into bed, then sat for several minutes more, his mind full of a picture of a secret room in which to keep Sienna.... Nothing.

He lay down with the picture still in his mind, hoping that something would come to him in his dreams, and drifted off to sleep.

Over the relatively quiet weekend, Severus caught up on the mountain of paperwork that had grown to alarming proportions on his desk. He never dreamed that the Headmaster position would require this much parchment-pushing.

As the second week began, he held his breath and waited for the next wave of casualties, but thankfully they didn't come. He figured that the troublemakers were still licking their wounds, with the aches and pains still fresh in their minds. He knew better than to let himself get lulled into a false sense of security, however, and remained ready for anything. And he continued to patrol the halls at night, looking for signs of trouble.

Wednesday evening, Severus sat at the staff table in the great hall and pushed his food around on his plate as he thought about Sienna. There had been no medical reason to bring her back to the school, and he missed her terribly. He didn't feel like eating, so he headed back to his office.

He quietly spoke the password and the gargoyle jumped aside. As he was climbing the spiral staircase he came face to face with Neville, Ginny, and Luna. Ginny was trying to hide something large and cumbersome behind her back.

"Silly girl," Severus sneered, "if you had been wise, you would have used a Reducing Spell as well as a Concealment Charm on this before you tried to leave with it. Even if you had made it out of my office, the first teacher who saw you in the hallway would have stopped you."

He held out his hand and waited for her to hand over the Sword of Gryffindor. Ginny slowly, sadly, turned it so that the handle faced him, then held it out for him to grasp. All three of them looked as though they were facing the gallows. If the Carrows had caught them, they would have been.

"About face," Severus said simply.

They slowly turned and headed back up the spiral staircase to his office.

Shards of glass covered his desk and the floor in front of the glass case where they had so crudely removed the sword.

"*Reparo*," he said casually with a wave of his wand. All of the shards returned to their previous position in the case door.

He then turned to the three students. "Have a seat," he conjured two more chairs. He then sat in the throne-like chair behind the desk and leaned forward, steepling his fingers.

"What, pray tell, were you planning to do with this?" he pointed to the sword, which was now lying on his desk.

"It doesn't belong here," bellowed Neville. "It belongs to Harry Potter! Dumbledore left it to him in his will."

"It belongs to this school. Dumbledore had no right to leave it to anyone." Severus' eyes narrowed. "So you stole it for Potter, eh? Then you must know where he is."

They all looked down at their shoes at the same time. "No, we don't," said Ginny, obviously deeply saddened by that fact, as if she felt very left out of something important. Then she looked up defiantly. "But we would have gotten it to him somehow!"

They all sat in silence for a moment. Severus felt the need to make them sweat a bit.

"And how, if you don't mind my asking, did you get the password to my office?"

His question was answered with several more moments of silent shoe surveillance.

"You're wasting my time... And these days it seems I have no time to waste." He thought for a moment, and then the solution came to him.

"Longbottom, look at me," he said sternly. Neville reluctantly obeyed. *Legilimens*, he thought to himself. A long stream of memories came flooding to the surface: Neville visiting his parents at St. Mungo's, being chastised by his grandmother for not having enough magical talent, fighting the Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic, scrawling graffiti on the third floor wall next to the girls' bathroom, giving cheek in class last week and being tortured to the point of passing out, feeling better in the hospital wing, but no knowledge of whom to thank (*good, he didn't get a look at Sienna*), and finally, overhearing Flitwick give Filch the password while hiding behind a stone statue. Severus broke the connection and scowled. Well, he would have to change it and ask the heads of house to be more careful about how and where they conveyed the password.

"Longbottom, you have already felt the Carrows' wrath. I'm surprised you would risk another disciplinary session with them."

"I'm not afraid of them, sir," Neville said with his head held high.

"Obviously," Severus replied thoughtfully. "Which is why I'm not sending you back to them. I believe something a bit more terrifying is in order for *all* of you!" He glared threateningly from face to fearful face and watched with satisfaction as they began to squirm in their seats. He let them wallow in their terror for a few moments, because

somehow he knew that what he had in mind would be like a walk in the park for these three. "You will accompany Hagrid into the Forbidden Forest tonight to collect dangerous potion ingredients for Professor Slughorn." He watched their reactions with amusement. They pretended to be frightened, but he could tell it was a façade for his benefit. He inwardly smiled as he stood up.

"You will report to his cabin immediately."

They all jumped up, almost betraying their relief, as they raced each other out the door, no doubt, Severus thought, thanking their good fortune.

He shook his head as he watched them leave. Then he addressed the door they had just exited through. "This is Headmaster Snape. The password will now change from Albus to Percival. I repeat: the password will now change from Albus to Percival." That done, he turned to the portrait of Dumbledore. "As long as they think it's in here, there will be more trouble."

"I agree," said Dumbledore.

"We need to at least appear to get rid of it."

"Good idea, but where should you take it? Its removal will need to be seen by several people."

"I could take the copy to Bellatrix. I'm sure the Dark Lord will agree that the safer place for it would be in her family vault at Gringotts."

"Perfect."

"I'll contact her and have her meet me in Hogsmeade to give her the copy tomorrow. She'll never know the difference."

Severus lifted the copy from his desk and placed it carefully back in the glass case. "I must admit that it was brilliant of you to put a copy in the case and hide the real one after you destroyed the ring last year."

"I do have my moments, from time to time, for one who has gone *mental*."

They both chuckled.

"Have you found what you needed for Sienna yet?" asked Dumbledore tentatively.

"No, come to think of it. And I have been trying every night before I fall asleep."

"You must be doing something wrong, then."

"I don't think so. I can't concentrate any harder."

"It's not a matter of concentration. It's how you *voice* your concerns that matters. You must be specific."

"Great Scott, Dumbledore!" bellowed Armando Dippet. "You may as well find it for him!"

"Ahh, Sleeping Beauty awakes!" exclaimed Phineas Nigellus.

"Put a sock in it, Phineas," retorted Armando.

"Enough, you two," said Dumbledore impatiently. "These are troubled times. Severus needs all the help he can get."

"*Voice* my concerns?" asked Severus, as if the dawn was finally overtaking him. "... That's it! I haven't been saying what I wanted ~~but~~ *loud*!"

Severus raced into his bed chamber and closed the door. *I have to be specific*, he thought to himself. He took a few moments to compose his thoughts and decide exactly how to word the request. "I need a place to hide Sienna so she can live here and no one can find her except for me and Winky." As the echo of his voice faded from the room, an archway appeared beside his wardrobe. He cautiously walked through it and into a modest windowless room with an adjoining basic bath, a wardrobe, a dresser, and a single bed. He looked around and decided that it was too dark. She may have to spend quite a bit of time sequestered here. He didn't want her to become depressed.

"Could there also be a decent sized window?" One appeared beside the wardrobe. And although it was still dark outside, he knew it would make a significant difference in the morning.

Severus nodded his approval and continued to study the room. He figured that, more likely than not, he would be spending his nights in here with her, and that single bed simply would not do. He thought of using an Engorgement Charm on it, but figured he would ask the room to make the change instead.

"How about a queen sized bed instead of that small one?"

The bed instantly transformed into a queen.

*This is fantastic!* he thought to himself gleefully.

"She would need to take her meals in here, and I with her, at least part of the time."

No sooner had he spoken the words than a table for two appeared in the corner between the bed and the window, equipped with a table cloth and a three-pronged candelabra.

*It's like the Headmaster's own little Room of Requirement*, he mused.

"Winky!"

She appeared in his normal bed chamber, with a POP, as usual. "Winky at your service, Headmaster Snape, sir," she said with a bow. Then she looked around. "Where is Headmaster Snape, sir?"

"In here, Winky."

"In where, sir?"

"Can't you see me?" asked a bewildered Severus, who could see Winky perfectly through the archway.

"No, Headmaster Snape, sir. Winky can only see a stone wall where Headmaster Snape's voice is coming from."

"That's odd," observed Severus, as he walked back through the arch to his bed chamber.

"Oh, goodness gracious, Children of Merlin!" squeaked Winky, surprise and a touch of fear smeared across her little face. "Headmaster Snape can move through solid stone walls!" She exclaimed as she prostrated herself at his feet.

"Winky," said a bewildered Severus, "get up and come with me. I need to get to the bottom of this."

She followed him out to the office.

"Dumbledore, I found it!"

"Excellent!" proclaimed Dumbledore.

"About time!" said Phineas snidely.

"But I specifically asked that Winky be included, and she can't see it."

"Can't see what?"

"See what why the r... the r... This is bizarre! I can't even say it now."

Dumbledore glanced at Winky and cocked his head to the side.

Severus finally got the hint. "Winky, could you please go back into my quarters and close the door?"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir." And with a very puzzled look on her face, she turned back to his quarters.

Once she had closed the door behind her, Severus cast the Muffliato Spell.

"Can we speak freely now?" he asked, a bit impatient.

"Yes," smiled Dumbledore brightly. "You see, the room has a sort of Fidelius Charm on it, with the castle itself as the Secret Keeper. Only the current Headmaster can ask for the room to appear, and only the Headmaster can reveal it to anyone else. Furthermore, no one can so much as speak of the room in the presence of someone who has never been in it. That way, the secret is always kept."

"But I was standing in it when I called Winky. She could hear me, but she couldn't see me. When I walked through the archway, she said it appeared as if I had walked right through the stone wall!"

"If you want her to be able to go in there, you must lead her by the hand the first time. As soon as you break the barrier, the arch will become visible to her as well."

"Then I will be able to talk with her about the room?"

"Yes."

"But neither of us will be able to speak about it, or what goes on in it, to anyone else?"

"Unless they have already been in the room themselves. And then *only* if there is no one else present."

"This is perfect," said Severus with excitement. "Even the Dark Lord will not be able to find her here."

"True, but if you know he is coming for a visit, I would get her out of here if I were you. She radiates quite a bit of power. He may be able to sense her presence even if he can't find her."

Severus nodded. "I agree that would probably be for the best. Thanks!" he looked up and smiled broadly at Dumbledore and the others. Then he turned on his heel to go show Winky the secret room.

After leading her through the arch, she became very excited. "Does this mean that Miss Sienna will be coming to live with us, Headmaster Snape, sir?"

"Yes, Winky, that's exactly what it means!"

"Oh this is wonderful news, sir. Winky is so happy! Can Winky go get her now, Headmaster Snape, sir?"

"Well, I was thinking that I would like you to take me to her instead. I want to tell her right away. I also have something in mind that would delay her arrival, but I believe it is the right thing to do under the circumstances."

"What is that, Headmaster Snape, sir?"

"You'll see," Severus said with a mischievous grin. "Shall we?"

She took his hand and they were gone.

## Severus Laughs

*Chapter 22 of 31*

Severus goes to the ashram to propose to Sienna, but when he returns to Hogwarts, he finds a surprise in the secret room.

A/N: In this chapter I introduce a new character, but he is neither from J. K. Rowling's imagination or mine. He is from the spiritual folklore of India. If you Google his name, "Babaji," you can find out more about him.

As always, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGEOGE and NervousAboutAngels, for helping me to make this a better story. My grammar is dreadful, and they

have to work overtime to keep me in line. An additional long overdue thank you goes out to the admins here at TPP. They find what my betas miss.

And, of course, the great and talented J. K. Rowling is responsible for the characters and their world. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this story.

## Chapter 22

### "Severus Laughs While Sienna Cries, But the Secret Room Holds a Surprise"

With a POP, Severus and Winky Apparated into total darkness.

"*Lumos*," he said casually. "Winky, are you sure we're in the right place?"

The dim wand light was more than enough to illuminate the tiny quarters they found themselves in. A single-sized mattress lay on the floor against one wall with a small window above it. A simple dresser stood starkly against the opposite wall with a mirror just large enough to see someone's hair and face hanging above it. On the center of the dresser top stood a small group of four pictures hinged together: Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and Mohammed. *Well, she's got all the bases covered*, thought Severus to himself. He noticed that they were stagnant images, Muggle-style pictures. They were arranged in a semicircle, facing a small candle. To the right of this little scene perched a magical photo. Severus recognized her mother and father smiling and waving. On the floor in front of the third wall sat a large cushion indented in the center with a button.

"This is Miss Sienna's quarters, Headmaster Snape, sir. Winky is sure of it."

"You must be right, because those are her parents," he conceded, pointing to the moving photo. "But it's the middle of the night. Where could she be?"

"Winky doesn't know, Headmaster Snape, sir. Maybe we should go outside and look around."

"I suppose there must be someone here who could help us find her." Then he looked down at Winky and raised an eyebrow. "But I doubt that any of these Muggles have ever seen a house-elf before. Perhaps you'd better stay here."

"Whatever Headmaster Snape sir thinks is best." She gave him a little bow and sat down on the cushion. "Winky will wait here, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"Hopefully this won't take long," he said as he let himself out.

The door led outside to a long, covered walkway. In one direction, he could see nothing but darkness. In the other was a dim, distant glow, which he decided to follow. He passed many other doors and little windows as he walked. From some he could hear loud snores drifting out into the cool night air, from others, only silence. He wondered if they were not occupied, or if the sleepers were simply quiet.

At the end of the covered walkway, he could see a large, white marble structure. High pillars supported a steep roof. There were no walls, but a wooden screen stood at the back of the structure. Its multi-paneled surface was elaborately carved and inlaid with precious stones and rich designs. The images represented many of the world's major religions in one form or another.

As Severus studied the structure, he realized that there were no Muggle electric lights, no torches, no candles. So where was the light source? The structure, as well as its occupants, seemed to be glowing!

Six people sat in silent stillness on cushions similar to the one in Sienna's quarters. They wore loosely-fitting golden sleeveless tunics, and their feet were bare. In the crisp, chilly night air, Severus wondered how they could keep warm in such scant clothing. They formed a semicircle around a seventh person. His cushion was elevated about twelve inches above theirs by a pedestal. He was clean-shaven, very handsome, and looked to be in his late 20's to early 30's. His straight black hair cascaded down over his shoulders. His skin was the dark tan of most natives from this part of the world. His hairless chest was bare and he wore only a white loin cloth. Severus couldn't help but feel a slight twinge of jealousy. *Is this the man she has spent every summer with?*

Severus noticed that Sienna was one of the people meditating in front of the bare-chested man. As he gazed at her, so serene and peaceful, a wave of guilt washed over him. The last time he had found her meditating was on the Gryffindor roof. What a selfish fool he had been that day.

Presently, the young, handsome man opened his eyes and immediately looked at Severus. Then he stood and silently stepped past the others as he made his way to Severus' side.

"Greetings, Severus Snape," he whispered in a very thick Indian accent. "I am Babaji. Come." He motioned for them to walk away from the class so as to not disturb them while talking.

As they walked away into the beautiful gardens, Severus noticed something remarkable: although it was a pitch-black, moonless night, somehow he could see where he was going. A glow seemed to follow the young guru as he walked.

"Welcome to my ashram, Severus Snape," he said with a broad smile.

"Thank you, sir. But how do you know who I am? Sienna was not expecting me."

"No, but *Babaji* was expecting you," he grinned impishly.

"How can that be?" Severus became intensely curious now.

"Because you finally found the secret room off your private quarters."

Severus' eyes popped open as an alarmed scowl crossed his face. "How do you know about the secret room?"

"I *am* the room, my dear boy!" Babaji laughed loudly.

"I don't understand. And what gives you the notion that you can call me boy? I'm a bit older than you are!"

Again Babaji laughed.

Severus began to get irritated. He didn't come all this way to be insulted or spoken to in riddles.

As if he could read Severus' mind, Babaji said, "Calm down, my son. In answer to your first question, wizarding laws do not apply to me. I have God's power at my fingertips. If you know about the room, I know about it, since through God, we are all one."

Severus raised a skeptical eyebrow, but he began to relax a bit as he remembered that both Sienna and Lily had given him the "we are all one" speech in the past. Perhaps there really was something to it. He still didn't like being called "boy" and "son" by this upstart, however, and displeasure remained sprawled across his face.

"And as for my age... Well, at this point I've lost track, but I materialized as the fully grown man you see before you over 500 years ago. My purpose in this incarnation is to take spiritual adepts who have reached a certain point in their advancement and bring them as far as I am able down the path towards spiritual enlightenment. Since my

duties often require me to appear in several places at once, it was decided that a young, vibrant body would make my job easier. So I have remained in this form, unchanging, over the years. I do not suffer disease. Whether I eat or not doesn't matter because I feel no hunger. My hair and beard do not even grow. Appearances can be time-consuming to maintain. My time is better spent on more important matters."

Severus stood, dumbfounded, in speechless amazement. He vaguely remembered reading about Indian folklore in a Muggle studies course. An ageless guru of great power was rumored to exist and had been spotted over the centuries by "the worthy and the faithful." Could this be him?

"So," Babaji said as he continued to read Severus' mind, "you are here to propose to Sienna. You hope that I can perform the ceremony to preserve the secret of her existence from the wizarding world."

"Can you?" Severus asked with an anxious tone.

"It would be my honor. But I have one condition."

"Oh?" Severus held his breath.

"You both must undergo two counseling sessions. The first, this Saturday, the next, one week later. If all goes well, you may be married the following day, Sunday, September 21st."

"Counseling?" Severus' posture stiffened defensively. "What on earth for?"

"I require it of all the couples I unite in holy matrimony."

"I think it's a waste of time, quite frankly."

"Ah, do you now?" Babaji spoke softly, as he narrowed his eyelids and gazed with scrutiny at Severus. It almost felt like a Legilimency session with Voldemort.

"I feel you haven't been truthful with her. You are hiding something."

"She knows that I am a spy. My position is precarious at best. She doesn't expect me to tell her everything," he said defensively.

I am not speaking of your fight against Voldemort. These are matters of the *heart* that you hide from her."

"What do you mean?" Severus asked, with a touch of apprehension creeping up his spine.

"Why, your undying love for Lily, of course!"

Severus' eyes popped open. He gasped at the guru and was once again reduced to speechlessness.

"I fear that if Lily was to reappear before you right now, in the flesh, and you were forced to choose between them, you would choose Lily."

Severus dropped his gaze to the ground. Babaji was right. He would give Sienna up for Lily, but it would be difficult and very, very painful.

He finally found the courage to speak. "But I love them both. And Lily is not alive. In fact, I haven't even seen her in my dreams for several months now." He looked back into Babaji's coal black eyes. He didn't think anyone could have eyes blacker than his, but there they were, staring back at him. And deep inside the depths of those eyes radiated a wisdom Severus had never known. This man had all the answers. This man knew the true meaning of life itself.

"I love Sienna dearly. I came here hoping to make her happy, not to break her heart."

"Yes, but before you do, don't you think she has a right to know that she will never have 100% of your heart?"

"I don't know about that. Over time my feelings may change."

"Possibly. But you should still tell her about Lily, about the dreams. Perhaps, if you mention that Lily gave her the vision in the first place, she won't mind sharing you with her."

"You know about the vision?!" Severus was astounded yet again.

Babaji shook his head and patted Severus' shoulder gently, just like Dumbledore used to do. "You have so much to learn, Severus Snape. It will take you several lifetimes to catch up with Sienna."

Severus sighed. He had been so excited when he and Winky had arrived. Now all he felt was apprehension. "I guess we'd better have your counseling sessions then," he conceded.

"Don't worry," Babaji smiled an impish smile again. "It won't be a one-sided confessional."

Severus raised a curious eyebrow.

"There's something she needs to tell you as well."

Apprehension began to creep up his spine again. Severus couldn't decide if he wanted to get away from Babaji, or spend the rest of his life at the ashram trying to feed off of his wisdom and positive energy. In a way, he was almost addictive. In another way, he was a bit frightening. It was strange. After a time he decided that he wasn't quite ready for what Babaji had to offer. Perhaps in his next life.

"May I speak with her now?"

Babaji nodded. "I'll summon her." His hand remained on Severus' shoulder as he closed his eyes and became very still. After a few moments Babaji opened his eyes and he could hear footsteps in the dark distance. Sienna finally appeared at his side, beaming up at him."

"You found the room!" She said excitedly as they wrapped themselves around each other.

"Yes," he said simply. "And *he* knows about it!"

She nodded her head towards Babaji, "He knows *everything*!"

"So I'm beginning to realize," Severus said with a touch of irritation in his voice. "By the way, how do *you* know about it?"

"Albus took me in there once."

"Really! What for?"

"I'll tell you about it later."

Severus eyed her suspiciously, then glanced towards Babaji who was giving him that "I told you so" look.

"Shall I go pack my things?"

"No, not yet," he turned his eyes back to Sienna and began to drink in her glowing beauty. "I need to speak with you about something first."

"I think I'll get back to the class," said the guru with a benign smile and disappeared into the darkness.

"Why can't I come back with you tonight?" she asked, obviously disappointed.

"Because I think we should be married first," he announced flatly.

"What?!" came her loud and somewhat stunned response.

"I've been thinking long and hard about this. I was in love once, long ago. I lost her because I made selfish choices. I vowed never to make the same mistake again." He gazed longingly into her silvery green eyes. "This love we share is one of the purest and most beautiful things I've ever experienced. I don't want to taint it with a base, sinful and selfish act. If I love you enough to take you to my bed, I should also be willing to marry you."

Tears welled up in Sienna's eyes and began to roll freely down her face.

"You don't want to marry me?" Severus asked, crestfallen.

"No, no," she sniffed. Then she took his face in her hands and looked deep into his eyes. "These are tears of joy, love, tears of joy..."

Severus sighed with relief then started laughing.

"Nothing could make me happier than to become your wife!" she announced between sobs.

Severus laughed even harder as he hugged her tightly. "Women!"

He could hardly wait for their wedding night.

They slowly made their way back to her quarters with their arms around each other. Severus informed her of the counseling sessions and wedding date and asked if that was OK with her.

"The sooner the better," was her happy reply.

Since it couldn't be a big wedding, there were no real preparations to be made. Sienna informed him that the ashram would throw the reception and all 25 of its occupants would attend, since they were her friends. She also wanted her mother to be there. She could send her Patronus, and then Winky could fetch her in time for the rehearsal dinner on the 20th.

So, it was all decided. After one long, wet kiss, Severus and Winky returned to Hogwarts.

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The next day, Severus awoke to more graffiti on the walls and another round of insolent backtalk in the Carrows' classrooms. He had come down hard on the Carrows the week before for almost killing Neville, however, so most of the students who ended up in detention did not also end up in the hospital wing. And those that did could be cared for with ease by Madam Pomfrey.

He knew it was an old-fashioned idea, but he was hoping that there would be no medical reason to bring Sienna to the school before the wedding. The only times he wanted to see her between now and then were during the two counseling sessions. And in his mind, he was slowly forming the speech he knew would inevitably have to come... the speech explaining Lily and how his heart was indeed big enough to love them both at the same time. He only prayed that she would understand.

Friday night arrived, and after dinner he finally had time to himself. He decided to spend it studying the secret room and perfecting it for Sienna's arrival.

He added a rug and some curtains, a dust ruffle for the bed, and some extra decorative pillows. A fireplace with a mantelpiece, a love seat in front of it, and he felt the room was complete. Since she would be spending more time in there than anyone else, he would let her add the finishing touches to her taste.

As he turned to pass back through the archway to his quarters, he noticed something odd. One of the dresser drawers was slightly ajar. Had it always been that way and he only just noticed it? As he walked over to push it closed he could see something inside. Curious, he opened the drawer fully. It was filled with nice neat rows of black socks! He didn't recall asking the room for a supply of socks. This had to be Dumbledore's doing. But how? His portrait was two rooms away. Sienna had mentioned that he took her in here once. Perhaps this dresser was here when he used the room, and he had left them in the drawer for the next Headmaster to find. If Dumbledore left something, perhaps others did as well.

Severus began to pull each drawer out for a thorough search. But all of the other drawers turned up empty. A bit disappointed, he began to remove the socks. She wouldn't need them. They were too big for her tiny feet, but he could always use more black socks.

As he reached in for the last pair he felt something hard and smooth. He pulled it out with great curiosity. So there was something else: a phial containing a silvery-blue liquid or gas-like substance. Severus deduced that it must be a memory, probably of Dumbledore's. But why would he keep it here? Unless... he never intended for anyone else to see it.

He held it up to the light as if the filtered rays could reveal its secrets. But there was only one way to find out what was inside; therefore, he marched through his quarters to the Pensieve in his office, holding it up as he walked.

"What do you have there, Severus?" asked Dumbledore's portrait.

"A memory. I think it might be one of yours. It came from a dresser drawer in the secret room.

"Now wait just a minute, Severus. That's private!" Dumbledore objected strongly.

"Not for long," Severus exclaimed with a mischievous grin.

"I'm telling you, Severus, you don't want to watch that. You'll misinterpret what you see, and you'll come to the wrong conclusion."

"Respect the man's private memories, Snape! For goodness sake," insisted Dilys Derwent.

"It doesn't concern you, Severus. Now put it away. I'm warning you!" Dumbledore said threateningly.

"Oh?" Severus felt genuine amusement at this idea. "And what exactly could you do to me, stuck as you are in that frame?"

"It's not what I can or can't do that should worry you," Dumbledore's face became solemn, "It's what you might do once you have seen it."



Severus gave him a contemptuous backward glance as he poured the silvery substance into the basin. Then, with a defiant look, he plunged his head in. He found himself drifting downward into his own quarters, but they were adorned with the trappings and trifles of Dumbledore, who lay very sickly and pale in his bed.

Presently, a knock came on the door. "Albus?"

"In here," came the very weak reply.

"Oh, Albus," lamented Sienna as she glided silently to his side. She sat on the edge of his bed and gently let her hand cross his forehead. The color immediately began to return to his cheeks. She positioned herself as close as she could get without sitting on top of him and began to move her hands slowly over his face and neck. She was not massaging him as she had done to Severus on that Valentine's Day two years earlier. Her touch this time was much gentler.

She worked his collarbone and shoulders, pushing the covers down as she went. Before she started on his chest, she grabbed a blanket from the foot of the bed, folded it up and covered his shoulders and neck with it.

She unfurled the blanket to keep him warm as she moved down his body slowly, finishing with his gnarly, worn out old feet. By the time she was finished, the twinkle had returned to Dumbledore's eyes, but he still barely had enough energy to sit up. Sienna looked very worried.

None of what he'd seen so far bothered Severus. He already knew she had performed her healing on him last year on a regular basis.

"Did you take your potion yet?"

"Yes, my dear. Severus brought it to me before dinner."

"It doesn't help much anymore, does it?"

"No, not that I can tell."

"Can't you get him to reformulate it?"

"I'm sure he would if I asked him to."

"Ask him. Even with my treatments you obviously aren't up to much."

"But your energy does help a great deal," he insisted.

She smiled weakly. Severus could tell that she knew it wasn't nearly enough if he was going to be able to continue as Headmaster.

A few moments of thoughtful silence passed between them, as Dumbledore gazed at her with that all knowing look that seemed to dive right into her soul.

"I have an idea," he said tentatively, "but it would be a bit unconventional, and it would be asking quite a lot of you. So if you don't want to, I will fully understand."

She looked at him with love and admiration. "You know I would do *anything* to help you feel better."

"Even so... It's your energy that helps me to heal, am I right?"

"God's energy, really. I just channel the energy into your body for it to use to heal itself."

"The longer I am exposed to it, the better I will feel?"

"That's the theory."

"And you agree that I have quite a bit of healing to do."

"Unfortunately. I don't know what you did to yourself, but it has really taken a toll on you. And it's getting worse in spite of all my efforts."

"What if I was exposed to your energy for say... eight solid hours?"

"Do you want me to work on you all night?"

"No, no that would be too much of a drain on you. No, I was wondering what the effects would be if you simply slept beside me, touching me somehow."

Severus' eyes almost popped out of his head. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He noticed Sienna had a similar reaction.

"You want me to spend the night in your bed?!!"

"Oh don't worry, my dear. There'll be no attempts at hanky panky. Even if I thought I could get away with it, I'm in no condition to try much of anything. Yes, regretfully, your virtue will be perfectly safe."

Sienna sighed then chuckled slightly.

"Merlin's Beard," barked Severus angrily. "You can't seriously be considering this?"

"Well, I've never read or heard of anything like this being done before, but I guess it's worth a try."

Severus became incensed. He started yelling at Sienna in disbelief. "HOW COULD YOU DO THIS? CAN'T YOU TELL WHEN YOU'RE BEING COERCED?!"

With great effort, Dumbledore pulled himself out of the bed and took her by the hand. Then he led her through the arch and into the secret room.

"Oh my, what is this place?" she asked, her eyes wide with wonder as it appeared before her.

"The headmaster's secret Room of Requirement. However, the rules are a bit different." Dumbledore proceeded to explain the secrets and rules of the room to her. Then he pointed at the dresser.

"You should find an appropriate night dress in the top left drawer. And you can change in the bathroom."

"But why do we need to come in here in the first place?"

"Severus has taken to checking on me in the middle of the night. He doesn't always come, but when I'm having a particularly difficult time of it, as I am tonight, he almost always checks on me. I'm afraid he would not be very happy if he found us sleeping together."

"Oh really?" She scowled bitterly. "I don't think he would care. I don't think he gives a damn about anything I do, to tell you the truth."

Severus felt a stab of pain thrust its way into his heart. *How could she ever think that?* he asked himself.

"Don't be too hard on him, my dear. He has a great deal pressing down on him at the moment."

Severus quietly thanked Dumbledore for defending him.

A very melancholy look crossed Sienna's face as she reached into the drawer for the nightdress.

When she emerged from the bathroom, Dumbledore had already crawled into bed. He kept to one side, giving her plenty of room to crawl in on the other.

"I suggest you lay on your side," she said matter-of-factly, "facing away from me."

With a few groans that Severus felt were only for dramatic effect, Dumbledore did as he was told. Then Sienna scooted up behind him and draped her arm over his shoulder and onto his chest.

Severus breathed a sigh of relief as the scene faded to black. *That wasn't so bad*, he thought. He had hoped to be the first man to wake up beside her in the morning, but he also knew that keeping Dumbledore alive, right up to the end, was of the utmost importance. And her approach to the matter had been, after all, purely professional.

But no sooner had the scene faded, then it came back into view. It was morning. The dim light of predawn was beginning to filter through the window. Severus noticed that it seemed Dumbledore hadn't moved a muscle all night, but Sienna had rolled over. They were back to back now, but still touching at the base of the spine.

Both sets of eyes opened at the same time. They rolled over to face each other. Dumbledore was smiling broadly, his eyes twinkling.

Severus glared at the scene through narrowed lids. He had a feeling that he wasn't going to like the rest of this.

"How do you feel?" Sienna asked tentatively.

"Like a new man!" he answered brightly.

"Good!" she smiled broadly back at him. Then she hopped out of bed, grabbed her clothes and headed for the bathroom. While she was changing, he walked out to his quarters and called a house-elf for some tea and crumpets. Then he carried them back to the secret room, conjured a table and two chairs and poured them both a cup.

"Oh, Albus, I can't stay," she explained apologetically when she emerged fully dressed and freshened up. Was it Severus' imagination, or did she seem very uncomfortable with her present situation?

"Why not? It's a Saturday. You have all day to meditate and do yoga. My days on this earth may be numbered, even with all your help. Make this old man happy. Sit with me for a while. I feel *good* for once. It's been months since I felt this good. And all," he held up his tea cup to her, "thanks to you."

Her lips curled as she sat down and pulled the other cup to her side of the table.

"My turn to get dressed," he announced. "I won't be long, I promise... Don't go anywhere."

"I'll be right here." She heaved a heavy sigh as he left the room, then she propped her head up with the heel of her hand. Severus noted that she looked tired, as if she hadn't slept all night.

Dumbledore headed for his private bath and was back in short order, looking fresh and clean, and wearing a deep purple robe that had an iridescent quality about it. This was one of his finest robes, worn, Severus knew, to impress his guest.

"Oooh!" she exclaimed as he came back through the archway. "What a beautiful robe. And you look so handsome in it!"

"Thank you, my dear. Such kind words for a dotty old man." He sat down and picked up his tea. "You know, if I were 50 years younger, vision or no vision, the Potions master would not have stood a chance."

Sienna laughed lightly, but Severus could tell it was a bit forced. Dumbledore must have felt it too, because he quickly changed the subject.

"You know sometimes during these healing sessions, you kiss me on the forehead."

"Yes," she looked at Dumbledore curiously.

Severus wondered where he could be going with this line of thought.

"When you do that I usually feel a real jolt of intense positive energy. It's always very uplifting."

"Good, that's what it is meant to do."

"I wonder..." pondered Dumbledore. He hesitated, as if he was afraid to venture further.

Severus knew now where this was leading and he didn't like it, not one little bit.

"... what would happen with a kiss on the lips?"

"Uhhh..." Sienna's eyebrows pushed up into her forehead. Severus could tell she was shocked and not sure how to respond. "I don't know if it would make a difference where I kissed you," she finally offered.

"Could we try?" he asked carefully. "Just... once?"

"But you said already that you fell like a new man," she reminded him. Severus thought she looked very uncomfortable indeed.

"Ah, but I could still feel *so much better*," he coaxed her with those crystal blue, sparkling eyes and a boyish grin sprawled across his face.

Sienna looked skeptical, and Severus decided, for sure, that she was most uncomfortable at the thought of giving Dumbledore a real kiss on the lips.

"DON'T DO IT!" he finally shouted at her. "IT'S A TRICK! THE OLD PERVERT IS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF YOUR GOOD NATURE!" Severus marched over so he was in her line of sight, right behind Dumbledore. "JUST LEAVE, GET UP AND GET OUT!"

He stopped suddenly, angry at himself for yelling at memories. He knew they couldn't hear him; that the events he was witnessing had already taken place. His urgings wouldn't change the outcome in the slightest.

"I suppose we could try it," she said half-heartedly.

"WHAT?" Severus yelled, in spite of himself. He watched in disbelief as they scooted their chairs together. Dumbledore cupped her face gently in his hands and put his mouth on hers.

Severus felt his pulse rate and blood pressure skyrocket. As he watched Dumbledore give Sienna her very first real kiss he felt jealousy infect his heart, as anger and

hatred crept into his soul.

He finally had all he could stand. He pulled himself up out of the Pensieve and landed squarely on his feet in his office, with a lurching stomach and daggers shooting from his eyes to Dumbledore's portrait.

"*You!*" Severus growled through gritted teeth.

"What are you so upset about, Severus?" asked Dumbledore defiantly. "You made it obvious by the end of school last year that you couldn't care less about her!"

"That's not true," he bellowed. "I LOVE HER!"

"Do you now? Then prove it! TELL HER!" shouted Dumbledore.

"I *have* told her! Severus shouted back. "In fact, I asked her to MARRY ME last night!"

Dumbledore's expression morphed from rage to surprise. "Really?" he asked in joyous amazement.

"But after what I've just witnessed," Severus added as his nostrils flared, "it seems I've made a terrible mistake!" He glared at Dumbledore. "How could you? Both of you? The only two people in the *world* whom I trusted... And I find out you've both been stabbing me in the back." Fuming, Severus turned on his heel and stalked towards his quarters.

"You didn't watch the whole thing did you?" called Dumbledore after him.

Severus stopped dead in his tracks and slowly turned back towards the portrait. "I saw all I could stomach," he spat out the words in a disgusted tone.

"I knew it I *knew* you'd leave before it was over. Be mad at me if you wish, but *don't hate her*. Watch the rest of the memory."

"Why? Why should I subject myself to your psychological torture?"

"If you want to know how she really feels about me *and* you, stick your stubborn, FAT head back in there and watch the rest of it!"

Severus looked skeptically at the Pensieve, then back at Dumbledore.

"Please, Severus," the portrait implored gently. "Don't make another colossal mistake...don't throw away one last chance at happiness."

Seething, Severus made his way silently back to the Pensieve, and with a wicked backward glance, he plunged his head in.

As if the Pensieve knew his intentions, the memory started where he had left off.

Severus was fuming as he suffered through the rest of the kiss when he began to notice that Sienna was simply going through the motions. Then he thought he saw a tear run down her face. Then another! She suddenly pulled away from Dumbledore and began to sob, her eyes still tightly shut.

"My word, love, is kissing this old man that dreadful of an experience?" he asked, sincerely worried and a bit crestfallen.

"No, no," she swallowed hard and tried to regain her composure. "It's just that I hoped more than anything that Severus would give me my first kiss. But the way he's treated me this year," she began to cry in earnest, "I don't think he'll ever really care about me."

Dumbledore wrapped his arms around her and began to rock her back and forth. "There, there now. Perhaps I was being selfish. I should never have tried to talk you into it." He kissed her forehead and continued to rock her. "Besides," he added, sounding somewhat puzzled, "I thought that after the meeting on your birthday, you two had finally worked everything out."

"So did I." She sniffed. "And everything was fine for a while, but something changed the first week of March. Since then, he's been completely ignoring me. I could take the abuse last fall because I could tell it hurt him more than it hurt me. But since March, I get nothing from him, no emotions at all. It's as if I don't exist. Now I understand why children misbehave to get their parents' attention; any attention, even the negative kind, is better than no attention at all."

Severus began to look back on those months. His attitude had changed on the night he and Dumbledore met to discuss Potter's future and the pig for slaughter issue. He had been so preoccupied with that news, as well as the role he knew he would play in Dumbledore's death and what it would mean for his future, that he had completely forgotten Sienna. And she was right... He knew how it felt to be ignored by someone he loved dearly. It's like a death sentence for one's heart. No wonder she had acted this way. He had driven her right into Dumbledore's arms out of loneliness and despair. He felt that to be labeled a heartless wretch would be an understatement.

"He's a cad for treating you this way!" Dumbledore tried to comfort her. "In my opinion, he doesn't deserve you. If I were 50 years younger--"

"Albus," she interrupted him, "if I was meant to be with you in this life, your age wouldn't matter to me. You could be 200 years old and I would have still fallen in love with you."

Dumbledore sighed quietly. "Perhaps in our next lifetime?"

"Perhaps," she smiled, sincerely this time.

"You really do love him, don't you?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"With all my heart," she admitted freely. "If he never falls in love with me, I'll probably end up alone, because it's him or no one."

Dumbledore nodded. "Well then, he's a very lucky man. Don't give up on him, my dear. He has some difficult times ahead. But perhaps, when everything calms down, he'll come to his senses."

"I hope so," she gazed into his crystal blue eyes.

They began to hug each other again and the scene faded to black.

"You perverted old fool!" Severus proclaimed as he landed with a thud back in his office. "You took advantage of her in a time of weakness and heartbreak. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"And what a big man *you* are, for breaking her heart in the first place!" Dumbledore retorted.

"You coerced her!"

"Indeed I did, but if she had truly objected, she would have refused me."

"She would have tried *anything* to help you get well, and you used that fact to your advantage!" Severus reminded him resentfully.

Dumbledore's eyes bore into Severus' soul with his next statement: "She was desperate for affection. Her heart was breaking. Just as she was willing to do *anything* to help me physically, I was willing to do *anything* to help her emotionally. The kiss was a mistake. I know that now. The hug was what she really needed." He began to calm down as he relived that moment. "I could feel the love radiating from her."

