The Uneven Orbit

by LadyofToward

Summary

A tragic romance set against the backdrop of 1993/4 school year. Severus Snape and Charity Burbage are unlikely collaborators on a project to defend Hogwarts from the prying eyes of the MoM - no easy task when the school has escaped convicts, Dementors and werewolves to contend with. Try as they might to keep cool heads, Snape and Muggle-born Charity fall in love but their fate is doomed by her past and his future. In a desperate effort to save them, Snape takes drastic action.

A perfect rainy day read for when you don't want to get out of your Slytherin pj's. A weepy, so bring tissues.

Notes

Thank you to Rannaro, author of A Difference in the Family; the Snape Chronicles for inspiration. I have, in honour of your wonderful rendition of Snape, carried many of your character developments into this story. If you love SS, you must read Rannaro’s works.
CHAPTER ONE

In the dim light of Dumbledore’s office, as evening descended outside and the last rays of Autumn sun sheened through the mullioned windows, the Headmaster thrummed his fingers on his desk as he paused to contemplate his two companions – the Potions Master and the Transfiguration Master – sitting opposite him in comfortable chairs and waiting expectantly. The portraits were sleeping, a sure sign that it was a business-as-usual type of meeting, and the fire blazed with busy pops and ticks, at that point the only sound in the room.

Snape cleared his throat - a touch of impatience not so subtly communicated - and Dumbledore rewarded him with a half-lidded look of disdain for his trouble.

“Well then, since I am to be hurried, my decision is that I will take the liberty of authorizing a rebalance of Gryffindor points in view of your obvious prejudice, Severus.”

Snape snorted. “That is prejudice itself, Headmaster. I resent the implication that I have been injudicious in my use of the system. As you said, the process has worked without complication for decades – including my entire tenure here. The…dramatic…variance of late reflects singularly on the student, not the master.”

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. “No, no Severus we’ve already covered this, I’m not suggesting there’s been any impropriety but-“

“Potter has flown closer to the candle of contumacy than any other student in my teaching career,” interrupted Snape, raising his voice a fraction. “And despite my efforts at maintaining some pretense of discipline and standard, he has been roundly rewarded for it. Are you seeking some kind of student rebellion by suddenly setting new rules? In effect making them up as you go along – or rather, Potter goes along?”

“Potter seeks nothing more than to fit in quietly. -,” McGonagall said, her voice raising in turn.

“Well then, since I am to be hurried, my decision is that I will take the liberty of authorizing a rebalance of Gryffindor points in view of your obvious prejudice, Severus.”

“Really, Minerva –,” Snape muttered contemptuously.

“Ultimately the awarding of the House Cup is at my discretion,” said Dumbledore, giving them a stern look each in turn, “and yes, I have, shall we say, compensated Gryffindor because in effect their deeds – and let’s not pretend that Potter isn’t hugely significant in these deeds – are proportionally deserving. Severus – the boy and his friends may have diverted disaster, the Philosopher’s Stone alone, I mean surely you agree if Quirrell –“

Snape’s eyes flashed. “The boy and his friends are meddling! They appear hell-bent on getting themselves into a situation from which they cannot be extracted, putting themselves and the school as a whole at risk and, I will be frank, my alternate duties under pressure. Were it Potter acting alone, well that’s one thing, but he is insisting on making two other students accomplices, one of them Muggle-born –“

McGonagall nodded slightly. “I do agree with Severus on that.”

“But witchcraft and wizardry cannot be done well without that element of risk, as you put it,” stated
Dumbledore, with a gentle smile at Snape. He was aware that the initial complaint raised by McGonagall had been sidetracked but felt the conversation had taken a course potentially more important, which was that of Severus’ need for control, discipline and exacting standards. It was these character traits that had made him the most potent Head of Slytherin in 50 years, better than Slughorn if achievement records were to be considered, and contributed in great part to the incredibly successful careers of at least four Slytherin alumni. Snape turned a blind eye to Slytherin antics but showed no leniency on their productivity and caliber of work. He brooked no incompetence and the academic results spoke for themselves. This was one of the reasons that Dumbledore was hesitant to intervene when complaints were lodged, which they often did. McGonagall could be equally strict but tended less towards preventative measures.

Both Professors moved to speak, but Dumbledore held up his hands. “Please. Worthy as both your arguments are, they are equally matched and we may never conclude. I feel I need to assert my position here and I am sticking to my decision.”

Snape huffed and crossed his legs, ensuring one boot stamped on the office floor as he did so.

“Severus, you’ve never hidden your deep-seated prejudice towards Potter since he started. For someone who places such emphasis on governance of emotion, you have quite a blind spot around this boy.”

Snape opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore hurried to continue. “We know the history there, and thanks to the grapevine in this place, so now does the entire faculty. You need to demonstrate a greater degree of…discretion…when deciding to deduct points from Gryffindor as a result of Potter’s behaviour.”

“Sir? And what arbitrary line should I abide by?”

“Minerva, what did you say some of the points were lost for?”

“The children told me that the Professor deducted fifteen points from Gryffindor because they put their books on the desk too loudly,” McGonagall was quick to supply, with no small amount of indignant satisfaction.

Snape failed to suppress a faint smirk at this but Dumbledore raised a brow at him. “For Merlin’s sake, Severus, how can they put books down too loudly?”

“It was disruptive. Five points for each of them. They are capable of placing objects down quietly.”

“I would never take points of Slytherin for something such as that,” McGonagall said, nettled. “They’re children!”

“Alright Minerva – “

“Well then what about the detention for Potter for, for putting his cauldron stirrer on the desk?!”

“The potion was acidic and has left a permanent burn in the wood. I expressly cautioned the students about it. Potter only hears what interests him. That is damage to school property through carelessness and negligence.” Snape spoke clearly but his eyes roved about the room dismissively.

“Headmaster, the detention was three hours in duration!” McGonagall vented.

“Are we going to cross-examine each and every perceived offense?” Snape inquired caustically.

Again, Dumbledore refereed with raised hands and McGonagall crossed her arms tightly and pursed
“Severus, I will repeat myself for the last time. Harry is not James. You cannot visit the sins. If the Potter boy were not so obviously and integrally different from the other students, he would be absolutely the same in nature and in deed. I can scarcely find a desk in the building that hasn’t worn the effects of determined and willful abuse at the hands of our charges, let alone accidental damage. Your view of him is corrupted and you are being, bottom line, unfair on him.” Dumbledore sat back in his seat, determined not to show any of the signs he felt of his unease in confrontation. Accustomed as he was to his position as head of the school, tackling Severus Snape always required extra vigilance and nerve. The man excelled at having the last word.

Snape frowned heavily and set his jaw. In truth, his argument was insincere and did not carry conviction. He did pick on Potter. He found the boy irritating beyond belief. He could have stomached it better if he felt he had the backing of his colleagues, but found himself battling alone in trying to contain the enormous swelling that was becoming the boy’s head. But perhaps more significantly, the boy had a penchant for wading into affairs that were out of his league. Affairs that were delicate. Complicated. That had taken Snape appreciable skill for him to engineer. He grudgingly recognized that Potter had been bequeathed a situation that was not of his design and had no ability to change. But did he have to act on it quite so willingly? And so recklessly?

The detentions and point-deductions didn’t seem to make any material difference anyway. Potter remained an infuriating mix of Muggle-ish dimwittedness, impulsiveness, popularity and courage. He showed none of the supplication Snape expected from his own House, and if he applied half as much energy to his studies as he did for blundering into compromising situations, he’d be a star pupil by now. That damned Invisibility Cloak was possibly the worst instrument of ne’er-do-well ever conceived for a child such as Potter and would have been confiscated months ago by Snape if it had been up to him.

So, yes, he was unfair to him. Because the playing field had become unfair. And if no-one else viewed this as a problem, was it his responsibility to make up the difference?

“What is your will, Headmaster?” Snape asked. This was truculent and through gritted teeth, but he was in an ill-humour now. Dumbledore rarely put his foot down with him.

“Quite simple, Severus. Treat him as you would others.”

“Thank you Albus,” murmured McGonagall, opportunistically employing his first name in attempts to show a conciliatory side.

“And I am reinstating one-hundred points on the Gryffindor balance,”

Snape’s mouth dropped open at that. “Headmaster!”

“Don’t take affront, dear boy. I have been exceedingly tolerant with you in the past as you know.”

McGonagall nodded approvingly and Snape took a deep breath. He was furious that the matter had been brought to the Headmaster’s office to begin with without her pandering to bias and favouritism. Derisive comments formed in his head, but instead Snape’s frown levelled out and the reigning in of his emotion was entirely visible. He stood. “Headmaster. If that is all? I take it, also, that there will be no consequences for Lupin over the boggart transgression?”

Dumbledore paused and exhaled, gazing with frustration at Snape. This was his way: if he didn’t get what he wanted, he withdrew. It would be weeks before tempers would stabilize. He would be perfectly cooperative, abiding, polite. But distant. All interaction would be formal and official. And
in spite of everything, Dumbledore enjoyed Snape’s intellect, his strategic angle on matters and dry wit, and during these sulking periods, would miss his company.

“Please. Can you try to see it - ?”

“If that is all?”

Dumbledore was about to resignedly confirm that it was all, when he was hailed from the fireplace. All in the room turned to face it. After a blaze of emerald, Cornelius Fudge’s head appeared in the flames.

“Dumbledore? Hello?” said the Minister for Magic jovially.

“Oh hello there, Minister! How do you do?”

“Very good, very good. Am I able to meet with you? Is now a good time? It’s just that I have a dinner appointment in an hour, so if you’re free…?”

“Oh, ah, yes I think so…?” said Dumbledore, raising enquiring eyebrows at his two Professors.

“Well, in fact, if your colleagues are finishing with you now, I wouldn’t mind their involvement in the meeting…?” suggested Fudge.

Snape and McGonagall nodded their agreement, slightly non-plussed but covering it.

“Tremendous,” said Fudge. “I’ll just come through properly.”

A moment later he stepped out of the fireplace and dusted himself off. He was in his usual ministerial attire of pinstriped suit, tie and waistcoat. He carried a black, softbound briefcase.

“Do take a seat,” said Dumbledore, gesturing to the empty chair Snape had vacated. “Fruit pastille? To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?”

“Oh thank you kindly,” said Fudge, politely helping himself to a sweet, and then seating, his case at his feet and lime bowler hat on lap. “Hello Professor Snape…Professor McGonagall? Both well, I hope?” He popped the sweet in his mouth as they murmured assent.

“Now, sorry to drop in on you like this, but I wanted to make the most of an opening in my diary. I have some important news to tell you. There has been an executive decision made between the Wizengamot, the Department of Magical Education and the Board of Governors, and I have been mandated to execute this…this development….”

“I see,” said Dumbledore, waiting expectantly, unsure how to receive this.

“The Ministry…in its profound wisdom as I’m sure you’ll agree…there’s been a series of investigations, in the way of background if you will, and the new Chair of the Board of Governors, Sir Bernard Byron as you’ll know, very progressive chap – he’s a half-blood – he has some ideas that, well you’ll know about them from the board elections recently…”

Dumbledore cleared his throat and said, “Yes, we were discussing him the other day, weren’t we?” he glanced at his Professors for affirmation. “He was a student here of course. Around Snape’s time?”

Snape raised a brow.

“He was probably one of our best graduates of Muggle Studies. Is that right, Professor Snape?”
“I believe so. I wasn’t closely acquainted.”

Fudge listened attentively. “Yes, yes, well there’s plenty of debate about his…ideas about Muggles. At any rate, in his capacity as head of IMC he visited Scandinavia recently and we all know that the wizarding community in Scandinavia are considered very advanced…small, but, well arguably ahead of their times…”

“Yes, I have read about it,” offered Dumbledore encouragingly.

“Well he has brought some ideas back; he’s keen to try them. They may not work for Britain, but you have to keep up as you know.”

“What sort of ideas?” Dumbledore prompted, steepling his fingers and realizing with this degree of hesitation from Fudge that they were unlikely to be popular.

“Well Sir Byron, as you know, lovely chap, very progressive, he visited the Advanced Magical Studies Academy in Sweden – AMSA – and was very impressed, yes, deeply impressed. He was there for three months, did you know? Speaks passable French and German…”

Dumbledore’s suspicions about the purpose of Fudge’s visit was starting to take form. He neutralized his expression.

“Anyway, he’s returned recently to Britain and has decreed that he wants all British Wizarding Institutions to implement necessary change…improvements, I’m guessing we’re meant to interpret that to mean…that would raise them to the level of an international standard. So based on the International Standard for Wizarding and Magical Excellence…you’ve heard of it?” Fudge glanced from Dumbledore to Snape and McGonagall with peaked brows.

“Uh, no,” replied Dumbledore. McGonagall frowned and said, “I have possibly come across it in a journal or paper somewhere,”

“Why?” asked Snape, in a tone that implied his scorn.

“Well for fairly obvious reasons I should have thought!” Fudge replied evenly. “The time has come for British Institutions – fine though they are – to join the ranks of the international community. As you know, Byron won the Board election on the strength of his platform to work more cooperatively – both across borders but also with…”

“Muggles,” Snape finished.

A strained pause in the room.

“Many people are still divided about his theory,” remarked McGonagall, diplomatically. She didn’t need to elaborate.

Fudge nodded vigorously. “Of that the Ministry is well aware. Well aware. His was an unexpected victory. Still, many think that the Great War would never have happened if we had the assistance of Muggledom.”

“Surely first every endeavor to avert war must be made,” murmured Snape, his expression carefully disinterested. “Would we risk exposure before knowing we absolutely require it?”

Dumbledore appraised him thoughtfully, and Fudge played a face of doubt but possibility. “There’s no way of telling, is there. Risk leaving it too late and you’ve lost the war. Potentially at great, irredeemable loss. As it is, our demographic data tells us for generations that pure-blood numbers are
shrinking. Soon they’ll reach peak decline, and the loss will be exponential. Muggle blood has infiltrated to such an extent that we may be better to embrace our heathen brethren now.”

Out the corner of his eye, Dumbledore noticed Snape stiffen. He wasn’t sure if Cornelius Fudge was aware of Snape’s half Muggle parentage or not, or more pertinently, his views on it.

Turning his focus back to the Minister, Dumbledore asked “So, this Standard? I’m sorry, Cornelius, is that the name for it? How does an Institution, such as Hogwarts, say, go about achieving it? To the satisfaction of the Board and Ministry, obviously.”

“Good question, Albus. There is in fact a process. It is an audit. The Audit department has been created and auditors report to Bartemius Crouch. The Department appoints an Audit Team to each institution, who attend the site and, shall we say, evaluate the institution against a set of criteria. The higher the institution scores against the criteria, the closer to achieving International Standard it is. And Byron’s goal is that all British Magical Institutions will attain standard within five years.”

McGonagall appeared half baffled, half bemused. “But surely a British Audit Team would be self-interested in ensuring an Institution achieved the Standard. Wouldn’t it be a rather expensive, resource-intensive, but ultimately meaningless exercise to go through?”

“No, no, Professor, the team is completely impartial and to keep it that way, international members of the Standard are on each team. Plus, the institution must provide evidence of how it complies with the criteria – it’s not enough to simply state that it does so,” replied Fudge. It was impossible to tell at this point where he personally stood on the subject.

But Dumbledore did. The description alone was giving him a headache. Surely the Ministry had more important things to worry about? Behind him, Snape’s contemptuous cough gave voice to his own silent opinion.

Fudge didn’t miss it. “I know it sounds quite bureaucratic, but really Byron is quite insistent upon it. He views it as an imperative step to sustaining the future of our prime wizarding institutions. He understands quite a lot about Muggle artefacts and their technology and how the Muggles are always advancing with their new things. I expect he worries that we risk stagnation. Time stands still for none, not even witches and wizards.”

“I fail to see,” said Snape, “how the same instruments that were responsible for separating the two worlds, can also be the means of rejoining them.”

“Ha ha, yes, good point indeed,” smiled Fudge, even though Snape’s expression was as stony as ever. “You really should think about communicating some of your thoughts to Sir Byron yourself. But I may attempt an answer. He describes it as readiness. My dear Professor Snape, as a potions master I needn’t tell you how futile it is to attempt to force two inglepots together when they’re cold. But if you warm them up a little first, and then ease together very gently in the right place, then can’t two inglepots become one?”

Snape was not impressed. “It would be difficult to find a more simplistic analogy.”

“But you understand my point, dear chap. Byron feels there is a climate of readiness. And whatever we may think on the subject, his winning the election surely points to some truth there?”

Snape regarded him coolly. “And what,” he asked smoothly, “would be the consequences if Hogwarts decided against being audited?”

Dumbledore watched the Minister’s reply with interest, rather glad it was Snape who asked the
Fudge chortled. “You can’t just, just decline, I’m afraid. It’s a decree. An instruction, an order. I 
daresay, if you were so foolhardy as to refuse, then I imagine the Board might exercise its 
authorisation to challenge the appointment of Headmaster. I mean, surely,” he glanced at each of 
them in turn, “you can’t have that much to hide. Is there any reason why you wouldn’t simply 
comply with what is not much more than a bit of a procedure?”

Snape was preparing to speak, but Dumbledore hurriedly interjected. “I’m sure the good Professor is 
merely curious to understand how it all works. We’ve no intention of causing trouble for the 
Governor. But what is being proposed sounds a bit more than a procedure…it sounds as if it might 
be quite invasive and terribly inconvenient.”

Cornelius Fudge laughed good naturedly as he reached down to retrieve his briefcase. “Well I’m not 
sure exploring all these medical synonyms is making the proposal more inviting. I urge you to read 
some literature on the subject that I’ll send through presently. It will explain everything, hopefully 
better than I have, ha ha. Good lord, is that the time?” He stood and placed his hat on head into its 
comfortable spot, mumbling a verbal charm that ensured the hat was affixed despite weather or 
perhaps riding a broomstick.

Dumbledore stood and came around the side of the desk in order to shake Fudge’s hand. He offered 
him a small enamel box containing his store of Floo, of which Fudge accepted a pinch.

“Must be off, I’m afraid, I am meeting guests for dinner. Just before I go though, I do want to 
reiterate that this needn’t be difficult, I know I can rely on you all to join with the Ministry on this. 
Can’t I, dear Albus?”

Dumbledore inclined his head just a fraction, as Fudge turned and entered the fireplace. “The 
Hungry Hag”, he announced clearly, and disappeared.

Dumbledore turned to face his companions, and was greeted with resounding silence. “Well. Well, 
well. I think we should take the advice of the Minister and make this whole business a lot easier on 
ourselves by not resisting, but taking the medicine quickly in one gulp. I will call a meeting of all 
faculty members the day after I receive the Minister’s literature and we can discuss it in more detail. 
But now, my dears, it is late, and your Houses will be convening for their dinner. I will see you 
down in the Great Hall in mere moments.”

McGonagall and Snape left then, exiting the Headmaster’s office into the hallways without 
exchanging pleasantries as they normally did. Of opposing Houses they may be, but there was 
avways respect between the two Professors. Snape, however, felt grievously betrayed by 
McGonagall on this occasion, and she was astute enough to expect it.

About to go their separate ways, Snape nodded his head curtly at McGonagall but she opted to 
speak. “Severus, I have never before challenged your good judgement- “

Snape held up his hand. “No matter. I have been given my instruction by the Headmaster, of course 
I will comply.”

“I know but- “

“You might like to consider, however, taking a firmer hand with the boy yourself. Gryffindor has 
already permitted atrocious behaviour from its students in the past, and it would appear highly 
conceivable that…events…are repeating themselves. I wouldn’t advise leniency with him.”
McGonagall, of course, knew exactly to what he was referring. She had been there, borne out the arguments and justifications and excuses from her own House students. *But he’s a Death Eater!* they rationalized time and again as she admonished the conduct of the Marauders, after repeatedly returning Snape’s belongings, or repairing some damage. Not that Snape needed her assistance, even as a fifth-former he was better at a number of hexes and spells than she was.

“I will keep a close eye on Potter,” she promised him in a confidential tone. Snape turned on his heel with a swirl of his robe, and stormed off down the corridor.
CHAPTER TWO

Two days later, at breakfast, the post owls arrived, and a horned owl flew to Dumbledore and dropped a large envelope on the table, knocking over the Headmaster’s second cup of tea. He scooped up the envelope before it stained, and Flitwick quickly cast a scourgify spell as the owl flapped away. The envelope was stamped and sealed with the Ministry “MoM”. “I think I know what this is,” muttered Dumbledore, barely audible over the din of breakfasting students.

Opening the envelope he withdrew a slim, bound gazette which bore similarity to Muggle type publications, being glue-sealed along the side and containing modern print and colour images. The pictures still moved however, and the main title re-wrote itself periodically to catch attention. The document was called A Guide to the Principles and Activities of Ministry Audit. Dumbledore couldn’t resist a deep, heartfelt sigh at reading it. A note within the first two pages was from Fudge, and merely mentioned that this was the document as promised and he looked forward to hearing from Dumbledore soon.

The Headmaster looked down the teacher’s table and caught Snape’s attention, then held up the volume for Snape to read. Remus Lupin was sitting next to Snape and also read it. He turned to Snape with interest and said “What’s that then?”

“Of little consequence,” Snape replied, turning his gaze. “Ministry nonsense.”

“Is Hogwarts to be audited?” asked Lupin baldly, showing surprising acuity. Enough to make Snape glance at him. The man had barely started working for Hogwarts and already was getting nosy.

“The Headmaster is to call a meeting on the matter. That is all I’m at liberty to say.”

There was a sudden clatter from the Gryffindor table, and an uproar of laughter. Snape watched as Ron Weasley jumped up, joined by students on either side of him. Weasley’s uniform pullover and the tops of his trousers were drenched in pumpkin juice. “Scabbers!!” he yelled, and the swiftly scampering rat was visible halfway down the table. The students clearly found it hilarious, but Snape scowled. He eyed his Slytherins, and those who had noticed Weasley were sniggering, but for the most part they talked and ate in the contained fashion he demanded from them.

The Prefects at the Gryffindor table ordered Weasley to go back to the dorm to change. No magic was allowed to correct horseplay unless injury had incurred. Snape noticed Potter getting to his feet to join Weasley and waited for the Prefects to stop him, but Potter proceeded to walk out of the Hall with his friend. Snape had to clamp his mouth shut to avoid barking out a reprimand. This, he reckoned, was the fourth time in two days he had bitten his tongue as far as Potter was concerned. Frankly, had the preceding events occurred at the Slytherin table, the first student would have received detention for bringing a familiar to the table causing disorderliness, and any companion choosing to simply depart from the table without being excused would have lost 50 points. Maybe 25. Actually, it was so unlikely from a Slytherin that 10 points would have been more reasonable, since there was probably a good reason for the decision.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore had Geminio’d the Ministry text and passed copies to both McGonagall and Snape. He then stood to mark the official end of breakfast, emptied his cup and wished the student body a day of positive learning. Then he tapped both McGonagall and Snape on the
shoulder on his way out. “Please, read this thing will you? Bring me your thoughts before
dinnertime. I’ll be in my office for the time being. Oh, and Minerva, remind your Prefects that
students need to be excused before leaving the table.” McGonagall looked aghast and Snape turned
his eyes away before his fellow had the chance to notice him gloating.

Snape didn’t have classes until late morning. He had planned on using the time to advance-prepare a
potion, but instead took the brochure for studying into his dungeon office. He wanted to get familiar
with the content before meeting with Dumbledore, in particular, he wanted to analyse it to see if there
were any obvious holes or sophistry in the text.

Wading through paragraphs of bureaucratic corporate-speak, he started to feel bored and irritated in
equal measure. There was plenty of propaganda about audits being a mechanism of enhanced
performance and productivity for Britain, of a standard being necessary to maintain quality of service
and delivery and so on. When it discussed learning institutions, it wittered on about the necessity of
Britain’s educated remaining world-class and upholding its historic legacy. Snape had to check
whether the publication had actually been written by and for the wizarding community, it carried
such overt Muggle overtones. He was somewhat regretful when he was able to confirm that it was
indeed the publication of their own Ministry.

About two-thirds in, it finally got to several pages of procedure, explaining how the audits would be
conducted, and what findings would be sought. Snape forced his mind to concentrate. It would
appear that Hogwarts could have a say in when the audit would commence, aside from that, there
was very little control over the process. The Ministry set the criteria, the Ministry assigned the
auditors, the auditors gathered the evidence and determined whether the evidence was substantive.
The auditors would cooperate with Hogwarts staff on how and where the evidence could be
obtained, but it would not call the process complete before efforts had been made to procure all the
evidence it required.

The criteria, Snape read, were based on the industry type. This allowed him to skip several pages
covering the likes of medical, correctional, policing and environmental categories until he reached the
education sector. He sat up a little straighter, his loyalty to his profession putting him on the
defensive before he’d even begun to read. What were a bunch of policy-wonks going to tell
Hogwarts about the business of education? They’d been in continuous operation for over a thousand
years, what could they possibly have to say that would be of even the slightest value (Snape had
often privately tried out the maths on this alleged antiquity and couldn’t make it work, was it
literally
a thousand years old?)

The guidelines stipulated that educational institutions would be assessed across seven categories:
finance, licensing and regulations, staffing and teacher performance, curriculum, facilities and
property, student attendance and performance, student wellbeing. Is that all? scoffed Snape. Then
he ascertained that under each category were up to twenty criteria against which Hogwarts would be
required to demonstrate their level of compliance on a scale. This made him pause a little. Pointless
it all may be, but it was going to be an onerous and aggravating brand of pointless to boot. And
apparently non-negotiable. All the propaganda was a half-hearted attempt at sugar to make the
medicine go down.

Snape sat back heavily in his chair and flicked the document idly on his desk. He didn’t discover
any immediate loopholes or weak links in the process other than the glaringly obvious futility of it.
The overall grading Hogwarts would eventually receive ostensibly would reflect their operations, but
surely a useless bunch of auditors would also have a bearing? Would they know anything about
running a school? How would they be able to tell if the curriculum at Hogwarts was good, bad or
indifferent? And as for student wellbeing…would they ask the students? Merlin knows what the
current medley of so-called scholars would divulge, particularly with nothing short of murder and
mayhem rampant in every corridor. Death Eaters, Dementors, monsters, near-fatalities – you name it, even Snape had to admit these were hardly the hallowed halls of high academia.

Would it be possible to simply employ a Memory Charm on any auditor who happened to hear too much? Snape wondered, easily imagining himself murmuring the spell from a discrete distance, directed at any wide-eyed, open-mouthed overly-conscientious auditor who’d just been interrogating a Weasley.

Rubbing his furrowed brow, he conceded he had no brilliant solution to this problem to present to Dumbledore just yet. He slammed shut the volume, making the pictures spin, and got up to prepare for his class in fifteen minutes.

As it happened, the next class was third form – Potter and co. He groaned inwardly - the day just got better and better. What infractions and infringements was he going to have to ignore today. The insufferable idiot didn’t seem to have even cottoned-on that Snape was muzzled, it didn’t bear thinking about what classes would be like once it dawned on him. As he swept the walkways towards the temporary classroom (his dungeon was being pest-managed by Filch: a procedure that involved releasing several snarks into an enclosed space where mice and other undesirables where known to reside. Snarks were able to differentiate between a familiar and common pest), he saw his usual class of Gryffindors and Slytherins gathered outside the door, Potter among them. He brushed past the students and entered the room with his customary floridity, positioning himself up at the front lectern and eyeing the students acerbically until they were seated.

Why did it take them so long? Why did their limbs seem to be filled with concrete that they were unable move swiftly and decisively? Why did the act of finding their books seem to confound them? Why could they not stop chattering with each other, even though they’d just been chattering, presumably, for the last fifteen minutes? Were their lives so impressively action-packed that they must impart everything to each other continuously? His irritation mounted. “Quiet,” he said, with no reaction whatsoever. “Quiet!” he said louder.

He eyed Potter, who actually was sitting, waiting. “What class have you just come from?” he asked.

“Transfiguration, sir,” replied Potter, looking slightly surprised.

McGonagall. She was losing her touch. Look at the state of the class – as if she’d just fed them each a packet of Every Flavoured Beans.

“And what were you transfiguring? Clowns? Fireworks? Chocolate factories?”

Potter looked utterly confused. “No sir-,”

“QUIET” to the class. “For the last time, pay attention! The next person who speaks gets detention. That is ten – no fifteen – minutes of this class wasted and you will all make it up during lunch, do I make myself clear?”

Silence now. As ever, he had to be the enforcer.

“You will recall, I presume, from my last class with you that you were required to research – and bring with you today – an ingredient that will prolong the shelf-life of the Blood Replenishing potion. If your ingredient not only prolongs shelf-life, but also enhances the effect of the potion – and one such ingredient does in fact exist – you will attain full marks. If you have only identified a shelf-life ingredient, then that is equivalent to 75%, assuming you are able to make the potion correctly. GARLAND! PUT THAT AWAY! Finally, if you were unable to research and or procure the ingredient, you will fail. Am I quite clear?”
“Yes, sir,” said the class in a dirge-like unison.

“You have the next five minutes to retrieve your ingredient, label it correctly in the Latin, and place it on the desk in front of you. Then prepare your cauldrons, we won’t have time to finish the entire potion today, but I intend to see all the constituents of the potion, prepared correctly prior to a brewing. You may begin. Yes, Master Weasley?”

“Sir, what does constituent mean?”

“Parts, boy. The ingredients. Avail yourself of a dictionary.”

The class continued to stare at him. He sighed inside. “Begin!” He magicked the instructions up on the board, conscious of the limited memories of his students.

Rumblings as students began rummaging around in backpacks, dragging cauldrons around, flipping through the pages of their texts. Snape went to his desk and tried to block it out. Not being in his own dungeon, he hadn’t brought coursework to process, only the texts for this class and a later one. He feigned an intense interest in reading the manual while discreetly watching the students at work.

The prize-winning ingredient for this potion was shoelace weed, in fact a form of algae that tended towards long strings when left to hang from the ceilings of dank caves or similar environments. There was a chamber deep in the bowels of the castle that had grown some prized lengths, and the Hogwarts store of Blood Replenisher was of an exceptional standard. Much was sent to Mungo’s to supplement their stocks, as otherwise the algae had to be sourced from French caves at greater cost. Anybody who had bothered to read *Hogwarts: a History* would know this. The properties of the algae that allowed it to bond in a linear fashion were what chemically transformed into a preservative, when mixed at the correct temperature with rosehip and muskrat oil. Shoelace that was of a greater age, and therefore more potent, had the additional advantage of healing qualities, particularly the damaged liver.

Predictably, the Granger girl had some fine strands. She was busy producing a label in the Latin, having laid her shoelace weed on silver paper along the top of her desk. Even from where he was sitting, Snape could tell that it was of good quality and that he would be expecting a finished potion from her by the end of the week. It would not do to waste it. His black eyes slid sideways to her companions, Weasley and Potter. Weasley at least was busy trying to lay out some weed, but it stuck awkwardly to the paper and the weed was starting to dry out and shrivel.

He then observed that Potter had yet to start. He was frantically searching the innards of his rucksack and looking desperate. Snape arose from his desk, straightened the lapels of his cloak, and advanced towards him. “Problem, Mr Potter?”

Harry’s internal wince was visible. He put the rucksack down, straightened and met the cold eyes of his Professor. “I can’t find my ingredient. I know what it was, I researched it and I found some. But it’s gone. It was in my rucksack this morning, I put it in there myself.”

A likely story. Snape’s raised brow informed Potter of his deep skepticism. “Indeed. Are you quite sure it was the right ingredient? Not something else, something that has legs and moves perhaps?”

Potter rolled his eyes, a little boldly, and Snape felt his hackles rising. “Sir, I know what the ingredient is. Can I just tell you it, and where I found it? Would that count?”

A snicker was heard from the front row filled with Slytherins. Malfoy, his arm bandaged, had turned to watch.
“I do see your point, Potter,” said Snape. “It’s not that I’m actually trying to teach you how to brew potions. Apparently, all I need to see is that you can read a page of textbook before class. So yes, why don’t you tell me the name of the ingredient that you seem to think you found.”

Harry was well attuned to Snape’s mannerisms and tones. He recognized immediately where this was headed and he didn’t want a battle today. He looked down at his desk. The sniggering at the Slytherin table continued and Snape growled at them to stop, then turned back to Harry. “Well?”

“Sir, it’s called Shoelace Weed. It grows in these long strings, but it’s very delicate, it can’t be left in the sun – “

“Where do you find it?”

“Caves, sir. Dark, wet places where it can grow from the ceiling.”

“The Latin for it?”

“Ligaminis Inutilis, sir.”

Hermione had been listening closely, and at this juncture interrupted. “Professor Snape, sir? I can promise you that he did have some of the ingredient. We were together to harvest it.”

“Thank you Granger, I don’t remember asking you,” snapped back Snape.

“I know sir, but –“

“You have spelt Ligaminis incorrectly.”

Horrified, she seized her label and examined it closely.

Snape considered Potter for a moment. He did in fact believe that the boy had found the herb and he also believed that it had somehow gotten lost. But he couldn’t tolerate the carelessness. It was a passive-aggressive act of contempt at his class, his subject. And again, negligence with school property, if he and Granger had harvested from the chamber which he strongly suspected they had, looking at the girl’s sample.

“You have failed this lesson, Potter. I did mention last week that this was worth fifteen per cent.”

He expected some kind of protest, but Potter uttered something under his breath and sat dejectedly on his stool, head hung. Snape regarded this with concealed surprise – James Potter would have hotly contested the decision, anything to attract attention – but Snape couldn’t tell if Harry was being dignified or simply resigned.

He didn’t comment further but continued his stroll around the classroom, examining the student’s efforts. “I would expect to see all the other ingredients on the table by now. You should have them prepared…No, Mirfield, if the horn hasn’t been ground it does not count – you couldn’t very well add it whole could you…Leave your work on your desks for me to grade.”

Presently the bell rang and the students gathered their things and began to exit. Snape wandered amongst the desks, marking in his grade-book the display of pre-potion from each student, occasionally tutting, and picking up an ingredient to scrutinize.

He paused at the sound of shouting not far from the classroom entrance. He couldn’t make out the words, but recognized the tone as heated, vehement. Putting down his book and quill, he hastened towards the sound of the altercation, and found Potter and Malfoy challenging each other with wands
aloft, Malfoy grinning spitefully and backed by his two goons, Potter alone with a furious expression on his flushed face.

“What on earth is going on here,” growled Snape, and using his own wand, swiftly expelled theirs.

“Sir, he attacked -!” cried Malfoy, and at the same time, Potter shouted: “He stole my Shoelace weed! He took it out of my rucksack!”

“Is this true, Malfoy?”

“Of course not sir. He’s just piss-, sorry, angry because he failed the class.”

“He’s just been egging me about it!” Potter burst out. “He showed it to me, he’s still got it, look!”

“Where?”

“I don’t sir-“

But Harry lunged at Malfoy and tore at the boy’s own rucksack, which, being slung over the shoulder of Malfoy’s bandaged arm, slipped off easily. He threw it at Snape. “Look in there, you’ll find it. In the silver paper.”

Snape bore his eyes into Harry warningly, and frowned at Malfoy. Then he opened the rucksack and saw within it immediately the sheen of silver wrapping. He drew it out and, placing the bag on the ground, slowly opened the silver to reveal a healthy strand of Shoelace. He all but rolled his eyes; why did Malfoy seem intent on undoing everything Snape was building for him? He was making it very difficult to help him.

“That’s mine sir,” said Malfoy immediately.

“Then why is it in your rucksack? Why isn’t it with your display, in class?”

“I had extra sir. That’s mine.“

“But this example is far superior to the one you used. I’ve just graded your work. This sample is darker in colour, clearly has more maturity. You’ve made a poor selection, if it is indeed yours.”

“Sorry sir, I should have been more careful –“

“It’s not his! I can tell you where that’s from,” Potter shouted.

Snape flashed at him, doubly irritated that he had been cornered into castigating a Slytherin.

“Control yourself, Potter! If this is yours then you should have been more careful with it! I know exactly where this sample is from, and it is considered valuable property of the School. You have been negligent.”

“You’re joking?! He stole it from me – that was for the assignment -,”

“Do I look as if I’m joking?”

Potter’s frustration got the better of him and he rammed the heel of his palm to his forehead, guttural noises escaping his clenched teeth.

“And dueling in the corridors? These wands are confiscated. You can collect them when you have completed detention. Both of you in my office this evening at 8pm.”
Draco looked appalled and Crabbe and Goyle made noises of objection but Snape silenced them with an upraised hand.

“Sir, I need the wand for Charms class after lunch,” stated Harry with urgency.

“Well then you can explain to Professor Flitwick why you do not have your wand, and obtain a substitute. He will have some.”

“What if I need to go outside? What about the… the Dementors?”

Snape glared at Potter in disbelief. “Then the answer is inexcusably simple, Potter. Tell me, what do you think the solution is to that particular concern?”

“Don’t go outside,” muttered Potter, wishing he’d kept his mouth shut.

“Do you think it might be possible for you to restrain your impulses for even a few hours?” Snape added. “I know you think the school rules don’t apply to you, but I have it on good authority that you’ve been instructed to stay away from the Dementors, with or without a wand, and so the prospect of wandering the school grounds should not be of consequence. I hope I’ve made myself perfectly clear on this. You too, Malfoy.”

“Yes sir.”

“Dismissed. Go for your lunch.”

Snape watched the four boys leave towards the Great Hall, glowering at each other. He tapped their confiscated wands impatiently against his leg waiting to see them get out of sight and wondered what in the wizarding world he was going to have them do in a twin detention. There was yet another evening gone.
Chapter 3

CHAPTER THREE

At 5pm, the Autumn sun was already beginning to set. Torches and lanterns throughout the castle were lit, as were roaring fires in all the occupied rooms. Halloween was not far away. This time, between 3:30 and 6pm, was usually quite peaceful. This was the time when Quidditch players were often called to practice, students could attend the library, or spend time in their common rooms socializing if they were not enrolled in extra-curricular. Student body Committees often commandeered a spare classroom, holding meetings on subjects they were passionate about.

On his way to the Headmaster’s Office to report on his study of the audit brochure, Snape passed a classroom and glanced in, then suddenly stopped and stared. Inside were half a dozen female students, seated on top of the desks, clearly having some kind of séance. The effect, although unsuccessful, had turned the air in the upper half of the room a swimmy, hazy blue. They were unaware of him, sitting trance-like as they were, holding hands.

Snape opened his mouth to say something, but then thought better of it. He had somewhere to be. He shook his head and continued his march to Gargoyle Corridor, cloak sweeping behind him.

Dumbledore was in conversation with the portrait of Headmaster Aragon when Snape entered the office.

“Welcome, Severus, do sit down,” said Dumbledore. Snape nodded his thanks and to Aragon as well.

“My fine predecessor and I were just discussing this audit process,” Dumbledore informed him. “I was thinking the additional burden of it just as we are dealing with the Sirius Black issue would not be good for morale. And Aragon was just stating that obvious concerns with security around the castle would probably be an issue the auditors would question.”

“Undoubtedly, Headmaster,” murmured Snape.

“Is the castle quite secure?” Professor Aragon asked Snape loudly. “It is unhappy for me to think of students, Dementors and an escaped convict of Azkaban all coinciding during term.”

“The Dementors are here primarily to re-capture the convict. They have no interest in the students themselves,” replied Snape, unconvinced, but wondering why this was for him to answer.

Aragon shook his head in disapproval. “Never in my day –,” he began sonorously, and Dumbledore very discreetly flicked his wand and the portrait dozed off.

“I do enjoy my chats with him, largely,” Dumbledore offered, with eyes a-twinkle. Snape allowed a small smile. “Lemon drop?”

“No thank you, Headmaster. You know I am not inclined towards them.”

“Is Minerva joining us?”

“I’m not sure. You didn’t give a specific time.”
“Ahh. That’s why you’re early. I told her five-thirty. But since you’re here, let us talk. I want to
discuss Potter. I want you to understand that I actually do see the need for maintaining a consistent
level of discipline with him. You are not wrong in seeing the risk in – in how he conducts himself.
It is his friends that I worry about too. I have been dismayed at the events that have overtaken the
school since his arrival – it cannot be mere coincidence – his duty, his liability, it follows him here –
the prophecy…,”

Snape nodded, but couldn’t completely conceal a flame of irritation. Was the Headmaster blind to
the fact that Potter was also genetically pre-dispositioned towards trouble? Anything good his
mother had contributed was currently utterly overwhelmed by obvious star-struck adulation with his
father. Not helped in the slightest by flagrantly exaggerated stories from Lupin, no doubt. In every
counter all he could see, all he could hear was James Potter. All the toerag needed was a bit of
hero-worship to breath air into any latent super-sized ego and you’d have a fourteen year old who
could barely hold a quill deciding he was ready to take on the Dark Lord.

Dumbledore looked at Snape imploringly. “Severus, I can’t think of anyone better to oversee his
protection. I can’t very well explain to Minerva why you’re treating him differently, and I think what
we discussed earlier today would apply to lesser infringements anyway, but, I know you understand
when I tell you that…there are movements. The boy has dreams. Have you…?”

“No, not in the…traditional sense…but I am too conscious of the…movements.”

“Lupin tells me there was an incident on the Express with a Dementor. Potter is clearly susceptible
to them. I have given my permission for Lupin to coach him in extra Defense work if necessary.”

Snape heard this and looked at his hands to thwart the intense aggravation he felt at this information.
If he was appointed to be Potter’s so-called protector, why was Lupin, that bloody werewolf, being
tasked with teaching Potter the Dark Arts? Yes, yes, Lupin was the Master on the subject of course,
but was Dumbledore intent on denying him any and every opportunity? It felt like distrust.

Well, the upside, he supposed, was that he didn’t have to spend more time with Potter than
absolutely necessary.

Just then McGonagall entered, carrying her copy of the Audit volume, and hurried into the remaining
chair. “Sorry to keep you waiting gentlemen,”

“Not at all,” responded Dumbledore with a warm smile. “You are in fact right on time. Lemon
Drop?”

“Ooh, thank you, don’t mind if I do. All this Ministry claptrap certainly leaves a bad taste in your
mouth.” The popped the sweet on her tongue and offered Snape a beaming smile. He curled up the
corners of his mouth in reply. If she thought he’d forgiven her…

“You’ve read the document then?” Dumbledore confirmed. Both McGonagall and Snape nodded.
“Dry, isn’t it?”

“When it isn’t awash with propaganda,” said Snape.

“Oh I agree,” said McGonagall. “It’s simply dreadful.”

“And so to your thoughts,” said Dumbledore, rising to his feet and placing his hands behind his
back. He began to slowly pace the room, an affectionate for when his listening was concentrated.

“I couldn’t find any way out of it,” said Snape immediately, cutting to the point of what he assumed
was his responsibility. Often deployed as unofficial Chief Strategist, Snape was expected to
mastermind matters for or against the School’s advantage, up to and including a ridiculous test as part of the Philosopher’s Stone baffle. He was quite proud of the riddle; given it was a first attempt, drawing rather smugly on his Muggle ability to think logically, but he was aghast it had been deciphered by an eleven year old. Otherwise, strategy was something he was naturally proficient at, except when it came to his own behalf.

“I see. Thank you for examining that angle. Minerva?”

“Headmaster, I fear that when I imagine how this exercise will play out, that the audit will leave Hogwarts in a somewhat compromised position. Plainly speaking, I don’t think we’ll do well out of it. We know what we’re doing here, but I think someone from…outside…will see it…differently…” she limped to a despondent halt, and Snape understood that she was attempting to be diplomatic in front of her superior.

Not that Dumbledore ever operated alone or exclusively. Matters affecting the school and its inhabitants was always the subject of intense debate and discussion by staff. There was far from consensus, however, on several issues. The most recent dividing subject was hosting the Triwizard Cup, the first time in 300 years, which Dumbledore was keen to do, and which several faculty members were less than thrilled about. As was befitting his position, the Headmaster made the final decision and everyone fell in. But, ultimately, the consequences of his decisions had nowhere to sheet but him.

“You deduced from the document that a failed audit will…what? Bring us into disrepute? Or something more serious?” asked Dumbledore, frowning.

McGonagall looked at Snape. He said, “I believe that if we failed an audit, there would be minor consequences. When the Ministry play within the rules our relationship is mutually beneficial, they would not be vested in undermining or undercutting us. But it might concern the Board of Governors. Byron would not appreciate the news, I’d imagine.”

McGonagall nodded, and added: “I worry about other consequences. In order to comply with the criteria contained in this example, much change would need to occur. I don’t believe Hogwarts could continue to be the school as we currently know and love it.”

Again, Dumbledore nodded. He paused at the glass tower cabinet containing his collection of memories, retrieved an empty bottle, then proceeded to siphon memories from his temple with his wand. He winked at Snape. “Just want to catch that conversation,” he murmured. Snape knew what he meant, but McGonagall looked a bit confused. All the same, Dumbledore was getting on in years, he was almost permanently at his Pensieve these days.

“And yet, despite all, we cannot change the course of it,” he finally stated, with raised brows at Snape. “We can but do or die. This is hardly the first time that Government has imposed unpleasantness on good folks simply trying to do their jobs. Just read the Muggle papers.” He put his Pensieve away. “I’m not consoled by your reports, and I didn’t read anything that causes me to believe differently, but I am resigned to the fact that we must capitulate.”

He returned to his seat and faced his colleagues. “I shall contact Cornelius tomorrow. He will expect us to provide a date. I want the entire business over with before the Triwizard Cup commences. The timing is terrible with the Sirius Black debacle and the Dementors on site, but if the audit is to be demanding and time consuming, then best to get it over with before end of term. Last thing people want to be dealing with over Christmas.”

“How good, Headmaster,” murmured Snape, “I expect you’ll call a staff meeting?”
“Yes. And Severus, I’ll be appointing you to lead this audit,” said Dumbledore, with a non-negotiable look over the top of his half-moons. Snape was neither surprised nor heartened. “I will think about who can provide you assistance. You’ll need runners: I will release some Prefects, you can choose—,”

“Slytherin Prefects, obviously,” replied Snape. McGonagall was about to offer up her Gryffindors, but Snape intervened. “And from Ravenclaw if need be.”

She sat back in her seat, fuming. It was to be expected, however. Her default was Hufflepuff. As far as Snape viewed it, the nature of the task required astute minds and Ravenclaw was simply an obvious selection. But she wasn’t quite finished. “Will these Prefects be given extra credit for this?”

“Probably,” replied Dumbledore, “they would expect something, it’s not exactly enjoyable work. But don’t fret Minerva, I will need runners again for The Cup. Gryffindor will yet get an opportunity.”

McGonagall and Snape sat silently, and Dumbledore took his cue to wrap up the meeting.

“Thank you, both, for your time. I don’t know where I’d be without you. I trust I’ll have your backing at the staff meeting when I hold it.”

McGonagall and Snape both hurriedly gave their assurances on this. They understood that he would be proposing an activity that would likely be received with significant rancor by the remaining faculty, irrespective of whether he had any choice in the matter. The weight of Snape and McGonagall behind him would help to hose down the dissent much faster. Despite the reputation Snape carried as a person, very few questioned him professionally.

The pair rose and made their farewells, their teacher minds immediately turning to the students and their present whereabouts. The time was 6 O’clock – dinner was imminent.

Snape strode through the corridors intent on returning to his office before dinner. He stopped only once to supervise a first year Hufflepuff student who had gotten lost returning from Quidditch practice. Were they mad leaving the child unattended outside? Seen too, he continued his path and was at his office door just in time to bump into Filch.

“Ah Professor Snape, just finishing up,” Filch told him, drawing shut the heavy wooden door. His pale cat was at his feet as always, staring at Snape most unnervingly. Filch held a lantern in one hand, and in the other, an awkwardly sized cage by its ring-top handle, draped over with a black blanket as if sleeping birds were inside.

“These would be the snarks?” Snape inquired, gesturing at the cage. The cage rattled with abrupt movement. “They were…effective?”

“Oh yes, very successful. I’m afraid I didn’t get a chance to clean up after them this evening, I was focused on getting them all back, I wouldn’t want to leave any running loose in your office after hours. I will return tomorrow to clean up, if you don’t mind. You won’t be needing your office tonight will you sir?”

Snape toyed with answering that yes, in fact he did require his office that evening, but on balance decided that having a disgruntled Filch hanging around would be worse than a few dead mice. “Tomorrow will be fine,” he said, and bade the caretaker a good evening.

Seeing the strange man and his cat around the corridor corner, he entered his office and shut the door with relief behind him. Some time alone at last. Snape was well aware of references to him as a bat,
but it didn’t trouble him in the least. In his opinion, aside from Dumbledore, he had the best office in
the castle. Contrary to popular gossip that it was cold and gloomy in the bowels of the building, the
dungeon rooms had the best insulation. They were shielded on all sides by reinforced moisture-
resistant concrete, the water of the lake maintained a steady temperature during the change of
seasons, and an early-lit fire during the autumn and winter soon warmed the rooms, the heat unable
to escape through cathedral ceilings or vast, ornate windows as it did upstairs. With some soft
furnishings, teak furniture and shelves of leather-bound books, the office and his private quarters
further along the corridor had, over time, become decidedly cozy. The formaldehyde filled jars with
their exotic contents had never troubled Snape, he quite liked the way candle-light glinted off them.
The ceilings were lower and the rooms easier to light, the only small problem he had to be conscious
of was a lack of ventilation if he lit too many gas lamps and cauldrons at once. To combat this, in the
anteroom of the office he installed some narrow windows along the top of the wall, level with the top
of the ground, and also a number of ventilation shafts which drew old air away and allowed fresh-air
in. These could be opened and closed at will. It was almost certainly through these shafts that mice
entered, very sensibly drawn to the warmth of these rooms during the colder months.

Snape had yet to encounter any bats in the dungeon, but mice he was aware of and so, looking
around, were the snarks. Little battered bodies were strewn around his office like the scene of some
rodent Armageddon. The snarks were unforgiving, and didn’t practice a clean-kill technique. Any
mice left alive would think twice about staying around after witnessing whatever had gone on in this
room during the day.

A quick spell would clean up one or even two nearby mice, but the only way to clear the whole
room at once would be a reversal spell, which obviously wasn’t desirable. Anyway, he needed
something for Potter and Malfoy to do, and a little housekeeping was perfect.

Stepping gingerly over little grey body parts on his rug, Snape went to his desk, dropped his book
and the students’ wands onto the tabletop and collapsed into his extremely comfortable office chair,
which he had magically adjusted to ergonomically calibrate to his every seated angle. This time, the
chair tilted almost prone, so that Snape could throw back his head and relax his neck. He shut his
eyes and rubbed his forehead, delighting in the absolute silence of the room. How had it come to
pass, he wondered for the hundredth time, that he, so inclined to privacy, to introversion, to
meditation, had arrived at an occupation that stampeded on his nerves hour after hour, day after day
like an especially thoughtless herd of cattle? The holidays were barely enough to salve them before
term started for yet another beating. Too often he forgot that his tenure at Hogwarts was in fact a
sentence, he was serving time to Dumbledore; that retribution was not meant to be enjoyable.

He had ten minutes before showing for dinner and reached into his bottom desk drawer for his bottle
of Firewhisky, from which he poured himself a quick snifter. He had a vial of Restoration Remedy in
his rooms but had no time for that just now. He needed something to brace him for dinner and
detention with Potter afterwards.

He took no pleasure or reward in being given the audit project, and he had the additional concern of
a poor audit result giving the Ministry misgivings about allowing Hogwarts to host the Triwizard
Cup – after all, the Cup was an international competition, would the Ministry fret about a sub-
standard British institution being on show to their superior overseas cousins? Dumbledore would be
distraught at the idea of it being rescheduled, or even worse, denied. And it would be front-page
news as well; not exactly the sort of publicity they were seeking.

He knocked back the whisky and winced as it burned down his throat, but it had a wonderful
warming and soothing effect which was just enough for him to get once more to his feet and gather
his robe around him. With a quick flick of his wand he dimmed the lamps and stowed away his
whisky and invigorated the fire with extra wood. Then he left for dinner.
Within a few minutes he was seating himself for dinner with the other teachers. As ever, the kitchen elves had excelled, with a homely but substantial serving of steak and kidney pie, with sides of mash potato and peas. Snape drank tea, not being a devotee of pumpkin juice like most of his companions. On Fridays the staff were allowed a modest glass of wine with dinner, or butterbeer, but today, Papus save us, it was only Tuesday.

Lupin was on his left again, and today, Flitwick was on his right. They ate in silence for a few minutes, keeping their eyes on the students who were, as usual, incredibly rowdy. Steak and kidney pie received mixed reviews from the pupilage, particularly the first years, who amused themselves by playing with their food. At one point, Pamona Sprout got to her feet (necessary if she were to command any attention) and shouted to the Hufflepuffs to put their wands away while they were at the table. Evidently, attempts to magic away the kidney were being made.

Snape’s attention was drawn to Flitwick who suddenly addressed him. “Severus, I had Mr Potter in my class this afternoon and he was without his wand. He told me it had been confiscated and he was to see me for a substitute. Do you know about it?”

“I did indeed confiscate his wand. Did you not have any spares?”

“No, I didn’t actually. He had to take turns with the Weasley boy to complete his lesson which made things…difficult.” Flitwick said this in a snippy tone and busied himself with his knife and fork.

“Then his productivity would have been about normal,” replied Snape. “No harm done.”

“What’s wrong with his wand?” asked Lupin with interest.

*Wolf ears flapping?* thought Snape, looking sidelong at him. *Preternaturally good hearing?* He deliberately took his time in answering. “There’s nothing wrong with it, unless you count its inappropriate use as a weapon between classes.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lupin, frowning. Flitwick was listening attentively as well.

“I caught him and Draco Malfoy engaging in a little dueling in the Ground Floor Corridor. There were students moving between classes, anything could have happened. As you know, using wands in the corridors is forbidden.”

“No doubt Draco started it,” commented Lupin. “He’s obsessed with dueling.”

“He claims Potter attacked him.”

“I find that hard to believe!”

“Needless, I have confiscated the wands of both boys.”

“It’s been hard to shake that whole excitement about dueling since Lockhart started up that club,” remarked Flitwick, shaking his head.

Snape drained his tea. “I don’t disagree. They learnt just enough to be dangerous.”

The teachers ate reflectively for a few minutes. Snape looked over at his Slytherins, their green and silver ties and hood linings generating a cool sheen in the candlelight. He caught the eye of Adrian Pucey and Cassius Warrington, both Prefects this year, who smiled at him. There were many Slytherins who idolised Snape, who respected not only his position in the House, but also his awesome skill and power as a wizard. Some, with his Death Eater history in front of mind, fables learnt at bedtime from their parents, preferred to describe him as a warlock, and justified his
chequered past as proof of his dedication to wizardry and its survival in modern times. What some of them privately liked about Snape was that he made them feel better about being a Slytherin. Not all who were sorted into the Serpent denomination were truly at ease with the decision and became rather worried when they discovered the number of Dark Wizards who had graduated amongst their forerunners.

Snape gave each group of First Year arrivals a lecture about what being a Slytherin truly meant, and how to separate the virtues from the hyperbole. He also assured them that the statistics proved that having a Slytherin badge was a better bet for future success than any other, and not to forget that the likes of Merlin had been wearers of the Serpent. Normally at this point he would comment on the spectacular – near record – run of House Cup ownership, but after the degrading usurping by Gryffindor two years previously, Snape now left this part out.

He also told them that they must never assume that being a Slytherin would excuse them from impropriety or disobedience, that being a Slytherin did not equate to short-cuts or deceit or other vices, and it conversely didn’t preclude them from nobility or greatness. A snake generated fear, yes, a snake could be calculating, it could be menacing, it could use all manner of devices to get what it wanted. But it didn’t degrade itself. Snakes were the stuff of mythology, and had survived on the earth for millions of years, an incredibly successful, adaptable creature that didn’t lament the loss of limbs, but took ingenious, creative, resourceful measures to turn it to its advantage. This is what Snape expected of his House.

At this point he would normally pause dramatically and soak in the crowd of fresh, young faces before him, gazing, mesmerized and slightly terrified at their Head. He would look at each of them in turn, branding them with his black, cold eyes and fold his cloak about him. He made them wait, made them thirst for what he was going to say next. More than a few at this moment had inwardly, perhaps even unconsciously, pledged allegiance forever to being a Slytherin.

Don’t ever think, he would tell them, that he would go easy on them. He would be harder on a Slytherin than anyone else, because he expected more. They only had themselves to depend on, and he would not tolerate - not once, not ever - a pupil who would disgrace or betray the Serpent. But if they were hardworking, obedient, devoted little snakes – well, they would have his complete support and his backing. He left them with the impression that to have Severus Snape at your back would be of more value than air itself.

Pucey and Warrington would be unlikely to set the world on fire, but they were diligent, and they worked unquestioningly for him. He nodded at them, at the dinner table, a mere incline of his head, and they were quietly thrilled. He would have them to work on the Audit.

Lupin broke into his reverie with an offer of more tea. “Thank you,” he muttered, disconcerted by Lupin’s affability and reasonableness. Didn’t he remember they were sworn enemies? Lupin poured him a cup and Snape simply scowled at him. Had the wolf mixed something into the beverage? Could he actually be making overtures of… of friendship? He noticed the scars on Lupin’s face and once again his mind returned to the night in the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack, of the hideous, malformed creature he transformed into. They were a dying breed, a branch of anthropology that had shriveled to an end in the British Isles. A small stronghold remained in Bavaria and Romania, but they refused to travel out of their sheltered domain, bound by a dependence on supernatural care practices. British wolves were left to their own devices. The likes of Fenrir Greyback, he recalled from his youth, stolidly stood by the Dark Lord in efforts to capitalize on a new world order where werewolves would thrive again.

He knew little of what had become of Lupin between graduating Hogwarts and returning to teach. He believed Lupin had joined the Order of the Phoenix in the first war, but never had the same
impact without his cohort of bullies and malcontents. Probably the lycanthropy was a hindrance as well.

Lupin offered him a small smile as he put down the teapot. “Severus, the lunar cycle, as you know – a couple of weeks at best…”

The wolfsbane. “I haven’t forgotten,” Snape said, and sipped his tea. Tasted fine.

“I – I wanted to thank you. I couldn’t have taken this post if –,”

“I know. You said the same last month. It is Dumbledore’s request and I am Potions Master. There is no particular feeling attached to it.” This wasn’t strictly true, Snape deeply resented it.

A pause. Lupin’s eyes lingered on him for a moment. “I see. I appreciate it all the same.”

Dinner was concluding. McGonagall had risen to her feet at the other end of the table, and was waving her wand to garner silence and attention. Once subdued, she announced: “I’m very disappointed to have to say that some very si – well let’s just say some ill-advised young ladies have been practicing the Dark Art of séance. I will say this just once. To use séance is strictly forbidden in this school. It is beneath you as properly educated young witches and wizards. We do not need malevolent spirits roaming the castle on top of other trials we are enduring. Any questions?”

Snape closed his eyes and groaned.
After dinner, Snape returned to his office to await his detainees. He stoked the fire—no need for this to be more uncomfortable than necessary—and gathered some work to do at his desk while the detention was underway.

Shortly after eight, there was a knock at his door and Snape unlocked the spell. Malfoy and Potter entered, faces like thunder. The first thing Potter did was stand on a mutilated mouse, and he lifted his foot, appalled.

“Stop where you are,” ordered Snape. He allowed them a moment to survey the room and its scattering of small grey corpses. “Filch had snarks in my office in my office this afternoon for pest control.” He felt he ought to explain, lest they assumed that he had been practicing some particularly barbaric Unforgivable. He was not unaware that, of the entire faculty, Snape was the only one they would accept as plausible for this kind of behaviour.

“I want you to clean them up,” he instructed. “That is your task for the evening. You have an hour. If you finish before the hour, I will find other work for you.”

The boys pulled faces as if he’d asked them to eat the mice, not just clean them up. Malfoy scowled at Snape and said, “Sir, this is unreasonable. I haven’t done anything wrong. Besides, I’m injured! I will be mentioning this to my father—”

Snape raised a brow at him. “You are perfectly entitled to tell your father anything you wish. I would only be too happy to speak to him again if he feels it necessary, although it has only been—what—two weeks since I discussed the Hippogriff episode with him? As you know, he was quite willing to take my guidance on a suitable punishment.”

At this, Potter turned to stare at Malfoy in surprise. He hadn’t known that the young Slytherin had received any punishment for his outrageous display during the Care of Magical Creatures lesson, certainly Malfoy wouldn’t have told anyone. He also didn’t know that Snape ever disciplined his own House, but clearly he did, even his favourite pupil.

Malfoy glared at Potter. “What?” he spat.

“This waste of time is being added to your detention. I would get started if I were you,” Snape murmured, lifting his paperwork to hide the smirk on his face at the shocked expression from Potter. It was incredibly guileless, and Snape was only human. “There are baskets in the corner. Put the mice in them and you can take the remains to Hagrid—no doubt he has something that will eat them.”

Each boy fetched a small wicker basket, shoving and squabbling in hushed voices all the while, which Snape ignored. “Do I have to lift them up with my bare hands?” asked Malfoy querulously.

“I don’t mind which part of your body you use, so long as it is done,” Snape retorted without looking up.

Potter snorted laughter. He was getting on with it. Picking up his Aunt’s dog’s droppings was a
perfectly normal part of his week back at the Dursley’s; this was no effort.

Malfy picked up a nether region of mouse by its tail and dropped it in the basked, nose curled up in disgust. That was one, compared to at least eight that Potter had collected by now. The problem was, Harry realized, if he went too fast, the Potions Professor would find something else for him to do and that wasn’t fair. He deliberately dawdled a bit, inspecting some of the more gruesome contents in the specimen jars and other unusual artefacts on the shelves. He had discretely rounded the end of a bookshelf and was in a small cranny where Snape had stored a chest of files and rolled up parchments. There appeared to be a collection of small, dragon-hide diaries. He opened one randomly, year 1977. “...chances of her seeing reason while she is Head Girl look to be none...”, he read.

The diary slammed shut suddenly in his hands with a small cloud of dust. Behind him - but how he had got there exactly Potter couldn’t fathom - was Snape looking furious, his wand aloft revealing how he had shut the book. “Sorry!” said Potter instantly, wondering what on earth had he been thinking? Snape’s diaries? Was he suicidal?

As far as Snape was concerned it may as well have been James Potter himself having a sneak into his deepest, most private thoughts. The invasion felt terrible, cataclysmic almost. Snape could have endured any amount of physical injury from the loathsome swine, but James much preferred to cause emotional torture, ironically much like the Dark Lord, and getting his hands on Snape’s diaries would have given him and Black fodder for weeks.

He reached towards Potter, who shied, but Snape merely tore the book out of Potter’s hands. Snape glanced at the cover saw that the year was 1977, the last year at school. An unbearable year. Shadows stole across his face, and Potter saw them, unable to drag his eyes away for fear he would be struck. “Sir? Sir I hardly saw anything, I only just picked it up -”

Snape opened the book and murmured a charm. The pages riffled and flipped back and forth, finally settling into an open position. The page Potter had been to. Snape read the entry and the impact was so intense, his head swam.

He vividly remembered writing it, up in the Astronomy Tower by himself, at an age where it felt his feelings would explode out of him if he didn’t channel them into something. He had no-one to talk to, no-one to confide in any longer: the diary was a small solace. That year he was starting to discover that his Death Eater-in-training cohorts weren’t quite the meeting of minds he’d expected, that in spite of their company, he felt more isolated than ever and that their brand of affiliation neither compensated for nor deterred the persecution from the Marauders. As well as his parents leaving him orphaned, his hormones had been in tumult, he craved affection, and it was the last year he could call Hogwarts home. He had no idea what he would do when the last term ended. The dread of leaving Hogwarts wasn’t just the absence of a future plan, he wouldn’t even be able to watch Lily from a distance.

After finishing that diary entry, all those years ago, Snape had stood for a long time in the arcading of the Astronomy Tower, letting a bitter wind chill him, staring, staring at the ground below.

His eyes lifted and caught Potter’s, who gazed back in fear. A wave of exhaustion came over Snape. The white-hot blade of anger which had pierced him only moments before did not energise him as it normally would, instead it seemed to deplete him. He wished only to be alone.

He turned and saw Malfoy staring at him too – both were obviously waiting for the explosion. But there wouldn’t be one tonight.

“Get your wands off my desk,” he muttered, “and get out.”
“Sir -?”

“I said leave!”

The boys didn’t risk it further, dropping their baskets and hurrying to Snape’s desk to fetch their wand. Snape stood still, waiting for the moment the door shut.

When at last the room was undisturbed, Snape strode to his desk and once again took out his bottle of whisky. He took a swig directly from the neck. He collapsed into his chair, took another swig then stoppered the bottle and returned it to its drawer. The diary was before him. He opened it and read an entry in December, close to Christmas.

In a week I will leave. I will return to Spinners End and from there, I know not what. Professor Dumbledore has asked me to keep in touch, he has told me I would make a fine teacher, but I have thought I might travel. There might be something elsewhere. The DE’s want me to stay, but I’m getting tired of how disorganized they are, all they do is talk and it’s not helping me. There might be someone out there, maybe someone like Lily.

No. She would never be Lily.

Snape let the diary fall shut and closed his eyes.
On Monday afternoon, the gargoyles outside the Staff Room admitted all Professors entry for a meeting. Support staff were minding the students, who effectively had a free period.

Dumbledore waited inside beside the fire for all to be seated. The mismatched chairs were placed around a large, round, mahogany table, and in its centre floated three candles; sconces were lit on the walls. Dumbledore, though thin, had a terrible sweet-tooth and had organized tea and cakes for the meeting, which were arranged on a side table against the wall.

Pamona Sprout entered, then Remus Lupin. They helped themselves to tea and chatted. Hagrid came next, stooping to fit through the door, and took off his enormous shaggy coat which effectively consumed the entire coat-rack. He helped himself to several cakes. McGonagall and Flitwick entered together, both putting their wands away inside their robes. McGonagall poured herself a cup of tea, but had some mints she shared with Filtwick. Professor Sinistra shuffled in, coughing loudly and wiping her nose roughly with a tissue. Her eyes were watery and when she greeted Dumbledore, she sounded very congested. Only a large mug of tea for her. Professor Vector and Trelawney arrived together, Trelawney holding forth. Professor Burbage made a rare appearance, as she only held classes three days a week. On the other days, she was restoring the archives deep in the bowels of the castle, so nobody saw her much. She hadn’t had time to really form relationships with the other teachers, in fact she was a bit new to the whole wizarding world. She was followed hot on the heels by Professor Sprout who cornered Burbage before she’d even had a chance to pour a cup of tea, with a barrage of questions which seemed to completely bewilder her.

Dumbledore had made pleasant chit chat with all of them, and had eaten a few friands already. At ten past the allotted time for the meeting, with no sign of Snape, he decided to start. They each took a chair around the table.

“Thank you so much for fitting this into your busy diaries. I realise it’s been a few months since our last meeting – we really should try to set a regular time aside – anyway, there’s plenty on the agenda so make sure you’ve fully stomachs and had a hot drink. We’ll make sure we’re wrapped up in time for dinner. I just want to quickly check that arrangements in place to cover for classes are in place?”

Nods around the table.

“Good, good. I’m not sure where Severus is, it’s perhaps his substitute hasn’t arrived. Anyway, in the interests of time we should start –,” he was interrupted suddenly by a banging from inside the wardrobe. All turned to look at it.

“What on Saturn is that?” asked Dumbledore.

“Just the boggart,” said Lupin authoritatively. “Seems to like it in there.”

At that moment, the gargoyles opened the staffroom door and Snape entered in a billow of black robes. “Sorry Headmaster,” he said, and stopped short when the cupboard started rocking and jumping.

“Oh hello Severus; don’t be alarmed, just the boggart. It can remain in the cupboard for now,” said Dumbledore.
Dumbledore. “Minerva, you’re closest, if it resumes a ruckus would you be so kind…?”

“Of course, Albus.”

Murmurs of assent around the table. “Remus, feel free to continue using it for teaching practical but in due course if you could remove it…?”

Eyes around the table turned to him. Dumbledore retrieved and opened a short parchment.

“Good news concerning The Cup. Crouch informs me that he’s had positive returns from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, so that means we have the requisite three competitors. The only change in circumstances is that there’s an age limit to be applied, so no students under 17 will be eligible. I don’t think that will be a problem, will it? I can’t think of anyone under seventeen who would be that keen.”

No comment from his staff, although Snape was pondering whether Crouch had deliberately sought the involvement of Durmstrang in order to bring their Headmaster Karkaroff back from expatriation. Crouch Senior was no longer heading up Law Enforcement, and Karkaroff had technically been released, but it wasn’t purely coincidental that very soon after his trial, the German had fled British borders. He himself had tolerated Karkaroff in their youth, but found him a bully and a self-absorbed coward, motivated by the Death Eater movement more for personal indulgence than a political view.

“Crouch says that the challenges themselves are being devised. So for us, the main prerogative, apart from supporting a champion of course, will be hosting the event and making the visitors welcome. No small task over winter. I thought maybe something special for Christmas?”

McGonagall glanced around the table. “Well I thought a Yule Ball was the tradition…?”

“Oh, a Ball, of course!” acknowledged Dumbledore delightedly. “Wonderful. I always thought Hogwarts made the perfect venue for a bit of teenage romance.”

The staff exchanged looks. It wasn’t that they thought Dumbledore had a lascivious bent, but rather they all knew amongst themselves where young love was brewing amongst the student body. It was openly accepted by the curators of wizarding history that familial bloodlines often took root, or branched out, amongst the walls and halls of their most prestigious educational institution. In fact, it was virtually encouraged, as a means of minimizing the dilution by Muggle blood, much as the organized social functions of Victorian and Edwardian times had served to perpetrate the control and expansion of the ruling classes.

“Minerva, I hate to call upon your feminine strengths, but might you take a lead on the organization of the Yule Ball?”

She pursed her lips. “Yes, Headmaster.” She knew that if the same task had been issued to Lupin or Snape, there would be no Ball. Or worse, a poorly arranged one. It grated all the same. At least she knew her efforts would translate into something magnificent. And the lasses in Gryffindor would find organizing this kind of event right up their street.

Pamona Sprout piped up. “I think I know of someone who might pop their name in the Goblet of Fire.” She eyed the others, looking smug. “Cedric Diggory has all the right characteristics for the task. I’m sure he’d do Hogwarts proud. Should I have a word with him Headmaster?”

While Dumbledore was affirming her opinion with excitable proclamations, Snape’s mind was rifling through the students in his own House, bringing up names and either ticking or crossing them. No
obvious starters came to mind, and he found himself quite untroubled. The whole event would prove disruptive enough without having to tend to fragile egos and intra-House warfare.

“Well I expect each Head of House to have some involvement in the administrations and coordination of the Tournament. There are to be three challenges to organize, the accommodations of our visitors, all the protocols and regulations set by the Ministry to observe and of course the support of our own champion,” said Dumbledore, looking from face to face around the table. “Our obligations extend from the safety of our own students, to an elegant farewell as host. It is a serious undertaking, as I’m sure you’ll appreciate. But as I have had the privilege in attending events in other nations at the grace those hosts, we must do our bit on behalf of our own great country to show that we contribute to that rich history, tradition and legacy. I am confident that I have your support?” As much as this was posed as a question, not one teacher would be bold enough to oppose Dumbledore.

Snape was mulling over how he was now supposed to combine the organization of the Triwizard cup at the same time as the audit. And all against the incipient menace of dementors and a dangerous, escape convict. Clearly echoing his own thoughts, Minerva put down her teacup and said delicately, “There’s quite a lot to be thinking about Headmaster. I wonder if we could discuss with the rest of the faculty what the Ministry requires of us?”

A rapid exchange of looks around the table. Dumbledore brought them to order after he’d refreshed his cup. “Yes, yes, indeed: Minerva is referring to our next agenda item which is about an audit of the school, to ensure Hogwarts meets the standards being set by the Board of Governors.”

Dumbledore turned and retrieved his audit pamphlet that he had placed on the table near the door. He gave it to the nearest teacher on his right and invited it to be circulated. “While you’re having a quick look at that, I’ll ask Severus to brief us on what’s involved. Would you mind, Severus?” Dumbledore sat down and sipped his tea, happy for a short break.

After a quick marshalling of thoughts before he spoke, Snape stood and walked to the large blackboard against the longest wall. His handwriting wasn’t particularly legible when using chalk, so he used the board wand to scribe his main points and key words. The Headmaster hadn’t given him any warning that he’d be presenting on the subject, but his long teaching experience and analytical mind meant he was able to succinctly explain the purpose, process and implications for the teachers without difficulty. What was harder was maintaining a neutral tone, which his colleagues zeroed in on, and which he regretted since he knew Dumbledore expected him to gain their cooperation and get the job done with a minimum of fuss.

“Who will the auditors be?” asked Flitwick before Snape had even finished his last sentence. “Someone the Ministry appoints? But how will they know how to judge us?”

“It’s not so much about judging us,” replied Snape moderately. “Their job is to collect evidence that answers the questions, and the questions are designed to frame a desirable end state.”

“Pardon?” said Trelawney, glancing around myopically for affirmation that Snape was speaking in riddles, which was ironic for her. “What does that mean?”

“There are descriptions,” he replied, indicating at the pamphlet impatiently. “And tiers of performance, not unlike the OWL grades or similar. To achieve the top tier is to be at the best possible level, arguably best in the world. But you have to work your way up from the bottom. We’ll be graded and placed somewhere along the tier according to the quality of the evidence we can supply.” He threw up a quick diagram depicting levels and numbers alongside them. “And there are categories. So we might do excellently against curriculum, for instance, but very poorly against… student wellbeing….for example.”
“Why would we be graded badly for student wellbeing?” Flitwick demanded.

“It’s an example…”, murmured Lupin.

“Yes, an example,” said Snape quickly with a nod at Lupin. “I wouldn’t care to predict how the auditors might evaluate us, what with everything going on at the moment - ,”

“I think we would fare rather well on student wellbeing,” commented McGonagall with a trace of heat in her voice. “The students never complain.”

“I agree,” rejoined Hagrid, beetling his brows at Snape as if he had personally criticized the welfare of the students. “I think the wee kiddies love it here. And the elves cook wonderful meals.”

Vehement murmurs of assent around the table.

Lupin had accessed the pamphlet and flipped through the pages to the section on criteria. “Wellbeing is just one of the categories,” he told the table as his eyes roved over the pages. “Severus is just using one example. There are seven. That’s a lot. Licensing and Regulations is one. And there are…,” he swiftly counted, “twenty-two criteria that we have to comply with just for that. Who does that stuff for the school?” He glanced up and looked immediately at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows shot up. “Licensing indeed! For what?”

“Flying instruction is one of them…”

“Whatever for?”

“If I may Headmaster,” said Snape, it beginning to dawn on him that Dumbledore had not read the pamphlet and he was going to be the messenger once again. “I did read somewhere that flying instructors teaching first year students are required to prove through a license that they are qualified to teach students who have never mounted a broom before. It would include such requirements as being able to maintain brooms so that they are safe, and being able to coach beginners in balance and control. That sort of thing.”

Everyone in the room looked at Madam Hooch. Her yellow eyes were wide with dismay. “I’ve never had a license,” she exclaimed. “I’ve been teaching first years for thirty years and never needed a license. It sounds like Muggle rubbish.”

Between the hubbub of indignant assent, Snape said to her, “In that case, I would imagine that obtaining a license would be a mere formality.”

“But why does she need one at all?!” cried Flitwick, “If she knows what she’s doing?”

“Madam Hooch,” responded Snape, with soft urgency, “did you not bring it to me yourself, the article in the Daily Prophet? The flying school in Newcastle?”

“Oh yes!” said Madam Hooch with spirit, as she recalled it. “Three youngsters died! It was their first lesson. The brooms were faulty – some say hexed – they flew the students straight into a freezing lake. Terrible!”

An energetic chatter immediately engaged the teachers, emotionally triggered as they were by the mere thought of harm to any young person and how it must have felt for the poor adult in charge. Snape waited patiently by the blackboard until Dumbledore called order.

With a deep sigh, the Headmaster said, “So it would seem that the Ministry has decided that some
balances and controls are necessary, ostensibly for the overall performance of the school but also to make the Board of Governors look good. He has to compete you know. Doesn’t want it on his watch that Hogwarts didn’t make the grade.”

“But what if we don’t pass,” asked Lupin, eyes darting between Dumbledore and Snape. “What if we fail and right before the Triwizard Cup? I mean, I take it this is happening soon?”

“We cannot fail,” said Dumbledore with gravity. And he turned to look at Snape. “And I’m confident we won’t. Severus is in charge of the audit. Mind you all cooperate with him.”

As the staff meeting concluded and house elves emerged to clear the tea things, Snape left to return to the dungeon and release the 5th years from their study period. He heard footsteps and turned to find Lupin hastening after him.

“Severus, Severus – you left this behind,” said Lupin holding out the pamphlet.

“Thank you.”

Lupin fell into step as Snape resumed his path. “What on earth did you do to earn that one?” he enquired with a sympathetic grin.

“The audit, you mean?”

“You must have really pissed off Dumbledore.”

Snape didn’t answer, he was beginning to wonder. Was it his complaining about Potter?

“Are you getting help with it?” pressed Lupin. “I could help you.”

“I can use Prefects.”

They walked in silence for a moment, Lupin having to apply effort to keep pace as Snape’s stride never relented. As they approached Slughorn’s Stairs, Lupin took the opportunity to place a hand on Snape’s arm and pause him. “I noticed something in the licensing criteria,” he said quietly, holding Snape’s gaze. “It said teachers of DADA need to be licensed. It said, well I’ve heard, that to get a license to teach DADA you are supposed to have your background checked. You have to pass certain things to be considered appropriate to teach it.” He looked anxious and pained.

Snape was cool. ‘You mean, not be a werewolf?’

“Yes, yes,” Lupin muttered, shutting his eyes. Then he looked at Snape again. “I don’t expect having a background as a Death Eater would get you a license either.”

“It’s neither here nor there. I’m no longer a Death Eater.”

“Do you think Voldemort knows that?”

Snape’s black eyes held Lupin’s for a beat, unflinching though the mention of the name caused a twinge on his left arm. What did he know? “The Dark Lord is dead, last I heard. Last anyone heard.”

Lupin cocked his head. “Not what I heard. Harry told me he was after the Philosophers Stone, using Quirrell. That’s why Quirrell died. Then the Tom Riddell manifestation in the Chamber. Sounds to me as if Voldemort is found his way back from the dead.”
They stared at each other, Snape’s heart starting to hammer but he kept his face locked down. Then without another word he turned to descend the steps to the dungeon.
On Wednesday, on his way out to breakfast, Snape passed his desk and noticed he had not put away his diary. He picked it up and considered throwing it on the fire. He no longer needed it, and clearly, in his office, even with the locking charm on his door, it was a liability – especially now Potter and Malfoy new of it. In fact there were at least two of them, he had started the diaries when he could no longer talk to Lily: he went to the alcove and saw the others, stacked on a low shelf alongside other old and retired items. A brief scan of the contents and his memory was catapulted back to a time full of angst and anger and private conflict. Stuff he usually kept secured in deep recesses within his brain, matters that didn’t need to be thought of normally.

Quickly, Snape assessed the other documents in the storage chest. Files and scrolls of parchment, some of it worthless, but some of it, he realized with mild surprise, were official school business. It was becoming clear why he’d kept them in the first place. They were dated, but they probably had some archival relevance: records of a number of policy changes to the potions curriculum; the official manufacture and specifications for cauldrons used in potions, and even some justifications to grading changes to certain past students achieving their NEWTs.

This was his dumping corner for later filing – the way his years went generally, he must have been optimistic at some point that some time would become available – but there was an obvious solution. Professor Burbage was sorting out the archives, he would take the lot down to her. Including the diaries. The Professors were given some private storage in the Archive; he could put them in there and worry about them another day.

At breakfast, Lupin switched seats with Hagrid in order to sit next to Snape. Hagrid was perfectly jocular about it, but Snape stiffened from head to toe, wondering where this was all headed. Werewolf potions? Audits? Dueling lessons? Or could it even be Sirius Black on his mind? – what was it to be? At some level, Lupin was not to be denied a relationship with Snape, however unbalanced and forced.

“Severus,” began Lupin immediately, shoveling scrambled egg onto his plate. “I have received a post owl this morning with the latest myrrh and aconite modifications to the wolfsbane potion. There’s barely wolfsbane in it, in fact, but the name sticks. There’s a wizard working in Turkey who has been treating local Lycanthropes there, and his brew has been successful in almost completely stalling the transformation.” Lupin gulped down some eggs and earnestly sought Snape’s attention. Snape poured some tea, avoiding his eyes.

“My father,” Lupin continued, “made contact with him when I was still a child. This wizard has been working continuously for years to improve the lot of local wolves. He’s hardly saved any – at least eight people – Lycanthropes – have died since he started. None of them to natural causes.”

Snape raised his brows and selected a single kipper.

Lupin rummaged around in his jacket pockets as he finished a mouthful of eggs. “Here,” he mumbled, handing a folded and sealed piece of parchment to Snape. “Here’s the recipe. D’you think you could brew it? It needs a few days to mature, before the same 10 day sequence preceding a full moon.” He gulped, and looked up at Snape. “You’ll need to start today.”
Snape’s eyes roved over the Slytherin table. His House were presentable, as far as he could see. A couple of older students, Prefects, caught his critical eye and immediately started berating the younger students for sloppy table manners or imperfections in their uniform. Inwardly Snape smiled. Exactly so.

Still not facing Lupin and held out an open hand. Lupin placed the parchment in it, like a dog delivering the newspaper. “I will begin the potion today. I can’t guarantee you it will deliver the results of your Turkish wizard. I know not this individual and I won’t be held responsible for the quality of his work. Has this version been approved by the Ministry?”

Lupin shrugged. No, then. “Thank you. Shall I come in a few days?”

“No. I’ll bring it to you when it’s ready.”

Snape took advantage of a pleasant pause to eat some breakfast, then cringed inside when Lupin said, “I’ve been having some ideas about reviving the dueling club…”

There was a class after breakfast, and then a break. Snape thought he should have been starting the potion for Lupin, but remembered that Professor Burbage was only teaching three days a week, and today she was in the archive. This was his chance to tick off an irritating chore.

He tidied up the dungeon classroom, using his wand to scour the bottom of three cauldrons and tutting that at least 150 grams of aye-aye spleen had been exposed to potassium chloride and would be wasted. Two potions worth seeing through he placed in the maturation chamber with a last, deliberate stir. With a sweep of his robes, he gathered his items for archiving and locked his dungeon door.

The archives were at the opposite end of the castle, but at a similar level to the dungeons, being level to the lake and accessed via winding stone steps. Sconces lit the way down, even in the late morning, autumn sunshine. When he reached the heavy oak, iron-hinged door of the archive, he banged loudly on the knocker.

“Yes? Who is it?” came a voice from within that he recognized as Charity Burbage. All going well so far.

“Professor Snape. I was hoping I might consult you.”

After a pause, the hasp lifted and the door swung inward. Burbage peeked through the gap.

“Oh it is you,” she uttered, looking surprised and a little annoyed. But then she smiled. “Did you want to come in?”

“Please. I should only take a minute.”

Burbage opened the door fully to admit him, and as he walked into the room he realized it was probably more than a few years since the last time he’d been there. Filing and archiving of school matters was normally the sort of task he’d give an elf, but not his personal diaries. He recalled the stone-walled, cool and cavernous room with its lantern sconces lit with candles, a single massive fireplace –presently out - and rows and rows of shelving. In the castle’s history, the room had been part of a passageway between the boathouse and the lower floors, being wide enough for rowboats and sailboats to be brought onto the floor when rough weather made it perilous for them to be
moored. Now it was fully sealed from outside, and every wall was lined with a miscellany of boxes, trunks and chests, volumes of books, and pyramids of leather scroll cases. Paintings and portraits were stacked up against gaps in the wall, and assorted furniture, taxidermy and other retired relics were stashed and propped in available spaces. In the middle of the room was an immense mahogany carved table that gleamed in the candlelight, its edges smooth and rounded from constant touch. Given its length of at least 12 feet, there were only a few chairs drawn up to it, but atop the table was clearly the manifestation of Burbage’s efforts, with several hundred scrolled parchments sorted into piles, cases piled up on the floor and an old typewriter placed before a chair with a padded seat, poorly illuminated by a stuttering candelabra.

Burbage watched him and then followed his eyes. “A while since you were last down here?”

“Yes. I trusted elves to know where and how to archive. If I needed something they would retrieve it for me.”

“Well they were probably the only people who would know how to find anything. Must have been some kind of logic they were following. That’s why I have Nixey sometimes to help me but he’s not a free elf and won’t accept payment.”

 Presuming Nixey was a Hogwarts elf, and yet to show an interest in freedom, Snape did not comment. Standing several inches taller than Burbage, he noticed she had cobwebs caught in her hair.

She looked up at him. “So what brings you down here, Professor?” She pointed to his parcel. “Must be looking for a home for these?”

“Uh, yes, these are official school records,” he replied, extracting the scrolls and handing them to her. In his other hand were the diaries. “But these…well these are personal. I believe there is secure storage for personal items?”

She nodded. “There are some lock boxes and safes, over here. I’ll show you, Professor.” After placing the scrolls on the table, she began walking to the west end of the room, wrapping the wool coat she wore tighter around her slim frame, her heeled boots clipping on the floor.

“Please, call me Severus,” said Snape, starting to feel some sympathy for the hopeless task she’d been given, and worried in case he’d unnecessarily disturbed her in the middle of things.

She looked at him over her shoulder and smiled. “And will you call me Charity? We’ve worked together a couple of years now – should be on first names.”

“Of course…Charity. Surely you’ve been at Hogwarts longer than a couple of years?” He was ashamed to realise that he’d barely noticed her since she’d started. He vaguely remembered Dumbledore making the usual beginning of term announcement, but considered Muggle Studies a third tier subject and promptly put it out of his mind.

“I started September 1990, so that’s three years this year. Doesn’t seem that long.” She smiled ruefully at him. “I keep a low profile. Especially down here.”

“How long have you been on this project?”

“Two years. That I definitely know. I can’t wait till it’s finished.” Having reached a panel of cupboard doors she opened them to reveal row upon row of neatly stacked black metal boxes, none of which appeared to have a lid or a keyhole, or other discernible marking aside from a name plate. She scanned these, searching until she found Snape’s. “Ah, here we are.” She pulled at the box and
it slid out of its compartment, apparently well reinforced as she needed both hands to hold it. “Will this do? The books should fit OK.”

“I had no idea… yes it’s perfect.” Snape took the box from her and searched for an opening.

“Oh it’s calibrated to your wand,” she informed him helpfully. “Unless you’ve had to change your wand?”

“No. No I haven’t.”

“So it’s just cistem aperio and a wand tap.”

Drawing out his wand from his sleeve, he spoke the charm softly and touched the box with it. The box immediately formed a lid and opened. He glanced at Charity who was beaming. “Magic, isn’t it?” she murmured.

“Presumably.”

She suddenly laughed. “I know. It still blows me away.”

“Who set up the calibration?” he asked as he placed his diaries inside the box. Closing the lid, it sealed invisibly.

“No idea. I just know that if you’ve had to change your wand since the original calibration, there’s a bit of a procedure to re-set it. So let me know if your wand is lost or stolen. Just like when you lose a credit card or forget your computer log-on.”

Once more he glanced at her. She was very Muggle-like. “You’ve worked with computers?”

“Oh yes. I’ve been living and teaching at Muggle schools until I started here.” Charity took the box from him and returned it to its compartment, then shut the cupboard doors. “Safe and sound. You can come and get that box any time you want.”

Snape stood with his hands clasped behind his back and considered her, somewhat intrigued. The cobweb in her dark blond hair stirred as she moved and he said, “Um – you have – there’s -,” and then vaguely indicated the top of her head.

She touched with her hand and found the sticky web, which she immediately grabbed free. “Oh no, not again. When you have to get boxes out from underneath the shelves,” she said by way of explanation. “And the dead mice! If Nixey’s here I get him to do it…” She then rubbed her cheek. “I suppose I have dust streaks all over my face as well?”

He perused her features briefly, looking for dirt but instead noticing her large, gentle brown eyes. She had a scattering of freckles across her nose.

“No…your face is fine…So are you…Muggle-born?”

She took a moment to answer him, clearly wondering where the question might be headed. Perhaps she was reviewing what she knew of Snape, what his feelings on the subject were. Re-wrapping her coat, this time protectively, he felt, her answer was subdued. “Yes. My parents are Muggles. Lovely, kind, dedicated Muggles. And they’re proud and delighted I’m a witch.”

He remembered Lily, suddenly. In the playground. You’re a witch.

“How did you find out? Did you get a visitor from Hogwarts?”
“I got a letter, yes, but I didn’t believe it. Then Dumbledore visited. My parents loved him. They knew that I was different, it caused problems, and they hoped that being with others like myself would make me happy.”

Snape remembered his own fervent desire to join the like-minded. A silly, naïve dream. As if prejudice couldn’t happen anywhere.

“I came to Hogwarts in ’72, but I only stayed a year,” she continued. “I couldn’t handle it. I missed my simple Muggle life.” She shrugged and smiled off-hand at him. “Probably not something you’d understand. You’re as wizard as they come.”

Snape felt the corner of his mouth twitch, a small smile in return. “I’m in fact a half-blood,” he found himself saying. “I thought most people knew that.”

But Charity’s mouth had opened in amazement. “No, I didn’t know that. I thought you must have come from ancient pure-blood lines. You’re so …so good at it!”

He lowered his eyes at the compliment, so free and easy, but did not comment. He fleetingly wondered what magic she’d seen him perform, whether it was something he rated himself, imagined her being impressed by it.

“Is your mother or father a Muggle?” she inquired conversationally.

“My father. He’s dead now. In fact they both are.” He shocked himself, even as the words were coming out. Why was he telling her this?

“I’m sorry,” she responded, a slight frown denting her brow. “Was it recently? They must have been young, considering you’re only - what – late thirties?”

He surprised himself further by saying: “Not long after I started here. A car accident.” He mentally started slamming down the lids of vaults in his head that had inexplicably sprung open before he became afflicted with a full-blown case of verbal diarrhea. He’d told this woman more about his life in the last ten minutes than he’d told half the staff in the last ten years.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated simply. “Hard when you’re a teen. And away from home.” Her words, intended to be empathetic, evaporated in thin air. Snape had entombed his thoughts and feelings about his parent’s death decades ago. The car crash may have ended their physical lives but they had been dead as a family long before that. She seemed to sense this and changed the subject. “So we’re about the same age. When did you start?”

“1971. Then we were here at the same time…I’m sorry, I don’t recall…” Scanning his memories, he tried to think if he’d known her then, but he hadn’t mingled outside his immediate group much.

She studied him for a moment, then said, “I think I do…you would have been in Slytherin…I think I might remember you. You were in a form above mine. Did you get in a fight once with some Gryffindor kids?”

“Ah. You’ve heard the rumours.”

She grinned broadly. “No, not rumours, I was there, I remember it. Things were pretty intense then. I was just a studious Ravenclaw lass, no reason you’d notice me. But all that hexing going on – crazy.”

His expression told her he was glad it was long in his past, but with Lupin on the scene, and Black out there somewhere, perhaps it never really went away.
“Well, I don’t know what those hexes were for, but from what I remember – well I hope you gave ‘em hell, Severus. Those boys were bullies even then. There were a lot of reasons I went home, but if I’m honest, the school’s method of dealing with those students – I think it could have been handled better.”

He was torn between agreeing with her and defending the school, Dumbledore and McGonagall. There were a lot of extenuating circumstances, and Snape never played the victim. But in his heart, when he had been silenced, when he was cajoled into letting things pass, when blithe excuses let justice slide again and again, he had hurt. “It was a long time ago,” he finally said, thinking the answer limp but conscious he didn’t know her relationship to the other staff.

“I did give them hell,” he thought, however, and very nearly said it out loud to please her. “They didn’t get half of it.”

Instead he said, “You were in Ravenclaw?” The Houses were useful for only the broadest of brushstrokes pertaining to a child’s barely formed personality, and that was if the Sorting Hat got it right. But for some reason he was glad she hadn’t been in Gryffindor.

“Yes! My House was the best thing about being here. Flitwick was brilliant. It was him that commended me to Dumbledore for this post. He completely and utterly ignored my mudblood status.”

“Don’t –,” uttered Snape, a little shocked at her use of the word. “Don’t say –,”

She grinned widely, eyes crinkling, and touched his arm as if to relax him. “It’s okay, I’m allowed to use that word. It’s our word – it’s ironic. It’s Muggle humour.”

“Many find it deeply offensive.” He was frowning, again thinking of Lily.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be offensive.”

“And you’re not a Muggle. You’re a witch. How did you practice magic when you lived at home?”

“After I left here you mean? Well I had to put away my wand, but I’d always been best with a more intuitive form of magic anyway. Non-verbal’s are my specialty. Sometimes it was uncontrolled, but I sort of managed to channel it. I had to promise to the Ministry to keep it under wraps.”

Snape regarded her with new respect. The person he’d viewed as somewhat reclusive and unremarkable was definitely destroying some preconceptions. She was open, humorous and had made some interesting decisions in her life. He liked her eyes, too, he discovered. She had nice eyes. Not Lily eyes, not like that. But warm. She seemed unafraid to look at him. When she smiled again, that was another thing he added to the list. He didn’t realise she was so willing to smile. He didn’t remember her that way at staff meetings.

“Being good at non-verbal’s is a huge advantage. Give me a demonstration.”

She raised her brows coyly at him. “Alright, let’s see. Something I’ve been doing a lot of down here in the archive. . . .” Charity set her sights on scroll cases on an uppermost shelf, and with just the slightest flick of her fingers, they levitated and travelled steadily towards the mahogany table, where they deposited gently. She swung round and beamed archly.

A smile of his own twitched in return. It was hardly revolutionary magic. She could see him thinking this and pouted. “Oh look, c’mom, I’ve got a lot of lost time to catch up on. And anyway, you are the toughest critic in the world. By the way, I was terrible at potions.”

At this, he actually laughed out loud. A mere exclamation, but nonetheless audible and once more he surprised himself, a bit like a puppy’s first bark. She caught his expression. “Oh go on, laugh at
me now. I’m glad my incompetence amuses you. But…it is nice to see you smile, Severus.”

He brought himself under control, but his features had softened all the same. “You’re not incompetent. Have you a decent wand?”

She looked caught off guard by the question. “Um, yes -,” she answered, patting about her person trying to locate it. “Where is it…?”

“You haven’t -?” He wondered at her. “Charity, you should keep it about you. Call it to you.”

“Accio wand,” she said obediently, looking at him as she spoke. The wand could be seen struggling to free itself under a pile of parchment on the table, then flew to her open hand. “It’s a nuisance to carry. Why do I have to keep it on me?”

He held her gaze for a beat, to let her know that he was serious on this point. “It will protect you. It will light your way. It will open doors. It will fell your enemies. Having said that, I don’t believe in foolish wand waving.”

Mischievous humour glinted in his eyes. She didn’t quite get the joke, but liked that he was colluding with her.

Snape gently took the wand from her to examine it. “From Ollivanders? What is this – poplar? What is the core?” Charity’s wand was pale in colour except where glossy black and russet rivulets of tree ring swirled and weaved up the length. A slightly moulded grip at the end made it pleasant to hold.

“Unicorn.” Her expression suddenly became distant. “I really loved that wand. I was desperate to show all my Muggle friends, but knew I couldn’t. When I came home, I put it back in its box and stashed it away. Sometimes I felt it pulling me, calling to me. If I took it out and touched it, like a little stroke, I could feel the magic tingle up my arm. But it got weaker over time. Can it fade? Can it lose its potency?”

He inclined his head a fraction. “A wand is like any instrument – you build a relationship, you form a bond, and like a marriage, you become…co-dependent. I don’t believe my wand would work for anyone else now. If you abandon it, yes, the spirit in it would dwindle away eventually. It’s known as wilting.”

As the words left his mouth he saw that she was listening intently, staring almost. He felt sudden, intolerable pressure. In his mind, Snape pulled down the shutters – Charity could tell the moment when his eyes became abruptly remote, aloof. Stiltedly, he handed the wand back to her.

“I’m so sorry, Professor, I have kept you intolerably long. I’m afraid I have a class in less than five minutes.”

“Of course,” she murmured, perplexed. What had happened?

He strode away from her, back towards the door, then turned and faced her a last time. “Thank you for…thank you.” And he was gone, his robe swishing behind him.
The remainder of the day was devoted to classes, none of which were particularly remarkable but which Snape found simultaneously a relief and vexatious. He welcomed the opportunity to immerse himself in a familiar and well-worn routine, but was nagged by the wish to be alone and meditate on a strange and anomalous alarm that had been triggered in his mind.

When a 6th year student produced an impeccable potion, first try, and brought it to Snape’s table for grading, he almost sobbed with gratitude. It seemed a tiny token in the day of something going right, a moment of clouds parting and a shaft of light coming through, a small flower in a muddy, mown field. The student received a smile from Snape for her work and her eyes widened in consternation, and she turned and hurried back to her desk and tried to make herself as inconspicuous as possible.

Snape could not explain why he felt this way, but he knew it had something to do with his conversation with Charity Burbage. It troubled him, as if he’d forgotten something important, or committed an impropriety for which punishment would be imminent. He scanned again and again across his words in case his instincts had picked up an error that he himself did not yet know, but nothing blipped, nothing stood out, nothing he’d said should be a problem.

At the end of classes for the day, he returned to his dungeon office unobserved to retrieve the modified potion recipe that Lupin had given him. The potion needed to be started, and he hoped, vainly, that getting that chore underway would somehow assuage him.

He sat at his desk to read through the instructions on the parchment, which took several minutes as the writing was almost indecipherable and smudged. This brought to his mind the typewriter on the table in the archive, an old-fashioned manual, mechanical object. Why couldn’t they be used occasionally? What was this wizarding obsession with ink and quills? He vowed to himself that he would ask Charity to let him use it –

And there was a sudden flare in his head, as if he’d touched an inflamed sore, or stung himself.

Charity. Was it she? Was she a threat?

He pictured her warm, laughing eyes and inside his mind, bolted down shields were wrenched open. What? Why? There was nothing about her different to other staff on the faculty, people he worked with every day, for years. What was significant about Charity that he should be hoisted into mental turmoil?

He forcibly dismissed the flare and concentrated on the parchment. The words swam. It was a long, exacting and complicated potion, with a great number of alterations on the version Snape had made for Lupin’s September full moon – gathering and measuring the ingredients alone would take hours. If he made a larger batch, would it store?

He should make sure this parchment was kept safe; he thought. He’d never memorise this potion accurately. Perhaps he should archive it. Perhaps he should make a copy, using the typewriter. There was no point using a copy charm if the original was next to useless. He imagined himself going to the archive to do so. Would Charity be there? He could go tomorrow when she wasn’t there, but he didn’t think he should use the typewriter without her permission.
A log shifting in the fire snapped him out of a reverie, in which he had imagined working on a duplicate with Professor Burbage, mulling over how he could explain the potion without revealing the need for it. Realising he’d wasted almost half an hour on unjustified cogitation, he chastised himself and stamped down the trapdoor steps into his storeroom intent on making a start. If, apparently, he was on a promise from Dumbledore to keep Lupin protected on his own expertise, then this would be the best wolfsbane potion Lupin had ever imbibed.

In the mixing room, the demands of the draught eclipsed his wandering mind and he lost track of time. Dinner came and went without him noticing. He was forced to replace two candles, causing much irritated cursing – why hadn’t the elves charmed them to replenish? Around 8pm, a second year student ended up banging on the door due for his detention that Snape had forgotten all about. Snape dropped a vial and the ingredients spilled over the stone floor, ruined. When he flung open the door, furious, the student – Rupert Kennett of Hufflepuff - jumped in fright and said he’d been to both the classroom and his office looking for him. For a moment, Snape considered yelling at him that detention was cancelled, then remembered this particular little toad had been making jokes in class about Neville Longbottom’s inventive boggart charm and so decided to be spontaneous.

“I need an assistant. You are to follow any instruction I give you but do not interrupt me. If you finish a task, wait in that corner until I call you again. Understand?”

Rupert nodded, eyes like saucers. At night, in the dungeon, with Snape in full flight over a large cauldron, this was no time to argue a point.

Twice, the potion was unsatisfactory. One was ruined by a mis-measured ingredient because the ingredients were processed in two separate forms, and he’d brought the wrong form up and measured that version out. That had been ruined at 6pm and the cauldron had been peremptorily scourgified, but Snape set Kennett to work anyway, scrubbing the cauldron and the stirrer.

The second potion had been toxified by heat. Too much flame beneath the cauldron – a rookie error. When Snape realized the potion was destroyed, he sent Kennett away and then threw a number of empty, glass canisters at the wall. He was running dangerously low on ingredients, and they were expensive, difficult to get. A special order would need to be placed to restock them. Furthermore, he needed to spend another hour down in the store before starting again.

It was two in the morning before Snape flung himself down on his bed, the Wolfsbane emitting its faint blue smoke in the maturing chamber. Although he hadn’t anything to eat or drink since lunch, he was too tense and exhausted to bother. He kicked off his boots with effort and allowed his eyes to unfocus, knowing sleep was far away.

How had it come to be that the man who had stood by while his friends humiliated and degraded him, indeed almost killed him, was now privy to hours of Snape’s time and labour? Why was Snape reduced to some kind of peon, when surely it was Lupin who needed to supplicate for the negligence and violence he’d been party to? It was Dumbledore who’d agreed to it, worse, offered it, on Snape’s behalf, without consulting him, to secure the wolf for a position that Snape coveted. Why was it that Dumbledore considered a werewolf, who needed constant, high-level maintenance and who posed a deadly risk to the students, a better choice than Snape? Was it the rumoured jinx on the post that Dumbledore was protecting him from – did he believe Lupin dispensable in case the jinx was true?

Anger, now mixing with the stress of the evening, did nothing to aid his rest. Snape tossed and turned, until dawn, when he thought of the mahogany table in the archive, Charity’s oddly innocent wand, her smiling at him over her shoulder, and finally relented to sleep.
The next day, Snape showered, shaved and dressed as though his life depended on it. Coffee was a special order for the House Elves, but he would be asking for several. For today, he was not just surviving, not just teaching, but initiating contact with the Board of Governors as well. This audit wasn’t going to get done by itself.

He checked on his Wolfsbane before he left. The potion was bubbling about once per ten seconds – perfect. The blue smoke was almost indistinct in the smoky candlelight. Snape straightened. Unusually, he craved sunlight.

Making his way to Great Hall, he heard the dull roar of several hundred head of teen discussing their lives over breakfast. He made his way to the teacher’s dais and took his usual seat, this time once more between Lupin and Flitwick. A quick glance over the Slytherin table assured him that everyone was accounted for. He would check in personally after breakfast.

Hagrid came in shortly after him and passed behind his chair. “Morning Severus. Good of yer to join us; we missed you last night. Almost came ter visit.”

“No need, thank you Hagrid,” replied Severus briskly. “Just caught up in a project. All is well.”

Hagrid often took it upon himself to extend his caretaking instincts to Snape, and had done since Snape had been a new entrant, volatile and yet heartbreakingly vulnerable to the practiced eye of Dumbledore and his gamekeeper. Snape placed his order for a pot of strong coffee, remembered too late his vial of Restoration Remedy and thought wasn’t it just ironic that he was too tired to remember a cure for tiredness? The thought of irony reminded him of Charity’s claim to ironic humour, and suddenly he froze, wondering if she was at breakfast.

The impulse to look down the table was overwhelming and he forced himself instead to select some food to put on his plate. And then the impulse got the better of him anyway. Fortunately, Dumbledore had said something amusing causing laughter, and even though he hadn’t heard it, he pretended he had with an enthusiastic glance in the Headmaster’s direction and then a sly look at the far end table. Unfortunately it was almost impossible to see at this angle, the teachers at the far end were hidden from view and he found himself disappointed. He toyed with the idea of fabricating a reason for a visit to one of the other Professors down that end…surely there was some reason to drop by McGonagall…

His coffee arrived. A physical need took priority and he poured himself a cup, forsaking the milk and sugar that had been thoughtfully added to the tray. Lupin watched with interest and said, “Need a boost? I have some Restoration –”

“Thank you, coffee will do.”

Lupin finished his mouthful, dabbed a napkin then said, “Tough night? The owls were atrocious – I don’t know what gets in to them sometimes – worse than cats – “

“The moon perhaps?”

The barb wasn’t lost on Lupin. He stiffened and looked away briefly, then roughly rubbed his moustache with the napkin. “Just trying to be…friendly…alright?”
Snape swallowed a cup of coffee in one gulp, then poured another.

“Dumbledore talked about the plans for Halloween -,” Lupin began stoically, but Snape turned his back and began a rather false conversational broadside with a startled Flitwick, who had sunk into a morning repose.

So obvious was Snape’s maneuver that the snub would have been obvious to any student watching. Too late, Snape realized, he hadn’t stopped to check. Quite apart from the gossip that would have been won as fair game, Snape didn’t want to be labelled a hypocrite by his own house. It was a bit too late to teach many of his Slytherins diplomacy now, however. His own conduct in the classroom recently had taught far more than potions – his younger students who reverred him had taken wholesome lessons in sarcasm, criticism, humiliation, victimization and dismissiveness to heart.

The bell rang and there was a cacophony of movement as students and teachers alike began moving towards their next appointments. Snape went down to the Slytherin table and caught the attention of Warrington and Pucey. “You two – come to my office after second period, I need to talk to you.”

“Yes, sir,” Warrington answered, hastily tucking his shirt in. Snape thought this was for his benefit, and made a point of raising his brow, but then saw the boys looking over his shoulder and turned to face Dumbledore, standing behind him.

“Thank you boys,” said Dumbledore, in effect dismissing them. He turned to Snape. “A quick word if I may?”

“Certainly Headmaster.”

“Lupin’s Wolfsbane is on track I hope? I overheard a terrorized young Hufflepuff who enjoyed detention with you last night. And I noticed you missed dinner.”

“It is a challenging and onerous potion, if I may be frank, sir. There is now a complete cauldronful, and it appears to be correct, so Lupin should be fine this month. But I have depleted stocks of key ingredients and I will need to order more before next month. I am afraid it will be expensive, particularly as I will need to make delivery fast.”

“Will the potion be ready in time?”

“He needs to take it for several days in a row before the full moon once ready. It’s maturing at the moment. I think he should start on Halloween.” Dumbledore was nodding, clearly quite concerned about it. Snape thought that was well and fine, that his rather glib and fatuous solution to giving Lupin employment was now a bit of a headache for everyone. “By the way sir, that Hufflepuff student, Kennett – he did not know the nature of the potion. I did not disclose it.”

“No, he didn’t name it, it was I that put two and two together. He was painting a very vivid picture of the mood the potion put you in. As you say, it is a challenging one.”

“I have a class, sir, but perhaps we could walk and talk as I have another matter.”

Dumbledore indicated he was obliged by indicating the way forward.

“The audit – I should like to visit the Ministry and have a meeting with as many members of the Board of Governors as possible – as I understand it, at least three work at the Ministry on any given day? Including the Chair?”

“Yes, that’s right, Sir Byron works in the department of IMC.”
“Perhaps, sir, you could send him a letter of introduction and advise him I would like to meet him for guidance, and then I could alert him via Floo when I will be visiting. I may need a substitute teacher that day.”

They had arrived at the top of the stairs to the dungeons and they could hear the students waiting outside the classroom for Snape, causing a ruckus.

“A good idea Severus, I shall do that.” Dumbledore cocked his head towards the noise. “Have a good morning, lad. I have a Restoration Remedy in my office if you need it.”

As Dumbledore walked away, Snape sighed heavily then straightened and braced for impact.

Later that morning, his head pounding, Snape returned to his office, arms laden with homework for marking. Warrington and Pucey were waiting outside, heads bent over something Warrington held in his hands.

“Thank you, boys,” Snape muttered by way of getting their attention, and he shifted his load of parchments to one arm while he flicked out his wand with the other to unlock the door. It was a very precise movement of a twitch to loosen the wand from its holds inside his sleeve and letting gravity slide it into his palm.

The Prefects following him in, and as he sat gratefully down behind his desk, Warrington approached the table with the object in his hand and placed it in front of Snape.

“What is this?”

“I believe it’s a Muggle camera, sir.”

Snape picked it up and examined it. Indeed, it was a Muggle camera, the kind he’d seen other Muggles use when he was a child. If his parents had one, they never used it. These days, when he went home to Cokeworth on holidays, he saw tourists using them, and remembered pharmacies used to process the photographs – sometimes he’d see them in their paper packets ready for the customers on the counter. While there was a superficial similarity in the wizarding world, magical cameras did not use film or need to be developed with chemicals. Rather, the camera was used to select an image with a viewfinder, then a technical charm was employed to transfer it to a glossy paper developed with an eisque developing solution, allowing the image to move.

“Where did it come from?”

“We found some first years playing with it. We think they stole it from the Muggle Studies cupboard.”

Snape’s head jerked up at this. “Stole it? Which House were they in?”

Pucey looked admonished. “Slytherin, sir. We caught them in the Common Room. I told them you’d be hearing about it.”

“Names?”

“Jacob Fetherington and Carmilla Constantinople.”
Snape set the camera carefully aside. “Thank you, gentlemen. Please send them to me here after lunch. No, wait -,” he reached into his desk drawer and pulled out the Master Class timetable. There were no coinciding free periods for Potions and Muggle Studies for the remainder of the school day. “Send them to me straight after last period.” He intended to return the camera, and wanted Charity to be there when he did. “Actually, better deliver them, some First Years won’t know how to find me themselves yet.”

“Yes sir,” said Warrington. “We do have Quidditch practice this afternoon -,”

“You won’t need to stay. Just make sure they find my office.”

“Yes sir, of course.”

Snape indicated for the two Prefects to sit, and when they were, he looked at them levelly for a moment or two. Then he said, “I am giving you each an extra-credit assignment. I need you both to assist me.”

The two boys glanced at each other, eyes wide, but not with anticipation, more anxiety. Snape shook his head slightly, guessing what was on their mind. “Not with potions, don’t worry about that, but since we’re discussing that, if you intend to go onto NEWTs, you’re going to have to start taking my class much more seriously before OWLs.”

“Yes sir,” they both said, eyes down.

“Onto the assignment at hand. The Headmaster has given me a project to manage, and it will be tedious and dull, and involve a lot of fetch and carry type work. But if you do a good job of it, there will be credit for each of you, and points towards the House Cup.”

The boys were confused now. “What kind of project?”

“Hogwarts is to be audited, it’s a scheme set up by the Ministry and Board of Governors. They want to make sure Hogwarts is up to the same standard as our European counterparts.”

“What’s it mean to be audited?” asked Pucey, and at the same time, Warrington said, “What do we have to do?”

“Audited means to be examined closely and to pass certain tests. Standards. They’ll want to turn over every rock to make sure the school is run properly.”

“Who’s they? People from the Ministry?”

“Yes. They’re called auditors. Unbelievably some people do this for money.”

The pair digested this for a few moments. Warrington was nodding slightly, as Snape observed the information being processed telegraph on his features. “So will the auditors want to talk to us?”

“I doubt it. What I need from you will become clearer over time, but what I need to produce is evidence. Where it can be found. The things the auditors will want to see that proves we actually do what we say we do. I’ll need your help finding that evidence.”

Pucey seemed to have a brainwave. “Why can’t you just conjure up evidence?”

Snape carefully controlled his expression. “Because the auditors will probably be expecting that. They’ll look for the traces of magic.”
“Oh. Will they check your wand?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them. Probably most of the House Masters and teachers will need to submit their wands for a reversal if there’s due cause.”

The two boys appeared to accept checkmate, and sat mutely. They clearly weren’t thrilled with the assignment, but had far too much respect for their Head of House to say so. Snape appreciated this. “Don’t worry, I won’t let it interfere with Quidditch. We still need that Cup. Gryffindor are not backing down.”

Warrington grinned, happy to be on familiar territory. “Don’t worry sir, we won’t let you down on that one.”

Snape offered them a strained smile. “I’ll be sure to come down for the matches. In the meantime, I rely on you to keep the Slytherin’s on track when I can’t be around. My schedule is…tight…at the moment. Please keep me informed, and let me know if there are problems.”

At long last, the teaching day drew to a close. By late October, 3pm drew a long-slanting light and rich shadows across the lawns. The Forbidden Forest was virtually pitch by this hour under the dense canopy. In the Great Hall and along the corridors with windows, the light was almost tactile, and rectangles of it reflected the counterpanes on the floor.

Snape stood at one of the windows on his way back to the dungeon office having escorted a student to the hospital wing after an eventful 4th year class that finished his day. The student would soon be back on her feet, Madam Pomfrey assured him, particularly since his quick actions had averted further damage. But it cast his mind to the possibility of the medical records being audited at Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey was kept impressively busy year in, year out. She had literally saved lives. While she was an indisputable asset to the school, was it normal for students to be exposed to such high rates of harm and hurt? Would their European cousins show similar histories?

Between Quidditch, hexes, jinxes, Jonkos jokes and Potions classes, the students seemed to be in a perpetual state of hazard. That didn’t include the odd magical creature losing control, and of course, the various antics visited upon them by the apparently fearless Harry Potter. Dementors, basilisks, escaped convicts and a psychopathic megalomaniac barely caused a blip by comparison. Snape let the sunlight burn through his shut eyelids to the back of his retinas and rubbed his forehead, then briskly swept his robe and marched on back to the dungeon.

The two first year students arrived not five minutes after he had sat down at his desk. Warrington and Pucey were immediately dismissed for Quidditch having delivered their charges as promised. The two students stood across the desk from him, mustering all their eleven-year-old bravado like good Slytherins in the making. But Snape wasn’t letting them know that.

“Take your hands out of your pockets!” he snapped at the boy, Fetherington. The lad did so, watched by his friend who seemed suddenly a little uncertain.

He spent a good ten seconds from there just sitting in silence, glaring at them. Their cool ebbed away. If the Prefects had done their job properly, these two should have been primed to expect the worst hour of their life.

“How long have you been at Hogwarts?” he asked them coldly.
“Sir?”

“You arrived on September first. It is now October 29\textsuperscript{th}. That’s less than two months. You are less than two months into your stay at this institution, in my House, and you have cost us thirty points.”

“Sir!” the two objected loudly together. “Why sir?”

“For stealing!” he rounded on them fiercely. “Fifteen points each. And it’s me who has to deduct it. Where did this camera come from?”

Constantinople dropped her eyes immediately at the sight of it. Fetherington decided to bluff it out.

“From nowhere. I brought it from home.”

“\textit{Really?”}

“Yes sir. It’s mine.”

Snape stood and went to the filing cabinet a few feet from his desk. It contained details about the students assigned to Slytherin. Apart from documenting anything significant about them as individuals, about their families (particularly if there were a Death Eater in the background), about their education prior to Hogwarts, he could record information on their file, such as breaches, awards, injuries and the like. He pulled out Fetherington’s file and scanned it before fixing an icy stare back at the boy. “It says here you’re a pure-blood. That your father owns a stonemasons business with exclusively wizarding clients. Why would there be a Muggle camera in a pristine, magical home such as yours?”

Snape had met Fetherington before when he met with each and every first year at the start of term. The interview had been unremarkable as the boy was a very typical Slytherin novitiate – pureblood, educated at home by tutors, pandered to by house elves, dressed in brand new uniform from Twilfit and Tatting. No evidence of fascism in the family, but he had a lot of that arrogance that comes from entitlement and indulgence.

The boy paled under Snape’s penetrating stare. A few sharp corners would be knocked off the edges of this one before he graduated Slytherin – doing so was a point of pride for Snape. They didn’t expect it from their Head of House, a previous Death Eater, so he was always able to catch them unawares. Perhaps he was motivated by envy, by resentment when he contrasted his own home life with theirs. But in greater part it was the truth he’d discovered himself that starving them a little, cleansing them, detoxifying them from those self-satisfied dogmatisms, made them better wizards and witches.

“Well?” Snape demanded, closing the file draw with a bang. “What on earth would a young wizard such as yourself do with a Muggle camera that you can’t even work? And even more puzzling, why bring it with you to Hogwarts?”

Devoid of answer, Fetherington shrugged. Constantinople saw the lay of the land. Sensibly, she said, “Professor Snape sir, he – we – took the camera after Muggle Studies. Professor Burbage had asked the class to pass it around and…at the end of the class we just sort of forgot we had it.” A blush crept hotly up her neck and Fetherington hissed at her. “We were going to take it back, honestly sir.”

“Except the entire time it is in your possession, \textit{not} being returned, it classifies as stolen. Having stolen goods on your person makes you a thief. Thieving is strictly in breach of Hogwarts Code of Conduct and the Slytherin Constitution. Hence fifteen points each. I’ll be making a note on your file.” He turned to Fetherington. “Lying is also unacceptable. Another five points from you. Thank
you, students, that’s thirty-five points in less than an hour and in under two months. I’ll leave it to you to explain to the rest of the House. In the meantime, we are all returning this camera to the Muggle Studies classroom immediately.”

Thoroughly dejected, the two First Years left the office with Snape. He made Fetherington carry the camera during the walk of shame to Charity’s classroom, his cloak billowing out behind them as he strode, the students trotting to keep up. He walked quickly for fear that she would have finished in the classroom for the day, gone off to wherever she went that had obviously screened her from Snape’s notice until now.

Entering the staircase to the second floor, Snape realized he was walking alone, and turned to see that Constantinople had suddenly stopped and staring at Snape with anxious confusion. Fetherington bumped into the back of her. “What? What is it?” He thought for a moment she might need to go to the bathroom.

“Sir, this is not the way to the Muggle Studies classroom. It’s on first floor.” Fetherington didn’t dispute her.

Snape pulled up short. How long since he’d been to Muggle Studies? Had he ever gone back since he gave it up as an elective in Year 3? Surely there must have been some reason to go there more recently? Although he felt mildly discombobulated, he made his expression stony, as if the girl had been an annoyance rather than a help.

“I know, I know – keep moving.”

Presently they arrived outside the classroom, and the door was closed. Snape took this as a sure sign Charity had finished with it. His heart sank, but he’d brought the students all the way here so he resolved to leave the camera on her desk with a small note.

“Right, come along, let us return the loot.” He pushed open the door and they went through, then Snape stopped abruptly, sighting Charity Burbage upon the dais under a beautiful arched window, where the late afternoon sun filtered through and illuminated the front end of her room in a gentle radiance. She was sitting at her desk, in front of her a microscope, and when she looked up, startled at their entry, the tips of her hair had a bronzed glimmer.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, clearly interrupted from something extremely absorbing. “Severus! What a – and, um, Jacob? Carmilla?”

“Professor Burbage,” said Snape officiously, although it took concentration not to smile. “I regret to interrupt you. I come on unhappy business.”

He nudged the two students forward towards Charity’s desk. With a soft frown, she stood and approached the students. “Whatever’s the matter?”

“Fetherington!” Snape barked. “Explain.”

The boy held forth the camera to her, which she accepted, still looking confused. “I’m very sorry, Miss. We took your camera after class.”

“Oh…I see.” The frown disappeared, and amusement smoothed around her eyes. “You helped, Carmilla?”

“Yes Miss. Sorry Miss.”

“And Professor Snape caught you with it, did he?”
Snape, his hands clasped behind his back, said, “My Prefects confiscated it. I have deducted 35 points from Slytherin for stealing.”

“Thirty-five, goodness,” she said, looking very disappointed at the pair. “Stealing is a serious offense. I’m glad you’ve returned it.”

“Yes miss,” the pair said in unison, dejected and miserable now.

“Well it seems to be in one piece, so I’ll thank you to pop it back in the artifacts cupboard and then I think you can go. Is that alright Professor Snape?”

“As you wish, Professor Burbage.”

The children hurriedly shoved the camera back into her special glass-fronted cabinet, then fled the room, a blur of black, silver and green robes.

After they’d gone, Charity turned to Snape with a smile and raised brows. “Well, well. Little rotters. In some ways I’m delighted they found the camera interesting enough to risk.”

Snape’s heart felt lighter. He hadn’t been entirely sure whether seeing her again would be a mistake and that his enjoyment of her company in the archive had been some aberration. But no. He was glad he’d come, glad she was here.

“My apologies on behalf of Slytherin. It’s not how I raise them.”

She laughed. “They didn’t view it as stealing. They seized an opportunity. Combine that with some cunning and inquisitiveness and I’d say it was exactly Slytherin.” There was no accusation, she made it sound like a compliment. Along with the broad smile, Snape couldn’t help but return it.

“Twice in two days!” remarked Charity, gesturing at him. “Our contact has increased by four thousand percent!”

He chuckled. “Returning the camera gave me a good excuse to see your classroom. It occurred to me I haven’t been here in several years.”

“Oh, I’m tucked away. Just like the archive.”

