

A Long Vernal Season

by MMADfan

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A *Death's Dominion* sequel, but may stand alone. Not DH-compliant. DH-disregarded. Rated M for overall content. Much of it is "T," but the ratings rise to MA later for a reason, hence the switch to an M-rating for the earlier chapters. Watch the individual chapter summaries and author's notes for ratings, warnings, and the characters appearing in that chapter.

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Prologue: Return

Chapter 1 of 118

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Author's Note: *A Long Vernal Season* is the sequel to *Death's Dominion*. *A Long Vernal Season* is a chaptered, post-war Snape-centric fic. Although I recommend reading *Death's Dominion* first, *A Long Vernal Season* can be enjoyed without having read the previous fic. *Death's Dominion* is available [here on TPP](#), and there's a slightly edited version available on fnet (edited for some language and a small amount of sexually explicit content).

If you haven't read *Death's Dominion*, just bear in mind that *A Long Vernal Season* is not DH-compliant and is only partially HBP-compliant.

The first chapters of *A Long Vernal Season* (Parts One and Two) are basically T in content, but the M-rating is because many of the later chapters contain M or MA content. Watch the individual chapter summaries for ratings, warnings, and characters.

Thank you to all the “pre-readers” who have encouraged me in writing this fic, as well as the others in the *Resolving a Misunderstanding* universe.

I hope you enjoy the story!



PART ONE

Prologue: Return

Sunday, 23 August 1998

With a crack, a tall, thin, black-clad wizard appeared outside the gates to Hogwarts, a carpet bag in each hand and a canvas knapsack slung over one shoulder. The wizard stood motionless for a moment, simply gazing at the gates, then he took a step forward and looked up.

The Hogwarts gates had been damaged during the battle three months before, and no longer did a boar grace them. Rather, a large bronze dragon, her wings spread, created a new archway over the gates. Her breast was embossed with a large heart; from her open mouth, copper flames flickered; her fierce eyes were enamelled green with dark onyx pupils. The Hogwarts motto, *Draco Dormiens Numquam Titillandus*, was inscribed on a bronze banner above the dragon.

The single Charmed bell that had hung above the gates for centuries had likewise been replaced. Now a carillon of three bells was raised just beyond the wall, and a handle protruded from one side of the ironwork framing the elaborate wrought-iron gates. Beneath it there was a brass plaque, decorated above and below with etched intertwined snakes. The black-haired wizard stepped closer and read the inscription.

In memory of Aurora Lucia Sinistra,

who died in defence of her House and her school.

3 April 1956 – 25 May 1998

Toll the bells and remember.

Given by Blaise Zabini and Family.

The wizard's head bowed a moment. His fingers rested briefly on the bell-pull, but he did not ring. Instead, he reached for the gate handle, whispered a password, and let himself onto the grounds, his baggage now following in his wake, gliding smoothly behind him as he walked up the long drive to the castle.

Partway up his path, the wizard veered onto the grass, crossing over to a short, polished, squared-off column of red and black stone. A brass plaque was affixed to its angled top surface. The wizard's expression did not change as he read it.

On this spot on 26 May 1998,

Harry James Potter,

son of

Lily Evans Potter and James Potter,

Defeated

Tom Marvolo Riddle,

son of

Merope Gaunt Riddle and Tom Riddle.

The sombre wizard raised his hand and his fingertips hovered over the centre of the plaque, then he dropped his hand heavily and turned, heading back toward the castle and its great oak doors. As he approached, they opened to him, and some life came to his dark eyes as he saw the two who were waiting for him in the entrance hall. He nodded in greeting to the Headmistress and the Head of Ravenclaw, who both smiled at him.

“Welcome back, Severus!” the diminutive wizard said brightly.

Minerva smiled and took his arm as he passed over the threshold. “Yes, welcome home, Severus,” she said.

Next:

Chapter One: Hermione's News

Monday, 24 August 1998

Severus meets Hermione at the Three Broomsticks to hear her news.

Chapter One: Hermione's News

Chapter 2 of 118

Monday, 24 August 1998. Severus meets Hermione at the Three Broomsticks to hear her news, and he's nervous about it.



Chapter One: Hermione's News

Monday, 24 August 1998

Severus looked around the Three Broomsticks, blinking as his eyes adjusted after stepping inside out of the bright afternoon sun. There they were. Severus caught sight of Gareth McGonagall's curly chestnut head first, then he saw Hermione sitting across from him, her own thick brown hair pulled back and held with what seemed to Severus an elaborate torture device with two sticks stabbed through it. She was bent toward her companion, their foreheads seeming almost to touch, then McGonagall threw his head back and laughed, mouth open, straight, gleaming-white teeth showing, and Severus felt the piercing pain of the twins, jealousy and envy. He allowed his face to betray nothing, and as McGonagall saw him from across the room, the younger wizard beckoned to him. Severus nodded once in acknowledgement and walked over to join them.

Severus answered Hermione's smile and enthusiastic greeting with a small smile of his own...though he did not show his teeth, which were nothing like McGonagall's perfect set...and he scowled slightly at McGonagall when the latter wizard clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly fashion. He had seen McGonagall a few times over the last two months, but he had not seen Hermione since he had paid her a visit in late July. They had spoken little during that visit, really, though she had given him some advice. He had taken the advice, and that was why he was there in the Three Broomsticks that afternoon. Severus had decided to return to Hogwarts for one more year. At the end of that year, he would decide whether he would stay or not. He usually tended toward the "not." But he would teach that year and remain Minerva's Deputy, and so he had returned to the castle for the last full week of August, preparing for classes before the students arrived.

When he got Hermione's owl asking him to meet her and Gareth at the Three Broomsticks, he felt a slight twisting in his gut. She had said they had "news" for him. Not that she did, but that *they* did. He could only think of one thing that could mean, and he didn't like it. But she had asked him to come, and he wanted to see her. Perhaps if he had visited her again during the summer . . . at least McGonagall wasn't a dunderhead. And he wasn't Ronald Weasley.

Madam Rosmerta came over and asked Severus what he wanted to drink. Gareth had a large glass of what appeared to be lager, and Hermione had lemonade. It shouldn't be a difficult decision, Severus thought, but it seemed as though every decision he'd made in the last several weeks was difficult, and all of them had been dull, everyday decisions. It puzzled him that after surviving the Dark Lord...which he had never expected to do...such mundane decisions should seem so difficult.

Rosmerta stood, awaiting his response.

"Water. With lime."

That seemed simple enough, but Rosmerta greeted the request with a raised eyebrow as though she had heard of nothing so peculiar in her life. Then she asked what they would have to eat, and Severus froze, grateful when Hermione and McGonagall ordered first. Hermione asked for grilled salmon and the fresh fruit salad, and McGonagall requested the cold chicken plate. Rather than think about it, Severus said that he would have the same thing McGonagall was having, and hoped that it would be edible.

Severus snuck a glance at Hermione's hands. She had a new ring. A sapphire. But on her right hand, which slightly calmed his apprehension. Hermione noticed Severus looking at her ring, and she held out her hand to him.

"From my parents after I sat my NEWTs," Hermione explained.

NEWTs and OWLs had been held the week before. Anyone who had been scheduled to sit their exams the previous June had been offered the opportunity to do so then, if they wished. Any students who chose not to do the OWLs would have their admission to NEWT's level classes determined by their regular class grades; as a result, only a handful of students bothered to sit the OWLs, but there had been a surprising number of students who requested to take the NEWTs. Minerva had organised special review classes for the week prior to the exams, and most students had availed themselves of the opportunity. Hermione, however, had decided to revise on her own. Because Minerva had promised Severus that she would not disturb him with Hogwarts business over the summer, her brother Murdoch had tutored the students who took the Potions NEWT. Severus was not even bothered by that.

Severus examined the ring, taking her hand lightly in his as he did. "Very nice. A platinum setting?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "A little extravagant, I thought, but when your parents give you a present, you don't object because it's too nice. Especially not after everything else I put them through."

They spoke briefly of Hermione's parents and their transition back into their own lives. Hermione clearly did not like talking about it, though...it seemed that they were still having peculiar problems with their memories, having disturbing dreams, and occasionally experiencing curiously long bouts of déjà vu, none of which surprised Severus in the least.

"I enjoyed meeting them last week, though," McGonagall said. "I think they'll be fine once a little more time has passed."

"You met the Grangers?" Severus asked, jealousy and envy surging again.

McGonagall nodded, setting down his glass. "They invited me to dinner. Her father wants to teach me to play tennis, of all things."

Hermione laughed. "That's just because they're hoping I'll have someone to play with." She looked over at Severus. "Dad complains because I'm not keeping up with it. We always used to play together. His idea is that if he teaches Gareth to play, I'll play more frequently, but I don't think we'll have time for that kind of thing."

McGonagall shrugged. "We could probably create a tennis court at the estate. Alroy wouldn't mind, and he might even enjoy learning, then you'd have another wizard to play with."

"Or we could play mixed doubles," Hermione said, "if Rosemary wants to learn."

The food arrived just then, and Severus found that whatever appetite he might have had, had completely dissipated during the conversation. Clearly, Hermione and McGonagall were anticipating spending a lot of time together.

He looked down at his meal. The cold chicken plate consisted of three different kinds of cold sliced chicken...one portion appeared to be ordinary sliced roast chicken, one some kind of cold teriyaki chicken, and one appeared to be spicy, perhaps curried...and there was potato salad and a mixed vegetable salad on the side. McGonagall began eating with vigour. Severus picked up his knife and fork, but did not begin eating.

"Is it all right?" Hermione asked.

Severus blinked and looked up. "Yes, I am sure it is fine." He took a bite of the spicy-looking chicken and chewed.

"I am glad you could join us," Hermione said. "It feels more like a celebration with you here."

Severus's chicken became sand as he swallowed it. "Celebration?"

"Yes...oh, I can't believe I haven't mentioned it already!" Hermione's eyes shone. "I'll be nearby, living here in Hogsmeade with Gareth and his mother!"

Severus could feel the blood drain from his face.

"You're telling this backwards," Gareth pointed out, trying not to talk with his mouth full. He swallowed. "Begin at the beginning or Snape will think that I have designs on your virtue."

Hermione laughed. "You remember that I was considering an apprenticeship?"

Severus nodded. She had mentioned something of the sort in one of her letters...along with Muggle university, a year travelling abroad, spending time with her parents, getting a Muggle job, getting a wizarding job, and several other possibilities. He hadn't been able to tell from her letters whether any particular option appealed to her more. He did hope that she wouldn't leave the wizarding world, though, even temporarily.

"Well, Gareth offered to take me as an apprentice in Arithmancy, and I have accepted...or he accepted me. After Professor Dumbledore examined the contract and suggested a few changes, which we made, we signed it this morning." Hermione glowed with happiness. "I begin on the first of September!"

Severus felt more confused and conflicted emotions in that moment than he had in weeks, but he held out his hand. "Congratulations."

Hermione smiled and shook his hand. "Thank you! I'm very excited about it. I'll still be able to take some Muggle classes and train with Alroy to become an Animagus. Gareth's letting me work out a schedule so that I can do everything."

Gareth quirked a crooked grin. "Not *everything*, Hermione. The apprenticeship still takes precedence." He looked over at Severus. "Her schedule will be flexible, but I don't want her to take on too much at once. No Muggle courses until winter term, for example. She needs to devote herself first to the apprenticeship, then she can take on more things if she wishes."

Severus nodded. He decided that he was relieved that it was only an apprenticeship they were celebrating, and not an engagement...it would be foolish of Hermione to rush into such a thing so soon after leaving Hogwarts...but he did not like the idea of Hermione living in Hogsmeade with McGonagall and his mother. Hermione in Hogsmeade was fine...quite nice, in fact...but it was something else to have her living with that young, good-looking Arithmancer . . . and his mother. Severus still found it difficult to contemplate Gertrude Gamp in anything other than the abstract, despite her words to him after the victory dinner at the end of May. He doubted he would ever be able to look her in the eye comfortably.

The other two had begun discussing the apprenticeship, and Severus had been eating mechanically as he considered Hermione's news, scarcely tasting his food.

"Aren't you a bit young to be taking on an apprentice, McGonagall?" Severus asked suddenly.

The other wizard's eyebrows rose slightly, but he responded with good humour. "Perhaps I'm a bit younger than usual, particularly in Arithmancy, but I don't believe that Hermione would do better with any of the other Arithmancy masters she considered asking. I have considerably more experience performing complex Arithmancy on real-world problems than most Arithmancers fifteen or twenty years older than I." Gareth shrugged. "I don't believe Hermione will be handicapped in any way."

"You are requiring her to live with you?" Severus asked.

"Requiring? We hadn't considered it in those terms, Snape. It is usual for the apprentice to reside with the master; you must have done the same. Perhaps if I were on my own in a flat somewhere, we would have made other arrangements, but Mum's house is large enough, so it simply seemed sensible. And, if you are worried at all about Hermione's virtue," McGonagall said with a grin, "Mum will be there most of the time, too."

Severus could see that Hermione was blushing. "Don't be ridiculous, McGonagall. I am certain that Hermione is quite capable of looking after herself." He scowled. Just because he *had* been wondering about the close living conditions didn't mean that McGonagall should embarrass Hermione by mentioning it in that way.

"I am sure she is," Gareth said amiably. "Quite capable. Anyone for dessert?"

Severus returned directly to his rooms in the castle. There was another staff meeting later that afternoon, and he was once again questioning his decision to return to Hogwarts. He was unsure why he had, though Hermione's advice earlier in the summer had made sense to him. Return to teaching and, if he wished, leave later on his own terms, not merely in reaction to the end of his obligation brought about by the Dark Lord's death. He also had very few ideas of what else he might do if he did not continue at Hogwarts, and no desire to explore any of them. In the mood that had overtaken him in the weeks after Voldemort's defeat, he was certain he would only have sat at Spinner's End and done nothing.

He had not expected to live beyond the end of the war. Not only had he never made any plans for such a future, but he now felt curiously hollow and empty, as though he really had died with Nagini's bite. He did not know who he was now; perhaps there was no Severus Snape beyond the role he had played for so many years. Minerva, on those few occasions when she attempted to sway him, had told him that being at Hogwarts would give him an opportunity to rediscover himself in familiar surroundings with people near who cared for him.

He was unsure whether Minerva was right about that, but the objective part of himself knew that it had to be better than sitting at Spinner's End and decaying with the house. For all that he was envious and jealous of the relationship between Hermione and Gareth, he was glad they had included him in their lunch, and when he was truthful with himself, he was also glad that they each saw him as a friend. It was an interesting experience, to have friends of an ordinary sort, and not Death Eaters whom he was betraying or colleagues whom he could never really speak to. Not that he had any idea what he would speak to his colleagues about now, but things were different. He could feel that much. They'd been different from the moment he'd opened his eyes, wiggled his fingers and toes, and heard Poppy's soft voice telling him he was awake.

There were the usual rustling and scraping as people gathered their papers and pushed back from the table. Severus had felt rather extraneous, since he had only returned to the castle the day before and had participated in none of the planning for the year. He was still Deputy Headmaster, but Filius had apparently taken on many of his duties over the summer. But it had only been for the summer, he was fairly certain, since otherwise, surely Minerva would have said something to him about it. Filius would be a better Deputy than he was, though. He had only been made Deputy because he needed to be able to meet regularly with Minerva during the war...not to mention that it had helped secure his position with the Dark Lord. But Minerva had promised him that she would not bother him over the summer, and it was only reasonable that she should

call on the other Heads of House for help. Still, she may have discovered that she would be better off with a different Deputy. It wouldn't surprise him. But unless she said something to him about it in their meeting that evening, he wouldn't say anything, either.

Amanda Teller, the previous Muggle Studies teacher, had apparently received an offer she couldn't refuse and was now the primary Muggle news correspondent for the *Daily Prophet*, as well as having her own weekly column on Muggle arts and entertainment. He had met the new Muggle Studies teacher that afternoon, who was also the new Head of Gryffindor, a witch named Sharon Carter. Severus had taught Sharon Carter several years before, and while she was not a complete idiot, neither had she been very good at Potions, and that was what he remembered most about her. He hoped that she actually knew something about Muggles. It would be odd having colleagues younger than he, and Carter wasn't the only one.

Sybill Trelawney had also left the staff, which surprised Severus. He had believed Hogwarts to be the only place the witch felt at home and that she had nowhere else to go, but now that the Dark Lord...*Riddle*, he reminded himself, even the *Prophet* was calling him "Riddle" now...now that he was gone, the Seer apparently felt freer to move about. Minerva hadn't said what she was doing now, and he was only mildly curious, and so he hadn't asked. The new Divination teacher was a rail-thin, giggly witch whom he had apparently been at school with, though he didn't remember her at all. She was a Hufflepuff, though, and a few years younger than he, so it was hardly surprising that he didn't remember her. There were some sensible Hufflepuffs, but the ones who weren't tended to be annoyingly . . . bubbly. Of course, he believed that Melina O'Donald was a Hufflepuff, and while she was somewhat more effusive than he normally could appreciate, she also had a sense of decorum and could exhibit proper sobriety when necessary. And somehow, even at her most cheerfully bouncy, she was only mildly annoying. This Sarah Duffy was very annoying even when all she did was smile.

Lanky and youthful-looking David Manning, the new Astronomy teacher, on the other hand, seemed acceptable, though older than he by a couple decades. His wife, Laura Walker Manning, according to his list, was to be the new librarian, though he had not yet met her. Madam Pince had, to Severus's surprise, retired early, moved in with Filch to take care of him, and they had married two weeks previously. Life was strange.

Severus hadn't yet met Olivia Ouellette, who was to be the new Transfiguration teacher. Dumbledore hadn't wanted to return to teaching Transfiguration, and believed that his last years at Hogwarts might be better spent teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts. Albus had apparently completely revised the Defence curriculum, and the OWLs and NEWTs committees were rewriting the exams to suit the course he had designed, which would now include written essays in the ethics of magic. The Defence NEWT would now take a full four and a half hours to complete, rather than the previous three, with two hours allotted for the ethics essays, two hours to the essays on Dark creatures, curses, and spell- and potions-use in Defence, and a half hour allotted to the practical portion, although it could take as little as fifteen minutes.

In addition to Ouellette, there were other new staff members who hadn't yet arrived at the castle, Severus thought as he picked up the full list of staff and perused it. More than half of them were new. It did not bode well for a smooth start to the new school year, since they would have a lot of preparation to do in a very short time. The new caretaker, Stan Shunpike, had fortunately been brought on in July. Severus was glad they had hired a wizard, albeit a talentless one, for that position. It seemed cruel, somehow, to have a Squib serve as caretaker for a magical school...no matter how much Filch had wanted the job initially or how determined he had been to keep it over the years, it probably hadn't been good for him.

There was to be a new assistant groundskeeper, too, a wizard named Carleton Rath. He'd been one of several groundskeepers at something called the Pertwee Project, an animal sanctuary for rare magical creatures native to the British Isles, but now he was looking for a change. Apparently he was the last of the Raths, an old pureblood family that had never allied itself with Riddle and which had suffered as a result. Rath had kept himself out of it all by essentially seeking sanctuary with the beasts for the past twenty years. Severus wondered how well the man would acclimatise to a new environment after so long living in the isolation provided by the project.

As glad as he was that Minerva had given him time to consider whether he was returning to Hogwarts or not and that she had not bothered him with Hogwarts business over the summer, Severus still wished that he had had some involvement in hiring the new staff members. But he couldn't have it both ways, and it was pointless to think any further about it.

Severus shook his head and tried to keep from glowering.

"Obviously, I can't order you to do this; it's entirely up to you, Severus, but I do think that you will be much better off if you do," Minerva said patiently. "You will have had your say, and in a relatively controlled way."

Severus did *not* want to give an interview to the *Prophet*, not even if it was to a former colleague. But Minerva did have a point: better at least to have had his say, as she put it, than only to rely on what others might say about him. He had not taken the *Prophet* while at Spinner's End, but since he had returned to Hogwarts, he had glanced at it the last couple mornings at breakfast. It did seem that there were some threads of distrust and scepticism beginning to emerge, although they were subtle and no one had said anything overt that he had seen.

The *Prophet* had begun publishing interviews with the Order of Merlin awardees beginning immediately after the second awards dinner. Daily, they printed several short interviews with holders of the Merlin, second- and third-class, and every day or two, they published one longer one with someone who had been awarded a first-class Merlin. Potter had apparently given the first interview, though Severus hadn't read it, and Albus, Minerva, and Shackbolt had also given early interviews. Apparently, he was one of the few major awardees who hadn't yet had an interview published.

"Very well. And you will go over the permissible questions with Teller before we meet?" Severus asked, resigned.

"Yes. That's one reason why I recommended that Amanda do your interview. She also interviewed Filius, Pomona, and Alroy, so it won't be entirely strange if she is the one to interview you. And she's a fellow Slytherin." Minerva looked at Severus's unhappy expression. "I know you aren't looking forward to it, but I think that eventually you would regret it if you didn't give an interview...certainly you would later in life...and it would look rather odd now if you didn't, since no one else has declined. You don't want to appear to be hiding anything, either. It doesn't need to be a lengthy interview."