Severus thought about all the times he had also felt that love, and he began to calm down as well.

"We share a special bond of eternal love and friendship that lives on beyond death, Severus," Dumbledore tried to explain. "There are no words to describe how much she means to me... And," he added just for good measure, "sex has nothing whatsoever to do with it! Does that register in your HOT head?"

"You mean, my FAT head, don't you?"

They both chuckled.

"Marry her, Severus. Wrap your arms around her *every day* and tell her that you love her. It will mean more than any kiss, than any amount of love-making ever will."

Severus felt his eyes beginning to well up. He glanced at Dumbledore and noticed him quickly wipe a tear from his cheek.

"Now go on, get out of here. I need my beauty rest!"

AN: I know what you might be thinking: Dumbledore is supposed to be gay... Yes, but he also loves Sienna and would do anything to help her feel better on an emotional level. That includes offering physical comfort. He was not comfortable kissing her. He didn't do it in hopes of a sexual encounter. He was trying to make her feel loved and special. A gay guy kissed me once, for that very reason. And just as with Sienna, at the time, I didn't know he was gay. But later, when I discovered the truth, it didn't matter. What was important was the act of caring, the desire to be a friend when a friend was needed, whatever that might entail.

## The Wedding

*Chapter 23 of 31*

After working out the final kinks, Severus and Sienna finally tie the knot.

Once again, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, JENGINE and NervousAboutAngels, for helping me to make this a better story. I must also thank the admins here at TPP. They are truly amazing, and also very kind and tolerant of my many grammar and punctuation bumbles...

And, of course, the great and talented J. K. Rowling is responsible for the characters and their world. I make no money from the writing or sharing of this story.

### Chapter 23

#### "Anger and Jealousy Finally Abated,

#### On With the Wedding, Long Awaited"

The next day, Severus woke early and sent his Patronus to ask Sienna what time he was expected. He was delighted with her reply of, "The sooner the better, and expect to have lunch and dinner with us." So he showered and dressed, then called Winky and Apparated to the ashram.

Sienna was waiting in her quarters and greeted them with open arms. With the previous night's events fresh on his mind, Severus held on to her a little tighter and quite a bit longer than usual. Then he lightly kissed her on the lips.

"We have a lot to talk about," he said with a touch of apprehension in his voice.

"Babaji will help us work everything out. I'm sure of it." She comforted him.

Then she turned to Winky. "He also says, Winky, that you are free to explore the grounds while Severus is here. We have told the others about you, and you might get a few stares, but they may as well get used to you since you'll be in the wedding."

"Winky, in the wedding?" asked Winky and Severus in unison.

"Well, of course. You'll be my Maid of Honor that is unless you don't want to..."

"Oh, no, Winky would LOVE to be Miss Sienna's Maid of Honor." She quivered with excitement as she bowed deeply, her nose almost scraping the ground.

Severus became concerned. "But that means I will have to come up with a Best Man. I can think of no one, unless we are willing to reveal your continued existence. I'm afraid there is no one I can trust with that information. It would be too risky."

"Don't worry." She grinned slyly. "You'll think of someone."

She walked out into the bright noon sun, leaving him and Winky standing there very puzzled.

"Well, come on, time for lunch."

She led them to the smallest building in the ashram complex. It was a simple hut that looked as if a stiff wind would make short work of it. The walls were made of mud, with a roof of thatched reeds and grasses. A small window was cut into the wall, with no glass or screen to keep out the insects. Beside it stood the only door, which opened as they approached.

Out stepped Babaji, radiating a halo of positive energy that Severus could feel from several feet away. He opened his arms wide and smiled broadly at the three of them, inviting Sienna's embrace.

"Master!"

As Babaji wrapped his arms around Sienna, Severus noticed his expression change to one of concern. But it vanished as they pulled away from each other. He then

reached for Severus' outstretched hand and pulled him in for a hug as well. Severus was alarmed at first. He was not accustomed to hugging men. His father had never showed him affection of any kind. But as Babaji's incredible energy began to permeate his being, he relaxed and found himself enjoying the experience.

Then Babaji got down on his knees to hug Winky. Her tennis-ball eyes grew even wider with amazement that a human would go to such trouble to show her affection. She recoiled in fright.

"It's OK, Winky." Babaji reached out his hand to her. "I won't bite, I promise."

"Winky can feel Master Babaji's power," she replied, trembling. "Such power as Winky has never known." She prostrated herself at his feet. He gently caressed the top of her head, and she slowly looked up. His touch seemed to give her courage as she cautiously rose to her feet and looked into his eyes, black and deep as outer space.

"To be touched by such a powerful wizard is an honor above all others." She bowed low to him.

Babaji laughed out loud. "I am not a wizard!"

"But Master," protested Sienna, "you can do anything a wizard can do and much more. Perhaps she can sense this."

"Indeed she can." Babaji smiled back at Winky and held his arms out once again for a hug. Winky cautiously approached him, and they lightly embraced. When he let her go, she ran back between Severus and Sienna and watched him with continued reverence from the safety of their legs.

"You can do anything a wizard can do?" asked Severus, understandably skeptical.

"Oh, he's much more powerful than any wizard," piped up Sienna proudly. "He can--"

"Now, now, my child." Babaji cut her off. "Let's not bore your fiancé with such trifles."

Sienna looked fit to burst. There were obviously many things she wished to tell him about Babaji, and Severus was understandably curious. Perhaps a little reverse psychology would get him to open up.

"More powerful than any wizard? I don't believe it. Winky..." He turned and looked down at the elf between his legs. "... you must be imagining things."

"Your thoughts betray you, Severus Snape," Babaji reminded him. "But I can see that you need some convincing... Hungry?"

"I could eat," he replied.

Babaji held out his hand, palm up, and in it appeared a large, juicy, red apple.

"That's easy," Severus snorted. "Wizards can replicate food. Your kitchen is right over there somewhere. I smell a delicious lunch in the making."

"Yes," Sienna defended Babaji, "but apples don't grow up here. We have no apples in our kitchen. In fact, there probably isn't an apple for 50 miles around!"

"I didn't replicate it, Severus Snape. I created it."

Severus glared at him in disbelief.

"I rearranged the molecules in the surrounding space to make the apple. All of the elements are here around us. They only needed to be rearranged in the proper sequence."

Severus felt an intellectual excitement that he hadn't felt since his first day at Hogwarts. "Can you teach others how to do that? Can you teach me?" The idea of being able to rearrange the molecules around him brought an infinite influx of ideas into his head. He could kill Voldemort with a single thought! He could save Potter and so many others. The possibilities were endless.

"I hear your ideas, Severus Snape." Babaji's tone was reserved, almost sad. "You, as well as everyone else here, has the potential to do this and so much more. But it would take decades for you to acquire the discipline. And, once acquired, you would also have gained the wisdom to understand that karma would tie your hands in such matters."

"And as for your next question..." Babaji continued to read his thoughts. "... yes, I *could* destroy Voldemort with a single thought... *from here, right now*. But I will not interfere with the intricate karmic patterns that are playing out as a result of his rise to power. Some will die, some will suffer the heartbreaking losses of their loved ones, some will become heroes, etcetera."

"I will tell you this much: Voldemort will eventually be defeated, but it will come at a great price. Just keep in mind, as you watch your friends die, that death is simply a doorway into a different type of existence. We step back and forth through that doorway each time we die and each time we reincarnate. It is the world, the life on the *other side* of that door that is more important. Someday you will understand."

Severus stared into the limitless depths of Babaji's eyes. He tried to wrap his mind around those words, but it was difficult. He had not grown up with the concepts of karma or reincarnation. He didn't fully understand them yet. But somewhere, deep in his subconscious, he knew they were real.

"Now..." Babaji handed the apple to Severus. "... let's eat some lunch. Then we can get on to the first counseling session."

Babaji led them to a sprawling two story structure with a kitchen and cafeteria on the first floor. Sienna informed him that a meeting and recreation area occupied the second floor.

The sumptuous meal that was laid before him filled Severus to the brim. He was surprised that he could find lentil and potato soup and pita bread filled with beans, mixed greens, and humus so appealing.

Once the meal was finished and the plates manually cleared, Babaji led Sienna and Severus outside to a little gazebo by a small river. Its hurried waters rushed over the rocks, creating a soothing sound. As they took their seats, Severus could see blue/white snow covered mountains rising up beyond the trees. The natural beauty of his surroundings had been lost to the darkness on his first visit. Between the intricate formal gardens, the lotus pond, and the mountains, he could easily see why Sienna spent most of her summers here.

Anticipating his question once again, Babaji pointed at the mountains. "Those, of course, are the mighty Himalayas. This..." he swept his arm to make reference to the rushing river. "... is the Ganges, which originates up there a bit farther. We are in the northern area of Uttar Pradesh. But no one can find this place if I don't want them to... Not even Voldemort himself."

Having his mind read was beginning to make Severus uncomfortable.

"You have absolutely nothing to fear, as long as you are here," he reassured him.

"Now, on to the task at hand. The first thing you both must do is clear the air between you, 'come clean,' if you will. Although you both love each other very much and want this marriage to work, you are both hiding something. And that is no way to start out. So, divulge your secrets. I will come back when you are finished. Then we will talk about any further concerns you may have." He paused for a moment, looking back and forth at each of them. "Hold nothing back or I will know!"

His eyes rested on Severus with that last statement, which made him shift in his chair uncomfortably. Sienna smirked.

"That goes for you, too!" Babaji chided her. She blushed and began to inspect her toenails.

Babaji grinned impishly and walked away, leaving an uncomfortable silence in his wake.

"Well, shall you start, or would you like me to?"

"Oh, I'll go first," she said with resignation. "Best get it over with."

Severus stared at her with eyebrows raised. He couldn't help but wonder if her confession would include lustful thoughts for her handsome and sexy Master, with his tan skin and muscular hairless chest.

But no thoughts of this kind were forthcoming. Instead, Sienna reached down the neck of her tunic and pulled up a gold heart shaped locket on a long gold chain. There was a beautiful "S" inlaid in platinum on the front. It was not the same ornate "S" of Slytherin House. This "S" had an Arabic flair to its design.

A curious look crossed Severus' face as she held it out and pushed the tiny button on the side to pop it open. The inside right pocket, to his surprise, contained a tiny photo of himself smiling back at him. His photo raised his eyebrows and gave a slight nod, then looked down. The scene repeated over and over. The other half of the locket held an empty photo. Severus' face became a puzzle. Not only was it odd for her to have a recent photo of him (since he didn't remember sitting for one), but it seemed even more strange that she would have an empty photo across from his. He looked up at her, full of questions. Before he could voice them, however, she began to speak.

"Albus gave it to me for my 20th birthday. He had Colin Creevey sit behind me at lunch one day and wait until you looked at me to take the picture. It was during my sixth year, when you were being nice to me. You never smiled at me my seventh year... broke my heart," she added almost under her breath.

"Yes, about your seventh year and the way I treated you--"

"No, it's *my* turn. You can talk later," she corrected him.

Severus felt perturbed at the interruption, but remained silent. His thought returned to the mysterious empty photo across from his, and he was about to ask her about it...

"That used to be a photo of Albus, waving and blowing a kiss at me." She chuckled. "But after he died, I opened the locket, and he was gone. I don't understand it. It must have been tied to him somehow. When he left this world, it left with him."

Suddenly, an idea dawned on Severus. "Dumbledore! Have you got a minute?"

Sienna looked at him as if he had lost his mind, but a moment later her eyes jumped back to the locket as she heard Dumbledore's voice!

"Ah, there you are, Severus. I wondered why I hadn't seen you in the office today. You're with our girl!"

"Albus!!" She squealed with delight. "Where have you been?"

"Why, in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, of course."

"But I didn't know oh this is wonderful!" She looked back at Severus. Tears started to well up. "Thank you." She looked at him lovingly then turned back to the locket.

"Albus, I've missed you *so much*. How *are* you?"

"I'm *dead*, my dear. What you see before you is just an imprint of my consciousness. I left it for you because I knew that I would soon be dead, but you would still need my comfort as well as my counsel. I should have mentioned that the locket needs to be open if I am to hear you calling, so I can come for a visit."

"So all I need to do, if I want to speak with you is open the locket and call your name?"

"That's it, my dear. But now is not the time. I imagine you two have quite a bit to discuss with a wedding in the offing. So, if you will excuse me..."

"I'll see you later!" she called after him.

Then she turned back to Severus. "All this time... I never knew." She shook her head with amazement, closed the locket and dropped it back behind the cloth of her tunic.

"I love him so much," she confessed, finally. "I think that if it hadn't been for you, I might have fallen in love with him, in spite of the age difference. We took to each other like ducks to water... instant friends. I miss his hugs most of all. Such warm, wonderful hugs... no strings attached." Her voice trailed off. Severus noticed a lone tear meander down her cheek. He reached up and gently wiped it away with his thumb, as the rest of his fingers caressed the side of her face. He searched her eyes for more information. He knew she must tell him a lot more than that to fulfil Babaji's criteria. His look coaxed her into continuing.

"One night, late last spring, he called me to his quarters. You had already been to give him that potion, which by then was a waste of time. After I worked my healing techniques on him, he had the strength to get up and lead me into the secret room." She stopped suddenly and glared at Severus. "You already know, don't you?" She seemed angry with him for knowing. "And you were just going to let me ramble on!"

"I wanted to hear your version," he admitted, not a trace of regret in his voice.

"But how do you know? Did Albus' portrait tell you, or did *he* before he died?"

"Neither, actually. I found a memory of the incident in a dresser drawer inside the room itself. I viewed it in the Pensieve."

Her eyes grew wide, and she turned beet red. "You saw the kiss, too, didn't you?"

"Yes." His lip curled with amusement at her embarrassment.

"I would have tried *anything* to help him feel better."

"I know," Severus reassured her. "It was all my fault anyway... the cruel way I treated you all year. I'm amazed you didn't run off with someone else all together."

"But you heard the conversation after the kiss, so you know that thought had never entered my mind."

"I know," he admitted, gratefully.

"It's funny. I could feel that part of Albus wanted to kiss me, but part of him was very uncomfortable with the idea. I'm not sure why, since I couldn't read his thoughts back then. But the hug was a different story. There was so much love wrapped up in that hug. I could have stayed in his arms all weekend, perhaps for the rest of my life." She gazed into Severus' coal black eyes, searching for understanding, tolerance. She patted the locket under her tunic. "I will always love Albus. I will always need him. We are tied together in a way I can't explain. I love *you* with all my heart, and my life will be devoted to your happiness once we are married, but there will always be a part of me that belongs to Albus Dumbledore. I only hope you can understand."

Severus heaved a huge sigh of relief as he knew that her admission just made his speech about Lily much easier to give.

He took a deep breath and began at the beginning, with their childhood friendship. He led her all the way through his confession to Dumbledore and his plea to protect her and her family, his meltdown in the office when he learned of her tragic death, and finally, his first dream where Lily came to visit. He admitted that Lily still watched over him and urged him to open his heart to Sienna. But it was with great reservation that he finally admitted to Sienna that Lily had planted the vision of him in her mind.

"So you see," he finally concluded, "if it wasn't for my undying love for *her*, there probably would never have been *anus*."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," Sienna said with a coy smile.

"I hope you don't mind sharing me with her, at least in my dreams. My heart *is* big enough for both of you."

"If you can share my heart with Albus." She smiled again.

"Deal." Severus held out his hand for her to shake.

Just then Babaji appeared, it seemed, out of thin air. "Well, it looks as though you have both 'come clean,' as it were. And since neither of you have any concerns, you have no need for my counsel on this matter. So I will leave you two once again, this time to enjoy each other's company until dinner. Tour the grounds, go for a hike, or just sit and enjoy the view. I dare say it rivals any in the world! Dinner will be served promptly at six. See you then!" With a smile and a slight bow, Babaji vanished.

Severus turned to Sienna with a puzzled look over what he had just witnessed, but before he could open his mouth to ask, she answered.

"I don't think he was really here just now. He's probably meditating somewhere and just used astral projection to give us that message."

"You know you could let me actually ask the question first before you answer it." He pursed his lips in annoyance.

"It's just that telepathy is so much more efficient. As humans evolve spiritually, more and more people will learn to communicate this way."

"Well, I'm obviously not there yet."

"Sorry." She rolled her eyes at him.

"I guess these sorts of things will be covered in counseling session number two?"

"Probably," she admitted.

"Let's hope so." He glared at her in mock irritation.

Later that night, Severus sat in the throne-like chair behind his desk at Hogwarts, looking at the empty frame that usually held Dumbledore's portrait. As soon as he and Winky had left, he figured Sienna must have summoned her best friend to talk. They had a lot of catching up to do, after all. *Better get used to it*, he thought to himself, since he now had to share the old man with Sienna. At least she would soon be here with him, and they could have a three-way conversation.

He turned instead to Phineas Nigellus to see if he had any more news of Potter and his friends. It was only last week that Hermione Granger had summoned him to his other portrait that she took from number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Even though she had blindfolded him, he could tell that she was with Potter and the Weasley boy from the conversation they had had. And they asked many questions about the Sword of Gryffindor. But they had not summoned him again, and after the blindfold business on his first visit, he informed Severus that he had no intention of going back.

"You *must* go, if you are asked. And I would appreciate it if you could keep your ears open as to their location," requested Severus. "It is of the utmost importance that I keep up with their movements and intentions as accurately as possible."

"All right, keep your knickers on, I'll listen when I can," droned Phineas.

Just then, Dumbledore's rear end came into view. Severus could hear him bidding Sienna goodbye, with a promise to return the next day.

"Finally!" complained Severus as Dumbledore turned in his direction.

"Well, if you're going to be rude, I'll just go back to India!" He began to turn away.

"No, please! I need to speak with you," Severus implored him. "Must be nice to be in such demand."

"Yes, it's quite a good feeling." Dumbledore beamed at him from his central perch on the wall. "Now, what's so important?"

"Well, I have a bit of a problem that I hope you can shed some light on."

"I'll do my best."

"Did she tell you that Winky is to be her Maid of Honor?"

"She mentioned it, yes. Is that the problem?"

"Only because it means that I must now come up with a Best Man... Any suggestions?"

"What about Hagrid? You've always liked him."

"I thought about him, but he keeps a secret like a sieve keeps water. No one else must know she's still alive."

"Oh, that's right... Well, who already knows?"

"Her mother, Winky, and the people at the ashram, but other than Babaji, who will be performing the ceremony, I don't know any of them."

"Hmmm. I see your quandary. Perhaps you should take a different approach. Who is your best friend?"

"With the position I've put myself in, I *have no* friends."

"Aren't I still your friend?"

Severus glared at him and snorted. "Yes, but you're a bit *two dimensional* to pass for a Best Man, don't you think?"

"I *resemble* that remark!" joked Dumbledore.

Severus ignored him. "Besides, your portrait is stuck to its hinge with a Permanent Sticking Charm. I wouldn't want to take it down even if I could because then we'd need a

new hiding place for the Sword of Gryffindor."

"You don't have to take it down. I could just move to Sienna's locket for the ceremony."

"Oh, please, that tiny picture? No one could see you except me, her and--"

"What does that matter? You're the only ones who need to see me."

Severus was becoming impatient, but Dumbledore wasn't going to take "no" for an answer.

"What does the Best Man do, anyway?"

"I'm not sure. I've never been in a wedding before. Perhaps hand the groom the ring? Which reminds me, I need to buy one this week. Think your brother would make the purchase for me?"

"I don't see why not... So, the Best Man delivers the ring... Oh, that's easy then. Open the locket, set it on a chair beside you and put the ring in front of it on the chair. Then you can simply reach down and take it when the proper time comes, as if I had handed it to you."

Severus sighed heavily. How sad, he thought, that his life had been reduced to this, with a portrait of a dead man as his only friend. He looked at Dumbledore with tired eyes. "I guess it's settled then," he muttered in defeat. He turned slowly and headed for his private quarters, dragging his lead feet with each step.

"What's the matter? You should be happy! Another problem solved!" Dumbledore called after him cheerfully.

Somehow, it just wasn't enough to cheer him up.

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The uneventful week passed at a snail's pace, but Saturday morning finally arrived, and Severus could hardly wait to see Sienna again. She was the only bright spot in his otherwise dreary life. Dumbledore's portrait went back and forth between the two of them to arrange the time that Severus and Winky were to arrive. Sienna's mother had already been informed of the wedding on Sunday and had been invited to spend Saturday night at the ashram to help Sienna prepare. Winky would fetch her in time for Saturday night's rehearsal dinner.

Severus had finally gotten used to the idea of a locket acting as his Best Man, and Sienna was, of course, delighted with his choice. She had planned to wear the locket open around her neck anyway, so Dumbledore could see the ceremony and participate in any way he could.

After breakfast, he called Professor McGonagall into his office to let her know he would be absent for the weekend.

"Where are you going?"

"None of your business!" he replied curtly.

She puffed herself up in defense. "So what do you need me for?"

"You are, after all, still the Deputy Headmistress, are you not?"

"I suppose I am." She raised an eyebrow. She obviously had not expected anything like this when she was called.

"Then, you shall be in charge during my absence. I don't foresee any problems, but one never knows in times such as these."

"Are you sure you want me in charge? I would have expected Alecto or Amycus to be your choice."

"They know nothing about running a school such as this. They can barely run a classroom," he admitted with irritation. "But they are aware of my plans, and they will be keeping a close watch on your actions for me. So don't try anything foolish." His eyes turned to slits as he regarded her with suspicion.

He then swept from the room and headed for Hogsmeade, his long black cloak billowing behind him. He had prearranged to meet Winky with the clothes he would need in the back room of the Hog's Head so it would appear that he was Disapparating to points unknown in the usual manner.

When Severus and Winky arrived in Sienna's quarters, she sent Winky to the kitchen to help with the rehearsal dinner and led Severus around to Babaji's quarters to get the final counseling session out of the way; something that Severus figured at this point was simply a waste of his time.

The mud hut stood where it had the last time, looking as shabby and simple as ever. They knocked and entered after hearing his "come in" float out through the window. But instead of a mattress on the dirt floor with a dresser, which is what Severus thought he had seen through the door last week, the floor was covered in tile, and Babaji sat behind a desk in a comfortable chair with two inviting padded chairs in front of it for them. He stood as they entered and came around the desk for the usual hug. Again, Severus noticed Babaji's look of concern when he hugged Sienna. He wondered what sort of look crossed the guru's face when he was hugged.

"So good to see you again, Severus Snape," exclaimed Babaji. "Please, have a seat."

Severus felt Babaji's penetrating stare and knew he was doing more than reading his mind. He was looking into Sev's soul, the way Dumbledore used to do. He hoped that the guru would come to the conclusion that he had truly changed, deep down, from the selfish, insecure young man who had foolishly joined the Death Eaters so long ago, to the man who sat before him. He was such a different person now. But was he worthy of Sienna? Her heart was so pure, not tainted like his. She didn't have his emotional baggage, and she was so much more forgiving. The world had not had the chance to harden her heart. Perhaps Babaji had tried to talk her out of going through with it. A flood of doubts and worries began to fill Sev's head when Babaji spoke again to still his fears.

"We meet here today to be sure that you two go into this union with the proper attitude. I only feel this is necessary because neither of you are used to sharing your world with anyone. You are both loners to an extreme. It will not be easy to share your bed or living quarters. There will need to be compromises, concessions. Things will not always go as you wish. I am here to help you put the small irritations of life into proper perspective. Learning the arts of communication and compromise can mean the difference between a successful marriage and a failed one.

"When you find yourselves picking at each other over insignificant issues, ask yourself this question: will this matter five years from now? If the answer is 'no' then it should not matter now either. Give in; let it go, because it is a small thing and not worth creating bad feelings between you.

"I believe that you have already come across such an issue, yes?"

Sienna looked at Severus, a bit puzzled. Then she smiled. She knew he was thinking about the mind reading issue and could have provided the answer but took Babaji's advice and kept her mouth shut.

Severus furrowed his brow and regarded her suspiciously. "Oh, go ahead, say it. Or perhaps I'm the only one here that requires speech at all." He scowled back and forth between the two of them, irritation spreading strongly across his face.

"Case in point, Severus Snape." Babaji chuckled at his reaction. "Since her death and resuscitation, Sienna can read your thoughts. I have always had that ability. It is just the way we are. We can no more change that about ourselves than you can change the fact that you are a wizard. I imagine that your father found it very disconcerting to learn that your mother had such power. And although it will be a source of irritation for you at times, I can also see how her unique ability will be used to your advantage on



several occasions in the future. Before your life is over, her ability to read others' thoughts will become something you are grateful for. Trust me. It may take some getting used to, but it will be worth the trouble in the long run.

"And as for you, young lady..." He looked scornfully at Sienna. "... flaunting your powers is greatly frowned upon. You know better. For the sake of your husband's comfort, I expect that you can extend him the common courtesy of letting him speak before you respond to his concerns. Eventually he will get used to the idea of your telepathy, but until that time comes, you must remember to use restraint."

"Yes, sir," Sienna responded meekly.

They continued their discussion about compromise and tolerance and not letting the small stuff get in the way of their love for each other. Babaji warned them that maintaining a good marriage was a lot of work, and they should not expect it all to come from the other side.

Later that evening at the rehearsal, the vows were modified to fit their unique situations with Lily and Albus. Severus sat next to Sienna's mum at dinner and couldn't stop apologizing for setting her house on fire. She had no problem forgiving him, however, since it completed the illusion of Sienna's death, insuring her safety from a relentless Voldemort.

She had also brought a blank marriage certificate for them to fill out. Once the war was won and Sienna could come out of hiding, it could go on file at the Ministry. It surprised Severus to learn that many people chose to marry on their death beds, for various reasons, so it was necessary for the hospital to keep such forms handy.

As Severus walked Sienna back to her quarters at the end of the night, they kept the conversation light. "So you've got a dress?"

"Yes, Winky made one for me. It's simple, but very elegant. I think you'll like it."

"I'm sure it will be fine. I have your ring. Aberforth actually made the purchase in Diagon Alley for me a couple of days ago. I popped over there Tuesday afternoon and had a look in Nitaarzine's Jewelry store, then went back and told Aberforth what to get and gave him the money. It's goblin made. Hope you like it." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a small ring box. She opened it cautiously, and he watched with delight as her eyes grew wide with wonder.

"Oh, it's beautiful." She paused for a moment. Severus thought she might start to cry. It sat up proudly in its box, all shiny and glittering of white gold, with a filigree pattern etched along the outside and a modest diamond solitaire sitting in a low profile setting. Simple, yet elegant.

"It isn't much, but it's all I could afford on a headmaster's salary," he apologized.

"Oh, no, it's perfect. Anything ostentatious would get in my way." She looked deep into his coal black eyes.

Hers sparkled like moonlight on water. As usual, he wanted to get lost in them. *Soon*, he thought to himself. *Tomorrow night is almost here...*

"It has an inscription inside," he informed her.

She gingerly removed the ring from its box and looked closely. In tiny script she could just make out the message. "To S and A, with love from S and L." She chuckled and gazed again into his eyes.

"I have no money to buy anything," she admitted, but Mum recovered Dad's ring from the fire. It is also goblin made, so the fire couldn't hurt it. Here, let's see if it fits." She ducked into her quarters and returned a moment later with her father's ring. Thick and yellow gold, with no obvious decoration, it suited Sev's minimalist taste and, as luck would have it, fit perfectly. He took it off and handed it back to her. "Wait! Look at your inscription," she insisted.

He held it up to the light to read the miniscule letters on the inside. "S & L + S & A forever." He smirked at her. "Did you know what I was going to write in yours?"

"No!" She became adamant. "I swear I had no idea."

He still eyed her suspiciously. But then his face softened as he remembered Babaji's lecture from earlier. "Doesn't matter. It's perfect as well."

"It's getting late. I guess we'd better get some sleep. Do you know where the guest quarters are?"

"Yes, over there somewhere." Severus pointed off into the darkness. "I'm sure someone can show me. By the way, where do you want to go for our wedding night?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Babaji offered to let us use his quarters."

Severus scowled at this thought. Even with the newly added tile floor, there was no bathroom, no curtains on the wall. It was tiny and dusty, probably overrun with insects at certain times of the day... Not his idea of a good time. "You've got to be kidding! I'd rather just go back to the castle!"

"Oh, don't worry. He'll fix it up for us. It will be perfect. You'll see." Her smile became devilish.

Severus still felt extremely apprehensive about it but let the matter rest. The amazing Babaji was always full of surprises.

He reached down and took Sienna into his arms, one last time as a single man. Her passion filled his heart, mind and body with thoughts of tomorrow; then he easily found his way to the guest quarters with a bounce in his step and a glow in his soul.

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The morning sun shone through the tiny window of the guest house after what felt to Severus to be only a few short hours. He assumed his internal clock had not yet adjusted to the four and a half hour difference between Great Britain and India, but since he didn't sleep well last night, he forced himself out of bed anyway. He busied himself with a shower, breakfast, and continually getting in the way of the ashramites as they set up for the wedding and reception. No matter who he asked about helping, they all told him to go relax and get ready. But he had nothing to do and no one to talk with, and he was not allowed to see Sienna until the actual ceremony. As he wandered the grounds he finally ran into Winky as she took Sienna's breakfast dishes back to the kitchen. She had eaten in her quarters, where her mother was now helping her get dressed. Did it take two hours to put on a wedding gown?

"Winky, is there anything I can help you with?" he begged for an occupation.

"Headmaster Snape sir wishes to help Winky?" Her tennis-ball eyes grew even wider. "Oh no, sir, Winky is helping Miss Sienna ma'am and her mum. Headmaster Snape sir must not see Miss Sienna until the wedding. It would be bad luck."

"I know that, Winky..." He thought for a moment. "Then could you do something for me, just something quick?"

"Winky will be glad to take time out to help Headmaster Snape sir. What does Headmaster Snape sir need from Winky?"

"Could you please go get Sienna's locket and bring it to me? It seems that will be the only thing I am left to do. At least I can talk to Dumbledore to pass the time." He felt quite left out and forlorn about this whole ordeal. No one would let him help with anything. It would only take a few minutes for him to don his dress robes.

"Winky will be right back, Headmaster Snape, sir. Don't go away!"

At this point, Severus felt that he could disappear, and no one would notice until the ceremony started. He was beginning to think this whole big deal was a big mistake instead. Perhaps it would have been better if they had just eloped...

"Here is the locket, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"Thanks, so much, Winky," he said with a sincere smile.

She bowed and ran off back towards Sienna's quarters.

Severus opened the locket. The picture of Dumbledore was empty. All he saw was himself, smiling benignly, then looking down. He wondered if he could enchant the picture so it would come alive for Sienna if anything should happen to him. He was Headmaster now, after all, and someday his portrait would hang in the office, just like all the others. He made a mental note to research the enchantment when they got back to the castle.

He walked leisurely over to the temple and sat on one of the many meditation pillows positioned in nice neat rows all over the floor. "Dumbledore!"

"Ah, there you are. I've been wondering when you would get here."

"But I've been here."

"Yes, but I couldn't see you. So from my point of view, you just got here."

"Whatever." Severus pursed his lips in irritation.

"Merlin's beard, man, you don't plan to wear *that* to your wedding?"

"And what's wrong with this?" he asked indignantly, looking down at his usual black clothes.

"It's a wedding, not a funeral, for Merlin's sake! Lighten up! If I were still alive, I'd loan you one of my finest lavender dress robes."

Severus snorted with laughter. "Lavender? I don't think so. But if you must know, lots of men wear black to weddings. A black tuxedo is very classy attire for the groom. And I have a bow tie that will go under my collar here..." He indicated the placement around his neck. "... and my finest silk dress robe. It is black, of course, but with the faintest hint of iridescence."

"Iridescence?" Dumbledore couldn't help but poke some fun at the former Potions master. "Severus Snape, clothes horse, always on the cutting edge of the fashion world."

"Very funny." Severus smirked. "I haven't had 150 years to collect unique dress robes and interesting cloaks like someone else I know."

"A lot of good they do me now that I'm dead. What did you do with them all, by the way?"

"I have no idea. By the time I became Headmaster, all of your clothes and personal items had been cleaned out of your quarters."

"Pity. Well, I hope they went to a good cause."

"I could always ask Minerva when I get back. She would know what happened to them."

"For that matter, I could ask her. She's sitting at the desk right now..." and Dumbledore walked out of the frame before Severus could voice an objection.

"Great. Alone again." Severus sat and stared at the locket, waiting for Dumbledore's return.

"How can you say you're alone in an ashram full of people?" came the startlingly clear voice of Babaji from behind him.

Severus twisted around to see the guru dressed as usual, in only a loin cloth. He had a glowing radiance about him, also as usual, and his presence lifted Sev's spirits considerably.

"You are not alone, I assure you," the guru said with a smile. "In fact, you are united in spirit with all of humanity, only you are not aware of it."

"Then why do I feel so isolated most of the time?"

"Probably because you have been afraid of getting hurt again. But now that you believe you have an 'invincible gift,' you don't have to worry about losing her."

"You know about the prophecy?" Severus once again became amazed by Babaji's omnipotence.

"Of course. And it has so far been misinterpreted by everyone who has heard it."

Severus' face mirrored his inner confusion.

"Let me explain... You assumed that when she came back to life she must have reached her full potential."

"Well, of course she must be invincible if she can bring herself back from a deadly curse."

"But she has not yet reached her full potential. And even when she does, it will not mean that her body is indestructible, nor will it mean that the organization that holds her loyalty will be invincible."

"I don't understand. Then what does it mean? And what will it possibly take for her to reach her full potential?"

Babaji sat down on the cushion closest to Severus and put his hand on his shoulder. Severus could feel a vibrant transfer of joyous yet tranquil energy. It was infectious.

"It is a spiritual prophecy, not a physical one. She will reach her full potential when she becomes fully enlightened. And with that will come an awareness that the energy of spirit can never be destroyed, hence the awareness of being invincible."

"But her body can still die?"

"It can, and eventually, it will. She is not meant to have a perpetual existence on this earth like I am. Not in this life anyway."

"So the prophecy only refers to the eternal nature of her spirit?" Severus became obviously disappointed at this less dramatic interpretation.

Babaji smiled. "...*only refers*... I guess that's what I should expect from someone like you."

Severus pulled his shoulder away from Babaji's hand and scowled. "What do you mean by that?" he asked defensively.

Babaji shook his head and laughed, making Severus even more incensed. "I don't mean to insult you. Please, let me explain"

Severus' scowl began to fade, but he still needed more information before he could let go of his defensive posture.

"When I refer to 'someone like you,' I mean only that you, like most of humanity, are deeply rooted in the mundane physical world. Notions of the spirit are considered trifling and unimportant, when in fact, we all come back here lifetime after lifetime with one goal: to advance spiritually. Unfortunately, most people forget that when they are reborn

and plug away at only the things that their five physical senses tell them are important. So when you said '*only* refers to the eternal nature of her spirit,' it showed me just how far behind her you are, because from my point of view, as well as hers, *nothing* is more important."

Severus began to feel quite small and insignificant. Doubts of his worthiness began once again to creep into his mind.

"Please don't infer that I think you will hold her back!" Babaji assured him. "She loves you she needs you, more than you know. Your life together will help her advance spiritually. In fact, it already has. And hopefully, she can return the favor by helping you learn to be more forgiving, by letting go of your hate. She was correct when she told you it was a waste of energy."

Severus thought back to one of their conversations about Potter when she urged him to let go of his negative feelings. He searched the universe in Babaji's eyes and nodded. "I'll try."

"Good. Eventually it will happen. And you'll feel so much better for it."

Just then, Dumbledore reappeared in the open locket. "Is this the infamous Babaji I have heard so much about?"

"Why, yes," answered the guru with a toothy grin. "And you must be the Best Man!"

"Albus Dumbledore, meet Babaji; Babaji, meet Albus Dumbledore."

"The pleasure is all mine!" stated Dumbledore enthusiastically. "I only regret I did not get to meet you when I was still alive."

"Perhaps in your next incarnation," suggested Babaji. "Well, I will leave the two of you to get ready for the ceremony." He stood up and nodded his head. "Two o'clock will be here before you know it," he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

After that uplifting conversation, the time flew by. Severus added the bow tie and black silk robe to his outfit, then took the locket out to the gazebo where the ceremony would actually take place. He conjured a high stool to set the locket on and found a rock to prop it up against, so Dumbledore wouldn't be looking straight up at the ceiling. He took a hanky and wiped the dust from his finest black dragon skin boots, and they waited.

The ashramites began to gather around the gazebo, leaving a path for Sienna and Winky to walk through.

Sienna's mother approached and took her place in the gazebo across from Severus. Babaji joined them, dressed this time in a bright white cotton tunic, but it only came up over his left shoulder, and Severus noticed that his feet were still bare. His long black hair shone in the bright sunlight and had been loosely tied back, reminding Severus of the way Dumbledore used to tie his beard. His lip curled as he glanced down at Dumbledore on the stool, who winked at him with a broad grin.

The sparkling headwaters of the Ganges rushing over the rocks joined the whispering wind and singing birds to create the joyous music for their ceremony. Just then, Winky appeared around the corner of the building which housed the ashramites. Her brand new pale pink pillowcase tunic looked clean and neat. Severus noticed that pleats had been ironed into the fabric so that it looked much more like a dress than a pillowcase. When she had covered about half the distance from the corner to the gazebo, Sienna appeared.

Severus could barely catch his breath because of her stunning radiance. Winky had outdone herself on the dress. Its tastefully elegant lines emphasized the fitness and perfect proportions of Sienna's body. The neckline plunged to reveal a hint of cleavage that, until now, Severus never realized existed. He hadn't thought much about her body before. He loved her for other much more important reasons. But the fact that she was suddenly so sexy didn't upset him in the least. In fact, the thought of exploring that beautiful body excited him almost to the point of embarrassment! He felt himself blush as he turned away and concentrated on calming himself. He glanced at Babaji for reassurance, but Babaji gave him a devilish grin instead, having read his mind as usual.

Winky took her place beside Mrs. Kaolin, and Sienna stepped up between her and Severus. Their eyes met. He thought he would burst from joy at this moment a moment he had assumed for so many years, would never come.

"We are gathered here today, my friends," began Babaji, "to join this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony, a union of a sacred and spiritual nature, that, if nurtured properly, will last until death and beyond. If there is anyone present who objects to this union, speak now, or forever hold your peace."

"I OBJECT!" exclaimed a stern voice from the tiny locket on the stool.

"WHAT?!" barked Severus as he spun around, swirling his iridescent cloak around his legs.

"Albus, how could you?" cried Sienna.

"Calm down, both of you," urged Babaji. "It's not what you think."

They both looked from Babaji to the locket with relief, but Severus still harbored just a touch of resentment for ruining his long awaited moment.

"I can't see squat from here! All I have is a lousy view of the back of your *funeral* cloak!"

"It's *not* a funeral cloak!" Severus hissed with growing irritation.

"Couldn't you find something better than that? You look like a giant BAT in that thing!"

Severus rolled his eyes and was about to retort when Babaji intervened.

"It's alright, I have a solution." He reached over and lifted the open locket over Sienna's head and hung it around his own neck. "There. Is that better, Albus Dumbledore?"