Snape looked around him. He had very vague memories of classes in here, but his MS teacher hadn’t bothered with the room the way Charity had. She had opened every available shutter and maximized the natural light. Then in alcoves along the walls were glass, spherical lanterns holding candles. The desks were polished like the archive table, and she had placed cushions on the bench seats. What he liked most, however, were enormous lacquered posters hanging high on the walls. They were at least 10 feet in height, and were instantly eye-catching as they were bright, coloured photographs, not paintings. Three along one wall depicted in turn a space shuttle launch, an exceptionally clear ultrasound image of a human baby, and the earth lit up at night from space, showing intense pockets of high-density electricity. Along the opposite wall, the image of a deep sea explorer sinking into the depths of an ocean, a graphic of the earth with a slice taken out of it to reveal the various inner layers, and lastly, the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb. Charity remained quiet as he examined them in turn. He found himself somewhat humbled and ambivalent.

“Muggles,” he said simply.

“They have their own kind of magic,” she responded softly. “Some of it dark. It was a difficult task narrowing it down to just six images. Since you’ve come all the way here, perhaps you’d like to see what I was just looking at?”
He didn’t speak, but followed her up to the dais, and her desk, where she motioned towards her microscope. “You’ve seen one of these before?”

“Yes. I went to a Muggle Primary.”

That caused her to turn and grin at him. “Did your Dad want you to have a, quote, normal childhood unquote?”

“My father didn’t know I was magic until quite late. He was…not highly involved.”

She acknowledged this with a sympathetic nod, then said, “I always ask first. Some kids have never seen or heard of one.” With a wry grin, she added: “ Mostly Slytherins, actually.”

“Purebloods,” he agreed.

She positioned her eye against the eyepiece and lightly dialed the focus. “There. I got a slide of human blood, showing the cells. With a better microscope you’d be able to see bacteria, and cell structure. This is a bit of an old one though. Have a look.”

Fascinated, Snape stepped forward and looked through the eye piece. The smear on the slide was magnified 400 times. Cells were clearly visible, jittering. While he examined them, finding himself unexpectedly entranced by this invisible world, Charity spoke in a soft voice. “What I wish is that I could teach the kids about the human genome. Our DNA. I happen to know that Muggle scientists have the technology know to read it, interpret it like they’ve discovered some biological equivalent to the Rosetta Stone.”

Snape was still looking, but he was listening closely to her, hearing intensity in her voice, obvious intelligence, the Ravenclaw roots of her.

“I strongly believe that one day, one day in our lifetime, Muggle scientists will discover the gene that makes us magic. They’ll figure it out. Even if they don’t believe in magic, they’ll find something genetic they just can’t explain. Then they’ll start to put two and two together.”

Snape pulled away and straightened, holding her gaze. She wasn’t smiling now. He cocked his head slightly. “What will two and two equal?”

“They’ll start to investigate this odd, rogue gene. Pull up historical DNA and search for it. When they find it, they’ll map the traits to the individual. Find a pattern. We all know that Muggle-borns can’t completely hide their magic – they’ll find that correlation.”

“You think their science is good enough?”

“Severus – computers can do the work of a thousand scientists in minutes. Research is so much faster…it’s like technology has, has abbreviated the process…Muggles are on this exponential curve of discovery -,” she frowned, slightly inwardly. “We won’t be able to hide. It’s not if, it’s when.”

He blinked, but couldn’t escape the obvious gravity of what she was trying to convey. “The Wizarding world will stay one step ahead. It will be like an arms race.”

“Not if we’re torn asunder from inside. This stupid, stupid obsession of preserving pureblood status. I’ve done my own research and I haven’t found any evidence of pureblood status resulting in superior magic or superior children. It’s bald-faced prejudice.”

She ran a frustrated hand through her hair, and he was distracted by the look of it, the feel of it; her bleak expression.
“I know,” he replied sedately.

She frowned at him, blinked slowly and seemed to remember where she was. A quizzical smile softened her face. “I’m sorry Severus, I didn’t – I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have –“

“Don’t apologise. You have no need to apologise.”

“It’s nice to share, I mean, I don’t have – the others…” she trailed off.

“I don’t…mind…if you want to…share with me,” he said, feeling warm, feeling foreign and awkward. His eyes suddenly roamed the room, then back at her. “I, personally, find science interesting.”

She offered him a grateful smile. “Thank you. You’ve just, you’ve just caught me deep in the middle of something. These slides –”she indicated. “Anyway, I should probably pack up. Not long till dinner.”

“I’m sorry. Please don’t stop on my account. I’ll leave you alone.”

“No! I mean, I just meant I’m not normally all weird and intense like this, when you came in I was mid-stream? You know? Like when you’re in the middle of a potion?”

At this, he smiled his understanding. “Yes. I’m a bit…focused…when I’m brewing.”

“That’s why you’re so good. You’d have made an excellent scientist. Did you ever consider a Muggle life?”

“No. No I didn’t.” He wasn’t sure if being honest with her about his preferences would be insulting to her, and he watched her reaction closely. “I do sometimes go to my home in Lancashire in the holidays. When I’m there, I use magic sparingly…the neighbours all around are Muggles. But I can’t bring myself to go in a lift.”

Her eyes widened. “A lift? Why ever not?”

Distaste crept to his features. “I don’t like the movement. I don’t like the small space. I always take the stairs.”

“You’ll use the Floo network? And apparate? But you don’t like the movement of a lift?” she said, laughter in her voice.

He acknowledged this wryly. He chose not to mention that he was capable of unsupported flight. “I’m not good on a broom,” he added. “Adequate at best.”

“Ah, me too. I think you’re best to learn the broomstick when you’re young and invincible. Trying to learn as an adult, all I can think about is falling off. I’m afraid Madam Hooch has just about given up on me.”

Unbidden, he imagined being at Spinners End with her, bringing home food in bags from the supermarket. She’d know how to shop at a supermarket properly. He knew how to cook.

“It’s amazing watching those kids at Quidditch, how they can move. I can barely stand to watch sometimes,” she said.

“They perform with the righteousness of youth. No fear of consequences. Completely immersed in the moment.”
“Bless them for it,” she murmured in asset. Absently, she was packing her microscope back into its styrofoam mold, then into a wooden box.

“Are these your own?” he enquired.

“The microscope is. Dumbledore gives me a modest budget for the other artifacts, but I brought the microscope from home. I thought I might let the kids see things like plant structure and pond water. But the curriculum won’t allow genealogy. I just thought it would be an interesting idea to show them how alike we all are at a fundamental level.”

“Muggles and wizarding?”

“No, mud-, sorry, Muggle-born and pureblood.”

“I see. Controversial.”

“I think Dumbledore worries it will get back to the Board of Governors. Draco’s father – you know.”

Snape sighed heavily. “Draco does like to share and his father encourages it. But Lucius Malfoy is no longer on the Board. I am in fact hoping to meet with the new chair rather soon. Perhaps I can report back his…leanings.”

He followed her to her cabinet where she was putting away the microscope. At his suggestion, she turned and smiled. “That’s very kind Severus. But don’t make any special effort on my account. I’m just happy to have my job here, I don’t want to make trouble.”

“I will be subtle,” he replied, not wanting her to take away an opportunity for him to do something for her, to please her somehow. When she shut the cabinet door, he murmured, “Better to lock that.”

“Mmm.” She glanced back at her desk. “I haven’t got my wand – could you do a quick -?”

He flicked out his wand and locked the cabinet in moments, then turned to her with his brows raised. “Have you misplaced your wand again?”

“It’s on the desk, Severus. I know where it is,” she answered with a rueful grin, and returned to her desk, but paused, clearly unable to find it. “I’m sure I put it here. I’m sure I had it with me this morning…”

Snape, who virtually slept with his wand under his pillow, was astounded. “Try summoning it.”

“Accio wand,” she said, but nothing happened.

“Accio Charity’s wand,” tried Snape, after a moment, with a little boost from his own wand. It still did not appear. “It will be somewhere it can’t escape from,” he deduced.

“I might just try my office,” she said to him, and then gestured the way, inviting him to follow. He was happy to.

She left the classroom and went a little further up the corridor to another closed door, with a nameplate on the front, Professor Burbage. As she opened the door, her wand flew out almost hitting her in the face. “Ah, there it is. Couldn’t get out, you were right.”

His laugh was partly at her defending herself against the eagerness of her own wand, and partly at the ludicrousness of leaving a wand in another room, and not even noticing. He was not alone in his
dependency on his wand. Her preparedness to go about her business without even noticing its absence brought it home to him just how novice she was.

“Charity, you can’t leave it unattended like that. Not only are you exposed without it, but someone could steal it.”

“Why would someone steal another person’s wand? That’s like stealing someone else’s keys which is pointless without the lock to use them in.”

“A spare wand around the place is never wasted.”

Some students were walking down the corridor, and as they passed, they each said, “Sir.” He nodded curtly at them. It impressed her. “Wow. They really seem to respect you.”

“No, I merely know them. They’re forth years now.”

It reminded them they were standing in the corridor, and any natural or obvious reason to be there had concluded. But he didn’t want to go.

“I, uh, have homework…” she said finally, raising her eyes at him and he could see that she too regretted the inevitable.

He imagined them being in his office together, each at their own desk, marking homework in companionable silence. He would offer to get them tea. The fire would be crackling away.

“Yes of course,” he responded gruffly. “I, too. I apologise for taking up your time -,”

“Not at all, Severus. Thank you for returning the camera. And thank you for finding my wand. Again.” A small laugh.

“One day I will show you how to use the insert in your gown, or in the sleeve.”

In a soft, considered voice she said, “I’d like that.”

He stole a moment to take a last sweep of her eyes, hair, mouth, then he turned sharply on his heel and strode away, robe billowing out behind.
The Great Hall had been decorated for Halloween, as was tradition, extravagantly. What seemed like hundreds of pumpkins were lit with candles, live bats flew freely around the stormy ceiling and orange streamers added a more carefree ambience. The tables were laden with the spoils of feast as the students celebrated on this pagan day for remembering the dead.

Snape sat at the Teacher’s Table and partook sparingly, tensing as the hour approached – or at least what was the agreed hour – when Lily Evans (he couldn’t bring himself to call her Potter) lost her life. On Halloween, did she feel being remembered? How was it different to any other day for him, when she was never far from his mind? How had it felt for her, close to this time thirteen years ago, fleeing with a baby in her arms, hearing her husband fall to the floor, defenseless, knowing she would be next. He had a scenario that he played in his mind, imagining how it must have gone, how she must have felt, and felt sick throughout at the thought, sick and ashamed that he had placed her in that position, her last moments being of all-consuming dread, however inadvertently.

And on Halloween, he missed her, and grieved that he would never see her again. It would have been enough, had she lived, to know she was happy, hear of her occasionally, maybe see her from a distance, and forever hold hope that one day, one day she might forgive him, perhaps even when they were old and grey, and wise, and truly knew what things were important, that they could be friends again. But now that could never happen, and if there was anything, anything he could have done to put himself in her place to spare her, he would have. Without a second thought. His broken heart hadn’t been enough...the world deserved Lily Evans, but there was not much to be gained from Severus Snape. He couldn’t even bring himself to like, not even be decent towards, her only son.

And there, sitting at the Gryffindor table, was why. Potter. He sat there, a replica of his abhorrent father, laughing and reveling as if the hour meant nothing. It made Snape ponder whether James would have been the same, if he’d survived his wife, would the grieving have come to a timely conclusion when society deemed it respectable? Would he have moved on to another to warm his bed? He wasn’t good unless he was being adored, Snape doubted he could have held vigil as a widower.

He didn’t truly know how Harry Potter grieved for his parents, or how he missed them, or if Halloween actually held any private significance to the boy, the date he became the Boy Who Lived. There were many things Snape had decided not to know. A part of him had rotted inside the night Lily died, and the toxin infected him, poisoned him against her son. Reason didn’t have much to do with it. It didn’t really matter to him right now whether Potter could in fact have been an ally once. Now they were enemies, Snape had seen to that.

So he endured the dinner, noticing, once or twice, Potter looking at him and then Lupin. Snape wondered what that meant, then looked at Lupin also in case they were passing some code between each other, and then dismissed it, forcing himself to watch the Hogwarts ghosts’ performance.

Not long later, he was heading gratefully out behind the Slytherins, looking forward to bed and time to process his churning emotions, when there came a disturbance from the staircase heading to the Gryffindor common room.
A Gryffindor first year came and urgently called for Snape, Lupin and McGonagall, who didn’t hesitate to head directly to the cause for concern. Proceeding as far up the staircase as the throngs of Gryffindor students would permit, Snape saw Dumbledore at the top of the stair looking grim. It took a moment to work out what had happened, but listening to the exchange between Dumbledore and Peeves, and seeing the ruined canvas of the portrait, Snape learned that the painting had, according to the Fat Lady, been slashed by Sirius Black.

The next hour was somewhat of a blur, as Snape summoned his students from the Slytherin Common Room, assigning Warrington and Pucey to the duty of rousing tired and distracted children from their beds, to the Great Hall for safety. He did a silent roll call as the Slytherins progressed in a semi-orderly formation along the same length of Hall where they would normally eat at a table, except now the Prefects handed out purple sleeping bags and told them to get into a bag, fully dressed if necessary, oldest closest to the doors. Snape marched up and down, urging haste and efficiency, quashing any over-excitement. He was proud of his young Serpents that there were no histrionics as the rumour of Sirius Black coursed amongst the students like a wildfire, no panic-attacks or dramatic meltdowns. His students chatted in whispers and largely followed instruction.

Soon after, Dumbledore called the teachers together to leave the Hall in charge of the Prefects and Head Students. In the Entrance Hall, Dumbledore lead the gathering to the staffroom, in which he took out a large map of Hogwarts, where he divided up sections of the castle to Snape, Lupin, Flitwick, Hagrid, Filch and McGonagall. To the rest he said, “Sirius Black may be in the building and I want to find him if he is. But I’m not asking you to expose yourselves to risk if you do not wish to be part of a search party. If you wish to leave, you may do so now, but be sure to go in pairs to check your rooms before you retire for the night, or else you may go to the Great Hall.”

None of the other teachers except Madam Pince opted out. “Very good,” said Dumbledore gravely. “The rest of you please select an area of Castle not yet covered and report back to one of the others when it’s cleared. I don’t believe Black has a wand, but he can’t be approached. If you do encounter him, stupefy only. The Ministry want him. Then fetch help immediately. I am going myself to my office to contact the Ministry immediately and see how they wish me to liaise with the Dementors – if we find him. They’re not entering the castle.”

Once Dumbledore departed, there was much bustling as the teachers agreed on where to go and who to report to, then one by one set off. Snape had been assigned the third floor, and various upper sections, including the Astronomy Tower – a likely hiding place, and for which Snape triple-checked his wand was with him. Before leaving, he sought Charity Burbage in the huddle of teachers still getting their instructions. He touched her lightly on the upper arm.

“Charity?”

She turned, a deeply troubled look on her face. “Severus! Have you got the Astronomy tower? Are you going to be alright? Did you see the portrait?”

His eyes roved her face. Having so recently been deeply immersed in memory for Lily, and fatigued by the day, he had a sudden and confusing mental displacement. For a moment it felt exactly like he was looking at, and talking to Lily, but then the eyes, the eyes were wrong. He blinked.

“Yes, um, yes the Astronomy tower, floor three – where are you going? Have you your wand?”

She produced her wand and showed him. “But Severus, I’ve never stupefied anyone. I want to help, I really do, but I’m worried I won’t be able to -,”

He was astonished she’d never stupefied anyone, most teenagers, once they’d learnt it, tried it out a few times on each other for fun if nothing else. It had been a standard part of the DADA curriculum
for years. Then he remembered she hadn’t been schooled that much at Hogwarts.

Time was getting away, and perhaps Sirius Black as well. “You can come with me,” he said briskly. “What areas are you taking?”

“Well since Sybil’s away this weekend I said I’d check her rooms.”

“Then we’ll do a quick sweep of the seventh floor while we’re there. The Room of Requirement would be a perfect place to hide if it agreed to let him in.”

Snape turned and led the way, Charity hurrying to follow. Without talking except to exchange the briefest of logistical messages, they scoured the third floor. Snape had Charity carry her wand lit with Lumos Duo, as well as carry a section of map, while he kept his wand at the ready for defence.

Had he been by himself, he would have been doing more than searching – he would have been hunting. He would have burned to find Black, the heat in his blood heightening his senses, putting energy in his movements. But he was anxious for Charity’s safety. If Black was lurking in the dark, and she surprised him, her Lumos Duo would blind and distract him sufficiently for Snape to take action, but he thought to himself that he really needed to teach her some self-defense at some point.

When rooms had been checked and cleared, it was Charity’s job to mark it off on the map, and Snape periodically checked it to make sure they hadn’t missed any rooms or hidden corridors, becoming dispirited at the sheer number of alcoves, turrets, storerooms, disused bathrooms, secret passageways and trapdoors that would make searching a building of this size and complexity a job of weeks or months. An army could, literally, hide in Hogwarts. How long had Black had to get away? He could be anywhere. Anywhere.

They stood together under a sconce while Snape did a final scan, and with a heavy sigh he declared third floor clear. He didn’t tell Charity that he was beginning to think this exercise a hopeless task. Adding to the mood, the Dementors seemed oppressively close, drifting past windows and dormers, he could feel the chill as they turned their hoods in his direction. Were they sensing him? Could they sense his past, his crimes? Could they feel the prisoner in the castle and now they were baying for blood – anyone’s blood?

Following his eyes and noticing his austere expression, Charity whispered, “Look at them, they’re closer, I think they know. How on earth did Sirius Black get past them? How did he get in at all?”

It took a while for Snape to answer. “Black knows the castle. He and his friends had all sorts of secrets to get them in, out and through things. Plus he’s an animagus – a Dementor might not necessarily recognize that form, an animal form.” Then Snape looked directly at Charity. “And he’s got a friend on the inside. I warned Dumbledore about it. I don’t know what his motives would be but there’s no disputing that before Azkaban, Black and Lupin were fast friends.”

“Does Remus know something about Black that we don’t? Does he think he’s innocent? Or is there something he’s helping Black to do?”

“I don’t know. Lupin got his posting here on the mercy of Dumbledore, and Dumbledore will only see the best in him. I don’t think he’d collude in a crime, Lupin is not villainous, but I think he would be easily persuaded, especially by Black.” Then he added bitterly, “Black was a manipulative reprobate.”

“Black by name, eh?”

Snape shuddered as a Dementor pulled up to a window behind them, frosting the glass. He
instinctively took Charity’s hand and pulled her behind as he strode away to the stairs. “Come,” he said. “Let’s get on.”

They went to the seventh floor and followed the same procedure, although Snape was starting to lose heart and he was getting more and more tired. At the Room of Requirement, he bade Charity to stand to one side as he walked to and fro, muttering his need to seek out Black. The door appeared and admitted him, and though Charity did not speak, her eyes were wide and amazed. He entered but barely scanned the room before leaving. “He won’t be in there,” he said by way of explanation to her confused expression. “If Black was hiding in there, the room would keep him hidden, unless it couldn’t meet his requirement because I would be able to find him. So there’s no point searching it.”

“You mean, even if we searched it we wouldn’t find him because the room would need to hide him?”

“Exactly.”

“So he could be in there, we would just never know?”

“Unfortunately.”

“But your need was to find him, so why would it open unless it could meet your requirement?”

“No. My request was to search the room to see if Black was in there. My need is to find Black. The room has admitted me to reveal that Black won’t or can’t be found in there. It’s persuading me to keep looking elsewhere.”

Charity fell silent and meditated on this for a moment while they walked. Then she said quietly, “I don’t understand that room.”

Snape chuckled softly. “It’s convoluted logic that only wizards would find clever. The Muggle in us just finds it annoying.”

She laughed lightly at this also, and once more a bonding thread was spun between them which he almost physically felt every time their eyes met, every time they touched, every time she laughed with him. His own skin still tingled where he’d held her hand earlier, unaccustomed as he was to the feel of another person. Dimly he was conscious of a sleeping giant within him beginning to rouse, a giant he had assumed had died when hope was lost, on Halloween twelve years ago. It was giant in its power, and giant in its capacity.

Sybil Trelawney’s rooms were next. Neither her classroom or office declared anything unusual. Snape and Charity became systematic in proceedings, and, the novelty starting to wane, Charity emitted an enormous yawn when they had paused for Snape to check the map.

He looked at her, amused.

“Sorry,” she uttered. “I had some of that pie at the feast. I think it’s made me drowsy.”

“It’s also two in the morning.”

“Oh god, really? What do you think Severus? Are we going to find him?”

“I doubt it. If you want to go back to your room, I think you’ll be fine. I’ll come with you.”

“Really?” she squinted at him. “What about the Astronomy Tower? I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to search that alone.”
He was touched that she worried for his safety. “Trust me, Charity, I would love to find Black. I am not in the least concerned what he can do to me.”

“You’re that confident? But he’s a mass murderer.”

“Right now, he’s alone, virtually unarmed and an escapee after twelve years in Azkaban. Trust me, all he has is his madness.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said ‘trust me’,” she observed wryly, with a sleepy smile. “And I do. So I think I’ll be more help to you if I get out of your way and let you catch that bastard. But – can you come with me to my rooms?”

“Who could refuse an invitation like that?”

“You know what I mean,” she mumbled, lightly thumping him, but in no way troubled by his mild innuendo. Another gossamer bond was slung between them.

Snape escorted Charity to her quarters, a teenage-like excitement deep inside as if he were taking her home after a date. The first floor was abandoned when they arrived at her door, the stone corridors shadowy and flickering in the light of the fire sconces. She unlocked the door with her wand and opened it, entering, but Snape waited outside and listened closely. A minute later, she reappeared, and gave him a grateful smile. “It’s fine,” she whispered. “Thank you Severus.”

A lurching instinct to kiss her farewell made him stiffen and words collapsed in his throat. He gave a faltering, jerky nod of his head instead and swallowed. “G-good night.”

She gently shut the door. He took a deep breath, trying to slow his heart which had suddenly started pounding as if he’d run up the stairs. If Black had been in her room right now, he doubted he would have been able to stop himself slicing him in two with a robust Sectumsempra.

Merlin! I do believe this is a crush. I’m addled like a teenager. I’m going to need a cold shower.

He remained where he was, dumbfounded, wondering how it had happened so quickly. A woman he’d barely known a week ago was now making his seemingly wounded heart thud out of his chest. This had never happened in his adult life. He was yet young, he’d noticed women, he’d had attractions, there had been friendly, pretty ladies at Hogsmeade, plenty who’d be happy to help a lonesome sorcerer get to sleep at night, and he’d been tempted, particularly if he’d had a few Firewhiskys late into the evening with Hagrid or Dumbledore. But nothing that made his skin tingle as if mildly electrocuted, none who’d made him lose the power of speech.

And if he was honest, the Hogsmeade ladies were younger, more obviously designed to be noticed, more seductive in their behaviour than Charity, what he thought a man was supposed to be attracted to. He’d assumed he never followed them up was because his heart had gone to the grave with Lily, and that he’d never feel love again. So how had this happened?

A grandfather clock chimed half-past two sonorously from the far end of the corridor. He jumped a little, and it had the effect of snapping him to. “A jinx,” he muttered to himself. “She’s jinxed me.”

Then he turned smartly on his heel and strode away to finish his search.

At around three pm, he reported in to Dumbledore in the Great Hall amongst the supposedly sleeping students. He told the Headmaster where he’d searched and that he had found nothing. Ears were flapping all around him, that he was sure of, but at least the children may take some comfort knowing the castle was apparently safe.

“Very well, Severus. I didn’t really expect Black to linger.”
“Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?” asked Snape, wanting Dumbledore to admit the risk Snape had warned him about, letting the flapping ears get a clue.

“Many Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next.” Dumbledore wandered amongst the sleeping bags, avoiding eye contact.

Snape bristled at this obfuscation. So the Headmaster was going to keep them up until three in the morning, ask them to confront the maniac, possibly incite further aggression and panic, and then play dumb about addressing the root cause of Black’s entry. Fine.

“You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before – ah – the start of term?”

“I do Severus,” replied Dumbledore, in a warning tone.

“It seems – almost impossible – that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns when you appointed – “

“I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black to enter it,” said Dumbledore quickly, cutting Snape off, and he shut down the conversation by deciding to attend to the Dementors.

Snape stood back to let him pass, and straightened, hands behind his back. He was tired beyond words, he’d been on tenterhooks for hours, his heart was tender and nervous from unaccustomed activity and despite doing nothing but follow orders without question, the Headmaster wouldn’t even do him the courtesy on hearing him out. Furious, he stalked out of the Hall to go to bed, not intending to emerge again until it was officially, categorically necessary.
Snape didn’t emerge from his rooms the next day until almost lunchtime. He did so in hopes of seeing Charity, certainly not because he could be bothered with eating. But before that, he had to give Lupin another goblet of wolfsbane.

The colour seemed to have come off Lupin somewhat, when Snape found him in the staffroom, alone, buried deep in the weekend edition of the Prophet. “Lupin,” said Snape, upon seeing him and putting the goblet before him on the table.

Lupin was unshaven, his eyes looked bleary and shadowy, and he seemed barely able to be bothered with the potion.

“Oh, Severus, thank you, honestly, that’s very decent of you.”

The greater part of him was ready to turn on his heel and leave, but against better judgement, Snape ground out, “Are you alright?”

Lupin took a gulp of the potion and grimaced. “Oh. Yes, I’ll be fine. Long night, wasn’t it.”

Several different replies formed in Snape’s mind, it was hard to decide which answer was appropriate and it took him some time. Eventually he said, “Yes. For little effect.”

Another gulp of the potion, and Lupin shook his head a little to shake off the taste. He placed the paper flat on the table and Snape could see he’d been reading several scandal-mongering articles about Black and speculation as to his whereabouts and motives. “His presence here hasn’t made headlines yet, but it will soon. I wonder how long before the Prophet dig me up as an old acquaintance. The last one.”

*Before they put the puzzle pieces together you mean?* Thought Snape, looking coolly at Lupin and not speaking. After a meaningful pause, he said, “What do you imagine they’ll broadcast?”

Lupin shrugged, and in a flamboyant gesture of having finished his dosage, turned the goblet upside down. “I expect they’ll imply that I am aiding and abetting. They may even imply that Dumbledore appointed me expressly for that purpose.”

That surprised and confused Snape. “Why on earth would they assume that Dumbledore would want you here to assist Black?”

“To make headlines. Sirius never confessed. He never admitted what he did, he defended his innocence throughout. They’ve always loved to paint Dumbledore in a controversial light – him being a sympathizer, not allowing the Dementors to do their job. Whichever way the Ministry’s leaning, they love to show Hogwarts in opposition. Goes way back. To Grindewald.”

Snape’s head started to hurt. What was Lupin trying to tell him? Did he need to know this? “Are you, Lupin?” May as well cut to the chase. “Are you aiding and abetting Black? Is that how he got in the castle?”

Lupin rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, and then looked long and levelly at Snape. “No. I
am not. I am as worried about Potter as you.”

“You know Black better than any of us. What is he after? Does he think the Dark Lord is waiting for him?”

“He may have gone mad, Severus. I don’t think he was mad when they locked him up, but not many people can survive Azkaban. Especially if they’re innocent.”

“You think he’s innocent.” It was not a question, but a horrified realization. “Pettigrew…those Muggles—”

“I don’t know what to think!” snapped Lupin, slamming his hands on the table. “And I don’t know what to think about you, either. You’re standing there quizzing me about my motives – you, you’re the one the shady history. You’re the one Voldemort will be calling. So why are you here, Snape? You’re hiding behind Dumbledore’s skirts every bit as much as I am, but I’m not on my bloody high horse.”

The words, the fury in Lupin’s eyes, caught Snape completely unawares. *You’re hiding behind Dumbledore’s skirts every bit as much as I am* – the ring of truth was intolerable. He had no riposte, not even a defense, except: *I’m not hiding*, was all he could think. *I’m trapped here. This is no bolt-hole, it’s a cell, the prison of a promise, a debt, and a penance.*

Lupin seemed to realise that he’d played a critical move. “I’m prepared to face Black. I’m prepared to face him now, whoever or whatever he’s become. I have lost three great friends in my life, four if you count Lily. And I can’t afford to be choosy now. But what have you got to lose, Severus? What are you so afraid of?”

“Why didn’t they make you Secret Keeper?”

It was Lupin’s turn to be caught off-guard. “What? Sirius was best man, godfather –”

“Face it Lupin. Potter and Black tolerated you, maybe even liked you. But the reason you never stood up to them the way you should have was because you were never that confident, were you? Scared that if they stopped liking you, they’d be gone, ditch you, the poor werewolf, couldn’t quite believe his luck that Black and Potter chose to be his friend – “

“Let it go, Snape…”

“Rudderless ever since. I made choices, Lupin, not always the right ones, but at least I stood for something. I was prepared to be counted. I fought for myself. And I never gave up on Lily.”

“Don’t you dare talk about Lily!” Lupin snarled, and drew his wand sharply at Snape, who saw it coming and already had his out.

“Are you really going to take me on, wolf? Finally, one on one? Or shall we wait around for some buddies to join you?”

Three, roaring heartbeats and Lupin lowered his wand. “GET OUT! LEAVE ME!”

Suddenly the door slammed open, the gargoyles outside talking rapidly to Dumbledore who stood there with a thunderous expression on his face. Snape didn’t wait but stormed out in such a fury of black robes that Dumbledore was forced to step aside and let him pass.
Snape stayed in his quarters for the remainder of Sunday, allowing his anger to work itself out and blow over like a storm; what residue was left he carefully shut away and then lay down on his bed, spent. Even if Charity was around today, he couldn’t see her like this, it wouldn’t have been fair on her. Isolation had always been his way of dealing with it. At dinner, he had food brought to his room, and late at night he went to bed, determined to rest so that he was prepared for Monday.

The next morning was again cloudy and cold. After a light breakfast and coffee brought to him by a kitchen elf, Snape washed and shaved carefully - although he never had any brilliant ideas for styling his hair after a basic wash and brush - put on a clean white shirt, then his usual frock coat, boots and a winter-weight cloak. In a black satchel he put his plans for the audit, the note for Gringotts from Dumbledore, Hagrid’s letter for the Post Master and his list of ingredients for the apothecary. He then took all his books, homework and lesson plans to the Dungeon classroom ready for the substitute teacher.

Finally he went into the Slytherin Common Room and had a first year fetch one or both of the Prefects. Pucey was brought to him, damp haired and half dressed. “Yes sir?” asked Pucey, looking worried.

“Pucey, I want you and Warrington to be in charge for the morning as I have business in London. If there are problems, alert the Headmaster as he knows I am away. Make sure all House students are breakfasted and get to their morning classes. I want you to stop by the Hospital Wing and check on young Alberton as Madam Pomfrey said he might be recovered today from that hex. Please remind Flint to do that stock take in the Broom Hut, he was supposed to do it yesterday. And I have my most important job for you.”

Pucey already looked as if he was having processing difficulty with the length of the list. “Do you want to write all that down?” Snape enquired with enforced patience.

“Don’t have a quill…” said Pucey glancing around him.

“Here,” said Snape, taking Pucey’s wand. He spoke a charm to the wand, then recited the list briefly. “Tap your wand to a blackboard and it will write up what I’ve just said. Now, when you are dressed, come to my office, quick as you can.”

Ten minutes later Pucey arrived, and Snape led him to the maturation chamber where he ladled wolfsbane potion into a goblet, placed a spill cap on it then handed it to the Prefect. “Listen. This is medicine for Professor Lupin –,”

“Professor Lupin?”

“Yes, that’s right, Professor Lupin. You have DADA with him, remember?. He needs this after breakfast. Please take it to him when you go in for breakfast and tell him that I sent you. Don’t let anyone else touch it.”

“So I give this to Professor Lupin when we all have breakfast?”

“That’s right. In the Great Hall, before you even sit down. And if Professor Lupin is not there, then give it to the Headmaster to pass it on to the Professor. The Headmaster knows about it.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be back in the afternoon. I’ll come to see you and you can let me know how you’ve got on.”
“Yes sir.”

Pucey departed, carrying the goblet as if it were about to bite him. Snape was not optimistic of everything going according to plan, but it was best if Lupin got the potion at the same time each day. If he didn’t get it from Pucey for whatever reason, he could get him a goblet in the afternoon at worst.

All his instructions dispensed, Snape went to the fireplace in his classroom which was a decent height, scattered the Floo powder and said clearly, “Ministry of Magic Entrance Hall”.

Moments later he exited one of the many gilded fireplaces in the main foyer, joining the throngs of Ministry workers as he had arrived just after opening. He wasn’t sure exactly what time he might get to meet Chairman Byron, so thought it best to freely available. The giant gold statue of the Wizard, witch, elf and centaur glittered brightly in the sunlight as the Ministry maintenance staff had decided today was sunny and cloudless.

Snape checked in at Reception and explained the purpose of his visit to the lady behind the counter, who smiled pleasantly and searched a large diary book for his appointment with a wand. “Ah, yes, Professor Snape, I have you here. Sir Byron is expecting you – oh, not until 10am. Did you know of the time? Are you happy to wait?”

“Yes, that’s fine. I wasn’t sure of the time. What floor is he on?”

“The Ministry of International Magical Cooperation is on fifth floor,” replied the Receptionist. “You can register your wand now if you’d like to save time later. Here’s your Visitors Badge.”

“Thank you.”

Snape went to the Security desk and the guard in blue robes scanned him front and back, then handed over his wand for identification. The guard read out the strip of parchment that was emitted from the brass Wand Register. “Ebony, ten inches, dragon heartstring. Belonged exclusively to you for twenty six years, mister, er -,” the guard checked his name badge. “Mr Snape?”

“Yes, all true.”

“Nice wand. Looks like it’s seen some action. Here you go.”

Snape was handed back his wand, which he instantly slotted back up his sleeve. The guard pierced the slip of parchment on his spike.

“I’m not going through immediately,” said Snape to him. “the Reception lady said it was alright to register early.”

“That’s fine. There’s a bistro round the corner at the far end of the Atrium if you want a cuppa while you wait.”

Snape thought that a welcome idea and killed some time reading the Daily Prophet and sipping tea until 10am. Finally at the allotted hour, he went through the golden gates into the smaller hall, then faced the lifts and steeled himself.

There may well have been stairs but he didn’t know where they were and searching for them now, let alone going up five flights, would make him late.

A jangling and clattering announced the arrival of a lift almost immediately as the grilled door was pushed back. Several people got in and Snape hesitated. The lift left. A minute later, one slightly
behind him arrived. People got out, a couple of people got in. He let it close and leave and he started
to feel his pulse speed up. The next one. The next one.

There were a couple of minutes before the next lift arrived. Two people got out but there was
nobody but him to go in. With a deep breath, he propelled his feet forward and entered the cab,
slammed the golden grille door shut then pressed the button with number 5 on it.

With much rattling of chains, the lift ascended slowly as the offices on each floor were announced
through a speaker. Snape felt his tea churn and shut his eyes, gritting his teeth as the lift stopped at
floor three and more people got on. At last, the melodious lady’s voice announced, “Level Five,
Department of International Magical Cooperation, incorporating the International Magical Trading
Standards body, the International Magical Office of Law and the International Confederation of
Wizards, British Seats.”

Snape couldn’t open the door fast enough, and almost fell out. But he was here, and he was in one
piece. Another deep, somewhat shaky breath and he summarily depressed all heightened emotion.
Then he strode towards the office of IMC.

He was greeted by another administrative person and shown to the door of Sir Bernard Byron, who
was waiting for him inside behind his impressive wooden desk. Byron was wearing an expensive,
tailored burgundy-coloured three piece suit. He was clean shaven, with his dark hair slicked back
with brillo cream, and had perfectly kept teeth. The room was lushly appointed, and after Byron had
approached Snape warmly greeted him and shaken his hand, he was invited to take off his cloak and
make himself comfortable on a leather armchair at an arrangement around a coffee table.

“So Professor, it’s good of you to come out to see us. And I must say, it’s a pleasure to make the
acquaintance of one of the top teachers at Hogwarts. Albus told me a little about you. I was at
Hogwarts from 66 to 71, Gryffindor. Where you there then?”

“I started in 71. Slytherin.”

“You’re the Head of House now, I hear?”

“Yes. Slughorn was Head of Slytherin then. You must have had McGonagall.” She never mentioned
that, thought Snape.

“Great lady. Although Transfiguration wasn’t a strength of mine. History, Charms, Dark Arts and of
course Muggle Studies were my NEWTS. Professor Harrold was my Master of MS. Is he still there?
I didn’t see his name on the Prospectus.”

“No…there has been a new teacher appointed recently. She’s very good, I…understand.”

“Excellent. Tell you what, I must make a time to come out and visit the school again in person. I
have met Albus of course, but I would love a decent tour of the place since I was there. This Chair
role is all a bit meaningless unless you’ve walked the talk, you know. Tea?”

Bryon had already stood up and started towards his office door to place an order, so even though
Snape didn’t feel like tea, he said, “Thank you, very kind.”

Byron placed the order with his administrator, then sat back down, hitching up his pinstripe trousers
a touch as he did so. “Now, Professor, I am to understand you’ve been tasked with coordinating the
audit of the school, so I’m delighted to tell you that I’ve arranged for Bartemius Crouch and Topias
Poole to join us in about fifteen minutes. Mr Crouch I believe you know? Mr Poole is his senior
auditor, and he’ll be the one on site physically auditing. If there’s anything you need to know I can’t
help you with, those chaps can fill you in.”

“Very good, thank you, “said Snape. “Is your role in the context of the Department of IMC or as Chair of the Board of Governors? The overlap seems…serendipitous.”

“It is! It is indeed. Not entirely coincidental, since after Malfoy retired, the parents and Ministry were after a complete change of thinking. Not all, of course, I have to remember that we are governing a large body with more purist or conservative views. But having so much interaction with more…advanced…international groups and corporates, it seemed natural to challenge the Board with taking a more growth-oriented direction. I’m talking, of course, about lifting the standard, aspiring for excellence, taking our place shoulder to shoulder with our equivalents across the Channel.”

“Yes,” murmured Snape. “Minister Fudge mentioned it.”

“So yes, I think it quite providential that I can maximize my time as Chair with my role here at the IMC. Not at cross-purposes at all. The other Board members seemed very pleased with my candidature proposal, dare I say, excited?”

“Clearly it’s time for a change, sir,” said Snape diplomatically.

“Good to know you’re on board,” responded Byron, reaching over to clap Snape on the back. “Ah, excellent, tea. I’m gasping, as my wife likes to say.”

A tea tray was deposited on the coffee table, and Byron insisted on pouring himself. “I’ve been holding forth, I fear, Professor. Tell me, what are your plans for getting the audit underway?”

“I’ve been through the brochure guidelines in some detail, and I’ve been planning a bit of a strategy around it, but I want to know more about the...the overall outcome of the audit.”

Byron took a moment to sip his tea and frown on an answer. Then he said, “Big picture, Professor, passing the audit means Hogwarts remains open. If, say, Hogwarts were to fail – and I don’t think for a million years that it’s at all likely – but say it failed, then the Board would have to convene as a matter of urgency and deem whether the risk is acceptable. It would also depend, of course, on which categories failure occurred. A crippling fail on the administrative categories is not necessarily life-threatening, but were Hogwarts to show underachievement on criteria affecting safety, or security, or welfare, for instance, massive incompetence or law-breaking – then these are areas when the Board has to think of its duty to the parents and children.”

Snape thought about the slashed portrait, the petrified students who had encountered the basilisk.

“To my mind,” Byron went on, “the Board hasn’t been involved enough with the School. It’s not a case of interference, but the parents are paying some considerable fees, they’re entitled to have confidence that that their children will not only be properly educated, but kept safe and well. I am aware that Lucius Malfoy will be requesting an investigation into the recent incident concerning a Hippogriff, and I have to say, it’s a classic case in point. How is it a student – during class mind you - is able to be badly mauled by a dangerous creature? I am told by Malfoy that another student actually rode the Hippogriff in the same lesson? Had there been any safety precautions taken? What if the child had fallen off? What if the Hippogriff had simply flown away with that child? I mean, they do eat meat. You see my point, Professor? What would I have told his parents?”

Snape filled his mouth with tea, resolutely mute that it was Potter with his suicidal tendencies who’d decided to take a joy-ride on a wild animal, Hagrid’s training notwithstanding. What if the Board had been obliged to report that Hogwarts had, through negligence, offed the Boy Who Lived?
As if reading his mind, Byron smiled and added, “And now young Harry Potter is boarding there, I will feel much better knowing that I could look any parent in the eye and tell them I had utmost, utmost confidence that all the children, not just The Chosen One, are in excellent hands.”

“Certainly. Of course.” Snape thought about Potter’s flying car ride, the Whomping Willow. “But, and again, sir, I’m merely playing Devil’s Advocate, were there unacceptable failings in the audit, a closure would only be temporary while efforts were taken to meet standard?”

“Oh, I expect so. The Board may have to work with the Ministry in deciding what’s the best means of taking a conservatorial position of the school. I think it would be necessary to…step in, at that point.” He laughed suddenly. “Don’t look so concerned, Professor, this is all merely hypothetical. I am most certain that Albus is running the place like a Grand Master.”

“Yes. Of course he is.” Especially when he appoints, illegally, a werewolf.

The office door opened, and two more men entered. One was Bartemious Crouch, looking sullen as usual, and one was a shorter man, with brown hair, rather pointed features and critical, appraising eyes. Snape stood to shake hands with them as Byron made introductions. “Crouch of course you know, and Professor Snape, this is Topias Poole, Senior Auditor.” Snape was put to mind of Percy Weasley, he had that bureaucratic, officious air about him.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Poole, in a slightly nasal tone, as they were all seated. “Sir Byron tells me you’ll be coordinating the Hogwarts audit?”

“I’ve been asked to do that, yes,” replied Snape. “But I haven’t been given exemption from my core work. I’m Potions Master and a Head of House, so I’m unable to devote my full time and attention to it.”

“Oh,” said Poole, eyebrows shooting up. “Then you’ll be busy. I daresay we’ll need at least two weeks on site. You’ll have some help?”

“Thankfully,” said Snape, thinking of Charity now. “It will be a learning curve, however. I hope we can depend on you for guidance.”

“Oh naturally,” said Byron cheerfully. “We all want Hogwarts to succeed, dear Professor.”

Crouch said nothing but stared at Snape. Crouch had taken his role as Head of Law Enforcement seriously and clearly maintained strong suspicions about Snape’s efficacious relationship to Dumbledore and Hogwarts. It didn’t surprise Snape that Crouch had wanted a good, hard look under the bonnet of the institution. Or was this more about the Triwizard Cup?

“When would be a good time for Hogwarts to receive me and my team?” asked Poole, pulling out a small diary from the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Team?”

“There’ll be three of us. And we’ll need our own room to work in. Privacy. What’s the nearest village?”

“Hogsmeade.”

“Then we can take rooms there for the period. But otherwise, full amenities please.”

Snape merely nodded now.
Byron stepped in. “You’ll notice how efficient Mr Poole is. We are very lucky to have him for our programme on International Standard for Wizarding and Magical Excellence. Bit of a mouthful. Still, Poole used to be an auditor with Muggle companies and his references were outstanding. Of course, the Muggles didn’t know that Poole is a first rate Legilimens.”

Snape blinked and Poole gazed at him with equanimity, a bit like a smug cat.

“Really? Is that…ethical?”

“It’s not illegal in Muggledom because they are unaware of it. And if they have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear,” Poole replied evenly. “It was only if necessary. And even then I would _obliviate_ afterwards. But the Company I worked for earned a world class reputation for being…thorough.”

“I didn’t ask if it was illegal. I asked if it was ethical.”

“It’s unethical to lie in an audit,” said Poole quickly.

“Where did you learn Legilimancy? Hogwarts?”

“No. I was home educated. Then I went to Edinburgh University so that I could join a Muggle company. I’m very supportive of Sir Byron’s advocacy of closer affiliation with Muggledom. So, no concern about a conflict of interest.”

_But what kind of wizard are you?_ Thought Snape. _We are not going to become friends._

“You wanted to discuss dates?” asked Snape heavily to Poole. “I know the Headmaster is keen to get the audit finished before Christmas if possible.”

Poole flicked through his diary. Crouch finally spoke, saying in a low voice to Poole, “If you’re putting Matte and Dunn on the team, they won’t be finished the Rail audit for a few days. Then Matte was going home to Switzerland for a week.”

“Yesss,” said Poole, without looking up as he flicked through pages. “I can start around the third week of November. Say the twenty-third? For two weeks, so finishing around Friday fourth December.”

Snape mentally thought through the school calendar but didn’t think anything particularly unusual was planned around those dates. “I think that will be fine.”

Poole scribbled down _Hogwarts_ into his diary, and drew arrows to cover the two week period.

“Excellent,” said Byron, beaming, and clearly signaling the end of the meeting. “Well I think it was a great idea to get together and meet. Thank you again, Professor, for coming to London.”

“May I have just one quick word?” Snape asked Byron. “It will take but a minute.”

“By all means. Why don’t I walk you out?”

As they walked towards the elevator, and Crouch and Poole departed for their offices or desks further along the floor, Snape said to Byron quietly, “We were talking earlier about Muggle Studies. Do you know who has jurisdiction over the curriculum? It may be worth a review.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“I think a lot has changed in Muggledom since the last time the curriculum was approved. I’m sure
the current teacher would like her lessons to have a modern relevance. I’m thinking particularly of your own tenets, sir. If she were obliged to teach the students subjects that were contradictory to what you’re trying to achieve with the Board, for instance.”

Byron looked at him, eyes narrowed. “What are Dumbledore’s thoughts on the matter?”

“I confess I haven’t spoken to him about it. It only just occurred to me while you were explaining your position. I believe, however, that unlike most of the subjects taught at Hogwarts, Muggle Studies is one that is often swayed at a more political level.”

“Yes. This is true. Muggle Studies can get bogged down in that pureblood supremacist stuff. If Dumbledore approves, I’m happy to have the Board consider an updated curricula.”

“Thank you, sir.” Snape pressed the down button on the lift and was mortified to see it open almost immediately, full of people. Barely concealing a grimace, he stepped inside.

“Keep me updated, Professor,” said Byron, as the gilded grilles clanged shut and Snape felt his insides roll.

Although mentally drained by the meeting, and not particularly encouraged by what he’d heard, Snape was elated that at least he’d have something to report back to Charity. And that he could leave the lifts behind. He strode out of the golden gates into the foyer of the Ministry of Magic, waited in a short queue for a fireplace, remembering, as he waited, to remove his nametag, then when it was his turn requested the Floo to take him to The Leaky Cauldron.

It took a few moments of swirling past fireplaces before the Floo network could drop him into the Leaky Cauldron, presumably because a few others were visiting at the same time. It was, after all, close to lunch. He noticed earlier arrivals still dusting ash off their clothes when he stepped out into the dining area, and peremptorily cleared off his own cloak and cuffs. That was the worst thing about wearing a lot of black – it really did show everything.

The sense of a weight having been lifted from his shoulders, he decided a wee dram was in order to reward a job well done. He went to the bar and ordered a snifter, then also ordered a steak sandwich, his appetite having returned after a couple of days. Having eaten and pleasantly mollified by a touch of liquor and something hot and satisfying in his stomach to soak up the swill of tea, and enjoying his own company immensely, he next turned to his shopping list on Diagon Alley.

In unusually good spirits for Snape, he went through the brick wall on to the alley, which, despite the cold November day, was bustling with shoppers in their winter finest, many of the shops already decorated for Christmas and bristling with retail promise. All this talk about Muggles made him conversely good-humoured towards the wizarding folk who, dressed as they were in cloaks, bonnets, witches’ hats and other distinguishing and yet familiar garb, carrying broomsticks, cauldrons or with an owl perched on their shoulder, brandishing wands with abandon, made Snape feel cosy and oddly affectionate. He nodded good-day to complete strangers, who ignored him, and he didn’t mind in the slightest.

He decided to deal with the most difficult first and walked up the Alley until he found the Post Office, whereupon he withdrew Hagrid’s papers from his satchel and entered.

The Post Office was not in full Christmas rush but it was nonetheless busy being lunchtime. Snape
waited in a queue to a customer service window, watching the owls come and go, and was then instructed that he didn’t want Post, he wanted Imports and Exports. Another window up the shop. So, he went there, which mercifully had a much shorter queue, and at last admitted to a desk with an irritable clerk forced to wear a Santa hat.

“‘Yes?’

“Good afternoon. I’m here on business for a friend, who has papers I’ve been told to give to the Post Master? But perhaps it’s someone else because I’ve been directed here.”

“So how can I help?” asked the clerk, looking like he’d rather be doing anything but.

Snape passed him the parchment from Hagrid, which he was starting to think looked unpromising. “My friend’s name is Rubeus Hagrid, he works at Hogwarts School. He has apparently ordered a shipment and has been advised that these need to be provided. I’m just passing them on for him.”

“What are they?” asked the clerk, unrolling them.

Snape groaned inwardly. So they weren’t forms then. He didn’t think so.

“I’m not sure,” said Snape, with an intake of breath. “My instructions were to deliver them to the Post Master and advise that they were from Hagrid.”

The clerk looked at them, shuffling page to page. “I have no idea what these are. They’re not Import or Export forms. What’s your friend ordered in?”

“He told me,” said Snape, as if he’d just walked into concrete. “that he’d ordered a shipment of Drop Bears…”

“Drop Bears? What are they?”

“I believe they’re a species of koala. From Australia.”

“Koalas? You can’t just import them. They’re, like, living things. You need a proper license and stuff. Anyway, I’ve never heard of Drop Bears.”

Snape shut his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “He said the Post Master would know about it. Hagrid’s a gamekeeper; he’s been ordering livestock for a good while -,”

“Post Master’s not here today. There’s no order of Drop Bears here, believe me I’d know about it. Hang on…”

The clerk got out from his desk beneath the window a very large, much-thumbed book which he used his wand to flick through backwards and forwards. “See? Nothing in here about Drop Bears. I’ve got sheep, goats, cows, owls, frogs, frog-spawn, carp, thestrals in fact lots of kinds of horses… nothing about no koalas, let alone Drop Bears. Are they even real?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Snape, world weary. “Look, thanks for your help -,”

“You need to talk to your mate, cause if he’s waiting on Drop Bears he’s gunna be waiting a long time…” The clerk shoved the parchment back at him.

“Thank you.”

The other customers in the queue behind him glared as he exited the Post Office, taking some of the shine off Snape’s previous good will. He shoved Hagrid’s parchment back in his satchel, fully
expecting admonition from the gamekeeper when he returned them later. No doubt it would be Snape’s fault.

Next stop was Gringotts. The bank, too, was busy. Again, he waited in a queue. Snape was used to standing, it was all part of a teacher’s day, he had good boots to do the job and Snape’s boots had a big job to do. But he hated the wasted time. There was nothing useful he could be getting on with while he waited. He just had to stand. It was excruciating.

Finally he got to a teller and handed over the withdrawal note from Dumbledore giving Snape access to funds in order to pay for more potion ingredients. It was a wizarding equivalent of cashing a cheque. After the Post Office experience, he had a fair amount of trepidation about this transaction and it seemed his anxieties were well founded.

The goblin teller frowned at him. “Who is this from?” he asked.

“From Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster at Hogwarts School.”

Another enormous book was extracted, this one a record of signatures. “Who?”

“Dumbledore. Albus Dumbledore. Look, he’s been banking here for at least a hundred years.”

The goblin didn’t care. He flicked through pages listed alphabetically. Eons later he reached the D’s.

“Dumbledore,” said Snape again, desperate to reach across and find the right page. The teller was in no hurry. “No…no it’s spelt D – U –“

The goblin ignored him, holding the note against the list of names to compare signatures. He flicked page after page of D’s. “There is no name like Dumbledore.”

“Dumbledore. D U. D U.”

The goblin looked at him vacantly. English was his second language, and he didn’t appreciate a cross, irritable and probably racist individual making fun of his accent. The goblin called his supervisor by ringing a small bell.

The supervising goblin eventually came over. He was a fat goblin, with little round glasses, which just about met the very definition of ugly. He flicked his eyes up and down Snape, then consulted with the teller in Hobgoblin. The teller’s tone was clearly dismissive and accusatory at once. Snape felt like his frustration was turning his actual bones liquid. He felt like throwing himself on the floor and having a toddler-like tantrum. He felt taking his wand to make the giant book of signatures snap shut on the heads of the goblins before him.

Pre-empting the inevitable questions the fat supervisor was going to ask him, Snape said, “Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster at Hogwarts – the note is from him, see his signature? It’s spelt D U M – “

“Albus Dumbledore?” asked the supervisor.

“Yes, yes,” replied Snape, thinking he must have said the name at least a hundred times.

“How did you get this note?”

“I work at Hogwarts. He gave me this note so I can get out some school funds. I need to buy school supplies.”

A rapid exchange between the two in Goblin.
“What is your name?”

“Snape. Severus Snape. I am a Professor there.”

The supervisor rang the bell. There were annoyed mutters from the people in the queue. Snape thought about grabbing the little bell and murdering anyone he could reach with it.

A third Goblin sauntered up. He had a paper napkin stuffed down the neck of his shirt, clearly having been interrupted during his lunch. “What is the matter here?”

“This man, called Severus Snape, says he has a note from Albus Dumbledore to give him money,” said the supervisor, at least in English.

“Where is the note?” the teller produced it, and the three goblins looked at the note from Dumbledore and had a prolonged conversation about it in their own language. The second supervisor grabbed the signature book, flicked to the right page and placed the note next to the official record of Dumbledore’s signature. Thankfully, they matched. Snape had received plenty of shorthand scribbles from the Headmaster in his time.

After much huffing from the teller, Snape was issued the right amount of galleons and knuts, which were placed in a little drawstring bag and dumped in his hand with a deeply resentful and highly skeptical teller who looked as if he couldn’t wait to meet Snape one day when they were both alone on Knockturn.

Back out onto the street, Snape stopped to get his bearings, feeling suddenly very depleted by the Post Office and Gringotts experience. Tucking the money safely away, he took the street towards the northern end of Diagon Alley, heading for the larger of the apothecaries. Deep into lunch hour, the cobblestone thoroughfares were once again busy, and eating establishments were full. Delicious aromas drifted on the air, and queues had formed at the food stalls and street vendors. Snape wended his way through them and at one point was brought up close to the mullioned window of Wiseacre’s Wizarding Equipment, in which a glossy item caught his eye and made him pause.

Unless he was very much mistaken, it was a Faerie Call. He hadn’t seen one in several years. Made of highly polished brass, it was about the size and shape of a lantern, the top having a hook or ring from which it could be hung. It did not have glass sides, but fine bars of brass, and in the centre was a magical chime that, when prompted to play, would rapidly revolve, generating a ‘call’ that only fairies and sometimes pixies could hear. They would be enticed irresistibly towards it, like moths to a flame. Some people liked to trap the fairies for a variety of reasons, others enjoyed simply watching them fluttering about the call, hypnotized.

They were not frequently come by, and Snape wondered if the person Charity had referred to who loved fairies owned one. If not, then this would be quite the Christmas gift.

A bell tinkled as he entered the shop and he lingered on the tables and displays inside, stocked with a wide variety of instruments and equipment which intrigued him. Occasionally he would tap an instrument to see its movement and action, then debate internally whether he needed it. He found one or two of the silver devices and contraptions Dumbledore had in his office on spindle-legged tables, which even Snape couldn’t identify. On tapping one with his wand, it began whirring loudly and moving around precariously and Snape hurriedly tapped it to stop having caught the watchful eye of the proprietor.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Ah, yes, perhaps you can. I thought I saw a Faerie Call in your window?”
The shopkeeper, a stout older wizard with white tufts of hair and an eyepiece, wearing a linen apron with an oily rag tucked in the front pocket, came out from behind his counter and went towards his display window to fetch the Call.

“Indeed,” he said. “There’s been a few enquiries about that.” He brought forth the Call to his counter top for Snape to have a closer look.

“I’m afraid it’s not a new specimen, so I can’t vouch for its history, but I tried it out soon after I acquired it, and definitely one fairy came to it, so I do believe it still works.”

Snape examined it, though in truth he had no means of judging it. “It’s an antique, is it?”

“Oh goodness, yes. I’d put it at several hundred years old. The witch who used to own it died at a hundred and seventy two. I remember her telling me about this particular Call and saying that it had belonged to her grandmother.”

“The mechanism,” murmured Snape, indicating the chime-piece inside the receptacle. “What is the magic? Is it eternal, or does it require re-charming?”

“Back when they made these,” smiled the shopkeeper, “they built them to last. That is an eternal charm – it will be working in a thousand years if you look after it. Faeries will be gone before this beautiful device fails. The greater question is whether it is as powerful as it once was, which is why I tested it. Of course, faeries are far fewer than they used to be…”

There was a stretch of silence while Snape considered the Call. He hadn’t bought anybody anything since Lily. He had once bought her some books, and for her fourteenth birthday, a brooch. While Lily had seemed delighted with it, she hadn’t worn it and he had no idea what had happened to it. As poorly practiced as he was in gift-giving, he felt he’d rather do nothing than get it wrong. If he bought the faerie call for Charity, would she view it badly, would he offend her somehow, would she think it strange?

The shopkeeper, very experienced in the delicate art of letting shoppers talk themselves into a purchase, feigned cleaning up a little behind the counter.

The door-bell tinkled again and a young witch entered, wearing a coat with a fur collar. She came up immediately to the counter to get the assistance of the shop keeper, but the Call caught her attention and she cooed over it. “That is lovely! Is it a Faerie Call? I didn’t realise they were so small, I’ve only seen them in books. Does it work?”

She looked at Snape expectantly, who nodded his head. “So I’m told.”

“I wonder how much it is,” she breathed as she gazed at it, then added. “If you’re not buying it, I may well put a deposit down. My niece would love that for Christmas.”

“It is lovely,” commented the shopkeeper, vigorously rubbing a brass object with his cloth. “I’ve had quite a few ladies ask about it since I’ve put it in the window. I’ve seen some modern ones, but they don’t work reliably, they’ve used a mocked-up charm because, of course, the genuine magic is closely guarded.”

“Is it a present for someone?” asked the witch, eyeing Snape up, as he looked quite imposing in the cosy shop dressed in head to toe black and a winter cloak. She may have been speculating on who the recipient would be, from the likes of him. Her fur collar gave a little pulse and rotated around her neckline as if alive.

“Yes,” he answered uncomfortably, and turned to the shopkeeper. “I will take it. I think it will make
someone I know very happy. How much?”

The witch continued to watch him, her expression – not resentful, but musing, slightly affronted. Snape got the impression she was accustomed to getting her own way a lot.

“For this rare piece, sir, forty-five Galleons.”

Snape wasn’t carrying that kind of money on him, but having worked for fifteen years without anyone but himself to spend it on, and even then being incredibly modest in his needs, the amount was not daunting for him. It did cross his mind briefly that it was the most expensive gift he’d ever bought anyone, particularly someone he barely knew, but he had a vision of giving it to her and seeing her smile, seeing her delight, seeing her marvel over it. He wrote the shopkeeper a cheque similar to the one Dumbledore had done – anything rather than go back into Gringotts – which the shop keep was happy to accept, particularly when Snape sealed it with a verification charm.

The Faerie Call was wrapped and then shrunk with a *reducio* and Snape left, under the increasingly sullen eye of the young witch, feeling quite buoyant. He had placed the small package in his satchel, but he could feel its little bulge easily and its presence brought a private smile to his lips.

The trip to the apothecary afterwards – an experience that Snape normally relished, involving much meditation and examination of rare things, perusing the descriptions, applications, derivations and lengthy browsing of the shops giant *Compendium of Magical Ingredients and Their Uses* – became somewhat perfunctory in nature by comparison with Wiseacres.

Time now against him, Snape went straight to the counter with his list of ingredients and got assistance in finding what he needed and in the right quantities. So much, now, was becoming rarer and more expensive each time he visited. The reasons were almost always the same: restrictions and prohibitions placed by Muggles on the parts or habitats of non-magical animals, ingredients that were staples in potion making: frog spawn, rhino horn, tiger claws, bear spleen, eagle eyes, lion hearts, gorilla brains, crocodile hearts, sharks fin, deer velvet, muskrat glands and even some batwings were now at a premium. A lot of frogspawn was in fact toad spawn and could have the effect of ruining a potion completely, but frogs around the world were under pressure, disappearing, and the remainders under vigilant watch by Muggle scientists. Pure rhino horn had peaked. Black rhino horn was no longer available legally at all. White rhino horn could be obtained in small quantities at ridiculous prices as these were from stores put away by wizarding merchants’ decades ago, who had received a prophecy in the seventies and were clever enough to act on it. Similar with tiger claw - fortunately this ingredient could be substituted with leopard claw or lion claw which tended to be more readily available. Plant species were easier to get except for hemp or poppy, which tended to be very heavily guarded and frequently supplies were disrupted by Muggle Police or customs if wizarding harvesters were reduced to those channels.

Snape was informed that the Apothecary was completely out of aye-aye organs of any description, and in fact the harvesters and suppliers in Madagascar were having to lie low as even their Muggle distributors were being spot-checked and raided by Government Muggle conservationists. This was having a knock-on effect on supplies of chameleon, Madagascar being a pipeline to this most magical of animals, especially the horned and miniature varieties. Luckily there were surplus in stock, but this was depleting fast and Snape took double. On the subject of reptiles, he asked about snake fang and venom. Predictably no problems there: Muggles were fighting to keep escaped and feral populations down around the world and harvesters had tapped into a profitable line. *Trust snakes to keep themselves sustainable,* he thought with a wry grin.

Forty-five minutes later, Snape had most of what he needed, at least enough to keep the Wolfsbane potion going until around July, when orders direct to merchants and suppliers would be made in
more realistic quantities. But he made a mental note that a number of potions that were considered part of a standard practical in first through third years curriculum may need to be reviewed until viable stocks could be relied on again. The practice of each student raiding the store cupboard in a practical lesson was going to become a thing of the past.

The amount Snape had spent on supplementary ingredients just to keep Lupin in comfort had probably cost the school dearly in some other respect, but Snape didn’t know what exactly. The financial mechanics were a bit of a mystery to him. Hogwarts never seemed to be short of a galleon, as evidenced by what he assumed would be a sizeable budget to host the Triwizard Cup, but he had to assume the coffers were not limitless. Doubtless they would find out the hard way, when the auditors turned up.

The apothecary assistant packaged up Snape’s purchases which were once again shrunk for Snape’s convenience, and he heard the clock above Gringotts chime twice. Definitely time to head back to Hogwarts, he was already later than planned. He headed hastily for the Leaky Cauldron and used the Floo network to transport him back to his dungeon classroom at the school.

He emerged from the fireplace in the middle of a lesson. Several children jumped at his unexpected arrival, and Madam Jones settled the class back down as he dusted off his clothes and removed his cloak, greeting him with something of a frown as she obviously hadn’t anticipated taking his classes into the afternoon. The students were assigned some reading while she updated him on progress, noteworthy incidents, absences and other status reports. Bringing him up to speed on the current class, he thanked her and apologized for keeping her, then she bustled out of the class while he mentally switched gears, finding they ground a bit more than expected.

A little under an hour later, the class was dismissed without incident and the students left quickly before Snape remembered he hadn’t given them homework. He went to his rooms and put away his things, carefully setting his Faerie Call on a table in his kitchen nook, then taking his wand performed an **Engorgio**. The Call was restored to its full size, and glowed brightly in the lamplight.

He spent an hour putting away the new ingredients, powders, oils and infusions in the storeroom, ensuring each new bottle or jar was correctly labeled, and rare or toxic elements properly secured. His receipt of goods he pocketed inside his frock coat. And finally he visited the Slytherin common room to see if Pucey or Warrington were available, and find out how they’d gone with their list. Draco was reclining on the green leather sofa, his bandaged arm cradled on his stomach, Crabbe and Goyle opposite him.

“Sir,” said Draco sitting up at the sight of him.

“Malfoy,” he returned curtly. “Are the Prefects about?”

“No sir, its Quidditch practice.”


“My arm sir. I can’t extend it properly.” Crabbe and Goyle nodded heartily.

Snape narrowed his eyes at him, but Draco stared determinedly back. “Show me,” Snape ordered and stood where he was, making Draco get up off the sofa and approach him. Draco stood before him and held up his bandaged arm, barely moving it and wincing.

“How long has this been, now? Since beginning of September? That’s over eight weeks. I must tell you, Draco, that I’m highly skeptical.”
“Sir? Are you saying I’m fibbing?”

“There is no reason for your arm to not have healed by now. What does Madam Pomfrey say?”

Draco shrugged. “She believes me.”

Crabbe added unhelpfully, “It really hurts him sir.”

“Have you tried taking it out of the sling? Exercising it?”

“Yes sir. But it hurts to leave it out for long.”

Snape held Draco’s eyes for some moments. It would have been easy to cast a Legilimens and prove the lie, but Draco would have reported it back to Lucius by owl within the hour. And to what end? If Marcus Flint was prepared to accept Malfoy’s persistent absenteeism, then it was his call as Team Captain, not the Head of House.

“Just know that I’m not convinced,” Snape said quietly for Malfoy’s ears alone. Then louder, “Send Warrington or Pucey to me when they arrive back.”

He left the Common Room intended for the Headmasters Tower. Dumbledore would want a report. As he walked along second floor on his way to the Gargoyle corridor, the DADA office door opened and Lupin stepped out.

“Lupin,” said Snape, slowing. “Good evening.”

“Evening, Severus.” Neither smiled. “How was London?” Lupin locked the office door behind him as he spoke.

“Successful.”

“I’m told you visited the Ministry?”

“My business was with the Chair of the Board of Governors. He’s at the Ministry.”

“Audit?”

“Yes. Audit.”

“Getting started soon?”

“Third week of this month. I’m on my way now to discuss it with Dumbledore,” Snape hoped this was indicative of his intention to close the discussion.

Lupin nodded. “I got the wolfsbane today from – Pucey, is it? – thank you for making the arrangement.”

“Good. I will bring it to you as normal tomorrow. Is – does the potion seem to be having any effect? Is any difference discernible?”

“Ah, yes, I think so,” replied Lupin, raising his brows thoughtfully.

“I had to replenish a number of stock for next month’s brew. The ingredients are scarce.”

“It’s possible that an entire goblet each day is unnecessary. If you want to experiment reducing the dosage I am willing to try.”
Snape gave a brief nod, then motioned his intent to continue walking.

“Severus – before you go –,”

Snape stopped and turned guarded eyes on Lupin, steeled for some uncomfortable reference to their argument.

“I may start the transformation as early as Friday,” said Lupin. “My third period class – if necessary, could you cover for me?”

Snape gave a long pause, considered declining, thinking he had no incentive, no will to help Lupin anymore. Remus didn’t speak during the interlude, simply stood and held his gaze, looking tired and worn.

“Fine,” muttered Snape curtly. “Confirm with me when you know.” Then he turned abruptly and stalked off.

“Thank you,” said Lupin to his back.

It was five pm by the time the gargoyle admitted Snape into Dumbledore’s office. Snape was grateful when the Headmaster offered him an armchair in his office, which was warm from a blazing fire. Dumbledore had been at his Pensieve when Snape arrived, but placed it carefully away in its cabinet, and as he greeted Snape, fetched them a goblet of mead.

“There. A little aperitif before dinner. You look as if you’ve had a long day.”

“Thank you, sir. I am pleased to say that, though it was indeed long, I would declare it successful.”

“Good days I am always glad to hear about. But there is something more important first.”

“Sir?”

“Severus, I interrupted you in the middle of a most disturbing row with Remus on Sunday morning. The staff room gargoyles gave me their version of events, but I am nonetheless disappointed that two grown, professional men are reduced to fighting like teenagers again. What if the students had heard?”

Snape closed his eyes at this, and when he opened them again it was to stare into the fire. “Yes,” he said shortly, and Dumbledore waited. “I am sorry I let my anger get the better of me. I was tired. I think we both were. The night before had been….trying.”

“Are you going to give Remus a chance, Severus?”

“Please do not doubt my professionalism, sir-,”

“I don’t! I’m asking about you as a person, as a man, as a member of my faculty, as a human, as whatever you please. Not as a Potions Master, that I wouldn’t doubt for a moment. No, I’m asking you personally, Severus – can you let it go? I know Remus has asked you the same.”

Snape set his jaw and a muscle twitched near his temple.

“Don’t do your withdrawing thing -,”
“I’m not – I can assure you that…confrontations such as that will not happen again. Although I must add that Lupin started it.”

Dumbledore laughed openly, eyes twinkling and he raised his goblet at Snape. “Your stubbornness is most outstanding, most impressive. It is why you are one of the most resilient people I know. I have never met a person who was so adept at orchestrating the world onto their terms. Which goes to show, really, how magnificent Lily really was.”

Snape realized the lesson was over. It would have gone very differently had Snape been disciplined at the time of the incident, however a good cooling off period, and maybe a private goblet of mead or two before the meeting had made matters considerably easier for him.

His comment about Lily, however, sideswiped him. Dumbledore was clearly referring to the fact that she was the only person Snape had ever capitulated to, ever showed his vulnerability. This was true. He didn’t realise it was common knowledge. But had he overheard the argument with Lupin? Had Lupin mentioned it? Had the gargoyles said something? He thought that since that night in 1981, when Dumbledore had made him promise to protect the boy if he truly loved her, he had kept his feelings utterly battened down because that was the deal – to never, never tell. His eyes met Dumbledore’s with reserve.

“Come Severus, no harm done. Please, brief me on your visit with Sir Byron.”

With a swig of mead, Snape related his visit at the Ministry, his impressions of Byron and Byron’s philosophies, the fact that Topias Poole was a Legilimens, the possibility of closure should the audit fail. He informed Dumbledore when the audit would start, the requirements of the audit team, but left out the discussion about the Muggle Studies curriculum. That was a separate subject.

He related his experience of Gringotts and the signature debacle, to which Dumbledore sighed and tutted audibly, gave the Headmaster the receipt of goods from the Apothecary, and described the paucity of ingredients. Lastly he regaled his recent meeting with Lupin, and that he would be covering him for DADA on Friday if necessary.

“Very good, very good,” said Dumbledore. “And what of Hagrid’s order? Did you manage to confirm his import of Drop Bears?”

Snape choked on his final swig of mead. “Sir? No, there is no order apparently. Obviously Hagrid has informed you of what he’s attempting?”

“Yes he did. I queried him on the wisdom of this endeavor in light of the Hippogriff incident, but he is very confident.”

“I’m afraid I will have to explain to him tomorrow that it might be necessary for him to visit Diagon in person. Sir, I’m not sure if Drop Bears even exist?”

Again, Dumbledore laughed. “I know not. I trust my teachers, if he says they do, then who am I to doubt him?” His eyes twinkled even more. “And he told me something rather salacious I fear.”

Uncertain, Snape frowned at him and shook his head a little.

“He told me that he hosted a most pleasant afternoon in the company of yourself and Charity Burbage?”

Snape sat back and fought a flush the likes he hadn’t experienced since a teen. He was suddenly furious.
“It was merely a cup of tea -!”
“I know. I’m only teasing –,”
“She is a member of the faculty, nothing more than a walk after lunch…”
“It’s alright Severus – “
“I bumped into her, a couple of Ravenclaw students - ,”
“You really don’t need to explain. Hagrid merely mentioned that he was pleasantly surprised…”
“I would hardly describe it as salacious, Headmaster!”
“Please calm down, Severus. I am happy that you have found…a companion…”
“Professor Burbage is no more a companion that Flitwick or McGonagall.”
“I’m sorry. Clearly I have touched a nerve-,”
“There is no nerve!”
“Professor Snape! Enough!”
Silence descended as the two men stared at each other, but Dumbledore was more confounded than angry, and cocked his head at Snape. “You’ve no need to be so defensive – you protest too much! I am not at all troubled by it.”

Snape took a heavy, shaky breath and put down his empty goblet. He stared into the fire again, letting his heartbeat slow a little before struggling out the words. “Sir, I entreat you, she…I…it is nothing other than a friendship, barely even that…she values her position here highly and I…”

Dumbledore watched closely, the young, intensely private man he’d known since a boy who seemed to simultaneously shy away from life as much as he seemed to wrench at it, flail at it, fight it like a cornered wildcat. There was no in between with Snape. He was either reclusive and isolated or whipping up storms with his bare hands. Whatever he said about Burbage, however, Dumbledore reserved his own opinion. He hadn’t gotten to this age without observing a thing or two. There was the delicate matter of relationships between staff, but if there were two people more likely to be discreet than Snape and Burbage, he could hardly imagine it. On the whole, if anything developed his instincts would tend towards it being favourable to the pair, on balance, better than not.

“Severus, you have no need to concern yourself. I shall not breathe a word, indeed I won’t even mention it to you if you prefer. You are adults, I encourage friendships between staff, Merlin knows these can be long days and nights as a teacher here without family around. I trust that you will keep your wits about you and remember your first duty.”

“Please stop, sir, there is nothing, a couple of chats at best.”

“And the audit? I recall you said she would be of valuable help?”

Snape nodded, disconsolate. “Yes…I would still value her help.”

“Well then I shall see her tomorrow and ask her. I need to thank her for the archival work she’s been doing.”

Snape left Dumbledore’s office in time to return to Slytherin Common Room and ensure all students
were in time for dinner. He was feeling dazed after his conversation with the Headmaster, appalled with himself that he hadn’t foreseen how a walk and a cup of tea with Hagrid would be viewed. But deeper than that, he was terrified that gossip would start, people, students would be watching and whatever fledgling feelings he felt for Charity, and the happiness that accompanied them, would have to be quashed, suffocated, disallowed.

*Dumbledore DOES allow it*, his mind fought back. *Just keep your wits about you.*

He herded young Slytherins out to dinner, briefly heard from Pucey, then stood in the doorway of the Great Hall unable to step further. He simply couldn’t face it. Safe at this distance, his eyes scanned the teachers sitting at the Head Table and found Charity, sitting next to Sinistra, talking animatedly. She seemed normal, happy. Something in his chest clenched.

He turned and headed to his rooms, to the welcome relief of solitude.
CHAPTER TEN

The following day dawned dark and brooding, much like Snape’s mood, which the students soon learned during class.

He was short-tempered and irritable, barely sparing a word for Lupin when depositing the wolfsbane, deducting points from every house over a three-period window, failing several students over mean-spirited trivialities and generally living up to his reputation as the least liked teacher at the school.

He stalked around the classroom in his black cloak, scowling, humouring himself by ridiculing students in front of their classmates. Their loathing bounced off him, he was hardened like basalt and when the students trooped out his room at the end of the lesson, he slammed the door behind them with a swoop of his wand, actually managing to catch the corner of Susan Bones’ robe (which she frantically tugged free rather than risk opening the door).

He avoided lunch. He instead chanced the Dementors and went out into the grounds, feeling validated by the gloomy, leaden clouds, walking close to the edge of the Forbidden Forest and willing Sirius Black to make a very poorly-timed decision to appear.

Halfway towards Hagrid’s house, Snape spotted the toadstool fairy ring that was almost certainly the same one Charity had mentioned. It was sizeable, easily two feet across its centre, and many of the older mushrooms were now broken and decaying. He recalled, when she’d asked about it, that she knew exactly what created a fairy ring, which they had nothing to do with fairies at all. So why had she wondered and wanted to show him? Was she simply trying to discover what fitted and what didn’t in the wizarding world, trying to navigate by herself in a culture that was, but wasn’t, quite her own? Did she hope Snape would be a guide?

In his bleak mood he felt like destroying the remainder of the ring beneath his boots, obliterating a few with his wand. But he didn’t, wanton vandalism wasn’t in his nature, and deep down he didn’t want to jinx anything – literally or metaphorically – that might represent his relationship – such as it was – with Charity.

“Oi. Come on you.”

How was it he hadn’t heard Hagrid arriving? The Gamekeeper was carrying a plate of food. “You can eat this in me hut and tell me why there ain’t no drop bears comin’.”

“I’m not hungry, thank you.”

“Who said this was fer you?”

“You just did.”

“I brought it fer me. But you can ‘ave some if you want. Come on, it’s goin’ to rain.”

Fat drops were in fact starting to fall, so Snape followed. “I have a class in fifteen minutes. I can only stay briefly.”
“All the same ter me.” Hagrid opened his door, wrestled Fang down and offered a chair to Snape, who declined, preferring to gaze moodily out of the window.

“Tea?”

“Hagrid – why did you tell Dumbledore about me and – and -,” It had blurted out before even Snape realized he was going to say it. The anger had a target and he hadn’t even known it was about Hagrid.

Hagrid looked taken aback, but not completely surprised. “Right. So Dumbledore mentioned that did he?”

“Yes,” snarled Snape. “He described it as salacious.”

“Wass that mean!?”

“Gossip! Tawdry gossip!”

“Well I didn’t tell him it was anything like that! I told him we all had a nice chat, that I’d never had Professor Burbage to me hut before. I thought you was being nice to her.”

Hagrid’s indignant, somewhat hurt response looked genuine to Snape. He relented a little.

“I mean she were a very nice lady, I never really talked to her before, but she was very interested in my flobberworms.”

Charity had indeed asked Hagrid a good many questions about the arthropods. Or whatever they were.

Hagrid sorrowfully turned and put the kettle on. “I’m sorry if I got yer into trouble by telling Dumbledore. I didn’t think I said anythin’ tawdry.”

The wind taken out of his sails, Snape’s shoulders slumped. “It’s alright. I didn’t get into trouble. I think Dumbledore finds it amusing to…poke fun at me.”

Hagrid’s eyebrows shot up like great woolly socks. “Well then he got a death wish, ain’t he? Didn’t he learn nuthin from when you were a kid here? You hate bein’ teased.”

A huge cup of tea was placed on the table and Snape acquiesced to have a sip or two. “So you never brought a friend with you before, Severus. Why miss Charity then?” Hagrid asked innocently.

“I bumped into her and when we were walking it got cold. The Dementors were about. She is a nice lady.”

At that comment, Hagrid looked at Snape astutely but said nothing. Snape quickly took a sip of tea to stop more words falling out, it was as if he was under some kind of truth serum, he just wanted to talk about her, confide his feelings, let them out to examine them and decide what to do. He’d done that in the past with Hagrid, maybe it would be safe.

“Very nice,” Hagrid agreed. “Seems a bit lonely if you ask me.”

“Yes, I think that Muggle Studies can be a divisive subject.”

Subtly, Hagrid pushed forward the food he’d brought from lunch, and absently Snape picked at a plate of crackers. “Lots of people ‘ave tried to get that subject stopped, ‘aven’t they.”
“She brings a lot of intelligence to the subject. She doesn’t just teach what electricity is, she makes them challenge the status quo, their preconceived ideas. She’s done studies, for instance, on Muggle-born test results.”

“I ’spect she keeps you on your toes when you’re ‘avin a chat, eh?”

Discreet as he was, Snape twigged to what his friend was doing and smiled at him. “I find…I don’t know…she is a pleasant conversationalist. Hagrid, I must go, I have a class. But I promise after dinner I will describe my visit to the Post Master.”

“I look forward to that, laddie. An’ don’t you worry, I won’t breathe a word about Professor Charity.”

Snape could tell that Hagrid truly meant it. Assuaged, he pulled his cloak about him and left the hut to return to the castle.

It wasn’t until the next day, however, that Snape spoke to Charity again. At breakfast in the Great Hall, as Snape supervised the Slytherins departure off to classes, she came up behind him.

“Professor Snape?”

He turned, meeting her warm brown eyes immediately. His heart did an odd somersault, and as warmth suffused his neck and cheeks he stammered, “Professor Burbage?” For Merlin’s sake, was he blushing?

“Professor, I was wondering whether I might trouble you for a few moments later today? The Headmaster has given me instructions regarding a project that I understand you are managing?”

Young serpents watched and listened, curious as to why the Muggle Studies teacher would want to meet with the Slytherin Head of House. The liberalism of the Muggle Studies curriculum generally drew scorn by the stronghold of purists in Slytherin.

“Um, certainly, I am in my office from 3pm today, you are welcome whenever convenient.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a professional smile, but there was genial softness in her eyes. She hesitated, then left abruptly and Snape watched her go.

Remembering where he was, he growled: “Right, come on, move along.”

The students who had the misfortune of Potions two days in a row could hardly believe their Master was the same man. Today, he was bordering on convivial, witty, spontaneous with plans and philosophical about failures. The students of Third Year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw class swore that Snape had laughed out loud in class, but everyone else said that he must have been coughing because of fumes.

Sitting at his teacher’s desk, idly flicking through returned homework assignments, Snape barely recognized himself, but he had a bubble inside him that would not pop. Did it really matter that those three in the corner kept talking and passing notes? Not really. And look, was that a bumblebee in the vents, this late into autumn? And if he was honest, the potions this class had produced today, they
probably were acceptable for this level, just because he would have done better, well that’s why he was a Potions Master and they wouldn’t be. But did that mean they’d failed? Probably not.

For the hundredth time his attention was diverted to the clock. Five minutes to three. Another bubble of excitement hitched into his chest. He stood up, gathered the folds of his cloak and announced to the class: “Pack up, please, you have five minutes, everyone packing up please.”

Most of the students were a long way from finished and they looked up at Snape in astonishment. Normally they would be kept back, anything up to half an hour on his insistence that they finalise whatever he had assigned them late into the class. Here they were, five minutes early and he was getting them to stop whatever they were doing and pack up. Although there were many exchanged, puzzled glances, nobody disputed him and the class was ready to go when the bell rang.

“Off you go,” he said to them as they hastened to leave with much scraping of stools on stone. “Enjoy the afternoon.”

This was too much for Euclid Tattinger, another Neville Longbottom in the making, who stopped and stared at Snape as if he’d sprouted a second head. “You too, Tattinger. Get some air outside. Have you ever tried out for Quidditch?”

Tattinger ran for it.

Snape laughed, and gathered up his things. He wanted to be in his office. He could tidy the classroom later.

The bubbles kept his step springy. He was back in his office by 10 past. He did a quick sweep with his wand, and items were put away on shelves, the fire was lit, the floor swept and candles refreshed. He quickly sorted items on his desk and straightened his framed qualifications and awards that hung on the wall behind him.

He sat down in his favourite chair and considered the chairs opposite him on the other side of the desk. Would she sit on those? They were rather austere, unyielding - he’d never noticed that before. He tried to remember the charm Dumbledore often used to conjure up chairs, made an attempt and conjured a hat stand instead, which he dismissed instantly with an impatient grunt. Movement in the corner caught his eye and he saw a mouse. He blasted it with his wand, but was too slow, the mouse escaped behind a bookshelf. Dammit, the recent eradication clearly hadn’t been enough, was the place going to be crawling with rodents while she was here?

Fifteen minutes later, having calmed himself down with marking some very poor homework, there was a knock at the door. With anyone else he would have unlocked it with his wand and remained at his desk, but this time, he jumped at the sound, and then quickly got up to open it.

Charity was on the other side, and she smiled widely when the door was opened. “Sorry I’m late,” she said.

“Not at all. Come in.”

She entered slowly, gazing all around her. In stark contrast to her spacious, un-shuttered classroom, his windowless office was dimly lit, the ceilings far lower, the walls of rough-hewn stone. Stuttering oil lamps seemed to leave a haze in the air. He saw the room through her eyes, and imagined she was starting to question some of his choices. Was his bat-like alter-ego crossing her mind? Without speaking, she approached the shelves of his private stock of potion ingredients: jars and bottles filled with labeled liquids and powders, sealed canisters, specimen samples floating in formalin, dissected and dried herb specimens mounted under glass, rows of insects preserved in resin. There were other
unusual artefacts scattered amongst the jars – fossils, bone fragments, claws and teeth, feathers, horns and tusks, petrified plants and glowing crystals.

Snape took a low, deep breath, remaining quiet as she examined the shelves, now and then taking a bottle to read the label, or picking up an object and turning it around, before carefully putting it back. His normal reaction to inquisitive (and often repulsed) visitors was to snap at them for touching, but she was considerate, reverent, her face showed nothing but interest.

He noticed something about her. Instead of the usual oversized Muggle cardigan and sensible skirt, she was wearing witch’s robes with a high neckline, in sapphire blue, with bronze trimmings: Ravenclaw colours. They hugged her figure, then flowed, and below he could glimpse heeled boots. And her hair, instead of the slightly manic ponytail she normally kept it, it was loose, smooth, glowing gilt against the dark silk. The change in couture, of which he approved immensely, gave her a serene, mystical, alluring air.

One bottle containing a viscous blue matter she selected but there was no label. It was so immediately recognizable to Snape that he hadn’t bothered. She turned to him with a slight frown. “This – it looks like blood, but its blue.”

“It is blood. From a certain kind of Asiatic dragon. I use it for a night-seeing potion but it also makes an excellent dye.”

“Amazing.” She returned it to the shelf, and said softly, “I feel quite at home here.”

He raised a surprised brow, his heart lifted.

“My major at University was in biochemistry. I qualified, but I wasn’t going to be making a career out of it. I got a post-grad teaching qualification instead. I thought maybe I could teach Muggles a bit of science.” She gave him that wide, diffident smile. “Our laboratories at Uni were a lot like this. Not so dark, but all the specimens – there was a research facility – some of my old Professors would have gone mad if they could have seen this room.”

“Mad?”

“As in excited. So much here that would be new to science. What are these eggs?”

“Phoenix. They never hatched, Dumbledore was inconsolable. So I preserved them.”

“Look,” she said, examining the shells. “It looks like gold but it couldn’t be –,”

“Yes. Gold in fact.”

“But…how..?” she said, almost to herself, staring at them. With a tiny shake of her head, she came to. “Severus, I’m so sorry, you must be very busy -,”

“No, you are not troubling me, in fact could I interest you in a cup of tea?”

“Oh!” this seemed to catch her unawares. “Tea…actually that would be lovely.”

Stupidly, he realized, there were no tea making facilities in his office. He was thinking of his rooms. He could order some up from a kitchen elf –

“I expect the tea things are in your rooms, are they?” Charity inquired, obviously reading his expression. She looked like she was going to suggest something but thought better of it. “We can…” she began.
“Would you like to come through?” he offered suddenly. “The oil lamps in here…it’s a bit stuffy.”

She hesitated, looking at him. “Well only if I’m not disturbing you…”

“Come this way,” he murmured, and led her from the office to the door of his quarters, which he unlocked and opened for her. Dumbledore sometimes visited here, Hagrid a few times to check on him. Otherwise, apart from elves, he was inviting her into his most intimate of spaces. She understood this. She understood, on a much larger level, what was happening, and that they had begun a very gradual, very inevitable centripetal pull and that she for one wasn’t making any effort to arrest it.

In contrast to his office, his rooms were basic, Spartan almost. He offered her his most comfortable armchair then went to the kitchen nook to make the tea. From where she was sitting, she could glimpse his bedroom, his bed with a dark cover on it, his winter cloak on a hook. There were many books in his room, writing materials and some household effects, but not much that gave clues to who he was.

Snape brought her a mug of tea, which somehow felt friendlier that a whole pot with cups on a tray. “Dumbledore visited you, then?” he asked, sitting opposite her on a kitchen chair.

“Yes. He asked for a tour of the archives, wanted to see what I’d been doing. He mentioned he hadn’t realized two years had passed. Where did he find that out, Severus?”

He inclined his head. “I told him your dedication had been impressive.”

“It was obvious within minutes that the whole thing had only occurred to him owing to your appraisal, but I found that somewhat disappointing. I had hoped he may have taken an interest on merit alone. But…given he’d clearly forgotten about me, perhaps I should be thankful.”

“He hadn’t forgotten about you. It was his idea that you would be of great use to me with the audit.”

She started to say something in a way that looked argumentative, then she hurriedly took a sip of tea and started vacantly over the top of the mug rather than engage. He let this go.

“I’m not going to be precious about it. I’m glad he finally took an interest in what I’d been doing. In fact, he promised to allocate some budget to shelving and storage in the archive – there’s a lot of parchment that will be lost to damp and rot if they’re not protected,” she said.

Snape nodded and attempted to show real concern and interest, but in fact he couldn’t care less about the fate of a lot of old parchment in the archive. While she talked, he stared at her mouth, her hair, the colour of her eyes. He remembered to nod in all the right places, then became fascinated in the hollow of where her jawbone joined her neck. He saw himself kissing it. Took a long slurp of tea and made himself blink, making understanding noises.

She looked up and caught him staring. “Severus?”

“Yes?! Yes, I absolutely agree. I know you’re not the only teacher that feels that way. Unfortunately, he doesn’t seem to have any particular system for prioritizing funds.”

“I don’t expect you have to worry about it too much,” she said caustically, and it was barbed in a way that he hadn’t anticipated. He wasn’t sure how to respond, and hesitated.

She sensed it and smiled apologetically. “I’m out of line. I envy your obvious connection to the Headmaster. I get the feeling he only tolerates Muggle Studies.”
Snape was in fact more distracted by the way heat seemed to be liquefying him internally. “Is that fire a bit hot?” he asked, even though the fire was barely even lit, and undid the top button of his coat. He got out his wand and cast a dousing spell. His face felt like it was on fire.

“So. Anyway.” She continued, clearly unperturbed. “By the end of his visit he got to his point, which was to ask me if I could consider the audit project. I remembered your presentation at the staff meeting. To me it looked like a poisoned chalice. But I said yes immediately.”

“You did?”

“It will be so refreshing to work with someone who has their head on straight. Someone really focused. Someone who has the ability to concentrate on the job at hand.”

“Um, yes.”

“I just want to know what I’m supposed to do. Dumbledore couldn’t really tell me. He said you’d explain everything. So I’m all ears.”

“By all means.”

She gazed at him for a long moment, then stood and put down the mug of tea. He watched. She came towards him and he froze.

“Look,” she said in a soft voice, and took out her wand from her sleeve. Then she put it back and then took it out again. “I’ve been practicing.”

“Oh yes. So you have.”

Their eyes met. A giddy thrill spun lazily through Snape’s body…so much heat, no breath. Did hours just pass?

She looked at him expectantly now. “Did you want to discuss the audit?”

Merlin, no, he thought. “Yes,” he answered. “but it is too hot in here. All my paperwork is in my office, I beg your patience if we could return there.”

She bade him to lead the way and he quickly checked the corridor before letting her step out of his rooms, and then he led her back to his office where he showed her a seat before collapsing into his chair behind the desk. His sleeping giant was rolling about inside like planets askew on their axes.

But she was attentive and earnest about the audit, seizing the explanatory booklet and grasping within minutes the exercise and its purpose. She devoured his strategy notes, asked several pertinent questions, made some extremely useful suggestions, and offered to start preparing the plan “…properly, on my typewriter and with a ruler. And don’t tell Dumbledore, but I have several ball-point pens which I shall be using also. If they’re OK with the Ministry, then they’re acceptable for the audit.”

“Quite,” he replied. Then added, “I would very much appreciate it if you could provide instruction on the typewriter.”

“Haven’t you ever used one?”

“No. I have not. But I should like to learn. There are a number of potion recipes and formulae I own that are on parchment and in a great deal of disrepair, or illegible. I would like them reproduced.”
She smiled at him, at his serious face. “I would be honoured to help you. It’s the least I can do. I’ll leave it in the archive and you can use it whenever you want.”

They turned focus back to the project and made arrangements to start the paper audit by procuring evidence and organizing the documentation. Snape told her about Warrington and Pucey, and that she should feel free to ask for their help whenever she needed it. They referred to the Master Schedule and agreed when Snape was teaching but she had a free period, that she would carry on with the paper audit and vice versa. They agreed to use the archive as their Project HQ, since much of what they needed would be stored in there, and the table was perfect for laying documentation out.

“Oh,” said Charity as if suddenly reminded of something. “I had some other visitors down there the other day. Did you send them as well?”

“Who?” he asked, completely at a loss.

“That Harry Potter. And his friends, Ron and Hermione. Out of the blue they knocked on the door.”

Snape frowned heavily, knowing this was in no way a coincidence. Were they on some form of surveillance, looking for gossip, had Hagrid told them? “What did they want?” he asked, his voice dropped to a dangerous pitch.

She noticed and offered him her own puzzled frown. “Harry asked me if school yearbooks were archived. They said they’d been to the library, but Madam Pince only kept general records, not school history. So I asked him what exactly he was after.”

“And what, exactly, did Potter want?”

“School yearbooks from the seventies. He said he was trying to find out who the Head Students had been in the past.”

A cold fury blossomed in Snape’s chest. It burned in his eyes, making Charity wary. “Severus? What on earth’s the matter?”

“And did he find any yearbooks?”

“Yes. There was one that seemed to satisfy him for obvious reasons – his mother and father were Head Students in 1977, it turns out. Doesn’t he look like his Dad?! And I saw you as well. In the Slytherin seventh year photo. You didn’t look very happy.”

“Was he looking at the Slytherin photo?”

“Yes. I didn’t realise it was you – it was the kids that spotted you. But you know what else?”

“What, pray tell?”

“Sirius Black is in that photo with Harry’s parents. And Remus as well. They were that gang, weren’t they, that Gryffindor group that were always prankng and hexing. I know you said that Sirius had been friends with Remus, I didn’t realise Harry’s father was part of the group. But didn’t he die? Wasn’t he killed by Voldemort?”

Snape’s Dark Mark tingled suddenly at the name and he jerked his arm involuntarily, which she saw, and her frown deepened. “Are you alright – your arm -,”

“It’s fine,” he snapped, and she was silent, gazing at him reproachfully as he massaged the skin
through his sleeve. That had been a fast, intense admonishment, the likes of which he hadn’t
experienced in years. What did it signify?

“I apologise,” he uttered, his eyes like glittering jet as he met hers from beneath his furrowed brow.

“Severus, is something wrong? You’ve become so angry. Was it to do with Potter in the archive?”

“It’s…it’s all history, nothing that concerns us here today. What did Potter do with the Yearbook?”

“He left it, archives can’t be removed. He seemed to think he had what he needed. Is Sirius Black
after Harry?”

“That is the commonly held belief. Did you mention to Potter about…about that group?”

“No. I don’t think it was my place to tell him his father was one of a group of bullies, particularly
since they’d just confirmed he had been Head Boy. I merely registered them in the photo. They
recognized Lupin but I’m not sure they realized Sirius Black was in there, even though he was
standing right next to his Dad. No…he was more interested in his mother, what was her name?”

Snape looked away, drawn to the memories suddenly swirling through his mind, Lily in her ruby-
coloured robes, her Head Student badge pinned to her breast, her dark red hair in an elegant French
plait as she swept through the corridors, smiling up at James, his arm around her waist possessively.

“Severus..?”

“Lily. Lily Evans.” He was barely audible.

Charity nodded slightly, but she didn’t speak; she sensed and saw his withdrawal but she didn’t
know why. The memories were clearly painful. After a moment, she rose from her chair almost
silently. While Snape watched her, he didn’t seem to see. The gold lining in her robe glinted gently
in the candlelight. “I – I’ll just let myself out…” she murmured, and he gave the barest incline of his
head. And then quietly she departed.
The emotional rollercoaster that had become Snape’s existence did nothing to stop the march of time, the incessant demands and infringements that clamoured for his attention, indifferent to his personal torments. After the meeting in his office, Charity disappeared – he saw her neither at dinner, in the staffroom, in the corridors nor in fact anywhere, for days. He didn’t know if she was avoiding him, or was simply busy, but the fact that she missed several mealtimes gave him cause to believe that she was choosing to keep her distance.

This merely added to his misery. He knew his behaviour had confused her, that he seemed scarcely in control of himself, which was even more confusing for someone who admired his containment. Perhaps he had even frightened her, and this possibility dragged at his heart like iron chains. In truth, he wasn’t even sure himself how he felt about Lily, and now Charity, and wondered if it were possible for him to ever love anyone after Lily, perhaps that was his sentence, his punishment for bringing about her death.

And yet he couldn’t stop thinking about Charity in his office, examining his collection. How desirable she looked in her sapphire gown, her hair the colour of dark gold in the firelight. How entrancing she had become as she let the sorceress within her shyly reveal. Had she done that for him? Had he complimented her? While the words had been in his head, he couldn’t remember saying them out loud.

The Faerie Call remained in his rooms, stored in wicker basket until he could think of the right time to offer it. Would she accept it now? No answer would come to him as he tossed at night.

The late autumn weather was worsening, clouds had permanently gathered and it rained incessantly, the nights were freezing and his rooms felt damp despite an almost perpetual fire. As the week wore on, and each day brought further disappointment at Charity’s absence, Snape forced himself to go through the motions and deal with the minutiae of his ordinary life.

On Thursday, Lupin spoke to him at breakfast. He looked like Snape felt, and he barely touched his food. “Severus, I’ll take a full goblet of the wolfsbane today, I think the reduction in the dosage is having a detrimental effect. I can feel the… I can feel the change already, the moon isn’t even full.”

Whatever his thoughts on Lupin, Snape was always interested in the performance of his potions. He pondered on possible reasons for the potency deterioration, but all he said was: “As you wish, I will bring it to you presently.”

“Friday, my third year DADA class – can you please take it for me?”

“I said I would.”

“I’ll bring you the coursework. We’re up to Chapter three. We’ve just finished grindylows and about to start hinkypunks.”

Snape glanced at him. Hinkypunks? “But you said third years -,”

“Yes. That blasted Slytherin, Gryffindor group – they can’t leave each other alone for five minutes.”
Snape cocked an eyebrow, somewhat mollified. “We should speak to Dumbledore about switching that group around.”

“It’s that bloody Malfoy that starts it,” grumbled Lupin. “Big mouth on him.”

“I’m inclined to think it’s more Potter.”

“Of course you do.”

Snape’s mouth twitched, but he said no more.

Later that afternoon, as he returned from an unsuccessful stroll down first floor in hopes of bumping into Charity, he crossed the Entrance Hall and the front doors burst open, spilling water, damp leaves and a gust of freezing wind in along with the greater part of a soaking Slytherin Quidditch team.

Their emerald and silver Quidditch uniforms were dripping and covered in mud, their teeth chattered and their hair was flattened against their heads. Snape immediately went over and helped them all inside before shutting the heavy doors against the squall.

“Go down to showers directly,” he ordered, noting their white, numbed fingers and streaming noses. “Hot showers, and change into civvies. Flint, I want you to gather the team together in the Common Room when you’re all dry.”

“Y-y-yes sir,” Marcus Flint stuttered, barely able to make his jaw unclench, and they trooped off, trailing freezing mud and grass behind them. Snape noticed that Malfoy was not amongst them. He hastily scourgified the Hall floor before Filch made an appearance, then made a quick visit to the Hogwarts Kitchens to order hot toddies made from Butterbeer for each member of the team.

He was waiting for them in the Common Room when they finally assembled from their dorms, many dressed in Slytherin patched green and white striped jerseys. This time Malfoy had joined them, his arm still in its sling. Snape had ordered some second year students to build up the fire, as he’d noticed the Common Room was feeling particularly dank. He told the students to help themselves to a hot toddy grouped on a tray on the table, then sit on the sofas as the other Slytherin students watched on curiously from afar.

“Now,” said Snape, folding his arms and turning his back to the fire. “Whose idea was it to practice this afternoon?”

“Sir, the practice was scheduled for weeks. We’re playing Gryffindor on Saturday,” said Flint.

Snape’s face was stone, but inside he made a heartfelt groan. Of course, he’d forgotten. Privately he was impressed with how stoic the team were, prepared to go out into the elements, all because of Gryffindor and Harry bloody Potter. It was dirty out there, and the Dementors were barely visible against the steel-grey wall of weather.

“You do realise there was lightening earlier? Not to mention the Dementors.”

Several team members nodded, then Flint said, “We haven’t been able to practice with a Seeker for weeks…it was our last chance before the match.”

“Did you play, Malfoy?”

“Yes sir,” said Malfoy, looking affronted. “But I couldn’t hold my broom properly and after a bit Flint told me to come back here.”
Snape held his gaze for a few moments, his skepticism clearly communicated and he hoped visible to the others. Malfoy dropped his eyes.

“I take it then you still won’t have a Seeker for Saturday?”

Young Vaisey put his arm up. “I said I’d cover, sir. I’m backup Seeker.”

Snape turned to Flint. “How many times has Vaisey actually played as Seeker?”

“Never sir. He did today, but we didn’t get the snitch. It was impossible for him to see it.”

Snape took a heavy breath. “And what is the weather forecast for Saturday?”

Flint glanced around at the others in his team, then said, “As far as we know, this storm’s in for several more days. Professor Trelawney told us she wasn’t a meteorologist.”

He let silence hang over the team, as the factors began to pile up. The roaring fire snapped and crackled, and the spectator students whispered fervently to each other. Snape looked from face to face of his Serpents, waiting to see what they’d say.

Finally, Graham Montague spoke in a quavering voice, “Sir, if we lose this match on Saturday, we lose our chance at the Cup.”

Snape didn’t reply. He looked at them each in turn, patient. Flint stepped forward. “I am Captain, sir, and I say we play anyway. It’s the right team spirit.”

“Are you sure you’re not playing for Gryffindor,” sneered Lucian Bole from the back.

“You take that back,” spat Flint. “I just wanna get out there and beat the crap out of them!”

“Language, Flint,” murmured Snape, nonetheless admiring his attitude.

“We won’t though, will we?” reasoned Peregrine Derrick. “We were rubbish today. Totally rubbish.”

“The conditions!” pointed out Montague, shrilly, who was vice Captain. “It was the conditions. And Malfoy’s out.”

“The conditions will be worse on Saturday. We haven’t got a chance, not a snowballs.”

“Gryffindor are out there,” said Flint hotly to his team. “They’re practicing, they’re not quitting.”

“That’s because they’re all dick, no brains!” said Malfoy, and there was much laughter. Snape coughed into the back of his hand to hide a smirk. “I said language!”

Flint looked aghast. “Really? You want to pull out?”

“No,” said Montague, standing to address Flint. “We want to fight another day. Professor Snape said there’s lightening, Dementors, and it was hell out there. We’re a man down. Let’s pick our fight.”

“Take it on to our ground!” yelled Miles Bletchley from the sofa.

“We’ve got good reasons,” said Montague. “We haven’t even been able to practice properly without Malfoy. He needs a chance to get fit again. He’s against that bloody Potter.”

“He doesn’t worry me,” said Malfoy with bluster, but Snape held his hand up at him.
Flint looked appalled. “You know what they’ll say. They’ll say we’re chicken.”

“And we say they’re stupid. With dicks for brains.”

Laughter again, and Snape ignored the choice of words. He asked, “Who will play if Slytherin pulls?”

A spectator from the far end of the room yelled “Hufflepuff!”

“Gryffindor will thrash Hufflepuff,” said Montague, staunchly. “we’ll meet them again.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Flint. “They’ve got Diggory. Diggory’s got some first class moves lately.”

“But Gryffindor have been planning on us! They can’t change tactics that quickly.”

“It’s fifty-fifty,” said Montague. “It’s worth the chance.” And he knocked back the last of his hot toddy.

Silence descended. Snape watched as Marcus Flint looked to each of his team members, and lastly to his vice. He looked dismayed, as if betrayed while he lay sleeping. But after a while he turned to the Head of House and muttered “We’ll pull. We’ll pull out on Saturday. I’ll tell Wood.”

Ardent conversation erupted throughout the room, but Snape held Flint’s gaze evenly. “This is being a leader, Flint. You listened to the team. They won’t always like your decisions, and you won’t always like theirs. But when you talk to Oliver Wood, you stand with your team.”

Flint simply nodded, resolved but far from happy.

The Daily Prophet projected terrible weather until the end of the week, Snape read with relief at breakfast the following morning. McGonagall and Sprout were casting him terrible looks over the tea and marmalade as evidently the news of Slytherin’s withdrawal having reached them already. Flint, presumably, hadn’t wanted to leave it any later than possible in a last ditch effort to salvage some dignity from the decision. While Snape respected Flint’s strong sense of duty, his own Slytherin inclination to self-preservation – happily supported by the weather report – eased any guilt at the thought that his own students would not be exposed to lightning, frostbite, rain-blindness or concealed Dementors. Given it was Famous Harry Potter she was sending out into the melee, he was, frankly, surprised that McGonagall thought she could afford to be so impassive. Maybe she hadn’t read the weather.

Charity was absent again, as was Lupin. While he’d never in fact asked Lupin, he presumed that his choice of hideout during the transformation-period was the Shrieking Shack. He felt a twinge of sympathy at the thought of being holed up alone, in the cold, derelict, leaking shack while your body contorted and disease fought cure in a dark rage in your veins. So it was unsurprising that Lupin had not brought him the coursework as promised for his substitute DADA class, which didn’t trouble Snape particularly as he had no intention of teaching third years about hinkypunks. It was supposed to be a class about Dark Arts, not an extension of Magical Creatures.

As if on cue, Hagrid sat down weightily in Lupin’s vacant chair. “Mornin’ Severus. Pass the sausages.” Hagrid’s enormous black coat was damp from rain and smelled like wet dog. Snape winced a little but obliged and as he passed over the platter a post owl that had been waiting for Hagrid to arrive, flew through the Hall and dropped him a letter, scolding the giant for the delay. Hagrid gave the owl a knut and a bite of sausage before sending it on its way.
“Perhaps you might like to dry your coat,” suggested Snape.

“Wha’?” said Hagrid, absorbed in opening his mail. Snape took out his wand and discreetly applied a drying spell, for which Flitwick reached back to give Snape a wink in thanks.

Hagrid ate heartily as he read the parchment and then dropped it triumphantly before Snape. “There’yar. Post Master can take a flyin’. Me Drop Bears are on their way.”

Snape read the letter. It did appear to be a consignment order for four Drop Bears expected to arrive on the Knight Bus in two weeks. Hagrid was to meet the delivery person at the Hogs Head and pay on delivery.

“At the Hog’s Head, Hagrid?” said Snape dubiously. “Who is this person?”

“I ‘ave me contacts,” was Hagrid’s obtuse reply.

“Have you a permit for them?” Snape asked. The audit criteria specifically sought evidence of authorized permits for the husbandry of magical creatures, and he would have thought particularly for imported endangered ones.

“Never had any permits,” mumbled Hagrid around a mouthful of sausage. “This chap didn’t ask fer none.”

“So these rare Drop Bears – if in fact they do exist – are going to arrive at the Castle via a highly suspect source, without any form of permission or documentation, right in the middle of a site audit? We’ll be closed on that alone – its illegal wildlife trade.”

Hagrid frowned so heavily his eyes all but disappeared. “They’re just li’le koalas, Sev’rus – it’s not like I’m cookin’ the Queen’s swans.”

For a long moment, Snape just looked at him. Finally, he asked, “Does Dumbledore know about this?”

“Dumbledore trusts me,” responded Hagrid shortly. “An’ look – yer know I’d do anythin’ fer you, Severus, I ‘ave in the past ain’t I? ‘Aven’t we got a deal? I won’t get yer into no trouble. So leave me be to do me job.”

Snape thought he’d better leave it at Hagrid putting his metaphorical foot down, rather than a real one. He finished breakfast and left to begin work for his first class, thinking, all the while, how to keep the auditors away from Hagrid’s menagerie.

The third year class after lunch was seated and waiting for him when he arrived. He went to the teacher’s desk, sat down and commenced a roll call, ignoring the sea of resentful Gryffindor eyes glaring at him. “Potter?” he glanced up, a chair next to Weasley was empty. Interesting.

He was in the middle of explaining to the class that they would not be learning about hinkypunks or anything else for that matter from Chapter three, reason being Lupin not having taken the trouble to give him coursework, when Potter came careening in. Snape was intensely disappointed, because he knew now that the class was about to become a tedious war zone. Predictably, even though Potter had been verbalizing an apology to Lupin for being late as he entered, he made no such apology to Snape upon realizing who was teaching, and proceeded to challenge him brazenly and rudely in front of the entire class. Snape was aware he was supposed to be applying discretion when it came to doling out points, but if he let Potter get away with this, open disrespect and disobedience, then he
was a sitting duck. Potter had cost Gryffindor 15 points before he’d even sat down. Amazingly, not one of his classmates thought this a problem. A Slytherin student costing the House that many points for such a preventable error would have been lynched in the common room.

After that, the Granger girl decided it was her job to tell him what to teach, and there were mutinous murmurs from the students when he remarked about Lupin’s poor organizational skills. Not one of them seemed to care that in fact all Lupin had been teaching them was bordering on cute and lazy.

He turned the class, with some effort, to page three hundred and ninety-four of their textbooks. The werewolf chapter. If they were finally going to learn something useful in a Dark Arts class, then might as well make it as practical, and relevant, as possible. Give them a crash-course in what to look for, and how to deal with it, if ever the failsafe’s around Lupin’s appointment, in fact, failed.

While the students moaned about having to learn something not in strict chronological order, he felt like yelling at them: who else here has confronted a werewolf? No one? So no-one here has ever come face to face with a werewolf except me? That’s right – I’ve seen what your beloved teacher turns into, and did it ever cross your mind to ask him where he got all those scars? Because grindylows are not on his mind when he’s seven foot tall, stinking and salivating. So stop being so naïve, stop questioning your superiors, stop whining about a class where you have to actually apply your brains, and turn to page three hundred and ninety four!

After he’d put Granger back in her place for disrespect, Weasley decided to try it on, emboldened no doubt by the collective rebellion of his classmates. Apparently, however, even his comrades seemed to recognize a point too far and the detention Weasley received for his trouble was justified. It had taken that to get the class to finally do some work. Having wasted at least twenty minutes of the class sorting out Gryffindor intransigence, he assigned the students homework when the bell rang. “I want two rolls of parchment on the subject and I want them by Monday morning. It is time somebody took this class in hand,” he said loudly over the top of more groaning and complaining. He assigned Weasley a detention scrubbing bedpans and then when at last the room was empty, he sat down at the desk and slammed the door shut with his wand, then put his head in his hands.

Charity wasn’t at dinner either. Snape wondered if she had been away, perhaps apparated back to the part of England she came from. He was starting to see how it was possible for him to have overlooked her for so many years. Before, however, he would have blithely carried on with whatever had concerned him, completely indifferent to whether she was at dinner or not, indeed whether she continued to live or not. Now, the first thing he did when he entered the Hall was look to where she was normally seated, and when he concluded that she was missing again, an ache settled at the top of his chest and his appetite vanished and he wondered fruitlessly, again and again and again, where was she and was it his fault?

The Gryffindor table - or at least the third years – shot him murderous looks all through the meal, but he couldn’t care less. Presumably, because Lupin was still away, they blamed him for their favourite teachers’ absence, no doubt extrapolating that Snape had been deliberately poisoning Lupin with the wolfsbane potion. Did it matter that they would never know the truth? Would it change anything even if they did? Everybody loves to hate someone, and Snape made it so very, very easy for them.

He spent a quiet night in his rooms, researching his charms textbooks for clues to the spell that made the Faerie Call work. He found something that might be effective, and spent a few minutes training his wand to cast it. Then he put the Call on the top of a bookcase and tapped it, triggering the inner mechanism to spin and a soft sound to emit. There was only one way fairies could find a way into his rooms, which was the same way as the mice, so he didn’t hold much hope. But the Call was the
It rained solidly all night. Snape’s fire went out midway through and by morning he was stiff and sore from lying in a freezing cold bed for hours. He fantasized about having Charity as a sleeping companion, her bodily warmth next to him, wrapping his arms round her and burying his face into her hair while she slept, deeply inhaling her scent. The sleeping giant within him rolled and tumbled.

There was virtually no reason to get up except that it was freezing cold, he was hungry from only picking at dinner, and he’d organized – for a reason that seemed appropriate at the time but which now just made him want to curl up and die – the hair cutting elf to visit him. The elf’s name was Nimpty, and she was willing – if not particularly able – to trim hair and beards, nose and ear hair and if you were particularly brave, shave.

Snape had often wondered, as a qualified Prime Sorcerer, whether he should grow his hair long like Dumbledore and Lucius Malfoy. It seemed to be the done thing for great and noble wizards, or at least it used to be. These days modern wizards were taking a lead from Muggles more and more, and keeping their hair short and faces clean-shaven, the easier to fit in when times required it. As for Snape, he just couldn’t be bothered either way. Lucius appeared to spend a great deal of time keeping his hair clean and combed and Snape knew he would never bother with that degree of maintenance. So his raven hair did its own thing until he could feel it on his shoulders, and then Nimpty was called in.

He washed and shaved and dressed quickly to ward off the cold, then immediately set a fire, lighting it with his wand. It was then the Faerie Call caught his eye, still revolving and singing, as it had all through the night.

A single fairy had answered the call, and was now limp and lifeless on top of the bookshelf at the foot of the cage. Snape instantly gathered up the little creature in his hand, and was relieved when he saw signs of movement. Judging by the sodden bedraggled wings and vestures, the fairy had braved the freezing rain and wind, then crawled through a vent, to find its way to his trap. A quick tap of his wand stopped the Call, and he placed the frail little body on some parchment before the fire, being sure that it was a safe distance but had warmth. Then with his wand, he knelt and murmured a healing incantation, a song as magical as the Call itself, all the while making tiny movements along the length of the fairy with his wand tip.

In time, the fairy roused and tested its wings slowly, much as a butterfly does in the sunshine. Snape had nothing to offer it but a sugar cube from his kitchen which he put before the tiny being. The fairy completely ignored his token, and instead attempted to flutter about the room, banging into the walls and getting precariously close to the fire. Eventually, Snape caught it in his cupped hands and left his rooms, briskly headed for the Slytherin common room. A young first year girl was sitting by herself in a deep armchair, reading her potions textbook. As a reward, he approached her and, tapping her on the shoulder, she jumped about a foot in the air. “Miss Abernathy, could you please take this fairy outside. Try and release it somewhere it might have a chance of survival.”

She may have been eleven, and a Slytherin, but Miss Abernathy was thrilled to be given a fairy to release and rushed away instantly to dispatch her duty.

Snape then returned to his rooms to find Nimpty waiting for him outside the door. “Oh Master Snape, sir, I am here on your orders for me to cut your hairs, sir.”
“Quite. Thank you. Do go in.”

Minutes later Snape was seated on a kitchen chair while Nimpty sheared away, and she managed to trim about two-thirds of it before Snape lost patience utterly and sent her off, whereupon he went to the mirror in his bathroom and, seeing the most obviously uneven bits, cut them himself.

For the first time in years, he stopped to look at his reflection. He wasn’t surprised, exactly, after all he shaved routinely, but he was curious to see what Charity saw. And what looked back dismayed him. While he was a while off forty, the wear of his life was beginning to show and what seemed to him was a much older man staring back. An old and ugly man. Years of teasing, abuse and persecution as a child had taught him to understand how the world saw him: dark, sallow-skinned, unkempt, odious, unlovable. He eschewed the vanities of other men, men like Potter and Black, because he knew he could never compete, he opted out before the race had even begun. In his most private moments, however, he hated his appearance and longed for the easy life of handsome men from loving, wealthy families. And then the battler in him would rise up and he would consider his lot. Poor. Neglected. Alone and unwanted, true. But he had a fierce intelligence and a burning to live, and most of all, hope. Hope that refused to die. If fuel ran out on a source of hope, his flame found something, somewhere else to burn.

The closest it came to being extinguished was the night Lily died. He literally lost his will to live. It came close, up on the Astronomy tower, death breathed down his throat like a Dementor, and his flame of hope sputtered, sputtered out…but for Hagrid. Hagrid had caught him, saved him, brought him to Dumbledore, showed him that hope, his hope, was eternal. He may never have Lily, never even have hope of Lily, but he may have hope that his heart could heal and that the value of a life wasn’t necessarily measured by the owner of it.

Could Charity see past the lines, the shadows, the bumps and irregularities? Black they may be, but could she see in his eyes what he had to offer? Could she be one of these rare women who wanted more that something superficial to look at over the breakfast table?

He caught his own thoughts at that point and comprehended what he’d been subliminally thinking. He was speculating whether Charity could bear to be with him in a relationship. It caught him cold and yet, yet not. He knew he’d been wondering this, at some level, for weeks. What else was attraction for, if not to partner with another, to have them in your life, not just knowing of it, attending to it, but sharing it, sharing it as part of an equation, making a whole greater than the sum of its parts. It was an alchemy in its purest, most ancient form – it was what made wizards do great things for. Love. Could he be in love with Charity?

I love Lily, he thought, and left the mirror. He couldn’t face breakfast just yet, he knew he wasn’t functioning quite right. He sat in the armchair in his front room, near the fire, and ran his hand through his shorn hair. I love Lily and I always will. Nothing can change that. Nothing will ever replace that. He felt some comfort, and reassurance. A return to normality. Some things are forever. Some things are greater than who we are. I will always, always love Lily.

Later that day, he went down with the Slytherins to watch the Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff Quidditch match. Why, he wasn’t quite sure. Something to do with showing support for the game, or rather support for his team, after they’d pulled out. He may as well not have bothered. As if gales, rain, lightening and almost non-existent visibility wasn’t enough, the Slytherins copped a resounding booing for even deigning to attend. As he so often found in recourse, Snape saw his Serpents well-wrapped up and safe in their stands while Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students crashed, literally
burned and halfway through, nearly plummeted to their death.

When Potter was falling, pursued by Dementors, Dumbledore had run onto the pitch and captured his descent with an *arresto momentum*, then cast an impressive *Patronus* to repel the Dementors until they drifted off into the gloom. Snape had scrambled out of his seat and to Dumbledore’s side as quickly as the crowded stands would allow. Encircled by Gryffindor and Hufflepuff players in the icy rain, Snape checked Potter from head to toe and declared him safe for passage, then Dumbledore had stretchered him to the hospital wing, Snape alongside.

Madam Pomfrey had taken over, releasing Snape to attend to the young player whose broom had caught fire from lightening. Fortunately, the broom had come to a standstill before serious damage occurred, but the girl was in serious shock. Then there were the remaining players, chilled, white, numbed and scared. Snape worked with Sprout to usher the Hufflepuffs into baths and showers while McGonagall took care of the Gryffindors. Potter’s friends refused to leave him, so they remained dripping onto the floor of the Hospital Wing. Snape then went down to the Entrance Hall and supervised the returning spectators, quickly dismissing the mostly fine Slytherins in order to pass out conjured towels and hot toddies to the remaining House supporters.

He then went down to the Slytherin Common Room to celebrate with his students that Hufflepuff had won the game.

Most of it had been on autopilot. Certain moments penetrated his locked down mind – Dumbledore’s fury at the Dementors, the shaking gratitude of the Hufflepuff chaser, seeing Madam Hooch carrying the remains of Potter’s Nimbus 2000 – otherwise he felt oddly detached and unaffected.

Later, much later as he lay awake in his bed, he realised that the rain had stopped. He could normally hear it in the drainpipes, but they had ceased their rattling and gurgling. He got up, put on his winter cloak and socks, then went up to the Ground Floor to look out of a window. The rain had indeed finally ended, and in the dripping, misty wake clouds were breaking up and clearing. Between them, Snape saw a brilliant moon, opalescent and full, and moths fluttering in its glow. His eyes seemed to drink in the light. Witches and wizards were innately drawn to the night, at a visceral level he felt it as a balm. Then he returned to bed and finally slept.

It was Sunday, the day of rest. Exhausted, Snape had finally slept soundly, and woken late in the morning. Again the fire in his other room was out, and again he let his mind drift to the idea of Charity sharing his bed. Could that ever happen? If they, as two teachers, decided to couple, decided to maybe even marry, since that was the common and expected outcome in the wizarding world, would they be able to share quarters and live together as well as teach? He had no living experience of it. Almost all the teachers on the faculty were single, spinsters, divorcees or widowers. He had never known Dumbledore to show any interest in a romantic way to anyone. Nor McGonagall. It was entirely possible, known as he was to be somewhat self-absorbed, that relationships had risen and fallen around him outside his notice. He decided he would try to find out.

He attended breakfast but had no expectation of Charity being there, and he was not disappointed. Being a Sunday, the residents of Hogwarts were allowed to take a far more relaxed approach to mealtimes and schedules, and so hardly anyone was in the Great Hall by the time he showed up at quarter to ten. He had a pot of tea to himself, and read the paper from front to back, although ultimately decided he was poorer for it.

Into the early afternoon he had floor duty, which required walking the corridors and hallways,
straightening artwork, picking up rubbish, eradicating graffiti, undoing hexes and jinxes, turning off taps, closing doors, blasting mice, resolving fights, straightening rugs, watering potted plants, giving directions, removing out of date notices and staring vacantly out into the grounds when a decent view gave cause. It took several hours and Snape had walked kilometers by the end of it.

After lunch, during which he had a reasonably pleasant conversation and a game of cribbage with Flitwick, he went to his office and found a small pile of completed homework assignments outside his door. They were mostly from Slytherins, two rolls of parchment on ways of identifying and defeating a werewolf. Only one from the Gryffindors - Hermione Granger, which was, in fairness, extremely competent if slightly unimaginative. One submission, from Daphne Greengrass in Slytherin, had him chuckling throughout. He was reasonably sure it was meant to be a serious, earnest attempt at the assignment, but the young lady had a tenuous grasp at best at what a werewolf could actually do once transformed, and her recommendations for addressing the problem were unintentionally hilarious.