"I want to see the questions first."

"As soon as we've gone over them, I'll send you a copy. You won't be taken by surprise. If you are, tell me, and I will take Professor Teller by surprise." Minerva smirked. "I am beginning to appreciate the advantages of my position and having powerful friends."

"You're married to Dumbledore," Severus pointed out cynically.

"That's very different, and times were different, too," Minerva said stiffly.

Severus remembered what Albus had told him about being pleased that Minerva had been able to shine of her own accord and been able to step out from beneath his shadow.

"I'm sorry, Minerva. I didn't mean to imply that you used your marriage to Dumbledore for your own gain. Anyone can see that wasn't so. Just that you must know what it is like to have access to the Ministry and so forth, even if only through your observation of Albus's work over the years. And you've never been entirely without influence of your own, either."

"Hmmpf. In any case, if the *Prophet* prints something other than what you say or makes it sound other than you intended, they shall be hearing from me. As for the questions she may ask, it is in all our best interests that certain topics remain unexplored for a while."

"I would like to read the interviews that Teller did with Flitwick and the others. And the ones that you and Dumbledore gave," Severus added.

"I'm sure that Laura Manning could help you find the articles. Have you met her?" At Severus's shake of the head, Minerva said, "She and Davey are still getting settled in, so I told her that she could skip today's staff meeting. Davey will fill her in. It was more for the teaching staff, anyway."

"Davey?"

"David Manning, the new Astronomy teacher," Minerva clarified. "His parents actually worked for Quin. Christine, David and Laura's daughter, was in school with you, remember?"

"Vaguely." Severus sighed. "So Madam Manning..."

"She wishes to be addressed either as Laura or as Ms Manning. Or Ms Walker Manning. She's the modern witch," Minerva said, quirkling a smile.

"So she's sufficiently acquainted with the library already to be of assistance and not merely be a hindrance?" Severus asked.

"Oh, yes, I should think so. And if not, this will be a good opportunity for her to become better acquainted with it. You could help each other."

"And she's so modern, but she's going by 'Manning'?" Severus asked with a frown. Married faculty members usually maintained some discretion and professionalism, and the witches, if their husbands were also on staff, almost invariably used their birth names, even if they hadn't in the past.

"Yes. I think it's a silly affectation to pretend that any married staff are not married, even when they are married to each other...perhaps especially then. Apparently, it's a practice that began in the sixteen hundreds for some reason. They had some very peculiar Governors back then, and they came up with many very strange rules and practices, some of which we have continued to follow merely for sake of tradition. This particular practice seemed pointless to me in this day and age. So she and any other married witches can go by whatever name they prefer." Minerva straightened the parchments in front of her. "This was one practice that was easy to change and didn't require anyone else's approval for me to institute. There are other traditions that I hope to change over time, too, ones that I don't think serve a positive purpose."

"Such as?" Severus asked curiously.

"I have several things in mind, some of which actually go against my own grain, given that they are customs I have lived with almost my entire life, and which I have enjoyed, but I am trying to look at everything logically and pragmatically and am putting aside my own personal preferences."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I need to think about them more before I discuss the more far-reaching changes with you, but I will talk to you before I speak with any of the other staff...except for Albus, of course. He's my sounding-board, even if he plays no official role in any of the decisions. I'd say he likely has greater opposition to my ideas than I have misgivings. But I promise I will talk to you about them at length before I speak with the rest of the staff or with the Board of Governors. But one of the changes is to the staffing schedules, and since you are in charge of that and I want to implement it immediately, I thought we could talk about that now."

Severus nodded. "You mean the schedule for curfew patrol."

"Not just curfew patrol, but also the meals. In the past, attendance was simply expected. I would like to have a schedule for the staff so that there is a rotating schedule. If someone is on the schedule to attend a meal, they arrive on time and stay until the students have left. If not, they can attend or not, as they wish, and if they do, they may leave as soon as they like. I thought six staff members per meal. We've always just assumed that there would be sufficient staff present, and there always have been, but it would be nice if those staff not assigned to attend could feel free to leave the castle or dine elsewhere. We'll no doubt have more than six present during most meals, anyway, simply because people do need to eat. I also want to have a schedule of evenings and weekend days off, rather than the ad hoc approach we have now. Not that staff couldn't still request other time off if they needed it, or trade with someone, but I think it would be nice for everyone to have more real, predictable time to themselves. Of course, for Heads of House, the situation is a bit more complicated, but as long as it's scheduled, we can adjust, I am sure. I would like you to work out the details and have a proposed schedule ready for me by . . ." Minerva thought a moment. "By Thursday, then we can present it at the Friday staff meeting. I think it will be well-received."

Severus nodded. He had never had a normal schedule, not in the last few years, anyway, and he had no real social life to speak of, but he knew that the other staff members would enjoy having more time for themselves, especially more freedom to leave the castle on a regular basis. And since Hermione was living in Hogsmeade, he could see her. With occasional evenings free, he could take her to dinner. He felt a smile creeping over his face and he quickly subdued it.

"I can do that. I'll schedule the first two weeks of September, and we can see how it goes from there," he said.

"Good. I'll see you on Thursday at two o'clock, then, and we'll go over it. But I would enjoy seeing you sooner, and not over Hogwarts business. Are you free this evening? Can you come up for drinks after dinner?"

Severus hesitated. "I'm sorry. I usually do some preparation over the summer, and I did none this year. I am afraid not."

"Tomorrow evening? Just for an hour or two. We'd love to see you./ would love to see you. I have some new photographs from our holiday...not that you want to see all of them, of course. But..."

"No, Minerva. I think not." He shifted in his chair. "I need to settle back in. Sometime soon, though."

"Thursday evening? Albus will be out that evening, and he'll be sorry to have missed you, but I am free Thursday evening after eight."

Severus sighed and nodded. "For a little while."

"Good! And you can see what I've done with the suite. I didn't spare much thought for redecorating last year, as you can imagine, doing nothing more than putting in the little kitchen, but I've made some changes. Well, we have, although it is probably more to my taste than Albus's."

"I will be here at eight-thirty, then, if that is suitable."

"Yes, yes, that's fine," Minerva agreed enthusiastically. "And with any luck, perhaps Albus will be back before you have to leave."

"Of course."

Severus still hadn't spent any time with Albus since the older wizard had visited him in the infirmary at the end of May, none that wasn't in public or in the company of several others. He knew he would have to, and that he would have to become comfortable with it, if they were to be teaching together at Hogwarts, even if just for that one year. He was resigned to that fact but unready just yet to face its reality.

Minerva stood and came around the desk as Severus rose to leave. "Have I told you how happy I am that you're back with us, Severus?" she asked warmly, placing her hand on his arm. "It just wouldn't have felt right, beginning this new school year without you. I hope that you are happy with your decision, as well."

Severus nodded shortly. He couldn't imagine what else he would be doing at that moment, except sitting in his depressing house, reheating yet another ready-meal, then throwing half of it away to eat cheese and crackers as he read, or pretended to read, some old book. He had found himself reading a lot of Muggle history recently, histories of massacres and battles, of intrigue, assassination, and treachery. It hadn't put him in any brighter mood, but he had obtained some bizarre comfort from it, nonetheless. Being back at Hogwarts gave him something more productive to do.

"It will be interesting," he stated, then hesitated. He had spoken to Gareth some about his sense of disconnection from the world and even from his own life, and with Hermione, too, on his one visit to her that summer. "I don't know if . . . if it was the right thing to do, but it seemed better than any other option. And it is good to see you again, Minerva."

"I'm glad. . . . It may be too soon to ask this, and if it is, just ignore it, but have you forgiven me? At all? A little, at least?" Minerva looked up at him with obvious concern in

her eyes.

The corner of Severus's mouth twitched up in a slight smile as he looked into her eyes. "I did promise I would learn to forgive for your sake, didn't I? I hope I can always keep my promises to you. I may still be uncomfortable with it all, but you . . ." Severus shook his head and briefly touched her shoulder. "You have no worries as far as needing my forgiveness. I said it before, on that day when I went to die, you are one of the best friends I could have had, and I was not wrong when I said that."

Minerva's expression brightened with her smile. "I'm glad, Severus, more than I think you appreciate. Thank you. And if you ever need anything, if you need to talk, or rant, or break things...though hopefully nothing too difficult to fix or replace...please do feel that you can come to me."

"The trouble is," Severus said softly, "I don't even know what to rant about. But I will remember your offer."

Next

Chapter Two: An Unusual Invitation

Tuesday, 25 August 1998

Severus begins preparing for the new school year when he receives an unusual invitation by Owl Post.

Author's Note: I use the actual real world calendar when writing my RaM-verse fics, so September first does not always fall so very conveniently on a Sunday as it seems to in the books!

If you've read Death's Dominion, you may also want to read the DD one-shot, "Enter, Peacetime," which is set during and immediately after the final battle. It's available here on TPP.

It is **not** necessary to have read any of the other Resolving a Misunderstanding universe stories before reading A Long Vernal Season. If you haven't read Death's Dominion and you want to, though, I do recommend reading that one before this, since this is the sequel to Death's Dominion, although it's not completely necessary. Death's Dominion is a Snape-centric fic that offers an alternative sixth and seventh year. (If you haven't read Death's Dominion yet, obviously you've had a really big spoiler, knowing that Severus lives and that he didn't kill Dumbledore, but not how that comes about.)

For additional information about the RaMverse fics and about A Long Vernal Season, visit my blog (<http://mmadfan.com>) or my LJ.

If you're interested in an MA-rated Snape one-shot I've written that's not a part of the RaMverse, you could take a look at "Heat."

Chapter Two: An Unusual Invitation

Chapter 3 of 118

Tuesday, 25 August 1998. Severus begins preparing for the new school year when he receives an unusual invitation by Owl Post.



Chapter Two: An Unusual Invitation

Tuesday, 25 August 1998

Severus was just finishing the inventory of his classroom potions cabinet after having restocked it with the most recent shipment of ingredients. He still hadn't spoken with Pomona about the ingredients he needed from the greenhouses, and he would have to do that soon since he would have to order any that she wasn't able to provide...and he didn't want to have to change plans for the first week's classes just because he was lacking the correct herb or root. Students provided many of their own basic ingredients, ones that were used frequently and were easily stored safely, but the others they got from the student stores. At this point, he would have to go to the apothecary in Hogsmeade or the herbarium in Diagon Alley and purchase any missing plant-derived ingredients for the first week himself if he couldn't get them from Sprout.

Severus sighed and sat down in the chair behind his classroom desk. He really didn't want to have to go into the village, and he certainly didn't want to go to London. He didn't really want to leave the grounds at all. Or the castle. Or the dungeons. The trip into the village to have lunch with Hermione and McGonagall the previous day had taken all his energy, and he'd been positively motivated to do that. The only way to keep going, though, was to keep going. He didn't understand why this was so difficult, this *living*, when the Dark Lord was gone, he was no longer spying, no longer being tortured or in danger of imminent death, no longer hiding and pretending. It was just living.

He took a deep breath, preparing to push out of his chair and go find Sprout, who was likely in the greenhouses, when Twiskett popped into the classroom, an owl perched on his head.

The owl hopped off of Twiskett's head onto the desk, the little elf seeming unperturbed by the talon marks left in his scalp, but Severus winced in sympathy. Some Post Owls had difficulty finding him when he was in the dungeons and would fly about the castle in confusion, and so Twiskett had taken it as part of his job to find the addepat birds and bring them to his professor.

"Thank you, Twiskett," Severus said as he took the letter from the owl. "I will bring the owl to the doors." He had to go out to the greenhouses, after all. It would save the

house-elf's head from serving as an owl perch for a second time that morning.

Twiskett bobbed his head and Disappeared.

Opening the drawer in which he had a few somewhat stale owl treats, though the tired Post Owl didn't seem to mind them, Severus looked at the front of the envelope. His name was in block print. He drew his wand and checked the letter for curses and traps. He had received a few jinxed letters whilst he was staying at Spinner's End, poorly cast, easily detected jinxes, and none particularly harmful, but it might be only a matter of time before someone sent something with a serious curse on it. He had received one Howler, a nasty, vituperative, shrieking letter, early in the summer before he had left for Spinner's End. It had arrived during lunch, and a half dozen other staff members had listened in horror and embarrassment as it spewed its bile before exploding, leaving insufficient traces to analyse and discover who the anonymous sender had been. Minerva had cast a charm, tying it into the Hogwarts wards, that would keep out any further Howlers, but Severus knew she would have to lift the charm when the school year started because parents sometimes sent Howlers to their children. Oddly, he hadn't received any Howlers when he was at Spinner's End.

Having assured himself that the letter was completely uncharmed...even the envelope was sealed with some ordinary gummy sealant and not a Sticking Charm...and that it contained nothing more than a single sheet of paper, Severus decided it was safe to open. Relatively speaking. It had the feel of something sent by a Muggle-born or a Squib. It might not be charmed, but it could still contain some nastiness. He stared at the envelope, trying not to think of all of the activities he had participated in, willingly or not, that had injured or killed Muggles, Muggle-borns, and supposed Muggle-lovers.

The owl hooted impatiently. It needed to get back to a post office. Severus slipped the letter into his pocket and held out his arm for the owl. He would wait and read it after he had taken care of his business with Sprout. He didn't want to have to meet with her at all, let alone after having read something nasty. He might be able to maintain a cool exterior with her, but internally, he would be distracted and his stomach in knots if he had just read a nasty anonymous letter. He had never been able to let insults just roll off him, and any about his activities as a Death Eater or a spy would likely be deserved...though the truth behind any insults had never done much to diminish his sense of injury, outrage, and shamed embarrassment at having been singled out.

Pomona looked down at the list. "Don't worry about these others that I don't have, Severus. There aren't many, and I'll get them for you. I think I can get most of them from Johannes, and I'll be seeing him tomorrow. You'll have a fully stocked cupboard before the first!"

Severus thought that he should decline her offer, or at least make a gesture in that direction, but he was relieved by the thought that he wouldn't have to go anywhere to find them himself.

"Thank you. I appreciate that," he said sincerely.

Pomona smiled up at him. "I'm actually looking for things to do now. Filius and I spent most of the summer at Hogwarts so that Minerva, Albus, and everyone else could have time to themselves, so the greenhouses are in better shape than ever and I'm well-prepared for classes. Did you enjoy your summer? Find time to relax?"

Severus shrugged. He hated it when people asked questions like that. He always had. But he knew that Pomona meant well, and he not only had decided to try to think before he reacted and not be as . . . as abrasive as was his wont, but he also lacked the energy at that moment to strike out at anyone.

"It gave me an opportunity to recover fully," Severus replied, trying not to sound off-putting.

"That's good. Perhaps next summer, you will be able to take the opportunity to take a holiday somewhere. I don't know what kinds of things you might enjoy outside of work, but a holiday doesn't need to be an entirely mindless excursion. I've never been much of one for just lying about on a beach, myself." She grinned. "Unless there were some especially lovely young men to watch, although even that can grow dull after a while. Window-shopping can be fun, but after a while, you want to taste the sweets, not just look at them! And that can be fun, too," she added with a wink.

Severus successfully fought a blush. "I tend to sunburn," he said awkwardly. Never mind the fact that he was nothing to look at himself and wouldn't be caught in anything approaching beachwear.

"Ah, well, I was only speaking metaphorically, anyway," Pomona said. "And the most fun on holiday is when you go with others...with a group of friends or with one special friend. You can always go off on your own if you want to, but then you have someone to talk with at the end of the day. Filius and I once took a trip to the Asian subcontinent. We did some things together and others apart...he was not as fascinated by the lecture tours of some of the magical botanical gardens as I was, and some of the things he found entrancing, I found dull, but we still had a wonderful time together."

Severus didn't know why the witch was telling him this unless to provoke his envy, although that seemed unlike her. She sometimes made jibes about Slytherins or about others' peculiar behaviour, but she wasn't sneakily mean or cutting, and he doubted very much she would care, or even imagine, that he might be envious. He thought he had expended his envy quotient for the week during his lunch with Hermione and Gareth, in any case. At that moment, he simply felt weary.

"Anyway, Severus, perhaps you could do something like that. Go somewhere you've never been, accompanied by a special friend, and just refresh yourself by seeing and doing things that are different from your usual routine. Some friends and I used to have a traditional trip we would take together almost every year, though we haven't been able to in recent years, and that was fun. Usually just a witches' holiday, although sometimes we'd have our wizards join us at some point, those of us who were attached." She grinned. "Now that things have calmed down, we might begin taking those holidays again. I'll have to ask the girls."

Severus just managed to keep himself from sneering at the use of the word "girls." He doubted there was a witch under fifty in her group of friends.

"Thank you for attending to the list, Madam Sprout," Severus said with a nod, avoiding any further discussion of holidays, relaxation, and trips with friends, of which he had few, and none who would want to go on holiday with him. Well, that wasn't entirely true; several years ago, Minerva had invited him to the McGonagall Cliffs for the weekend. Not him alone, of course. The McGonagalls were apparently having some large party on that Saturday evening, and she had invited him to come in the morning and stay through Sunday. She had called it a little holiday for him. He hadn't even attended the party on Saturday. He didn't remember why now; he probably hadn't had very much of a reason other than his usual contrariness. That was almost ten years ago now. She hadn't invited him the following year, and then Potter started at Hogwarts, the Dark Lord returned, and all their lives changed again.

Pomona smiled cheerfully. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do to help, Severus!"

Rather than walk straight back to the castle, Severus stopped and sat on a bench not far from the lake. It felt as though the letter were burning a hole in his pocket.

He looked at it again, and at his name in anonymous block letters, then he flicked a finger to slit the top of the envelope open. He drew out the letter and unfolded it. He recognised the handwriting immediately. It was dated the previous day.

Monday, 24 August 1998

Dear Severus,

I hope you are keeping well. I presume from your return to Hogwarts that you have recovered completely from your injuries. My own recovery is still proceeding apace, despite the circumstances.

I wish to speak with you before Hogwarts classes begin again. I invite you to visit at any time between nine a.m. and eight p.m. during the week, or if your visit must wait until the weekend, between ten a.m. and nine p.m. on Saturday or Sunday. I do have an appointment at St. Mungo's on Friday at eleven, but other than that, you will find me at home.

We are residing at number 222, Coopers Lane, Leeds. If you are unfamiliar with that area of the city, you may Floo through to the Wand and Staff. The pub is at the bottom of Furculum Way, seven streets from Coopers Lane, where Furculum ends. From the pub, proceed west on Furculum, go under the arch, turn left on Coopers Lane, and the house is three streets further. The number is on the outside, and you should be able to detect the tingle of the wards several yards before you reach it.

Please do come, Severus. We owe each other nothing, but it is not for my sake that I ask, and we do have a shared history, though it would be foolish to request your presence based upon that.

Sincerely,

Lucius A. Malfoy

Severus stared at the letter. It was peculiar. Apparently Lucius was no longer at the Malfoy manor, and neither had he been remanded to one of the Ministry's new prisons...though that was hardly surprising, given the influence he had once held. He wondered who in the new Ministry had been open to bribery or other subversion. There was still something odd about the letter, though...the visiting hours, for one, and if Lucius had really wanted to see him, he could have named a time and then, if Severus declined, visited him at Hogwarts.

The most peculiar aspect of the letter, however, were the directions to the house. He had never known the Malfoys to be without a Floo connection, even if they usually kept it closed or otherwise protected. The wizard expected him to walk ten streets to get there. Severus didn't know Leeds well, though he'd been in wizarding Furculum Way two or three times, but he had the sense that the neighbourhood surrounding Furculum was far from upscale and primarily Muggle.

It was only Tuesday afternoon. He had time to think about it. From what Lucius implied, Severus presumed that he wanted to speak to him about Draco, though he didn't come right out and say that. It was remarkable, as well, that in his last sentence, Lucius had broken from the distant, formal tone of the first part of the letter to entreat him to visit. Malfoys demanded, they did not beg. Yet that final line . . .

Severus shook his head and pocketed the letter again. He would think about it. He knew he would likely accede to Malfoy's request, but he didn't want to think about it at that moment. But he was Draco's Head of House and the Deputy Headmaster, and it was his duty to meet with parents. Perhaps he could simply suggest that Malfoy come to him at Hogwarts. Friday morning before the other wizard was due at Mungo's...then he couldn't stay long.

Severus heard footsteps on the stairs behind him. With so few people in the castle, it had to be someone looking for him. He stopped and waited, listening as they came down the corridor he had just left. Young, male, tall. Could be Manning, though why an Astronomer would be in the dungeons was a curiosity. Likely needed him as the Deputy Headmaster. Severus turned and headed back, rounding the corner into the hallway leading from the stairs just as the other wizard approached it. His eyebrow rose.

"McGonagall?"