"Perfect, Babaji. Thank you." He looked back and forth between Sienna and Severus, smiling like a spoiled child who had finally gotten his way after throwing a tantrum.

"I love your cloak," Sienna whispered reassuringly. "It's very classy and so... you. Any other color simply wouldn't have been right." She gave Dumbledore a quick reproachful glance, then gazed back at Severus full of love and joy.

He could tell that this moment meant as much to her as it did to him. They clustered their four hands together between them as Babaji continued.

"I believe that the two of you wished to say something to each other before the exchange of vows, yes?"

They both nodded.

"Well, now's the time. Severus, you go first."

"Sienna..." Severus gazed into her sparkling, silvery green eyes, "... for so long I was afraid to open my heart. I had become comfortable in my misery. After all, how could I expect anyone else to love me, when I didn't even love myself? But you made me realize that I was worth loving. You have renewed my life, my sense of purpose. You have removed my sorrow and my loneliness. I humbly offer you my hand and my heart, and I will endeavor always to deserve you."

Babaji nodded his approval then turned his shining face to Sienna.

She gazed into the depths of Severus' glistening black eyes. He felt her love wash over him like a gentle wave. He felt that wave undulate back and forth between them, uniting their spirits in pure bliss and making him feel almost dizzy. He had to hold her hands tighter to steady himself. He had never felt anything like it before. Did Babaji have something to do with this? A sideways glance at the guru made him realize that the answer was yes. Severus felt overwhelmed as Sienna began to speak.

"Severus, my love, I knew from the moment I first saw you that I would someday be your wife. It was my destiny to love you. You didn't always make it easy for me, but my spirit urged me to keep trying, assuring me that, someday, you would open your heart to me. And what a beautiful heart you have, with so much love to give. I offer you my hand and my heart in return for yours, and I promise to always strive to be worthy of your undying love and devotion."

"Beautiful..." mumbled Dumbledore as he dabbed his eyes with a lacy lavender hanky.

"Very well." Babaji looked back and forth at them once again. "Do you, Severus Snape, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, during good times as well as the difficult times which surely lay ahead, forsaking all others *still living*, until death and beyond?"

"I do," Severus stated clearly and without hesitation.

Babaji repeated his question to Sienna.

"I do." She smiled and swallowed hard, trying to hang on to her composure. Severus knew that she tended to cry from joy almost as easily as she cried from sorrow.

"Rings, please." Babaji looked at Winky and then from Severus back to the stool.

Sienna held out her left hand so Severus could gently take it in his.

"Just as this ring I give you today is a circle without end, my love for you is eternal. Just as it is made from an indestructible substance, my commitment to you will never fail. With this ring, I thee wed." He slipped the elegant diamond solitaire onto her finger. Then his hand moved up to her glowing face and wiped away a lone tear. He smiled and shook his head, then held out his left hand for her.

She retrieved her father's ring from Winky then repeated his words and slipped it on his finger. More tears rolled down her beautiful face even though she was smiling from ear to ear.

"May your love for each other be always unconditional. I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Severus bent down and planted a conservative kiss on her lips. He had never been comfortable showing affection in public. There would be plenty of time for that later.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Severus Snape!"

A huge flock of birds had taken up residence in the branches of the surrounding trees during the ceremony, and with this statement, they all began to chatter and sing, as the small crowd of ashramites applauded and cheered. The sudden noise startled Severus and Sienna, for they were concentrating so hard on each other they had almost forgotten about everyone else.

As they walked, arm-in-arm, towards the gardens where all the food had been set up, the birds continued to sing. Some people in the crowd threw bird seed at them as they passed. The birds must have seen weddings here before. No wonder they were singing. A free meal awaited them as soon as the crowd dispersed.

The sumptuous spread of food seemed even more impressive to Severus when he reminded himself that no magic was used in its preparation. They all stuffed themselves on colorful and flavorful vegetarian dishes, and once again, he was pleasantly surprised at how much he enjoyed them, never once missing the meat.

Several ashram residents doubled as musicians. An accordion player, a reed player, a sitar and some bongo drums rounded out the ensemble, and although the music was rather eclectic, it livened up the atmosphere considerably. People were dancing and singing. They began to form a circle and pulled Sienna into it, but Severus refused.

"It is your wedding day," explained a little old man. "It is bad luck not to dance!"

Sienna pulled herself out of the circle and leaned against him in an attempt to change his mind. "You heard the man. It's bad luck not to dance on your wedding day."

"If you think I'm going to go out there and flail around like some deranged wild animal just to placate some archaic tradition..."

"You're a stick-in-the mud at your own wedding reception." Sienna shook her head in relenting disbelief.

"I have a reputation to consider," Severus informed her proudly. He had always felt that dancing was a useless waste of energy. "But you go right ahead, my dear. I have no doubt that the spectacle will be very entertaining."

Sienna gave him a quick kiss. "Have it your way," she called back to him as the dancing chain scooped her up and dragged her away.

Through the entire party, Sienna's open locket remained around Babaji's neck. He and Dumbledore seemed to be enjoying each other's company. As the party finally began to wind down, Sienna asked to relieve him of the locket, but Babaji smiled down at Dumbledore. "No, I think I'll keep him for the night, so the two of you can have some privacy."

Sienna giggled and blushed slightly.

"Oh, that reminds me, would you like to see your honeymoon suite?"

The idea of that mud hut passing as a honeymoon suite made Severus laugh out loud. "This ought to be good."

"You continue to underestimate me and my 'Muggle magic,'" Babaji chided him. "Come and see my wedding gift to you both." He led them around to the other side of the dormitory where only the shabby little hut had stood just a few hours ago. In its place now they found a beautiful stone cottage protected on three sides by a thick stand of trees. The exposed front faced the rushing Ganges with the Himalayas rising in the background. A covered front porch came equipped with two chairs and a table where they could enjoy a serene cup of tea in total privacy with a picture postcard view. As Babaji led them inside, Severus' heart skipped a beat. *Babaji must have pulled this place right out of my imagination*, he thought. It was everything he ever dreamed it could be.

A king-sized four poster canopy bed stood proudly on one wall, a fireplace with a roaring fire graced the other. A Muggle sound system played soft romantic music from the built-in shelves on either side of the fireplace, while books and three-dimensional art pottery, glass and sculpture filled the remaining places. A loveseat with ottoman sat in front of the fire, flanked on both sides by end tables.

Under a window near the front door sat a table for two with a beautiful view and, on the back wall, a wardrobe for clothes and the entrance to the bathroom. Severus assumed it would be very basic, but Babaji insisted on leading them in there as well to complete the tour. To their astonishment, they found his and hers sinks, the necessary commode, a bidet, a walk-in shower large enough for two people and, best of all, a huge whirlpool tub with all the bells and whistles. Plush linens lined the shelves on the wall between the shower and tub. Babaji had thought of everything.

It was all too good to be true. Severus' jaw had dropped when they entered the cottage. He just now realized that his mouth was still agape when he began to speak. "I can't believe it! How did you do this *when* did you do it? The mud hut was here this morning, in this very spot. I remember seeing it."

Sienna's face beamed. She seemed to already know the answer, but she let Babaji do the talking.

"How quickly you forget, Severus Snape. This place is no different from the apple. All of the atoms and molecules needed to create it were already here. I only rearranged them"

"But the trees? How did they grow so fast?"

"I created them fully grown. It's quite a time saver."

"But how did you know what I would want? I wasn't thinking about it."

"Somewhere, at some time in your life, you imagined this place. I found it in your memories. Perhaps you had dreamed of taking Lily here, many years ago."

The idea that someone could access every thought he had ever had brought a momentary shiver of paranoia to Severus. But he shook it off quickly. He knew that this man would never use such power against him.

"If you need anything to eat or drink while you are here, just call Winky."

"Of course," Severus replied.

"Now I believe that your mother needs to get back soon. So before you get too comfortable here, perhaps you should take a moment to say goodbye."

"Oh, Severus, can we show her the place? And Winky?"

"Certainly," Severus replied with a smile.

They found Mrs. Kaolin and Winky and joyfully gave them the tour. Sienna was obviously delighted with all their oos and ahhs. But it was getting late, and Hazel had to work the next day. So they said their goodbyes, and Winky took her home.

Finally, Mr. and Mrs. Severus Snape were alone...

## From Wedded Bliss to Hogwarts Castle

*Chapter 24 of 31*

After a glorious night together, it's back to reality for the newlyweds.

The people and places that you recognize belong to the creative genius of J. K. Rowling. I make no money, I take no credit.

As always, I would like to thank my terrific betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for the many hours they have spent, sifting through my tangled tale, to make it readable. And, for the same reason, I also extend my eternal gratitude to the staff here at the Petulant Poetess. They all work hard to make this a better story.

Another personal note: The song lyrics at the beginning of this chapter were written back in the 1940's by my father, Mr. Hershel Gilley. It is a beautiful song. I wish you could also hear the haunting melody that goes with it. The lyrics just seemed to fit the scene perfectly, so I used them here.

This chapter is the main reason for the NC-17 rating, so if explicit love scenes aren't your thing, you might just want to skim over it. But there is a great deal of other important info that you should be careful not to miss.

### Chapter 24

**"From Wedded Bliss to Hogwarts Castle,**

**Keeping the Secret Can Be a Hassle"**

The romantic Muggle music set the mood for the newlyweds as they began to explore their temporary home. "Quite a step up from the broom cupboard, eh?" commented Severus as he began to peruse the collection of books surrounding the fireplace.

Sienna laughed. She picked up a piece of the pottery to examine it more closely. "No kidding."

"But I must admit that all of this, the art work for instance, did not come from my mind."

"I would assume that Babaji tapped into both of our imaginations to create this, just to be fair. I know I saw a bathroom almost identical to that one in New York a few years ago. After I finished my training here, Mum took me to America for a couple of weeks as a reward. She wanted me to see how the other half lived. We took a Muggle airplane, we used Muggle money to pay for everything, and we stayed in Muggle establishments. One of the really posh hotels in New York City had a bath just like that, with the two person Jacuzzi and everything. I had my vision of us together by the Lake only a few months before the trip. I immediately thought of you and how romantic it would be to enjoy your company in such an environment." She began to blush as she placed the work of art back on the shelf, and they moved closer together.

Just then a slow waltz with a haunting melody filled the air, coming from the Muggle stereo.

"And here's Ram Seshadri Rambachanan with his rendition of 'Would It Break the Spell,' by Hershel Gilley," the announcer informed them. His voice faded just as the singer's came in.

*The spell of the night rules my emotions,*

*Your eyes are dancing without a motion.*

*Dare I tell you I have a notion,*

*Or Would It Break the Spell?*

They stood face to face in front of the fire. She didn't even have to ask him. He reached one arm around her waist and took her free hand in the other as she reached up to caress his neck. Slow dances had not been part of the musicians' repertoire at the reception. But Severus considered a sensual slow dance to be an investment of energy instead of a waste. Consequently, he took great pleasure in leading the way as they swayed slowly and gently to the music. "I wouldn't want to bring us bad luck," he confessed in a whisper.

*The fire in my heart is burning brightly,*

*Your lips are parted, now they invite me.*

*Dare I kiss them ever so lightly,*

*Or Would It Break the Spell?*

"If I kiss you will you turn into a frog?" she teased him.

"I'm more worried that if I kiss you I'll wake up from this perfect dream and be back in the nightmarish life I left behind."

"Shall we try anyway?"

He gave her a devilish grin, then leaned in and lightly touched his lips to hers which only left her wanting more.

*Magic Spell, can this moment last?*

*Must I soon live in the past?*

*Speak to me Spirit of the Night,*

*Tell me please, what's wrong or right*

The look she gave him overflowed with longing. He knew she had been waiting for this night a lot longer than he had, probably ever since she had seen him on her first day at Hogwarts. He had given up on love long before she managed to wiggle her way into his life. He felt a surge of gratitude as he pulled her closer. He let go of her hand and wrapped both arms around her tightly, feeling a sudden rush as her body pressed against his.

*The moon and the stars high up above you*

*Nod their approval, they know I love you.*

*Dare I say it, "Darling, I love you,"*

*Or Would It Break the Spell?*

*Don't ever break the spell.*

"Thank you," he whispered sincerely as the song faded.

"For what?" she asked as her left ear listened to his heart beat quicken.

"For loving me, for not giving up on me."

She didn't respond verbally, but he felt her grip tighten.

After a few moments of simply standing there, wrapped in each others' arms, she looked up into the limitless blackness of his dancing eyes. Each moment just got better and better. He never knew life could feel this good.

"Could you help me with this zipper?" she finally asked. "I think there's also a hook at the top."

He twirled her around playfully and gently kissed the back of her neck. Then he unlatched the hook and nuzzled her shoulder with the tip of his nose. Then he pulled the zipper all the way down (it led his hand just past her waist), and ever so lightly ran his fingers up her backbone. Then he once again touched his lips to the spot on her skin that the hook had just occupied.

She turned towards him, and her pale grayish blue eyes were sparkling like moonlight on water. She stood motionless, studying every detail of his face, his hair, the anxious and hungry look in his eyes, the quickening throb in his temple. Oh, Merlin, how he wanted her, but he also wanted to take his time, to let it last as long as possible, to relish every moment of this glorious night, and to commit each tantalizing sensation to eternal memory, the kind of memory that hovers like a shadow lifetime after lifetime.

His hand came up and gently cupped the side of her face as she tilted her head to meet it. Her closed eyes and parted lips begged for a kiss, which he gladly bestowed. Then his hand gently meandered down her neck, lingering at her exposed collarbone for just a moment before pushing the elegant gown off first one shoulder and then the other. It slid with a rustle to the floor, leaving an assortment of sexy undergarments exposed. He tried not to smirk when she blushed slightly.

Just as he began to wonder if she would be too shy to disrobe him, her slender fingers found his neck. The silk robes, bow tie, and top coat had long ago been shed in the Indian humidity during the reception, so she only had to unbutton his white linen shirt. But the stiff, heavily starched fabric proved a challenge as she tried to hide the trembling of her hands.

"Are you nervous?" Severus asked with sincere concern. He truly wanted her to enjoy this as much as he planned to. She had seemed so sure of herself in Aberforth's broom cupboard.

"A little," she admitted reluctantly, followed by a deep sigh.

"Perhaps we should slow things down a bit then." He tried not to let the heavy disappointment show in his tone.

"No!" Her lips pursed in determination. "I've been waiting for this longer than you have. We don't need...I just...it's just that..." Her voice trailed off as if she realized she sounded like a babbling idiot, not the type of woman her new husband would want, not at all.

His gaze met hers with amusement as he took both of her hands in his and kissed her fingertips; then he began to put her fingers in his mouth, one by one, and gently sucked each in turn. He could feel her pulse quicken, and he inwardly smiled. Perhaps he could drive her so wild with lust that her nervousness would soon evaporate.

When he ran out of fingers, his mouth found the nape of her neck as her newly freed hands went back to the daunting task of those pesky buttons. His sensitive nose buried itself deep into her hair and relished the light lavender scent that always seemed to mingle with her aura. His hands slid down over her shoulders and around the small of her back, pulling her pelvis to his so she could feel how hard he had become. So hard.

Her fingers became frantic until she finally gave up and dug them in between the buttons and the fabric, and with an angry growl, she ripped the shirt open. Severus watched with delight as the buttons rained noisily over the tile floor.

"Well, I suppose that's one way to do it," he announced with a grin.

"Sorry, I'll fix it later."

"Winky will fix it later, with pleasure, I'm sure," he corrected her.

Her fingers began to explore the soft exposed skin on his chest. He wondered if she would have the nerve to touch his nipples. As if in answer to his unvoiced question, she lightly encircled one with her index finger. *Will she kiss it?* Indeed, an instant later he got his wish as her lips and tongue began to play with a nipple that was already almost as hard as his privates. He gave her lower back another tug and ground his pelvis into hers. In response, she began to suck on the second nipple while her fingers continued to play with the now wet first nipple.

Oh, GOD! How he wanted her. How many years had it been? *No, don't think about that right now. All that matters is right here, right now, this moment. That's all, nothing else, no one else.*

He found the straps of her silky slip and pushed them off her shoulders. It piled silently on top of the wedding dress which she was still standing in the middle of. His hands found her face as he pulled her lips from his chest and directed them towards his own with reckless abandon. As his tongue found its way into her eager mouth, his hands found the clasp of her bra, and hers found his belt buckle. But when that bra popped off, he could think of nothing else. Again, she anticipated his needs and threw her head back, exposing those supple breasts with nipples so hard that they looked prickly as if they had been exposed to sub-zero temperatures.

She continued to fumble blindly against a belt that refused to cooperate, but his hands came to her rescue, dislodging the bloody thing and leaving the snap and zipper exposed for her still trembling hands. Only now her hands were not trembling from nerves but from heated anticipation and years of hidden desire. *Desire for me, Severus Snape... this beautiful, intelligent, talented witch... What could she possibly want with me?* He kept expecting to wake up and find that it was only a dream.

Suddenly, she stopped pulling at his zipper and grabbed his head, pushing him away far enough to look into his eyes. Her stare ripped into his soul. His return look betrayed his momentary feelings of self doubt.

"You are the most amazing wizard I have ever met, even more amazing than Albus Dumbledore! You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. And I love you more than life itself." A motherly scowl crossed her face. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," came his obedient reply.

They stood, returning each other's intense gaze for a moment as Severus' mind and heart let the sincerity of her words sink in.

"As you were." Sienna smirked.

After returning her smirk with a seductive smile, his lips dove back to her nipples as her fingers pushed his pants off of his hips, and they slid down to reveal his bulging shorts. He tried to step out of the trousers, but he tripped and almost fell in the process. His nose had been buried in her cleavage at the time, and he gasped as he grabbed at her arms and breasts to steady himself. She seemed to enjoy the jostling and fondling. For him it was a definite turn on. But, then again, just the sight of her naked breasts had been almost enough to make him reach orgasm.

When he took the time to pry his boots off, the pants easily followed. Finally, Severus simply couldn't stand it any longer. He vanished both of their remaining undergarments, then he scooped her up in his arms and carried her the short distance to the bed where he laid her down gently. He crawled over her and lay on his side with his elbow cocked and his head resting on his hand. He raised an eyebrow and tried to look suave, but from her expression, he had only succeeded at looking like a delusional geek.

*Great... Erection? What erection?* It became painfully obvious that the wrong look from her would deflate more than just his ego. He wasn't a teenager any more. Would he be able to get it back? He would most definitely need some help in that regard. Perhaps if he could get her to suck on his nipples again...

No sooner had the hope crossed his mind than she had pushed him down flat on his back and was straddling him with her fingers running through his chest hairs. Her lips and tongue worked in concert with her other hand to stimulate him like no one ever had. *Oh God, she's good. Should I stroke myself? What if she stroked me, what would that feel like?* Her hand was there in an instant, caressing his length with her fingertips. His stiffening cock jumped *Oh, Merlin, if her fingers would only go around it...*

*Perhaps if she rubs my balls...* While her mouth and one hand remained busy with his nipples, the other hand groped around in his nether regions for his very sensitive testicles. She clumsily began to fondle. *Not too rough...* Her fondling instantly became a caress. His blood began to rush again, but he still wasn't nearly as hard as he had been before.

He stared up at the ceiling, trying to get his concentration back. *Perhaps if she kissed my balls. Could I ask her to do that? On the very first night? No, that's too much to expect. There has to be another way.* Suddenly he realized, as he looked back down, that her lips were meandering south. One hand remained at his chest while her lips and tongue worked in concert with her other hand to stimulate him like no one ever had. *Oh God, she's good. Should I stroke myself? What if she stroked me, what would that feel like?* Her hand was there in an instant, caressing his length with her fingertips. His stiffening cock jumped *Oh, Merlin, if her fingers would only go around it...*

*Yes... Now stroke. Up and down... Don't squeeze too hard... Fast, faster...*

She was reading his every thought, his whims, his desires, his fantasies! This was absolutely incredible. Before he could get hold of his own imagination, he had fantasized about having an orgasm in her mouth. She obediently licked the head of his penis and put it between her lips, slowly working up and down on him, taking in just a little of his length at first, then a little more, then more still. No one had ever done this for him before. Did he just feel her teeth lightly skim his skin? It was the most arousing sensation he had ever felt in his entire life.

He was on the very edge of ecstasy when he remembered that this was her first time and he had wanted it to be as special for her as she had already made it for him.

"Stop!" he insisted out loud.

She lifted her head with a puzzled look as his erection stood just below her chin like a monolith at Stonehenge.

Severus' breathing was ragged as he attempted to regain his composure. "Sienna," he began slowly, almost cautiously, "you were reading my mind, weren't you?"

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"I'm not. You anticipated my every desire," he snorted incredulously. "You're every man's wildest dream. Look at that erection." He directed her gaze and didn't hesitate when she blushed a deep crimson. "I've never been so *hard* in my life!"

"So, what's the problem?" Her color began to return to normal.

He took a deep breath and felt himself tremble as he let it out slowly. Then he looked into her eyes with all the love in his heart. "This night is for you as well." He reached for her hand and led her back up to lay beside him. "Now it's my turn to drive *you* wild, to fulfill *your* every fantasy."

She smiled and blushed again even deeper if that was possible.

He bit his lower lip as he thought of what to say next. "But I can't read your mind, so you're going to have to tell me what you want."

"That's just the problem, isn't it? I've never done this before, so I don't know what I want."

"Perhaps if I try a few things you can tell me what feels good and what doesn't. I do have some experience in these matters, but I have also found every woman to be a bit different."

"Sounds like a plan," she quipped.

"Something else you should know. When I actually go inside you, it may hurt a bit, at least at first. I'm rather on the large side... if you haven't noticed."

She offered him a demure smile.

"And at this point, I'm so excited that when I enter you I probably won't last long, so I will need to get you just to the edge before I go in. Then we can both climax together."

"Yes, sir, *professor*." She giggled.

He pursed his lips in mock irritation then put his mouth on hers without waiting for an invitation. His lips caressed hers and their tongues began to dance, long, languid movements that let him taste her mouth with just a hint of pumpkin juice and wedding cake still lingering. As his kiss deepened, his hand found her breast and he gathered it up in his palm. Then he momentarily let go and slipped two fingers in between their engaged lips to wet them and then quickly returned them to her breast, where he found the nipple and teased it into rock-hardness.

Oh, Merlin, his erection was so stiff that it hurt.

"Does that feel good?" he whispered between kisses.

"Yes."

His fingers pinched her slightly. When no response was forthcoming, he pinched harder and twisted the tip of her nipple in between his thumb and forefinger.

"OW! It's not a wizarding wireless knob, ya know!"

"Sorry. As I said, every woman is different," he apologized meekly.

"It's OK. I think we may safely assume that I'm not aroused by pain."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said as he softly kissed his way down from her lips to her breasts and began to gently suck. "How's this?"

"Ooooooh, I like that. Can you suck just a little harder?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll let you know if you do."

Apparently the sucking felt quite different from the twisting because it didn't seem to matter how hard he sucked; as long as he didn't also bite, she became more and more excited. She even began to moan under him.

"Yesss," she hissed between clenched teeth in a rough voice that he had never heard before. Her back arched slightly as he moved one hand along her belly and down over her hip. As he moved his body towards the foot of the bed, his rock-hard cock rubbed gently along her inner leg. His hand followed her curvature and came back around to her inner thigh. Then he slowly tickled his way back up to her crotch. He wet his fingers again, then reached back down and just barely touched her clit. A sharp intake of breath let him know that he had come in right on target. Now the trick was to figure out just how she liked to be touched there. An up and down motion was soon stopped by her hand as she guided his fingers to move lightly from side to side instead.

"Yesss."

He hungered for the sound of that word as it escaped her lips. He imagined her screaming it in the throws of passion in a husky, guttural voice. With the deep desire to drive her wild, he redirected his lips to her most sensitive spot. Her fingers entwined themselves in his long, silky hair as she guided his mouth to just the right place. As his tongue moved back and forth, recreating the motion of his fingers, she held his head still and moved herself beneath him.

"Top to bottom," she whispered. "Just lick from top to bottom." With this, she held still and let him try the new technique. He could feel her body quivering with excitement. "Yessss." That word was music to his ears.

He slipped two fingers quickly into his mouth for lubrication, then inserted them into the mix as well. But as his fingers began to explore her, he knew that she was already so wet that no extra lubrication was necessary. Oh Merlin, she was wet! The mere thought of sliding in and out of that hot wetness almost sent him over the edge. Was she close? *Oh God, please let her be close* He knew he wouldn't last much longer.

And then he heard it, that voice, the wild animal voice of exquisite desire that he had never heard from any woman's lips. Not for him, not for the likes of Severus Snape. Not until this... very... moment.

"Severussss...Yesss...Severussss...Oh god, Severus I want you. Inside me. NOW!!"

With a trembling hand, he guided his engorged cock into her soft, wet heat as his lips found her open mouth. He was afraid to thrust too hard. He didn't want to hurt her. He tried to go slowly at first. But her legs swept up around his thighs as her hands curled over his butt, and she pulled, taking in all of his length in one sudden thrust. Then again, and again, harder and faster. Just when he knew he could no longer contain himself, he heard her primal moans and felt the spasm of her muscles around him, and he exploded.

But the mutual orgasm was only the beginning. As the two became one, something extraordinary happened. He wasn't just one with her physically, he felt one with her *spiritually*. He became Sienna, and she was him. It was an ecstasy beyond words. But it got better as their combined consciousness expanded. They became the ashram and its inhabitants. They became the Ganges and felt themselves flowing down to the Indian Ocean. They rose above the rest of the earth as the great Himalayan Mountains. They were all of India, and then, finally, the entire earth filled their consciousness. Severus could actually feel billions of pairs of feet walking across him, but he also was the feet as he shared the joys and woes of their billions of owners. He could hear the sun burning in outer space. His breath became the wind, the earth's crust his bones, the ocean's current his blood.

He wasn't sure how long it lasted. It could have been a moment, it could have been hours. One thing was certain: he wanted it to last forever.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. He felt like a prisoner, locked in his small, insignificant body, with only his own five senses to guide him. He opened his



eyes in disbelief. Did he imagine the entire experience?

"No, love, you didn't imagine it," she said breathlessly. "It really happened."

Severus sat up in the bed and stared at her, confusion and questions going like a blender in his mind. "But... ?" was all he could manage to ask.

Sienna, who seemed also to be giddy from the experience, sat up next to him and snuggled up to his shoulder. He put his arms around her and they eased back down. There they stayed for quite a few minutes as they let the experience soak in.

"Babaji must have had something to do with this," he finally managed to say.

"I'm sure of it," she added. "But I had a similar experience when I died. Remember how I described my expanding consciousness to you?"

"I remember, but it was impossible for me to understand what you were talking about until now."

More time passed. Severus wasn't even sure how much. He was too busy reliving the experience. But he still had so many questions. "Is this what we can expect every time we make love?"

"I doubt it. Once we leave here and are no longer under Babaji's direct influence, it will probably just be a normal sexual experience."

"Whatever that is..."

"What do you mean? This is my first time, but I never *dreamed* that at *your age* this was your first time, too!"

"Oh, it's *not*. But I've been in love before, and I've been with a woman before, but never a woman I was in love with. I just assumed that that would make some kind of difference in the way it felt."

"I'm sure it would." Now he had piqued her interest. "What was so abnormal about your other encounters?"

Severus stared at the ceiling and shuddered as he raked through his memories. "There were only a few others. After The Dark Lord murdered Lily, he felt the need to play matchmaker for me, and he insisted that I spend the night with Bellatrix Black. She wasn't married back then. It was a nightmare, like trying to have sex with a Blast-Ended Skrewt! I felt as if I had been violated even raped by the time she got through with me. For about two years after that, I couldn't even look at a woman with romance in mind. It was sickening..."

Sienna gave him a look of deep sympathy mixed with distress. "That must have been horrible for you."

He gave Sienna a little squeeze. What a different type of person she was from Bellatrix. So warm, so giving, so gentle. "With the exception of a few meaningless one night stands along the way, there was only one other, a Muggle Studies teacher at Hogwarts about ten years ago. She took a liking to me for some reason, but I had no interest in her whatsoever. Her adoration went on for about six months, and one night, she invited me up to her quarters. I didn't really want to go, but she insisted, and I could find no graceful way out of it."

Sienna smirked this time. "As my grandfather used to say, 'la noblesse oblige.'"

"The nobility obliges?" Severus raised an eyebrow, and then his lip curled. "Something like that. Anyway, that went on for a few months. I needed the stress relief, but she meant nothing to me. I finally began to feel guilty about using her when she obviously cared deeply for me, so I broke it off. She took it rather hard and turned in her resignation at the end of that year. I haven't seen or heard from her since."

More silence followed as they remained lying on the bed with her face on his chest and their arms wrapped around each other. He found great comfort in the feeling of her body pressing down on his. Her breath tickled his skin as he watched his own breath move the hair on the top of her head.

"Well," she turned her face up and looked into his eyes with mischief lighting up her own, "there's only one way to find out what 'normal' is..."

A huge grin spread across Severus' face as he felt his blood begin to rush again.

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The next morning bathed the mountains in bright sunlight while the cascading water and birds' songs filled Severus' ears. A year ago he would have gagged in disgust at the idea of such a happy scene, but now he soaked it up and relished the feeling of joy in his heart. Sienna stirred beside him. She opened her eyes and stretched out her arms, then wrapped them around him. He reciprocated and kissed her lightly on top of the head.

"Sleep OK?"

"Never better," he replied sincerely. "Did you go somewhere last night?"

"Oh, I thought you were asleep. Yes, I got up and went out to the temple to meditate for a couple of hours."

"Really? As late as we finally went to bed, you still had the energy to meditate?"

"When you know what you're doing, it is actually *more restful* than sleep. I'll probably get up in the middle of the night back at the castle, too, if you don't mind. I would rather do that and come back to bed because I really want to wake up beside you in the morning." She gazed into his eyes lovingly.

"Yes," he admitted, "I've been looking forward to that as an everyday occurrence." He tightened his grip around her.

"You know, that tub was sure a lot of fun last night. Do you think we could duplicate it in the secret room?"

"Are you reading my mind again?" he asked with a touch of mock irritation.

She started laughing. "No, love, that thought came directly from me."

"I believe we can come up with something like it. It's certainly worth a try."

They both put bathrobes on and Sienna called Winky for some breakfast. Then they couldn't resist more fun in the Jacuzzi before getting dressed and sadly making the necessary preparations to return to Hogwarts.

"Before we leave, I would like to find Babaji and thank him for everything," Severus informed her.

"Why don't you go on, then? I'll finish packing."

It didn't take long to find the guru. He had just finished breakfast and was leaving the cafeteria when Severus caught up with him.

"Sienna tells me you had everything to do with our spiritual experience last night. I want to thank you for that. It was the most incredible thing that has ever happened to me." Severus reached up and touched Babaji's bare shoulder in a gesture of sincerity.

Babaji smiled wistfully. "What do you think the world would be like if everyone could feel the way you felt last night?"

"It would be a paradise, I imagine."

"Yes, Severus Snape. No famine, no wars, no crime. People would spend their lives helping each other because they would finally understand that to help someone else is to help yourself. We are all truly one in the infinite ocean of spirit."

"I can finally understand that now, thanks to you."

"You could get there on your own if you would only learn to meditate. Sienna can show you how."

"I'm afraid my duties as Headmaster keep me rather busy. I don't know when I could find the time."

"Still, you should try. Speaking of your Headmaster duties... be prepared for trouble when you arrive back there this morning. Much has happened during your absence. You and Sienna will have your work cut out for you in the hospital wing, I'm afraid."

With that ominous message, Severus gave his final thanks, combined with a sad goodbye and rushed back to the stone cottage. He found Sienna and Winky ready to go when he got there.

"Don't you want to say goodbye to Babaji?"

Sienna smiled and began to radiate a sense of peace and joy. It made Severus feel warm and almost giddy.

"I don't have to. He never leaves me."

Winky extended her tiny hands, and in an instant, they found themselves back in his quarters at Hogwarts. He then took Sienna by the hand and led her through the arch to the secret room.

"Here you are," Severus gazed around the room. I'm not sure if you can make changes to it, or if I'm the only one. If you can't, just make a list of things you want me to add."

"It's lovely. The only thing I can think of is a couple's size Jacuzzi in the bathroom."

He smiled broadly as they both peeked into the bath. "You try. Then we'll know."

"Room," she asked, feeling a bit awkward, "please add a tub large enough for two people to relax in, with the ability to squirt the water from several locations for massage and therapeutic purposes."

Severus raised an eyebrow at her exact description, but the tub appeared before them just as she had described it. "Good. You can tweak things to your liking then." He turned to Winky. "I guess you should take me to the Hog's Head so I can walk back. I can't just mysteriously reappear in my office." He couldn't see what was going on in his office since he had put a Locking Charm on the door to his quarters before leaving for the weekend.

He gave Sienna a quick kiss. "I'll be back."

With a pop, they Apparated into the back room at the Hog's Head. Aberforth was in there retrieving a few more bottles of mead for out front. He was understandably startled by their sudden appearance.

"Oh, thank Merlin, you're back. All hell broke loose over there while you were gone!"

"What has happened?" Severus asked as his heart jumped up into his throat.

"Amcyus and McGonagall got into it some kinda fierce, and Alecto came up from behind and hit McGonagall with the Cruciatus Curse."

"Do you know what they were arguing about?"

"Probably, the treatment of the students that ended up in detention. Several of them had to go to the hospital wing Saturday after Alecto got through with them."

"What did they do?" Severus felt his blood pressure climbing.

"The word I got was more graffiti and some big disruption in the Great Hall during breakfast Saturday morning."

Severus shook his head and let out a sigh of frustration. "Why can't they just behave? Don't they understand what they're in for?"

Aberforth could only shrug. "McGonagall got hit several times with the curse. I think she ended up in the hospital wing too."

Severus was mortified. "Winky, go directly to the hospital wing. Do whatever you can to help Madam Pomfrey. Tell her I'll be right there."

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir." She didn't bother to bow. The look he gave her was enough to convey the urgency of the situation.

"Thanks," he said hastily to Aberforth. He then swept out of the back room and through the front door of the Hogs Head. Once outside, he felt it best to hasten his return and decided to take flight. In seconds he had landed by the great oak front doors. He let himself in and took off at a run for the hospital wing. When he arrived, he found an irate Madam Pomfrey, taking her frustrations out on poor Winky as if it was all her fault. The elf cowered in the corner, trembling with fear. "But Headmaster Snape sir sent Winky to help, ma'am," she insisted.

"How DARE you berate my house-elf when I sent her to help you? What is the meaning of this?" demanded Severus as he stormed up the ward.

"Look at what those HIRED THUGS of yours did in your absence!!" She pointed frantically around the room at the injured students. Then she lowered her voice so only he could hear. "And as if this is not enough, poor Minerva is suffering the after-effects of multiple Cruciatus Curses. She should be in St. Mungos, but those GOONS of yours won't let me send her!" She was incensed, more upset than Severus had ever seen her.

He searched the room with his eyes, but didn't see McGonagall. A bewildered look at Pomfrey gave him the answer.

"She's in her quarters. There's nothing I can do for her here. Flitwick put a Muffliato Spell on the door so the students couldn't hear her screaming."

"You just left her like that?" Severus scowled, horrified. He knew full well what she must be going through, having gone through it himself about three and a half years before. "Come, Winky," he cocked his head towards the exit and marched in long, quick strides so the elf had to run to keep up.

"As if you give a DAMN!" Madam Pomfrey shrieked after him.

They made their way quickly over to Gryffindor Tower and Minerva's quarters. Severus let them in amidst the cries of pain coming from the writhing tangle of blankets on the bed. He turned to the door and put a complicated locking spell on it. "Winky, go get Sienna and bring her directly here. Tell her it's an emergency!"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir."

Minerva's cries suddenly stopped just as he knew they would, and he cautiously approached the bed.

As she noticed his presence, her face contorted with spreading resentment and contempt. "What do you want?" Her voice was weak, but defiant.

"Minerva, I'm here to help you. I know what you're going through. It happened to me a couple of years ago."

"I don't want your help! Get out, you *murderer*. You and your Death Eaters have ruined this school! Hogwarts is better off closed... " She looked away in distress. "... destroyed."

"Please try and calm yourself, Minerva. Help is on the way."

"Who you sent for Alecto to finish the job?"

Just then she had a flashback, and the pain overcame her. She began to shriek and wail, and her body contorted from the pain. While she was still screaming, Winky arrived with Sienna.

"Oh, no!" Sienna gasped as she rushed to McGonagall's side. "Just like you at the end of my first year here."

"Can you help her?"

"I'll try. But we need to get her clothes off."

"We'll have to wait until she calms down." Severus looked skeptically at the squirming, screaming mass on the bed.

The pain finally subsided and McGonagall opened her eyes. "Sienna Kaolin? But...I thought you were dead!" Then she looked back at Severus with great suspicion.

"Dumbledore fell prey to an extremely powerful dark curse the summer before his last year. It made him terminally ill, despite all my efforts. He planned his own death, using me as the instrument, so as to cement my appearance as the Dark Lord's man. But, I assure you, I am not."

"Oh, please, do you expect me to believe this cock and bull?"

"It's true, Professor. Severus promised Albus that he would do his utmost to protect the students after Albus was gone. I'm a healer. Severus has been bringing me here in secret to help heal the students that have been injured in detention."

"The Dark Lord thinks he killed her." Severus glanced at Sienna and smiled triumphantly But then his expression darkened as he turned his attention back to McGonagall. "I'm afraid that, after Sienna has worked her Muggle magic on you, I'll have to wipe your memory clean of all this to keep her cover as well as mine."

McGonagall stared at him, and he could see from her look that she was quickly sifting through many years of memories. "Lily Potter..." Understanding began to dawn across McGonagall's face. "You cared for her and he killed her. That's why you came to work for the Order. That's why Dumbledore trusted you."

Severus knitted his brow, and his gaze became intense. "Yet another reason for me to wipe your memory clean."

"There's not much you can do here, love. But I think I could hear someone's voice in your office. Sounded as if he was trying to get into your quarters. You might want to go back and check it out."

Severus reached over with his left hand and patted McGonagall's arm.

"What's that on your finger?" McGonagall reached for Severus' left hand just as he was about to turn and leave. "And yours?" she added as she looked at Sienna's left hand.

Sienna blushed slightly, and Severus felt his own face redden as his memories of the previous night came to the surface. Their eyes met and joy radiated from both of their faces as well as Winky's. Minerva couldn't help but notice it.

"I guess we'd better put a Concealment Charm on the rings," she said reluctantly as she admired hers and then showed it to McGonagall.

"Good idea." He touched his wand first to his own ring and then to hers. They both became invisible, but he could still feel the weight of the gold on his finger.

Severus turned to Minerva. "Sienna and I were married yesterday. That's where I've been all weekend."

McGonagall's jaw dropped as she stared, bug-eyed, back and forth at the two of them. Then suddenly, she gasped as another flashback began to overtake her.

"Go on, love. Winky and I will take it from here."

Severus gave Sienna a worried look and then swept from the room, his cloak billowing behind him.