Since these students had honoured his rather unreasonable deadline, he returned the courtesy by marking them and giving comment. He paid particular attention to Hermione Granger’s. He instinctively grasped that Miss Granger was probably their last, best hope for Harry Potter’s survival, certainly she was his best hope of getting through OWLS, and he was under no illusions how much work she was in fact doing for Potter and Weasley. If he gave her feedback in her homework, it could transpire to effect a means of communication that would find its way back to Potter in ways his direct messaging never would. There was far too much animosity and prejudice now for Potter to even listen, let alone hear, what Snape was trying to say. But he listened to her, and she listened to Snape.

So he gave her some pointers. He hinted that the transformation could be muted, to an extent, with a potion and that the primary ingredient had once been wolfsbane. He commented, very discreetly, that transformation meant werewolves under treatment were required to be incarcerated for at least three days or for the duration of the full moon. And lastly he mentioned that many good, normal folk who had the misfortune of a lifelong incapacity to lycanthropy developed a phobia of moonlight and, by association, a full moon. He left it there. She was smart enough to get it.

At around four pm, he was surprised by a Floo message from Dumbledore. The Headmaster requested his presence. He packed up his room and went directly to the Headmaster’s office, where he was greeted by Dumbledore in his winter cloak and hat. “Severus!” said Dumbledore heartily at the sight of him. “How are you? How was your day?”

“It was perfectly adequate, thank you Headmaster. Are you going out?”

“I am. And I’m hoping you’ll join me. Unless you have something on?”

“I am currently unoccupied – where are you going?”

“Hogsmeade. The Three Broomsticks. I am meeting Cornelius Fudge.”

“I am required?”

“The Minister will almost certainly raise the audit, and I believe your presence yesterday regarding the Dementors during Quidditch will support my decision to him. So yes, I would value your presence.”

Snape nodded his head, although he didn’t feel like going out. Why couldn’t the meeting be held in Dumbledore’s office?
“Besides, Severus,” added Dumbledore with a small smile. “It will do you good to get out and have a Firewhiskey. You’ve been looking very…down, lately. Even for you.”

“Very good, Headmaster,” Snape sighed.

“And it’s supposed to be a beautiful night, now the rain has finally lifted,” Dumbledore continued, ushering Snape back down the staircase. “A fine evening for a walk. But you might want to get your cloak. I’ll wait for you at the Front Entrance.”

Within a few minutes of retrieving his cloak, Snape and Dumbledore were passing through the school gates and walking into Hogsmeade. Although it was scarcely dusk, the light was disappearing fast and the first stars were already winking in the cerulean sky. “Frost tonight I imagine,” commented Dumbledore as they walked, placing a fur scarf over his shoulders. “Should you be pondering on a Christmas present for me, I am in dire need of some more gloves.”

“Thank you, sir,” rejoined Snape wryly. “Such subtle hints make gift giving much easier.”

“Have you a list for Saint Nick, young Severus?” asked Dumbledore, looking a bit like Nicholas himself with his twinkling eyes.

“I believe I have been far too often on the naughty list to be granted a visit by Saint Nick. However if he wants to leave some coal in a stocking for me, I won’t decline. My evening fire isn’t lasting through the night.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Well I keep my own list, and your name is on it. Perhaps some enchanted logs for your fire might be a start by the sounds of it? But I have an early present for you.”

Confused, Snape glanced at him.

Dumbledore winked at him as they approached the Three Broomsticks and opened the door. When they entered to a cheerful hubbub of patrons in a warm and ambient atmosphere, Snape thought Dumbledore must have meant he would buy the first round of drinks. But then Dumbledore nudged him and indicated with a nod towards a table near the back of the room, beneath a window. Seated at it, each with a drink, were Madam Sinistra, Madam Hooch and Charity Burbage. Charity was staring at him.

Snape immediately flushed and looked to Dumbledore, but the Headmaster had gone to the bar to greet Madam Rosmerta. Snape stood where he was, his feelings raging between elation at seeing her, to alarm at the fact she wasn’t smiling, to consternation about what action he should take. Charity solved that problem by turning, pointedly, back to the conversation with Sinistra and Hooch. The problem was further solved by the front door opening again and Cornelius Fudge entering.

Fudge greeted Snape, and then Dumbledore with his usual effusiveness and Snape was relieved to be able to turn his embarrassed attention to a matter of business. A table was chosen for the three of them, and Fudge offered to purchase drinks as he had apparently promised when the meeting was set up. While Fudge was up at the bar, Dumbledore leaned towards Snape. “I must say, Professor Burbage looks very fetching in a witch’s gown. She never used to wear them, but I’m told by Minerva that Madam Sinistra has quite taken Charity under her wing and asked Minerva to transfigure some old gowns. Looks as if Minerva did an excellent job.”

Although Snape was mortified by Dumbledore’s gossipy chitchat, he allowed himself to discreetly observe what Charity was wearing. This gown was again in silk sapphire, but was engraved with delicate gold thread whorls and patterns and stars. The front was drawn to with small, blue, fabric buttons, similar to Snape’s own, and finished with long, pointed sleeves.
“Is that a Bewitcher’s Ribbon?” asked Dumbledore softly, “In her hair?”

Snape could barely speak he felt so embarrassed, but again he looked and saw that a black, velvet ribbon, imprinted with glittering stars, had been woven through Charity’s plaited hair. The end threads of the ribbon were long and cascaded down her back.

“You know what that signifies, don’t you?”

“N-no,” flustered Snape.

“In witchlore it is worn by a young witch who is available and marriageable. If she selects a wizard, he pulls the free end and releases her hair from its bonds. I wonder if it was Charity’s idea.”

“Sir!” exclaimed Snape desperately. At that point, Fudge returned with three pints of Butterbeer.

“Good, strong ones,” Fudge announced, sitting down and taking a long gulp after they had all toasted good health. Snape did the same, needing to steady his nerves.

“Good to see you again, Albus,” said Fudge. “Good of you to stop by. Thought it might be an idea to bring a bit of business Rosmerta’s way. Don’t want the locals to think they can’t have a drink in the evening.”

“Until curfew?”

“Until curfew, that’s right,” muttered Fudge. “I’m afraid the Ministry has to be cruel to be kind sometimes. It’ll be lifted as soon as Black is caught. The trail has gone cold, but given the events at Hogwarts recently, I think he’s laying low nearby. He can’t hide forever.”

“What are the Ministry doing to find him? The problem is becoming oppressive at the school,” said Dumbledore.

“The Aurors and Witch Watchers are everywhere, but it’s the Dementors I’m relying on,” said Fudge. “Tell me what happened.”

While Dumbledore informed the Minister about the events at Saturday’s Quidditch match, and insisted that the Dementors stay off school grounds entirely, Snape half listened, but he was distracted by the presence of Charity only metres away. His eyes, as if under their own orders, couldn’t stop sneaking looks at her. He wished Dumbledore hadn’t mentioned the ribbon. It would have been pretty enough without the frisson of inference. Of course he imagined pulling the ribbon free, her hair loosening around her shoulders as she gazed up at him….

“I have been to almost every house in the village,” Fudge was saying. “The town is completely demoralized. But I don’t think Black represents a threat to the average resident -,”

“No. It would seem the greatest threat is to Harry,” replied Dumbledore. “He is forbidden to leave the Castle. Poor lad. His friends and classmates have started daytrips to Hogsmeade and he is unable to join them.”

“I think that is wise, however,” said Fudge, draining his pint. “There is a lot of speculation about Black’s motives in murdering Potter. Is it just unfinished business, or does it represent something more..?”

“A gesture for Voldemort, you mean?” Dumbledore asked. Snape’s left forearm seared again, enough to make him twitch and grit his teeth. Next to him, Dumbledore glanced over and realized what had happened. He didn’t mention it, however.
“It’s a theory, nothing more,” said Fudge. “The Ministry has enjoyed a period of calm and prosperity. Nobody can believe You Know Who survived.”

“Unless it was he that was responsible for aiding Black’s escape. For some reason, I can’t see it.”

“No, we agree, the Aurors are not convinced about the possibility of a return,” said Fudge.

“I meant, I can’t see Sirius Black turning operative for Voldemort – oh, sorry Severus.”

Snape shook his head slightly.

“I know how close Black and Potter were. As you know, the Potters asked Black to be godparent to the baby. It seems inconceivable that he could turn like that. It wasn’t in the nature of the boy I knew; he rejected everything the Black family stood for. He fought in the First war.”

Snape kept his opinion on Sirius Black to himself. Snape had known Regulus Black reasonably well, both being students in Slytherin and then both taking the Dark Mark around the same time. Regulus hadn’t talked about Sirius much, but if his name did come up, it was met with scorn and disaffection. When Regulus defected, Snape watched closely but Voldemort and the higher ranking Death Eaters smothered the truth and propagated the rumour that Regulus had been fatally punished for his betrayal. Through all this, Sirius seemed disinterested. Snape believed that Black’s rationale for tormenting him and bullying him through his teens because he was a Death Eater was a ploy. What Black really hated about Snape was his friendship with Lily. Muggle-born Lily being friends with a Death Eater was perverted in Black’s eyes. It was like a vegan being friends with a hunter. But Lily, being a girl, being naïve, being pretty, obviously couldn’t think for herself. Potter and Black needed to rescue her, apparently. They would save her from him: creepy, twisted, vengeful, Death Eater Snape. As soon as Snape fought back, it was on, it was all Black needed to keep himself occupied.

Snape finished his beer just as Madame Rosmerta bustled over with an empty tray and gathered up their glasses. “Three whiskeys!” ordered Dumbledore with a flourish. “On the tab, please.”

There was a lull in the conversation, and Snape’s attention once more wandered over to Charity. The three women were laughing now, and he was reminded of Lily with her friends, forever surrounded, always making him have to embarrass himself to talk to her.

“Master Snape!” declared Fudge suddenly. “I hear Hogwarts is to be audited later this month. Byron told me about your meeting, described it as positive.”

The whiskeys were deposited on the table, and all three took a sip.

“Indeed, sir,” replied Snape. “Sir Byron was very...open...about his ambitions for the audit process.”

“I know Bartemius Crouch will have a leading role in organizing the Triwizard Cup, so he obviously has a vested interest in knowing how the audit shapes up. I don’t think he’ll be recommending the Cup be held at Hogwarts if the audit fails,” said Fudge. “But I don’t think there’s much chance of that.”

“No sir,” said Snape, taking a larger sip of the firewhiskey so that his throat burned. “We have no intention of failing the audit, obviously.”

“Severus is absolutely the best man for the job,” said Dumbledore. “Fond as I am of all my staff, I’m afraid a great number of them couldn’t organize a...how does that saying go, Severus?”

“Ah... it just means that they’re not very organized.”
“Severus knows all the Muggle sayings,” explained Dumbledore. “Some are rather amusing.”

“There is a great deal to organize,” went on Snape, before Dumbledore remembered the Muggle expression. “I had a meeting with Professor Burbage,” he said to the Headmaster. “She is very committed.”

“Who’s Professor Burbage?” asked Fudge.

“She’s on the faculty, Professor of Muggle Studies. She has a good strategic mind like Severus.”

“Good, good. Actually, Sir Byron mentioned the Muggle Studies curriculum to me. He said the Board would like to have a look at it. Concerns that it is too purist? You know Sir Byron is quite liberal in his views,” Fudge said, swirling the non-melting ice in his tumbler.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows lifted and he turned to Snape. “That is news to me. What do you know of this?”

“Sir, as you know, Sir Byron received his strongest OWL in Muggle Studies, it is a subject of passion for him. Clearly he takes an active interest in its ongoing form,” replied Snape after a moment’s quick thinking. “I haven’t myself had any involvement in the curriculum since my second year at school. I did not choose it as an elective.”

“Professor Burbage is an excellent teacher,” said Dumbledore. “But she is more Muggle than magical. I would hope that she is not lobbying the Board independently.”

Not liking where this was heading, Snape blurted out, “She is quite magical. I mean, I believe she is finding a good balance between her Muggle life experience and the world in which she now resides.”

Dumbledore smiled slightly at Snape, implying he heard exactly what he’d said.

“Well the Muggle Studies curriculum is a matter for me and school,” he then said to Fudge, who seemed happy to leave it be. “I will discuss that with my staff another time. Now, - oh, Severus… didn’t you have to…return to the Castle?” Dumbledore said, looking meaningfully at him.

Snape looked at Dumbledore, baffled, then followed his Headmaster’s eyes. Charity and the other teachers were rising from their table and heading towards the front door of the Three Broomsticks. Snape’s heart somersaulted, knowing the moment was now or never.

Knocking back the remains of his whisky, and blinking as his throat scorched, he stood. “Yes, the Headmaster is correct, I regret am needed back at the Castle. Good evening, Minister. Good evening, sir.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Severus,” Dumbledore responded cheerily.

Snape gathered his cloak and tipped Madam Rosmerta, then hastened outside. Night had almost curtained the sky, and when Snape spotted the three women, standing on the empty street in coats and hats, he could see their breath on the icy air. With their backs to him, Madam Sinistra was pointing to the stars, and Charity and Madam Hooch were following her gaze. He determined it was some kind of casual astronomy lesson, because Sinistra would move her finger in several directions, presumably pointing out interesting parts of the constellations, while the other two nodded.

He shoved his hands in his cloak pockets and wondered what to do. He desperately wanted to talk to Charity, but alone. And if he approached them now, it would look glaringly obvious. He hesitated and stood glancing about him as if for inspiration.
“Oh, Professor Snape. How fortunate. Could I please have a word – about the audit?” It was Charity, sounding extremely business-like.

Sinistra and Hooch waved at them both and began walking away in the direction of Hogwarts. Charity came towards Snape, and as he watched her approach, unable to tear his eyes away, his heart started hammering.

Her face was unreadable. She held his gaze levelly, but she wasn’t as friendly-looking as normal. In her dark gown, cloak, and holding her wand, the stars glinting in her ribbon, she was a little formidable. She also didn’t look in the least bit Muggle.

“Severus,” was all she said, as she stood looking up at him.

“I am sorry,” he said, before he had time to think. “I am very sorry.”

“I thought I’d best give you some…distance. Some space. I wasn’t sure if it was me, or -,”

“It wasn’t you. It definitely wasn’t you.”

Her shoulders sank a little. Her eyes softened. “I didn’t know what to think. You just…you were so angry.”

“I’m…sorry.”

“Can you tell me what it was about?”

He thought about explaining Lily to her, about Potter, about the whole damn mess. “It’s…very…complicated. I can’t really. But it has nothing to do with you.”

She seemed saddened by this. Remorseful that there was a history he was not willing to confide.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” he said, barely above a whisper. “I found I…missed…your company the last few days. I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

“I was keeping an eye on you Severus. I had a feeling you’d come tonight.” Charity smiled at him, and it appeared forgiving.

Had she been at Hogwarts all along? He didn’t question that she’d been in the shadows, or how - because there were very few things that escaped Snape - but he picked up on a note of affection in her voice.

“I didn’t know you would be here. Dumbledore -,” he said, not needing to explain further as Charity was nodding.

“He’s a canny man.”

“Hagrid told him about our visit to his hut. I’ve had a word with him. I told him we are nothing more than friends.”

His rather brutal choice of words caused her to flinch the slightest bit, a fleeting dent between her brows. As he knew it couldn’t have been further from the truth for himself, he had selected them specifically for her benefit, assuming she would be concerned for her reputation, her professionalism. And because he blamed himself for compromising her.

“Oh,” she said. “Told who? Hagrid or Dumbledore?”
“Uh, both actually.”

“I see. Well that’s a good idea. As we are…just friends. No need for scandal right before the audit.” She stared off into the middle distance, slightly formal, and he realized he’d set things back.

“You look…”

She looked up at him, a bit disheartened, a bit curious.

“…very well in that gown.” Snape’s hand waved in her general direction, trying to make up for the lack of words. He suddenly didn’t trust his own speech.

“Thank you.”

“It most certainly brings out the witch in you.”

She laughed. “That would not be considered a compliment back home.”

“I meant it as a compliment, however.”

“You think I look more like a witch?”

He paused, sensing quicksand. “A very lovely, a very beautiful, wise witch.”

“Beautiful?” she repeated, caught off guard. “Sorry, I thought we were just friends.”

She smiled up at him and he held her gaze, letting her know that she was far, far more than just a friend to him. Her expression was thoughtful, but open and she did not shy from his eyes. He stepped closer to her, enough to get a drift of her scent, and she remained still, waiting for him. The Firewhisky had done its job, and between the relaxation of his armor, the stars shining in her hair, the roaring of his heart in his ears he felt a giddying compulsion to kiss her, to kiss her on the lips right now –

The door crashed open and revelers from the pub tumbled out. Snape and Charity immediately pulled away, worried in case it was Dumbledore and Fudge. But it was people from the village, who were too intoxicated to notice much. The moment, nonetheless, had passed. Snape felt simultaneously thwarted, dismayed and frustrated, but also some relief, in case she’d rebuffed him, in case she hadn’t.

“I – I guess I should be getting back to the castle…” Charity said. Did he read disappointment on her face?

“Yes. Yes. I shall escort you.”

“Thank you. It’s getting late, I suppose.”

He came to her side as they walked along the path in the direction of Hogwarts. She described what Sinistra had been showing her in the night sky, and behind them the full moon was rising, a blood moon. He steered her courteously round puddles and added to Sinistra’s teaching what he could. He even gently teased Sinistra, getting a bit of a laugh out of Charity.

Then suddenly Charity stopped. “Oh, Severus – did you see that?” She got her wand out. Seeing that, he instantly retrieved his own.

“What?”
“There. See it?” She pointed along the path that diverged towards the woods and the Shrieking Shack. Far in the distance, Snape could see the faintest of lights in an upper story window of the shack, but otherwise couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“There..there!” she repeated. “Oh my, is it a dog?”

He followed where she was pointing, and sure enough, there was an enormous, shaggy dog, almost completely black, the reason for it being so hard to see at night. It stood from half behind a rock, and stared at them, very un-dog like.

It wasn’t doing anything except staring at them, but it was unnerving. Snape decided to give it a bit of blasting, send it on its way, it might be mad or starving, he didn’t like the way its eyes tracked them. Then he noticed Charity holding her wand forth and remembered he was going to give her some coaching in defense.

“Here,” he said in a low voice, now wanting the dog to stay around as a practice target. He moved behind her and carefully wrapped his right hand around hers, holding the wand. In her right ear, he murmured, “Move your hand swiftly down, and to the left, but still pointed at the target, and say “stupefy.” And when you say it, envision what you want the wand to transmit. Say it with conviction.”

She hadn’t let her eyes leave the dog. He released his hand. The dog stood staring, but something had changed in its eyes. They didn’t look quite right –

Charity moved her wand and hissed “Stupefy!” Green light shot from her wand tip towards the dog, which had clearly interpreted what was happening and bounded away. Snape leapt forward and blasted a silent stupefy himself, but also missed, and the dog disappeared into the night.

She turned to him urgently. “Did I do it wrong?”

“No. No, you were perfect. That dog wasn’t right. It understood, it knew what you were doing.”

“Maybe it’s been hit before. Maybe it recognizes wands.”

“Maybe…” Snape looked hard into the black space the dog had been moments before. It was strange, almost as if he recognized the dog’s eyes, it seemed familiar… “I think you’re right - I think it does recognize wands.”

But instead of lingering, Charity shivered and took Snape’s arm. “I think we should just leave it. It’s a stray. Let’s get back to the castle.”

And Snape, had he been here alone, would have pursued the dog, because he suspected exactly who it was. But seeing Charity home safely was more important to him. Hopefully Dumbledore would be safe as well.
CHAPTER TWELVE

Double potions with third years was a terrible way to start the week, particularly the abominable Gryffindor / Slytherin combo, yet Snape started the day in reasonably good spirits. The dread he'd carried around for days about Charity had lifted, and this week they were to start preparing for the audit in earnest.

As they had missed dinner in the Hall on Sunday night, Snape had ordered tea for two which they had eaten in in one of the chamber rooms off the Great Hall – a simple affair of omelette, crusty bread, a glass of wine and a selection of cheese and fruit. Although it was tasty, they both only picked at the food, their conversation being too much of a diversion. A lot of the discussion centered on the audit, differences in the Wizarding and Muggle world, working as a teacher, dealing with the personality differences between Houses, working with Dumbledore, the rigors of boarding and Quidditch. There was a lot of relaxed laughter – Charity not only got his droll sense of humour but could match it.

Eventually, Charity had noticed it was late and decided it was time she headed to bed. Snape agreed, even though he could have happily stayed up all night talking to her, and escorted her back to her rooms. At her door, she thanked him and then, with her hand on the door handle, paused to look up at him.

He waited. His heart started to thud.

“Severus...,” she searched for words, but when they didn’t come, she shook her head slightly and seemed to appeal to him.

But he, too, was lost for words. And yet he had so many things he wanted to tell her.

She smiled softly and at last murmured, “Good night. Till tomorrow.”

“Sleep well.”

He hoped she slept better than he did. Elves had made up the fire in his rooms that night and it burned throughout, but he was too stimulated to sleep for hours. His mind replayed scenes from the evening again and again, mostly about Charity. He had wanted, and been satisfied, with her company at first, but a new dimension had been added to his hunger. Now he longed to touch her. This was a new experience for Snape. His feelings for Lily had been deeply emotional, and years after she had died, they were more akin to an intellectual devotion. He had never even kissed Lily. And then his rare physical encounters with the friendly witches at Hogsmeade had been so spontaneous and – if he was honest – under the influence – that he could scarcely remember them. So it was new to him to have an attraction of the mind grow and extend to his whole physical being, leave him almost aching with the desire to feel Charity, caress her, kiss her and feel her touch on him.

After a restless night he rose and got ready for the day, tired but buoyed by the evening before. At breakfast, she was there, in her usual seat. When he entered, ushering in the Slytherins, including, he noticed, a freshly un-bandaged Malfoy, she acknowledged him with a small, prudent smile and he gave a single nod in return.

Breakfast had almost finished before Dumbledore made an appearance. He rejected tea and asked for strong coffee, with a restorative. Snape went over and sat down quietly next to him in a vacated
chair, and Dumbledore looked at him sideways. “Do you know how many Firewhisky’s Fudge made me join him in?” he muttered.

“It is a credit to you and your constitution that you made it to breakfast, Headmaster.”

“I’m not sure my constitution is as good as it used to be. But I worked tirelessly in the interests of Hogwarts last night, let me assure you. Minister Fudge owes me many things.”

“Has he been seeking your advice again?”

“Certainly. One might say I am running the Wizarding world by default. I just hope my advice is right.” He tipped some Restoration Remedy into his cup of coffee and took a long slurp. “Now, do tell me Severus, what happened after you went after Charity.”

A quick glance about him revealed no one in earshot, and Snape frowned at Dumbledore. “Really, sir, is this appropriate?”

“Severus, I am an old man, and love has long abandoned me. Please humour me, it will help with the hangover.”

“I thought you asked me to use good judgement.”

“I thought you exercised excellent judgement last night.”

“Sir, I actually came over with some serious news.”

“Good. And I want to hear it. After you tell me what happened with Charity.”

Snape emitted a deep sigh and rolled his eyes. “There is little to tell. As I mentioned, she and I are merely friends.”

“So she has forgiven you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Snape responded cagily. How much did Dumbledore know?

Dumbledore gave him a tired smile. “Dear boy, you don’t live to my age without recognizing a sign here or there. You were mopier than a maudlin moon cow last week. And she was missing as well. I don’t know why you two had a falling out, I just want to know if you did the right thing by her last night.”

Snape was thin-lipped for a moment, then said stiffly, “We have discussed matters and we are ready to start work on the audit this week.”

“Ah. Delightful. Here’s to you both,” and Dumbledore took another long drink of coffee. “Now, you had some serious news?”

“Yes. On our way back to Hogwarts we encountered a large black dog along the path. I believe it was an animagus. I believe it may have been Sirius Black.”

“Did anything happen?” asked Dumbledore, looking suddenly interested.

“No. We both attempted to stupefy it but it got away. I could see that it understood what a wand is and what was about to occur.”

“Did you see where it went?”
“It was dark and the dog was fast and black. I’m afraid I couldn’t track it. We saw it in the vicinity of the Shrieking Shack.”

“What made you think it was an animagus? Any identifying marks?”

“Only the eyes, sir. They resembled Black’s exactly.”

Dumbledore mused on this for a moment while he finished his coffee, then said, “Thank you Severus, that is indeed important information. Lupin would have been in the Shrieking Shack last night, I wonder if there is any coincidence. I’ll report what you’ve told me to the Department of Law Enforcement.”

From breakfast, Snape arrived at Double Potions in the dungeons carrying several jars of animal hearts in his arms for the class to work on. The third year Slytherins and Gryffindors were outside the classroom and, as usual, embattled. “Settle down, settle down. What’s going on?”

“Malfoy, sir!” said Ron immediately, red in the face. “He’s doing these stupid Dementor impressions and – “

Snape looked sternly at Draco, who gazed back innocently. Couldn’t he have at least feigned his sore arm for another week? “Enough Malfoy. Open the door for me.”

They entered, took their places and Snape did a quick roll call. “Before we start today’s lesson, I want you to divide into four groups – two Gryffindor, two Slytherin.” He had considered mixing the groups up after his chat with Charity about the shortcomings of the House arrangements, but he was too tired to be bothered with the furious indignation such an experiment would have occasioned.

Once the students were organized into their groups, he issued each one with a jar containing a preserved heart. As he walked the room, he said, “We are creating the potion on page a hundred and eighty-eight – turn to page a hundred and eighty-eight of your texts…Who can tell me the name of the potion?”

“Soumettre le Coeur” mangled Miles Bletchley eventually.

“Yes, it is a French potion, invented in France. Here in the United Kingdom we call it Heart Stopper or Heart Subdue. We will not be making Heart Stopper today, for obvious reasons, but tell me, why would Heart Subdue be in the cabinet of a potioneer?”

“Is it a love potion?” said Andrew Cleveley.

“No. Not trying to speed the heart up.”

“So you can slow someone’s heart down?” said Anjali Kapoor.

“Yes. Precisely.” Dunderheads. “Why could it be helpful to slow someone’s heart?”

“So they don’t have a heart attack?”

Snape snatched a box of Shock-o-Choc from Pete Balsall. “If you were lucky enough in a crisis to have Heart Subdue on your person and gave it to someone having a heart attack, then yes, it could have an effect. What else? Why is it most valuable?”

“Sir?” Granger put her hand up. “Could it help you live longer?”
“Thank you, Granger, yes. It has been known to prolong the life of an individual by a factor of point five. That means, by taking Heart Subdue you can extend your life but not indefinitely,” He roamed the room with his hands behind his back, watching the students carefully. Out the corner of his eye he saw Malfoy with his arms above his head, but he instantly dropped them when Snape turned. “It might be long enough to enable something to be completed, or survive a situation, or suspend the body while other life-saving work is going on.”

He returned to the dais at the front of the class and faced them.

“Now, listening. Gryffindor table one, in your jar is a crocodile heart. Table two, yours is beaver, so is yours table three and table four, your heart is bear. What do we know about these animals? What do they have in common?”

“They’re from America?” yelled Millicent Bulstrode.

“Hands up! It is a Nile crocodile. From Africa.”

“They eat meat?” guessed Gregory Goyle and Malfoy kicked him. “No they don’t idiot – it’s a beaver.”

Granger put her hand up again. “They have the ability to slow their hearts. Either by holding their breath or by hibernation.”

Snape inclined his head at her. “Thank you. Correct. The hearts in your jars for this potion contain the essential properties– by which we mean those properties which make it work – for slowing down the heart. These animals figured out how to do that. How? Scientists will tell you it’s evolution and adaptation. What else do we know, in our world.”

“The heart is magic,” said Potter. He looked worn and dispirited.

“Partly true – the heart is the most magical organ, closely followed by…”

“The brain?”

“Thank you, Malfoy. But today we use the organ with the most direct application – that being….Potter?”

“The heart, sir.”

“What is it that we are attempting to extract from the heart for this potion…?”

No answer. Granger clearly knew but she was trying not to be a know-it-all. “It’s in your textbook, people, page 188.”

“The blood?” attempted Amity Button.

“No blood left in these hearts, they’ve been preserved. Anyone else?”

No answer.

Snape went to the blackboard and drew a diagram. “What do potioneers seek to extract? What is the essential property?”

“The magic that made the mutation,” said Granger finally. “An animal that has evolved for certain conditions did so through an evolutionary adaptation of its genes. Science believes that natural selection favoured a gene that mutated giving the animal an advantage. In potions, we seek to extract
the magic that made the mutation. Or qui facit mutationem magicae.”

“Excellent Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor. We covered this at the beginning of last term, everyone. If your Heart Subdue is to work, then your brew will need to be able to destabilise the mutated gene therefore liberate its magic. There will be virtually no animal heart remnants in the final potion, it should be a distillation. If I find any residuum in the final result, I will deduct points.”

He used his wand to put some instructions for the potion up onto the blackboard. “You can commence work.”

Above the commotion of students talking and arguing, moving cauldrons and chairs and emptying rucksacks, Snape said loudly, “Remember you are a team. Make sure you adapt the recipe for the kind of heart you have – the variations are in the appendices. Watch that jar, Malfoy! If you spill the formalin anywhere near the other ingredients, they’re ruined.”

This was the bit where Snape’s nerves always took a beating. There were knives, scalpels and other sharp instruments at play, flame beneath the cauldron, chemicals, raw ingredients, expensive ingredients, glass, fumes and gases. As usual, he stalked between the desks, closely observing and supervising as his cloak swished about him. He checked weights and measurements, adjusted heat, demonstrated stirring, assessed prepared materials, exchanged ingredients, pointed out instructions, explained instructions, calculated times and sampled products. It was impossible for him to monitor all the class all the time. He occasionally cast a class-wide glance to catch anything majorly problematic, but if students largely had their heads down, he simply hoped for the best.

So he did not catch Draco Malfoy in the act of impersonating a Dementor and behaving in a foolish and juvenile fashion, although he had no doubt it had happened. What he did see, when yelling and swearing at the first Gryffindor table caught his attention, was Ron Weasley throwing an entire crocodile heart at Malfoy and it smashing him squarely in the face.

The entire class, except for Malfoy, instantaneously hushed and stared. Snape was speechless, but quickly gathered himself and went to attend to Malfoy, who was enraged and covering his hands with his face, being careful not to step on the fallen heart.

“Aargh, I dink my dose is broken!” hollered Malfoy, and indeed it was bleeding and Snape quickly applied first aid and an Episkey spell to stop the flow. “Up to the hospital wing. Crabbe – accompany him, tell Madam Pomfrey what’s happened.”

Once the pair had left the classroom, still to silence, Snape retrieved the heart and examined it. Most of the damage had occurred when it struck the floor. He recalled purchasing it, just the other day at the apothecary. 18 Galleons and 12 sickles. He straightened and glared at Ron Weasley.

“Sir -!” began Weasley, desperately. Even Potter had the sense to put a hand on his shoulder to try and stop him. “He just wouldn’t stop doing the Dementor impressions, it was –”

“Really? That’s your excuse?”

The class went more than quiet; it held its breath. They sensed a Snape Spectacular.

“DO YOU THINK THAT EXCUSES YOU?”

“No, sir.”

He counted on his fingers. “You have failed your class. Failed your team. Injured another student. Damaged valuable school property. Wasted everybody’s time. Ten points for each infringement. Weasley, that’s 50 points off Gryffindor.”
“But -!”

“I DO NOT WANT ANOTHER WORD OUT OF YOU!”

He turned to the other Gryffindor students, breathing hard. “You lot. He has cost your House fifty points. Why don’t you do something?”

They looked at their hands, the desk, the ceiling – anywhere but Weasley.

He turned his attention back the remaining students. “The rest of you, carry on with your work. You lot, find another group to work with. Weasley – you’re out. Stay where you are and read the textbook. You have failed this class.”

At the end of the double lesson, exhausted, Snape sat at his desk with the three vials of distilled Heart Subdue potion. “This being Monday morning, if you have your completed scrolls on the werewolf assignment, bring it to me now,” he said, just as the bell rang to announce time. The students got up to leave. Two Slytherin students brought their homework to Snape, but not a single Gryffindor.

“Granger. A moment please.”

She came up to his desk a little anxious. “Sir?”

“I have marked your werewolf homework. It was fair. You can retrieve it from the box outside my office.”

“Thank you, um, I think the others are still working on theirs…”

“You can go.”

After tidying up the dungeon, he departed for the Hospital Wing. Draco hadn’t returned to class although Crabbe had come back looking dark. In the ward, he found Draco sitting on top of a bed holding a compress to his face. On seeing Snape arrive, Madam Pomfrey came out to talk to him.

“Is he alright?” Snape asked in modulated tones. “It was a direct hit, but shouldn’t have been heavy enough to cause lasting damage.”

“He’ll be fine. Mostly bruising. Your Episkey fixed him up. That compress has an anti-bruising ointment on it; I thought I’d just keep him here for the rest of the period. He can leave when he’s ready.”

“Sir?” said Malfoy caustically when Madam Pomfrey had returned to her office. “I hope you are giving Weasley a month of detentions. My father will be hearing about this.”

“Draco, what was your contribution to the event?” asked Snape, standing over him at the bed.

“Sir? I don’t know what you mean.”

“It is extremely inappropriate to be impersonating a Dementor, or to be ridiculing Potter in any sense. And it is in particularly poor taste as a Slytherin to be lampooning the prison guards of many families in our House who have served in Azkaban. What were you thinking?”

“Whose side are you on, Professor?” Malfoy’s eyes flared with resentment.

“It’s not that simple, Malfoy, it’s never that simple. Don’t reflect badly on Slytherin on my watch. Your father is, as ever, welcome to contact me.”
Snape swirled his cloak as he strode away, leaving Malfoy staring after him with his mouth open.

At lunch, before Snape had even taken his seat, McGonagall came over and, touching his shoulder, took him a little aside out of earshot.

“Minerva? Is everything alright?”

“I’ve had the youngest Weasley boy come to see me after potions today. Fifty points, Severus? I thought our meeting with Dumbledore -,”

“This is Weasley, not Potter,” Snape said, standing a little back. “Did he tell you I also gave Gryffindor 10 points, and none to Slytherin? So net, it was forty.”

“No, but… fifty? For some larking about…?”

“I have just come from Malfoy in the Hospital Wing. There was a possibility his nose was broken.”

“Broken? Oh, I see…”

“The crocodile heart, which was unusable, was 18 Galleons.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows piqued and she tapped her wand in her hand.

“He also denied a learning opportunity for eight other students.”

“He’s formed the impression you’re picking on him…” said McGonagall, a little desperate for some redemption to report back.

“They all have.”

“Did you speak to Malfoy? It sounds as if he was being an insensitive, irresponsible – “

“Yes. I have spoken very directly with him. And no doubt his father as well in due course.”

She nodded briskly, unhappy but somewhat cornered. “We should speak to Albus about that group. I’ve never taught such a contentious lot. Get them switched around. The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff third year group is a delight by comparison.”

Knowing the Gryffindors at lunch were watching this exchange closely, Snape made a point of nodding and lightly touching McGonagall on the arm in solidarity as the conversation concluded. He then sat down to lunch, after quickly checking that Charity was at her place. She was, and gave him an encouraging smile. It was the best thing that had happened all day.

It didn’t improve. Close to dinner, returning to the dungeons from the Potions Storeroom on second floor, he walked past the DADA office, which had its door open. Clearly he was spotted walking past as he heard “Professor Snape! Severus?”

He turned. Lupin appeared in the doorway, looking haggard. “Might I have a word?”

Snape paused. “I only have a minute, Lupin, I need to get to the Common room –,”

“It will only take a minute.”

Reluctantly, Snape entered the office and Lupin shut the door behind him.
“Did you make a full transformation, or did the wolfsbane have an effect?” asked Snape, noting that Lupin seemed drained of colour and strained.

“It…helped,” Lupin replied, although not enthusiastically. “It was very unpleasant.”

“Lowering the dosage may have had an impact, or should the dosage continue during the transformation period?”

“I didn’t want to talk to you about that. I wanted to ask about what happened in the DADA class with third years.”

Snape actually rolled his eyes. Next they would be filing written complaints to the Board.

“Which bit? The bit where I had to deduct fifteen points off Potter for openly challenging me? The bit where I had to give Weasley detention for insolence?”

“The bit where you skipped to the end of the book to teach about werewolves.”

“What of it? You left no coursework.”

“Rubbish, Severus. You did that deliberately to expose me,” Lupin spat. “And homework? You made them do homework on it, in case the lesson wasn’t enough? I don’t think it was for the Gryffindor’s benefit, was it? You were angling for this to get back to the Slytherin parents. The ones whose parents work for the Ministry.”

“I was angling to teach your fanclub what it is they’re dealing with!” Snape sneered heatedly. “We don’t know how Black got into the castle, but I bet you do. What’s to stop you during a transformation coming back in to take a few recruits, Greyback style?”

Lupin’s eyes flashed with fury. Mentioning Fenrir Greyback was a cruel blow. “You should have more faith in your own potion, Snape.”

“It’s not the potion I don’t trust. But then again, I’m just working from the recipe you gave me.”

“There is no risk,” Lupin roared suddenly, “No risk to those kids! I would never harm one –,”

“But we’re not talking about you. We’re talking about the wolf,” Snape retorted icily. “You have no control, Lupin. Did you recognize me when I was sent into the tunnel? You should be giving your devotees a chance to know what they’re up against. If one life is saved as a result of that class, then it was worth every excruciating minute.”

Lupin’s hand hovered over his wand, but he did not withdraw it. Snape continued to hold the glare.

“You’re jealous,” Lupin concluded. “Devotees? You’re jealous the kids like me. You’ve always been jealous.”

Snape raised a brow. “Listen to yourself. I have things to do, I have to go.” He turned on his heel and left the office wondering when was the day going to end.

After dinner, a peremptory affair for Snape who made a point of moving farther up the table and away from Lupin, he had a brief Slytherin House Meeting (known as an SHM, and organized by the Prefects, mercifully the agenda was light discussing Draoidh Oidhche) and then he could retire to his quarters. Uncharacteristically, he ran a hot bath, in which he added a muscle relaxant elixir and
poured himself a snifter of whisky, which he drank while wallowing in the bath. He shut his eyes and focused on shrinking down, shutting away and fastening up the anger. Between the elixir, the heat and whisky, it worked a treat. He mentally described Lupin with multiple profanities, decided his interlude with McGonagall was a victory, observed that Malfoy seemed fully recovered in the SHM, and that Dumbledore was actively approving of his….his what, with Charity?

_I should be testing those distillations_, he thought, but his mind discarded that almost immediately in favour of dwelling once more on the evening with Charity. She’d been trying to communicate something to him at the door to her room…was she trying to tell him she felt as he did? _Had_ the ribbon been her choice? Or was that a little joke of Madam Sinistra’s? Had Charity been talking to Sinistra? Were all the female teachers plugged into the grapevine now whispering behind their hands about him? Did McGonagall talk to him differently, somehow, this afternoon?

He wished that there was some far away, undisturbed place where he and Charity could meet and let events unfold without the interference of day to day life and other people. Somewhere time stood still, and he could talk to her without the terrible, dour hand of time constantly tearing them apart, where the leaden chains of responsibility and duty were shed, and feeling unburdened, undistracted, where they could just be together.

Could they take some leave together, perhaps, over the Christmas holiday? Perhaps she could join him for a few days in Spinners End (although he’d have to get there first and tidy the place up a bit). Or maybe she had a place he could go to. Or perhaps they could rent one of those Muggle cottages by the sea, he could easily afford it, it didn’t have to be serious, just a few days together like friends, walk along the beach and so on. Anywhere where they could just be together alone….

As Snape was as red-blooded as the next man, and as the whisky had worked wonders, his imagination turned to other interesting activities he and Charity could enjoy in a secluded cottage by the sea.

His pleasant escapism was dreadfully interrupted by something he was not expecting. A sudden, sharp, intermittently painful activation of his Dark Mark. Wincing, he lifted his left arm out of the bathwater and rubbed it with his right hand, and then he noticed the mark was darker. Was that his imagination? He stared at it, and despite the warm water, his blood ran cold.
It was less than two weeks away before the site audit. Snape awoke with an urgency, an alarm that things had to be started today, it was getting too late.

At breakfast, before sitting, he went directly to Charity’s chair. She watched him coming, her eyes widening as he did so and then she stood as her reached her.

“Professor Snape?”

“Professor Burbage,” he responded, hating having to be so official. “The audit preparations should start today. I have consulted the Master Schedule and see that we are both free after lunch. I would appreciate your attendance at a meeting in the Audit Headquarters from 1pm. I should like to devote the entire afternoon to project requirements. We can make further plans from there. Would that be suitable?”

“Yes Professor. Of course. I will meet you at HQ at one pm.”

Snape inclined his head and she gave him an almost secret smile, then he returned to his usual place at the teacher’s table. Privately he was delighted. Dumbledore’s idea of assigning Charity to the audit was the most brilliant thing he’d ever done. Snape tucked into poached eggs and toast with relish.

At ten to one, Snape had made his way to the Archives. When he entered the room, he was struck by the cold, the musty smell and bleak light, so immediately called for a house elf to build a fire in the huge fireplace and conjured extra oil lamps and candles to brighten the room. There was a particularly hideous painting on the wall of a sixteenth century witch hanging from gallows which he made a point of turning around, and a big pile of moldy and rotted wicker baskets which he chucked on the fire.

By one o’clock, the room was considerably more hospitable, and he was busy laying out his audit plans and notes on the mahogany table when Charity came in. She had a satchel with her, which she brought to the table and opened.

“Hello, Severus,” she said with a warm smile. “It’s nice to have a lovely, big fire in here.”

“It seems to be drawing satisfactorily. Sometimes the chimneys become blocked if they don’t get used much. Are you ready to start work?”

“Most certainly. I’ve brought my things – parchment that will go in the typewriter, ball point pens and my Archive Index.”

“Archive Index?”

The book she brought forth from her satchel was lengthy, bound with some form of hide and stitched. “The House Elves did this for me. Aren’t they clever? My Index is a catalogue of all the
archival material I could reference down here. I’ve classified the types of materials, then catalogued them by a standard set of qualitative indices, dated them as accurately as possible then recorded their storage location. Which is largely alphabetized. So if we need to find historical documentation, we’ll know where to get it. Ideally this would all be on a computer with a search function.”

Snape took the volume and leafed through the pages. It was all typed, an incredibly detailed inventory. He then looked at her, amazed. “Charity – this is exceptional work.”

Her face lit up, thrilled with his compliment. “Thank you. So where do we start?”

“At the beginning, as they say,” said Snape, and they took a seat at the table. He put the Index carefully to one side, making sure it wasn’t anywhere near any candles or stray sparks. Then he brought out the audit guidelines and opened it at the page outlining the categories, criteria and examples of evidence.

“Category one: Finance. It wants a statement of the business and operation of the entity, so Hogwarts. Then accounting policies, transaction authorisations, financial reports, account reconciliations, budgets.”

“I can get the statement of business operation,” said Charity, immediately reaching for the Index. “I know of the Ministry’s and Boards Ordinance for the school. I’ll get that. This other pecuniary stuff though – there’s none of that in this archive.”

Snape thought for a bit. “It’ll be in Gringotts. Dumbledore uses the accountants there to keep the finances in order. We may need to go to Gringotts before site audit.”

“I’ll organize an appointment for us with the right accountant,” said Charity.

She found what she was looking for in the Archive Index, then went to the nearest set of shelves that housed a large number of boxes, and took out her wand with one smooth motion that impressed Snape. With a murmured incantation, the shelves seemed to collapse, then rotate and reconfigure, finally settling onto a new or different shelf containing volumes of dark, leather-bound books. She searched for the right volume, which she withdrew and brought to the mahogany table. *Ministry of Magic Ordinances, Acts and Adjudications 1503 to 1803.* She searched through it carefully, all the while watched by Snape, until she found the right page containing the *Declaration of Official Enterprise: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,* and a summary of the school’s purpose and operations, including location, enrolment, staffing and revenue information. She then took up her wand again and tapped the page with a clear “Duplicare”. The page was reproduced, materializing above the page in the book on delicate parchment. Fascinated, Snape watched as she took the reproduction to her typewriter, wound it through the rollers to the top of the page, and then she typed onto the parchment the book title, dates and reference details.

Finally, she carefully wound the parchment out of the typewriter and handed it to Snape. “There you go. Evidence item number one. What shall we do with it?”

Snape examined the page quickly, but his attention had been captured by the quiet, methodical process he’d just watched. He said to her, “I am very impressed. I don’t know what to say.”

She smiled charmingly. “Thank you again. It’s early days, Severus. That was an easy one.”

“Let’s concern ourselves with the remainder of Category One when we go to Gringotts. Category Two: Licensing and Regulations. A. Registration as an educational body; b. Boarding license; c. Licenses for DADA, Magical Creatures, medical facilities, flying; d. Compliance with volatile, dangerous, and restricted substances; e. Compliance with Ministry law, eg apparating; f. Registration
of Rare and Restricted literature; g. Permits for imported, dangerous or vulnerable creatures; h. Compliance with House Elf Act; i. Permits for objects with historical and cultural significance.”

They looked at each other, shook their heads and began the process of discussing, agreeing and writing down the sources of information and evidence. Charity’s Archive Index found them a good deal of evidence. Snape knew where he could get a copy of the standards for volatile, dangerous and restricted substances and would assess his potions storeroom to check it complied. Charity would meet with Madam Pomfrey to check the Hospital Wing. They knew Madam Hooch didn’t have a license for flying instruction and they strongly doubted Hagrid had correct licensing for Magical Creature husbandry but thought they could assess what obtaining the licenses might require and whether they complied with that. Apparating instruction was outsourced, and no student was taught it before aged seventeen which they had records for so that was alright. They discussed what might count as rare and restricted literature, and Snape believed the section in the library for which permission was required to read the Dark Arts books. Were those texts registered – neither Snape or Charity had any idea, but Charity agreed to talk to Madam Pince. They also discussed what might constitute objects with historical and cultural significance, and Charity used her index to locate a very old asset register, which was an extremely long piece of scroll with wooden rollers on either end. It listed all manner of objects, artwork (over 3,000 paintings), antiques, heirlooms, artefacts and curios. Thousands of pieces of furniture, rugs, tapestries, chandeliers, gold and bronze fixtures, thousands of copper and brass pots, pans and cutlery, hundreds of pieces of Quidditch equipment and several thousand wands and cauldrons. Snape noted that included on the asset register were the Sword of Gryffindor, the Sorting Hat, a few intact dragon taxidermies, the Pensieve, the ceiling in the Great Hall, the Room of Requirement, invisibility cloak, Mirror of Erised and even the Forbidden Forest. These were the items he believed would qualify as historically and culturally significant; whether there were permits for them was anyone’s guess. “Philosopher’s stone?” asked Charity. “Is it still here or has it been returned to the Vault?” Snape shook his head. “Dumbledore said he was going to destroy it. I have no idea whether he did or not. Even if it was still here, I wouldn’t be drawing attention to it. Leave it be.”

Following this exercise, they stopped for a short rest. Snape ordered tea, and they chatted about what they found on the asset register, which led Charity to comment on her Muggle artefacts in her classroom being utterly worthless by comparison, which reminded Snape about the MS Curriculum.

“Charity, I am sorry for the delay in informing you, I fear it slipped my mind. I spoke to Sir Byron at the Ministry the other week as you know, and I raised with him your concerns about the Muggle Studies curriculum.”

“You did?” she was genuinely surprised. “How did you describe the concerns?”

“As you told me. That the curriculum neglected to teach students the bio-chemical aspects of magical geneticism. That students should have a more informed understanding of the similarities between Muggle-born and Pureblood.”

She nodded sagely, hopeful. “And what did he say?”

“He said the Board would be prepared to look at it if Dumbledore approved.”

“Dumbledore will never approve,” said Charity quickly, her face falling.

Snape nodded. “I believe your instincts may be well founded. At the Three Broomsticks with Minister Fudge, he said the curriculum was school business. Personally, I only partially agree with him.”

“He thinks the school sets the curriculum and the Board steps in when necessary.”
“The audit criteria, category four – it looks for evidence of compliance of the curriculum to standards. The Ministry and Board have set that standard. School set the curriculum, lesson plans, the Board decides whether it’s adequate and reflecting the political agenda. Sir Byron suspects Muggle Studies isn’t reflecting what he and the Board are pushing.”

“Where does Dumbledore’s reticence around Muggle Studies come from?” asked Charity.

“Simple. Revenue. It’s the Purebloods that have the greatest sway and donate the most to the school. If the parents think Hogwarts is getting too…liberal…they worry. They worry about contamination, about exposure, that, in essence, the Wizarding world will either be blown apart or leach away,” Snape explained. “They’ll pull out their students and home school. There are a lot of Pureblood tutors out there.”

Charity listened closely. Then she said with an expression of contempt, “Contamination. I like that. Is that your word for it?”

“No. Not my word.” He could see anger gathering like storm clouds. “Charity…don’t worry. The audit may well have influence on Dumbledore’s thinking.”

“Is it me, do you think?” she asked, looking more lost than angry now. “Am I too Muggle for him?”

Her intuition was spot on. Snape recalled Dumbledore’s words: she is more Muggle than magical. But they were spoken clearly in confidence and he didn’t think anything would be gained by Charity knowing.

“Dumbledore has a long and complex history. He always has sound reasons for his choices and I have never heard him speak of you except in the highest terms. He said that you had a clever, strategic mind.”

“Really?” she brightened.

“Yes. I happen to agree with him.”

She held his gaze and smiled. “I like that you make me use it. You expect it.”

“Why would you not use it?”

There was a long pause where she seemed to debate in her head. “I’ve known people who didn’t appreciate it.”

Who? To whom was she referring? Snape instantly interpreted this to mean a man, a man in her past and there was a quick stab of jealousy. In his head he saw James Potter, James with is showing off, his stupid Snitch, his exhibitionism on the broom, obscuring what Lily had, reducing her to a trophy, all her lessons in spells and potions from Snape dimmed to nothing. As far as he knew, Lily never learnt a thing from James except how to socialize and become a good wife.

“Then it is their loss,” he said finally. “Would you expect it from Hermione Granger?”

She took his point and they finished their tea on genial terms.

The remainder of their time in the afternoon was spent researching for missing evidence. Charity spent time with Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing, looking for licensing and certifications, and Madam Pomfrey gave her supplementary material showing that she had authorisations to administer specific medicines. Charity then went to the library and met with an extremely unhelpful Madam Pince, trying to locate any registers or other official documentation for the roped-off collection of
Dark Arts books in the restricted section.

“They need approval to read the books,” said Madam Pince. “I won’t let anyone in there unless they’ve got permission.”

“Yes, I understand that. What I’m looking for is for the auditors to show that Hogwarts School is allowed to have the books. They’re quite dangerous. Who approved for the Collection to be housed here?” Charity explained.

“They’ve always been here!”

“Okay, well how long is that? How long is always?”

“Well that’s a stupid rhetorical question.”

Charity blinked. “Fair enough. I guess my question is, are they decades old? Hundreds, thousands of years old?”

“They’re magical,” Madam Pince glared at Charity, with intense irritation. “They’re not through a publishing house. There’s nothing in there about publication dates.”

“So they just showed up on the shelf one morning.”

“I don’t know where they came from! They’ve always been there.”

Charity held her breath and counted in her head. “I would like to have a look at them. There may be something inside them. A clue.”

Madam Pince jutted out her jaw. “Have you got permission?”

“I’m a Professor!”

“I don’t know what you’re looking for. I think the Headmaster should tell me if you want to do that.”

“Madam Pince,” said Charity, starting to feel equally irritable, “You don’t own the books. You’re a curator. And you can’t even curate, apparently! I would like to, and I am, having a look at them.”

Charity brushed past the librarian, who began babbling angrily and causing several students to look up curiously. “You can’t remove those books, you can’t take them out of here!”

“I’m not going to. I’m just going to look at them.”

“I’m going straight to the Headmaster!” Madam Pince declared, but she stayed where she was.

Charity went through the roped section and pulled a massive, ominous, unnamed volume off the shelf, so heavy she almost dropped it and Madam Pince gasped. “That’s the Tome of the Arcane and Occult!” she whispered feverishly.

Balancing it on her knee, Charity attempted to open the front cover, but she couldn’t – it was fixed shut.

“Don’t wrench it!” cried Madam Pince.

“Is the book keeping itself shut? Or is it locked somehow?”

“You don’t have permission! I told you!”
Charity put the Tome back and tried the second book. This one shrieked at her and she shut it quickly. The third book froze her fingers and face and she shut it quickly again. The next one was locked like the first, and the last book she tried had nothing but blank pages inside.

Frustrated and surly, Charity turned to Madam Pince. “Do you have anything here, about any books in this library, not necessarily the restricted section that proves where the books came from? That they’re authentic and legitimate.”

“There’s the library catalogue. I’m very diligent with cataloguing correctly,” Madam Pince said defensively.

Charity softened. “I’m sorry, perhaps I’ve given you the wrong impression of why I’m here. It’s certainly not to criticize or judge how you run the library. I’ve been to a few University Libraries – I’ve even been to the Vatican library – and I can assure you, your work here is outstanding.”

Madam Pince frowned at her and hesitated. “I’ve always wanted to go to the Vatican Library.”

“It’s amazing. You’d love it.”

“I hear it has over a million books.”

“I was the Secret Archives that I wanted to see, but that’s not for general public access.”

For a few minutes the pair discussed how they would spend the day at the Vat if they had the means, and some ice was thawed away. Madam Pince then showed Charity her catalogue cards and classification process, and how she classified the bibliographic items in the Dark Arts section which, unfortunately, was scant at best since the knowledge about the authors and histories of these items was unavailable now, in fact may never have been. Many were simply donated or gifted from anonymous sources.

Lastly that afternoon, Charity visited Madam Hooch in her office. There was only twenty minutes before Madam Hooch was due to supervise Quidditch practice, but it was enough of an opportunity for Charity to sit down with her and show her the audit requirements for flying instruction licensing.

“Do you remember we talked about it in the last staff meeting?” Charity asked.

“Course I remember. But I haven’t thought about it since, if I’m honest. I just don’t see the need for it. Why now, when I’ve been instructing here for thirty years?” said a very disgruntled Hooch, standing up to look out her window and take an active study of the, happily benign, weather conditions.

“That is a very good question,” Charity admitted. “It’s really because the Ministry is changing. The world is changing. Everything is getting more bureaucratic. It’s because everyone wants to blame everyone else when things go wrong.”

“Falling off a broom is part of learning!” Hooch said emphatically. “It’s like riding a bike, not that I’ve ever ridden one, but I’ve read about it. You need to find your balance. And until you train your body to find its rhythm with the broom, you keep falling off. I bet Muggles don’t need to have a license to teach people how to ride a bike.”

“That is true,” admitted Charity. “But a bike isn’t very high. A better comparison might be Muggles teaching other Muggles to fly an aircraft, or a hang-glider or –“

“A what?”

“A hang-glider. It’s like, uh, one big wing and you hang from it and it glides through the air.”
“Oh. Yes, I think I’ve seen those.”

“Anyway, in those cases, they definitely need to have a license because it’s so much riskier. Rolanda, nobody has more experience at this than you do, I expect obtaining a license for you will be about as easy as falling off a bike – ha ha (Hooch didn’t get it). Why don’t I get the licensing paperwork from the Ministry and then you and I can sit down together and fill it out.”

“Will they need to test me? Because I will find that very insulting.”

“I think when they’ve seen your history and experience, they’ll waive any practical test if they have one. But I do have to ask one sensitive question, Rolanda. May I?”

Madam Hooch turned her yellow eyes on her, frowning, but didn’t say no.

“Has any student died from falling off a broom under your tutelage?”

Hooch’s nostrils flared briefly and her eyes looked away.

“Students fall all the time. They get carried away, over excited sometimes. With the Muggle-borns, it’s their first time. They’ve watched Quidditch and they think they know what they’re doing…”

“Many, Rolanda?”

“No. Two. Only one during a lesson.”

“How long ago?”

She looked flustered, momentarily, casting back. “Oh I don’t know, over twenty years ago now. Her name was Anastasia Imity. First year. She hit a tree, which is not unusual in itself but this time, the angle, badly made broom. She broke her neck. Died instantly.”

While Madam Hooch was clearly transported back in time to the incident, Charity waited quietly. Then she said, “I’m terribly sorry. And I’m sorry I had to ask. But the audit people will, and I’d rather be able to prepare for it.”

Pursing her lips, Hooch shrugged. “Can’t be helped. Won’t bring Anastasia back. But after that incident we got rid of all those brooms and replaced them with Star Stratums: a better grade, safer, heavier wood and more responsive.”

“Thank you for your time. I’ll talk to you at dinner when the license paperwork arrives.”

“As you wish. I must get out now, practice is on. Thank you Charity.”

Meanwhile, Snape had sent an Owl to the Ministry to obtain a copy of the compliance standards for volatile, dangerous, and restricted substances, then done an inspection of both his dungeon storeroom and the second-floor storeroom. Snape knew without question which ingredients and products he had that would meet the definition, and had always taken his own precautions anyway, but he was extremely conscious of the recent raids on his storeroom for Polyjuice ingredients. Security had been stepped up and nothing had gone missing since, so he was starting to believe that his additional measures had worked.

Dumbledore was only free to meet with him at 5pm. Snape went to his office and was admitted by a
rather weary looking Dumbledore, dressed in a dress robe and who was removing his cloak and hat and putting them on a hook in a cupboard.

“Evening Severus. Everything alright?”

“Yes sir, everything is as good as can be expected. You’ve been out?”

“I have. To the Ministry. There’s a lot of talk about Hagrid’s Hippogriff. I thought a visit in person might influence in the right direction. I’m not sure I persuaded them.”

“What’s to become of the Hippogriff?”

“They’re still reviewing the case. Snail pace. But Lucius is not budging.” After shutting the cupboard door, he went to his drinks cabinet and poured himself a goblet of mead and offered one to Snape. “Sit. Tell me, what news do you bring me?”

They each sat in the comfy chairs before the fire, one of Snape’s favourite places in the world.

“We started work in earnest today on the audit preparation. The first category is devoted exclusively to analysis of the entity’s – that is, Hogwarts – financial history and records. They want to review the likes of financial reports, general ledgers, account balances, transaction history – that sort of thing. I am assuming all that information is at Gringotts?”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose and he looked thoughtful. “I see. Isn’t that commercial in confidence?”

“Ah, I don’t think so. This is an audit, Headmaster. Financial records for an institution of Hogwarts’s stature is of public interest. Not least of all the parents. And I believe we have a number of benefactors?”

The goblet of mead was drained. Clearly Dumbledore’s visit to the Ministry had been trying and this was not the best moment, Snape thought. Dumbledore stroked his whiskers briefly, then said, “I see. Well I have nothing to hide, necessarily. We have an open fee structure. Parents make a deposit each quarter. It all goes to Gringotts. Donations are made to a separate account, however – how we use that money needs to be traceable. Withdrawals and expenses are kept on record by Gringotts. They send me a scroll each month, so I can track it. We can largely stay within budget – as you know, magic makes a lot of things a lot easier.”

“Sir, Charity and I thought we might visit Gringotts -,”

“Charity and you?”

“Professor Burbage.”

A sly grin from Dumbledore. “But you called her Charity.”

“That is her name. Equivalent to Minerva or..or..Remus…”

“You never call him Remus.”

Snape sighed heavily. “Your point, sir?”

“Alright,” An equally heavy sigh. “Yes, the accountant at Gringotts is named Earkras. At least he has been for the last five or so years. When are you planning on visiting?”

“Before the audit, which starts on the twenty-third.”
“I shall make a time for you.”

“Can you please make sure they’re expecting me, and know what it’s for? My last visit to Gringotts was worse than pulling teeth –,”

“Pulling teeth? Urgh – who would do that?”

“It’s an expression, sir.”

“One of your Muggle expressions? Worse than pulling teeth. Does it mean to pull teeth out of one’s mouth?”

“I believe so.”

“How is that accomplished? That would be very difficult.”

“I don’t know. I think that’s why it is an expression. They were not cooperative.”

“I understand. Alright, I will send them a detailed letter by owl and let you know the date. How is the audit faring?”

Snape was contemplative, remembering Charity and her Archive Index. “I could never describe it as enjoyable, but it isn’t as onerous as I was expecting.”

“You mean working with Charity isn’t onerous,” said Dumbledore, with feigned innocence looking over his spectacles.

Snape regarded him in some dismay. “You are an incorrigible old gossip. When did this start?”

“That is a fair description,” said Dumbledore reasonably. “Except for the bit about ‘old’.”

For Draoidh Oidhche, the Scottish Wizarding celebration, the students had been given permission to build and light bonfires after dinner. Many of them had been working during their breaks and after class to construct the massive frameworks, one for each House, which were situated along the banks of the lake and decorated with a straw man dressed in House colours. In historic times, the Guy Fawkes equivalent had been referred to as Muggle Man or Mudblood Man, argument being it was retribution for the Salem witch burnings, but this has been forbidden in more recent years.

Along with the burning bonfire, it was wizarding tradition to eat a specially made ring-shaped cake called Ettie Cake, which symbolized permanence or endurance, accompanied by a hot toddy of choice, and it was also traditional to wear pointed hats or wizard hats, similar to Halloween. Most important, however, was an excuse to be out at night, something witches and wizards craved.

Dumbledore arranged a typical Scottish feast in the Great Hall with black pudding and haggis, and then the students were released into the starlit evening to light their fires. House elves and kitchen elves roamed amongst the crowd with trays of mead, sherry, warmed butterbeer, hot chocolate and Firewisky, hand-sized rings of Ettie cake, roasted chestnuts, shortbread and Fire Imps. When the bonfires were burning solidly, special fireworks were thrown directly into the heart of the inferno, from where they would be spat out, fizzing and popping and shimmering. Wands were in full Lumos, some had them charmed to emit the occasional fizzing firework, and a proper display was visible in Hogsmeade, cracking and singing into the sky.
McGonagall, in full tartan dress robes and with one too many sherry’s in her, organized a Scottish singalong as the teachers sat down on rugs and blankets on the lawn, placed around braziers and gazed into the pagan spectacle before them.

Aurora Sinistra sat down on the rug next to Charity and gave her a little nudge. “Got a toddy?” she checked.

“Of course. I think I prefer butterbeer when it’s warmed up.” Charity pushed her pointed hat back on her head slightly, but didn’t remove her eyes from what she was watching. Down at the lake edge, Severus Snape in full winter cloak was supervising the Slytherin students to keep their bonfire intact as it burned. She could tell from his body language and gestures that he was barking orders and hyper-vigilant about students getting too close. The light of the fire made his face contrast and turned his hair as black as the night around him. At one point he looked at a student, who must have said something amusing as Snape gave a wide smile and Charity’s heart gave a little flip.

Sinistra followed her eyes. “Mm. You’re not the first to notice Severus.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“He’s a bit of a favourite at the Three Broomsticks. If he goes.”

“A bit of a favourite?” Charity repeated, face flushed suddenly, and not from the brazier.

“There’s a coven of single witches in Hogsmeade who have been waiting patiently for Professor Snape to come out of dormancy. There’s no middle ground with him. Some women despise him, and others simply fold like a card table at his merest glance. It’s bizarre.”

Charity was stunned and speechless. She had thought she’d uncovered some hidden gem in Severus, an overlooked gift that he was her special secret, something only she could appreciate. The idea of a coven of women on standby in the village put a heavy stone in her heart.

“Really? How big is a coven? I mean, are you talking about one or two…?”

Sinistra shrugged. “I quite often get asked when I’m there if he’s coming out. It’s not just who he is, it’s the whole deal. I mean, he earns a good pay here at Hogwarts. He’s a High Sorcerer, a Master and a Head of House, so that’s all extra on top, there’s a lot on offer for a village girl. And – some women find him attractive. He’ll never be pretty boy, but he has a – an intellectual appeal, I suppose.” She knocked back the toddy she was drinking. “Look at the sky tonight... beautiful.”

“I don’t know why you’re telling me this,” blustered Charity, also taking an overly casual glug of butterbeer. “Professor Snape and I are simply working on a project together-,”

Aurora Sinistra grinned at Charity. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

“How do you know that?”

“That you’re protesting?”

“No – Shakespeare.”

“I read Shakespeare! I can read English you know.”

Charity shook her head as if trying to clear it. Sometimes magical folk completely dumbfounded her.

“Anyway, I’m not protesting, I’m simply telling you the facts.”
“Which is why you’ve completely changed your appearance lately,” said Sinistra with a sidelong look.

“But – you helped me. You said it would be good to help me fit in more,” Charity gasped, staring at her friend.

“Sweet Charity. It worked didn’t it? You don’t feel so much of an outsider now? And can I add, that Severus was practically drooling the other night at the Broomsticks.”

“I – I didn’t notice…”

“Did you notice the death stares from the local ladies? I’m surprised they didn’t hex you. It was the ribbon of course.”

“The ribbon? The one you put in my hair?”

“The very same. Never fails. You can thank me later.”

Charity was a bit confused. “It was a pretty ribbon but -,”

“Remember I told you? It was a Bewitcher…” seeing that Charity was none the wiser, Sinistra said, “It means you’re single and available. I think he got the message.”

Recalling Severus’s eyes roaming over her face and hair outside the publican’s, Charity suddenly understood what had happened. She closed her eyes, mortified. He must have thought she did that on purpose, especially because she’d hinted she’d thought he’d turn up.

“Can you see Andromeda – that rather plain little constellation? She was rescued by Perseus. So clear.”

“Aurora – there’s not…gossip…is there? What I mean is, there’s absolutely no need for gossip, there’s nothing at all going on between me and Professor Snape.”

Sinistra smiled again, and helped herself to another hot toddy from a passing house elf with a tray. “No one has said anything to me. And I haven’t said anything to anyone else. C’mon, let’s go for a stroll, it’s getting too bright here. Look, you can see the fireworks in Hogsmeade really well from that little hill.”

The two friends rose and walked a little way to a hillock from which they watched the fireworks, talking about more general, harmless matters. Presently, she heard from behind her, “Not a bad display.”

She swung about to find Snape standing there, hands clasped behind his back, skin pale and eyes glinting, the faintest smile on his lips. “Happy Druid Night. We have been fortunate with the weather.”

“Hello.”

“Evening, Professor,” said Sinistra, with a wry smile. “I saw that Slytherin’s fire was the last to burn out.”

“They had somehow managed to wrangle entire tree stumps into the construction.”

“Sure it wasn’t a fire extender charm on the wood?” she asked brazenly.

“Would you ask that of Hufflepuff?” he smiled back. “No one ever believes Slytherin can win
“It’s that Slytherin win so often,” said Sinistra, gathering her skirts so that she could descend the hillock more easily. “What is it about you serpents?”

As she departed, she gave Snape a meaningful look which made Charity wonder whether she was in fact one of the witches to “notice” Severus.

“Are you enjoying the evening?” Snape asked Charity when they were alone.

“Yes…it’s very atmospheric. Glad it wasn’t rained off like last year.”

An unsmiling pause, during which Charity imagined Snape in Hogsmeade choosing from a bevy of lusty young witches, who, inexplicably, had draped themselves all over him. Much as she tried to reason with herself, she felt betrayed.

Snape cleared his throat, seeming to sense that not all was quite right. “I thought I might inquire whether you enjoyed much progress this afternoon?”

“Uh, yes, yes I did,” Charity told him a little snippily. “Madam Pince was difficult, but we got there in the end. I will need to sit down with Rolanda and complete her application for a license; I sent away for the paperwork. And you?”

“I met with Dumbledore to explain our need to visit Gringotts. He is arranging an appointment for us. I’ll let you know when a date is agreed so that you can organize cover for your classes.”

“I see. Perhaps it is not entirely necessary for us both to go to London.”

At this comment, Snape realized something was definitely up. A frown appeared between his brows. “I’m not sure why…I was under the impression…?”

In Charity’s slightly butterbeer-fulled imagination, Snape had selected a buxom witch in the Hogsmeade and was now following her back to her place…

“Yes. I mean, you don’t really need me, do you?”

“It’s not so much a case of needing _-,” Snape uttered, now completely perplexed. It wasn’t just what she was saying, but her frosty demeanour. “Have I said something?”

“No. You haven’t _said_ anything…,”

“Then perhaps you can tell me…is it something to do with Madam Sinistra’s remark?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps you should ask her that.”

“Charity,” said Snape, “please explain what it is that’s troubling you.”

Glaring at him, she opened her mouth then, after a moment, shut it again. Betrayed, jealous – whatever feelings she had, what Severus did at Hogsmeade was no business of hers. She had no right to have any opinion on it whatsoever. And if she gave him cause to think she was victim to unjustified and childish emotions, emotions that had no place in a professional, working relationship, he might think twice about her place on the project. He said he valued her clever, strategic mind, not her adolescent angst.

But try as she might, she simply couldn’t neutralize her feelings that quickly. They had bubbled up, surprisingly strong, looking to vent, and now she had denied them escape. Lest he detect something
in her eyes, she glanced away and lifted her chin, wishing he would leave so she could get some control.

“It’s nothing, it really isn’t. I’m sorry.”

“If it is something I have said or done, I am almost certainly sorry for it. It was a mistake.”

“You haven’t done anything,” she muttered, but in her head she was yelling: *you were supposed to be mine! How dare you be noticeable to other women! How could you hurt me like that, having a life before I came on the scene!*

She was definitely glad she hadn’t said anything now. But she was still irrationally mad at him.

Snape, however, knew better than take a woman at her word, but he still wasn’t sure what to do. He remained on the spot, rolled onto the balls of his feet and back again, then at last turned uncertainly.

“If you are quite insistent about…everything…then I wish you a pleasant evening.”

“Good evening,” Charity choked out, and as he walked away, she watched him go. Who knew what he’d come over for, what opportunity she’d just slammed shut. It was for the best, though, she was sure of it. Her overreaction to Sinistra’s remarks had proved to her how much she’d allowed to germinate, to thrive. At some point, in her unconscious mind, she’d laid claim to Severus Snape and had reacted wildly to threats to it. But he was not hers. She had no basis on which to be jealous, he had as much said they were just friends. Professional friends. He’d merely come over to see how she’d got on with her audit tasks.

A hot, heavy ball was in the base of her throat, and she turned her face to the cold, lake breeze and let the chill numb her to the core.
The remainder of the week was similar in that the afternoons of Snape and Charity was spent focused on examining each category, and each criteria of the audit, to assemble as much qualifying evidence as possible. They convened after lunch in the Archive, their classes – if they had one – in the hands of a substitute (Snape insisted on Madam Jones, but only because he viewed her as reliable yet unchallenging), spent hours pillaging the data in the archives, or scouring the castle, for material that might satisfy the auditors of Hogwart’s reputation.

It was not a simple task, however. The upside, as far as Charity was concerned, of a difficult task was that it forced the mind to concentrate and focus. She recognized in herself that if the job at hand had not overwhelmed in its need for attention, she would have been quickly and easily distracted by the presence of Snape. Since the evening of the bonfires, she had become self-aware about her situation relative to him. She understood she had cultivated a deep, and serious, attraction to him, and every cell in her body wanted her to explore that in minute detail. And so, although the audit required her to search archive data, or explain to Pucey again what she needed (for the Slytherin Prefects had occasionally been available to assist), she had to do so against a tide of instinct to stare incessantly at Snape, to lose track of what he was saying when he talked, or to find excuses to stand slightly too close to him.

For both of them, the audit became an intense and bittersweet project. In some respects, it was very satisfying to be so productive and to make steady progress, and to feel that they were working on a bureaucratic equivalent of an Arthurian quest, like two lost knights in a cloister, defending Hogwarts from ministerial evil.

On another level, it was the antithesis of the cold, objective process they’d both been relying on to counteract their weak, human foibles. It had a fatalistic effect of bonding them during the wins and successes, and giving them a joint goal to unite over, but which they were obliged to fight against like salmon swimming upstream. Being constantly thrown into each other’s company, sometimes only the two of them, working by firelight in their hidden chamber, became a resistance challenge on its own grand scale as formidable as the actual audit. If Snape passed a document to Charity and their fingers brushed, it was as if she’d been electrocuted. If he made a comment and Charity laughed, he would just stop and stare and then look away again.

One afternoon, when Charity entered the archive and Snape was already underway, he said, “I’ve asked Lupin to meet us here. We’ve got to talk to him about the DADA license.”

“Okay,” Charity said, wondering why his expression looked grim. She knew Snape wasn’t particularly impressed by Lupin, but the look on his face was acerbic even by his standards. Charity got to work at the big table, assembling into a volume all the collected notes, pages and records the teachers had given her about lesson plans and applications of the curriculum, including any changes. She felt that, if one day she had to defend a decision to Dumbledore, this volume would prove that teachers took liberties with the curriculum all the time. It also was the response to Category 4, criteria b and c of the audit.

After a little while, there was the sound of the heavy knocker at the door and Snape opened it from where he stood using his wand. It was Lupin, and he entered tentatively, looking around.
“Lupin,” said Snape stonily, by way of greeting.

“Hello Remus,” said Charity, over her shoulder, feeling like she better be the reasonable one.

“Well, well,” said Lupin, putting his hands behind his back and roaming around, looking at everything, picking things up and putting them down again. “The archive. So this is where you two have been hiding. It’s cozy, isn’t it? How perfect for getting away from everything.”

“The archive happens to be the most logical place for amassing quantities of records and paperwork,” replied Snape, not looking up from his current chore of chronologically ordering a number of parchments that refused to lay straight.

“Yes. Very convenient. Merlin’s beard, is that a Muggle typewriter?”

Charity looked up at him and smiled as he made his way over to the table to examine it. “I’ve seen these in the curiosity museum in Diagon Alley,” he remarked, and pushed a key. “Ha – look at that. I made a j.”

“If you want to make an uppercase J, you press this lever and then the j key again – look,” said Charity, demonstrating. Lupin humoured her with his most affable chuckle and tried several more keys.

“Lupin, we have work to do,” barked Snape. “The DADA license.”

“Oh yes. Hmmm. How can we get around it?”

Snape opened a box and pulled out an envelope. “This arrived yesterday by owl from the Ministry,” he removed the folded papers from within. “It’s the form for acquiring a license to teach Dark Arts. It’s for any individual – personal or professional – who has some role or responsibility for studying, instructing, practising or otherwise having involvement. That would be you?”

Lupin came before Snape and took the form from him, looking it over. “Instructing…yes, that would be me.”

“To get a license, and to legitimately teach DADA, you’re supposed to complete that form, and if it’s approved, they send you the license. I’m assuming that never happened.”

Lupin was reticent and hesitated. “No…I can’t say that happened... I didn’t even know it was necessary before this audit.”

Unspoken, everyone in the room guessed that Dumbledore knew it was necessary.

Snape looked intently at Lupin and said in an ominous voice, “I’ve read through that form. If you answer it honestly, I believe they will not only not give you a license, but they will revoke your position here.”

Listening closely, Charity’s eyes flicked between Snape and Lupin. She didn’t dare say anything, though she immediately seized on the question of what it was about Lupin. A criminal history?

Sensing her inquisitiveness, Lupin said softly, “Perhaps we should discuss this in private, Severus?”

“Why? Are you planning on discussing something off the record?”

A long, weighty pause, then Lupin said, “I am not looking for a fight, Severus. I want to cooperate. This is my job on the line.”
“Then speak openly in front of Professor Burbage. You don’t want her being caught wrong-footed by a nosy auditor and not have the story. Do you?”

Lupin’s eyes flicked to Charity. “The more people that know, the more chances of a slip.”

“She can be trusted absolutely.”

Lupin took a long pause again, then indicated his acquiescence by slumping his shoulders and sitting down on an armchair. He said to Charity, without looking at her, “I have lycanthropy. I have since a small child. I suppress the transformation through a controlled course of wolfsbane each month, but I must incarcerate myself for at least three days when it is a full moon. Despite the effects of the potion, it is still illegal in this country for Lycanthropes to hold an occupation, particularly working with children.”

With wide eyes, hardly believing what she was hearing, she looked from a defeated Lupin to Snape, who stood unmoved, remorseless.

“Lupin was a popular prefect while at Hogwarts, as you know, Charity. And he fought with the Order of the Phoenix in the war. Dumbledore, I imagine, would see that those attributes outweigh an outdated precaution from the government. What we don’t know is how the parents and the Board would view it.”

“We’ve been over this, Snape. If I honestly believed I posed any threat to any child in this castle, I would never have accepted the position,” said Lupin, then turned to Charity. “What Severus isn’t saying is that his own hatred of me is fueling his determination to get rid of me, not compliance with a— a flimsy bit of paper.”

“Your being here, your disregard for that bit of paper, not only threatens your job, but Dumbledore and the school as well. The lead auditor is a Legilimens! One look at you and I expect he would delight in overextending his authority and recommending closure.”

“Then he mustn’t know!” spat back Lupin. “Why does he need to know? If Dumbledore trusts me then as far as I’m concerned, my tenure here is sound!”

“Dumbledore flagrantly ignored the rules bringing you here, Lupin,” said Snape. “He can’t help you if it is discovered.”

Lupin leapt out of his chair and shouted at Snape. “Then help me! And if you won’t help me, help Dumbledore. You know what the audit wants—find a way to— to get around it.”

He stood panting for breath, his face desperate as Snape considered him levelly. Snape then turned to Charity, who was stock still and wide eyed, and said, “Your thoughts on the license forms, Professor?”

Lupin handed them to her and she quickly perused them. “It says they absolutely must be submitted prior to work commencing. Remus, you’ve been working here since September?”

“Yes.”

“But you’ve never been a teacher before?”

“No. I’m not supposed to work. I accept welfare.”

“Are you still accepting welfare?”
He sighed. “Yes. If I stopped it, they’d want to know why.”

“So welfare fraud on top,” said Snape, bitterly.

“I don’t want the welfare! I want to work! I’m good at my job,” retorted Lupin heatedly.

“Remus, why would they know you’re a were-, I mean a Lycanthrope?” asked Charity.

“I’m registered. All werewolves are. The minute I was taken for treatment at St Mungos, at five years old, they put my name down with the Department Magical Creatures. Any employer who runs a background check will be told I’m unemployable. Every three years I need to appear at the Court for re-registration if my welfare is to continue. They treat me like a common criminal but were more than happy to accept my services as a soldier.” Lupin was standing with his hands on the wall, back to them. It wasn’t possible to see his face, but the sourness in his voice was very clear. Charity realized why he always seemed so run down, so shabby. And yet he was enormously popular with the student body.

“I’m so sorry, Remus,” said Charity quietly. “I’m reading these forms and I agree with Severus. They would never approve you to work at Hogwarts. Quite apart from the illegality of having your…condition…it requires that DADA instructors have a teaching qualification or equivalent experience, have a clean criminal history, and have no connections or association with any outlawed or recidivist groups.”

At this comment, Lupin suddenly turned and flashed a look at Snape, who scowled. “How do you propose we simply get around it?” he said to Lupin with heavy sarcasm. “Just…lie?”

“I don’t…I don’t know…can it be skipped? I mean, I saw how many criteria there are… will it matter in the scheme of things if a DADA license is missing?”

Charity considered this. “We can try omission. But if that doesn’t work, Remus…”

“If they ask for it directly, Lupin? I should think there’s a good chance an auditor would be extremely interested in knowing what Hogwarts is teaching generation after generation about DADA. Apart from hinkypunks, I mean.”

Charity didn’t know what that meant, but the exchange of furious looks between the two men clearly hinted at a long, long history of animosity.

“Particularly given the Dark Lord himself applied for the role,” Snape continued. “Particularly since the Aura programme run by the Ministry depends on graduates with NEWTs in the subject. I just can’t see them….forgetting…to ask.”

“Just can’t wait to get me out, can you Snape?” hissed Lupin, looking cornered now. “You’ve always wanted the job. You’re eaten up.”

“Well that’s preferable to the students being eaten up.”

Lupin’s hand went to his wand, and Snape swiftly followed suit. “Really? Again? You Gryffindors always resort to violence. You forget, Lupin, how much you depend on me. I don’t think making any more of an enemy of me is in your best interests.”

“You don’t do anything for me, Snape. It’s for Dumbledore, and he alone. I’m under no illusions
about that."

“Well then perhaps I should just report this whole little matter to him directly.”

“Wait, wait,” said Charity, and taking out her own wand muttered, *expelliarmus!* In great surprise, Snape watched his wand fly out of his hand and Charity hastily gather it. “Really gentlemen! You’re like a couple of schoolboys in the corridor,” she took Lupin’s wand where it had clattered the floor. “Cool heads, please! Cool heads.”

Snape regarded her with the faintest of smiles and a hint of approval in his eyes.

“I think it’s time we moved on from all the acrimony and tried to figure out how we’re going to resolve this,” Charity said with a great deal of forced reasonableness. “Remus, what you’re asking is for us to co-conspire with you. We’re putting our own careers in jeopardy if we do that, we’d be accessories. I really want to help you, I do, I think you’re a great teacher, a natural. But – hell – I can’t see what it’s worth -,”

“What if I can help you find Black?”

Sudden silence. Snape and Charity stared at Lupin in disbelief.

“Do you know where he is?” Snape asked after a moment, in a cold voice.

“No. I honestly don’t know where he is. But he may trust me. And I can help Harry, I can coach him, persuade him to take the risks seriously.”

Snape said nothing but regarded Lupin disdainfully.

“I think we’ll need to think on that,” said Charity, with a strained smile at Lupin. “I don’t think we can make a decision impulsively. But we’ll think on it.”

Lupin appealed to her. “Do think about it. I’m not a proud man, Charity, you can see for yourself that my position – Dumbledore will do what he can – ask him. But if you can get me through this audit, I may, there may be things-,”

“We will, Remus, I promise. We will do what we can.”

“Your concerns are noted. We need to get back to work.” Snape muttered dismissively.

Lupin straightened and ran a hand through his hair. “Please. Do what you can. I – I don’t want to leave Hogwarts.”

“Of course, Remus,” said Charity, again trying to smile reassuringly and handing him his wand. “We’ll do our utmost.”

At that he turned and left, hunch-shouldered, a far different man than the one that came in.

After being sure he’d left, and Snape had shut the door, she looked at him directly. “Want your wand back?”

Snape merely extended his hand at her. She gave it to him.

“Severus, I don’t know everything that went on just now, I mean it’s pretty obvious you two hate each other and have done for years. But, I – I think we should try and help him. He’s a victim of prejudice that is in no way his fault, I mean, he was five for crying out loud, that’s horrible! And Dumbledore will vouch for him I’m assuming.”
“Lupin never balked at seeking sympathy.”

She shrugged, a little disinterested in Snape’s heavily biased perceptions. Snape had returned to his previous task but she could tell that he wasn’t focusing on it. He had become quite remote again.

“I have one idea that might, might work.”

He glanced at her skeptically.

“When I was gathering evidence for the category on Staffing – there’s a section on recruitment. I saw an application form for a DADA teacher back in the 80’s. He’d attached his license. What if we forged it?”

“Forgery?” repeated Snape as incredulously as his closed demeanour would allow.

“Yes. Copy the license. Do it up with Lupin’s details. Just pass it to the auditor and hope that’s enough for him to abandon the trail.”

“And if it’s not?”

“Then it’s in Dumbledore’s hands.”

“And what if they discover the forgery?”

“Lupin wears it, not us.”

Snape considered her through half-closed eyes. “There’ll be magical protections on the license against forgery.”

“Yes. I’d thought of that. I know someone who can help.”

Two days later, on the weekend, when just about everyone else in the Castle was out getting some thin, watery sunshine, practicing Quidditch, or relaxing, Snape and Charity were in the archive with a wizard as crooked as he was bent. He was seated at the mahogany table, his long, angled nose almost touching the document he was focused on, a candelabra placed only inches away to maximize the light. At the end of the table stood Snape and Charity, watching, and behind them, stood Hagrid, looking apprehensive.

What the old wizard was doing was almost surgical in its precision, but the patient was merely a forged DADA license, being recreated through an unveiling charm that was complicated and highly illegal. “I can ‘ardly bear to watch,” said Hagrid, his eyes, in fact, glued to the scene. The old license, belonging to a failed and yet highly commendable applicant for DADA, was physically wriggling on the table, restrained as it was by a Permanent Sticking charm, and having been brought “to life” by the crooked wizard.

Animating the license was necessary in order to disassemble it, and to the audience, the procedure was akin to an autopsy as the wizard peeled back layers of magical protection adhered to a square of gold card, and then stripped back the writing and the photo with thin-tipped tweezers. The wizard meticulously replaced the picture and words, including Lupin’s signature, with those provided by Snape, and then, with a precision belied by the gnarled hands and slightly bulbous eyes, the old wizard re-laid the layers of magical defence, sealed, finally with a charm that the wizard refused to let anyone hear.
Snape realized that he’d stopped breathing as he watched the final stages, and discreetly exhaled once the routine steps were underway. Botching the procedure carried the daunting possibility of the old DADA license “ alarming” the Ministerial authorities by triggering radio-waves. While this couldn’t communicate the whereabouts of the tampered license, it did give the authorities notice that a DADA license infringement had occurred and to put the issue on high alert. Hardly a desirable situation for those just about to undergo audit. Snape, again, marveled at his current situation: he was currently jeopardizing his career, reputation, credibility – to help a werewolf he hated – who had never done a thing for him – for a woman who was inexplicably angry with him.

He discreetly observed Charity looking more anxious than he was, unable to tear her eyes away from the Bosch-like scene before her. The whole arrangement was on her suggestion and her design, the contribution from Hagrid being the unnamed ne’er-do-well who had, a few hours previously, delivered a consignment of Drop Bears at the Hog’s Head. She executed her plan with a ruthless efficiency that made Snape curious and a little disquieted, but he complied with her instructions and kept out of her way. When they had a moment together, he asked “Have you done this before? You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“No; never. I’m surprised you even asked me that, Severus.”

“How do you even know about that individual?”

“I talk to people other than you, you know.”

They were closing in on the final stages, and the crooked wizard placed the charmed forgery down carefully on the table. “Let it cool down,” he said, as if referring to cookies out the oven. “By this evenin’ it’ll be ready to use.”

“Thank you,” said Charity sincerely. “You’ve done an amazing job. Did you and Hagrid discuss payment?”

The wizard appraised her as he packed away his little toolkit. “Aye. ‘E said I could have my pick of a student here.”

Snape and Charity both frowned in shock. “Pick of a student –?” Hagrid stepped forward, “Wha?! I never -,”

The wizard enjoyed his own joke immensely, as he tucked his toolkit away in his robe. “It’s a joke, a joke. We agreed on 30 Galleons. Delivered to Hog’s Head by next Friday. And if I don’t receive it, I’ll trigger the alarm.”

“You’ll receive it,” said Snape gruffly, wanting the miscreant out of the castle. He was unpleasantly reminded of some of the more workaday Death Eaters.

Hagrid ushered the wizard out and escorted him back to Hogsmeade. After they’d left, Charity slumped in the same armchair Lupin had used and threw an arm over her eyes. “Oh my god,” she muttered to Snape, who remained standing and watching her. “I can’t believe we did that, and I can’t believe it worked. We’re now partners in crime.”

Thinking on some of his misdemeanors as a Death Eater, Snape felt this was at the lighter end of the scale, yet he understood her discomfort. Mostly he was concerned that if the forgery was discovered, it would undermine all their efforts in the rest of the audit.

“There is always my preferred option, which is to let Lupin be revealed and slung out of Hogwarts on the next Express.”
“I know we’ve just agreed to pay the man thirty Galleons, but do you think we should check with Dumbledore?” Charity asked, now looking at him.

“I expect he’d appreciate being briefed on the risks. But the money comes from Lupin, not the school.”

“I’ll talk to Lupin, you talk to the Headmaster,” said Charity decisively. “And what do you say to a Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks?”

Snape’s heart suddenly began to hammer, and he stared at Charity to see if she was joking. When she held his gaze, joy surged inside him. There was nothing he’d like more than to have a quiet beer across the table from Charity.

“That – that is an excellent suggestion,” he said to her, and she smiled. Whatever had angered her on Druids Night must have worked itself out. “Is there a party, as in, a group going?”

“No, that’s no need to thank me, indeed it is I who should be doing the thanking. But let us celebrate the milestones that have been met so far. It is 4:30pm – as good a time as any, I think?”

She smiled in agreement, gathered their cloaks and belongings, then locked the archive door behind them with a charm. Feeling lighter than he had in days, Snape was talking animatedly as they headed for the front door and didn’t notice Dumbledore and Hagrid until they’d almost walked into them in the Entrance Hall.

Dumbledore, in outdoor robes, was frowning slightly and Hagrid looked contrite.

“Ah. How fortuitous. You appear to be leaving?”

“We, ah, yes, we were - ,”

“Could you both spare me a minute? In my office?”

Snape looked at Hagrid, who waggled his eyebrows at him. “Of course, sir.”

“Yes, Headmaster,” said Charity, looking ashen.

All four detoured to the Headmaster’s office, following Dumbledore who walked briskly and removed his winter cloak as he went. They stood standing in the circular room, before Dumbledore’s desk, awaiting an elf to establish a fire. The room was uncharacteristically cold, and the previous headmasters in their portraits all appeared to be awake, surveying the scene with interest. On his perch, Fawkes sat quietly. Dumbledore hung his cloak and poured himself a mead, but didn’t offer one to anyone else, then seated himself in his ornate chair.

Having set a roaring fire, the elf pulled the door shut behind him, and Dumbledore faced Snape, Charity and Hagrid.

“I have just heard a very disturbing story. Hagrid tells me he was escorting a known felon off Hogwarts property. At first I thought the felon must have been chased here by the Dementors, but it seems he was invited onto the premises!”

Snape and Charity both spoke at once, each attempting to take responsibility. Dumbledore raised his
hand to quiet them.

He turned to Snape. “Please do go on.”

“The wizard was under strict supervision at all times. He was undertaking a…task for us…for the audit.”

“What possible task..?”

“We needed a teaching license for Remus Lupin,” jumped in Charity, desperate to take responsibility. “It’s my fault, Headmaster, it was my idea.”

Snape made to speak and support Charity, but the Headmaster intervened, initially confused. “How would that individual supply a teaching…?” Then it dawned on him. “Did he make one?”

“Yes sir. There are arcane spells that are required, it would have been impossible to achieve without his, um, expertise.”

Dumbledore looked from Charity to Snape. “This license. Is it the one required to teach Dark Arts?”

“Yes sir.”

“His lycanthropy. They would never have issued it.” Dumbledore appeared to be saying this almost to himself.

“Correct sir. In fact, he failed a number of the criteria for getting an approved license.”

Dumbledore sat silently for a moment, sipping his mead. Then, “Is he aware of this?”

“He does not yet know about the forgery. But he was extremely anxious about the possibility of his job being lost. He was quite desperate for help.”

Dumbledore seemed exceedingly angry, but he did not direct it towards the three standing before him. When his goblet was empty he stood and strode back and forth across the width of his office with his hands folded within the arms of his robes. The portraits whispered amongst themselves. “This vexes me greatly. Both paths carry unacceptable consequence if we should fail. If the auditors uncover the forgery, then we may fail the audit. If we do nothing to protect Lupin, he will be sacked and we fail the audit. And if we fail the audit, we lose the Triwizard Cup for certain, and then possible closure as well. This is indeed serious.”

“We may not fail the audit if Lupin is sacked -,” attempted Snape, but Dumbledore flared at him.

“And who do you think appointed him? Don’t say I told you so, Severus. There is no way I could plead ignorance about his circumstances, he had it throughout his schooling. I’m afraid I took a calculated gamble on him and it seems I have a debt to pay. The great injustice is that he is a good and popular teacher, and the wolfsbane that you are brewing appears to be working. He may lose his job here for no reason whatsoever.”

Snape, Charity and Hagrid stood silently. For Charity, this was her first experience of Dumbledore in a temper, and she was quaking.

Dumbledore went to the window and stared out, his back to them. “When were you planning on informing me? And why did you not consult me before making this impetuous decision?” Several of the portraits made supportive mutterings.
Away from Dumbledore’s furious glare, Charity, Snape and Hagrid looked at each other. Then Snape, who determined that he had a weight to carry but the most leverage with the Headmaster, said, “We had agreed that you needed to know. We hadn’t time to inform you.”

“Before or after you decided to sneak off to Hogsmeade?”

Heat rose in Snape’s face and he saw in the corner of his eye Charity visibly wilt. “Sir, we were not sneaking, it has been an extremely arduous week and we were making exceedingly difficult decisions regarding Lupin –,”

“It is the weekend, sir,” added Charity, which was the entirely wrong thing to say.

“Your duty comes first, always!” Dumbledore exclaimed, just shy of shouted, and he spun around at them. “Your duty to me, your duty to the school! It is not of consequence what day of the week it is – you are not on Muggle hours now, Professor!” he added specifically to Charity, whose blood rushed to her face.

“Did it occur to you,” the Headmaster continued, “that the felon you permitted onto school grounds will now be pursued by the Dementors, and if he is caught, will sound all manner of alarm at the Ministry? What am I supposed to explain to the Board? To parents, already overexcited by the threat of Sirius Black? Isn’t it enough that we are presently under siege by a mad, escaped convict without you – as well intentioned as you may have been – opening the gates to sundry lowlifes?” He took a heaving breath as the three stood silently.

Hagrid cleared his throat at this point. “That wizard is my fault, Headmaster. He is my contact.”

“Why are you associating with common criminals, Hagrid?”

“He’s my, uh, inside man for gettin’ certain things I need for work.”

“Do I not give you sufficient permission, sufficient resource to undertake your work? Hagrid, you told me you were sourcing these…these koalas – you neglected to tell me how you were obtaining them. And I am deeply disappointed that you are placing your position here at Hogwarts, and the life of Buckbeak, in further peril by associating with nefarious types wanted by the government. Is it not enough that I gave you the teaching role? Is it not enough that I put my neck out for you defending your capabilities, that you then sabotage my word with these selfish, childish misdemeanours?”

Snape guessed what would happen next and was right. Hagrid burst into tears and begged forgiveness. Fawkes made a soft, fluting note at the sound of it.

The display deflated Dumbledore. Unlike Snape, he couldn’t sustain a rage. He resumed his seat at his desk and clasped his hands together, head bowed a little. Beside Charity, Hagrid snuffled and wiped his eyes, just like an enormous child.

Snape cleared his throat. “Sir, if I could have a moment…”

Dumbledore gave him a weary look and indicated with his fingers for him to speak.

“The outcomes, as you see it, are indeed grave. But I do not believe the Ministry wants those to eventuate any more than we do. Their priorities, as I understand it, are to find Sirius Black, to showcase England in a Triwizard Cup and, of course, to keep investment in Hogwarts. The Lead Auditor has a job to do, but he reports to Bartemius Crouch and ultimately to Sir Byron. Whatever petty non-conformances he may find in the audit, I am sure that enabling the Ministry to achieve its higher priorities will take precedence. Lupin may well have the trust of Sirius Black and the means to bring him to justice in exchange for his tenure. And as for reinforcing confidence in the Ministry as
to Hogwarts global standing, I am sure the audit results will merely echo the high opinion the
Ministry already has of your abilities and standing. Sir.”

Dumbledore raised his head to look at Snape over the top of his glasses. “Are you trying to flatter
me, Severus?”

“I don’t need to. You yourself told me that the Ministry ‘owes you many things.’ But more
significantly, Sir Byron is overdue for a visit in person to Hogwarts. I believe a well-placed and well-
timed personal tour will greatly deflect any trifling objections raised by the auditor. Even if the
forgery is discovered, which, by the way, is extremely unlikely.”

For a few minutes, the only sound in the room was Fawkes making small trilling noises, and fire
crackling and popping. Dumbledore ruminated on Snape’s words, regarding all three before him as
he did so. Then he stood once more and came out from behind his desk to approach them.

With a heavy sigh, he said, “Very well. We will continue on your chosen course. See to it that no
evidence of bribery or corruption can be traced back to Hogwarts. Severus, you steer clear of any
transactions and occlude anything you witnessed regarding this forgery. At least your wands weren’t
used. I will contact Sir Byron and invite him to visit.”

Snape and Charity nodded. Dumbledore turned to Hagrid. “These koalas – am I then to understand
that they have been ill-gotten?”

Hagrid nodded his great head miserably.

“Then you must do whatever it takes to ensure they are not discoverable. How did you pay for them,
Hagrid?”

“Unicorn hair. I collect it in the Forest.”

Dumbledore appeared to quell. “I see. You must have wanted them a great deal.”

“They’ll be no trouble, Headmaster sir.”

“Is Hagrid sufficiently licensed to pass audit?” Dumbledore asked Snape and Charity.

“We will see to it that he is,” Snape replied.

It was clear that Dumbledore was still far from happy, but he offered them all a small, appeasing
smile and signaled that they were dismissed. “That will be all. Please keep me informed in future.”

The three departed and did not speak until they reached the great oak front door, from where Hagrid
would go to his hut. As he stood on the doorstep, he said to Snape and Charity, “I will pay that
wizard, I know how to reach him and get ‘im his money without any trail.”

“If the Dementors chase him back to Hogwarts, do not give him entry,” Snape said.

“‘e’ll be long gone by now.”

“Hagrid, hide the koalas by Monday week.”

The giant nodded his great head and turned for his home, looking utterly despondent.

Snape closed the oaken door, and Charity touched his arm. “Severus, I am so, so sorry.”

He looked perplexed. “For what? You have done nothing in which I didn’t willingly participate. In
fact, your quick thinking may well alleviate a great deal of difficulty for Dumbledore and Lupin.”

“Dumbledore’s right though. I should have consulted him about the idea.”

Some students passed through the Hall and glanced at Snape and Charity, who were clearly confiding. Snape straightened and glared at them until they hurried off.

“I feel our best game plan is to maintain clear sight and steady course. Do not chasten yourself, Charity, draw on your strengths now.”

And at that, Charity looked into Snape’s eyes and discovered that was exactly what he was.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The following week was dedicated to assembling audit requirements for the last three categories. Category Five, Student Enrolment, Attendance and Performance, was relatively straightforward, though lengthy, requiring evidence on everything from enrolment and attendance records to compliance with the Wizarding Examination Authority to Scholarships, Apprenticeships and Career Guidance. It was meat and potatoes from a Hogwarts point of view, and Snape and Charity were able to compile the relevant paperwork with ease, particularly with Pucey and Warrington running errand.

Category Six was Student Wellbeing. One of the criteria required at least five years’ worth of student medical records, detailing everything from headaches to fatalities. While Madam Pomfrey kept excellent files, the quantity over five years was voluminous. There were 344 slips, trips and falls of sufficient seriousness to require hospital treatment. 89 head injuries. 632 cuts, lacerations or serious bruises. 32 broken bones. 72 burns. There were 29 referrals to Mungos for various magical maladies that needed specialization, and several near-drowning incidents. In the five years, the main causes of injury related to flying and Quidditch, transfiguration and apparating efforts that had gone wrong, pranks, hexes and potions, and encounters with magical creatures.

“My god,” said Charity, as she and Snape read through the records in Madam Pomfrey’s office. “It’s a wonder anyone makes it out alive!”

Madam Pomfrey shook her head sadly. “Teenagers think they’re invincible anyway, without giving them magic to play with. But they’re still human. And still mortal.”

Charity looked up at her from the mountain of papers. “What about the students’ emotional wellbeing? Do they get treatment from you if they’re suffering emotionally?”

“Less so,” said Pomfrey, and then waved towards a shelf of various draughts and tinctures. “I have some light potions, like hearts ease, and Restoration Remedy. But if they need help with mental distress, they see their Head of House.”

“Really?” Charity looked with a grin to Snape, who folded his arms. “A student who’s feeling anxious, unhappy, not coping – has to come to you for help?”

“I find Slytherins learn to cope remarkably quickly.”

Madam Pomfrey nodded sagely. “I hear Pomona gets quite a lot of them.”

“Probably Slytherins too,” Snape admitted.

The last category was Facilities and Property, of which there were twenty-two criteria. The first was Security and Freedom of Muggle Interference. Evidence was sought for regular maintenance and care of the Muggle-Repelling Charm placed over the castle, which needed to be routinely tested, then strengthened and reinforced where weak. Dumbledore was the chief activator of the charm, seconded by Professor Flitwick. Flitwick told Charity that the charm was tested every two years and was done so with assistance from a wizard who ran tour groups for Muggles in the nearby Scottish village of Achintee. The wizard, for a small fee, would incorporate into his summer tour a hike
through the nearby countryside, well within view and reach of Hogwarts. If any of the hiking Muggles noticed or felt drawn to explore or ask about Hogwarts, over and above it being anything but an old ruined castle, the wizard would explain that the castle was derelict and not for public access, then conduct a discreet memory charm on the entire group once back on the bus. He would later report back by owl that the charm was either sound or showing weakness. One year a Muggle on the hike reported to the tour guide wizard that the castle looked “odd” and “shimmery” and “one turret looks completely intact, but the rest of the castle is crumbling”. On receiving this assessment, Dumbledore and Flitwick hastily conducted a ‘patch-test’ on the charm and discovered the equivalent of a hole, which meant the turret had become observable. They also surmised that the Muggle in question may have been more squib-like than true Muggle since none of the others on the group noticed. Nevertheless, the close call resulted in a strengthening of the charm and there had been no reported incidents of a Muggle ever showing any interest.

The other evidence of “Freedom from Muggle Interference” interested Charity greatly. It was based on the Ministry’s belief that the Muggle parents of students should have limited access to their children during the school year and be prohibited from knowing too much about what was learned at the school when reunited during holidays. This was a condition apparently issued to Muggle parents when their magical child was offered a place at the school and explained a great deal to Charity. When she’d been a student at Hogwarts, she observed, during holidays, that her parents asked very little about what she did at school. In contrast to her time at her local elementary, during which her parents enquired every day what she’d learnt and done and assisted with homework, her time at Hogwarts seemed to be all but ignored. At the time she’d fretted it was because her parents actually disapproved or felt suspicious of her involvement in an exclusive society, but now she realized they hadn’t told her that they were under a great deal of restriction. By opening the school to Muggle-borns, the defenses between wizarding and Muggle communities had been permeated like a sieve – some protections were necessary.

A lot of the evidence required for this criterion included the enrolment forms which had parent signatures for the clause “I hereby give consent to the Headmaster of Hogwarts School to use discretion when approving access to or contact with parent or guardian during school term. I also agree to refrain from unduly questioning or soliciting from my child information about Hogwarts School; reading, using or otherwise interacting with Hogwarts property during non-term periods, and discussing my child’s attendance at Hogwarts with any other persons. Non-compliance will result in the expulsion of the child.”

It was amazing to Charity the number of Muggle parents who willingly authorized this. As it was a complete mystery to the parent how the wizarding community could know about non-compliance, so presumably few dared to break it. She had no evidence of any child being expelled as a result of it being broken.

The whole subject made Charity slightly moody. She was brooding on it in the archive, busy duplicating, typing and binding at the big table, when Snape entered in his usual brusque manner of flinging the door open with his wand and marching in with a flurry of robes.

Charity got up and quietly shut the door again, while Snape threw his books down on the table.

“I have been to see Lupin,” he announced, scowling.

“Hello Severus. How are you?”

“I gave him the new Dark Arts license. He was off-hand at best.”

“Perhaps Dumbledore has forewarned him. Or even cautioned him.”
“I think it more likely that he is a rude and inconsiderate ingrate.”

Charity had already ordered tea, and Snape poured himself a cup. Charity waited expectantly.
“Speaking of rude and inconsiderate…”

“Apologies. I shall make you one.” Snape knew that Charity liked hers with only a smidge of milk and no sugar.

“Thank you. Did you get the floor plans from Filch?”

Snape disrobed, throwing it over the back of the chair, then went to stand by the fire with his cup.
“There,” he responded, nodding at the books he’d dropped. “That cost me three hours. Actually retrieving them took five minutes. The remaining two hours and fifty-five minutes consisted of his entire life’s work at Hogwarts.”

“But how did he manage to keep you so long? You didn’t actually contrive to be polite?”

“Of course not,” snapped Snape. “He outright lied. Pretended to not know of their whereabouts. The minute some Hufflepuff showed up at his door with a story about a student blocking a toilet, he went directly to the cupboard, got them out and shoved them at me.”

Charity laughed outright, but Snape glowered.

“I’m working on criteria one. Since you ask.”

Snape caught her drift and acknowledged his gracelessness. He came to her side and looked over her shoulder. “Muggle interference…” he read. “That’s the Repelling charm.”

“Yes. Did you know it got a hole in it one year, and a Muggle saw a turret?”

“I did not. Did the Muggle report it?”

“No, his memory was obliterated. But Dumbledore and Flitwick had to regenerate it and fix it pronto. Imagine if the school were discovered.”

“All Headmasters are given the Repelling Charm access code. Same with the Apparation Jinx. And protective wards if necessary.”

“But look at this bit, Severus, part B. This is about Muggle parents being…distanced…from their kids while they’re at school. And even while they’re at home.”

“A different form of interference,” he reasoned.

Charity looked up at him, slightly solemn. “When I was at home, I thought my parents didn’t like Hogwarts, didn’t want to know about it. I felt…rejected.”

Snape sat down beside her and looked at the paperwork. She said to him: “Here’s where all those Muggle parents agree to hand over their children,” and pointed to the clause. “They see them to the train platform, and then they have no idea. Can’t even ask.”

“They must view it as a necessary evil,” said Snape, although he was reflective.

“Imagine trying to do that in reverse,” said Charity. “Wizards would be in an uproar.”

“Wizards were forced to live in secret due to Muggles,” Snape rejoined. “But it’s likely true.”
“It says that Dumbledore gets to decide if a child can see his or her parents while they’re at school.”

“I don’t believe Dumbledore would ever restrict a Muggle-born from seeing his or her parents. I know he let Lily - .”

Abruptly, he stopped speaking.

“Lily Evans?”

Snape nodded, but said no more and made it obvious he didn’t intend to. Charity stared at him for a moment to see if he would change his mind, and when he didn’t, in fact, stood and walked away in an aimless fashion, Charity felt like screaming at him. What is it with Lily Evans?! She knew she was Harry Potter’s mother, and had died horribly, but why did Snape react like this whenever her name came up? There had clearly been a relationship, but Lily Evans evidently ended up married to James Potter, so had she broken Snape’s heart? People got together and broke up all the time, especially teenagers. Why was Snape so forlorn about it, up to twenty years later?

Charity didn’t know whether to be jealous or resentful, and settled on both, having been in an off-mood anyway. She and Snape finished working the remainder of the afternoon in virtual silence.

The following day, a Wednesday, while the pair were in the archive assembling two-years’ worth of meal menus to prove a responsibility towards balanced nutrition (although both Charity and Snape agreed that the proportion of the diet that had sugar as its main ingredient was alarmingly high), they had an unexpected visit from Dumbledore.

He knocked on the door to announce himself, and entered with his usual jovial expression, greeting them both warmly. Charity hadn’t spoken to him since the awful meeting in his office, and had lost a lot of sleep over his accusation of her keeping Muggle hours. She was very glad that today he had caught her not only studiously working, but dressed head to foot in witches robes, including a pentacle, and hopefully looking sufficiently or appropriately magical. His benign expression was an immense relief.

Snape seemed indifferent either way. He stood upright and nodded his head at Dumbledore. “Headmaster. This is a pleasant surprise.”

“I thought I would drop by, but halfway here I realized how far away it is. It’s worse than your dungeon, Severus. Good heavens, it’s a good thing you have the fire on.”

He went towards it and toasted his hands for a few minutes. “How goes the audit?”

“Very well. We have finished almost six of the seven categories. We only have category one to do, which should be completed after our – my - visit to Gringotts. Other than that, there are simply arrangements for room and accommodation for the auditors during their stay.”

“Excellent. You have both done commendably. If, Merlin forbid, we do not pass, it will not be due to your efforts. I wanted to tell you that I have spoken to Sir Byron today, and he will be visiting on the twenty-fourth. He will join us for a special Teachers Lunch, and I will escort him through the school and grounds, that sort of thing. We may drop in on a class here and there. You’re not planning on anything…extraordinary… in potions that day?”

“A Tuesday is it? No. And I expect Madam Jones will be running it anyway.”

“Oh yes, Severus, that reminds me. Madam Jones is getting a bit short of patience. Now that you’re close to finishing, could you pop in and take a class occasionally?”
Snape looked displeased at this, but muttered, “If I must.”

“When are you both due at Gringotts again? Was it Friday?”

“Yes, I’ve set the day aside,” Snape replied.

Dumbledore looked from Snape to Charity and back again. “Just you, Severus?”

“Ah, yes…I believe Professor Burbage didn’t think it was – economical - for us both to go.”

Charity looked at the floor, her neck hot.

“Nonsense!” declared Dumbledore, and with his wand, lifted her chin so he could make eye contact. “Miss Burbage – Charity – I insist you accompany Severus. I appointed you to the project to assist him. But, more importantly, I would like you to go to Diagon Alley and make something of a day of it. I treated you unfairly the other evening, and moreover, interrupted your weekend plans. I want you both to go to Gringotts, and when you have completed your task there, to have a meal at my expense. Put it on the tab, I have one in almost every establishment there. You have both earned it.”

Charity blinked at him, then gave a tiny nod. “Yes sir. Thank you, sir.”

He left soon after, and when Charity summoned the courage to look at Snape, the corner of his mouth twitched in a smile. “You heard the Headmaster. He insisted that you accompany me. Insisted.”

The next day, at breakfast, two post owls brought mail – one for Hagrid, and one for Madam Hooch – both were approved licenses from the Ministry. Hagrid was, of course, proud as punch to be made official, and passed his license along the teacher’s table for everyone to witness. Madam Hooch was more circumspect, dismissing it as ridiculous, bureaucratic red tape, but she kept a close eye on it while it was viewed by those beside her. When Minerva McGonagall asked loudly why she wasn’t required to have a license, Madam Hooch positively quivered in delight.

A post owl also brought a large packet for Snape. It turned out to be a letter confirming that Topias Poole and his two sub-auditors would be using the Floo Network to arrive at Dumbledore’s office at nine-thirty am on Monday, which was right in the middle of double-potions with third years. The letter had a series of dot-points reminding Snape of their requirements in the way of a private office, access to whomever they needed to meet, access to any documents, records, archives or files they requested, access to any rooms, facilities or equipment they required, access to an “audit coordinator” at all times and, naturally, eating and sleeping provisions. The package further contained, for his records, the audit proforma that would be completed while they were visiting. It was a lengthy, horribly officious looking form with many lists, checkboxes, blanks for filling in, directions to follow, arrows, numbers and footnotes. Lupin was sipping his coffee as he watched Snape perusing his mail, and commented, “Well that looks like a fun way to spend a weekend.”

Snape gave him a sidelong look, but couldn’t actually disagree with him.

“I’ll give you thirty Galleons to trade places,” Snape said.

“Nup. Need a lot more than that.”

“Fifty – but you take third year potions.”

Lupin took a considered slurp of his coffee. Then he smiled at the Slytherin, a rare event indeed. “Sorry Severus, I did think about it. But I wouldn’t wish a full moon on even you.”
By the end of Thursday, at dinner, feeling satisfied that Charity was in her place and eating her dinner as well, Snape got out the letter again, and the audit criteria, and went through the dot-points.

Everything was done.

He was quietly, privately amazed. Everything – everything that could be done, except for Category One – every dot point was a tick. It was as if they’d built a house with their bare hands and had been given the key to enter. He went through the list and third and fourth time. His heart swelled. Nobody else would ever understand why it was such an achievement. He almost didn’t care what the auditors found. He had scaled a mountain. He and Charity had scaled a mountain.

He contacted the kitchen elves and requested a glass of wine. Merlin’s hat, he was going to celebrate.

For the sheer pleasure of it, he sipped his wine at the teacher’s table and went through the list again. He noticed many pairs of eyes from the House tables examining this unusual behaviour, and the students speculating wildly on what it could possibly mean. He found out later that the rumour which had really grown legs was that he had been perusing a particularly mean and difficult test paper that he intended to issue to third years and up.

Lupin, too, couldn’t fail to notice that his table companion, who often sat throughout dinner in moody silence, was imbibing and deeply immersed in what – to anyone else would seem – tedious documentation. After several attempts at discreet and sneaky looks, he failed, and finally asked. “What are you so gleeful about, Severus?”

Contented enough that even Lupin couldn’t dampen his spirits, Snape replied, “We’ve just about finished the entire audit list. Hours of work. Hours and hours.”

“And you’re celebrating.”

“Yes. I am enjoying an exceedingly rare event for me, known, I’m told, as feeling…happy.”

Lupin stared at him, wide-eyed and shocked. Snape smiled. Little Euclid Tattinger saw and dropped his spoon in his soup, splattering a Prefect.

Friday morning rolled round, and though the night before Snape had retired to his rooms, bathed and climbed into bed slightly squiffy, he did not sleep well. He was too… he was too…he himself could not believe it, but he was too excited.

The dictionary confirmed it for him. The word was excited. A word he had long ago given up ever applying to a mood belonging to him.

He was full of anticipation about spending an entire day with Charity away from Hogwarts. Dumbledore’s non-too-subtle instruction regarding Charity’s attendance at this visit was not lost on Snape – obviously Dumbledore harboured some remorse about his spontaneous disciplinary and decided to make amends. It was good value at twice the price, as far as Snape was concerned.

On Friday morning, unable to sleep any longer, he got up early and dressed. Not that anyone would notice, but he took pains with his appearance. He picked a clean shirt, coat and cravat. He washed and shaved carefully, brushed his hair fruitlessly, squinted into the mirror and reassured himself that his looks hadn’t stopped her enjoying his company so far. Then he followed the same routine as his previous trip to London which involved ensuring his classes were well catered for and visiting the
Warrington came down the steps from the dorms pushing a first year by the collar in front of him. Both were still in pyjamas and dressing gowns. As they came closer, Snape realized the first year was Fetherington.

“Sir?” said Warrington, looking decidedly surly.

“Who is this?” Snape enquired, indicating the first year being held like a cat at the scruff of the neck.

“Jacob Fetherington. First year.”

“Yes, I realise that, but why the…why are you dragging him around?”

“He’s a little thief, sir. Caught him going through people’s trunks and cases.”

Warrington released the boy who stood, staring as though his life depended on it, into the back of a nearby chair.

“Did you find anything on him? Any bounty?” Snape asked.

“Yes sir. Some sweets. A novelty item from Gambol and Japes.”

“They’re mine!” Fetherington exclaimed defiantly, sullen eyes suddenly flashing. “You can’t prove they’re not! Someone gave them to me from Honeydukes.”

“Who?” Snape asked instantly.

“Don’t have to tell you.”

Snape remembered that today was going to be a good day, one that he’d looked forward to, one that a little toad like Fetherington was not going to spoil.

“Warrington, I am in London today and not available -,”

“Again sir?” Warrington looked at Snape directly as he said this, recalcitrant.

Fury exploded within Snape. Partly it was at the insolence, and partly at the irritation of his plans being foiled, but a large part was guilt. Warrington’s comment had touched a nerve. Snape was conscious that his attentions had been diverted from his House duties for some weeks.

“Again. Warrington,” Snape said with icy warning. “And if you question my movements again I’ll have your badge. You and Pucey are in charge. I’ll be back this evening and tomorrow we’ll deal with Fetherington. Today he is confined to House quarters unless he is in class. No recreation, no Quidditch, no socializing. Keep an eye on him and report back tomorrow. If he defies you, I want to know.” He looked at Fetherington with his most devastating glare. “It will all add up.”

He turned back to Warrington. “Any serious issues, report them to Dumbledore. He’ll assist until I return.”

“Yes sir.”

“Right. I leave after breakfast, so let’s be getting on. Upstairs to dress.”

At 10:00am, Snape met Charity in the Entrance Hall, dressed and ready to leave. Like him, she had taken some trouble to look tidy and professional, her dark blonde hair tied back in a loose French
braid, and she wore a fitted, longline, dove-coloured coat with small brass buttons and dark cuffs and collar. As she walked across the floor to him, she smiled, touches of pink in her cheeks, and a bit of makeup made her brown eyes even larger and more alluring. At the sight of her, looking delighted to be joining him, made his sleeping giant roll over. “You look…very well. Have you everything you need? It may be a long day.”

She held up a leather case with straps and buckles. “All the audit stuff we need is in here. And just a few personal effects of my own.”

“Wand?”

She slipped it out of her sleeve and gave him an admonishing look.

“Then we are ready. Floo or apparate?”

“Apparate.”

“In that case, to the gate.”

They walked side by side out of the front oak door. The students were all in class, so few would notice their departure, but it would have made an interesting sight. Snape usually travelled alone, with a very determined speed and destination that made people move out of the way. Today, however, he was clearly in the role of escort, moderating his pace to that of his female companion as they walked along the path, conversing, sometimes with hand gestures, looking almost normal.

When they got to the outside of the Hogwarts gate, Snape offered her his arm. “Why don’t we side-along apparate together this time, just to be sure we arrive at the same place?”

She smiled and accepted his arm. With a crack, they disappeared from Hogwarts and moments later appeared on the footpath of Diagon Alley.

Their sudden arrival caused pedestrians to step out of the way, but nobody batted an eye. Snape saw Charity turn where she stood, drinking in the sights, sounds and smells around her, her face mesmerized like a child. The Alley did indeed look fetching, decked, as it was, for Christmas. Slung between the wall-mounted carriage lamps up and down the alley were luxurious lengths of holly, pine and mistletoe wreath, spun with tendrils of twinkly lights, and ornamented with sugared fruits, pinecones, and candy canes. In corners, nooks and crannies between the shops were Christmas trees, dressed with sprigs of holly, apples, singing robins and candles, and in handsome square stone pots at intervals along the cobblestone thoroughfare were pear trees, fruiting, and a partridge nestled within its leaves. Every shop window was decorated profusely with Christmas cheer, and from an unknown source, carols could be faintly heard.

Snape was more at the Scrooge end of the spectrum when it came to Christmas, but Charity’s joy was infectious. Lily had been the same, always ready to embrace the season, poking gentle fun at his dourness. “Severus! It’s gorgeous!” exclaimed Charity. “Look at the partridges!”

“‘Tis the silly season, I suppose. Even though it’s not even December yet.”

“That’s not unusual. Muggles have Christmas things in the shops by October. What time is our appointment at Gringotts.”

“Quarter to eleven.”

“Oh, then we have half an hour. Let’s have a coffee, come on, please?”
After his restless night, the suggestion of a coffee had definite merit. He followed Charity to Rosa Lee Teabag tea shop, and they sat in a quiet corner with a mug each. Charity had ordered a version with cinnamon and chocolate because, according to her, wizarding folk couldn’t make a decent coffee if their lives depended on it.

“You know what I’ve noticed about Diagon Alley? And Hogsmeade is the same,” said Charity conversationally. Snape shook his head, content just to look at her.

“Not a straight line anywhere. Everything is crooked and defying the laws of physics. I guess wizarding folk could bolster and prop and scaffold their buildings with any manner of spells. Or they could just buy a ruler.”

Snape chuckled. “It’s not just a lack of engineering. Those buildings are ancient, many of them pre-date rulers.”

“And…it’s not a bad thing they don’t look like modern Muggle buildings – so soulless. Look how pretty it is.”

He nodded, but didn’t take his eyes off Charity.

They entered the silver doors of Gringotts exactly at ten forty-five and in the marble hall, approached a counter where Snape explained to the Customer Service Goblin the nature of their call. They were led to another counter, behind which was a door, and through that were some offices. Earkras the Hogwarts accountant had his name on the glass panel inset to the dark, wooden door of his office. The customer service goblin knocked on the door, briefly exchanged words with Earkras in Gobbledegook, and Snape and Charity were admitted.

Earkras, seated behind an enormous glossy mahogany desk with figured timbers, black writing leather across its top and what seemed like a hundred little drawers with brass locks and handles, was dressed in a dark suit, his hair was plastered to his scalp, and he had a monocle. A gold abacus and a gas lamp on a bendable neck were the only items atop the desk. As Snape and Charity entered, he did not greet them, but drew nearer the gas lamp and took out a long piece of parchment from one of his drawers, which, Snape noticed, had the Hogwarts coat of arms on the top. It was the official letter from Dumbledore explaining the purpose of their meeting. Earkras commented that they were five minutes late by looking at a fob-watch, indicated they could sit, then fiddled with his monocle, while he re-read Dumbledore’s letter.

Snape and Charity sat stiffly on almost black wooden chairs on the opposite side of the desk. Earkras muttered and snorted as he read the letter, then when he was finished, dropped it on his desk and scowled at them both. His monocle popped out of its own accord.

“This is very irregular,” he snarled. “Very irregular and most inconvenient.”

“We most certainly agree,” answered Snape. “We are obligated on Ministry instruction.”