"Hey, I'm happy to see you, too, mate!" Gareth greeted him with a grin. "I thought I'd stop by as long as I was in the neighbourhood, see how you're faring back at the ranch."

"I am fine. And Hogwarts is hardly a 'ranch,'" Severus said icily. He didn't like it when people simply dropped in on him, even people who had every right to, such as colleagues. He hoped that McGonagall didn't plan on making this a habit.

Gareth laughed. "For a man with a such a sharp wit, your sense of humour is sometimes lacking."

"Perhaps it is *your* sense of humour that is lacking," Severus retorted.

"Could be." Gareth stood there looking at him. "So, is this your new sitting room? Or should I say, 'standing room'?"

"It is most definitely your humour that is lacking." Severus turned and began to walk back down the corridor toward his quarters, knowing that Gareth would follow. When he didn't immediately hear the younger man's footsteps behind him, he felt an astonishing sense of disappointment, a sinking sensation in his stomach. But then a few moments later, he heard the sound of boots on the flagstone, Gareth's long stride caught up with his own, and the two wizards walked side by side. Severus realised that he had come to expect Gareth's acceptance and his understanding of him even when he was not overtly welcoming. Was that something of what friendship was?

He shrugged off those thoughts as they reached his door.

"Want me to plug my ears, Snape?" Gareth asked.

"As if I would use only a password to ward my quarters," Severus replied disdainfully. He held his hand to the stone beside his doorway and cast a nonverbal spell. Although the Headmistress's and the matron's passwords would open the door, he himself had devised his own method of casting a nonverbal password charm...useful, too, as he had always declined a door portrait, which was the usual way of setting and holding the passwords at Hogwarts. If he were unable to cast the charm, he did have a back-up verbal password, but he had only used that on a few occasions when the Dark Lord's punishment had exhausted him, and he had reset it each time he had been required to vocalise it. Although security was not as great an issue as it had been, he still liked the elegance of his password charm. It had taken him several weeks to create it and get it right, and he was rather proud of it.

"Impressive," Gareth said as the door glowed and then opened to them.

The corner of Severus's mouth quirked up, but he said nothing. As they entered his quarters, he gestured toward the sofa, inviting Gareth to have a seat. He sat in his comfortably worn armchair.

Unaccustomed as he was to having a social caller, Severus was unsure what to do next, but he thought offering tea might be suitable. It was getting on toward four-thirty.

"Yes, thanks, that'd be good," Gareth replied. "Aunt Minerva invited me to stay for dinner, but that seems a long ways off at the moment."

Severus took the broad hint, and when he called Twiskett, he requested biscuits and sandwiches with the tea.

"So, how have you been faring, Severus?" Gareth asked when the elf had winked away.

Severus hesitated. He had briefly mentioned his sense of dislocation and estrangement when they had met before over the summer. But he was back at work, his injuries all apparently completely healed, and even the mild, lingering side-effects of the magical components of Nagini's venom had completely subsided weeks before. He should be fine now.

"I have begun preparing for classes, much as I do every year, though I am not as prepared as I usually am at this point."

"But how are you?" Gareth persisted.

Severus shrugged. "I am fully recovered from my injuries, I believe, although Melina still wishes to examine me monthly for a while to make sure there are no residual effects. My next appointment is Friday afternoon."

Gareth nodded. "I hope it goes well. Is she coming here? I haven't seen her in a few weeks."

"No. I go to St. Giles Clinic to see her. It was more convenient over the summer to do so, and it is still more convenient than St. Mungo's, not as far an Apparition. I would also prefer not to see a strange Healer, and Melina is only at Mungo's once a week unless she has a patient admitted there."

"Yeah, and I guess she's not taking on many new patients, anyway. I think there are plans underway for her to begin training Healers at St. Mungo's in her method of curse treatment using the *Arrestocordis*, but they move at a snail's pace down there, so who knows when she'll begin," Gareth said. "And otherwise? Feeling any more settled than you were?"

Severus was saved from answering by Twiskett's return with a large tray.

"How are you, Twiskett?" Gareth asked the house-elf as he set the tray down on the small, square table and the wizards got up to move over and sit at it.

Twiskett smiled and nodded.

"We were partners, Severus, Twiskett and I," Gareth said. "He helped me find Malfoy and then he Apparated him to the Hospital Wing. Kept me from being hexed six ways to Sunday."

Twiskett blushed, then reached beneath his tunic-like tea towel and pulled out a cord, holding it out for Gareth to see.

Gareth grinned. "One of Snape's Slytherins!" he said on seeing the charm that hung from the cord, two intertwined snakes, one gold, one silver, each with one tiny emerald eye.

"Mr Blaise gave it me," Twiskett whispered in explanation, tucking it back under his green tea-towel.

"And you well deserve it. Good lad!"

Twiskett looked up at Severus.

"That will be all at the moment, Twiskett," Snape said.

Twiskett nodded cheerfully and Disapparated.

"When I first was getting to know Twiskett, I thought he might be unable to speak," Gareth said as he reached for a sandwich on crusty bread.

"No, he is simply quiet by nature, and that is why he was chosen for me. His silence has been a virtue. He has suited me, although I have not made as much use of him as I might." Severus poured their tea and Gareth helped himself to a little milk for his. "I had not immediately recalled that you and he were the ones who rescued Malfoy."

Gareth nodded, a mouth full of sandwich preventing him from responding.

"What do you know of Malfoy?" Severus asked. He had wondered whether Gareth had known that the wizard he had saved had been one of those who had attacked his mother all those years ago, and an unrepentant Death Eater, even if he had personal regrets about the course his life had taken under the Dark Lord.

"If you are asking what I believe you are, I know he was with you that night," Gareth replied. "Mother said he lost his mask as he fell and she saw him."

Severus set down his cup and shifted. He disliked discussing Professor Gamp or the night on which he had permanently maimed her, but his curiosity won out, and he asked, "Did you know that when you and Twiskett found him?"

"Of course. But whether he had been there that night or not, he was a Death Eater and I'm sure that there were other nights when he committed such crimes and worse, and I know he was a true believer, he never turned away from Riddle or showed any remorse. None of that played any role in what I did. Aunt Minerva asked it of me, and I didn't have any hesitation about doing it."

"Why? Or why not?"

"You know the state he was in. He was a human being before he was a Death Eater, and becoming a Death Eater didn't change that. He simply didn't exercise the positive attributes of humanity. Riddle, on the other hand . . . I think he destroyed his own humanity long ago. I don't know if what was left of him here on earth was human any longer. His body certainly wasn't." Gareth shrugged. "Finding Malfoy, trying to save him, it was the right thing to do. I may not always find it easy to do the right thing, but in that instance, I could have made no other choice. I actually thought he was dead, even after we found him, and was surprised that he was still holding on to life."

"Have you seen him since?" Severus asked.

"No. He was in Mungo's when Mum and I were, but although I was interested to hear news of his condition, I had no desire to see him. Besides, he was in a secure ward. I probably would have had to go through some rigamarole to get in."

"He is apparently out of that secure ward. I had a letter from him today," Severus said.

"Really? Did he want something from you?"

"In a matter of speaking. He wishes to see me. It had almost the sound of a summons, but it was peculiar."

"Where do they have him?" Gareth asked as he Summoned the plate of biscuits.

"If you mean the Ministry, nowhere."

Gareth's brow furrowed. "Nowhere? A man must be *somewhere*, Snape."

"He is living in Leeds."

"The Ministry doesn't have a facility in Leeds...a prison, I mean. Must have him under some kind of parole, probably because of his health."

"Parole?"

"You really *haven't* been reading the papers, have you? Complete revamp of the justice system. Uncle Albus spent a lot of time on it this summer once he and Aunt Minerva returned from their holiday; but rather to Aunt Minerva's annoyance, he even Apparated to the Ministry a few times whilst they were on holiday. Restructured the punishments, created a greater variety...now there's no chasm between paying a fine and ending up in Azkaban, which I'm sure you must know they've closed permanently.

"They're hoping that one side effect will be to stop the slow leakage of the wizarding population in emigration. With all the losses in the war, we can't afford more folk deciding they're better off in Canada or Australia or wherever and moving off. Even without Dementors, Azkaban was a pretty dreadful place, no matter how horrific the crime. But throwing a common thief in there and treating him the same as murdering Death Eaters, well, it may have been something of a deterrent to crime, but it also created a lot of resentment, and in the families of the prisoners, too. Wouldn't be surprised if it was a wonderful recruiting tool for Riddle. And it caused a lot of people, people who might have otherwise been 'Muggle-lovers' and on the side of the Ministry, to leave the country and seek more enlightened pastures." Gareth took a sip of his tea. "So, yes, there's now parole. Not just a free walk like used to happen when someone had enough money to pay off the right people in the Ministry; there are all kinds of

conditions, apparently, but sentences can be reduced or commuted now without it just being a matter of who can bribe the right people."

"He said he is residing in a street near Furculum Way...Coopers Lane, I think he said."

"I know Furculum Way, had a friend who lived there for a while, but I don't know the neighbourhood around it. Are you going to Apparate?"

"I've only been there a couple times about twenty years ago. I believe I will Floo to the Wand and Staff, as Malfoy suggested." Severus shifted in his chair. There, he had made the decision to go, though he still did not want to see the other wizard.

"Want company? We could go together, then when you're done meeting with Malfoy, we could have lunch. The Wand and Staff used to do a good lunch. I've been there more recently than you have, so I could even Apparate us, if you like...at least to Furculum Way. I don't know Coopers Lane."

The idea was completely unexpected. "Ah, well. I don't think so. It's Hogwarts business, I'm sure." He hoped it was Hogwarts business.

Gareth shrugged. "We could still meet after. You might want to talk. Or just have some company."

"I don't know . . ." The idea was beginning to gain in appeal. And if he wanted to leave, he could tell Malfoy that he had an appointment, someone waiting for him.

"I know you don't like to talk about it, but you're probably still adjusting to the new circumstances, and I can't imagine that you're looking forward to seeing Malfoy very much. I wouldn't suggest that you require moral support, but having a friend with you couldn't be a bad thing. I wouldn't go with you to Malfoy's, of course, but I'd be happy to give you a Side-Along to Leeds and then wait for you. We could have lunch or dinner after, depending. If you have time, of course. Aunt Minerva said you've been very busy."

He had an excuse now, if he didn't want McGonagall along. But although he could decline easily, he found himself saying, "It would provide some diversion. And if you know Furculum well, can you Apparate us to the west end of the street? According to Malfoy, Coopers Way is located at the west exit of the street."

"Top of the hill, then. Sure. The pub is all the way at the bottom of the hill; it'll save you a walk, too. Just tell me when. I'm pretty free this week, and as long as I have a little notice, any plans I might have are flexible and can be changed."

"Friday," Severus said promptly. "There's a staff meeting in the late morning, and we're all supposed to attend lunch, too...Minerva wants us to get to know the new staff...then my appointment at St. Giles is at two o'clock. I could meet you in Hogsmeade by three-thirty, I should think, then we could have dinner after I see Malfoy, if Minerva doesn't require me here for the evening meal."

"Why don't I meet you at St. Giles, then? That way if you're done early, we can leave as soon as you're done, and if it takes a little longer, you won't be thinking about having to leave and meet me in Hogsmeade. I can bring a book and read if I have to wait."

Severus shrugged. "As you prefer. I will owl Malfoy and tell him to expect me in the late afternoon. He was open-ended with his invitation; I see no reason to be any more precise."

Over an hour later, Severus was surprised to find that dinnertime had arrived and McGonagall was still there...and not an unwelcome presence. As he and Gareth left the dungeons for the Great Hall, Gareth telling him an outlandish story of some merpeople he had known in the Adriatic, Severus found himself remembering Gareth's words, *having a friend with you couldn't be a bad thing* and he felt an unfamiliar warmth creep through him, and an easing of tension that he hadn't been aware of until it had begun to dissipate. He glanced at the wizard beside him, *a friend*. Too many unannounced visits might become irritating, but perhaps it wouldn't be too onerous if Gareth dropped by occasionally.

Next

Chapter Three: St. Giles Clinic for Magical Maladies

Friday, 28 August 1998

Severus goes for a follow-up examination at the Edinburgh wizarding clinic and receives disturbing news.

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who has reviewed so far! I really enjoy hearing from readers. It's very encouraging!

If you're interested in seeing info and updates for *A Long Vernal Season*, visit my blog (mmadfan.com) or my LiveJournal.

Chapter Three: St. Giles Clinic for Magical Maladies

Chapter 4 of 118

Friday, 28 August 1998. Severus goes for a follow-up examination at the Edinburgh wizarding clinic and receives disturbing news.



Chapter Three: St. Giles Clinic for Magical Maladies

Friday, 28 August 1998

Severus pulled on his short black boots, then stood and picked up his jacket and put his arms through the sleeves. He was wearing his black Muggle suit that day, knowing

he'd be walking through Muggle Leeds later in the afternoon and hoping to avoid too many stares and curious looks. If the weather were cooler, he would have worn his black trench coat, but it was a warm day in late August, and the trench coat would have been too much.

As he tugged on the front of his waistcoat and tried to square his shoulders, Severus pushed aside the worry he felt as he remembered Melina's slight frown as she cast some of the diagnostic spells. She had drawn some of his blood again, something that persisted in making him nervous, despite the fact that he trusted Melina as much as he could trust anyone and she had reassured him that she would perform the tests herself and it would not leave her possession. The last few times he had seen her, she had simply cast diagnostic spells on his blood without drawing any; that she had drawn some indicated to him that the tests she wished to perform were ones that could not be done in vivo.

He didn't know why Melina had felt the need to test his blood so thoroughly again, and that, combined with her expression, caused him a sense of unease. He felt well enough, he'd put on a little weight, and he'd regained full strength and mobility in his right arm, though his shoulder did tend to stiffen up on occasion. He didn't want to imagine what had caused the look of concern to cross Melina's face, or why she was going to test his blood in vitro again when she had stopped doing so weeks before. If he began to imagine it, he would no doubt imagine things far worse than reality.

At least her poking and prodding had been reduced to a minimum, focussing primarily on his right arm and shoulder, and she'd only asked indirect questions about his bits and whether he was experiencing any untoward effects from his injuries the previous April, seeming to be more concerned with any lingering effects from the bite Nagini had given him in May. Fortunately, her questions about his private areas had been worded in such a way that he didn't have to go into any detail. Was he experiencing any difficulty urinating? Was he urinating more frequently or urgently? Did he have any difficulties with his erection or any problems related to sexual performance? It was easy to respond in the negative to each question without having to explain that as he had no sex life, he could not be experiencing any problems with it. Nor did he feel obligated to mention that he was beginning to feel the return of his libido, both emotionally and in a purely physical sense. The stress of the Dark Lord's return had slowly bled him of any sexual desire, and by that final year, he had ceased even missing his libido.

Melina had instructed him to meet her in her office when he was dressed, and, familiar with the clinic from his previous visits, he made his way through the hallways to her private office. He knocked on the door, and it was opened by a cheerful house-elf dressed in a knee-length green dress and a green- and white-striped pinny, one of the free elves who worked in the clinic.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape! I am Spinnet. Healer O'Donald asks you be seated for a few minutes. She'll be quick quick, just a little wait! Can I get you tea or coffee? Spinnet is happy to serve you!"

"No, thank you," Severus replied automatically, immediately regretting it, as he felt he could use a cup of coffee, and he hadn't had any with his lunch.

"It is no problem for Spinnet, sir. I am happy to fetch a cup of coffee for you."

"Er, all right, then. Coffee. Black...no, with cream. No sugar."

"Yes, sir!" Spinnet smiled happily and popped away with a sharp crack.

Severus sat in one of the guest chairs and successfully restrained his desire to look through the files on Melina's desk. She probably had them charmed in some way to protect them against prying eyes; his was likely still with her, in any event. Just as well his curiosity hadn't overcome him, since Spinnet was soon back with his coffee, a small plate of digestive biscuits floating beside it. The house-elf set the coffee and biscuits down on a quickly conjured table.

"I thought Professor Snape might like some bikkies," Spinnet said brightly. She looked around with an exaggerated display of secrecy, then whispered, "These be my favourite bikkies! Not too sweet, just a little sweet with coffee."

"Thank you, Spinnet." Pudding at Hogwarts that noon had consisted of lemon meringue pie and treacle tarts. He liked lemon cream pies, but meringue was disgusting, and treacle tarts were far too sweet. A digestive biscuit might actually be rather nice . . .

By the time Melina had arrived ten minutes later, Severus had forgotten his worry about Melina's frowns and had finished his coffee and biscuits as Spinnet had dusted the bookshelves and entertained him with peculiar half-told tales of the clinic house-elves. Spinnet spun a good yarn, but she always seemed to become side-tracked part-way through one story and would launch into another one, so that by the time Melina arrived, the chattering elf had begun four stories and finished none.

Melina smiled at him as she sat down behind her desk and Spinnet Disapparated. "I'm sorry for the wait. I hope that Spinnet has been good company for you in the meantime."

Severus remembered his concern and immediately put Spinnet and her stories out of his mind. "It was fine."

"You probably noticed that I ran more tests this time," Melina said, briskly getting back to business. "The reason I was late was that I wanted to do your blood work immediately." She withdrew a green-tinged Charmed vial from her robe pocket and twitched a slight smile. "I thought you might like it back now that I'm done with it."

Severus drew his wand to Vanish the vial and its contents, but seeing what he was about to do, Melina jerked the vial away and shook her head. "Allow me, Professor." She raised her own wand and destroyed the blood before Severus could blink.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"I will get to the point. I am not pleased with your magical levels. Your reserves fluctuate wildly when I have you perform the simplest spell, and not only have your reserves not increased since I saw you three weeks ago, but they have decreased slightly. Not massively," Melina qualified, "but somewhat, and that was . . . unexpected. You say that you haven't performed any difficult spells recently or expended your magical energy more than usual?"

Severus shook his head. "I have done a little brewing, performed the usual, everyday sorts of spells, the occasional *Accio*, opening the door, that kind of thing. I did Apparate here today, but I've Apparated much greater distances than from Hogwarts to Edinburgh with no ill effects."

"Recently?"

"No, not recently," Severus admitted. "I've Apparated perhaps a half dozen times since I last saw you, but no long distances, and that's the most strenuous magical activity I've engaged in. As I said, I've done some brewing, but none that took more than a small amount of magic." He hesitated. "I did notice . . . You understand potions brewing. I noticed that the flow of magical energy into the brewing hasn't seemed as steady, as controlled, as I'm used to. But it was nothing that affected the finished potion, so I didn't think very much of it. I thought I was just tired and wasn't concentrating very well."

Melina nodded. "I'm not surprised. You aren't going to like what I have to tell you, but you have to do absolutely no magic, no spells, no charms, no Apparition, no brewing, nothing...and particularly no wandless magic...until I see you next. And I want to see you one week from today."

"But...last time, you said monthly," Severus protested mildly. "And if it's just that my magic is expending itself too easily, I can reduce the amount I use, rest it, but I can't possibly teach at Hogwarts and not use any magic."

"Just for the week, Severus," Melina said firmly but understandingly. "I need to see what happens when you're not using any magic at all. Before you leave my office, I'm going to take one more reading. There should also be a potion waiting for you at the reception desk by the time you leave. You need to take it morning and evening. And definitely contact me if you notice any worrying symptoms. See Poppy immediately, then contact me."

"I don't understand. You said last time that I was recovering well. *I feel* well, except for a bit of . . . of lethargy. But that's something altogether different."

"Related or not, I am glad you mentioned it," Melina said, making a note on the paper in front of her.

"What is the potion?"

"Ferron's Elixir, which is another reason why you cannot exercise your magic for the next week," Melina said, naming a specialised potion used for treating paralytic magical morbilliac fever, a dreadful disease that was now extremely rare, though there had been epidemics of it in past centuries and there were still occasional isolated outbreaks of it. It was the only potion that was at all effective against the magical wasting associated with the disease, but it was dangerous to use any magic while taking the potion. "I am also going to write you a prescription for a variant of the Nagini antivenin potion. You'll need to bring it to my father's apothecary, as he's the only one qualified to brew it...unless you want to take a Portkey to Amsterdam and have Robert brew it for you. As soon as it's ready, I want you to take it according to the directions I will write down for you. One large dose, followed by smaller doses at six-hour intervals until you have finished the bottle. Only three days, Severus, and you can take it orally," Melina reassured him, reading the mounting dismay on his face.

"Will Weasley have to give more blood?" he asked. "And what is the prognosis?" The situation was sounding increasingly serious. Was he going to end up no better than a Squib? How could he teach if he couldn't perform any magic? "I begin teaching on Tuesday. The students are arriving on the thirty-first this year, because the first falls on a Tuesday," he added irrelevantly.