He didn't even have to look in his office to know that Amicus must have been the one that Sienna had heard, trying to break into his quarters. Alecto was probably with him. And as much as he was tempted to kill them both for what they did to Minerva, he knew that that reaction wouldn't go over well with the Dark Lord.

But invading his privacy was another matter. Voldemort could appreciate the need for their punishment in this case, perhaps even killing them, but then Severus would have to worry about replacing them. And as bad as they were, anyone else he could think of would be much worse. At least these two were not the sharpest knives in the drawer and easy to outsmart when necessary. In any case, he would have to catch them in the act to justify any actions that he might wish to take. So it was with great care and stealth that he tiptoed up the spiral staircase and listened at the door.

"We've been 'ere since breakfast," commented a gruff voice. "What if 'e comes back?"

"'e was supposed to be back last night right? 'e ain't back yet maybe 'e ain't comin' back!"

"'e'll be back that greasy git's indestructible."

"Yeah, and I'm beginning to think, so's this bloody door!"

"No Locking Charm could be this complicated!"

"Ya think? Care to give it a go?"

A pause filled the air as Severus strained to hear them. Would the dimwit come up with the complicated counter curse to his intricate locking charm? He held his breath in anticipation.

"Alohamora!"

"WHAT?!"

If he wasn't so angry, Severus would have laughed out loud.

"ello every one. I'd like you to meet my brother... the certifiable MORON!!"

"Well, you've been tryin' all these long drawn out counter curses, maybe 'e used somethin' simple."

"This is Severus Snape we're dealin' with ain't nothin' simple about 'im."

As they continued to argue, Severus inched open the door. They didn't seem to notice as all of their attention and energy was focused on his quarters' entrance.

His Expelliarmus Spell hit them both with such force that they slammed up against the door face first. Their wands flew up into the air and gracefully landed in his waiting hand. When they turned, horrified, to face him, they both had blood trickling from their flared nostrils.

"Severus, mate, you're back," smiled Amycus, but his eyes betrayed his worry.

Alecto took a different approach. "About time you got back. We thought somethin' 'appened to ya, and so naturally, we felt the need to..."

Severus crossed the room with silent rage in his eyes, and he stuck his wand up to her throat. "I could kill you both for trying to break into my quarters, and the Dark Lord would probably reward me for it," he finally said quietly with a 'calm before the storm' sort of quality to his voice. "But the time and paperwork involved in replacing you is more than I can spare *at the moment*." His emphasis of the last three words assured them that he had not ruled it out for some future time. He eyed them both suspiciously as he lowered his wand, and they began to relax a bit. "But if I *ever* catch you in here again without my permission..." He raised his wand again and watched their eyes grow wide with fear. "... it will be my pleasure to watch you die a slow... and agonizing... death." His silky smooth voice lingered on every word, sending chills up and down the Carrows' spines.

Intimidation was so much fun. At times like these he actually missed teaching.

Severus glanced up at the ornate, centuries-old clock on the wall. "Didn't your first class start 15 minutes ago?" he glared back at them. "Get going!"

With great relief, they started to shove each other out of the way in a fight towards the exit. Then Amycus stopped and turned back to Severus. "What about our wands?"

"I think I'll keep them for a day or two."

"WHAT?!" objected Alecto loudly. "We can't teach without our wands!"

"What if the students don't listen what if they turn on us?"

"Then you'll just have to deal with it. Alecto, I would think that you could do a better job teaching Muggle Studies if you have to live like one for a couple of days, don't you?" He raised one eyebrow and curled his lip.

"That's suicide suicide, that is!"

"We can't face those brats without wands!"

"Perhaps," he suggested with mock helpfulness, "if you don't tell anyone you are wandless, they won't notice."

With scowls on both of their faces, they turned towards the door.

But as Severus glanced around his office, he noticed several things out of place and thought something was missing from the little table with the silver instruments on it that had been such a source of amusement for Dumbledore. With a flick of his wand, he silently cast the Levicorpus Spell, and Amycus suddenly found himself hanging upside down by one foot.

"What the bloody hell?"

The missing instrument fell from his pant's pocket onto the floor.

"Worse than Mundungus Fletcher," Severus mumbled as he walked over to pick it up. Once he had returned it to its rightful place, he removed the spell, sending Amycus to the floor in a heap.

"Now GET OUT!"

They didn't need to be told twice.

## Vanishing, Faded Photograph

*Chapter 25 of 31*

Severus loses his temper when his photo of Lily goes missing.

My eternal gratitude goes out to my two betas, JENGEOURGE and NervousAboutAngels, as well as the staff here at The Petulant Poetess, for all of their hard work in sorting out my nightmarish grammar mistakes. I'm hopeless. They are patient above and beyond the call. Many thanks.

This story is based on the Harry Potter Book Series by J. K. Rowling. The characters and places are hers. I make no money from the sharing of my fantasies from her universe.

### Chapter 25

**"Vanishing, Faded Photograph,**

**Sends Snape Down a Dark Path"**

Just after the Carrows' hasty exit, Winky popped in with a request from Sienna for a deep sleeping draught. Severus already had plenty on hand and supplied Winky with the necessary dose. "How's it going?" he asked tentatively.

"Mrs. Snape, ma'am has made significant progress with Professor McGonagall, Headmaster Snape, sir. She should make a full recovery."

"Oh, thank Merlin." He sighed with relief. "This should keep her asleep for about three days while she regains her strength." He handed Winky the potion to take to Sienna.

That night, Severus, Sienna and Winky haunted the hospital ward and did what they could for the injured students. Sienna had taken Polyjuice Potion to pass for Madam Pomfrey as usual. None of the students had life-threatening injuries, however, so they finished after only a couple of hours.

When the newlyweds hit the bed for the first time in their new home, they were both so exhausted that romance was the farthest thing from their minds. Severus remembered Dumbledore's words of wisdom, however, and he summoned the energy to wrap his arms around her. She draped herself over his chest and gave him a soft, supple kiss.

"I love you so much," he whispered.

"I love you, too."

Sleep overtook them both in a matter of moments.

Winky was given the job of watching over Professor McGonagall while Severus and Sienna fell into the new school/married life routine. She spent a couple of hours each day in meditation and most of the rest of the day mixing the potions that Madam Pomfrey needed in the hospital ward.

As the rash of detentions subsided, Sienna and Severus found more time to enjoy each others' company. They even scraped together enough spare time to try out the two-person whirlpool tub in the secret bath. They would usually take morning coffee together before Severus went to breakfast. As much as he wanted to stay with her, they both knew how important it was to keep up appearances. But he could usually find some excuse to disappear and join her at lunch time. Once in a great while, he would feign a churning stomach and also spend the evening with her for dinner. Winky was always happy to bring them their meals in the secret room.

One night, Hagrid burst into the headmaster's office, alarmed about some dangerous creature who had escaped into the forest. Severus just barely made it from the secret room to his quarters before Hagrid opened his sitting room door. After that, he realized that he needed another layer of protection and asked the secret room to put an exit from it to his private bath. That way if he didn't make it back in time, he would appear to be coming out of the bathroom.

Professor McGonagall awoke on the third day and asked Winky to fetch Severus and Sienna. The three of them popped back into her room, smiling as they witnessed her recovery.

"So I didn't dream all of this?" McGonagall asked hopefully.

"No, Professor. I'm still alive, Severus and I really did get married, and he is truly on the side of good in this war." Sienna beamed at her.

"Which leads me to the unfortunate task of removing your memory of the past few days," Severus added matter-of-factly.

"Oh, please don't. I'll keep your secret, I swear. I won't tell a soul."

Severus looked at her with sympathetic eyes. "I'm afraid that if you were captured by the Dark Lord, he would tear into your memories like a piranha. What's left wouldn't be fit for St. Mungo's' long term ward. And my life, as well as Sienna's, would be toast."

She reached for Severus' left hand and felt the ring that she could no longer see. Then she looked remorsefully into his coal-black eyes. "But I don't want to start hating you again."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. He didn't want that any more than she did. But he knew that he had no choice. "It's alright, I'm used to it... a small price to pay for our safety." He looked sideways at Sienna and his lip curled.

"Then let me apologize in advance for anything cruel that I say or do to you until this war is over and you can remind me of the truth again."

"Apology accepted." His lip curled even more. "The last thing that you will remember is getting hit with the Cruciatus Curse." He glanced again at Sienna. "You two better get out of here."

With a nod and a pop they were gone.

"I knew in my heart that Dumbledore's faith in you was not misplaced. I only wish he had told me what to expect."

"If you had known the truth, it would only have put you in more danger. Besides, this way it's much more convincing. He and I both knew that the people here had to hate me to make it seem real. It was the only way."

"Even Harry Potter?"

Severus snorted. "Especially Potter."

He lifted his wand and uttered the complicated incantation to erase only the last three days of her memory. Her eyes fluttered, and when she opened them, she viewed the man before her with contempt once again.

"What are you doing here? You and your goons have ruined this school!"

"I was just checking on you. My 'goons,' as you refer to them, really did a number on you. And even though it wouldn't break my heart to see you gone," he lied, "replacing you would mean a mountain of paperwork that I don't need right now."

"Get out! If I need looking after, I'll send for Poppy!"

Severus let out a heavy sigh. The look he gave her was of joy and sadness mixed together. He was of course happy that the spell had worked, but sad that his old friend could so easily send such loathing thoughts in his direction.

McGonagall's scowl showed hints of curiosity as he let himself out the door in silence.

For the next few weeks, things finally seemed to be settling into something that resembled normality. With no new detentions to worry about, Severus felt almost relaxed for the first time since school started. His private time with Sienna filled his heart with joy, and every morning at breakfast just the hint of a smile would play around his face. He was happy for the first time in his life. His happiness must have shown in other ways, too, although he was not aware of any outward change in his behavior.

"What's gotten into you lately, Severus?" asked McGonagall one day as they passed in the halls.

He turned towards her, eyebrows raised.

"You seem so happy lately."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Was it that obvious?

"I haven't seen this much bounce in your step since that Muggle Studies teacher took an interest in you a few years back. What was her name again?"

"I don't recall," he lied. He decided it best to throw her off a bit. "Perhaps it's the anticipation of trying the tortuously painful new dark curse that I came up with over the weekend on the next errant student foolish enough to land in detention." He planted an evil glint into his eyes.

"Humph!" Her lids narrowed at him suspiciously.

His lip curled as he watched her turn and stalk down the hall.

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Before Severus knew it, November's cold winds and rain had overtaken the castle. The house-elves worked day and night to keep the fires stoked so people wouldn't freeze. And people were starting to catch the usual rash of colds that worked their way from person to person when the damp and chilling weather lowered everyone's resistance. Even witches and wizards caught colds, and although their remedies seemed to work better than the Muggle ones, no Healer or Potions master had ever found a cure for the common cold.

Try as he might to keep away from the sick and to avoid being sneezed upon, or even breathed upon, by others, Severus finally succumbed to the inevitable and joined the ranks of people in need of a cold remedy. But instead of Madam Pomfrey, he turned to Sienna for help. She brewed him up a sinus potion and a cough potion. She even tried her hands-on technique to soothe his aching throat. But the pain and suffering always returned by morning. He had taken to sleeping in his own quarters in the hopes of keeping her healthy, but she continuously reassured him that she didn't get sick and finally convinced him that if he would come back to sleep beside her he would recover faster.

So finally, with Sienna at his side to soak up and alleviate some of his misery, he got a decent night's sleep. When he woke up the next morning relaxed and refreshed, Severus showered and began to get dressed. But as he reached for his robes, he noticed they weren't quite the way he had left them the night before. He lifted them carefully from the hook behind the door and put them on as usual. But something felt different. As he took a deep breath he realized that they also smelled different. They had been cleaned! He instantly reached into his inside left pocket and pulled out the letter with Lily's love written at the end, but the photo was missing. He checked the right pocket... empty. He checked all of his other pockets, but they also came up with nothing.

"WINKY!"

She appeared immediately before him and took a deep bow, "Winky at your..."

"Did you take my robes to be cleaned overnight?" he cut across her shortly.

"Why, yes, Headmaster Snape, sir, but Winky put them back right where Headmaster Snape sir keeps them, sir."

"Why? Why did you take the robes without asking?" He glared at her angrily, his eyes boring into hers, which were growing wider and more frightened by the second.

Winky began to tremble. "Mrs. Snape asked Winky to take the robes, sir. Headmaster had already retired for the evening. She didn't think Headmaster would miss them, sir. Winky had them back in their proper place by morning, Headmaster Snape, sir."

The flood of anger abated slightly as Severus realized that Winky had been acting under his wife's orders. He stood tall and took a deep breath, trying to regain his composure.

"I apologize, Winky, for my outburst. When you took the robes for cleaning, did you by chance turn out the pockets?"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir, that is standard procedure for all garments that are brought to the laundry."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing, Headmaster Snape, sir."

His anger began to build again, but this time it was aimed elsewhere. He tried to contain himself as he continued to interrogate the elf. "And where, pray tell, is my wife?"

"Winky transported her to a cliff on the far side of the Lake this morning to meditate, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"Well, GO FETCH HER!!" he could control himself no longer.

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir," she began to shake again from his harsh tone.

"NOW!!!"

With a quick bow and a pop, she was gone. She returned in only a few moments with Sienna in tow. Upon their arrival in the secret room, Severus told Winky curtly that she could go and turned to Sienna, fuming.

"Why did you send my robes out to be cleaned without asking me first?" he asked quietly through gritted teeth.

"You'd been wearing them since the wedding. I know they're black, but still, they get dirty, and with you getting sick and all, I thought it would be a good idea, for sanitation reasons, if nothing else." Her voice remained calm and steady even though she could tell he was about to blow. "I thought, as long as they were back by the time you woke up, there wouldn't be a problem."

"Well there IS!" he growled, as his stormy black eyes bore into hers. His face became red with rage. "Where is the photograph?"

"Photograph?" she looked completely bewildered.

"Yes, there was a photo in the left pocket a torn photo with the letter." He reached in and pulled out the letter, waving it frantically in her face. "Lily's letter and photo. It was the ONLY photo of her I had. The **ONLY** one!" he ranted as he stuffed the letter back in his pocket.

Sienna continued to look clueless as his temper completely abandoned him.

"I can't believe it. I've lived my entire life alone I can take care of *myself*. I can decide when and IF I need something laundered!"

Sienna stood silently as he raged at her, making no attempt to stop him or defend her actions. Her apparent apathy pushed his blood to the boiling point.

"The ONLY photograph I had I went decades with nothing to remember her by but her son's angry eyes and my dreams. Then I finally find one after years of searching... and YOU MADE SURE IT **DISINTEGRATED IN THE LAUNDRY!!!**" He put his bare hands up to her throat as she glared back at him in disbelief. But he didn't hurt her; he didn't even touch her. Instead, Severus let out one long, agonizing scream and then turned on his heel and swept from the room. He stomped through his office, ignoring Dumbledore's questions, bounded down the spiral staircase and out the front door. The biting wind whipped through the bare trees, twisting them and making them groan under the strain. He stalked along the shore of the Lake, knowing that, at some point, the sheer cliffs would make it impassable. He just had to get as far away from her as

possible without Disapparating. Somehow, the physical exertion and the whipping wind helped to cool his temper.

By the time Severus had calmed down enough to return to the castle, his feet ached, so he headed to the hospital wing for some ointment. He quickly checked on Madam Pomfrey's stores and made a mental note as to what she was about to run out of. By then it was dinner time, so he headed for the great hall, but found, after only a few bites, that he had little appetite.

He still felt incredibly angry however, so he decided that when he returned, he would keep to himself in his own quarters, and if she bothered him, he would simply go into his office and close the door.

But when he arrived in his quarters, all was quiet. The secret room was dark and still. He stepped in and lit the lamps, searching for signs of Sienna, but she was nowhere. In fact, all of her belongings were also missing. He began to frantically search the dresser drawers, the bathroom nothing. She had taken everything she owned. His heart leapt up to his throat when he realized she was gone.

With lead weights for feet, he walked slowly over to their bed and sat down in a slump. As he did so, he noticed a small box lying on his pillow. It had not been there this morning. In fact, he had never seen it before. He opened it carefully. Inside was an envelope. When he lifted up the envelope, he uncovered a locket. It was slightly smaller and flatter than the one Dumbledore had given her, but the "S" design was the same. He pushed the button, and it popped open to reveal the missing photo of Lily, laughing and smiling as always.

Severus gasped first with delight, then with horror. The things he had said... the way he had acted... How could she ever forgive him?

Sienna's graceful handwriting adorned the envelope with his name. He was afraid to open it, but he knew that he must...

*My Dearest Severus,*

*I had hoped to surprise you with this for Christmas, but after this morning I realized that you could live without me much easier than you could live without a mere photograph of her.*

*In relationships there is always one person who loves more than the other. I assumed it would be me in ours, and I didn't mind that. But now, I know that I don't share your heart with Lily. She owns all of it.*

*I had originally taken the photo of her in the hope of putting her on one side and myself on the other, but this morning I removed my own photo. I couldn't help but feel that you never wanted to see me again.*

*So it is with deep regret that I leave you now with your only true love. I sincerely hope you can find happiness with her, at least in your dreams.*

*I will always love you.*

*Yours Forever,*

*Sienna*

Severus sat stunned on the side of their bed. He stared at the photo of Lily, smiling and laughing, not a care in the world. For the first time in his life, he gained no comfort from thoughts of Lily. Her image brought him only sorrow. He closed the locket in disgust not for Lily, but for himself. He then put it back in the box and reached into his pocket for her letter. He folded it to also fit in the box. Then he angrily stuffed it all into the top dresser drawer. He finally replaced Lily's letter with Sienna's in his left robe pocket.

"Winky!" He tried to hold his voice steady.

She appeared before him, looking bedraggled. When she took her usual bow, she stumbled forward, almost falling into his legs.

"Winky, what's wrong with you?" he asked, genuinely concerned. "Look at me!" he added sternly when she didn't meet his gaze.

Her tennis-ball eyes finally looked up. They were blood-shot and swollen from crying. She hiccupped!

"Winky, have you been drinking?"

"Mrs. Snape is GONE and it's ALL WINKY'S FAULT!!" She wailed inconsolably then fell to the floor and began to hit her head against it as her sobs and wails grew to an alarming level.

"Winky, STOP! He commanded. "It's not your fault... it's MINE!"

Winky stopped beating her head on the floor, and her cries began to subside as she slowly looked up. "Not Winky's fault? But Winky took Mrs. Snape back to the cliff where she could Disapparate."

"But she Disapparated to get away from me, not you. You only did what you were told."

"But Winky took the robes to be laundered. Winky lost the photograph."

"It isn't lost. Sienna took it. You didn't do anything wrong do you understand?"

"Winky understands, Headmaster Snape, sir," she acknowledged with another hiccup.

"And, I forbid you to get drunk any more. You may partake of the occasional butterbeer, if you like, but never to the point of inebriation it hinders your ability to do your job." He glared at her sternly; he knew this advice was for her own good as well as his.

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir. Winky will never get drunk again. Winky will give up butterbeer, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"You don't have to give it up, Winky, just well, do what you think is best, but no more getting drunk!"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"When you took her back to the cliff, tell me exactly what she said and did everything you can remember."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir. Mrs. Snape hugged Winky very tightly and said, 'I love you.' No witch or wizard has ever said that to Winky before. It made Winky cry. Then she said Headmaster Snape didn't want her anymore so she had to leave. That made Winky cry harder."

With that statement, Winky began to sob again. Severus' eyes also began to well up as he shook his head in disbelief at his own cruel stupidity and selfishness. "And then what happened?" He choked on his own words.

"Then Mrs. Snape began to cry also. She asked Winky to look after Headmaster Snape, sir and take good care of sir for her."

"Did you just leave her up there?" he asked in alarm.

"Oh, no, Headmaster Snape, sir. Before Winky came back to the castle, Mrs. Snape said goodbye and Disapparated." She began to wail again.

Severus stood in stony silence, tears streaming down his own face. He finally decided that standing in a stupor would not get her back. He had no idea where she had gone, but he knew of one person that probably did.

He marched out of the secret room and headed straight for Dumbledore's portrait.

"Where is she?" he demanded to the old man, who was no doubt pretending to be asleep.

Dumbledore slowly opened one eye, then the other. He yawned leisurely and stretched his arms. "And to what do I owe this *rude* interruption?"

"She's bound to have talked to you since this morning. You know where she is TELL ME!"

"Why, so you can go continue to yell and scream in her face like a lunatic?"

"No so I can go apologize," he admitted sheepishly.

"It's too late for that, I'm afraid. This morning's performance was over the top *even for you*."

"What did she tell you?"

"She didn't have to tell me anything. You were yelling so loud I heard every word quite clearly from right here."

Severus turned away in shame. Tears flowed in a steady stream down to the end of his long nose. He looked back up in desperation. "I know that you know where she is tell me *please!*"

"She asked me not to, and I shall honor her request." With that statement, Dumbledore stood up to leave.

"Tell her I'm sorry. Tell her I love her!" Severus cried to Dumbledore's rump as he exited for Sienna's locket. The words felt like one last gasp of air to a suffocating man. At that moment, he thought he might shrivel up and die if he couldn't get her back.

He sulked over to the secret room where Winky sat on the floor, still sniffing. She looked up at him with blood-shot, puffy eyes. He conjured them both a hanky.

"Dumbledore was no help at all." He thought for a moment. There was only one person beside Sienna who could see the remorse in his soul, who could and would help him find Sienna Babaji.

"Take me to the ashram, Winky." She stood up and held his hand, and with a pop, they were gone.

They arrived in Sienna's quarters which were, of course, empty. Since she had Apparated, she would not have had time to get there. But somehow Severus felt that this was not her final destination. He told Winky to wait there, and he launched himself outside in search of Babaji.

He feared that the darkness would make his search difficult. But his instincts told him to keep his wand unlit and follow the glow. It led him to the temple, but no one was there. He decided to try Babaji's quarters. He fumbled his way to the cottage where he and Sienna had spent their wedding night and found only the mud hut in its place. But there was no one inside.

*Perhaps Babaji is with Sienna wherever she is,* he thought. *Perhaps he is trying to talk some sense into her.*

He made his way back to the temple and sat on one of the cushions. He didn't realize until that moment how emotionally drained and physically exhausted the day's events had left him. He pulled another cushion over next to the one he sat on and lay down. In only a few moments, he fell into a light REM sleep.

"Boy, you really screwed up ROYALLY this time!" came Lily's scolding voice.

Severus whipped around to face her. They stood on a high cliff, overlooking what might have been the Lake at Hogwarts, with the wind whipping around them. "What am I going to do? I've got to get her back somehow. I'll do *anything*."

"Sounds like a conversation you had once with Albus, on another windswept hill top."

"How do you know about that?" he asked with curious concern.

"There are certain advantages to being on this side. I can watch episodes from your past like a picture show if I want to."

"Interesting, but that doesn't help my current situation."

"Oh you want *my help*?"

"That's why you're here, isn't it, to help me?"

"I haven't decided. This morning was bad *even for you!*" She scowled at him.

His gaze dropped to the bare rocks around his feet as a stray dead leaf was carried past them by the wicked wind.

"It was just a picture a PICTURE for goodness sake. She's a flesh and blood woman! What's more important?"

"You know what that photo means to me! I thought it was destroyed!"

"SO WHAT?? It was a bloody piece of paper, Severus! I would have left you, too. Only I wouldn't have been so nice about it." She continued to glare at him. "In fact, I think I'll leave you now to lick your wounds and think about the mistakes you've made." Her image began to fade from view.

"But wait! Can't you at least help me find her?"

Lily's image dissolved into the swirling wind without giving him an answer. He felt even more forlorn now. He couldn't even get help in his dreams. Would Babaji also send him away empty-handed? All he could do was to wait and see. That thought comforted him very little as he drifted into a much deeper, dreamless, yet somehow restless sleep.

A few hours later, the pre-dawn light had just begun to peak over the horizon when Severus became vaguely aware that he was not alone. He opened his eyes and looked around, to find himself surrounded by the ashramites, all sitting on cushions with their eyes closed, still and quiet as stones. He searched the crowd in hope of finding Babaji at the head of the group, and he was not disappointed, but when he stood to approach the guru, a stern hand shot up immediately, indicating that their talk would have to wait.



Severus trudged with a heavy heart back to Sienna's quarters, where he found Winky asleep on the cushion. He thankfully took his place on the mattress that rested beneath the window on the floor and closed his eyes. But this time, worry filled his mind to the brim, and sleep could not enter. For what felt like hours, he lay there staring up at the ceiling, until finally, Babaji appeared at the door.

"Oh, thank Merlin," he jumped up. "Do you already know what has happened? Have you seen her?"

"I know," Babaji said simply, but the look he gave Severus was grave. "Come walk with me."

Severus gave Winky a half smile and shrugged as he followed Babaji out the door.

They walked in silence to the gazebo where the wedding had taken place only two short months before. The bench had returned and they both sat down.

"It worries me, Severus Snape, that I do not see you learning from your mistakes."

"What do you mean? I know what I did was terribly wrong. I couldn't be more sorry."

"I can see that your remorse is genuine, but many years ago you chose a path for materialistic gain and recognition a path that put an end to your friendship with Lily Evans."

"One of the biggest mistakes of my life." He didn't need to ask Babaji how he knew that tidbit from his past. He remembered that Babaji had access to every event from his entire life.

"I realize that. But did you learn from it?"

"I think I did."

"Did you? You overheard a prophecy about a child which child, you had no way of knowing. But once again in the hopes of being rewarded by your Lord Voldemort, you passed on that information, knowing full well that it might cost some poor, innocent child and his family their lives. It was only later, when you found out it was Lily's child, that you became remorseful."

Severus looked up at the Himalayas, so strong, devoid of frivolous emotions. Hadn't he felt one with those very mountains, just two months ago? He should have felt their strength, drawn from their ancient patience, instead of raging at the woman he loved over an old photograph. And to make it worse, Babaji could see a pattern in his dreadful, selfish behavior.

"I can see in your memories several instances since then when you judged a person based on his appearance or behavior and treated him with cruelty as a result, just as others have done to you. You have not yet learned to look beneath the surface."

Severus replayed some of the many events in his life that proved the truth of Babaji's accusation. Neville Longbottom, Hermione Granger, among many others... and of course, Harry Potter had been subjected to his verbal abuse on more occasions than he could count.

But cruelty had become part of his persona. The students expected it. Like a security blanket, he could hide his true emotions behind it, so no one could ever guess how he really felt about anyone or anything. How could he keep order if he didn't show strict cruelty? How could he keep the Carrows in line or the other teachers for that matter, if they were not all terrified of him?

"There are other ways of keeping discipline besides terrorizing people," Babaji scolded him. "Respect must be earned."

"I'm not in a position to change my tactics at this time," Severus explained in his own defense.

"I understand your predicament, but that is no excuse for the way you treated Sienna. Again, you chose a material object over the feelings of a human being. I can't help but wonder if your remorse would have been so heartfelt or quick if the photo *had been* destroyed."

"It would have," Severus insisted. "As soon as I realized she was gone, I felt horrible. I had not yet found the locket. I would still be here, begging for your forgiveness and help, even if I never saw the photo again." His lower lip began to quiver. He reached for Babaji's bare shoulder out of total desperation. Their eyes met as his composure abandoned him. "You can see into my soul," he croaked. "I will never hurt her again I swear it!"

"Oh yes, you will, but not out of malice."

Severus gulped and gasped for air. "What do you mean?" he asked through his tears.

"Only that something beyond your control will happen that will cause her pain, but hurting her will not be your desire or intention."

Severus' wits began to return as he contemplated Babaji's statement. A few silent moments passed as he regained his strength and felt a sense of peace from Babaji's touch.

"So you'll help me?" he finally found the courage to ask.

"I can only give you advice. She loves you, and she will eventually return, even if you do nothing. But if you do nothing, things will never be the same between you. On the other hand, there are steps you can take to bring her back faster, which will also heal the rift."

"Anything," he sighed with relief. "Just tell me what to do."

"Very well. Go back to the castle and ask whatever God or Higher Power you believe in for her safe and speedy return. Ask the Source of All Life to furnish you with the strength to do what must be done, the circumstances that will hasten her return, and the wisdom to see the opportunity when it presents itself. People often ask for help, but do not recognize it when it comes."

Severus nodded.

"You don't have to ask out loud, just in your mind. The more often you ask for help, the better."

"I understand."

"You might also try talking directly to Sienna."

"But I don't know where..."

"In your mind, Severus Snape. Ask for her forgiveness. Assure her of your remorse. Remember, you are one with her in Spirit. She will hear you."

Severus sighed and nodded again. He wasn't sure how any of this could possibly help. He felt in his heart that, unless he could look deep into her sparkling grey-blue eyes, she would never know how sorry he really was.

Once again, Babaji read his mind. "If all else fails, go to the last place anyone saw her and talk to her out loud. Say everything I can feel now coming from your heart. Shout it out, if you must. In time, she will respond. I promise."

As odd as that advice sounded, Severus nodded and agreed. He was willing to try anything. He steeled his resolve and then called Winky. After giving Babaji a grateful farewell, they found themselves back at Hogwarts.

That night, Severus lay in their bed in the secret room and stared up at the ceiling, her letter in his hand. He didn't just ask The Source for help he begged, professing his remorse and promising to do better. He asked for everything Babaji told him to and more he asked for forgiveness from Sienna, from Babaji, and from that Higher Power, whatever it is. But the hardest kind of forgiveness, the ability to forgive himself, was something he didn't think he deserved. He would never forgive himself for hurting her just as he could never forgive himself for what he had done to Lily.

But after several days of this routine, Sienna did not return. He missed her so much that he felt physical pain. He refused to eat, even when Winky brought his food to the secret room. Every moment he spent alone, he thought about her and asked the Powers That Be for her safe return.

Finally, one night about a week after Sienna's disappearance, a frantic knock came on his office door. "Come in." Severus looked up from his desk in hopeful anticipation.

In stormed McGonagall, her angry cheeks flushed with purple rage. "Graffiti has been found on the walls again, and the Carrows have rounded up the usual suspects."

"Oh?" he raised his eyebrows, trying not to look too worried.

"I'm afraid the Cruciatus Curse isn't good enough for them any more."

Severus stood in alarm.

"They've decided on one of your old favorites: Sectumsempra!"

Severus took a quick breath but then stopped himself. He knew how nasty those cuts could be and deep enough to kill if cast with too much enthusiasm. "How long have they been at it?"

"They only just started. When I saw what they were doing, I came here immediately."

His first thought was to act as though he didn't care. But he did need to know, and even though he had wiped McGonagall's memory clean, she still came to him if there was trouble, something she had stopped doing before the wedding. So somewhere, on a subconscious level, she knew she could still trust him. He didn't want that to change, but he couldn't afford to get too friendly with her either.

"Thank you for the information, Minerva," he said calmly. "You may go."

"Well, aren't you going to do something?"

"They know better than to take it too far. The Dark Lord has left strict instructions not to kill purebloods."

"But they're not all purebloods! Some are from a mixed background. What about them? Are their lives any less important?"

"I get your point." Severus pursed his lips then walked around the desk and passed her as he headed towards the door. "I'll see to it that no one gets killed," he added as she followed him down the spiral staircase.

When he reached the hallway to the DADA classroom, two third-years passed him, levitating an unconscious Ginny Weasley towards the hospital wing. At first he could see nothing obviously wrong with her, but then he realized that blood was dripping from her school robes to the floor, leaving a trail on the flagstones. He stopped the two students and lifted up Ginny's robes to see the slash marks across her stomach. He quickly traced the marks with his wand while singing the little song he had sung the day Harry used the same spell on Draco. After three tries, the bleeding subsided. He replaced the robes and looked urgently at the two third years. "Get her to the hospital wing quickly. Tell Madam Pomfrey what has happened." They obediently hurried down the hall with Ginny in tow.

When Severus entered the DADA classroom, Crabbe had his wand pointed at Colin Creevey, who was writhing around on the floor, screaming, as blood ran down the side of his face. Neville and Seamus lay unconscious beside him, their faces also bleeding. Just then Amycus gave Neville a swift kick in the stomach, as if whatever else they had already done to him wasn't enough.

Severus' mood throughout the week had gone from bad to worse as Sienna failed to return. He had enough anger and frustration built up inside to take on ten Amycuses. It was with perverse pleasure that he took aim and fired off the spell. The bolt of red light hit the witless twit so hard that he flew in a spiral all the way to the opposite wall where he slammed to a stop and slid to the hard stone floor.

"How dare you?!" Severus barked. "The Dark Lord left specific instructions no pure blood is to be spilled!"

"But they're not all purebloods!" hollered Alecto in her brother's defense.

"And I wonder how pure your blood is, Alecto," Severus stalked over towards her, wielding his wand in her face threateningly.

"At least as pure as yours," she replied defiantly.

His eyes narrowed as he touched her neck with the tip of his wand. Oh, how he so wanted to use Sectumsempra on her jugular. It would be so easy... But he stopped himself. Killing this slimy excuse for a witch was not worth ripping his soul apart.

"Watch your tongue, Alecto, if you want to keep it."

Severus glanced quickly around the room and directed the students still standing to get the injured ones to the hospital wing. Then he marched over to Amycus and stood staring down at him angrily. "If any of these students needs a blood transfusion, I'm getting it from you. And if any of them dies... I'll feed you to the dementors myself."

He turned and swept from the room, his robes billowing behind him. As he made his way back to his office, he wondered what kind of internal injuries Neville and Seamus had suffered during this latest disciplinary session. Only Sienna could tell. Only Sienna could save them. Was this the "help" he needed to get her to come back? If she wouldn't come back for his sake, perhaps she would come back for theirs. It was worth a try. He made his way through his office and quarters to the secret room.

"Winky!"

"Winky at your service, Headmaster Snape, sir," she said with her usual bow.

"Winky, you were the last person to actually see Sienna, at least that we know of. Am I correct?"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir."

He walked over to the dresser and pulled open the drawer with the locket and Lily's letter. "Can you take me to the exact spot where you took her?" he asked as he pulled the photo from the locket and then stuffed the letter and photo into his left robes pocket.

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir."

"Good." He returned the empty locket to the dresser drawer and then took her by the hand. "Let's go."

In a moment they stood on a high cliff of barren rock overlooking the Lake. The faint lights of Hogwarts Castle could be seen far away on the distant shore. It reminded him very much of his last dream with Lily. The vicious wind cut into Severus' face as if someone had cast the Sectumsempra spell on it. How could she possibly meditate up here under these conditions?

"Are you sure this is where you last saw her?" he shouted over the wind.

"Yes, Head Master Snape, sir." Poor Winky had already begun to shiver from the cold.

"Very well. Go back to the castle. I'll call you when I've finished here."

Winky looked at him with grave concern. She knew how depressed he had been over Sienna's disappearance. She was afraid to leave him there alone.

He suddenly realized what her problem was and knelt down to look into her eyes. "I won't do anything foolish," he said sincerely. "I promise."

She nodded and gratefully left the chilly wind behind with a pop.

Severus looked around. As the rocks sloped away from the Lake, it looked as though the cracks and crevices could have hidden a cave, or other form of shelter. He figured that Sienna probably found refuge in them when she came up here to meditate.

He sifted through his memory to find Babaji's exact instructions... *Shout it out, if you must...*

"Sienna!" He could barely hear himself for the howling wind. "SIENNA!" The sound was immediately swallowed up as if his voice was dust and the wind was a vacuum cleaner. Was he wasting his time and energy when the students in the hospital wing needed his attention? No, he had to try. Babaji promised that she would hear... somehow...

"Sienna, listen to me, *please*... look into my heart... my soul." He no longer felt the need to shout. It wouldn't make a difference anyway with the wind. If she needed physical sound to hear him, he really was wasting his time. But he had to try. "I don't care about the photo any more. It's *you* that I want. I *need* you. I miss you so much. I was a spoiled brat a total GIT! I don't blame you for leaving. I don't deserve you." With that statement he hung his head, distraught. He fought back the tears as he took a deep breath and continued. "But the students they need you. Finnegan and Longbottom are dying. Others are badly injured. Please, Sienna. If you won't come back for me, come back for them." He stopped and looked around but saw no sign of his beloved wife.

He had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but there was one more thing to try. With a heavy sigh, he reached into his left robes pocket. "Here!" he said as he held up Lily's letter. "I'll let go of her if you'll just give me another chance." He let the letter slip through his fingers and closed his eyes as the rushing air grabbed it and carried it out of sight into the black night. "Look!" he announced with tears running down his cheeks, "The photo... going, going, gone!" And Lily's photo followed the letter into the darkness.

Still no Sienna.

"WHAT ELSE DO I HAVE TO DOOOO?" he sobbed as he fell to his knees with a silent wish that the wicked wind would carry him off into oblivion as well. With eyes closed and clenched fists resting on the bare rock, he knelt there sobbing, when suddenly he felt a soft, gentle hand on his shoulder. He whipped around to find Sienna with tears in her eyes and Lily's photo and letter in her other hand.

"Here, I believe you dropped these." She smiled at him through her tears.

He stood and threw his arms around her, ignoring the letter and photo. "I'm so sorry. I love you with all my heart. I swear it."

"I know. I just had to be sure that you knew it, too."

"Can you ever forgive me?" he asked with a worried face as his tears subsided.

"I forgave you the moment it happened, love. But you need to forgive yourself." She lovingly placed her hand over his heart.

"You can help me with that later. Right now, the students really need your help."

"Sounds like the Carrows are getting worse. I'm afraid it's only a matter of time before they kill someone."

"Well, let's make sure it doesn't happen tonight, shall we? WINKY!"

## Winter's Ice

*Chapter 26 of 31*

Snape delivers the Sword of Gryffindor to Harry, but Harry gets more than just a sword.

As always, I would like to thank my two wonderful betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for their perseverance on this rather lengthy project. And the staff here at The Petulant Poetess deserves much of the credit for final polishing and finishing touches. Thanks, gang. I couldn't manage this without all of you.

The following chapter has several quotes directly from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, by J. K. Rowling. These direct quotes are shown in italics to set them off from the rest of the text.

J. K. Rowling gets all of the credit and the money. I'm only in this for fun.

### Chapter 26

#### "Winter's Ice Brings the Shivers

#### And Gryffindor's Sword the Doe Delivers"

As the Christmas break approached, Severus couldn't help but wonder how many of the students would not be returning. He half expected the staff to vacate the place and

leave him alone with the bloody Carrows for Christmas, but to his surprise, the Carrows decided to go visit their mother for the holiday. The ancient Mrs. Carrow was rumored to be swimming in Galleons and not long for this world. Severus envisioned her two greedy children doting over her at every turn in hopes of inheriting her fortune.

For the first time since he could remember, not a single student stayed in the castle for the Christmas holiday. But, save the Carrows, the staff remained. He figured as much as they all hated him, the nicest gift he could give them all would be his absence at meal times. It also gave him more quality time with Sienna. They treated the break like the Honeymoon they never got to go on.

On Christmas morning, Severus woke to find Sienna lying beside him with wide eyes, studying his thick black lashes and the sandpaper stubble on his cheeks.