“If the Ministry have some doubts or distrust in my account-keeping, they are welcome to bring that to me in person.”

“I will certainly pass that on. But I don’t believe the audit stems from dubiety in your professionalism.”

“In fact, as the Ministry is the state owner of Hogwarts, I would think they should be keeping their own records,” huffed Earkras. “I shall be writing and expressing my dissatisfaction with this process.”
“Indeed.”

Looking extremely irked but unable to progress any further on this angle, Earkras stood and approached a plain wall behind him. With a finger-gesture and a mumble of something unintelligible, large, wooden cabinet drawers suddenly materialized along the breadth and height of the wall, each made of the same patterned mahogany, and brass escutcheon draw-pulls. For the topmost drawers, Earkras was required to stand atop a rolling stepladder, which he now employed to access a drawer which he drew open and with more muttering, several files flew out and landed in his long-fingered hands. Earkras brought these rolled up parchment files, ledgers and daybooks to his desk, and began opening them with jerky, irritable swipes of his hands.

“There, there and…. there,” he said, shoving the documentation across the desk at them. “Well?”

Charity fetched forth the list of items required for the audit out of her bag, and for the remaining hour, during which Earkras became increasingly fractious, they duplicated the relevant pages, journals, and records. Charity carefully recorded the source file and other relevant information on each copy with a pen. Snape had the task of extracting from Earkras what they were actually copying which was by far the more difficult as Earkras quickly formed the impression he was dealing with a couple of imbeciles. This was hard for Snape to suffer, and though his voice never rose, his tone got darker and icier.

Finally, Charity was satisfied that they had what they needed, and she and Snape rose to leave.

“Thank you, Earkras,” Charity said, unsure whether to extend her hand to shake the goblin’s. “I am so very sorry we interrupted you. You’ve been most helpful and…accommodating.”

“I shall be expressing my displeasure to Dumbledore, you can tell him that. Never in my day!” muttered the accountant, gathering his files together. Snape and Charity took this as their cue to leave and they exited the office as quickly and soundlessly as possible.

Ensuring the clasp of her bag was well-fastened, Charity and Snape walked through the gleaming white and gold hall and out the front doors in to the cool, November sunshine. Charity stood on the marble steps and placed her hand on Snape’s forearm, then laughed gaily.

“Dear Lord!” she gasped, catching Snape’s amused eye. “That was like…actually I don’t think I’ve ever experienced anything so torturous!”

Snape shook his head. “It is well that you finished when you did. I’m not sure how much longer I could have kept my composure.”

“It was pretty obvious to me how cross you were getting. Not sure Earkras noticed. As far as he was concerned, he was the victim of the piece.”

“I would expect Earkras feels victimized by a great many things in life. Fortunately, we have finished with business for today, and our time now is at our pleasure.”

Charity’s smile was so genuine, Snape’s heart gripped a little. He offered his arm. “A stroll through the streets, perhaps?”

Charity slipped her hand through Snape’s arm and allowed him to lead her along the cobblestones to look through the windows of shops and emporiums. They paused to listen to carol-singers dressed in robes, furred coats and pointed hats, bought some roast chestnuts to nibble on and a goblet of mulled wine from rickety street stalls. A wizard vendor was using robins and bluetits to weave simple floral crowns of mistletoe, ivy and baby’s breath, of which Snape bought one for Charity and which she
placed lightly on her head, looking doe-like at him. He thought it very becoming. At Snape’s request, they spent some time at Flourish and Blotts, Obscurus Books and the apothecary. Charity paused at the window of the Muggle curiosities museum and cooed over some owlets and then when they strolled past the window of Madam Malkin’s, she pulled at Snape’s arm to halt him.

“Oh Severus,” she breathed, pointing in the window. “I do like that gown.”

He followed her gaze to a Jacquard silk, floor-length sleeved gown she was pointing to, in midnight blue and gold embroidery, with a plunge cut neck line.

“It is…very fine…” he remarked, being of absolutely no judge on women’s attire except when they were wearing it.

“Can I go in and try it on? It won’t take long.”

“Of course. I shall continue my browsing and return in half an hour.”

She flashed him a happy smile and entered the shop. Snape wandered about, feeling a little desolate without her, occupying himself with a street vendor who sold magical puzzles and games. Presently he decided she must have finished, and returned to Madam Malkins, but paused when he glimpsed through the window that Charity was being attended to by the Madam herself. Standing on a stool, with her back to him, Charity was wearing the gown and Madam Malkin was fitting it, adjusting the hemline and waistline. Snape quickly withdrew his gaze, and stood against the outside wall feeling guilty, but then his curiosity got the better of him and he took another discreet peek.

Charity, unaware of him, had turned on the stool while Madam Malkin fusses. She looked breathtaking. Blood rushed to his face and his heart hammered in his chest as he withdrew again, utterly flustered by his own physical reaction to the sight. But he couldn’t keep away. He peeked again, drinking in the vision of her in the gown, the night blue against her creamy skin at the neckline, the swell of her breasts, the gold tendrils of hair touching her shoulders, and the delicate circle of winter-green on her crown.

A wizard came up and stood next to him, doffed his hat at Snape and then pointed at Charity through the window. “Now there’s a sight for sore eyes. She’s a stunner.”

Snape scowled darkly at him.

“Who is she? Don’t recognize her.”

“She’s with me,” Snape ground out. “I’ll thank you to move along.”

“She’s with you?” exclaimed the wizard, amazed. “You?”

Snape’s face changed from a scowl to a far more dangerous neutral, except for the obsidian eyes, which glittered. “Move along. Or I’ll make you,” he said murderously.

“Alright, alright, keep your hair on,” said the wizard, raising his hands, and as he sauntered away he looked back in disbelief.

The interaction had caught the attention of Charity, who – seeing Snape standing outside – ushered him in.

“Do you like it?” she asked, and Madam Malkin, on turning to see Snape hesitantly enter the shop, exclaimed, “Oh goodness, my dear Professor Snape! It’s been so long!”
“Madam,” said Snape, inclining his head.


“It is…extremely agreeable.”

“Agreeable!” cried Madam Malkin, appalled. “I think the word you mean, sir, is ravishing. This beautiful lady was made to wear this gown. Look how it cossets her figure. Few ladies have a figure to carry it, but she is effortless. I insist you purchase it for her.”

“Oh no,” said Charity hastily, “Professor Snape is just a friend. I will pay for it myself.”

“Why is he just a friend?” demanded Madam Malkin with the brazenness of the town busybody. “Are you married? Where is your husband?”

A rose-coloured blush crept to Charity’s cheeks. “I am not married,” she replied quietly, and seeing her unease, Snape stood awkwardly, wondering whether to leave. “I’d love to take this Madam, I’ll just…um…get changed…”

Charity retired to the changing rooms and Madam Malkin faced Snape. “Agreeable indeed! Even if she is only a friend, you could pay a better compliment. There was a time I would have paid for such a divine young lady to model that gown for me in high society.”

She bustled off to the change room and soon returned carrying the gown which she proceeded to box and wrap with a quick flick of her wand, as tissue paper and ribbons magically set to work.

Snape, uncertain, said, “She looked lovely.”

“Hm. Lovely is better. Now will you be paying?”

“Yes. Please,” said Snape, thinking it was the least he could do for the terrible faux par, and while Charity was in the changing room, he gave Madam Malkin the required Galleons and Sickles.

When Charity emerged, Madam Malkin handed her the beautifully, Christmassy-wrapped box. “There my dear. Professor Snape has taken care of the transaction.” Charity, astounded, stared at him. “Oh don’t look so shocked. He all but insulted you. I would love a photo when you wear it out – what is the occasion?”

“Um, oh, I haven’t actually got an –,”

“There is the staff Christmas party.” Snape offered. “In a few weeks.”

Madam Malkin beamed. “Perfect. At the grand Hogwarts Castle no doubt. Professor Snape, I do hope you will be escorting Miss Charity to this party?”

Charity began to shake her head, already overwhelmed by the turn of events, but Snape looked at her for a moment profoundly, and she stopped, wide-eyed.

“If Miss Charity would consent to have me, it would be an honour to escort her,” he said, as if they were completely alone.

They most decidedly weren’t. Madam Malkin clapped her hands and said “Now that’s more like it! Then the occasion is all set. Please come back and tell me all about it!”

Speechless, Charity allowed herself to be ushered out, and once on the street, looked up at Snape. “I don’t know…what to say…I –,”
“Say yes,” he told her. He wasn’t smiling, he looked rather pained.

“Severus, yes, I – of course, yes! And thank you – you didn’t need to pay – I was –,”

“I’m sorry I insulted you.”

“You didn’t, I’m sure she was just trying to guilt you into –,”

“I fear I did. My choice of words – well words failed me.”

She smiled deeply at him. “But that never happens.”

“I thought that too. I am glad to have found out what could finally arrest them on my tongue. It was worth it.”

Taking his arm again she gave it a little squeeze, and Snape’s sleeping giant rolled so momentously his chest heaved.

As dusk fell, they realized they hadn’t eaten all day, and decided to take up Dumbledore’s offer of a meal. Snape located in a tucked away little lane an establishment called Pippin Brimble’s, with a brightly shining Christmas tree located on the stone slab threshold.

Behind the heavy oak front door revealed a dining room with several round tables draped with white tablecloths, each dressed for dinner with glinting cutlery and glasses, and lit with a single candle in a glass jar. A candle chandelier hung from the ceiling, and a fireplace crackled at the far end of the room, its mantelpiece adorned with a wreath and brass candlesticks. Slightly crooked, arched windows reflected the warm glow from within, and the gleaming, amber-toned floorboards showed between Persian rugs. Hung from the beams in the ceiling were clusters of holly, ivy and mistletoe, and again, soft music played from a mysterious, hidden source.

At this relatively early hour, the restaurant was only half full, but there was an amiable atmosphere and the groups around the tables talked mutedly amongst themselves. Snape didn’t eat at restaurants often, but given his needs for the evening, this place showed every sign of being perfect.

Charity evidently thought so too, because her eyes shone in the candlelight as she smiled.

The proprietor, a rotund bald wizard except for whiskery sideburns, wearing pince-nez and a striped apron tied around his middle, appeared from the kitchen door and met them at the booking table. He was more than happy to offer them a table for two at the window, where they could look out at the people hurrying past with their purchases. They gave him their coat and cloak, and as they took their seats, he gave them each a menu and said they were welcome to look, or he could simply discern what they wanted.

Charity frowned, puzzled. “Excuse me? Discern? Do you mean, guess?”

“No, madam, I mean I can discern from looking at you exactly what you would like to eat. It’s a little gift of mine.”

“But what if I want something you don’t have on the menu?”

The proprietor simply chuckled a little, as if the idea were absurd.

Charity cocked her head slightly, intrigued. “Then by all means. Please…discern.”

Snape observed wryly as the Proprietor lapsed into silence and carefully studied her face. After a
moment, he said, “I really must comment, Madam, on what captivating eyes you have. I’m afraid I’m a little distracted. Please bear with me.”

Flattered, Charity smiled and had trouble composing her face again to be studied. While she was engaged, Snape was able to cautiously examine her himself, and thought that the word ‘captivating’ was extremely apt.

At last the Proprietor reached a conclusion, and stated with a brandish of his arm, “While Madam has an appetite after a long day, she is also a little nervous and doesn’t want anything too heavy or too problematic to eat. So I would not advise pasta, my dear. Madam favours fresh, unadorned ingredients, wholesome and yet flavoursome, although Madam does not like aniseed or coriander. Madam, I recommend the pan-seared scallops with a spring risotto, which contains fava beans, green onions and finely grated Romano cheese. And with that, of course, champagne and some crusty bruschetta.”

Charity’s eyes widened and her mouth fell open. “Yes...yes, I would absolutely like that! You’re right, that is perfect! I love scallops!”

The Proprietor didn’t seem at all surprised. He turned to Snape. “And for yourself sir – would you like the discernment -?”

“Thank you, no,” replied Snape curtly, handing back his menu. “I’ll just have the brasato. It sounds delicious.”

“Brasato, very good choice sir. And can I recommend a glass of the Barbera with that?”

“Please. But champagne to begin.”

The Proprietor gave a little bow and hurried off.

Alone together, in such a romantic little restaurant, without the distractions of things to do, Snape became suddenly shy. He was thrown back to his childhood, watching the other children playing in the bleak, concrete schoolyard, finding a corner of a wall to cut the grim wind that forever seemed to blow. He had no idea how to approach them, join in or invite others to play with him. He wasn’t even that good at actually playing, unless it was doing something magic and he was forbidden to do that. The other boys played marbles, football, conkers, toy soldiers and swapped collectible cards, but he had none of those. Eventually he hardened his shyness into repudiation, and told himself he didn’t need friends, and would spend his days in the library or behind the bike sheds, doing unspeakable things to frogs.

Not knowing where to look, he took out his wand from his sleeve and rested it on the table, then picked it up again and placed it a different way around. Then he began twirling it between his fingers until Charity placed her hand over his, stilling it.

“Severus, I never thanked you properly for the beautiful gown. Thank you so much. I hope you don’t think the whole thing was some ploy? I have the money to pay for it. In fact, perhaps I could pay you back?” she said.

But Snape was shocked into silence by the touch of her hand on his. It was so warm, so smooth. It felt as if little pinpricks of pleasure were passing through his skin. His eyes met hers.

“Severus? Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” he stammered. His skin, so devoid of human contact, seemed to light up along his arm. “I don’t want you to pay me back. Th-the dress is a gift. I wanted to buy it. For you.”
“It seems an awful lot -,”

“I have little else to spend money on. Or for.”

“I don’t understand why that is,” she said, smiling gently. “I think your company is wonderful. I don’t know why there isn’t a very happy Mrs Snape.”

*Because that’s you*, he thought, instantly, unbidden. And then swiftly thought of Lily, as if somehow he had been unfaithful. No words passed his lips, however, and Charity removed her hand.

“Did you hear the Proprietor say I was a little nervous?” she said, with a small laugh. “I haven’t been on a date since my…well in forever. Oh my god, sorry, I called this a date!” she flushed a deep crimson, and fortunately at that point the Proprietor returned to the table with their bottle of champagne in a bucket, which was magically icy-cold. He poured them each a flute, placed a little basket of nibbles in the centre of the table then left again.

Charity took a hearty swig of her drink. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s come over me. I think its – well its everything. I haven’t had such a lovely day in so very long….”

Snape, in fact, was deeply gladdened that she’d referred to it as a date, a charming Muggle word, because it revealed how she was feeling. As well as nervous. And describing a day with him as lovely – he honestly couldn’t remember anyone ever saying that. He drank half his champagne in a single gulp, and then tentatively smiled.

“You’ve probably noticed. I’m nervous too. I hope…I hope you continue to view it as a – a date.”

She cocked her head at him. “You’ve invited me to the Staff party. Now we’re on a date…what does this mean, Severus? It doesn’t seem…professional as such…”

He almost shrugged. “I didn’t have a plan, Charity – this day has run away with itself…”

“Must be all the magic in the air,” she remarked, and fortunately didn’t appear to interpret his comments as dismissive. Maybe she felt the same, just…caught up in the flow.

“The staff party,” he suddenly said, his brain seeming to activate again, “Did you attend last year? I did not.”

“No, I didn’t. I went home a bit earlier that Christmas. Why didn’t you go?”

He pulled a bit of a face. “Not my sort of thing. But, with you, with company -,”

“So much easier,” she agreed. “And with the audit finally over, we’ll have something to celebrate, too.”

“Dumbledore generally puts on a spirited affair, he’s very gregarious that way. He’ll be pleased I’m attending this year.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” she said, with a grin. She looked about fifteen – it was hard to remember she was a qualified scientist.

Which inspired him to ask, “What made you choose to study science – bio chemistry?”

“Hmm. That’s a bit of a story. Think I need a top up.”

He obliged her, and she sipped her champagne as she spoke, her eyes going distant as she recalled the events.
“My magic gene, from wherever it came, didn’t manifest until I was about five years old. And the incidents, we’ll call them, were so insignificant that they could be explained away. But it did grow, as I’m sure is the way with all Muggle-borns, until it became obvious to my parents that I was in possession of something rather unusual. But I had a brother, and cousins, who were all regular Muggles and my parents didn’t want to single me out. So we all just sort of agreed to make out as if it were typical, certainly not noteworthy. I think to this day that attitude helped me both to assimilate with Muggles quite comfortably, but also made me a bit…coy...about my abilities.

“But one day, my Grandmother took me out. I think it was my birthday or something, it was meant to be a bit of a treat. I remember I had a party dress on. We went to a grocery store on the way home, Grandma needed to get something, and I – I was quite happy but I’d just drunk a whole bottle of lemonade at the party, I remember, and I really needed to, you know, go.

“And then as we were about to pay for whatever she’d got and go, my Grandma got stopped by a news anchorman, you know the ones on Muggle TV? You probably saw them when you were a little kid. Back in those days, they’d talk to the camera with a microphone and read the news? So this anchorman, he was quite famous on the telly back then and my Grandma got all starstruck. And he told her he was filming on the streets to talk to the common people, vox pops I think they call them. So my Grandma is agreeing to a bit of an interview on the camera, but in those days the camera is a huge, heavy thing and they have to set it all up, and the lights and the anchorman needs makeup and so on. It took ages. And all the while I’m just desperate, just absolutely desperate, but I can’t leave and there’s no toilets anywhere.”

Charity sipped her wine and smiled sheepishly at Snape. “It’s a bit embarrassing, but I just couldn’t help it, Severus. I eventually ended up having to - relieve myself – where I stood. And I can’t tell you how mortified I was, I mean, I was shaking with the shame, and I was furious, absolutely furious, because it was my party frock. And then the anchorman spotted me, because I was crying by this time, and when he realized what had happened, he started laughing. But my Gran – she was yelling. I was ruining her big moment.

“And I remember – I remember there was this point where it was as if I was suddenly spinning on the spot, almost whirling, much, much faster than it’s possible to do in reality, like the inside of my head was a hurricane, and then it went black, and then I snapped out of it and saw everyone staring at me, just shocked, gaping at me. But some were also looking over my head, and when I turned around, I saw why.

“Every item that had been on the shelf of the aisle I was standing in at the grocery store, had flown off and crashed and smashed everywhere. I remember bags of sugar and flour, everywhere. Eggs, smashed, those tins of treacle – great big puddles of it…. how do tins get opened? Must have been a hell of a job to clean up.

“My Grandma just took my hand and we bolted. She never asked what happened, and I’m not sure I could have told her if she’d asked. She looked at me strangely, has done ever since, but she never asked me if I caused it to happen, and if I did cause it to happen, how. Maybe my Grandma knew something. Maybe my gene comes from her side of the family, although my suspicion is that the gene is heterozygous.”

The proprietor arrived then, carrying two plates of food which he assiduously placed before them, wiping small, imaginary spots off the plate, and topping up their glasses before wishing them bon appetit. Charity made a big show of being greatly impressed with her dish, and thanking him profusely, while Snape merely nodded and thanked him. They tucked into their meals for a few minutes, then Snape said, “Please go on. It is indeed an interesting story.”
She smiled at him knowingly, as if suspecting him of just being polite. But she continued. “As it turned out, the entire incident in the grocery store had been filmed. The news crew took it back to the studio and processed it. They didn’t broadcast it because they didn’t have permission, but I believe what happened it that it was sort of hocked around to people trying to interpret what happened. A lot of theories were that some kind of weird seismic activity had shaken the grocery shelves, but it didn’t explain why every other shelf was fine, and why things like tins had opened.

“Eventually the footage ended up in the hands of a scientist, who tracked me down. His name was Doctor Prentis Ditton. He wore an overcoat, I remember, and a hat, and carried an umbrella, except in the laboratories and there he wore a lab coat. He had like a gingery moustache and pale eyes. He came to our house one afternoon. My dad was at work, I was home from school playing with my brother and my mum was doing her thing. All of a sudden this man is on our doorstep, ringing the bell.

“He asked my mother if he could speak to me. You have to remember, this was 1969 and when important looking doctor scientists turn up unexpectedly, you just obey. So my mum brought me forward. Maybe she hoped this man could help me. He said he wanted to talk to me, ask a few questions. I was scared, I was worried I was in trouble. I did get into trouble at school a bit. But he said I wasn’t in trouble, he was terribly interested in what I could do.”

Snape felt a cold prickle down the back of his neck at this but didn’t interrupt.

“Doctor Ditton was quite clever at being low key. He came across very reassuring, and my mother started to get her hopes up. She started telling Ditton about things that ‘happened’ around me. He took a lot of scribbly notes, did a quick sort of examination – I remember he looked closely at my hands, my fingers, then my eyes. He kept saying, ‘she looks normal, completely normal’ and would shake his head as if that were disappointing.

“Then he stared at me very intently and said, ‘Can you move things with your mind?’ Which I could. But I was worried to say anything. But maybe he could tell from my face, because that was it, visit over. He thanked my mother and then he shook my hand and gave me a business card. Which I thought was terribly important, being eight.

“I know my mum talked about it with my dad, and my dad was a bit leery of the whole thing, but my mum started to get hopeful that Dr Ditton would sort of cure me. Dr Ditton telephoned my mum and told her that I had scored a place as a subject for his research programme, and that he had a special facility nearby designed to examine gifted children, was how he called it. He asked her permission for me to go along to the lab and undergo some tests. She said yes, on the proviso that she could come along and keep an eye on things.

“So for a few months, about once a week or so, after school mum, my brother and I would go to Dr Ditton’s rooms at Bath University. He was in the School of Science and he’d been given his own laboratory to use. And I would do these tests that he’d set up. Some were puzzle-based tests, at which I was just average, and some were about manipulating objects, which I was good at, according to him. Sometimes he would get my brother to do the experiments as well. Once he sat down with my mother and asked her to tell him everyone in her family tree that she could remember and asked if any of them had any special abilities she knew about. He asked her about my dad’s family as well, but she couldn’t tell him that much. There was one experiment, and he was very nice about it, but it was clearly an experiment designed to provoke an outburst of uncontrolled magic. He strapped me to a chair and mildly electrocuted me. Just little zaps like when you get static electricity. Then he’d ramp them up a little. I did start to get mad. Mum eventually intervened. She asked him if this was going to help me get better. And he said to her that it wasn’t a case of me getting better, that I was perfectly healthy, what he was trying to understand was my special gifts.
“Around this time, I got another visitor. I was walking home from school, through the park by myself, when this woman stepped out from behind a tree and called my name. She had these weird aviator goggles on her forehead, and this long, long plait of hair like Rapunzel or something, and fingerless leather gloves with studs on them. She was weird and cool all at once. She told me her name was Candace Peacock and that I was perfectly safe but that she wanted me to know that she was like a guardian angel, that she was watching over me because she was worried about Dr Ditton.

“I asked her if she was from the University and she told me she was from another special place but that she knew about the University and what they were doing there. I asked her if she was an angel was she from heaven, and she laughed and said no, but that she could fly. How could she fly, I wanted to know, she didn’t have wings. And she said she could ride a broom, just like a witch. And I said like Samantha from *Bewitched*, and she laughed and said exactly like that.

“I realise now that Candace was an Aura or from some department, and that the Ministry were all over what was going on. They clearly knew about Doctor Ditton. Maybe the film footage had gotten into the hands of a wizard at some point who reported it, I don’t know how the Ministry finds out about Muggle-borns, but it was obvious that my experiments were known about. I met Candace in the park a couple of times. She showed me her broom. Did a couple of bits of magic and I immediately bonded with her. She quizzed me about what was happening at the laboratory. I told her that Dr Ditton wrote comprehensive notes, frequently filmed experiments, put diodes on me and took blood tests. She asked me how many times he did blood tests and I told her that he took a blood sample from me every time I went to the laboratory. In fact he’d also taken a urine sample, skin samples and saliva samples. Then she got kind of fierce and asked me where Dr Ditton kept the samples. I said I only knew about a fridge in his laboratory.

“Then Candace, who’d always been very friendly and kind, got angry. And she told me that I didn’t need to do any experiments with Dr Ditton. I told her that she’d have to talk to my mum because my mum thought Dr Ditton was going to fix me. And I remember she was almost shouting that I didn’t need to be fixed! That I was special, not wrong. And I started to shake and cry, and it was horribly confusing, I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing. Candace was remorseful and tried to comfort me and then she looked me in the face and said I was never to worry, she was my guardian angel and that she was going to stop the experiments. And I remember she got on her broom, right in the middle of the park, did this sweep with her wand in case there were any witnesses, then just flew straight up, like a rocket, straight up so that she was hidden by cloud.

“Pretty soon after that we never saw Dr Ditton again. But something important had happened. On one of our last visits to the lab, he let me look through his microscope at my blood. Being a research facility, his microscope was the absolute latest in technology, and what I could see utterly enthralled me. I looked through the eyepiece and I remember him asking, “See anything special?” and I said, “Yes I think so,” meaning the blood cells, and I remember him saying, ‘I think I do too.’”

Charity looked at Snape. “What do you think he meant by that?”

Snape, who’d been listening so intently took a moment to garner his thoughts. “I think he might have been implying that he’d found something. But he can’t have.”

Charity shook her head, bemused. “The next time I saw Candace she was bringing me a letter for Hogwarts. My mum at that point was resigned, and took a sort of ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’ approach to the school. She thought if I couldn’t be fixed, I may as well be happy. Which I think she felt better about after Dumbledore came to visit. So off I went. But as you know, I didn’t settle. I not only missed my happy Muggle life, I also really struggled with the sense of rejection when I came home. I was also thinking about studying science at that point, and it wasn’t on offer in the Wizarding world. I’d been having these ideas that…if I could somehow combine my magic with
science…you know when science is on the breakthrough of something profound, all they need is a tiny miracle and the world changes? Maybe I could do that somehow. But when the Ministry found out I was flipping – they were deadly serious with me. Candace reappeared and she actually came to take my wand. I told her, in truth I begged her, not to take it. She relented, perhaps against the rules, I don’t know.”

Charity took a deep breath, and then offered a plaintive smile. “So there you have it. Why I chose science. And I don’t regret it.”

“Why did you come back?” Snape asked, signaling for more champagne.

Charity looked at Snape for long moment and then said, “That’s another long story. Maybe for another day.”

“I don’t know when we’ll get another day. I want to hear it.”

“There are some things, Severus, that are difficult to talk about.”

“Well then, now is perfect. We have time. There are no interruptions. And I would like to know.”

The Proprietor stopped by to remove their empty plates, wipe the table and offered them a dessert menu, then took the empty champagne bottle away.

“Why do you want to know? Maybe you’ll think differently about me if I tell you.”

“I – I don’t think so. Unless you’re about to tell me you’re hiding from Muggle police.”

“No,” she smiled. “Nothing like that. So why do you want to know?”

Snape paused from answering while they Proprietor refreshed their glasses. The wine and extremely satisfying meal were having a calming effect on him. He decided to be honest. “Because when you’re interested in someone, you’re interested in everything about them.”

She studied his face at this response, seeking sincerity. He couldn’t have been more sincere, and she saw that.

She took a long drink of champagne, stared at the table and said quickly, “In that case…I came back because my marriage failed.”

To Snape, the world felt like it had just imploded. “Wh-what?” he stammered, “have you been meaning to tell me?” He sought control, control over emotions that had just broken a sea-wall.

Her marriage. She was married? Her marriage failed? Snape came to a mental crashing halt, speechless again, desperately trying to process what he’d heard. “You’re…married?”

“I said it failed, Severus. I was married to a Muggle – his name is Jason – it didn’t work, we’ve been separated and recently divorced.”

“How long ago is recently?”

“Two years or so.”

“Well, so, he’s out of your life then?”

Another deep breath and she drained her glass. “Not quite…I’ve been meaning to tell you this.”

To Snape, the world felt like it had just imploded. “Wh-what?” he stammered, “have you been meaning to tell me?”
Charity reached over and took his hand in hers, and looked at him with large, dark, imploring eyes. “Severus – I have a daughter, a little girl, she’s six, turning seven. Her name is Holly, and she’s beautiful, and I love her with all my heart.”

The wall of emotion flooded. It short-circuited Snape’s brain, lights went out, thoughts drifted to a standstill. He simply stared at her.

“Jason has primary custody. I see her during holidays, but he looks after her at term-time.”

“Does she have magic? Is she coming to Hogwarts?”

“We don’t know…I’ve been looking, I haven’t seen anything.”

“Does…does your ex-husband know you have magic?”

“Yes. It was probably the main reason we couldn’t stay together. He resents it, afraid of it, the usual stuff. I had to start obliviating him, which I hated, and which got me into trouble with the Ministry. It wasn’t going to work. He desperately wanted to give Holly a sibling, but…it’s hard enough on her.”

“But you still love him?”

“Severus, no, I don’t love him. Nothing will change how I feel about Holly, but I don’t love Jason.”

He didn’t speak.

“I am so sorry to have to tell you this, I didn’t want to because…because I didn’t think…well we were just, you know, work colleagues, I didn’t know where I stood, it didn’t seem necessary if we were just teachers together, but I feel, now, that maybe -,” Charity gasped and looked, in torment, out of the window, but saw nothing.

“Please don’t let this change anything, Severus. Perhaps it is right you should know, but don’t let it change what…we have.”

“What do we have compared to that?”

“Something I’ve never felt before. It’s very new, I know, but – I just love every minute with you…” she trailed off miserably.

Snape just had to sit still while his head stopped reeling, but he heard what she said. It felt as if the world had suddenly tipped sideways and he was flailing about to find balance, to find something to hold onto. He moved his hand under hers so that he held it more tightly. “Nothing has changed, I just…I just don’t feel, what I mean is…you have others…how can I compete?”

She shook her head. “It’s not about competing, there’s no competition…oh God, I don’t know how to say all this. Severus, I just want us to go on as before, doing what we were doing, seeing where this goes. My ex – that changes nothing. My daughter - that will never change, no matter what. But you deserve to know. And if you can’t…live with it…then I’m afraid that’s a choice for you. Because I can’t give up my daughter, I don’t have a choice there.”

The Proprietor came towards them to take orders for dessert, but Snape shot him a warning look which he advisedly received and detoured in another direction.

It had the effect of somehow stabilizing things for Snape. A few emergency lights came on in his head, sirens were turned off. He assessed the damage.
He was here, in this romantic restaurant, with one of the loveliest women he’d ever known, who was holding his hand and asking him to stay. He’d just had the emotional equivalent of the Poseidon, but her world hadn’t changed, and she didn’t want anything else to change – she was on stable ground. *Come up to where I am,* she was asking. *Climb up here and we can continue this journey.*

This was the world of adult relationships. If he’d thought teenage romance was tumultuous, then it was time for him to grow up. She was a mature woman with her own mind, her own life. There were histories to be worked through – his included, it wasn’t as if he didn’t have a past he hadn’t told her. The relationship had to be balanced with work. Dependents entered the picture. There was just so much more at stake. He had thought losing Lily was as difficult as relationships ever got, and though he had loved Lily, loved her with everything he had, *she wasn’t his,* his loss was theoretical, not actual, however much it hurt.

He didn’t want to lose Charity as well. She was asking him to trust her, and the choice was all his.

Or was it? Did it matter what he thought at all? When he looked at her, his heart did all the talking. Where he was touching her, the way the sensation seemed to heat up the blood in him, his body knew exactly where it wanted to be. This wasn’t a question to be answered at all. There was never any question.

He said slowly, “Tell me about your daughter.”
It didn’t surprise Snape to learn that Holly was to be the recipient of the Fairy Call. And when Charity showed him a photograph of the little girl, wearing a princess costume, her mother’s hair and eyes, she was what he had expected. Charity’s transformation into a mother – a degree now removed from him – didn’t surprise him either. He knew mothers. He respected them utterly, but mothers inhabited a realm closed to him. Little Holly sounded like every other six year old girl he’d ever heard of or come across, admittedly not that many, as a teacher he dealt, fortunately, with older children, but what she was and what she represented were entirely different things.

Snape could have blasted Holly off the face of the map with a single wave of his wand, had he been so inclined. And yet she held all the cards. All the cards. She was the equivalent of the Dark Lord with blond hair in pigtails.

While Charity told stories about her daughter (as he came to think of her), Snape tuned out. He could still hear enough to appear as if he were interested, but in fact he was sizing up the opposition and realized that, like Harry Potter, he was never going to win. The offspring (to other men) of the women he loved were destined to stand between him and the object of his true desire. If Potter stood between him and a final metaphysical reconciliation with Lily, a redemption, then little Holly was going to be the real and physical obstacle between him and Charity. It didn’t matter what she said about nothing changing, it wasn’t true. Nothing changed for Holly. Almost everything changed for Snape.

And so, he decided, he must persevere nonetheless. If he could not get rid of Holly, then he must somehow learn to accommodate her. Or lose Charity forever.

Charity was intuitive enough to realise that, despite what he’d said, she’d exhausted Snape’s attention. Rather quickly, she noted. Teacher he may be, but Snape’s strengths did not lie with young people. He was an adult’s adult. He was being polite at best, and, out of deference to Holly if nothing else, she deftly put the photo away, and took Snape’s hand again.

He came to. She had repositioned him from back seat to front seat again. Charity was adroit enough to appreciate what the power of physical touch had on this contact-starved man.

“Severus? I’m sorry, I’ve been blathering on.”

“Not at all. I’m just amazed you’ve managed from mentioning her earlier.”

She closed her eyes, conscious of the many barbs contained in this otherwise inoffensive remark.

“Yes. I made choices. It’s not because I’m in any way ashamed. Whatever I do, whatever happens to me now, her welfare is utmost. And in fact it always has been. Please don’t change your opinion of me because I have a child. Holly has made me a better person.”

“Believe me, Charity, I know how a woman grows when she becomes a mother. And I fully understand – in perhaps ways you don’t – what the power of a mother’s love can actually do. So if I seem…somewhat…reserved on finding a whole other dimension to you…it’s an adjustment. My feelings haven’t changed, but my perception has.”
Charity found this an eloquent statement and realized that he’d been through something significant she hadn’t, but he was trying to reassure her that he was still there, he was still there and still willing, and that if his brain was in catch-up, she should continue to appeal to his heart.

So she smiled, she smiled with all the affection, and warmth and budding love she had for him, this odd, fascinating, awe-inspiring and devastatingly attractive man who’d walked into her life in a swirl of black robes.

She held no allusions, however, that he would ever be a father-figure to her daughter. Holly didn’t need one, she was devoted to Jason, her Dad, and rightly so, Charity was more than comfortable with that. A time when Holly and Snape would even ever be in a room together seemed so improbable, so remote that for now, she was prepared to leave that in the hands of fate.

She suggested to Snape that it was time to go, and he agreed. They requested the bill and Snape paid rather than put it on the tab – their time had been paid for by Hogwarts, which was enough. Then after donning their coats and assembling all their packages, they once more entered Diagon Alley.

Snape still seemed a little withdrawn, but Charity snuck her arm through his as they walked and he didn’t resist. She was acutely conscious of the bomb she’d pulled the pin on, but didn’t see how she had any other choice. In her chest, however, her heart she supposed, she ached and ached that the day had ended on this note. She couldn’t recall a day in her life, apart from when Holly was born, that she’d enjoyed so much. Snape had been an utter gentleman throughout, she couldn’t have been more pleased or prouder to be on his arm.

And yet, while she knew he had been lonely, she wondered if she was actually an improvement in his life.

Diagon Alley was even more charming at night, if possible, under street lamps, braziers and twinkling fairy lights, the breath puffing from people in the November air, frosts forming on darkened windows. Sadly, they had reached the spot in the alley where they had arrived.

“Are you ready to apparate?” Snape asked, turning to face her.

“I’ll go myself,” she told him. “It’s okay.”

“There is no hardship -,”

“I know. I just want to. Are we going to Hogsmeade, or the front gate?”

“Hogsmeade,” Snape replied, thinking the walk back to Hogwarts gave them just a few more minutes together.

“Thank you, Severus, I’ll see you on the main street of Hogsmeade.”

With that, there was a faint crack and Charity disapparated. Snape did the same a few seconds later.

When he arrived, with a sharp intake of breath as apparating under the influence of a few glasses of champagne made for an interesting experience, he saw he was alone. And it was freezing.

His breath was more solid than gas, his fingers instantly numbed and he saw the street beneath him was icy and slippery. This was not just in contrast to Diagon Alley, this was unusual, this was
strange.

It was a Friday night and yet the social, lively town was deserted. It seemed darker than normal. The quiet seemed to echo. A fog was creeping, shy of the flickering light from the street lamps. Snape’s senses went instantly on high alert and he slipped his wand into his hand.

“Charity?” he said.

Silence. There was a dripping sound from somewhere. A rat scurried. He could see the fog shapeshifting in the shadows.

“Charity!”

No answer. Then something moved above him and he glanced up. It was the black sky, but it wasn’t still. “Lumos maxima” he muttered and raised his wand which threw a beam of light before it. He raised it above him again, into the night sky, and again pieces of black seemed to separate and to reform, shrouded in the mist.

The cold. It was so cold, freezing. He pulled his cloak tight around him and circled on the spot, lighting the immediate vicinity with his wand. “Charity?” he called, swearing under his breath. “Tell me where you are!”

She knew how to apparate, she should be here…a sudden clanging noise, like a bucket falling and Snape’s nerves sprang him up and around, heart trip-wired. He wanted to go now, he fervently wanted to leave, something wasn’t right and he felt the familiar sensation of engulfing sadness and despair. But where was Charity? He had seen her leave before him – where was she?

As if in in answer, a scream rent through the stillness.

He knew it was her. It was as if he’d heard her scream a hundred times before. Without a moment’s hesitation he ran towards it, yelling “Charity! Where are you?!” It was coming from the direction of where the paths diverged.

He heard her again, but this time it wasn’t a clear scream, it was a more strangled noise, a dreadful sound of a body in distress and his very veins chilled in horror. But he ran as fast as he could, searching with his wand before him, lighting the way.

And then around a corner, a scene of dread unfolded before him. Dementors, three of them, their black, rag-like beings billowing, hoods shrouding where their faces should be, loomed over a prone, limp Charity lying on the frozen ground, her parcels strewn before her, the Dementor had her and was sucking at her mouth, its long fingers waving like seaweed as it fed.

White-hot rage filled Snape. Hate and disgust and loathing. And beneath that, acute protectiveness. The Dementors slightly turned towards him as he appeared on the scene, but their facelessness betrayed nothing except entitlement, like wild animals gorging, and that enraged him further. With a full-arm swing, he pointed his wand towards them and hollered, “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

He’d been taught to think of happy thoughts, but Snape’s Patronus never originated from that. He had wondered in the past if his Patronus would in fact meet the true definition, since the source of magic that was supposed to produce it had never worked for him. His happiest thoughts of time spent with Lily had effected a watery, flimsy light at best. Snape’s version of a Patronus was the essence of passion, not happiness. His passion came from many places, the full spectrum, passionate hatred through to passionate love, and his ability to control it, to master it, to make it his servant somehow made it purer.
His Patronus sprang now from his wand in an explosive, brilliant light – in the silence it was almost audible, like waves or vibration in the air. As it formed a shield, he carried it before him, closer to the Dementors, who shied away reluctantly.

He swore at them, channeling his magic powerfully through his wand, his Patronus unyielding. The area all around was lit up from above, shadows dancing starkly in the blinding light. He could see Charity, now free of the Dementor, but unmoving. Closer still he came, and the Dementors backed away but did not leave. This was clearly a meal they were prepared to fight for.

Another minute, but they did not go, and his Patronus flickered. They were going to outlast him! He couldn’t believe it, that never happened, they must have been starving. He approached closer until he was standing over Charity, and still holding his wand with the Patronus shield, he knelt quickly to check her hand, her neck for a pulse. She was frozen and bloodless.

His Patronus flickered again, the energy depleting. He closed his eyes and concentrated, scared to miss anything but even more scared of his Patronus failing. He could feel his wand starting to tremble.

“Charity,” he gasped, in a desperate hope that if she could rise, if his magic faltered, perhaps they could run for it, or he could at least cover her, or he could send his doe for help…

The Dementors kept a distance from his Patronus, but they did not flee. They hovered, and when his magic stuttered, they hovered a little closer. He gritted his teeth and channeled every ounce of passion in him. Visions flew through his mind like a spinning top – Lily’s death was a wellspring of passion, her smile, her eyes, her laugh, his ardent wish that he had died in her place. The humiliation at school, intolerable shame, hatred and dread. His inauguration as a Death Eater, his initiation, the scorching, indelible Mark on his arm and Voldemort’s soulless stare as he laid claim. His plea to Dumbledore, hide them all!, the severity of his terms, the fear and weight he felt, the fetters drawn tight in opposite directions. His father, his mother, the fighting, the desolation. The aching, ever-present loneliness.

And then, Charity. In his mind, she was looking over her shoulder at him. Sitting at her desk with the light behind her. Walking into his office in her witch’s robe, catching his eye in the Three Broomsticks, smiling up at him at the greenhouse, laughing with him in the archive. Then the vision of her in the gown, the quiet beauty and always her brown eyes, her smile, the way she held him in her gaze as if no one else in the world existed, then or ever.

There was a pulse in his Patronus, and a blue shimmer ran through it. The Dementors backed off. “Charity,” he cried hoarsely. “Get up.” She didn’t move, he wasn’t even sure she was conscious. He was weakening though, he could feel it, the energy was sapping and his wand was shaking.

Then suddenly, from behind him, out of sight, there was another holler of EXPECTO PATRONUM! And a brilliant, silvery wolf bound into space beside Snape’s shield, its radiating shine eclipsing his own dimming one. Snape turned, startled, to find Lupin, extending his wand into the space where Snape’s was draining.

“Get her! Go!” yelled Lupin, his expression fraught and furious.

“They’re starving,” Snape said, “they won’t leave, you can’t fight them alone.”

“Get her away, Severus! Get her to safety before she freezes to death!”

Snape dropped his shield Patronus while Lupin was strong, threw off his cloak and wrapped it tightly around Charity. He cast a quick resuscitation spell, then willing his wand to find strength, he
called up a corporeal Patronus to send a message. His doe leapt forth, ran a little ring around Snape then stood to attention. _Open the gate, we have a medical emergency, meet me I will be carrying Charity_, Snape told the doe, who dashed into the night to find Hagrid.

He glanced back at Lupin. His wolf had made advances and one of the Dementors had disappeared. He gathered Charity in his arms, astounded at how light she was, then hastened away towards the gates of Hogwarts, watching all the while for signs of life.

When he got there, Hagrid was already waiting, holding a lamp. “Got your wee doe,” Hagrid muttered and immediately took Charity from Snape’s arms. “I’ll get her up to the hospital.”

“Take care of her, I’ll be back directly, I’ve left Lupin up there alone.”

Snape raced back to the place he’d left Lupin. He could see the glow of the Patronus and astonishingly there was one remaining Dementor refusing defeat. Probably the one that had lost its feed. Snape rushed to Lupin’s side and sent forth his doe Patronus once more and minutes later the Dementor finally fled.

“Is Charity alright?” Lupin asked immediately, panting, as they lowered their wands.

“I don’t know – I’m going back now,” He looked at Lupin. “Thank you.”

“You would have done the same,” Lupin replied to Snape’s departing back.

Minutes later, Snape arrived at the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey, Hagrid and Dumbledore were already there at the bedside of Charity, who, Snape was immeasurably relieved to see, was awake, but in a terrible state, her skin almost blue. They had placed her in the bed closest to the fireplace, which was now roaring, and bundled her in blankets, but despite this she shivered uncontrollably.

“Severus!” Dumbledore exclaimed instantly upon seeing him. “Was it a Dementor?”

Snape nodded but moved past the Headmaster to go to Charity’s side and feel her face. To Madam Pomfrey, he said urgently, “Draught of _Calor_?”

“Yes. Full dose forty cc’s, intravenous, but she’s still cold.”

“Give her more. Her cardiovascular and endocrine systems will be compromised.”

“Her heart though, Severus?”

“Heart Subdue. I have some fresh in my office – send for some. Administer half the dose. Strengthening Solution?”

Madam Pomfrey hurried to her store to get more Draught of _Calor_. “I gave her Invigoration Draught because her pulse was so low,” she said as she went.

“Yes, that’s good, later when her heart and temperature are stabilized, replenish Invigoration with Strengthening. And some Calming Draught, later. This shivering - it may be cold, it may be nervous. I resuscitated her, which sometimes has this effect.”

“How long did the Dementor have her, Severus?” Dumbledore asked.

“A minute or more. I heard her scream and then fought it off in…perhaps two minutes.”

Pomfrey returned to the bedside and through the drip supplied more warming potion. Charity’s eyelids flickered and her lips moved but that was the only sign of life.
“You as good as saved ‘er life, Severus,” said Hagrid. “She near ‘ad it sucked right outta ‘er.”

Snape didn’t acknowledge the comment as it seemed redundant. He would have done the same a thousand times. “Headmaster, the Dementors - they were resistant, inured, I almost couldn’t hold them off -,”

“Severus produced an exceptional Patronus.” It was Lupin. He entered the ward carrying Charity’s parcels and leather bag. “How’s the patient?” He joined the others at the foot of the bed.

Pomfrey ushered them back. “Probably no better for you lot invading her space. Give her some room please, and talk quietly, she needs to rest.” Snape noticed that she didn’t include him in her admonishment.

“But your Patronus wasn’t enough?” questioned Dumbledore, who in fact wasn’t at all surprised at the quality of Snape’s magic, that had been something he was aware of since his Potions Master had joined Hogwarts at eleven, jinxing and hexing for all it was worth.

“It took both of us,” replied Snape, indicating Lupin. “He’s the hero.”

“How many were there did you say?”

“Three. With one very determined one, I think hungry. My interruption only strengthened its resolve. We need to let the Ministry know. Innocent people are now at risk.”

Lupin added: “Hogsmeade was deserted, not even curfew, and it was utterly freezing. The Dementors are not keeping their distance.”

Dumbledore turned to listen to Lupin, and as he did so his eyes narrowed and he frowned. “What were you there for, Remus?”

“I’d been to the Three Broomsticks,” he answered lightly. “I – sometimes like to go. I noticed Severus’s Patronus and rushed to help him as quickly as I could.”

Snape could recall the town and it’s closed, shuttered feel. He didn’t think the Three Broomsticks had been open, and if it had been, it had been totally silent. He didn’t buy Lupin’s story, but right now he owed him, and didn’t intend to cause a problem. He had bigger things to worry about anyway.

“Right then,” said Madam Pomfrey, drawing the ward curtain partway round Charity’s bed. “If you want to discuss things further, I suggest you take it away from here. I want to let this poor girl rest. Out you go, out, out. And where is that elf with my Heart Subdue?”

Dumbledore, Lupin and Hagrid left the Hospital wing, but Snape stayed at Charity’s bedside and Pomfrey didn’t argue. He had always been an invaluable collaborator and assistant to her, having an instinctive feel for healing and cures. In her estimation, he’d missed his calling as a Healer. Besides which, her intuition told her how Snape felt about Charity and his presence was probably the one tonic above all others that would save the girl now.

She moved quietly away to chase up the house elf and left the pair alone, in the darkened ward by the light of the fire.

Snape had brought a visitors chair to the side of Charity’s bed and sat pensively, watching her. Why had this happened? He should have disapparated with her, he should have insisted, why hadn’t he thought of her safety? Was he cursed to harm every woman he loved? What felt like a hot, iron ball seemed to be lodged in his throat and his head pounded. His finger-tips were still numb from the
freezing cold. But all he could think about was whether Charity would make a full recovery. What damage had occurred? How lasting would it be? Would she forgive him for letting her come to harm?

For hours he held vigil. Sometimes he paced the ward. He topped up the fire. He helped Pomfrey administer potions and check Charity’s extremities for frostbite. Sometime after midnight he helped Pomfrey with vital signs assessments on the other patients in the ward. And finally, fully dressed, he fell asleep, still sitting on the chair but his upper body laying along the bed next to Charity.

When Charity roused at around four in the morning, she found him thus. Her eyes had flickered open and focused, and she gradually realized where she was. She saw the fireplace to one side of her, felt the drip inserted into the back of her hand, then turned her head to her other side and saw first Snape’s black tousled hair where his head and shoulders were resting alongside her. She longed to reach out and run her fingers through it, but her arms were pinned to her side by a swaddle of blankets. He was snoring gently and so she lay still, so as not to disturb him. She guessed he had finally fallen asleep that way and the sudden, dramatic intimacy of it probably hadn’t been entirely planned. When her last memories started to flood back, her heart began to hammer and panicky feelings made her twitch and struggle slightly against the blankets, rousing him.

“Charity?” he said softly, conscious of a sleeping ward, then sat up. “Papus save us, Charity are you alright? How do you feel?”

“Severus? I’m – I’m fine, I think, I’m fine. I can’t move and I’m scared that I can’t move -,”

“It’s alright, it’s alright…” he stood and stripped back the layers of blankets to release their bind. Freed, she struggled to sit up but fell back, exhausted. “I’m so weak!” she gasped in despair. “What did it do to me?”

“Your life-force, your energy, vitality, your happiness. It robbed it of you; you were close to – it took a great toll on you. I’ll give you tonics for it, you’ll be restored, don’t trouble yourself unnecessarily.” He took her hand, the one part of her that she’d already offered him and so felt at liberty to touch. “Charity, trust me, you’ll be well again.”

Fearfully she searched his face, looked into his eyes and saw that he was telling the truth, that she could trust him. She knew that he had a vast knowledge of healing, that in a Muggle hospital it was as good as waking up to find your own doctor asleep on your bed. His reassurance calmed her.

“You found me,” she whispered, remembering the black, motile night separating around her, taking form, enveloping her. The intense, shearing cold. “It was too late before I -,”

“I didn’t know where you were until you screamed. I’m sorry I was too late, Charity,” he said, stroking her fingers. “It was my fault, you should have disapparated with me. I’m so sorry.”

“But you found me. You saved me,” she whispered with as much energy as she could muster. “I’m the one who -,”

He shook his head, barely detectable and she hushed. She stared into his onyx eyes for a long time, just breathing, feeling his fingers in hers. Eventually, becalmed, her eyelids drooped and sleep stole over her.

Madam Pomfrey kept Charity in the hospital for the entire weekend.

Snape visited frequently and took over a lot of the basic care while Pomfrey attended to the two other
patients in the ward (one Quidditch injury, one bad case of gastro enteritis). He ate simple meals at her bedside rather than go to the Great Hall.

When he was not with Charity, he had an enormous pile of Potions course notes and homework to go through, which he found dumped unceremoniously outside his office by Madam Jones with a note attached saying, “All yours. Let me know if anything needs explaining.” Clearly, he had assumed too much about her availability.

Aside from these obligations, there was the matter of the Slytherins. His plan had been to visit them on Friday evening, the minute he was free after his trip to London, but important events superseded that. He caught up on sleep in his rooms late into Saturday morning, having been sent away from the Hospital by Madam Pomfrey and finally able to rest properly having conversed with Charity and knowing she was on track for a good recovery.

It was the afternoon of Saturday before he made his way finally to the Common Room. Warrington had approached him as he entered and requested a discussion with Snape, at which Snape pushed down his irritation and made a point of standing very straight, at full height, and putting his hands on his hips which caused his black robes to gather behind him in a particularly bat-like fashion. “Yes, Warrington, I had fully intended to meet with you, I haven’t forgotten about Fetherington, if that’s what the issue is.”

“Yes sir. That is what the issue is. He needs disciplining. Sir.”

“Thank you, I am a Head of House, I don’t need you to explain my job to me.”

Warrington looked disdainful, and Snape privately realized an unconscious challenge was afoot, something he would have to quash hard and in short order. It was the inherent predicament with the House of Slytherin – its members were hardwired to test authority and prone to dissidence, even their own leaders if they smelt blood in the water. He could show no crack, no chink, to Warrington.

“Sir,” said the Prefect, his eyes holding Snape for a second too long. “What time then?”

“I will tell you the time. And you bring Fetherington to my office.”

With that Snape turned on his heel and marched away, tapping his wand on his thigh as he went.

In the afternoon he sent a first year with message for Warrington, and went to his office to start on marking homework while he waited. Presently Warrington arrived, his hand resting firmly on the shoulder of an insolent looking Jacob Fetherington.

Snape let them stand on the other side of his desk while he sat back and let an ominous silence pervade the room for a while.

“This is a fine way to spend a Saturday, isn’t it?” he said eventually, when Fetherington began to fidget and frown. “Warrington – regale me with news on Fetherington’s activities – starting when you caught him thieving and the remainder of Friday.”

Warrington supplied Snape with the story of catching Fetherington in another boy’s port, the stolen items he’d confiscated, the boy’s impoundment in the Common Room throughout Friday, Fetherington’s escape on Saturday morning and counter-seizure of the confiscated goods, the fisticuffs that had followed soon after in the Common Room and Fetherington’s rallying of a group of seditious supporters.

While Snape listened, he kept his face neutral but he was actually rather alarmed at how badly things had deteriorated in the space of twenty-four hours. Thank Merlin it had been confined to Slytherin –
if this had happened with another house he would have returned to the Castle under siege. Fortunately, at this stage, no-one else had to know about it.

“Right. Well – where to start? Let us list the breaches of the Hogwarts Conduct Code and the Slytherin Commandments. In no particular order: stealing, insubordination, fighting, failure to follow instruction, deliberate disruption, disloyalty, unruly and disrespectful behaviour and insurgency. Anything else?”

He paused, but there was nothing. “What do you have to say on the matter Fetherington?”

The boy had pink flags in his cheeks and his eyes burned mutinously. “This is totally unfair! Those sweets were mine! I was just taking them back!”

“Did the port belong to you?”

“No, but I told you, I was getting them back!”

“How did they come to be in another boy’s port?”

“I dunno – he probably stole them off me.”

“So you don’t know how they came to be there, but you did know they were there. Or did you check everyone’s belongings?”

“No, I don’t go through people’s stuff.”

“So if you knew this other boy had your things in his possession, why didn’t you just ask for them back?”

“Cause he woulda lied. He would have said he didn’t have them.”

“Of course. In which case, have him open his port and prove it, or else get a Prefect to do so on your behalf.”

“Well if it’s mine I should be able to just take it.”

“No, that is not the case. And do you have any proof that they’re yours?

“Mine’ve gone missing!”

“That’s not evidence, that’s a pronouncement.”

“What sort of proof?”

“Well, do you have any witnesses that can verify that you had the exact same items before they went missing?”

“No, course not!”

“Well then your case is proving uncompelling. And what we do know is that you have stolen before, haven’t you, Fetherington. I’m afraid so far I’m not finding in your favour.”

“That’s cause you hate me.”

“No, I have no feelings about you. And it would be a matter of indifference if I did. On the balance of probability, I think it more likely than not that you did steal. Where are the items now?”
“Burned, sir. He threw them on the fire,” Warrington informed.

“I see. It gets worse and worse. And as to the other matters, what do you say in your own defense about fighting, disruptive behaviour and insurgence?”

“What’s insurgence?” asked Fetherington sullenly.

“Trying to get others to join you in rebellion.”

“They’re just my mates, they were sticking up for me. They know the truth.”

“Well naturally. So that is an admission. With whom were you fighting?”

“Me, sir,” said Warrington.

“Do you have witnesses, Warrington?”

“A Common Room full of Slytherins, sir,”

“Well I don’t think much can be gained from investigating that further. I dearly hope you didn’t start the fight, Warrington?”

“No sir, I was trying to restrain him and he swung round and started punching me.”

“No dueling?”

“No sir, I confiscated his wand.”

“Just as well. Hand his wand to me, please, later. That remains confiscated for now. Here is my judgement and my ruling: twenty points for fighting. Fifteen for stealing. Ten for deliberate disruption. Ten for insurgence. Five for insubordination and cheek. That makes how many, Fetherington?”

The boy didn’t answer but stared furiously at the ground.

“That makes sixty points off Slytherin,” advised Snape, wondering if the boy needed tutoring in maths as well or was he simply sulking.

Warrington groaned, rolled his eyes then turned and cuffed Fetherington.

“That’s enough of that!” said Snape sharply.

“But sixty points sir!”

“Indeed. I’m going to have a charming conversation with Professor McGonagall over that. Fetherington, I want you to announce the points and penalties at the next SHM. Let your house mates tell you what they think about it. Further, you will be doing detention each Saturday for the next two weeks.”

“Sir, this is totally unfair!” yelled Fetherington.

“Do not raise your voice at me!” Snape spat back. “Get this through your head, Fetherington. You are a first year and you have commenced down a very slippery slope. If you carry on like this I can guarantee you that suspension and expulsion are inevitable before you make to second year. Am I making myself crystal clear?”
“This sucks sir!”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Dismissed.”

After the pair had left his office and closed the door behind them, Snape reached for his bottom drawer and took out the bottle of Firewhisky and had a quick gulp straight from the neck, shuddering as it scorched through his body. It may never have stood in a Muggle courtroom, but his version of playing judge and jury had always served in the past. He left the execution to the students, who were feared far more than he ever was. But he wondered this time if sixty points from his own House was a little steep. It would almost certainly cost them the House Cup, particularly on top of the thirty-five points he’d already doled out to Slytherin in a month, thanks to the same dunderhead. He’d taken fifty points of Gryffindor for the crocodile heart debacle, and fifteen points of Hufflepuff for a broken window. At least he was being consistent.

It didn’t sit easy with him, however.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to wait for the House Meeting for the remaining Slytherins to discover what Fetherington had cost them. The minute 60 emeralds ascended in the Hourglass the students were in an uproar. Warrington had decided or interpreted Snape’s comments about letting the House Mates comment on Fetherington’s penalties as license to mete out intra-House justice, and the first year was subjected to a series of jinxes, jokes and hexes that left the boy mildly traumatized, including being immobilized with a Petrificus Totalis and taken out and left in the Forbidden Forest. Fang found him, fortunately, only an hour later when Hagrid happened to be searching for mushrooms, and he was unharmed, however abundant quantities of Calming Draught had been required and an overnight stay in the Hospital Wing.

It didn’t stop there. Fetherington’s buddies who’d thrown their weight behind him and initiated several arguments in the Common Room, were one morning found hogtied together on the second floor, wearing lipstick, pig-tail wigs and dressed in Gryffindor jerseys and scarves, with a Gryffindor flag draped over them, perhaps the most brutal punishment for a Slytherin to be eeked out in several years. They were gibbering idiots afterwards, and could not eat in the Great Hall for two weeks. Although Snape was mortified about the wellbeing of the students, he had to privately salute the pure inventiveness of the punishment, which, had his fellow Slytherins done to him as a student he may never have recovered from. It had the added bonus of incensing the Gryffindors. This was a particularly potent crop of serpents.

Snape had called an immediate meeting in the Slytherin Common Room where he promised swift and terrible retribution to whomever the culprit was behind the incidents, shamed them all on the embarrassing gossip Slytherin were providing the other Houses, assured them that the sixty points were standing and that they had better start focusing on how to replace the loss rather than new and interesting ways to cost them more. Meanwhile, if they didn’t stop the crap immediately, he would have every Slytherin line up outside the door to the Hospital wing to go in and give Fetherington a personal apology.

Needless to say, a freshly acquired reputation as a Dementor-slaying legend certainly helped to reinforce his message.

He wasn’t aware of it, but the student body had got wind of Snape’s battle with the Dementors. Teachers never did know how these stories were leaked, but between gargoyles, ghosts, elves and portraits, it was impossible for anything to remain a secret for long. With the benefits or drawbacks of Chinese whispers, Snape’s Patronus had become forty-foot across, he had single-handedly defeated no less than half a dozen Dementors, he had carried Charity to Hogwarts slung over his shoulder as he fought them, and he had brought her back from certain doom using Dark Arts magic
learned as a Death Eater. If the story were told by a Slytherin, then Lupin never entered the picture. If the story were told by a Gryffindor, then Lupin had saved both Snape and Charity who were about to be sucked alive, and Snape was in league with Sirius Black and the Dementors knew it. The story was told in the corridors for at least a week.

On Saturday night, in his bed, Snape had the first opportunity to reflect on the information Charity had told him at dinner. At a visceral level, Snape hated her ex-husband. This, he understood, was based on absolutely no data, evidence or rationale whatsoever – he simply hated him because he’d laid his hands on Charity. He hated his name. Jason. He decided he knew what kind of man Jason was, and most of it was to do with the fact he was a Muggle. And that he’d let his Muggle prejudice hurt Charity. And that despite being presented with the miracle that was the magic gene, Jason had been too ignorant to appreciate it. Ipso facto, Jason the Muggle was a slovenly, stupid rock-ape who had managed to procreate and now remained, albeit distantly, in the picture. This left Snape discomfited at best. He had some pleasant ideas about how he would deal with Jason if ever the misfortune arose that they encountered each other, but his ultimate intention was that it should never occur. His preference was to pretend that the loathsome imbecile didn’t exist.

More complicated was the presence of the young daughter. So very young. Still dependent, still impressionable, still needful. This, he knew, was sacred ground. A clumsy footfall here was akin to desecration, he could not afford to treat this lightly. There was something about Charity being a mother of a young child that was simultaneously repellant and wildly attractive, and the difference lay in the length of time he’d known her. Had this information been revealed immediately, he would have retreated knowing that somehow, at some level, she was not available. But, with time on their side, and having received signals that she was in fact interested in him, the presence of a dependent child made her more vulnerable and wholesome; she was a mother ans she needed his protection. This was not a woman who was indulging herself or sampling the goods – this was a woman with an important duty placed on her shoulders and she needed someone who was ready for a workload. Somebody serious, and somebody loyal.

Snape lay in his bed, the room dark and his eyes shut, but in his mind he was back on Diagon Alley and seeing Charity in her gown, the crown of wintergreen in her hair, smiling at him and bidding him to enter the shop. He hadn’t known then she was a mother and his base reaction to her had been self-evident. Did it change anything that several years ago she had borne a child? It didn’t define her – the Charity he’d grown to care for was a woman unto herself – it was who she was as a woman that he wanted in his life, not her role as an extension. He thought that what was more of a problem for him was not that Charity was a mother, and not even the child, but the walking, talking corollary of Charity’s relationship with another man.

On Sunday, Snape was due to commence another batch of wolfsbane if it were to be ready in time for the full moon. After breakfast, and after visiting Charity, he closeted himself away in his potion room for uninterrupted brewing. He didn’t anticipate the mistakes he made last time. He wanted the batch prepared and stewing slowly in the background while he was busy with the auditors.

He was busily engaged thus, when later in the afternoon, Madam Pomfrey hitched the curtains around Charity’s bed aside a little and said, “How are you feeling?”
“Better all the time. That Calming Draught has helped – I could sleep and no nightmares,” replied Charity. “And I ate everything.” She indicated to a meal tray before her with the vestiges of a soup and sandwich, cookies and a pot of tea.

“Good girl,” said Madam Pomfrey, who, accustomed to dealing mostly with students, sometimes forgot when she had an adult in her care. She examined Charity’s face for a moment. “Charity, you have a visitor, do you feel up to talking?”

“Severus?”

“No, and he wouldn’t check with me first anyway. No, it’s Professor Dumbledore. If you feel up to it I’ve told him he can have twenty minutes.”

“Of course!” said Charity, attempting to sit up and smooth her hair. Pomfrey put extra pillows behind Charity’s back, then picked up the meal tray and allowed Dumbledore to take the seat next to the bed.

“My dear girl, how are you feeling?” asked Dumbledore, carefully returning the privacy curtain.

“I think I’ll be ready to go back to work tomorrow, thank you sir. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape have taken excellent care of me.”

“You look much better,” Dumbledore said, studying her face. “I can see colour in your cheeks again. Your eyes look clear. No lasting damage I hope?”

Charity wiggled her fingers at him. “Some numbness, early stages of frostbite. But otherwise fully fit.”

“As you know, the Auditors arrive tomorrow, so there’s no rest for the wicked I’m afraid. But should you find it overly taxing, I’m sure Severus can cope. After all, you’ve already done the hard work.”

“I wouldn’t want to miss anything, sir. We’ve invested a lot of effort into the audit, I’m anxious to see it pay dividends.” Charity didn’t want Dumbledore thinking she wasn’t up to the job.

“I completely understand. Severus tells me the visit to Gringotts went well. Got everything you need?”

“Yes, we did sir, thank you for the letter of introduction. Earkras did mention he would be writing to you to complain about being audited, but I’m not sure he’ll bother. We were very explicit with him that the audit is driven by the Ministry, not Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore nodded, not looking at all concerned. Perhaps Snape had told him all that as well.

“I see from the packages under your bed that you enjoyed the time on Diagon Alley?”

Charity flushed a little. “Yes…uh, very much. I – I don’t get to go shopping that often…thank you for allowing us the time.”

“And we missed you at dinner.”

“We had supper while we were there,” Charity said by way of explanation, feeling a touch awkward now. Were they in trouble again? “Professor Snape paid for it, sir. We had taken some time that day.”
Dumbledore waved a dismissive hand. “I told you to take it. I’m just sorry it ended on such a bad note,” he paused and considered her. “Severus may well have saved your life that night. Lupin saw what happened. He fought off three Dementors then brought you to Hogwarts. Then he rushed back to help Lupin. He was quite the hero.”

Charity listened and frantically wondered what she was supposed to think. Was he angry that she’d place Snape at risk? “I will never be able to repay Professor Snape, I know I owe him my life…he won’t hear of it when I try to thank him…”

“Severus doesn’t work like that,” retorted Dumbledore. “For him it wouldn’t have been a matter of choice. I think, in your case, it went far beyond an obligation, however. I have seen a momentous change in him since you and he have been working together.”

“I see,” Charity said, stiffening. Where was Dumbledore going with this?

“I’ve known Severus since he was eleven. He’s had a difficult life. He is a brilliant wizard, he could easily attain Warlock if it interested him, but the demons he battles are more…shall we say…inward.”

Charity said nothing, thinking it best if Dumbledore were free to get to his point.

“You’ve brought out a better man in him. I’ve even heard the students saying that he isn’t himself. Severus’s parents died when he was an adolescent, and I think he’s come to view me a bit in the light of a father-figure. Certainly I’ve taken it upon myself to see that he has a home here as long as he wants it, and I have his confidence – as he has mine. I flatter myself that I understand him…perhaps better than a lot of people. Severus has an intense loyalty.”

Charity nodded, frowning a little. Did Severus know this conversation was happening? She strongly doubted it.

There was a long pause while Dumbledore carefully selected his words. “What I’ve noticed is that Severus is forming an…attachment…to you. That is no small accomplishment. And the person who is…special…enough to have achieved that takes on a considerable undertaking. Severus doesn’t do things by halves. If you have the fortune of winning his affections, then you will be wealthy indeed.”

Charity felt blood pound into her head. “Sir -,”

“Charity, my purpose for saying all this is…take care. Both of you. I need Severus here. He has…a duty. You both do. But Severus - ,” he looked at her meaningfully at this point, before carefully enunciating the words. “Much depends on him.”

She dropped her eyes to her hands. She understood exactly what Dumbledore was delicately stating. Not only was he cautioning her to wear kid gloves, but if he was forced to choose then she would be the expendable one.

Dumbledore stood, smiled and patted her arm. “Now, rest and get well and strong. I look forward to seeing you up and about again.”

After he left, Charity felt an ache in her chest that had nothing to do with Dementors.
At promptly nine-thirty am on Monday, the Auditors arrived by Floo in Dumbledore’s office, carrying briefcases and suitcases.

Snape was in the middle of a double Potions class with third years and so had arranged for Charity to join Dumbledore in welcoming them and assisting them navigate the Castle to their designated “office” space, where they could let her know what they may need until he could join them at around 11am.

There were three auditors, led by Topias Poole, who arrived first, wearing a suit. He cleared the fireplace and was greeted with a handshake by Dumbledore as introductions were made. Poole’s sub-auditors arrived one after the other: Octavius Matte and Fergus Dunn, both in their early thirties, Charity estimated, clean shaven, short-haired, wearing plain trousers, shirts, ties and sweaters, who also made slightly formal, stiff introductions and otherwise did not speak unless spoken to.

Dumbledore offered them tea, which they declined, and when the small talk limped to an obvious conclusion, Charity stepped in and offered to take them to their office space and give them the basic tour of the Castle.

She took them to the empty classroom on the first floor which had been cleared out and refurbished as a work space, containing three office desks, rugs on the floor, coat racks, extra lighting, trays for filing, a roany fireplace in case they needed to Floo communicate, quills, ink and plenty of neat, flat parchment. She showed them how to find the office, nearby facilities such as the toilets, introduced them to a kitchen elf who would be on standby to assist them with any basic amenities, and then took them on a quick tour encompassing the Great Hall, Entrance Hall, first and second floors, including the gargoyle corridor in case they were seeking Dumbledore, and also the way to the dungeon floor in case they were looking for Snape.

Throughout, Poole – who seemed to be the only one to speak – was polite and perfunctory, certainly not obsequious or even in fact overly grateful. He seemed to think their efforts were perfectly acceptable and not much else. He didn’t make any particular observations or comments about the castle, which must have taken a kind of superhuman effort since at first sight, Hogwarts was impressive to everyone. He seemed more troubled by the temperature, mentioning on several occasions that he found it cold. Charity encouraged him to ask the elf to light the fire in their room, and suggested a piping hot pot of tea, since it was morning tea time.

They were returning to first floor from the second and had paused while a staircase moved to meet them, and Poole asked whether the staircases ever caused confusion or delay, or if in fact they were more of a hindrance than a help. Charity told him that they had served a purpose for a millennium, and once you were clear about where you needed to go, the staircases were more than willing to provide causeway. They certainly had the advantage of provoking new arrivals to form a mental map very quickly.

They made their way back to the auditors’ office, where Warrington and Pucey were waiting, standing outside. Snape had borrowed the portrait of George von Rheticus from the Grand Staircase to hang next to the door to the office, and he was currently berating the students for entering without
permission. “Mark my words, your Head of House will be hearing about this!” he scolded the two students who looked extremely irritable.

“Thank you sir,” said Charity to the portrait. “These Prefects have been nominated to assist with the audit, so they may require entry from time to time. But no other students are to be admitted without strict prior permission.”

“Well zank you for telling me,” said von Rheticus looking surly. “Are you quite sure zere is nobody else who can come through?”

“Apart from Professor Snape and myself, these gentlemen obviously, who you met earlier. Did you want to assign a password?”

“Yes. Ze passvord is Narratio Prima.”

“What?” said Dunn

“It’s alright,” said Poole. “I’ve got it. Thank you portrait. And so your names, lads?”

“Cassius Warrington and Adrian Pucey,” said Warrington. “We’re prefects in Slytherin. We’ve been helping Professor Snape get ready for the audit. He said you might need our help as runners.”

“We get extra credit if we help,” added Pucey.

“I see. That is very useful. Well the first thing you can do is locate that elf – I think we need a pot of tea and the fire lit.”

They all entered the office and while the auditors set up their workstations, the prefects went to organize the House Elf. Soon, the room was warming and tea was served. Warrington and Pucey had left, agreeing to return after lunch.

At that point Snape turned up, gave the portrait a curt reply on being spoken to, then entered. Poole stood. “Hello again, Professor Snape. We arrive at long last.”

“As do I. My apology I couldn’t be there to greet you, regrettably the students don’t teach themselves.”

He shook hands with the sub auditors and introduced himself. “I see you’ve met Professor Burbage?”

“Certainly. The Professor has been most helpful in inducting us. We met Professor Dumbledore earlier and had a short tour of this wing. We’re just having a spot of tea before it’s time to get started.”

“And what is to be the order of the day?”

“Well start with a desktop audit of all your Category One financial data. If you could bring that to us, we can get started. We know what to look for, if there’s any questions, we will keep a record of them and consult you at three pm. Where will we be dining?”

“In the Great Hall. Lunch is at twelve-fifteen and dinner is usually served by six-thirty. Unless you wish to retire to Hogsmeade for the evening – the Three Broomsticks has excellent meals.”

“Thank you, we’ll join you and Dumbledore in the Hall this evening, then perhaps Hogsmeade from then on.”
“Very good. In that case I believe Professor Burbage has all the documentation for Category One…?” Snape turned to Charity, who nodded but looked somewhat perturbed.

“I have it here, but I’m afraid I haven’t had time to sort it all into any kind of order. We obtained it Friday but I’ve been – unwell - all weekend and that was when I was planning to organize it for you.”

She took the reams of paper from Gringotts out of her leather case. The parchment had gotten crumpled and a bit damp as a result of being crushed in her bag throughout the weekend, and having fallen on the wet ground at Hogsmeade when the Dementors attacked. But she thought it was a miracle she had them at all under the circumstances.

Poole took the documentation off her and gingerly sorted through them with his fingertips. “Ah. Bit worse for wear, I see. These are not the originals?”

“No, they are copies. I don’t believe Gringotts would have permitted us to take the originals.”

“I see you have referenced them at least. That’s a start. Well, we shall have to do our best.”

Charity looked at Snape, who seemed rankled but said nothing.

Poole tore his eyes away from the documents to find them still standing there. “Thank you. As I said, we’ll get started, if you don’t mind collecting us for lunch..?”

Snape nodded and he and Charity left the auditors to it. Once they were in the corridor, they stood awkwardly for a moment, then Snape said, “Archive?”

“Yes,” said Charity quickly, and they headed down to their headquarters.

As they walked, Snape asked, “How are you feeling?”

“A bit tired, but I think otherwise fully recovered. Severus, you know I don’t know how to thank you.”

“We’ve discussed it. I have only one answer which I have told you repeatedly. There is nothing to thank me for.”

“I know but…well, Dumbledore seemed at pains to make me understand how indebted I am to you.”

“Dumbledore? He came to visit you did he?”

They had reached the Archive and went inside, Snape very firmly shutting the door behind them.

“Yes,” said Charity, putting down her case and sitting in the armchair. Snape commenced lighting a fire. “He said you might well have saved my life and that you were a hero.”

Snape snorted and didn’t deviate from his task.

“I got the distinct impression that he thought I had placed you at risk and that he wasn’t too pleased about it.”

Snape shook his head lightly, dismissing it. “I’m sure you’re reading too much into it.”

She paused a moment, thinking hard on what to say. “He seems to be very…aware…of what’s, um, happening and I wouldn’t say he was all that…supportive.”
Snape now awarded her a glance. “I know what you’re trying to say. And I have had Dumbledore’s comments myself on the subject. I told him he was an old gossip and should mind his own business.”

Charity felt immensely relieved to hear this. The fact that Snape seemed so comfortable telling Dumbledore his opinion helped to reconfigure the incident into proportion. But then, Snape could do that. If he was as indispensable as Dumbledore implied, then he would have no compunction about speaking his mind. That had no bearing on her standing in Dumbledore’s eyes.

The fire now burning merrily, Snape came to stand before her in the chair. She looked up at him.

“I spent the weekend reflecting on…matters we discussed at dinner,” he said. “About your family circumstances.”

She nodded and her mouth went dry.

“You said that nothing would change.”

“Not for you or me. I’m quite resolute about continuing…on this path as it were.”

He nodded and ruminated a moment, studying her face. “Then I am willing to join you…on this path. To see where it leads. I couldn’t, at this point, do otherwise, I am too far along it seems. But I won’t lie – you blindsided me.”

She acknowledged that, but added, “There was never going to be a good time. If I had told you at the beginning, you would have backed off.”

“Perhaps that would have been for the best,” he said, with an unexpected note of recrimination. “We won’t know now. We don’t know where this path leads.”

Charity was scalded. “Don’t talk as if you’re somehow here against your will!”

“But I am. This path I thought was for two has halfway along become a path for three or even four. And now I can’t turn back.”

She stared and gaped at him. Then stood, not liking the unequal height. He was still much taller than her but it felt more balanced. “If we’re going to carry on with this metaphor, then it becomes quite simple really. Turn around and simply follow the path whence you came. To the place you seem to prefer – the one of solitude and isolation. That can be your choice, I am not keeping you.”

He lowered his eyelids. “You think it’s that easy?”

“I don’t see why not,” she retorted, raising her chin, but hoped with all her heart that he would see she was only bluffing.

“It would be amongst the hardest things I have ever done. I can’t do it. And I won’t.”

He turned away, strode back to the fire and stared into it.

She was nonplussed. Were she to interpret the situation, he was telling her he was staunch by her side, but that she needed a telling off. Was he wrong? He’d felt blindsided, and then she’d admitted she’d manipulated the situation. Lied by omission. She’d known he’d been working on the assumption she was single and available. She’d used naivety as a convenient excuse to let him walk too far to go back, in any other context it was entrapment. But she resented that he thought of her daughter as a deal breaker under normal circumstances.
Crossly, she followed him to the fireplace. “I accept that…that I could have told you the truth sooner, I didn’t want to seem presumptuous, but alright, there were probably ways I could have slipped it into conversation so that at least you knew. If knowing about my daughter would have been the catalyst for you to decide that I…that I wasn’t going to be of interest to you, then well fine. I don’t bargain where my daughter’s concerned. We’re a pair, I won’t shy from that, I wear whatever happens. But you’re a fool, Severus, if you think that adults don’t have baggage. I’m no teenager. You knew that. And I don’t apologise, I am not going to say I’m sorry about Holly.”

He had turned and faced her to listen as she made her little speech. He saw how she was proud and defiant. She worked the situation to her advantage and she had him totally where she wanted him. She could have made an excellent Slytherin. Something about that made him want her.

“We’re even,” he told her. “I have come to terms with the situation and I feel about you as I ever did.”

For a moment she felt patronized and narrowed her eyes at him. But she also had to acknowledge that he had conceded. He held her gaze, and it looked as if he were trying to suppress a smirk. She almost kicked him. But at that moment, she felt if she made any physical contact whatsoever, she might not be responsible for her actions.

Dinner lunch passed without incident, the auditors didn’t say much about Category One, but questioned intently all the food on offer: it’s origins, it’s preparation, it’s cost, the quantity (Snape had to admit that quantity – as in the excesses – were sometimes an issue), the variety, the nutrition, the availability of alternatives for those with food sensitivities (not readily available), the variety, as in, were international cuisines ever explored (not often) and finally how the leftovers and waste were dealt with (Snape didn’t have a clue).

When Dumbledore came over to acknowledge them, they asked him if he would be willing to authorize surveys and questionnaires to both student and teacher bodies. He stumbled around a little, then finally acquiesced, throwing the ball firmly in Snape’s court by saying Snape had full jurisdiction around the audit and if he thought best then he was prepared to comply. Snape had no warning that surveys were on the agenda, even though they had been alluded to in the literature, but if it lubricated the way towards a good outcome then he would see to it.

The auditors went back to their office after lunch and, as far as Snape knew, remained there for the afternoon. Charity had a class and he had homework to catch up on.

At three pm he went up to floor one and met with the auditors in the office. They had a number of points about the information given to them by Earkras that didn’t quite close the deal on Category One. He answered their queries as best he could, but it was accounting detail, not an area he had much familiarity with. Poole complained that the standard of the material supplied was inadequate for their needs and Snape was happy to refer them to Earkras as a resource. Poole’s face soured at this and he looked sideways at Snape. They said they were missing evidence for one criteria. Snape explained it didn’t apply to Hogwarts. Poole grudgingly accepted this. And then the three o’clock meeting was over.

Snape sighed inwardly thinking this was going to be the longest two weeks of his life. But it was still preferable to third year potions, at least here he had a modicum of control and a pretense of respect.
At dinner, he, Charity and the auditors sat with Dumbledore at the Head table and participated in rather stilted conversation about the Ministry and its various undertakings, Quidditch of all things, the upcoming Triwizard Cup and, of course, the whereabouts of Sirius Black. Snape noticed Charity yawning discreetly several times and looking as if she might doze off directly onto her plate. At last the meal was over, and as Dumbledore bid the students a good night, the auditors had arisen, ready to be shown their rooms in Hogsmeade. Charity stood, apparently ready to assist but Snape told her to go to bed, he would show the auditors the way and be back before curfew.

When Hagrid was asked to open the gate so that Snape could exit Hogwarts, he said, “Aye, I can do that, and wass more, I’ll come with you. After that las’ trip, I wouldn’t feel comfortable leavin’ you on your own.”

In his shaggy great coat and lamp, the auditors did a double take as Hagrid clanked his massive ring of keys and opened the Winged Boar gates, Fang at his side. It was a cold night, icy on the path, the waxing moon bright in the sky and reflecting off scarves of fog on the moor. The men didn’t feel much inclined to talk as Hagrid’s comments were full of foreboding and they hurried along, pulling their coats and cloaks tighter around them.

Snape didn’t even enter the Three Broomsticks when they arrived, but promised them they would be in excellent hands with Madam Rosmerta, and then bade the auditors a restful night, agreeing to meet in the morning after Snape’s first period class.

“Come on, let’s get back quickly,” muttered Snape to Hagrid once the wooden door to the warm and homely interior of the Broomsticks closed behind the group of auditors. The two strode off, Snape occasionally breaking into a slow trot to keep up with Hagrid, whose strides covered that of two men. Fang was doing his normal doggy thing out on a walk and racing ahead inspecting everything and thinking a nighttime stroll was a brilliant idea, when he pulled up short and his hackles rose. He started a rumbling growl in his throat and stared off into apparently nothing.

Hagrid propped and put out his hand to arrest Snape, who walked into it. “What’s the matter?”

Hagrid shushed him and pointed at Fang, whose growls were becoming more intense. He had lowered his head and was starting to lean towards a shadowy, mist-shrouded group of pines some way off the path to Hogwarts.

“Black,” stated Snape immediately in low tones. He’d been carrying his wand with him through the entire walk, and now he pointed it in the direction Fang was staring at.

As he and Hagrid watched, the mist began to coalesce in front of their eyes, almost obscuring the knot of pines. The mist swirled about and moved in a deliberate fashion, forming a shape. Snape squinted at it, trying to decipher what the mist was evidently trying to tell him. “What is that…?”

“Iss a Grim!” blurted Hagrid, and stepped back.

As soon as he said it, Snape could see that indeed, the mist had taken the shape of a great dog’s head, with decipherable fangs and a malevolent eye. It drifted apart and reformed, like a morse code message on repeat.

Fang suddenly broke into a volley of snarling barks and Hagrid reached down and grabbed his collar. “No you don’t boy, let’s go home,” and he turned pulling the boarhound behind him.

But Snape paused. “Hagrid, wait – this is our chance to get Black! He’s there…he’s right there.”

“But what, don’t be foolish, it’s dangerous - ,”
“I’m alright. Come after me if I’m not back in five minutes.” Snape half walked half ran towards the knot of pines, his wand alight and shining in front of him like a torch.

The grass was saturated and freezing cold. His boots were soaked in seconds and his feet became numb but Snape was so focused he didn’t notice. He was bothered by the light of his wand which was preventing his eyes from adjusting to the dark, but otherwise every sense was on high alert and adrenaline started to buzz through his veins, elevating his heart, not only watchful for Black but actively hoping for him. He’d already decided that if he encountered the dog or the man, he would stupefy, then bind him tightly and take him to the Castle as a captive for the Ministry. There would be little stopping him killing the convict if Black gave him the slightest provocation, and his choice of self-defense would be *Sectumsempra*. It was an ugly way to kill someone compared to *Avada Kedavra* but, Snape’s Slytherin heart rationalized, if you have an iron-clad excuse of self-defence, why not take the opportunity to use it for a little revenge.

Snape muttered “*Nox,*” and the wand went dark. He stopped just within the first of the trees, where the ground became a bed of dry needles and the scent of sap filled his nostrils. Behind him came the barking of Fang, punctuated by frustrated whining as the dog was restrained from rushing in with him. “Black?” called out Snape into the inky shadows before him, his ears straining. “Come out.”

A breeze lightly rustled the branches but otherwise silent. He could hear his own blood pounding.

He advanced slowly, unwilling to even breathe. “I know you’re here,” called Snape into the darkness, eyes darting everywhere. “Come out peacefully and your life might be spared.”

There was a sudden rustling to the left of him and Snape spun towards it. “*Lumos!*”

In the starkness of the abrupt blinding light, he saw a shadowy movement and instantly incanted “*Stupefy!*” firing the spell in the general direction of the noise. Everything went quiet. He ran towards the place of the movement, expecting a man, expecting even a big black dog, but all he found on the ground where his spell had made contact was a prone badger.

All was still and silent again. He undid the spell and the badger rounded onto its feet and made a little dash at Snape as if in retaliation, then disappeared into the shadows. His instincts told him that Black was in here somewhere, but a logical voice in Snape’s head was now suggesting that Fang had merely been barking at the badger, and that the mist appearing to look like a Grim was actually nonsense – at best, their imaginations on overdrive. He dropped his wand and started to walk back towards Hagrid and his dog, his time having run out, besides which Hagrid would be anxious having seen the flash of his stupefy spell.

“Nothing. It was nothing,” Snape said upon seeing Hagrid’s worried face. “A badger. Come on, let’s get home, we’ve wasted time.”

“Fang don’t growl at no badgers,” remarked Hagrid, setting off at an even faster stride than before. “I know my dog. There were summat in there, and it weren’t good.”

In record time they made it back to the gates, only to stumble into Lupin standing outside, shivering. When he saw Hagrid and Snape together his eyes widened, and Snape stared at him suspiciously.

“Hagrid! There you are, I couldn’t get through the gates – I tried *alohomora* -,”

“Nope, tha’ won’t work, they need my special keys. Where you bin, Lupin?” he asked, and Snape listened closely. “I didn’t know you wasn’t in the castle.”

“Three Broomsticks. I, uh, there’s some friends, we, uh, play cards and the like.”
“Huh!” said Hagrid, unlocking the wrought-iron gates and admitting them all. “Musta jus’ missed yer. You wanna watch yerself walkin’ around out there of an evenin’ – Severus and me saw the Grim jus’ now.”

Lupin’s eyes flicked up and caught Snape’s penetrating stare. “Really? Thought that was just Harry. How is Charity, Severus?” asked Lupin, changing the subject and quietly reminding Snape that there was still a debt outstanding.

“Much recovered.”

They commenced up the path to the castle entrance after Hagrid and Fang had returned to their hut. “And where’ve you been? Taking Fang for a walk at this hour?”

“Taking the auditors to their accommodation. I wouldn’t be out here if it were at all avoidable. No Dementors, but we had company on the return trip.”

Snape watched for a reaction but Lupin stared at the ground as they walked and merely shrugged.

“It’ll be good to get inside by the fire,” was all he said after a moment.

Once they were inside, Snape bade Lupin goodnight and briefly watched him walk away, noting the mud splatters on the bottom of his trousers. *Has he been where I have?* Snape wondered, remembering now his freezing, soaked boots and strode off to his quarters for a warming bath.

The following day, in the auditor’s office, Snape, Charity and Topias Poole were interrupted from working through Category Two by Dumbledore, who arrived at the door accompanied by Sir Bernard Byron. Dumbledore and Byron attempted to enter the door, but were vociferously halted by von Rheticus who gabbed in German, then demanded: “Haz you ze passvord?”

Startled, Dumbledore blinked, and a moment later Charity was at the door assuring the portrait that he was allowed to enter, upon which von Rheticus exclaimed “Was ist der Sinn?” and complained bitterly that what was the point of making him the door guard if everyone was simply free to come and go.

The three auditors stood quite promptly upon seeing Sir Byron, who was again dressed impeccably, this time in tweed, and wore a rather dashing deerstalker, presumably in tribute to his Scottish destination. “Sir,” they all said as Byron went round the room shaking hands and making pithy comments as if he were royalty. Snape shook his hand also, and nodded his head once by way of greeting, and noticed that when Byron made a show of kissing the back of Charity’s outstretched hand, she blushed. “I say Albus, you’ve done a jolly good job here of setting up a home away from home for my team. I trust you have everything you need?” he asked them and Poole made suitably decorous comments.

“Well I must say,” Byron continued, stepping over to warm his hands against the fire, “that I’m no auditor, but from what I’ve seen so far, Hogwarts is every bit as pleasing as when I attended. Was it this cold then?”

“No doubt, when you were a student, you were rushing from place to place and unable to stay still, just like the children today. They are kept warm on pure energy,” said Dumbledore.

“I daresay,” rejoined Byron, smiling broadly. He then turned to Charity. “Did you just now say you
are the Muggle Studies teacher? I wonder – you couldn’t humour me on my wee trip down memory lane at all? I would dearly like to see the classroom of my favourite subject again.”

“Oh – uh…?” said Charity, surprised. She glanced at Snape, who said, “Please go ahead Professor, I’m sure Mr Poole and I have things under control here for now.”

Dumbledore was uncharacteristically quiet, but he stepped aside to permit the slightly flustered Charity to pass and she led the way towards her classroom.

Sir Byron’s timing was good. The sun was high in the sky when they entered, and shone brightly through the arched windows, showing the room to its best advantage. For her most recent class, Charity had erected a display board, to which she had attached a graphic depiction of the technological development of the Muggle telephone, from the first Alexander Bell wind-up model, all the way through to a Motorola flip-model mobile phone. Next to that picture was an image of the circuit-board inside the mobile phone, and she had circled the microchip.

After admiring the light, the comfortable seats, the cabinet of Muggle wonders and the 10-foot posters, Sir Byron approached her display board and studied it, hands behind his back. Dumbledore, still silent, stood a little behind him, also looking. It occurred to Charity that this was the first time the Headmaster had been in her classroom.

“I recognize a telephone,” said Byron, “and I’ve used them regularly. But these new-fangled mobile phones, I don’t quite get how they work if they don’t have a line connecting them.”

“Um, they transmit electrical signals on radiowaves, via a cell tower, which then sort of forwards on the signal to the second phone. The phones have an antennae in them to receive a call. And they run on a battery, and this is a microchip, which can store vast quantities of data. They have designed a phone now on which you can send a written message. You can use the number pad just like a keyboard and type out a message, then send it to anyone.”

Sir Byron and Dumbledore stared at her as if she were certifiable. “Can you not send it to someone you want?” asked Dumbledore. “Surely that would be more useful.”

“Yes, of course, sorry that’s what I meant. Every person who buys a mobile phone has a number, the phone number, and you programme the phone to send the message to the phone number you enter.”

Dumbledore looked dubious, but Sir Byron took off his hat and slapped it against his thigh. “Remarkable! Brilliant! I’ve been called a Muggle-lover but I have to say, why not? After all, what they come up with in spite of no magic, I do respect that kind of ingenuity.”

Charity smiled widely at him. “It makes for some very interesting lessons, I can tell you. Some of the students have said they wished they could have mobile phones, particularly in a place like this.”

“I don’t doubt it!” Byron guffawed. “I’ll be Merlin’s slippers!”

“They wouldn’t work in Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore, and for the first time Charity saw that he looked irked. “Electricity makes the magic -;”

“Yes, we know,” said Byron. “More’s the pity. Still, it’s tremendous that students get the opportunity to learn about these things. A vast number go on to live a reasonably Muggle-like existence. Stumbling around in downtown London looking baffled about a telephone will just draw attention to them. Much better to prepare them, I say, conceal them out in the open so to speak.”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore. “We have to keep pace with their technology.”
“I would go so far,” said Byron, looking at Charity approvingly, “that it’s high time we considered making Muggle Studies a compulsory subject. It’s all very well teaching them charms, but we’ve moved into a modern world. I know my MS classes were a cornerstone of my career path, and I for one see an urgent need for it. I was talking to Professor Snape about it when he came to see me. I would like to see the curriculum on this, Albus; I would like to discuss it with the Board.”

Charity made a sudden point of moving away to tidy her desk while Dumbledore, looking decidedly piqued, talked in an undertone to Byron. After a few moments, Byron left Dumbledore and came over to the desk beside Charity.

“Professor Burbage, thank you so much for your time. I am most impressed with your classroom, and I can see the trouble you’ve gone to. Your students are very lucky to have you.”

“Thank you sir. That means a lot,” she replied, conscious that Dumbledore had not accompanied him.

Byron returned to Dumbledore, who explained that a special lunch had been organized in his honour, at which Byron did the good guest thing of saying he was humbled but delighted, and together they left her classroom.

Charity sat down in her teacher’s chair and took a heaving breath. She was in that terribly difficult position of having the leapfrog approval of her boss’s boss – clearly Dumbledore was not convinced and now she was inadvertantly backing him into a corner. He wouldn’t appreciate that. Amenable and benign as he appeared, there was steel inside the glove. It would appear that everything she did, however innocently, had the effect of rubbing him the wrong way.

At lunch, Charity sat next to Snape. When Byron was holding forth and keeping Dumbledore engaged, he asked her, “How did the classroom visit go?”

“Byron loved it,” she said simply. “He said he was most impressed and the students were lucky to have me. Dumbledore, however, sucked lemons through the whole thing.”

“Really? Unlike him.”

“Byron told him he wants the Board to have a look at the curriculum. He recommended Muggle Studies becoming compulsory. You could have stripped wallpaper with the look Dumbledore gave him.”

“But that’s good news, isn’t it? You’ll have the curriculum looked at. Your big opportunity.”

“If I last that long.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I think I’m on thin ice with Dumbledore, Severus. I haven’t done anything wrong except be something he doesn’t like.”

“He does like you. He’s fine with you.”

“Perhaps it’s not me, per se. It’s what I represent. I’m just too Muggle for him. I think he likes the idea of Muggle tolerance in theory, not in practice.”

Snape put down his knife and fork and picked up his glass of wine – a rare novelty in the middle of a school day – but merely contemplated it. Eventually he said, “I’m going to teach you how to make a Patronus.”
“Pardon?”

“I need you to learn it. It’s something Dumbledore taught me. Firstly it’s defensive, but also it will mean, wherever we are, we can communicate.”

“Hah. Ironic. Like a mobile phone.”

It was Snape’s turn to be confused. Charity shook her head dismissively, a little irritated that the conversation had taken an abrupt right turn. “Alright, sign me up. You can teach me the Patronus charm. Although the last thing I’m intending to do is get within light years of a Dementor.”

“No, more than that, if you can produce a corporeal Patronus, you can send me messages. Wherever you are, your Patronus will find me.”

Charity stopped, took stock and looked at Snape, who was sipping his wine. She was deeply touched. She interpreted a slightly portentous note in his segue to suddenly set up communication channels between them – did he foresee a time when she might not be around? – but she could tell that he felt it important, urgent even. She liked the idea of being connected to him, linked to him, wherever he was, wherever she was. “Ok, thank you, I would like to learn,” she said.

At the other end of the table, Bryon dialed in a joke and Dumbledore broke into jarring, uproarious laughter.
Snape checked on the wolfsbane potion each morning before heading to the Great Hall for breakfast. It was simmering slowly on a very low heat, but Snape had to take great care to ensure enough fuel for the fire beneath to cauldron to keep the heat continuous – cooling would be disastrous. He had acquired the assistance of a second year Slytherin who was showing some potions promise, and had her responsible for checking the fire at least every two hours, and to add fuel if it looked as if it were running out. She was also permitted to stir the draught so that any skin solidifying on the surface would be mixed back in, preserving the potency. She was very keen, and he gave her an exclusive access charm to the brewing room, which he would expire once the potion was ready to dispense. The only problem was that he could not tell her what the potion was or what it was for, and she was bright enough to ask a number of probing questions that kept him on his toes. Eventually he told her that the potion was a special request of a Wizarding elite who lived in Europe, and that while Snape had the recipe even he was uncertain of its ultimate application and so it was pointless her asking questions as he would be unable to answer them even if he wanted to.

He had a morning class which was thankfully uneventful, largely because he was keeping it that way while the auditors were on site. Lessons had been reduced to theory and tests, with cauldrons and wands put away, but the textbooks were a getting a better workout than they had in years. He had made extensive notes of his own throughout his master versions, and encouraged his pupils to question and challenge similarly, giving House points to any of them who were able to replicate the error or limitation that he had discovered.

Madam Jones had relented to covering his afternoon classes so that he could then be available for the auditors. Category Two – Licensing and Regulations - had been covered the day before, and today, Topias Poole wanted to see the licenses belonging to Hagrid, Madam Hooch and Remus Lupin.

Snape sent Pucey to given notice to all three teachers, asking them to present to the Auditor’s office during the morning, and bring their license with them.

In the office, Matte and Dunn were seated at their desks examining the documents and data that Snape and Charity had prepared. These records, which Charity had diligently assembled and organized with her typewriter, had received a haughty sniff from Poole as he flipped through them. “Better condition than Category One,” he commented disdainfully, and promptly delegated them. Matte and Dunn seemed to be busy cross-referencing and correlating the evidence against their own verification checklist, but Snape was not permitted to see for himself.

Poole, meanwhile, had moved his own desk closer to the fire, and had taken to wearing a woolen scarf throughout the day, looking more morose than officious. He was sitting thus, decidedly Scrooge-like, when Snape entered the office. He immediately sent for a kitchen elf to arrange tea and biscuits.

“Do you have coffee?” Poole asked. “I’m afraid I didn’t sleep terribly well last night.”

Snape changed the order and said, “I’m sorry to hear that. Was it something Madam Rosmerta can attend to?”

“I was freezing cold all night. I know it is colder in Scotland than the south of England, but really – I
couldn’t open my window this morning it was so frozen solid – I believe there was ice on the inside of the glass. And the entire village was white this morning, I thought it must have snowed, but I was told it was a hoar-frost.”

Matte and Dunn nodded in agreement, miserably.

Snape immediately suspected Dementors. It hadn’t been unseasonably cold last night. How on earth was Sirius Black able to survive the temperatures? Was he actually inside the castle somewhere, lying low? Was Lupin supplying him with clothes and blankets?

“You must ask Madam Rosmerta to put enchanted logs on your fire in the room. And ask for better blankets, wool and duck-down.”

Poole chose not to comment, becoming accustomed to this habit of teachers to boss everyone as if they were thirteen. “So Professor Snape,” he said instead. “You have arranged for those licenses today? Then I want to discuss our survey process with you. Please, bring your chair to my desk, I’d rather not leave the fire.”

Snape drew up his chair and focused on keeping his expression neutral.

“There are two surveys. One for Category Three, it is a staff satisfaction survey. Each teacher who works at Hogwarts will be given a questionnaire to complete. It is anonymous. The teacher is required to tick a box by self-selecting from a choice of answers, thereby reducing the chance of handwriting being identifiable. The questionnaire is placed in a collection box which we will locate in the staffroom. We will analyse the results and report back. While it’s obviously a subjective survey, we are interested in whether the faculty here believe the school to be run well, whether they feel consulted, involved. Their opinions on the facilities, equipment and so on.”

Snape raised an eyebrow, nodded but otherwise didn’t speak. He sipped his coffee which had arrived, thankfully hot and strong. In his head he was imagining how the other teachers would react to completing such a survey, whether they would view it as disloyal, or did they privately harbor discontent that school leadership was rather autocratic. He imagined Charity might have some strong thoughts on the matter – would she be bold enough to complete it honestly?

“The second survey correlates to Category Six – Student Wellbeing. We want to have a private audience with a cross-section of your student body. The complement must include representation from all four Houses, all years, boys and girls, varying levels of academic achievement, pureblood and Muggle-borns. Our suggestion for achieving this is to arrange four groups of approximately 20 students in each group, and that attendance be drawn randomly. Therefore you must organize for the name of every student to be put in a hat so that eighty may be drawn.

“I or one of the auditing team will facilitate the consultation in a room of your choice, however the room must be cleared of any portraits, gargoyles, ghosts or other paraphernalia that may compromise student confidentiality. I will check the room for secret passageways and so on. The students must be able to speak freely about their experiences attending the school.”

Snape’s heart sank. He strongly suspected that his name would be raised frequently and unsympathetically by a great many students, mostly Gryffindors. Well then, so be it. He wasn’t here to be liked, he was here to teach. And whether he was popular was secondary to his student achievement records, his potions alumni and Slytherin performance under his Headship.

At that moment, Hagrid arrived at the door to a spiel of indignant German from von Rheticus. “Come through Hagrid,” said Snape, and Hagrid stooped through the doorway and approached - Poole’s desk looking nervous. “Mr Poole, you met Professor Reubus Hagrid at lunch the other day.
He is our teacher of Care of Magical Creatures,” said Snape.

“Very good, Professor Hagrid. I would like to see your animal husbandry license – I trust you have it with you?”

Hagrid mumbled and searched around in the pockets of his coat, finally producing the license proudly and handing it to Poole. “Thar you go. One license, thass my signature, sorry its not very neat.”

Poole glanced it over and then handed it to Dunn. He looked Hagrid up and down. “Are you the Hagrid under investigation with the Ministry?”

“Ah, you mean about Buckbeak?”

“I don’t know its name. It was a Hippogriff I believe.”

“Yeh, that’s me. Or at least, that’s Buckbeak. He’s innocent. Dumbledore’ll get him off, you wait and see.”

“It attacked a student?”

“Tha’ student was outta line, he shouldn’t ‘ave come up to Buckbeak without showin’ respect –,“ Hagrid retorted loudly, and it was obvious he was about to start a ribald rant on the subject so Snape jumped up and put his hand on Hagrid’s arm. “Leave it, Hagrid, now is not the time.”

“But they don’ know the other side of the story-!”

“If you’re satisfied with Hagrid’s license I think he probably needs to get back to work,” said Snape and Poole nodded, handing the license back.

Snape walked an incensed Hagrid out the door, and once out of earshot, said, “Hagrid, you’ll get your hearing on Buckbeak. What you don’t need is for the likes of the auditors to go reporting back to the Ministry that you’re not a reasonable person. Or looking too hard into what you do here. Don’t lose your Professorship now over something trivial.”

“Buckbeak’s not trivial!”

“That’s not what I meant. Just – keep a level head, understand?”

Hagrid looked greatly put out, but he huffed and nodded and stomped off across the Hall. As Snape was returning to the office, his path coincided with Charity, hurrying and carrying files under her arm. She had spots of colour in her cheeks, having clearly hurried for some distance.

“My dear,” said Snape, smiling at the sight of her. “Where have you been?”

“Oh Severus, I’ve been finishing a class, and they left the room in a state, then I had to go down to the archive to get these – how’s the morning been?”

“They have just passed Hagrid’s license. And they have briefed me on their requirements for a teacher’s survey and a student survey. There are logistics we’ll need to attend to.”

The pair walked back to the office and when they arrived, Charity handed the files to Poole. “Good morning Mr Poole. These are the files for Category Three.”

“Good morning, Professor Burbage. Thank you for bringing these, I can make a start for the day. I’m expecting Category Three to be reasonably straightforward, but I was just saying to Professor
Snape before that I have a questionnaire for the teachers that will need to be completed. How many permanent teachers are employed at Hogwarts?"

Snape and Charity did a quick tally. “Fourteen”

Poole retrieved from his briefcase a foolscap sized envelope, sealed with the MoM coat of arms and handed it to Charity. “Here. This is the original. Please duplicate it fourteen times and hand-deliver the survey with the instructions I gave you – completely confidential, to be dropped in a box in the staffroom, to be filled out and returned no later than Wednesday next week. It is compulsory for all teachers to complete it. Are there any away at present?”

“No,” replied Snape. “They’re all here during term.”

“Very well then. I’ll leave it with you. And the matter of the student survey – I’ll need some means of randomly drawing eighty names and four groups of twenty between now and next Wednesday. Can you please arrange it?”

Snape’s long-suffering expression told him it would be done.

He and Charity were about to depart for the archive to start work when Lupin showed up at the door. Ignoring von Rheticus, he caught the eye of Snape and then Charity, looking apprehensive. Charity went to the door to admit him, and he entered, glancing about him, having the same demeanour of someone who’s just entered a courtroom for the first time.

Snape returned to Topias Poole’s desk and said, “This is Professor Remus Lupin, our teacher for Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“I see,” said Poole, standing to reach across the desk and shake Lupin’s hand. “I am Lead Auditor, Topias Poole. I was hoping to see your Dark Arts instructor license.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Lupin, and then reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, withdrawing the forged license. He swallowed and handed it over to Poole who was examining his face closely.

Poole’s eyes flicked between Lupin and the image on the license. “Forgive my bluntness,” said Poole, then waved a finger generally in the direction of his face. “These scars. Were they obtained in the line of duty?”

“Uh, fall. From a broomstick. Going too fast,” replied Lupin, and emitted a hollow laugh. “Hit a holly bush on the way down. Serves me right.”

“A holly bush gave you those scars?”

“Um, yes. I have skin condition that leaves a lot of scarring.” Lupin made sure to enter a slightly defensive note in his tone, warning Poole that the line of questioning was getting personal.

Poole dragged his eyes away and flipped the license back and forth in his hand. “Seems in order. So what are you teaching the kids these days? Top three Death Eater giveaways?”

Lupin laughed, too enthusiastically, causing Poole to watch him again. “Very good. No, Death Eaters are not on the curriculum, we have students who come from a long line of supremacists. Hinkypunks this term.”

Snape had stiffened slightly at the facile remark about Death Eaters and supremacists, but let it slide, not least because Charity was standing right next to him, but also the forgery had almost been given
back to Lupin and would soon be out the door.

“What did you do before teaching Dark Arts?” Poole asked mildly, sitting down and gathering up bits of documentation. The question seemed purely conversational. Lupin was almost across the line.

But Lupin stalled, he didn’t seem to have an answer to this. How had he not prepared for this?

Poole glanced up.

“I, uh, I served with the Order of the Phoenix in the war.”

“I see. I mean, what or where were you teaching before Hogwarts?”

“I did private tutoring. Hired by parents,” replied Lupin after a noticeable pause.

Poole studied him unsmilingly for a few moments, then said, “Thank you Professor Lupin. Very nice to meet you. Here’s your license.”

Poole’s eyes remained fixed on Lupin’s as the license was handed over, and Lupin smiled quickly, then turned heel and left without acknowledging Snape or Charity. Before Poole could comment in any way, Snape said, “Professor Burbage and I will be down in the archive preparing for the questionnaire. If you need us, send an elf or one of the Prefects.”

Poole nodded and the pair left, swiftly making their way to the far west wing and down the steps to the archive, which they had come to view as their own. Snape had grown affectionate of the uneven, irregularly sized, worn stone steps that led to the oak plank door with its medieval black iron hinges. Inside was promise, acceptance, intrigue and possibility. As Charity had in his office, here he felt at home, not just because it was the place she had made, but the store of history, narrative and forgotten things.

Inside, as always, he immediately arranged a fire, while Charity sent for tea. “I don’t get the feeling that Poole is even close to convinced about Lupin,” she stated with a heartfelt sigh.

“The license was fine, but Lupin doesn’t help himself. How could he have forgotten a background story?”

Then Charity sat down at the glossy, Mahogany table and placed the file containing the questionnaire on it, staring at the seal, waiting for Snape to join her. When he did, she said, “You can open it.”

He took the file, slipped his finger beneath the seal then withdrew the papers held within. He placed it down between them, so they could both see, and they read the questionnaire.

All told, there were thirty questions, with a selection of answers to each requiring the reader to select their preference. There were no questions that could be used to identify the writer, it was strictly based around the individuals’ opinion on their experience being employed by Hogwarts. The survey queried how resources were distributed, how students were allocated to classes, how students were supported when struggling, whether they as teachers had adequate time to support the students. It asked how much training and further education they received, whether they felt skilled enough to teach their subject. It asked if their performance was reviewed, what kind of feedback they received, how useful the feedback was, whether further assistance was supplied if they were experiencing difficulty. There were a lot of questions about how much involvement they had in lesson planning and curriculum improvements, how much they talked to the parents and the Board. It finished with questions about their personal satisfaction with being a teacher at Hogwarts and whether it was a place they would recommend others to work.
“I think we should give Dumbledore some advance warning,” said Charity. “Imagine if the results came back negative. He needs some time to prepare for that.”

“It will almost certainly come back negative on some areas. Every teacher feels under-resourced and over-committed. No teacher is going to admit they have adequate time to work with the underachievers – otherwise there would be no underachievers. And no teacher ever feels adequately consulted about the curriculum. Dumbledore couldn’t possibly meet every single teacher’s request, there’s be chaos. I myself have adjusted the potions curriculum several times and never told him – why bother? Just do it. I feel qualified enough to know what’s important for a budding potioneer to learn.”

Charity nodded. “I don’t disagree. But if I were him I’d want to know.”

“He’ll complete one himself anyway.”

“I’ll do it,” said Charity firmly. “Let’s make enough duplicates, then I’ll go to his office.”

Snape nodded. “Very well. While you’re there, ask for the master student register so that we can commence the random selection process.”

Working together, and frequently standing unnecessarily close or making any excuse to share personal body space, they organized fourteen scrolled parchments to be distributed to each teacher, then Charity made a copy to take to Dumbledore, being careful to ensure no particular or identifying marks were on the paper. They drank their tea as they worked, making each other’s, passing biscuits with their fingers and chatting and laughing quietly like a companionable old couple. Charity brushed crumbs off Snape’s lapel and commented that the black showed everything and he agreed. He helped her find her wand. When a mouse ran across the floor he blasted it and she chastised him soundly.

A little while later she said, “Right. I’m off to find Dumbledore and explain what’s happening.”

“Don’t forget the student list.”

“Student list. Won’t forget. Will you please arrange us lunch?”

“Anything?”

“Anything is fine. But not kippers.”

While she was gone, he felt lonely. He ordered lunch from the kitchen, being sure to add some dessert items because he knew she liked a sweet or two. He cleared away the dead mouse. He stoked the fire. He tidied up the desk where they’d been working, and found some parchment she’d been writing on and studied her handwriting, for no reason other than it was hers, and he liked it, and part of him wanted to completely consume her, absorb her into him, somehow keep her within his very being, close to his heart like a salve. And still she was away and he wondered when she was coming back and missed her some more.

Then when she returned, he came to the door to greet her, which was unusual and caught her by surprise. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “Anymore.”

She searched his eyes for an explanation, and the giddy feeling came over again as if he were about to fall, fall into something where he didn’t know if there was a bottom, he wanted to fall headlong, and he looked at her mouth and he decided he had to kiss her, he had to because he wanted to so
very much, nothing in the world mattered until he had his lips on hers –


His eyes re-focused suddenly and air rushed back into his lungs. “Oh. Good,” he said, dazed.

Over lunch, during which Charity did most of the talking and Snape did a lot of staring, she informed him of Dumbledore’s reaction to the questionnaire, which she had been unable to interpret with confidence. He was quite closed, she said. He had read the questions silently and without expression. He had thanked her and said he would think on it. She had then effectively been dismissed. But not before she’d gotten a duplicate of the register, which Dumbledore kept in his office.

After lunch, Charity numbered each student on the list from one to two-hundred and three, while Snape rummaged around in a stash of old game sets in a box, eventually finding a dice. He then took out his wand and cast a charm, so that when the dice was rolled, instead of dots, the top of the dice showed a number. The dice would randomly roll any number between one and two-hundred and three, which the auditors could do repeatedly until they had eighty students selected.

Their reasons for staying in the archive room were running out. Snape saw Charity start to gather her things and he felt oddly bereft. He didn’t want to go back to the office or the classroom or the Hall or the dungeon, he didn’t want to do anything except take Charity before the fire and kiss her. He wanted to cup her face and kiss her lovely eyes, her mouth, along her jawline, down her throat, and imagining it made his sleeping giant tumble over and his eyes lingered on her like a starving man.

“Right,” she said briskly, businesslike, and he was frustrated. Couldn’t she sense what he wanted? Was she being deliberately insentient? “Back to the office?” she suggested.

“Fine!” he retorted resentfully. He stormed over to the fireplace and extinguished the fire with his wand, then marched out the archive door, almost slamming it behind him, cloak swirling in his wake.

Charity stared after him, but she wasn’t completely naive, she’d seen what had come over him, she had seen the way he was looking at her. She let him go, hopefully to cool off. Part of her was delighted that he evidently felt the way she did, that the chemistry and electricity in the room had been intoxicating for the last hour, that her skin had almost detached itself from her in its longing to touch him. At the moment when they had been reading the questionnaire, she had breathed in his aroma, the soap, the shaving cream and the unique, intrinsic scent of Severus that she knew, if she could kiss the soft skin of his neck, would envelope her and that she would inhale it into her lungs and that some basic, ravenous carnal instinct would be – already was - unleashed within her.

But another part of her was exquisitely conscious of being at work, being in teacher mode and the subtle warnings from Dumbledore, duty first, that Snape was needed, Snape was property of Hogwarts, that his infatuation was all very well but she needed to know her place, if he was forced to choose, to separate them, then let it be known, she was the dispensable one.

If she capitulated to temptation, then where would it lead? She knew she wouldn’t be able to stop at a chaste kiss. She didn’t get that impression from him, either. Their bodies ached for each other, there would be no hosing down that fire once it was lit. They couldn’t afford it. Not now. Perhaps not ever, and yet she had no way of getting that message through to her monkey, physical self that was screaming: mate with this man!

All she could do was force herself, actually make her mouth open and say the awful, cold, scalpel-like words that kept him at bay, kept herself at bay, pushed down the desire and pushed down the
want so that they could keep cool heads, keep their wits about them. And impishly, her body betrayed her, even as her voice activated the words, her eyes would zero-in on his hands and imagine them on her, or notice a lock of his hair falling stray and she would daydream about brushing it back, letting her fingers tangle in that tousle of silky raven hair. It was pure hell.

So after he had stormed out, frustrated, rejected, she remained where she was for several minutes, letting chemicals in her blood fizz out, search and find nothing, expire. Tears ebbed, such was the frustration she felt herself. Not just physical, but at the possibility of happiness withheld. There was something about Severus that felt like her missing piece of jigsaw puzzle. To think that she may never have it was to find herself cut adrift, her life support terminated, in space.

By the following day, the questionnaires had been distributed by Charity and Snape, a drop-box placed in the staff room, and four groups of twenty students had been selected. The room for the groups had been cleared and chairs set up. Pucey and Warrington had been dispatched to notify each selected student to attend a survey group at a specified date and time, and the location (written on a small sheaf of parchment – Snape didn’t place any value on a student’s mental memory). Dumbledore spoke at dinner about the importance of attending, and that if a student had been randomly selected, they were to abide by the instructions and they would be released from any class they happened to be in.

This, of course, set up a tidal-wave of prattle throughout the school, with randomly selected students behaving as if being chosen was anything but chance, and being targeted by other students to ensure they conveyed whatever concern or piece of feedback was burning to the individual. Common rooms became mini focus groups themselves, as students debated and parleyed about what should be said, and lines were drawn between truth-talkers and loyalists, and the randomly selected students interviewed about their own preferences and whether they were right or wrong and whether it was possible for a randomly selected to be exchanged with someone who was going to represent student interests actively and intentionally. Fights sprang up, tears were shed and students lost sleep as their date for a focus group drew nearer.

It got to such a fever pitch in Slytherin that Snape called another impromptu meeting to thrash it out. Being the most controversial House, fidelity was an enormous issue to Slytherins and it was a cornerstone of their Commandments. The randomly selected members of Slytherin, of which there were fourteen, had been cornered and interrogated and threatened by fervent advocates and liegemen, so the message sometimes got confused about whether the selected students were meant to be commenting on Hogwarts or their House, as a number of Slytherins felt a stronger adherence to their House than to the school. When a couple of the randoms had approached Snape and asked to exchange with someone else, he called a House meeting and told off the lot of them, promising any Serpent found persecuting another student, or using the focus groups to peddle pedantry, would be assigned to table-service (a punishment in which Sytherin students were required to serve Gryffindors during dinner for a week. It had only ever been needed once).

The auditors, meanwhile, had moved on to Category Four – which was a short category about the Curriculum. Snape and Charity didn’t foresee any major issues arising. Charity had provided all their evidence and paperwork by mid-morning, the auditing team had set to work processing it against their assessment report. Snape provided them a status update that the first of the student groups was organized for Tuesday the following week, and that there would be one per day until Friday. Poole did a quick tally against his diary, and announced if that was the case, then Monday would not be necessary for them to come in, given their rate of progress, and to consider it a long
weekend as far as the audit was concerned. The audit team would be returning to their homes in London as of Friday afternoon.

After discerning that they wouldn’t be required for the next few hours, Snape informed Poole that he and Charity would be working in the archive and they could be reached there if necessary. Charity glanced at Snape confused – this was news to her. She had homework to be marking, and a lesson plan needed compiling for the following day – her fifth years were commencing a whole new Semester’s worth of work early, which she had planned to organize over the Christmas holiday. But she didn’t comment until she and Snape were making their way to the archive and alone.

“What are we working on?” she asked, hastening to keep up with Snape, who looked in as foul a temper as he had been when she’d last seen him and wasn’t slowing down for her benefit.

“We’re going to work on the Patronus charm. I told you it might be necessary one day.”

“Oh.”

She was quiet for a little bit, deciding that she could spend time that evening after dinner working on her lesson plan. She might do it in the staffroom, there was often a lively buzz in there in the evening and she could catch up with Aurora.

As they travelled hastily on a ground floor corridor, she said, “Having Monday off from the audit is a lucky break. I thought I might have to come back early on Sunday to get ready for Monday if the audit was going to be continuing, but now I have some extra time, so I can spend longer – “

Snape whirled around and faced her. “Come back from where?”

“I’m going home for the weekend,” she said to him, startled.

“What? Go home where?”

“Go home to see my daughter. I have scheduled time with her during term. It’s close to her birthday I was going to take her out – why am I explaining myself to you?!”

“You didn’t tell me!”

“Did I need to?”

“Were you planning on telling me at all?”

“Yes, uh, of course I was, it’s only Thursday -,” she replied, thinking to herself that no, she hadn’t any organized plans to explain anything to Severus, she knew she had the weekend coming up and she’d spent more time contemplating what to buy her daughter for her birthday and where to get it than she’d given to filling Severus in.

His eyes narrowed, there was doubt in his eyes, misgivings, but behind that was a sadness. She knew it wasn’t about her going away, it was that she hadn’t thought enough of him to tell him.

“Severus, I’m sorry,” she said softly. “We’ve been so busy -,”

It was an inadequate excuse, she knew it, and he said, “We need to talk.”

They continued their march down to the archive. Once inside, he slammed the door shut behind them and locked it.

“What is this?” she asked immediately, wary.
“You can calm down. We just need to talk and I don’t want unexpected visitors.”

He took off his robes, went to the fireplace and lit a fire. Charity sat perched on the edge of the armchair, uncertain now, feeling in trouble. “Are we still learning the Patronus?” she asked.

“I will still teach you the Patronus, whether it will be today I don’t know. It depends on whether you’re serious.”

Snape saw that the fire was burning with purpose and he stood before it, watching.

“What do you mean whether I’m serious?”

“This is the third time I’ve been surprised by you. I feel you are playing. What is your agenda, Charity?”

“Agenda? I don’t have an agenda, what are you talking about?”

“How can you fail to remember that I might like to know if you’re going away?” he shouted suddenly. “It makes me assume that you don’t care!”

“I said I’m sorry!” Charity said in alarm. He really was terrifying when he was angry. “It…it slipped my mind...”

“But how can that happen? I spend every spare minute thinking about you! Do you just forget about me when we’re not together?”

His words were so raw in their honesty that they almost seemed to cut his throat and tongue on their way out, it hurt to say them, it hurt to show her how vulnerable she’d made him. He could no longer look at her, afraid to give her any more power over him when she could be so capricious.

“I said I’m sorry! What more can I say?”

“That is not an answer. Don’t think that repeatedly apologizing will make this go away. You can’t toy with my feelings Charity – they are not young and elastic, they don’t have the resilience of other youthful men. If you are not serious about me, then do me the courtesy of saying so now.”

Charity swallowed and sat still, staring at him as he stood tall, dark and ominous before the fire. She realized how swiftly their relationship had lurched out of the starting box, as if it were racing, pounding the turf against time, and although falling for him had seemed as natural as breathing, she hadn’t taken the time to unwrap Severus slowly, deliberately, with that agonizing pleasure of delaying the inevitable, lingering and savouring every part. It was the best bit of falling in love, the learning about the other person, delighting in the similarities, curious about the differences, reconciling the gaps. With Severus being such a profound personality, it was as if she’d presumed to know him and took it for granted she knew who he was. But in fact – and how had she missed this?! – Severus was the most mysterious of men. What he projected and who he was were entirely different. She had fallen for the showman, his exterior, and neglected entirely the heart of who he was. No wonder he was cautious of her being an imposter.

“I am serious about you, Severus. I have…developed very strong feelings for you. But I still hardly know you,” she answered carefully.

He considered this. He took up the poker and shifted logs around in the fire. “It is true that not much time has passed. I find myself - ,” he searched for a word, “as if dropped from a whirlwind, caught up in forces bigger than me, beyond my control. I am not accustomed to it. But in spite of that, it brings me…great joy, contentment, I am filled with anticipation each day at seeing you.”
“I’m not toying with you, Severus,” she murmured emphatically, getting to her feet and approaching him. “Do you really think you’re the sort of person that someone takes on lightly?”

“I couldn’t presume to predict the motives of another. But you don’t strike me as the kind of person who is motivated by spite.”

“The only thing I’m motivated by didn’t stop to consult me either. I didn’t arrange anything, I didn’t orchestrate anything, I am as much a victim of other forces as you seem to be. I don’t know how it happened that we shared a staffroom for two years scarcely aware of each other, then one day you walk into my archive and -,” she pulled up short.