"I am sorry. I am certain it will be inconvenient for you, but better a short-term inconvenience than a long-term disability," Melina said. "And no, Arthur won't have to donate more blood. The variant potion will treat only the magical portions of Nagini's venom. We extrapolated information from his blood previously, as well as having analysed a sample of your own blood from immediately after you were bitten...and since the snake's venom had changed in the intervening years, it is a good thing that we did. However, we also possess actual samples of Nagini's venom that Dumbledore retrieved before he incinerated her and burned down the Shack. That will all be sufficient for my father to brew an effective potion."

"He retrieved her venom?" Severus asked, having so many questions, he didn't know where to begin.

"Her venom sacs and her two upper fangs," Melina said. "He thought they might be useful in your treatment. It was foresighted and cool-headed of him, particularly given the pressure of the circumstances."

"And Ferron's Elixir? That treats a disease. This is not a disease condition," Severus said. He hadn't brewed Ferron's Elixir since he was an apprentice, and he couldn't remember very much about it.

"You can discuss it at greater length with Dumbledore, as I'm sure that he can explain it better than I, since he helped to develop it with Michel Ferron, but the Elixir doesn't act on the disease aspect of morbilliac fever. Rather, it treats the primary effect of the disease; the potion acts on the witch or wizard's magical core and . . . helps to rebuild it, to . . . to plug the leaks and bring the magical reserves back to the patient's natural level. Poppy will need to monitor you to make sure that it's acting as it should. As you no doubt are aware, Ferron's Elixir can be dangerous if taken by a wizard in perfect magical health." She hesitated slightly. "There can also be temporary side-effects regardless of health, but they *are* temporary, and with Poppy monitoring your condition, she can make sure that they don't become too severe, and can have you stop the potion if anything untoward occurs."

Severus digested that for a moment, then asked, "And what did your tests of my blood show you?"

Melina stood and came around the desk, carrying a thick folder and then setting it down on the desk near him with a heavy thump. It had his name on it.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Those are my records? I have seen you only since May...April, if you included the previous event."

Melina quirked a smile. "These include all of your health records since you began teaching at Hogwarts in nineteen eighty-one. Some of the parchments are actually shrunk."

"But I've seen my records there..." Severus began.

"The official records, yes, but when you were ill in April, Poppy made her unofficial records available to me, and I made a copy of them when I began to see you here at St. Giles. Don't worry, they are still very secure. But I needed to have a complete picture of your health and any previous injuries and what treatments you had received...and I misspoke earlier. They also include your records from your days as a student."

Severus stared at the bulky file and watched as Melina pointed out several places in the records where Poppy had made note of his magical reserves and magical frequency, as well as any variations she had detected following different injuries and treatments over the years.

"Poppy was quite thorough and did a very professional job in documenting everything, even when you were receiving unofficial care. It was quite helpful to me when I began treating you for Nagini's bite. But it is clear from examining all of your records that your magical reserves should be much higher than they are now. No previous fluctuations have ever been as wide or created as great a . . . a diminishment and drain as the one you're experiencing now. I am unsurprised that you are finding your fine magic control less than what you are used to. It's fortunate that you haven't been performing any complex or strenuous magic, or you may have injured yourself. You certainly would have been alerted that there was a problem, though."

"What is the problem, precisely?" Severus asked as calmly as he was able, which caused the question to come out of his mouth more like an insult than an inquiry.

Melina ignored the sarcastic tone. "I cannot be very precise. I wish I could. However, the levels of Nagini's magical toxins, which had seemed to dwindle and then vanish...though more slowly than the mundane toxins...have reappeared in your blood in very minute, almost immeasurable amounts, and they are distributed widely, though sparsely, throughout your magical system. I am fairly certain that it is these toxins causing the erosion of your magical reserves. I fear that untreated, they could begin to damage your magical core, possibly irreparably. I am sorry, Severus," she said as she sat back down behind her desk. "I was certain by mid-July that you were completely cleared of the toxic effects, and I hadn't detected any magical toxins in your blood since mid-June...the mundane toxins had been cleared long before that, of course. Your magical reserves and spell-casting seemed to be improving over those weeks. I simply hadn't anticipated this possibility, that the magical toxins were somehow still present at undetectable levels and that they could increase on their own and cause further damage."

Severus gritted his teeth slightly, tightening his jaw, but then he tried to relax. The witch had saved his life, after all, if indirectly. "You had not encountered this particular injury before," he said. "It is unsurprising that there might be unanticipated complications."

Despite the monotone with which the statement was delivered, Melina took the statement at face value as Severus had intended it, and nodded. "I don't believe that we have any cause for alarm just yet, Severus. I believe I caught it in time. We simply need to be more aggressive. There are some Healing spells I can cast, as well, but I want to wait until you have been on the Ferron's Elixir for a week before we use them. You will need some time to recuperate from the spell treatments, too, so I will do it in the Hogwarts infirmary on Friday next, then you'll have the weekend to rest."

Severus blinked. What a start to the new school year, one that was supposed to herald a new life for him, to begin it as an invalid. "I clearly should not have returned to teaching," he said with undisguised bitterness.

"No self-pity, Severus," Melina said briskly. "You are in a good place there. We will treat you and you will recover. Granted, you still have a difficult road ahead of you, and I had congratulated myself at having treated you without having had to resort any of the more enervating spells, but we both relaxed too soon. You have made it through far greater difficulties, dangers, and pain than this, and you will not be alone. You are 'Without Peer' for a reason, Severus; you can do this. We can have faith in each other, I think: you, faith that I will not allow this remnant of Darkness to damage or kill you, and I, faith that you will put forth the effort required for you to recover, including taking the potions I prescribe and resting when you are told."

Severus nodded shortly. "Of course." He would look up Ferron's Elixir when he got back to the castle. He sighed. He couldn't return immediately, and when he did, he'd have to Floo through to the Three Broomsticks and walk back up to Hogwarts. No Apparition. McGonagall was waiting for him, though, waiting to bring him by Side-Along

to Leeds. Perhaps he wouldn't mind Apparating him back to Hogsmeade, or even to the Hogwarts gates, after their outing. He lived in Hogsmeade, after all, and he had to get home himself. He hated having to ask the other wizard for any favours.

"I will explain it to Minerva, if you prefer," Melina offered, seeing his miserable expression.

It would be . . . awkward to have to try to explain to Minerva that he couldn't do any magic for at least a week, and why. He loathed having to request any accommodations. She would be understanding, he knew, but he still disliked the thought of informing her and the implied request it would carry.

Severus shrugged, as though it were no concern of his. "If you wish. I have business to attend to after I leave here." Gods, he did not want to see Malfoy. "It would be convenient if you could inform the Headmistress." He would have to think about how he would deal with his classes. He couldn't do any demonstrations, not even of the simplest potions. He could work around that for four days, but longer . . . He wouldn't think about it yet. Perhaps after Melina's spell treatment on Friday, he could begin using magic again, on a limited basis, at least.

Melina smiled and nodded. "I will be glad to. Is it all right with you if I answer any questions she may have about your condition?"

"It is understood that you may," Severus replied. When he had filled out the forms on his first visit to St. Giles, the welcome wizard had insisted that he complete the section marked "next-of-kin," and at a loss, he had put Minerva's name down and then had ticked the little box that gave the clinic permission to share his health information with her and contact her in an emergency. After all, she had still been his boss, even if he hadn't been certain at the time whether he was going to renew his contract, she was a friend, and she had been privy to his various injuries and treatments for quite some time.

"All right, then. I'll probably pop over and have a chat with her, since I haven't seen her in a while, anyway, and we can speak in private that way," Melina replied. "Let me take one more reading and transfer the results to parchment, and then if you'll be patient just a few minutes longer, I'll write out the prescription for you to bring to the Egidius Apothecary. Be sure you give it directly to my father, though. His previous apprentice is on holiday and his new one just came on last week. I wouldn't want the girl to think she could try to brew this, if she could even manage to decipher the instructions."

"I can wait," Severus said as Melina waved her wand and multicoloured symbols began to float in front of him, "but I believe that McGonagall...er, Gareth, may have arrived. We have an errand and he said he'd meet me here."

"Go on out to the reception area, then, see if he's there, and I'll be out in about ten minutes. Don't forget to ask at the desk for the Ferron's Elixir." Melina put her glasses on and began to write out the prescription for Murdoch to fill.

Gareth had his nose buried in a book when Severus found him in the reception area. He looked up and smiled. "Ready to go?"

Severus shook his head. "There's a potion I need to pick up at the desk, and O'Donald has a prescription for me. I have to wait for that. She said it wouldn't be long. If you can't wait..."

"I'm here to bring you to Leeds, for us both to go to Leeds together. Of course I'll wait," Gareth replied.

Severus didn't respond, simply turning on his heel and heading toward the reception desk. It was practical to have McGonagall there to Apparate him to Leeds, but now he didn't want the energetic younger wizard's company. He didn't want to have to attempt to be civilised and polite, and he didn't want to have to accept McGonagall's help because he needed it. It had been different when it had been purely a matter of convenience because McGonagall was more familiar with Furculum Way and could Apparate them both there, and he had grudgingly appreciated that McGonagall understood that meeting with Malfoy would be difficult for him and that having a . . . a friend meet him afterward might make the meeting easier for him, but now that he was incapable of Apparating without endangering his magical health, like some doddering hundred and eighty year-old wizard whose faculties and magic were failing him, Severus found McGonagall's company an irritation.

The welcome wizard was a young, acne-spotted wizard who had left Hogwarts after his OWLs a few years before. Severus greatly preferred it when the receptionist was a grey-haired granny in a flowered bonnet or one of the welcome-elves, but Arnold Hill simply nodded at him, opened a drawer, and drew out a tall, narrow blue bottle with a glass stopper and a maroon wax seal. Hill set the bottle on the desk in front of him, ran his fingers over a sheaf of parchments, then plucked one out, folded it, and put it and the bottle in a small brown paper sack with twine handles.

"If you have any questions, sir, please don't hesitate to place a Floo-call. Our apothecary is on duty from eight-thirty to four-thirty daily during the week, and one of her assistants is always available when she is not." Hill gave a brief smile as he handed Severus his bag. "It's my job to tell you that, Professor. I'm sure you know about the potion you've been prescribed. But if you have any questions at all, do call through."

Severus nodded and went to sit beside Gareth, one chair separating them. Healing Potions was a specialised discipline; the master he had been apprenticed to had been less interested in the Healing arts and more interested in potions that would require the attention of a Healer after administration. As an apprentice, Severus had brewed all of the most standard Healing potions, and a few of the more esoteric ones as well, but the emphasis of his studies was not geared toward a career at St. Mungo's, or even as a general apothecary. Although he could open a Potions shop with a variety of useful nonmedicinal potions and some of the most commonly used Healing potions, he couldn't open an apothecary and expect to be able to compete with the well-established apothecaries whose focus was on pharmaceutical potions.

He could brew any of the Healing potions, of course, but each time he brewed one he hadn't brewed before or hadn't brewed in a long time, he would have to read up on it. But other than the simplest ones, he also probably couldn't brew them as efficiently as an experienced apothecary, and so it would cost him more time to brew them, at least in the beginning. Besides, there were a handful of well-established apothecaries in Britain that had loyal clienteles stretching back generations. It was unlikely that someone would go to a new, untested apothecary on a whim to get their Healing potions...particularly one that was owned by a former Death Eater. Still, a generalised potions shop might be more satisfying than an apothecary, provide more variety to the brewing, though there was still the problem of being a former Death Eater. Of course, all that might be moot if his magic disintegrated.

Gareth glanced over at Severus, who was just staring into space, thinking about former Death Eaters brewing Healing potions and about what might happen to him if his magical core was slowly destroyed.

"Everything okay, mate?"

"Hmm?" Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Everything all right? Just wondering about the potions . . ."

"Fine, McGonagall." After a moment, he added, "Before we go to Leeds, we need to Floo to McTavish Street. I need to stop at the Egidius Apothecary."

Gareth nodded. Severus could feel the younger wizard's gaze on him.

"We could Apparate, Snape. It's just a short hop."

"I am under Healer's instructions not to Apparate," Severus said in a harsh whisper. "Read your book, McGonagall."

Gareth shrugged and turned back to his book.

Severus had been so focussed on the problem of his magical drain that he hadn't asked Melina whether the magical toxins would have any other effects on him. Worry about magical depletion was pointless if the toxins could kill him. She had said something about not letting them kill him. He glanced over at Gareth, and the alert wizard looked up and met his gaze.

"She found more toxins in my blood. Some side-effects. It's nothing, I'm sure, but she says it has to be treated." Severus shrugged one shoulder.

"Ah." Gareth was quiet for a moment. "This sort of thing is her specialty. I'm sure you're right. No cause for worry. But better safe than sorry. Handy I met you here to Apparate us, hmm?"

Severus grunted in response. Surely ten minutes had more than passed. Where was that blasted witch?

"Do you mind telling me what the potion in the bag is?" Gareth asked.

"Nosy, aren't you?"

"Can't be a Ravenclaw without suffering from terminal curiosity, Snape!"

The wizard probably had never heard of the potion before, anyway. "Ferron's Elixir," Severus said stiffly.

Gareth's eyebrows rose. "Really?" He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again, glancing over at the middle-aged witch a few feet away. "I helped my brother brew that one winter."

So he did know what it was for. Foolish not to have remembered that McGonagall had spent his teens living with an apothecary and helping in his shop. At least the Ravenclaw was discreet and hadn't announced to the entire world that he was taking a potion used to treat a deadly contagious disease. Small consolation. Hermione's optimistic smile flitted through his mind. He was still in no danger of becoming a Pangloss, he thought, and that fact reassured him.

Next

Chapter Four: Through the Looking Glass

Friday, 28 August 1998

Severus meets with Lucius Malfoy in his new home.

Characters: Lucius Malfoy, Severus Snape

Author's Note: If you've forgotten Gareth McGonagall's precise relationships to the other characters in the story, he is Minerva's nephew, the son of her late brother Malcolm and Gertrude Gamp. Gareth first appeared in *Death's Dominion* in Chapter Thirteen, "And the west moon." His introduction to Severus was somewhat rocky, as you may recall! Melina is one of Gareth's cousins, the daughter of Minerva's brother Murdoch.

If you haven't read [Death's Dominion](#), it's here at TPP, and I really recommend reading that one before reading *Long Vernal Season*. It is not necessary to read *An Act of Love*, though.

Interested in the new staff members mentioned in Chapter One, or just want to try to remember who they are when they are mentioned? I posted a list of them, with a little bit of biographical info on each, on my [MMADfan.com blog](#). Click on the tab that leads to the Compendium, "Who, When, Where."

Chapter Four: Through the Looking-Glass

Chapter 5 of 118

Friday, 28 August 1998. Severus meets with Lucius Malfoy in his new home.



Chapter Four: Through the Looking-Glass

Friday, 28 August 1998

Rather than Disapparating from the corner of the reception area intended for such departures, Gareth had suggested they find a spot behind the ancient stone building, out of the view of both Muggles and wizards. Severus wasn't unhappy with that suggestion, since he disliked having anyone seeing him being Side-Alonged like some invalid. As soon as they arrived in the small park near the Egidius Apothecary, Gareth dropped his hand from Severus's arm.

"It's only a little after three," Gareth pointed out as they walked down the park path toward the apothecary. "We have time for a quick cup of coffee after we drop off the prescription, if you like. Both the Cailleachan Café and Aphrodite's Apple have good coffee...or tea, if you prefer."

Was the younger wizard trying to avoid having dinner with him that evening? Substituting a quick coffee in McTavish Street for dinner in Furculum Way? Perhaps he'd had a better offer since they'd seen each other on Tuesday.

"Perhaps. But you needn't feel obligated, McGonagall. Or to stick around for dinner. I don't know how long I'll be at Malfoy's. I can Floo to the Wand and Staff on my own."

"Aren't in the mood to go out for dinner, Severus?" Gareth asked, pausing at the end of the path. "That's fine, though I'd been looking forward to it. But I understand if you're not feeling up to it. I'll still give you a Side-Along to the top of Furculum Way and wait and give you a lift back to Hogwarts, if you like. It's a long walk from the Three Broomsticks to the castle at the end of a tiring day."

Severus twitched one shoulder noncommittally. He stepped onto the pavement and strode toward the apothecary. If he didn't want McGonagall's company now, he had a good excuse to decline it. Somehow, though, the prospect of going to Leeds alone and then Flooing alone back to Hogsmeade after meeting with Malfoy seemed worse

than having McGonagall tagging along.

"We'll see. I need to speak with McGonagall...Murdoch...about the potion, anyway."

"Want me to wait in the café?"

"No need, unless our conversation goes long, then you're free to leave as you wish," Severus replied.

"Mm, I can poke around the shop if I become bored," Gareth replied.

Severus didn't respond, simply pushing open the shiny green door and entering the cool apothecary. He could hear a sweet, mellow chime coming from above, and immediately following the bell, hurried light footsteps came from the backroom of the shop.

A young blonde witch in an apprentice's cap stopped behind the counter, momentarily startled, then she asked, "May I help you, Professor?"

"I will speak with your master, Miss Turpin," Severus replied stiffly.

Gareth grinned at her, recognising her from the battle and the awards dinner. "Good afternoon, Miss Turpin! Just let Murdoch know that his nephew Gareth is here with Professor Snape. It is good to see you again, and under much more congenial circumstances!"

Lisa smiled and blushed, surprised the wizard had remembered her. "I'll fetch him for you at once, Professor. I believe he is free now." She may have been addressing Severus, but her eyes were on Gareth.

After she had disappeared into the depths of the apothecary's workrooms, Severus looked around him. He hadn't been here in more than a year, and not since it had been rebuilt. The apothecary was pleasingly arranged and well-lit, both from the large windows at the front and one side of the building and from Charmed daylight globes that hung at intervals from the high ceiling. He wandered among the shelves, coming to one area that was less well-lit and kept artificially darker than the rest of the shop. He nodded with approval. Not only were these light-sensitive ingredients and potions kept in a darker part of the shop, but they were in Charmed glass-front cabinets, and Severus was certain that the glass had been charmed so that the ingredients were visible from the outside but the light did not seep through to the ingredients. The jars, crocks, vials, and bottles were all opaque, as well.

A pleasantly throaty woman's voice reached his ear.

"Gareth! You should have let me know you were coming! I would have prepared tea for you and Professor Snape."

"Hi, Estelle," Gareth replied. "We didn't know we were going to be coming. We also have other errands. Is Uncle Murdoch on his way?"

"Yes, he said it'd be just another minute or two. He was at a vital stage and didn't want to relinquish his stirring rod to me at that point," the witch replied, a smile in her voice.

Severus stepped around the corner toward the centre of the shop where Gareth and Estelle were standing near large baskets and urns of bulk potions ingredients. Estelle turned toward him.

"Professor Snape, so good to actually meet you," she said, her hand extended. "I'm Estelle McGonagall."

"Madam McGonagall," Severus said with a nod, shaking her hand briefly.

"It is you we have to thank for the survival of the Egidius Apothecary," she continued, "and I'm glad to have the opportunity to thank you myself."

Severus nodded again. "I understand that it was not without cost to you both, however."

She shrugged. "A few bruises, some minor burns. We were both fine. And the apothecary needed renovation, anyway." She smiled broadly. "I'd been after Murdoch for some time to modernise things. Turns out it was for the best that we didn't do it any earlier, but now we have things we'd only dreamed of on paper before."

A heavy but lively tread approached them from the backrooms, and seconds later, Murdoch emerged, pulling off a leather apron as he stepped out into the shop.

"Professor Snape," he said, acknowledging Severus first, "I had a Floo conversation with Melina and she said you'd be coming, but I didn't expect you so soon. She said you'd have a prescription with you?" As Severus handed him the sealed envelope, Murdoch smiled at his nephew. "Good to see you, too. Didn't know you'd be along."

Gareth gave a crooked grin. "We have a few errands today, then we thought we'd grab a bite somewhere."

Murdoch had unsealed the envelope and was perusing the long parchment he'd pulled from it. He nodded. "It will take a while to brew this . . . Estelle, why don't you call Turpin back out here and have her do something useful in the shop whilst I show Professor Snape the new laboratories and work areas? If, of course, you have a few minutes," he added, turning to Severus.

"Only a few," Severus said, although he was interested in seeing the older Potions master's new labs. "I have an appointment soon."

Gareth said he would prefer to pass on the tour, since he'd seen the new workrooms before, but Severus followed Murdoch into the apothecary's backrooms. They were, indeed, impressive, and Murdoch pointed out the improvements they'd made when they rebuilt the apothecary that summer, having staged an accident just days before the attack on Hogwarts. By blowing up their own apothecary, he and Estelle had been able to save most of the shop's stock and the stores of potions ingredients, as well as escaping any serious injury themselves. Their apprentice, Lawrence Shelby, had been staying the weekend with his parents, so he had been entirely unhurt. Their own injuries had been deliberate, in order not to make the explosion appear to be anything other than an accident.

"The last time we had any extensive damage to the shop was an accident back in forty, and my wife was killed and our apprentice severely injured, so at the time, neither I nor Uncle Perrin were in any mood to think about improvements we might be able to make to the facilities," Murdoch explained. "I'd made improvements here and there over time, of course, but nothing as thorough-going as this."