"Merry Christmas." She beamed. Nestled beside him, atop the down comforter, were two small packages. He grabbed the first to find it round and squishy. He tore into it, discovering a pair of black socks.

"Albus insisted I get those for you, so I sent Winky."

His lip curled. The next package was a small box the *same* small box... Inside he discovered that same troublesome locket. He pushed the button to reveal Lily's photo, restored to its previous location, but now with Sienna's photo across from it. And unlike Lily, who was laughing at a no longer visible James and Harry, Sienna's photo only had eyes for Severus as she blew him a kiss.

"Thank you," he whispered, swallowing hard to keep his voice steady. He leaned over and gave her a long, leisurely kiss, then grabbed his wand and flicked it towards the archway to his quarters. "*Accio gifts.*"

In flew a box large enough to house a quart jar of pickles and another moderately sized box. They landed lightly on the bed between them.

Sienna reached for the moderately sized box first and uncovered a pound of her favorite chocolate truffles from Honeydukes. The pickle-jar sized package yielded a large, fat candle with three wicks.

"It's enchanted to smell like anything you tell it to when it's lit. I thought you might like it to meditate with."

"It's wonderful. Thanks."

After a playful morning bath for two, they enjoyed coffee and Danish pastry for breakfast at the little table in their secret room.

When Winky brought them their food, Sienna presented her with a new pillowcase tunic and some non-skid socks to keep her feet warm on the hard stone floors of the castle.

"Remember, you are already a free elf, Winky," Sienna reminded her as she gasped in horror at the clothes. "We give you these to honor your service to us, not to send you away."

"We hope you never want to leave us," Severus added sincerely.

Those words made Winky feel much better about the gifts, which she then graciously accepted.

Lunchtime came, and with it a desire for Severus to wish the staff a happy holiday, so Sienna meditated in his absence. Once lunch was over, he headed to the Hog's Head to see Aberforth and have a drink.

Thankfully, the place appeared deserted as he and Aberforth stood at the bar and enjoyed a glass of oak mead. But they spoke in low voices just in case.

"Anything I need to know about?"

"Haven't got wind of any plans. I'll let you know if that changes."

They stared into each other's eyes. Severus couldn't get over how much Aberforth resembled his brother, especially his eyes. Presently, a thought occurred to him.

"Did your brother ever mention a girl to you a student named Sienna Kaolin?"

"No, never mentioned her."

"They were very close. I'm surprised he wouldn't have said something."

"Albus loved his secrets... The name does sound familiar, though. Kaolin?"

"Yes."

"Didn't I see in the *Prophet* where her house burned down with her in it?"

"Yes, I read it too." Severus' mind began to race. What if something happened to Winky, and Sienna was trapped inside the castle? How would she escape if she needed to? Having a friend on the outside might not be such a bad idea.

"You know, when school is in session, all of its secret passages are guarded by Death Eaters."

"Yeah, I know."

"But people are smuggling dung bombs and other paraphernalia in somehow."

Aberforth gave him a look of mock innocence.

"Do you know how they're doing it?"

"Maybe. But if no one's life is in danger, isn't it best that you don't know?"

"What if someone's life *were* in danger? Is there a way I could smuggle her out?"

"Is this the woman from the broom cupboard?"

"Maybe."

They both grinned at each other.

"How'd you get her in?"

"A house-elf transported her."

"Brilliant! The Kaolin girl?"

"Her name is Mrs. Snape now."

Aberforth's jaw dropped.

Severus pulled out his new locket from under his black shirt and popped it open. "The one on the right."

Aberforth studied the tiny photo. As he did, his face lost most of its color. "Those eyes," he finally stammered.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Just like my sister!" Aberforth looked back up at Severus with astonishment.

"Like your sister?"

"I never thought I'd see eyes like those again if I lived to be 200!"

"The painting in the room upstairs?"

Aberforth nodded, still somewhat dazed.

"Yes, her eyes definitely looked familiar the first time I saw that painting. Now I know why."

"May I meet her? In person?" His look was pleading, his voice desperate.

"The Dark Lord thinks he killed her."

"And he won't learn otherwise from me. Death Eaters don't pay me any mind. They all think I'm a senile old coot. And none of them know Albus was my brother. Please, let me see her, let me talk to her."

"Very well." Severus motioned to Aberforth, and they retreated into the back room and closed the door.

"Winky."

She appeared and bowed with the usual greeting.

"Can you take us directly to my office, please?"

"Certainly, Headmaster Snape, sir," and she took them both by the hand.

Aberforth laughed and shook his head. "Right under the arrogant S.O.B.'s nose!"

Once there, Severus checked to make sure Sienna wasn't still meditating while Aberforth traded barbs with his brother's portrait. Severus came back shortly and led Aberforth by the arm into the secret room. It was quite obvious by the look on his face that he had never been in there before. But as his gaze found Sienna, his face flooded with emotion.

"Children of Merlin!" he exclaimed softly. "If your hair was blond, you'd be my sister back from the dead."

"Aberforth Dumbledore, it's an honor to meet you," she smiled broadly.

He took her hand gently in his and stepped closer to her. Their eyes locked with such intensity that Severus could only imagine what kind of experience they might be sharing. Each mirrored the other's expressions as they changed from joy to fear, then anger to sorrow. This went on for several minutes, as if they were both in a trance.

Aberforth finally broke the link and looked at Severus, his eyes glistening with tears. "There's a way out." He looked back at Sienna. "What's your Patronus look like?"

"A mongoose."

"Killer of snakes." He nodded his approval.

"Even King Cobras!" she announced proudly.

"Good choice. If you get stuck here with no way out, send me your Patronus. It'll take some doing, but I can get you out."

"Thank you, Aberforth." Severus shook his hand vigorously. "And Merry Christmas."

Sienna reached up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He patted her arm gently. "No wonder he never talked about you," he admitted with a chuckle. "My brother always kept the most important things to himself."

"Well, I'd better get back. Some of those derelicts don't have families. You never know when one of them might wander in, even on Christmas Day!"

The instant Winky left with Aberforth, Severus turned to Sienna. "What was all that about?"

"I'm not sure." A distant look invaded her face. "I witnessed a series of flashbacks from his sister's life..."

"Were you reading his mind?"

"I don't think so. Sometimes he was in the flashback, sometimes he wasn't. But I didn't just watch, I *lived it*, as if I were his sister, Ariana!"

Shock took over Severus' face as he stared at her in disbelief. His concern grew as she told him what she had learned from the encounter: the cruel Muggle boys who created Ariana's delicate condition and what her father did to them, the way she and Aberforth interacted and enjoyed the goats, the fits of unexplained rage she would have where magic exploded from her hands and radiated from her body, causing damage to the house and furniture. Sienna even relived the day Ariana experienced one of those fits and accidentally killed her own mother. This made Severus gasp in horror, but it paled in comparison to the rest of her tale, of Albus' friendship with Grindelwald and her subsequent death. Severus wasn't sure which was more disturbing, that Ariana was killed because of Grindelwald, or that Albus had been so close to him in the first place.

"Can you imagine if she wasn't killed and he went off with Grindelwald to conquer the world? Those two were so gifted... They would have been invincible. They would have made the Dark Lord look tame."

"Perhaps that's why I felt such peace in her death... It brought Albus back to his senses, to the good side. She accomplished what she came here to do."

"Looking into Aberforth's eyes brought you all this information? I wonder why it didn't happen with Albus?"

"Perhaps because by the time he died, I hadn't been killed and resuscitated yet. I get the feeling that these were my own memories I just experienced, not someone else's."

"Perhaps you were Ariana in your past life and that's why you felt so close to Dumbledore. In a way, you already knew him."

The rest of their Christmas together grew quiet and peaceful. They later stuffed themselves on a wonderful vegetarian dinner and relaxed in front of the crackling fire. After a long silence, Severus finally spoke.

"Something I've been meaning to ask you," he said, almost absent-mindedly. "After you came back to life, did you ever find Potter and explain the technique to him?"

Her look became one of concern as she shook her head slowly. "I haven't been able to find him. I searched for a while during my meditation, but England is a big place. I have a feeling he won't believe me anyway."

"Perhaps telling him flat-out is not the answer."

"What do you mean?"

"Could you plant an idea in his head while he's sleeping? In his dreams, perhaps?"

"I never thought of that. Good idea. But I still need to know where he is."

"Phineas Nigellus is working on that little problem for us, AREN'T YOU, PROFESSOR BLACK?" Severus shouted towards his office door so that the portrait could hear him from two rooms away.

"And why should I bother?" came the distant waspish reply, "when you can't even take the time to wish us all a Happy Christmas?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Come on." He took Sienna by the hand and led her into his office. After some profuse apologizing and a sincere "Merry Christmas to all," Mr. and Mrs. Snape retired to their secret room.

Even though he had not cast any but the simplest spells all day, this had been, by far, the most "magical" Christmas that Severus could ever remember.

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The day after Christmas, Sienna went back to her pre-holiday routine of rising before dawn for her yoga and meditation practice. Severus lay in bed and watched in amazement as she stretched and contorted herself. She claimed that it was relaxing and helped to relieve stress, but he couldn't for the life of him see how.

As the sun began to shine into the lone window, he forced himself to get dressed and prepared to tackle the mountain of paperwork that was building up. Sienna had already begun to meditate, and he knew it would be a couple of hours at least before he could talk with her again, so he had Winky bring him some coffee and a bowl of hot oatmeal, which he ate in his quarters.

Expecting another tedious day of pushing parchment, he reluctantly meandered into his office and reached for the Carrows' lesson plans. As he stood there, he wondered with amusement what kind of ridiculous entertainment he would find within their pages, when suddenly Phineas Nigellus came hurrying into his empty frame.

*"Headmaster! They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood..."*

*"Do not use that word!"* Severus snapped with irritation.

*"...the Granger girl, then, mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I heard her!"*

*"Good. Very good!" cried the portrait of Dumbledore behind the headmaster's chair. "Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under conditions of need and valor and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him--"*

*"I know," said Severus curtly. He approached the portrait of Dumbledore and pulled at its side. It swung forward, revealing the hidden cavity where the sword of Gryffindor had been kept since before school started.*

*"And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?"* asked Severus with frustration *as he swung a traveling cloak over his robes.* He had begun to tire of taking blind orders from a portrait which could very well cost him his life.

*"No, I don't think so," said Dumbledore's portrait. "He will know what to do with it. And Severus, be very careful, they may not take kindly to your appearance after George Weasley's mishap--"*

*"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he said coolly. "I have a plan..."*

Severus swept from the room with sword in hand. As he descended the spiral staircase, he mumbled the Reducio Charm to shrink the sword to pocket size. Then he cast a Concealment Charm on himself. This trip would have to be made in complete secrecy. Only Sienna must know where he went and why. Once he arrived at the Forest of Dean, he could send her his Patronus. Once he found Potter, she could then zoom in on his location and hopefully plant the idea of surviving the Avada Kedavra curse in his mind.

After he slipped through the great oak doors, he took flight, uttering the counter curses to get him through all of the protective enchantments, and then he promptly Disapparated to the Forest of Dean. Once there, he took to the air again. He knew how skilled Hermione was at charms. Her concealments wouldn't be easy to detect. The tangle of branches made his search a tedious one. He kept airborne, so as to not disturb the crunchy leaves and snow on the forest floor, and alarm them to a possible intruder.

After several hours of searching, he took a break and summoned his Patronus to send a message to Sienna. "Speak only with Sienna," he said wearily. "I am in the Forest of Dean, searching for Potter. Try and use my location as a starting point to reach him. Perhaps you can communicate with him next time he sleeps if you know where he is." The silver doe bounded between the trees and out of sight.

A few moments later, Sienna's mongoose Patronus came like a flash of silent lightning through the tree tops and landed in front of him. "So you found him, this is wonderful news," it declared. "I'll begin my search right away."

He knew his own search was far from over as he took flight again, hovering just above the ground as he went. Lucky for Severus there was just enough breeze to swirl the leaves around. He watched them move in the wind as the gentle air danced with them, creating patterns between the trees. After about two hours he finally isolated a spot where the leaves did not move like the others, and the moving leaves seemed to bounce off of an invisible barrier. The occasional scampering squirrel also seemed to abruptly change direction when it got to this particular spot. He knew this must be them, so he made a mental note as to their location then continued to scout for the perfect place to let Harry "find" the sword.

A brook full of rushing water held possibilities, but he feared that the current might pull the sword from its hiding place and take it downstream to points unknown.

He thought of leaving it high in a tree, but he didn't want Potter to get hurt while trying to retrieve it.

Finally, he found a small frozen pool, just deep enough that Potter would have to completely immerse himself to reach it. And though the water would be icy cold and dangerous, a quick dip would not be life-threatening. Severus broke a small hole in the ice and carefully dropped the shrunken sword through it. Then he used the Engorgement Charm to bring it back to its normal size as it drifted slowly to the bottom of the pool.

He looked around for a place to watch the scene play out where he would not be detected. A pair of oaks grew close together; there was a gap of only a few inches between the trunks at eye level, an ideal place to see but not be seen.

He carefully retraced his path back to Potter's hidden camp, then turned and went carefully back to the pool, paying close attention to the location and size of trees and branches, as he would not try to lure Potter to the sword until well after dark. He had to know the way well so as not to get lost once daylight fled.

Finally satisfied that he could find the pool even in his sleep, Severus gently set himself down on the branches of a nearby large tree and waited.

The daylight had long since turned to dusk and the blackness of the overcast night engulfed the forest like a pillow intent on suffocating its victim. Unable to see who might be watching, Severus finally took the chance that, even if it were one of the others, they were all Gryffindors and all worthy of retrieving the sword. He silently cast the silver doe Patronus from his high perch and directed her towards the spot he remembered their protected hiding place to be. He watched cautiously as she stepped silently through the snow, leaving no prints since she existed only as light energy.

When she reached the edge of what he thought to be the protected area, he directed her to stand still for a few moments to be sure she would be noticed by someone. Then he directed her to turn and slowly come back towards him. As she did so, to Severus' relief, Harry emerged from the protective charmed area with a curious look on his face. He hurried to keep up with the doe as Severus directed her graceful body through the trees towards the frozen pool. He took flight so as not to make any noise and floated along above and behind Harry.

Severus brought the doe to a halt beside the frozen pool and made her turn to look at him one last time. Severus had reached the twin oaks he planned to hide behind, and as Harry broke out into a run to reach the doe, he extinguished her image. He knew that Harry would feel a temporary blindness that would allow him to settle in behind the trees undetected.

Severus watched as Harry lit Hermione's wand and adjusted to the oppressive darkness. Although he could hear a slight rustling in the underbrush nearby, he attributed that to the abundant fauna that he had seen earlier in the daylight.

Harry finally turned his attention to the pool and became excited when he eventually saw the glint of Gryffindor's sword. Severus waited patiently as Harry paced around the pool, trying different spells to retrieve it without immersing himself in the icy water, but all attempts failed. Finally, he began to disrobe but stopped short of removing his underwear. *Thank you, Merlin, for sparing me that sight!* thought Severus. *But why on earth is he still wearing that dreadful locket? The chain could get caught on a root and he could drown.*

Severus decided to stay until he saw Harry safely back on dry land with the sword in his hand. He hadn't gone through hell for the last 14 years to let the boy die in a hole of frozen water.

*"Diffindo."* Harry's voice cut through the quiet. But the cracking ice seemed like a clap of close thunder by comparison. The ice sheet covering broke up, sending shards sliding across the surface. Finally, Harry jumped in.

*Better you than me,* thought Severus as he shivered at the thought of what Harry must be going through.

But as the seconds ticked by, Harry didn't pop up. Severus became concerned as he heard a disturbance in the water's surface that indicated a struggle. He felt sure that Harry would drown if he didn't act immediately, but just as he was about to run to the pool, he saw someone emerge from the trees and rush towards it. *Was that Ron Weasley?* The young man threw down his rucksack and jumped in fully clothed. After only a few moments, Harry was heaved up over the edge into the snow, and Ron crawled out behind him, holding the sword and that ridiculous locket with its broken chain still attached.

But had Ron seen him? Just in case, Severus cast a Concealment Charm and rose up into the air, making himself a seat among the branches. He listened intently as they conversed about who could have cast the doe Patronus. *Idiots...* He shook his head. He was only mildly surprised to learn that Ron had abandoned Harry and Hermione, picking a very opportune time to return. For this, Severus was grateful. And, sure enough, Harry investigated the two oaks for signs of the spy. *Good thing I moved when I did,* thought Severus.

But when they began to discuss the authenticity of the sword, it surprised him. *How do they know a fake exists? And what do they plan to do to that locket?*

As he watched, he became aware of a strange and evil energy emanating from the locket. It began to twitch as the sword grew nearer. He could tell that it must be overflowing with dark magic.

*"I'm going to open it," said Harry, "and you stab it. Straightaway, okay? Because whatever's in there will put up a fight. The bit of Riddle in the diary tried to kill me."*

*Bit of Riddle?* thought Severus. *What on earth is he talking about?*

*"How are you going to open it?" asked Ron, looking terrified.*

*"I'm going to ask it to open, using Parseltongue," said Harry.*

Severus began to put the pieces together as they argued about whether or not to open it and who should stab it once it was open. *The ring... Dumbledore had stabbed it with the sword to destroy whatever was inside... Bit of Riddle... The diary...* He racked his brain trying to remember some of the rare and most horrible of dark magic he had found once in an old book at his grandparents' house.

Then Harry made an odd hissing sound, and the locket opened. Severus watched with terror-stricken fascination as the scene played out in front of him. A voice that sounded just like Voldemort's emanated from the locket, torturing and tormenting Ron as he held the sword aloft, ready to strike. Severus saw images of Harry and Hermione intertwining as they attempted to taunt Ron into a jealous rage. Severus and Ron both looked on in disbelief, and the real Harry begged Ron not to listen, just to strike.

Then finally, the sword plunged, and even from his high perch, Severus could feel the release of icy cold evil energy as it dispersed into the black depths from whence it came.

As Harry approached Ron and they shared a tender moment of true, unconditional friendship, Severus suddenly felt like an intruder instead of an observer. His job was over. It was time for him to return to Hogwarts. As he watched the two friends wander back to their secret hideout, he rose above the trees and headed for home. Perhaps somewhere in Dumbledore's extensive private library was some old obscure book that would help him to figure out what that locket really was and why it took something as special as the sword of Gryffindor to destroy it.

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As Severus trudged wearily up the spiral staircase to his office, he could hear voices, which was not unusual since the portraits often engaged in conversation at all hours of the night. But Sienna's voice he did not expect to be among them.

"What are you doing in here?" he stormed in on her with alarm as he turned and cast the Muffliato spell on the door. "What if someone hears you?!"

She didn't seem to notice as she continued her heated conversation with Dumbledore's portrait. "How could you, Albus? He's just a boy!"

"He's of age and he knew what he was getting into."

"He may have thought he knew, but nothing you showed him could have prepared him for this NOTHING!"

"You don't know him like I do. He is up to the challenge. His friends will help him. Together, the three of them will succeed."

"At what?" Severus refused to be ignored any longer.

Sienna turned as if she only just realized his presence in the room.

"And why are you in here?"

"When I confronted him in the locket, he tried to run away and come in here, so I followed him. I had to talk with him face to face," she said angrily. "I just couldn't believe it."

"Believe what?"

"HORCRUXES!!" she shouted. "Albus has him hunting the Dark Lord's Horcruxes!"

Severus stood in silence for a few moments as he racked his memory for the definition of the word. As realization slowly dawned in his mind, a look of horror spread across his face, but it was quickly replaced with calm.

"Well, they destroyed the Horcrux. I saw Weasley stab it with the sword of Gryffindor. So it's done. There's nothing to worry about."

"There are others," Dumbledore's portrait informed him quietly, looking almost embarrassed.

Severus and Sienna both glared accusingly at the portrait. "How many others?" he asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Not sure. But I believe four."

"And they are...?"

"Helga Hufflepuff's Cup, something significant of Rowena Ravenclaw's, the snake, Nagini..."

"... And Potter himself," whispered Severus, remembering their fateful conversation in this very office.

"My God! Must he be destroyed, too?" asked Sienna in horror.

"To be rid of the last bit of Voldemort's soul that resides in him, I believe that he must sacrifice himself," Dumbledore informed her regretfully.

Severus became just as repulsed by those words as the first time he'd heard them.

"And you knew about this?" she turned angrily on Severus.

"I assumed you would have read my thoughts to find out," he said coldly.

"Since our counseling session with Babaji, I've fallen out of the habit," she answered with just a bit of irritation in her voice.

"And how did you find out about the Horcruxes before I got back? I wasn't even sure what that locket was until just now."

"When you told me where you were going, I immediately went into a meditative state and easily found Harry in the Forest of Dean. It was the all-consuming thought on his mind."

"I imagine so," Severus admitted.

"The ring was a Horcrux, wasn't it?" asked Sienna, turning back to Dumbledore. "And you placed it on your finger like a foolish child!" She was obviously very angry with him. "That single act took away the first, best person who could actually help Harry find and destroy the rest of them. Why, Albus?" She began to cry, as much from rage as sorrow, at the thought of losing her best friend to such a frivolous act.

"I was a fool, no doubt," he admitted sheepishly. "But I did my best to give Harry the necessary training and experience..."

"Oh, *please!*" responded Severus condescendingly. "Sienna's right he's just a BOY! And without even a complete education!"

"Does he even know where to locate the other Horcruxes?" asked Sienna.

"Well, Harry himself and the snake are obvious. The cup I suspect is in the LeStrange vault at Gringotts. It's only a matter of time before he figures that out for himself. The Ravenclaw item... At the time of my death, we weren't even sure what to look for or where it might be. I can only hope that Harry's unique link to Voldemort's mind will give him some clues.

"And as for his age he's an adult now. He can make his own decisions."

"And how wise were the decisions you made when you were his age?" Sienna asked through narrowed lids as she took a few menacing steps towards the portrait.

"To what are you referring?" Albus asked her cautiously.

"Getting so cozy with Gellert Grindelwald that you neglected your family!"

"Please don't tell me you've been reading Rita Skeeter?"

"Gushing over his grandiose schemes of 'the Greater Good.'"

"You leave Gellert out of this! What did he ever do to you?"

"He KILLED me, Albus, he *killed* me I was your *sister*, Ariana in my last incarnation!"

"What?" the old man in the portrait stared in disbelief. Tears began forming in his eyes as he reached into a side pocket to retrieve his favorite lavender lace hanky. "I always knew you had her eyes, but I just thought it was a cruel coincidence. How do you know for sure?"

"When I met Aberforth yesterday I had a flood of flashbacks. When I meditated this morning, I saw that entire lifetime in detail." She hesitated, swallowing hard, then continued. "When Aberforth confronted you about abandoning your family to go off and conquer the world, the argument started and you finally began to see Gellert for what he truly was. He became so angry with you that he cast the Avada Kedavra at you, but your Protego Charm shielded you. Unfortunately, the curse bounced off your



shield and hit me."

"My attempt at self preservation... cost you your life?" His words became faint and obviously choked a bit. "Sienna, my love... Ariana... How can you ever forgive me?"

"You didn't kill me, Gellert did. Don't you see? I did what I came to this earth to do. I brought you back to the right path. My death was a small price to pay for the saving of your soul, Albus. I was happy to make that sacrifice. I chose that life in advance, knowing what would happen to me if you got tangled up with Grindelwald." Sienna paused for a moment, and then continued. "We're soul mates, Albus, and, more often than not, we don't actually end up married to each other. But, lifetime after lifetime, our main mission is to help each other advance spiritually. My death helped you see the light and come back to the side of good."

Severus immediately thought of Lily and how her death brought him back to the side of good. Could she be his soul mate? He felt in his heart that the answer was most certainly "yes." He made a mental note to ask her the next time they were together in a dream.

Sienna glanced at Severus. She had been reading his mind and smiled. "Guess I'd better get in there and see if I can plant some ideas into Harry's dreams. If he has to sacrifice himself, perhaps I can convince him that he has the choice to come back if he wants to." With that remark, Sienna turned back to Dumbledore's portrait and reached up to touch it. "Don't worry, Albus, I'll always love you."

"I love you, too, my dear."

"This may take a while. Why don't you try and get some rest," she suggested to Severus. "You look exhausted."

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The next day Severus woke to find an empty pillow beside him. Sienna still sat in a peaceful trance on her meditation cushion in the corner of the secret room. Just as he stretched and sat up, her eyes opened, and she looked at him, beaming. She seemed to be quite pleased with herself.

"Well?" he asked tentatively.

"I recreated my near death experience as a dream inside his head. In a way, I planted my memory of the event into his mind as if it were his own. So he now feels that he lived through the experience as I did."

"The whole thing?"

"From start to finish."

"Even our first kiss?" Severus became alarmed.

Sienna grinned devilishly. "I thought about it, but no, don't worry. I stopped just short of the kiss. He experienced the hug, though, but more importantly, the expanding consciousness *and* the desire and needed concentration to make the transition back to the body."

Severus looked at her curiously. "So he feels as if he gave me a warm, loving embrace?"

"And he enjoyed every minute of it, just as I did they were my memories, after all."

"Oh," his lip curled, "I wish I could have been a fly on the wall when he woke up and thought that one through!"

"You can. My consciousness lingered long enough to watch him tell Ron about it this morning. I'll pull my memory for the Pensieve if you'd like. Then you can see for yourself."

"This is going to be rich," he smirked. "Let me get dressed and get some coffee first."

About half an hour later, Severus watched with phial in hand as Sienna extracted the memory from her temple and gave it to him. Then, full of anticipation, he marched through his quarters to his office, where he opened the cabinet which contained the Pensieve and poured the silvery substance in.

"What's this?" asked Phineas Nigellus nosily. "Not another of Dumbledore's private memories, I hope. I can't stand any more of your bickering."

"What?" asked a bleary-eyed Dumbledore who had come back from a sound snooze at the mention of his name.

"No, no," Severus reassured both of them. "This is one of Sienna's memories, used by permission. She claims that Potter now knows what it feels like *to love and appreciate me*." He choked back a laugh. "I just had to see this for myself."

"Is that wise?" asked Dumbledore. "What if Voldemort sees into his mind?"

"Don't worry," Severus informed him. He thinks he dreamt the whole thing. The Dark Lord would simply assume it was a twisted nightmare, probably what Potter thinks as well."

Relieved, Dumbledore gave him a shrug. "Let me know how it goes, will you?"

"Perhaps, if you play your cards right." Severus eyed him slyly, then plunged his head in.

He found himself standing beside the very same pool where Ron saved Harry and retrieved the sword the night before. They both were kneeling down to scoop water into containers to levitate back to camp. Their conversation came in whispers with nervous glances back towards the campsite where a very angry Hermione remained, no doubt in a feeble attempt to cook breakfast.

"I had a really weird dream last night," Harry explained to a very attentive Ron.

"Not another vision from the mind of You-Know-Who?"

"No not his mind... Someone else's. You remember Sienna Kaolin? A year ahead of us?"

"That mental case who was in love with Snape?"

"Yeah, last night I dreamt *I was her!*"

"You what?!"

"Yeah," Harry's look intensified as he stopped scooping water and faced Ron directly. "This was really weird. I was captured by You-Know-Who. Snape and Wormtail were there."

"Did Snape help capture her? What a back-stabbing, greasy git!"

"No...he didn't know anything about it. He was horrified actually. I think he really cares for her."

"SNAPE?" Ron became adamant. "He's a cruel, heartless murderer he never cared about anyone but himself."

Harry's look gave Severus the impression that he was not so sure of that anymore. Ron's look became rebellious.

"No, wait! There's more," Harry insisted. He proceeded to recount the night Sienna died and came back to life as if he had lived through it. He had felt what she felt, including the depths of Severus' love and sorrow over the prospect of losing her. "So she must be an empath, apparently," exclaimed Harry, "because she could feel what everyone else in the room was feeling."

"Or maybe that's one of the advantages of being dead," Ron interjected sarcastically.

"Dunno," Harry shrugged. "Anyway, so I'm floating around up near the ceiling watching the three of them and feeling their feelings and hearing their thoughts, and You-Know-Who felt no remorse whatsoever. In fact, he found Snape's pain over the whole ordeal quite amusing. He's pure evil, that one the lowest form of life! I almost feel sorry for him."

"So what happened next, mate?" Ron was now on the edge of his seat.

Harry continued the tale, describing the deep concentration and determination it took to come back to life. Then he recounted Severus' initial suspicious reaction.

"Idiot," commented Ron.

Severus raised an irritated eyebrow at Ron's comment.

"What else could it be?"

"I don't know. Maybe he thought she'd been turned into an Inferi or something. I mean... Wouldn't you be skeptical?"

Severus could hardly believe his ears. Harry Potter was actually defending his actions!

"So how'd you I mean *she* convince him?"

"A combination of Legilimency and the fact that she knew where her mum kept the chocolate."

Ron laughed. "And then what happened?"

Harry turned beet red, but remained silent.

"What?" demanded Ron. "Oh, you know now you've *GOT* to tell me." The grin on his face spread from ear to ear.

Harry hesitated. Finally he said, "You've got to *swear* you won't tell a soul!"

"It's only a dream, mate, for Merlin's sake!"

"*Swear!*"

"Okay, okay. I swear I won't tell anyone."

More hesitation... Finally Harry took a deep breath and blurted it out. "He hugged me."

"Who?"

"SNAPE!"

The look that invaded Ron's face was one of horrible revulsion. His voice dropped to almost a whisper as if saying the words too loud would give him a taste of the experience. "Snape *hugged* you?"

"Well, he hugged Sienna, but since I saw the whole thing from her point of view, I felt like it was happening to me."

"That must have been *horrible*..."

"No, actually, that's what's so weird about it. I felt what she was feeling, and she felt only joy and something I've never experienced before... pure unconditional love... when his arms were around her... like she just wanted to stay there... forever... in his arms..." A far away look crept into Harry's eyes as he relived the moment. A slight smile turned up the corners of his mouth. Severus felt the same rush of peace and joy. It was as if Sienna had pulled them together and made them both realize what could have been if life had given them a kinder set of circumstances.

Ron's reaction snapped them both back to reality. "All right that's enough you're scaring me, now! This is Severus Snape we're talking about, remember? A.K.A. Greasy Git, Murderer of Dumbledore?"

Harry jerked back and glared at Ron for ruining his moment, then shook himself free of the memory's spell. "Sorry."

"Hey, it was only a dream, right?"

"But it seemed so real. More like when I see through You-Know-Who's eyes. I remember every detail of it... like it actually happened to me. I almost feel like I *could* come back from the Avada Kedavra Curse."

"Let's hope you never have to find out, eh?"

"I wonder if she was trying to send me a message?"

"I rather doubt it, Harry."

"You never know. Stranger things have happened."

"A message from the Great Beyond?"

"What do you mean? Haven't you been listening? She *came back* from the dead."

"Yeah, in your dream, but I forgot to tell you. I found out while I was home that her mum's house burned down with her in it. She's dead, Harry. There was no body for her to come back to."

Shock and horror spread across Harry's face as he shook his head in disbelief. He stood up abruptly and took a few steps towards the twin oaks that had so conveniently hidden their new anonymous ally from them just the night before. Severus watched him swallow hard and quickly wipe a tear from his cheek as he turned back to Ron.

"She can't be dead," Harry said with stubborn determination. "She's alive, I just know it." Then his face brightened. "What about her Patronus? Have you ever seen it?"

"Katie Bell said she saw her cast one in her OWL exams, like you did. It was a mongoose."

"She could already cast one when she sat for OWLs?" Harry seemed disappointed that he wasn't the only fifth year in a century who had managed it.

"Don't feel too bad. She was already 17 when she started at Hogwarts, so I think she had turned 18 by the time she sat for her OWLs."

"Oh yeah, she was a bit older. I'd forgotten."

"I'm tellin' you, mate, she's dead."

The look on Harry's face was obviously one of pain and sorrow, although he shed no more tears over the news.

"What are you so upset about? We barely knew her."

"I don't feel that way anymore, not after this dream. I feel like she's part of me. It's really weird. I knew in the dream the plan was for Snape and Wormtail to burn the house down with her in it, but Snape knew she wasn't dead and they decided that she would pretend to still be dead and leave right after they did. She could be in hiding somewhere." His look became hopeful. "Maybe we could find her..."

"Haven't we got enough to worry about? Come on, let's get this water back to Hermione before she gets pissed off and comes looking for us. I don't need another scene like last night!"

They gathered the containers and levitated them, guiding them through the trees as they marched back to the campsite.

The scene went black and Severus landed with a thud on his feet, back in his office. A rush of emotions confused his heart. The boy he loved to hate was beginning to grow on him.

## Hallows or Horcruxes

*Chapter 27 of 31*

Sienna continues to follow Harry with her psychic abilities.

As always, I would like to thank my fearless betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for all of their diligence and hard work on my behalf. And also, the staff at The Petulant Poetess keeps me on my toes with their constant vigilance! Thanks to you all.

The characters and their world belong to the amazing J. K. Rowling. I make no money, I take no credit. I'm just here to have fun, and I hope you all enjoy the ride as well. Thanks for reading.

### Chapter 27

#### "Hallows or Horcruxes, What a Decision,

#### With Harry the Window to Voldemort's Vision"

Valentine's Day fell on a Saturday this year, but instead of looking forward to a pleasant candlelight dinner with Sienna and Honeydukes chocolate for dessert, Severus felt the Dark Mark burn on his arm right after lunch. Both he and the Carrows made a trip to Malfoy Manor, which turned into a full-blown meeting of Voldemort's council. Luckily, Severus didn't have to suffer through watching one of his former colleagues being tortured and killed while pleading for his help, but it was always unpleasant to be subjected to Voldemort's intimidation just the same.

By the time Severus got back to the castle and made his way into the secret room, Sienna was already sleeping. He disrobed quietly and slipped under the covers beside her. She didn't seem to notice as he nestled himself in and fell into a light REM sleep.

"Some Valentine's Day you had," came Lily's soft, soothing voice.

Severus opened his eyes. He found himself still in bed with Sienna while Lily stood by the bed smiling at him. This was different. Usually they met somewhere else in his dreams.

"Not exactly romantic," he replied with a shrug.

"She really does make you happy, doesn't she?"

Severus could feel the joy radiating from Lily. This was her plan all along, to see him happy with someone else.

"You picked her just for me. You knew what kind of woman would intrigue me. Of course she makes me happy."

"So I guess that means that you're ready to let me go, then."

Severus knitted his brow. He felt his heart start to race. This was definitely not part of his vision of a perfect world. "I'll never be ready to let you go, Lily. You know I'll love you for all eternity. In fact, I wanted to ask if you and I are soul mates."

"Yes, love, we are. And your hunch was right. I chose the life of Lily Evans, knowing that if you went down a dark path it would mean a premature death for me, to bring you back to the good side, just like Albus and Ariana."

"If you had let me know how you felt early on, I would have made the right choice to begin with."

"Yes, Severus, my love, but you would have made it for the wrong reason. You had to choose the right thing because it was right, not because you wanted a pretty girl on your arm."

"You were never just a pretty girl on my arm." He scowled at her now, feeling a bit perturbed. "That one night over Christmas break when we were the only students who stayed, you kissed me in the Gryffindor common room. I'd never kissed a girl before. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven, but you were just teasing me. You have no idea of the torture I went through, wanting another kiss."

She gave him a coy smile. "It was my first kiss too, and I also wanted another, but I could see the choices you were making, and I didn't like them." She began to scowl back at him. "I didn't want to tie myself to someone who associated with people that thought I was a low-life animal just because I was Muggle-born. You have no idea how much it hurt me to see you enjoying yourself with people like that. It cut me to the quick, Sev."

His eyes fell to the bedcovers. In retrospect, he was reminded of what he already knew to be true. His selfish choices had cost him the love of his life. He looked back up at her with intense remorse building in his face. "Please don't leave me. I know I don't deserve you, but..."

"Oh, but you *do* deserve me, Sev. That's why I want to come back into your life. But before you can have me back, you have to let me go."

"I don't understand."

Her coy smile returned, along with a twinkle to her intense green eyes. "If you want me back, all you have to do is get her pregnant."

Sev's eyes grew wide with mischievous glee as he looked first at Lily, then down at Sienna asleep beside him, then back at Lily. But then his look changed to one of concern. "But I don't feel fatherly toward you, Lily. I love you in a romantic way. Perhaps it's not wise..."

"Oh, don't worry. The instant you see my screaming, squirming, tiny pink body, all thoughts of romance will be pushed aside and your paternal instincts will take over."

"But I always thought that when we're reunited we'll be married, like we should have been this time."

"Severus, my love, over the eons we have shared thousands of lifetimes together, and we have been everything to each other: parent and child, best friends, worst enemies, cousins, siblings, aunts and uncles... you name it. We have switched genders, been happily married, miserably married, gay couples, lesbians..."

"Alright, alright, I get the picture."

They both started laughing. He glanced again at Sienna, who still lay sleeping peacefully. He gently caressed her shoulder, which was exposed atop the comforter. He felt his heart swell with joy at the thought of starting a family with her. He knew she would be an exceptional mother. He wasn't sure what kind of father he would make, however, since his own was never much of a role model.

He looked back at Lily with concern in his heart. But as he drew breath to speak, she cut him off.

"Don't worry, Sev. You'll be a kind and gentle father, not at all like Tobias, even though I'll try your patience at every turn. As your soul mate, it will be the best thing I can do for your spiritual advancement, to teach you the art of being patient."

"Are you sure I'll make a good father?"

"Just as long as you don't let me wrap you around my little finger too much. I wouldn't want you to spoil me," she grinned impishly.

"Well, then..." a broad and impish grin spread across his own face, "... I guess I'd better get busy."

"See you in about nine months... Dad!"

He drank in her beautiful face as she faded from view; then Severus rolled over to Sienna and kissed her neck. Sensing his presence, she turned over to face him, beaming with joy.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he whispered.

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March arrived, and with it the usual erratic weather patterns. Severus and Sienna lay in bed late one night, entwined together as usual, when Severus was rudely awakened by something butting against his shoulder.

"What the..." he said as he sat up with a start.

"What's wrong?" asked Sienna sleepily.

Severus immediately recognized Aberforth's goat Patronus as it began to speak in his voice.

"Send Dobby to me immediately! You don't want to know why!"

As the words echoed into silence, the silvery glow of the Patronus faded. Severus glanced at Sienna, concern written across his face. He didn't even have to ask.

"Harry's in trouble," she said, closing her eyes to concentrate. "He's in the cellar of Malfoy Manor... Wait... Ron, Luna, Dean Thomas, the wand-maker, Ollivander, and a goblin called Griphook, are all with him."

"What about Granger?"

"Oh God! I think Bellatrix is torturing her." Sienna opened her eyes in horror. "This is awful!"

"Dobby used to belong to the Malfoys. Potter tricked Lucius into giving him a sock to free him. So Dobby knows the house well. Aberforth's right. He's the perfect choice."

Severus jumped up and grabbed his bathrobe, then ran through the archway to his private quarters. "DOBBY!"