“What?”

“Well…what happened. My life turned on its head.”

He took a breath so deep she could see his chest rising and falling. “Then I ask again. Why didn’t you tell me you were going home for the weekend?”

Her eyes met his, and held. “I forgot,” she said.

“Then that is all the evidence I need.” He was abrupt, and his eyes glittered. “You are spinning me a good line. You are telling me what I want to hear, but your actions say otherwise. Charity, you don’t feel for me as I do for you. And that…that…there is so much at risk!”

“What are you saying?” she cried desperately. “You’re questioning my intentions? Doubting me?”

“Yes! That is exactly what I’m doing. If my Patronus had failed against those Dementors, I would have gladly given my life to save yours. Do you feel the same? I need to know!”

She hesitated. A second was all it took. So much had hung in the balance, but her mind flew to her daughter and it made her pause – would she have died for Severus? Would she? And leave her daughter motherless? But she cried “Yes!” almost frightened now.

And then Snape grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and pushed her back in the direction of the armchair, where he forced her down so she was sitting facing him. Without warning, his wand was in his hand and he was pointing it at her, his eyes searing into hers. “Severus?” she had time to ask, before she heard him mutter “Legilimens!”

The invasion was powerful, not painful, but brutal and intense. She could see what he was seeing, and he searched quickly, torridly, leaving her gasping. Images flew forth, he would see how she gazed at him, the surfeit of memories that he had already accumulated in her mind, that there was nothing she was hiding, but that her hours and days were paid in advance, they were already spent before she even got to them, she could only afford to spend half her life in the present. He scanned through them as if they were photographs he would throw aside, not the information he sought, not the truth he believed she was hiding.

When he withdrew barely minutes later, she was left weakened and defiled on the chair, a sweat from the stress dampening her hair to her head, her lungs heaving for the oxygen that had been denied.

He seemed almost exhausted himself. His hand holding his wand hung limp by his side.

“You bastard!” she spat. “You -!”

He closed his eyes.
“YOU BASTARD! How could you?!”

He hung his head.

She got up from the chair and smoothed her clothes, attempted to straighten her hair, not for him, but for the world outside, the world outside that was normal, that was expecting her life to be normal also. She didn’t want to explain why she was drenched with sweat, why her heart was hammering, why she felt utterly violated.

“I’m going home,” she uttered, and he didn’t move, didn’t speak. “I have a class on Friday then I’m out. You can tell Dumbledore where I am. And you – you have a think on what you saw.”

Then she left the archive without another word or a backward glance.
Lupin needed his wolfsbane. The agreement was Snape would bring it to him in the DADA office each morning after the recess bell had rung. Only that, and a morning class got him out of bed. Were it anything else, he would have pleaded illness – perhaps the first time he would have done so in several years. He skipped breakfast, and told his sixth-year class that they had a self-directed study period, then he sat at his desk and attempted to read essays but his eyes kept going out of focus. Partly fatigue – he had not slept a wink all night – and partly utter apathy. He wasn’t interested in anything. He couldn’t be bothered focusing, he couldn’t be bothered teaching, he couldn’t care less whether the world kept turning and the sun and the moon kept rising, indeed whether his heart kept beating. He sat so morosely at his desk it caught the attention of his students. Marcus Flint, astute enough to discern the difference between a grumpy Snape and a sad Snape, approached him cautiously after class and enquired if he was alright. Snape clenched his jaw and snapped at Flint for being nosy and dismissed him.

At morning tea, Snape went through the motions of filling a goblet with wolfsbane from the simmering cauldron, sealing it then walking it to the DADA office on the second floor. Lupin was at his desk sorting through mounds of parchment when he arrived.

“Oh. Morning Severus. Thank you.”

Snape didn’t reply but deposited the goblet on the desk and removed the seal so that the blue vapor misted into the air.

“Is something the matter?” Lupin asked, noticing that even by Snape standards he seemed out of sorts.

“Nothing that concerns you,” he muttered, and indicated he was waiting for the goblet, so Lupin drank it in a few gulps and winced extravagantly at the taste.

There was a knock on the door. They both turned to look in surprise as it opened and Topias Poole entered. “Ah,” he said, seeing them. “I was looking for you Professor Snape. You hadn’t come by the office this morning.”

Snape hurriedly took the goblet, which Poole noticed. “And why would you think to look for me here? This is Professor Lupin’s office.”

“Yes, I was hoping to find it. It’s a happy coincidence you’re both here.”

“You should have just sent an elf. Or used the Floo. We could have come to you.”

Poole had entered the room and was walking around it, inspecting the décor, the equipment, the tank with the grindylow. Lupin stood and looked perturbed, clearly more worried than baffled about what would have drawn the auditor to his office. “Not at all, it’s nice to get out, see a bit more of the castle. I think I would have enjoyed Defense Against the Dark Arts if I’d been a student here. I couldn’t help but notice in the records how many teachers have held the job – compared to the other subjects it has a turnover ratio of about eight to one. Why on earth is that?”
Snape couldn’t verify the statistic but there was undeniably some kind of jinx on the role. He knew the rumours but it had never been proven.

“Did you know that Professor Lupin? Did that worry you when you accepted the role?”

“Of course not,” responded Lupin. “I was honoured to accept any position at Hogwarts.”

“And on what basis was the position offered?” Poole asked, turning his attention back to Lupin directly. “Did you compete against other applicants? Would there be any recruitment paperwork to show how you won the position on merit?”

“I met with Dumbledore. He remembered my student achievement record from when I was attending here. I did well in the Dark Arts subject. And we fought together during the war.”

“So no other candidates?”

“Not that I know of.”

Snape immediately saw how facile Lupin’s answer had appeared, and while he was weary and indifferent, he mustered some energy and said, “If this is part of the audit, Mr Poole, please let me know what criteria you’re seeking to fulfil, it’s possible you already have what you need -,”

“Category Three, Professor,” said Poole, with a censorious, diffident look. “We’ve already been through all your evidence, and it seems fairly scant regarding Professor Lupin.” His eyes came to rest on the goblet that Snape had been concealing behind his back. “And what is this? Medicine? Are you unwell, Professor?” he asked Lupin.

“I’ve been perfectly honest with you,” said Lupin. “I don’t have anything more to tell you. I’m sorry I can’t be of help.”

Poole stood appraisingly and Lupin added, “I have a class in a few minutes. If you don’t mind?”

“For now,” Poole answered coolly, and he turned and left, slamming down the lid on a desk as he went past.

Alone, Snape and Lupin looked at each other. “He suspects,” muttered Lupin. “I don’t know what exactly, but he knows something’s not right. He’ll do the background check.”

“Well your answers to him yesterday wouldn’t have helped. But you’re registered with the Teacher’s Board. Your DADA license passed muster. He may lose interest. Something else comes up and the scent goes cold. I’ll talk to Dumbledore, see if we can’t arrange some sort of distraction,” Snape said, but he didn’t care terribly much. Lupin was proving higher maintenance than Lockhart.

Lupin nodded dispiritedly and watched Snape as the potions master left his office. It was hard to tell who was more dejected.

Snape returned directly to his brewing room to return the measuring goblet, then went to his office and called Dumbledore on the Floo. “Sir? Are you free this morning I would like to meet with you?”

“Yes, Severus, come by around eleven-thirty,” said Dumbledore’s voice in the chimney.

Thankfully, being Friday, Snape was free of classes for the remainder of the day, so at the appointed time, he trekked up to the Headmaster’s office, on the lookout for Charity as he walked. There was no sign of her, none all day, none the previous afternoon, she had done her vanishing act again. He
had visited the archive earlier, on the pretext of getting material for the auditors, but he had a faint hope Charity might be there – why she would he didn’t know, but hope springs eternal - however he wasn’t surprised to discover the room empty and silent. His eyes came to rest on the scene of the crime and his chest constricted painfully, and he physically turned away, unable to bear it. He wondered if he would ever be able to enjoy the archive room again.

Dumbledore was waiting when Snape sought entry. He was at his desk and he was looking through the teacher questionnaire, frowning heavily. A chilly haze of rain had been persisting down since early morning and it was smattering hard against the window panes, audible even over the crackling of a settled-in fire.


Dumbledore shook his head slowly at Snape, who stood before him across the desk. “This questionnaire…survey…whatever you call it. It seems a bit audacious, don’t you think? Why on earth would teachers want to talk to parents or the Board? That’s my job, to spare them that annoyance. And curriculum – I mean, I don’t mind teachers preparing for classes and designing lessons, indeed, that’s what they’re here for. But influencing the curriculum? Imagine if I let every teacher set about willy-nilly redesigning the curricula? Consistency? Continuity? All gone.”

“It’s nonsense!” spat Nigellus.

Dumbledore peered closer at Snape, lowering his glasses. “My dear boy? Is everything alright?”

For Snape, having entered the company of Dumbledore, who seemed reassuringly in typical form, in the comfort of the Headmasters Office, found the burden of his enormous distress suddenly surge up within him and he struggled strenuously against tears.

Dumbledore saw this and stood and approached him, putting a hand on Snape’s shoulder. “Sit, sit Severus, I will get you a whisky. What has happened? It’s about Charity isn’t it?”

Snape let his legs give way before an armchair, and despite the early hour, gratefully took a snifter of whisky and downed it in a gulp. It had the effect of relaxing his throat and diluting the boulder that seemed to have settled at the top of his chest.

“It is about Professor Burbage. Sir, I must confess I have acted inappropriately, I am guilty of something grievous.”

“What have you done? I’m sure it can be resolved.” Dumbledore sat opposite him, watching closely.

“Sir, I – I performed a Legilimens without proper consent.”

“What? You mean you cast a Legilimens on Charity? Without her permission?”

“Yes. I am afraid so. I have no excuse.”

“You didn’t trust her about something?”

Snape couldn’t make himself answer, so Dumbledore filled in the gaps. “A lover’s tiff? You quarreled?”

“It is probably not a matter of much significance compared to my impulse and…and the damage that has occurred.”
“She’s physically alright? People react differently -,”

“She’s fine. Obviously she is outraged and has gone home for the weekend, but there was no physical damage.”

“So the damage is to your relationship. And you’re right – as far as a fledgling romance is concerned, that kind of conduct is, inarguably, grievous.”

If Snape felt disconsolate before, Dumbledore’s words did nothing to alleviate it. If anything he felt worse, since the Headmaster would surely have said something positive if there was any possibility of that at all.

A long, mournful silence stretched between them. Snape didn’t know what else to say. There seemed nowhere to turn for relief. He had destroyed any chance between himself and Charity, and breached the sacred protocols for a person who has been given latitude to practise as a Legilimens. On both personal and professional fronts, he’d wreaked chaos in the space of several minutes.

“It seems extraordinarily out of character for you,” Dumbledore finally observed. “There must have been some extenuating circumstances?”

“None but loss of control. I am not making excuses for myself.”

“No, no I see that but….if I am prepared to pardon your transgression -,”

“Why sir? Why would you do that?”

“Because, Severus, you have never been in love before. You don’t know how it makes men behave.”

“I have been in love -!” he caught himself, and Dumbledore nodded.

“I knew you’d say that. But it was not the same. She loved another and your adulation was from a distance. And even then, if I recall, it brought out an impulsive side of you, or rather, jealousy did.”

Snape closed his eyes, trying to shut out Dumbledore’s knowing expression as well as the memory, a stupid, reckless, impetuous moment that ruined everything, everything. There were many similarities and at the root of both incidents, his insecurities. Lily had never forgiven him, why should he expect different from Charity?

Except Dumbledore pointed out an important, distinctive difference. Lily hadn’t loved him. She had cared, she had even been affectionate, and she had been his committed friend for years. But she had never lost her heart to him as he had for her. Charity, however – well if there was one thing he could salvage from his crime was that he had seen the truth in her. She had been honest with him. There was no secret rendezvous with her ex-husband planned, she had eyes for no-one but him and her feelings for him were real. He believed there was a chance that Charity could love him in return, and if she felt for him what he did for her, then forgiveness was conceivable. If she could forgive him, then perhaps, perhaps she could trust him again too.

“You think it is safe to hope?” Snape asked quietly.

“Ah, she is a woman, Severus, I would not be so foolish as to pretend to know.”

Snape paused, an idea half formed in his mind. “Sir, you – we had a conversation, just after Lily died, after I – we discussed the Potter boy, his protection, the contract was that if I truly loved Lily -,”
Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed and he stared piercingly. “What are you saying, Severus?”

“You have just now pointed out…the love I had for Lily was never reciprocated…if there is any possibility with Charity…what then my obligations to Harry Potter?”

“That fate was sealed the moment you told Voldemort the prophesy,” said Dumbledore, a cool calm hardening the edges of his words. “A love for Lily may have made your contract more tolerable, but replacing her with someone else does not make it any less binding. Need I remind you: you promised me anything.”

Snape dropped his eyes. Had he known to whom the prophesy referred of course he wouldn’t have told the Dark Lord, he would have defected immediately. But he hadn’t known. It was a mistake.

“Where is this line of questioning leading, Severus?” asked Dumbledore. “Is that why you searched Charity’s mind? Were you looking for proof of love because you thought it would absolve you of any responsibility to Potter? To Hogwarts? To me? Did you think she might offer you freedom?”

Snape’s eyes lifted to Dumbledore’s again. “Am I not free?”

“That depends on your definition.”

Snape sighed. “No. That wasn’t why I did it. That wasn’t on my mind.”

“Just as well. Because then your feelings for Charity become adulterated. If you hope to win her back, then don’t be motivated by selfish reasons. But there must surely be one good outcome as far as Harry is concerned: if your misplaced devotion to Lily has found a true resting place in Charity, then your disappointment that Harry is not like his mother must be lifted. Does it matter to you nearly so much?”

“It wasn’t just that isn’t like his mother, but rather that he is so like his father. But, for all that, I do find myself less vexed.”

Dumbledore pondered on this for a while, then stood and began to slowly pace the floor, watched with interest by the portraits. “As prepared as I may be to pardon your contravention of the ethical code, I’m afraid that decision doesn’t rest with me. It is Charity who has been aggrieved, and it is she who will be offered an opportunity to lay a formal complaint. If she does, then I’m afraid I will need to treat this as I would any other person, Severus, lest it be escalated up to the Board for them to appoint an investigator. From what you told me, I do not see that you have any mitigating evidence that would prevent some level of discipline being applicable. As it would be a conflict of interest for me to determine an appropriate discipline, I expect it will be a matter for the Board.”

“What do you think they would deem a suitable punishment?”

“The common one for misuse of Legilimens is prohibition for a period of time. You will be curtailed from practice – the term depends on the severity of the circumstances. If you abuse the prohibition, they may go so far as to rescind your teacher registration – otherwise known as sacked. I really don’t want you to be sacked, Severus.”

Snape didn’t reply. If he were sacked, would he then be free? Free to go to Azkaban, perhaps, devoid the protection of Dumbledore. Free to live in isolation, in hiding. Free to never see Charity again. It depends on your definition.

“I am prepared to serve any sentence deemed appropriate. I only wish to set things to rights.”

“I will talk to Charity on Monday. Let us hope that the weekend gives her cooling off time and that
she is canny enough to understand that your actions were borne of passion.”

“Thank you Headmaster,” said Snape and he stood to leave. As his hand was on the door handle, he heard Dumbledore say, “Severus?”

Snape turned.

“As much as I am a fan of love, I asked you to keep your wits about you.”

All weekend, Snape kept a low profile. There was a deciding Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, in which the badgers were flattened, and the Slytherins were through to the running next against Ravenclaw, which they were confident of beating. There were celebrations in the Common Room as the future matches were plotted and critically assessed, and Slytherins concluded their chances of winning were as good as ever.

Snape made an effort to appear interested and involved, but the minute duty had been dispensed, he made excuses to withdraw. He wanted nothing more than to be alone. He took a long walk on Sunday as dusk fell, wrapped up against the chill, but still soaked by the time he returned to his room for a bath. As he lay immersed, feeling the heat sink into his bones, all he could hear was a soft drip from the tap and the clock in the kitchen ticking, and thoughts – all kinds of frantic thoughts that had hounded him all weekend - wanted to crowd into his brain, but he took them and locked them down. Locked them down tight. Numb was better.

The cold showers carried through to Monday, with clouds so low and heavy it appeared as though the rain only had a couple of metres to fall. The start of winter was only a day away. The students were showing the first signs of restlessness as holidays became visible on the horizon, and talk began to turn to Christmas. The auditors remained away on Monday and Snape took his normal classes, and to help focus the students, and distract himself, gave them a practical in the second half of double potions. He knew Charity would be back, though she was not at breakfast and that didn’t surprise him, it was now possible for him to talk to her, if she would let him. His mind obsessed over it and he needed the threat of imminent disaster in the classroom to keep him connected.

On his way to taking the wolfsbane to Lupin, Snape encountered Dumbledore in the second floor corridor. “How are you?” Dumbledore asked in a quiet voice.

“I yet have a pulse.”

“I am on my way now to Charity’s classroom. She has agreed to meet me there. I will let you know how I get on.”

Snape nodded grimly, feeling suddenly drained.

There was a soft knock on the classroom door and Charity called, “Hello? Come in,” as it opened and Dumbledore entered. She gave him a forced smile in welcome, and continued to gather up the play Muggle money that had been left on each desk by the previous class. She was teaching the second years how to convert Wizarding money into Muggle money, and how economics adjusted the value of Muggle money depending on the country – something that didn’t affect Galleons and
sickles, which paid the same wherever you spent it in the world. Again, much moaning that the Muggles over-complicated things.

“Charity,” said Dumbledore. “I shall only need a few minutes, but it is quite important.”

She nodded, strongly suspecting she knew what this would be about. She sat sideways on the chair at the nearest desk to her and invited him to take one on the aisle opposite. He patted the chair’s cushion before carefully gathering his silvery robe and seating, chortling at the novelty of sitting at a student desk again.

“My dear, without further ado, Severus came to see me on Friday. He told me what he had done.”

Charity almost winced at the sound of him name, and having it confirmed that Dumbledore had come to talk to her about it filled her with dread. She knew enough about the Dark Arts to recognize Legilimency, she knew what Severus had done and she knew that it was highly unethical but fully expected Dumbledore’s intent to be to convince her otherwise.

“I want to ask first how you are? Between all the additional work with the audit, and then the Dementor attack, this event has added yet another loop to your roller-coaster ride I fear.”

“I’ll be glad of a break over Christmas,” she replied. “I am taking my daughter to Calais.”

“That is good. Good. A chance to properly refresh. It is lovely there, I have shares in a holiday stay in Hardelot-Plage. It always does me the world of good.”

“Yes.”

A pause. “Then I shall get to the point. You are familiar with the practice of Legilimency? Severus is skilled at it, as with occlumency, and as part of his High Sorcerer qualification took a moral oath. So what he has done is very serious, particularly since he is a professor. I’m sure I need not tell you how very distressed he is about this.”

Charity flared briefly. “As you must be as well,” Dumbledore hurriedly interjected. “That goes without saying. I probably should have said that the cause of Severus’s distress pertains far more to how he has hurt you, rather than any professional implications.”

“He has no idea how he’s hurt me,” she muttered.

“I am not defending him,” Dumbledore said, with his eyebrows raised. “I have told him that this one act of impulse has put his career at considerable risk. And I think he already knows what it has done to your trust.”

Charity didn’t reply, because that was the most confusing part. She would still trust Severus with her life. In seconds. She would follow him anywhere, enter a burning building if he said she needed to. She had never met a man with more integrity. So how had this happened?

Because he hadn’t trusted her.

“Charity, I want to let you know that he has acted wrongly against you, and if you wish to lay a formal complaint, you are entitled to do so.”

“A – a what? Lay a complaint? What will that do?”

“It means the incident will be investigated and then a formal hearing held to determine how Severus needs to answer to his deeds. Since he has willingly confessed everything, I don’t believe it would
be especially onerous on you except that you would need to recount what happened. It could be personal,” explained Dumbledore, all the while keeping his voice low and level.

“But I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to get him into trouble. This – what happened, it’s a matter between two people, I don’t even know why he went to you about it. What he did was horrible, but he and I need to deal with it, I don’t want to lay a formal complaint.”

“The context was personal between you two, that is true, but improper use of Legilimens is a grave matter, he was right to inform me. If I had discovered the breach some other way it would be much worse for him.”

Charity nodded slowly, realizing what he said was true. She looked up at the Headmaster. “What did he say about us?”

“He is a private individual. But I could tell he was in intense anguish. While I believe he expects nothing, he would also ask for nothing but your forgiveness.”

Forgive him? Charity stared unseeing at the toy money in her hands, remembering their last moments in the archive, her pounding heart, the brutal mental assault, her sense of wretched helplessness in the face of it, so sudden, so unprepared. Forgive him how?

“Nothing will be healed – for either of you – if you don’t talk,” said Dumbledore.

The bell rang distantly, signaling the start of the next class.

Dumbledore reached across the aisle and patted her hand which rested on her lap. “I will leave the decision with you. Reflect. If you decide to lay a complaint, you will need to see me.”

Then he rose and silently left the room. Charity put her hands over her face and heaved a huge, shaky breath.

Dumbledore called a staff meeting later that afternoon. As Charity was coming down the stairs from first floor to attend the meeting in the staffroom, she saw Severus briskly covering ground from the other direction, his robes billowing, obviously having come from the dungeons. Heat rushed to her face and for a split second she considered turning and hurrying away, sending her apologies to the meeting, hoping Dumbledore would understand. Then he saw her, his eyes locked on hers and he stopped. She couldn’t speak and he didn’t either, they were both frozen.

The door of the staffroom opened and McGonagall came out. She saw Severus but didn’t notice Charity at her spot on the staircase. “Severus! Do come in, did you see Hagrid on your way? We’re still missing a couple and Albus wants to get started.”

Their eye contact broken, Charity came around. She would attend the meeting, she needed to remember who she was, where she was, that she needed this job and that work went on. She straightened her back, waited for Severus to enter the room then followed a minute later.

Her heart plummeted when she walked in and realized that, apart from a seat right next to Dumbledore – which is where everybody would be looking – the only other seat left was next to Severus. To his credit, he looked mortified as well, and in fact hovered behind his chair, unsure what to do. “I can stand,” he muttered to her as she took a hesitant step towards the table.
Hagrid entered, and took the last chair beside Dumbledore.

“Don’t be -,” she muttered back, aghast. “Sit. Let’s just sit.”

As if the chairs were electrified, she and Severus gingerly took their places, earning a curious glance from some of the other teachers. Except Sinistra, Charity noticed, who was smiling at her across the table with her brows raised.

Dumbledore had waited patiently, not drawing attention to the awkwardness between two of his faculty, and having a side conversation with McGonagall. When everyone was ready, he cleared his throat and then drew from an inside pocket of his robe the teacher questionnaire.

“Thank you for coming on short notice, everyone. I only have two items on the agenda, but we can discuss other business at the end if need be. The first item is with regard to the compulsory surveys issued by the auditors. The student groups start this week, and of course, these questionnaires will need to be completed and returned by each of you as well.

“As I mentioned at dinner the other night, if you have students in your classes required to attend one of the groups, please release them at the appropriate time. They should have a note as verification that they have been randomly selected. I am told the groups last approximately an hour.”

“Are they going to be asked about us?” Flitwick inquired, voicing the concern of every teacher in the room.

“I don’t know what the questions will be,” Dumbledore replied. “And we are not allowed to know. But don’t be too concerned if the students express their opinions. They are, after all, only opinions and extremely subjective ones at that. Every person in this room has at some time cause to be unpopular, which as far as I’m concerned, shows you are doing your job. I have plenty of experience of students loathing the very ground I walk on. So I shall not be paying any attention to feedback about which teachers are liked or disliked, or popular this week, or generous with points or any of that nonsense. Am I clear?”

Murmurs of assent around the table.

“Which brings me to this questionnaire. It is completely anonymous. And the results are analysed by the auditors, which means I never even see the finished documents. You will place the questionnaires in the locked box over there if you haven’t done so already -,” he pointed to the deposit box on a table at the far end of the room and some teachers made a show of turning to look at it, as if they hadn’t been gossiping about this very subject for the last week, “and they will be collected by the auditors on Wednesday. Be honest, all of you. The information received from these questionnaires will be examined by the Board, and may make a real difference to how Hogwarts is run and your experience working here.”

“I think its rubbish!” declared Hagrid loudly and indignantly. “I can’t even understand the bloody thing, but what a load of old bollocks. What’s it ma’er to them how Hogwarts is run? Its run bloody well is what! Best school in the country. Best school in Europe ‘s’far as I’m concerned.”

“Thank you Hagrid,” murmured Dumbledore, then he was about to speak again, when McGonagall spoke up.

“I happen to agree with Rubeus. I don’t know why all the secrecy about it. If a teacher has a complaint or a concern, they should just speak up, not hide behind a silly questionnaire.”

“Hear, hear!” said Pomona Sprout. “I think it’s a cheek. No teacher needs to stay here if they can’t
be happy. But Headmaster, if a teacher is critical of Hogwarts in this questionnaire, the problem is with them, not with you."

“Well I’m not sure -,”

Flitwick squeaked, “If you don’t want to answer the questionnaire, just put a big line across it and put it in the box. We should just object on principle.”

“I second that,” said Lupin. “Questionnaires don’t make any difference anyway.”

“Please, everyone, don’t be -,” said Dumbledore, alarmed.

Madam Pomfrey said, “And I object that support staff weren’t even given an opportunity to comment. Not that I have any complaints about Hogwarts, but that they view us as second-class citizens around the place. I wouldn’t fill one in.”

Madam Hooch huffed and even banged the table. “I think this entire audit’s been a huge imposition and a ridiculous waste of our time and government money. I’ve never been so professionally humiliated in all my career.”

A heated melee broke out as teachers competed to share their objections. Charity sat and listened, not contributing, but conscious of the hours and hours of work she’d put in to make sure the institution complied with the audit. For some reason, the cheap but furious resentment showed by the staff ostracized her, as if they viewed her as somehow complicit, and more than anything she would have drawn comfort from knowing Severus felt the same. He, too, sat silently, his fingers laced together before him on the table. She remembered him saying on their visit to Diagon Alley how proud he was of the work they’d done, how nobody else would know or understand the effort that had been put in. However objectionable the exercise, together they had worked hard to protect and defend the school.

Charity looked at Dumbledore and was startled to see him staring directly at her. His eyes flicked to Severus and then gradually he raised his hand, giving enough time for any last grumbles to be aired, before saying, “Now then, that’s enough. Quiet please. I hear your concerns. Yes, thank you Hagrid, I do understand. Please, everyone, much as you might object, the audit has another week to go and we will be complying, we will be doing what the audit asks and we will be cooperating. Sir Byron came to visit, as you know, and he said many positive things, so please, let’s not ruin this for ourselves now. Furthermore, most of you aren’t aware of the momentous effort put into complying with the audit by Severus and Charity here, who have labored tirelessly for weeks now on top of their normal work to get this done. Join me in thanking them, please.”

He started a golf-clap and the teachers joined in, rapidly gaining momentum, and Flitwick gave Severus such a hearty slap on the back that he was nudged forward on his seat.

Charity blushed furiously, unaccustomed to drawing any attention to herself amongst the faculty. But she smiled and acknowledged the looks and comments offered to her and felt, for the first time, a small kernel of kinship between herself and the other teachers when she realized that they didn’t, in fact, hold her responsible.

When at last the applause had died down, Dumbledore smiled and said, “On to more pleasant matters: consider yourselves reminded of the Staff Christmas Party on Friday the eighteenth, at 7:30pm in the Great Hall. Dinner for the students will be early that evening as most should have returned home for the holiday. For those remaining, I have asked for a skeleton crew of substitute staff and Prefects if they’re here to stay either in the Common Rooms or the staffroom for the duration of the function. Obviously if there is some form of disaster then we’ll need to attend to it,
but assuming all is well I encourage you to come along, enjoy some music, food, wine and possibly
even party games.”

“Games?” said Flitwick mischievously. “Are you setting up your bowling alley again,
Headmaster?”

“My dear Filius – I have my Chocolate Frog card reputation to live up to. But perhaps no Chamber
music this time. I have extended the invitation to the Board as well, so we may be graced by the
company of Board members and their partners, which, I think, given the precipitousness of the
Triwizard Cup is politic. Sir Byron has already expressed his intention to attend for a few hours.
While I can’t force you to come along, I do hope you will make every effort.”

Charity thought this must have been the worst staff meeting she had ever been unfortunate enough to
endure. She should have pardoned herself after all. Was Dumbledore doing this on purpose? At the
mention of the Christmas Party, her mind was immediately cast to the beautiful gown that Severus
had paid for, his sweetly formal invitation to escort her, how happy and thrilled she was at the idea of
it. How she had held his arm at Diagon Alley and for a few hours felt like the happiest woman on
earth.

Although she couldn’t look at him, Charity was aware that Severus had propped himself on his
elbows, his chin on his hands, pensive. The gown, the invitation was almost certainly on his mind
too. Waves of hyper-consciousness flowed between them.

Feeling eyes on her, Charity looked up to see Sinistra indicating towards him meaningfully and
Charity gave a tiny nod, which was rewarded with a broad smile. If only it could be that stupidly
simple. She had no idea anymore if she was going to the Party, let alone with Severus.

A last item of business came from Flitwick, who also had a reminder, this one about his annual
Choral Performance in the Great Hall on Friday evening. Charity was looking forward to it – the
students sang beautifully, and it was one of the few extra-curricular activities at Hogwarts which
disregarded which House the students belonged to.

As Dumbledore called an end to the meeting, he produced a platter of friands and invited the teachers
to help themselves and the room broke into groups of chatting, animated staff at that point barely
indistinguishable from the over-excited, hormonal teenagers they were constantly suppressing.

Sinistra was at Charity’s side in a moment, before she’d barely left her chair. “So you’re going?” she
asked her, under her breath. “And with company? Did he ask you?”

Unsure how to answer, Charity had time to say, “Yes, but -,” before Sinistra gave a huge, cheesy
grin and grabbed her hands in excitement.

“Papus be saved, you lucky thing! What are you wearing? Have you got anything? We’ve got to
make you gorgeous!”

It was impossible not to get a little caught up in Sinistra’s adolescent thrill. With a shy smile, she
said, “I do have a new gown, actually - ,”

“Oh! I want to see!”

“I don’t know if I’m going, Aurora -,” she said mutely, but Sinistra suddenly wasn’t looking at her
but over her shoulder.
A ball of dread plunged in her as she followed Sinistra’s gaze to discover Severus standing behind her, waiting, and having clearly heard her last words. Control was poorly masking an expression of deep disappointment, in fact, he looked stricken.

Dismayed, Charity shook her head minutely. “Severus, I – I -,”

He stood straight and closed down his features, becoming the Professor Snape of old: remote, untouchable. “You do not need to explain. I completely understand.” Then he brushed past her and exited the room so abruptly she felt a breeze from his robes.

Sinistra stared at her, astounded. “What was that all about?”

“It’s…complicated,” said Charity, feeling ridiculous, hardly believing her own words.

Sinistra looked at her intently, then said, “Wait here.” She quickly crossed the room, consulted briefly with Dumbledore, who nodded, then came back to Charity’s side. “You’re coming with me, quick. We’ve got the afternoon off and I know where Trelawney’s hidden some plonk. You’ve got to cry on my shoulder a bit. Let’s go.”

“Really?” said Charity, stunned. But she didn’t resist, allowing Sinistra to take her up to her secluded little office after raiding Trelawney’s hidden stash of supermarket sherry hidden in an alcove behind a tapestry.

After Sinistra had plied Charity with three quick glasses of sherry, and they were comfortably settled on her velvet covered plush sofa, Sinistra asked pointedly. “What happened? Tell me everything.”

And Charity did.

It took her an hour from beginning to end, and Sinistra’s bottom jaw was almost touching the sofa by the time she finished at Dumbledore’s visit to her classroom only that morning.

“Oh. My. God,” Sinistra said, eventually. “Charity, the man completely adores you. Are you telling me you’re ending it?”

“How can I not?” Charity asked miserably. “I can’t forgive him that.”

“Did you see his face? He’s clearly gutted.”

“He regrets it, I’m sure. But he hasn’t apologized.”

“Did you give him a chance?”

“Whose side are you on?”

“I just don’t want you to throw away something that could be so great!” cried Sinistra, pouring two more sherries. “A chance of happiness for both of you. I mean, we all thought Severus must’ve taken a vow of celibacy, I mean, he never even looked at anyone -,”

“But you said that coven of witches -,”

“That doesn’t mean any of them were successful. Look, I’ll be honest, Charity, there was a time – a long time ago – when I tried. But he was like a fortress. I may as well have been air. I’ve moved on now, I’ve got another fella, but I often wondered who the lucky gal would be who finally cracked the Great Bat.”

Charity stared at Sinistra, still surprised to learn this even though she’d suspected it herself a while
ago. She was also delighted to learn that Sinistra had a boyfriend hidden away somewhere – maybe she’d meet him at the Party. If she went.

“You did? I thought he was sort of…disliked.”

“Disliked by the Gryffindor students, sure. Feared by Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students, absolutely. But worshipped by the Slytherin kids and the teachers have a helluva lot of time for him. Dumbledore goes to him for everything. Have you seen him in the hospital wing? Madam Pomfrey says all the time he should have been a Healer. And even though Dumbledore won’t let him have the DADA job, there’s never been a DADA teacher who could even touch him on the Dark Arts. Flitwick thinks the world of him and Hagrid won’t have a word said against him. I’ve never known Severus to fail at anything, but there’s something about him…for all that infallibility…you can tell he’s lonely.”

It was a ringing endorsement and Charity was at a loss of what to think or say, so instead sipped her sherry trying to absorb it all. It was fairly evident that Sinistra thought she was mad to let a little slip like an unapproved Legilimens get in the way of a decent catch. Much as she enjoyed Sinistra’s company, she thought they had different priorities in life. Not least of all, motherhood.

Silence hung for a moment or two, and Sinistra shrugged her shoulders philosophically. “I’m sorry, Charity, I’ve not been in your shoes, I’ve not experienced what you did. I wasn’t there. You know best what’s right for you. I just think, for what it’s worth, that you two were probably meant to be together, and when astral bodies collide, you should give that every chance you can.”
When Snape was delivering his goblet of wolfsbane the next day to the DADA office, he heard footsteps behind him. At first he ignored it, the corridors were often busy, but there was something in the pace that was keeping up with his that finally made him slow and look around.

It was Topias Poole. Following him.

“Ah. Professor Snape,” said Poole with a sly smile, coming to stand before him. He pointed at the goblet. “Professor Lupin still unwell?”

“Were you following me, Mr Poole? I am perfectly happy to come to your office if you need me. Professor Burbage is due to bring you documentation for Category Five in only half an hour.”

“I was coming to see Professor Lupin again. Seems our visits keep coinciding. But perhaps its best if you’re in attendance anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

Students were milling in throngs through the corridor now, on their way to their common rooms. Snape should have been securely in the DADA office, but here he was with a goblet of wolfsbane being curiously observed by dozens of pupils.

“Let’s get on, eh? Don’t need a hundred ears listening in.”

They made their way quickly to the DADA office and Poole gave the briefest of knocks before barging in and shutting the door swiftly behind him. Lupin positively jumped in his chair up at his desk, and on seeing Poole, became instantly alarmed. He looked from Poole to Snape and back again.

“Professor Lupin, sorry for interrupting,” Poole intoned in his nasally voice. “Seems I’m always arriving at medicine time. Perhaps you should be in the Hospital Wing.”

Snape put the goblet down on a nearby desk, but did not move from where he was standing by the door, waiting to see what Poole’s visit was about.

“Thank you Severus,” said Lupin, frowning hard. “Why have you brought Mr Poole back to see me?”

“Nothing to do with Professor Snape,” said Poole, walking up the length of the classroom and taking a seat in the front row. “But it might be good for him to listen to what I have to say.”

“And what do you have to say?”

“Since I was in London yesterday, I spoke to a couple of colleagues in the Ministry and I had them run a background check on you.” Poole paused to let the dreadful inevitability of this sink in. Lupin paled. “Professor Lupin, you’re no teacher. Are you?”

Lupin swallowed and he glanced frantically at Snape, who was standing, dumbstruck and helpless.
“Are you, Professor Lupin? You’re no more a teacher than I am. In fact, you’ve only been registered about six weeks. You’ve been teaching here since September, illegally. Am I right?”

Lupin swallowed again, but didn’t speak. “And to get onto the Teacher’s Registration, you lied on your application form didn’t you? You fabricated an entire qualification. You’ve never obtained any credential as a teacher and you’ve never held a job as a teacher. You’re bloody lucky you didn’t use Professor Dumbledore as a referee or he’d be under the spotlight too. And as for that DADA license, you obviously fraudulently applied for that as well. As soon as they’ve found your application form the department are going to send it to me, and this hole you’ve dug yourself will just get deeper and deeper.”

Lupin took out a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and mopped his brow and moustache. “It isn’t of consequence to Dumbledore if I haven’t a formal qualification, he -,”

“And why is it you don’t have any teaching experience? You’re clearly a clever chap – why go about this so underhanded?”

Snape stepped forward, sick and uneasy. “Mr Poole, we should - ,”

“What’s in the goblet, Professor Snape?” Poole suddenly snapped, rounding on him. “What does Lupin need a cure for?”

Snape hesitated, and Poole, with uncanny appositeness, said, “I’ll remind you I’m a practicing Legilimens and I am authorized to use it where necessary. Tell me what is in the cup. Take off the spill cap.”

Snape remained still, but Lupin stood, scraping back his chair as he did so, and wearily came down the dais towards Poole. He shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and slumped his shoulders. “It’s wolfsbane, Poole, as you know perfectly well. I expect you’ve already checked the other register with my name on it.”

“Fourteenth February 1966, Valentines day to a Muggle. But to you, the day you officially became a werewolf. And you’ve been collecting welfare from the Department of Magical Creatures since you turned seventeen. Including the last three months.” Poole reported with satisfaction. Clearly he’d been looking forward to this moment.

Snape looked at the drawn Lupin and then back at Poole. “You must find your job very rewarding.”

“This is what they pay me for, Professor Snape. Not everyone can do it.”

“Your mother must be proud.”

“I wouldn’t get cute with me, Snape. You’re the one holding the wolfsbane. There is an entire collusion here and this is going to come at a pretty price for Hogwarts.” He put out his hand. “Give me your DADA license, Lupin. You are stood down.”

“You can’t do that!” blurted Lupin. “I have a class in ten minutes!”

“Nothing has been decided, Mr Poole, and nothing will change in the next hour,” said Snape. He handed the goblet to Lupin, then added, “Professor Lupin should continue with his class and you and I can visit the Headmaster immediately. You can inform him yourself of the discovery and we can decide what needs to be done this afternoon when classes are finished.”

“I’m in charge here!” said Poole furiously. But he withdrew his hand. “I’d be packing my bags if I were you, Lupin!”
Ashen, Lupin stared after them as Poole and Snape stormed out of the DADA office, up the corridor to the gargoyle corridor and the Headmaster’s office. “I require the Headmaster urgently,” Snape told the gargoyle, who left his post with the message. In minutes it returned and let them pass, up the spiral staircase and into the round office.

They had barely crossed the threshold when Poole declared angrily, “Professor Dumbledore we have a matter of official Ministry business and I insist that you request an audience with either Bartemius Crouch or even better, Sir Byron. Please contact them by Floo.”

Dumbledore stood flummoxed beside his desk. He had been on his way to the door to greet them but stopped in his tracks at the sight of the red-faced Poole. He look enquiringly to Snape. “What have you done now?”

“This concerns Professor Lupin,” stated Poole loudly. “And I won’t speak further until you have either gentlemen party to the conversation.”

“Lupin,” Dumbledore repeated, realization dawning on his features. “The audit…”

“Please, Professor Dumbledore, I insist! If you don’t arrange a connection I shall report interference with the audit proceedings.”

With a sigh from the bottoms of his feet, Dumbledore threw Floo powder into the fireplace and requested connection with Crouch or Byron. Byron responded.

“Albus?! All well?” he asked cheerily.

“Erm, it would seem -,”

But Poole interrupted. “Sir Byron, can you attend a meeting here, it is quite urgent.”

“Is that you, Topias? Uh, I have visitors in ten minutes -,”

“Perhaps you could ask your secretary to postpone them for a few moments. Your attendance is urgently needed here.”

“I, uh, I see, uh, very well…”

Dumbledore used magic to disappear the fire that had been burning in the grate to admit access to Sir Byron, who emerged, ten minutes later, dusting down his jacket and looking extremely baffled. “Mr Poole, what is all this about?”

“I’m afraid I am duty bound to report a very serious infringement of Ministry regulations in the appointment of Remus Lupin to the role of teacher at Hogwarts,” said Poole officiously, still showing a lot of colour in his face but rallied by the presence of Ministry hierarchy.

“Oh. I see. What is wrong with his appointment?”

“He does not meet the prerequisites to hold a teacher’s position. Furthermore, he is a werewolf.”

“Oh. Oh,” said Sir Byron, raising his brows in a rather startled way and looking at each person in turn. “I suppose the audit found this out?”

“I had officers in several departments run checks for me yesterday. He has been on the Lycanthropy register since 66. He has been transforming regularly throughout. Professor Snape here makes him wolfsbane.”
Dumbledore offered Byron an armchair and took a seat himself. “I am sorry to say, Bernard, it is true. Mr Poole has been doing his homework. It is a shame you didn’t attend Hogwarts, Mr Poole, no doubt you would have achieved highly.”

“What does Professor Lupin teach?” asked Byron.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Dumbledore and Poole at the same time. Byron nodded his head and frowned again.

“Mr Poole, you have done a most competent job, yet again. Thank you. I would like to take it from here, if you don’t mind.”

“Sir?”

“You’ve done everything you need to do here. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I should like to talk to Professor Dumbledore alone, if you would be so kind.”

“But sir!” exclaimed Poole, turning beetroot.

“Severus, please take Mr Poole with you back to the auditor’s office. It looks as if he may need a few minutes,” said Dumbledore.

Snape opened the office door and waited for the ropable Poole to storm out before shutting the door discreetly behind him. He didn’t need to show Poole the way at all – the auditor refused to acknowledge Snape as he fumed on his way down the staircase and marched off down the corridor, knocking over little Euclid Tattinger on the way. When Snape came up behind Tattinger and extended a hand to help him to his feet, the boy jumped upright of his own accord and scuttled away with eyes like saucers.

Snape continued down to the first floor to the auditor’s office and was admitted by von Rheticus immediately. Poole had indeed returned to his desk, where he was now cursing and throwing things about to the intense discomfort of Matte and Dunn who sat immobilized in their seats, but it was Charity, seated by the side of Matte’s desk, also wide-eyed, that caught Snape’s instant attention.

Charity didn’t know where to look. Poole was ranting about the categorical imperative of the audit, the irremissibility of the contract, the duty of good faith and various violations he had been witness to, throwing innocent but convenient pieces of parchment into the fire and generally having an adult tantrum having been turfed out on his ear. When Snape entered, he garbled about a web of lies and insinuating vitriolic accusations, but Snape didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest. He waited for a pause in the diatribe, then said calmly, “I think you’ll find everything is in order for Category five. Professor Burbage, may I have a word? In private.”

Stunned, Charity rose and followed Snape out of the office and into the corridor where they were alone. She looked up at him. He said, “Charity, I’m sorry, I must speak with you. Will you please give me a few minutes? That’s all I ask.”

He was so commanding. It was difficult to collect her senses. She shook her head, confused. “What is it? Why?”

“Not here. The archive. Please.”

She frowned. “I don’t want to go to the archive.”

His jaw ticked, but he evidently counted to ten then said, “I need to talk to you in private.”
“Fine. Here then.”

“This is a corridor.”

“Do you honestly think I’ll go into the archive with you again?”

Snape flinched, as if she had fired invisible arrows at him. He took a breath, closed his eyes then resumed his position of dignified repose. “As you wish.” A quick glance up and down the corridor to check they were alone, and while classes were on, the corridors were free of students, but Filch or Peeves were an omnipresent possibility. He steeled himself.

“Charity, how can I show you how sorry I am? Name it. Anything. I beg of you forgiveness. That is all, nothing else, I will leave you alone, I will depart from your life, just please…say you forgive me.”

He looked abject and she utterly believed him. But she said, “I’m not laying a complaint. If that’s what you’re worried about, don’t. Your job is safe.”

“No, you misunderstand,” he responded instantly. “I don’t care about that. Honestly. Lay a hundred complaints, I don’t blame you. That’s not what I seek. I want to know that you are alright, and that, that, you know how desperately sorry I am.”

She held his gaze. “Tell me. What did you see?”

Something like a tremor passed through him. He blinked, but it was slow, pained. After a long moment in which she could read on his face the sorrow, the regret, where he turned inwards, opened that box in his head that he had pushed everything into, opened it like a guilty child and revealed the crime, he said, “You were telling me the truth. You were honest with me. I was jealous, I was afraid, I was weak. And I am sorry.”

“What did you see?”

Sunshine, a single shaft, broke through the clouds and lit the pane of a window nearby, reflecting on the stone.

His eyes refocused, and met hers. “You have a beautiful daughter and you wanted to please her for her birthday. You’d spent days thinking about it, you had a hundred ideas about what to get her for her birthday but you were still undecided.”

That hurt. So much invasion, so much violation. It was her turn to wince. “What else?”

“I saw myself,” he murmured, his voice so guttural as to be almost unintelligible.

“Yes. You. So much of you.”

A long, weighty silence. “Yes. I – I didn’t know.”

“How could you not know?”

“Because I seem to want you so much more.”

Her breath caught. And when she finally had the courage to look into his dark, dark eyes, she saw the heat, a burning. The entire universe spiraled in an instant into that fire in his eyes, and she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think.

A group of Slytherin students suddenly rounded the corner at the far end of the corridor, talking and
laughing, two of them were throwing a bludger back and forth.

Snape stepped back, and as if the previous five minutes had never happened, stalked towards his Slytherins in a swirl of black robes and they all halted at the sight of him, and without speaking he held out his hand and they obediently dropped the bludger into it. “Bletchley! Higgs! You should be in Transfiguration. I want an explanation in an hour in my office. What’s your name? Weldon? Where are you meant to be? Why aren’t you there? I’m taking ten points off Slytherin for this. Don’t argue. Give me that – what is it? It’s confiscated. Class! Now!”

The group dispersed in several different directions and Snape watched them go.

Charity looked on from where she was standing, and something about the scene felt terribly familiar, as if she’d watched it a hundred times, and it was very comforting, very reassuring. To her, at that moment, it was as if she and Severus had been together always, with a thousand silly quarrels and differences and arguments between them, and each of them hurt, they all stung, but somehow it reached a point where life and death stopped resting on them, and mycelium they had grown beneath the ground between them were still bound inextricably together, untouchable, unseeable, forever in a ring.

She smiled.

Over the next few days, the auditors met with the groups of random students in the cleared classroom and again the school was buzzing with talk. Peeves had gatecrashed on one group and the Bloody Baron had to be sent in to make him go before the group could resume. The auditors took notes about what the students said, but they were closely guarded and each evening the auditors took all their material with them in their briefcases to Hogsmeade.

On Thursday morning, when Snape went to the audit office, Poole glared at him from his desk by the fire. “Category Six, Professor?” Poole almost shouted. “Matte and Dunn need to get started!”

“Is there a problem, Mr Poole?”

“Yes! Obviously! Where is the material for Category Six?”

“I can get that, but why are you shouting at me?”

Poole was quivering with rage and fought with himself internally for moment before picking up a pile of papers on his desk and shaking them at Snape. He recognized them as the teacher questionnaires. “Is this some kind of joke?”

“You’ll need to explain -,”

“They’re not filled out!” Poole exploded, and threw them down again. Matte and Dunn busied themselves at their desks, watching furtively. “Just a line through each of them! Except one, and that’s not enough to be statistically valid. Who organized this? It was you I bet.”

Snape picked up the questionnaires which had been due the previous day. There were exactly fourteen, and all but one had a line drawn across the front page, or NA written on it. He himself had joined the rebellion and refused to answer the questionnaire, but he was surprised that it had gotten such sweeping traction across the faculty.
“No, you are mistaken, it was not organized and certainly not by me. It would appear the teachers have merely agreed amongst themselves that the questionnaire is not for them.”

“You included, clearly, unless you’re the person who filled one out.”

“I think, what this response communicates, is that the teaching faculty at Hogwarts are more than satisfied and don’t appreciate being asked to complain about their employer.”

Poole glared at him some more, then said in a snide voice, “Aren’t you just so pleased with yourself. Between Lupin and the questionnaire, you think you’ve got one over the Ministry but I’m here to tell you, Professor Snape, this school isn’t exceptional in any definition of the word. You haven’t stitched up anything. Don’t take me for a fool.”

At that point Charity entered carrying the paperwork for category six and seven as well, having come via the archive, and she gave Snape a quick smile upon seeing him. Then she noticed Poole and hesitated. “Is everything alright?”

“Give that to Matte,” ordered Poole pointing at her files. “We have work to do. Send up tea please.”

She frowned but left the room and Snape followed her out. “What’s with him?” Charity asked.

“They collected the teacher questionnaires yesterday. Only one was filled out.”

Charity laughed out loud. “Priceless! I did the line across the front thing myself. Who completed it? Was it you?”

“No,” Snape answered. “I didn’t. It may have been Dumbledore. From what I could see of the questionnaire, whoever answered it gave everything perfect scores. Anyway, Poole believed I instigated it and has taken exception.”

“Thank god this is all over soon.”

They were in the Entrance Hall, waiting for a kitchen elf to come out of the Great Hall after breakfast clean up so that they could order tea. The front door banged open, filling the room with sudden light as it was a bright and frosty morning outside, and Hagrid came through carrying an enormous Oregon pine, replete with an anxious squirrel.

“Ah, Christmas Tree time,” murmured Snape as they stood like spectators while the giant wrestled the tree through the door and argued with the indignant squirrel.

“I’ve carried this blasted thing all the way from the forests on the other side of ‘Ogsmeade Station,” Hagrid told them, obscured on the other side of the tree. “’Ad to bring it across the lake on a boat. An’ Dumbledore wants twelve! Least he backed down on the live reindeer.”

He dragged it through to the Great Hall as several elves scurried out of his way carrying piles of dishes. Charity cornered one and placed an order for tea in the auditor’s office.

Snape took out his wand and carefully captured the squirrel using a levicorpus spell and then levitated it outside where he released it. As he was crossing the Hall with his dangling, chattering rodent, Dumbledore came down the marble staircase and tut-tutted at the trail of pine needles from the front door. “Is Hagrid bringing the Christmas trees in?”

“He’s sourcing them from across the lake apparently, so could be quite an expedition,” said Charity, and using her wand, cast a quick scourgify as the needles were quite slippery.
“Let’s have a look,” said Dumbledore, entering the Hall. “I want them decorated in time for the Choral Festival tomorrow.”

In the Hall, Hagrid propped the tree upright and Dumbledore conjured a sturdy pot to hold it. “That is a fine tree indeed. Eleven more, if you can, Hagrid, they’ll be very impressive. Filius can do the trimming. Now -,” he turned to Snape and Charity, “Just the people I need to talk to. Walk with me.”

Dumbledore wandered out of the Hall, through the front door and out into the grounds, followed by a slightly bewildered but obedient Snape and Charity. “I am looking for holly, mistletoe and ivy – there!” he pointed to a holly tree on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, laden with bright red berries. They walked up to the tree, crunching across the frost and Dumbledore took out his wand. He cast a charm and branches of holly were freed from the tree and twisted and contorted themselves into a large, glossy, bristling wreath. He handed it to Snape to carry, who took it tentatively. “Like that?” he grinned at Charity’s exclamation. “Made that charm up myself. Now keep a lookout as we walk.”

“I thought you might like to know the outcome of my chat with Sir Byron,” he told them, his eyes scanning the trees. “Fortunately he’s a reasonable man and we came to an agreement. Lupin can remain at the school for the remainder of this academic year, but then he must submit his resignation. While he’s here, you’ll need to keep making him wolfsbane, Severus, he can’t present any risk at all. He’ll need to go to London over Christmas and sort out some affairs with the Ministry because he’s been accepting welfare as you know. That will need to cease while he’s taking a wage with us. Sir Byron will deal with Cornelius Fudge to seal and secure a ministerial exception, although I don’t foresee any difficulties there – Fudge owes me a great deal – but it is to be based on three promises from us. The first is that the Board have say on future teaching appointments. The second is that Lupin assist Harry Potter in his defence studies. Apparently Harry has asked to learn the Patronus Charm, which is exceedingly difficult in one so young. I didn’t commit to any particular defences, but given his recent adventures I think equipping him with some useful tools might be beneficial. And lastly, and this was the angle that turned it, Lupin will help bring Sirius Black to justice. I used your suggestion, Severus and convinced Byron that since there is history between the two men, it could be that Black still trusts Lupin.”

“Why would he?” Snape demanded. “as far as Lupin knows, Black betrayed the Potters as secret-keeper.”

“Black maintains his innocence to this day. He may find it easier to convince an old trusted friend than a room full of Wizengamot.”

“I don’t believe it for a minute,” said Snape bitterly. “But Lupin offered the same deal to us. I think he knows something. I think he knows where Black is.”

“Then let’s give him room to do what he needs to do,” said Dumbledore, “at any rate, I have briefed him on these events, he understands and accepts the reasons. I have rarely seen a man more desolate, and I’ll be honest, I was crushed on his behalf. I blame myself.” He spotted some ivy growing in the shadow of some birch trees. “Charity, let me teach you this wreath-making charm.”

Dumbledore showcased his rather exceptional teaching skills with Charity and she mastered his spell in two attempts. Snape was freshly reminded that Dumbledore wasn’t Headmaster by accident; it was something of a loss to the school that he had left behind the classroom. Brandishing a rather beautiful ivy and winter green wreath, Charity looked delighted, but her face fell when the sound of the school bell rang out. “Oh no, I forgot, I have a class. Excuse me gentlemen, thank you Headmaster.” She shoved the wreath at Snape and hurried up the hill to the castle entrance as the two
men watched her leave.

“Just lovely,” said Dumbledore, and Snape threw him a cross look thinking he was referring to Charity, but realized the nimble old man had turned his attention to the ivy wreath and was examining it. “She’s a competent little thing, a natural talent, just needs a bit of cultivating.”

“She does have a strong, innate ability. She had powerful instincts as a child, apparently. A lot of uncontrolled magic.”

“Yes. Flitwick had high hopes for her when she was at school here. Couldn’t settle, I recall.”

They resumed walking, their breath making plumes in the frosty air. They could see Hagrid with Fang setting off again to retrieve another tree. He waved at them as he passed.

“When I asked her whether she wanted to raise a complaint against you, she seemed appalled at the idea,” mentioned Dumbledore. “She said it was something you two should work out between you. Have you apologized? Has she forgiven you?”

“We’ve talked briefly. She told me she didn’t want to take things to a formal footing, which I am obviously relieved about but it was never my greatest concern. I have apologized, but I couldn’t say that she has forgiven me. She seems friendlier today, so perhaps it is merely time she needs.”

“Ah. That seems positive to me. And what about the Christmas Party? I assume you’ll be coming together?” Dumbledore had spied some more holly and was busy charming up another wreath.

“That is, uh, less certain…”

Dumbledore paused to look at him. “You have asked her Severus?”

“Yes, sir, I have. Some time ago in fact. But she’s…expressed some doubt…now.”

“I don’t think so,” said Dumbledore, twirling his wand to make a circular shape. “I freely admit my knowledge of witches can be a bit on the light side, but I believe you still have time. She is clearly very fond of you. I think you just need to show her how serious you are about making amends.”

Snape nodded and accepted the third wreath from the Headmaster.

“Can you give her a Christmas gift perhaps? I know you’re not much in the habit…”

Snape almost slapped his forehead. “Of course, Headmaster, you’ve reminded me. I do in fact have something I intended to give her, I had forgotten it.”

Dumbledore laughed at him. “Dear boy, it won’t work for you if you don’t give it to her.”

“Thank you sir, I shall see to it as soon as we’re back in the castle.”

“Excellent. And now see here -,” Dumbledore bade him to follow him along a dirt path a little into the forest. He stopped at a tall tree. “Look up there – mistletoe – just the ticket.”

“Yes. I see.”

Dumbledore cast a quick spell at the mistletoe and gently transported it down. “We’ll keep this nice and fresh in time for the party.” And like everyone’s rather bawdy old uncle, he winked at Snape. “Make sure you take advantage of it.”

A little later, Snape deposited the wreaths in the Great Hall for Dumbledore to muse over and saw
that Flitwick was now busy decorating the large pine tree. “Filius, could I trouble you for some advice?” asked Snape while the Charms Professor was balanced precariously on the top of a step ladder, waving his wand about enthusiastically as white and gold baubles materialized from a box and placed themselves around the branches. “Advice from me?” responded Flitwick, glancing down. “For you Severus? Can’t imagine what I can help you with, but of course, by all means.”

“I have an antique contraption that need’s its charm refreshing. I’ve tried it myself but can’t quite get it. Would you have a look?”

“Certainly!” said Flitwick. “Delighted.”

Snape went down to his quarters and retrieved the Faerie Call, and within a few minutes, Flitwick was examining it carefully, a monocle to his eye, most intrigued. “It’s lovely,” said Flitwick. “But you think the call’s lost some of its power. I think I know where I have that charm in a book. Up to my office, Severus.”

As they walked together up to Flitwick’s tower office, Flitwick asked him where he’d come across the Call and its eventual home. Snape wasn’t sure whether to mention Charity, but told Flitwick it was to be a Christmas present.

Flitwick glanced up at him, amused. “Really? I’ve never known you to exchange gifts, I rather thought you scorned that kind of thing.”

“I, uh, haven’t had much need…” mumbled Snape, relieved when they reached the office. He hadn’t realized that people had viewed him as such a Scrooge.

The walls of Flitwick’s office were lined with bookshelves crammed with books and he scrambled up a sliding ladder and rolled along examining the spines, pulling a few out and shoving them back. Finally he selected a book above his head and used his wand to retrieve it and lower it to his desk. “That’s the one. Spells and Charms of Medieval Romania. I like it because they’ve done the translation in English.” Once up at his desk he became absorbed in the task and for a long time simply ignored Snape, who had begun to browse the library himself while he waited.

When Snape heard incantations coming from the dais, he turned to see Flitwick in almost a trance, his wand pointed at the centre of the Faerie Call, and delicate multicoloured sparks of light and magic emitting from his wand tip as he murmured an incomprehensible spell. For the second time that day, Severus saw for himself the talents of his co-workers that had secured them their place at Hogwarts. Silly or foolish he may well describe it, but Flitwick could do things he couldn’t. Really, this was what the auditors needed to see.

Presently, Flitwick seemed satisfied. “Come and see, Severus. Those cunning Carpathians, look at this beautiful magic. Now understand, I’ve merely enhanced the existing charm, the original magic is still there. How old did you say this Call is?”

“No, no,” replied Flitwick impatiently. “The book says the original charm dates back to the eleventh century. It was still intact, just a little dusty. You’ve got a wee beauty here. Listen.” Flitwick tapped the Call and the mechanism began revolving and from it emitted a haunting, murmuring melody that made no sense to human ears, but which Snape recognized from the evening he’d let it play. “That will attract faeries from miles around. Remarkable. Who did you say you’re giving this to? It’s rather precious.”

Snape coughed and flushed. Flitwick, keenly observing, said, “Is it Charity Burbage?”
Resigned, Snape said, “You too?”

Flitwick sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers together. “I didn’t notice you. I noticed her.”

That surprised Snape and he raised his brows.

“Charity was a dear favourite of mine. She has a rebellious streak a mile wide and I can’t resist them. I actually contacted her when the MS role came up, she was always arguing with me about science and technology compared to magic, we couldn’t be further apart intellectually, but we just clicked. I knew she’d be perfect for the role, I knew she would challenge those pompous purebloods around the place, just what we needed. I must say, Severus, I approve of your taste, she is an absolute delight.”

Snape didn’t know what to say, but he smiled.

“Look at you, grinning your head off, I don’t blame you. When she first arrived, she was clearly uncomfortable and I tried to help her I really did. But Dumbledore gave her that dreadful archive project and she just disappeared. I think she used it as a bolt-hole. For a while I wondered if I’d made the right choice, inviting her back to Hogwarts, I mean she struggled with it so when she was a student. She wanted to do science, she felt she could make a difference in the Muggle world. Frankly I was surprised when she said yes. But what I noticed, when I realized something was up, she came to dinner one evening in a witches gown, and she looked, well, forgive me Severus, but she looked like a picture, and I remember thinking, Hello – what’s happened here? Then all of a sudden, she’s quite the thing, isn’t she? On that audit project with you. I had Kettleburn asking about her the other day, and I daresay Hooch wouldn’t say no to a dinner date.”

Again, Snape was at a loss for words, but it warmed him to hear Flitwick’s reminiscences.

“And so it was you, all along, bringing her out of her shell,” said Flitwick, looking at him wonderingly. Then he turned serious. “Now listen here, young man, if I hear she’s been hurt, trust me I will be onto you. I may not be tall, but I know a thing or two, don’t test me. She is a bright, bright young lady and she is a responsible woman as well. Has a child I believe. She cannot be a plaything.”

Snape shook his head, in some ways belatedly grateful that someone took the trouble to give him the fatherly speech he would otherwise never receive. To know that someone had seen the value, the beauty in Charity before he had was also somehow affirming, because she was not the surface, showy type; James Potter would never have got it. “Filius, she is…I can’t describe…”

Flitwick smiled and relieved the pressure. “Well she’s got you giving her presents, and that’s a first, so it’s obviously something a bit special. You have my blessing, dear boy, I couldn’t think of a nicer couple.”

Together they walked back down to the first floor, and while on the marble staircase, Hagrid came through the front door again, carrying another pine tree.

“Rubeus!” said Flitwick suddenly, and Hagrid stopped in his tracks, dripping melted frost onto the floor.

“Rubeus, look what we have here. Clever Severus found it. A Faerie Call.”

Hagrid dropped the tree where he was standing and stared at Flitwick. “A real one?”

“Yes. Eleventh century. I’ve just improved it. Severus, I think you should let Rubeus play it.”
Hagrid came up to take the Faerie Call in reverential hands. “Severus – why didn’t you tell me you ‘ad it?”

It wasn’t really a question and Snape thought better of saying anything while Hagrid looked it over carefully from top to bottom as if it were made of glass. “I’ve seen a lot of fairy activity in the forest lately. Are you saying you’ll let me use it?”

“Ah, well, it’s a present -,” said Snape and Hagrid looked at him directly.

“For Professor Burbage?”

“Yes!” squeaked Flitwick excitedly. “Worst kept secret, apparently!”

Snape died a little inside of pure mortification.

Hagrid continued looking over the Call for a minute longer then said, “Tell you what, I got an idea. Why don’t we set it up at my hut, an’ come the evenin’, when there’s loads of fairies around it, you bring Miss Charity down to see it. Thass a much better present than a bit of old contraption what she don’t understand.”

Flitwick actually beamed at the idea. “Oh yes, that’s wonderful. Tonight will be the perfect evening for it. And Severus, if you don’t mind my saying, I think you could take a pointer or two when it comes to romantic gestures. I can’t wait to see how it works. Rubeus, can we use the catcher, I may use the fairies in my classroom for decoration…”

The pair wandered off with the Faerie Call in the direction of Hagrid’s hut. As obsolete as he may have found himself, Snape didn’t hold a grudge or even feel put out. On the contrary, he thought what he was currently feeling might actually be the thing they called the spirit of Christmas. “Bah humbug,” he thought to himself, and drawing forth his wand, attempted to levitate the pine tree off the Entrance Hall floor.

That evening, at dinner, Hagrid leaned over to Snape and muttered as furtively as was possible for him that the Faerie Call was working like a, well, charm and even in daylight several had been lured out of the Forest. Hagrid had apparently captured these early responders in a wicker basket for Flitwick’s classroom. “Bring Charity down at nine pm and rug up well, it’s freezin’ out.”

Through dinner, Snape pondered on how to convince Charity to take a walk with him outside on a freezing winter night at a time many were thinking about having a bath and going to bed. Finally, knowing Charity, he decided to let curiosity do the work for him. As the students were leaving the Hall to return to their Common rooms and dorms, he strategically placed himself at the door ready to catch her as she left. Typically, she wasn’t alone, but with Professor Sinistra, who watched everything so closely she left virtual burn-marks.

“Um, sorry, Professor Burbage – may I have a quick -,”

“Professor Snape,” said Charity, rather overdoing the pretense at professionalism, he thought, since evidently any notion of their relationship being a secret was as historical as a Professor Binns class.

“If you are not otherwise engaged this evening, could you spare me a few minutes, around nine pm?”

“Nine pm? That’s rather late, Professor Snape,” said Charity looking concerned and glancing askance at Sinistra, whose eyebrows had shot up.

“Uh, indeed, I apologise for the hour, however it is the only time that I can show you...”
Hooked. The two women were suddenly extremely intrigued. “Show me what?” prompted Charity.

“I’m afraid I can’t say.” They stared at him. “It is a surprise,” he added. Then he worried she might spend the interval imagining all sorts of extravagant things, particularly with Sinistra throwing fuel on the fire, so he concluded, “It’s only a small thing, but I believe you may like it.”

Sinistra gave Charity a little nudge at this point, so Charity said, “Well then, of course. Where shall I meet you?”

“In the Entrance Hall. And dress warmly, we will need to venture outside.”

Charity gave him a small, curious smile and nodded, then she and Sinistra departed, the Astronomy Teacher making exaggerated swooning gestures as they walked. Snape found that oddly gratifying, having never before been the man to trigger that sort of response in a woman. This must be how it felt to be a teenage Sirius Black.

At eight-fifteen, and unaccountably nervous, he went out himself to check the performance of the Call, and was astonished to discover he could actually see the light of the fairies from the front steps. By the time he reached Hagrid’s hut there was a swarm of them, drawn to the melodious Call Hagrid had hung from a hook in the eve of his roof. A rugged up Hagrid was catching the odd one with a butterfly net. “Severus! She ain’t here is she? I’m not ready!”

“No, Hagrid, I was just worried in case it wasn’t working, but obviously that’s not going to be a problem.”

Hagrid paused and stood straight, staring into the middle distance, clearly concentrating on something. “What’s that?” he muttered. “Can you hear that? Is it ghosts?” Snape saw he was trying to hear something, so drew his wand and tapped the Faerie Call to still it. “There!” said Hagrid, “What is that?”

And now Snape could hear it too. He followed Hagrid out onto the lawn towards the castle and realized that was where the sound was coming from. Looking up to locate the source, he saw a crowd of students, many in dressing gowns, standing at windows and balconies that faced Hagrid’s hut, booing collectively. Snape formed a thought about what was going on, and Hagrid confirmed it. He let out a shout of laughter and said, “The blighters think you’ve come to confiscate the Faerie Call! Wonder ‘ow long they’ve been up there watchin’.”

The sad irony was not lost on Snape. But he didn’t want an audience when Charity came down so he waved his arm at the jeering spectators. “To your Common Rooms, now,” he shouted. “Are you all Gryffindors? I’ll take points!”

Fortunately he then recognized the taller figure of McGonagall appearing on the balcony, attempting to herd up the wayward students. They pointed at Snape, remonstrating, and she looked in his direction, but she was too far away to discern what she was thinking or saying. Reluctantly the students were ushered back to their rooms, and Snape turned to Hagrid, who was still chuckling away. “They’ll never know the truth,” he said.

“What? Tha’ their favourite bat is actually a big ole softy? Nah, don’ ruin it for them, every school needs a teacher the kids love to ‘ate.”

At nine, in a thankfully deserted Entrance Hall, Snape waited dressed in his winter cloak. Two minutes later, Charity appeared at the top of the staircase and hurried down. She wore a warm beige coat, scarf and leather gloves. With her honey-coloured hair pulled into a loose ponytail, her face lit up with attentiveness, she looked young and endearing.
She looked up at Snape quizzically when he took her hand, but neither spoke, not wanting to draw any attention, and Snape led her silently out of the door.

The moon had risen, and it was almost full, glittering on the frosty grass and spilling across the surface of the still lake. They didn’t need a lantern as they descended the steps, and as Snape directed Charity towards Hagrid’s hut, he could again detect the otherworldly glow of the faeries that were gathered, fluttering like sparkling moths, concentrated around the Call where the glow was at its brightest, but their shimmery pale hues were visible all around Hagrid’s hut and amongst the nearby trees and garden.

As they walked closer, the hum of the Call became audible and Snape could tell from a slight squeeze of Charity’s hand that she had discerned magic in the air, in ways that Muggle’s barely could, witches and wizards had a sixth sense for it. Snape paused in their passage to let Charity see the hut from a short distance, as it truly was a rare and beautiful sight to see so many tiny pinpricks of enchanted light flying freely. And then she saw, and he heard her gasp softly and whisper, “What are they? What’s making the light?”

“Fairies,” Snape told her, looking at her now, drinking in the wonder on her face.

She glanced up at him, smiling, artless and he urged her on again. “Come and see. Hagrid’s waiting.”

Indeed Hagrid must have been watching them approach as he came out of the door of his hut, a huge grin on his face, arms held aloft. “Merry Christmas, Miss Charity,” he said. “What do you think of them?”

Charity stood open-mouthed as the tiny beings fluttered all around, trailing glowing vapors of magic dust, their pale, phosphorescent wings in shades of pink, blue, green and violet. She noticed they were gathered around the Faerie Call, would flutter in towards it, bump into it then flutter away again, only to repeat the fruitless but irresistible task.

“Oh, its amazing!” she breathed. “Why are they here? Why are they flying to that thing?”

“It’s a Faerie Call,” Snape told her. “It’s for you.”

She looked up at him, confused. “For me?”

“It’s a gift,” he said. “From me. For Christmas. I remembered you asking about the fairy ring, I thought you might like to see some of the real thing.”

An opalescent yellow fairy landed on her head for a moment, then fluttered away again, and a shimmery vapor of magic dust settled on her hair. “Severus,” she said, her eyes warming as a smile from her heart formed. “That is the most beautiful, thoughtful present anyone has ever given me.” Then she reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear, “Thank you. Thank you so much.” And then to his disbelief, she let her cheek linger against his then touched her lips to the soft skin. It was as if she’d branded him. The feel of her in his arms made his heart pound and his sleeping giant rolled and then stopped, abruptly, as if becoming aware. And then as if she were a mere wisp, she slipped free, and Hagrid said, “Go’ one of ‘em for me, young lassie?” and he bent down so she could give him a hug as well.

Still stunned, Snape could only stare in a daze as Flitwick emerged from Hagrid’s hut, holding a bottle of liqueur and little crystal glasses, which he must have brought with him as Hagrid didn’t have anything small in his hut. Charity laughed delightfully at the sight of him, and he began to describe the Faerie Call to her, the history, the construction, the means of stopping and starting it. As
if from a thousand miles away, Snape continued to watch Charity as Hagrid caught a fairy and deposited it in her cupped hands. “Look! This one’s a pixie!” he said, catching the little creature and holding it by the wings so she could examine it.

Flitwick came up to Snape, who couldn’t seem to come out of his daze, and offered him a drink. “Get this down you, Severus, you look as if she’s put you in a trance.”

Snape threw back the hot, sweet spirit and Flitwick grinned at him. “Are you quite sure she hasn’t given you a love potion?”

“Filius,” replied Snape under his breath, “There isn’t a potioneer in the land who could bottle this.”

Flitwick nodded, eyes twinkling behind his specs. “There is no tonic for any man like the love of a good witch. You are fortunate indeed.”

Then something behind Snape caught his attention, and he turned as Flitwick announced, “Headmaster! Minerva! How wonderful, do come and see this glorious sight. A wee tipple?”

As McGonagall followed Flitwick towards the hut, exclaiming that she’d seen the fairies from the Gryffindor tower, Dumbledore came up beside Snape and said with an inquiring smile, “Is this your doing? Or Hagrid?”

“The Faerie Call is mine, sir,” replied Snape. “Or at least was. I have given it to Charity…a present, like you suggested. Flitwick helped to get it working properly and Hagrid offered to…well…test it.”

“Marvellous!” responded Dumbledore, and took a long sip. “Look at Charity, she’s like a child in a sweet shop. Severus, we may yet see the best of you. Do you think she’s forgiven you?”

“I am hopeful, Headmaster.”

He and Dumbledore joined the others, and as the evening progressed and Flitwick’s liqueur ran out, Hagrid produced a bottle of Firewhisky and so they had tapped off the Call and entered the warmth of his hut, and all six teachers sat in an assortment of chairs around Hagrid’s table, who was incredibly merry at this unexpected gathering, and they nipped whisky and laughed and told a hundred stories, and presently Snape felt Charity’s fingers entwine themselves in his beneath the table and Snape turned to see her gazing at him and it occurred to him that right here, right now, in this hut, with these people, with this woman holding his hand, he’d never been happier in his life.

But as events unfolded to conspire against him, the meagre angels of his fortune who had rallied so hard to give Snape one evening of respite, to know and feel how ordinary men felt, collapsed from the effort, since it was Snape’s destiny to end unloved, and he never even knew, and would not remember later, that in fact his life had peaked at that moment.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Christmas trees, all twelve, had been erected in the Great Hall – one in each corner and eight smaller against either wall - and trimmed both gaily and tastefully by Flitwick, with baubles, beads, ribbons, candles, clusters of holly, pinecones, mistletoe, crabapples, candy canes and tiny, indefinable twinkling things that looked a bit like stars. He had frosted branches with a dusting of permanent snow, and tiny birds, which couldn’t have been real but certainly looked it, twittered occasionally and flitted between the branches.

Dumbledore had finished with at least twenty wreathes and garlands of holly and wintergreen, interwoven with red and gold ribbon, and the same twinkling stars that Flitwick had conjured, and these were hung strategically at eye height around the room.

The mantelpiece, which already bore an ornate and majestic stone-carved Hogwarts coat of arms, was also now festooned with garlands, prancing miniature reindeer and a single, giant Advent candle, which had already burned down four days.

For Flitwick’s Choral Festival, the Hall had been transformed into an auditorium, with seats arranged in rows for the audience, box seats for Dumbledore and McGonagall, and even the dais for the High Table had been raised so that everyone could see the choir. While there wasn’t a school band at Hogwarts, the magical, omnipresent music she’d heard at Diagon Alley was here as well. She could identify the odd, classical Christmas carol as well as other, unidentifiable but unquestioningly pleasant orchestral music.

Apart from every student, teacher and support staff at Hogwarts, the house and kitchen elves had been invited to take allocated seats along the sides of the Hall, and special invited guests (members of the Ministry, Board and honorary Family members, such as Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, who had donated considerable amounts of money to the school or ‘purchased’ certain facilities such as the Quidditch gear or library sections) had cushioned chairs along the front behind Flitwick, the conductor.

The guests and audience poured in when the doors opened at half past seven. Students were required to wear full uniform including pointed hats, and they sat according to their House, smallest at the front. Prefects and Head students were permitted to find their own seats amongst the staff.

What caught Charity’s breath, as she entered for the performance, were the hundreds of floating candles which were usually plain (apart from the fact they were floating) had been transformed to look like a golden glass, so that they reflected the candlelight and twinkled even more brightly, and the ceiling showed the sweep of the known universe, not just the sky outside, but galaxies, stars, planets, comets, everything that was awe-inspiring outside of earth, and when she watched it she could see shooting stars, and planets orbiting, and she was staring so hard at it she bumped into the person in front of her waiting to take a seat.

The Hall was so gorgeous, so breathtaking, she felt a huge rush of emotion that made her cheeks flush and a hot lump of pure happiness lodge in her throat. She batted her eyelids against joyful tears. She looked around for Severus but couldn’t see him, which was disappointing as she would have loved to have sat with him, but she didn’t want to hold up the queue of people who had come to see the show.
As she’d entered, she’d been given the play list for what the Choir would be singing, which she glanced at now, and which only comprised five songs, starting with a speech from Dumbledore and finishing with all students singing the Hogwarts School song, at which time the students would head off to bed, and adults were invited to stay afterwards for drinks and nibbles.

She saw Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor students already seated, so that was the hold-up for Severus, the Slytherins hadn’t arrived yet. As if on cue, she heard his deep voice outside the front door of the Hall. “Wa-i-i-t!” She turned to look and saw the youngest and smallest of the Slytherins standing at the door, poised to enter, the remaining students lined up according to height, their emerald and silver robes gleaming under the candlelight, their Serpent insignia blazoned on their breast and atop their scrubbed faces, their black pointed hats. “Hodgson!” barked Snape, and the little boy in front jumped. “Find the front seats under the Slytherin banner and sit down. Everyone follow, IN A LINE remember the instructions!”

Through came the Slytherins and in file, found a seat and sat, unable to stop themselves talking and giggling and looking around at the decorations. The excitement was irrepressible. Charity could see the Malfoy’s turning to look for Draco, who didn’t disappoint, having grown several feet, it seemed, in the last few months and looking particularly splendid in his robes with his white-blonde hair matching the silver.

When the last student was seated, Charity looked for Severus, and he, standing at the door, she could tell was searching for her. She raised her hand, he spotted it and came directly. Soon he was seated beside her and she took his hand again, not caring anymore who saw. After the shindig in Hagrid’s hut, it seemed pointless to feign indifference. And anyway, she was too high on feel-good vibes to worry.

He didn’t say anything, but his fingers stroked hers and it felt delicious. The choir entered the stage, a mixed group of approximately thirty students, all ages, all Houses, wearing a generic Hogwarts uniform of black velvet robe, a bold Hogwarts coat of arm on the breast, tie and uniform, pointed hat and a pendant on a wide ribbon to signify they were choir members. The ribbon, striped in black and either red, blue, yellow or green were the only clue as to a House membership.

They stood there silently, and then Dumbledore advanced onto the stage, looking utterly resplendent in pearl and ivory robes, trimmed in gold, a tassel hat, phoenix-topped staff and his beard clasped in a gold band.

He stood at the swooping owl podium and addressed the audience with a gentle, heart-warming speech peppered with little jokes and asides, thanked everyone under the stars, wished everyone a wonderful Christmas then made a flourishing introduction to the choir. He took the podium with him as he left the stage, then disappeared, only to be seen seconds later in his seat in the box.

Flitwick raised his wand (on this occasion, serving as baton), a tune started and the choir began to sing.

As their truly exquisite voices filled the Hall, Charity gazed at their young, innocent faces and recognized several of them, some surprised her, she had not known they were in the choir and if she were honest, she wouldn’t have picked it. How they happened to be there was a mystery to her – did they know they could sing? Did Flitwick somehow search them out?

What she was certain of, and it was probably the thing that warmed her heart the most, was that this performance, the work and the talent they were now enjoying, was exclusively the realm of nature and effort. There was no magic involved. The children were doing what children did the world over, Muggle children, magic children, their pure, bright voices joined in unison, singing clearly with nothing other than what nature gave them and it made the hairs stand up on her neck with its beauty.
Entranced, she relaxed and leaned against Severus, not aware that a row back, two Prefects from Hufflepuff noticed, and one jabbed the other and pointed, and the jaw of the second dropped in amazement, and it was lucky it was a pair of Hufflepuff students who decided the whole scene was rather endearing and sweet and would only tell a select few of what they’d witnessed – that Professor Snape and Professor Burbage were in luuuurve.

Snape was woken in the early hours the next morning by a tingling on his inner forearm. He tried to sleep through it but it intensified gradually over the space of around two hours then abruptly stopped. When there was enough light to see by, he looked at his Dark Mark and saw that the brand – not ink, whatever it was – had darkened again, from a pale reddish colour to a grey.

The design had once thrilled him, when he was young and stupid, barely out of his teens, the kind of image hormonal boys are drawn to as a tattoo or on a fast car. He had wanted to prove himself, belong, and he was frankly flattered that the Dark Lord was impressed by his abilities. Now he thought that snakes and skulls were kind of crass, not what you’d expect from somebody meant to be cool, calculating and class-conscious like the Dark Lord.

But the Mark was more indelible than an ink tattoo, he could never remove it, never ignore it, at best it would fade if the Dark Lord were vanquished – which didn’t seem to be the case. The intensification of colour was an obvious clue that strength and power were recovering and in his deepest core, Snape was terrified.

Snape had selected a path that had never been walked before – the Dark Lord believed Snape still belonged to him, indeed, an inner-ranker, and playing fast and loose with his loyalties when he was young, desperate and reckless hadn’t seemed too difficult a debt. Now, however, now….he was about to become a playing card between the two greatest living wizards. He had sworn allegiance to Dumbledore and as far as he was concerned, that was his only key to survival.

And survive he must. He had a future to live for. Where once youth alone had sustained a burning self-preservation, now it was a chance of happiness, love, security and legacy. He needed to protect Charity and he wanted to try life with her by his side. He wanted the things Voldemort hated and despised and could never have or understand. Somehow, if the Dark Lord rose again, and he was summoned, he would have to forge a path between the two warring wizards and conceal his identity as never before, his skill as an Occlumens would be stretched to endurance. Because if Voldemort discovered the truth, he may not kill Snape immediately, he would kill Charity first and Snape would be forced to watch, driven to madness.

Even more pressing was the need to tell Charity everything. He couldn’t leave it any longer. He didn’t know how much she was aware of about his past, but if were to attempt a life with her in it then she had to understand how his past was now catching up with him. Death and destruction lay everywhere in his future, she had to know, she had to have the freedom to choose.

To live without her now was intolerable, but to live with her was possible death to them both unless he did something drastic. Could they escape? Could they escape Voldemort, Azkaban, Hogwarts? Could she leave behind everything she knew and loved to be with him, in exile? Her daughter?

Checkmate. Somehow, somewhere, the minute she’d told him she was a mother, he knew it would come down to this. The children of the women he loved were shutting doors on every exit.

And so the choices made at times in both their lives when their futures could not possibly have been known, the consequences impossible for foresee, the implications only now surfacing. And adults through time immemorial have waged war against the unfairness of choices thrust upon them without
the benefit of a full hand of cards, and the struggle that then follows is the story of humankind, the pursuit of happiness when every chance seems thwarted because happiness is never a formula, there is no guarantee, be you magic or Muggle, no one can tell whether your chance at happiness is now, then or never. You take your chances, just like a game.

And Snape had taken his chances.

Breakfast was a solemn affair for the Potions Master, sitting alone after hours of lying awake and who, unbeknownst to him, was the subject of chaste giggling at the Hufflepuff table.

Being a Saturday, the post owls had delivered a late edition of the Prophet, the weekend version, and Dumbledore was reading it over his eggs and tea, and eventually he folded it – poorly – and brought it over to Snape.

“Morning Severus. Enjoy the show last night?” Dumbledore took the empty seat next to Snape and helped himself to some of the coffee Snape had ordered.

“Yes, Headmaster, very much. Unless I am much mistaken, it gets better each year. I was glad to see at least a third of the choir comprised of Slytherins.”

“Are you drawing an equation between the quality of the performance and the quotient of Slytherins?”

“Yes. Naturally. Perhaps we can leave off the Hogwarts song next year? Or forever.”

Dumbledore guffawed. “Thought you might like to see this.” He placed the front page of the newspaper before Snape and sipped his coffee.

It reported that the Ministry would be auditing St Mungos commencing early in the new year.

“They’ve already moved on,” said Dumbledore. “We flattered ourselves that they cared that much. It was good for us ultimately, I do feel we’re better for it, like a spring clean. But if we thought we were special, we were fooling ourselves.”

“Sir?” said Snape, looking at the Headmaster who seemed somehow deflated. “Did you think the audit was visited upon us because we were special?”

“I am angry – to the point of helplessness – that the effort we put into it was for so little gain.”

“It wasn’t entirely pointless,” said Snape. Without knowing why, his mind was cast back to his trip to Diagon Alley. “It was good for Hogwarts. It was good for the faculty.”

Dumbledore nodded. “And entirely ruinous for Lupin. The DADA license was almost worth it. But now we’ll lose a perfectly good – better than good – member of staff because of some faff around bureaucracy.”

“Better be careful how you talk around Sir Byron at the staff party,” offered Snape, but he was thinking that Lupin’s resignation would be hardly too soon.

The three Auditors had left on Friday afternoon via Floo from Dumbledore’s office. Snape, Charity and the Headmaster had arranged a little sending-off party, the mood rather formal and official as Poole was still in high dudgeon. They did not yet know the results of the audit, or the student survey
groups, but were advised that this would be sent through after final assessments and protocols were observed in the Ministry. When the three auditors had vanished in a swirling flash of green, Dumbledore turned and shook the hands of both Snape and Charity. “Merlin’s beard,” he said, “I thought it would never end. This little meeting is the first opportunity I’ve had to view the output of the work you two have done. It was prodigious. The show’s not over, but regardless of the outcome, I want to acknowledge personally that you have shown great dedication and resourcefulness to Hogwarts. Thank you.”

Snape put away the paper, and sought Dumbledore’s attention. In a low voice he said, “Sir, since you’re available to talk, I want to tell you that my Dark Mark has been active, just this morning. Not at the level of a summons, but enough to convey that the Dark Lord is gaining strength. He clearly wants us to know that he is far from over. I think this is a presage of a return to power, perhaps imminently.”

“Ah,” was all Dumbledore said for some moments, his appearance even more crestfallen. “Thank you, Severus – if that’s your Christmas present, then you’ve given me quite the task to equal it.”

“It is obviously no present. I was planning on those gloves you asked for.”

“Stick to gloves. That’s actually something I need.”

Snape sipped his coffee to help swallow down a flash of irritation. “It doesn’t satisfy me to bring you this kind of news, it has preoccupied me all morning. The implications for myself are terrifying. But if I’m to operate on your behalf, then consider this my first instalment for the Order. Hide your children.”

Dumbledore nodded sorrowfully. “Why is it, just when you think things are looking up, you receive news like this? While it is not wholly surprising, it is like the ticking of a doomsday clock, you can never truly be calm for it.”

Snape’s finger circled the rim of his mug reflectively. “I was forced to think myself this morning what my options are. I don’t know of any Death Eaters who have…partners or relationships outside the circle. You are meant to be wedded to the cause, devout. The Dark Lord doesn’t want you to have any distraction. I can’t….there is no survivable way to…act as an agent and keep…” he trailed off, the situation sounding even worse when the words were stated aloud.

Dumbledore was nodding. “I do understand. Of course. Voldemort would hunt Charity down and kill her. Punishment and competition. Whether to reinforce your loyalty or as a precursor to your own demise. The school would lose you, lose Charity as well, the Order would lose its most critical pipeline and Potter’s chance of survival would be greatly compromised. You’re right. It is unsustainable.”

“Unless she and I -,”

“No. I won’t hear of it, Severus. There is no other way. I have already prepared her for this eventuality. I don’t know how long you have, but there is only one path ultimately open to you.”

Snape’s blood ran cold and he stared at Dumbledore. “I’m sorry, sir, did you say you’ve already told Charity about this?”

“Not in as many words – and, my dear boy, if you haven’t done so yourself, don’t you think you owe it to her to tell her? This Doomsday clock counts down the time for all of us.”

A cold, intense fury began to ball in Snape’s chest. He narrowed his eyes. “You treat me like so
“You willingly enslaved yourself to Voldemort, Severus, as you know perfectly well. We are all reduced to pawns on a chessboard when there is a war on.”

Snape loathed that particular truth, and he rubbed his Mark where it had stung at Voldemort’s name. “He is powerful but not infallible. My chances of surviving are far less if he discovers my allegiances rather than to defect and hide.”

“And you would be so selfish? Severus, you are having a tantrum. Enjoy Charity now, but when the time comes, you must play your part for the greater good, and your part is pivotal. Victory may well depend on it. Charity will understand. Perhaps, if peace can be restored, you will be able to resume where you left off.”

“Oh, I will be murdered and never know what it means to live a normal life. There is my basic and fundamental right to life, sir, I never willingly gave that to anyone.”

“Nonsense. Who told you that existed? Millions the world over never have it. At best, humans can plod forth torturously in hopes of attaining it for future generations. I tell you again, resign yourself and be motivated by the prospect of a peaceful time in which you and Charity can be unfettered. And for Merlin’s sake, tell her. Tell her today. Take her to my cottage, you can talk freely there. Good luck.”

Dumbledore rose, conversation over. Snape remained seated, trying to get mental hands around the anger, to shrink it, but it kept escaping through metaphorical fingers, it wanted to be loose, to vent, to erupt. He pushed back his chair so hard it tipped and fell with a crash, where he left it, and stormed out of the Hall. The Prefects at the Hufflepuff table watched him go and their eyes widened and they grinned slyly at each other.

The cottage belonging to Dumbledore was lochside. It was small, whitewashed with a slate-tiled roof, a lean-to and it faced out over the iron grey waters of Loch Dunshiel. There wasn’t a tree for miles, but hunched hills furled with tough grass, moss and bracken, through which ran a single unsealed track to the cottage and its meagre gardens. No-one knew why Dumbledore owned it or how he used it, but it had been loaned out to staff several times when an occasion called for it. Snape had been there once before, to call on Dumbledore himself who had been holed up inside to finish various academic papers and needed uninterrupted time and space to conduct experimental spells. On fine, summer days the cottage could be a welcome respite, with the loch reflecting blue skies and the hills purple and yellow with moorland grasses and flowers. In December, however, it seemed the embodiment of winter desolation itself, the house almost indistinguishable from a white, oppressive horizon, the grass frosted to a brittle brown and the lake itself emitting a still, eerie mist.

Snape and Charity apparated outside the cottage with a muffled crack. Charity was sidealong, having never even heard of the place let alone able to visualize it. On arriving, she turned and observed her surroundings and felt pinpricks of apprehension. This was not the location of a normal picnic, which was the ruse Snape had given her – he himself carried the basket of food – this was the sort of place innocent victims found themselves before terrible things happened. She took in the cottage, the lake, the obvious lack of any electricity, modern conveniences or means of contact and looked hard at Snape, who stood looking back at her.

“What is this?”

“Dumbledore’s cottage. I told you.”
“More like a shack.”

He shrugged, and walked up to the front door. A quiet incantation and the door opened, Snape entered and Charity followed.

Inside, mercifully, was more homely. Dumbledore had an eye for comfort and the rooms inside were decorated in a cosy, snug fashion, with rugs, cushions and soft furnishings in abundance, bookshelves, lamps and side tables all aimed at having a visitor sit and rarely move. After dropping the basket of food on the kitchen table, a well-executed wave of Snape’s wand had the fire and candles lit, and then, for fun, he blasted a mouse or several.

“Severus, please leave the mice alone,” said Charity. “They’re not doing any harm.”

“They are! They eat holes in things. Dumbledore would want me to get rid of them.”

“Why are we here? It’s obviously not a picnic destination.”

Snape heaved a heavy sigh. “I’m afraid we need to talk.”

“Again? This is not a good sign. And why are you in such a mood?”

“It’s a hard thing to talk about.”

“So you’ve brought me somewhere I can scream and no one will hear?”

Snape didn’t get the reference, but he did laugh a little. “We have one day. And Dumbledore suggested here because this way, we’re out of prying eyes and can’t be uninterrupted. Would you like something to eat?”

“No. I want to get down to business. I want to know why my weekend is being spent here.”

Snape decided to put the kettle on and make, at least, a cup of tea. Everything was a bit easier with tea.

Charity poked around and inspected Dumbledore’s cottage. There were pictures on the mantelpiece and she deftly wiped the dust off as the unknown people in the images waved and smiled. The books were, she was rather happily surprised to learn, fiction, although not subjects she would have picked herself, and many of a Wizarding origin that she didn’t know, mostly mysteries and crime varieties, thought it reflected well on her Headmaster that he took the time for recreation occasionally. She liked the artwork too, small prints mostly, nature and wildlife related, an occasional human study. He had a telescope set up at the window overlooking the lake, and in one corner, the wizarding equivalent of a gramophone, and beside it a short tower of records. A corner, glass fronted cabinet could be opened to access a very respectable selection of high-end self-replenishing Firewiskys, meads, wines and liquors, with the kind of glasses a connoisseur indulges in placed upside down on a shelf below.

“Any Headmaster portraits?” Snape called from the kitchen. He returned to the living room and quickly scanned the paintings, then spotting one in a pretty gilded frame which looked to Charity to be of an empty study or library with a floor-standing globe, he muttered, “Ah. That would be you.” He then took the picture down and carried it to an adjoining room. “Privacy,” was all he said by way of explanation on his way back to the kitchen.

Hearing the kettle whistle, which took time on a wood-burning stove, she settled on the sofa from where she had a view out at the lake and noticed the dark, brooding clouds that had materialized at the far end. Ducks bobbed closer to shore.
Snape brought her a mug of tea and took a seat in the armchair at the other end of the coffee table between them, facing her. He took a sip from his own brew, placed it carefully on the table, then proceeded to undo the buttons on the left cuff of his coat.

“What are you doing?”

“Showing you something.”

At first Charity had no idea. Then the sketchy lines of a rumour she’d heard once began to take shape. He had a tattoo or something to do with a nefarious past. She watched morbidly as he rolled up the sleeve and held out his forearm, and there, against the pale, smooth skin just up from the arteries at his wrist, was the skull and the snake.

The Dark Mark was routinely plastered all over the Daily Prophet, The Quibbler, wanted posters and shop windows in Knockturn Alley. It was instantly recognizable, and Muggle marketing experts would argue that rightly or wrongly, as far as a brand was concerned, Voldemort and his Death Eaters had done a brilliant job. Not just was the image immediate, but its message too, the association with evil, malevolence and crime was perfectly communicated. When Charity saw Snape’s Mark, and realized that the rumours of his past were in fact true, her first reaction was fear. She thought she’d known him, she didn’t, apparently, didn’t at all, and she was sitting in this room with a stranger. She put down her cup.

“You were a Death Eater?”

“Technically, and as far as the Dark Lord is concerned, I am still a Death Eater.”

“What do you mean as far as he’s concerned? He’s dead isn’t he? It’s over.”

“You see that the colour of the mark is grey? It will become a stark black. It is intensifying and it is becoming more active. He is alive and he is gathering strength. In time, it is probable he will rise again.”

She stared at the Mark, her breath quickening. Then she looked into his eyes, searching, trying to find him. “But what does that mean for you? Will he expect you back? Will you go and work for him?”

“He will think I have gone to serve him. But my allegiance is to Dumbledore, to his organization called the Order of the Phoenix.”

“I’ve heard of it,” she said, trying to remember where, how. The war had happened when she was at University, most of what she knew she had picked up through scattered news reports, patches of conversations, references. She knew Dumbledore had been front and centre, but mostly what had been newsworthy was He Who Must Not Be Named, scandalmongering 101, she had thought rather cynically.

“What will he have you do? What is your role as a Death Eater?”

“He asks me to spy for him, on Dumbledore, Hogwarts, the Order. He has me feed information. Run various errands, arrange various things. I am a strategist for him, an analyst, an advisor – not that he takes advice well.”

She considered this for some minutes, staring blindly out of the window, tea forgotten.

“Why Severus?” she asked finally, the question he had been waiting for. “Do you agree with what he stands for? His policy is based on a regime of fascism, blood supremacy, racism, extremism,
prejudice, hate, bigotry – the list goes on. Why Severus? Why? Why would you want to be a part of that?” Her voice had risen and she had trouble keeping a tremulous note out of it.

Snape dropped his eyes. “I didn’t join for those reasons.”

“Why then? You just hate Muggle-borns?”

“Obviously not!” he shot back, expecting this deduction would come. “This was some time ago, Charity, I was still a teenager.”

“Who let that happen?! Why didn’t anyone stop you? You clearly weren’t old enough to be making life-decisions like that, that – that bastard exploited a stupid, impetuous - ,”

Charity had a moment of realization, thinking on all the dumb reasons teenagers take half-baked risks. “Was there some girl? Was there a girl in his ranks you were trying to impress?”

He thought of Bellatrix but shook his head. “No. If I’m honest, my reasons for joining…I was seduced. They offered things…I didn’t have much…I was young, hot-blooded I suppose, looking for…direction, purpose. They liked what I could do. They offered me rank and profile. All my time at school was about being judged. With them, it was not about who I was, but what I could do for them.”

She internally critiqued his explanation. It was undeniable that everybody had times in their past, usually as teenagers and young adults, when they would cast about looking for a tribe to belong to. The values that would normally act as a compass when making these kinds of choices were still unformed, easily manipulated and not yet fixed enough to resist the spin of recruiters, and they knew that young, single men in particular were easy meat – be it fodder for wars, drugs, gangs – the chance of fortune, sex and notoriety were merely sweeteners to the compulsion to join the protection of a herd.

So Snape’s story was not implausible, he probably hadn’t read the fine print closely when he took a non-negotiable vow, and evidently didn’t have anyone to do it on his behalf and talk sense into him. He was pulled towards it, flattered, but pushed as well. She already knew that story, had seen some of it with her own eyes, the flip-side of the herd when it rejects you. She had seen the bullying from a distance, everybody had. Nobody examined it too closely, it was part of school life, no different from chickens establishing a pecking order, and somebody had to be at the bottom. But nobody wanted to be that one. Snape had fought it hard and possibly in a moment of desperation had sought to bolster his chances by encircling himself in a ring of power called Death Eaters. A gang of rich, pretty-boy Quidditch players who weren’t even smart or original enough to come up with their own tactics, definitely did pale against the likes of Tom Riddle and his accomplices.

But, like the devil, you paid with your soul. How could Severus have missed that bit?

He sat quietly while she processed the information, and inside she felt her heart fluttering like a trapped bird, thinking, I have imagined a life with this man, who is the enemy. I told him my beliefs about Muggle-borns and Purebloods, and all that time he had that Mark on his arm having sworn, sworn his life that he would serve a cause hell-bent on everything opposite to what I stand for. This man opposite me, who told me I couldn’t use the term mudblood, had freely joined the club that sought, at any cost, the expulsion – perhaps even the extermination – of her. Born to Muggles. A genetic freak. Rejected on either side.

“Why are you here?!” she suddenly shouted, and stood abruptly, her heart not letting her sit any longer, and her cup was bumped and spilled. “What are you doing with me, Severus? You know where I come from. I’ve told you what I believe, about all that, that bullshit – you didn’t think then
was a good time to tell me you were a card-carrying fascist?”

“I am not!” he shouted back, because now he realized he’d lost her. “I told you – that idiot I was is not who I am now. Dumbledore took me back, it was too late but he took me back and he offered protection. It’s where I stand. I am a half-blood myself, I remind you.”

“But I expect that’s what drove you to them. I expect you hated your Muggle father and decided that joining those racist, bigoted bastards was a good way of renouncing anything Muggle in you. You think they just overlooked that? They were just using you, you fool!”

Snape rose to his feet. “Don’t pretend you know anything about it, Charity. You don’t know my life-“

“And what if Voldemort finds out about me?” Charity raged, absolutely furious now. “When you’re sitting at his throne and anointing his feet, and somehow it casually comes up that, that you’re seeing a mudblood – what then? What then? Who gets to die? You or me, Severus?”

Snape couldn’t answer her, and the blood drained from his face. He looked away.

“Me!” she interpreted. She wrapped her arms around herself and stepped away from him, dimly aware of being in Dumbledore’s cottage, thankful now, that Snape and the Headmaster had obviously had the prescience to realise that news of her likely death would need some seclusion. The bastards! The lot of them! How stupid did she look?

She burst into tears and she shocked herself, not anticipating it. “So this is it then? Your breaking – is this it for us? You go and give me a fucking Christmas present then you tell me it’s over or everybody dies? This is fucked up!”

Snape was taking off his coat and loosening his cravat. She’d never seen that. In his white shirt with the top buttons undone and the necktie hanging loose he looked stunning. It generated a fresh wave of tears.

“You’re exaggerating,” he said, and took two steps towards her. “Nothing may happen. It is not the end of us, I don’t want that. That’s the last thing I want. But now you know how it feels to be blindsided. I had to tell you.”

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “You said the Dark Mark was getting stronger. If he comes back, then you have to go to him. It has to be over.”

“I haven’t seen him, I haven’t been summoned, the brand – it’s not an exact science it might not mean anything, I don’t know.”

“But why don’t you tell him the truth? Why don’t you tell him you’re not a believer anymore… perhaps he’d release you?”

Snape laughed unpleasantly. “Defectors die, Charity. I’m surprised you asked that.”

“What if he can’t find you?”

“And you? What would you do?”

She scanned possibilities in her head. Go into hiding with him? Where? How? They’d have to leave the country, her daughter, she wouldn’t see her daughter.

“I could wait for you…” she said lamely, and tears spilled. “I can’t leave my daughter, you know
that.”

He looked away again, nodding slowly. “Dumbledore saved me from Azkaban. If I defect, I lose that protection as well. I will be in the wilderness, alone, I don’t know if I could ever return. And what does an ex—Potions Master on the run, having no one to trust, live on? Oh, I could turn my hand to many things, certainly, but is that the man you want, Charity? I wouldn’t be what you were waiting for, I can tell you that.”

A long silence and then she looked at him and said with some finality, “We’re damned.”

“We have now,” he said.

“I don’t want now, I want forever!” she blurted out in a fit of passion, and then her breath caught when she realized what she’d said.

He stared at her. Her cheeks burned and she had to get out of this room, this stifling room so she hastened to the front door and threw it open, desperate for air.

“Charity, wait,” said Snape, running after her. There was nowhere outside to go, but she couldn’t let him look at her, the humiliation was overwhelming. She strode blindly along the chalky track.

“Wait, for Merlin’s sake, wait,” said Snape, and held her arm. “You don’t need to leave. We just need to talk it through. I’m glad you were honest.”

“Don’t patronize me, let me go,” she spat furiously, and wrenched her arm free. “Don’t you think you’ve done enough fucking damage? We could have had a chance, Severus! You fucking this up. You’ve ruined everything.”

“This is not about choices I’m making now,” Snape shouted, his eyes blazing. “The only choice I would make today is you. You can’t go back either, you can’t go and undo a marriage to a Muggle who can’t love you. You can’t undo the decision to bear a child who can’t be with you. You’ve done things that hurt us too.”

How dare he? That was entirely different. And he stood there in his shirt, his hair shifting in the lake breeze, and she could see his throat and collarbone, and why now, when everything was falling apart, did he have to look so desirable? The only thing she could think to do was to push him away. But it wasn’t that easy. Physically, emotionally, she wasn’t that strong against him. When she put her hands on his chest to shove, he grabbed her wrists and he was strong.

“Let go!” she hissed and twisted her hands. Her fingers grazed his Dark Mark and he suddenly released his grip and bent double over his forearm with a snarl of pain. “That burned!” he exclaimed and examined his arm. “Where you touched it.”

“What do you mean?”

He extended his forearm again and indicated for her to place her fingers on it. Tentatively, very gently, with the tips of her fingers she ran them from the length of his arm until they met with his Dark Mark and he flinched again and gasped. “Why does it do that?”

“Oh God, I can’t even touch you?”

“I don’t know why it does that, I’ve never had that before.”

“I bet I know. I bet it’s because it detects I’m a mudblood. Who knows what kind of screwed up magic he built into it. He wants to know about anyone fraternizing with the enemy.”
Snape met her eyes and didn’t argue with her, only because he didn’t know for certain, nobody else had ever touched it before, it was possible it had that reaction to anyone. But what if she were right? Was it wise to underestimate the Dark Lord?

When he didn’t dispute her theory, she felt the tears welling up again and turned away. Only last night, watching the choir with his fingers stroking hers, it seemed as though they were singing for her, she felt as if she’d been blessed by the very heavens. And then in the space of less than a day, she saw nothing but dead ends and crevasses and divides.

The words were gone now. No more came to mind, she felt utterly exhausted. She turned and slowly returned down the path to the cottage, out of the cold, Snape following her. Inside, she curled up on Dumbledore’s soft, pliant sofa and wrapped herself in a woolly throw. Snape shut the door against the world and surveyed the scene. In a few moments he had taken out his wand and cleared up the spilt tea, stoked the fire then sat on the sofa with her, silent, hanging his head.

For an endless time they simply shared the sofa, and slowly, slowly the monsters that had been launched into the room seemed to diminish without the words to feed them. Charity watched the clouds outside come rolling in over the lake, and Snape had shut his eyes and rested his head back and while she could tell he wasn’t sleeping, he was very still and calm. There was no clock in the room and with the sun obscured it was hard to tell what time it was, but she wasn’t sure if they were expected back. And now, amazingly, she felt hungry.

“Severus?” she whispered, and instantly he was alert and looking at her.

“I don’t want to go back to the castle, but I’m not sure what the arrangements with Dumbledore were. I’m not sure what time it is.”

Snape got up from the sofa and went into another room, presumably a bedroom and came back.

“Clocks have all wound down,” he said. “We’ll just have to tell the time the old fashioned way.” He looked out the window. “I’d say it’s somewhere between lunchtime and tea.”

She laughed, probably more so than his comment deserved, but it felt nice not to be fighting.

“Are you hungry?” he asked and she nodded.

“Bring down the basket,” she said, “we can eat just here.”

He did so, and shared out the provisions, which were uncomplicated sandwiches, fruit and cakes. Snape poured them each a glass of red wine from the cabinet and assured her that Dumbledore intended for it to be used, even though he’d opened a whole bottle which he didn’t put away again. They relaxed a little and made normal conversation, and after a second glass of wine, she was having trouble believing that earlier they’d been at each other’s throats, or at least, she’d been at his. And when she remembered what their future held, her heart constricted anew.

The conversation lapsed into a natural lull and now, satisfied after a meal, relaxed after two glasses of wine, she openly watched him. Aware now, that time was borrowed, she wanted to drink in every detail, to forcibly imprint him to memory, and not just his appearance, but his mannerisms, his smile, the tenor of his voice.

“Severus?” she asked eventually, softly, and he looked at her. “What made you change your mind? About being a Death Eater, I mean? Why did you go to Dumbledore?”

He didn’t answer, she could tell he was cast back to a time and to events that brought pain.

“Be honest with me. Please tell me the truth.”
“I needed Dumbledore’s help. The Dark Lord was going to kill some people and I couldn’t let it happen. I couldn’t save them myself, but Dumbledore could.”

“Were they saved? Did it work?”

“No. It didn’t work. All but one was killed. Harry Potter.”

She took a sharp breath. “You knew Voldemort was going to kill his mother and father and couldn’t prevent it?”

He didn’t need to speak, the hurt on his face said everything.

“But Harry was a baby - he didn’t mean anything to you. And I can’t imagine you would have troubled yourself unduly about James Potter, so – of course. Lily. You tried to save Lily Potter but she was murdered by Voldemort and somehow…somehow you let that happen?”

“No. I didn’t let it happen. They were in a safe place, hidden away. The Dark Lord would never have found them but for Sirius Black, he denies it but someone had to have told him. It is long ago now, but, but…”

“You carry a lot of remorse about it. You feel responsible?”

“I was responsible. I told the Dark Lord about the prophesy. I didn’t know then that the Chosen One was going to be Lily’s son.”

“Severus, he would have found out sooner or later, from other sources, I don’t think things would be different now if you’d never heard the prophesy. Are you holding onto guilt you don’t need? Or does it give you an excuse to hang on to her? Lily?”

He scowled. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

“Did you use her to self-select out? So long as your heart was devoted to a dead woman, you could avoid heartbreak again?”

“Charity,” he said warningly. “You’re going places you have no right to. You know how I feel about you, it is unbecoming to be threatened by someone in my past, someone who can’t be here.”

“If she was though, would I be? Even though she was happily married to someone else, they were clearly starting a family, you can’t get much more committed than that. Would you have moved on?”

“I won’t talk about Lily to you,” he said bluntly, his eyes boring holes into the coffee table. “I don’t ask about your ex, so I don’t feel I owe you anything about Lily.”

“You’re not over her,” Charity declared. “Oh my God, Dumbledore said you were loyal but …don’t you think you could once in your life be disloyal just to save yourself? It seems everyone owns a part of you. Everyone’s got more say over you than you do!”

Snape couldn’t refute this point, his own words to the Headmaster this morning were the same.

“Charity, I don’t want to fight again,” he said wearily.

“Yes, I know, I feel the same. Despite what you think, I’m not threatened by Lily. I envy her. I wonder what it must have been like for her to have been so adored by you.”

“How do you not know that?” said Snape, slowly raising his eyes to meet hers. “Surely you know
how I feel, I -," the words were there, right on the tip of his tongue. She waited. He wanted to say it, it just wasn’t how imagined it happening. Surely when you told a woman you loved her with every cell in your body, something he’d never said to anyone before, it wasn’t after an afternoon of intense fighting and the realization that your future was likely doomed. Instead he limped in to finish. “You must know,”

But what Charity heard was that he couldn’t or wouldn’t tell her he loved her, and it was probably because he’d just had a side by side comparison with his first, possibly only, true love. He was being honest. He may love her, but he didn’t adore her, wouldn’t ever love her the way he did Lily.
They disapparated back to Hogwarts soon after, so emotionally wrung-out they could barely talk. She said goodbye to Snape in the Entrance Hall, and it felt somehow final, and though she wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him until he couldn’t breathe, she didn’t, not now, and perhaps not ever.

In her rooms she considered packing and leaving on emergency leave, but she couldn’t stand the idea of telling Dumbledore, making it obvious that she wasn’t up to the job, that she couldn’t keep her wits about her. So she threw herself down on her bed, still dressed in her coat and boots, and decided to hide. She had done it before, she could disappear again, her wallflower act, her own private invisibility cloak.

Time apart was what they needed, time far apart; there was something about them being together that was starting to warp, just like that rare species of plant in Sprout’s hothouse that, once infected, would convolute and writhe, like a snake in pain, but so, so slowly in plant-time, so that it was possible to watch it happening in the space of weeks or months. Eventually the plant died, so ensnarled in itself it asphyxiated.

She would give them abeyance and room to heal. She needed to think.

The ground outside hardened with frost. Icicles formed on the eves of the Castle leeside. On the Sunday morning, Snape gave Lupin his final dose of wolfsbane and told him to take plenty of blankets with him to the Shack. Since the audit had finalized, Lupin had become quiet and withdrawn and Snape felt a slight kernel of sorrow for him, now that he had what he wanted. There was no sign of Black and Snape privately thought there never would be, Lupin had merely made empty promises that bought him time. For all anyone knew, Black was frozen stiff dead in a ditch somewhere. But at the mention of blankets, Lupin looked up and attempted a wavery smile. “Thank you, Severus. I owe you a lot. I do know that you can’t wait to see the back of me, but rest assured I still appreciate what you’ve done. He never suspected the DADA license, by the way. And Dumbledore told Sir Byron that you were concocting the most advanced wolfsbane available – I don’t doubt it got bought me six to eight months.”

“Oh, I do what is required…let me know if you need assistance during the transformation. I understand the moon rises early…”

He turned to leave, but Lupin said, “Severus – that time in the tunnel, when we were kids -?”

Snape started to shake his head and raised his hand.

“Let me finish. I want you to know – I – I – when I’m a wolf, the lycanthropy, I don’t recognize anyone, don’t think that I would have hurt you or anyone on purpose -,”

“I know all that.”

“It wasn’t a joke to me. I was furious with Sirius, and with James. I was furious that they used me
that way. I was furious that they used my condition to amuse themselves. I was furious that lives were put in danger, not just yours, mine as well. You might have done anything to protect yourself, we knew what you were capable of. And I was furious with the school that they chose to view it as a prank, some tomfoolery, boys being boys. Sirius and James could be first rate jerks when they wanted, I can’t tell Harry that, it would break his heart, but I see that you’re being honest with him, you haven’t got anything to lose by telling him the truth. He’ll never buy it, of course. Thankfully he has enough of Lily in him he sees more sense. I just…I just wanted you to know that, there was a time, if it hadn’t been the whole Gryffindor Slytherin rubbish, if we hadn’t been forced into corners, forced to take sides, there might have been a time when I…well I had a lot of respect for you.”

Lupin waited gamely for a response from Snape, but it was all too late for him. He understood, at an intellectual level, what Lupin was trying to say. But the two men were like orbiting planets, their paths never to coincide. Lupin may have mourned a lost opportunity, learned on reflection, as an adult, the consequences, but then Lupin had an advantage over ordinary men – he had scars.

Snape’s scars were invisible. They were lacerated across his heart, their disfiguring tissue blocked and stifled his emotions. His gave him no advantage because he couldn’t learn from them, he could only operate around them. And so he merely nodded at Lupin, then turned and walked out of the room without a backward glance.

Unbeknownst to Lupin, however, he was watched as he left the Castle before sundown, from a window in a tower. While the students ate their dinner, he was observed carefully stepping and sliding over the frozen stone steps, carrying his duffel with extra blankets slung over one shoulder, nobody to notice him except one; one who wouldn’t eat in the Hall that night. Lupin was watched tramping across the glass-like grass to the Whomping willow, overwintering, and slip like a shadow down the tunnel, gone, and the two lonely men went their separate ways, to their own separate worlds of hurt.

For four days, Charity and Snape were apart. A mere trifle of time for those who are secure, but for Snape, it felt like an eternity. The incessant turmoil was starting to have an effect on him, both physically and mentally. He lost weight, and caught a cold; sleep was elusive, he started to drink too much. In the classroom he was disconnected, the students were beginning to wish the old Snape would come back, at least that version cared enough to be angry. This version was late, sloppier, forgetful. The classes were less eventful, but they also learned less and that didn’t matter to Snape, it was the end of term, he would get it together again soon.

He got up each day, he shaved, he took class – everything he was supposed to – but he lived in the shadows. He had no expectation of seeing Charity and stopped even looking for her. In the evenings, he retired to his rooms using his cold as an excuse for avoiding company and would pour a large tumbler of whisky. Sometimes he would read until he fell asleep in his armchair, then awaken stiff and freezing cold, to then go to his bed and lie there, thoughts racing through his head for hours as he tossed and turned. One such night he eventually got up and went out, rugged up in his winter cloak he took advantage of the full moon to wander outside, feeling the freezing air on his face and in his lungs, taking a perverse pleasure in his shivering.

He missed Charity, her absence became a permanent heartache, and physical frustration had become a problem as well. Accustomed as he was to a bachelor life, he’d been capable of meeting his own needs during peacetime, but his body had been jolted out of hibernation by her proximity and her touch and it was starting to get very difficult to remain a gentleman. In Dumbledore’s cottage, with a
bedroom mere feet away, with her eyes raking over him filled with desire, it took a will of iron not to simply grab her, caveman style, and let nature take its course. For all their intense debate and emotional deconstructions, his instincts only needed ten minutes, max, and things would probably settle down nicely. Nothing seemed to relieve the urges either, they were a constant background pressure programming him like some kind of search and destroy missile to find her and claim her. Except she was nowhere to be found.

He understood why she was doing her disappearing act and didn’t blame her, in fact he could appreciate at a very cerebral level that it would do them so good to have some space. Ever since Diagon Alley, it felt as though they were flying through a meteor shower, under assault and without means of direct escape. Yet none of it was enough to shake his resolve about her. She thought he would never be able to, or even want to, replace Lily. True enough, Lily would always have the throne, but Charity was the person who made him happy now. If Lily walked into his office tomorrow and told him she’d made a terrible mistake and it was he, all along, that she should have been with, he honestly didn’t know what he would do. It was a spurious scenario, but it reinforced for him just how much Charity had taken up residence, that she had rocked the foundations of something he believed to be as eternal as the sun in the sky.

He was in the middle of a potions lesson with fifth years when a young Slytherin named Nash knocked on the classroom door and entered with a piece of folded parchment, which he delivered promptly to Snape seated up at his desk. The message had been sealed, he noted, usually indicating the subject was to be handled confidentially. When he opened it, he recognised Dumbledore’s handwriting immediately. The note beckoned Snape to the Headmasters office as a matter of urgency. Nash, a first year, was eyeing Snape closely, as if waiting to see a reaction. “Yes?” Snape uttered at him. “I have no reply, you’re dismissed. Go back to whichever class you were in.”

“Sir, that class has been cancelled. That’s why there’s a note.”

“What do you mean, cancelled? What was the class?”

“Muggle Studies, sir. The Headmaster has said it’s cancelled for the rest of the period. Can I go to the Common Room sir?”

A cold dread raced down Snape’s back at the name of the class, and it took a moment for him to realise that Nash was waiting. “Yes, yes – whatever the Headmaster’s instructions were.” His immediate presumption, as he packed up the homework and textbooks on his desk, was that Charity had taken ill or some emergency at home had come up, which is why he himself had been summoned. There was still over twenty minutes of his current class to go, so he informed the students to continue with their exercise, he expected to be back briefly.

He walked swiftly up the dungeon steps and to the Headmaster’s Tower. The gargoyle admitted him upon sight, indicating Dumbledore had passed on instruction and within moments he entered the office. There he found Dumbledore, stony faced behind his desk, Charity seated before him, eyes red-rimmed and mortified at his arrival, holding a cold compress to her forehead, and standing to the side of Dumbledore’s desk was Jacob Fetherington, sporting his usual defiant expression, lower jaw jutting, hands balled into fists at his side.

“Headmaster?” Snape enquired, instantly worried – it looked as though Charity had some sort of injury.

“Professor Snape, I believe you know this student Jacob Fetherington?” Dumbledore had a very stern, no-nonsense tone to his voice and looked highly unimpressed.
“Obviously sir, he is a first year in Slytherin.”

“I believe you’ve been making more of an acquaintance with him lately?”

“If your referring to some of his more recent activities, then yes, he has been in some trouble. Has he done something today, Headmaster?”

“Just now, in fact. I view it very seriously. Fetherington initiated nothing short of a riot in his Muggle Studies class and Professor Burbage has been caught in the cross-fire, so to speak.”

Charity closed her eyes and seemed to Snape, who was getting skilled at reading her expressions, more exasperated than anything.

“A riot? What exactly happened?”

Fetherington refused to speak, so Dumbledore related what he had seen after a Ravenclaw student had rushed to seek his assistance and he’d gone to the classroom to investigate. He discovered desks overturned, chairs thrown around, books, quills, inkpots and other sundry items strewn, and Charity at her desk with blood pouring from a gash in her forehead. The Slytherin students involved in the riot had fled the classroom, but the Ravenclaws had stayed to help Charity after she moved them out of the classroom and into the corridor.

“Of course I solicited names immediately,” said Dumbledore, “and all the Ravenclaws were as one in naming Fetherington the ringleader. I expect as his Head of House you will ensure that his discipline follows due diligence, but if he is guilty, it is to be treated as very serious indeed.”

“What do you say to this, Fetherington?” Snape demanded. “Is this true?”

Fetherington went purple and a mouthful of expletives came forth. Snape had heard everything under the sun, of course, after almost two decades of teaching, but it very rarely happened in the presence of a Headmaster and a Head of House. He was astounded, and then equally surprised by Charity’s frustrated moan and the way she shook her head, just like a defence lawyer whose been foiled once again by their own client.

“I think I’d take that as an admission of guilt,” stated Dumbledore. “I will thank you to never speak like that in front of adults again, young man! Apologise immediately. I shall be in touch with your parents irrespective of any other punishment considered suitable by Professor Snape.”

Unsurprisingly Fetherington did not apologise, but instead banged his fist repeatedly against his forehead. At this, Charity stood and said quietly to Snape, “I think he has some kind of learning disability. Something like an attention deficit disorder.”

Snape had heard of such things, and when students with behavioural issues were discussed in the staffroom, a teacher would invariably pose the question of whether taking a Muggle approach and treating the student as someone who might benefit from assistance rather than punishment could be an idea. This was, equally without variation, howled down by the faculty members who had most influence, those being the ones with pureblood status, hierarchy and/or a history with Hogwarts of greater than twenty years. It made victims out of perpetrators, they argued. Rewards bad behaviour. Undermines the discipline process and the Code of Conduct. Sends messages to the student body that poor behaviour can’t be controlled, they may as well all be victims of some special affliction rather than just disobedient, hormonal hooligans.

Snape didn’t disagree with Charity that Fetherington seemed unable to control his impulses, in fact, he was getting steadily worse. He was immensely disliked by the members of his House, who
neither trusted him nor tolerated him, and he had been isolated by all but a select handful who were becoming the next generation of Crabbe and Goyle, except this bunch made Draco and his goons look like characters at a Disney wedding.

Whether Fetherington suffered from some kind of chemical imbalance or a neural processing disability, he couldn’t say. The Wizarding world didn’t trouble itself unduly with such matters, there was no institution in which Fetherington could be tested unless his parents opted to send him to a Muggle facility, and few did, since the treatments prescribed by Muggle doctors were highly distrusted by wizarding folk.

At best, if a healing intervention were considered appropriate, Fetherington might be given regular doses of a calming potion or put under some kind of enchantment that made him appear as if he’d had a lobotomy. These addressed behaviours, but they also radically undermined a student’s learning capacity, motivation, initiative, independence and growth. They fell behind and didn’t have the wherewithal to care.