Severus felt awkward and just nodded. The two wizards discussed some of the various changes and improvements Murdoch had made, the different work surfaces, the various modern Charmed cupboards for storing ingredients, and even separate laboratories kept at different environmental conditions for the preparation of ingredients or the brewing of potions.

"Now that we have three rooms with easily set environmental charms and not just the one charm-controlled lab as we had before," Murdoch said, "we'll be much more productive and efficient. Before, we had one of these labs and two basic workrooms where we'd cast limited charms on the area around the workbench if we needed them. I feel positively spoiled now."

"They are impressive. Certainly on a par with the Potions laboratories in St. Mungo's, and I doubt there's another apothecary in Britain that is more well-equipped," Severus said.

"It's got nothing on the apothecary I visited in Tokyo several years ago, but for this corner of the world, it's not bad," Murdoch said. "The one room that's more or less the same is the apprentices' workroom. It's still in the back of the stone cellar and looks almost identical to mine when I was an apprentice here back in the thirties," Murdoch said. "Of course, once an apprentice begins to brew any of the more complex potions or ones that I will stock in the shop, they usually do the work in the main apothecary workrooms."

Severus nodded. "I was unaware that Miss Turpin was your new apprentice."

"I know that it's usual to ask for a reference from you, but I knew what you'd gone through. I didn't want you to have to bother with it. I accepted her conditionally on her performance on her NEWTs and her work in the revisions sessions I held at Hogwarts. Minerva had made her records available to me. She's only been here a week, but I think she will do well."

"NEWTs results aren't out yet," Severus said, slightly puzzled.

Murdoch grinned. "I sat in on the practical portion, then got Slughorn and Birch to let me read her essays. Not precisely standard practice, but we didn't want to wait until November to start the apprenticeship...and I wanted to be able to begin looking for another candidate immediately if she weren't suitable. Theodore Nott had actually applied, as well, but that was before the . . . before everything."

Severus swallowed and looked away toward the neatly arranged potions ingredients laid out on the slate-top table. Nott could have had such a promising life, and he had had to throw it all away, joining Goyle in killing Sinistra. He must be in one of those "facilities" which Gareth had spoken of.

"I have an actual office now, too," Murdoch said, opening the door at the back of the workroom they were in. "Always used to have paperwork and such scattered about between here and my study in the flat. Drove Estelle and Quimpy crazy, even if I knew where everything was." He set the prescription down on his desk. "I'll get started on your potion as soon as you leave, Severus, but it will take some time to brew. It should be ready tomorrow evening. I'll send it to you, or bring it myself, as soon as it's ready."

Severus nodded, looking at the envelope. "May I see it?"

"Of course." Murdoch handed it to him.

As Severus expected, the first section seemed less a prescription than a description of the potion, what it was to achieve and what ingredients Melina expected Murdoch to use in it, but then it was followed by what appeared to be a potions formula, but with directions containing symbols that he didn't recognise and with several points at which he would have expected at least an indication of what should be done next, but where Melina had only slashed a solitary solidus, the usual potioner's symbol for "proceed as usual." Since this was not a usual potion belonging to a particular class of potions, Severus could not see how there could be an "as usual."

He looked up at Murdoch. "I presume you can brew this."

Murdoch twitched a smile. "Yes. It is a variation on the one that we created before you were bitten, and similar to one that I brewed for you as you were recovering. It probably didn't make terribly great sense to you, even as an experienced Potions master. It's written in a combination of St. Gile's conventional prescription symbols...which are almost identical to those of St. Mungo's, if you're familiar with them...and those of the Egidius Apothecary. With, of course, a dash of McGonagall idiosyncrasy," he added with a slight grin. "At some stages of brewing, she's leaving it to my judgement as Potions master how to proceed, of course, since it's not a standard potion. I hope that you will trust that judgement, as well, Severus."

"Of course." Not that he had any choice in the matter. And it did seem that father and daughter had managed the other experimental potions well enough. He glanced at the century clock on the shelf beside the desk. Past three-thirty already. "Thank you for the tour. It is quite impressive."

"I'm always happy to show it off to another Potions master. Stop by any time...and if you ever would like to do a little brewing in one of our environmentally controlled labs, just drop me an owl. I'm sure you can do whatever you need to at Hogwarts using temporary charms, but sometimes it's nice to have the room doing that work for you."

As Severus followed Murdoch back into the shop, he heard a giggle. McGonagall was leaning casually against a wall, one hand resting on the corner of the wall just above his head, smiling down at a blushing Lisa Turpin, his eyes sparkling. Turpin still had her apprentice's cap on, but sometime between fetching Murdoch and returning to the shop, she had let her hair down from where it had been pinned up under the dark red, brimless cap. Severus was disgusted; Turpin was usually quite the sensible Ravenclaw, not given to fits of giggling or foolish female vanity. It looked as though she had even applied a make-up charm of some sort to her lips. So much for Estelle setting the apprentice to some useful task. The Potions mistress was behind the counter, totting up an inventory.

"Coming, McGonagall?" If he didn't come, he could Floo from Aphrodite's Apple to the Wand and Staff and then walk.

Gareth immediately straightened up, winking at Lisa and telling her that he was sure he'd see her again soon. The apprentice actually giggled again. Severus's lip lifted in distaste. He turned toward Estelle.

"Pleasure to meet you, Madam McGonagall. Thank you again for the tour, Murdoch," Severus said, determined to be the perfect image of courtesy despite his companion's ill manners. At least he was their relative, and not his.

As soon as they were out the door and onto the pavement, Severus said, not looking at Gareth, "Do you have to chat up every eligible witch you come across, McGonagall? The girl's an apprentice, for Merlin's sake."

"But not mine," Gareth said lightly. "And it was just one witch, not the entire universe of witches. Just a bit of harmless flirting, Snape, that's all."

"You distracted her from her work."

"Hardly," Gareth replied. "Estelle told her to help any customers who came in, and there weren't any." The two wizards entered the park and Gareth stopped. "It really bothers you, doesn't it?" he asked, puzzled.

"It was unbecoming behaviour," Severus replied stiffly.

"I doubt that was it, Snape."

"I believed you had more sense, and Turpin, too."

"More sense than to take the opportunity for a little fun? I'd say you need to lighten up, but that would be pointless. We were just chatting, Snape. We weren't planning some sordid assignation or something."

"Hmph. Sure you don't want to stay and 'chat' with her, McGonagall?"

Gareth took in a breath, held it a moment, then let it out. "If we weren't in public," he said in a low voice, "I would tell you precisely how I feel about your asinine insinuations. Let's just Apparate to Leeds, and for the moment, I'll try to ignore the fact that you're behaving like the hindquarters of a cantankerous Jarvey. I'll put it down to those toxins in your blood." He took Severus's elbow. "Ready?" When Severus nodded curtly, Gareth Disapparated them with a sharp crack.

Severus looked around. They were standing beside a wall of dark brick. Furculum Way was below them to their left, and a narrow alley led off to their right. Stepping out from the shadow of the wall, he could see now that it belonged to a large building that extended to both sides of the high street, perhaps some kind of warehouse; an arched passageway extending over the street connected the two halves of the large building and allowed Furculum Way, narrowed at that point, to pass through it, presumably ending at Coopers Lane.

The high street led its crooked way down a steep hill, narrow wizarding streets crossing it every so often, and Severus could just make out a large sign jutting into the road from a building near the foot of the hill, the golden staff of the Wand and Staff clearly visible on it even from that distance.

"Have your bearings now, Snape?" Gareth asked.

Severus nodded.

"Why don't we meet in the pub at half past six," Gareth suggested. "If you're later than that, I can have a pint and wait for you. If you're earlier, I'll likely be in the Lucky Goose, which is a stationer's a couple shops from the pub, or in the Dusty Tome, a used book shop about halfway down the hill on the right-hand side. Or you can go on ahead to the pub. You haven't had any of your potion yet. You could have a pint, if you like."

Severus grunted slightly in response. He rarely drank. It had not been a wise thing to do when he had been a spy, and even aside from that, between his desire to remain in control of himself and his memories of his father's drinking, alcohol hadn't ever held much appeal for him.

"You want me to take your bag for you?" Gareth asked. "I'll be careful not to mislay it or anything."

Severus handed him the brown paper bag. Better not to show up at Malfoy's carrying it. He wondered how he would manage not using any magic in his presence. Hopefully, such an occasion simply wouldn't arise.

"Six-thirty is a bit late," Severus said. "It's only four now. I hope not to be longer than an hour with him, at most."

"Six, then, and I will probably be spending most of my time in the Dusty Tome," Gareth replied. He hesitated. "You know, Snape, I can imagine that if I had been to the Healer today and had received news like you did, I might not be up for socialising, so if you change your mind, I will understand, but on the other hand, if you feel like talking about it, I wouldn't mind listening. And if not, then you might just like to get your mind off of it for a little while, have a nice supper, talk about other things."

Severus nodded. Somehow this time, Gareth's words didn't make him wonder whether the other wizard would prefer to be off doing something else with someone else who was more congenial company. Gareth still put up with him, strange as that seemed to Severus.

As Gareth headed down the hill, Severus passed beneath the archway that led to Muggle Leeds. Despite the fact that there were a few other witches and wizards also walking through the passage, either coming or going, it felt desolate, almost eerie. Trying to place why that should be, Severus became aware that his footfalls on the cobblestone were deadened, almost soundless, and although he could feel the damp in the air and see a rivulet of water running along a narrow channel into a drain, he couldn't hear any of the sounds he would have expected to hear in such a place. It seemed that charms had been laid upon the tunnel-like alley, among them, ones that would dampen any sounds. There were no doubt also charms that would distract Muggles from noticing the passage's existence, perhaps making it invisible or appear to be an unbroken part of the building that surrounded it.

As he approached the Muggle street, he felt a shimmer of wards as he passed through some unseen boundary, and the sounds of traffic reached his ears and the daylight beyond seemed brighter. Just before he reached the Muggle pavement, there was a grey-painted steel door to his left that had "Maintenance Fire Control" stencilled on it. To his right, a glass door led into a Muggle newsstand. Through the door, he could see the crowded shelves and counters of the shop, and could look right through the windows that faced Coopers Lane. Automatically reading the backwards lettering on the large windows, Severus saw that this was Westerbrook's Newsstand, and it carried "newspapers ~ magazines ~ sweets ~ postcards ~ tobacco," and large swirling red letters beneath it all declared Westerbrook's to be a vendor for Coca-Cola, as well.

Severus looked behind him. The passageway was still obviously there to him, though it seemed foggy and indistinct from this side. He imagined that if he were a Muggle, he'd likely see nothing but a brick wall, perhaps a few trash bins, and immediately lose interest in anything other than the newsstand.

Coopers Lane ran along the crest of the hill, at only a slight grade for the few blocks that Severus had to walk. He found number two twenty-two quite easily. As Lucius had said, he could feel the tingle of the wards around it before he reached the house.

He stood at the bottom of the steps and looked up at the new home of Lucius Malfoy. From the outside, it looked no different from any of the other row houses on the street. There was a bay window to the right of the door, and two more on the first and second floors, and only two other small windows were visible from the street, one over the other above the door, perhaps to provide a little natural light in a stairway. But, despite its three stories, it was clearly a very small house. There appeared to be a basement flat, as well, with an entrance below the stairs to the main house.

Nothing for it but to go up and ring or knock, Severus thought with an internal sigh.

At the top of the stairs, Severus saw a plain brass knocker in the centre of the door and a small black button set into the doorframe. Out of curiosity, he pushed the button. A shrill buzzing sounded somewhere behind the closed door. A few moments later, Severus heard a shuffling sound, then the door opened.

If he had not known that he was calling on Lucius Malfoy, Severus would not have recognised the man who answered the door. Though not the bag of bones he had become by the Battle of Hogwarts, Malfoy was still gaunt: thin, parchment-like skin drawn tightly over prominent cheekbones, the once aristocratic nose now looking more like a narrow beak, the formerly sharp and commanding eyes now dark, shadowed sockets, and the previously thin but still sensuous lips, reduced to merely a dry, pale outline of his mouth. His long, fine, straw-blond hair had been cut short at some point, or it had fallen out, and he hadn't grown it back yet; his receding hairline led to short white tufts, and sparse sideburns led to a poorly shaven jaw. Rather than holding the aristocratic silver-topped black walking stick as he used to, Malfoy now leaned upon an ordinary aluminium cane with a grey rubber foot, the sort that any Muggle might use. He wore dark grey trousers, a white shirt open at the collar, and a loose, calf-length, unbuttoned light-weight grey robe over it all.

Long years as a Death Eater spy spared Severus's face from betraying any reaction, but internally, whatever he had expected, it was not the sight that met him, and he was stunned.

The man at the door nodded and made an attempt to smile in greeting. "Severus. Thank you for coming." He stepped back to allow Severus to enter.

"Malfoy." Severus nodded.

Lucius closed the door, then turned to his visitor. "I am afraid I must ask you to place your wand in that basket for a moment," he said quietly but matter-of-factly. At Severus's slightly raised eyebrow, he explained, "It is one way they track my visitors and what magic might be used on the premises."

Severus drew his wand from his inner jacket pocket and placed it in the basket that Lucius had indicated. The basket glowed for a moment, and then there was a little click.

Lucius nodded. "You can take it now."

Severus pocketed his wand.

"If you'll come through here," Lucius said, indicating the door to the right of the small entry hall, "we can speak comfortably."

Severus opened the door and stepped into what could have been a typical Muggle living room in a house anywhere on the street. Other than the sofa and the small Queen Anne desk, he recognised nothing from Malfoy's previous home. It could be that the Dark Lord had despoiled it all, but Severus found that unlikely. Then he caught sight of the cords leading from the lamps to the wall sockets. Curious. And the telephone on a stand beside one of the armchairs, even more so.

"Please, have a seat. Make yourself comfortable," Malfoy invited him.

Severus sat in the armchair beside the telephone, and Lucius sat in one across from him, resting his cane against the arm of the chair. Severus could now see a dark blue ring encircling the other wizard's ankle, his trouser leg tucked into it. Hardly a fashion statement, but Severus was at a loss to know what it was for.

Lucius saw Severus's gaze fall on the anklet, and he gave a crooked smile. "You have noticed my new adornment. It is a Charmed anklet, another of our newly enlightened Ministry's innovations. Among other things, they know where I am at all times with this. I can't remove it without numerous unpleasant consequences. It's hardly pretty, however it is more comfortable with the trousers in between it and my ankle; since it doesn't affect its functioning, the Ministry doesn't care how I wear it as long as I do. I also can't step beyond the doorstep without having the MLE descend upon me, except for prearranged outings, such as the one this morning to Mungo's."

Severus nodded his understanding. "And this house? They provide it?"

"One could say that, though the money for it comes from the rent the Ministry is paying me for the manor."

"Rent for the manor?" This last bit of information was finally too much for Severus, and his face showed it.

"You haven't heard?" Lucius asked. "The former home to generations of Malfoys is now a prison. They don't call it that, naturally. It is a 'minimum security facility for the rehabilitation of low-risk transgressors.' Whether there or here, I would be a prisoner in my home. Better to be here."

"No, I hadn't heard. I didn't take the *Prophet* during the summer," Severus replied.

"I also pay restitution from the rent the Ministry is paying for use of the manor. In two thousand eighteen, they will have the option to purchase it for a nominal sum, or I may reclaim it at that time. During the intervening period, they lease it and I pay my bills from the proceeds. In the end, I obtain a small monthly allowance from it, sufficient for my current needs."

"But your other holdings, your Gringotts accounts..."

"What wasn't taken by our former master . . . what he did not use, what very little was left, they allowed me to sign over to Draco to avoid having it become part of my restitution payments. There are no more Gringotts accounts."

"Narcissa's money, from her side of the family," Severus said questioningly.

"Gone. Most of it spent bribing the Ministry the first time they wanted to send me to Azkaban. I had always planned to restore it someday . . ." He let out a harsh sound, possibly a laugh. "Now I haven't even a legacy to leave my son, nothing but a disgraced name."

"The restitution will not be indefinite, surely."

"No, not indefinite, but when it's finished . . . the manor will belong to the Ministry, and I will have paid my restitution. I may sound bitter, but I am not. The Ministry did give me options. I should say more properly, the Ministry gave me options and the Wizengamot approved my choice. I could have spent the next thirty years of my life in prison...thirty years, minimum, possibly with a reduction in the sentence at some point if I was 'well-behaved.' If I were lucky, I would have placed in a minimum security facility, and likely in some . . . prison infirmary for the first few months. But eventually, I would have been sent to one of those 'facilities,' and I would be given work to do and Merlin knows what else. Malfoy manor would have remained ours, but with no Galleons to keep it up and no house-elves left, Draco and Narcissa would have found it impossible to maintain. There were a couple other possible options presented to me. This seemed the most expedient course to take. I am not allowed to carry a wand or to use any magic outside of my magical rehabilitation at St. Mungo's, or even to use any Charmed objects other than those on a very short list approved by the Ministry, but I find myself not caring much. My health is such that I am unable to do very much more than sit and read, anyway. We do have a back garden that I am allowed to use. That has been pleasant." The wizard sighed. "I do regret it for Narcissa. She never had very much to do with my business, any of it, though she was . . . she was always there when I came home." He swallowed, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing. "But we are happy enough here. Narcissa is glad to be back in England, I believe."

"Where is she now?" Severus asked curiously, wondering whether Malfoy's wife had undergone a similar change as her husband...although living in Sweden under the protection of the Order had saved her from the wrath of the Dark Lord.

Malfoy's eyes seemed to deaden further, and his pale face became more pinched. Barely moving his lips, he said, "She is at work. I expect her home shortly after five o'clock."

Work? A Malfoy working at an ordinary job? "She has obtained employment?" Severus asked, phrasing his question as politely as possible.

Malfoy nodded. "It supplements our income, and she prefers to be occupied. Twilfitt and Tatting's has a shop in Furculum Way. She preferred that to their London location. More convenient."

Severus also assumed that Narcissa did not relish the prospect of seeing her former friends and acquaintances in Diagon Alley. She would still see some who knew her, but fewer, and as Furculum Way was not considered as upscale as Diagon Alley, those whom she did see would likely not include those who had once been a part of her "set"...if any of that set were still alive and free. Severus felt for a moment as though he'd stepped through Lewis Carroll's looking glass and had found himself in a world in which everything was turned upside-down. It had only begun with the on-going peculiarity of his own survival and then spread out from there.

He had been attacked by the Dark Lord and his familiar, Nagini, and had survived. Sinistra, good Slytherin and admirable witch that she was, had been leading her students to safety within Hogwarts walls, and she had been killed by a couple teenage wizards in her care. He had cold-heartedly maimed a witch, and now, years later, her son called him "friend" and was meeting him for dinner. He, the half-blood son of a drunken Muggle and a weak witch, was Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Lucius Malfoy, a pureblood born into wealth and privilege, was living in a small Muggle house, surrounded by electric lamps, and Narcissa Black Malfoy was a shop assistant. Somehow, the only normal thing in his life seemed to be the news that he still had Dark toxins in his blood, and that they were multiplying and destroying his magic. That seemed real; all else, strangely unreal.

Next

Chapter Five: An Alternative Treatment

Friday, 28 August 1998

Severus learns why Lucius wished to see him, then he takes his leave of Lucius and Narcissa.

Author's Note: *If you're enjoying the story, I'd love to hear from you!*

Chapter Five: Alternative Treatment

Chapter 6 of 118

Friday, 28 August 1998. Severus learns the reason for the invitation, then takes his leave of Lucius and Narcissa.



Chapter Five: Alternative Treatment

Friday, 28 August 1998

"And Draco?" Severus asked, finally broaching the subject he assumed to be the reason for Malfoy's invitation.

Lucius averted his gaze, looking toward the cabinet that held a Muggle radio.

"He has returned to England with Narcissa, has he not?"

"Yes." Lucius's voice was rough, and he cleared his throat. "Yes, he returned with his mother."

"And I presume that your invitation was in order to speak with me regarding him?"

Lucius nodded. "Thank you for taking care of him, Severus," he said softly. "Narcissa told me that you delivered him to safety after Dumbledore's death...what we all presumed was his death."

"I delivered him to the Headmistress at her behest. It is she whom you should thank...and Dumbledore, as well as those who created their haven in Sweden. I believe that both Andromeda and Nymphadora had a hand in it as well," Severus said. "I merely acted in compliance with the Vow I made to your wife; they, however, acted wholly of their own accord."

Lucius lifted his eyes to look at Severus. "Are you saying that you would not have tried to protect him had it not been for the Vow?"

"No. I would certainly have done at least the little that I did in bringing him to the Headmistress. He is a Slytherin, and was a student under my care. But had I believed that the Headmistress would send him to Azkaban, I would have nonetheless acted as I did, even if it had meant my death from breaking the Vow. And it was not for Draco's sake that I took the Vow, though I was not indifferent to his fate, but because it was in accordance with the Headmaster's wishes that I protect him."