A loud CRACK pierced the night air as Dobby appeared. He immediately bowed, his long nose almost scraping the floor. "Dobby is at Headmaster Sn..."

"No time for pleasantries," Severus cut across him. "Do you know Aberforth Dumbledore?"

"The late Headmaster's brother? Oh, yes, sir, Dobby knows him, sir."

"Good. Apparate to the Hog's Head and speak only to Aberforth. Do whatever he tells you to do. This is urgent!"

"Yes, sir, very good, sir."

"And, Dobby..." Severus looked at the elf with earnest concern. "... be careful."

"Always Dobby's intention, sir." He began to take another bow.

"GO!"

"Yes, sir!" And Dobby disappeared with another loud CRACK!

As Severus came back through the secret arch to bed, he had a thought. "How did you know where to find him? Potter, I mean. I thought you lost track of him when they left the Forest of Dean."

"Aberforth knew. Harry must have communicated with him somehow. I read Aberforth's thoughts and found out where Harry was. Once I knew his location, I could concentrate on him and find out what was happening and who else was with him."

"So because Aberforth knew, you could zoom in, so to speak."

"Exactly."

Severus extinguished the light, and they both lay back down and wrapped themselves around each other for comfort. "I hope they get out of there." Severus sighed, worried.

With this troubling thought in both of their minds, sleep refused to return. Eventually, Sienna rolled over on her back and lay staring at the ceiling. Suddenly she sat up in the darkness with a gasp.

"What is it? What do you see?" asked Severus as he sat up beside her.

She turned to face him, with a terror-stricken, tear-stained look. "They got out... They all escaped, thanks to Dobby."

"Then why," asked Severus cautiously, "are you crying?"

"Because Bellatrix threw a knife at Dobby just as they Disapparated."

"Oh no." Severus knew what she would say next. Bella's knife rarely missed.

"It went straight into his heart," she whispered in a choked voice.

"I guess I'll have to tell Winky in the morning."

"Poor Winky. She loves him so."

They held each other tightly and lay back down. "But everyone else is safe? What about Granger?"

"She'll be okay. The rest are a bit battered, but they'll recover."

"Thank Merlin. Do you know where they've gone?"

"Bill and Fleur's house, Ron's older brother."

"Good. They should be safe there. Can you keep tabs on them now that you know where they are? Find out what they plan to do next?"

"Well," she began slowly, "this long-term surveillance is new to me. It takes a great deal of concentration. I'll have to break the link and rest once in a while, so my information will have gaps. If they Disapparate while I'm not tuned in, I'll lose them."

Severus nodded with understanding. "Well, they should be there for a while. Granger will need to recover. Why don't we get some rest? You can check on their status later."

They both closed their eyes, but it was an exercise in futility. Sienna finally decided to listen in on Harry's thoughts as he laboriously dug Dobby's grave by hand.

"What are Hallows?" she asked him curiously.

"No idea," he admitted shamelessly.

"I can tell it has something to do with the Dark Lord...and a wand from wizarding folklore."

Severus still shook his head, just as bewildered as she was.

Then suddenly Sienna gasped as realization dawned across her face. "The Dark Lord killed Gellert Grindelwald earlier tonight! He wanted to know where that ancient wand was."

"There was a wand in old folk tales. Some called it the Death Stick. It had several nicknames. Legend claims that the master of that wand would be unbeatable!"

"Then that's what the Dark Lord is after. Why would Grindelwald know where it is? Did he have it?"

"Perhaps he did at one time," mused Severus.

She continued to listen in on Harry's thoughts as he dug the elf's grave... "Wormtail was killed."

"How?" Severus, though not broken-hearted over the news, still felt some concern.

"The Dark Lord replaced his sacrificed hand with a new silver one, correct?"

"Yes."

"I believe that's what did it. He hesitated to kill Harry because of some old life debt, and the silver hand turned on him and strangled him to death!"

The thought made Severus ill as he sifted quickly through his own memories, trying to recall if he had ever received such a "gift" from Voldemort that could also prove treacherous. But luckily, none came to mind.

She quietly described Dobby's informal funeral with tears in her eyes, then she became apprehensive again as Harry's private thoughts turned to Voldemort's pursuit of the invincible wand. "The Elder Wand... that's what it's called. It's one of the Hallows."

"But we still don't know what a Hallow is."

"He's going to talk with Griphook now." She periodically gave Severus updates on their inquiries as to the feasibility of breaking into Gringotts Bank. "Are they insane?"

"It's the only way to gain access to Hufflepuff's Cup," he defended their decision. "They have to try. Desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Is there anything we can do to help them?"

"Not that I can think of." Severus gave her a worried shrug. "But if anyone can help them, Griphook can. He worked there for many years and knows the place and procedures well."

Just then a scowl crossed Sienna's face and her lids narrowed. "That wretched little sneak!"

"Who?"

"Griphook! All he wants is the Sword of Gryffindor. He can't be trusted."

Severus raised an eyebrow, but then his lip curled slightly. "Don't worry. That sword is enchanted. It may be goblin-made, but its allegiance is definitely to the Gryffindors. Dumbledore told me once that it will magically appear for any Gryffindor under conditions of need and valor. So Griphook may steal it, but he won't be able to keep it for long."

Sienna smirked at that bit of good news. Then her expression changed to one of curiosity. "They're going to talk with Ollivander now... about this Elder Wand..." She closed her eyes in concentration as she took in their conversation, tapping in on Ollivander's thoughts as well as Harry's.

Then suddenly she gasped again as her eyes popped open.

"The Dark Lord is coming *here* NOW! He's already in Hogsmeade!"

As she said the words, Severus' Dark Mark began to burn. He bolted out of bed to get dressed.

"How do you know this?" he asked anxiously.

"Harry's mind is connected to his somehow. He gets little snippets of his thoughts and circumstances now and then."

"You've got to leave here immediately. Dumbledore and I agreed that he might be able to detect your presence in the castle, even if he can't find you. We can't take that chance. WINKY!"

"Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir," said the cheery elf as she appeared.

"But Severus the Elder Wand is here in the tomb! He's planning to take it right out of Albus's dead hands! You can't..."

"And how do you propose I stop him?" He glared at her. "It's too late. He has already summoned me. I must go now or risk almost certain death."

"Perhaps Winky could take me..."

"NO! You must leave NOW! Winky, get her out of here!"

Sienna reached for her clothes as Winky grabbed her hand. Without even a hug, they were gone, and Severus headed towards the door to go meet Voldemort. He took deep breaths as he walked and let them out slowly as he attempted to calm his nerves as well as his heart rate.

"My Lord." Severus opened the gates to the grounds of Hogwarts Castle then knelt down to kiss the wispy black hem of Voldemort's robes. As cold and bitter as the wind felt to Severus, Voldemort wore only his usual light-weight soot-colored silk. Severus wondered if he had enchanted the fabric somehow to make it impervious to the wind and cold. "To what do I owe the honor of your presence?"

"My business is my own, Severus. You know better than to ask unsolicited questions of me," Voldemort hissed.

"I beg your forgiveness, my Lord." Severus bowed his head slightly. "I simply assumed that you required my services..."

"Apology accepted... this time." Voldemort cut across him.

They continued up the path in silence.

"I shall join you in the castle shortly," he said in his high, cold voice. "Leave me now."

Severus bowed and continued up the path to the school. After several paces, he risked a quick backward glance. Just as he suspected, the Dark Lord had employed a Disillusionment Charm to conceal himself and his mission. But Severus knew where the vulture was headed. And there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop him.

The thought of that slimy piece of filth violating Dumbledore's hallowed tomb made Severus' stomach turn. The Elder Wand... Dumbledore had possessed it all these years but amazingly was never seduced by its power. Now it would belong to Voldemort. The mere thought of horrors yet to come, thanks to this extraordinary pairing, made Severus shudder. The most powerful wand ever created in the hands of the most powerful dark wizard who ever lived... The world might never be safe again.

As Severus sat in his throne-like chair and waited for Voldemort, he updated the portraits as to the current situation.

"Why didn't you tell me, Dumbledore, how powerful that wand was? I would have hidden it... or destroyed it... or something."

"Actually, you were supposed to become its master when you killed me, but Draco disarmed me before you got there. Don't worry about Voldemort possessing that wand, Severus. He is not its master, Draco is! It won't perform properly for him. You and Harry are actually better off because of his mistake."

Severus let out a huge sigh of relief, just as he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Dumbledore and the rest of the portraits immediately feigned sleep as the door swung open.

Severus stood and bowed again. "My Lord." He motioned for Voldemort to take his chair as he came around to the front of the desk.

"So, how are you finding the Headmaster position, Severus?" Voldemort asked as he settled himself into the chair.

"A lot of tedious paperwork, but other than that, I find it quite rewarding, reshaping the minds of all these previously misguided young people." He forced his lip to curl into a convincingly satisfied smile.

"Good. But the Carrows inform me that a small handful of students have become chronic troublemakers. Luna Lovegood won't be coming back, so you no doubt can stop worrying about her. The Weasleys have all gone into hiding, so there's another one out of the way. Oh, do let me know if you hear of their whereabouts, won't you? So I can have them all wiped out once and for all." He seemed amused at the very thought of it. "I think Lucius should be allowed to do in Arthur. It would bring him such pleasure... Oh, but wait, that's impossible now. I forgot Lucius no longer has a wand." He began to laugh maniacally.

Severus raised an eyebrow and tried hard to look indifferent.

"If Longbottom and Finnegan continue to disrupt the new order," Voldemort continued, "the Carrows have my permission to come down hard on them. If that still doesn't work, I have something else in mind."

"Would you have them exterminated and be done with it?" Severus asked casually, knowing that idea must have already crossed the Dark Lord's mind.

"That isn't out of the question, but it would be a last resort. No, perhaps holding their relatives hostage, or giving them a few months in Azkaban, might encourage their cooperation." Voldemort smiled pleasantly, as if he were picturing a relaxing stay in a luxurious seaside resort.

As inept as he had been at Potions, Severus had gained new respect for Longbottom this year because of his relentless bravery and defiance of the Carrows. He would deeply regret any of those scenarios for the young man. Perhaps he could indirectly get word to McGonagall somehow to warn Longbottom to toe the line this term.

With this last bit of information, Voldemort requested that Severus see him to the gate, in a rush, no doubt, to try out his new wand on some poor, unsuspecting soul.

## Romantic Hideaway

*Chapter 28 of 31*

Sienna tells Severus a secret that makes him very happy. Then Severus tells Sienna a secret that upsets her deeply.

A/N: This chapter is for all of you who love erotic scenes... I really used my imagination on this one. Please let me know if it sparks yours.

As always, my heartfelt thanks go out to NervousAboutAngels and JENGEORGE for all of their great suggestions. I must also include the staff here at The Petulant Poetess for their hard work. They have been instrumental in making me a better writer.

I make no money, I take no credit. The great J. K. Rowling invented everything here that you find familiar.

### Chapter 28

#### "Romantic Hideaway Out of Sight,

#### Plans for the Future Looking Bright"

Winky took the news of Dobby's death rather hard but found comfort in knowing that he had died saving the life of his favorite wizard, Harry Potter. Her pride in his noble death helped her to recover quickly, and in an attempt to emulate him, she became a bit more enamored with the idea of being a free elf herself.

As the days turned into weeks, Severus and Sienna realized that Harry wasn't going anywhere any time soon. So Sienna began checking in once or twice a day for updates, but she no longer kept up a constant vigil reading Harry's mind.

And although the trouble makers had started out with a bang, the former DA members soon learned to keep a much lower profile since the Carrows were taking great pleasure in harsh punishments following the Dark Lord's new mandate.

Spring semester blew by with much less excitement than the fall had afforded them. Sienna rarely made clandestine visits to the hospital wing any more. She and Severus had both finally concluded that her help eased their pain and sped up the healing process too much. It had ultimately lulled the trouble makers into a false sense of security that no real harm could come to them. So Sienna reserved her visits only for cases where life or limb was threatened. After Michael Corner was almost killed for setting free a first year in chains, Sienna saved him and checked him over thoroughly to be sure he was out of any real danger, but his pain and disfigurement were so great that the misbehaving came almost completely to a halt. After watching Michael suffer horribly, the other DA members must have finally gotten the message.

Severus began to wonder if Sienna was going stir crazy in the secret room. He would have suggested she go to the ashram for a week or two just for a change of scenery, but he also felt an urgent desire to get her pregnant which he acted upon almost nightly. He was determined to keep that pace up until his goal was reached. Sienna certainly didn't seem to mind his increased amorous desire. Quite the contrary -- her youthful exuberance and raging hormones made every night a new adventure. Severus never knew life could be this much fun.

April arrived, and with it a new rash of graffiti on the walls and dung bombs in the corridors. The Carrows could prove nothing, but took great pleasure in torturing the usual DA members for information. Severus knew Neville must have been behind it and began to fear for the boy's life and the life of his grandmother. So after due consideration, Severus finally called the boy into his office. Neville had only just been released from detention and struggled up the spiral staircase after uttering the password Severus had included in his summons. Severus made a mental note to change the password as soon as Neville left.

Severus motioned for Neville to sit in the waiting wooden chair. He regarded the boy for a few moments, studying the bruises and cuts on his face. He could have healed the fresh cuts with a few waves of his wand, but he restrained himself. It saddened Severus to think his face would be scarred for life, but if the pain of those cuts could serve as a reminder that would perhaps save his life, it would be a small price to pay. Curiously, Neville didn't seem nervous, as he would have in years passed. No, this young man had grown and matured considerably over the past few months.

"Longbottom..." Severus' eyes narrowed with intimidation. He kept his voice silky smooth and quiet as he chose his words carefully. "I have no doubt that you are behind these latest flair-ups of rampant insolence."

Neville glared at him defiantly. "You got nothing on me, *sir*."

"The Carrows have been given permission to use more drastic measures on chronic cases."

"They wouldn't kill me. I'm a pure blood."

"I'm afraid your bloodlines will no longer guarantee your safety," Severus replied coldly.

Neville shifted uncomfortably in his hard chair. "What sort of drastic measures are we talking about... *sir*?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. Perhaps the boy was finally taking him seriously. "I'll leave the details for your overactive imagination to fill in. Suffice it to say, you will long for the days of the Cruciatus Curse and Sectum Sempra."

Neville met his scrutinizing gaze with anger. "And I suppose I have you to thank for these drastic measures, *sir*?"

"No, actually, the orders come from a source... over my head." Severus knew the young man would understand that to mean Voldemort. It was never spelled out for the student body that the Dark Lord had the last word for everything that went on at Hogwarts, but everyone knew it to be so.

Neville swallowed hard but remained combative. "I'm not afraid," he replied spitefully.

"Ah, yes. That's very noble and brave of you, to be sure... A true Gryffindor to the last," Severus droned sarcastically. "But there are others to be considered. You see," he continued, "you are not the only person they may take their wrath out on."

He stopped to let his words sink in.

Concern and resentment spread slowly across Neville's face as he put the pieces together.

"I suggest you modify your behavior. I wouldn't want to be responsible for someone else's pain... incarceration... or death... Would you?" He could almost see a shiver go down Neville's spine. But a hint of defiance remained in his eyes.

"Will that be all, *sir*?"

"For now."

Neville rose and started for the door.

"Watch yourself, Longbottom," he added with a tone that mixed fatherly advice with a menacing air.

When Severus could no longer hear Neville's footsteps down the corridor, he closed the door and spoke to it. "This is Headmaster Snape. The password will now change from Wulfric to Brian. I repeat: the password will now change from Wulfric to Brian."

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Two weeks later, Severus heard a rumor that Death Eaters had failed in their attempt to capture Neville's grandmother. A short time later, Neville himself disappeared, but the dung bombs and graffiti did not. Other troublemakers stopped coming to class and meals one by one, and no one could shed any light as to their whereabouts. But the clandestine disruptions became more frequent. Aberforth would only tell Severus that he didn't want to know what was going on, so at least Severus could be confident that Aberforth was helping them and that they wouldn't starve.

With Sienna's help, he finally discovered that they were hiding in the Room of Requirement. But as long as one of them stayed in there, he couldn't get the door to open. It was maddening in a way, but when he finally resolved himself to their predicament, he found their psychological torture of the Carrows quite entertaining. He inwardly cheered them on and had to force himself to react with anger when the Carrows came to him with complaints of their latest disruption.

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Spring was in full swing and with it much more pleasant weather. Winky began to take Sienna up to the cliffs on the far side of the Lake to meditate, and Severus could immediately see a change for the better in her attitude.

On the very first night of May, Severus came back to the secret room after dinner in the Great Hall. Instead of finding Sienna getting ready for bed, she met him fully dressed with a mischievous gleam in her sparkling blue-gray eyes. She grabbed both of his hands in hers and pulled him close as she gazed lovingly up into his smiling face. "Can we go for a walk by the lake...*please*?" she added as he began to object. "It's dark, no one will see us. Perhaps we could find a little cove that's not visible from the castle."

Severus furrowed his brow. But she was beaming at him and radiating a joyous energy that began to dissolve his objections. She so seldom asked for anything. He couldn't bring himself to refuse her. "Oh, alright," he conceded. "For a little while."

They asked Winky to transport them to the water's edge and promised to call her when they were ready to return. As the two walked hand in hand with the castle rising up behind them, he couldn't help but wonder if they were finally living Sienna's vision. They walked in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the cool crisp night air and the pleasant absence of insects that would undoubtedly descend upon the area in the days to come.

"I brought you here for a reason," Sienna finally broke the silence.

"Oh?" Severus waited with baited breath.

"I have news... I think you'll be pleased, but under our current circumstances I can't be sure."

He had a feeling he knew what she was about to say. With hope swelling his heart to a monstrous size, he waited impatiently for her to continue.

"We're going to be parents," she said softly and with great apprehension.

Severus cocked his head back with relief. He let out a faint cry of joy and started laughing. "I knew it." This time it was his turn to beam at her. They both began to laugh as he pulled her close. He gazed into her inviting eyes. "You have made me unimaginably happy," he admitted as a joyous tear meandered down his cheek. "Thank you," he added softly. Then they kissed like there was no tomorrow, a long, wet, passionate kiss that left them both giddy.

"Let's see if we can find that cove you mentioned," Severus suggested with an impish grin.

As they continued to walk hand in hand, Sienna reached up and touched his hair. "Are you getting gray?"

"I should hope not! I'm only 39."

"Ah, don't worry," she said as she ran her fingers through his hair. "I think it's just the moonlight reflecting off of it."

"Oh, that's good to know." He smiled down on her. Perhaps this was her vision after all.

"I'm so relieved that you're pleased by my bit of news."

"How long have you known?"

"I had my suspicions last month, but I didn't want to say anything until I knew for sure."

"So when do you think she'll be born?"

Sienna looked at him curiously, "December ninth, if my calculations are correct. But what makes you think it's going to be a girl?"

Severus finally admitted his last dream with Lily and why he had suddenly become so amorous. Sienna's mood immediately became melancholy and she was deathly quiet as they continued along the shore.

An outcropping of rock put an abrupt end to the shore line, but Severus remembered that if they swerved inland, they could find a path that led to the other side. He had made a point of exploring the shore line during the many lonely hours he had spent here in his youth, so he knew it well. As they emerged on the other side, a secluded cove presented itself, just as Severus had remembered. A wide sandy beach lay before them, and gentle waves quietly lapped against the surrounding rocks. With the quarter moon rising over the opposite shore, Severus couldn't have dreamt of a more romantic spot.



He conjured a fluffy down comforter for them to sit on, took Sienna's hand in his, and they sat down. "Now please tell me what is troubling you," he insisted.

She stared at the water as it shimmered in the moonlight. Words escaped her for some time, but she finally found the courage to speak. "I'm just afraid you'll forget about me once you have Lily back in your life."

Severus sat in shocked silence for a moment. Then he reached up gently and took her face in his hands. "Look at me," he coaxed. When her eyes finally met his, he realized she was crying. "How could you ever think that? Look into my mind my heart. Can't you tell how much I love you?"

"But she's your soul mate. What chance do I have?"

"She'll be my daughter. And you will *still* be my wife." His eyes bore into hers as he willed her to read his mind. When her tears did not subside, he let go of her face and looked out at the sparkling water in frustration. "Perhaps this is just some hormonal thing you're going through because of the pregnancy," he suggested with annoyance.

"But what if you spend all of your affections on her? I need to feel your arms around me, Severus. I need you in my life, not just as a bread winner. I need your heart, your love and devotion."

"And you will always have it," he reassured her. "When Lily expressed a desire to return to me, I was only willing after she assured me that I would love her strictly in a fatherly fashion. I will reserve all of my romantic desires for you and you alone." Sienna still looked skeptical. Then Severus remembered Dumbledore's advice from before they were married, and he wrapped his arms around her. He rocked her back and forth for a long time. "I will love you and seek your affections to my dying day and beyond," he whispered. "Please believe me. You have nothing to worry about."

Much to Severus' dismay, she was totally unresponsive. "Can't you read my mind right now?"

"No, actually, I guess my emotions are so strong that they have clouded my view. Or perhaps I'm just being selfish."

Severus decided that a more persuasive tactic was in order. "Well," he mused as his eyes sparkled seductively, "if you could read my mind, you'd know that I am currently salivating at the mere thought of tasting you."

Sienna's face became hopeful.

"For instance..." Severus leaned down and began to nibble on her ear. "Mmmm... delicious. But your ear pales in comparison to your neck." His lips slowly progressed to said area, where they gently sucked as his tongue caressed her skin. "Ahh. Just a hint of salt. Did our short walk overexert you?" he asked with true concern.

"No, I think I was just nervous because I didn't know how you would take the news of my pregnancy, and then also what you said about Lily."

Severus shook his head slowly. "As I said, nothing to worry about. Now, where was I?"

"I believe you were giving me a hickey."

"You don't mind if I leave that job unfinished, do you? I feel that there are other, more effective, ways of marking my territory." He raised his eyebrows, awaiting her consent.

"By all means, carry on as you wish." She finally bestowed a smile on him.

With great relief, he returned her smile, but he knew he still had some convincing to do.

"Now, your mouth," he continued, "is another matter entirely. More than a vault full of flavors, such wonderful textures await to tantalize my tongue. Did you know that the tongue is one of the most sensitive parts of the body?"

"No."

He thought he noticed a sparkle returning to her eyes, thank Merlin. Sensing an opportunity, he leaned in gently and began to kiss her, his lips slightly parted. It felt as if his sense of touch had been magnified somehow. Her delicately trembling lips felt softer and hotter than ever before. As his tongue coaxed her mouth open, he felt the hard smooth surface of her teeth, the ridges in the roof of her mouth, and the roughness of her tongue as it began to stroke his. His heart filled with joy as she began to take an active part in the kiss. She must have regained the ability to read his thoughts again because she began to respond to his desires as only Sienna could. He had begun this overture with the tasting theme, and she could tell that he wished to continue the encounter along those lines. But apparently, she could also tell that he wanted to work for his rewards.

"Ahh," he murmured upon releasing her mouth, "delicious." His eyes followed her neckline down to her cleavage. "I believe this lovely dress is about to get in my way. After all, my taste buds have only begun their adventure." He reached behind her and lowered her zipper, then pulled the sleeves off her arms. His lips found her collarbone and worked their way to the newly exposed cleavage. His fingers pushed one of the bra cups to the side, but it wasn't enough. He stopped long enough to penetrate her soul with his intense black eyes. "More pesky clothing."

Sienna smirked at him and began to reach behind her back to unclasp the bra, but he stopped her.

"Allow me." In a flash, it had fallen to the down comforter that they were sitting on, and her bosom burst forth, young, firm, and swollen from the onslaught of pregnancy. His penis twitched inside his pants. "Merlin, you are more beautiful now than ever."

"Perhaps, but will you still think so six months from now when I'm waddling and swelled up like a balloon?"

He beamed at her with a joy that he had never felt before. "There's a life growing inside of you that is the product of our love for each other. You will become more beautiful, and I will want you more, with each passing day.

"Now, where was I? Oh, yes." He dove for her nipples, already firm and rock hard, just as his erection was fast becoming. He caressed and sucked gently, just as she had taught him to do. He knew that this was one of her favorite pastimes.

She gasped with delight and let the breath out through her teeth in a long, soft hiss. Another gasp produced his favorite phrase: "Yessss, Severusss." She began to blindly grope for the buttons on his frock coat, but his hands intercepted hers.

"Relax," he cooed. "Your radar must still be in a state of disrepair, or you would surely know that I want to drive you completely wild before I give you any access to me whatsoever. I have always wanted to make love to you while I am fully clothed and you are completely naked. In fact, I have an idea that may enhance the experience for us both. Do you trust me?"

"What a silly question. Of course I do."

Severus smirked impishly and raised his eyebrows. "I want to try something new. We've been experimenting quite a bit lately, but with the less than soft landscape, and my knees being what they are, I thought this might be the perfect opportunity to try a new spell that I've been working on."

"And what spell is that?" She looked a bit apprehensive.

"It's a surprise." His impish look grew into devilishness. "Could you lie back, please?"

Her apprehension morphed into suspicion.

"I thought you said that you trust me!"

"Can you give me a hint at least?"

"Lie back," he insisted. "You'll be glad you did. I promise."

Reluctantly, Sienna stretched her legs out straight in front of her. Then she slowly and cautiously leaned back until her body was completely horizontal, but her eyes never left his. "I'm all yours."

"Yes, you are, aren't you?" he purred. He lay down beside her and propped his head up on one hand as the other hand caressed her face. Then he worked his way down the center of her chest and back up again. "But what you seem to forget sometimes is that I am yours as well, from the top of my greasy git head..."

"Your head is *not* greasy and you are *not* a git!"

"... to the bottom of my gnarly toes..."

"Albus had gnarly toes. Yours are beautiful."

"... and every fiber of my heart, soul and spirit in between."

Finally, Sienna began to beam back at him. "I can see what you have in mind. This should prove interesting."

"Finally!" He rolled his eyes in mock irritation. "You really have me spoiled, you know. It's high time I returned the favor." He whipped out his wand in a flash and touched it to Sienna's abdomen. "*Leviosa Longitudo*." Sienna's body rose up off the ground just a few inches. "How does that feel?" he asked tentatively.

"Like I'm floating on a cloud," she admitted with amazement.

"Try to move for me," he commanded.

She could speak and move her face, she could turn and lift her head slightly, and she could wiggle her hands and feet from the wrists and ankles down to her fingers and toes. But her arms and legs wouldn't move. "This is a bit frustrating. Almost like a Full Body Bind Curse."

"I'll have to work on the amount of dexterity the spell affords its victim. But this will do for now." He got to his feet and bent down, grabbing her waist with both hands. He pulled her floating form up to workbench height and discovered with delight that she remained there after he released her.

"Perfect!" He slid the dress down just enough to give him open and easy access to her swollen breasts; then he continued to taste them each in turn, tickling and laving them one by one. He found that he could wrap his arms around her back without encumbrances, and she delighted in his every touch.

Like a kid with a long wished for new toy, Severus explored the endless possibilities that presented themselves with her floating in mid air. When he wanted to kiss her back, he raised her up for easy access. When his lips hungered for hers, he would pull her back down again. After thoroughly tasting the top half of her body, he began to work on the bottom half. He slipped her shoes off one by one and watched her squirm and giggle as he sucked each toe. For the sake of keeping her warm, Severus pushed Sienna's loose dress up over her waist. Then he dispensed with her knickers and kissed and nipped his way up her inner thighs after prying her legs apart. His touch lightly tantalized her senses as he caressed her legs, over, under, inside and out... and her buttocks, so round, so firm, so soft.

Her crotch now stared him in the face. But he wanted to be able to view her reactions while tasting her core. So he gently pushed her down slightly and gazed into her eyes with curiosity. "Can you bend your knees?"

"I don't think so. I think you have to do it."

He grabbed her leg where it met her hip with one hand, and wrapped his other hand around her ankle. Then he pushed her foot towards the rest of her body. When the task was repeated with the other leg, he angled her butt up slightly. Perfect! Now he could dive face first into her core while still gazing into her eyes. But he found that the dastardly dress now obstructed his view of her impeccable breasts. He could cast a spell to keep her warm if need be, but that dress would have to go. With one graceful sweep of his arm, Severus pulled the dress the length of her body and tossed it aside. Now she floated before him, completely naked. Merlin, what a turn-on!

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

Severus snorted incredulously. "You have no idea!"

"Actually, I do. I have full access to your thoughts and emotions again."

"I suspected as much." He ran his fingers lightly around her labia and just barely touched her clit. Then he licked and laved his fingers and coaxed open her dripping wet entrance. Before tasting her, he blew on the spot gently.

"God, you know just how to drive me wild." Her brow furrowed. She almost seemed stressed.

Severus chuckled as his tongue entered her and began to caress and tickle as only his tongue could do. All the while his hands massaged her behind, and his fingers lightly ran down her crack to tickle her anus. His penis felt so hard in his pants that he took a moment to unbutton his frock coat and unzip his fly, so he could free the stifled member. It popped out of its own accord and stood straight out perpendicular from his body. He could feel the tip already weeping as he went back to tickling her clit with his tongue and entered her heat with two fingers.

"Severus, God, *Severus, please!*"

Just her words almost sent him over the edge. He took a deep breath and tried to hold on to his composure. He was determined to send her to the brink of insanity, and he knew that in order to do that, he would need to give her breasts just a bit more attention. He withdrew his fingers and pushed her down gently to crotch level. Then he walked around her leg to her right side, relocated her right arm up over her head, and placed her left arm at her crotch. "Can you stimulate yourself like this?"

"Yes, but I would much rather..."

"Good." He proceeded to lean into her side and tickle her nipple with the head of his still-weeping, rock-hard cock. He used his other hand to stimulate her other nipple.

She began to quiver and moan. "Severus, please. Be merciful!"

He knew that he couldn't take much more himself, so he quickly, almost frantically, repositioned himself at her crotch and let the head of his cock lubricate her fingers, her clit and her entrance, before sinking into her core. He took it slowly, knowing that she preferred to be teased. Only his dark glistening head at first. Then just a small part of his shaft. He could hear her gasp and moan as he grabbed both of her butt cheeks and pulled her towards him. With her floating like this, her body felt weightless in his hands and he could move her at will, an infinitesimal amount, or several inches, almost with no effort at all. Up, down, side to side, the direction made no difference.

Oh, Merlin, she felt good. And she was wet, so very, very wet. He slid in only a couple of inches, then moved her body in a circular motion as his cock slid in and out, a little deeper with each stroke. He could feel her muscles tightening around him.

"Severusss. Yessss, Severusss."

Deeper. Faster. Her muscles began to spasm as they tightened around his granite-hard cock.

"Severus...*God...Severus!*"

Her wet heat and primal moans coaxed him onward. An unmistakable sensation started in his loins and shot through the head of his cock as he heard himself half groan, half scream in ecstasy. He could hold back no longer and spilled his seed into her welcoming body.

Then he ripped his own clothes off while still inside of her and scooped her up, silently releasing her from the levitation spell. He longed for skin on skin contact. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms around his neck, their bodies pressed together in the afterglow of the most incredible sex either of them had ever experienced.

Severus lowered himself to the ground and they lay together in a warm embrace as the moon drifted overhead. He conjured another blanket for their comfort, and they fell fast asleep.

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When Severus awoke the next morning, the sky above him shone so brightly it hurt his eyes. He gasped with anxiety as he fumbled for his pocket watch in the pile of clothes by his side. "Sienna, wake up it's already 7:30! I've missed breakfast and you've missed Potter!"

Sienna sat up suddenly with the news. "I'm so sorry. I had read that pregnant women need a lot of extra sleep during their first trimester, but I had no idea it would be this bad."

They hastily slipped back into their clothes and called Winky, who popped them back to the secret room. As soon as she was gone, Severus halted his rush to freshen up and touched Sienna's face gently. "Thank you for last night. I shall treasure the memory always."

"Me, too," she admitted as she caressed his hand. He bent down to give her a quick kiss and then it was back to business.

"I'm going to shower and change into some fresh clothes. Why don't you see if you can find Potter? Gringotts always has guards at the front door. Find out if either of them has seen Bellatrix Lestrange this morning."

"But the Bank doesn't open until 8:00, right? So they won't be able to get in until then."

Severus glanced again at his watch. "It's almost 8:00 now."

"Well, go on then. I'll let you know when I find out something."

Severus showered and changed in his quarters so as to not distract her. Then he headed to his office to tackle the usual morning paperwork. A few moments later, Sienna called to him from the archway. "They're in. I'll try to keep tabs on them."

"Does anyone suspect anything?"

"I'm not sure; Harry Confunded the two at the front door. I think he was forced to Imperio a Death Eater who decided to tag along."

"Potter casting Unforgivables... truly an act of desperation." Severus began to worry. How could they possibly pull this off? And what could he do about it if they were caught? "What's happening now?"

She didn't answer right away. She had to find them again. "I don't know. I don't think they're in the lobby any more. Perhaps they are headed down to the vault already. This may be difficult."

Severus returned to the secret room and sat beside Sienna on the love seat as she closed her eyes to concentrate. Several minutes passed before she opened her eyes with a look of frustration. "I can't find them. The underground tunnels are like a maze, going in many different directions. It's like trying to find a needle in a haystack. I'm afraid they'll come back out while I'm searching the tunnels, and I won't even know if they succeeded or not!"

"Perhaps you should concentrate on one of the goblins in the lobby. He will surely notice if Bellatrix comes back through. Make sure you chose someone who has not been Imperiused or Confunded."

"Right."

Babaji had been correct, as always. Severus really felt grateful for her mind-reading ability as he made his way back into the office and continued to work at his desk.

About an hour passed before she came running in. "They did it! They escaped!"

"Where are they now?"

"I still don't have their location. They came bursting out of the tunnels on a DRAGON! It all happened so fast that the goblin whose mind I was reading didn't know what was going on until they were already out the door. He ran and hid behind the counter. So by the time his mind could tell me about it, they were airborne and too far away for me to find. They could have gone in an infinite number of directions."

"Did they retrieve Hufflepuff's Cup?" asked Dumbledore's portrait."

"Not sure. I need to find someone of authority to focus in on and find out what they took."

"Well, at least we know they're still alive and still free," added Severus.

"Thank Merlin's wand," commented Phineas Nigellus.

Sienna smiled at Severus and headed back to the secret room, where they sat together again on the loveseat as she closed her eyes. "Griphook is among the Goblins... He's got the sword of Gryffindor. I was afraid of that, the double-crossing little..."

"Sienna, I'm surprised at you. I thought you were taught not to judge people," Severus taunted her. He was actually relieved to see that she was not so "perfect" after all.

"A little golden cup, yes, the cup, that must be it. That's the only thing that's missing from the vault."

"Good. They got it. But without the sword, how will they destroy it, I wonder?"

"I don't know." She opened her locket and called Dumbledore's name. He appeared obligingly, with a slight bow.

"How may I be of service, my love?"

"Albus, they have Hufflepuff's cup, but Griphook managed to steal the Sword of Gryffindor from them. What other ways are there to destroy a Horcrux?"

"A Horcrux can only be destroyed by a magical object or spell of great destructive power, but it also must be able to protect itself from the Horcrux, since the bit of soul inside will no doubt attempt to defend itself. Harry used a Basilisk fang in his second year here to destroy the diary. I suppose any Goblin-made knife, sword or hammer that was soaked in Basilisk venom would do the trick. It wouldn't necessarily have to be the Sword of Gryffindor."

"And none easy to come by, even under the best of circumstances," Severus observed. "Well, there's not much else we can do except wait. Sienna, I know it will probably prove a waste of your time, but keep looking for them. You might get lucky."

"Yes, love," she sighed, looking down at the locket. "Thanks, Albus. See you later."

"You know, it's lunch time. I should go down to the Great Hall, since I didn't make it to breakfast. Why don't you take a break and eat something. Pregnant women are always hungry."

She smiled. "Good idea."

Severus disappeared down the spiral staircase.

## Time To Flee

*Chapter 29 of 31*

As the final battle of Hogwarts becomes imminent, Severus must decide what to do with Sienna.

**A/N:** As always, I would like to thank JENGEOGE and NervousAboutAngels for their diligence and hard work. A big thank you also goes to the staff here at The Petulant Poetess for keeping me in line. I never realized that the English language had so many rules.

I make no money, I take no credit. It all belongs to the unsurpassed J. K. Rowling. This applies even more so in this chapter, because I have lifted quite a bit of dialogue directly from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, specifically Chapters Thirty-one and Thirty-two. The exact quotes are indicated with italicized type.

### Chapter 29

**"Time to Flee, Time to Fly,**

**But Why, Oh God, Is It Time to Die?"**

The darkness was descending on the castle as Sienna continued in vain to search for the trio. Severus realized soon that she would need to break for dinner. He was debating whether or not to dine in the Great Hall when a dark gray smoky orb passed through the office window like a ghostly cannon ball and exploded on the floor before him. In the secret room, Sienna jumped up and ran to the archway for a closer look as the smoke reformed into the shape of the great snake, Nagini.

"What is that thing?" she asked with a trembling voice.

Severus glanced quickly at her and motioned for stillness and quiet as the dark snaky form spoke in Voldemort's voice.

"The boy and his friends are believed to be headed for the castle. He may attempt to find someone or something in Ravenclaw Tower. Put one of the Carrows on watch there. I have alerted Hogsmeade, in case he shows up there first. If he is caught, detain him and summon me immediately. If mistakes are made, you will find my charitable nature already spent."

The smoke dissipated into nothingness.

"That's the Dark Lord's version of a Patronus," Severus informed her.

"But why does it look like that? Not white or silver? Not made of light?"

"I'm not sure, but I believe it is because he has never known love," Severus suggested thoughtfully. "The only method I know to make a real Patronus requires a truly happy memory, one that fills your heart with joy."

"And true joy can only come from unconditional love."

"I would bet his happiest memory involves torturing and killing someone perhaps to create his first Horcrux."

Sienna's face contorted as she shuddered at the thought.

"Well, I'd better go to dinner so I can give the Carrows their assignment." He stood and crossed through his private quarters to the arch. "You alright?"

She nodded. "It just gave me a start, is all. I thought we were under attack."

"No, it's only smoke." He bent down and kissed her cheek. "I'll be back shortly."

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"Well, the whole school knows what has happened now," Severus bellowed when he returned from dinner. "Terry Boot must have gotten an owl from his parents. One of them was in Diagon Alley this morning when it happened. Before I could stop it," he added in disgust, "the Carrows came down on him pretty hard, right there in front of everyone."

"Anything I need to attend to later?"

"No, he'll be alright. Just beaten up, that's all. They didn't even use wands."

Sienna nodded, but then produced a gaping yawn that made Sev's lip curl. "Why don't you get some sleep, my love," he suggested softly. "Wherever they are, they'll stay put for the night, if they follow their usual pattern. You can start up again in the morning."

She stood up and walked slowly over to his waiting arms. They held each other for several minutes, basking in the unconditional love that they shared. He felt so peaceful, so at home in her arms. And the idea of becoming a father was like delicious frosting on an already perfect cake. The two women who meant more to him than life itself would surround him and brighten his every day.