So it was only with the greatest reservation that these steps were taken. The overwhelming preference was to treat poor behaviour as wilful disobedience and address it with strict discipline. This left Snape standing somewhat awkwardly in the Headmaster’s office while Fetherington walloped himself, Dumbledore looked increasingly impatient and Charity sought his endorsement for her hypothesis.

“I, uh, shall deal with Fetherington in my office, Headmaster. Thank you Professor Burbage. And, I, uh, apologise on behalf of Slytherin for this unforgivable transgression during your class.”

Having stood to speak to him, she had taken the compress away from her forehead and he saw for the first time the injury. There was a large, purplish lump forming and a short but deep laceration which looked exceedingly painful. He didn’t speak but communicated his concern with his eyes, and she dismissed it by looking away with a slight frown.

Dumbledore glanced from Fetherington (“Stop it, boy!”) to Snape. “I want a report the minute you’ve made an assessment. Professor Burbage, please get that looked at by Madam Pomfrey. And I would like to meet with you later. After dinner, please.”

The tone in Dumbledore’s address to Charity informed Snape that she, too, was in some kind of trouble. She set her jaw in response and nodded before walking out of the room.

Snape wanted to talk to her, but Fetherington was the first order of business. His initial confusion had settled into a cool anger, and he marched the insolent delinquent down to the Slytherin Common Room where he was placed under House Arrest until classes had finished for the day. When the bell rang for the end of final period, he collected Fetherington and brought him to the confines of his office, stood him before his desk and snapped, “Well?”

“I hate her class, sir! I don’t want to do it anymore!”

“You will address your teacher as Professor Burbage. And you consider that an explanation, how?”

“Because I get angry in her class, sir. Professor Burbage. I can’t help it. I just feel like I want to wreck it.”

“Well this time you literally have. And you have injured a teacher. Were any students hurt?”

“Don’t know. I told them to get out of the way.”

“How was Professor Burbage hurt? How was she injured?”
“I don’t know sir, I wasn’t looking.”

“Give me names. I want to know who was party. I take it they were all Slytherins?”

“As if, sir, I’m not a dobber!”

“GIVE ME THE NAMES!”

“No sir! I’m not telling!”

“I’ll find out anyway, and if you cooperate now you’ll do better for yourself. Now, for the last time, who was with you?”

The boy glared at him and clamped shut his mouth. Snape fought a tremendous inclination to strike the look off his face, and as if to communicate this, slipped his wand into his hand which he proceeded to tap against his leg, the way his old teachers used to do with a cane. It was now absolutely forbidden to use corporal punishment, but some habits die hard.

“Fetherington, do you have any comprehension of how much trouble you’re in?”

“So what, sir? How’s that news? I know you hate me!”

“As I said last time we met in my office, my feelings about you are a matter of singular indifference. The issue is your behaviour, and your hellbent insistence on gross misconduct. Your wilfulness, your defiance and your contempt. I don’t care how much you dislike a class, what makes you think you can destroy it? I need an explanation, and if you can’t provide one that I find acceptable, then the next step is discipline.”

“Just get on with it, sir. Doesn’t matter what I say, does it? I’m done for now. I’m just glad that effing mudblood bitch got what she needed.”

“Why you -!” Snape swung out. It was a hearty cuff to the back of the head, enough to make Fetherington jerk forward. Snape watched as the boy looked up, shocked, and rubbed the back of his head.

“Sir! You can’t hit me sir!”

Snape knew that but he wasn’t about to go admitting it to a student. He regretted losing his cool, but there was still some latent satisfaction in venting his anger on the miserable little sod who had besmirched Charity.

“You, boy, are facing expulsion.” Snape was almost snarling, and he took perverse pleasure in Fetherington’s discomfort. “You haven’t said a single thing to redeem yourself and you in fact continue to dig yourself deeper. Referring to a Professor in that fashion is an abominable contravention to just about every rule in the school. You are a blight on your House. There will be an investigation and your future at Hogwarts hangs in the balance. Until then, you are to be sent home and await the outcome. Go to your dorm and pack your things, I will be in touch with your parents.”

Swearing under his breath, Fetherington stormed out of Snape’s office and slammed the door behind him. Energised, Snape sat down with quill and parchment and wrote a letter to Fetherington’s parents explaining his decision to suspend, then sealed the letter. Via Floo, he communicated his decision to Dumbledore. He then went to the Slytherin Common Room and apprehended the nearest Prefect with strict instructions to send a school Owl with the letter, address was on the front. After that, he called an emergency SHM for six pm, just before dinner. Finally, he went in search of
Charity.

She was in her classroom. Madam Pomfrey had done a good job with an *Espinsky* spell and now there was only a small sticking plaster on her forehead. The tables and chairs had been right-sided, probably owing to some quick magic by Dumbledore, but the remaining mess was being picked up and sorted by Charity along with two young Ravenclaw students.

Charity was performing a *Reparo* spell on the spines of several sizeable textbooks called *Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles*. When she saw Snape, she heaved a huge sigh of resignation. He came up to the desk where she was working and said quietly, “Are you alright?”

She shrugged lightly. “The impact of the blow was enough to split the skin, but I’ll definitely live. I mean, I’ll die of shame, but technically I’ll live.”

“What hit you?”

She held up the textbook. It must have weighed four or five kilos. He flinched at the thought of it. “I need to know what happened,” he said, again in muted tones casting a quick glance at the two Ravenclaws, who were practising their *scourgify* on some ink stains.

Charity turned towards them. “Thank you, girls, you’ve been lovely to help me. Ten points to Ravenclaw.”

“Thank you miss!” they chorused and didn’t hesitate to go.

Charity turned back to Snape implacably. “I’m trying to avoid you. I’m trying to let things level out. I’m trying to give us five minutes of peace.” Then she indicated towards her classroom in utter despair and defeat.

“I’m suspending Fetherington,” he replied, as if that somehow would help. “I’m seriously considering expulsion. He’s being an unforgivable little….”

“Go ahead and swear, Severus, you know I do. For what good it will do. But expelling him won’t fix his problem. He hates me, he hates this class because it exposes him.”

Snape perched on the end of the desk opposite Charity as she picked up another book and *Reparo’d*. The spine and loose pages magically sealed back up.

“What do you mean it exposes him?”

She took another deep breath, dropping the repaired book onto a stack on the next desk. Then she turned and held his gaze levelly. “It’s the reason Dumbledore will give me a bollocking tonight. I’ve been giving the students assignments with things like Lego and Meccano. It’s just child-level engineering: Muggle kids as young as five can build stuff using simple instruction, but pure-blood kids here are really struggling. Fetherington can’t process it when he fails, he can’t deal with embarrassment or humiliation. Every time he attempts to build something it falls apart. Anyway, I caught him trying to fix it with magic and I called him out. Next thing, pure chaos.”

Snape vaguely remembered Meccano from when he was a child. He never had any, but he recalled the other boys in his class talking about it. It had sounded boring to him. Why bother arduously screwing a bunch of pieces of metal together just so it would make the most archaic of movements, when you could cast a quick spell and make it tap dance?
Charity must have registered his sceptical expression because she said, “What they’re learning is that Muggles sometimes have to work through problems in a sequence. It’s teaching them that certain laws of engineering mean that to connect a to b you must slot through c. It is impossible to achieve a certain outcome unless you have followed a logarithm. It is a stark, stark point of separation between Wizards and Muggles. Well the laws of physics, the principles of engineering – issues that never trouble wizards – are both the starting point and the constraints upon which massive Muggle achievements have been built. Don’t look at me like that.”

He had been staring. Whether his thoughts had been evident on his face he was uncertain, but clearly she wasn’t happy. What he’d been thinking was how much he admired her.

She picked up another book, but the spine had been so damaged that great reams of pages fell free of the covers. In disgust, she simply abandoned it.

“My point is, Severus, that I noticed when I was doing these classes how much pureblood kids are unable to cope with the self-discipline, the self-restraint to start at a and work through sequentially. They want to cut straight to c. Or even d. And if I tell them to disassemble and start again, this time read the instructions, they can barely stand it. I’ll be honest, I think the magic gene comes at a cost. I would have said possibly inbred, but the fault is too consistent. Some left-brain function is compromised. I think if Voldemort got his way, it would come as a major, major impost on the viability of future wizarding generations. His best bet for sovereignty is to make very good friends with the Muggle-borns and learn the secret of cohabitation.”

Snape nodded, not disagreeing. As a half-blood, he was conscious himself of some significant shortcomings between his thinking and his co-workers. Nothing that would upset the order of things, but it could be frustrating. He said, “The Dark Lord is a half-blood.”

Charity looked at him, brows raised. “Really? Well I’ll be. Then what the hell’s his problem?”

Snape couldn’t help but smile. So irreverent. “I think he thinks his life would have been so much better if only both his parents had been wizarding. Then he wouldn’t have been an orphan. And so on.”

She nodded, looking unsurprised. “As is so often the way: at the heart of incredible human suffering is some guy’s wish that he could have been accepted.”

“You may be right. Or you’ve just taken a blow to the head.”

He was smiling, and she smiled back, thumping him on the arm. “It’s easy for you. You don’t have an after-dinner date with Dumbledore the Displeased.”

“He never stays displeased for long. Don’t take him too seriously.”

Charity’s smile turned rueful, and having finished repairing the textbooks, she stood and gathered them in her arms and took them up the steps of the teacher’s dais to put on a bookcase behind her desk. Snape then noticed that her glass fronted cabinet of Muggle artefacts had been pushed over onto its front. He quickly took out his wand and restored the cabinet to its original position and reparo’d the glass, but his magic wasn’t sophisticated enough to fix the various Muggle items and things that had been damaged in the fall.

She came towards it and let out a disappointed groan upon seeing her microscope in pieces. “Isn’t it just the bloody way, the one time I don’t bother putting it away in its Styrofoam, this happens.” She picked up the main piece and then its stand and made a half-hearted effort at re-attaching them, but quickly gave up and deposited the broken parts on her desk, then collapsed into her chair and buried
her face in her hands. “I have those same feelings I did before. That this world doesn’t want me. I keep trying but… I can’t seem to get it right…”

“You have a foot in both worlds,” Snape said, slowly approaching her. “The hardest place to be. It’s not stable. If they move away from each other, you’re going to have to jump or fall.”

She raised her eyes to him, forlorn. “You’re absolutely right. I – I don’t know which way to jump.”

*Jump to me*, he wanted to say. But if she did, what would she leave behind? And what could he promise her, apart from himself? If he lived.

She read it all in his face. She stood and took two steps towards him. He watched and waited. Then suddenly she was in his arms and had wrapped her own around him fiercely, her face pressed into his chest and he found himself stroking her hair and kissing the top of her head while she cried and cried.

At the emergency Slytherin House Meeting, Snape informed the students that Fetherington’s future at the school was being decided, and that a full investigation would be held into the incident in the Muggle Studies classroom. He would find out who participated, and he would deal with those individuals later. Any that wanted to come forward of their own volition, and apologise to Professor Burbage, were encouraged – fewer points would be deducted for a genuine show of remorse. He told them that Slytherin, as a House, had reached a new low. Because of the points he would have to deduct, this was going to cost them dearly for the House Cup.

There was a spate of enraged mutters and cursing from the students. Malfoy voiced his intent to get his father to talk to Fetherington’s father but Snape warned him that a process was being followed and not to take matters into hand.

The meeting was concluded in time for the students to get to the Great Hall for dinner. A hush descended on the Hall from the other Houses as the Slytherins entered, the classroom riot story having already flown around the entire school faster than the Snape and Burbage gossip (which had been met with a great deal of doubt by some students who said that Snape didn’t have a heart so how could he possibly love anyone), and they were watched taking their seats in an extremely subdued fashion. Snape kept a close, paternal eye on them throughout the meal and excused them to leave early if they wished.

After dinner, as instructed, Charity made her way to the Headmaster’s Tower, and took the spiral stairs with a heavy heart. She only had a suspicion about the purpose of the meeting, but had donned her academic robe and pulled her hair back demurely in efforts to appear as professional as possible. All the way to the office she mentally propped herself, bringing to mind her multiple qualifications, the letters from parents who appreciated her work, the feedback from students who were thriving under her tutelage, the comments made by Sir Byron. She was a good teacher but she had a difficult subject, and her passion for it, her strong belief that a wider education of her subject could lead to a better future for the wizarding world, strengthened her resolve for whatever was about to happen.

Dumbledore opened the door for her and invited her to sit in an armchair by the fire, something he
hadn’t done before. He offered her a glass of mead but she declined, and waited silently while he poured one for himself then positioned himself opposite her with a weary sigh.

“I see that Madame Pomfrey has made short work of that nasty bump,” said Dumbledore, indicating where her bruise had been. “She said a heavy book caused it. Did a student throw it at you?”

Charity shook her head. “The textbook is extremely heavy, a young boy wouldn’t be able to throw it more than a few feet. I’m afraid it was an uncontrolled magic event.”

Dumbledore listened attentively and nodded. “Hmm. I see. I will require you to complete a full incident report and include all contributing factors as you see it. Then please give a copy to Severus. I’m not sure if you know, but he is considering expulsion. As expulsions need to be reported to the Governors, and parents need to be informed, it’s necessary for him to follow a strict process.”

“Of course sir. I shall make mention in the report that the student, Fetherington, shows evidence to me of having a learning disability. Even for a pureblood.”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows shot up. “I do apologise – can you explain your meaning to me?”

She took a deep breath. “Sir, Fetherington’s violent outburst wasn’t really a surprise to me. He’s taken a deep dislike to my subject – and I believe to me personally – and it’s been brewing since September. A lot of pureblood students do struggle with my class, for a number of reasons, but combined with a learning disability in Fetherington, I think it just became combustible. He’s a bright kid, he has potential, but there’s so much resistance.”

Dumbledore considered this a few moments, then said, “The catalyst, what finally sparked a flame, was it the lesson you had this morning? What were you teaching?”

Charity held his eyes for a moment, sensing that this question wasn’t that innocent. He’d talked to the students. “I was teaching them engineering principles. Logarithms. Sequential problem solving.”

“Using…Muggle toys?”

“Technically they’re classified as toys, but Muggle adults have built full scale constructions using them because the principles are the same. Lego is building blocks, Meccano is mechanics. There are robotic toys coming on the market too, simple robotic arms, that sort of thing -,”

“It isn’t in the curriculum, is it Charity?” said Dumbledore, just the slightest edge entering his voice. “Why are you teaching Hogwarts children mechanics and engineering?”

She paused. “In case they have an interest in it as a career. My Muggle-born and part-blood students have no real trouble, in fact many have told me they find it a refreshing change -,”

“But the curriculum doesn’t require it. You’ve introduced these ideas because you have a personal interest in experimenting on the children.” Dumbledore looked hard at her, not smiling.

“Sir?” objected Charity. “Experimenting?”

“You’re trying to prove that pureblood children have shortfalls compared to Muggle-borns and part-bloods.”

“I have observed that purebreds follow a different kind of logic, but I wouldn’t say it was a shortfall and I am definitely not experimenting -,”
Dumbledore emptied his glass and looked unconvinced. “Then you don’t think that Fetherington had an uncontrolled today because your classes repeatedly make the pureblood students feel inadequate? Frustrated? You don’t feel it is provocative for a Muggle-born such as yourself to recurrently teach subjects that show purebloods to be failures and the others as successful? What message are you trying to communicate, Charity, seeing as you evidently found the set curriculum insufficient?”

The blood had drained from her face. The Headmaster was not just displeased, he was accusatory and now he was staring stonily, awaiting her response. “Sir, I have been teaching students from all backgrounds at Hogwarts for three years now, and this is the first time I have had an incident like this. This is about Fetherington, not me. My teaching performance has been impeccable.”

“This is true, Charity. You’ve had a low profile for the first two years, and all of a sudden you’ve popped out of a box. I’m not sure whether to construe this incident as a coincidence or the latest manifestation of – of this journey of self-discovery you seem to have embarked on.”

“Sir? I don’t understand -,”

“Between the DADA license, Sir Byron, the Dementors and now this. And need I mention the gossip in the halls about you and Severus -,”

“I can’t believe this!” muttered Charity, the blood suddenly rushing back up and making her head spin.

“I was happy for you to come out of the archive. You had been neglected, and for that I am sorry. I thought the audit project would be an excellent opportunity to showcase your skills. But it seems to have unleashed a series of events that make me seriously question the wisdom of my thinking.”

“I am not a troublemaker sir! The Dementors were hardly my fault, and Sir Byron - ,”

“Are you trying to tell me you didn’t put it up to Sir Byron about the Muggle studies curriculum?” said Dumbledore looking sceptical.

“Definitely not sir! I hadn’t even spoken to the man prior to that afternoon!”

“Coincidence upon coincidence…”

Anger began to replace Charity’s anxiety. “I feel I’m being attacked, sir. If it’s my resignation you’re seeking then I -,”

“No, of course not. I’m not looking for you to resign. I do want you to cease the radical lesson plans you’ve been trying and return to the set curriculum. I am very concerned about this incident getting out to the pureblood community. Amulius Fetherington did a lot of the stonemasonry here at the castle you know, this will cause an uproar.”

She couldn’t look at him anymore, even though it compromised her professionalism, she worried he might see the intense anger. She choked out the words. “I understand. I will do as you ask.”

“And the gossip, Charity. You know I am not going to come between you and Severus, but I asked for calm heads to prevail. Please desist from obvious displays of affection in front of the student body.”

“I haven’t!” Her face was burning now.

“What is the matter with Severus, anyway? He seems to have withdrawn. He has become highly
unpredictable.”

“I don’t know. He said he had a cold,” answered Charity through gritted teeth.

“He never gets sick. I fear the turmoil is taking its toll on us all. When are you going on holiday?”

Through her disbelief she mumbled, “Soon enough sir. Perhaps sooner.”

“Then I hope you make the most of the break. I’m sorry to have to bring up unpleasantness Charity, if it’s any consolation, I loathe having to do it,” said Dumbledore and Charity seized this signal that the meeting was over, jumping to her feet.

“I’ll see myself out,” she said, and left as quickly as possible.

Away from his Tower, the words roared around her head as she walked, unseeing, through the corridors, just walking, unsure of where. Her heart was racing, her head spinning, and she was in deep shock. When she rounded a corner, she walked straight into Professor Sinistra, coming in the opposite direction.

“Charity! Merlin, I’m sorry!” exclaimed Sinistra, extending a conciliatory hand.

Charity couldn’t answer, her throat was too choked. Sinistra sized up the situation immediately.

“What’s happened? Are you alright?”

“I think Dumbledore wants me to quit,” she said, and saying it out loud made the first tear fall. “I think I have to quit.”

“Is this about that dumb kid in your class? I don’t believe it. Come with me, up to my office this instant before someone sees.”

In Sinistra’s office, plied with a stiff vodka, Charity brokenly told the story of the meeting with the Headmaster. Sinistra could hardly believe it.

“You are not resigning! No way! You need this job, you have little Holly to think of, remember? You have to get your allies around you, Charity. Me, Flitwick and Severus of course. Hagrid. And let’s not forget Sir Byron, who’s over Dumbledore’s head. This is probably where it’s coming from, actually, Dumbledore’s threatened that you have an inside with the new Chair.”

Charity sniffed a little, and took another sip.

“Look, Dumbledore’s got power, don’t get me wrong. But don’t cut up your nose on your face. -,”

“Pardon?”

“You know, that Muggle expression?”

“You mean don’t cut off your nose to spite your face. I know what you’re trying to say. And you are right, I can’t throw this job away, what’s more I like teaching here, I like my subject and most of the kids are really lovely. But everything’s going wrong. I mean, he’s even blaming me for Severus getting sick.”

“Oh it’s just a cold for Merlin’s sake. Dumbledore needs Severus and he needs Sir Byron on side, and you’ve got the keys to both of them. Why don’t you fight back, Charity? Dumbledore will have you locked back in that bloody archive, teaching the students about how Muggles make tea if you don’t show some gumption. Shoulders back, chin out and put your degree up on the wall. You
haven’t done anything wrong.”

Charity gave her a quivering smile and knocked back the vodka.

The next day was Friday. Charity taught her classes in a spare room and then finished tidying her own classroom when she was free. The solitude gave her time to think. As many of the items in her cupboard had been broken, she didn’t bother repairing them but threw them out. She took all her Lego and Meccano sets and boxed them up. She packed away her New Scientist and National Geographic magazines, her display boards and pictures, even her perpetual motion machine. The only thing she left was the six large posters and the broken microscope. She neutralised her classroom so that when Dumbledore came to inspect, as she strongly suspected he would, there could be nothing incriminating.

In the afternoon, she wrote her incident report and sent one copy to Dumbledore and one to Severus. Then to ensure she didn’t have to speak to either of them about it, she put on her wool coat, boots and hat and went outside for a long walk in cold drizzle. She stayed out until it was dark, and then went immediately to her room for a hot bath, which she filled with bubbles, and put a warm towel over her eyes. Dinner was in her room, and she longed for a television and remote, but read classical novels instead, marvelling how much Mr Darcy reminded her of Severus.

On Saturday, she packed a small bag and disapparated back to her studio apartment on Shakespeare Road in Bedford. She wasn’t due to see Holly that weekend, but she needed to get away from Hogwarts. She went into the town and shopped for Christmas, enjoying being Muggle again but noticing how devoid it felt of Christmas spirit compared to Diagon Alley.

In the window of a menswear shop she saw some fine wool, high neck sweaters that she knew Severus would look gorgeous in. He needed to get out of that coat. She bought them, and hatched a plan for the perfect occasion for him to wear them.

Every now and then, Dumbledore’s words would flood her brain and she would get a sick feeling that started in her gut and rose to her throat, quickening her pulse. The sense that time was suddenly short would not escape her. An hourglass of her life had been initiated, she was sure of it, and she was conscious of more than just doors beginning to close, but an end of all things coming into sight. She hoped it was nothing more than a symptom of panic, she tried to tell herself that, but all her decisions were now coloured by an omniscient sense that nothing could be wasted, choices could not be cheap or transient, it all counted, every second.

In her bed, in her townhouse that night, having watched television into the early hours, she thought about the staff Christmas party in a week. She shouldn’t go, she decided. She was disgraced and out of favour, it would do her standing in Dumbledore’s eyes a lot more good if she played it low key and kept out of his way. There was only a week to go before she was on leave for the Christmas holidays anyway, it wouldn’t matter significantly if she skipped the event and left a little earlier. Severus would understand, she was sure of it, once he understood her predicament.

Nevertheless, while she felt she had made a noble decision, a part of her was devastated and would allow her no rest.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

At the top of the marble staircase, three days later, carrying fresh stationery supplies to her classroom, Charity saw Dumbledore walk across the Entrance Hall to the great oak front door. He opened it to admit Severus in full academic robe, and two adults – a man and woman, both dressed in smart day clothes. She guessed them to be parents, owing to the way they listened to Severus with full but concerned attention. The woman in particular looked distressed and rotated a purse in her hands while she glanced around her. Severus introduced the man and woman to Dumbledore, who shook the man’s hand warmly as if they had met before, and then slightly more formally to the woman, also bowing his head slightly. Charity discerned that he was apologetic about the nature of the meeting. She deduced that these were Mr and Mrs Fetherington and the news was being broken to them that young Jacob may not be returning.

She hadn’t spoken to Severus in almost a week, so could only guess the decision that had been made. He had tried to reach her following the report she’d submitted, but she declined. She was too raw and ashamed, and she’d done a very thorough job on the incident report, she didn’t have anything further to add. Let him deal with it now.

Dumbledore turned and invited the party to follow him, presumably to his office. Charity moved backwards so she couldn’t be seen, though she noticed Severus frown and look up as if he had detected her. He had an uncanny radar.

Once they had safely moved on, she carried on with her task, restocking her supply cupboard with reams of parchment, candles, quills and bottled ink. She had a fleeting idea of allowing her MS students to use ball-point pens but then thought this might be considered provocative (to use a Dumbledore term), and so dismissed it.

The bell for recess rang and students flooded the corridors. Presently there was a knock on her classroom door and Professor Sinistra looked in. “Oh good, you’re here. Apparently the kitchen elves have made those hot scones; come with me to the Hall?”

“Yes,” said Charity with a smile. She had skipped breakfast and could use some light company as well.

They headed down to the Hall together, doing a touch of corridor duty as they went, and as they waited in the queue for a scone from the banquet table (morning tea was generally self-serve), Sinistra turned round to ask, “Did you head home for the weekend?”

“I did. Had to get away. Did you need me for something?”

“Nothing important; a few of us went to the Three Broomsticks and I dropped by to see if you wanted to join us but you were nowhere.”

“I needed television. I ate a tub of Ben and Jerry’s and watched nineteen-eighties rom-coms for hours.”

“Nothing you just said made sense.”
“Then I pity you. It is one of the great salves of our generation. I did feel better but now I’m too fat to wear the gown Severus bought me.”

Sinistra laughed aloud. “So a scone will fix that, right?”

“Doesn’t matter anymore. May as well eat the whole table. I’m not going.”

“What?!” exclaimed Sinistra, whirling to face her directly. “Don’t be stupid, of course you’re going.”

Charity shook her head and picked up a plate. “I can’t, Aurora. I think I just really need to stay out of Dumbledore’s way for a bit, until he calms down. I’d probably just aggravate him if I turned up, especially as a date.”

The two teachers picked a scone, jam and cream plus a cup of tea then took a seat at one of the tables.

“This is ridiculous,” said Sinistra. “Have you told Severus?”

With a sheepish expression, Charity shook her head. “I haven’t seen him for days.”

“Ah. Well that would explain why he’s been storming around the place like a bear with a sore paw - ,”

“- sore head -”

“Tell you what,” Sinistra continued, perking up. “I’ll set up a rendezvous for you two. I’ll hunt him down and tell him to go to the Astronomy Tower at four o’clock today. You wait there for him. I can lock down the Tower so you two get some uninterrupted time and talk. But rug up well, there’s a keening northerly which cuts right through it.”

Charity looked at Sinistra and smiled gratefully. “Thankyou. That would really help.”

“And you’re coming, alright? Because I’ve another Bewitcher’s Ribbon all ready to go.”

At four O’clock, Charity was in the Astronomy Tower alone watching distant students at Quidditch practice. It had begun to sleet, and a cold breeze infiltrated the observation windows, sometimes enough to make the smaller telescopes creakily swing on their metalwork stands. She was glad of Sinistra’s warning, and had worn her wool coat, gloves and a scarf which she now turned up a little.

A few moments later she heard the door bang and hurried footfalls on the stairs. Severus was there, and as soon as their eyes met, he paused and gave a hesitant smile. When she smiled in return he took that as a cue and crossed the space between them quickly, taking her shoulders in his hands. “Charity – I missed you, I haven’t stopped thinking about you. Why didn’t you answer me?”

Before she had a chance to reply, he had wrapped her in a hug, literally, as his winter cloak enveloped her, and as she pulled him closely to her and felt his heart beating and breathed in his scent, she wondered why she had stayed away so long. Here felt like coming home.

He pulled away again and examined her closely. “How’s your head?”

“It’s fine, it’s good.”
“Why didn’t you come to see me after your meeting with Dumbledore? I stayed awake for hours in case you needed to talk.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t want to bother you with it. None of it is a problem for you.”

“Sinistra told me what happened. I have spoken to Dumbledore, I told him his assertions are completely unfounded. I wish you had told me.”

“You did what? Why Severus? He’ll think I sent you!”

“No, I told him I haven’t seen you since the meeting, that I found out from another source. He said he was expecting me to come. What’s this about you offering to resign?”

He had placed his hand gently against her lower back and steered her out of the cold, sleety wind towards the top of the stairs where it was sheltered. Together they sat side by side on the steps.

“I felt cornered, Severus, he was accusing me of all sorts of things, of experimenting on the kids, of deliberately targeting purebloods, he practically said he wished he’d never let me out of the archive. He thought I’d been lobbying Sir Byron – all sorts of stuff. I couldn’t believe it. I really felt if I wanted to keep any dignity at all I should just give him what he wants.”

Severus held her hand in his, and they huddled together, their body heat combining. “I have confronted him about it; we – exchanged words - but I believe he is satisfied that if you comply with the set curriculum his concerns are largely superficial. There is absolutely no need for you to resign.”

“You exchanged words?” asked Charity, alarmed.

“Yes. I respect Dumbledore but I’m not afraid of him. If he’s going to distress the woman I…you…then he will have me to answer to.”

Charity raised her brows but didn’t reply, wondering how on earth the conversation would have gone. Perhaps Sinistra was right when she implied Charity had some strong allies.

They sat quietly for a few moments, just indulging in each other’s presence.

Then Severus said, “Fetherington is gone. He is expelled. My first since I’ve been here.”

Charity looked up at him. “That was a tough call.”

“Not really, not in the end. He was already on a warning for other infringements. Students had been injured in his attack as well as yourself. Throughout he was unrepentant. No, I have no qualms about the decision. His parents were unhappy but ultimately I think they understand how we had no other recourse.”

“What a nightmare of a week,” said Charity, hardly believing it. Expelling students was horrible, however justified.

“I agree. And you’re being away from me made it altogether worse. Why didn’t you tell me you were going home for the weekend?”

“It wasn’t scheduled, Severus. I was distraught after the Dumbledore meeting and felt it would be best for everyone if I just...removed myself. I have the strangest, persistent feeling that my time is running out. I think it might be caused by stress and panic and...and just too many strong emotions. So I went home for R and R. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”
He lifted her fingers and pressed them to his lips. “Please don’t leave again without telling me.”

“I leave on the weekend for Christmas holidays. But I told you about those.”

“Yes,” he said, staring ahead. “Two weeks.”

“Then the weekend of 9th January? Let’s go away together.”

He looked at her abruptly. “How did you know that?”

“I have my sources…how old will you be? Thirty-four?”

“Thirty-four. A whole weekend together?”

“Anywhere you want. I’ll pay.”

“I don’t care. So long as it’s with you.”

Charity felt a lightness in her chest that hadn’t been there in days. Just the proximity of him made everything else seem less important.

“Why did Sinistra tell me you weren’t coming to the Christmas party? Because of Dumbledore?”

“Largely, yes. I do want to go, I just feel – maybe a bit of distance right now…”

“Dumbledore will expect you to be there. Sir Byron is attending and he wants to give the school the results from the audit. It is good news, I believe. I imagine Sir Byron will want to thank you.”

Sir Byron had been very decent to her. This did put a new complexion on things.

“And Charity, you accepted my offer. I won’t be understanding if you change your mind.”

He was now looking at her and as she turned her face to his they were barely inches from each other. She half expected him to kiss her now, her lips parted in anticipation of it and she saw him look at them. Seconds passed and her heart started its upward tilt, she could hear his breath coming heavier. Just as her eyes started to lose focus in hopes of feeling his lips, he stood and cursed roughly.

“And this!” he growled, taking a few steps down from her. “I don’t know how much more I can stand, Charity! I’m constantly…I can’t find any relief! I can’t sleep for thinking about it. I’m irritable with everyone, I mean, even more than normal. I’m extremely frustrated!”

“I know. I – I know, me too.”

“Then when?!” She didn’t think she’d ever seen him look desperate before. She shook her head slightly, bewildered. It wasn’t as if she’d decided a date.

“Soon. It must be soon. I’m starting to live in a cold shower. If I’m with you like this it starts to be all I can think about. But we’re always in some godforsaken place like – here! Or fighting. Or with a million people around. For my sanity, Charity, let me please…I must…”

She was flushing furiously, but her heart was singing because she wanted it too, so much. “I agree, Severus, I’m just a bit surprised…you haven’t even…kissed me yet.”

“I only have so much self-control, my love,” he said quietly, his black eyes burning. “If I kiss you now then blizzards be damned.”
Friday before the end of term, and the corridors and hallways were buzzing with excitement. A Hogwarts Express left Sunday morning, the day after a Hogsmeade visit. A considerable number of students had already left as families across the country travelled and connected for Christmas, and only a handful were expected to stay during the holidays.

Classes largely comprised quizzes, end of term wrap-up tests and tidy-ups. Snape had the Potions students sort out the class store cupboard, scrub cauldrons, organise beakers, vials and measuring implements and scour benchtops. While they worked, he ran a quiz competition between Houses, allocating points to each correct answer, awarding the winning House points. He was in reasonable good cheer, enjoying seeing his classroom take shape and unexpectedly upbeat about the staff party. The positivity of the students was also difficult to resist.

Another third of students departed for home at the end of the school day if they were old enough to apparate or had parents come to collect them, so the earlier dinner that had been organised was down to approximately half the normal number of students. The room had become far more intimate as a result, with only two tables divided between the four Houses to enjoy the Christmas decorations and chattier-than-normal teachers.

The four substitute teachers – glorified babysitters really – turned up at six-thirty ready to take over supervision in the Common Rooms and get remaining students off to bed. As compensation for being confined to quarters, the students were allowed provisions in their Room for small parties of their own, with House ghosts and portraits put on sentry duty to inform Dumbledore if anything got out of hand.

Charity skipped dinner in the Hall to eat snacks with Sinistra in her rooms after taking a long, soapy, scented bath. She had washed her hair that morning in order to give it ample time to dry, and with a glass of champagne in Sinistra’s room, seated before her friend’s mirror, Sinistra – dressed only in a dressing gown herself - started the task of plaiting a Bewitcher’s Ribbon into Charity’s dense, dark blonde hair. Sinistra’s boyfriend – Timor - was apparating to Hogwarts in time for the beginning of the party, and she had laid out her dress and plonked a collection of makeup in the bathroom vanity in preparation for getting ready herself once Charity had been magic’d into the most alluring arrangement she knew. “Tonight’s the night,” she said to a golden Charity, as she worked, fingers mysteriously manipulating strands of hair behind her. “He is going to lose it tonight when he sees you.”

“Well. He’s made it pretty clear he’s not prepared to wait much longer,” replied Charity, tongue considerably loosened by the champagne.

“Merlin’s sweet beard, what did he say?!”

“He said he’s..extremely frustrated,” said Charity with a small giggle. “In fairness, he’s been a perfect gentleman. Very chaste. To be honest, I’m glad he told me or I would have been getting worried.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t,” commented Sinistra, sounding matter of fact. “It’s plain as anything that he’s close to rutting the nearest tree. Look at him sideways and he takes your head off.”

“Aurora!” laughed Charity, embarrassed on Severus’s behalf. “He’s also had a really tough week.”

“Oh yes, everyone’s heard about the expulsion. Thing is, Slytherin’s now populated with some
seriously resentful serpents. He’s going to have his work cut out keeping them under control.”

She stepped back and admired her handiwork, and then held up a hand mirror for Charity to see. “Just one last little touch…” said the Astronomy Professor, picking up her elegant wand from the table. “I call this charm Galaxis, hold still -,” With a gentle sweep over Charity’s head and a murmured incantation, a second ribbon-like tendril of shiny, glittery lights wove itself through her hair and around her brow, giving her a vaguely empress appearance. “Like them? Flitwick totally stole it for his Christmas decorations. He won’t admit it though.”

“They’re beautiful,” said Charity, delighted. “Thank you!”

“You look gorgeous. Put the dress on, I want to see.”

Charity stepped into the privacy of Sinistra’s bedroom where the dress was magically suspended to keep it crease-free. Within moments she had slipped it on and got Sinistra to do up the zipper at the back.

Heels and a small clutch completed the look. When Charity shyly stepped around for her to give a final assessment, Sinistra covered her mouth with her hands and squealed. “Papus save us, you look divine! You look stunning. I am SO jealous. Severus is going to DIE. That gown is just gorgeous.”

“Thanks Aurora – too much, calm down, it’s just a dress.”

“Fine but stay away from Timor. Now, I must get ready, so go take your places. Where’s he picking you up?”

“From my room. Thank you so much.”

Charity gave Sinistra a tiny thank you kiss on the cheek, then put her academic robe over her dress to walk the corridors discreetly.

She made it back to her rooms without drawing attention, then had another look in her own mirror while she waited. The galaxis stars lit up her face in a quiet golden glow and the gown, fortunately, was very forgiving of her icecream and scone diet. She though Sinistra might be right, that tonight would be the night.

In his own rooms, Snape had bathed within an inch of his life – even his hair had low sheen and behaved itself. He was wearing his dress coat, white shirt and a bronze-coloured cravat, with a corresponding waistcoat. His boots gleamed and he smelled lightly of after-shave. At seven-thirty, feeling nervous, he locked up his rooms, his office and the brewing room, then strode up the stairs of the dungeon, only just then realising he hadn’t bought Charity any kind of bouquet. He panicked for a moment, then hurriedly strode across the Entrance Hall and out the front door where he broke into a run as he headed to the Forbidden Forest. Frantically he searched the trees until, with a relieved sigh, he discovered winter berries, ivy and mistletoe, which he transformed into a small posy using Dumbledore’s charm. Fingers starting to numb, he hurried back up the Castle entrance, noticing as he did that Dumbledore and Hagrid had done a delightful job of decorating the steps and courtyard to the front entrance with planters of Christmas themed foliage, fairies in lantern-cages and burning torches in brackets. On the front of the door was a holly wreath six foot across with the Hogwarts coat of arms emblazoned on a banner in the middle.

But he had to admire it in passing, he was now late to pick up Charity. He ran up the staircase two at a time to get to her rooms on the first floor, where he paused for twenty seconds to get his breath, then he knocked on her door.
Any breath he had salvaged was stolen away again when he saw her. He couldn’t speak. If she’d looked lovely in Madam Malkin’s wearing the gown, she now looked genuinely like some heavenly body. Standing before him, gently smiling at his reaction, eyes warm, hair aglow, skin luminous, he could do nothing but stare. The neckline of the gown took a daring plunge and his eyes travelled hungrily down her throat, décolletage and to the hint of swell at each breast, her skin smooth and creamy. She turned her head slightly to draw shut her door and then he noticed the fine, star-studded velvet ribbon that cascaded over the nape of her neck and bare skin of her back and, unable to help himself, emitted a groan of desire. The Ribbon. Why did it have this effect on him? She was like one of those Veelas.

The sound caught Charity a bit by surprise. “Severus? What? Is something wrong?”

He cleared his throat. “You are being an ingenue. You know nothing is wrong.”

“I see. Thank you, I suppose. Are those for me? They’re beautiful.”

“A bit of leaf,” he said dismissively. “Ugly beside you. You are beautiful.”

That was better. She lowered her lids coyly. “You’re very kind. And I like the posy very much. It’s very natural. Your own work?”

“Sorry, it was done in haste.”

“And look at you! I’ve never seen these clothes before, you look gorgeous!”

He coughed with embarrassment. Gorgeous was not something he’d been called before, but he liked that she approved.

“I like your hair,” she said, and reached out to feel it. “It’s all silky.”

He stiffened at her touch, seemed to endure it as if her fingers scalded him, then took a shaky breath. He offered his arm. “Are you ready to go down?”

“Love to. Thank you.”

Together they descended the staircase, blissfully free of prying student eyes, and walked across the flagstone floor to the entrance of the Great Hall. The doors swung open of their own accord and they were immediately greeted by elves carrying trays bearing crest-inscribed flutes of champagne. Snape deftly took one, drank the lot in two gulps then reached for another. Charity laughed. “Relax!”

The room bore the same Christmas decorations as the choral performance, but had otherwise transformed into the perfect venue for a pleasant gathering. There was a grand piano and cello being played by wizards in coattails up on the high table platform, but light-hearted, romantic tunes filled the air rather than somber classical music. The fire was roaring behind an ornately wrought guard while the tiny reindeer frolicked atop the mantelpiece, above which now also bore an enormous gilt framed mirror, reflecting the room. From somewhere, small round tables had been conjured, dressed in starched white tablecloths and tucked towards the edges of the Hall so that the parquetry floor was clear and gleaming, ready for dancing. There was, as tongue-in-cheek promised, a two lane ten-pin bowling alley installed in an out of the way corner and along the other end, the banquet table was laden with mounds and platters of delicious finger food and nibbles, as no lady in her finest feels like sitting down to a mountain of mashed potato. “Oysters!” Charity exclaimed excitedly, pointing them out to Snape. “Do say you like them!”

Indeed he did. The fresher the better, they were among his favourite memories of infrequent trips to
the coast. Unusually he had developed a palette for them at a young age, and whiled away many an hour scrabbling amongst the rock walls in search of the small but delicious wild variety.

Dumbledore, naturally, was already in the Hall, wearing the same sublime robes he’d worn for the choir, but this evening also bore a sash in Christmas colours. When Snape and Charity entered, he peered at her over his glasses a moment, then walked towards them immediately. Charity steeled herself.

“My dear,” he said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it so that she was extremely startled but kept her composure. “You look…I’m quite at a loss for words that Severus here won’t object to. Rest assured, they are most positive. Divine. I hope that is demure enough.”

“Thank you,” said Charity, scrambling to keep up. She motioned about her. “You’ve done an amazing job, the place looks just perfect.”

“I should have done some qualification in interior design, I think. I really enjoy it,” he replied, then in joining her survey of the room, noticed a faltering banner and tsked before whipping out his wand to correct it. He then said, “We are to be joined by Sir Byron and his wife Andalusia reasonably soon. I have heard he is exceptionally pleased with the results of the audit so I imagine he’ll want to speak to you two. Severus, if you can keep your hands of Charity for a couple more hours, you’ll be doing me a great favour.”

“Sir,” said Snape crossly, before Dumbledore smiled. “It won’t be easy, I think. Fortunately you’re made of sterner stuff than me. Now, tuck into the oysters before they all go.”

The faculty were now arriving in numbers. Flitwick was in bowtie and coattails and made a beeline for the musicians. McGonagall looked amazing in a striking high-necked glittery gown in Gryffindor colours, topped with a traditional Scottish pointed hat. Remus Lupin had even dressed up, in a smart three-piece suit, even though he clearly was showing the effects of the recent full-moon. He was alone, sadly, as many of the staff seemed to be. Hagrid arrived and removed his enormous coat to reveal a clean, linen white shirt, braces and a neck-tie and his hair had been brushed back and tied in a rakish, piratical bow. He immediately swigged several champagnes and ordered a whisky. Hooch and Trelawney showed up together, quickly followed by Madam Pomfrey, who surprised everyone by looking rather lovely in a flattering and figure-hugging white dress and stilettos and accompanied by an older gentleman with a moustache that must have been her partner. Sinistra was next and her dark gown was thigh-length and modern, topped with a long, crepe like scarf and thigh-high boots, very much channelling the sexy-witch look which she pulled off with aplomb. Her boyfriend – a young, slightly goofy looking man – stuck with her like glue. In all, every member of staff had showed, which Dumbledore stated later, was a first.

Board members were also given special treatment, for many of them this being their first exposure to the actual school which they governed. Dumbledore made a point of introducing them to the staff most gallantly, and Charity and Snape, who had each discreetly scoffed approximately half a dozen oysters each, were dragged from the buffet table to entertain a Mervin Sterling and his wife Leontine, who had been to Hogwarts around a hundred thousand years ago and so kept asking them if they’d known teachers who rightly should have been long dead, and recalled playing archaic, frankly absurd wizarding sports which were now either banned or extinct.

Charity didn’t mind much. She was already enjoying herself immensely. The food was delicious, the wine free-flowing, the Hall was looking beautiful and Severus kept looking at her with undisguised hunger. It felt as if she had swum to a safe haven in a sea full of sharks. Not rescue, but a respite.

Snape himself had noticed that every other man in the room had looked at Charity in much the same
way he did, even Mr Sterling, who must have been a hundred if he was a day. It was quite affirming, in its own way, that even old age didn’t diminish the effect of a beautiful woman. Charity was clearly enjoying herself, which, if anything, worsened the situation for poor Snape, since her wit and vivaciousness just added to the mix. She turned every head in the room, and it took all his self-restraint to let her wander off unattended because he couldn’t bear to let her out of his sight. Especially when she went quite pointedly to Remus Lupin.

He was at the buffet table, eyeing it but not selecting anything. Charity took a flute of champagne from a nearby elf and went up to him, offering him the wine. “I come in peace,” she said. “The argument between you and Severus is not mine. I wanted to see how you are.”

He straightened and accepted the glass, smiled at her and she noticed his eyes did a quick scan of the room, no doubt pinpointing where Snape was. Then he looked back at her. “Thank you,” he said. “That’s kind of you.”

“I hope you’re going to take advantage of this buffet tonight. The food is delicious.”

He nodded, looking at it but his expression was downcast. “My appetite…fluctuates a bit…”

“Are you going home for Christmas, Remus? Your family, perhaps?”

“A couple of days. I have some errands in London. I had hoped to spend Christmas here, actually, but…well…”

“I’m glad you could make it tonight.”

“Thank you. You look quite amazing, might I add. Severus always had…excellent taste.”

Charity looked abashed. “You must be referring to the lovely Lily. I’m afraid I’ll never be in her league, but I’ll take the compliment.”

There was a pause, then Charity said quietly, “I am so terribly sorry that you won’t be staying with Hogwarts. It is wrong and unjust that you can’t continue teaching, you clearly have a natural flare for it.”

He shrugged his shoulders defeatedly. “We all have our demons. I know you went to a lot of trouble to help me. And I heard about the Slytherin kid in your class. He’s expelled?”

“Yes. I didn’t have any say in the decision, but by all accounts it was warranted.”

“Never a dull moment, eh?” he replied, with a wan smile.

“And I never got to thank you properly for…helping save my life.”

He shrugged bashfully. “Well, good practice for me. I am the Dark Arts teacher.” He looked up suddenly and said over Charity’s shoulder: “And Severus did the hard work anyway.”

Charity hadn’t heard Severus come up behind. She turned and caught the look on his countenance from which his name derived. “Lupin. Not eating? Not enough meat on the buffet?”

Charity hissed at him, appalled, but Lupin merely smiled.

“Any improvement with the wolfsbane?”

“Yes, I think so, this month was smooth sailing. Never pleasant, but uneventful.”
“Any sign of Black?”

Charity, aghast, elbowed Snape who seemed mystified by her reaction, but Lupin merely smiled at the exchange. “No, Severus, and I am certain that if there were, you would be one of the first on the scene.”

Hagrid came barrelling up at that point. “Look at this spread,” he said, eyes alight at the feast. “I keep offerin’ them ducks and stoats but they won’ take ‘em.” He took a fistful of cheese balls. “Charity, how do you look? You knock a man’s socks off, you do. Did you see the fairies out front? From your Call. But it will snow la’er tonight so I’ll let ‘em all go in a few hours.”

“Snow?” Charity repeated, rather delighted. “You’ll have a white Christmas for sure.”

“We will? Aren’t you stayin’ for Christmas then?”

“No. I have a little girl who needs all kinds of presents wrapped and under the tree. I must admit, I can’t wait to show her the Call,” said Charity.

Within a few moments, Flitwick had joined their little group, and then Sinistra with Timor, and Charity realised she was surrounded by friends and supporters. Conversation flowed happily, everyone seemed glad of a pause in proceedings to just enjoy each other’s company.

It was not a surprise, then, that when Sir Byron and his wife arrived they were escorted rather hastily over towards them by Dumbledore, keen for the Chair to experience a quick and lively atmosphere at his shindig. Sir Byron was in his element, being the smooth-talking, extroverted type (helpfully back-stopped by his short wife, Andalusia, who said nothing but smiled ineffectually a lot), who swiftly took a lead position and showed off his exceptional ability at small talk. Dumbledore hovered and inserted as many opportunities as possible to reveal Hogwarts in its best light.

The conversation soon drifted to the audit, and Sir Byron ensured everyone had fresh glasses before announcing a toast. “Glad you brought that up. I just want to take a quick moment to congratulate you all on a sincere victory as far as the audit it concerned. I was never troubled for a moment, it should be said, but they are terribly taxing things to do and many an organisation has faltered – Hogwarts did exceptionally well for a first time and you deserve a toast. Well done!”

He raised his glass and all the teachers joined him.

“I’m not saying for a moment there weren’t any non-conformances – there are a few things you’ll need to fix up, no doubt about it (he tactfully avoided eye-contact with Lupin) – but you most certainly achieved certification, and I’ll be very glad to let the Minister know that your remarkable school here is more than equipped to host the Triwizard Cup next year. In fact, I hope you’re well on the way to getting that organised? Big job.”

“Oh yes, oh yes,” said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling.

“Don’t come to me with any of it,” said Snape, gruffly. “I’m owed holidays.”

A small ripple of laughter, and Sir Byron clapped him on the back. “Professor Snape, I do appreciate that the audit was a bit of a burden placed squarely on your shoulders, but I think Albus here made a fine choice in appointing you to the task. It was fairly grudgingly made, but Topias Poole was forced to concede that the quality of the submission was very high. You and Charity Burbage – Charity?”

Charity smiled at Sir Byron, who shifted slightly to address her directly. “My, that’s a pretty dress!” he remarked, apparently forgetting his long-suffering wife standing right beside him. “Yes, Poole...
made a point of mentioning your name. He said you made their time at Hogwarts almost pleasurable. And I don’t doubt that you were the powerhouse behind a lot of the work - they said you supplied them with a small mountain of paperwork. Which reminds me!

More glasses of champagne to those who could stomach it.

“The student surveys! Look, you’ll get the whole lot back in the report which is being filed at the moment, but just as a quick summary, the vast majority of the students who were interviewed appear to be thrilled to be here. Now, we were quite specific not to ask them about individual teachers, and I’m not going to go into that, but Charity got a mention and so did Remus Lupin – apparently the students love the challenges you’re creating in class, well done to you both, I thought that might be a little bit of a Christmas present for you just before term breaks.”

He raised his glass and everyone took a sip. Charity’s heart glowed at the feedback, and she felt Snape give her back a little supportive rub. She was careful to avoid Dumbledore’s expression, however, particularly when Sir Byron turned to him and said as an aside, “Albus, we really must get together soon and discuss the Muggle Studies curriculum. I think Charity here is taking it in the right direction and I would like to get the Board involved in a review.”

She heard but did not see Dumbledore say, “Let me get back to you on that, Bernard.”

This time, Snape squeezed her hand, which she took to be encouragement. He had obviously heard too.

The teachers who had all gathered to hear Sir Byron’s toasts were now talking feverishly amongst themselves, and, even though she was actually quite embarrassed about it, many of the teachers approached Charity to acknowledge the positive feedback, including Minerva McGonagall, which, for some reason made her particularly pleased.

Dumbledore had taken to the stage to advise them to find a table, as there were a few speeches to be made, followed by Christmas cake, then the bowling alley would be opened and dancing could start. In a haze of pleasure, everyone took seats at the round tables lit with crystal candelabra, and elves took orders for drinks.

The pianist and cellist took seats as well while Sir Byron stood up at the podium and began his speech, which was extremely high-level and centred on challenges for the Ministry, the goals being set for the Board of Governors, and his personal hopes for the staging of the Triwizard Cup, with side-jokes about strongly advocating for a Hogwarts win. He handed over to Dumbledore, who thanked his staff for the first term efforts, expressed his delight at the audit results if not surprise, requested a team effort in organising for the Cup (including you, Severus) and wished everyone and their families a happy Christmas and New Year, reminding all that term two commenced on 3rd January and everyone needed to be at their stations.

Dumbledore invited anyone else to make a speech and when everyone fell resolutely silent and didn’t move, he said, “In that case, music please, and cake. Merry Christmas, everyone!”

Charity and Snape were sitting at a table with Sinistra and her partner, Pomona Sprout and Sybil Trelawney. They talked amongst themselves briefly while the second band set up and an enormous Christmas Cake was wheeled into the room to applause, Dumbledore making short work of slicing it up with a quick spell and elves hurrying to take pieces to each table.

The band struck up, playing tunes, and once the cake had been dispensed with, the lights were dimmed and Dumbledore broke the floor by inviting McGonagall up to dance. Hagrid invited Rolanda Hooch, Sinistra and Timor joined them on the floor, as well as Poppy Pomfrey and her
husband. Sir Byron took Andalusia for a twirl, as did another Board member and his wife. Flitwick did the honourable thing and invited Bathsheda Babbling onto the floor and Charity started to look very pointedly at Snape.

“I’m not dancing,” he said to her.

“Oh please? You don’t have to do much.”

“No. I don’t dance.”

“In that case, would you mind Severus? It seems a crime to leave her sitting there.”

Charity looked up to see Lupin, awaiting permission. She was surprised, but quite willing, and didn’t wait for Snape to decide. “I’d love to Remus, thank you!”

Sprout laughed out loud at Snape’s furious expression as Charity and Lupin stepped out onto the parquetry and he politely led her in a relaxed waltz, making chit chat and occasionally being clumsy. He was warm and witty company and Charity began to wonder what on earth Severus’s problem with him could be.

As soon as the music ended and Lupin was in the process of thanking her, Hagrid and Flitwick both came up at the same time to ask for the next one, and soon Charity had her dance card marked for Sir Byron and Dumbledore as well.

She was a bit nervous about dancing with Dumbledore, but she had to be honest, he put her at ease very quickly and was not only an attentive dance partner, he was definitely light on his feet: Charity had to pick up her game. He made her laugh and complimented her and she wondered, as she had numerous times, what his story was. How could such a charming, respected and successful man – who even smelled nice right now - have ended up in Hogwarts as Headmaster and alone? Having far too many champagnes in her by now, she had almost plucked up the courage to ask him outright when the song came to an end and fortunately so did her moment of flirtatious impudence.

Dumbledore gave a little bow, told her the honour was all his, and then said cryptically, “But now is the time for your most important trip along the light fantastic.”

She frowned at him quizzically, and he took her hand and turned her in order to drop it lightly into Snape’s, who was standing behind her. Dumbledore then took out his wand and waved it in the direction of the band, and unless Charity was entirely mistaken, he had magicked a slow, romantic number.

There was no disguising that Severus was feeling awkward, but Dumbledore’s request was a perfect choice. It required almost no nimble movement but for partners to get up close and shuffle-sway, which even he could manage. The song was dreamy, thoughtful and strangely apposite to the situation Snape and Charity found themselves, rendering a powerful emotional tenor to the moment, in which, embraced by Severus, decidedly squiffy and high on the whole evening, Charity more or less lost her inhibitions and clung to him with all the fervour her body could muster. It was fair to say that the sexual tension was emitted in waves around the room and soon other amorous couples took to the floor and the poor singles in the room began to cast about for do-for-tonight’s.

Feeling the vibe, the band continued in this rich vein, and Charity and Snape spent at least forty-five minutes dancing thus, Snape starting to relax and make conversation, much of it quite personal in nature, and Charity was getting giddy.

At the end of a song, Snape was tapped on the shoulder, but it was Sir Byron making his farewells
and wanting a moment to talk to him. Charity used the excuse to totter back to her table and have a quick drink and rest her feet.

The evening had descended into that point in parties where general structure has collapsed and everyone was too drunk much to care. She couldn’t quite be sure, but Charity thought she saw Dumbledore and McGonagall in a decidedly intimate embrace out on the dancefloor, and Lupin looked like he was chatting up Sinistra while her boyfriend chucked fireworks into the fire.

She herself was swaying a little in her chair and concentrating on focussing when Sybil Trelawney, who’d been thoroughly taking advantage of the free alcohol all night, was suddenly right up in her face.

“You are Charity? Charity Burbage!” exclaimed Trelawney, her eyes myopic, head on a tilt. Charity nodded. “We don’t know each other. Not well. But I can see that you are on a path to ascendancy. I can see that gods smile on you tonight.”

“No, I – I think I’ve just had bit too much of that very delicious champagne.”

Trelawney shook her head and raised her hands to the side of Charity’s face. “No. You have an aura. I can see that there are messages for you tonight. There are messages the universe wants you to have tonight. They have selected tonight to tell you.”

Trelawney frowned and squinted and studied Charity’s face with confronting proximity. Charity raised her brows and backed away a little, but she couldn’t help but be intrigued.

“Is that so? What sort of messages then? Because I keep thinking my time is running out.”

Trelawney’s eyes popped wide. “Yes! Yes! Your days are numbered my dear. I see that too. Give… give me your hand.”

“Are you sure, Sybil?” said Charity, doubtfully extending her palm. “I think we’ve all had a couple…it’s been a bit of an evening.”

“This is the clearest time,” Trelawney answered, taking Charity’s hand and smoothing it out beneath her fingers. “I am flowing freely, the channels are clear and I am picking up strong signals from you.”

Trying to focus, Charity resigned herself to a reading. Snape had disappeared, the dancers seemed to have gone behind a cloud, the music was almost hypnotic. But Trelawney was oddly sharp and clear beneath the candlelight on the table.

“You are in love!” said Trelawney in a factual tone as she bent over Charity’s palm, her nose almost touching it, and Charity smiled. That didn’t take a lot of insight. “It is a powerful love.”

“Mmhm, well, I mean look at him!” replied Charity, looking around her and wanting to point out Severus as if it were obvious. Where was he?

“Love is not new to you, though, I see that you have an abiding love, an everlasting love, the one that flows at the bottom of the river, the one that rolls boulders, that carves through mountains, that sifts gold and diamonds, that starts first and finishes last.”

Charity stared at her, and despite herself murmured, “Holly?”

“I don’t have names,” retorted Trelawney irritably. Her finger ranged over her palm. She paused. “This is your lifeline…you said you felt your time was running out. Look, child, look! It is short.
Your time on this mortal earth is brief…I am sorry, but those you love will outlive you and you must make the most of the spoils you have.”

Trelawney looked up suddenly and her owlish eyes connected with Charity’s, but there wasn’t the usual inebriated madness in them and Charity felt a lurch in her stomach. As she waited for the Divination teacher to continue, starting to feel slightly sick, the candle in the candelabrum inexplicably sputtered out, and everything in the room dimmed except for Trelawney’s face, and the noise faded away until all she could hear was Trelawney breathing and staring, and she blinked, blood running cold now because this was strange, this was weird, where had the world gone? Her own breath had hitched in her throat and she wanted to get up and go but she couldn’t move while Trelawney held her hand, except she wasn’t looking at her hand anymore.

“You will die young…young and quickly,” said Trelawney in a dull monotone, and she stared unblinking into nothingness now. “Snakes. There are snakes. Snakes that love you and snakes that loathe you, that bring destruction. Snakes bring your end but also your life. They bring terrible misery but also immense joy. They are hatred and love, the snake that eats its tail, it must bring about an end but you will bring about a beginning. The one who could save you will desert you. You will fall afoul a great snake for speaking a truth. Always speak the truth. And your love will find a way.”

Charity had sobered up quite a bit now, but a dreadful whirling had started and Trelawney seemed to be doubling before her. When there were no more words, she whispered, “When? When am I going to die?”

Trelawney’s eyes refocused and she blinked. “Sorry m’dear? When? Oh your lifeline isn’t specific, it’s just short. And time is relative, isn’t it?” The candle blinked back into life.

Charity clapped a hand over her mouth and muttered, “I’m sorry, excuse me,” and she scrambled up from her chair and looked around blindly.

The party had reappeared – the music, the revellers, the laughter – everything was normal. For them. But Charity could scarcely stand upright. No doubt the champagne was having an effect but this didn’t feel like drunkenness, this was panic. A cold sweat suddenly flushed all over and she had to get out.

Aurora Sinistra was at her side, holding her arm. “Charity! Charity are you okay? Are you feeling sick?”

“Air. I just need air,” said Charity, and Sinistra said, “follow me,” and guided her through the crowd to a back door that led to one of the side chambers. The room behind was dark and empty. “Are you going to be sick?” asked Sinistra gently, helping her to sit in on a stool stored in the room.

“Would you like me to get you some water?”

“No. Thank you, I think I’ll be fine,” replied Charity truthfully – just some quiet made a huge difference, soothing her fevered mind. “I might just sit here for five minutes. I’ll be back out soon. Thanks Aurora.”

“Shall I stay and sit with you, make sure you’re alright? You do look pale.”

“No, no of course not, I’ll be fine. I feel better already.”

Sinistra studied her a moment, then murmured, “I’ll be back in ten to check on you. Just take it easy. It’s been a big night for you.”
Charity took a deep breath, right into the bottom of her chest, and smiled her thanks. Quietly, Sinistra left, clicking the door shut behind her and Charity sat in the numbing stillness and let the dark soothe her, the soft night ease her intemperate soul.

Trelawney’s words were already fading, she could only remember snatches, but she couldn’t forget how time, space, physics itself seemed to distort around the message, when people spoke about a sense of foreboding, was that what they meant. Trelawney was mad, but she wasn’t a prankster, she had just given Charity her own prophesy, and she saw her death, young and quick, and apparently snakes were her ying and yang, her friend and enemy, her beginning and her end.

Severus, obviously.

There was a window in the room, and a torch in a wall bracket was flaming outside, flickering light through the glass. She hadn’t noticed it before, but a door next to the window led to a small, paved courtyard outside and she was drawn to it, attracted by the night. The glittering frost on the grass told her the air was cold and crisp, just what she needed, a few deep gulps of the chill evening.

She opened the door and stepped outside, only now remembering the flimsiness of her gown, and wrapped her arms around herself. As always when it was night, she looked up to find the stars, specks of light thousands of years away, knowing that generations and empires had risen and fallen in the time it took for that moment of light to reach her eye, here on lonely, mortal earth. But tonight, there was dense cloud and a heavy silence. The snow was coming.

She put her hands on the iron railing that formed a balustrade around the courtyard, for the rock on which the patio had been built fell away steeply, the cliff descending straight into the lake, and the iron was all that stopped her falling. Then she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. You will die young and quickly…

With a suddenness that made her gasp, she felt warmth on her shoulders. A jacket had been placed there, still carrying the heat of its previous owner. She turned and her heart leapt to see Severus, who, as always, had found her.

He didn’t question why she was out here, but as she did, looked up. “No stars,” he commented. “Not in the sky, anyway.”

“Snow, Hagrid said. I’m just getting some air. Got a bit intense in there,” Charity offered.

“I saw you with Trelawney,” he said, watching her closely. “She looked…profound.”

“I’m a scientist, Severus, she’s just a mad old bat.”

“Glad to hear you say that. Because you looked terrified.”

“It’s the champagne. The excitement.” She heaved a shaky breath. “She said I’m going to die young and quickly.”

“She’s always telling people that.”

“And she rabbited on about snakes. Snakes that would love me and snakes that would loathe me. She said the one who could save me would desert me. And that I would speak a truth.”

Snape shrugged, and stared out across the lake. “How much has she had to drink?”

“Do you think she meant you?”
Severus looked deeply unconvinced. “I’m not saying she’s a charlatan, because she has foretold prophecies in the past. But she also has a lot of work to do to keep from being thrown out on her ear. So she’s seen you and I together and, frankly, concocted a rather lazy story to give you a party thrill. She could see you were susceptible. And she’s not a fan of me. I mean, really, snakes? Bloody gypsy.”

Of course, he always brought common sense to things. Charity felt much better and gazed up at him. “You’re getting cold,” she observed. “You’re trembling.”

“Not the cold,” he mumbled.

Something icy and wet landed on her cheek. Severus touched it. “A snowflake,” he told her. Looking up, a light swirling of snow drifted down. She held up an open palm to catch them.

“Did you know?” said Charity, looking into his dark, brooding eyes, “That the real name for them is a snow crystal. And that no two are alike even though they all have six arms. Because the exact shape of a snow crystal is determined by the precise path it took through the clouds: the six arms all took the same path, and so each experienced the same changes at the same times. The six arms grow in synchrony, and even though it’s a complex shape, it’s perfectly symmetrical. And since no two snow crystals follow the exact same path through the clouds as they fall, no two look exactly alike. There is a beauty in the science. The snow falls the same on all of us.”

The snow was falling harder now, and Severus drew her close to him, pressing her up against his length for warmth. His sleeping giant had, at last, woken, and now would not be stopped.

He reached inside the jacket he’d placed around her shoulders and drew out his ebony wand. He pointed it above their heads, at the swirling, falling snow, gave it a little twitch and murmured so low she could feel his voice in his chest, “Limino ninguis.” The snowflakes began to glow, radiant like the fairies’ wings, a magical, hidden light within each flake drifting down around her. “Oh!” she breathed. He then flicked his wand again and an invisible umbrella was cast above them, shielding them, and the shining snow slipped to the ground around them, piling up in glowing drifts at their feet and resting on the shield like fallen stars.

“The snow falls differently on us,” he murmured into her ear.

Severus placed his lips against her forehead, then holding her close, he reached for the end of the Bewitchers ribbon that cascaded down her back. With a gentle tug, he pulled the ribbon loose and it unravelled, unresisting, freeing her hair.

“Charity,” he spoke at last, and kissed her cheek, her brow. “I…,” his breathing was ragged. “I adore you. I…live for you. My heart, my soul, is yours.”

The ribbon was winding around them, a black, velvet snake, two encircles before falling to her feet.

She couldn’t speak. Words wouldn’t come. Her heart was too full.

“I have fallen in love with you. I love you with all that I have.”

She swallowed. “Then kiss me…please…”

And snowflakes that fell from the black sky above the bleak moors and lochs and hills of highland Scotland, tumbled down over a magnificent, ancient stone castle, where fairies were released to fly free from their holds, and strains of music could be distantly heard in the still air. Some flakes caught in the trees of a dark forest, and within its shadows the unicorns stirred restlessly, while others drifted further away, to the sky above a small courtyard upon a cliff, overlooking the inky lake, and these
mingled with magic so that they began to glow and shine as they fell to earth at the feet of Severus Snape, Potions Master, as he placed his warm lips on Charity’s and kissed her as though he would never kiss again.
Charity awoke from an exhausted sleep as dawn was breaking, although there was barely any evidence of it in the rooms belonging to Severus down in the dungeons. She had mentally programmed herself to rouse early, before anyone else, so that she could sneak back to her own rooms without being seen as all she had were her gown and shoes, not so much as a hairbrush, to make herself decent in the event she crossed paths with a crowd of over-excited weekending students bound for Hogsmeade.

Predictably she felt dire – far too much champagne – but these were merely symptoms of some lowly, earthborn vessel that she no longer inhabited. Overnight she had regenerated into a new being that floated above the mortal plane, subsisting on nothing but air, light and the ravenous attentions of Severus.

His bed was scarcely bigger than a single, but it didn’t matter because the pair couldn’t stand to be more than an inch apart anyway. Nevertheless she wriggled to roll over under the weight of his arm so that she could look at him and tell him she needed to get up.

It was a shame to wake him, he was probably as exhausted as she was, and she stole a moment to stare at him, replay his words in her head for the thousandth time, notice how his eyelashes rested against his cheek when his eyes were closed, the faint shadow appearing on his chin, the lips finally allowed to rest having spent hours at work last night.

A few more kisses would hardly make a difference then, she thought, and reached up to gently place her own on his, amazed that a thrill went through her as she did, and she thought she could kiss him endlessly.

He responded before opening his eyes and half asleep started to run his hands over her, obviously deciding that if she was willing he was more than up to the task, but she smiled and gently pushed him back. “I’m just trying to wake you a bit. I have to go.”

“What?” he grunted, now reluctantly lifting his eyelids and focussing on her.

“My room. I can’t go sneaking back to my rooms when the kids are up and about. I have to go now.”

“Stay here.”

“But I haven’t anything. Not a toothbrush, not my wand, nothing.”

“Where’s your wand?”

“In my room.”

“Why?”

“Because how was I supposed to carry it last night? In my clutch?”

“Your what?”
“My purse. It’s a little purse. It doesn’t fit a wand.”

“How did you lock your room without a wand?”

“I didn’t. I thought I was going to be back in my room last night, Severus!”

He sighed deeply and she thumped him. He smiled. “Alright. Do you want me to go up to your room and lock your door?”

“No, I want to go up to my room. And I’m going now.”

“No, stay. Stay here in my bed. Let’s stay in bed together all day.”

She could see from his face he was serious. And truthfully, she loved the idea. “I have to disapparate home tomorrow, don’t forget.”

“I know. So we have today. All day. Stay.”

His black eyes locked on hers, his hair all dishevelled on his pillow, it was pointless resisting him. “OK,” she grinned. “A day of lascivious sinning. But you go and fetch some things for me from my room and lock the door.” She gave him instructions on where to find everything.

He sighed again and forced himself up from the bed. As he threw on a few items of clothing, she admired him silently from her vantage point beneath the covers. Who knew he was hiding that body beneath his layers of black?

Running his fingers quickly through his hair and putting on his winter cloak, he stood looking back at her at the bedroom door. “Don’t move.”

She smiled winningly and he gave her a stern look, then she heard him open and shut the front door. She lay where she was for a few seconds, then she heard what sounded like vehement cursing coming from behind the door that Snape had just exited through. Concerned, because it sounded like he might have hurt himself, she threw on one of his shirts and raced to the front door, throwing it open.

“No! Charity, no -,” hissed Snape, who was standing out there with his wand raised. “Go back in!”

“What is it? Are you alright?”

He moved to usher her back into the room, but it was too late. She’d seen it. Scrawled across the front of his door in red paint were the words *Snape Fucks Mudbloods*.

While her eyes had seen it and her brain obediently read it, her mind was addled from hangover and exhaustion. It took her a couple of seconds to register what the words actually meant. And then she reeled back, aghast, horrified, her hand over her mouth.

Snape hastened back into the room with her and slammed the door. He wrapped her in his arms. “It’s just stupid kids, stupid kids, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Oh my god!”

“I’ll fry them. When I find out who did it, they’ll be hung by their thumbs. But honestly, Charity, don’t think anything of it, please don’t dwell on it.”

“When did they do it? It must have been after we got back to your room…?”
Mortification was swiftly followed by anger, and she spat out a few choice words of her own but then she felt weak, and sat down on his armchair, bent over, her face buried in her arms.

“It’s too hard!” she moaned. “This! It’s all too hard.”

“No, no listen – this is not about you, it’s not about us. It’s the friends of Fetherington, it’s just a stupid bit of childish revenge. Don’t blow this out of proportion. It’s just a Slytherin thing, I’ve seen it before. Go back to bed. Wait for me. I can clean it up in less than a minute.”

She nodded her head dolefully, thinking what else could she do. He squeezed her hand, then departed once more. When she listened carefully, she could hear him outside the front door. After a minute, she heard his feet striding away. She waited a minute more, then went to the door and opened it herself – the locking charm allowed the door to be opened from the inside but not the outside – and saw that the graffiti had been completely erased. It was part of corridor duty, there was a reasonably simple charm that teachers knew to remove most media-based graffiti. That paint had gone, but no spell could remove the image blazoned on her mind’s eye.

She ran a bath. He had soap, but no bubble bath, so she lathered herself up abundantly with the bar until he water ran milky white, then allowed the hot water to soak into her, almost dozing off. Scenes from the night before insisted on being reviewed over and over again, a technique her mind employed to extract every last drop of significance or intelligence from occasions that had registered high on the emotional Richter scale. And this one had just about made it to a ten.

The water was just starting to cool when she heard Severus re-enter the quarters.

“Charity?”

“Through here.”

He stood in the doorway of the bathroom and, out of habit, immediately looked away. “It’s alright!” she laughed. Then added, “I hope you don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” he turned to leave, and said with his back to her, “I’ve brought your things and locked the door. I’m sorry it took a bit longer than planned.”

“Did you have trouble finding my things?”

“No – no that was fine. Filch wanted me.”

“Filch?” said Charity. “Was it about the graffiti?”

“It’s been removed.”

“Did he see it?!”

Severus’ shoulders slumped, and, stricken, she realised. “There was more?”

“I’ll make tea,” he answered, and left.

Feeling suddenly cold, Charity pulled the bath plug and dried off in a hurry. Her effects were in a bag outside the bathroom door and she pulled on her Turkish spa robe and socks, tied her damp hair into a quick topknot and followed Severus through to the living area. He had made the fire in the woodstove, with a kettle on top, which was now burning merrily and warming up his quarters, and he was setting out tea things in the kitchen.
“Where was it, Severus?” she asked. “The graffiti? Who else saw it?”

“We got it early, my love. I doubt anyone saw it.”

“Why won’t you answer me?”

“Because I don’t want to ruin our day!” he said, heatedly, facing her. “Merlin knows, I get few enough of them. I dance like a puppet to any tune this godforsaken school asks of me. I am expected any day or hour the whims of circumstance require. But you – you have one day before you go again. You’re always going. I don’t want to waste it troubling over some…imbecilic prank; there’ll be time enough for me to worry about it while you’re gone.”

Abject, he turned back to what he was doing, but couldn’t seem to muster interest any longer and instead propped himself against the bench and hung his head. He looked like she felt. Exhausted and battle worn.

She went to his side and took his hand. “You’re right,” she said quietly, seeking his eyes. “You’re right. Forget the tea. Let’s go back to bed.”

She led him back through to the bedroom.

Snow fell again that day, and third years and over spent several hours at Hogsmeade. Snape didn’t care if they never came back. In his dungeon quarters, revived by Restoration Remedy, he and Charity simply wallowed, refusing to concern themselves with anything other than each other. She was beginning to learn how to blank out his Dark Mark, it was possible to see it but not consciously think about it, even when she accidently touched it and he recoiled.

They ordered food from the kitchen at dinner time, careless of whether their absence would be noticed in the Hall, and nobody enquired. Long after dorms were closed for the night, they rugged up to go for walk outside and get some air although it was very brief when they realised there was now several feet of snow on the ground.

Before they re-entered the castle, Snape pulled Charity to him and said, “Stay the night in my room.”

“I have to leave tomorrow…”

“I know. But that’s tomorrow. We still have a few hours…stay with me.”

Mutely, she nodded and together like cave creatures they returned to his rooms and shut the door. Depleted, exhausted, Snape fell asleep almost the minute they were back in bed, the tempest inside him for once soothed and stilled by her presence beside him.

At noon the following day, Snape went with Charity to the Hogwarts Gate to see her off. She was going to disapparate to Diagon Alley, pick up Holly from Jason at the Charing Cross station then take the train to Trowbridge where her parents owned an older detached home on the outskirts, perfect for a family Christmas. She carried a case with her belongings, a handbag with her wand in it and the Faerie Call in its wicker basket.

He was in a mood. He was faced with two weeks of an empty bed, which having just discovered
what it was like to have her in it was worse than if he hadn’t. It is always worse being the one left behind. She would have the distractions of travel, and family, a week in France. And while he usually preferred Hogwarts when it was empty, this time he would feel purposeless and lonely in its cold, echoey corridors. She was forcing brightness, he could tell she was trying to keep things light, but he couldn’t make himself. He wanted her to know how miserable she was making him by going. Again.

“I suppose I shall see you when I get back,” she said, with a limp smile.

He looked at her grouchily, then reached inside his robes and withdrew from a pocket a scroll of parchment and a quill, which he handed her. “I have enchanted it. I will write at six pm each day. You write back on the bottom half with this quill, tap it with your wand and say Convey. I shall get your letter on my half. The parchment will clear just before six.”

“Will it work in France?”

“I would trust it sooner than an owl.”

“What if you don’t write? Does that mean something will have happened?”

“If you haven’t heard from me in twenty-four hours, then something may have happened. But it would have to be very serious and I think it highly unlikely. Don’t lose this parchment, though. If I haven’t heard from you I shall be frantic.”

“I’ll contact you by Floo if I lose it. But I won’t. I’ll carry it with me always.”

He lowered his lids, transmitting his disapproval of this whole business. “I shall miss you terribly,” he finally muttered.

Uncaring who saw, she dropped her things at her feet and threw her arms around his neck. “I’ll miss you too. So much.”

Then, before she started crying, she gathered her things and apparated, the muffled crack all that remained.

Snape walked slowly back up through the snow to the Castle, feeling as though his whole body were transforming to stone. He would find solace in hunting down, remorselessly, the students responsible for the graffiti. Then he would let his instincts take over.

Later, as the train to Trowbridge pulled out from Paddington Station, Holly sitting beside her swinging her legs and wittering away, Charity took the parchment out of her handbag, curious to see how it worked.

“What’s that mummy? Can I read it? Can I draw on it?”

“No. It’s a letter. It’s important to mummy.”

She removed the bit of ribbon tie and unrolled it. The paper was divided into two halves and was blank except for three words in the top half, in Severus’s handwriting: I love you.

Two hours and a car drive later Charity and Holly were brought home to Briggside, the name of her parent’s Georgian two-storey home, twenty minutes south of the city. While it was a residential area, it was well to do, clean and quiet, and her parents had a lovely garden. As ever, her mum and dad were delighted to have family, and they adored Holly, indulging her completely, always lamenting quietly on the side that she didn’t have a brother or sister. The house was all set up for a family
Christmas, and as it was now twilight, her parents immediately set about getting Holly upstairs into her little bedroom, helping her unpack her things while Charity went to her guestroom which, as always, was impeccably arranged with goose-down bedding, plump pillows and comforting little table lamps, and soft, fluffy towels at the end of the bed. But she was pining. She couldn’t believe in the space of an afternoon she felt completely bereft, as if Severus had died, not just a few miles away. She sat on the edge of the bed and got out the parchment again, and then looked at the clock. Barely 5pm – the sun went down so early in winter. There was a whole hour before he’d write. What would she have done if he hadn’t thought of this parchment? She couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of that before now.

Her mother knocked on the door and stuck her head around it. “Everything alright, sweetheart? Got everything you need? We’re just about to pop the kettle on.”

“Yes, Mum, everything’s…perfect, thank you.”

Her mum watched her for a second, telling in an instant that Charity was far from perfect.

“What’s the matter love?”

Charity shook her head slightly and shrugged at the same time, unable to look at her mother in case she started crying. But her hunched shoulders were as obvious to her mother as if she’d written a treatise on the subject – her daughter was suffering.

Mrs Burbage bustled in and sat down on the bed next to her, putting a comforting arm around her shoulders and gathering her into a gentle hug. “There, there now. Whatever’s bothering you, it will be alright, I promise. Do you want to tell me?”

“It’s difficult Mum,” replied Charity through a shaky breath. “I think I’ve messed things up.”

“You mean with Holly? Your job? Has something happened with Jason?”

“No. They’re all fine, it’s not that.”

Relieved, her mother relaxed slightly and jollied her leg. “Then why on earth are you so sad? On holiday, this close to Christmas?”

Her mother was right, she should have been jubilant, she should have been in with her daughter planning things to do, downstairs with her dad eating homemade biscuits with a glass of Baileys. But unable to explain things very clearly when a choking, hot lump was in her throat, she handed the piece of parchment to her mother, who took the mysterious document in her hand and peered at the words through her glasses as if she’d been handed the Deep Sea Scrolls.

“It’s terrible Mum! I’ve gone and fallen in love!”

“Goodnight, beautiful girl,” said Charity, kissing Holly on the forehead as the little girl lay snuggled in her bed with approximately a thousand soft toys and dolls. “It’s late, big day today, lights out.” She shut the bedroom door softly and stepped lightly along the landing to her own room, hearing her parents downstairs in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner.

She felt like an excited teenager creeping off to her room to talk on the phone. But this was the first opportunity she’d had to see if there was a message from Severus on the parchment and she couldn’t
wait a moment longer. Once safely in the privacy of the guestroom, she crawled onto the bed and propped up against the cushions, unrolled the stiff paper.

Her heart leapt to her throat at the sight of his cramped, barely legible handwriting, fitted into the top half of the paper. He’d run out of space, and scribbles went up the margin. She could easily imagine him in his office, dipping the quill in the ink and scratching away in the candlelight.

*My love – how is it that after only a few hours apart, I feel as if you’ve been gone a lifetime? I haven’t stopped thinking about you all day. I have wondered earnestly if you apparated safely, and that you are with your daughter at your destination as arranged. Write quickly to reassure me that all is well. Please give my most cordial greetings to your parents and let them know that I wish them a happy Christmas.*

*On a less pleasant note, I was visited by Dumbledore today who had heard of the graffiti through Filch. He enquired after your wellbeing when he learned that you were aware of it, and I have told him that you showed a great deal of equanimity under the circumstances. He is, as I am, greatly concerned that such moral corruption seems to have infiltrated the student body; it is unusual. While I am strongly of the opinion that the culprits belong to Slytherin, no ghosts or portraits were able to confirm that they had seen students leaving the dorms or common rooms that night. I will persist.*

*The only other news is that poor Hagrid has been beside himself most of the day having received post from the Ministry that his hippogriff will be destroyed. He is inordinately fond of the creature, as you know. I may share a whisky with him later.*

*Dumbledore has put lights in the suits of armor around the place as part of his Christmas decorating. It is, in my opinion, a little eerie, but the remaining students seem to like the effect. As far as I’m concerned, Dumbledore could put a herd of elephants through the Castle and it would feel empty and hollow while you are not in it.*

*My love, I am lost without you. Write swiftly. Yours, S.*

She had scarcely finished reading when she leapt to her bag and found the quill, then an inkpot from her suitcase, made room on her bedside table and began her reply. She reassured him that she and Holly had arrived perfectly safely, and everything went according to plan, and though she was delighted to be spending time with her parents, she missed him horribly, and she too was surprised and pained at how achingly the distance between them felt. She thanked him for the other news, but entreated him not to fret too much over the graffiti, she was happy to move on. She asked him to pass on to Hagrid how sorry she was to hear about Buckbeak, and not to give up hope, miracles happen all the time. She got a little maudlin and sentimental, and professed her undying love, then murmured *Convey*, tapped the parchment with her wand and the message faded and then disappeared.

When she went back downstairs her parents were watching television in the same seats and positions they’d been in over ten years ago when she’d left home. “Hello love,” said her father. “Holly all settled?”

“Did you get a letter from your fella?” asked her mother. Charity nodded as she curled up on the sofa next to her father, smiling in spite of herself. “On the magic paper?” Again a brief nod.

“Why doesn’t he just phone you?” asked her Dad, even though she had explained to him several times about the lack of electricity at Hogwarts.

“Don’t tell anyone, Mum,” said Charity. “It’s my life there, now. I’m supposed to keep it secret.”
“We haven’t told anyone so far,” replied her mother with an affronted twitch of her shoulders. “And I know it’s your life, I had just sort of hoped that you and Jason…”

“No Mum. You know that. I don’t love him anymore. I haven’t in years.”

“I think he still has a soft spot for you.”

“Well he had a funny way of showing it when we were together.”

“He just didn’t know how to deal with all the…well… you know.”

“Which is why I think it’s easier for me to love someone who likes that side of me.”

Her mother returned her focus to the television for a little while, everyone in the room recognizing when the conversation took this bent it could get quite uncomfortable and unpleasant, and no-one wanted that on the first evening. She allowed time for it to diffuse, but evidently her Mum couldn’t ignore it altogether for she turned back to Charity and said, “So is he a teacher at the school?”

“Yes. He’s a subject master, and head of house. He’s highly respected.” Charity couldn’t help herself but talk him up. Whenever she came home, she reverted right back to her self-conscious fifteen-year-old self.

“What’s his subject?” asked her father gruffly.

“Potions,” replied Charity less quickly, knowing this wasn’t something they understood and predictably, her father scoffed.

“What’s that? Magic potions? What’s he brew ‘em up over a cauldron like?”

“Um, yes in fact. He’d be the equivalent of a Chemistry Master. He’s also a bit like a doctor.” She threw in this last bit knowing it would mollify her parents somewhat.

“So what kind of money does that make?” asked her Dad.

“It doesn’t matter. I make my own money. But he’s very comfortable if you must know.”

Less worried about Snape’s credentials, and more the future of her daughter and grandchild, Charity’s mother looked at her anxiously. “Is it serious, love?”

Charity glanced down, feeling her heart clench suddenly, then she said, “I think so. I feel very serious about it. He says he is. He’s certainly the serious type.”

“But do those people get married? Will you go and live with him somewhere?”

“Yes they get married! They’re still human! And it’s a bit early for him to be proposing, I think.”

Her mother assumed a slightly fretful face, and though she stared at the television, she was obviously not seeing it. Finally she said, “So he’s a wizard?”

“Yes,” said Charity, with a little smile. “A very good wizard.”

The next few days sailed past in a very Muggle holiday routine, with much eating, shopping and
trips into town to see Christmas lights, pantomimes and a Santa Grotto. In all these scenarios, Charity tried to imagine Snape along for the ride, and struggled to admit to herself that it seemed improbable. She adapted quite quickly back to Muggle life, but he was more comfortable in the wizarding world, that much was clear. Was that a permanent divide between them? Each day, as promised, he wrote to her on his parchment, and it was her special treat to herself to read it alone, with a glass of wine in her room, after her daughter had been put to bed. Sometimes she read his letter several times straight in a row, almost squirming in delight with his words, his slightly formal turn of phrase, the subtle, laconic wit. In one letter he told her that he had been to her classroom and taken a turn about it, then discovering her still broken microscope on her desk, had whiled away several hours repairing it “the Muggle way”, which she interpreted was meant to impress her. She didn’t know what it meant exactly – had he used screwdrivers and the like? – but she thought it very sweet.

In another letter, he told her he had been down to the archive and blasted a large number of mice, and that it was imperative that she arrange protection for the documentation on her return because they were starting to get the run of the place. He went on to describe using her typewriter, attempting to recreate his recipes and spells, but that the “tiresome thing” was uncooperative and eventually he figured out the principle of the action and he and Flitwick were devising a charm to make it work without actually having to type, and he’d heard they had done this in America already.

On Christmas Eve he wrote that the teachers and residing students would be dining together on Christmas day, which meant that one of his fifth years, Roderick Bass, would be there. He said he thought this would make for awkward company since Bass was high on Snape’s list of possible suspects or accomplices for the graffiti, and after some initial accusations had been made, Bass had virtually hidden himself all week and did not appreciate being informed his attendance would be expected at lunch. He went on to tell her that he had finished his interrogation of all ghosts and common room portraits, and had even sent letters to the substitute teachers, but nobody could account for students being on the prowl during the evening of the staff party.

At the end of each letter he always finished with the most loving, adoring words, prose almost impossible to imagine coming from the austere, irascible man. And they never failed to reduce her to a woebegone puddle who would pick up her quill the moment the tears dried on her face, and scribble back her, contrastingly, mundane replies.

She didn’t mention him any further to her parents, and they didn’t ask, which they hadn’t been doing since she was a little girl, as this was the way of things in her family. She walked between the two worlds, on a tightrope, alone.

On Christmas day, Holly unwrapped her presents piled under the Christmas tree: the usual assortment of toys, games, clothes and books. Her parents gave Charity some beautiful prints to hang in her quarters at Hogwarts, and a proper analogue watch, which were becoming harder to find in the dawn of the digital age. Her brother arrived with his girlfriend, and Jason was to arrive later for lunch, which Charity was dreading, and so while her parents became busy cleaning up and starting meal preparations, Charity went upstairs to get Holly and herself dressed. On the landing, she lifted Holly into her arms and whispered in her daughter’s ear that she had one more special present to give her. Then she took her into the guest room and took the wicker basket down from atop the wardrobe and opened it.

Holly took the hook at the top of the Faerie Call and pulled it out. “What is it?”

“It’s a Faerie Call. It’s a magical device that makes fairies come to it.”

In comparison to the small mountain of plastic in primary colours Holly had just opened, the old,
brass work of the Call didn’t have a lot of appeal to a seven year old. Her daughter eyed it silently, and very unsurely.

“When do the fairies come to it?” she asked at last.

“When you turn it on. It plays music only fairies like, and they will fly to it from all around to hear the beautiful music. Remember when we were reading about mermaid’s singing? Like that.”

“Can you turn it on?” Holly retorted logically, thrusting it at Charity, who removed it gently.

“No. It’s magic. And you have to treat it very, very carefully. Because it’s old and it might break if you’re too rough.”

“Does it need batteries?”

“No. It needs a magic wand.”

“I have a magic wand!”

“I mean a real magic wand.”

Holly looked crestfallen. “But I want to see fairies come to it.”

Charity considered her daughter and realized too late that perhaps she shouldn’t have raised the temptation of the idea without being able to follow-through, after all, without the fairies, the Call was just an old metal object to a little girl.

“Look how pretty it is,” said Charity, pointing to some engravings on it, hoping to distract her and at the same time perhaps introduce the idea that not everything had to have Disney princesses on it to be of value. “Look at these engravings on it. They were done a long time ago.”

Holly peered closely at the hand-wrought designs but remained unconvinced. “Mummy, I think this is a grown-up toy.”

Charity breathed out some low-level frustration. “Listen, Holly, this is a very special thing, maybe more special than all your other Christmas toys put together. But I can see that it might be a bit boring to you right now. I tell you what, I’ll show you how special it is when we go to our holiday in France, because that place is by the sea, and I bet there are lots of fairies about.”

Holly jumped up and down and clapped her hands. “Yay, cool!”

“Yes, cool. Now hop in the shower, you want to look nice for Daddy.”

At half-past twelve, as arranged, Jason parked his late model sedan in the driveway of Briggside, and walked up to the front door swinging his keys with one hand, an enormous wrapped box in the other. He was lanky, in jeans and long sweater, short, brown hair swept out of his eyes, clean shaven. He looked as if he’d made a real effort. Charity was watching discreetly from the bay window and she could tell from the ribbon and bow on the box that he had got the gift wrapped in the store.

He rang the bell and she answered the door. “Hi,” she said, startling him a bit. “What time did you leave home to get here?”
She couldn’t believe she used the word home. Where was home now? The one she’d referred to was the house she’d shared with Jason in Royston when Holly was born, the one she’d thought was going to be their forever-home. Jason had bought her share of it.

“Hi, how are you?” he asked, looking at her intently.

“I’m fine. I’m good. How are you?”

“Good. Merry Christmas, by the way. I got this for Holly.” He indicated the box. “Where is she?”

“Inside, come in. My god, what did you get her?”

“Some princessey thing. When is she going to get into camping and cars and stuff?”

He wiped his shoes, having been to the Burbage’s home a number of times before, and entered. Within mere moments, Holly rushed out of the kitchen and raced towards Jason, flinging herself into his arms for an up-in-the-air hug. “Daddy!”

Fortunately Jason had time to pass the box to Charity, but he took it off her again to hand to Holly with a big flourish. “Merry Christmas, my sweet princess. Santa dropped this off at home by mistake. Open it!”

While the little girl ripped off the wrapping and pulled apart the princess castle inside, Jason shoved his hands in his jeans pocket and appraised Charity. “You look different,” he said. “What’s with the hair?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s all smooth and…stuff.”

“I don’t know,” Charity shrugged. “More professional.”

“Professional? So you’re into this teaching thing then.”

“As in my job? Yes, I’m into it.”

Jason assumed a phlegmatic expression and rocked on his heels. “Thought you might have worked it out of your system by now.”

“So you thought I might try it out? Like macramé or something?”

“Well, I know you were into the magic thing. I kinda thought you might…grow out of it.”

She tried to hide the scorn. “Like I might grow out of my curls? Or my eye colour? You know, the things that make me, me?”

Jason didn’t take his eyes off his daughter, who was in paroxysms of pleasure over her plastic, radiation-pink rendition of a stone-walled, turreted castle. There was no dungeon, however. “It didn’t used to define you, Char. I think you decided it made you more interesting.”

“You’re not letting this go, are you?” said Charity with a sigh, forcing a smile for Holly’s sake. “It’s not a choice. And there’s a possibility that Holly will be the same. You’re going to have to learn to adapt to it.”

At this, Jason’s face turned dark. She recognized the expression. “What’s happened?” she asked instantly. “Has she done something?”
His eyes flashed at her. “If you think you’re taking her away from me, you can forget it. I will fight you. I’ll fight you every step of the way.”

“What happened Jason? I need to know!”

“Nothing’s happened. Not really. But she’s normal, you understand? Holly is a normal little kid.” Jason let his eyes bore into hers for a second longer, then stormed off to the kitchen. Charity watched him go, then let her attention return to her daughter, who was making little princess characters go up and down the castle stairs.

Meanwhile, at Hogwarts, Snape had just sat down to lunch in the Great Hall at the single table set for twelve. The teachers, Dumbledore and Filch had already taken their seats, along with fifth-year Slytherin Bass, who had been given last minute instructions from Snape to attend lunch or attend detention. He sat at the other end of the table, his hands in his lap, staring at his table setting. Two youngsters arrived in a great hurry, presumably first years, but in civvies Snape didn’t know who they were.

The food was loaded onto the table, honey-baked carrots, tripe, roast potatoes, parsnips, sprouts in bacon, chipolatas and of course a huge turkey. As soon as the first years had taken seats and tucked serviettes into their collars, Potter, Weasley and Granger showed up. Snape regarded it an amazing coincidence that all three of them just happened to be over-wintering, but since the entire school seemed to have agreed that as far as these three were concerned, nothing should be considered too extraordinary or problematic, he didn’t ask. Dumbledore was enthusiastic in greeting them, explained the one-table situation to them as though they needed to know, then they took seats side by side at the end of the table, opposite the others.

Everyone having arrived, Snape was just about to pick up his wine glass and take a sizeable gulp to help hurry the occasion along, when Dumbledore, across from him, took up a suspiciously large silver cracker next to his plate. He looked at Snape who recognized an evil glint in the Headmasters’ eye. “Crackers!” he announced jovially, thrusting it towards Snape in a way that was not to be negotiated.

There was obviously some kind of jape afoot. Barely disguising the long-suffering dread he felt, Snape took the end of the cracker and pulled obediently. A loud bang, and from the ripped bon-bon a witch’s hat with a stuffed vulture fell onto the table, almost knocking a candlestick over. Dumbledore waggled his eyebrows at Snape, who responded with a tired smile but there was not a Merlin’s chance that he was putting that on, not if he wanted lunch to continue. It had been a long term, and frankly he felt he deserved a bit better than that. He pushed the hat back towards Dumbledore who wisely put it on his own head. “Tuck in,” he invited to everyone, with a sidelong look at Snape.

Trelawney arrived a few minutes later in a sequined dress, and made a rather drunken spectacle of herself insisting that people would die because there were thirteen of them. Dumbledore, in revenge for the hat, conjured a chair in the air between Snape and McGonagall and Snape just had a second’s wherewithal to move out of the way before it landed heavily on the floor next to him. He drained his glass immediately afterwards and poured another, starting to realise how Trelawney had reached her otherwise pragmatic state. As Trelawney hesitantly seated herself, McGonagall made a dry joke about serving her some tripe which made Snape snigger privately, and the two women started a tit for tat which killed time while Dumbledore carved the turkey.
Trelawney was talking about Lupin, about his time being short, which sounded very familiar to what she’d been saying to Charity, and Snape started to tune out, turning his attention to the food instead and trying to avoid Trelawney’s habit of touching everyone. “I doubt that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger,” said Dumbledore, heaping turkey onto McGonagall’s plate. “Severus, you’ve made the potion for him again?”

Snape looked up, caught off guard for a moment, then understood this was a cover up for the benefit of the students at the table. There was a good three weeks until full moon again. “Yes, Headmaster,” he said, which wasn’t an outright lie. The students didn’t seem overly interested anyway.

The dinner went on interminably. Snape rather openly had three glasses of wine, only seconded by McGonagall who became increasingly acerbic as she partook, and the rather stilted atmosphere was a bit of a shame as the meal was delicious and Dumbledore was trying his hardest to imbue some Christmas spirit.

Bass excused himself as soon as pudding was over and Snape raised his eyebrows at Dumbledore as the boy hurried for the door. The remaining students perhaps cottoned on that the teachers would relax more if they weren’t there, and also started making reasons to go, except for Granger, who wanted to talk to McGonagall.

“Doesn’t she ever take a day off?” Snape heard McGonagall mutter under her breath as she got up to meet Granger outside the Hall.

Snape took the moment to reach inside his cloak pocket and withdrew a small parcel, which he placed on the table in front of Dumbledore. He hadn’t wrapped it – that kind of thing was beyond him – but he did pick a quiet moment when the Headmaster wasn’t cartwheeling or tap-dancing in efforts to amuse everyone.

“What’s this?” asked Dumbledore, with a small smile and a wink. He opened the parcel to uncover a pair of soft deerskin and tweed gloves with an adjustable wrist strap. His face lit up at the sight of them. “Why Severus! They’re perfectly wonderful. I didn’t expect you to take my little throwaway comment seriously.”

Snape waved his remarks away, uncomfortable.

Flitwick admired the gloves from his seat and said with a grin, “That’s two gifts Severus has bestowed this Christmas. Do we have an imposter?”

While Snape fought to keep an embarrassed flush rising to his face, Dumbledore gazed at him with something akin to fondness. “Our beleaguered Head of Slytherin proves to us all that it is nobler to give than to receive. Having recently been enriched with the most priceless of gifts, he is now enjoying the experience for himself.”

“Enough, sir,” said Snape almost imperceptibly.

“I once read a Muggle who said, ‘Give. Expect nothing. Its magic’,,” chuckled Dumbledore to the table at large. “And how right he was. So much magic in life has nothing to do with wands. Such as music – Flitwick, a carol please, sir!”

At six o’clock, Snape was glad to retire to his quarters with a wrapped bag of turkey sandwiches and some slices of baked ham. His daily correspondence with Charity kept her close to him; while he scratched away with the quill he imagined her reading his letter, forced his memory to recall every detail of her face, fantasized about talking to her in bed instead of through ink and paper.
It was too cold in his office, there being no fire in there all day, so instead he sat at his kitchen table with a tumbler of whisky and told Charity about the lunch, about the rabid rantings of Trelawney, about Filch’s terrible singing voice, about McGonagall’s sniping, about the expensive broomstick Potter had allegedly received and the fresh snow that had fallen.

Then, squeezed into the remaining space, he wrote: *Let this be our last Christmas apart. If it is the season for giving, then I give my all to you, this year and every year. Come home to me soon. I miss you intolerably. With all my heart, S.*

The day after Boxing Day, Charity, Holly and her parents took the train from Trowbridge to London, then caught a quick flight to Ambleteuse in France. The Channel Tunnel was still a few months from opening. Charity had rented a gorgeous stone holiday cottage for them all, months earlier. Being out of season, she had gotten a good discount, but it was still a bit of an outlay on a teacher’s salary, however when she saw the windswept beach view from the garden gate, she was glad she’d done it.

Her parents made the place home within minutes of lighting the wood-burning stove and putting the kettle on, and Charity took Holly down to the beach well-rugged up as a stiff wind was blowing and it was like walking through sandpaper. They headed vaguely in the direction of the Fort, obscured by flying sand, and although Holly complained and screamed girlishly into the gale, Charity found it bracing. She liked the horsewhip nature of stepping deliberately into punishment that flayed and stung her skin as if somehow to atone for the failures in her life.

A permanent ache of longing had settled in her heart and she spent the early waking hours each day remembering and replaying the nights in Severus’s bed. Then she would get out his message from the night before and re-read it, his own loneliness becoming more evident with each one. Finally, by breakfast, she had wallowed so thoroughly, it had almost soothed the pain and she was able to focus on the day.

Had she known when she booked this holiday that she would miss someone so intensely she doubted she would have gone ahead with it. But now there was more than her to think about, not just her daughter but her parents who were thrilled to be invited, and she did need to thank them for all the babysitting and caretaking they had done while she was teaching.

So with effort she concentrated maximizing the time with family, and in the few hours left of daylight, they enjoyed a walk to the nearest *une epicerie* (eschewing a global petrol station shop in favour of something a little more French) and bought provisions for tea that night, plus *le cabas* for carrying it all home in.

With a large glass of Pommard, Charity quietly departed from the others at six pm to climb the open stairs up to her dormer bedroom under a sloping roof, and sat on her iron-framed bed to await the message from Severus.

Ten minutes later she received the words, *You are further away. I sense it. Have you gone to France now?*

Yes, she wrote back. *In Ambleteuse, by the sea. For four days.*

She wasn’t sure if that was going to be her lot for the evening, and she waited breathlessly to see if this parchment would allow for more than one exchange. Her heart leapt when she saw more writing materialize beneath the first sentence.
Are you alone there with your daughter? I could join you, it would be safer.

She was with her parents, she told him, having almost groaned with pleasure at the idea of having him here with her in this seaside cottage. She told him a bit about the cottage and how, perhaps one day, they could come back, just the two of them.

A long delay.

I am utterly wretched, he finally responded, then nothing. It was as though he’d hung up the phone on her. She was devastated. She tried writing him back, but he’d clearly signed out. Had something happened that day at the Castle? She paced the room once or twice, unable to stay seated, her muscles responding to panicky impulses to act, to go to him, then she heard her daughter calling her and she had no alternative but to leave it for now.

Twice before bed she checked the letter in case he’d written further, but nothing. Just those awful words. Late into the night she finally succumbed to sleep to the sound of the sea roaring outside.

The following day was calm and mild. It was a good day to try the Faerie Call, even though Charity wasn’t particularly optimistic since the local environment didn’t lend itself terribly to small, flying creatures, but there was an old, gnarled blackthorn tree sheltered by the hill behind the house which she was delighted to see had some hollows in it. Perhaps they would get lucky. At dusk, she and Holly went hand in hand to the tree, the little girl holding the Call up high off the ground, and Charity holding her wand. Together they selected a crooked but sturdy branch, black and desolate during the winter months, that was around six feet off the ground, and Charity reached up to hang the Call securely.

“Now. Wish mummy magic,” said Charity, and with Holly’s wide eyes on her, she tapped the Call with her wand.

Was there an incantation? She couldn’t remember. But when the Call made no sound or motion, she took her wand again, avoiding Holly’s disappointed face, and channeled her magic, feeling a little rusty after a week of no use.

Tap. Play, Faerie Call, play and summon.

It started. The mechanism began to whir and a moment later, the ethereal music began to issue, indistinct beneath the sound of the nearby waves. “Look! Look darling – it’s started! It’s working!”

Holly jumped up and down on the spot like a little gazelle. “I can’t see! Lift me up!”

With effort – she was no toddler anymore – Charity hoisted her up so that Holly could see the Call spinning and producing its melody.

“We have to give the fairies a chance to hear it and fly here,” explained Charity, leading Holly back towards the cottage. “We’ll come back later tonight.”

“Where did you get that thing from, Mummy? From the castle you go to?”

“Yes. From the castle. A very special wizard gave it to me. He wants me to believe.”

“Did you see fairies? Do you believe in them now?”

“Oh yes. Fairies are real.”

It was her mother that spotted them first. Washing up in the kitchen after dinner, she noticed them
through the window over the sink, the soft blue phosphorescence of the coast-dwelling fairies glowed and danced around the tree and she called her husband, who immediately called Charity.

“It’s fairies!” she breathed at the sight, almost unable to believe it, and she raced around putting on coats and shoes for herself and Holly and yelled over her shoulder as she bolted out the back door, “Mum! Dad! Come and see!”

There weren’t as many as Hagrid had summoned at Hogwarts, and they all had only shades of blue for colour, but they were fairies nonetheless and as they hovered and swooped in and out of the hawthorn branches, and plinked against the Call, shedding their fairy dust, Holly was utterly enchanted. Her breath plumed in the frosty air, and her eyes shone, and she gripped Charity’s hand tightly, a little nervous at a first encounter.

They stood quietly and watched, presently joined by her curious parents, who stared and stared. “Well I’ll be…” muttered her father. “Are they some kind of insect?”

“They’re fairies, Dad…,” said Charity softly. “Real ones. At Hogwarts they catch them…Professor Flitwick had them in his classroom. You give them a bit of sugar water, or honey.”

“I thought they were just in stories…” said her Mother. “Did you magic them?”

“The Call is magic. They’re sort of hypnotized, so they don’t know what they’re doing. But they live around here, they must live everywhere, Muggles just don’t see them.”

Her parents knew the term Muggle. It sat with them a little uncomfortably, interpreting it to mean lesser. But they didn’t comment. It seemed churlish in the face of what they were witnessing.

It was difficult putting Holly to bed that night, she had been overstimulated. She wanted to keep the Call running from her bedroom window and catch fairies in a shoebox, but Holly gently talked sense into her, and eventually she was sedate enough to leave.

Hurriedly she escaped to her own room to see if Severus had written. Her heart plummeted when she opened the parchment scroll to find his section blank.

Uncertain, but frantic, she took up her quill and ink – which was starting to run low – and on her bedside table simply wrote: Severus?

Less than a minute later, she received, Here, my love.

Why didn’t you write? she scribbled, relief flooding through her.

I feel tired. Disconsolate.

She didn’t know how to respond to that, it was so unlike him. She pondered on it for several long moments, before tentatively picking up her quill again and writing, Tonight we summoned some local fairies. I wish you could have seen the joy they brought. It was because of you, the things you do, the difference you make in the world. You are remarkable, incredible, and I can’t really describe how delirious you’ve made me. Severus, please, stay with me, you are on my mind constantly and your letters are my only way to stay sane.

Only two more days, was the reply. Then come quickly.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

On New Year’s Day, Charity, her parents and her daughter flew back to London, arriving at two in the afternoon. Jason met them in the Arrivals hall at Heathrow, and gave Charity a censorious look when Holly babbled to him about the Faerie Call. Even though it was decent of him to come to the airport to pick up their daughter, especially on New Year’s Day, Charity realized she was hurrying everyone. She had already told her parents she wouldn’t be returning home with them for a final night, which had been the original plan, and they grumbled a bit but she thought in some ways it suited them to go home to a quiet house after the holiday.

“Come on then,” she urged brightly. “The car’s on a meter, let’s all get home.”

When, at long last, everyone was in transit, and she was alone at the airport, Charity’s heart started to thud, her nerves thrummed in anticipation. She carried her bags in a sea of people, walking past shops and gates and flashing signs not seeing any of them, wondering if she could disapparate from here to Hogwarts safely. She could do it from Diagon Alley…surely only a few miles difference…

She could almost hear him calling her, almost feel a physical tug on her heart.

As she exited the terminal it was drizzling, but there didn’t seem to be anywhere secluded enough to attempt a sudden disappearance. Cameras were everywhere as well, she noticed. She walked for an hour in the cold, gentle rain towards the more industrial end of the airport, where trucks and baggage vehicles travelled, their drivers casting glances at her. When she happened upon a narrow access lane with a barricade, she slipped down it, unseen, and then went around another corner. Her heart sped up. She looked up and around, searching for cameras, but saw none. It would have to do, she couldn’t wait any longer. She visualized the gates of Hogwarts, then with determination and deliberation, both easy for her to muster, she disapparated with the familiar lurch.

The rain was falling as snow in the highlands of Scotland. She arrived outside the Entrance Gates in a foot or more of it. The winged boars carried a deep frosting on their backs. She glanced about her quickly, never having splinched before and uncertain of how to recognize it if she had, but she seemed in one piece.

She saw something in the corner of her eye. Looking back towards the train station, she saw the ominously drifting black shadow-like forms of Dementors. She didn’t think they were yet aware of her, but panic fluttered in her chest.

Of course the gates were locked and she held the iron railings as she shouted at the top of her voice for Hagrid.

But it was not Hagrid that she saw walking through the drifts of snow towards her. She recognized his frame, his walk, instantly, even with the hood of his black cloak drawn up.

“Severus! SEVERUS!”

He broke into a run, and had drawn his wand to unlock the gates from yards away. She pulled free the padlock, and leaving her bag behind pushed open the gates and ran towards him.
Their embrace was a joyous collision. She wrapped her arms around his neck and he lifted her free of the ground, whereupon she wrapped her legs around him also and pushed back his hood and kissed him hard.

“My love, Charity,” he muttered when she allowed him air. “Ah, thank Merlin you’re here.”

When she was on the ground he said, “Is this your only coat? Here,” he took her within the folds of his fur-lined cloak and kissed her thoroughly once more. “Never leave me again.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry I went away. Oh my god I missed you so much.”

Snape used his wand to cast a levitation spell and lifted her bags from outside the gate to where they were standing.

“How did you know I was here?” Charity said, staring at him incredulously. “I’m a day earlier than planned. I wanted to surprise you.”

He picked up her bags in one hand, and still holding her close within the cloak with the other, they began the trudge back up the hill to the castle entrance. “I had a sense of it,” he replied. “It’s felt as though we’ve been connected since you went. I had a feeling for your movements. When I asked Dumbledore about it, he said it was the Bewitchers Ribbon.”

“The Ribbon?” she echoed, knowing what he meant, knowing that tugging sensation, that strange way, in the most unexpected moments, her mind would fill with desperate, sapping longing for him.

“I took the ribbon from your hair. You might remember it encircled us? That was the Ribbon enchanting us with the bond. So long as the ribbon remains intact, so does the bond. Apparently your commitments away tested the bond because it was so new, it’s not supposed to be put under that kind of stress for a few months at least.”

“Oh,” said Charity. “Does a wizard usually remove the ribbon under more…formal circumstances? I mean, is it like part of a marriage ceremony or something?”

Snape gave her a little squeeze. “I expect so, but these are old traditions. My love, I don’t think I needed the ribbon to feel what I did, I think I would have missed you to the point of desperation anyway.”

They were greeted halfway up the hill by Fang, who barked in a welcoming way, soon followed by Hagrid, who gave Charity a bellowing hello, then stopped at the sight of her. “You look like a drowned rat! Wha’ happened?”

“Oh, nothing, I got caught in the rain.”

“You mus’ be frozen? Stop in by the fire, ‘ave a whisky!”

“No,” said Severus shortly. “No, I can warm her up myself thank you Hagrid. Dumbledore gave me the spell for the gate lock, but it is still open at present.”

“Righto, thanks Severus, welcome back miss Charity.”

“I’m so sorry about the news of Buckbeak, Hagrid.”

He dropped his eyes sorrowfully for a moment, then offered a brave smile. “Severus passed on what you said…and thank you, I’ll keep askin’ Merlin for a miracle.”
Snape and Charity continued their journey and before long were entering the front door into the Entrance Hall. Something flooded into Charity’s heart to be here, something warm and wonderful and familiar.

“Quick,” said Severus, barely stopping. “I don’t want anybody seeing, no interruptions. To my quarters, quickly.”

They hurried across the Hall, to the stairs to the dungeons and straight down, along the dungeon corridor to Snape’s rooms, which he unlocked with a breathless muttering, and Charity barely had time to enter before he was upon her.

He shoved her up against the back of the door and pressed himself hard against her, his lips locked on to hers and his hands frenetically undoing the buttons on her coat. She was startled at first and simply stood there being accosted, before she came to and shoved him back.

“What are you doing?!”

“What?” he said dazedly. “What are you doing?”

“You can’t…I’ve just walked in…”

“I know. Thanks to Merlin, alone at last.”

She smiled at the crossed wires. “Severus, my darling, I’m cold, I’m wet, my feet are frozen. Can I have a bath and some Restoration Remedy do you think?”

“A bath?! But that will take hours!"

“I will emerge warm and limpid and glowing and all ready for you.”

He frowned heavily, opened his mouth and shut it again and stormed off to his bathroom to run the hot water. While she rummaged through her bags for the bubble bath she’d bought him, he prepared a vial of Restoration Remedy and two tumblers of whisky. As soon as the bath was half full, she pinned up her hair and climbed in the scalding water, lathering the soap all over her luxuriantly, and he knocked on the bathroom door before entering with her whisky and R&R. His eyes were dark and oddly glittery as he watched her soaking, then abruptly left and she could hear him banging around in the other rooms. When she felt thoroughly rejuvenated, she emerged wearing nothing but one of his towels. He was in his armchair by the fire, down to shirt and trousers, scanning the paper which he folded and put aside at her arrival. He appraised her openly, then stood and crossed the floor between them in two strides. With a single yank, he pulled off the towel, then scooped her up and carried her directly to his bedroom.

The students were returning for second term on the Express on the evening of the second, ready for school to recommence in earnest on Tuesday the third. A start of term feast had been planned in the Hall for their arrival and teachers were expected to attend in full academic attire, as well as be prepared for lessons to commence on schedule for nine am the following day.

Snape had a late order of supplies delivered which needed sorting and stocking, and the inventory updated, and Charity was nowhere near organized, with her bags still unpacked and her curriculum disrupted, so reluctantly the pair agreed the following morning to go their separate ways.
Snape was much placated, however. Knowing she was only metres away rather than miles was far more tolerable as far as his rather vulnerable attachment bond was concerned. He also quite enjoyed the task of stocking up on new supplies. The store of ingredients largely dictated the practical’s he would be planning in his double-potions classes, and also what new or experimental potions would be in the offing.

They worked all day, attended the dinner in the evening, then Snape was obliged to settle the Slytherins back in to their dorms as, post-Christmas, there was always a lot of catching up and sharing between the students making them late for lights-out. A Quidditch match was also scheduled for Slytherin and Ravenclaw on Saturday, and so urgent arrangements for practice were being made. “You’ll be coming, won’t you sir?” said Marcus Flint.

“Certainly,” replied Snape, thinking Charity would probably support Ravenclaw. “Make sure you secure the pitch with Madam Hooch first thing tomorrow. And get Malfoy to practice hard. We need this win. Potter’s got himself a Firebolt and Malfoy will be up against him next match with Gryffindor.”

Flint’s eyebrows shot up. “A Firebolt? Who gave him that, sir?”

“As yet unknown. It’s presently being assessed for jinxes and hexes but I expect Professor McGonagall will want him to have it back before play. But listen to me – it is a Gryffindor trait to resort to equipment in lieu of resourcefulness. A Firebolt might be quick, but it’s only a tool – Malfoy needs to concentrate on wit and cunning, not brooms, to beat Potter. If you’re half as much Slytherins as you say you are, you’ll have Potter flying as fast as his Firebolt can carry him in the opposite direction of the snitch.”

“Straight into a tree if we can arrange it, sir,” grinned Flint, enjoying this chat with his Head immensely.

“Well I didn’t hear that. But Slytherin have had a tough first term and a win over Ravenclaw will have us heading in the right direction again. We’ll worry about Gryffindor when we’ve got this one in the bag.”

“Right, sir. First practice tomorrow after school.”

It was late by the time Snape left the Slytherin Common Room. He hesitated in the Dungeon corridor, then picked up his pace again and went directly past his office to his quarters and let himself in. He’d hardly seen Charity all day, and in spite of his compulsion to see her and hold her, he assumed she’d be resting after her long day and broken night, he would be kinder to let her alone. His last thoughts, before falling asleep, were of her.

The first school week of 1994 was pleasantly uneventful. At dinner mid-week, Lupin told Snape that Harry had shown exceptional promise in his Patronus coaching. “How are you teaching him?” Snape asked, as it was unusual for a student to grasp this particular spell.

“Using the Boggart,” Lupin explained. “His Boggart is a Dementor. He’s already managed to create an effective shield.”

“Corporeal?”

“No. Not as yet. Won’t be far off I don’t think. We’re meeting once a week.”
Snape raised a grudging brow and looked at where Potter was sitting. “Who sent him the Firebolt do you suppose?”

Lupin wiped his moustache with a napkin and shrugged. “Wasn’t me, I can tell you that much. Down to the bones of my arse thanks to the Ministry.”

“Does Potter have any theories? A wealthy fan perhaps? A rich relative he’s unaware of?”

“Well if he’s got a rich relative they’d be better off coming forward than sending him presents.”

Snape paused to pour himself tea. “What about a rich godparent?”

Lupin coughed and took a draught of pumpkin juice. “Are you suggesting Sirius Black walked into Quality Quidditch Supplies and bought a Firebolt? After, presumably, going into Gringotts to withdraw some money? Then went to a post office to arrange an owl and send it?”

“No. Maybe he went in and bought a Firebolt as a dog.”

Lupin scoffed and looked at Snape as if he were quite mad, but Snape was smiling too. “Which is, of course, a preposterous idea. But is it so preposterous for Black to ask an old friend to help him? While he’s on holiday in London?”

Lupin was frowning now and had paused from eating. “What are you implying? That I’m in touch with Black?”

“You did make all kinds of promises.”

“And even if I were, which I’m not, but even if I were, why on earth would Black want to buy Potter the world’s most expensive broom? Your theory is that he’s trying to kill him.”

“Bait, Lupin. He’s baiting him. He knows Potter’s old broom got destroyed, he’s gone straight to the tastiest lure he can find.”

“How would it work if he can’t claim credit for it? What’s the point if it’s all anonymous?”

“Well that’s the art of seduction, don’t you think? Let the boy get enamored with the gift first, let him feel obligated, let him slowly draw his own conclusions. But this will be in your master plan, Lupin, you tell me.”

Lupin huffed and physically pushed away from the table a little. “You just can’t let it go, can you?”

“Get ahold of yourself, it’s just a few questions,” replied Snape mildly. “Or maybe they’ll find a hex on it and everybody’s suspicions will be confirmed anyway.”

The following day was bright and mild. When classes were finished, Snape hurried the students out of his classroom and locked up, then swept up Slughorn’s Stairs, across the Hall to the marble steps up the first floor and along the corridor to the Muggle Studies classroom. Charity was in there, tidying up, and smiled warmly upon seeing him. “Oh hello you.”

Snape stopped to look around, surprised. “Where are your posters?”

“I took them all down yesterday,” she said. “A conciliatory gesture for Dumbledore the
Disapproving.”

Snape narrowed his eyes at her, skeptical. “I thought he was just Displeased.”

“No, he disapproves. He thinks my classroom is far too Muggle-ish for Muggle Studies.”

A snort of laughter and Snape shook his head. “Just give him time.”

“Not sure I have that. He told me that Sir Byron has organized a meeting at the Ministry next week about the curriculum. First item of business for the Board, he tells me. Not that I’m invited.”

“This is good news?” inquired Snape cautiously, walking up the aisle between the rows of desks towards her.

As she bundled up the days’ assignments, she replied “Worrying news. It depends how hard Sir Byron pushes it. I really don’t need Dumbledore venting his frustrations on me.” She turned then and beamed at Snape. “By the way, thank you for fixing my microscope – it’s working perfectly!”

“Ah. Good. The, uh, typewriter, I’m afraid, isn’t in such good shape.”

She laughed at his disquieted expression. “Really? It’s kind of hard to break a typewriter.”

“You must come to view it as a noble sacrifice in the pursuit of discovery.”

“Well I haven’t been down to the archive in some time, so I’ll have a look next time I’m there.”

She hefted the assignments into her arms and Snape hastened forward to take them off her. “It’s just homework for marking,” she said. “Thank you. I was taking them to my office.”

“And after that?”

“Well, uh, if you’ve got a suggestion…?”

“I thought a walk? Slytherin are practicing this afternoon and I was going to go to the pitch and watch.”

Together they went to her office and deposited the homework on her desk. She said, “But Slytherin are playing Ravenclaw aren’t they? How would it look if I were there at Slytherin practice?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well fine. So long as you don’t expect me to clap or cheer. And what about Dumbledore? We were supposed to keep things low key.”

“That gossip has been and gone. We are yesterday’s news. As far as the teenagers are concerned, we are an old married couple and I’m sure they’d prefer not to think on it too closely.”

Charity laughed aloud, easily visualizing a group of fourteen year old’s feeling vomity at the idea of them together. “Alright, you’ve talked me into it.”

She collected her coat and Snape fetched his cloak and they stepped out into the late afternoon winter sunshine, causing snow to melt and the icicles to drip.

As they walked towards the Quidditch pitch, they chatted harmlessly about their week so far: Snape informed her of the alarming invoice he’d received for the fresh stock and how he hadn’t broken the news to Dumbledore yet. She showed him her new analogue watch that she’d unpacked from her
bags. He told her about his chat with Lupin and she was astounded at the theory of Sirius Black sending a Firebolt. She told him that Sinistra had broken up with her boyfriend after a huge fight at the staff party when Lupin had chatted Sinistra up. It was exceedingly pleasant and relaxed.

The Slytherin team were already up in the air when they arrived. They took seats in the Slytherin box and waved at Flint and Bole as they swooped past with incredible ease and proficiency. The bludgers were beaten back and forth and Flint hollered instructions to the other players while Malfoy could be seen at height practicing turning and stopping maneuvers.

“Severus,” said Charity after a few minutes of watching the sport. “This weekend. I know we must stay for the match, but afterwards – well one of us will be celebrating, won’t we? Not just whichever team wins, but it’s your birthday on Sunday. Remember I said we should get away? What do you think?”

He took up her hand and squeezed it, smiling at her. “I think it is a fine idea.”

“What would you say to staying at my place in Bedford? It’s countryside, practically. And it’s been a few weeks since I was there so I should just check in on things.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like better.”

She smiled broadly at him. “Really? As simple as that?”

“Would the Muggle in you prefer it if we complicated things a little?”

She laughed. “I suppose I must be living my life in expectation of problems at the moment. No. Let’s keep it deliriously simple. Bring a toothbrush and a change of clothes.”

“Will we be going out?”

“Perhaps for some dinner?”

“Then it is all arranged.”

The match on Saturday started at eleven am. Under a dry but cloudy sky, the stands were full, all Houses except Slytherin supporting Ravenclaw. The Slytherin supporters held their own, however: chanting, whistling, stomping, waving banners and flying emerald green serpent flags. They honestly didn’t need the support of anyone else, they were so strong in their own self-conviction. Snape was wearing his green and silver robes for the occasion, sitting amongst the students, deafened and uncomfortable but genuinely needing this win for his House after months of debilitating knocks and slips. He didn’t know for sure if the graffitist was sitting in the stands with him, he just had a strong feeling that the offensive, personal slurs came from a disgruntled Slytherin, probably a Fetherington cohort, and maybe Bass knew more about it than he was letting on. But right now, he needed them all to unite and feel some of that emerald kick in their veins, remember the pride of being the oldest, strongest, most successful House at Hogwarts.