Lucius thought about that a moment. "Nonetheless, I thank you. And I know that I neither hold nor deserve your loyalty. But you are the Head of Slytherin and Deputy Headmaster. Draco will be returning to Hogwarts to complete his studies. The Headmistress would not allow him to apply to take his NEWTs independently. He does not wish to return, but his mother persuaded him to do so. His future is far more dependent upon his NEWTs than it would have been . . . in a different time."

"And you want me to do what?" Severus asked, trying to get the man to come to the point.

"Watch over him. He bears a stigma now. It will be quite different for him in Slytherin than it once was, as it was when he entered Hogwarts."

"He is a Slytherin, but he is also an adult. I will offer him whatever advice or assistance he requests that I can also reasonably give him as Head of Slytherin. It is what I would do for any of my students."

Lucius seemed weary. "Yes, I am sure you would. But perhaps . . . if you could approach him, at least remind him that you are his Head of House and that he can turn to you."

"I speak with each of the students individually during the first few weeks of term," Severus replied. "I will schedule him for one of the first meetings. But you know, Lucius, that your son will not be alone if he finds certain aspects of Hogwarts and Slytherin student social life not to his liking. He himself has been on the other side of things in the past," Severus replied, remembering that he certainly never had been one of the popular ones the way that Draco once had been, never had the status associated with a pureblood name, nor that brought by good looks, athleticism, or charm. He had watched the Potters, Blacks, and Malfoys of the world smile their charming, superior, gleaming smiles, and had seen the world smile back at them. It might be chastening for Draco to experience being on the other end for once, perhaps have *his* book bag jinxed, lose *his* Potions project that he'd worked on for three weeks, hear the laughter of those who saw the tears well up in his eyes . . . *Snivellus*. Severus shook himself internally.

"I will do what I can, Malfoy, and I will speak discreetly with the Headmistress and the other teachers. I will not show any favoritism, however, and I will not insulate Draco entirely, but we will try to ensure that his life is not made too miserable. It is the Headmistress's desire that the school try to heal after the past years of discord and division." Minerva had tried to actively recruit Slytherin staff, but unfortunately, the depredations of the previous few years, and the number of Slytherins who had joined the Dark Lord and who were therefore 'unavailable,' had significantly reduced the candidate pool. Among the new staff, only the new Transfiguration teacher, Olivia Ouellette, daughter of the former Minister for Magic, Oliver Ouellette, was a Slytherin.

"That is all I ask . . . although . . ."

Severus waited.

"If you could perhaps speak to him about his name." Lucius looked uncomfortable. "He does not speak to me any longer, you understand. Narcissa says that it is a phase. Perhaps she is right. But he wishes to change his name. If a son could disown his father, I believe that he would do so. Narcissa has persuaded him to wait for a few months, to be sure it is what he wants to do. Could you speak with him about it?"

Severus felt unaccountably amused. "Why should he not change his name if he wishes? What does he want to change it to?"

"Possibly to Black. I don't know," Lucius said wearily. "But if he does, I will be the last of the Malfoys."

"Lucius," Severus said with a shake of his head, "that is hardly a crisis for the human race...or the wizarding race, if you prefer. And there are probably Malfoys you don't even know about. Probably even some very nice Muggles named Malfoy, and related to you in some way, too."

"You couldn't understand..."

"What I don't understand is why you care." Severus gestured toward him. "You are under house-arrest, or whatever they're calling this, you can't use magic, your own options in life will be quite limited for decades, at least, your health is poor...you're lucky to be alive, as they say. If you can accept all that, or at least deal with it, I don't understand why you should care whether Draco changes his name or not. He'll still be your son, yours and Narcissa's. And unless your health prevents it, you and she may still have other children someday, if your pureblood name means that much to you." Severus didn't keep the derision from his voice when he uttered those final words.

"It isn't just about blood," Lucius said softly. "It is partly that. But he's my son. I understand why he feels like he does, but . . . he is my son."

Severus understood now. It wasn't simply about the Malfoy name and bloodline; it was Draco's personal rejection of his father.

"I will speak to him. But I will only help him to see his options clearly, and the issues involved. I will not try to sway him one way or the other. If you wish to sway him, Lucius, I suggest you begin this very day by trying to become a man he can be proud of."

Lucius gestured at his own wasted body, then laid his hand on the rubber grip of his aluminum cane. "You see me, my circumstances. What you suggest is impossible."

Severus shook his head. "No, not impossible, simply extremely challenging. You have some intelligence, Malfoy. Use it. It would give you something to spend your time on, something other than sitting in your garden dreaming about what might have been. You're right about one thing, of course. It is impossible to change who you were and what you have done. I encounter that same truth on waking each morning and am reminded of it constantly. But show some ambition, Malfoy! Aim for something more than you were, something *other*."

"Easy for you to say: you chose your sides well."

"Not well: late. And hardly easy." Severus stood. He had nothing more to say to this wreck of a man. Lucius did not yet understand the nature of his choice, that it had meant more than choosing sides and picking the winning one. Until he did, Severus doubted that the other wizard could move beyond what he was and where his previous choices had brought him.

"When *did* you choose, then?" Lucius asked, suddenly looking up at him sharply.

Severus looked down at him. "Before his first defeat. You have surely learned that from the *Prophet*. And it is still a choice that I make every day. I must leave now; I have a friend waiting for me in the high street. We have plans for the evening."

"Narcissa will be here soon..."

"Give her my regards..."

"There she is now," Lucius said as the sound of the opening door came to them and, a moment later, Narcissa's voice calling out. He looked more lively than he had since Severus's arrival.

"Lucius, I brought us some take-away..." Narcissa said as she came into the room carrying two white plastic bags. "Oh! Severus! It is good to see you. Lucius said you were calling today."

The aroma of curry reached Severus's nose. He nodded. "Narcissa. You appear well."

Narcissa smiled slightly and inclined her head. "Thank you. You do, as well. I was distressed to learn you had been so ill."

"Severus was just on his way out, darling," Lucius said.

"Can you not stay longer? Did Lucius provide you with refreshment? Would you care for tea or a sherry?" she asked, setting her bags down on a side table.

"I cannot, but thank you. A friend is waiting for me." McGonagall would probably still be pottering about the bookshop, but Severus did not want to remain. This had not been a social visit.

"What a pity," Narcissa said, and Severus read in her face the truth of it: they had no social visitors, and even his company would have been welcome diversion for her. "Perhaps the next time you call..."

"Perhaps," Lucius said, interrupting his wife. "Thank you for stopping by, Severus."

"Good evening, Lucius," Severus said with a nod, "Narcissa."

"Who is your friend?" Narcissa asked as she moved slightly to one side to allow Severus to pass through the doorway behind her. "Anyone we know?"

"Narcissa..." Lucius began.

"I only wish to know whether I should send my greetings, darling. I have been quite busy since our return to England," she continued, turning toward Severus. "I have not perhaps been as diligent in renewing social ties as I ought to be."

"It is Gareth McGonagall. I rather doubt you are acquainted with him. He has lived abroad much of his life and only recently returned. He's the son of Headmistress McGonagall's late brother and his wife, Professor Gertrude Gamp."

Narcissa looked blank, but in Lucius's face, Severus detected distinct surprise.

"Very nice for you, I'm sure," Narcissa said pleasantly, "to have new friends. So many of the old crowd . . . there have been changes." She looked around her, as if to remind herself of the changes in her own life. "Darling, would you take the bags through to the kitchen, and I'll see Severus out."

Lucius brought his cane around and pushed himself up out of his chair. Narcissa followed Severus out of the room.

"If you could place your wand in the basket before you leave," Narcissa said.

Wordlessly, Severus drew his wand and placed it in the basket. After the glow and click, he removed it, and Narcissa opened the door for him then followed him out onto the front steps.

"Thank you for visiting, Severus. I am sure that Lucius appreciated it. Things have been difficult for him. Did he speak with you about Draco?"

"He did."

"Draco won't even speak to Lucius any longer. He even moved out of the room I fixed for him up on the first floor and moved into the downstairs flat. He and I . . . we became closer while we were away. He does not wish to become estranged from me, but he is upset with his father. I counsel patience to Lucius, but he has lost a lot. He does not want to lose his son, too."

"I can only do so much, Narcissa, and your son is an adult. It is up to him...and to Lucius. Now I must go."

"Are you really meeting Professor Gamp's son?"

Severus nodded.

"I'd read that his mother is alive. I had believed for years that she was dead," Narcissa said. "Doesn't he care that you were once a..."

"He does not care that I was once her student," Severus replied with a sneer, "if that was what you were about to ask. As for anything else, he is intelligent and a very astute judge of character. Good evening, Narcissa."

Severus hurried away down the street toward Furculum Way, leaving Narcissa Malfoy to step back into her Muggle house and close its solid door behind him.

Since it wasn't yet even half past five when Severus reentered Furculum Way, he decided to stop into the Dusty Tome. If McGonagall were there, they could leave

immediately. If he weren't . . . perhaps he might browse. He normally liked wandering about bookshops, wizarding or Muggle, particularly ones selling used books, but he felt restless and in no mood to look at books or anything else.

He strode quickly down the centre of Furculum Way, looking for the Dusty Tome, side-stepping when a Charmed, elf-driven cart came up behind him and bleated its horn. As the cart turned down a narrow street, Severus saw the shop on the corner, its sign an open book, binding on one side, opened pages on the other.

He pushed against the brass plate above the doorhandle, opening the bright grape-coloured door. A tangle of bells jangled cheerfully above his head, drawing the attention of the two wizards standing at the counter. One of them was McGonagall, the other was a wizard whom Severus recognised as Tarrant McPherson. He'd taught McPherson during the Hufflepuff's last years at Hogwarts, and McPherson had been his reason for establishing the requirement that a student attain an Outstanding in their Potions OWL in order to proceed to the NEWTs level class. McPherson had received an Exceeds Expectations in his OWL, and Severus assumed that was only because the examiners' expectations for the boy had been so low. The Hufflepuff was no Longbottom, but he was at the bottom of his NEWTs class, and it was sheer luck that he'd received an Acceptable on his Potions NEWT.

Gareth grinned at him. "Severus! Glad you found me. D'you know my friend, Tarrant McPherson? He manages the shop."

"Professor Snape," Tarrant said, some surprise showing on his face, but then quickly masked. "Gareth mentioned he was meeting a, um, friend." He shot Gareth a side-long glance.

Severus raised an eyebrow and addressed Gareth. "Yes, your directions were adequate, McGonagall. Mr McPherson," Severus said with a nod. He looked around him. Despite the name of the shop, it was not at all dusty, though it was crowded with used books of various ages and conditions. "I was unaware that you had entered the retail business."

Tarrant flushed slightly. "It's one of my uncle's shops. I've brought it up quite a bit. He's better with curiosities than with books. If you're interested in a specific subject, Professor, I could direct you. It's all well-organised. We carry both wizarding and Muggle publications."

"Look at what I found," Gareth said, pulling a long narrow tube from somewhere behind him. "It's a present for my Uncle Morgan. He's a nut about old wizarding maps showing former boundaries and such."

Severus looked at the large map as Gareth unrolled it. The map depicted Scotland, England, Ireland, and many of the small islands between them. He twitched a slight smile at the quaint depictions of a sea serpent in the Sound of Jura, a Welsh Green spitting flames in the Cambrian Mountains, frolicking clauricorns dancing in the west of Ireland, an ugly buggane scratching its hairy chest and dominating the small island of Man, and a giant and giantess sitting beside a flickering campfire in the remote Scottish Highlands. Ornate gold lettering in the bottom right-hand corner boasted that the map was the result of the *"Personal Explorations and Measurements of Hezekiah Ambrosius Drinkwater, Master of Magical Cartography, Anno Domini 1547."*

"Very nice," Severus said in true appreciation. The parchment was still in excellent condition, the pictures, still animated, and the colours, still bright. He didn't know McGonagall's Uncle Morgan, but it did seem a splendid present. "He will no doubt be very pleased."

"Did you want to look around a bit, Snape? If we have the time," Gareth said. It seemed to him that Severus looked more tired than he had when they'd left St. Giles.

"On another occasion, I believe," Severus replied.

Gareth took his leave of his friend, and the two stepped out onto the pavement.

"Where to, Snape? The Wand and Staff? Or elsewhere? It's still early yet."

Severus looked down the hill. From that vantage point, the Wand and Staff was no longer visible, too many twists in the road between them and the pub. It felt very far away. He was beginning to get hungry, but had no real appetite. It had not been a good day. He shook his head slightly.

"I don't think so."

"Let's walk a bit," Gareth suggested, touching Severus's elbow briefly.

They headed down the hill, walking slowly and stopping occasionally to glance into a shop window.

"You mentioned the Lucky Goose," Severus said. "Did you need to get anything there, or was it just a whim?"

"I could use another few reams of plain Arithmancy parchment, but it's not essential I buy it now," Gareth said, referring to the precisely measured sheets of parchment preferred by most Arithmancers, sometimes available with specific charms already on it. "How was your visit with Malfoy? Was it Hogwarts business?"

"Partly, I suppose. It was . . . oddly disturbing," Severus replied. "His health is clearly poor, and he is living under some kind of house-arrest. Narcissa returned before I left. She is much the same, though she seems to have a peculiar attitude toward the current state of affairs. She appears to be coping, however."

"If it isn't indiscreet to ask, what did he want?"

"Help with his son. At Hogwarts. And apparently the younger Malfoy is disaffected and will not speak with his father." Severus gave a slight twitch of his shoulder. "There is little I can do about that, nor do I particularly want to. But I said that I would speak to him, though not specifically on Lucius's behalf."

"It must have been a strange meeting," Gareth observed.

Severus didn't reply. The entire day had been odd, and not pleasantly so.

"You know, I have an idea. If you aren't set on eating at the Wand and Staff, that is," Gareth said.

"What is it?"

"Listen, let's stop by Melina's first so that I can check with her about it first. Don't want to do anything that would compromise your health. I can drop my things off with her, too."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "We shouldn't bother her at home."

"She's my cousin, remember? I'm just dropping by. Come on, I'll Apparate us." He took Severus's arm and drew him into the doorway of a shuttered shop. "Hold on."

A moment later, Severus found himself in the large entry hall of a private home. Narrow stained-glass windows flanked the door, there was a telephone on a small telephone table, and to his left, there was a hatrack with a cloak and a raincoat hanging from it.

Severus looked up as a slim elderly gentleman came down the stairs and stopped on the landing.

"Gareth! And Professor Snape, if I'm not mistaken." He came the rest of the way down the stairs and held out his hand to Severus. "Brennan O'Donald, Professor. A pleasure to meet you."

Severus, somewhat bemused, took O'Donald's hand and shook it. The other man still stood ramrod straight and his blue eyes were bright.

"Gareth, I wish you had phoned ahead! I can still set two more places at the table, though. It's Friday, so it's spaghetti night, and there's always plenty," Brennan said.

Melina skipped lightly down the stairs and joined them, dressed as Severus would never have imagined seeing her, wearing a light, sleeveless Muggle summer dress and strappy sandals. She smiled at them as she took her husband's arm.

"I hadn't expected to see you again today, but as Brennan says, you're both welcome to stay for supper. We'll be eating in about a half hour. Since Brennan doesn't let me in the kitchen when he's cooking his sauce, you'll be saddled with my company in the meantime," Melina said brightly.

As Melina squeezed Brennan's arm and looked up at her husband with a smile, Severus had a sudden curious sense of double-vision, as though he saw Brennan as he was at that moment and also as he once was, the years dropping away from him as he looked down at his wife and returned her smile with a warm one of his own. Severus felt the hitching of an unfamiliar emotion in his chest, and he averted his eyes.

"Sorry, Melina, I think we have other plans...unless Severus would like to stay?" Gareth said turning to Severus with his question. At the other wizard's slight shake of his head, Gareth continued. "I just wondered if we could drop a few things here for a while, and I need to speak with you, Melina."

"Of course," Melina replied. "Bren, could you take Severus into the living room...unless you need to stir or correct seasoning or something?"

Severus followed Brennan to the right, into a large, comfortably furnished living room, and sat when the older man invited him to. He saw a glass fish bowl with sparkling Floo powder in it. Brennan followed his gaze.

"We're on the Floo Network. We had to put some strong wards on it during the last couple years of the war as a safety precaution, but now it's just the usual again."

"Don't you have Muggle visitors here?" Severus asked, slightly puzzled.

"Of course. And Melina closes the Floo to visitors and callers when we do...and whenever she leaves the house, as well, just in case I have company whilst she's out...and she redirects it to one of the unused upstairs bedrooms." Brennan chuckled. "She used to redirect it to our bedroom, but she forgot about it one night, and we were quite startled when Minerva flashed into our room in the middle of the night!"

"That must have been disconcerting," Severus remarked.

"Yes, but not as bad as if it had been her dad," Brennan said, still chuckling. "It's always open to family, you see...except during the trouble with that Riddle fellow, of course. Melina was concerned that it was a weak point." He shrugged. "I leave that sort of thing up to her."

"What do your Muggle friends think about the Floo powder?" Severus asked, thinking it would be much more discreet to keep it in an opaque container, even if it wasn't obvious what it was.

"Hmm? I suppose they either don't notice it or they think that it's potpourri or something," the Muggle replied.

Severus wondered where Gareth was and what he was discussing with Melina. "Been here long?" he asked, trying to fill the time.

"Since we were married. We rented at first, then bought it. It's been comfortable, and when I was still working, I could easily cycle in, or even walk."

"You were a chemist?" Severus asked, dredging up what little he had heard about the man.

"That's right. Had my own shop. It became difficult to beat back the big chains, but Quin used to exert a bit of influence, and then Alroy after him, and there wasn't another chemist's within over a quarter mile of my shop for years."

Severus raised his eyebrows.

"I know what you're thinking, and I had some misgivings at first, but Quin said that Boots and the others all had the power of money and exercised it. It wasn't as though they were terribly disadvantaged. And my customers were well-served."

"He interfered with Muggle businesses?" Severus asked frankly.

"He wouldn't have put it that way. He has a lot of Muggle holdings, himself. He didn't use magic, other than a bit of his own personal charm. And when I was ready to retire, my shop got quite a good price. Boots has it now. They expanded, knocked into the shop next door."

"How long have you and Melina been married?"

"Forty-one years last week," Brennan replied.

Severus wanted to ask him if he'd ever regretted it, but that didn't seem the most polite question to ask a man he'd only met ten minutes before. He supposed that forty-one years spoke for themselves. That and the aroma of marinara sauce coming from the kitchen.

Brennan was just inviting him to join him in the kitchen while he gave the sauce a stir when Gareth bounded into the room, followed by Melina.

"Ready, Snape? You might want to use the loo before we go. We got the green light from Healer O'Donald." Gareth was grinning...rather madly, to Severus's eye.

Severus stood.

"It's the second door to the left off the entrance hall," Melina said helpfully. "And I insist you cooperate with Gareth. He has a fine idea. Very good alternative treatment for you! Just tell him if you become tired. I'll arrange to have your Ferron's Elixir sent to Hogwarts. You can pick it up from Poppy in the morning before breakfast and take your first dose then." At Severus's incipient protest, Melina said, her eyes sparkling, "No, you don't want to bring it with you. Trust me on that!"

When Severus emerged from the loo a few minutes later, Gareth was standing in the foyer with Melina, waiting for him.

Melina turned toward him. "Brennan enjoyed meeting you, but he had to go take care of the things on the cooker. He said to tell you to feel free to drop by any time you're in Edinburgh and that you're always welcome for spaghetti night!"

"Ready to go, Snape?" Gareth asked.

"Where are we going?" Severus asked, uncomfortable with the thought of some unplanned outing.

"You'll see! Trust me, Snape! You might want to loosen your tie, though, mate." When Severus didn't make a move to loosen his tie, Gareth shrugged and took his left arm. "It's a bit of a hop, so hold tight!"

Severus grimaced but he raised his right hand and grasped Gareth's arm.

"Bye, Severus! Enjoy yourselves!"

Melina's words still in his ears, Severus felt Gareth's Side-Along Apparition take him with a jolt and a bang. He blinked, completely disoriented. It was noisy and the smell of fried foods drifted through the air. Bangs, clangs, whistles, shouts, laughter, music . . . Severus looked up at the Ferris wheel going round. He blinked again.

"What the..."

"Time for some fun and some food, Snape!" Gareth said cheerfully. "I thought we'd start with the fun first, unless you're hungry. Some target games are always good, even without magic, maybe go through the funhouse and then...well, I'll save the best for last, and leave it as a surprise for you. It will do you good, though!"

Gareth walked a few feet then turned. "Coming? Hanging about behind the booths isn't nearly as much fun as getting out and seeing what's going on in front of them."

Severus stepped forward. "This is Melina's idea of 'alternative treatment'? We were going to go to dinner. This is . . . this is just foolishness."