Suddenly, a silent flash of lightning came bursting through the window and took the form of Aberforth's goat Patronus. "Potter is in the castle. He got in through the Room of Requirement. Says he's got a job to do, a job that Albus left for him. Be careful. He'll stop at nothing." As the sound of Aberforth's voice echoed into silence, the burning white image of the horned goat faded, leaving its black reverse image on their retinas. The looks they exchanged were steeped in concern and dread. Sienna immediately took her side of the love seat while Severus settled on the other. It didn't take long for her to find them. "They're with Neville and the others who disappeared. They're talking about how it has been here at the school with you as Headmaster. I'm afraid," she looked at her husband sympathetically, "they're not being very complimentary."

Severus raised an eyebrow and shrugged it off.

"Oh no. Harry saw into the Dark Lord's mind. He's checking on his Horcruxes. He just now realized that the ring Horcrux is missing. Harry is afraid that he might be headed this way. He's either coming here or the cave, where the locket was originally kept." Sienna's face became a ghostly white. "He'll be here in a matter of hours, if not sooner."

Severus furrowed his brow; his eyes became hawk-like. He looked deep into Sienna's worried face. A horrible feeling of foreboding stirred deep inside him. He took both of her hands in his as they stood, facing each other.

"More people have arrived in the Room of Requirement to join in the battle."

"This is it, love. The outcome of this war will be decided tonight. You should go to the ashram. You'll be safe there."

"No, I won't leave you. What if you're injured? My healing powers could save you."

"I need to know that you're safe."

She adamantly shook her head.

"Don't you see? If I'm worried about you, I won't be able to concentrate. I could make foolish mistakes because my mind will be filled with concern for you and the baby. If I know you're safe, I can keep my wits about me."

"But, Severus..."

"Sienna, if I don't survive this, there is that tiny bit of me that lives on in you. Nurture her, protect her. Please, do this for me."

"She needs her father as much as I do. She's coming back for *you*, Severus. If you get hit by the Killing Curse remember how much we both love you. *Will* yourself back into your body. I *know* you can do it. Promise me."

"I promise you that I will do everything in my power to live through this, but if I don't, remember it's not because I don't love you. I could never love anyone any more than I love you right now. You are my world, Sienna. If anything happened to you, I could not go on. So please, for the sake of the wizarding world, let Winky take you to the ashram."

She flung her arms around him and started to cry.

"Sienna, *please*... Time is of the essence."

She started sobbing uncontrollably. He wondered if her instincts were showing her something that he couldn't see.

"Winky!"

With a pop, Winky appeared before them. She started to bow, but stopped out of concern when she saw Sienna's emotional display. "What is troubling Mrs. Snape, ma'am?"

"Things are about to get very dangerous here, Winky. You must escort Mrs. Snape to the ashram. Gather her things, would you? She's in no state to do it herself," he informed the elf without letting go of Sienna.

In only a few moments, Winky had packed all of Sienna's belongings into a small trunk with wheels and had it sitting in the middle of the floor, ready for Side-Along Apparition.

Severus let go of all but Sienna's hand and stooped down to look Winky directly in the eyes. "Stay with her," he implored. "Take care of her and the baby. Keep them safe, no matter what. Your number one job now," he touched Winky's shoulder with his other hand, "is to take care of them and keep them safe for me."

"But what will become of Headmaster Snape, sir?" Her innocent look made his heart ache.

"I don't know, Winky. But..."

Now Winky started to cry.

"...I'll call you to come back when it's safe to do so." He stood up and took Sienna in his arms once again. He looked down into her tear-stained face and felt his heart breaking. Somewhere deep inside he feared that this was the last time he would ever hold her. The desperate kiss that followed ended with them choking and gasping for breath, as if they had both started to drown in their own tears. "Now get out of here, quickly," he begged them as he wiped his face dry with the back of his hand.

With a gut-wrenching look of longing and despair, they were gone. He broke down and wept, but only for a moment; then he took a deep breath and began to regain his composure. He must have a clear head before he stepped out of the secret room. She was gone now, and he had no way of knowing what was happening. Potter could be anywhere in the castle by now. He stood up straight and tall and began to concentrate. Potter would be looking for two things: the Ravenclaw item, and a tool to destroy both Horcruxes. He would head for the Room of Requirement and from there to the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room. He could only hope to run into Potter somewhere along the way.

Severus stopped short of racing out the door and turned to look at the room. The thought occurred to him that he may not live to return. There had to be certain precautions in place to ensure that only the right people would gain access to his office. If he died before reaching Potter, the only place left that Potter could turn to for help, for the truth, was Dumbledore's portrait. He had to have access to it. Severus would have to change the password to one Potter could stumble upon by accident, one the Heads of House could deduce when they realized there had been a change, and one the Carrows were too dunderheaded to figure out. It only took a moment. Unless the Carrows made a point of studying their childhood collection of chocolate frog cards, they probably assumed he had been using random names for passwords all year. But the Heads of House would know, and it was the one word that Potter would quite likely mutter out loud from sheer desperation.

"This is Headmaster Snape," he called to the door. "The password will now change from Brian to Dumbledore. I repeat: the password will now change from Brian to Dumbledore."

"Excellent choice, Severus," commented Dumbledore's portrait.

"Glad you approve," he replied sarcastically. "If all goes well, I'll see you later. If not, I guess my portrait will see you later!"

"Either way, I look forward to it!" Severus heard him say as he ran down the spiral staircase.

Just as he reached the bottom, his left arm began to burn. It wasn't the intense burn that came when the Dark Lord called. But it was the signal that Potter had been found. The Carrows must have caught him in the Ravenclaw common room. He made a beeline towards the tower entrance, but stopped suddenly when he heard a loud bang. It echoed faintly off the walls as if it had come from a distance. He continued on with caution and stealth, keeping his wand unlit but at the ready. Then once again, he heard sounds in the distance. The soft voice of the Ravenclaw eagle asked a question, but the rough and ignorant reply must have come from Amycus. There was no mistaking that voice as it echoed up and down the stony corridors. Then he heard another voice, that of Professor McGonagall. Good, she would see to it that no harm came to Potter until he could take over. He decided to hide and wait for them to descend the stairs before revealing himself.

When McGonagall finally appeared, she was dressed for bed and seemed to be alone. He found amusement in the notion that she could have so easily dispensed with the Carrows. And Potter must be with her, only hidden under that amazing cloak of his. But this put a different spin on things. Perhaps he should keep up his cover just a bit longer and follow them to see if they shed any light on the description or whereabouts of the unknown Horcrux. If something happened to Potter, it would be up to him to complete the mission. He listened as they passed his dark hiding place and could easily distinguish three different sets of footsteps. He hoped his would blend with theirs unnoticed as he quietly attempted pursuit, but the hard soles of his boots betrayed him.

*McGonagall halted, raised her wand ready to duel, and said, "Who's there?"*

"It is I," Severus admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. He stepped out from behind a conveniently located suite of armor. *"Where are the Carrows?" he asked, knowing full well that the answer would be concocted.*

*"Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus," said Professor McGonagall.*

*"I was under the impression,"* Severus continued as he scanned the area for signs of Potter, *"that Alecto had apprehended an intruder."*

*"Really?" said Professor McGonagall. "And what gave you that impression?"*

Severus subconsciously flexed his left forearm without even realizing it.

*"Oh, but naturally," said Professor McGonagall. "You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication, I forgot."*

Severus barely noticed her reply as he drifted forward, hoping to sense Potter's presence. His mind raced as he began to feel the urgency of the situation. The Dark Lord would no doubt be arriving soon. Time was of the essence. He had to get the boy alone, find out what he knew, and convince him somehow where his true loyalties lie. If he could just get the boy alone in his office, the portraits could help him to convince Potter of the truth. He had to get him away from Minerva. It was the only way.

*"I did not know that it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva."*

*"You have some objections?"*

*"I wonder, what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour?"*

*"I thought I heard a disturbance."*

*"Really?"* he asked slyly, even though he had heard the very same disturbance. *"But all seems calm."*

*This is getting nowhere,* he thought with frustration. In a last desperate attempt to get the truth out of her, his eyes met hers for just a moment *Legilimens...* Yes, Potter's face and Luna Lovegood's came floating to the surface. *"Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist..."*

In an instant, Professor McGonagall sent a hex through the air that would have surprised him had he not been using Legilimency on her. But he saw it coming, thank Merlin's winter cloak, and his Shield Charm came up so fast and so strong that she was thrown off balance. She brandished her wand at a torch on the wall and it flew out of its bracket. Although Severus had lost his link with her the second eye contact was broken, he had seen enough to know that she was ready to kill him, or die trying. So much for subconscious trust...

Severus did all he could to parry away her spells and hexes so no harm would come to her, and he was equally careful not to let dangerous spells fly about helter-skelter because he knew that Potter could be injured under that cloak. It made him invisible, but not invulnerable.

Then a squeaky voice called out from the darkness behind McGonagall. *"Minerva!"* It was Flitwick, with Sprout bringing up the rear. She must have summoned them somehow.

*"No!" squealed Flitwick, raising his wand. "You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!"*

Severus began to feel trapped. There were only two ways out of this: either he would have to get hurt himself, or he would have to hurt them. Neither of those alternatives would help him to achieve his goal. But as Flitwick's spell hit the suit of armor and it came to life to attack him, a third option came to mind. He threw the armor back at them like a bowling ball rolling after pins and took flight down the hall. *He hurtled through a classroom door and burst through the huge picture window on the far side of the room.* He soared through the air with a wonderful sense of freedom. He wished he could fly all the way to India, to Sienna, to peace and joy.

Suddenly he was drawn back to reality as McGonagall's enraged cries of *"Coward! COWARD!"* rang out into the distant night behind him. She had had no idea that he could have easily killed her and everyone else there. She would probably never know what an act of mercy he had just shown her. He tried to block it out of his mind as he left the great structure behind... his home... the only place he had ever really belonged. This was the second time he had had to flee, thinking he would never be able to return. He was mistaken before, could he be mistaken this time as well?

The perimeter wall stretched out ahead of him in the darkness. He knew that it was infested with dementors. Rather than employing his Patronus as most wizards did, and drawing attention to himself, he chose an alternative way to defend against them, a method he had come up with on his own. It was really quite simple if one thought the problem through. Dementors feed on happy thoughts. They suck their victim dry of all joy within and then feed on the despair that is left. But he figured out long ago that by using the skills that made him an expert Occlumens, he could keep the dementors at bay. By blocking out all thoughts and concentrating on something mundane, he would appear uninteresting to them, and they would let him pass. Severus brought to mind the most boring lecture by Professor Binns that he ever remembered suffering through and kept that emotionless memory at the front of his mind. The dementors didn't even acknowledge his existence as he flew by.

Before he knew it, Severus had arrived in Hogsmeade. As he landed, several Death Eaters greeted him and grilled him for an update. "I don't wish to appear rude, but I don't recall being ordered to report to any of you!" he replied curtly and turned on his heel to head for the Shrieking Shack. From there he would have a good view of the castle and hopefully be alone for a while to collect his thoughts and come up with a plan. But no such luck was afforded him.

Just then, with a loud crack, the Dark Lord appeared before them with the great snake, Nagini, draped over his shoulders. In one smooth motion, he reached for Severus' left arm, pushed up his sleeve, and plunged his wand into his flesh, sending Severus to his knees in agony. Every Death Eater present winced at the pain as their own dark marks blackened and burned. Within moments other Death Eaters began arriving, until the streets were full. Bellatrix pushed her way to the front of the crowd with Lucius and Narcissa in tow.

"Why are *they* here?" asked Voldemort, with more than a touch of disgust in his voice. "They have no wands. They are of no further use to me. I only let them live as a favor to you, Bella."

"They wish to know the fate of their son, my Lord," Bella replied with a bow.

He raised an eyebrow at the Malfoys. "Very well. Stay out of the way."

"Yes, my Lord. Thank you, my Lord" Lucius bowed deeply and backed away.

Then Voldemort turned to Severus. "What, may I ask, are you doing here, my greasy friend? Why aren't you up at the castle helping the Carrows hold Potter for me?"

"He apparently escaped their grasp, with help from the other teachers, before I arrived at the scene. They turned on me and I was outnumbered four to one. I had no choice but to flee. I felt I could be of more use to you alive than dead."

"Perhaps," Voldemort's look stole the color from Severus' face. Was his usefulness finally at an end? "So Potter is still in the castle somewhere, then?"

"As far as I know, your Lordship."

"Very well..." Voldemort's eyes narrowed at Severus, but then he turned and started to walk towards the front gate to the Hogwarts grounds. "They no doubt know that I'm coming for him." Severus rose from his knees and began to accompany him as he glided forward, but Voldemort stopped suddenly. "Did I ask for your company?" he growled viciously.

"No, My Lord," Severus gave a slight bow and remained still.

He watched with great apprehension as the Dark Lord's silhouette shrank into the distance as it grew closer to the huge front gate. He did not drop the snake to the ground so it could slither at his side as usual. No, the snake remained draped over his shoulders. Dumbledore had said that this would eventually happen and that this was the signal that Potter must know the truth. Now it was more urgent than ever that he reach Harry. But how?

Voldemort stood at the gate for quite some time, staring at the school with an air of longing. When he finally strode back up to the waiting Death Eaters, a sinister smile had painted itself across his snakelike face. "We will give them time to find and hand over the boy."

"And if they refuse?" asked Fenrir Greyback, who had been one of the last to arrive.

"Then we attack, of course," Voldemort replied, matter-of-factly.

Fenrir began to lick his lips in anticipation of all that fresh young flesh.

Voldemort waved his wand in the air in a complicated motion, with the last stroke aimed at Hogwarts Castle. Then he put the tip of it to his throat and began to speak. His words remained normal volume to the surrounding crowd of Death Eaters, but Severus could hear a much louder echo rolling towards them from the direction of the castle.

*"I know that you are preparing to fight."*

Severus could hear distant screams as the students reacted to this strange and powerful sound effect.

*"Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood"*The Dark Lord paused, as he no doubt imagined his unwilling audience drinking in his every word. Then he continued, with an unmistakable gleam in his eyes, a gleam of corruption and power, as he hoped to turn friend against friend. *"Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded."*

*"You have until midnight."*

With another flutter of his wand, the voice-carrying spell was broken. "Come, Severus. Let us plan our attack." He floated by, and Severus was drawn into his wake as they made their way to the Shrieking Shack.

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As they discussed different angles and their advantages for attacking the castle, Severus learned to his hidden horror that Voldemort had managed to recruit the giants as well as the dementors, and a hoard of them were gathering outside as they made their plans. Luckily, the Centaurs remained neutral in the impending fight. But with this many reinforcements, Severus wasn't sure how in Merlin's name the battle could be won by the few adults left in the castle. And what of the students? Would McGonagall and the other teachers get the younger ones out through the Room of Requirement the way Harry Potter got in? He could only hope so. There was nothing he could do to insure their safety from here.

When the Dark Lord was satisfied with their plan of attack, he instructed Severus to go outside and coordinate their forces, positioning them in their proper places, and readying them for the onslaught that was surely to come. Severus did what he was told with a heavy heart, then he waited for midnight.

As it arrived, he saw Voldemort give the signal: three balls of red light shot from the end of his wand up beyond the tree tops and burst as Voldemort emitted an eerie screech that reminded Severus of a primitive war cry.

Here at last was Severus' golden opportunity. He could advance with the others, get lost in the bedlam that followed, and find Harry. The assembled mob moved forward as one, but as Severus began to move with them, he felt a cold, clammy hand grab his shoulder. "Not you, my valuable friend," said Voldemort as he dug his long black nails into Severus' flesh. "You can fire off curses from here, out of harm's way. I may be in need of your council."

Voldemort turned and retreated into the Shrieking Shack, leaving Severus to helplessly gaze at the ongoing battle. Curses flew everywhere, lighting up the night. Thunderous crashes could be heard as parts of the ancient structure crumbled. The only real home he had ever known was being destroyed before his eyes. He felt a tear begin to slide down his cheek, but quickly reached up and wiped it away. He could not be caught crying, for it would surely be considered a sign of weakness.

After a deep breath to compose himself, he advanced to a large rock on the hillside overlooking the school. It was a perfect place to fire off nonverbal spells that would look wicked, but do no real damage. But he knew that from this distance, he would never find Harry. This helpless feeling was maddening. Why wouldn't Voldemort let him go and fight? And where was Harry? Had he found the last Horcrux and a way to destroy it? Was he even still alive? Anything could have happened to him by now. If only he had Sienna to tell him what Harry was thinking. But he could not call her back, not here, not now. Her appearance would only bring about both of their deaths. No, she was safe, thank Merlin's wand. He would have to do this on his own.

Severus continued to fire off the occasional flashy curse while watching the battle progress. Although he wasn't sure, he thought he could hear Tonk's voice, and perhaps Lupin's, above the din. Was Shacklebolt also among them? Perhaps the Order of the Phoenix had arrived in time for the battle. Yes, they could have gotten in the same way Harry had. That gave him a ray of hope. But their cause still looked bleak from his point of view. The feeling of foreboding grew as his stomach tightened.

Just then, Lucius Malfoy appeared at his side. "The Dark Lord wishes to see you, Severus."

"Oh?"

The look Lucius gave him was inscrutable. Their eyes met, but no valuable information was forthcoming. Lucius's only thoughts were filled with worry for his son, the son Severus had sworn an unbreakable vow to protect. He hadn't thought of that until this very moment. If anything bad happened to Draco, would he, Severus, drop dead on the spot? Or was the oath satisfied when Dumbledore was killed? Because of the ambiguous wording, he couldn't be sure. But perhaps if he was here, and there was nothing he could do to help, the curse wouldn't apply in this case. But he couldn't worry about it now. The Dark Lord awaited his arrival, so he turned and headed for the Shrieking Shack, leaving Lucius anxiously staring at the raging battle.

As Severus entered the decaying structure, he heard Voldemort's voice, beckoning him into a side room.

"What is your assessment so far, Severus?"

He didn't answer right away. It seemed an odd question, since Voldemort's view out the window offered at least as good a vantage point as he had had from behind the rock. He feared that stating the obvious would only bring the Dark Lord's wrath, but since he didn't know what else to say, *"... my Lord, their resistance is crumbling..."*

*"...and it is doing so without your help," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice. "Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there... almost."*

Severus didn't know where this conversation was leading, but he knew now, as he studied Nagini in her newly constructed magical cage, that finding Harry was of paramount importance. *"Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please."* Severus held his voice steady, keeping it low and passive, almost a monotone. He could not let the anxiousness in his heart show in his voice. He walked past Voldemort and stared out the window.

*"I have a problem, Severus," said Voldemort softly.*

Severus turned to face him, his heart racing. *"My Lord?"*

*"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"* asked the Dark Lord as he held up his legendary wand and poised it to strike.

Severus immediately thought of what Dumbledore's portrait had told him the night Voldemort robbed his tomb, that Draco Malfoy was the wand's real master. But he mustn't let on. It would surely mean Draco's death if Voldemort found out the truth. *"My my Lord?"* Severus replied blankly. *"I do not understand. You you have performed extraordinary magic with that wand."*

*"No," said Voldemort. "I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand... no. It has not revealed the wonders it has promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago... No difference."*

Severus' heart filled with apprehension.

*"I have thought long and hard, Severus... Do you know why I have called you back from the battle?"*

*"No, my Lord, but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter."*

*"You sound like Lucius. Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I know his weakness, you see, his one great flaw. He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will want to stop it at any cost. He will come."*

Severus knew that Voldemort spoke the truth. He knew Harry better than Voldemort could possibly imagine. Harry cared deeply for people, and if he could just reach Harry and make him understand the truth, he knew Harry would willingly sacrifice himself to save the others. It was important for some reason that Harry die willingly, not in a fight. Somehow, he had to convince Voldemort to let him go... *"But my Lord, he might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself..."*

*"My instructions to my Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends the more, the better but do not kill him."*

*"But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Harry Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable."*

*"My Lord knows I seek only to serve him. But let me go and find the boy, my Lord. Let me bring him to you. I know I can..."*

*"I have told you, no!"* said Voldemort with a red glint in his eye.

Severus knew he had crossed the line.

*"My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally meet the boy!"*

*"My Lord, there can be no question, surely...?"*

*"...but there is a question, Severus. There is."* He stopped and slid the Elder Wand through his white fingers, and Severus felt the heavy weight of his stare.

*"Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?"*

*"I cannot answer that, my Lord."*

*"Can't you?"*

Severus prayed that Voldemort wouldn't try to use Legilimency on him at this point, because he wasn't sure just how well he could resist.

*"My wand of yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me under torture of the twin cores, told me to take another's wand. I did so, but Lucius's wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."*

*"I have no explanation, my Lord."* In this instance, Severus was speaking the truth. His attention was drawn once again to the snake in her cage. How the orb sparkled as she coiled and uncoiled herself, made restless by her unaccustomed confinement. He knew just how she felt as the desire to find Harry burned deeper and deeper into his heart.

*"I sought a third wand, Severus. The Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore."*

Suddenly Severus understood. Voldemort believed *him* to be the true master of the Elder Wand because he had killed Dumbledore. His death was imminent. But he hadn't yet told Harry what he needed to know. He couldn't die now. Not yet. He could tell Voldemort the truth about Draco in hopes it would buy him some time, but somehow he felt that this news would not stop Voldemort from killing him anyway, just in case. And then he would surely hunt Draco down as a result. No need for both of them to die.

He had never felt so helpless, so defeated. He had been ready for death since the night Lily was killed, but he didn't want it to end without fulfilling his mission. Then he remembered Sienna's self-resuscitation and began to calm himself. That was the answer he needed. Voldemort was not the master of the Elder Wand, so it should be



even easier to come back from beyond death. He only hoped that the Dark Lord left the room before it was too late to return to his body. Yes, that was the solution: he would will himself back, just as Sienna had done.

*"My Lord let me go to the boy..."*

*"All this long night, when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here," said Voldemort, his voice barely louder than a whisper, "wondering, wondering, why the Elder Wand refuses to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner... and I think I have the answer."*

*Kill me then and get it over with,* thought Severus, his irritation growing.

*"Perhaps you already know it? You are a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."*

*"My Lord ..."*

*"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner. You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot be truly mine."*

For Draco's sake, Severus pretended that Voldemort's words were fact and decided to play his part to the proverbial end. *"My Lord!"* he protested as he raised his wand.

*"It cannot be any other way," said Voldemort. "I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last."*

Severus braced himself for the feeling of intense fear that Sienna told him would accompany the Avada Kedavra Curse, but it didn't come. Voldemort swiped the air with the Elder Wand. It did nothing to Severus, who stood confused for a split second, but then noticed too late that the snake, cage and all, was upon him. Before he could resist, it had encased his head and shoulders. He struggled against the Force Field Charm in vain as he heard Voldemort hiss something in Parseltongue to Nagini. He didn't have long to wonder at the meaning.

Nagini came at him, fangs bared and mouth agape. He screamed as he realized that there was no escape and felt the fangs sink deep into his neck. He felt his face lose its color as the blood poured out onto his shoulder and chest. His knees buckled as he became dizzy from the sudden loss of blood.

*"I regret it," said Voldemort coldly,* turning to leave. He pointed the Elder Wand at the starry cage and commanded it to lift Nagini off Severus and follow him out the door.

## Letting Go of Hate

### Chapter 30 of 31

Nagini's bite ends Severus' life. How does he react to the after-life? What does Sienna do when she finds out he is dead? And what, if anything, can Lily do to help?

A/N: Thanks go out to JENGEORGE, NervousAboutAngels, and the staff here at TPP for all of their hard work and improvements to this rather long tale.

It all belongs to JKR. I make no money, I take no credit.

In the very beginning, you will recognize the two lines of dialog that Severus utters to Harry. Since these come directly from the text of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, they are shown in italics. But they are the only two direct quotes. All other italics appear for the usual reasons.

### Chapter 30

#### "Letting Go of Hate At Last,

#### Closes the Doorway to the Past"

*I can't die yet,* thought Severus. *Sienna... the baby... Potter I haven't told Potter...* He lay back as he felt the life gushing and sputtering out of him. *No! Not like this. I must... tell... Potter...*

And then, as if by some miracle of God, Harry Potter appeared, kneeling over him or was this his dying mind playing tricks? It took all of his remaining strength to reach up and grab Harry's robes. Yes, thank Merlin, he was real. He must have come through the secret tunnel from Hogwarts. Severus knew he didn't have enough time left to say all the things he wished to say the truth about his love for Harry's mother and how he had spent the last 16 years of his life protecting Harry for her. His short time with Sienna had taught him forgiveness above all else. He could not hold on to hate. He had so many regrets, so much he wanted to apologize for. There was only one thing he could do to make Harry understand. He began to release his memories.

*"Take... it... Take... it,"* he heard himself say, but he didn't recognize his own voice. It sounded divorced from his being like a distant ancestor. But even as his life came to an end, there were still some secrets he wished to take to his grave. All the private time with Sienna, of course, was none of Harry's business. But also, his most treasured memory, the only time Lily ever really kissed him, his very first kiss... Yes, Harry didn't need to see that to understand the truth.

As Severus watched Harry collect the last of the memories, he relaxed. Sienna would be alright as long as Voldemort was defeated. He would watch over her from the other side and come to her in her dreams as Lily had done for him.

*Lily* would he be able to find her once he made the transition? Or had she already taken up residence in the life that grew inside of Sienna? Perhaps, if his dying thoughts were for her, she would hear his soul calling, and she would come.

Severus had no strength left to hold Harry's robes. His only hope was to attempt speech one last time. *"Look... at... me..."* The words barely escaped his lips: he had no breath, no energy left to say them. But somehow Harry heard and came closer.

As the black eyes found the green, the wretched face of James Potter dissolved, and Lily's angelic smile materialized in its place.

She took him by the hand and led him up to the ceiling where they turned and watched the scene below. His limp hand fell to the floor as Harry continued to stare into his

lifeless eyes.

Suddenly, Voldemort's bellowing voice engulfed the house, the town, and the castle grounds as he called back his troops and handed Harry an ultimatum: to surrender or watch his friends die without mercy. Then Harry and Hermione retreated into the tunnel from whence they came.

Severus felt no horror as he observed the last of his blood spill out of his neck and into the ever-expanding puddle on the floor. He felt only calm and great joy in being reunited with Lily finally!

As he held her hand, the scene began to fade into a blinding white light. Its warmth wrapped around him like a blanket or was that Lily's presence he felt? Suddenly, he became aware that his physical body had been replaced with an ethereal one of light just like the one he had left behind, only healthy, whole, and glowing.

He turned to Lily; her body also radiated with light, warmth, and pure love.

"So this is what it's like to die?" he asked curiously. "It's not bad, really. Nothing to be afraid of."

She smiled. *You don't have to use words, here, Sev*He heard her voice, but her mouth didn't move.

*Telepathy?*

*Everyone uses it, she explained. Here, there can be no lies, no secrets.*

With this comment, he raised his eyebrows in concern. *No secrets?*

*Don't worry. As your past life memory returns to you, everything will make sense again.*

Then Sienna crossed his mind. She had no way of knowing what had happened to him. No one knew she was at the ashram, not even her mother. She may not find out for days.

*Sienna.* He looked at Lily with great concern.*Is there some way I can tell her what has happened?*

*If she's meditating, you may be able to communicate with her. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until she's sleeping. Then I can show you what to do.*

*Can you take me to her?* he asked hopefully.

*If you know where she is...*Lily was still holding his hand. *... just wish us there and we will be.*

The instant Lily made the suggestion, the white light rearranged itself into Sienna's little room at the ashram. There she sat, cross-legged on her cushion, eyes closed.

*Good, she's meditating,* he conveyed to Lily. *What do I do?*

*Just talk to her.*

Severus glided over, knelt down in front of her, and attempted to caress her cheek, but his luminous hand passed right through her face, causing her brow to furrow slightly.

"Sienna?" he spoke her name, but no sound was created in the conventional sense. He could only hope that her spiritual ears were listening.

A scowl crossed her face. *Severus?*

*Can you hear me?*

*Yes. What has happened? Why are you here, in my meditation?*

*I'm afraid that Voldemort killed me.*

*But you can come back, right? You're supposed to come back. You promised.* Her eyes were still closed, her mouth didn't move. They were communicating through telepathy. She seemed to still be at peace, in spite of the news.

*I can't. You see, He didn't use the curse. He used the snake, Nagini. My body is damaged.*

Her face formed a slight grimace. *Did she eat you?*

*No, she just bit my neck.* He made a grotesque face and reached up to the spot to reassure himself that the gash was no longer there.

*Where is your body now?*

*In the Shrieking Shack, on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. But there's nothing you can do, love. I'm dead.*

*How long ago?*

*It only just happened, just a few moments ago. Lily's with me. We came here straight away.* He looked to Lily for comfort. This was not as easy as he thought it would be. He could feel the tension building in Sienna.

Suddenly, her eyes popped open. She was no longer in her meditative trance. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she looked down at her left hand. The wedding ring was now visible, letting her know that the caster of the Concealment Charm was indeed dead. She looked up at the ceiling, close to the spot where Severus and Lily hovered, almost as if she could see them. "Stay with me, Severus. Please... WINKY!"

"Winky at your service, Mrs. Snape, ma'am."

"Winky, do you know where the Shrieking Shack is located, just outside of Hogsmeade?"

"The most haunted house in Great Britain? Oh, yes, ma'am, but Winky would never go in there, ma'am."

"It's not haunted, Winky. And you MUST take me there. Right NOW!"

"But Headmaster Snape told Winky to keep Mrs. Snape safe, ma'am. You wouldn't be safe there. Winky can't take you somewhere that you won't be safe."

She grabbed Winky's tunic and pulled the little elf right over to her. Since she was still seated on the cushion, they were nose to nose. "He's BEEN HURT, Winky. I've GOT TO TRY AND SAVE HIM!!!"

Winky's eyes grew wide with fear. She recoiled from the intensity of Sienna's voice.

"Please, Winky, *every second counts!*" Sienna's desperation infected Winky as she took Sienna's hand in hers, and with a pop, they Apparated directly to the Shrieking Shack.

With a mere wish to join them, Severus found himself and Lily there as well.

*Sienna, there's nothing you can do. You're putting yourself in danger. The place is crawling with Death Eaters!*

*She can't hear you, Sev. Let her try. She won't be able to live with herself if she doesn't at least try. Winky will keep her safe. Don't worry.*

Severus watched with an aching heart as they both searched the building for his dead body. When Winky suddenly screamed, Sienna ran to join her, but the color drained from her face. She had to grab the door sill to steady herself as she grew faint from the sight of his ghostly white face with wide open eyes, lying in that huge pool of blood.

"No," whispered Sienna as she began to hyperventilate. Her body trembled and she closed her eyes, forcing slow deep breaths to calm herself. "Concentrate, Sienna, concentrate," she whispered as she began to regain her composure and the color returned to her face. She let go of the door sill and briskly walked over to Severus' dead body, where she knelt down beside him. Her robes began to soak up his blood as she closed her eyes and cupped her hands over the gaping wound in his neck.

Severus felt his neck tingle and reached up to touch it. *Something's happening*, he informed Lily, with surprise and hope in his thoughts. *I think she's doing it, she's healing the wound*, he conveyed as they both watched Sienna work with great interest.

But it wasn't enough. He had lost almost all of the blood in his body. Even if she could put back what had poured out all over the floor, the blood cells were already dead. Sienna was a healer, not a miracle worker. Without access to a generous supply of Blood Replenishing Potion, even she couldn't bring him back to life.

Sienna's face became contorted in agony as she finally realized that there was nothing she could do to save him. She unsuccessfully tried to fight back the tears, but when she finally succumbed to her emotions, she draped herself over his chest and wept with reckless abandon as Winky cried right along with her.

*Now I know how it felt for her to watch me cry when she died. I thought death was supposed to be this peaceful, blissful experience. But all I feel is her pain and suffering.*

Suddenly he felt himself being pulled away as the scene changed and Severus began to experience his life's memories flash before his eyes. Only this time, he felt not only his own joys and woes, but also the feelings of others he had influenced. Each situation, even ones long forgotten, was brought to the surface to be relived in a process which immersed him in great shame and sorrow. It felt like hours, but somehow only spanned a few moments. But before he could wallow in his guilt for all the sadness he had caused, he felt his consciousness expand to include Lily. He seemed to be riding an emotional roller coaster as they enveloped each other, just as salt water mixes with fresh, with an ecstasy much like what he had felt with Sienna on their wedding night. Then his consciousness continued to expand, leaving Lily's behind. He wasn't sure why she didn't come with him, but it somehow felt right this way.

He could see the battle raging on the grounds of Hogwarts. He watched with a detached peace as the participants tried to kill each other. He shared the horrors, fears and emotional pain of each person equally, no matter which side he or she was fighting for.

And then his consciousness became inexplicably drawn to his office, where Harry had just poured his swirling silvery memories into the Pensieve. His spirit rushed to merge with Harry's, just as Harry took the dive. Time stood still while Severus came to understand more about Harry Potter than he had managed to in his entire life. The boy's fears and aspirations, his difficult childhood, his deep friendships and hatreds, the strange link to Voldemort's mind and how it had affected him. It was all there for Severus to absorb into his own being. How sad that he had to die to understand, much less forgive Harry Potter. Reciprocal forgiveness on Harry's part was too much to expect, but Severus could hope that his memories would give Harry enough insight into his life that Harry could somehow understand his true motivations.

*Finally letting go of your hate, I see*, floated the calming thoughts of Sienna's guru over Severus' shoulder. He whipped around to see Babaji's glowing ethereal body, gleaming teeth and sparkling eyes, as the scene around them rearranged itself back into the Shrieking Shack.

Sienna's hand still lay pressed against his neck as she cried herself to sleep on his chest. Her overwhelming feelings of sadness began to permeate his soul again as it merged with hers and he gazed pleadingly into Babaji's eyes. *Is this the cause for your look of concern when you hug Sienna? You knew this day would soon come? You knew that I would die?*

*It's not your death that concerns me, Severus Snape. It's the choice you're about to make. I knew this circumstance would play itself out, but since you have free will, I am not able to see how it ends.*

Lily had reappeared and reached for Severus' shoulder to console him. He didn't even notice. All he could sense was Sienna's pain as he stared unblinking into the limitless universe of Babaji's eyes. *Can't you help her? Please?*

*Only you can help her.*

*I don't understand. What choice do I have to make? What can I possibly do to help her?*

*Your karma was fulfilled the moment you gave Harry Potter your memories, Severus Snape*, Babaji patiently explained. *You may have thought you would rather die than to tell him the truth, but your actual death really wasn't necessary.*

*So you don't have to stay with me now if you don't want to*, added Lily.

Severus glared back and forth between the two of them in disbelief. *What are you playing at?*

*Oh, this is not a game, Severus Snape*, Babaji assured him. *The time has finally come for you to choose between Lily and Sienna.*

*You mean... I can go back?*

Babaji nodded.

*But how? She healed my neck, but there's no blood left in my body.*

Babaji gave Severus his usual toothy grin. *Your blood is no different from the apple, Severus Snape. I can simply rearrange the existing molecules to create new blood. But don't make your choice in haste. Your recovery will be slow and quite painful.* His tone became ominous. *The snake's venom has already taken its toll. You may wish you had not come back before it is all said and done.*

*What does she want?*

*Can't you tell? Can't you see into her heart? For better or worse, Severus Snape. Nothing in that world matters more to her than you do.*

*But is that what's best for her in the long run? Or will I simply cause her more pain?*

*From this day forward, the pain and joy you inflict will be of your own making; so you tell me.*

Severus glanced at Lily and reached up to gently caress her face. *I had gotten used to the idea of having you as my daughter.*

*Your heart has always been big enough for both of us, Sev. You can give me up, I don't mind.*

*I'm not giving you up, he smiled at her with dancing eyes, just postponing your presence for a while.* Severus walked slowly over to Sienna and knelt down beside her. It seemed so odd to see himself dead. It felt surreal, like a strange dream. Could he go back to being that person? That body didn't feel like it belonged to him anymore. But he could feel Sienna's heart breaking, her soul was in an upheaval, and he would do anything to help her if he could. He stood up and walked back to Babaji. *If it will bring her joy, then send me back. I don't care what I have to go through. And I swear I'll never hurt her again, not if I can help it.*

Very well...answered the guru...

\*

... More pain than the Cruciatus Curse had ever inflicted shot from his neck to his toes as Severus gasped for breath. He knew his blood was rushing again because with each beat of his heart he felt a sledge hammer come down on his head. But he couldn't move his arms or legs. Was he paralyzed? Did Nagini's venom kill his nerves, or just deaden them temporarily? If Babaji created new blood, then the venom should already be out of his system and the effects should be reversible. Although he couldn't move, he could still feel the pain he was in and, as bad as it was, he took that as a good sign.

The instant Severus took his first breath, Sienna sat up and removed her hand from his newly repaired neck. Then she grabbed both sides of his face and looked into his frightened eyes. "You're alive? Winky he's ALIVE!!!"

"Headmaster, sir, oh thank Merlin, sir," she exclaimed through tears of joy.

Sienna immediately regained her wits and composure. "Take us to the ashram, quickly."

With a pop, they were gone, just as Severus lost consciousness.

## Epilogue - Nineteen Years Later

*Chapter 31 of 31*

After nineteen years of ashram life, Severus and Sienna come back to the wizarding world.

A/N: Hello loyal readers. Here ends my saga of Severus and Sienna. I hope that you don't mind the fact that I leave the details of the previous nineteen years up to you to fill in, but I believe that you will find enough information in the following installment to put the pieces together. I wanted to follow the format of J. K. Rowling's amazing creation.

A huge thank you goes out to my two long-suffering betas, JENGEORGE and NervousAboutAngels, for their tireless work on my behalf. And the staff here at TPP has also helped a great deal. I never realized that the English language had so many rules about when to use a comma! They have helped me immensely in the pursuit of better grammar.

Thanks especially to those of you who have stuck with me through this rather long saga. Please let me know what you think, even if you have never posted before. This was my first ever attempt at Fanfiction. And as always, I make no money, I take no credit. It all belongs to the brilliant J. K. Rowling.

### Epilogue

Nineteen Years Later

"Hurry up, you two. We may have already missed the train," Severus barked as the Snape family approached the barrier between platforms nine and ten at the train station. "Remember, it's better to take it at a run on your first try."

They all made it through the barrier, with Severus bringing up the rear, leaning heavily on a thick ebony cane with a phoenix head intricately carved into the top, its eyes encrusted with polished onyx stones. After his death and resuscitation, Severus' Patronus had not-surprisingly changed from a doe to a phoenix. Shortly after the change, Fawkes arrived at the ashram, which delighted Babaji so much he insisted the magnificent bird stay. Since both Sienna and Severus had come back from the dead, it seemed only fitting that Fawkes would choose to adopt them.

The little family arrived just in time to watch the shiny scarlet Hogwarts Express caboose disappear around the corner with nary a Snape on board.

"Lily," Severus growled as he felt his pulse rate and blood pressure rise, "I told you to pull your hair back in a pony tail and be done with it! Now see where your fussing has gotten us."