Once the teams had cruised on and taken position to rousing cheers, Madam Hooch released the balls and blew her whistle. The snitch zipped left, right, then whizzed away out of sight, hotly pursued by Malfoy, who lost it and cornered sharply against a stand.

It was an intense game right from the start. The Slytherins took an early lead when the quaffle was thrown and immediately taken by Montague, who narrowly avoided a careening bludger from Inglebee and a collision with Burrow as a result. The quaffle went through the third hoop cleanly
within minutes of play, and Roger Davies gave his keeper a mouthful.

Penalty points were given to Ravenclaw when Peregrine Derrick beat the bludger upwards from below directly at Stretton’s broom, almost knocking him off, then Warrington took advantage of a distraction to get another quaffle past Page.

Bole was so busy keeping a bludger away from Marcus Flint, who was marking Roger Davies, that Stretton intercepted a quaffle played by Montague and zoomed down the other end of the pitch directly through Warrington and Derrick to score, Bletchley having picked the wrong hoop to defend. It was agreed this was the best play of the match.

Snape saw Malfoy cruising at height, scanning, and Cho Chang preferring to cover more of the middle ground. Find the damn snitch, Snape transmitted mentally, even though that was obviously was Malfoy was doing, but was he doing it enough? The sunlight through a thick blanket of cloud was hard and bright and the snitch would be largely invisible against it. Did that height give him an advantage? He suspected Cho Change was using whatever shadow was available from the stands to provide visible contrast.

Clever Ravenclaw played well, that was undeniable. The chasers were their strength, which they had invested in over and above their seeker, intending to accumulate short, sharp points knowing that Bletchley was probably too heavy as Keeper to keep momentum over a sustained attack. Roger Davies shadowed Flint closely, Slytherin’s best chaser, to steal the quaffle, and the Ravenclaw beaters focused more on clearing a pathway for the chasers than trying to hit their opponents.

It took two hours for Ravenclaw to accrue 165 points, with thirteen goals and 35 penalty points. Slytherin had scored two goals, 15 penalty points and the pressure was building on Malfoy as the remaining team started to tire.

Behind him Snape heard a Slytherin roar “Use your fuckin’ eyes, Malfoy!!” and the snitch zipped past the stand a second later. Snape jumped up and gave an earful to the fourth year who had somehow forgotten he was seated directly behind the Head.

Flint left play suddenly to fly up to where Malfoy was cruising. There was a conversation, Malfoy looking defensive. Then Flint suddenly pointed and gesticulated and Malfoy swung about, closely watched by Cho Chang. Malfoy clocked the Snitch whizzing up and over the Hufflepuff stands, all but camouflaged amongst the yellow, and he took off after it so quickly he was lifted out of his seat on the broom. Cho Chang bolted after him, but she herself had not sighted the snitch.

All eyes were on Malfoy. He crouched low on his broom, becoming as streamlined as possible. The snitch flitted at a right angle from the Hufflepuff stands directly across the pitch, low to the ground, and players hurtled out of the way as Malfoy shot after it. The sharp right angle had caught Chang late, and she lost meters of distance still frantically trying to lock on to the little golden ball. The Slytherins began a chant “MAL-FOY, MAL-FOY” and spectators practically fell over the guards trying to point him in the right direction as the snitch struck left and up. It was almost possible to hear Malfoy’s Nimbus 2001 screech on the tangent, swoop under and up, and then he was mere inches away from the snitch.

Randolph Burrow, in the meantime, got another quaffle past the diverted Bletchley, but nobody was watching when a few seconds later, upside down, Malfoy closed his hand over the snitch. Rightside up again, grin visible to all, he held it high above his head and did a victory whirl.

Snape was up and clapping while serpents all around him whooped and yelled and stomped in their stands. He hadn’t realized his heart had been in his mouth for that last sequence of play, and his relief was palpable when Hooch blew her whistle and called time. Slytherin had won, 185 to 175.
The players all landed on the pitch and shook hands. Slytherins loved beating Gryffindor, but their favourite team to play was Ravenclaw, appreciating a better deployment of strategy and tactic. While Slytherin had literally scooped the win, everyone agreed that Ravenclaw had played brilliantly, and Gryffindor were going to have their work cut out.

All the students and teachers made their way back up the hill, chatting excitedly, faces ruddy and breath pluming in the cold. McGonagall and Flitwick both shook Snape’s hand, now that the season had just become a close call, and Snape said that Ravenclaw had been the better players. Alone again, he looked around for Charity, and eventually spied her, in blue and bronze, with a striped scarf around her neck, smiling and laughing with a group of Ravenclaw students.

She spotted him waiting for her and she separated herself, then walked towards him with an enormous grin. “That was fantastic,” she said. “You did not deserve to win.”

“I know. But they’re the rules.”

“In fairness, Malfoy was all over that snitch. Did you see that upside down thing he did?”

“Once somebody else had pointed the snitch out for him. But he’s quick on a broom, all told. I wonder whether Lucius will be investing in a Firebolt when he hears about Potter.”

Keeping a respectable distance in the middle of the swarm of students, Charity couldn’t, however, keep a gleam out of her eyes. “When will you be ready to apparate?”

“Let me congratulate the team, then I am ready to go,” he told her, the corners of his mouth lifting in return.

The Slytherin Common Room was in very high spirits when he entered, multiple bottles of Butterbeer having been obtained from somewhere and shared about generously. Still dressed in Quidditch uniform, Snape was easily able to make out his team members in the centre of the throng, and hollered at the celebrating teenagers to clear out the way and let him through. He gave Flint a thorough handshake and congratulated him, Malfoy as well, and then somebody, possibly inspired by their Head of House in green, shoved a Butterbeer in his hand and shouted “Speech!”

Snape wasn’t a lover of butterbeer, finding it unpleasantly sweet for his taste, much like pumpkin juice, but this wasn’t the time to get precious. He took position with is back to the fireplace so that the large stone serpent above the mantelpiece was visible and raised his bottle and said clearly above the now-silent crowd: “To Slytherin!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

“Thanks to our boys in green and silver we have literally snatched back a chance at House victory. Congratulations to the team.”

“THE TEAM!”

“There will be time enough to dissect play and analyse our strengths and weaknesses. But right now is not that time. Celebrate! You played hard and you played to win. I was proud of you out there, and I’m proud to be Head of this House. Long live the Serpent!”

“HURRAH!!”

Snape took a long swig of his beer, joined by the House members and the celebrations kicked off again. It was his cue to leave.
Careful not to draw attention to himself leaving the room, he slipped away and then hurried down the corridor to his rooms where he collected his black leather hold all which he usually used for trips home to Cokeworth. He locked all his rooms securely, then departed for the Hogwarts Gates, which was the meeting point with Charity.

Halfway down the hill he heard her calling behind him. He turned and waited while she caught up, noticing she’d changed out of her Ravenclaw colours into Muggle slimline jeans, hooded cable knit sweater and leather boots. Her hair was in a loose ponytail, and she finished the relaxed look with a mischievous grin and a suede, patched backpack. “Look at us sneaking away like lovesick teens,” she said, immediately giving Snape a cuddle. “Quick, before we’re intercepted!”

Not needing any further encouragement, they half-ran to the gate and Snape, who still had the lock code from Dumbledore, opened it with his wand on approach.

He scanned once for Dementors and not seeing any, they stepped outside, then he re-locked the gate behind them. There was a bark, and Fang ran out of the trees near the gate, skidded to a halt on seeing them and barked the alarm.

“Hagrid will be on his way,” said Snape. “I take it I’m sidealong?”

Charity nodded, smiled and raised her arm and they linked together, then picking her studio apartment’s back door as the destination, they disapparated with a crack, just in time for Hagrid to hear as he came tromping through the snow for his hound.

A red bus was drawing to a stop at an intersection alongside Charity’s corner street as the pair materialized on the paved back step of her Shakespeare Road, Bedford apartment. A passenger on the bus saw them, blinked, leaned back to stare speechless as the bus pulled away again, otherwise Charity and Snape were alone and both sound.

“These are my digs,” she said, as Snape looked around. “Welcome.”

“Thank you.”

“Have you been to Bedford before?”

“No.”

“Well it’s lovely here. I chose here because it’s not too far from…Jason, and Holly, in Royston. Anyway, come in.”

She unlocked the door using keys she had to fish out from the bottom of her backpack, while Snape stood impatiently fingering his wand. They entered into a clean but slightly airless hallway, that was also as cold as outside. “Heating,” she said to no one in particular. “I’ll turn it on.”

“Shall I make a fire?” offered Snape, feeling rather awkward, and not uncomfortable per se, but uncertain.

“Hah, no fireplace Severus, this is a modern Muggle home. There’s a gas fire in the living room you can turn on if you want. I’ll check the hot water cylinder.”

Charity spent several minutes wandering around the apartment dealing with the issues of heat, water,
light and ventilation. She chit-chatted away as she worked, explaining that her visits were so intermittent that the place had to be re-started every time she came back. Snape’s place at Spinners End was similar, except there was no electricity and he didn’t bother with it during winter so heating hadn’t really been a problem.

She had a pile of mail on the hallway floor that Snape gathered for her and deposited on the wooden dining table, on his way through to the living room. It was an older, renovated residence, and many of the original character features were in evidence throughout - cornices and ceiling roses, pressed metal, toggle switches and window levers, there were elegant scrubbed oak floorboards in the kitchen and dining areas which he liked immensely, and deep window seats she used as bookshelves. There was a spartan feeling however, which didn’t ring true with the person he’d come to know. She liked her creature comforts, she imbued sentimentality into objects and liked them around her, she may have been a scientist, but she also derived great pleasure in beauty and art. This seemed to be missing from her apartment. It was clearly a transient place, unsettled.

He found the gas heater and after a few minutes, figured out how to turn it on. The flickering flames behind the glass screen seemed very paltry compared to a real fire, in his opinion, and it took a good while before he could detect any warmth coming from it. A clock in the kitchen informed him it was close to half past two, and he realized that as well as cold, he was hungry.

There was a fridge in the kitchen, humming. While he knew exactly what it was, it was still novel. The fridge in his Cokeworth house hadn’t operated since his parents had died, and there were none at Hogwarts, so he opened it and stared inside. But for a block of butter, some sauces and a jar of pickles, it was empty. The freezer was even more impressive, having accumulated a thick crust of dire-smelling ice. He amused himself briefly with the automatic light in the fridge, and then Charity walked in.

“Oh – are you after something to eat?”

“I don’t think you have anything.”

“No. We’ll have to go out.”

He waited.

“You don’t seem very relaxed,” Charity observed, looking at him standing in head to toe black under the fluorescent light and white paint of her kitchen. He looked as if he’d stepped out of a time tunnel.

“I’m…fine. What would you like me to do?”

He was more than just anachronistic. He was starkly other-worldly, but like a creature that’s washed up on the beach, out of their element, he couldn’t do here what he was made to do. She felt as though she might have disempowered him, bringing him here, whereas she felt more in control.

She reached out and took his hand. “I’d like you to come with me.”

She led him out of the hard lighting of the kitchen and up the stairs to the bedrooms and bathroom. She spent more time in these rooms when she was here, and had softened the master bedroom with a warm-toned coverlet, rugs on the floor, heavy drapes, cushions and pillows. There were photos of Holly in frames on the bedside tables, books and pictures and lamps with printed shades and a television set opposite the bed.

She stood him beside the bed and removed his cloak, which she draped over a chair, undid the
buttons at his collar and loosened his tie, then wrapped her arms casually around his neck and reached up for a leisurely kiss. He responded as if starved, emitting a throaty groan before picking her up and throwing her on the bed. “Look,” she said, with a wicked smile. “Queen size!”

She was lying with her head resting on Snape’s bare chest explaining how the remote control worked as he, propped against the pillows, scanned the TV channels. He paused at the news. “That’s Major, the Muggle PM,” he commented and she agreed. “About as effective as Fudge.” Flicking through some more he came across a commercial for a cleaning product. The lady in the commercial had a wand which she waved to make her benchtops sparkly clean. Snape snorted. “That seems to be the most imaginative use for a wand Muggles have come up with.” Charity chuckled with him. Some more flicking and he struck a movie channel showing The Exorcist. “Dark Arts,” he remarked presently, after watching it a bit. “I know the curse she’s under. He thinks she’s possessed, but it’s a curse. She’s crossed somebody.”

“So the Muggles who made this movie, who won’t believe in magic, have accurately recreated the effects of a real curse?”

“I don’t know why Muggles don’t believe in magic. They obviously see it sometimes.”

She idly ran her fingers through his fine chest hair, listening to his voice rumbling up from somewhere very deep. Her eye caught her watch, which compelled her to check the time. “Oh my god, it’s quarter to six. We should go out and eat. Aren’t you hungry?” She took the remote off him and turned off the unfriendly sounding movie.

“I’ve been hungry for several hours, but you very capably distracted me.”

She smiled at him. “I have something for you Severus. It’s a birthday present, okay? Wait here.”

Throwing on her sweater and knickers, she went to her wardrobe and withdrew a parcel wrapped in plain gold paper, which she brought over to him. “Many happy returns!”

Snape accepted it almost reverentially. It brought to mind the presents his mother would get him on the 9th January, an extremely inconvenient date for a birthday so soon after Christmas when his parents seemed to view him as inconvenient anyway. But his mother had tried. Clearly only remembering at the last minute, she would often get him a box of chocolates from the corner store, or ask the neighbor if her kids had any hand-me-downs or wrap one of her old textbooks from Hogwarts. This was how he had acquired a book on potions which had commenced him on a lifelong journey. The best thing about the potions textbook was that it had felt almost new, and he had few things of his own. She had apparently taken a spartan interest in potions at school and never explored any part of the book that hadn’t been used during instruction. But Snape had read every single page numerous times before he’d stepped foot in Hogwarts. He begged her for a wand, for a cauldron, believing that even if he couldn’t get actual boomslang skin, he could catch an adder and maybe that would work just as well. He would gather the ingredients himself, many of the potions were Celtic in origin and available locally even if these days it would take a bit of work to get them. Irene saw that he was determined, but fretted about Toby, what he would do if he came home and found the boy brewing in the kitchen over the gas stove. “Just wait till you’re older, sweetheart,” said Irene. “We’ll go to Diagon Alley. We’ll get you a wand of your own. Just be patient.”

“Open it!” said Charity, not discerning the reason for his pause. “It’s not super significant or anything, but you should open it now.”

So Snape undid the giftwrap and revealed two fine merino jumpers, with high collars, in charcoal
and midnight blue. He’d never owned anything similar before. He didn’t speak.

“When you’re with me doing Muggle time, you can wear these out and about and nobody will pay you any attention,” Charity explained. “If you wear your coat, I think it will attract attention. The Muggles will think you’re off a period film set or something.”

When he still didn’t speak, she hurried on. “I got colours I thought you’d like. And the collars are like your coat. So it won’t feel that different wearing them.”

He reached up and gently kissed her on the lips. “Thank you. I shall wear one tonight.”

“Come and have a shower with me,” she said. “then we can go.”

When Charity came down the stairs with her backpack, Snape was waiting for her in the living room standing by the gas fire, as was his habit, even though the effect wasn’t the same. He looked, however, stunning in his new sweater and she stared for a long time before he realized she was there. “You look great!” she announced and he turned, frowning, smoothing down the wool.

“It feels very different…”

“I know. It’ll take some getting used to, but you look…fantastic. It makes you taller!”

“Is the fit..?”

“Fit’s perfectly. And wool will get roomier. Just don’t give it to the elves to launder! Give them to me when they need cleaning and I’ll bring them back here. Where did you get your coats from anyway?”

“Madam Malkin.”

“Ah. So that’s how she knew you.” She checked her watch. “I know a place that serves oysters. What do you think?”

His face relaxed a little and he smiled. “Lead the way.”

“I’ve just got one little favour. Can you give me five minutes to make a phone call – I want to say goodnight to Holly.”

“Of course.”

Charity put down her bag and went to the wall-hung phone in the hallway. Jason answered.

“Hi Jason, it’s Charity. I’m calling from my apartment. I just wanted two minutes with Holly.”

“How come you’re at your apartment? I thought you said you wouldn’t be back from the school so soon after term started.”

“It’s just an overnighter.”

“But you know I needed someone to take Holly tonight, I had to rearrange all my plans. You could’ve helped me out.”

“I’m with someone, okay! This had been planned for weeks.”

“Oh I see. One of them, I’m guessing. We’ll maybe you should put him on the phone and he can explain what the fuck I should do with your daughter!” yelled Jason bitterly.
“What are you talking about?”

“That bloody fairy thing you got her. She took it outside the other night and started it and we had bloody insects for miles all over the garden.”

Charity almost dropped the phone. She was speechless for a moment and Snape watched closely. “She..she started the Faerie Call?”

“Yes! Took it outside in the middle of the lawn and next thing, bloody moths or fireflies or something all over…”

“How did she start it?”

“She said she used her wand, you know the plastic one, but she must’ve found out how to turn it on. I never got a proper look at it, because it got confiscated by your lot.”

Her Holly. The evidence at last, the clue. Not uncontrolled, like her immature magic had been, but deliberate and by design. She imagined her little girl, on her knees in the grass at twilight with her pink plastic toy wand, tapping the Call. She had channeled the magic from her genes, directed it to achieve an end. How?

She dragged her attention back to the phonecall, to the words Jason was saying. “Confiscated? What happened?”

“Some blokes turned up at the front door saying they were from the Ministry and wanted to investigate an incident. I thought they were from the government, but there was no car, nothing. They had just appeared. As if by magic. I put two and two together. They asked a lot of questions about Holly and then confiscated the fairy thing. I told them that you were a teacher at the school – what’s it called? Hog? Cow something?”

“Hogwarts,” she said impatiently. That was quick of the Department of Magical Accidents. Holly would have recognized the fairies, but Jason was either to determined to think they were insects, or he’d been charmed by the Reversal Squad was hard to tell. She wondered if any of the neighbours had seen.

“They’ll probably want to talk to you. In the meantime, your bloody daughter decides she’s a witch.”

“She’s our daughter, Jason. And yes, I’d say she probably is a witch because there is no on-button for the Faerie Call!” Charity’s eyes caught Snape’s. “She used magic and that’s why the Ministry showed up.”

He sighed heavily into the phone. She remembered his words at Christmas, insisting that Holly was normal. It would explain why he didn’t seem too surprised now – she had a growing suspicion that Holly had been showing signs of magic for some time.

“Well I’m pretty much stuck here with this and you know I’m not good with it Charity. I can’t handle her by myself if she’s up to this kind of caper. You’re going to have to move back to Bedford and start helping me with her. It’s not fair to leave her with me like this when she’s turning into one of your lot.”

He meant move back to Bedford permanently. He wanted to change the custody arrangements.

“Besides,” he added, in a more conciliatory tone. “I think it’s time we talked. It’s not right, raising her like this. We were good over Christmas, weren’t we? We got along. And how happy was she,
having us together again like a family?”

“We’re not a family, not like that, not anymore,” said Charity quietly, and she shifted slightly away from Snape, who suddenly looked hard at the floor.

“Families come in all sorts of ways, these days. And she’s seven now – if she doesn’t have a sibling soon the gap will be too far apart.”

Charity could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Are you seriously proposing this? I’m not a brood mare. Holly has never asked for a sibling, anyway!”

“We’ll talk about this later,” said Jason, his bitter tone resumed. “But I’m getting in touch with my lawyers, Charity, I want to revisit the custody agreement. You’ve been at that school for, what, three years now? I’ve had her ninety-percent of the time. It’s not fair on her or me. You need to ditch that job and get something closer to home.”

There was a plunging sensation inside her. Charity had dimly wondered how long this would last, she knew this day would come but she’d blocked it, locked it away in her head. Jason had fought tooth and nail for custody and she’d relented then because teaching in Scotland had become a possibility. Now she was showing signs of magic, he couldn’t shove Holly aside fast enough.

“She’ll go to Hogwarts when she’s eleven. It’s only four years away! I can’t lose my job there, she’ll have to move and live with me in Scotland.”

“No. You’re not taking her to Scotland.”

Anger flared, a flight or fight reaction to Jason’s typical pig-headed unreasonableness. Then she noticed Snape had taken a seat on the sofa, arms resting on his knees and head bowed.

“You’re right. We’ll talk about this later,” she hissed into the phone. “Now put Holly on.”

Jason swore under his breath but fetched her daughter and Charity chatted briefly with her, scolding her lightly for using the Faerie Call, but amazed at Holly’s recount of the dozens of fairies that had apparently been drawn from garden sheds and alley ways. With kisses down the phone she ended the call and hung up, then tentatively joined Snape on the sofa. She put her arms around his shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You probably heard what happened.”

“I heard enough. So, you are the mother of a young witch.”

“I can’t believe it. I never saw any sign. Then all of sudden she’s doing this.”

“She activated the Call on purpose. That means she’s already conscious of her abilities.”

“Perhaps. I mean, she was just copying me, she has a toy wand, and it’s possible she inadvertently channeled some magic. But it certainly wasn’t uncontrolled.”

Snape nodded. “Then I can understand why your ex wants you to be more present for your daughter. My father was the same, almost afraid to be left alone with me. You don’t want her being raised as if she has something wrong with her, something she needs to hide or be ashamed of.”

He lifted his own arm and drew her into a comforting embrace, but his expression was reserved and solemn. She kissed him lightly. “Let’s go for dinner,” she said. “I could use a glass of wine.”
Charity ushered him out, desperate to lift the mood while they had such precious time together. They walked to a nearby Italian bistro and shared a bottle of red over pasta and talking hard. After that, she took him to a wine bar where they shared oysters and she joined him in a scotch and at last he began to thaw, sitting side by side on a soft, deep leather sofa near the window, watching people outside and cars drive past, the Saturday night Muggles making spirited conversation at their tables while a piano tinkled in the background. In their secluded corner she snuggled into him and he murmured, “The last time I used my wand was to unlock the gates at Hogwarts. How long ago is that? At least nine hours. It would be years and years since I’ve gone that long without using it.”

“How you know why I keep forgetting mine.”

“But it’s so tiring being a Muggle. Having to open everything and get up to fetch things and turn things on.”

“No elves, either. When we get back to my place, the bed will be all unmade, just as we left it.”

“Well that’s not necessarily the end of the world. After all, I was intending to mess it up again.”

Charity looked up to smile at him but found him flinching instead, as if in pain. “What’s the matter?”

He stretched forth his left arm. His teeth were gritted. Then he took a big gulp of his whisky. “Dark Mark,” he muttered, shutting his eyes, waiting for the pain to ebb. A few moments later he exhaled deeply. “That was a test. Short but sharp.”

“He’s out there isn’t he,” she said grimly. “He’s going to call for you. How will you know when it’s time to go?”

He didn’t want to answer, he didn’t want to think about it, not tonight. Not ever. They had just spent dinner making plans, about getting a place in Scotland together close to Hogwarts, putting Holly in a local school and going home in the evenings, together, like a family. She could live with them during term, then in the holidays see her father, grandparents and Snape would have Charity to himself again, in their cottage with a garden in Scotland somewhere. Somehow they would convince her ex, somehow he would learn to live with his child, he would do it all for Charity because it was the only future he wanted. Her eyes had shone as they discussed it, buoyed by the ever-present hope that rose in him like a spring, that made him so resilient and he had thought to himself that he never wanted to be anywhere where he couldn’t see her eyes.

They were like soldiers battling across the Somme, under constant fire, getting hit and falling, then getting up again, putting forward foot after foot until hit again, and thinking that there was a line out there somewhere they could cross, if they could just cross that line they would be safe, left alone to be together, which was all they wanted, and if they could just get up again and go a few more feet, maybe that would get them to the line. How many hits, though? How many hits could they take?

Charity could see that Snape had retreated again and she sat quietly next to him, not letting go of his hand. After a while he leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “When we get back to Hogwarts,” he said, “I am going to teach you to cast a Patronus. I want you to be able to reach me at all times.”

The week back at work passed largely without incident, through to the middle of January, the sky commonly a glaring white and cold winds constantly threatening more snow. The fall that had been
on the ground had now melted and when it re-froze overnight, turned into extremely dangerous, slippery ice that required constant vigilance when walking on stone outside. Madam Pomfrey was kept busy attending to a multitude of bumps and bruises.

The final audit report was posted to Hogwarts and enclosed with it the Certificate to showed the school had met standard. This was framed and hung in Dumbledore’s office. The accompanying letter stated that they would be due for re-audit in two years or so, so Charity made a point of spending several hours in the archive carefully packing, labelling and storing all the results of the first audit so that it would be easy to refer to the next time.

She felt slightly nostalgic being in the archive. It was redolent of simpler, easier times, of her blossoming affection for Snape, of being busy and having a project. She discovered the typewriter which no longer worked, several dead mice which Snape had left where he’d blasted them, the chair she had sat in when he invaded her mind, charred logs in the fireplace from the last time it had been lit. A sudden upsurge of conviction that her time was running out crashed through her chest and made her head swim; somehow she knew this would be the last time she would visit this archive… this quiet, serene refuge where she and her elf had invisibly toiled away for months documenting Hogwarts history. Nobody had visited her. Upstairs, aboveground, adventures on a grand scale had rolled out, and yet down here she had been undisturbed, like a mole, until that day she had opened the door to Severus Snape.

A sob escaped her and she put her hand to her mouth to stifle it. Would her future be different now, if she hadn’t? Had he somehow brought about her imminent demise? She thought that, like Lily, yes, somehow, perhaps not directly, not intentionally, but somehow, her fate had been tripped by him, the day he stepped through the door and looked at her, pointing out the cobwebs in her hair. She had noticed him long before he entered the archive of course, it was hard not to, so tall, dark and imposing. In staff meetings he was always so serious and commanding, she’d been a bit in awe of him. But when he came into the archive, he had seemed so much more approachable, and being in awe of someone, and liking them as well, was a heady combination. Perhaps she had fallen for him as early as that meeting, or perhaps a person’s life was like a train, tied to tracks of destiny, and that she had been born to love him, she had just been waiting until that moment when her train travelled down that section of track.

It didn’t matter now. She was on this journey and there was no going back, but she clutched like a drowning woman at the plans they’d made at dinner, the perfect little life they’d described to each other, these would keep her afloat, they would carry her to safety, she would live to walk through the front door of that cottage with her daughter and her true love, and they would die old together, it had to happen because she wanted it so much.

But trembling legs made her sit on the armchair, and look around for the last time at her archive, the bittersweetness of it making her heart ache.

Snape took her for her first Patronus lesson down near Hagrid’s hut. School had finished for the day, the Gryffindor Quidditch team were practicing, and she had agreed to accompany him more to be with him than anything, since they’d barely seen each other the whole week. But even though she was delighted to be with him, even outside on this steely, January eve with the denuded Forest looking raw and primal, he was nonetheless in teacher mode, and so brooked no foolishness, was impatient with poor effort, and had no tolerance for her pleas to start easier. “You are an accomplished witch, Charity, there is no reason why you shouldn’t be able to do this!” he barked at
her when her wand, feeling rather shocked and bewildered she sensed, produced a whisper of nothing.

“It’s hard!” she argued, but took position again. “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

“Don’t just shout it out,” frowned Snape. “What are you conveying through your wand? What are you instructing it? Have you told it what you want?”

“Yes!” she sniped back, but the Patronus that followed was willowy and transparent.

“Well that’s just going to feed them,” said Snape, referring to Dementors which was their opponent of choice. “Watch!”

He did a demonstration, his shield Patronus expanding into the space before them, shimmering, almost pulsing with energy. “This will keep them back, this is what you need.”

She waited for him to put his wand away again then said, “I thought you said you wanted us to be able to communicate. How is this doing that?”

It was a fair question and he knew it. “You’ve heard of a corporeal Patronus. It is an image, a…a manifestation of your true self. The magic you dispense to produce a shield Patronus is the same magic you need to produce a corporeal Patronus. Your image, your animal, whatever it is, won’t reveal itself until you have learned how to concentrate, how to channel that particular magic stream. It’s an ancient magic, but if I could put it in words – it’s as if the magic extracts from you the essence of who you are in animal form – it’s the stuff that’s in your genes, Charity. Let your scientist put down the logic and just…believe…”

“Now listen,” he said, more gently but no less persistently. “We’re going to get this shield Patronus working, and the more you feel it, the more you’ll know what to feel. Does that make sense?”

“What’s your Patronus?” she asked abruptly. “If you sent your Patronus to me, what would it be?”

He straightened and his face went suddenly blank. “A doe.”

“A doe?” she repeated, frowning. “Like a deer?”

“A female fallow deer, I believe. A female red deer is a hind.” He was matter of fact. Blunt.

She shook her head, confused. “But I thought you said your Patronus is like…like your essence. How is a female deer the essence of you?”

“Are you ready to try again?”

“Can I see it?”

“You’re wasting time, my love. We are against the clock.”

“I want to see it. Explain it to me.”

“Are you going to push this!” he suddenly shouted. “We have to be back in the school in half an hour!”

She was stunned and shocked for a second, then she threw him a furious glare and started marching up the hill towards the castle. “I don’t have to put up with that!” she shouted over her shoulder.

“Sorry. I’m sorry! Charity!”
She couldn’t resist when he said her name, and paused, but kept her back to him.

“I will show you,” he said, and something in his voice told her he was doing this in spite of himself, perhaps better judgement, and she turned.

When he saw she was watching, he took his wand, swirled it and non-verbally produced his doe, which sprang from his wand and capered a moment before him on the frozen grass. Then it stood still and awaited instruction. Charity watched. Snape spoke to the doe and it twitched its ears, pawed at the ground then scampered a bit before trotting up to her. It was silvery, smoke like, a silhouette more than a replica. When it was close to Charity, she heard in Snape’s quiet voice, “You are my reason for being.” Then the doe turned and sprang away, evaporating into air.

The doe had been beautiful, undoubtedly, but if she hadn’t heard the words in his own voice she doubted she would have ever attributed the doe to him. She came back down the hill to where he stood. “That doe is not yours.”

“You saw it come from my very wand.”

“I did. But that’s not you.”

“You expected a bat?” he asked drily.

“No! Fuck you Severus – I hate that you don’t give me any credit. Don’t give me platitudes and then assume I don’t know anything. I know you. I know you. That doe is not the essence of you. Whose is it?”

“What do you mean ‘whose is it’? It’s mine.”

“I’m not buying it! It doesn’t add up. You were telling me the truth when you said a corporeal Patronus is the essence of your true self, your spirit in animal form, that I believe. Then you were resistant when I asked to see yours, you were hiding something. And then you produce the doe. Which is patently not your animal spirit, or the essence of you at all. Tell me the truth!”

He hesitated, then she said, “I think I know.”

“What?”

“What was Lily’s Patronus before she died?”

His resultant expression answered her question. He slowly shut his eyes and turned his head.

“It’s hers! That doe is Lily’s! Isn’t it?! Answer me Severus!”

“I didn’t choose it!” he replied hotly, still unable to look at her.

“So how does that happen? You end up with the Patronus of someone else? Oh my god, this is like finding your husband has left everything in his will to his first wife!”

“You wanted the truth. I can no more pick my Patronus than the colour of my eyes. It became the doe when she died, I don’t…I can’t…”

“But don’t you see!” Charity said, hot tears springing to her eyes despite herself. “She’s here! She’s still…she’s still…”

“I love you, Charity!”
She shrugged, opened her mouth but the tears were balled up in her throat. “In a way,” she uttered eventually, and walked away up the hill, leaving him there on the edge of the trees.

She and Snape didn’t speak for two more days. She did, however, speak to Lupin, after seeing a murderous looking Snape leave the Hall after his Slytherins one breakfast, she got up for her seat and re-located to the one he’d vacated, to the surprised look of Lupin, who almost choked up his coffee.

“Coffee, what a great idea,” she said. “May I?” and indicated to his coffee pot.

“By all means. You can order them you know, from the kitchen.”

“It’s not why I’m here,” she acknowledged with a small smile as she poured herself one in Snape’s empty tea cup. “I want to ask you something.”

Lupin was undisguisedly curious. He frowned hard and said, “What can I possibly help you with?”

“Promise you won’t tell Severus?”

“Nope!” declared a high and mighty Lupin. “You know Severus and I share absolutely everything.”

“Alright, then it’s this. You seem to know all about Patronuses. Severus is teaching me so I can produce a corporeal one. So I asked him to show me his. And guess what his Patronus is.”

“Ah,” said Lupin, and took a small sip of his coffee. His expression had changed from polite enquiry to guarded realization. “His is a doe. Doesn’t seem to fit, does it?”

“No it doesn’t! But it’s not his. I don’t know what his own Patronus is, but guess where the doe comes from.”

“Lily,” he replied after a subdued moment.

“Yes! How did you figure that out?”

He paused, started to speak then abruptly closed his mouth.

“I know he loved her, Remus, that’s not news. I want to know why he got her Patronus.”

Lupin issued a resigned sigh. “I should start by saying there is no single controlling force or logic over Patronuses. But there are some very loose, general patterns. That is all. So all I can really tell you is based on probability, a very flimsy understanding at best.”

“I’ll take that.”

“James’ Patronus was a stag. Very big, very imposing, James all over really. When he and Lily fell in love and married, hers became a doe, the female version in the relationship. It’s a pattern we see with Patronus’s everywhere. A love bond exhibits itself through the Patronus as an animal pair. When one partner dies, the other takes the Patronus, but since James died as well as Lily, well…”

“But… I know Severus loved Lily, but she…I didn’t think she…”

Lupin could see the anguish on Charity’s face, trying to understand, trying to apply Muggle logic and reason to the problem. He felt for her. “Don’t try to figure it out, Charity, it’s not even
something Wizards truly understand. And in fairness to Severus, he didn’t have any say in the matter.”

“Does it mean that she loved him all along?”

Lupin half considered this, half dismissed it outright. “No. No I don’t think so. She loved James, of that I’m sure.”

“Do Patronuses know something about ourselves that maybe even we don’t?”

He looked at her levelly for a long moment, her eyes knowing the truth even if she didn’t want to hear it. But he owed her that. “That is possibly true.”

Her scientist was driven to find the truth of the matter. She practiced her Patronus charm for hours when she was alone, in her classroom, in her quarters, but most often out in the grounds, thinking Snape must have chosen that place for a purpose. She preferred the edge of the forest, but sometimes down by the lake, and sometimes behind the stands of the Quidditch pitch when no one was using it.

Between herself and her wand, they started to figure it out. Her wand was unused to this kind of demand, and at first played dumb. It had a lifetime of being unused followed by household magic – this kind of thing wasn’t in its poplar and unicorn makeup.

But she persevered, and more, she had a burning curiosity to find out what her own Patronus was, whether it in any way reflected Snape because in some way she needed to claim him back, she felt the doe had kicked out the chair beneath her feet, that it knew something she didn’t, that the message it had delivered to her was a horrible, putrid lie – even if they didn’t know it yet.

Somewhere in her was a Patronus of her own, and it would tell her, she knew, it would give her an answer.

In the evenings, ducking away, she would find a deserted spot and practice. Her shield Patronus grew steadily stronger, and with repetition she discovered, that like riding a bike, once she had synchronized with her wand, progress was one-way. In the Forbidden Forest one evening, her protective shield was strong enough to light the way through the trees for yards, and she sent startled birds out of their roosts and rabbits bolting for their burrows. She was tempted to try it out on a real Dementor and actually went down to the Hogwarts gate, thinking she could try it out from the safety of her own side of the gate if one came drifting past, but though she waited half an hour, none did.

Then one evening, when she was practicing near the Forest, she bumped into Hagrid gathering firewood. “Hello there Professor,” he said cheerily, his arms laden with kindling. “Out by yerself?”

Fang came loping up and nosed her, his tail wagging lazily.

“Hello Hagrid. Yes, I’m quite alone. But I wanted it that way. I’m practicing.”

“Practicing being alone?”

“No, no – practicing some magic. I have as much to learn as some of the students here.”

Hagrid shrugged philosophically. “Well no one ever stops learning, Professor. What are ye practicing then?”
“Charity, Hagrid, you know that. And I’m trying to learn the Patronus. Can you do it?”

He looked as if she’d asked him if he could fly. “No! No, I can’t do no Patronus. Tha’s for proper wizards like. Do you know that Dumbledore ‘as the most magnificent Patronus I ever seen. Bet you can’t guess wha’ it is.”

She thought for a moment then answered, “A phoenix?”

“How’d you know that?!” he responded in amazement.

“Lucky guess.”

“Professor McGonagall. Do you know hers?”

“No. I don’t. Tell me.”

“A cat! She’s an animagus.”

“So is Professor Lupin’s a wolf?”

“I don’t know. I ‘and’t thought of that.”

She laughed out loud at his thoughtful expression. “And what would yours be, Hagrid, if you had one?”

“I don’t know, no-one knows. But I think I would like a dragon.”

“Are you confusing Patronus’s with pets?”

“Maybe if you really wan’ something enough. So what d’you think yours’l be then?”

She sighed and shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. That’s why I’m trying to produce one.”

“Are you ‘opin’ it’ll tell yeh summat? ‘Bout who you are?”

She smiled at his down-home wisdom. “I guess so. I think that might be right.”

“Well then, good luck. And if you get one, tell me what it is.” He waved at her, then called up Fang and turned in the direction of his hut.

She’d lost the last of the dusk light and it was getting cold. Something heavy settled in her heart, a desolate conviction that she would never be good enough, in fact, she could count the ways. Not a good enough scientist, good enough teacher, good enough mother, not good enough to replace Lily in Snape’s heart and not good enough to even produce a Patronus. She was average at everything and special at nothing.

She looked up and saw stars, the first of them, only dim but it was nice to see something other than cloud up there. She imagined the light from the stars travelling forever through time, just to humour her eyes for this moment, the light that would continue travelling for thousands of years, to vanish to nothing, unseen, unwatched, unnoticed. So much of existence went that way, perished without note. Blades of grass, tiny creatures, things at the bottom of the ocean – they formed, they lived and then they went. They had their moment under the sun and seemed grateful for that alone.

As she made slow steps towards the castle entrance, she felt her wand in her hand vibrate a little, as if in encouragement, and she said in her mind to her wand, let’s make a Patronus, and then she closed her eyes and let herself flow through her fingertips, her whole self, like starlight streaming through
space, claiming her time on the earth.

Non-verbals were her strength. She didn’t speak to her wand, she let it connect to her and she felt it receive her message and give a tremor, and then almost of its own volition it performed its own spin, and when she opened her eyes, she had produced a Patronus.

The glowing white, translucent form before her in the dusk was more wisp than structure, but it had a movement that she focused on because it was so recognizable – the Patronus had wings and the wings were flapping, and the creature flew about her haphazardly as if flight were new and a strenuous activity. Her first thought was that it might be a bat, and that was her slightly odd connection to Snape, but no, the wings were not bat-like at all. Then she thought – it’s a butterfly! which was unexpected, because she didn’t know insects could be Patronuses, then she thought, of course! A fairy? And she had convinced herself the ethereal, misty form was a fairy even though she puzzled over why that was her essence in spirit form - perhaps because there had been so many in her life lately. She studied the Patronus as it flapped a while longer, deeply dissatisfied with her own assessment the whole time because it wasn’t ringing true to her, fairies did not fly like that, and it came to rest on the trunk of a dark tree. It raised and lowered its wings once more, and then was still, the wings flat against the bark, and then she was able to see, completely and perfectly, that it was a moth.

Her heart jumped with joy. She had loved moths as a child, and would often sneak outside after bedtime during summer to watch them gather around the porch light, or feed on the night-blooming flowers. If they found their way inside the house, she would gently scoop them up in cupped hands and resist the instinct to drop her moth as its little feet and wings tickled her skin, then release them into the hedges along the side of the house, where, she had felt, they would prefer the dark and safety. Her friends at school, naturally, were inclined to butterflies, their extravagantly coloured wings adorned jewellery, t-shirts, pencil-cases, but Charity pledged allegiance to their dowdier cousins, liking their evolutionary choice to exploit the night, for that was her preference too, their quiet, understated beauty, their softness and fragility.

As she grew older and studied more, she learned that moths in warmer, foreign climes could grow large and rather spectacular, and when she saw the displays in the natural history museum she marveled and the incredible variety, the extent to which these mysterious and overlooked creatures had reinvented themselves and steadily capitalized on incongruous niches for survival. She interpreted and respected that as a kind of intelligence.

So she was somewhat ashamed at herself that it had taken her so long to recognize that her Patronus was a moth. A fairy? What had she been thinking? Here was her old friend of the night, awaiting her instruction. She paused to examine the Patronus a little closer because she saw some detail in the shape of the wings, now it was lying flat and still. She committed the shape to memory, vowing to look it up, as she knew that in this variant would be more secrets to unlock.

Then she decided to try it. Send a message to Severus Snape, she told her Patronus, transferring a mental image of him. The message is: I’ve done it.

And to her astonishment, the Moth flapped its wings and took to the air again, circled her once and then flew off in the direction of the castle. Charity had to forcibly stop herself clapping her hands in delight, but she couldn’t prevent an enormous grin of self-satisfaction and the pleasure of having found a new friend.
Later, after dinner, Snape caught her at the door of the Great Hall as she was leaving, which didn’t entirely surprise her and she gave him an expectant smile. “May I walk with you?” he asked.

She had been heading to the library, and he fell into step. “Of course. I haven’t seen much of you these past days. You must be busy.”

He ignored this, as they both knew it had been her that had been making herself scarce. “The moth is yours?” he enquired, but it wasn’t really a question.

“So she found you! It was my first attempt.”

“Yes, it found me. I was greatly surprised, firstly by a Moth Patronus, which I’ve never heard of before, and that it was yours. You must have been practicing.”

“It wasn’t easy, Severus. I’ve been spending hours outside. I was starting to give up.”

“Then I applaud your perseverance. It’s a rare accomplishment. Your witchcraft abilities may run deeper than you know.”

Coming from Snape, she took this as a huge compliment. “Thank you. I’m actually just on my way to the library because I want to look up what kind of moth it is. I know a bit about them and I recognize that the shape of her wing is significant. I just can’t remember exactly what kind it is.”

“I’ll join you,” he decided.

They were quiet for a while in the library, both searching the shelves for the right section for the information she sought. The library was heavily biased to subjects either taught at the school or that had direct application to wizardry, and so regular books about wildlife were few. However she found a book about the Patronus Charm, entitled “The Patronus: ancient pathways to your spirit protector” and Snape found a generic Butterflies and Moths of the British Isles.

They took a seat at a table with a spare gas lamp, and the students at the other end of the table suddenly found excuses to pack up their studies and move away, which was fine with Snape and Charity.

The first thing she did was flick through all the pictures of moths. While there were a good number of colour plates in the book, the author also informed them that over two-thousand species of moths alone had been recorded in the Kingdom. “I don’t think it’s in here,” she said, her mind scanning back to her early years, her trip to the Museum. “I think it’s a big moth, and I think it’s from somewhere like South America or Asia.”

Snape raised a brow but took the book back to the shelf and returned with another, titled: A Collectors Guide to Butterflies and Moths. Charity was impressed. Maybe she had underestimated Madam Pince’s bibliotheca.

This was a slightly less scientific journal, but it did have a large representation of colourful pictures and photographs and it didn’t take long before she kept coming back to a very large moth, as large as a grown man’s open hand, with extensions on the forewing and a thickset body, but short antennae. While the colour photo showed an attractive pattern on the russet coloured wings, her Patronus had been a slivery white and so that provided no clue.

“An Atlas moth,” Charity muttered to Snape when she was satisfied she’d pinpointed the correct one. “It comes from Asia. Why would that be my moth?”

Snape examined the picture and read the description. “This might explain it. It’s also known as the
snakehead moth – look at the wings.”

Of course. When she looked again at the picture, the image of a snake’s head in each of the forewing extensions was incredibly clear. The snake had a black eye, mouth and even appeared to have scales – it was remarkable, a miracle of natural selection. “A defense mechanism, do you think?”

“Almost certainly. Clever little thing.”

“So there is the connection to you, Severus. And also my prophesy, it would seem. Snakes and I are intertwined, apparently. Will snakes be my undoing or be my savior, do you suppose?”

She looked up and met his dark eyes, which were troubled and unable to answer. He said softly, “I will do everything in my power to keep you safe, my love.”

She squeezed his hand. “I know, Severus. It’s what you do.”

She read a bit further. “There’s something else,” and her throat constricted. “Obviously it goes through metamorphosis, a plain caterpillar emerges as this beautiful moth, but then it only lives a short while, two weeks at best. It doesn’t even have mouthparts because it doesn’t eat.”

“You’re reading a bit much into this, Charity,” said Snape, sensing a catastrophic interpretation. “After all, you have mouthparts.”

She laughed in spite of herself and thumped him. He smiled, then added thoughtfully, “I’d prefer to think of it as a creature that navigates by the moon. That it’s attracted to light. To some, the terms light and truth are interchangeable. Your Patronus says you are a seeker of truth.”

She liked that.

She wiped away a tear with the heel of her palm, and then – prying eyes be damned – she pulled Snape’s head to her so that she could kiss him. “If I’m a moth, are you my flame?” she whispered. “Not a candle, a star,” he replied, in a voice so deep it was almost unintelligible, and he kissed her back.

“Merlins’ beard!” came a loud exclamation, and Madam Pince came stomping up to them. “Are you aware that you’re in the library?! I’ve a good mind to report you both! Out! If you’re going to carry on like that, out!”

Unable to suppress a giggle, Charity rose obediently and handed the book on Patronuses to Madam Pince. “I’d like to borrow this please.”

Students all around the library were goggling at the fracas, some snickering at two teachers getting caught red-handed, even funnier that it was the Potions Master.

“You can borrow this when you’ve learned some respect, young lady. Out!”

As they left the library, Snape paused in his stride to take her hand. “Come to mine, tonight. It’s Friday. I want to…spend some time with you.”

She cocked her head at him. “I’ve missed you too. But…I’ve been wrong footed all week by the Lily thing. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to read that book, I want to understand why your Patronus is a doe. Is it because you still love her? Is it because she loved you?”
Four seasons crossed his face; first and foremost was frustration, but also despair, irritation and resignation. Several times he started to speak but changed his mind. Finally he shrugged his shoulders and let them hang. “Is there any point? Any point in telling you?”

“Definitely. If you’re not in love with her anymore.”

“She’s long dead, Charity...”

“That’s not a no.”

“Do you differentiate between being in love with someone, and just, sort of loving them?”

She thought, yes she did. She understood that difference. “You have a love for her. Different from the one you have for me.”

He nodded. “I will never stop having a love for Lily, because...because she deserved it. I was the one who let her down. She might have taken her friendship from me, but I...I don’t just stop.”

Charity frowned, considered this. “Do you think, perhaps, that the doe is representative of your love for Lily, in a sense, but is in fact a projection of your loyalty? When she died, it sought a home in the one who had guarded her most fiercely, who had been as loyal to her as her own husband?”

He raised his brows reflectively. “It’s all possible, my love. The Patronus is an enigmatic thing.”

“What was your Patronus before the doe?”

At this his face relaxed and his mouth twitched at the corners. “Only briefly. It was a fox. I liked him.”

She grinned at this. She could totally imagine it. “Yes, that makes perfect sense.”

“Moths, deer, foxes – we’ve had quite the menagerie. Now, come to my room.”

“Alright, Reynard.”

Over the weekend, Snape and Charity walked the grounds a few times testing her Patronus. Moths and deer were exchanged with messages, some romantic, some silly, all frivolous given the purpose of a Patronus. But, Snape argued, it was worth it for the practice, and also for her wand to become familiar with the command, almost like a kind of muscle memory.

Every time the doe presented to Charity, she would have a twinge. She tried to reason it away, tried to be logical, but she couldn’t help it. Jealousy was there. Why did she not feature in his Patronus? What was this hold Lily had on him? She privately wished he’d have his fox back but she didn’t speak of it, in fact resolved never to raise the subject of Lily again.

By Sunday evening, after two nights spent in Snape’s quarters, she was ready for her own bed. Stress and fatigue were setting in, and he was the same. The phone call with Jason the previous weekend felt like a guillotine above her neck. She worried about Holly and their future. The panicky sensation that an hourglass was eating at her time would not go away. She was anxious about Dumbledore’s meeting with the Governors. She fretted about the students, their opinions of her, the gossip, the graffiti.

And Snape: he had his own hourglass, stamped on his wrist. If his Dark Mark had called again he
didn’t tell her, but sometimes being with him was like sharing space with a snarling, pacing, caged cat. It was often a mystery what was going on in his head, his moods could be unexpected, disconnected. As often as he flared up, he shut down – she could see the moment doors were closed and shutters drawn, his eyes would go suddenly blank. It was harrowing.

As she crawled between the cool sheets of her single bed in her quarters, luxuriating in her cheesy flannel pyjamas and socks, she was conscious of a tectonic shift occurring again, of climate change in her relationship with Snape, that brief as their relationship was, it had never had time to simply exist on an even keel. Their love was a mere fledgling, exposed at the top of a tree that was being buffeted in a storm – it had to endure so much.

For the next few days she focused on her classes, using lesson plans recommended in the teacher edition of the subject text, but they were dull and meaningless. The author, it transpired after she made subtle enquiries, came from a longstanding wizarding family that could be traced back to Godric’s Hollow, a fact on which she automatically assumed some sort of connection to the Dumbledore’s. What personal experience the author had of living as, or amongst, Muggles, was tenuous. Written in the seventies, the text was now also seriously dated as far as Muggle technology, science and economics were concerned – half the countries on the world map had changed. Rather sardonically she stepped her students through the learning goals, careful to keep her attitude neutral, but it was difficult when they asked when they could use Lego again, or where the cool posters had gone, or how did Muggle engineering survive earthquakes (the ’94 Los Angeles earthquake was a contemporaneous subject since the Magical Congress departments in California had suffered some damage and the Ministry of Magic were sending reinforcements).

Although it was uninspired, it was a few days of respite from the tumult that had marked her life more recently, and so it was a surprise to her when, on Wednesday afternoon, first period after lunch, she was in her office filing student reports from the previous year, when she heard Dumbledore hailing her through the Floo.

“Charity? Are you there?”

“Yes Headmaster. What can I do for you?” she responded immediately, this being highly irregular.

“You can come to my office, please. Now, if convenient.”

“Of course. I’m on my way.”

“The Gargoyle will be expecting you.”

Once he was gone, she stood in her office and took deep breaths, willing her pulse to slow. This would be the first time back in Dumbledore’s office since the nightmare meeting, from which she’d never truly recovered. Her anxiety levels had soared at the very prospect of going back there.

She put on her robe just for a sense of security, checked her reflection quickly then left her office, locking it behind her. She remembered her dance with Dumbledore at the staff party - he’d been perfectly pleasant – solicitous even – and had given every appearance of a person wanting to reinstate good terms. She focused on this as she made her way to the Headmaster’s tower.

When she entered the office, she found Dumbledore sitting in his armchair opposite a visitor, also seated, the remnants of tea-things on a small table beside them.

The visitor, who was a striking looking but older woman, perhaps in her fifties, had white and grey streaked hair pulled back in a tight knot, and wore an austere, dark grey suit with a mandarin collar and a coat-of-arms emblazoned on the left breast. She stood up when Charity stepped into the room,
and gave a concerned smile. Charity felt as if she’d seen her somewhere before.

“Ah Charity, thanks for coming so quickly,” said Dumbledore, also standing. “You may remember this lady – her name is Candace Peacock. She’s with the Ministry, in Law Enforcement. You’ve apparently met before?”

At the name, Charity immediately recognized the features of the woman who was now extending her hand. She shook it automatically. “Candace on the broom,” she said, remembering the guardian-angel like witch who had just as mysteriously exited her life as she’d entered it in the park that afternoon.

“You remember...” The woman seemed pleased.

“Yes. I remember. But it was – how many? Twenty-odd years ago?”

“Twenty-five.”

“I was eight, maybe nine?”

“That’s right,” said Candace, smiling in a more relaxed way now. “I’m so glad you’ve come to Hogwarts. You have great abilities and for a long time we thought you were gone to the Muggles forever.”

Dumbledore conjured a third chair and motioned for everyone to sit again. He poured fresh tea and handed them around. “Charity,” he said, while he was busy, “for many of us it seems our past is never truly in the past. Do you remember much about why Candace made your acquaintance as a child?”

“A little. You were worried about Dr Ditton’s experiments. I didn’t know about the Ministry then, but I do now and I’ve understood a lot more recently about why you were there.”

“I’m not an Aura anymore,” said Candace. “I head up the office for Improper Use of Magic. But when this case came up again, I asked to be appointed. You see, I’ve just been explaining to Professor Dumbledore -,”

“Albus, please.”

“– Albus, that Dr Ditton has been to your parent’s house. He’s looking for you.”

Dumbledore and Candace both watched as Charity processed this news. She felt prickles up her spine, alarm bells sounded in her head. “Why?” was all she could think to ask.

“We don’t know exactly. But we’re connecting his reappearance with the incident at your ex-husband’s house recently, your daughter…”

“The Faerie Call…”

“My staff attended that incident, Charity. Your ex-husband told my officers that you worked here and we’ve connected all the dots. Somehow Dr Ditton found out too. He knows that Holly is your daughter, but he’s gone back to the last place he knew you were – your parents’ house.”

“How did you know he went there? I haven’t heard from Mum or Dad about it -,”

“I’ve been to see them. The Aura office placed a protective ward around your house when you were young that could detect if Ditton approached the house. We’d forgotten about it, but he triggered the
alarm. When I realized where it was, I took the case. I told your parents I was coming to see you today. I’ve told them you’ll be safe.”

“Holly?!” said Charity, eyes suddenly wide. “Does he know where Holly is?”

“No. At least not from your parents. They didn’t reveal anything. But I wouldn’t leave it too long, Charity, we don’t know what he wants.”

“Can – can you put that ward over my husband’s – sorry, my ex-husband’s house?”

“Not without your ex-husband’s consent. Can you talk to him? Explain what’s happening?”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “What does this Dr Ditton want with you, Charity?”

She had a flood of memories of the time in his laboratory, the questions, strapping down her arms for electrical conduction tests. Then she raised her brows matter-of-factly. “Simple. He wanted to find out if I could do magic. He didn’t call it that of course. He described it as being gifted, having unique abilities. He wanted to crack the genetic code, but they didn’t have the tools then; he combined laboratory testing with field study, quantitative and qualitative – a mixed research approach. He had the theory, he just had to prove it… but the proof is locked up in DNA and he couldn’t get it then…”

“So if he can prove that magic exists and is genetic -,” began Dumbledore, but Candace cut smoothly across him.

“Not an original theory, Albus, other scientists have attempted it. We have shut them down, and we shut Ditton down too, in the late 60’s. But we couldn’t find all his research. The others were already considered…experimental…by the scientific community and a quick Confundus curse or Obliviation were enough for them to be ostracized by the Muggles themselves. They dwindle to nothing. But Ditton already had tenure at the University, they have a history of pharmaceutical research there and the Sixties were open to all manner of groundbreaking theory. He survived our efforts, it would seem.”

“Can’t we just shut him down again?” Dumbledore asked.

“My team are already on it. He’s got smart though. The Human Genome Project in the US has just announced its five year plan – I think he wants in on it. He wants a seat at that table and he wants to prove his theory. A blood sample from Holly may be enough evidence to get him an interview, certainly enough to write a scholarly article on the subject and get peer-reviewed.”

“The Human Genome Project is a decade away from a full map though…” said Charity.

“It’s the credibility he needs,” responded Candace. “The time. The funding. He’s approaching retirement now, he’s got nothing to lose anymore.”

Charity frowned, remembering Dr Ditton and his umbrella. “He didn’t strike me as the type to break the law though.”

“Not Muggle law, maybe. I don’t think he’d give a damn about the wizarding community if he found out about it. He’d crack it open like an ants nest. In the name of science, of course.”

Candace’s expression was grim, and a chill went through Charity, feeling somehow responsible. “We didn’t know. My mother just wanted help for me…”

Candace shook her head and her features softened. “I spoke to your mother. She was great, she just
wants you safe. She didn’t do anything wrong and neither did you. I just wish the Ministry had found out about you sooner.”

Dumbledore leaned forward and took Charity’s hand, which he patted soothingly. “Ms Peacock and I were discussing what action to take before you could join us. We think you need to make your daughter your priority right now. Go with Candace to your daughter’s home and talk to your ex-husband so the ward can be placed over his house. Or, you can relocate Holly to your parents.”

Charity blinked and looked at Candace. “Now? But -,”

“Now is probably best. I came by Floo, but if we leave together we can apparate.”

“It’s OK, Charity, I will take care of your classes and so on,” said Dumbledore.

“Can I talk to Severus?”

Dumbledore hesitated a second, then smiled and said, “Naturally. I’ll call him by Floo and ask him to meet you at your rooms. You can fill him in while you gather your things. Then call me back here when you’re ready to go.”

Candace looked questioning at the mention of Severus, but Charity decided to let Dumbledore do the explaining. Feeling shaky, alarmed, she excused herself and left the Headmaster’s office with as much professionalism as she could muster, having concluded that his office and herself were just a terrible mix.

A few minutes after letting herself into her room, Snape showed up at her door. She opened it and immediately he said, “What’s happened?”

She led him inside, shut the door and then flung herself in his arms. He held her tightly and kissed the top of her head. “It’s alright, it’s alright, tell me what’s happened.”

“Remember I told you about the Aura called Candace? When I was a kid?”

“Yes…at the dinner - ?”

“She’s here. I have to go with her. Dr Ditton is looking for me. Looking for Holly.”

Snape looked utterly confused. She pulled away from him and opened her wardrobe, blindly pulling items out and throwing them on the bed. He followed her around while she worked. “Dr Ditton? That scientist at the University? That man?”

“Yes. Him. He’s back, like my own little Voldemort.”

Snape’s arm twitched at the name and his eyes narrowed but he didn’t refer to it. “Back how? What do you mean? Why is he looking for you?”

Charity explained it all to him, her voice catching occasionally. “Jason will freak out. This is not good.”

“But what can this Dr Ditton do? Kidnap you? Surely he doesn’t pose that great a threat?”

“I don’t think so either, but the Law Enforcement office is taking it seriously and Candace Peacock has asked for the assignment specifically. My mum and dad will be wondering what the hell is going on. Dumbledore says I’m to go with her today, now.”

“Well yes, he’s right, Holly’s welfare is paramount. How long will you be gone?”
“I don’t know. Maybe a few days?”

Snape stood straight at this information, and swore under his breath. Then without warning, he slammed his fist against the wall, making her pictures rattle. “Why? Why is there always something? Why must this always be so bloody hard?”

She stopped what she was doing to give him her full attention. “I know. I feel that too.”

He swore again and ran his hand over his face. Then, with his eyes closed, took a deep, meditative breath. “Tell me everything I need to know about Dr Ditton. Where is he? Where does he work? Where has he been. What does he know about you?”

Charity briefed him while she packed, telling him everything she remembered, everything Candace had just told her. Snape listened without interruption.

“Keep in touch with me,” he finally said when she had finished and stood zipping up her backpack before him. He touched her cheek.

“I’ll send my moth. I’ll tell you what’s happening.”

“Where’s your wand?” Snape asked. She had it inside her robe and took it out to show him.

“For Papus’s sake, don’t lose it.”

“I don’t want to go,” she said to him, blinking back tears again. “I’m worried about Holly, but I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to leave you again.”

“A few days. That’s all. For peace of mind.”

She felt oddly empty inside, as if systems had short-circuited after an overload. Instructions ran in her head: do this…now do this…but she was detached from it all, not present in the moment. The only sensation that was getting through was the touch of Severus’s fingers.

He tilted her chin up and kissed her eyes. “I’ll come with you now.”

Charity’s fire wasn’t lit, so she didn’t bother using Floo powder, instead she and Snape walked together to Gargoyle Corridor and along the way asked a portrait to deliver the message to the Headmasters Portraits that they were coming.

They waited at the Gargoyle on third floor and presently Dumbledore and Candace emerged, dressed in winter cloaks and coats. “Hello Severus,” said Dumbledore, and introduced him. “All ready to go, Charity?”

She nodded and forced a smile.

“Then let us go to the gates. I will see you both off.”

Rather somberly, all four walked down the icy hill to the Entrance Gates. The further away they got from the castle, the worse Charity felt. It was like the Green Mile. She reached out for Snape’s hand and he gripped it tightly.

Snape checked for Dementors at the gate but it was clear so Dumbledore unlocked it and Candace stepped outside after shaking Dumbledore’s hand. When she came to shake Snape’s hand he said, “Who will be watching her?”

“I will,” she replied, looking at him steadily. “At all times. I did when she was young, and I’ll do it
“Again now.”

“She can produce a corporeal Patronus. If she needs me I want her to send one.”

“She’ll be safe, Professor Snape.”

Dumbledore turned to Charity in surprise. “You can produce a Patronus?”

She nodded, a weak smile. “A moth.”

“I’m not surprised at all,” said Candace. “There’s a lot of magic in this girl. Say goodbye for now, Charity.”

Although her heart felt like exploding, she could only give Snape a demure hug in front of the others. She couldn’t look him in the face.

Candace linked arms with Charity and said, “Make the destination somewhere at a discreet distance from the house. If Holly is at school, we’ll walk from there.”

And then the two witches disapparated with a crack, and Snape stood looking where they had been for a few moments, then Dumbledore closed and locked the gates.
It was drizzling on the street in Royston where her home had been on Elm Walk, a brick, semi-detached new build in a housing development, not flash, not remarkable, but the first home she’d had as a married woman, and where she’d brought Holly to when she was born.

With a quick glance around her checking they were alone, Candace turned to Charity with deep concern and said, “Are you alright? OK after the apparating?” Charity nodded dumbly, then Candace conjured a large umbrella which she hoisted above both their heads. “It’s four o’clock. What time does school finish?”

“Three. Holly should be home unless they had some activity or a playdate or something.”

“Alright. Lead the way.”

Charity indicated the way, and she and Candace walked together along the pavement sharing the umbrella to the driveway of the house. At four, on a rainy, cloudy afternoon in January, it was already dark enough for streetlights, and the interior of Jason’s front room. Charity could see the television in the lounge was on. Holly was almost certainly watching it.

A car cruised by on the street, behind them, water splashing under its tyres. Charity knew this neighbourhood, knew that the driver would be assessing them, trying to identify them, wondering why they were staring at the house. “We should go up,” she said.

“Not me,” said Candace. “I’ll just aggravate the situation. I’m going to find a place to watch from a distance. If things take a turn for the worse, use your wand to send out a red light and I’ll come. I promised Professor Snape I wouldn’t leave you on your own.”

At his name, Charity’s heart constricted anew. She would do this for them. For their future in Scotland. She nodded at Candace, and walked up the paving stone of the front drive.

Jason had apparently seen her coming for he opened the door seconds after she rang the bell. “Charity!?” he said, half smiling half frowning. “What are you doing here?”

“Can we talk?” she muttered, not returning the smile, in fact feeling a bit sick.

His own smile faded and he nodded, stepping aside to give her room to enter. She glanced back at the street, but Candace had vanished, only a pool of light from the streetlamp remained where she had been, rain spattering on the pavement.

Inside the cloakroom, Jason took her coat, her backpack and, hearing her arrival, Holly came through and jumped into her arms. “Are you OK?” Charity asked her. “Is everything good?”

“Yes, everything’s fine,” replied Holly brightly. “I got a certificate at school. Wanna see?”

“Sure. Go bring it here.”

Holly ran off and Jason stared at her dubiously. “Is this about the phone call? Are you here to talk about moving back? Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?”

Chapter 26
“I didn’t have time,” Charity answered, following him through to the dining room. He picked up the remote and lowered the volume of the TV as they passed through the lounge. The house looked almost identical to the last time she’d seen it, perhaps a bit shabbier. Housework was not his forte. She could smell cooking, something pinged in the microwave.

He hurried into the kitchen to remove it. “Popcorn,” he explained. “this will keep Holly occupied until her tea.”

“What? A whole bag? That’ll ruin her appetite.”

“She asked for it,” he said. “She’ll be right. Glass of wine?”

She took a seat on a chair at the table, her legs feeling tired and uncooperative. “That’d be nice. Thanks.”

Holly returned, and showed Charity the little certificate she’d been awarded for being ‘a good friend and showing compassion’. She got a big hug, lots of compliments and a bag of popcorn. “Mummy and Daddy are talking now,” said Jason. “You can play or watch TV till dinner.”

Holly skipped off, dropping a trail of popcorn as she went, and Jason sat down at the table across from her with a beer and her glass of wine.

“Nice look,” he commented, indicating her sapphire blue witch’s gown. “It’s a nice colour on you.”

“I didn’t have time to get changed,” she said, feeling incredibly weary, and took a deep sip of the burgundy. “I’ve literally just got here from Hogwarts.”

“So why, then? Why are you here in such a hurry?”

With effort, she looked up and made sure to meet his eyes with as much gravity as she could muster. “Jason, I’m going to explain everything, and I want you to listen and pay attention. Everything I tell you is absolutely true and I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t serious. There is a person out there, right now, watching and waiting for me. Please let me do this without a fight.”

He looked slightly affronted, but also a little worried. He shrugged and nodded, and with a last bolstering sip of wine, she began.

An hour later, she’d told him everything, apart from Snape, but all that pertained to the reason she was sitting at his dining room table. There were a couple of times he couldn’t help himself but ask alarmed, angry questions, but she silenced him and continued. When she’d finished, he sat with his empty beer glass staring at the table and looking resentful and sullen.

“So what now?” he asked after a silence between them in which the maniacal music of cartoons drifted through from the living room. “We’re just going to sit here and wait for this guy? Talk him out of it nicely like a vacuum cleaner salesman?”

“The Ministry of Magic want to place an alarmed ward over this house. If he comes through, they’ll be notified.”

“So what?”

“Ministry Law Enforcement will come here directly and deal with it.”

“And do what exactly? Turn him into a teapot?”
Charity scowled at him. “Don’t be a dick, Jason. Just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”

“Well then you tell me. What can they do?”

“They have methods of wiping a person’s memory, or-or making them look mad so they’re discredited. They’ve dealt with Ditton before; they told me.”

Jason swore and got up to get another beer from the fridge. “You know, there is another way,” he said from the kitchen. “Just give him what he wants. A test-tube of blood? Two minutes at the pathologist in town. All over, gone away. He gets to go on with his little experiments and we’re all left in peace. Big deal.”

When he returned, he banged his glass of beer down so hard on the table it slopped. Charity gritted her teeth, determined that Jason’s contempt wasn’t going to deter her. “His ‘little experiments’ could prove the existence of genetic magic. Muggles and wizards are not ready for that, there could be war, terrible persecution, genocide. Listen how you talk about them, how you talk about me - imagine that on a mass scale. We know what humans are like, they fear what they don’t understand, but they would also covet the power of the magic, they could do horribly destructive things with it. He would do it for the glory, for the money and status, and to use the magic himself, and in his wake – all I can see is annihilation.”

Jason’s eyes registered deep derision. “Jesus, Charity, he just wants a blood sample.”

“We don’t actually know what he wants,” Charity was becoming enervated in the face of his relentless scorn. “But if he wants blood, it would be more than just in a tube.”

“So, you think he’d go so far as kidnap?”

“Not kidnap, he’s not after a ransom. He’ll want to experiment. He’ll want to do research. Ultimately he’ll want to track down the gene and manipulate it. It’s not in his interests to harm or kill Holly, or me, because he needs us to prove his theory. It’s what he could find that would wreak havoc. It would be his means of opening Pandora’s box.”

Jason sighed heavily through his nose, then looked at his watch. “I have to start her tea in a minute.” He then held her gaze steadily. “Tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll tell you what I want.”

She only partly acknowledged that he had terms of his own, she was so glad to be able to lay down hers. “I want you to consent to a ward being placed on the house and to cooperate with Law Enforcers from the Ministry. I want you to help keep Holly away from Dr Ditton.” Then she frowned a little. “What do you want?”

“I want you back here, in this house, like a family again,” replied Jason, speaking with clear conviction which made her think he’d rehearsed this line. His stare did not waver. “I want you to give up all that magic shit and be a normal person and a mother to your daughter.”

While his demand was not entirely new or unexpected, she was still stunned by it, still thrown that he had the audacity. “I can’t just give it up, Jason – it’s who I am!”

“You can. You did it before.”

“That didn’t work! That’s why we got divorced!”

His jaw ticked in frustration, but he tried to keep his voice reasonable. “I know now that I didn’t
meet you halfway. Let’s work out how to meet in the middle. There’s a compromise, and a compromise could work.”

“No, Jason, I - ,”

“I don’t know why the hell I do this, because every time we’re together this happens, but…” he leaned back heavily in his chair, his eyes casting about as if looking for inspiration. Then he gave a small, exasperated shake of his head and said, “I can’t get over you. I…I still love you and I want to give it another go.”

Charity stopped and stared at him, thunderstruck. “You what?”

“You heard. We don’t have to get married and…all that, we could just be de facto. But I want you back here, in our lives again.”

After the shock, a cold anger settled on Charity. This was the typical brand of disrespect that Jason always seemed to reserve for her, a kind of passive-aggressive condescension that implied, despite all her flaws and failings, he was prepared to care for her anyway, prepared to suffer the burden of her. She glanced at the way through to the living room, checking that Holly was still occupied, then said quietly “That’s not going to happen Jason. You forget, I’m with someone else now. If you won’t consent to the ward, then I’ll take Holly with me.”

There was a moment of frozen silence. Jason’s expression became hard, his eyes were flinty. Was it the rejection, the news she had moved on, the threat of taking his daughter? What had she expected - that he would take it well? “Take her and I’ll report you. You’ll have the cops on your tail in a minute. Then I’ll get full custody and she will never be a witch as long as I live.”

“The police can’t come where I can take her.”

“Then she’ll never see her grandparents again, never see her father again, her cousins. You’ll be in hiding, on the run. And I will do everything in my power to expose your stupid, secret world. I will tell Ditton everything. Is that something you want to do to her? Or do you agree that she shouldn’t have a choice?”

“You’re not giving me a choice.”

“You had more choice than most people, Charity. You flitted back and forth between their world and this one and expected people on both sides to humour you. That can’t go on. You have to pick a team. Pick theirs, and give up Holly. Pick Holly, and you give up them.”

*You have a foot in both worlds*, Snape had said to her, not so long ago. *The hardest place to be. You’re going to have to jump or fall.*

Her head was spinning, she put down her glass before she dropped it. “I can’t answer this now,” she muttered, and pushed back her chair. “Candace is waiting. I’m going to tell her to put up the ward.”

“I haven’t given my consent!”

“She’s my daughter too.”

“This is my house!”

“Then use it to protect your daughter, for God’s sake! I’m getting Candace.”

She withdrew her wand and went to the living room window sending out a red beam into the
darkness outside, Holly watching with interest. Within moments the doorbell rang. She answered the door to let Candace in. Jason stood in the hallway, his face furious but he was silent.

The witch shook her umbrella off before entering, then nodded to Charity and watched Jason carefully as she stepped into the hall. Muggles who were close associates and relatives of wizarding folk, who had become au courants as they were referred to, or ‘wizard-wise’, were kept under a level of surveillance and assessed for their level of risk. If they were high-risk or showing signs of becoming so, they were given a dilute version of Confundus and re-programmed by a member of the Ministry using an activated letter that was sent to them. Candace was thinking that Jason seemed overdue for his letter. “Jason, this is Candace,” said Charity. “She’s been aware of Dr Ditton since I was eight years old. She works in the Law Enforcement Department at the Ministry. Candace, Jason consents to the ward.”

Candace leaned forward to shake Jason’s hand, continuing to observe him mindfully. “Thank you Jason, we’ll get that arranged. You won’t notice any difference on a day to day basis, but do let us know if there have been any power surges or nearby lightning strikes as the ward may need to be recalibrated. I must say, it makes it easier for us when your electricity is conducted underground on these newer estates – much less interference.”

“What does the ward do, exactly?” asked Jason, barely disguising his cynicism.

“It is configured to identify Dr Ditton’s features and characteristics,” Candace told him, her expression becoming business-like. “Much like those sensors can read the human iris, this ward will ‘know’ if Dr Ditton crosses a barrier around your house, and an alarm will be triggered at the Ministry. Immediately one of my officers will attend and deal with the situation as necessary.”

“What, like, arrest him?”

“No, we’re not Muggle police, that’s not in our jurisdiction. We have a variety of…means…of stopping action, and then…say…influencing the doctor to move along. No one will be hurt. If you decided you wanted to inform the Muggle police that he’s being a nuisance or a threat, that would be your decision.” Candace exuded antipathy in equal measure and arched a brow at him, as though she shouldn’t have to remind him of his responsibilities.

“This is bollocks,” said Jason irritably under his breath, and he stalked back into the kitchen where he commenced banging things around as he made dinner.

“Thanks Candace. I think everything is fine here,” said Charity, and Candace gave her a quick, reassuring smile before turning and disapparating on the doorstep.

After closing the door, Charity stood undecided in the hallway for a minute, then gathered her belongings and went into the kitchen. “I’m going to my place,” she said to Jason’s back. “I’ll overnight there. Tomorrow morning I’ll take Holly to school if you like, and pick her up. Give you the day off.”

“Fine,” muttered Jason, not turning to look at her. He shoved frozen vegetables into the microwave, but Charity didn’t remind him of her fresh food policy for Holly. She’d forfeited certain rights to that.

“Call me if anything happens, anything at all.”

“Whatever.”

Charity spent a few minutes cuddling and saying goodbye to Holly before leaving the house and
quietly shutting the door behind her. Then she disapparated to the back step of her studio apartment. She had forgotten her keys and so unlocked her back door with a quick non-verbal, then entered her empty apartment, turning on lights and heating as she went. She made sure all the windows and doors were securely locked, put the kettle on and went upstairs for a shower.

Her bed was still unmade from her last visit with Snape. The sight of it made her heart clench, and the lure of it in her state of exhaustion was just too much to pass. She put down her backpack and lay down on her back, willing herself to relax. She remembered that afternoon they had shared together, rolling around, then Snape flicking through the TV channels. She grabbed the pillow he had been propped against and brought it to her face, breathing in his scent, which lingered, and wishing he was there to wrap her in his arms which he did so well.

Only then she remembered her moth. Instantly, she jumped up and opened the bedroom window, then cast her Patronus charm, her strong emotion making the moth appear easily. It fluttered about the room, then landed on the wall, wings flat, and she gave it her message for Snape. *I am in Bedford apartment. Ward approved for Royston house, Holly fine. Love you and miss you so, so much.*

Go, said Charity to her moth. Send it to Severus as quickly as you can.

The moth flapped its snakehead wings and vanished out of the open window, where she watched it speed up and then disappear into the night sky.

When she returned to the bedroom from her shower twenty minutes later, Snape’s silvery doe was waiting for her. The doe’s large ears rotated and it took, light, tentative steps towards her.

Oh thank God, she thought. What is the message? Tell me the message?

*Stay safe. Stay secure, my love. I am finding Dr Ditton, leave this with me.*

That was it. The doe twitched its ears and then gave a little prance before exiting through the bedroom window.

She stared after it, absently closing the window and drawing the curtains, frantically turning over Snape’s words. *I am finding him.* What was he doing? Why was he finding Ditton? Why wasn’t he at Hogwarts?

And yet, as she climbed into bed, hungry but uncaring, just wanting sleep, she hugged the pillow to her and felt that somehow, if anyone could, her Severus would keep her and Holly safe. She would not want to be Dr Ditton when Snape found him.

And then, with the light still on, she fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next day dawned cold but sunny, and Charity had managed almost a full night of uninterrupted sleep, which utterly amazed her, and she wondered if she’d have managed it if she hadn’t had Snape’s message.

In daylight, in the normal hubbub of urban, English Muggle life, and dressed in Muggle clothes, matters seemed to shrink down into proportion. When she arrived in Royston to pick up Holly up from the front door, Jason dressed for work waiting for her, she sensed the ward as she walked through it, level with the end of the driveway. “Oh, it’s already up!” she remarked, after her skin
prickled slightly.

“How do you know?” he asked, looking around, but of course it was invisible.

“I felt it. Here – just here.”

Holly felt it too, but Jason did not. This did nothing except aggravate him further. He strode briskly away back up the drive and made a terrific show of getting into his car and slamming the door.

Charity took Holly to school, walking distance from Elm Walk, and spoke briefly with Holly’s teachers to say that she was not to leave the school under any circumstances unless it was with herself or her father. This was school policy anyway, but she was really appealing to the teachers to be extra vigilant with her daughter.

Charity watched Holly in the playground until the bell rang and the children piled into their classrooms for their morning lessons. She didn’t want to be too far away, but she couldn’t hang around the street either, so she took a bus to the next nearest village and spent the hours drinking coffee and walking around the streets and parks. She longed to send her moth to Snape, but worried in case she or it were spotted, or in case its appearance somehow interfered with what Snape was doing.

As three o’clock approached, she decided to apparate back to the school rather than chance the bus, but then worried that the only destination she could visualise for the school was the front gates, which was where parents and carers would likely be assembling to collect their children, so she opted to take the bus after all. It was a good network and she only had to wait fifteen minutes for the next one, but the return trip was far slower with a multitude of stops and a traffic jam for roadworks that hadn’t been there in the morning. When finally she was able to disembark, the school bell had already rung and children were flooding out the front gate.

She raced up to the fence, scanning the faces of the children, an eighth of a second on each face dismissing them as not her child. Where was Holly? She looked for Holly’s pink princess backpack, a bright colour against the navy blue uniform and the grey concrete playground, but no sign of it.

“Holly?” she called, and walked past the gate along the fence line which bordered the sports oval, searching, searching, panic mounting. She saw a mother with her daughter who looked about Holly’s age and she ran up to them. “Hello, I’m Holly Chadwick’s mother – do you know Holly? Have you seen her?”

The little girl just stared, and the woman shook her head with an apologetic smile. Charity muttered a thank you and hurried on, wrangling her way through the throngs of children, searching.

A cloud passed over the sun. Charity’s skin suddenly prickled all over with goosebumps and an urgent instinct made her turn, as if in slow motion, to look back at the gate.

And there was her daughter, in the midst of a swarm of school kids and adults, pink backpack over her shoulders, blonde hair in untidy pigtails, accepting the proffered hand of a man. A man she didn’t know. Holly’s face was uncertain but she was nodding. The man, who looked to be Asian, in a plain beige shirt, baseball cap, sunglasses and jeans, smiled at her, but that was all she had time to notice.

“HOLLY!” she screamed, and still in slow motion, willed her legs to move, unaware that she had in fact already covered several metres.
The man looked towards her at the sound, and abruptly jerked Holly forward.

“HOLLY!” Charity yelled again, and some of the children and parents glanced up.

The man was staring at Charity as he leant forward and placed his hands under Holly’s arms, ready to lift her. A scream rose in her throat, but just at that moment there was an enormous bang, and behind the man an idling silver SUV, with its passenger door open, was suddenly shunted hard sideways by another car behind it which had swerved randomly across a footpath on an inexplicable collision course.

There were yells and shouts of surprise from the crowd and Charity saw the man leap away from the SUV, which had mounted the footpath towards him in the crash. Holly was thrown backwards, but was caught - caught and lifted into the arms of Snape.

Charity was astounded - where had he come from? “SEVERUS!!” Charity hollered, almost there now, blocked by the kids and startled adults. An older man was getting out of the back seat of the SUV, a man with grey hair in a tweed suit.

The man in the baseball cap was coming back, sizing Snape up, seeming to take instruction from the man in the suit. Snape spotted Charity and pointed her out to Holly, who had become quite distressed by now. Snape was wearing the Muggle jumper she’d brought him, but he was still over six foot and dark, with a terrifying expression on his face. He dropped Holly back on to her feet seconds before Charity reached her, and in a swift, smooth move lifted the palm of his hand and the man in the baseball cap was pushed back towards the car by an invisible force.

“Holly! Holly!” gasped Charity, embracing her daughter, who wrapped her arms around Charity’s neck in a choke hold. With Holly clinging to her, she backed away from the man in the cap, and watched as Snape turned his attention to the man in the tweed suit.

“Who are you?” the man asked Snape, but it wasn’t angry or accusatory, he sounded curious, fascinated, and then Charity realised, forcibly, that she was looking at Dr Ditton.

Snape didn’t answer him, but strode away towards Charity. “Come with me, quickly,” he said, and she broke into an awkward trot to keep up with him.

“WAIT!” said Dr Ditton, and started to follow them. “Charity? Is that you?”

Snape had entered the school grounds, walking against the tide of children and away from the crowd gathering at the car crash. “We’re going to disapparate on the move, OK?” he said to her, glancing over his shoulder. Dr Ditton had been held back by the throng, but had now broken free and was joined by his associate in the cap, running after them.

“CHARITY!” Dr Ditton yelled across the grounds. “You can’t hide forever!”

“Who is that man, mummy?” Holly asked in a frightened voice.

“I’ve got film of your friend, Charity!” Ditton yelled. “I saw what he did!”

Holly shifted heavily in her arms and Charity stumbled, almost falling. Holly landed on the ground. Snape swung around, half bent to pick Holly up, but then instead turned to face Ditton head on. The man with the baseball cap had almost reached them.

Snape again raised his palm and the man in the cap was flung backwards, landing heavily a few feet away. He turned to Ditton.
“Leave them alone. I know who you are and I know what you want. Leave them alone and no harm will come to you, Doctor.”

Ditton slowed his pace but his eyes never left Snape. There wasn’t any fear or anxiety in his expression, just open, naked curiosity.

“How did you do that?” he asked, pointing at his associate still in the process of getting back on his feet. “You crashed that car into us, didn’t you? How? Who are you?”

“Back off, Dr Ditton,” said Charity. “If you come any closer I’ll report you for attempted abduction. Leave now, do as he says.”

“I’m recording this Charity,” said Ditton, glancing at her but still focussed on Snape. “It’s all on film. It will all come out. Just cooperate with me.”

Snape reached for his wand.

“You’re not Holly’s father, are you,” said Ditton, continuing to scrutinise Snape. “How did you two meet?”

Snape raised his wand and incanted “Obliviate” sweeping the charm on both Ditton and his baseball cap friend. A moment later, the associate, back on his feet, looked suddenly confused and slightly vacant, but Ditton, still staring at Snape, simply smiled.

“Trying to wipe my memory are you?” he asked, cocking his head to one side. “Naturally. What is that tool you have there?”

Snape looked as confused as the first man. Reading his expression, Ditton said, “I have an advanced form of microprocessor implanted in me, a prototype. Do you know what that is? I use it as an electrical conductor, constant mild pulses. It doesn’t do me any harm, but it baffles your…special abilities.”

“What?” muttered Snape, and it was the first time Charity had ever heard him sound at a loss.

Dr Ditton took a step towards Snape, still smiling, looking half entranced, half fascinated as if trying to approach a rare bird. “Do you think you’re the only ones I know about? I’ve been studying dozens of your kind. I’ve figured out that electricity thwarts you. I’ve had my memory wiped a dozen times or more, but each time, it was a little less effective, and now – well it seems I’ve got a little foil hat on.” He gave a low chuckle. “I really want to understand you. So how about you just work with me? If we work together, we achieve more. Come on, Charity –,” he said, glancing at her with the same beguiling smile. “This is for science. For the good of all humankind”

“Leave us alone, Dr Ditton,” warned Charity.

Snape moved his wand again towards Ditton, this time incanting Incarcerous. Ropes sprang forth and wrapped themselves around Dr Ditton, but they did not bind, instead fell limply. It was enough, however, to make Ditton stumble, in the time it took for him to collect himself, Snape had linked arms with Charity, now holding Holly, and disapparated.

They apparated on the back step of Charity’s apartment, Holly was screaming from the experience even though, at that short a distance, the transition had been mere seconds. Desperately, Charity clamped a hand over Holly’s mouth and shushed her. “It’s alright, we’re at Mummy’s house. See?”

“Alohomora,” said Snape with his wand and Charity’s door opened, all three spilled inside. Snape left Charity to look after Holly while he inspected the property from top to bottom, then she heard
him incanting *Repello Muggletom*, once from inside, and then once from outside.

After a few minutes he returned and stood before them, Holly pressed up close to Charity, her eyes wide and frightened.

“You’ll be safe here for now. He doesn’t know about this address, and it’s virtually invisible to Muggles at the moment. Call your ex, tell him you have Holly and you’re safe, but don’t say anything about the address or location, just in case. I’m going back to deal with him.”

“Severus, no! No, just leave him. He can’t find us.”

“I’ll be alright.” Then he seemed to suddenly notice Holly. “You’re very brave,” he said to her. “I hear you’re quite the witch!”

Holly didn’t speak, just stared at him.

“He’s a wizard, Holly,” said Charity. “A friendly wizard.” Snape emitted a snort of laugher at this. “He’s mummy’s very best friend in the world.”

A shadow passed over his face, it softened for the briefest of moments, then he straightened and tapped his wand against his leg. “I’ll be back later.” On his heel, he turned and left the building.

Hours later, Charity lay in her bed, resting but listening. She jumped at every creak, every tap of a twig against the window pane. And then, after two in the morning, she heard definite noises from downstairs.

Her wand was under her pillow, and Charity grasped it. Heart in her mouth, she slipped on her robe and, holding the wand out before her, tiptoed out of her room and step by step, to halfway down the stairs, ears focussed intently. She heard footsteps walking through the lounge towards her. She watched through the bannisters of the staircase and when a dark figure emerged into the hall she muttered, *Stupefy*, and aimed her wand at the intruder.

But the spell bounced off harmlessly when the intruder blocked it, and she heard, “My love, it’s me, Severus.”

“Oh, thank god, I couldn’t really see – are you okay?” She hurried down the stairs and flicked the lights on.

Snape blinked in the sudden light but offered her a tired smile. He was covered in a fine dust, bits of debris through his hair, smudges and scratches all over his face and hands. “What on earth?” she cried, aghast.

He waved it away. “Don’t concern yourself. I’m afraid it was unavoidable.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Scratches. Nothing.”

“What happened? Did you find him?”

“I couldn’t find him,” he said, with bitter regret, taking a seat on the stairs. “He’ll have gone to ground, he would be expecting me. But I found his offices and destroyed everything in it. Except
your file. I took that.”

She stared at him in amazement. “You destroyed his offices? Where?”

“At the University. Bath. His laboratory was easy to find. Easy to get into. Too easy, I fear – I get the strong impression that it’s nothing but a decoy, that his real work is far less exposed. But I exploded it behind me anyway, to make it simple for the Excuses office to explain what happened, gas leak or something.”

She sat down with him and put an arm around his middle. “How did you find my file? Where is it?”

“He wasn’t lying when he said he’s studied a lot of people. Your file is with Candace. She followed me there and I’m afraid she isn’t very happy with me, but it’s a Ministry paper crunch matter. I told her what happened this afternoon, how close he got, that he’s immune to the memory charm. They’re going to have to come up with something better.”

Wearily he leaned against Charity and kissed the side of her head. “All I want now is a shower and to go to bed with you.”

And so she led him upstairs and ran him a hot shower and soaped his back and tended the worst of his cuts and then took him into her room and laid him gently down on the bed and kissed him, thinking he wanted more, but he simply folded her in his arms and fell asleep within minutes.

The next morning, while Snape continued sleeping, Charity got up and took Holly downstairs so she wouldn’t disturb him. She rang the school and advised them that Holly wouldn’t be returning for the foreseeable future. Then she took Holly with her to the nearby delicatessen and bought a huge array of delicious things to eat since nobody had eaten dinner the night before, and she wanted more than anything to find a way to thank Snape for what he’d done.

Later, leaving Snape in her apartment, she took Holly back to Jason. He had taken the day off work sick, knowing that Holly would be returned. He demanded to know everything, and she didn’t withhold the truth, knowing that Holly would eventually tell him about her wizard friend.

“I don’t want that bastard anywhere near my daughter!” Jason hollered at Charity, getting up from the table where they’d been sitting. Holly was upstairs in her room, playing a toy keyboard and making a dreadful din. Frankly, she didn’t think Snape would want to be anywhere near her either, right now.

“That bastard just saved Holly from an abduction attempt! I saw it with my own eyes – the guy in the cap was just about to pick her up and put her in the car!”

“So where were you? You were supposed to be looking after her – you had one job, Charity! And meanwhile, your cult buddy goes and destroys the whole School of Science at Bath University. Did you see it on the news this morning? An unexplained explosion, they said, a possible gas leak. Three security guards knocked out by it. Decades of research obliterated. That is not a sane and reasonable man and I don’t want him near my daughter. Holly will tell me, and if I hear of it happening again, I’m taking custody.”

“Or are you just jealous, Jason?”
“He keeps threatening full custody, Severus!” she yelled. “He wants things on his terms, or Holly’s at risk. He has lawyers, good lawyers. They’ll paint me as unfit – after all this, it will be easy for them. Then if he has full custody, he can take her anywhere, and I think he would, just to spite me. He said -,” but she halted too late.

“He wants you back,” finished Snape. “I heard the phone call. It doesn’t surprise me.”

“Severus, I love you, I want us to be together, in the cottage – I’ve just got to figure out how; I can’t keep doing this, it will wreck all of us.”

“Well work it out,” he said, attempting to soothe but she could see that he was far from calm himself. “We need to work it out together. But right now, we need to go home.”

“You mean Hogwarts?”

He met her gaze but did not reply.

Once they were back at the castle, she all but fled to her quarters. She didn’t need to be away from Snape, but she needed to be somewhere still and quiet. He didn’t object, perhaps he felt the same way. She didn’t even bother unpacking her things. She threw her backpack on the floor, under the kitchenette table, took her shoes off and went into the bedroom where she fell face forward onto the bed.

Her mind turned to thoughts of escape. It even included versions that escaped Holly and Snape, the people she loved most in the world. What she was actually fantasizing about were boltholes, places she could be alone, places where time stopped, responsibilities vanished, consequences didn’t exist and hearts could heal. She didn’t like this version of herself that occasioned ripples of disruption in the world, it was not her wallflower self, where life carried on around her instead of with her. She enjoyed causing an impact, and then hated the aftermath. She enjoyed being noticed, and then hated the attention.
When she looked at her watch eventually, she saw she had missed dinner and that outside would now be dark. Stars. Driven more by instinct than anything, she got up and gathered her coat, put on comfortable shoes, and then snuck out of her room, down the stairs and outside via a secret passageway that took her towards the west side of the castle. She didn’t want to draw attention to the great exercise that was opening the front door after hours.

Her secret exit opened onto grass and verge that sloped down to the lake, not far from where the Slytherin Common Room extended beneath the water. She was completely alone, freezing cold and the sky was full of stars. She breathed deeply, once, twice so that her whole body shivered, three times so that her head swam. Her throat stung with the cold, her eyes watered, her nose wanted to run but she wiped it vigorously. Behind her were the steep turrets of the castle, soaring upwards and dark now, she could make out the windows of the Great Hall. Against the backdrop of stars it was breathtakingly beautiful, and she understood with the knowledge that can only be earned when something has been lost, she understood why Snape called it home.

And with sorrow that she could hardly bear, that engulfed her, she also understood that it could never be home for her.

The next day, Saturday, she went down to the Great Hall for a late and leisurely breakfast, delighted to find Snape there already, reading the paper. When he saw her at the door, he got up from his seat and came to meet her, asking with great concern how she was, and if she’d had any further news. She reassured him everything was fine and deflected him, drawing attention instead to her hunger and anticipation of caffeine. She sat next to him at the table and they shared a pot of coffee; he gave her pages of the paper he’d finished with and they talked about the slow news, inconsequential matters, broke apart a couple of croissants to nibble on as they ate. She thought that this might be the closest she got to her life in a Scottish croft with him, this is what it would be like, if her dream had come true. At least she got a taste of it.

He cracked a wry joke about something he was reading and she laughed. It felt like her cue. She said she had to leave, and that she loved him. He dropped down the paper and looked at her, his uncanny radar instantly receiving, but she forced a smile to reassure him. His obsidian eyes locked onto hers but she couldn’t hold them. “What do you mean?” he asked in a low tone.

“Nothing!” she responded brightly, quickly. “I’ll see you later.”

Then she rose and walked up the table to where Dumbledore was seated, talking earnestly with McGonagall. He paused and looked at her as she hovered. She requested a meeting with him in an hour in his office. He nodded silently, unsmiling. And then she went out.

She spent the hour walking, unseeing and yet absorbing it all as if by osmosis. She watched the students practicing Quidditch, watching with amazement at their skill, their speed, their larger-than-lifeness. She wished she’d tried harder on a broom. She had a feeling now that if she had persevered, not wasted that opportunity, she would have been good at it.

When she re-entered the castle, she took the moving staircase to the third floor, and as she walked along the corridors to the Headmaster’s tower, she talked to the portraits and paintings, straightened a tapestry, returned the helmet on a suit of armour the right way round, and bade the gargoyle outside the office a good morning. “I believe the password is Liquorice Fiddlesticks?” she said, and the gargoyle admitted her to the spiral staircase.

It was with something close to repose she felt when she entered the office, as though part of her had come to terms with her fate. However, the scene, when she entered, was anything but serene.

Snape was in there with the Headmaster, and his face was dark with anger. Dumbledore himself
was flushed with hot temper, and when she walked in the both turned to her with barely controlled enmity. Not to her, she realised, she’d just interrupted something. Something not good.

“Charity -,” they both said at once, and she stopped, stared and waited.

“Severus?” she asked, confused. “Why are you here?”

“I asked him here, Charity,” said Dumbledore. “To explain himself for absconding his duty for two days while I was away in London. Professor McGonagall just informed me at breakfast. I rightly assumed it was related to you.”

“Absconding…?”

“And I was just asking Professor Dumbledore to clarify which duty, exactly, he feels I was absconding from,” said Snape heatedly, turning his back quite deliberately on the Headmaster to walk away from him towards the door. “Seems we have a different definition of duty. Since the Headmaster has no one but himself to worry about, he’s decided we all must pay in blood to the school.”

At this, Charity’s eyes widened in shock and she turned to watch Dumbledore’s reaction.

“YOU ARE OUT OF LINE!” Dumbledore thundered, and Fawkes on his perch gave a squawk. A round of energetic muttering issued from the Headmaster portraits. “Your conduct is nothing short of a dereliction of duty and further, you are being insubordinate. I have a good mind to strip you of rank!”

There was a tremble in the room, like the most minor of earthquakes, Charity could hear glass tinkling and one of Dumbledore’s delicate bronze instruments toppled to the floor. It was impossible to know for certain who caused it.

“Strip away,” responded Snape disdainfully. “You think it means anything to me? They stand for nothing but more chains around my neck.”

“Don’t tempt me Severus. The Ministry want an explanation. It would help me a lot if I could serve them your head on a plate.”

“Why am I not surprised? They fiddle while Rome burns. Why don’t you give them what they want, Headmaster, and give them all the reason I need to post bail on this cell. Did Peacock tell you my memory charm did nothing? Nothing! I don’t know where he is and neither do they.”

“That matter isn’t our problem. You are not employed here to run personal errands and play at super-heroes. You are a teacher! A teacher, Severus!”

Snape’s lip sneered. “Except when you need me to be tinker, tailor, spy - sir!” he blazed. “Bodyguard to the Potter boy, clinician to the werewolf, chief runabout for the audit. I haven’t been a teacher here since I started.”

Charity’s mouth hung open, unable to believe what she was witnessing.

“Severus, I warn you - you go too far. You’re becoming wilful, headstrong. You are forgetting your place, and you forget why you are here, and free - you could be rotting in Azkaban, or dead at the hands of Voldemort. How quickly for you do your promises become empty!”

“And when he returns? I will undoubtedly be dead anyway – but I expect you will do your utmost to ensure I serve useful purpose to the cause before my position becomes untenable.”
There was a fraught pause. The portraits could be heard exchanging muted opinions, Nigellus defending Snape but the others dismayed at the insolence. Dumbledore shouted at them for silence, and then regarded Snape with his head held back, eyes piercing.

“Severus, you have the makings of a very accomplished wizard and you are an excellent teacher. But I despair of how I can help you when you insist on this defiance and self-interested antagonism. It is the Slytherin in you: you will not be told, you will not come to heel. Tom Riddle was the same, but heed this: he won’t tolerate it in others. If a war is ultimately at the expense of your life, it won’t be because of me. I will do everything in my power to protect and defend you, as I have always done. You cannot say otherwise.”

This could not be argued with. Snape put his hands on his hips and hung his head; Charity could see the muscle in his jaw ticking, his chest rising and falling. The room was completely silent. Dumbledore let it remain thus for a full minute.

It was Snape who spoke next, his words seemingly wrenched from the bottom of his soul. All he said was, “Headmaster. If that is all?”

“No,” said Dumbledore shortly. “Charity? Does our meeting have any bearing on Severus? If it concerns your activities in the last two days, then he may as well stay.”

Jumping at the sound of her name, Charity had almost forgotten why she was there, her whole being immersed in the exchange she had just seen, her impulse to go to Snape. But she turned to the Headmaster, knowing that now was not the time to be anything but strictly professional.

“I’m afraid my timing could be better, sir,” she said, approaching the desk behind which Dumbledore had just seated himself. “I’m sorry but I am afraid – I am afraid the events of the last few days -,”

She reached into the inside of her robes for the letter she had written.

“Do not tell me this is a resignation?” flared Dumbledore, his ire back within moments.

“It isn’t what I want,” she said, her prepared speech simply vanishing in the face of the toxicity in the room. “I -,”

“What?” exclaimed Snape, swiftly closing the distance between them. “No! You will not resign!”

“My daughter -,” Charity attempted to explain to Dumbledore, but Snape was pacing and interrupted forcefully.

“The circumstances to do require you to resign. Let the Ministry do their job! You haven’t thought this through properly!”

Dumbledore said to her: “Severus may well be right about this Charity.”

“With respect sir -,” she started.

“You’ve been manipulated into this,” said Snape angrily.

“Neither of you have children!” Charity finally blurted out. “All this talk about duty! She is my first responsibility!”

Both men fell silent. The Headmasters in their portraits were virtually falling out of their frames, so intent were they on hearing every last word.
“And it’s not just my daughter,” Charity added, desperately trying to claw back a semblance of decorum. “My reputation here, my credibility, my integrity as a teacher – it can’t continue.”

Dumbledore said, “We’ve had our differences, Charity, undeniably, but I felt the worst of that was behind us. There is no need for a resignation.”

“Sir, the graffiti, the expulsion – I can’t just pick up from that, if there is a war coming, it will only get more intolerable.”

“And us?” said Snape, stiffly. “Had you considered that? Isn’t it fortunate I was here meeting with the Headmaster when you decided to make this decision? When were you planning on telling me?”

“Severus!” snapped Dumbledore impatiently.

“Headmaster, if you accept her resignation, then you must accept mine too,” declared Snape, his voice low and charged. “Charity has done nothing wrong. If you accept it then you are complicit in an agreement that her absence will change this situation, that Hogwarts has no accountability in recent events.”

“What - ?” began Charity, but it was Dumbledore who stood and shouted again.

“I am not accepting any resignations from anybody!”

The room shook again; a quill rolled off Dumbledore’s desk.

“This has gone far enough! Both of you are stood down on grounds of impairment from stress. In my opinion, you are both overwrought and not in a fit state to teach. For those reasons I cannot accept any resignations in that they have not been made in sound mind.

“I am tired of the turmoil,” he continued, in a more moderate voice. “Go. Leave Hogwarts and go where you won’t be interrupted and sort out your affairs. Decide your futures, together, apart whichever you think best. But it must be on the condition that when you return, you are calm and competent and that you have reached agreement in the best interests of all parties. Do I make myself clear?”

Neither of them spoke.

“You can use my cottage. I will send a kitchen elf each morning with provisions. Prepare a lesson plan for each of your classes today and I will arrange substitute teachers. Charity, if I hear from Candace or your family, I will send a Patronus. I want you both back in my office no later than Wednesday next week with a plan.”

“But sir -, began Charity, but Dumbledore raised his palm.

“No. That is it. Do as I say.”

Charity was furious. She had reached an emotional state where she had felt composed, satisfied and accepting of her decision and then Snape had ruined it. Once more she was humiliated in front of Dumbledore. Could she ever leave his office with a shred of dignity? She turned on her heel and marched out of the office.

Behind her, Dumbledore held his hand out to detain Snape. He waited until she had left, then said, “Severus – that plan will not include your resignation. Do you understand?”

Snape stared at him coldly, then stalked out of the office in a swirl of his robe.
Charity did not want to go to Dumbledore’s cottage. She wanted to crawl under a rock and remain there until the snake or whatever else was prophesized for her took care of matters. According to her destiny, she would not need to wait long.

In her office she sat at her desk and put her face in her hands. How in hell had things got to this? Stood down. Unfit. Chased by a man with a microchip in him. It was madness, utter madness. And in the face of it, how was she supposed to come up with a prudent and sensible plan? Her programming did not process absurdity, she just wanted to run from it.

She would spend one day in the cottage with Snape, she resolved, and then return, directly, with her resignation. And that would be it. She would be gone.

For the next few hours, while the flood of emotion in her started to settle again, like flakes in a snow globe, she prepared her lesson plans for the substitute teacher. It wasn’t difficult, she didn’t need to pour much inventiveness into it, the world’s dullest textbook made sure of that. In some ways it was even calming.

At lunch, on autopilot, she drifted somewhat aimlessly down towards to the Great Hall, but then faltered to a stop. She wasn’t hungry, and the Hall would be full of people she didn’t want to see. Small talk would be required. Awkward interactions with Snape and Dumbledore. But when she cast about in her head for what to do next, she could think of nothing and nowhere – in this enormous castle, with magic at her disposal, she could think of nothing that would settle her. She returned to her office.

The arrangements for when she and Snape were supposed to be departing for Dumbledore’s cottage had been left unclear. She hadn’t spoken to him after the meeting and by the end of the day there had been no sign of him. Undoubtedly he was licking his wounds himself, and she knew he was angry that she’d made the decision to resign unilaterally. The day drifted into evening, and evening became another star-studded night, and hungry but unable to eat, she let restlessness drive her outdoors again, walking across the frosty grass. She went down to the lake for lack of any other destination and had walked a few metres of the shoreline when she saw a figure ahead of her, standing still and staring at the moonlight across the water. She’d know that posture anywhere. She stopped, undecided what to do when Snape turned to look at her, his radar always on.

He didn’t move either. Their stillness betrayed the ambivalence between them, a new thing. A few long moments passed, and then, stunned, she saw him deliberately look away from her, back out over the water.

Her heart plunged. It was one thing to be angry and sulking, but this – this was quite another. Devastated, she stumbled backwards a few steps, then turned and hurried back up the hill, lifting her skirts, her boots starting to soak in the dense frost. Tears pricked her eyes, and while her heart pounded, it was her head that screeched at her: *what did you expect? That he would never reach his limit? That his life hasn’t been hell too? That he would constantly forgive you for excluding him and shutting him out? For making a mockery of the commitment he made to you? For putting his life, his career on the line for you? Are you surprised he’s come to his senses?*

The roaring in her ears was so loud that she hadn’t heard him follow her up the hill at a run. When she reached the door of her passageway, she was just about to push it open when she heard “Wait.”

She swung round. He was panting slightly from the exertion of his run, but he held her gaze levelly.
“Dumbledore was right. We haven’t been in sound mind. I recommend we leave for his cottage first thing tomorrow.”

“Fine, but,” she said, shaking her head slightly, “it won’t change anything Severus. I was feeling perfectly sound when I made up my mind.”

“Then why couldn’t you tell me?”

“Dumbledore is my employer, not you.”

“Don’t be so obtuse!” he shot back, “you should tell me because I love you! And you’re supposed to love me! And when one person makes a decision that splits you asunder, you tell the other!”

It was indefatigable logic, and yet she hadn’t seen it that way. What she had imagined was Snape talking her out of it, she knew he would succeed. Presenting it as a fait accompli seemed an easier way out.

“Here am I again,” said Snape, in a quieter voice, his eyes penetrating, “wondering about you, wondering what a commitment means to you. I lay down my very soul so that you don’t have to muddy your shoes, and you – you intend to sneak out the back door. Have I not earned more from you than that?!?”

She gasped because air could not enter her lungs; she was drowning inside in a sea of remorse. She struggled out: “I was simply in a state of desperation, Severus. You’re right, of course, I should have talked to you first.”

“It was more than an accident. You did that quite by design. We had time at breakfast, I asked you! You had it planned while we ate and talked, you had it in your head the whole time and never decided that I deserved more respect than to be treat like a fool.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We leave tomorrow. First light. Be dressed, have your things and meet me at the gate. We have much to discuss.”

He turned on his heel and walked back down the hill. She, miserably, entered the passageway and returned to her rooms. She supposed being spoken to like a teenager was justified, she hadn’t behaved much like an adult. And now the days at Dumbledore’s cottage were likely to continue as they’d begun, with a blazing row and there could only be one way it would end.
They arrived at eight twenty-six am. Charity had checked her watch was wound up and working since it would be their only source of time while they were at Dumbledore’s cottage. She was wearing her cable knit jersey and relaxed-cut jeans and boots. Snape was wearing a moss-coloured sweater she hadn’t seen before, a scarf and dark chinos. She had stared at him when he came down the hill to the gate, barely recognising him, but she didn’t comment.

Sheets of cracked ice floated at the edge of the lake, there was barely any sign of life. No birds sang, no ducks bobbed in the water, the stark bushes behind the house were like skeletons. Charity hugged herself, tucking her fingers under her arms to keep warm while Snape opened the cottage and admitted them.

For the first half hour the pair were occupied with the business of making the cottage habitable. Some things were unchanged since the last time they’d been there, such as the Headmaster’s empty portrait was still removed, and used cups sat in the kitchen sink. Snape lit a roaring fire in the living room, in the kitchen woodstove and upstairs in the main bedroom. Charity went upstairs afterwards to investigate as she hadn’t looked last time, and discovered, like the cottage in Ambleteuse, a dimly-lit, single large room with a sloping, timber-beamed ceiling and dormer window. In the middle of the room was a large bed with head and foot boards in a solemn, dark carved wood. A blanket box, a chair in a tartan fabric, bedside table with gas lamp, and a selection of books on top of the mantelpiece. The bed was not made up so she went in search of linen, until Snape asked her what she was doing and when she explained, he went upstairs and simply waved his wand and the bed was suddenly busy making itself. “I’ve been doing that since I was nine,” he told her. “I’ll teach it to you one day.”

The bathroom was intimate, under a precariously sloping, beamed roof, rough-hewn wooden floors with candlesticks on old, three-legged stools and a large, copper clawfoot bath. The only room devoid of artwork, a single small window allowed pale light. While it was rustic, the cottage was steeped in character and Charity decided she could grow to love it had it been hers. But Dumbledore’s presence was everywhere, as strong as if he were actually with them.

She didn’t unpack. She left all her belongings in her bag in the bedroom. She had no way of knowing how long she would be in the cottage, it could be hours or days. When she returned downstairs, she made a point of assessing the size of the sofa in case one of them – well, Snape – would be sleeping on it.

“We’ll be sleeping upstairs,” he commented from the kitchen where he was putting a kettle on. “Both of us.”

She had gotten used to his mind-reading and didn’t reply. She did note that he was still in his blunt, instructional mood and so clearly he was as angry today as he’d been last night. Much as she’d expected.

She was still standing near the sofa when he emerged with two mugs of tea, one of which he handed to her, then put his empty hand in his pocket and regarded her. “Here we are.”
“Yes.” She took a sip of the tea, deciding to let him lead the discussion since he was being the bossy one.

He took a deep breath. “If we need to go back with a plan, it makes sense to first decide what outcome the plan is intending to achieve. I will be bold and state that the outcome I am here to fight for is that we return as a couple, to Hogwarts, as teachers and find a place of our own to live nearby. Much as we discussed at dinner. It would seem that at some point, your outcome has deviated.”

She took her mug and selected an armchair, then sat down with her feet curled up beneath her, waiting for the room to warm.

“Severus - ,”

“Why do you continue to call me by my name?” he asked abruptly. “You have no term of affection for me.”

“I like your name,” she replied, which was true, but didn’t know why she referred to him that way. Evidently this was inadequate as an answer for he didn’t acknowledge it and so she said, “Shall I go on.”

“Do.”

“When I decided that the right thing to do was to return home, and look after my daughter, I’ll be honest that a weight lifted from me. It felt to me that doing the right thing had a quality of ease, or simplicity that signified it was what I needed to do. Every other option felt like an uphill, fruitless struggle.”

He didn’t answer straightaway. He went into the kitchen again and put down his cup on the counter. Then he said, “I see. Well, I grant that you have come straight out of the starting box at a gallop. Thank you for taking the trouble to spare my feelings.”

He was propping himself on the counter with his arms, head hung.

“I thought you’d appreciate my being honest - ,”

“You are honest when it suits you! And apparently your decision to be, or not to be, honest, has nothing to do with me. Charity, are you trying to push me away? Why?”

“No! Well - ,”

“You are?" his voice was anguished, she’d never heard that before, and she was stricken.

“Not in those words! It’s the effect of my decisions, which, I’ll be honest, are brutal for us, I know, I’m sorry, but I can’t have it all! I want it, I really do, but I can’t have you, and my job, and Holly safe – I just don’t see how!”

A potent mix of anger and amazement crossed his face. “How calmly, how decisively you say that. As if you’ve been through a menu and selected what’s manageable for you. I would have liked the cheesecake, but I know when enough’s enough! Merlin, Charity, that scientist in you can be hard.”

“These are the decisions a mother has to make,” said Charity coolly. She didn’t enjoy being called hard.

“How convenient you have a child’s welfare to hide behind. No one can argue with that, can they?”
“She’s my daughter!” said Charity, jumping up. “You call me hard! How can you say something like that?”

“Who else is going to call you out? It would appear that I’m the only one fighting for us, here – why do I bother? Fine. If our time here is actually an extended break-up fight, let’s be up front about it. Have you called time on us, Charity? In the space of a day, have you decided to…end…what we were?”

She checked her watch. It was Nine fifty-three. It wouldn’t even be recess at Hogwarts, and words were failing her. She had nothing to say. She looked at Snape, who was waiting, poised, and when he realised she wouldn’t answer he swept his arm across the counter and his mug went flying, smashed into the opposite wall.

Her eyes closed and internally she shrank back. Somehow this was her doing. For trying to do what she thought was right. Nine fifty-four. Time had suspended. Why was it never the same two days in a row? It counted down the same numbers, sometimes so fast, sometimes so slow. Why didn’t it suspend during the good times?

“Got somewhere to be, Charity?” Snape asked caustically.

“Away from here,” she muttered. “You just want to attack me. I don’t answer to you, I don’t need to defend myself to you, I don’t owe you an explanation about things that don’t concern you. I’m going.”

She went up the stairs to get her bag. Her vaguest of vague plans was to apparate to her apartment. On Monday or Tuesday, she would return to Hogwarts and hand in her resignation, explaining to Dumbledore that her relationship with Severus was finished, over, and she would be gone. Perfect. She would deal with the fallout later.

She grabbed her bag from the bedroom and, for some reason she couldn’t explain, felt a huge pang of disappointment that she wouldn’t be trying the bed out with Severus, but it was shut down swiftly, and she trotted back down the stairs to the front door. Curses crossed her mind, but she said nothing, did not look at him. She felt his eyes on her. Stop me! She cried out subconsciously. I’m bluffing! But he didn’t stop her. She stood before the door. He didn’t stop her. Her pride was egging her on: teach him a lesson, stick with your principles, stand up for yourself, but then, Stop me before I go out of the door!

She was ready to lift her right foot and place it across the threshold when she lifted her eyes to his. It was almost painful to do so, the burden of so much pride was laid heavily across it. He was staring steadily at her, and his eyes were ready for hers.

“You’ve given us less than two hours,” he said.

She’d watched crap TV shows longer than that. Stood in Post Office and airport queues longer than that. Shopped for groceries, been stuck in traffic, lazed around in bed for more than two hours without a second thought.

She had been in labour with Holly for eighteen hours. Holly had been worth labouring for, she had worked hard for Holly, for eighteen hours. Did you have to earn that kind of love, in blood, and sweat and tears?

She wanted him to come over and physically take the decision out of her hands, but he didn’t. He was a strict teacher, unpopular with it. She had to work this one out for herself.
Her hand was already on the handle of the door. It was a lever-action latch: push down on the lever and the latch raised free of the catch, the bind, the hold. The door would be free to open. She could step out – as soon as she was free of his gaze, it would be easier. She could disapparate in seconds. Then she would only have herself to think about.


That was a tough, sharp blow. He knew her well enough to know that she was not the woman who had adored him, but rather an avatar of herself, sent into battle. It was hard to hurt an avatar, feelings were kept safely out of impact.

She pushed down the lever. He turned his back to her.

The door swung open and chilled air from off the lake drifted into the room. She turned again to look at him but he hadn’t moved. And so, heart thumping, holding her breath, she stepped outside and shut the door behind her, and moments later, she was gone.

Snape remained where he was and allowed her several minutes to realise, frantically, the terrible choice she’d made and come back. He waited for the door to bang open and hear her heartfelt apology, her plea to start again. He imagined, when that happened, he would go to her and wrap her in his arms to reassure her, all would be forgiven, they could make some lunch and sit down and properly talk. They would agree that a love like theirs was not something you discarded in a day and two hours. Snape knew what it meant to be loyal, he understood the sacrifice that came with a sincere commitment. Theirs was something deserving of effort.

When she had not reappeared ten minutes later, he began to experience an uncomfortable anxiety. He walked through to the bay window in the living room, irrationally hoping that looking for her, watching the spot where she might reappear would facilitate her arrival. Eventually he pulled up a chair and sat, looking out through the window, waiting.

Perhaps an hour or two later, he didn’t know, there were no clocks in Dumbledore’s house, a figure appared on the path outside and he jumped up, heart hammering. But it was a kitchen elf, with a basket of food. Snape went outside and took the basket, thanked the elf, then re-entered the house. He saw in the basket the elves had arranged items of food in pairs, like a picnic, good food, sustenance they should have been enjoying together.

She wasn’t coming back.

There was a feeling like a rope being pulled tight around his chest and with an angry growl he hurled the basket through the living room, items falling out of it everywhere during its transit, the basket crashed against the fireplace and fell to the floor. He swung about and kicked the front door hard and then, by itself, the latch of the door lifted and the door opened and slammed, opened and slammed, opened and slammed with a loud bang each time. The windows rattled in their old frames. He then wrenched the door open and stormed outside again and stood in the spot from where she’d left and searched the sky around him, as if she might be hiding out there somewhere, and shouted, “Charity! Charity!”

For a blinding second he hated her with every fibre in his being. He cursed her, he spilled forth a choice selection of profanity that he hadn’t used in years. And then he stood still on the dirt path and heaved for breath having no idea what to do next.

He couldn’t tell if what he was feeling was anger, worry or grief. He suspected all three, and they
consumed him to almost blindness. In his head, his only shocked thought over and over was, She’s gone! She’s gone! He seemed unable to process anything else. She’s gone, he thought, she left. She left me. She’s gone. His legs were moving and they carried him down to the lake and he stared out over the water, much as he’d done at Hogwarts, letting the icy breeze cut through him. A second surge of vitriol rose up, as spontaneous and bitter as bile, and he yelled expletives and cursed her again, but halfway through this bout, tears came to his eyes.

He rubbed them away angrily. He wasn’t going to cry over her. He thought about producing a Patronus and sending her a filthy message about how much he hated her now, but it would just sound stupid coming from a doe. And from a grown man. No, he needed what little dignity he had left, the little she had left him. But he wanted to hurt her back, it was instinct.

Has she gone forever? Asked a voice in his head, so small and nervous it was almost drowned out. Perhaps she’ll be back later. When she’s had some time. And if she does, what then? Screaming and cursing? Will she get a second chance?

Some energy and flooded feeling had been drained off, and he could touch the bottom again. Perhaps she’ll be back later. It was indeed possible she could simply appear at any moment. Who knew what was going through her head, wherever she was. Maybe she was regretting her move, maybe she was filled with remorse, just unsure how to come back from it. That was a more likely scenario that a permanent departure. Pride had pushed her out the door, that was all, she would come back when she’d figured out how to explain herself.

And despite his own pride ranting that it wouldn’t make any difference now, that she’d blown it once and for all, his eternal spring of hope came back to life and started to flow.

He wasn’t exactly buoyed by this hope, but it was enough for him to breathe deeply and walk slowly back up the path to the front door of the cottage and let himself in. The invisible rope around his chest tightened again, and he went directly to Dumbledore’s drink cabinet and poured himself a double whisky which he downed in four gulps, making his eyes water. On top of the adrenaline coursing through his veins, he was seriously lightheaded for a couple of minutes and thought he might throw up, but then it started to numb his nerves and soothe the jagged edges and he decided on a little rest on the sofa to calm down.

And like men everywhere who can sleep in the most unlikely of places, at the most extreme of times, he nodded off. He dreamed about Charity. He dreamed she had learnt the Sectumsempra curse, and on a broom, flying above the canopy, was chasing him through the Forbidden Forest where he was running, running desperately. Above he could hear the curse slicing through whole tree branches which toppled down in front of him, behind him, cut through the dust in the path before him, leaving bloody gashes in the dirt. He couldn’t see her, he just knew it was her, and that she wouldn’t stop chasing him until she had at last, viciously, cast the cutting curse through him.

When he awoke, he didn’t remember the dream, he just had the residual feelings of panic and fear. The fire had gone out while he slept, and night had fallen, the room was in darkness. He got out his wand and lit the candle on the coffee table, then went about the room lighting the gas lamps and other candles he could find. He re-lit the fire and the wood burner, he used his wand to restore the basket of food and then he simply stood in the middle of the silent room, pointlessly, uselessly, and so utterly, utterly alone.

She’s not coming back.

Grief swamped him and he remembered the feelings from Lily, but there were no tears, just a tidal wave of chemicals that stole the breath from his lungs. He went back to the sofa and lay down again, breathing heavily, his heart pounding with the fresh surge of adrenaline, the rope tugging and
tugging. He wished there was someone else, anyone, to share this awful, poisonous burden, who could pump antidote through him, stop the toxin before it reached his heart. But he knew no one who he could trust with his vulnerability. There would have been a time when Dumbledore would have offered comfort, or at least common sense, but not right now, not this time, not with the way he viewed Charity. Snape was completely alone, and the realisation that his life once more stretched out barren before him was as distressing as his loss. Was it any surprise that the Death Eaters had felt like family in comparison?

Where would she be? He should go to her, confront her, demand his rights to a proper conclusion. He had invested so much of himself and had trusted her so absolutely, this was too cruel a way to treat him. Why should she be able to simply walk away and just leave a mess behind? She owed him more, no matter what she said, she owed him an explanation and an apology and the common courtesy of a decent farewell. The Muggle word for it was closure, he believed. If this was indeed it for them, if she had left him for good…

Why though? Why had she left him? Why had she done it so suddenly? How could she just walk away like that?

Chest aching, he rose again and fetched the bottle of whisky out of the cabinet. This time he brought it down to the table before the sofa and fire. He’d put his tumbler down somewhere, he couldn’t see it so he unstoppered the decanter and simply drank from the neck.

Fire scorched through him. It felt cleansing. He remembered the night in the Three Broomsticks, drinking whisky with Dumbledore and Cornelius Fudge, watching Charity across the room, she’d been wearing –

The Bewitcher’s Ribbon.

It hadn’t been broken…. He sat up straight. That would explain the tugging, tight feeling he’d had since she went. Then she would be feeling it too, and feeling that drowning sensation when they were apart. How long before it became intolerable, and she would come back to him for some relief? Did it work forever, or did it eventually fade if for some reason the ribbon wasn’t able to be broken? He didn’t know, all he did know was that it got worse before it got better.

The ribbon was in his rooms at Hogwarts. He had kept it the night he’d untied it from her hair, scooped it up off the floor and pocketed it without really thinking, had assumed it was gush of sentimentality, but now thinking it was possible that was literally part of the charm.

His spring of hope flowed freely again, and between renewed hope and the whisky, he started to feel a little better.

He had no idea what time it was, but it felt late when he went upstairs to the bed, the alcohol making the unlit passage up the irregularly shaped steps rather precarious. With his wand, his ever-present wand, he ignited a single wall sconce, kicked off his boots and main items of clothing which were dropped to the floor as he was quite drunk by now, and crawled under the covers of Dumbledore’s bed. Had Dumbledore ever shared this bed, Snape wondered. Had he ever had a lover beneath the blankets with him? Seemed a waste not to, it was a surprisingly comfy bed despite its forbidding appearance. Then he rolled over and the whisky took him into a black hole.

He was woken, an indeterminate amount of time later, by someone shaking him in the dark. The candle must have gone out while he slept. He bolted upright and pointed his wand, “Lumos!”

It was Charity.
“Severus! Severus it’s just me, it’s just me,” she whispered.

She was still dressed as she had been when she left, but her hair was loose. “I’m sorry to wake you like that,” she added, staring at him. “Are you OK – you smell of…is it whisky?”