"Of course it is! The very best kind of foolishness. Trust me, Snape! And your Healer did tell you to cooperate!" Gareth grinned. "Loosen your tie...or take it off! And put this on!" Gareth tossed him a gold wristband, then turned and set off briskly, walking toward the sound of laughter and loud music.

Severus shook his head, loosened his tie, and followed.

Next

Chapter Six: Race Cars Go "Vroom"

Friday, 28 August 1998

Severus finds his "alternative treatment" peculiar, but enjoys it despite himself.

Characters: Severus Snape, Rubeus Hagrid, Gareth McGonagall, Melina O'Donald, Brennan O'Donald

Note: *Thanks to everyone who has reviewed so far! It's encouraging. :-)*

Chapter Six: Race Cars Go "Vroom"

Chapter 7 of 118

Friday, 28 August 1998. Severus finds his "alternative treatment" peculiar, but enjoys it despite himself.



Chapter Six: Race Cars Go "Vroom"

Severus choked back a laugh, then let it out. Gareth had just tipped himself over trying to swing a sledgehammer, and he hadn't even hit the target. Grinning, Gareth got back up and gamely tried again. This time he was successful, and the counterweight rose up on its track several feet before falling back down with a thud.

"Three tries, right?" Gareth asked the attendant, who nodded. "Okay. Just getting warmed up with those first two."

Severus smirked and watched as Gareth hefted the hammer, took in a breath, then raised the hammer and swung. Severus's eyes followed the counterweight as it shot up and rang the bell, and his smirk transformed into a grin, which vanished as quickly as it had come. Gareth had recommended sticking with the arcade area with the traditional games, which had been fine with him, as he complained that he hadn't had any choice about being there in the first place. So far, they had tossed rings and shot pellet guns, something that Severus had turned out to be surprisingly good at. He had won an electric torch with a radio in the handle and a crank to charge its battery. It was supposedly waterproof and buoyant, as well. Useless at Hogwarts, but it had a nice heft to it.

Gareth hadn't been quite as proficient at the shooting, to Severus's surprise, but he had managed to win a small stuffed purple elephant with a bendable trunk. When Severus had teased him about it, Gareth did something vaguely obscene with the elephant before stuffing it into his sporran, only its purple trunk emerging. Severus shook his head. Puerile foolishness. But amusing.

Melina had instructed Gareth to avoid any of the roller coasters or similar thrill rides, but had approved of the rest of Gareth's plan, which he wasn't sharing with Severus.

"Vroom-vroom-vroom!" Gareth pretended to fly his most recent prize toward Severus.

"Don't you know anything, McGonagall? Helicopters do not go 'vroom-vroom.' Race cars go 'vroom.'"

"So what do helicopters do?" Gareth asked, steering them toward a darts game.

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know they don't go 'vroom-vroom'?"

"ThwppthwppThwppthwppThwpp," Severus replied, feeling foolish. "The sound of the rotors," he added.

Severus looked down at his gold wristlet and was reminded of Malfoy's anklet. "Where'd you get these? Transfigure them?" he asked, wondering if they were stealing from the Muggles who ran the amusement park.

"Nope, they're genuine," Gareth replied. "Of course, yours belongs to Brennan, but I don't think Alroy would mind."

"Alroy gave them to you?"

"The entire family gets annual passes for all the Golden Cup parks and attractions. The day passes are green for the kids and red for adults," Gareth said, gesturing toward the other visitors, "and they're embossed with the name of the specific park and the date. Ours just have a cup on them and an identity number."

"Odd sort of gift," Severus remarked.

"Mmm, I suppose, but when we were younger, we enjoyed them a lot...still do. Uncle Albus always used to come to one of the parks at least once a year, and Robert, Thea, and I would join him. Minerva came some years, too. It's not really her cup of tea, though. Too much noise, I think."

Severus could sympathise.

"Besides," Gareth continued, "it doesn't really cost them anything. It's part of the MacAirt family business, the Golden Cup Parks and Resorts."

"They own the Golden Cup parks?" Severus asked, astounded.

"Yep. One of the things that Quin was able to keep up with after his, um, injury. It used to be just one small amusement park and one resort, and after his injury, they devoted more resources to it, and it's grown a lot since then. They just referred to it as the GC Enterprises, though, to avoid reminding him of his golden cup."

Severus stopped, and was immediately run into by an entire Japanese family. He didn't even notice. "Wait, wait, wait. Explain."

Gareth stopped and turned. The Japanese family smiled at him as they went around the two men, the youngest one pointing at Gareth's kilt and giggling.

"Explain what?"

"MacAirt. He taught at...he taught with me last year. Are you saying he owns all this? And . . . and more?"

"Well, not all of it himself, of course. As I said, it's a family enterprise. And there may be other shareholders. I don't know. I don't really understand Muggle businesses."

Severus stared at him.

"Come on. I want to throw some darts before we eat, and I'm starving!"

Severus caught up with Gareth, his mind turning over what he'd been told. No wonder the Dark Lord...Riddle...had hated Quin MacAirt. He was surprised he'd left the rest of the family alone. He couldn't begin to imagine what had enticed Alroy MacAirt to teach at Hogwarts the previous year. Must have been motivated by hatred for Riddle and what he'd done to his father.

"And 'Golden Cup'? Does that refer to what I think it does?" Severus asked, trying to remember the story of Cormac Mac Airt. He'd never been much of a student of Celtic legends.

"I'm not a Legilimens, Snape, so I don't know what you're thinking. But if you're referring to the cup of truth and lies, yes."

"That's just a myth."

Gareth laughed. "Darts, Snape! Then food!"

Gareth turned out to be better at darts than at the other games they had played, and won several prizes, giving them all away to the children standing around, except for a little crystal bud vase. Severus declined to try the darts, though he had enjoyed seeing Gareth win. He really was very good at it.

"Keeping this one for Mum," he explained, tucking the vase away with his elephant. "Now, for food. I'm famished."

He led the way toward the food stalls, and Severus became aware of just how hungry he was, and it all smelled delicious.

"What are you up for, Snape? Indian, barbecue, burgers, fish and chips, chipolatas, tempura? Or we could go to the cafeteria over there. They have a lot of the same stuff, but a bit more pub grub. Further on, there's a real restaurant, specialises in seafood."

"I don't know." Severus looked around him. There was too much choice. Inexplicably, his heart began to race and he felt dizzy. He blinked.

"Come over here. Sit down," Gareth said, leading him over to a small, round moulded plastic picnic table. "I'll get us both a couple plates of food, pile them up with everything, and you can take your pick."

Severus sat and looked up at Gareth. "Do you need money?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out his green and silver striped tie. "Wrong pocket." He felt in his trouser pocket for his money clip and loose change. He'd brought some Muggle money with him, knowing he'd be walking through Muggle Leeds, and wanting to be prepared.

"No. It's on me. You can get the next snack." He turned to go, then stopped. "What would you like to drink?"

"Doesn't matter."

Several minutes later, Gareth returned, carefully balancing a tray piled with food and carrying a drinks holder with four large cups in it.

"Fanta, Coke, mineral water, and something called a grape slushy. Take your pick and help yourself to whatever you want to eat." He dropped a pile of serviettes on the table, then sat as he reached for the barbecued ribs.

The two men ate in silence for a while, Severus enjoying the tempura still hot from the fryer, then moving on to a bowl of curry and a samosa.

"The pizza didn't look very good to me, so I didn't get any of that," Gareth said, reaching for a sausage. "There's a couple burritos under the plate of nachos, though."

"We can't eat all this," Severus said.

"Maybe not, but we can have fun trying!" Gareth took a swallow of his grape slushy to wash down his sausage. He started in on the nachos. "So, I gather from the Ferron's Elixir and the ban on Apparition and so forth that you've got some specific problems to deal with."

Severus looked around them. No one was paying any attention, and with the ambient noise, he doubted anyone would hear very much they said, anyway.

"Melina said that the toxins are coming back," he said softly. "Not the mundane ones. The others. Multiplying on their own. They are . . . I don't know, eating away at my core, affecting my reserves. My energy fluctuates a lot when I do . . . you know."

Gareth's brow furrowed. "But I thought that those were cleared out weeks ago."

"So did I. So did Melina, clearly. If she weren't as thorough as she is, we probably wouldn't have noticed it until the damaging effects on my ma on my reserves were severe. I am lucky, I suppose," he said, not sounding as though he felt very lucky.

"It must be disturbing."

Severus put down his half-eaten burrito. Disturbing. That was an understatement.

"Sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. So the Elixir is to help with the effects, and I presume that Uncle Murdoch is compounding something to deal with the cause?"

Severus nodded. "It's never-ending, you know, McGonagall?" He shook his head. "But I should have expected it. Expected it more than anything else in my life at the moment, anyway." He looked around him and let out a slow breath.

"It is all an adjustment for you, I'm sure. But a lot of it can be good, even if it takes getting used to. It will be good."

Severus gave a sceptical snort.

Gareth smiled and poked him in the side. "You're here with me now, after all. A feast spread out before us? That's good, right? And we haven't even hit the ice cream stand yet!"

Ice cream . . . as though that would solve anything.

Gareth ate the rest of the nachos, then slurped up the last of his slushy. Severus sipped his water.

"Finished?" Gareth asked. At Severus's nod, Gareth almost forgot himself and reached for his wand to banish the remains of their meal, but then he picked up everything and stacked it on the tray. He carried it all over to one of the trash bins and dumped it. He looked back at Severus, who was just pushing to his feet.

"I think we'll wait a bit for our ice cream. Maybe have that just before we go home," Gareth said as Severus walked up to him. "Let's walk a little, and then we'll go for the highlight of the evening. All right with you?"

"Since I don't know what you have planned, I can't say," Severus replied, sounding surly.

Gareth ignored him and they strolled back toward the arcades. "Let's do the funhouse now. I love the mirrors!"

Severus shook his head, but followed him to the funhouse and its moving, undulating walkways, trick doors, and distorted mirrors.

"There's a waterpark, too," Gareth said as he reached out and grabbed Severus to prevent himself from falling over on the shifting gangplank they were crossing. "Next time, we'll come early in the day and do that. It has the longest waterslide in Europe. That's open year-round, too, even after a lot of the park closes for the winter."

Severus stepped lightly across one moving plank and onto the next. It was rather satisfying, he supposed, particularly seeing the way that Gareth had to keep grabbing the rail. Next, he crossed a pathway made up of wooden rollers that spun as you stepped on them. Gareth didn't even try that one, taking the solid walkway beside it.

"I do not like getting wet," Severus said, now walking across a series of oddly spaced, pointed wedges.

"What are you, a cat or something?" Gareth asked, watching him nimbly cross the walkway.

Severus shrugged. He'd never been terribly athletic, but he did have a good sense of balance.

After a few more minor obstacles and a number of funny mirrors, the two exited the funhouse.

"I'm ready for ice cream!" Gareth declared.

The two got their ice cream, Gareth insisting that Severus get a large cone, though he had claimed not to want any.

"Now for the highlight of the evening," Gareth said grandly, leading them through the arcades.

"I thought that was it, the funhouse," Severus said, trying to lick some chocolate ice cream that was running down his chin.

"Nope." Gareth bit into his cone.

"What then?"

"You'll see!"

Severus felt like rolling his eyes, but that would have been more childish than *you'll see*.

They walked through the crowds for a bit longer, then Gareth stopped and gestured. "Voila!"

Severus looked at Gareth. "Have you lost your mind, McGonagall?" Throwing darts was one thing, even the funhouse was marginally acceptable, but this was absurd. He would not make a fool of himself.

"Let's get in the queue...we should be able to get on for the next round," Gareth said, ignoring the disbelief on his companion's face.

"You queue up. I'll watch," Severus replied.

"Not without you, mate," Gareth said. "Remember, Melina said to cooperate. I'll be really disappointed if after everything else, you funk out on me now."

"I'm not 'funking out,' McGonagall."

"Then come join the queue with me," Gareth repeated.

Scowling slightly, Severus dragged himself along behind Gareth. He listened to Gareth's inane prattle about the time he had gone to one of the theme parks with Aunt Minerva and Uncle Albus, eaten too much, and then thrown up all over Minerva when they took a corkscrew roller coaster together. It was the last time Minerva ever went on any of the more exciting rides, Gareth said, trying to sound sad, but with a big grin on his face.

"She never liked them much, anyway," Gareth said.

"I suppose I can thank the stars that you aren't dragging me onto a roller coaster," Severus grumbled as they inched forward.

"Melina said nothing too strenuous, no roller coasters or other thrill rides, but she thought this was a grand idea," Gareth replied cheerfully as he held up his wrist to show the attendant as they approached the track.

Severus just grunted. "I am not getting in a car with red and gold stripes, McGonagall."

"All right, I'll take this one," Gareth said, climbing into his car. "The next is solid purple. I presume that meets with your approval?"

Severus didn't respond, just folding his long legs into the little vehicle he was presented with. Dodgems. Whoever heard of anything so ridiculous? He took hold of his steering wheel and felt a thud. A laughing, red-headed boy bumped him again as he went around him. Severus snarled slightly, his eyes gleaming, and he sideswiped the boy before chasing after Gareth. McGonagall wanted to play, he'd play, then!

By the time their turn on the cars had ended, Severus felt as though his bones had all been jarred to bits, and he knew that his spine was definitely too old for that sort of game any longer, but he had, unexpectedly, enjoyed himself...particularly ramming the Scottish wizard, who'd never managed to outrace or outmanoeuvre him.

As they walked away from the track, Gareth clapped him on the shoulder. "I knew I'd have you smiling with that, Snape!"

"I am not smiling," Severus said, quickly trying to erase the smile from his face.

"And now for some refreshment before we head home," Gareth said.

"Haven't you eaten enough already?"

"Liquid refreshment," Gareth explained.

"I don't want to Apparate with you if you've been drinking, McGonagall."

"No plans to get plastered," Gareth replied. "Just a pint...or a half."

"A half," Severus said.

"Right."

They found a German-style beer garden, and Gareth ordered a pint, but made it a shandy. "Don't usually drink those, but on a warm night, they taste good. What are you having?"

"Water."

"Have a pint. You aren't starting your regimen until tomorrow," Gareth said as their waitress stood patiently.

"I don't think so," Severus said.

"Bring two shandies, then, extra lemon," Gareth said, smiling up at the girl. "And some chips, please."

As the girl left, Severus remarked, "You are a bottomless pit."

Gareth shrugged. "Thought you might enjoy some, too, and they'll soak up the alcohol."

"That's a myth."

"It slows its absorption if you drink on a full stomach," Gareth replied.

"Your stomach is already full," Severus grumbled.

When the girl returned with their order, Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out his Muggle money, insisting on paying. "No, it's my turn," he said. "You got our supper and the ice cream."

Gareth thanked him and smiled up at the waitress as she put their drinks on the table.

Severus sipped his shandy. Not terrible.

Gareth drank off half his pint, then sprinkled some vinegar over the chips and squeezed some ketchup onto the edge of the paper plate. He dipped the end of a chip into the ketchup. "Want some?"

Severus shook his head.

"Tired?"

Severus reflected on the question. He had felt tired before they'd left Leeds...even before they'd left the clinic, in fact...but now he felt tired in a different way. Relaxed and tired.

Gareth took his silence for assent, and said, "Me, too. But not a bad day...for me. I'm sure your experience of it was different from mine."

"I'd say so." There was no comparing their days, Severus was sure of that.

"But this hasn't been bad," Gareth said, stretching his long legs in front of him. "A nice end to the day, wouldn't you agree?"

Severus tilted his head noncommittally. "It was different."

"Better than another trip to the Valetudinarium Egidium, I'd think."

"The what?"

"St. G's," Gareth said. "It started life as the Valetudinarium Egidium. Then it became the St. Giles Asylum and Infirmary, or some such thing, in about fifteen-oh-five. Its current name is from around the turn of this century, I think."

"Is the apothecary related to it, then?"

"Founded by the same family at about the same time. They took their family name from the hospital, I think. There's always been at least one Egidius relative working at the hospital, but it hasn't been in the family for a couple hundred years. The apothecary, on the other hand, has always been passed on in the family, usually run by Parnovons and Egidiuses, but now Uncle Murdoch's got it. Always keeps the same name, though. It's one reason Uncle Murdoch was so upset with Calum."

"Calum . . ." The name was familiar.

"Melina's son. Thought he might have an aptitude for potions, and then the boy tells them he wants to stay in Muggle school with his friends and grow up to be like his father." Gareth laughed. "I was just a kid, but I remember Dad trying to convince Uncle Murdoch that it wasn't a tragedy. Anyway, I'm sure that by the time that Uncle Murdoch's ready to retire, there will be a Parnovon or McGonagall or some other relative ready to take the reins. Or Calum might still do, after all. He's already collaborating with his grandfather on a number of projects. He'd just have to hire a Potions master or two."

"You could have," Severus said, remembering what the younger wizard had said about enjoying potions, but not wanting to have to ask permission of the Hogwarts Potions teacher to take the NEWTs independently. He had been that Potions teacher.

"Maybe. I don't know. It may have seemed more attractive to me at the time because it wasn't an option. I enjoy what I'm doing now, and I was able to make a contribution to Aunt Minerva's project that I wouldn't have been able to make otherwise."

Severus nodded. Despite all odds and all the forces working against them, they had won and Potter had killed the Dark Lord, reclaiming what was his. It was not all completely fair, however. If it were, then surely he and Malfoy would be dead, and witches like Aurora Sinistra and Molly Weasley would be alive. Poppy had told him quite truthfully that more Death Eaters had died than Hogwarts defenders, but that did not ease his own sense that his life, his living, was undeserved. If Hermione and Albus...and even Aberforth and Healer Egdius...hadn't spent their time and energy saving him, perhaps more on their side would have lived. Perhaps another Slytherin teacher would be enjoying that summer's evening. It seemed an imponderable, and yet his mind continued to return to it, and to the evil he had done and the evil he had witnessed. It seemed to permeate even the air of this Muggle amusement park, that evil which he carried with him. He felt a cold chill come over him.

"Let me get you home, Snape," he heard Gareth say softly. "It's been a long day for you."

"They want to put up a plaque where it happened, you know," Severus said suddenly. "Minerva's leaving it up to me, since it's in the dungeons near Slytherin House. And I don't know what the right thing is. What do I have to say about such things?"

"Plaque for what?" Gareth asked.

"Where . . . where Sinistra was killed." He blinked. It had grown dark and the Ferris wheel lights glowed green and white.

"I see."

"If there were a plaque for everything . . . there'd be one everywhere. Hogwarts would be nothing but a giant memorial to the dead. But she shouldn't be forgotten, either. And yet what would remembering do for Slytherin House now, in the immediate future? I wish Minerva hadn't even told me about it, just approved or disapproved it herself," he ended miserably.

"What do they want it to say? And who are 'they'?"

"Zabini. Not Zabini himself, but he's behind it and he'll probably donate money to the school or to some charity in her name if we put it up. It's supposed to be in the name of 'Snape's Slytherins,' and I don't like that, either."

Gareth was quiet for a while, watching the giant Ferris wheel turn, then he said, "There's already a memorial plaque for her and the carillon was dedicated to her. People will already be reminded every time they enter and exit the grounds. I don't think it would be unreasonable to say that that was a sufficient memorial, though I can see how saying that could sound . . . unappreciative or worse. Why do they want another, do you know?"

Severus shook his head. "Perhaps to extol the virtues of Zabini's group and point out the failings of Goyle and Nott. They want to put a quotation on it, something from Milton about . . . about their makers' image forsaking them when they vilified themselves. I've never read Milton, and I very much doubt Zabini has, but he was probably looking for some way of pointing out Nott and Goyle's vices whilst touting their own heroism. I find it overmuch."

"It will also memorialise you, though...*Snape's* Slytherins, not Zabini's. Perhaps that is part of what they want."

"If I had died, it might have been appropriate to memorialise me. No. I don't want it. I don't want to see it every day. I don't know as I'd ever get used to it, but I'm sure that eventually, most people would. They wouldn't even see it. It would become an empty symbol after a while, which may be the worst kind of forgetting."

"Think about an alternative, then," Gareth suggested. "See if you can come up with one. And if you don't want Snape's Slytherins mentioned, or anyone but Professor Sinistra, I think that would be just fine."

"Perhaps."

"You should talk to Uncle Albus about it. He's been around longer than anyone. He might have some advice for you, or at least be able to offer another perspective, even if you don't like his advice." Gareth took a last swallow of his shandy. "I find I often see things differently after talking with him even when I don't end up exactly agreeing with him."

Severus nodded. It was not a bad idea, in theory, to ask Albus what he thought about it. He'd seen the former Headmaster briefly the evening before. He had visited Minerva, admired the changes she'd made to the Headmistress's suite, looked at a few wizarding snapshots from her holiday with Albus, and chatted about a few of the new staff members. Albus had returned just before ten, and the three had sat together for a quarter of an hour and talked. Severus had felt uncomfortable, but had managed to avoid thinking about the reasons for his discomfort and hadn't darted out the door as soon as the other wizard arrived. That was something.