"O – oh, looks like you just missed it," said a familiar voice as two adults and a child too young for Hogwarts appeared through the morning mist.

"You still have an amazing grasp of the obvious, Potter," commented Severus icily, as if not a day had passed since their last Potions class together.

Harry and Ginny stopped dead in their tracks, eyes buggy and mouths agape, as the mist between them cleared and they realized just who stood before them. The Snapes had spent the last 19 years in India at the ashram, and until the beginning of this past summer, no one else knew of their continued existence except Sienna's mother, Hazel. Now Minerva McGonagall and the staff also knew because of school arrangements and the necessary pre-testing, but they had vowed to keep the secret as well.

Neville's reaction had been priceless. He had come up from the greenhouses at Minerva's request and fainted dead away when Severus extended his hand to shake. And of course, no visit to Hogwarts would be complete without a stop at the Hog's Head to give Aberforth a warm hug. He had to sit down when he saw them, and Sienna had used her hands-on technique to ease his heart attack symptoms. He dared not believe his eyes at first. He had thought he must've been going senile, but they had finally convinced him that they were real, alive and well.

After Severus' death and resuscitation, he could read minds as well as Sienna could, and a smirk crossed his face as he watched the confusion and disbelief whirl around

in Harry and Ginny's minds. He finally reached out his hand to Harry. "It is agreeable to see you again."

Harry stared down at Severus' hand, then back up into his laughing eyes, then back down at the hand, which he finally took warmly into his own. Both men experienced a flood of emotion with the touch, but were relatively successful in not letting it show on their faces.

"Merlin! I don't believe it. I watched you die! How can you be standing here? Where have you been all this time?"

"It's a long story," Severus replied solemnly.

"I would *love* to hear it," Harry said with all sincerity. "But what about your kids? They missed the train."

"We can Apparate, it's no big deal," Lily informed him casually as she rolled her eyes at her father.

"You remember my wife, Sienna?"

"Wife?"

Sienna smiled broadly. "We were married in secret right after he became Headmaster."

Harry took a step forward to wrap his arms around the long-lost Gryffindor. "Everyone thought you were dead, too. But I knew better. Something told me..." Harry's mind drifted back through the years. "You planted that dream in my head – how to survive the killing curse."

"That's right." Sienna drank in his brilliant green eyes and then turned to Ginny for another hug. "So good to see you both again." Then she looked down at the young girl by Ginny's side. "And what's your name?"

"I'm Lily." The little girl announced proudly.

"Oh yeah? So am I," the older Lily informed her. "Lily Hazel Eileen Snape," she said as she reached out to shake the little girl's hand. The young woman's hair had been pulled back into a meticulous French braid, with baby's breath flowers interwoven into it. The tiny white flowers stood in stark contrast to her raven curls. She had her mother's face, with elegantly sweeping eyebrows, but her sparkling emerald eyes made Harry feel as though he were looking into a mirror.

"Children," Severus began, "I would like you to meet a genuine hero, Harry Potter, and his lovely wife, Ginny."

Lily shook Harry and Ginny's hand with great enthusiasm, but when the son of Severus Snape stepped up to face him, the moment took Harry's breath away. The young man who stood before him was almost a carbon copy of his father, only slightly taller, with the usual black garb, shoulder-length straight black hair, a long crooked nose, and quiet, reserved demeanor. That was all expected, but the loving smile and crystal blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore came as a complete shock.

"I'm Severus Aberforth Harry Snape, but you can call me Sevvie. It's an honor to meet you, sir." He then turned to Ginny and her daughter. "And you, too, madam... mademoiselle."

Severus could sense an immense amount of confusion coming from Harry when he realized that Severus Snape's son was named after him. He felt touched, honored, overjoyed, but somehow ashamed at the same time, as if he didn't believe that he deserved such high praise.

"I'm not a hero," Harry confessed. "Without my mother's sacrifice, Albus Dumbledore's talent and an incredible amount of help from your father, I wouldn't have stood a chance." Harry turned and looked mournfully into Severus' black eyes, swallowing hard. "If anyone should be called a hero, it's you, Severus Snape."

"Severus Snape?! Is this the man you told us about, Daddy? The bravest man you ever knew? The man you named Albus Severus after?" asked little Lily as she pulled at Harry's arm to get his attention.

Severus' eyebrows rose up when he heard that last question. He searched Harry's mind for the answer and found warmth and admiration accompany a resounding "Yes, the very same."

"Wow!" The little girl beamed at Severus with delight. "It's really nice to meet you." She offered her tiny hand to him, and as he took it gently, he could sense amusement from his wife and kids and lingering shock from the elder Potters.

"Wait 'til I tell my brothers! I got to meet you and *they didn't!*"

"Well, actually, I'm sure they will meet me, since I'll be teaching there again, starting tomorrow."

Lily's face fell slightly, but brightened up again. "But I met you first!"

"Indeed you did," Severus smiled down at her.

"Teaching again?" Ginny asked enthusiastically.

"We'll both be working there, actually," piped up Sienna. "I'll be filling in for Madam Pomfrey while she takes a leave of absence, and Severus will be Potions master once again, to take the place of Horace Slughorn, who's finally retiring for good this time."

"We wanted to be close to our children," added Severus, "so we would have lived in Hogsmeade anyway. When we contacted Minerva about testing them for placement, she mentioned that both positions would be opening up. It seemed the perfect solution."

"Now I understand why you have no luggage," observed Harry. "So if you're already there, why do your kids need to ride the train?"

"That's what I asked him," Lily said with a scowl. "Why's the train such a big deal?"

"I wanted you to experience what it was like, the social interaction, the excitement, at least on your first day." Severus glared back at his daughter.

"Well, we can Apparate back to Hogsmeade Station in time to meet the train, then go over on the boats and be sorted," Sevvie placated his father. "It's okay, Dad. It's no big deal. We're so much older than the rest of them anyway."

"How old are you?" asked the little Lily.

"We're twins, both eighteen. But her birthday's the day before mine."

"I was born at 11:55 p.m. on December eighth."

"And I came fifteen minutes later on the ninth," Sevvie explained.

"Why are you starting at Hogwarts so late?" inquired little Lily.

"They've been studying other subjects at the ashram, just as I did. But we home-schooled them in magic through their fifth year studies," explained Sienna.

"I'm proud to report that they each achieved an 'Outstanding' in all of their OWLs, but I would have expected nothing less of them." Severus smirked as he stole a sideways glance at the twins.

"Hey, I've got an idea," suggested Harry excitedly. "Why don't we go grab some coffee in Diagon Alley. I've skived off the day, and the train won't get to Hogsmeade for hours." He looked at Severus hopefully. "We could catch up... get to know each other again..." Then he added sheepishly "... maybe wipe the slate clean and start over?"

Severus raised an eyebrow at the idea. He could read the hundreds of questions that Harry wanted to ask him, and he wasn't sure if he could tolerate an interrogation at the moment. But he had to admit that he had his own list of questions for Harry, and the idea of a possible friendship between them was not unpalatable. He sensed Sienna's desire to catch up with the Potters, but she also shared his need for privacy, and they silently reminded each other of the mountain of work that awaited them at the castle. They had only moved in a few days ago. There was still so much to do and the school year was descending upon them at breakneck speed. He decided a compromise was in order.

"Coffee sounds inviting," Severus conferred, "but we will have to keep the visit short, and I would prefer the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade, if the little one can come with side-along Apparition. No one in London is aware of our continued existence. I know the press coverage is inevitable, but I don't think I can deal with the likes of Rita Skeeter just yet."

They all looked at each other and nodded in agreement. "Sounds brilliant!" said Harry. "Let's go." And with a loud crack, the lot Disapparated and Apparated to a Hogsmeade side street, right outside the front door of the Hog's Head Inn.

"Why didn't we see Weasley and Granger with you this morning?" asked Severus as he held the door open for the little crowd. "Don't they have at least one brat old enough to attend Hogwarts by now?"

"They were right there with us, just before we saw you," commented Ginny. "I guess they had to get back. The mist was so thick, they didn't see you, or believe me, they would have been as anxious to talk with you as we are."

Severus and Sienna shared a quick glance. They both read Ginny's mind and knew that Hermione would have truly enjoyed their visit, but Ron would have preferred a dentist's chair. He still hated and spoke badly of Severus even now, because of the cruel way he had treated Hermione in class all those years ago. "Now that we're back to stay, I'm sure we'll get to see them eventually," Severus commented with a noted lack of enthusiasm.

As Severus magically rearranged two tables so that they all could sit together, Aberforth shuffled over to greet them. His advanced age had really taken its toll, so his movements were slow and laborious. But his mind was still sharp, and his blue eyes sparkled behind the spectacles that slid halfway down his long nose.

"Aberforth!" Severus beamed at the old man and grasped his hand warmly.

Aberforth smiled broadly at Severus and kissed Sienna on the cheek, then he nodded at the two young Snapes. As he looked deep into Sevvie's eyes, he chuckled and shook his head. Then he turned to Harry and Ginny. "My brother and sister back to haunt me!" he said with a snort as his hand gestured towards Sevvie and Sienna. "Good to see you again, Harry, Ginny... and you too, little lady." He winked at the young girl. "What can I get for everyone?"

"A round of coffee for the adults and..." Severus glanced at Ginny, then at her daughter.

"... and a pumpkin juice for our little pumpkin," grinned Ginny.

"Ooooh, Mom," groaned Lily.

Harry was looking at Sienna and Sevvie with great curiosity because of Aberforth's off-handed comment, but before he could ask the question, Severus spoke. "Don't be too flattered that my son carries your name, Potter. I didn't make the decision." The instant he made the comment he regretted it and wondered if he would ever learn the art of being tactful. He felt Harry's ego deflate considerably, almost to the point of getting defensive. Harry even began to regret coming to the Hog's Head. Severus figured he had better act fast before everything was ruined, but he needn't have worried. Sienna could also feel what was happening and she came to his rescue.

"Actually Albus Dumbledore chose the name," she interjected, just in the nick of time.

"What?" Harry's apprehension began to abate. "But how could he? Wasn't he dead long before you two even got married?"

Sienna's face lit up, and she reached under her collar and pulled up the locket. Then she opened it and showed it to Harry. Inside he saw a moving photo of a much younger Severus Snape, looking up and smiling and, next to it, an empty frame.

"I don't understand," he said, genuinely bewildered.

"Why don't you ask him yourself," Sienna suggested innocently.

"Ask Albus Dumbledore?" Harry looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"Ask me what?"

Harry's eyes shot from Sienna to the locket, and he gasped. Then he finally realized what he was looking at. "Professor Dumbledore! Children of Merlin! This day is just becoming more and more extraordinary."

"Harry, my boy! So good to see you. It has been too long. How have you been?"

"I'm great, just great."

"Albus, would you like to spend some time with the Potters and catch up on their lives?" asked Sienna.

"Oh that would be wonderful, my dear. But Harry had a question, did he not?"

"You can borrow the locket for a few days," she informed Harry as she pulled the chain over her head and handed it to him. "We can talk to him in the Headmistress's office if we need to until you can get it back to us."

"What was your question, Harry? Minerva needs me to come back shortly. She wants my input for the new school year. Oh, by the way, Severus and Sienna are expected back for a staff meeting as well."

"Sienna told me that you chose Sevvie's name. I just wondered what inspired you to name him after me?"

"Oh that's easy. You see, Sevvie holds my spirit. He is me reincarnated, so to speak. Notice his eyes? The window to his soul."

As the locket spoke, Sevvie took unusual interest in the rather dirty cup of thick black coffee that had just been set before him. Harry wondered if he had heard this tale before.

"Sienna and Severus knew that she carried both my reincarnation and that of your mother's. Well, they couldn't confer with your mother about a name, but thanks to the locket, they could consult me. Their first idea was to call me Albus Severus, just as your second child is named. But I told her that I didn't want to be named after myself. I would prefer to be named after the three men I admired most during my life as Albus Dumbledore: Severus, my brother, and, of course, you."

Severus could sense an even greater feeling of honor and love swelling up inside Harry's heart at the thought that Albus Dumbledore had admired him enough to suggest the name. Severus quietly added, "Incidentally, I had no objection, but I couldn't claim it as my own idea."

Those words quickly washed away any regret Harry may have harbored about suggesting the chat over coffee.

Severus noticed Harry swallow hard as he groped to change the subject. "So," he regarded the twins, "Albus Dumbledore and Lily Evans Potter reincarnated, eh? Do you two swallow all that rubbish?"

All of the Snapes started to laugh at once. "It's not rubbish," admitted Sevvie. "When Lily and I sat for our OWLs, I knew where everything was in the school. When we were invited into the Headmistress's office, I could remember which things had been there before and which things had been added since my departure. Coming here really brought back a flood of memories I didn't know I had, especially the first time I met Aberforth."

"I had a similar experience," added the elder Lily. I bet I can tell you where all of the secret passages are on that Marauder's Map of yours. And meeting you has sparked memories about what you were like as a baby..." She hesitated, as everyone around the table leaned in and waited with baited breath.

"Well, like what?" insisted Harry.

Lily looked from face to anxious face, took a deep breath and said, "Okay, but you may regret I said this. You had a birth mark on your left butt cheek. It looked like a dragon—"

"—a Hungarian Horntail!" she and Ginny both announced at the same time.

The whole table burst into hysterics. Harry groaned loudly and hid his reddening face in his hands as Sevvie shouted out, "Too much information!"

"Only my real mother could embarrass me in public like that." Harry laughed when he finally found the courage to raise his head.

"Well," Dumbledore's portrait interjected, "this little family reunion has been wonderful, but I must be getting back. Harry, just open the locket and call my name when you feel like a chat."

"Will do, Professor."

Dumbledore's portrait took a slight bow and disappeared out of his frame.

"We must be getting back as well," said Severus regretfully as he stood up to leave.

"We have so much to do before the start-of-term feast tonight," added Sienna as she and the twins joined him.

"Do come see us, Potter. I'll be head of Slytherin House again, so you know where to find us."

"I'll come on one condition," Harry eyed him with an impish grin.

"Oh? What's that?" Severus raised an eyebrow as he hobbled around to Harry's side of the table towards the exit.

"That you'll call me 'Harry' from now on."

Severus smirked. He had felt Harry building up his nerve all morning to put forth that request. "Of course." His black eyes twinkled as he let his cane lean against a chair and reached for Harry's hand to pull him in for a hug. He remembered the first time Babaji had hugged him and how uncomfortable he had been at the start, but how wonderful it felt by the time Babaji had finally let go. Severus could sense the same awkward feeling emanating from Harry, but as Severus tightened his grip, he felt Harry reciprocate, and the discomfort eased. He could tell that Harry's memory had found the dream that Sienna had planted that fateful night in the Forest of Dean, where Harry had lived out one of Sienna's memories in which she hugged Severus. Harry was reliving the feeling of unconditional love that he still treasured from it, and as Severus shared that feeling, it warmed both of their hearts.

Severus had worked hard over the years to overcome his emotionally deprived childhood and finally show love in a positive way. He had learned to meditate and felt truly at peace with himself in a way he could not have imagined before Sienna came into his life. He had grown immensely on a spiritual level during his time at the ashram. He felt only love and admiration for the man who now stood in his grasp. When they finally let go of each other, they both had wet faces and showed no shame in the discovery.

Sienna had already laid a galleon on the bar and hollered to Aberforth in the back room that they'd see him later. Then, without another word, the group walked outside and headed for the front gate of Hogwarts Castle.

"I can hardly wait to see your brats in my classroom," Severus said slyly. "Both Gryffindors, I trust?"

"Well, James is, but Albus will be a first year, so we don't know yet," Ginny informed him.

"He's really afraid he'll end up in Slytherin," little Lily whispered loudly to the tall mysterious Potions master.

"I'm not worried now if he does." Harry beamed at Severus. "I know you'll be there to keep him straight."

Severus unlocked the gate with a silent incantation and a few waves of his wand.

"Mind if we hang out in town while we wait for the train?" asked Lily.

Sienna and Severus shared a quick glance. "Just stay out of trouble," she advised.

"Don't get any bright ideas!" Severus added as they began to walk away.

"We can't," Sevvie informed them over his shoulder.

"We don't have any money!" Lily added.

"Here's ten Galleons," Severus flipped them a large gold coin, "but don't you dare spend a knut of it at Weasleys'!" He eyed his daughter through narrowed lids.

Ginny smirked, "George does have quite a collection in this little store. Sales here are better than Diagon Alley when school is in session."

"With all the Hogwarts students just outside the door, I'm not surprised," Severus confessed.

They exchanged hand shakes and hugs.

"Don't be a stranger, *Harry*," Severus grinned.

"I won't, sir, I promise."

"Please, call me Severus."

"That'll take some getting used to."

Severus replaced the Locking Charms on the gate behind them, then he and Sienna waved as the Potter family Disapparated and their twins headed for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes with a foreboding look of mischief.

The two elder Snapes turned and headed up the path to the school with fingers interlaced. Though their voices were silent, their minds were filled with continued conversation. They had never informed anyone of their ability to read minds, not even their children. Only the omnipotent Babaji knew. Sevvie had his suspicions and almost never tried to get away with anything underhanded. But Lily didn't have a clue, and it always infuriated her that her parents could catch her in a lie. So, after sharing impressions of the Potter family, Severus and Sienna spent the walk trading ideas on what Lily would buy at Weasleys' and the creative ways she would try to get away with it.

The staff meeting turned out to be pretty routine until Minerva informed them all that Sienna would not only take Poppy's place temporarily, but would also be teaching an advanced NEWT level course in healing. Interested sixth years would sign up for meditative and spiritual studies which they would need to master before learning the other techniques, then during seventh year she and Severus would team teach a class that combined the hands-on healing technique with Medicinal Potions. This course description brought all sorts of questions from the other staff members since many of them found the idea fascinating and wished to learn more themselves. The Snapes informed them that their family would meet at 5:30 every morning in the hospital wing for meditation and yoga, and anyone was welcome to join them, both staff and students alike.

Then came lunch in the great hall. It would be the last meal for a long time that included some semblance of peace and quiet. Although the ashram had been full of people, 25 voices and minds were much easier to tolerate than the hundreds that would fill this room in only a few hours. If it weren't for their training and continued meditative practice at the ashram all those years, Severus would never have been able to cope with it. Now he would finally understand what Sienna had suffered through when she first came to the school as an empath.

After lunch, they went back to their quarters in the Slytherin dungeons and continued to unpack and settle in. Fawkes had decided that his preferred location would be beside the window. Even though the sunlight flickered playfully as it filtered through the murky waters of the lake, he seemed to find the patterns it created soothing, which would come in handy on burning days.

Winky had been very busy and made considerable progress during their absence, but there was still much more to be done. For a couple who didn't want to be tied down with material possessions, they certainly seemed to have accumulated more than their share over the years. Most of it had been stored at Spinner's End, and Winky had made regular visits to the place to keep it from falling into disrepair. But their quarters at the school still appeared to burst at the seams with odds and ends, nothing of any monetary value, but important just the same. Severus finally used an Enlargement spell on one of the closets so they wouldn't be climbing over things.

Winky was so glad to be back at Hogwarts. She had barely seen another elf for 19 years and missed being around her own kind terribly. Severus and Sienna gave her two weeks of vacation time and several holidays off every year, and they had a sneaking suspicion that she spent the time back here with her friends in the kitchen and laundry, but they didn't mind as long as she kept their secrets which she was sworn to do.

Finally, the upper classes arrived in the Thestral-pulled carriages. The staff was seated, with the exception of Neville who had taken over the job of keeping the first years quiet in a chamber off the hallway until it was time to be sorted. Severus and Sienna sat together just to the right of the Headmistress and watched with glee as the first years were paraded in. Their two kids towered over the others, causing quite a stir within the general population. Severus could feel mortified embarrassment from Lily, but Sevvie held an air of self-confidence far beyond his years. Most of the rest felt fear and apprehension, afraid that they would be sorted into a house that their parents would not approve of. He was quite surprised and a bit disheartened by just how deep this fear ran in some children. One girl thought her father would disinherit her if she ended up anywhere but Gryffindor.

*What git would possibly have said that to his daughter?* Severus silently asked Sienna.

*I guess we'll soon find out,* came her answer.

"Atwater, Cindy," announced Longbottom.

*From the look of her, she might be a Weasley.*

"Ravenclaw!" bellowed the sorting hat.

*Well, then the kid better learn to take a joke, because none of them would ever disinherit their children, not even if they ended up in Slytherin.*

Severus snorted.

"Bedonia, Jonathan."

"Hufflepuff!"

Minerva had been observing the pair all this time and felt the need to comment. "If I didn't know better, I would think you two were carrying on a silent conversation. For two people who barely speak to each other, you really do seem able to communicate exceptionally well."

The innocent looks she received gave her the answer she expected. Minerva simply smiled and turned her attention back to the sorting hat.

Quite a few names later... "Malfoy, Scorpius," announced Professor Longbottom.

"Slytherin," shouted the hat before it had even nestled onto his white head. The Slytherin table erupted, and Severus half-heartedly clapped.

*What's wrong? Son of Draco... grandson of Lucius. You should be ecstatic.*

"Nelson, Jacob."

*I will be if his ego isn't as big as his father's was.*

"Ravenclaw!"

*If anyone can bring him down a peg or two, it's you, love.*

Severus smirked.

Minerva shot them both a sideways glance and raised her eyebrows. "See what I mean?"

"Pay attention, Minerva, I think Potter's son is up next." Severus quickly redirected her gaze.

"Potter, Albus"

Albus was so nervous he seemed to be quivering as he sat on the stool. The hat fell down over his eyes, and Severus could hear every thought from both him and the hat.



He was begging to be placed into Gryffindor, but the hat had other ideas. They argued back and forth for a while. Finally, the hat confided that he could have the great and legendary Severus Snape for his head of house if he would consent to be sorted into Slytherin. With this exciting bit of news, Albus pushed the hat up above his eyes so he could see and whipped around in search of the face he had, until now, only seen in books. His heart skipped a beat when his eyes met Severus', and he knew the promise was real.

Say yes, boy, Severus concentrated hard, hoping to influence little Al's decision.

Albus smiled hugely and nodded at Severus almost as if he could hear his thought, then finally turned back towards the crowd and silently consented.

The hat shouted out "Slytherin!" to thunderous applause from both the Slytherin table and the staff table. Severus was thrilled beyond measure that Harry's son would be under his watchful eye. Through his son, Severus would finally have another chance to get things right.

Eventually, the Snape twins came to the stool as the crowd murmured about the mysterious older kids. Lily ended up in Slytherin, to remain for two more years under the jurisdiction of her parents, and seemed a bit disappointed, but Sevvie was sent to Gryffindor. The hat had a hard time deciding between that or Ravenclaw, because the young man was brilliant, to be sure. Neville would be his head of house. Severus had a feeling that during his son's two short years here, the other kids would look to him for help at least as much as they would turn to Longbottom.

"Weasley, Rose."

*So she is a Weasley after all.*

"Ravenclaw!" Rose immediately began to cry as the Ravenclaw table applauded enthusiastically.

*Well, she must have Hermione's brains, conveyed Sienna, but now she's terrified. Perhaps when people start eating I can go have a word with her.*

That would probably be a good idea. Remind me to hex her father next time I see him.

After Esther Zambini ended up in Hufflepuff, Minerva stood to make a few announcements. A rash of whispers spread through the student body at the mention of Severus Snape's name, but most of the younger kids had never heard of him. Then the usual magnificent spread of food magically appeared from the kitchen below. Severus had actually learned to prefer vegetarian food over the last 19 years, and their children had been raised on it. But everyone else ate the usual meat laden British fare. Sienna grabbed a roll to munch along the way and set out across the room in search of poor Rose. After a few minutes she returned, radiating joy. The conversation had been a great comfort to the girl. She assured Rose that she and her father had gone to school here together and he would be likely to joke about such things, but like her uncle George, she shouldn't take him too seriously.

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After dinner, the entire Slytherin student body assembled in their common room to meet their new head of house. Lily sat off in the corner with pained boredom stretched tightly across her face. Scorpius, one of the few first years who did recognize the name of Snape, sat toward the rear of the crowd in an attempt to seem cool and uninterested. Albus Potter, on the other hand, sat in the front row on the edge of his seat, hanging on Professor Snape's every word.

"My name is Severus Snape. I am the new Potions master, as well as your new Head of House. This is my wife, Sienna. She is also the school Healer and will be teaching NEWT level classes in Healing, a new course of study for advanced students this year. You will refer to her as Madam Snape and me as Professor Snape so as to avert confusion. She is a Gryffindor," he stared down his nose at her condescendingly, then he smiled as he looked back at his students. "But we must not hold that against her. She did, after all, have the good taste to marry a Slytherin." His audience snickered. Sienna beamed up at him. "Between the two of us, we should be able to help you with any subject you may be having trouble with if you are not comfortable going to the subject's teacher for help. If you find yourself needing counsel on a personal matter, please don't hesitate to come to us. Think of Slytherin House as your home away from home and us as your surrogate parents, or your friends, if that makes confiding in us a bit easier. We are here to help. We want your Hogwarts learning experience to be a happy one, but also one that prepares you for the rest of your lives."

Then the look on his face grew grave. "The world can be a dangerous place. While trying our best to keep you safe and happy, it is also our job to prepare you for what's out there. Lord Voldemort may be long dead and gone, but someday, somewhere, the Dark Arts will take hold of someone else's heart, and he or she will no doubt follow in his footsteps. You must be prepared. Armed with the proper skills and knowledge, you will be able to protect yourself as you navigate through both the magical and Muggle worlds."

Severus could have heard a pin drop on the stone floor. With the mention of Voldemort's name, he sensed a cloud of fear gather over the room. He didn't want to end his introduction on a low note, so he asked, "Are there any questions?"

One of the older kids raised his hand. "Yes," he pointed to the young man. "I'm afraid it will take a while for me to get to know everyone's name."

"Larry Lotus, sir."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Son of Lorenzo?"

"Why yes, sir. Do you know my father?"

Severus tried not to let the disappointment show on his face. He reminded himself not to judge the boy on his father's lack of skill, intelligence or achievement. "Yes, he was one of my students many years ago when I taught here before."

"So you *are* the same Severus Snape who used to teach here then?"

"Didn't I just say that?" Another snicker flitted across the room. "And I believe my wife was in class with your father, am I right?" he looked to her for confirmation.

"Yes, we were both in Gryffindor and in the same class." She smiled at Larry. "I could tell you stories."

"I'll look forward to it," the young man grinned devilishly at her.

Albus Potter raised an enthusiastic hand. In days gone by, Severus would have ignored such frantic waving, but if Lily had taught him anything in the last 18 and a half years, it was patience. "Yes, Mr. Potter, isn't it?"

"You remembered!" he responded excitedly. "My parents always told me that you died a hero, but yet, here you are standing before us. If you died and went to Heaven, how can it be that you're here? Are you like Professor Binns, just a ghost?"

Ever the teacher, Severus decided to answer his question with another question. "Who here can tell Mr. Potter the difference between a ghost and a living person?"

One of the older students went into a description of the Bloody Baron, which Albus should have noticed floating above the dinner table, another mentioned how they were a bit translucent, and yet another described the unmistakably chilling sensation caused by a physical encounter. With that, Severus stepped forward and offered Albus his warm, solid hand to shake, so he would know without worry, that his Head of House was very much alive.

"So you didn't actually die, like everyone thought?"

"Actually, I *did* die," he admitted quietly and much to his daughter's surprise. She sat up straight and leaned closer to pay attention. This was one tale she had never been

told. "I was dead for several minutes, but with the help of my wife, my house-elf and a rather extraordinary Muggle, I was brought back to life." He put his arm around Sienna's waist and pulled her close. Lily suspected that the extraordinary Muggle must have been Babaji. A mixture of amazement and disbelief permeated the room. Severus knew that some would never believe his story, while others would blindly take it on faith. He didn't really care what most of them thought, but he was glad that Lily and Albus believed him.

To Severus' surprise, Scorpius' hand shot up. He pointed to the boy.

"What was it like? Being dead, I mean?"

Severus heard the boy's thoughts and knew from his memories that he had been by his grandmother's side at St. Mungo's when she passed on just a few months ago. At first he was angry with her for dying, but then later blamed himself. Now he felt concern for her spirit and became very anxious about the possible answer.

Severus chose his words carefully. "I saw my life flash before my eyes, which I think happens to everyone. I felt a deep sense of freedom and joy, but I could sense my wife's sorrow, and I think it was my desire to comfort her that brought me back. But you see, I was lucky. My body was repairable. Most people can't come back. They may want to with all their hearts, but the body is beyond repair, and they have no choice but to move on. Don't be upset with your grandmother. I'm sure Narcissa still loves you very much and wanted to stay, but she couldn't."

The boy's eyes grew wide with fear and wonder. "How did you know I was thinking about my grandma?"

Severus hadn't thought about the fact that Scorpius didn't mention a specific person when he had voiced his question. But Sienna jumped in, once again, to save the day. "We read that she died in the *Prophet*. I'm sure Professor Snape simply assumed that..."

"Right," said the boy, a bit relieved. "I forgot it was in the paper. I thought you were a mind reader there for a minute!"

The other students laughed. And with that easing of tension, the meeting ended. "Remember that we are here for you, my young Slytherin friends," Severus added as the crowd began to break up. "Twenty-four – seven."

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The next day marked the first full day of classes. It had been 20 years since Severus last faced a room full of 11 year olds. He found himself with just a few butterflies in his stomach. Should he use his old intimidation tactics or take a softer approach? His caustic wit and acid tongue had not diminished over the years, but his time at the ashram had definitely softened his heart and gave great flexibility to his temper. But he wanted to keep an air of mystery, and intimidation mixed with sarcasm had always been his preferred style of teaching. The big difference now would be the fact that he could tell when he reached someone's breaking point and if he was about to do more harm than good. Neither a frightened mind nor a spirit in turmoil was conducive to learning, so he proceeded with caution. The trick was to keep their attention. He would be able to tell if their thoughts strayed from his lessons. Babaji told him once that respect should be earned. So that was exactly what he set out to do.

As he called the roll he looked up when he reached Scorpius Malfoy's name and made eye contact. The boy had digested his new information about death and seemed much more at peace now. He gave Severus a slight but grateful smile.

The very next name was Albus Potter, whose resounding "Present" was just a touch too loud.

Severus could feel pure excitement radiating from the boy and his lip curled slightly as his lids narrowed in mock irritation. "No need to yell, Mr. Potter."

"Sorry, sir," came the meek reply.

Severus finished the roll and stood up to deliver his opening speech while stalking the room with the help of his Phoenix cane.

"Good morning, class. As some of you already know, my name is Professor Snape. I am here to teach you the subtle science and intuitive art of Potion making." Just as he used to do all those years ago, he kept his voice barely above a whisper. He knew they would pay closer attention if they had to strain to hear him. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will doubt that this is even magic. It requires years of dedication and practice to appreciate the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the nuances that exist within a single family of ingredients, the amazing effects of a specific stirring pattern that bring to life the delicate power of liquids as they creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses, perhaps severing or tethering the soul to the body... I can teach you how to brew fame, bottle glory, even stopper death – if you are dedicated and determined to develop your talent. You see, it takes more than mere magic to brew an effective Potion. It takes intuition, concentration, and perseverance.

"Don't be discouraged if, in the beginning, the task at hand seems insurmountable. If you have trouble, don't hesitate to ask for help. Your job here is to learn, and it is my job to be sure that you succeed at yours." His mind quickly swept the room to get a sense of how his little speech was being received. Since none of the parents had previously known of his return to Hogwarts, none of the students could have been brainwashed into thinking badly of him. Although a couple of people seemed to teeter on the edge of boredom, most found his talk fascinating. He knew in his heart that not everyone would grow up to share his love for this delicate art, but he hoped to inspire at least a few to go on to NEWT level.

Sally Roundtree's mind had begun to drift back to the younger sister she had left behind at home, and a jealous rage was building as she thought of the little sister with their room and their parents' affections all to herself.

"Miss Roundtree!" Severus barked suddenly, "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

She stared at him, shocked and bewildered. A touch of scarlet began to creep up her neck to her cheeks. He could tell that the entire class was now paying close attention, so rather than reduce her to tears on the very first day which he would have gladly done 20 years ago, he asked the rest of the class at large. Albus raised his hand, fit to burst with the answer. When no one else had the knowledge (or perhaps the courage) to put a hand in the air, Severus relented.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Draught of Living Death, sir?"

"That is correct. Very good young man. Five points to Slytherin."

Severus could no longer turn on his heel because of his malfunctioning left leg, a lingering gift from Nagini. So his theatrics were held to a minimum as he leaned on his cane, turned slowly, and pointed his wand at the board, where a simple recipe to cure boils appeared. "Everyone have their potion kits handy?" There was a general rustling as people began to pull out their equipment and supplies. Another wave of his wand lit the fires under the cauldrons at each work station, and he settled himself behind his desk to watch the scene with amusement. Now and then a hand would go up and he would be forced to rise and investigate the problem, but they all seemed adept enough to handle this simple recipe.

Thankfully, the end of class arrived with no major mishaps, and he hobbled around to inspect the contents of each cauldron. "Well done, class. Each team please fill a phial and place it in the basket on my desk before leaving. Your assignment this week, due Friday, is to research the origin and usage of bezoars. Class dismissed."

Each class ended with at least one or two students apprehensively lingering behind to ask him if he was the same Professor Snape they had read about in their history books or that their parents had talked about from the war. He would humbly admit to his fame and assure them that reports of his demise had been greatly exaggerated but, thanks to the other Slytherins, the story of his death and resuscitation quickly made it through the school's rumor mill. By the end of the day, Sevvie had heard that his father had been resurrected like Jesus! The Snape family got a good laugh out of it, but after giving his children the factual details, Severus urged them to tell the other kids that no miracle was involved, just timely intervention and good medicine.

After another glorious dinner in the great hall, they kissed the twins goodnight and retired to their private quarters. One look from her husband and Sienna didn't need telepathy to know that his body cried out for one of her hands-on healing sessions. Stress and fatigue showed plainly on his face while every muscle and joint radiated pain. He plopped heavily face down on the bed, anxiously awaiting her company. After putting the usual wards on the bedroom door, she sat down beside him.

*Could you please Vanish my clothes? I just don't think I can muster the energy.*

With a flick of her wand, he was naked, and she couldn't resist first gently biting, then kissing, his adorable butt.

*Ow!*

Oh, come on, that didn't hurt!

Everything hurts!

Was it that bad?

I was on my feet more today than I have been in the last two years combined. What do you think?

Sienna straddled his butt and took great satisfaction in the huge sigh of relief he let out when her hands melted into his aching back muscles. He concluded, as she made her way up his spine to his shoulders, that she must have found her new duties invigorating, because her positive healing energy was even more powerful than usual.

Life at the ashram had agreed with him. Although he did not lead a life of leisure while there, what with endless chores to do, the complete lack of stress had done wonders for his overall health. His physique would still be considered lean by any standard, but his bones no longer protruded, and he had acquired better muscle tone. There was even a touch of color in his still-pale cheeks.

After she relieved his headache tension, she slipped off his butt and started to massage his lower half, starting with his feet and working her way back up. By the time she reached his rear end, he felt like a new man and flipped over to face her.

*That's not fair! You're still wearing clothes.*

Well, I wasn't sure if you were going to be **up** for anything else, you were in such a state when we got here. But obviously, she noted with a giggle, *had nothing to worry about.*

Over the years, with the help of telepathy, they had perfected the art of lovemaking. To keep it fresh, they constantly tried new things, but they never tired of each other. They both knew what it was like to lose the other, which made every moment spent together a gift. They were still deeply in love and never took each other for granted.

With one fluid motion, Severus Vanished Sienna's clothes with a wandless spell and grabbed her hand, pulling her on top of him. As her soft curls cascaded over his chest, they tickled his nipples, making them rock hard to match his erection. Noticing this, she kissed her way to them, gently sucking them each in turn. Then she continued her descent down past his navel to that beckoning erection. Her gentle hands and supple mouth worked together until his heart was beating so fast he knew he would explode at any second.

"No!" he moaned out loud, almost out of breath. "Not yet."

She stopped, thank Merlin, just in time, and he began to regain a hint of self control. She smiled that all-knowing smile of hers and began to kiss and lick her way back up his torso to the bite mark on his neck. Even after all these years, it was still sensitive, but she knew he enjoyed just a little pain with his pleasure, so she dug her teeth in slightly. With a quick intake of breath, his neck arched. *Not too hard*, he conveyed. She gently gave the spot a kiss, transferring some healing energy at the same time, and the pain instantly subsided. Then her lips found his, and they reveled in the sensations that they had, over the years, come to enjoy so much. Her body pressed down against his at every point possible as his stout erection rubbed her inner thigh.

Now it was his turn to drive her to the brink of madness. He flipped her over and was instantly on top of her as he leisurely meandered down her soft, lavender-scented body, exploring every curve and crevice with gentle dexterity, all the while rubbing his stiff privates along the inside of her legs, which she gladly parted for him. When he reached her breasts, a soft caress with his long, slender fingers wasn't enough.

*You know what I want*, she insisted.

*That doesn't mean I have to give it to you right away* he teased as his tongue encircled her nipple.

*Suck, for Merlin's sake!*

He looked up and grinned devilishly. He knew that was one of her most sensitive spots and it would drive her wild with pleasure when he finally relented. But he made her wait just a bit longer as his hands and lips wandered back and forth between them. When he finally gave her what she longed for, her back arched and she groaned with delight as she tangled her fingers into his long, slightly graying hair.

He continued his descent and then took endless pleasure in tickling, tantalizing and teasing her with tongue, lips and finger tips until she had reached the precipice. He could tell she was beyond excited, and he quickly climbed back up to share a searing kiss as he slipped himself inside her.

He could feel her squeeze him as he thrust and thrust. *Faster, faster!* They both had the same thought at the same time. *Deep—deeper!*

As their bodies exploded in the intense pleasure of the physical climax, their souls did as well, in an ecstasy beyond words. As much pleasure as it brought physically, it paled in comparison to the spiritual experience. Sienna had become such a part of him he doubted that he could exist without her. He would rather suffer a dementor's kiss.

*You know, Lily may be my soul mate*, he admitted as they relaxed in each other's arms, bodies still aquiver, *but you are, without a doubt, the true love of my life.*

As you are of mine, she replied sincerely.

*I think I was in love with the idea of winning Lily's heart when we were young. The idea kept me going.*

And that idea put you back on the right track when she died. So she fulfilled her mission as your soul mate.

Yes, but now it seems her mission is to drive me to sanity's outer limits.

They both laughed out loud at this notion. *But haven't you learned patience and compassion as a result of her constant testing?*

I suppose I have.

Then consider yourself blessed that your soul mate has come to you twice in one lifetime.

A few moments of pure contentment passed between them. Then Severus asked, *Are you glad we came back? I feel like I have come home, but you must feel just the*

*opposite.*

No, I was ready to live in the wizarding world again. It's where we belong.

I belong wherever you are, my love, Severus informed her. *You are my heart, my soul, my spirit.* They held each other even tighter as Severus Snape and the love of his life drifted off to sleep.

***THE END***