“How do you think I am?” he muttered, but his eyes roved her face, and he thought, she couldn’t stay away because of the ribbon. He was so angry with her, but – Papus save him - so, so in love with her. “Are you back, are you staying?”

“I couldn’t rest,” she said softly. “It was like I couldn’t breathe, in my chest, it was tight.”

“The bond,” he explained.

“I wondered.”

She took his wand off him and whispered “Nox.” They were in the dark again. He felt her hands on the side of his face, and then her lips on his with gentle, persistent kisses. “I’m sorry,” she uttered, and the kisses became intoxicating, surges of lust powered through his body and, giddy with intense desire he flipped her onto the bed so that he was on top of her.

“You are a wicked witch,” he murmured. “And you keep hurting me. Tell me what you want. I’ll give you anything.”

“I think you know why I’m here,” she answered, and wriggled out of her sweater. Snape tugged off her jeans, and any other items of clothing, wanting nothing, not even shreds of fabric, between them.

He was as starved for her as he had been their first time, but there was anger and betrayal in the mix and he wanted to dominate her, to claim back some ground. Once or twice she gasped and it propelled him more and at the end, he seized a handful of her hair, pulled back her head and groaned into her neck. Her fingers gripped his other wrist, his left, and his Dark Mark flared in pain and the sensation of it all combined exhilarated as much as it hurt him, so that even as he collapsed on the bed beside her he knew it would only be minutes before he was ready again.

“Oh my god,” he heard her say. “Oh my god.”

Snape claimed back ground three times that night, and the sun was slipping across the horizon before he finally felt spent. Charity was completely limp beside him, raw and exhausted, and, he felt, justly punished. He felt scared she would leave again but he needed to sleep and so he rested one hand on her arm which felt more secure, in his addled brain thinking that if she got up he would feel it, and then he drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

When he awoke hours later, the first thing he registered was that Charity was still with him in the bed. She was curled up on her side, back to him, he could see her blanket rising and falling with her slow breathing. He scooted over and possessively drew her in against him, the closest possible spoon he could create, he wanted to feel her against his length. She also couldn’t get away when they were like this, not without waking him first. She hadn’t stirred and soon, he fell asleep again.

Hunger woke him again, later. Charity was now awake, lying on her back and gazing out the window quietly.

“Morning,” he said.

“Afternoon,” she replied.

“What time is it?”
She glanced at her watch. “Twelve fifteen.”

“I’m starving. The kitchen elf will be here soon with a basket. Shall we get up?”

She turned onto her side so they were face to face. “Severus, I won’t leave again until we’ve talked things through. I...I do realise that it would be unfair of me to simply take matters into my own hands. But that is reason I’m back. I want to do the right thing by you.”

He processed her words, which were phrased delicately enough to risk being misunderstood. “You’ve come back but you’re not staying.”

“I haven’t changed my mind,” she said softly.

He didn’t speak while frustration and resentment once more cascaded through him, bringing a kind of stinging heat to his skin. When he felt in control again, he said, “Do you love me?”

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation, looking at him openly.

“Doesn’t that make you want to be with me?”

“Yes, constantly.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“You can’t always have what you want.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Perhaps not,” she admitted. “Let’s talk about that.”

She rose, and put Snape’s shirt on that she’d found on the floor. “I’m going to have a bath – you made a bit of a mess of me last night. Are these bruises?” She touched tender places on her neck and jaw. “Look at my wrists!” A dark red, tender looking bruise ringed each one.

He murmured an apology and rose as well, dressing quickly against the cold, then we went through to the bathroom to run a bath for her. While Dumbledore’s cottage had no electricity, it was at least plumbed with a gas heating for the water.

He then went downstairs to re-light all the fires and put the kettle on, and raided yesterday’s food basket to stifle the incessant rumbling in his stomach. As he worked, he ruminated over Charity’s words, and tried hard to keep his animosity at bay. Her assurance that she loved him did help to soothe things, but he couldn’t come to terms with her willingness to walk away from something he felt so ardent about. He made himself a mug of coffee and stood sipping it thoughtfully, wondering how he could convince her that love like theirs was worth fighting for, the stuff that gave purpose to existence, the kind of thing that you took with you into the black, that gave you peace in your final moments knowing you’d had the best of what life could offer.

It had gone quiet upstairs. He put down his mug and went up to the bathroom to check she was still there, and alright. He found her soaking in the clawfoot tub, hair pinned up but damp tendrils encircling her face, skin glowing from the moisture and heat, her naked form tantalisingly obscured by the film of soap in the water. She had her eyes closed and seemed unaware that he was standing in the doorway and staring with undisguised hunger. These physical impulses he was feeling came from somewhere quite primal, he was a little shocked by them himself, but having lived so cerebrally for so long there was some part of him that was relishing the freedom to let instinct take the helm.
She shifted in the bath and lazily opened her eyes, then gave a start when she realised she had company. “What’s the matter?” she asked instantly.

“Nothing,” he responded. “I just wanted to check -,”

“That I was still here.”

“That you were okay.”

“I’m more than okay. This bath is lovely. You can have the water when I’m finished.”

He considered that, the sharing of bathwater; such a throwaway comment and yet it revealed an intense intimacy, a private communion between them: we share hearts, dreams, our bodies and the bathwater.

He took a step towards her, “My love?”

“Mmhm?” She had closed her eyes again, luxuriating.

He opened his mouth, but words wouldn’t come out. His heart started to hammer almost painfully. “Charity?”

“Yes my darling.”

Her words seemed to explode like a firework in his mind, my darling. Never had anyone called him that.

“I – I wanted to ask you…”

She opened one eye and smiled at him. “Ask me what?”

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” he blurted, a flush rising to his face.

“That would be nice, thank you. When I’m dressed though.”

“…And something else.”

“Okay. What?” She was looking at him now because Snape didn’t usually falter like this.

“Would you consider…,” a shaky breath, “becoming my wife?”

She stared at him. She was not smiling, she looked dumbstruck.

“Would you marry me?” Snape hadn’t expected deathly silence from her and thought perhaps rephrasing the question would help.

“It would be a great honour if you would marry me,” he added in finality, and then wiped some perspiration from his brow with his sleeve.

“Severus…,” she said, although the word was tremulous. She sat up straight in the bath, covering her front with her arms and stared at him with wide, astonished eyes. “What…? Why…?”

“I thought that…if we were perhaps married…it might remove some sources of anxiety for you. A more permanent, binding relationship might make it easier for you to decide. What to do,” he explained. He did not add that he was starting to believe that life without her would be almost intolerable for him, and this would be one way of getting the peace of mind he needed about her. Her
flightiness made him extremely nervous.

The wizarding community were more traditional about marriage than modern Muggles. Divorce was rare, and proposals were often made within months rather than years of dating. But even by wizarding standards, Snape’s offer was startlingly soon into the relationship and revealed more about his insecurity than his confidence in Charity. At one level he was conscious of that, but Snape had also been waiting for Charity all his life – he didn’t measure his love for her in terms of weeks or months, it was simply circumstance that it was only now that she had finally embodied the hole he’d carried around since a child, become the person who completed him. He’d wanted to attach to someone for as long as he could remember, and it wasn’t until he’d fallen in love that he understood utterly that she was the one. The last one and the only one to return it.

An acceptance from her would have made him the happiest man on earth, he was quite sure of that. He felt it would be the only plan worth taking back to Dumbledore. It somehow rendered all his other commitments and obligations moot, they were meaningless in the face of such an overriding oath. He would be bound, but also free, to start life anew. And where that new freedom would take them, he didn’t know – it would unlikely be anywhere particularly rewarding at first – but with her by his side, it would be the impetus he needed to forge onwards and make it all worthwhile.

So he waited a minute, but she looked confounded – he’d seen similar expressions on unfortunates under the influence of the spell – and so he gave a small nod and said, “I will leave you to think on it. I’m sorry I - I’m sorry to raise it so unexpectedly, I haven’t done this before…I will just be downstairs.”

He turned on his heel and left at a march, not stopping until he had exited the entire cottage and was walking down the dirt path to the edge of the lake, head reeling, wondering what on earth he’d just done. She hadn’t leapt to a yes, beaming with joy as he’d hoped. She’d looked bewildered. He didn’t regret asking - he wanted her to say yes - what he regretted was putting himself in harm’s way again. He would be hurt once more, he would bleed his love yet again but he didn’t know what else to do. He had to find out, he had to know, he had to be sure that he had exhausted every possible way of keeping this ailing love alive.

Being outside with distance between them shielded his humiliation a little. It gave him time to reinforce himself, and the biting January air, redolent with snow, helped remind him that life was still going on around them, their little bubble was a temporary thing. The wide, steel grey, impassive lake restored him to normal size, where horizons were distant, and troubles of the heart were merely atoms in the universe.

Presently he heard a cough, and turned to find the kitchen elf with another basket of food standing at the front door. Snape went back up the path to him and took the basket with a thankful smile. The elf vanished. After a moment, Snape swished his wand and his doe Patronus bounded forth, doing her skippy trot for a moment then pausing for instruction.

“Message to Albus Dumbledore,” said Snape to his doe. “Progress is slow and difficult. Thank you for provisions. Will return Wednesday at latest.”

That bought them one more day. One more day if they needed it.

He looked at the sky and the clouds were so dark and heavy it felt as if he could touch them. His sweater – the delft blue one Charity had bought him – was warm but was no match for the imminent arrival of snow. He went inside back beside the cottage.

Charity was in the kitchen. Immediately he flustered, but forced composure and he tried to pretend he hadn’t just proposed to her.
“Lunch,” he remarked, taking the basket up to the bench. “There’s pie – perhaps while it’s still warm -?”

When he looked up, she had come towards him, eyes enormous. She reached up to pull his head down towards her and she kissed him fervently. Then she released him and he was cautiously hopeful because surely that meant –

“No,” she said, and her eyes filled with tears. “No Severus, I can’t marry you. I’m so sorry.”

He turned her words over in his head, and saw her wipe her eyes and blink rapidly, but not enough to stop the tears spilling down over her cheeks.

Even though he’d half prepared for this answer, the devastation was immense. It tore through his flimsy protection like a hurricane, twisting and wrenching and hurling his defences as though paper. The hurricane aimed directly for his heart, and within minutes he was wreckage.

“Why?” he said, and leaned against the bench.

She was openly crying now. “If you’d asked me that day we went to Diagon Alley, I would have said yes in a heartbeat. It’s not that I don’t want to marry you, I just can’t. You don’t seem to want to hear that.”

“Wha-?” What’s different between then and now?”

“Everything, Severus! You’re a Death Eater! I can’t go back to Hogwarts, and my daughter – she needs me more now. She’s one of us, out there in Muggledom, vulnerable – so many things have changed – so many things that make us impossible.”

“For Merlin’s sake, Charity – marry me and we can make those problems go away together. I don’t want to live without you! What is my life without you?”

“Getting married won’t fix those things!”

“Getting married will stop you running. You are running away!”

“What you want is a leash, Severus, not a marriage. Getting married will make you more of a target for Voldemort – not if, but when he finds out you’ve married a mudblood!”

“If we were married I would defect. We would leave.”

“You told me that defection was impossible. Even for one. I think he would delight in hunting you down, hunting us both down. And how can I be with Holly if we leave?”

“We would take her with us…” said Snape, somewhat helplessly, knowing how improbable that was.

“NO!” Charity hollered and rushed at him and half pushed, half pummelled his chest. She was sobbing but intent on keeping her eyes to his. “Don’t you see how stupid that is? How dangerous this has become? Severus, stop this, stop this stubborn delusion. We can’t go on. There isn’t any future for us.”

He pushed her away with his arm. Her crying distressed him and he was already deeply wounded, bleeding profusely inside.

She made her way to the sofa and curled up on it, crying and crying, drenching one of Dumbledore’s
throws.

His protective instinct told him she needed him, but he couldn’t go to her. He felt she had cut him in
two, sliced by his own curse. The scar tissue from his first heartbreak had toughened the tissue, the
weapon had to be sharper and more deadly, but she had found it. And used it.

If she wouldn’t marry him, then what was the point of anything?

His little spring of hope bubbled over on to his lacerated heart. Maybe in time? Maybe the answer
was not no, just not now? Could she wait for him?

He made his way unsteadily to the sofa and sat down beside her where she was now rubbing her red,
stinging eyes and sniffling.

“Two things may alter our course, my love, which may bring our divergent paths back together.
Holly will turn eleven and come to Hogwarts, and if Voldemort does resurrect, this time he will
surely be defeated once and for all. There will be peace. I will be free and we can be together. Do
you see?”

She gave a small nod. “Yes, possibly sometime in the future…”

“If we marry, even if we must be separated for a few years, we will have that comfort of knowing. I
can stand to be apart from you in person if I know I have your love forever.”

She looked doubtful. “But Severus, if I marry you then Jason will take Holly -,”

Snape’s eyes flared at the name. “Where were you yesterday?”

“I went to my apartment!”

“Were you with him? You changed since that last weekend. What has he been saying to you?”

“No, I wasn’t with him…well, I went to see Holly and he was there - ,”

“He’s cajoling you. Worse, he’s manipulating you. He wants you back and is using your guilt
against you.”

She looked away. “No, I’ve told him I’m with you…”

“Really? Because you’re not. You’re not with me.”

“What are you going to do, Severus?!” yelled Charity, finding her voice again. She jumped up and
backed away from him a step. “Going to use your Legilimens again? You’re getting controlling and
jealous!”

“Or what? You are killing me. You’ve trained me not to trust you!” Snape shouted in reply, also
rising.

“You think marriage is like chains. If we want to be together we’ll find our way back to each other.
I’ve been married Severus, I know what it can do. We don’t need it.”

“I don’t trust you! You will flee! I will never see you again.”

“Then I was never yours!” she half sobbed, half shouted.

“Your Patronus says you are,” responded Snape in disbelief, scrambling for evidence.
“The prophesy,” said Charity, backed into the corner of the lounge, where she slid down the wall to the floor. “It said there would be snakes that would love me but snakes that would loathe me, that snakes would bring me misery but also immense joy. Snakes that would bring life but also death. And it said a snake that would save me would be the one to desert me.”

“Half-witted rantings of a mad drunk,” spat Snape.

“But who knows why snakes are in my Patronus.”

“Because you love me!”

“Like you love Lily! Her doe!”

Snape roared with profound frustration and suddenly the coffee table rocked and upended. Then the cupboard doors in the kitchen began opening and slamming of their own accord. Charity shrunk into her corner.

“I have nothing more for you, Charity!” he thundered. “You have emptied me. I gave you EVERYTHING, everything I had. I laid my life down for you. Why? Why do you want to torture me?”

The front door joined in the banging, and with each opening a small flurry of snow gusted onto the slate threshold. Doors throughout the cottage now were slamming repeatedly, even the one to the drinks cabinet, and Dumbledore’s wine glasses rattled and crashed.

Charity put her hands over her ears as the noise was deafening. Snape, however, had reached such a rage he didn’t appear to notice. His voice was so loud that it could be heard above the clamour around him. “Even then, even when I knew you would hurt me, I kept giving. I feel nothing anymore! Take yourself away, I have no one, I feel nothing, I have been a fool. You have destroyed me.”

For a moment he stopped and stared at her crouched in the corner, his chest heaving, his eyes glittering, then he clenched his fists and stormed out of the front door. The minute he had left the cottage, the banging stopped.

Terrified, Charity got to her feet and ran to the window to see what he would do. While she watched, Snape marched away up the path and even as he walked, leaving dark footprints in the light layer of snow, he flicked his wand above his head and his form dematerialised into a black, indistinct wing-borne shape that suddenly took to the air and flew upwards, freely into the clouds, leaving a faint, smoke-like trail behind it.
He returned, much later, when the snow had stopped and daylight had faded. He was freezing, he had left without a cloak or coat because at the time his anger had fuelled such intense heat it hadn’t felt necessary. But he had cooled down, literally and metaphorically, and the bond once more drew tight and called for her. Shivering, he took out his wand, thinking they had one more day, one more day and anything could happen, so he came back.

He wasn’t entirely sure whether she would still be there, but a faint glow in the window told him someone had lit the gas lamps inside and he was hopeful. He let himself into Dumbledore’s cottage.

“Charity?” he called at the sight of the empty living room. A low fire was still burning in the grate. After securing the door, he went straight to the fire and threw some fresh logs on it, then let the warmth ease through him, felt life return to his numb fingers. He noticed that, despite the damage his rage had caused, the cottage seemed intact, and reasoned that Charity must have repaired what she could. He went to the drinks cabinet and, grudgingly approving Dumbledore’s decision to purchase the self-replenishing bottle of Firewhisky, poured himself two fingers which he downed in a single gulp and which thawed him inside in seconds.

Soft steps on the stairs made him look up. It was she, in pyjamas, looking down anxiously at him from halfway. “I – I didn’t know if you were coming back,” she said.

“We still have a day,” he replied, pouring himself another, smaller, whisky.

“It was my turn to do the waiting.”

He acknowledged this with a tilt of his head, but didn’t look at her and didn’t comment. He rather hoped it left her as gutted as it did him.

“Are you coming to bed?” she asked, and he looked up sharply.

“Your capacity for games is endless,” he said. Then added bitterly, “Are we all friends again?”

“We may not be friends, I grant you, but we don’t have to be enemies.”

“This is true,” he replied snidely. “I love having those who have eviscerated me near and dear. Charity, know this: I can barely stand to look at you.”

He heard, satisfyingly, a sharp intake of breath from her. But it wasn’t the truth. The sight of her balmed his soul, he could look at her endlessly. And, despairingly, he knew that he loved her as much as he ever had. His heart, rent in two, still brokenly beat for her alone.

She hesitated, then asked in a small voice, “Have you eaten? Shall I prepare you some tea?”

He had scarcely eaten in two days, and in spite of everything, he was ravenous. Because he didn’t answer, she took this to mean her efforts would be appreciated. She padded down the stairs and went into the kitchen, where she compiled items from the baskets onto a plate for him. She poured two
glasses of red wine and took his food and glass onto the table before the fire, then brought down her own glass and curled up on the spot she had decided was her seat, wrapped in the wool throw.

Snape, observing all this, wondered what was behind her conciliatory mood. But his stomach needed answering first. He took the armchair, lifted the plate and wolfed down the food, aware that she was watching, but not much caring. He was much more in touch with his primal side these days. Hunger being the best seasoning, the food tasted delicious, and between the warmth, whisky, a sated appetite and her olive branch, he felt appeased. He was, at the end of the day, still a man.

“Where did you go?” she asked when he had relaxed back into the chair and contemplated the fire.

“Up,” he answered shortly.

“Did you have a destination, I mean. Did you go to a particular place?”

Being generally uncooperative with her, he took his time answering. Then he said, “There is a hill in the north of England. I went there.”

She waited a few beats before asking “Why?” Much of him was still a mystery to her.

“I spent time there as a child. It suited my mood.”

It would have to do. She didn’t probe any further. And while he wasn’t lying, he hadn’t aimed for Pendle, he had ended up there, as roads often lead back. The Hill had been covered in snow, not settling as in Scotland but falling wetly, and it had felt desolate.

Charity bit at a fingernail nervously, then finally said, “Severus, I don’t blame you for hating me,”

It was an open invitation to deny it. He didn’t accept.

“But I can’t help that I still love you,” she said a little while later. There was a slightly desperate note to her voice. “I’m trying and trying to be level-headed, but I still adore you.”

He couldn’t resist looking at her after she said this. Something stirred in him.

“I want you to come to bed,” she said at last, almost guilty.

“It is the ribbon. The bond,” he said gruffly, with a sad realisation.

“Where is it? Can it be broken?”

“You want to break it?”

She gazed at him earnestly. “What if this isn’t anything to do with the ribbon?”

“How will knowing that help?”

“Then all I have to deal with is myself,” she said quietly.

He stared into the fire for some time, taking large gulps of the wine. “I don’t know where the ribbon is,” he told her. He didn’t look at her, but her silence suggested she might not believe him.

Presently she rose from her seat and came up behind his chair and tentatively put her hands on his head, and when he remained motionless, she leaned over and kissed his brow. “I’m going to run you a bath,” she said. “It will do you good.”
He didn’t object and she left to go upstairs. From his chair he could hear the plumbing clanking into life as she ran water into the tub. He was too tired to guess at her motivation, perhaps she intended to drown him and, if so, maybe he’d just let her.

Much of his thinking during his hours away had been dedicated to trying to strategise his – their – way out of the problem. Every solution, and there were no new ones, but those he did arrive at were so disproportionately comprised of wild unknowns, absolute unanswerables, nothing but flashing question marks, he rejected them as fatuous speculation. Plans and futures couldn’t be built on such unstable ground. His last shred of hope had been time. Let time unfold. The bond may lead her back to him.

His brain had then turned to more pressing issues of healing. But when he visualised his life knowing he wouldn’t see her, hear her or touch her, distress clouded his mind, the fear of his loneliness, of missing her, the perpetual, relentless ache of longing terrified him in ways a cruciatus curse couldn’t touch. Because he’d known it before and he could hardly believe that fate had determined he should suffer it again. She had never experienced it, she didn’t fear it like he did, she was naïve in her willingness to endure it.

As if hearing his thoughts, she reappeared then and took his hand, urging him out of his chair. “It’s lovely and warm up there,” she said. Resigned, he allowed her to lead him up the stairs to the rustic little bathroom, lit by candles. He had to duck his head to enter the door, then once inside she sat him on the chair in the corner and one by one, untied and pulled off his boots. It was quiet but for the drip of tap water. An owl outside cried once. She helped him remove all his clothes, quite deliberately running her fingers over his torso when it came to undoing his belt, and by and by he climbed into the bath and sunk into the enveloping warmth.

“I’ve put a calming potion in it,” she said. “You’ll breath it in through the vapours. I found it on the vanity. Really, Dumbledore thought of everything here.”

And as she’d said, his jangling nerves did soon start to calm.

She had rolled up the sleeves of her pyjama top and had taken a bar of soap that she began to lather on his skin, very slowly and gently. It was exceedingly pleasant, and he rested with his eyes shut. After a while of this she said, in an observational tone, “You are covered in scars. They’re everywhere. Severus, you are battle-worn.”

He didn’t deny it. He had lost count of the injuries over the years, the latest, greatest one having been caused by Hagrid’s monstrous three-headed dog. The scar on his leg was still fading. At least it would fade, the physical scars healed the easiest.

“Here, dunk your head back in the water and I will wash your hair. I promise you, it’s very relaxing.”

He did as instructed, and positioning herself behind him on a stool, she massaged his scalp and neck and soaped his hair and rinsed it, running her fingers through. He made small groans of pleasure.

“What come to bed,” she whispered. “I need you.”

Almost dazed, he stepped out of the bath and she hastily towelled off the excess water but he was still damp when she took his hand and led him through to the bedroom, where she started to shimmy out of the pyjamas as she sat him on the edge of the bed and kissed him urgently. Confusion and ardour coursed through him in equal measure, but she was insistent, and he didn’t try hard to resist.

He did slow her down, however. He was becalmed by the potion, and he also knew that their times
like this together were numbered. He wanted to be conscious of every second. He made her lie still while he ran his hands over every square inch of her, as if committing to memory the feel of her skin, the shape of her, every curve, every hollow, every secret place. And then where his hands had been, he followed with his lips and mouth, memorising the taste of her as well. And when she sighed or gasped or groaned, he would listen and preserve it in his mind.

Later, as Charity’s watch ticked away the seconds and minutes and hours, they lay in bed in the dark, face to face and talking. They reminisced. So much of their struggle had been about trying to forge a path through an impenetrable thicket, thorns snagging at every move, it was easier and kinder to spend what little time they had left reflecting on the love they’d had. They laughed often, quietly, and there were gentle caresses, soft kisses, and there were confessions as well, back stories and explanations so that the whole story of their relationship was mapped out in full before them both. Snape told Charity how afraid he was of being alone again, how much their separation would hurt, and his fear that he would never see her again, and for a few minutes silent tears slipped down each face, wetting their pillows. She stroked them away, and in a choked voice told him that she had never loved anyone the way she did him, and that she would come back, she would come back for him if he didn’t forget her.

In the darkness, she heard him say, “You said earlier that if I’d proposed to you that day at Diagon Alley, you would have said yes in a heartbeat.”

“I believe I would have. I think that was one of the happiest days of my life.”

“Would we have lived in a cottage together, like this one?”

“Yes. And we would have had a beautiful wedding.”

“Would you have worn a dress like the one you wore to the staff party?”

“Since you liked it so much, I think so, but perhaps in a pale colour.”

“And one of those flower things in your hair?”

“Yes. And we would have a lovely, intimate reception afterwards, just like that time down in Hagrid’s Hut with the Faerie Call and all the teachers.”

“I don’t know if I’d have Lupin there.”

“We couldn’t leave him out, Severus, that would be mean.”

“And afterwards,” Snape murmured, “we would go back to our cottage, for a night like tonight, except it would be the start of us, not the end.”

It was hard for Charity to answer that because the lump in her throat burned so much. She whispered, “Yes,” and tears flowed freely.

She could hear Snape’s breathing slowing and his arm around her grew heavier. When she stirred a little he half-woke and muttered, “My love, promise me you will come back. I want to make an honest witch of you.”

“I will my darling, I promise.”

And in the darkest hour, they fell asleep.
At dawn, beneath the covers of Dumbledore’s bed, Snape thought to himself, *we have all day, we still have the whole day*, and clung to Charity, although anger and confusion were his primary emotions again, after the calming potion had worn off. He forced himself to remember the feel of her, the warmth, her scent, the way her hair tickled his face, her always-cold feet, the downy hair on her arms, the mole on the back of her neck. Although he knew Voldemort was a master Legilimens, he opened files in his mind and stored memories of her as though packing for an extended trip, squeezing them in, determined not to leave anything behind. With a cold horror he realised he’d never taken a photograph of her – Lily had been the same – and he resolved to transfer as many as he could to vials for a The Pensieve. His Occlumency would have to be outstanding this time round.

When Snape was downstairs later, making something of a brunch for them from the remains of the baskets, he heard Charity moving around upstairs in the bedroom. The wooden floors in the upper storey virtually had a language of their own they complained so much. He wondered why it was taking so long for her to come downstairs. And then he realised, he understood with dreadful, brutal clarity, as soon as he saw her feet on the treads. She had her shoes on. She was dressed to go.

She had her hair tied up. Her coat on and her backpack slung over her shoulder. As she slowly approached him, he shook his head and said, “No. No.”

She took a shaky breath. “Severus, there’s no point-,”

“No, it’s too soon! We have the day-!”

“It’s too painful-,”

These last hours were undoubtedly bittersweet, but he wasn’t ready. He took her shoulders in his hands, but she pulled free. “I’m going Severus…I have to go…”

“Where are you going?”

“Let’s make this our last goodbye, let’s cut this cleanly, my darling, please don’t make this any harder,” she implored, eyes starting to fill with tears again. Where did they all come from?

She turned and went directly to the front door.

Briefly, crazily, he thought about *stupefying* her, or putting a locking charm on the door or an anti-apparating jinx – there had to be some kind of magic that could change this situation. And then he remembered the Bewitchers ribbon, and prayed that it would do it’s only ever job, the only job it had, which was to keep them together. But even that wasn’t stopping her.

She had opened the door and stepped outside. Her movements were oddly jerky and stilted, and then he heard her sobbing and realised she hadn’t been able to see through the tears.

A cool breeze off the lake had kept yesterday’s snow intact, although it had hardened and was slick, and she tottered a little to keep her balance. Snape had rushed out after her, but paused when he saw she had taken position on the path, the unofficial apparating spot. She stood straight, ready to leave, but her face was a portrait of anguish. Roughly she wiped tears away on her sleeve like a child.

“Goodbye Severus.”

He shook his head. The words were like a nightmare coming real. The arguing, the bargaining, the denial – it had achieved nothing. She was leaving him. “No,” he said. “Don’t go.”

“I promise I will come back. Tell me you love me. Tell me what you said under the shining snow.”
It was how she described the snow that fell when they had stood together on the patio. They had talked about it during the night, what they remembered, how they had felt. Unable to think of anything except what might make her happy, make her stay, he did as she asked.

“Charity,” he began, but the words came out mangled around the constriction in his throat. “I adore you…”

She sobbed into her hands.

“…I live for you,” he continued, barely able to raise his voice above a hoarse whisper. He approached her and folded her into a tight embrace so that she cried openly into his shoulder.

“…My heart, my soul, is yours…”

“Oh god,” she mumbled.

“I love you with all that I have,” he finished thickly. And then he added new words. “I always will.”

As silent tears slipped down his own cheeks, he wouldn’t let go, but she released his arms and put her hands on his chest. With a pleading shake of her head at him, he stepped back and then a second later there was a muffled crack and she disappeared.

Hours into the evening, in a similar spot to where Charity had disapparated, a second crack split the silent, frosty air and in the space where a small group of startled rabbits had been, stood a tall, bearded, elderly wizard, dressed in long, fur-lined robes, a tassel hat and deerskin gloves. Dumbledore raised his wand and commanded light, then took a moment to stare at his Lochside cottage under a sickle moon.

With an even louder crack beside him, a kitchen elf appeared, dressed in an odd assortment of Muggle children’s clothes and holding a lidded basket.

“So, Banrey, it does indeed look deserted. It may be that the Professor has gone on one of his sojourns again.”

Dumbledore and the elf picked their way carefully along the icy path to the front door of the cottage and Dumbledore opened it with a flick of his wand. The cottage was dark, cold and silent.

“Severus?”

There was no response from within the house. He shut the door, then Dumbledore exchanged wandlight for gas, and with a sweep of his wand every lamp in the living room and kitchen was lit and turned up high.

He first noticed that his liquor cabinet had been raided. Shattered glass was strewn across the floor before it, and bottles inside the cabinet had been knocked on their side. He tutted. “Banrey, do be so kind as to put the basket in the kitchen and then repair that cabinet for me. A reversal spell will be fine.”

As the elf followed orders, he took a few feet forward to assess for any other evidence – or indeed damage – and he saw a large, lumpy shape on the sofa. The shape had made a noise.
“Severus,” said Dumbledore, but it was not an inquiry. In fact, there was a slightly impatient note to his tone. He went before the sofa and found his Potions Master lying along its length, partly obscured by the woollen throw that Dumbledore thoughtfully left for occupants to wrap around their legs, and on the floor and table, his Firewhisky bottle and several empty wine bottles. As the Firewhisky had replenished itself, there was no telling just how much Snape had consumed.

The pallor of Snape’s face was almost blue. Dumbledore slipped off his gloves before touching his cheek and discovered it chillingly cold. Immediately he turned and tossed the last of the wood onto the grate then lit the fire. He poured fire from his wand into the grate for a few seconds longer to get it going strong and hot, then turned his attention back to Snape.

“Severus, can you hear me?” Dumbledore asked, and gave the shoulder a gentle shake. “It’s Dumbledore.”

A primitive groan came forth, which Dumbledore took as a good sign. “Are you able to sit up? If you sit in the other chair it’s closer to the fire. I’m going to help you up.”

He reached around and carefully pulled Snape upright by his shoulders. There was little resistance, and Snape’s head lolled forward, which struck Dumbledore as rather alarming since this was a condition he’d never seen his stern, proud Slytherin in before. Not even when Lily died had Snape really lost control. He’d been distraught, obviously, almost suicidal, but hadn’t foregone his dignity.

“Merlin,” exclaimed Dumbledore softly. “You are in a state. Do you think you can stand?”

With a presence of mind that Dumbledore recounted to friendly audiences many years thereafter, Banrey then appeared at the sofa, and he held a large copper cooking pot out before him.

“What’s that for?”

And there was a convulsion from Snape and Banrey swiftly placed the pot in front of him as seconds later a riotous bout of vomiting ensued, Dumbledore jumping a little out of the way.

“Oh very good!” said Dumbledore to Banrey with a highly approving nod. Banrey went away then returned, this time holding several damp tea towels.

“You shall have a week’s holiday for this,” commented Dumbledore to the elf, but Banrey looked worried at the prospect so he left it at thanks. He took the towels and, when gasps told him that Snape had finished for now, he sat beside him on the sofa and wiped his face as though a child.

“Which level of hell are you on right now, dear boy?” asked Dumbledore more cheerfully. “Did you eat anything at all before emptying my annual supply? Look – pure liquid!” This final comment was directed at Banrey, who took the pot to empty it.

“Feel any better? I have some Restoration Remedy upstairs. Sit back but don’t lie down.”

For the first time since arriving, Snape opened his eyes. Only a crack, and merely to acknowledge Dumbledore, then he closed them again and slumped back.

An accio would have brought the remedy to Dumbledore’s hand, but he was curious to inspect the rest of his cottage. From Charity’s report to him earlier, the days the pair had spent here had been tumultuous, and he wanted to cast a quick eye over the place. He turned on lamps as he went and steeled himself as he mounted the stairs, but was relieved, when he entered the bedroom, to find it in perfectly good repair with the bed neatly made and only Snape’s holdall in the corner to mark it any different from usual. The bathroom was similar, the bath shiny clean, towels dry and folded on the vanity. Dumbledore guessed the handiwork of Charity before she left.
He collected his bottle of R&R from the vanity drawer then returned downstairs to find Snape bent
over the copper pot again, Banrey standing by with frightened eyes. Banrey didn’t talk much, but he
clearly thought he was deeply compromising his own safety by bearing witness to the terrifying
Professor in such a humiliating state.

“Don’t worry Banrey, he’s not fit to do anything, and I doubt very much he’ll remember this
tomorrow,” said Dumbledore. “Oh, you’ve done a fine job on the cabinet. Could you pop the kettle
on?”

Banrey gratefully handed tea towel duty to Dumbledore and took the swilling pot away with him.

“Surely that must be the lot?” said the Headmaster, taking his seat again and wiping Snape’s face.
Snape snatched the tea towel off him and threw it away before slumping back again and resting an
arm over his eyes. “Were you just numbing the pain or was this another heartbreak induced attempt
on your own life?”

“Don’t mock me old man,” grunted Snape. “I am indeed in the depths of Dante’s Inferno. I am never
drinking whisky again.”

“Here, take some of this,” Dumbledore opened the little brown bottle of Remedy and handed it over.
“In fact, take the lot. You’re supposed to be back in the classroom tomorrow.”

“Sir, I may have to report in sick.”

“Severus, you have approximately eighteen hours to sober up and report for duty. Your stand down
is over. You can’t disapparate in your current condition, so spend another night here, but I would like
to see you at breakfast tomorrow. The Slytherins are asking a lot of rather uncomfortable questions.”

Snape had necked the entire bottle of Restoration Remedy. He shook his head and lay back down.
“Papus save us, do you really think I care about the students?”

“And do you really think you’re the first person to endure a break up? The students are breaking up
and making up all the time and they don’t get three days grace to get over it.”

“This wasn’t a teenage romance, sir, I think you understand that.”

Despite his impatient attitude with Snape, Dumbledore was in fact smiling and his eyes were glinting
behind the half-moons. He couldn’t help feeling paternal about his young, brilliant Master. He knew
a bit of tough-love was going to be necessary to get Snape moving again.

“Perhaps not,” he allowed. “But you have now had two great, abiding loves. That is more than many
get in a lifetime. Perhaps you should view it as having had great fortune, rather than great loss.”

Snape grunted and opened his eyes to give Dumbledore a baleful glare. “It was definitely a loss.”

“Time -,”

“I asked her to marry me,” interrupted Snape, guessing quickly where Dumbledore was headed.
“She said no.”

“I know. She has been to see me.”

The Rescue Remedy was evidently working for Snape sat upright quickly. “When? Where?”

“In my office, earlier today. She came with her resignation.”
“Effective immediately, I suppose,” said Snape caustically.

“Null and void, actually. I have spent the last day and a half in London with Sir Byron and a handpicked group of individuals from the Board and the Department of Magical Education. Long story short, they have requested a re-write of the Muggle Studies curriculum and a new textbook to accompany it. They want Charity’s direct involvement. So, I negotiated a compromise with your young lady. She will continue to receive a salary from Hogwarts while she is on a sabbatical to research and write this curriculum. It’s not a simple assignment, it is perilous territory in today’s climate. The Muggle Liaison Office have expressed interest in her research and the Department of Law Enforcement will have to keep watch until they know more about the movements of that…Doctor…”

“Ditton. Do they know anything more since the…the -?”

“Unknown, Severus, they guard the information closely.”

“How long is her sabbatical for?”

“A year, at this point. I can arrange classroom cover for that time.”

“Where will she do her research from?”

Dumbledore held Snape’s gaze. “She wouldn’t tell me, Severus, I’m afraid she made a point of insisting her whereabouts be secret. She is unwilling for you to go to her…”

“If I knew where she was, I can keep watch over her, make sure she is safe-,”

“She said there was protection where she’s going,” interrupted Dumbledore sounding final.

Snape’s face hardened, a dangerous shadow was cast across his eyes. “Him! The ward - she’s going to him.”

“I don’t know who he is, Severus, but don’t underestimate Charity. I’ve come to realise she’s wise beyond her years. She asked me for something else.”

“What?” asked Severus, eyes narrowing.

“She asked me to break the bond of the Bewitcher’s Ribbon.”

“But I have the Ribbon hidden,” Snape retorted angrily. “How can you break it?”

“Severus, would you genuinely want to keep her against her will?” Dumbledore looked appealingly at him over his glasses. “Break the bond.”

“No. I understand she needs this time apart, but the bond will bring her back to me.”

“The bond can in fact be broken. By the person who cast the charm…I told Charity I couldn’t do that for her, it is an old form of witchcraft, she would need to go back to the witch who gave her the Ribbon for her hair.”

“Sinistra,” said Snape, with a gritty kind of glumness. “She has gone to live with him and wanted the bond broken. I don’t know if she is wise, but she is certainly smart. She has her job, her daughter, and her Muggle life back. She played me perfectly and I was willing.”

Dumbledore laughed. “She loved you Severus, she still does – an old man knows these things. I think you are looking for conspiracies that aren’t there. You can’t believe she would make choices
that are ultimately for the best if it meant giving you up. Therefore, she must have ulterior motives. I think not. I think she has had to make very difficult, very distressing decisions and for that I respect her.”

Snape wearily massaged his eyes with his fingertips. “I think sometimes it is braver to stay.”

Dumbledore considered him, the three-day shadow, the dark circles under his eyes and the appearance of utter, demoralised defeat. “My dear boy, you are poorly acquainted with mothers…did you really think you were going to win that fight?”

A sigh that originated in the bottomless depths of Snape’s soul, and reverberated through his entire body, carried out from him into the world the incredible despair he felt, the emptiness and the hopelessness. “I thought that perhaps, finally, I would know what it means to be…loved, as others are. I thought…because she was like an eclipse…she slipped straight through to me as none other than Lily… Part of me wishes I’d seen it coming but…I think I was the happiest I’ve ever been with her.”

A wave of sympathy for Snape washed through Dumbledore at this pronouncement. He knew better than most how seldom happiness found Snape, he was unfairly denied it.

“As I said, you had a rare chance at something very special. In time you’ll come to see that you were blessed, not cheated. But, for all that, I wish it had turned out differently for you. I would have dearly enjoyed attending that wedding. I know exactly what I would have given you both as a gift.”

“Sir, I confess I am intrigued.”

“No, absolutely not, I will not jinx that possibility, figuratively or otherwise. Let’s give the whole thing time, shall we?”

Dumbledore got to his feet at that point after giving Snape’s thigh a couple of affectionate and heartening pats. “I will see you at breakfast, Severus. If time is what needs to pass, then when better to start than first thing tomorrow?”

“If you say so.”

Dumbledore called for Banrey and collected his wand and gloves, then making a cheery farewell, left the cottage in silent wake to Snape.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

The sun didn’t fully set until nine at night in the middle of August, and Snape often took advantage of the extra daylight to take long walks in the hills and moors beyond the castle. The heather was blooming at its best, they had enjoyed a mild summer and it was a relief to be out of the school. The previous months had tested his mettle considerably.

He was furious and resentful about the interference with Black’s capture and erstwhile release. He was furious that Lupin had turned events on their head and made his resignation Snape’s fault. His dislike of Potter had, unbelievably, doubled, he felt robbed of the Order of Merlin, his blow to the head had taken weeks to heal despite the ministrations of Madam Pomfrey – yet another scar – and Dumbledore, constantly amusing himself in his game of cat and mouse with Snape’s sensibilities – had let him humiliate himself in front of Cornelius Fudge instead of involving him in his little side-plots and schemes. He seemed to find it entertaining to collude and conspire with Potter and his adolescent gang, spring traps at Snape’s expense, rather than acknowledge what Snape had achieved.

In the end, he had grown irritable with the entire contrivance. After months of Potter’s relentless insistence on escaping the castle grounds, the insults of that – frankly pernicious - Marauders Map (why did Dumbledore allow Potter the likes of maps, time turners and invisibility cloaks if he also wanted him protected?), Lupin’s reckless disregard for the potion he spent weeks of his life brewing, Black’s audacious lies and posturing, McNair and Dementors lurking around the place and losing the House Cup to Gryffindor with that nauseating display at the dinner, Snape was about at breaking point. To learn at the end that Pettigrew had inexplicably decided to live in animagus form for twelve years with the Weasley family, and that Sirius Black was really OK with Dumbledore, and that Potter was the hero of the hour, coupled with the occasional flare of his Dark Mark and news that Voldemort was recruiting an assistant, was enough for him to pack his bags at the end of term and spend several weeks at Spinners End.

What no one else knew was that, above and beneath all his frustrations and disappointments and disgust and dismay, between being betrayed and ridiculed and embarrassed, in spite of no mention of thanks or gratitude for the efforts he had made to bring Black to justice, he was quietly suffering the torment of the Bewitchers Ribbon. Daily, the bond was like a band around his chest that squeezed the air out of his lungs, that clawed at his throat and that made his heart throb and ache to distraction. He continued to teach his classes through a fog of misery, ate only for sustenance, made private stores of Restoration Remedy which he consumed morning and night, and wrestled with unremitting memories of Charity, flashbacks sometimes so clear and pronounced he would momentarily experience his own twist in time as if she were back with him, and then cruel reality would pounce afresh. His dreams brought more stress than rest or relief, featuring Charity in multiple forms, sometimes alluring and tempting, sometimes evil, sometimes in terrible peril but all out of Snape’s control.

His life had become almost unendurable. His time at Spinners End had deteriorated from being a welcome, if slightly uncomfortable, respite into a sufferance of longing and loneliness. Three times over the course of six months he had sent his doe to Charity, with strict instructions to only appear to
her after dark and when she was alone. His messages were brief enquiries about her wellbeing, and he shied from being too personal or sentimental in case her feelings had changed. He couldn’t abide the thought of any more scorn or derision.

He received only one moth in return, one May evening in his rooms. It simply said *I love you and miss you*. He made the moth repeat is several times, just to hear her voice, and watched as the moth fluttered away, clinging to the words like a life-raft. For a day, he was the man in the desert who’d stumbled across an oasis, and he drank and drank with relief until it almost made him sick. If she had sent this one, perhaps now she would send more, and his little spring of hope bubbled up.

After the moth, he had braced himself and, one weekend when he knew the acting Muggle Studies teacher was away, had gone into Charity’s classroom. It was largely unchanged from when she’d left, except it felt bereft of the warmth and charisma she’d brought to it. He remembered when he’d entered it with the two young Slytherins and she’d been seated at her desk, the light from the window behind her seeming to frame her in a halo, her smile at the sight of him. He had felt a kind of wonder at her classroom, a small haven of light and warmth in the castle, and in such contrast to his own. And photographs, huge, bright colour images, miracles of Muggle ingenuity. They were all gone. The cabinet remained, but only a few, uninspired objects were in it. Her microscope was gone.

From there he had gone to the Archive. Here he indulged his bond, which had all but seized his throat in a choke-hold while he was in there, and permitted a few silent tears to escape, which he wiped away indelicately with the heel of his hand. He heard mice but ignored them, what did he care anymore for the damage they caused? He found some papers she had worked on and stared at them, her handwriting, almost hearing her voice as he read the sentences she’d composed. The room was tidier than he’d remembered, and he discovered her careful coordination of the audit paperwork ready for future reference.

The typewriter he took. There was nowhere to keep it in his rooms, and for a while it was in his office but students on detention kept looking at it and commenting on it, so he ended up taking it with him to Spinners End, though it was awkward to carry. He placed it on the round wooden table that had belonged to his mother in his front room. One day he would make it work. It would be possible to type on it and glance up and out of the window.

As the days warmed and daylight lengthened, and the dramas of Sirius Black unfolded, he had found ways to tolerate his perpetual sense of loss. Other grievances grappled for his attention. And then in August, in between preparations and administrations for a new school year, he took to walking, often needing to shed his coat if he walked in the heat of the day, but more often in the late afternoons, preferring the more slanting light, his wizarding equilibrium already destabilised slightly by the limited hours of true night.

He was returning from one such walk in mid-August, approaching the front entrance of the Castle when Aurora Sinistra called after him. He turned at her voice and discovered her walking up the hill from the gates. She was dressed in smart witch’s robes and a pointed hat, a purse hanging from her arm. She hailed him, putting out her hand.

“Severus,” she said, pausing to catch her breath a moment. “This is a fortuitous crossing of paths. I was about to come and see you. But here is perfect.”

He nodded his head and stood rather stiffly, not having really forgiven Sinistra for allowing Charity to break her end of the bond. And, indirectly, blaming Sinistra for the anguish he now endured.

Her initial expression of friendly greeting changed into concern, an urgency took hold. “I have just been into London, to the Ministry, it was a work thing. But I bumped into someone there – Charity. She was there. We caught the same lift. We talked a little afterwards.”
It was as though he had been shaken awake. Every sense went on high alert.

“You saw her?” was all he could mutter, feeling a stabbing envy but forced it aside. “How is she?”

Sinistra’s face changed again, this time to a kind of anxious restraint. “She is well – I mean, she looks very well – but…,” she floundered for words, “I think you should see for yourself, Severus.”

“Why? What’s the matter?”

“I can’t say. She is happy, she is safe. You don’t need to be worried for her. But she told me you two haven’t been in touch and…as a friend…I think you should go see her.”

“Tell me why!” he spat, but she shook her head and raised her palm at him.

“I’ve said too much already. I’ve broken her confidence. Please leave it at that, Severus.” Then Sinistra abruptly turned and hurried away into the castle.

“Where is she?!” Snape shouted after her, but she had gone.

Charity’s whereabouts and locating her had been a problem Snape had pondered over endlessly since the separation. He had already decided what he would do to find her if he had to.

On Thursday, he left a note for Dumbledore after breakfast that he was away on business in London. Dressed inconspicuously, he disapparated from Hogwarts to the discrete laneway behind the back of Holly’s school where he’d landed his first visit. On that occasion, never having been there before, he located the school on a map and then flown unsupported. Since he now had a visual, apparition was quicker and easier, and given it was currently school holidays, the school was deserted.

First checking he was definitely alone, he produced his silvery doe and instructed the doe to lead him to Charity. Spoken words weren’t necessary, the doe had no ears, but he wasn’t certain whether this was something a Patronus could do. The doe danced a little and he panicked a moment that the doe might fly off in the direction of Bedford or anywhere else Charity might have gone to for the day, but then she headed off in a purposeful walk in a south-easterly direction.

Despite being a suburban area there weren’t many people out on the streets and Snape had it mostly to himself, however the Patronus was spotted by a group of teenagers on the opposite side of the road heading back from the football club and she leapt behind the hedge of a garden. Snape simply ignored the teenagers, letting them talk themselves out of what they thought they’d seen. He wasn’t sure if the Patronus was “aware” of keeping hidden, or it just happened to be prancing about – he had never followed his doe before. What was a challenge was keeping the doe to stay in his sights as he was restrained by streets and paths and couldn’t cut across lawns or through fences like his deer, who always took the most direct route to her destination.

Once the Patronus had brought him to a street called Elm Walk, however, he became conscious that his bond was tugging and pulling around his chest, drawing him forward, guiding him back to his mate. He saw his doe ahead along the street flit towards the house in which she was residing, and as he drew closer, his wand gave a little vibration to announce it had detected the shield ward. Snape retreated a short distance and assessed it.

It was decidedly unremarkable double-story house with a driveway and a dividing fence but open fronted. He loitered a little, staring at the house, wondering what to do. He hadn’t thought this far ahead. If he knocked on the door and the ex-husband answered, how would that play out? If Charity answered and she simply slammed the door in his face, what would he do? What if they had visitors and the timing was terrible? What he couldn’t imagine was being invited across the threshold.
He eventually decided to pick a discrete spot and wait for Charity to come out. If she did, he would approach her from the street, invite her to come to him rather than corner her. If she and her ex were back together and came out showing obvious signs of being together then…then…well he would worry about that if it happened.

There was a small greenspace not far from the house where two street corners intersected, and the patch was grassed along with some rather forlorn beech trees, a bench and a couple of refuse bins. He could see the house from there, enough to be able to tell if someone was using the front door. He could tell that the bench was rarely used, and he would attract attention from the neighbours if he sat there too long, so he resolved that he would send her a Patronus if she hadn’t emerged within two hours. Until then, he squared his shoulders and walked to the bench where he sat down to wait.

As it was, he barely had to sit tight for forty-five minutes. While he watched, the front door opened and Holly ran out, holding a puppy. Charity emerged seconds later and stood on the front step, arms folded, keeping her eye on her daughter while the little puppy – obviously going through some toilet training – bounced around to Holly’s yelled instructions: “Do wee’s, Barker!”

Snape first made as if to get to his feet, but then he paused, and instead ducked down so he was not easily visible. But he watched Charity intently.

After a few moments, the puppy ran down towards the front of the lawn where it met the footpath. He heard Charity say, “Watch he stays off the road, Holly.” She took a few steps forward on their front path and turned slightly, observing closely, ready to make a dash if necessary.

And what he saw was unmistakable. Charity had a bump.

She was pregnant. She even rested one hand lightly on the bump and stroked in a habitual, off-hand way.

Snape’s own stomach did a lurch at the sight of it and his mouth fell open. His first thought was: Is it mine?

This was why Sinistra wanted him to see it for himself. When Sinistra had encountered Charity in the Ministry of Magic, the bump would have been obvious and Sinistra had evidently wondered the same thing as Snape – was he the father? If he was, why wasn’t Charity saying so?

Have I fathered a child? thought Snape, thunderstruck, unable to take his eyes off her. There had been ample opportunity, that couldn’t be denied. He certainly hadn’t taken a lead on any form of protection, it had been discussed briefly but not in detail. In his somewhat naïve dealings with the female of the species, he’d preferred to leave that to her to worry about. It had been such a remote possibility for him for so long, he’d virtually forgotten that the joys of one act, lead to consequences later.

Or is it his? Was Snape’s immediate next thought. The ex, whose name he could barely bring himself to say. Jason’s. On estimation, based on the size of the bump, Charity was anywhere between five and eight months along. And Snape was certainly no expert. This could easily be the offspring of Jason, or him.

Right now, looking at her, no-one would ever suspect that Charity was a witch. On the front path of her Hertfordshire middle-class home, dressed in a tracksuit and slippers, hair in an untidy ponytail while the new puppy did its business on the lawn, resting a hand lazily on her bump and looking prosaic and bored, it was hard for even Snape to believe this was the same woman whose hair he’d untied in her formfitting witch’s gown under the snow.
It would be easy to believe that she’d slotted back into Muggle life all too easily. Picked up where she’d left off, succumbing to the steady and insistent pressure from Jason to be a family again, to give a sibling to Holly before it was too late, to choose a world and jump to it. The pedestrian, predictable, understandable ways of Muggles were her comfort zone, the happiness of her daughter was her priority, she needed the peace and security of a home with protection from Dr Ditton, a reliable male presence in her life, one whose genes were the same as her daughters. It would explain the absence of communication, the single Patronus he’d received, almost token now he reflected on it, like a guilty Christmas card than a real, heartfelt expression.

If she’d known the child was his, she would have told him, he was certain – after all, why keep it from him? Why not tell him? She should have delighted in the idea of parenting with him. But she hadn’t. She didn’t because she wasn’t pregnant to him. In fact, it was entirely possible she’d known she was pregnant to Jason when they were at Dumbledore’s cottage. It would explain why she’d become so adamant. She, so certain that her time was limited, would have done what she needed to do to secure the future her family wanted and needed.

He continued to watch, devastation creeping upwards through his veins, while clarions rang in his head. He watched, half-noticing a car coming down the street, as the little girl ran around trying to catch her puppy. He watched, and realised, that the puppy was ambling towards the oncoming car. He withdrew his wand. He saw Charity come to the same realisation, saw her try to move quickly towards the puppy and her daughter who was chasing it, but the seconds before impact where closing. He said, “Arresto Momentum,” and cast the spell at the puppy, who was suddenly snatched and suspended in mid-air while the car whizzed past, a mere metre away. Holly ran towards the puppy and seized it in her arms, then turned towards her mother. Snape saw Charity reach Holly and, first, embrace her daughter and then stand, slowly, and stare out to the street, searching. Her eyes were scanning towards him and Snape lowered himself behind the bench. He let several seconds pass before raising himself to look again. She had returned to the matter at hand and had lowered herself on her knees to give Holly a talking to. Then she stood, and together with the little girl holding the puppy, they all walked back up the path to the front door. Charity ushered her daughter inside, but before entering herself, turned once again to search the street for the issuer of the charm.

Snape held his breath. If she saw him now, he would let it happen. His bond was almost feverish in its desire to connect with her. When she was alone like this, he could imagine talking to her, he would ask her about the baby, he was convinced in himself that he would ask outright if he was the father. There was a kernel in him that rejoiced in the idea, that if she confirmed that the baby were his, he would suddenly turn fate, destiny and everything that was knowable or not, on its head, and would gather her in his arms and walk away with her, take her and his unborn child away from this place and back to his world, and consequences be damned, the future didn’t matter anymore, he didn’t care. He would do whatever it took to keep her safe and greet this child into the world, and a whole new reason for being would dictate all his decisions thenceforth. He surprised himself at the power of an instinct he didn’t even know he had. If he were a father, everything changed.

Her eyes roamed. He could only tell by the slightest nuance in her face. She turned once and seemed to look in his direction. He remained still. She stared. His heart stopped – was this it? Had she seen him? And then she turned her head again and swung open the front door and went back inside. The door was shut firmly behind her.

He rose to his full height and looked at the closed door from his position at the bench, the wooden, panelled door with a round door knob, resolutely barricading from him the last love of his life. Her bond had been broken, that was clear. She had suspected someone nearby, probably put the Arresto Momentum spell down to an Auror on watch-duty or perhaps even Holly performing uncontrolled magic, but the bond had not made a connection with him, had not felt his call.
She was gone to him. Her promises had been empty. A love might still abide, but not a love great enough to surmount all odds. She was home, here. What else did a puppy symbolise, other than the intent to fulfil a family? What more than a new baby?

Blinded by anger, hurt and rejection, Snape turned on his heel and walked back the way he had come, his head ringing, his lungs heaving for air as the band around his chest tightened like a noose. He dropped his wand – he never dropped his wand – and when he bent forward to pick it up, a black wave surged over him, retreated again and left him hot and prickly and feeling as if he might be sick. Desperately, he disapparated on the spot back to the gates of Hogwarts, away from the horrible desolation he felt, that Elm Walk came to represent.

Two days later, he sought out Sinistra.

She was in the Astronomy Tower, in fact he had picked a time when he knew she would be, there was something about the place which matched his mood.

She was in the process of disassembling a telescope. Plates, mounts, screws, shims, knobs, mirrors and various other brass and copper mechanisms were laid out carefully in an arrangement on a sheet covering a table. Lubricant and cleaning solution were in bottles with rags. Sinistra was wearing glasses with flip-down magnifiers and fine, fabric gloves.

When he came up the stairs, she paused in the middle of unscrewing the lens housing, which didn’t trouble her as it was a difficult bit. She shoved the glasses back atop her forehead. “Hello Severus,” she said, without any surprise at all.

“‘Aurora,’” he replied quietly. “‘Might I have some time?’”

She shrugged and shook her head fruitlessly. “I’ll do what I can, but I don’t know much.”

He stood before her, his face impassive, the version of him she’d known so long. The Severus who’d been in love had been volatile, but he’d been alive, and there had been times when his joy had seemed to radiate off him. She remembered him at the staff party, almost unrecognisable, and how she had stared across the room, wondering what it would be like to be the one standing next to him as Charity had. But she knew the end had come. Before her was Snape at the end.

“I saw her,” he said simply.

Sinistra examined his face for a clue about how he felt, but it was shuttered. “Do you think -?”

“No. I believe she would have told me. It will be his.”

Sinistra delayed responding as she placed a screw down on the table, she had to pick the place carefully, it was a map for reassembly.

But she needed the moment to process her own feelings on hearing Snape’s conclusion. Her conversations with Charity had gotten further apart and sketchy after the staff party – Sinistra was nursing her own bruised heart, and Charity had gone to ground with Snape. Then before she knew it, Charity had left altogether. She had her own sadness about that, Charity having been a woman of her own age and in similar circumstances, a comrade at the school, they’d had a laugh together. There was a noticeable gap left behind.
The last visit had been the day she’d left. Charity had asked Sinistra to break her Bewitchers Ribbon bond and Sinistra had almost refused, unable to believe the love of a lifetime was being rebuked. What she would have given to swap herself into Charity’s shoes…

To think that she may be carrying Snape’s child had seemed like a miracle. She herself longed to be a mother and had come to accept that it was not in her destiny. That her friend seemed so careless with such fantastic treasures scalded her. But if Snape was telling the truth, that Charity carried another man’s child, then she realised she hadn’t really known Charity at all.

“Whose?” asked Sinistra. “You’re implying she had relations with someone almost as soon as she left you…”

He sighed impatiently. “Her ex. The father of her daughter. She has returned to him.”

“Why?!”

“It is a very long and very complicated matter,” said Snape. “If she hasn’t told you herself then it is not for me to say. She had her reasons.”

“Are you absolutely certain? Did you talk to her?”

He glanced away. “No…no, I – she doesn’t want to see me. I did consider it, but I think – it would have been even more painful.”

“But she loved you Severus, she really did, she was crazy about you!”

This stung him. He shut his eyes as if dealt a blow. But he didn’t reply, merely turned his head a little.

“She wanted to break the bond,” Sinistra continued sorrowfully. “I’m not sure I should have told you. She cried the whole time. I said I didn’t want to unless you felt the same way, and she insisted you did, she said…she said the relationship had to end. She was my friend, Severus, what could I do?”

He looked at her again. “This bond. I have endured it alone for seven months and it has been torture. It is making me sick now that it won’t be reciprocated. I want to break the bond. I want to expunge every last trace.”

She nodded woefully. “That is simple, Severus – if you still have the Ribbon, just throw it on the fire. The bond will be eliminated.”

“I know that. I want to go further.”

Sinistra frowned, confused. “What do you mean? You’ll feel better when the bond is broken -,”

“I need to eradicate her from my life.”

She shook her head, no clearer. “But that’s a bit far…when it lasted your love was amazing…why would you want to-,”

“Aurora!” snapped Snape. “I know what it was like. But now that I know hope is gone, it is safer for me, and safer for her, if all traces can be scoured away. I have retained a lot of…memories…and feelings that…compromise me. She has taken up an occupation that is likely to be politically sensitive and I don’t want her to become a target because of me.”
“What are you asking for?”

“There is an ancient ritual, witchcraft -,”

Sinistra’s eyes widened.

“It is called Memoriam Delens. Do you know it?”

“Severus,” she shook her head determinedly. “You’re going too far. That is Dark Arts. It’s illegal.”

“Tell me who will perform it.”

“I don’t know. And neither should you. You don’t need to go to those extremes.”

“I just want a name, Aurora.”

“You know whole Roman troops went missing because of that ritual?”

“Dark Arts do not dissuade me, you know that. Do you know a practitioner or not?”

“No I don’t!” said Sinistra, raising her voice now, a little frightened. That kind of witchcraft was literally murderous. If you kept your life, odds were you lost your mind instead. It was like surgery with an axe. “Can’t you just let the memories fade, like normal people?”

“My mind is not like normal people’s,” he retorted, being honest not supercilious. “Listen, if I can survive this ritual then I may be able to save Charity. Trelawney had a prophesy about her – I played it down, we all know what Trelawney can be like – but Charity’s lifespan is short. She may have asked you to break the bond in efforts to extricate herself from me because our association will bring about her demise.”

“You mean because you’re a Death Eater?” said Sinistra gazing at him almost fearfully.

He scowled but continued. “The Dark Lord will return soon; the signs are all there. He will call me back. He knows I am a master Occlumens, in a position of trust, except he doesn’t trust anyone. He will make a point of probing my allegiance, my intentions and my interactions. If he finds Charity in my memories, if he deduces the nature of the relationship, particularly since she was Muggle-born -,”

“I see,” said Sinistra, staring at the ground. “Can’t you just tell him the relationship is over?”

He paused and looked at her acerbically. “Yes, Aurora, because he is a man who is reasonable and temperate and humane. I’ll just tell him we broke up.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I still say this is too much. I think you’re just over-reacting and trying to justify it with this stuff about a prophecy. You need to show more respect for the Dark Arts.”

He stood straight at that point, put his hands behind his back and shut down. “If you will not help me, or Charity, then that is your prerogative. Good day.” He turned to leave.

She heard his feet down the steps, out of sight. She knew exactly who he needed to see, but she was afraid in case something happened to him. He’d never be hers, but she couldn’t stand the idea that if it all went wrong, she’d be a contributor. She wanted to help him, she didn’t want to help him do something stupid. But she said, “Wait.”

The steps stopped.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this! For Merlin’s sake, will you be careful, Severus? Promise me
you’ll be careful!”

“I am always careful,” she heard him say in a low voice.

“I never told you this, understand? Do not repeat my name. Ever.”

“I will not.”

She knew he was telling the truth. He was a man of his word, always.

“Go to Madam Rosmerta. There’s a coven in Hogsmeade.”

A pause, then, “Thank you. I won’t trouble you again.”

And he never did.
CHAPTER THIRTY

Two weeks passed. School resumed, new students arrived and were sorted. Alastor Moody was announced as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, to Snape’s bemusement. It wasn’t enough that Dumbledore denied him the job yet again but thought fit to appoint the man who had sought his incarceration. Clearly the Headmaster was working under the delusion that everyone had shaken hands and moved on. Or more likely, given his appointment of Moody in succession to Lupin, that Dumbledore simply didn’t think about Snape at all when he was fussily selecting from his vast array of candidates.

Death Eaters had infiltrated the Quidditch World Cup and the Dark Mark had glowed in the sky, Muggles attacked, mass panic. It was easily the most interesting bit about the Quidditch World Cup as far as Snape was concerned, but it was also extremely disturbing. The pace was gathering, old affiliates, auxiliaries starting to get restless, starting to dust off their masks, practice their Morsmordre’s. It was highly probable that his left wrist was not the only one starting to burn.

Worse than even Alastor Moody in close proximity, was Igor Karkaroff, now Headmaster of Durmstrang Institute, due to take up temporary residence in the school during the Triwizard Cup. Dumbledore had known this as early as October last year – was his appointment of Moody, the Auror who’d put Karkaroff in Azkaban, a deliberate move to entertain himself? Karkaroff had given Snape’s name to the Wizengamott, Moody had enthusiastically backed the offer of intelligence and only Dumbledore had prevented the worst. Did he now hope to set them all up to play together, gladiator style? Snape recalled that Sir Byron had requested all future appointments be approved by Board – perhaps this was their idea, not knowing the awkward triad that had been created.

The entire school year was subject to an excess of disruption due to the hosting of the Cup, not least the cancellation of school Quidditch, which didn’t trouble Snape unduly, but which aggravated his upper years who had been hoping for careers in the sport. Privately he thought it was probably a good thing these ambitions may be thwarted, and they would hopefully redirect their energies into more profitable pursuits. He also hoped none of them got silly ideas about nominating themselves for the Triwizard Cup, and whenever the subject got raised during SHMs he played down the significance of the event and that it was the sort of thing better suited to the Gryffindors of the world who liked to show-pony. His Prefects exchanged looks when he spoke thus, but none of them refuted him.

He kept himself busy during the first two weeks meeting with the new first years (glad that the next Fetherington brother wasn’t due to enrol until the following year), meeting with the new Prefects to outline his expectations of them, sorting out his student files to extract the graduates of last year – he thought the files ought to be archived, but the sudden throb in his heart encouraged him put it off for now – and write a few references for those graduates who had already sourced employment.

The Master Schedule had been changed around again by McGonagall, and he now had double Potions on Tuesdays and then again on Friday afternoons. Was she insane? Double potions on a Friday afternoon?! He may as well commence each of these classes by blowing his own head off and saving the students the trouble. He decided to pre-empt this by carefully planning these lessons to avoid the difficult, complicated or extremely messy potions, which meant reconfiguring the evolutionary path he’d intended from simple to complex during each term, but which he felt was
better sacrificed than his own sanity. That would already be sorely tested by other events likely to unfold.

The most pressing trial was the *Memoriam Delens* ritual scheduled for the weekend. Madam Rosmerta had told him she knew of an old sorceress, who titled herself a Wicce, and who was an aunt twice removed of one of the coven residing in Hogsmeade. The Wicce – a self-selected title meaning practitioner of only ancient healing magic – could be ‘hired’ to perform certain rituals for an extremely hefty price in cash only, and who would accept no liability whatsoever in the event things went awry, and who would travel only to the location of the ‘patient’, never revealing her normal whereabouts. She had to be summoned by Patronus and wore a shawl and a mask through all proceedings.

Snape willingly accepted all these terms and conditions. He gave the money in advance to Rosmerta, who went on to book a room in the Hogs Head Inn for the Saturday night on which the ritual was to occur.

On the Friday afternoon prior, a brown owl brought him a rolled-up piece of parchment, on which, he discovered when he opened it in his office, were some handwritten instructions.

1. *Burn after reading.*
2. *Tell those who need to know that you will be away until twilight Sunday.*
3. *Bring a full bottle of Firewhisky.*
4. *Bring any keepsakes or items attached to the eradication subject.*
5. *Refrain from eating two hours before ritual.*
6. *Do not consume any other potions, philtres or medicines a day before the ritual.*
7. *Do not make serious commitments or decisions for two days following the ritual.*
8. *Ensure a secure place for storage of memories.*
9. *Prepare written instructions to yourself for the future use of the stored memories. Bring these with you.*
10. *Ensure your will or estate is in order.*

For the first time starting to doubt his own mind, which he supposed might have gone slightly crazed with grief and longing, he packed a bag, including the Bewitchers Ribbon. He hadn’t looked at it since the night of the staff party, since he’d released it from Charity’s hair and later, barely conscious, stuffed it in his pocket, he had locked it away in a small drawer in his desk. When he unlocked the drawer and withdrew it, the stars still shining against the black velvet, his mind was suddenly suffused with the memory of he and Charity on the patio, vivid and beautiful, his heart thumped now as it had then when he’d laid claim to her by pulling free that ribbon, feeling her hair cascade over his hand, the ribbon encircling them as he placed his lips to hers.

And he was torn. These memories, they were his, his alone, his to treasure, his to cherish and revere like priceless gifts. But they were also a burden, like all things precious, you paid a price.

He wound up the Ribbon and with effort, shoved it into his bag which he buckled up quickly. The Ribbon was enchanted, it was meant to tempt and tease him, it was just a magical red herring. He could not stop this journey now.

Instructions eight, nine and ten he thought on. Eventually he decided his lockbox in the Archive would be the best place for storage of something so private. By the time he came to put it away, there would be no associations, no feeling attached. A simple exercise in logistics. He wrote the following instructions to himself:

*These memories have been secured and will remain so for an indeterminate amount of time. The container must not be opened by any person until such time as peace reigns between wizards and...*
Muggles, or until Severus Snape, or Charity Burbage, are deceased. Place in the lockbox of Severus Snape in the Hogwarts Archive. The box is uniquely calibrated to the wand of Severus Snape and Cistem Aperio charm.

Aut viam inveniam aut faciam.

This he rolled up and sealed with the Hogwarts seal.

And as for a will – he had none. He cared not for what happened to him once he was dead. He had no one to leave anything to. But he did write a single note for Dumbledore which he folded and sealed and left on his desk:

In the event of my death, please ensure that the Faerie Call is returned to Holly Chadwick. It is with the Ministry.

All else, I leave in your good judgement.

S.

His own death, it occurred to him, was a matter of some indifference, but he wasn’t sure when that happened. Perhaps when he realised no one else would care when he had gone. Death itself was painless, it was living that hurt.

He then threw the list of instructions onto the fire, where it flamed bright green before turning to ash.

On Saturday, he had become mechanical in his movements and decisions. He deliberately did not think about the afternoon’s activities, except when he casually mentioned to Dumbledore on his way out of the Great Hall after breakfast that he would be away overnight. Dumbledore raised his brows enquiringly, but Snape didn’t respond and pretended to be distracted by a student.

He had not taken his usual doses of Restoration Remedy and the relentless constriction and tugging of the bond was worse than usual, making his head swim. He craved the hour when he could leave for Hogsmeade, and finally close this chapter of his life, perhaps even the whole book. It had to be better than this.

At last the hour arrived. Still as an automaton, he collected his bag, placed his instructions in his pocket and locked his rooms, then went to the Entrance Gates. Rather than be seen walking to Hogsmeade and attract attention, he disapparated directly to The Hogs Head, went inside without looking at anyone, and, having announced his arrival to the girl behind the counter as John Smith (Madam Rosmerta assured him that Aberforth Dumbledore did not work there on Saturday afternoons) went straight up the stairs to the room she had booked.

Inside was much as he expected. There was an iron double bed with rough wool bedding and sagging mattress. The floors were unpolished board with some rag rugs, the walls a mouldy, patterned wallpaper, a brick fireplace, candlesticks on the mantelpiece with gritty, depleted candles in them, gas lamps on the wall, a desk and stool placed beneath the single, small window and one, threadbare, faded, indeterminately patterned armchair. He put down his bag, then sat in the chair to wait, looking at the mouldy ceiling and wondering if that would be the last thing he’d see. If he died in this room, and word got back to Charity this was where they found the body, there could only be so many conclusions she could draw about his reasons for being there, and none of them reflected well on him. Well, maybe she would blame herself. So be it.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. “Who is it?” he asked.

“I have a drink for you sir,” said a female voice, that of the barmaid he surmised. He frowned,
suspiciously, and perhaps his silence encouraged her to add, “I was told to give it to you when you arrived.”

He crossed the floor and unlocked the door which had been secured with an advanced locking charm. The barmaid, who looked worn and distinctly uninterested, stood outside with a plain brown bottle and a goblet on a tray. “I’m just following instructions,” she explained at his puzzled expression.

He took the bottle and goblet with thanks, then returned to the room and locked up behind him again. He put down the tray and picked up the bottle. There was a slip of parchment label tied to a piece of string around the bottle’s neck which simply read: relaxant. As a long term potioneer, he examined the contents of the bottle with great interest, pouring some of it into the goblet and first watching how the potion behaved, any fumes, any colours, any bubbling or frothing, any residues, the clarity, the hue, the viscosity. Then he inhaled it, smelling for identifiable ingredients, acids, chemicals, alcohols. When he touched it with the tip of his little finger, nothing happened, it certainly didn’t hurt. Then saying to himself, in for penny, in for a pound, he drank the amount in the goblet. It didn’t taste bad, a bit bitter, he got a strong sense of herbal compounds and wormwood - he prepared himself to feel woozy, unstable and lightheaded.

It didn’t take long. He was partially drugged within minutes, unable to focus, smiling inanely. It was a strong potion that could do this to his brain, which had been cultivated for decades to keep control like a powerful dog on a tight leash, it was exceedingly well trained. In the shadow of his relaxation was mild panic, not conscious, but present. He took to his seat again and waited.

An hour passed although he had no idea of the time. He’d consumed the entire bottle of the potion, his inhibitions having fled long ago, and freed of the terrible, suffocating constrictions of the bond he was elated. He had mild hallucinations, nothing serious, the wallpaper crawling, the floors undulating, the sky outside sometimes in daylight sometimes at night. He found it more interesting than alarming.

Then there was another knock on the door, and it opened, as if his powerful charm was nothing, as if it had been unlocked all along.

Two young women entered. He vaguely recognised them, women from the village, women he’d seen in the Three Broomsticks, a redhead and a brunette. He’d never paid them much attention before, but as they came into the room and looked at him, he decided they were wildly attractive. He smiled.

“Aunt. He is here. He has drunk the relaxant,” said one of the women who had red hair. Red hair just like Lily’s.

Then a third person entered. She was larger, older, dressed in black and wine-coloured robes, a shawl covering her head, her face in a black half-mask, her hands sheathed in black gloves. She carried a carpet bag.

She put down the bag and stepped towards Snape, pausing to critique him. “Your name?” she asked without preamble.

“Severus Snape. Professor.”

“Age?”

“Thirty-four.”
“Where is your wand?”

Snape pointed at his bag.

“The instructions. Give them to me and they will be passed back to you at the end.”

He handed her his sealed note from his pocket

“Who am I?”

He looked her up and down unsteadily. “I don’t know,” he waved a hand. “You’re a Wicce.”

She took up the brown bottle and shook it, then upended it. “You’ve drunk all of it?”

“Every last drop,” he breathed. “It’s great. And I’m a potions master, I should know.”

One of the girls giggled. The Wicce swung round and said briskly, “Light the fire. We need to get on.”

The fire was lit while the older woman went to the desk and levitated it away from the window, then took up her carpet bag and began to withdraw items from it and place them on the desk. She turned to the brunette. “Take him to the toilet and then he needs to undress.”

The dark-headed woman offered him her hand which he took without complaint, indulging the touch, and she led him out of the room down the hall to the shared bathroom facilities. “I’ll wait outside,” she told him with a shy smile. Within minutes, happily, he allowed her to return him to the bedroom, which now felt quite cheerful, and the Wicce, with a black wand sporting an engraved mandrake root handle, locked the door with a muttered incantation behind them.

“Get him ready,” dictated the masked witch. The brunette was unable to keep a pleasant smile off her face as she removed Snape’s coat, undid his belt and removed his boots socks and trousers, then told him to lie down on the bed, still wearing his white shirt and boxers.

The redhead, in the meantime, had got the fire raging and the small, closed room was becoming hot. He didn’t object to dressing down at all. The Wicce picked up an enamel box from the desk, opened it and withdrew powders between her pinched fingers which she scattered onto the fire like she was sowing seed. Twice she sprayed and twice the fire hissed and spat and fragrant smoke gutted into the room.

Daylight began to fade and absently Snape placed the hour somewhere between seven and eight pm. The redhead lit the gas lamps and then she was sent from the room to retrieve a large bowl of water, towels, a jug of lemon juice and straws.

The Wicce approached Snape and laid a hand on his brow. “Professor, how do you feel?”

“I am fine,” he said, thinking of words a Professor might say.

“Do you know what it is you have asked for? Do you understand what the ritual of Memoriam Delens is for? Do you accept that undertaking this ritual may result in madness or even death?”

“Yes,” said Snape, finding it difficult to make his mouth move the way he wanted. “I accept that.”

“Have you said goodbye?”

“Pardon?”
“Have you said goodbye? To this person you want to eradicate?”

He thought of their last moment before Charity had disapparated outside Dumbledore’s cottage, the last time they’d spoken, the last time he’d touched her. Had it been goodbye? Or was it more of a “hold on, I’ll be back”?

No. She’d said goodbye even if he hadn’t. She’d said goodbye when she moved back in with her ex. When she broke the bond. When she bought a puppy. When she got pregnant again.

“Yes,” he answered. “She - ...yes.”

The Wicce turned back to the desk and took up another box. This contained something moist which she threw putties of into the fire. It created wet smoke, pungent, robbing him of oxygen. He coughed and gasped for breath, and then he heard her uttering a low chant, words he didn’t know, didn’t recognise.

The room shimmered and began to elongate before his eyes; the room had become the Great Hall: there was the ceiling full of stars, there were the hundreds of candles, the House banners…and then it was just the room at the Inn again, except now…now it was full of Slytherins, students in uniform standing silently, shoulder to shoulder, staring at him, strangely, oddly similar, as if the same student had been duplicated. “They’re everywhere,” he muttered, sitting up a little, seeing emerald-robed blond students staring at him from every corner of the room. “Ugh, everywhere!”

“Are they watching you?” asked the brunette, conversationally.

“Yes!” he said, trying to find them all. “They’re under the bed!” Slytherins jostled to look at him, their faces cold, blank, clinical. They stared and he felt exposed, unnerved, out of control. His heart started to pound.

“He’s visualising, Aunt,” said the brunette. She took his wrist and fingered the pulse. “Heart is elevated.”

“They’re not here, Professor,” said the Wicce in a calm voice, coming up close to him, and the Slytherins faded away. “I’m going to anoint you.”

“What?” he said, glancing up at her fearfully.

“Just relax, remember when you were relaxed,” she had a jar of some kind of oily paste and she took a swipe with a middle finger and wiped some behind his left earlobe, then behind his right. “Take off his shirt,” she said to the redhead, who exchanged looks with the disgruntled brunette, and straddled Snape to undo the buttons of his shirt. She eased it off over each shoulder and then the Wicce raised his right arm and rubbed the paste into his armpit, and then went to the other side of the bed to do the same to his left.

She paused before releasing his left arm, noticing his Dark Mark. “What is this?” she commented with interest and ran a hard-nailed finger down it. There was no particular sensation, it didn’t flare as it had with Charity. “Are you a Death Eater, Professor?”

“Doesn’t concern you,” he muttered, and looking towards her his eye was caught by a flash of movement, and he saw that the snake in the Mark had slithered clear of the skull and was winding its way up the length of his arm. He cried out and jerked his arm back, but when he looked again, the snake was back where it was supposed to be.

“Death Eaters are wicked,” said the Wicce, anointing his thyroid and then adrenal regions. “Evil. They are spiritually abandoned. Is your need for this ritual because you fear consequence of being a
Death Eater Professor?"

He didn’t answer. He was staring out the window because, chillingly, Dumbledore was staring back in at him from outside. Speechless, terrified, he pointed – couldn’t anyone else see that? The Headmaster had found him, was staring at him from outside, apparently hovering two storeys up, staring and frowning.

The brunette looked at the blank, dark window and smiled benignly. “Visualisations are very distinct, Aunt. He is starting to perspire. His respiratory rate is high.”

“Death Eaters are wicked,” repeated Snape, closing his eyes, but when he did the world immediately tipped and whirled and spun, and in the middle of the spinning top, was Bellatrix, laughing, more terrifying in her own way than even the Dark Lord. When he opened his eyes, the whole room was spinning, spinning, and the two women were now Bellatrix, seductive, insane Bellatrix and his stomach revolted.

“Get that!” ordered the Wicce, and the redhead swiftly placed an empty bedpan before Snape who promptly threw up everything in him.

“Lemon juice.”

He was offered water mixed with lemon juice through a straw, which was sharp and bitter and for a second he came to, and his mind scrambled to get a foothold. His eyes collided with the redhead, and hers widened at the sign of sudden comprehension, but when she morphed into Lily and he cried out the name, the eyes softened again.

“Who is Lily?” asked the Wicce, approaching him again with a different tin in her hand. “Is Lily the one we say goodbye to?”

“Lily is gone!” he gasped, staring at the redhead, staring as the green eyes started to sink back into her skull, the flesh started to recede from the bone, her hair slide off in clumps, and Snape cried out again, but in revulsion. “No!”

The Wicce had taken hold of his left ankle and was sliding his left leg across the counterpane. “Let me do that, Aunt,” said the brunette, but the Wicce dismissed her with a flick of her hand. “You need a husband, Diaphne,” she said. “This is healing.” Then the Wicce reached up to the very top of his inner thigh, inside his boxers, to where his most sensitive, delicate skin was and rubbed tincture on it. He was too stunned to resist. She went to the other side of the bed and repeated the anointment on his right leg.

“Bring me some perspiration,” she instructed, putting the lid back on her tin, and the redhead leant over the top of his head and soaked up some of his sweat with a cottonwool ball, which she then handed to the Wicce.

The masked woman turned to the table and attended to the sample, and the two younger women turned back to Snape, who wanted to close his eyes but was afraid of the spinning, afraid of what he might see. The tincture behind his ears and under his arms had started to burn and along with the fire it felt as if his entire body was incinerating. Sweat poured from him. The pillows behind him were soaked, the blanket beneath him too. His throat was parched.


“Quick,” said the Wicce, hearing this and swinging round. “The lemon juice. And the fresh mint. I want him relaxed.”
The redhead attended to Snape’s thirst and he heard the brunette comment, “He is not relaxed, Aunt, he seems afraid. Pupils are dilated.”

“His mind. He is too controlled. He’s resisting.”

“Shall I help him, Aunt?” asked the brunette, smiling at him. But the Wicce tutted.

“He is a patient, Diaphne, not a plaything. Professor – you are resisting, I cannot help you if you do not succumb. Let your mind relax. What keepsakes did you bring?”

“In the bag,” he muttered, feeling horribly sick now.

In response to a flick of the Wicce’s finger, the brunette went to Snape’s bag and opened it, from which she brought forth the ribbon. “Anything else?”

“The sweaters. She gave them to me…birthday…”

“Yes, those too,” said the Wicce. “Bring them.”

The two, soft wool jumpers were duly handed to the witch who glanced them over and said, “Very nice. It is a shame.” Then she promptly threw them both on the fire, along with another spray of powder. She incanted.

The wool in the sweaters did not burn easily and released strong fumes into the room. “Breath and release,” said the Wicce to him.

A lungful of air made him lean forward and retch. The water with lemon was returned and caught in the bedpan by the redhead. She started to look a little unhappy herself. “Aunt…” she said tentatively.

Diaphne was quick enough to grab the bedpan before the redhead’s eyes rolled back and she slumped clean to the floor. “Oh, Imogen has fainted!”

Snape saw it happen and struggled to get up and help the poor girl, but the Wicce swiped her wand at him and his wrists were pinned back against the iron bed head with an incarcerous. She then raised Imogen with the mobilicorpus spell and she was levitated out of the room, presumably to another. “She will sleep it off. I will revive her if she is not recovered in an hour,” said the Wicce as she came back into room, and once more locked the door.

Through the haze in the room, pulling against this binds, Snape saw the Wicce non-verbally raise a Patronus, which was a large bird like a crow or a raven. “Send message to Madame Rosmerta – I need another assistant urgently.” The bird immediately flapped away, dissolving through the shut window. Then she turned back to her patient.

“Professor, did you pack whisky?”

Snape nodded.

“Good. Then I want you to drink some. Controlled amounts, through a straw. We need to relax you. Accio whisky!” she commanded, and the bottle in Snape’s bag rose and travelled through the air to her hand. She gave it to Diaphne, “Give him some; sips.”

A teacup of whisky was poured and Diaphne held the straw to Snape’s lips, who sipped and instantly gagged. The Wicce had come up to him level with his head and place her palm on his brow again, and her hand was cold compared to his fever, he felt the chill penetrate through his skull and
diminish the spinning. “Any pain, Professor?”

The younger woman watched with interest. “What are you doing Aunt?” she asked inquiringly.

“This will help with his dizziness, but I can’t cool him down too much or the trance will be adulterated. The alcohol may balance it out, but so crude. Drink some more, Professor.”

Snape was obedient, but he said, “Release…my hands…”

“No Professor Snape, I am afraid I cannot do that. It is for everyone’s safety. I have had patients go mad and try to kill all in the room. I promised I would never risk that again.”

When the Wicce turned back to her desk of accoutrements, Diaphne ran her hand along the length of Snape’s left arm. Her touch tingled and teased and he looked up at her, confused. She smiled, then fingered his hair away from his eyes. “So black,” she remarked gently.

“How is his pulse? Respiration?” the Wicce asked.

Diaphne let her fingers trail back along his inner arm, lingering over his Dark Mark until she found his wrist pulse. “Still quick,” she answered presently. “Did you want some perspiration?”

The effect of her fingers across his Dark Mark triggered the snake to wriggle and slither again. Snape watched horrified as, where her fingers had traced their way down his arm, the snake now crawled up, as if following a trail. And then another snake slithered out of the skull, and another, and another until four or five snakes wended their way along his arm, down his neck and across his chest. He began to shudder and twist.

“No sign of exudation?”

“No. I can’t see any. Here is some sweat from under the neck. Oh – visualisations beginning again…”

Snape strained against his binds, the compulsion to swipe off the snakes overwhelming him. Guttural noises of horror escaped his throat. The Wicce stood over him and wiped a hand sweepingly along the air just above his torso. “There Professor, I have got them off you.”

The snakes had vanished, and he lay still.

“More whisky. I want that cup finished.”

There was a knock at the bedroom door and the Wicce asked for the person to identify themselves. “It is Aurora Sinistra,” said the voice from the other side, “You sent for assistance?” And the Wicce opened the door with her wand.

Sinistra entered and shut the door quickly, then eyes wide, surveyed the room. “Oh my, Severus -,” she whispered.

Snape was just cogent enough to realise that a co-worker had entered the scene, when he was bound, sick and virtually naked. It was one thing having a group of strangers attend to him who he would likely never see again, quite another to have an acquaintance with whom he was supposed to deal with on a professional basis day to day. “N – no,” he began, but the Wicce cut him off.

“Don’t worry Professor. Madame Sinistra will have her memory obliviated before she leaves the scene. She won’t recall any of this.”
“Do you know him?” asked Diaphne, sizing Sinistra up and down.

“Y-yes, we work together. And Charity was a friend of mine.”

“Charity is the person we are eradicating?” checked the Wicce.

“Yes, she was the other half of the Betwitchers Ribbon bond. I have broken that half.”

The Wicce picked up the Ribbon from the desk. “So this half is still in effect?”

“The Ribbon looks intact. Yes, it is still working.”

“How long since you broke the other half?”

“I broke it in January. So eight months now.”

The Wicce sucked air through her teeth and Diaphne made a little gasping noise. “Why did he not break it?” said the Wicce sounding astonished and concerned in equal measure. “He must have been in terrible anguish all that time. Why did you not encourage him to break it?”

“He -,” began Sinistra looking anxious, but Snape, who had been listening to this conversation, said through gritted teeth, “I didn’t want to.”

“He’s a very loyal person,” explained Sinistra. “He had hope. He loves her still.”

“No wonder he is resisting,” muttered the Wicce. “He assured me he had said goodbye. And he is still attached to a bond.”

“I told him he shouldn’t do this.”

“Professor, if you are not ready to do this, the risk is greater,” the Wicce said to Snape and while her mask made her expressionless, the unease could be heard in her voice.

“I am. I am ready,” he muttered.

After a pause, the Wicce said “Madam Sinistra, be so kind as to break the bond of this Ribbon, please,” handing it to her. “I can feel the magic in it. You made it a very strong bond.”

“I thought their love was up to it,” murmured Sinistra, following this with a low incantation and then dropping the ribbon into the fire. The Wicce followed with a toss of powder, and green flashing fire shot up with sparks. More fumes filled the room.

“I believe his love was a match for that ribbon,” said Diaphne, gazing at him and stroking his brow. “Poor Professor.”

“It is rare in a man,” agreed the Wicce. “Even when the love continues, the man usually breaks the ribbon out of vengeance. His heart is broken?”

“I think that’s possible,” said Sinistra, a hand covering her nose and mouth. Distractedly, the Wicce gave her a gauzy scarf to use, then went to Snape’s left side. With incomprehensible mumblings, she placed her hand on his bare chest, where his heart lay beneath, and stood for a moment feeling it.

Then she pressed down, and manipulated the flesh and Snape gave a faint groan.

“Yes… I can feel… this heart is damaged. The beat is sound, but the muscle itself… it is still… has your heart been broken more than once Professor?”
He gave a single nod. Diaphne’s hand flew to her mouth. “May I feel, Aunt?”

“Quick then,” said the Wicce, and placed Diaphne’s hand where hers had been. She muttered the healer’s charm beneath her breath then said, “Send your fingers through the skin, mind his ribs, feel for his heart, it should be easy, it’s beating. Not too tight. Feel that it isn’t smooth but ridged, some bits are hard. That is a wound that has healed in the past.”

“Where is the new wound?”

“You won’t be able to tell that until you’ve had more experience,” said the Wicce, then cautiously helped the girl withdraw her fingers and indicated for her to step aside. “Give him more whisky, we have lost time. I am going to start removing memories in a minute. Madam Sinistra, please come here to where I am.”

Sinistra stood beside the Wicce and allowed the old witch to take her hand and place it over Snape’s heart. She once more cast a spell. “You can monitor his heart rate for me. Because of the damage, his heart has a higher rate of failure. Professor, are you a pureblood?”

“Half-blood,” he muttered, eyeing Sinistra standing beside the bed with her hand pressed against his chest.

“That is good, that is good. More vigorous. Stronger. Madam, please inform me if his heart rate rises above 100 per minute or below 60 a minute. Here is a stopwatch.” The watch materialised out of thin air. Despite everything, Snape couldn’t help but be impressed. Her skills were easily the match of Dumbledore’s.

“Diaphne, over this side please. I need you to hold this Witch’s Bottle. I will deposit the memories in here. And you can tend the patient when he is distressed.” She gave the brunette a teardrop shaped clay jug with a looped handle and a diagram stamped on it.

The Wicce then returned to her desk and laid her black wand on it. She bent over the wand a little, and muttering spells, tripped her fingers along it one way, then back again. When she straightened, the wand lifted itself into her hand. There was a small, insistent part of Snape that was keen to know what her wand was composed of, where she’d got it, whether the mandrake was an engraving or part of the actual wand. But seeing that she was now approaching him, in a slow and deliberate fashion, he held his tongue.

“Professor, I am going to perform Legilimens on you. Please look me in the eyes and prepare yourself.”

Snape forced his eyes to look up and into the inky spots behind the black mask. His heart skipped a beat with sudden apprehension, and Sinistra made a little noise of surprise.

Sound dropped away as his eyes locked with the witch, and she held them fast, then raised her wand, pointed it at him and said clearly “Legilimens!”

His mind was abruptly invaded and his head pushed back by the impact, but once she was inside, she was deft, and began an agile sorting through his memories. He could see images and scenes being scanned and discarded – mostly worthless remembrances of the past few weeks, school related, his walks across the hills.

“Mother of Merlin, Professor,” said the Wicce, “It is busy in here. You spend a lot of time up here, I can see. You are an intellect. And you don’t forget much.”

Snape couldn’t really speak. It didn’t hurt, but it was uncomfortable, oppressive, and slightly
claustrophobic.

“You have many, many locks and bolts. Professor, are you an Occlumens?”

Snape nodded.

“Ah. I see here, Death Eater memories. And He Who Must Not Be Named. He has been here before, I see. Young Tom Riddle, I see. Tom Riddle sought me for an apprenticeship, but I said no.”

Snape’s eyebrows rose with interest.

“Just a bit longer, Professor. What is this? Childhood…Professor, please loosen these locks…oh! Strong emotion, such strong emotions, you were very unhappy…”

Snape struggled. She prised the locks and he could do nothing to stop her. The rituals she’d been performing had eroded all his defences. His childhood recollections, many he hadn’t revisited in decades, flooded forth and as she had perceived, powerful emotion followed with it.

“Heart rate rising,” commented Sinistra. “He’s breathing fast.”

“You can put them away,” announced the Wicce presently, and she withdrew. “We will take a break.”

Snape slumped back. The Wicce turned to Diaphne and said, “Please check on Imogen. You two can go downstairs and get food.”

Diaphne left the room and the Wicce then turned to the fire which she stoked with a muttered “Incendio” and it began to rage again. She then poured more whisky into a cup and offered it to Snape through the straw, handing the cup to Sinistra, she then went back to her desk and withdrew a small, glass bottle. This she unstoppered and poured some of the glistening liquid onto her fingertips and then she returned to Snape’s side and pressed her fingers to his brow, leaving a glistening mark. After that, she poured some more onto her fingers and quickly spattered it over his body.

Nothing happened for a moment, but then he felt his nerves begin to spasm, his muscles twitched all over, his skin crawled. Then his teeth began to chatter.

“His heart is beating very fast!” said Sinistra worriedly.

“It’s fine, he is fine,” said the Wicce, but she watched him closely.

Behind Snape’s closed eyes it felt as if fireworks were shooting through him, his muscles twitched and jerked and spasmed, and along with the strong emotions from his childhood, he felt the blackout surge of uncontrolled magic mounting.

“There!” declared the Wicce jubilantly. “We have exudation!”

Silvery mist, almost invisible, floated in tiny drifts from his skin, eyes and mouth. Using her wand like a syphon, the Wicce gathered some up and then placed the wand-tip in her mouth and released the vapour again. She tasted the mist, savoured it on her tongue, like a fine wine.

“Yes, yes, good,” she mumbled, “Where is my bottle? Professor! We are going to have another go. Are you ready for Legilimens?”

Using all his willpower, Snape lifted his head and locked eyes with her. “Legilimens!” And she was once more inside his mind.
“Ah hah! It is all open in here for me now. Thank you, Professor, now I can help you! The ribbon is gone, your locks are opened and now I want to see your memories of Charity. Bring them to me. Bring them out, bring them all out, Professor Snape.”

For a few minutes there was quiet as the Wicce began to use her wand to pull the vapourous, silvery threads of memory from his temple and carefully place them above the neck of the bottle. The bottle gently sucked them in.

“She was lovely,” commented the Wicce, “slow down please, I don’t want to miss any.”

The first memories that Snape offered up, applying as much control as he could muster over the process, were pleasant and harmless. Conversations, walks, shared meals, laughing over trivial matters. “What is this cave you are in so much?” asked the Wicce, and Snape couldn’t speak but Sinistra guessed.

“The Archive at Hogwarts Castle. They worked together in there.”

“There is such happy feeling,” the Wicce observed, almost kindly. “Ah, here we have an early one – she has cobwebs – this is your first memory?”

Snape could see Charity, smiling at him over her shoulder, she said, “I know. It still blows me away.” Snape smiled back and then the memory faded and blinked away. Gone. And in ways he hadn’t realised, that he hadn’t thought through, that he hadn’t counted on, there was a cold, plunging sense of loss.

The Wicce continued. She found the memory of the day he had returned Charity’s stolen camera, her smile at him, her halo. Snape thought that might have been the moment he fell in love with her, he just didn’t know it then. The moment when they had been searching the Castle for Sirius Black and she asked him, “Can you come with me to my rooms?” Who could refuse an invitation like that, he had said. These memories faded and disappeared as the Wicce siphoned them from his head. It hurt, it hurt everywhere.

He saw Charity in his office, dressed in her sapphire blue gown, looking at the blue dragon’s blood, and he remembered how he had first started to truly desire her that moment. Then next in the Three Broomsticks, seeing her ribbon, the way she had walked up to him so confidently, so beautiful. Faded…gone. No, he thought. Please let me keep that one. Up came the memories of Diagon Alley, spying on her in the gown, asking her to the party, the floral crown, his feelings of happiness, contentedness surged. “I just love every minute with you,” she had said at dinner and they held hands. He would have known that night he could love her forever, but he didn’t know that his window to make her his love forever was passing. Why hadn’t he taken that opportunity? Tears started to spill from the corners of his eyes.

“You’re doing very well, Professor,” said the Wicce, tenderly. “Let’s keep going.”

“His heart rate is still high,” said Sinistra, “raised but steady.”

“That is normal. These memories are very, very intense. They are so fresh, it is like surgery on an infant.”

Snape’s uncontrolled magic was rumbling down deep, like a subway, but in his mind the memories seem to offer up of their own accord. He remembered the time in the Archive, she sat in the armchair and he forced the Legilmens on her, invaded her mind. “You BASTARD” she had screamed at him, and he remembered the sick, shamed feeling he’d had.
“Professor Snape, this was not your proudest moment,” remarked the Wicce. “That was below you.”

He felt like saying he didn’t need her judgement, but he couldn’t speak.

In contrast came the Faerie Call at Hagrid’s hut. He saw the fairy in her hair, the light shining in her eyes, the moment she had flung her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, and then later, fingers entwined… “Merlin, that was a strong one,” said the Wicce, as the memory faded and blinked away. “No…” groaned Snape and twisted against his binds. A sob escaped him.

The door to the room reopened and both Diaphne and Imogen stole in, swiftly closing the door behind them. They stood to one side for a moment, then the Wicce waggled the witch’s bottle and Diaphne returned to duty.

There were a number of memories of the first trip to Dumbledore’s cottage when he had divulged his Death Eater status, the feeling of dread that had snuck in, the fear that an insurmountable obstacle existed between them. “I don’t want now, I want forever,” he remembered her lamenting, the awful realisation that the one thing they both wanted was the one thing they couldn’t have. She had cried and cursed and all he’d wanted to do was love her, just love her.

“Love is an untamed force, I am told,” murmured the Wicce, matter of factly, siphoning away those memories.

And then came forth the staff party, a rich vein of remembrance, Snape’s feelings were so profound he thought he might pass out. “Merlin’s beard,” said the Wicce with an unsteady breath, “this was an occasion. I see you in here, Madam Sinistra.”

“The staff party?”

“Miss Charity looks very beautiful indeed. She is wearing the ribbon.”

“Oh yes, that was quite a night.”

“What happened?” asked Diaphne, as if it were an episode of a soap opera.

Snape writhed on the bed, and each memory banished was like a knife in his heart. “No,” he gasped aloud. “No more, I – can’t – stand – it.”

He remembered her dancing with him, holding her so close, the drenching, intoxicating desire, her eyes, her scent, the feel of her pressed up against him. His love for her had been all consuming, he’d barely been able to see straight. And then…the first kiss, the kiss, he thought he’d might devour her, her soft lips had been like oxygen to a drowning man, and she, she had kissed him back. All night. His bed had been ransacked and they – they were animals, nothing but instinct.

Even the Wicce had gone quiet. The memories were quickly drawn away, faded and gone, and all he felt was loss afterwards, he didn’t even know what had gone. His mind hurt, there was a clamouring panic in his chest like a trapped bird, but he didn’t know why.

“There is exudation, Aunt,” said Imogen, who had been sitting on the faded armchair and now stood. “Look!”

“I know,” said the Wicce in a low voice. “His feeling is deep, all pervading. But he will be alright. Stoke the fire Imogen, and more of the dust.”

More fumes clouded the room and Sinistra gagged but kept her hand on Snape’s chest. It was becoming slick with sweat, and his heart had barely slowed in fifteen minutes.
Suddenly Snape stilled. The memory he had brought forth was set amid the snow on the grounds of Hogwarts. He was trudging through it, compelled, drawn to the Entrance Gates and then he knew why. Charity was on the other side of them. She cried out his name and he was almost flying in his will to reach her. The bond had exhausted him, but now it meant they could be reunited, he never knew such energy. He remembered as she leapt into his arms, how she had wrapped herself around him. He remembered how he had taken her to his room afterwards and...but it was stolen from him, the memory was lifted and carried away from him before he had the chance to re-live it.

There was her Patronus...there they were lying in her bed on his birthday, and their dinner when they planned their future...he watched them all and the Wicce robbed him of them, and Charity's store of memories began to run thin.

“Where are we now?” said the Wicce, seeing a desolate cottage beside a lake. “You are fighting.”

Dumbledore’s cottage. Never in his life had he laid himself so bare. These memories caused him as much pain as pleasure, they were as erotic as they were exposed. They touched a violent, rarified nerve and he wrenched so hard that one bind against the bedstead was broken, and he used the free hand to tear against the other wrist. “Leave me!” he snarled as the women leapt forward. The Wicce had to pull herself forcibly from the Legilimens, which caused a kind of mental vortex and there was a cyclone in his head so that he couldn’t tell up from down and he fell forward and almost off the bed.

The Wicce used her wand to reposition and bind him once more against the bedstead, and he collapsed, defeated. Huge, shuddering sobs wracked his body. Sinistra’s own eyes filled with tears to watch him, and Diaphne covered her eyes and turned away. “Professor!” shouted the Wicce, and she leant forward and slapped him hard. “We are almost finished. Pull yourself together. Are you ready?”

He gulped and swallowed and, breathing hard, sought control. Then he raised his eyes to hers and she once more entered his mind.

But it had become easier. As his earlier memories had been wiped, these last ones were like individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that had lost any meaning or significance in the absence of context. While he saw himself proposing to Charity, and the feelings attached to that memory were briefly sparked, he was already questioning how that event had come to pass. By the time his final memory of her was offered up, he had no idea why he was looking at a pregnant Muggle Studies teacher outside her house. The little girl was meaningless to him.

“His heart rate has slowed down,” said Sinistra, glancing up at the Wicce. “He looks a lot calmer.”

“It’s all but over,” said the Wicce. “There are some scattered, old memories of this Charity woman in here, but I think they preceded the love affair. He is entitled to those, they do not trouble him. And this other woman, his red-headed girl -?”

“That will be Lily. Leave those,” said Sinistra, gazing at his face as his eyes scanned behind their lids. “Leave him Lily.”

The Wicce pulled free of the Legilimens and Snape lay on the bed, free now of his binds, his eyes closed, exhausted. The witch’s bottle was taken by the Wicce and in the now silent room she placed a cork stopper tightly into the top and then dripped candle wax over the cork and neck to seal it. Then she took Snape’s instructions and tied them to the neck of the bottle.

The two girls covered Snape with the bedding, the teacup and whisky bottle were left on the desk while the Wicce carefully packed away all her possessions and then cast a Tergeo spell generally
across the room. Snape was passed out, breathing peacefully, and only a single candle remained flickering in the room. The wax now dry and sealed, the Wicce placed the witch’s bottle inside his bag and buckled it.

“Thank you, Madam Sinistra, for your assistance. If you accompany me downstairs I will erase your memory of this evening.”

Sinistra nodded, with a lingering look at her colleague, and sent a silent prayer for Charity that he would be alright.

“He will be fine now,” the Wicce said in a gentler voice, finally, pausing to check on Snape a last time. “The price was steep, but he has paid it.”

The four women left together, softly closing the door and locking it behind them. Snape slept on.
Three hundred and ninety-five miles away, and almost a year to the day that Snape had walked into the Archive and met Charity, his son was born to her. He was seven and a half pounds, and perfect. Only her parents had been present for the birth, and Charity was quite content with that.

For post-partum, she and the baby were taken from the Community Hospital to her parent’s home in Trowbridge. The baby’s cot, change table and accessories were set up in the bedroom she would sleep in, leaving Holly’s free for when Holly would visit. It was easier this way. Jason wanted nothing to do with the baby.

Charity was nursing on her bed, when her mother knocked on the door with a foolscap envelope. “Hello, love, can I come in. Post’s just been.”

“Hi Mum, yes, just feeding here.”

“This one’s for you,” said her mother, handing her the envelope. “It’s from the General Register Office.”

“Ah. That’ll be a copy of his birth certificate. You can open it.”

Mrs Burbage sat at the end of Charity’s bed and busied herself opening the document, smiling at the baby as she did so. “Oh, look at the wee poppet - such a good feeder.”

“I wish he slept as well as he feeds.”

“Not another night, love?”

“He’s just restless. Won’t settle.”

Mrs Burbage withdrew the parchment coloured certificate with its seal and its coat of arms and cast her eye over it. “There you are poppet: all official. James Servius Snape. 26th October 1994. And there’s mummy’s name and there’s your daddy’s name. Did you think about hyphenating it, love?” her mother asked Charity suddenly, looking at her daughter.

“No. It’s simple this way.”

“But he and Holly will have different surnames.”

“That’s okay, they have different fathers.”

“And they both have a different surname from you.”

“Modern family, Mum,” said Charity with a grin.

“It will be very confusing for their teachers.”

Charity laughed at that. “Teachers don’t care. And anyway, having Snape in his name will give this little man an advantage when he goes to Hogwarts.”
Baby James Servius had finished feeding and smacked his lips. Charity placed him gently against her shoulder where she had placed a terry-towel cloth as he could be a bit spilly. She rubbed his tiny back.

“So…so you think he’ll have the magic gene then, like Holly?”

“Really mum?” said Charity in disbelief. “You really think there’s any question of that? I mean, it’s possible he won’t, but I’m more inclined to think I should enrol him for Hogwarts now. I had to wait until Holly was seven before she showed she was magic – I can guarantee with Severus as his father that this little guy will be accio-ing his own bottle.”

Her mother didn’t understand the detail of Charity’s comment, but certainly got the gist of it. She nodded solemnly but couldn’t keep a smile off her face when the baby gave a tiny burp.

“Oh, but he’s a bonny baby isn’t he? So quiet. Hardly ever cries.”

“I know! Holly was screaming her lungs out by this time. And have you noticed how he stares? He may be just trying to focus, but it’s incredible how he’ll hold your gaze.”

Charity was now holding James in the crook of her arm, toying with the tiny fingers that gripped her own, gazing at him in amazement. She still had to pinch herself.

“So dark, aren’t they?” her mother said, watching as well. “His eyes. I mean, yours are brown, but his are almost black.”

“His fathers.”

“His father’s hair I take it, as well? Couldn’t believe that thatch when he first came out.”

“Oh god yes. My blonde genes didn’t stand a chance against Severus’s.”

“Is this Severus from Italy or somewhere?”

“I suspect Romanian or Latin heritage.”

Baby James was making little gasping noises and waging his fists. But other than feeding and sometimes sleeping, he didn’t do much else at this age.

“And when are you going to tell him?” asked Mrs Burbage quietly, as she had done at least a hundred timed before.

Charity didn’t reply or in fact even react to her mother’s question. She rocked the baby slightly and made little kisses on his face.

Defeatedly, and with a heavy sigh to indicate it, Mrs Burbage rose from the bed and placed the certificate on the side table. “I’ll go fix us some lunch, alright love?”

“Thank you, Mum.”

When the door shut behind her mother, Charity rose off the bed and walked slowly around the room, soothing and gently rocking, hoping that baby James would start to settle. The little tyke must be tired, he was up most of the night shuffling and sniffing and making little animal-like noises. He rarely cried, rarely showed any sign of discontent – already as independently minded as his parents.

“Shall I tell your Daddy about you?” said Charity aloud, more for the sake of bonding through the sound of her voice than anything. Babies learned to identify their mother’s voice early. “What do you
think your Daddy will do? Do you suppose he will want to see you? I think he will. Do you want to see Daddy?"

*But he won’t take you away,* thought Charity fiercely. *I will always love your father, but this is the way things need to be right now. I will explain it all when you’re older.*

Half an hour later, James Servius had finally fallen asleep on Charity’s shoulder and, incredibly, she had been able to lay him down in his cot still asleep.

With trembling hands – partly fatigue, partly nervous exhilaration – she opened the bedroom cupboard as quietly as she could, and from inside withdrew the carved teakwood box that held her wand. It was nestled in wrappings of silk to protect it, but she made a point of using it at least every second day, wanting to keep the wand vibrant and alive.

Channelling her magic the way she’d practiced when she first learnt to produce her Patronus, she silently brought forth her moth, relieved and thrilled to see it, uncertain whether it was something she could still do. The moth flapped its silvery snakehead wings around the room once before becoming still on top of the cupboard.

“Send this message to Severus Snape,” whispered Charity, her throat oddly constricted, her heart thumping. She paused, choosing her words carefully. “We have a healthy son. I love you and miss you.”

The moth flapped its wings once and disappeared once it passed through the window of her room.

She never received a reply.
Chapter 32

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Voldemort raised Lucius Malfoy’s wand, pointed it directly at the slowly revolving figure suspended over the table and gave it a tiny flick. The figure came to life with a groan and began to struggle against invisible bonds.

With a shock and a gasp, Charity was thrown awake, and processed quickly that she was suspended by her ankles and slowly spinning. Her head was pounding, it was difficult to breathe. Her hands, bound behind her back, were unyielding and her instincts begged to panic. But at least she could see, even if everything was upside down, and her eyes had difficulty focusing after being blind for so long. She could make out that she was in a spacious, hall like room with a fireplace and, that she was suspended immediately over a long, polished, grand dining table. She recognized nothing. Around the table were people, people she thought she didn’t know. The people who had snatched her, she assumed. No, wait! Draco! And his parents, the Malfoys. She saw others looking at her, their expressions were not pleasant, and fear made a flamboyant reappearance.

During her stay in the cells she had learned that fear was a temperamental and lazy guard. Blindfolded and calm, she was often left alone for hours at a time and during these periods she discovered she was no longer gripped by fear, but other emotions would come creeping out again – sadness, anger, astonishment, anxiety, regret (how she wished now she had taken more trouble to arrange that trace on her that Candace had recommended) – and sometimes, she was reflective. She spent a lot of time thinking about her family, the things she wished she’d focused on, the things she would do if she survived this, the things she was grateful for. She spent a lot of her time thinking about Servius, and what would become of him. She became a little contemptuous of fear and its loud, attention-seeking dominance.

“Do you recognize our guest, Severus? asked Voldemort.

Severus?! Severus was here? She tried to twist around, tried to make out the faces of the people before her. Was this his doing? Had he organized this? Relief suddenly flooded through her, because if she couldn’t have an army of Aurors rescue her, then Severus would have been her very next choice. He hadn’t replied to her Patronus, presumably he was less than interested in their child, but with their history, the passion with which he’d loved her, he would try to protect her now. He always had. Protecting was in the heart of him.

And there he was, seated at the top end of the table, to the right of – a chill ran through her – Voldemort. The Dark Lord, as Snape preferred to refer to him, pale, red-eyed, hairless, with an enormous python draped around his shoulders. It was he who had spoken, he who had asked Severus if he recognized her. Voldemort was putting a very pointed challenge before his right-hand man. Charity half wondered if he had somehow learned of their relationship, from Draco, perhaps, now that he was clearly in the inner sanctum. Cheap points for the young lad, who now was staring at the table, a white-faced composition of fear and remorse. But Severus, her grand Severus, it was hard to see him properly, but oh! How her eyes delighted to rest upon his face again.

Snape raised his eyes to the upside-down face. All of the Death Eaters were looking up at the captive now, as though they had been given permission to show curiosity. As she revolved to face the firelight, the woman said, in a cracked and terrified voice, “Severus!
It was not the words she’d imagined saying to him when she fantasized about their reconciliation. She’d had a thousand scenarios about that moment, ranging from an accidental collision in a corridor of Hogwarts all the way through to an arranged meeting atop a bridge in Hyde Park where she would introduce him to Servius. She had attended the funeral for Dumbledore, expecting to see him there, but he wasn’t. Had it then been true, what she’d heard? But she couldn’t believe her Severus – the man who had picked her a winter posy, the man who had made the snow shine – could murder the closest person he had to a friend.

But this – no, she hadn’t imagined this. Yet there was nobody she was gladder to see, and for a second of bliss, her eyes met his.

But his eyes were those of a stranger, he didn’t seem to know her, he showed no emotion at all. She had seen a universe in those same eyes, they had burned for her, cried, laughed, through them she had been permitted access to the whole, incredible person he was. Fresh fear and horror coursed through her at the blank, cold eyes.

“Ah, yes,” said Snape, as the prisoner turned slowly away again.

“And you, Draco?” asked Voldemort, stroking the snake’s snout with his wand-free hand. Draco shook his head jerkily. Now that the woman had woken, he seemed unable to look at her any more.

Charity revolved, occasionally twitching against the bonds, the words *Ah, yes* on repeat. He couldn’t have rejected her harder, more callously than if he’d said he hated her. Hate had passion in it, but this indifference, this hard indifference, particularly now when she needed him was chilling. *A snake who would save you will betray you…* Or was that Draco, who kept his guilty eyes diverted from her, betrayed the school, his teacher, his own Head of House by indulging in chances to further his own interests in this snake pit.

“But you would not have taken her classes,” said Voldemort. “For those of you who do not know, we are joined here tonight by Charity Burbage who, until recently, taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

There were small noises of comprehension around the table. A broad, hunched woman with pointed teeth cackled.

“Yes…Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles…how they are not so different from us…”

One of the Death Eaters spat on the floor.

Candace had said to her that she should think about protection, to come and see the Auror office about having a personal trace applied. She’d said to Charity that there were leaks from the Ministry, that the Muggle Liaison Office had been ransacked, and that they were moving Sir Byron to a safe place. She had said to Charity that she would become a target, since the Daily Prophet article she had raised herself above the parapet, she’d attracted the wrong kind of attention. But…oh, stupid buts… she thought it all rather hysterical nonsense. She wasn’t of interest. Surely the community could engage in a bit of journalistic debate without resorting to violence? She had only spoken the truth, after all, she was a scientist, fact was her currency. How could people get so riled up over facts? And anyway, Voldemort was a half-blood.

But now, listening to him, she could see where this was going, why she was here. Was
Fetherington’s father seated at this table?

Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape again. “Severus….please…please…”

Snape wasn’t looking at her. He had his fingers laced together, resting on the table, and he stared into space. Perhaps he was formulating a plan – yes, of course! That was it, he wasn’t rejecting her, he was maintaining cover while he thought up a brave, clever Severus plan to get them out of here. He couldn’t reveal anything to Voldemort right now, it was too soon. She should be careful not to blow it for him.

“Silence,” said Voldemort with another twitch of Malfoy’s wand, and Charity fell silent as if gagged.

Some kind of silencing charm kept her lips pressed together. Charity’s eyes widened with apprehension. Could Severus see what was happening? Why didn’t he look at her? Why didn’t he give some secret sign that all would be okay?

The possibility that she may not survive this curled into her mind. This was her hourglass running out, she was down to the final few grains of sand and it was all unfolding just as the prophecy had said. She, the proud, defiant servant of science was about to fulfil a destiny as unbelievable as if foretold by a gypsy woman in a circus tent. There was the snake that had loved her, to the right of the snake that loathed her, at a table full of serpents because she had spoken the truth. How could it possibly be? She struggled harder, her heart was pounding, the blood in her ears was roaring. This couldn’t be her death knell, she hadn’t told the children goodbye, she wanted to tell them she loved them, she wanted to give them a hug that would make them gasp, let them know she would be watching them, wherever she went, she would love them and watch over them, and that she was sorry, so sorry she had let them down. A noiseless, anguished sob escaped her.

“Not content with corrupting and polluting the minds of wizarding children, last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defence of Mudbloods in the Daily Prophet. wizards, she says, must accept these thieves of their knowledge and magic. The dwindling of the pure-bloods is, says Professor Burbage, a most desirable circumstance…she would have us all mate with Muggles…or, no doubt, werewolves…”

Nobody laughed this time: there was no mistaking the anger and contempt in Voldemort’s voice. For the third time, Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape. Tears were pouring from her eyes into her hair. Snape looked back at her, quite impassive, as she turned slowly away from him again.

She was never to look into the eyes Severus Snape again. He was the last person, in fact, she ever saw, as she shut her eyes when she realized, acknowledged with a dread, horrible, certainty, that something in him had died, and that her own existence on this earth was over. She had nurtured, borne and cared for his son but all that was just dust on barren ground. While it was she who was physically rotating, it was he that was turning away. How much his actions were self-protection, how much was a kind of revenge, she would never know, because he was not the man she knew, but her last thought was, Severus..?

“Avada Kedavra.”

The flash of green light illuminated every corner of the room. Charity fell, with a resounding crash, on the to the table below, which trembled and creaked. Several of the Death Eaters leapt back in their chairs. Draco fell out of his onto the floor.
“Dinner, Nagini,” said Voldemort softly, and the great snake swayed and slithered from his shoulders on to the polished wood.

The End
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Written as if for a post-war "Crimes of the Second Wizarding War" article.

EPILOGUE

Charity Burbage was abducted by two Death Eaters, Yaxley and Selwyn, at 5:42pm on Thursday 12th July 1997, outside the Ministry of Magic office.

It was a brazen move. Footage discovered on CCTV showed the Death Eaters were dressed in Muggle clothes, and Yaxley cursed her on sight as she exited the telephone box on the corner of Great Scotland Yard with an Imperious, then invited her to walk with them down an alley not far away and out of sight. They then disapparated with her side-along to Malfoy Manor, although this is assumed.

Those who investigated her disappearance, however, never discovered why she had decided to use the public entrance to the Ministry that evening. She had spent a few hours at the Ministry in the Department of Magical Education working on her curriculum and Muggle Studies textbook as she often did, making appointments, having meetings and using the Ministry’s archive and library. She rarely stayed long, having relied on carers to look after three-year old son Servius, and sometimes her ten-year-old daughter as well.

It was often her wont to use public transport when in London and so she may have been on her way to the tube. She often travelled by taxi or bus or train when she had Servius with her as he was an unhappy apparator. She also thought it appropriate to stay as Muggle-like as possible while she was researching and writing. However, given the urgency she would have felt to get home to her pre-schooler, the decision to use the public entrance on this occasion seems better explained as a summons.

It had to have been a convincing ruse. Burbage’s now highly-publicised article published in the Daily Prophet on 9th July 1997 caused a storm of outraged letters and complaints by a growing contingent of pureblood sympathisers and supremacists in the wizarding community. She had been cautioned by Ministry of Magic to take steps for her own safety and avoid being alone, but as this was a period in which the Death Eaters were busy infiltrating the Ministry, it is highly possible that she took advice from an employee who was in fact an undercover operative.

There is evidence from the cells at Malfoy Manor that Burbage was held hostage for several days. Survivors of the cellar did not see her, however, as prisoners were blindfolded with the Obscuro spell, but it was reported that a woman’s voice was heard and the house elves also describe a female hostage.

Having been a teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for a number of years, it would have been an easy task for the Death Eaters to identify her and locate her. A previous student of hers, Draco Malfoy, had been given the Dark Mark and of course she was a colleague of Severus
Snape, Death Eater responsible for the murder of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster. Though she had been working remotely for over a year, she was in contact with the school regularly via the Board and through submitted reports.

It is assumed that the reason for her death at the hand of Voldemort was due to her views on cooperation between purebloods and Muggle-borns, and between the wizarding and Muggle worlds. Her work on a purportedly radical curriculum for the subject of Muggle Studies at the school would have also inspired hostility from Voldemort as he was known to have placed one of his own Death Eaters on the school’s faculty to take up the education of this subject, with an agenda of promoting discussion and furthering his own ends. Her death made way for his own implant as well as communicating widely amongst his staff and his followers that such bold ideas would not be tolerated in his regime.

Her Daily Prophet article is likely to have been the trigger for his action, given the timing. Death Eater operatives at the Ministry of Magic would also have reported to Voldemort about her work on the curriculum, connections with Sir Byron who had been evacuated during the War due to his platform of cross-Muggle and cross-continental cooperation, and her connection to a Muggle geneticist which likely contributed to her theories on magical genealogy.

It was known amongst those who knew her closely or professionally that Burbage had qualified at a Muggle University in the subject of bio-chemistry and had taken a semi-professional interest in studying how the diminishing pureblood gene fared across a number of parameters compared to a mixed gene background. She produced several reports of her research to Sir Byron, who had associations with Ministers and Educators in Europe sharing similar theories based on local studies in their own gene pools. Her theories and findings have never been published or found in Britain, although their existence may be tracked to Europe where Sir Byron allegedly forwarded her reports.

She alludes only lightly to these theories in her Daily Prophet article, but the famous position taken by Voldemort that Muggle-borns were ‘thieves’ of magic from purebloods is notoriously attributed to some of the early work she produced on the subject, almost certainly stolen or smuggled from the Ministry.

That the Death Eaters had motive for murdering Charity Burbage needs little substantiation. That they had the means is also clear. That they took probable steps towards it is evidenced by her abduction and imprisonment. Her letter of resignation, also reported in the Daily Prophet in late July 1997 was found to be a fabrication – no letter of resignation was ever filed at Hogwarts or with the Ministry. This is the obvious steps of concealment and evidence suppression.

The body of Charity Burbage, however, was never discovered. The Death Eaters who survived the second Wizarding War did not take credit or otherwise for her death or disappearance under interrogation. Disposal of a body by this group would have been effortless, and, under the circumstances, failure to produce a corpse was no defence in the outcome of the trial against the Death Eaters in the face of other powerful inculpatory evidence.

Charity Burbage: scientist, researcher, theorist, writer, teacher, accomplished wizardess and last, but by no means least, mother, was also a tragically overlooked and unsung hero of the second Wizarding War. She was robbed of her life, no doubt brutally, for speaking the truth, and for pursuing peace during a time of guerrilla-like violence and persecution. She asked for tolerance and collaboration at a time of growing supremacism and fascism. Her posthumous writings that were never completed reveal a woman and educator committed to a vision of harmony.

She wrote in an essay: I want to raise my son in an undivided world. For myself, I desperately wanted to find a way to live in both but was told I must choose only one. I don’t believe this is true. I
think it is entirely possible for all sympathetic worlds to intersect like a venn diagram, and in areas where they overlap, lies the greatest and most promising future for all humanities. It is the willingness to come together which is our greatest challenge, the legacy I will one day pass to my son, my daughter and to all the children who find themselves on one side, looking longingly towards the other. We are more alike than we are different.

She is survived by her daughter, Holly Chadwick, her son J. Servius Burbage and her parents. She was just thirty-seven.

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