Perhaps he could ask for Albus's advice. If he visited him in his office, it would be clearly Hogwarts business. He had to work with him for this year, at least. And he believed that he did want a relationship with him. Punishing Albus by withdrawing his company would also punish himself.

He was still angry and hurt because of all he had gone through when he'd believed that Albus had died and that it was his fault, at least in part. But he also remembered his sense that he had never truly appreciated the people whom he'd cared about until it was too late, until he had driven them away or lost them. With Albus, he might have a second chance. He hoped that he'd be able to actually take that chance, but didn't know if he could. A chance was a risk, after all, but beyond that, he didn't know if he could get past his hurt and anger. He had never been able to do that in his past; it was one of the things that had made his life not worth living, him not worth saving.

"Let's go home," Gareth said, standing. "Think about it all tomorrow, hmm?"

Severus stood.

"Saturday nights during the summer, they have fireworks. We'll have to come some Saturday, spend the entire day. There's a lot more to do than what you saw today. They have shows, too."

"I begin teaching on Tuesday," Severus reminded him. "I will be very busy. And the summer is almost over."

The two men walked toward the arcades to find an isolated but noisy spot to Disapparate from.

"Next summer, then. After exams. We could get a whole group together. It could be fun."

Severus couldn't imagine that, but he nodded in agreement anyway.

They stepped around a corner, Gareth took Severus's arm and looked at him and smiled. "Straight to the gates, then?"

Severus held onto Gareth's arm and closed his eyes. He hated Side-Along Apparition. It didn't bother him much physically, as it did some people. He didn't lose his balance or become nauseous. He didn't like it because he hated the sense of not being in control. It reminded him of the blind transport to the Dark Lord's side.

They were at the gates in less than a moment, and Severus opened his eyes.

"I had a good time this evening," Gareth said. "It was good to see you smiling a little."

"Hmph." He had not smiled. Not much, anyway. "Thank you for accompanying me to Leeds. It was not the evening I had anticipated, but it made the events of the afternoon feel more distant."

"Good. That was the hope. See you soon...maybe Sunday? I know you'll be getting ready for classes and be taking the potions, but if you feel up to it and have the time, Hermione's moving in on Sunday. We thought we'd go out to lunch at the Three Broomsticks. I'm sure she'd be happy to have you come along. I think she'd really

appreciate it, in fact."

"I don't know. We'll have to see."

"I'll owl you, then. See you, Snape!"

Severus turned toward the gates even as Gareth Disapparated with a crack. He doubted very much that he would go to lunch with them on Sunday. He couldn't very well ask whether Professor Gamp would be coming, too, and make it seem that his attendance was conditional on her not being there, after all. Besides, he'd be on both potions by Sunday. He didn't remember what side-effects the Ferron's Elixir had, but he probably wouldn't want to go out. He also couldn't Apparate or perform any magic, either. Not conditions under which he wanted to go anywhere.

No magic, he thought just as he reached for the handle of the gate. He swore lightly under his breath. The nighttime and holiday password to open the gates required that he hold the handle and pass some of his magic through it as he uttered the password. It was hardly a spell, but the thought of his magic draining was alarming enough to him, and he knew that Healer O'Donald was including this kind of magic in the prohibition, as well.

He gritted his teeth and pulled the bell handle instead, which activated the charm on the carillon so that wherever the groundskeeper or his assistant were, they would hear it.

The bells themselves tolled sweetly, and Severus remembered the witch whom they memorialised. A few minutes later, Hagrid came jogging down the drive.

"Evenin', Perfesser!" he greeted cheerily as he approached the gate. "Headmistress tol' me t' be expectin' you." He pulled open the gate for him, shaking his head. "Nasty things, these venomous bites, nasty things. But sure you'll be back t' yer old self in no time flat! But y' need anythin' meantime, Perfesser, just ask!"

Severus nodded. "Thank you, Hagrid." Minerva must have informed the staff. It would save him some embarrassment. They would not expect him to perform any magic and he would not have to explain to anyone why he was not. It would certainly make things easier once the students arrived. It was still uncomfortable to know that his colleagues were aware of his current condition. He wondered what precisely Minerva had told them. He wished now that he hadn't given Melina blanket permission to discuss his health with Minerva.

"G' night, then!" Hagrid said. "I'm off t' see if I can catch the stoat what's been eatin' me Flobberworm larvae. Don't begrudge him a bit of a meal, but not all me larvae!"

With those words, Hagrid set back off across the grounds toward his little cabin. Severus smiled slightly despite himself. No, Hagrid wouldn't begrudge any "critter" a meal. He looked up at the lights shining from the castle and began to walk toward them. He was tired. It was good to be home.

Next

Chapter Seven: Waxing

Saturday, 29 August 1998

Severus has his first treatment with the Ferron's Elixir and tries to deal with his fears. Did he escape death only to become a Squib?

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Rubeus Hagrid

Chapter Seven: Waxing

Chapter 8 of 118

Saturday, 29 August 1998. Severus has his first treatment with the Ferron's Elixir and tries to deal with his fears. Did he escape death only to become a Squib?



Chapter Seven: Waxing

Saturday, 29 August 1998

Severus didn't bother to hold back a pitiful moan, which came out more like the mew of a kitten. Gods, just let him die. He pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged himself.

"Sit up, Severus," Poppy said. "Come, sit up. I tell you, you will feel better if you sit up."

"No," Severus moaned.

Poppy shook her head and waved her wand, adjusting the head of the bed which Severus had collapsed upon a few minutes earlier.

He did feel mildly better now that he was more upright, but he didn't open his eyes or uncurl himself. All the torture he'd been through, and he was laid low by a Healing potion. It would be humiliating if he felt well enough to feel humiliated.

"You need to breathe."

"I'll be sick." He was certain that if he breathed too deeply, he would vomit. His entire body would vomit. He had never felt so nauseated in his life. It was as though every one of his cells was nauseous, not just his stomach. He was sweating and salivating, and he didn't know why he wasn't throwing up.

"I can give you something for the nausea in a little while," Poppy said softly. "It is probably little comfort to you at the moment, but the texts I read last night said that for the three percent of patients who are affected by nausea, that side-effect subsides completely by the fourth dose for almost all of them."

Severus didn't even bother to moan in response. Only three percent and he had to be one of them. Typical of his luck.

"The good news is that there don't appear to be any untoward spikes or dips in your magical flow, so the dosage is not too high," Poppy said. "I'd like to check your flow each time you take the Elixir, but if you take it and I'm not with you, you'll just have to rely on how you feel and let me know if anything feels strange. I will need to check you a few times a day to make sure that there are no negative effects on your core."

"I'm going to die," Severus groaned, unable to think about what Poppy was saying.

"Someday, yes," Poppy said, "but not from the nausea, as awful as it must be."

He felt a lukewarm flannel pass over his face. "Go 'way."

She didn't reply, and a moment later, he heard her footsteps as she walked away. He hadn't really believed she'd leave.

A few moments later, she returned, however, and he heard her put something down on the bedside table, then she put an arm under his shoulders, lifted him slightly, and he could feel the whisper of her magic as she removed the pillow from beneath his head and a fresh one replaced it.

"There, that's better," she said. "You're streaming with perspiration." She wiped his face again. "I think that next time, you might want to have a change of clothes handy or wear a nightshirt."

"Mmm." He was beginning to feel slightly better. Now only his stomach was nauseated, not his entire being, but he became aware of a headache like a band tightening itself around his head. He managed to swallow. "Headache."

"I have some Headache Potion here for you. Ninety percent of patients who experience nausea also get a severe headache. Fortunately, it is easily treated with the standard potion. In about ten minutes, I can give you something for the nausea and then you can take the Headache Potion."

"Mmm."

"Would you like me to leave you alone in the meantime?" Poppy asked.

"Don't care," Severus mumbled. He did hope she would stop talking about nausea, side-effects, and percentages if she did stay.

"I'll just have a seat, then," she replied. "Let me know if you want anything or if you suddenly feel worse."

Severus tried to distract himself by doing a mental inventory of the students' Potions cupboard. That reminded him of the appearance, texture, and odour of some of the ingredients, though, and made him feel worse. Animals. His father used to play an animals game with him. They would take turns naming animals in alphabetical order. There were some letters that would stump them, and then they'd make up an animal and describe it in ridiculous detail when the other one challenged it. They never made it all the way through the alphabet. His father would have him dissolved in laughter before they got past the letter S.

"Aardvark," he mumbled. At five, that had been his favourite 'A' animal. "Bear. . . . Cougar." He paused, thinking. He didn't want to use 'Dog.'

"Doe," Poppy said.

Severus paused. He'd scarcely been aware that he'd been speaking out loud. "Elephant."

"Ferret."

"Mm," Severus thought a moment. "Goat."

"Hare," Poppy replied promptly.

"Ibex." Severus smiled slightly.

"Jenny."

"Good one," Severus said. "K . . . K . . . Kine."

"Does that count?" Poppy asked with a frown.

Severus didn't even crack an eyelid. "Cattle, cows, bovine animals. It counts."

"All right. Didn't seem it should. Llama."

"Meerkat." Another one he had liked as a boy. His father told him that someday they would take a trip to a zoo and they'd see real meerkats. But then things got worse at home . . . and they stopped playing the game. He was getting too old for it, anyway.

"Oh, dear. N. Seems it should be easy," Poppy said. "N . . . I'm a blank!"

"You can pass."

"You'll win."

"No winning or losing. Just . . ." Severus shrugged slightly and took a deep breath. He still felt sick to his stomach, but it wasn't quite as bad.

"Nightjar."

They usually only used mammals, but he liked that one, so he let it go. Poppy didn't know the game, anyway.

A few more letters, then Poppy declared that he could take the other potions for the side-effects.

Severus opened his eyes and swallowed down the anti-nausea potion she gave him, then she poured him a dose of Headache Potion, and he took that, too. In less than a minute, he felt almost well, though limp and damp with sweat.

"Feel better?"

"Much."

"I'm going to talk to Melina. I'll give her the results, of course, but there might be something that we can give you before you take the potion that will make it easier on you."

Severus nodded, feeling somewhat embarrassed now about his reaction to the nausea.

"You probably don't feel like going down to breakfast, but you should eat something, at least something light."

"I don't know how I'll teach on Tuesday with this," Severus said, swinging his legs around as he sat up. "And I'll be on the other potion then, as well."

"The side-effects should have passed by then. If you take the Ferron's Elixir early enough in the morning, you should be fine by your first class even if you're still having mild side-effects."

"And the other potion?"

"We won't know about any side-effects until you begin taking it, I presume, but you didn't seem to have any to the earlier versions of the potion. I'll ask Melina what she might expect."

He didn't want to begin the term like this. It was important to set the right tone from the start, particularly with the first-years. They needed to take Potions seriously and they needed to take him seriously. They certainly wouldn't if he looked like a limp damp rag.

"I'll call for some breakfast for you. Do you want anything in particular?" When Severus shook his head, she said, "I'll keep you company, if you like. I haven't had my first cup of tea yet, and I could use a bite to eat, myself."

"As you wish," Severus replied. Now that she was done torturing him, she should just leave him be.

After she left the room to call for their breakfast and report to Melina, Severus stood, feeling somewhat shaky but much improved, and went over to the washstand to wash his hands and face. Looking in the mirror, he thought that he looked worse than he had before he'd learned there was anything wrong with him. Worse than he had when he'd got out of bed that morning. There were certainly shadows under his eyes that hadn't been there before. He hadn't had time the night before to read up on Ferron's Elixir, and the little bit of information he'd found in one of his general Potions texts that morning hadn't been very useful. Fine if he were brewing it, but not when he was the one taking it.

Poppy had mentioned texts she'd read, and there had been a few books stacked on her desk when he'd arrived to get the potion. They'd probably be more helpful than the books he had in his office. He could make a trip to the library, he supposed.

A house-elf popped in with two breakfast trays and placed them on the bedside tables.

"Would Professor sir like anything else?" the house-elf asked.

"No. . . . Thanks."

She nodded and was gone. As Deputy Headmaster, he was supposed to know all of the house-elves, but he didn't, and even many of those whom he did know, he couldn't keep their peculiar names straight. He supposed he would just have to pay better attention. It wasn't as though it was Advanced Potions.

Severus sat and lifted the lid from one of the plates. Fried eggs, quartered tomatoes, grilled mushrooms. There was a rack of wholemeal toast on the tray and a small pot of jam. He presumed that the other breakfast was identical. He re-covered the plate and poured himself a cup of tea. He usually preferred coffee in the mornings, but even though he wasn't nauseous any longer, the tea appealed to him more that day.

He was pouring his second cup of tea when Poppy came back.

"I was just speaking with Melina. She thinks that the nausea is definitely temporary and that it will get better each time you take the Elixir. Didn't the breakfast appeal to you? I could order you something different."

"I thought I'd wait . . . since you're eating here," he said gruffly. It hadn't seemed very polite to eat his own breakfast when she'd made arrangements to eat up there just to keep him company, even if he hadn't wanted her to.

Poppy smiled and sat down. "She said that if you have any other intermittent side-effects, you should find me and tell me immediately. And especially be sure to tell me if you begin to feel feverish. We will need to let Melina know right away and either stop the potion or reduce the dosage. I'll spend the day either here or in my quarters and let you know if I have to go somewhere else."

Severus nodded. "Did she say anything else?"

"She's checking with Murdoch about how the other potion is coming. She wants me to be with you the first couple times you take it, and she's given me some specific diagnostic spells she wants me to cast to see if it's affecting the toxins."

"When the potion's dropped off, could you give Murdoch...or whoever delivers it...something for me?" Severus asked.

"Of course."

Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out the golden wristband from the night before. "It's Brennan's, I believe. McGonagall...Gareth...forgot to take it back. If they could get it to the O'Donalds . . ."

"Sure," Poppy said, smiling as she took the wristband. "Did you go to one of the parks? Which one?"

"I don't know. We Apparated directly into the park. There were a lot of golden cups on the signs, but I didn't notice a name anywhere."

"Have a good time?"

Severus just looked at her and took a bite of toast. He was not going to have people discussing his outings behind his back or laughing about the greasy git going to the amusement park. "It wasn't my idea."

"Oh . . . well . . . I hope you had a good time, anyway."

They finished their breakfasts in silence. Severus stood.

"I'll see you this evening for your second dose," Poppy said, "but I'll let you know if the other potion arrives before then. You might want to start it immediately."

"I'm supposed to take it every six hours. I don't want it timed so I'm getting up at three in the morning to take it," Severus said, irritated.

"We'll keep that in mind, then," Poppy replied mildly.

"I'm going to the library."

"You should take it easy, Severus. You've been teaching Potions long enough not to need to do more preparation today, I'm sure."

"Perhaps, but I am going for my own purposes," Severus replied.

Poppy was the quick Hufflepuff. "Reading up on Ferron's Elixir?"

He nodded. "I have texts with the formula, of course, and with commentary aimed at a Potions master, but they are not for an apothecary or Healer, let alone for a patient."

"I can save you a trip to the library, if you like," Poppy said, standing. "You can borrow my books, then return them this evening. I made notes, so I won't need them again immediately."

"That would be convenient. Thank you." He hadn't wanted to ask to borrow them, but he was glad that she had offered. Not that knowing more about the potion would help him avoid the nausea, but he would like to refresh his memory on the dangers the Elixir could pose and the symptoms that presaged them. Best to know what to expect.

Severus watched as Poppy closed the door behind her. He supposed it was good of her to come down at midnight to watch him take his first dose of the Nagini potion and make sure he didn't have any bad reaction to it, and then to cast the spells that Melina had requested. Still, he couldn't help but resent the intrusion. It wasn't so much Poppy's presence as it was the reason for it that bothered him. Now that he wasn't a spy any longer, he wasn't supposed to have Healers and mediwitches dropping in at all hours to watch him take potions and to cast diagnostic spells on him.

The second dose of Ferron's Elixir earlier that evening hadn't been as bad as the first one had been, but even though Poppy had given him a mild anti-nausea potion a half hour before the Elixir, it had still been highly unpleasant. He told Poppy that he would take the next dose on his own, and the next dose of the Nagini potion, as well, so she had given him a bottle of the antiemetic potion and told him to see her immediately if there was a problem.

He still had to report to her after breakfast, and again at three other points during the day so that she could cast the diagnostics that Melina had prescribed. He supposed that it could be worse. Melina could have wanted to admit him to the clinic. Better than being at St. Mungo's, but only marginally.

At least he'd had a valid excuse when he'd received McGonagall's owl that afternoon, he thought as he got ready for bed. He'd written back and said that his potions regimen didn't permit such an outing, but that he wished Hermione well. Somehow, the fact that he really was hampered by his current medical condition made him wish that he could meet them for lunch. It was perverse, like everything else in his life.

Severus sat on the edge of his bed and, using a long wooden match, lit one of the candles that Minerva had brought down for him the night before.

"Twiskett!"

He had barely finished calling the elf when he was there.

"Lights, please," Severus said.

The house-elf snapped his fingers and all the regular Charmed lamps went out.

"Wake me at five minutes before six," Severus told the elf. He had to take his next dose of the Nagini potion at six.

Twiskett nodded and waited and, when there were no further instructions, vanished with a sharp crack.

Severus made sure that his box of matches was within reach, then he put out the candle with a brass snuffer and crawled into bed. He lay there, sleepless, trying to put out of his mind all of the thoughts that crowded through it, but he only succeeded in becoming very aware of the fact that he was completely helpless and vulnerable, that without magic, he was worse off than the greenest first-year, and that this could become a permanent condition. The Order's former spy, reduced to living like a Squib...or worse. So much of a wizard's or witch's vitality depended upon the health of their magical core.

He had put off talking to Minerva that afternoon when she came down to see him. He really was feeling as though it had been a mistake to return to Hogwarts, but despite that feeling, he didn't want Minerva to think the same, and he was afraid she would. He didn't know what he would do if she suggested he leave Hogwarts until he was fully recovered. He had no idea when that would be. There would be no point to recovering if he weren't teaching. He could rot at Spinner's End as easily as a Squib as he could as a wizard.

Finally, Severus sat up in the dark, felt for the matches, and lit the candle. He got out of bed and, carrying his candle, crossed the room and lit the candles on his dresser. He pulled off his nightshirt and dressed quickly in black trousers, white shirt, and a lightweight black over-robe, finally slipping on a pair of black trainers. After pinching out the two candles on the dresser, he picked up the other one and carried it through his suite. When he opened the door to the corridor, which was well lit by torches, he put out the candle and set it on a nearby bookshelf.

He strode through the empty, silent castle and came to the great oak doors. He'd never had to open them without magic after they had been barred for the night. He hoped it was possible. If it wasn't, he'd have to leave through one of the other exits. Minerva had said that she had changed the passwords on the doors and gates so that they did not require any magic. When he protested about the security, she reminded him that when Filch was there, they never commonly had such precautions on the gates nor on any of the doors other than the main ones. That was when he had told her that he was tired and needed to take a nap.

He hadn't needed a nap; he hadn't liked the feeling that he was being compared to Filch, though he knew that wasn't how Minerva had intended it. But he didn't want to talk about his teaching and have her possibly extend the analogy in her own mind and decide to send him away.

Fortunately, although it did take some effort, it was not impossible to unbar the main doors without magic. As the door swung shut behind him, Severus heard the bar fall back into place with a bang. He hadn't realised it would do that, but he could reenter the castle through one of the other doors.

It was a beautiful clear night, the air cool and fresh. He walked down to the edge of the lake and stared across it, unable to see the further shore. The stars were bright, though the moon was not, and Severus sat on a bench and looked up at the countless stars in the deep black sky. He was overwhelmed by a sudden sense of peril, as though the unending sky would swallow him whole. His heart raced and he closed his eyes against the dizzying sight.

Swallowing, Severus leaned forward and held his head in his hands. It must be some side-effect of the potions, or perhaps of Nagini's toxins in his blood as they fought for survival. He hadn't eaten much dinner; it could be he was simply hungry. He tried to breathe calmly and regularly.

Footsteps approached, but Severus recognised them, so he only raised his head and tried to sit up straight.

"Perfesser Snape?"

"Hagrid," Severus sighed.

"Couldn't sleep?"

Severus shook his head.

"Mind some company?"

He shook his head again and moved over to the end of the bench.

Hagrid lowered his large form to sit beside him, and Fang stretched himself out at their feet. Severus felt he should object to the dog, but there was something comforting about the animal's large paw resting across his feet and his great head leaning heavily against his ankles, warm and alive.

The two sat in silence for a while, then Hagrid asked, "Aren't feelin' well?"

Severus twitched one shoulder slightly. "I've been worse."

They were quiet for a bit longer.

"Couldn't you sleep?" Severus asked.

"Went to the Hog's Head for a while t'night, then when I got back, I was a tetch restless and had the feelin' I should take a walk. Almost caught the stoat, but di'n't quite, so thought I'd jest stroll a bit. Then I saw you."

Severus reached down and rubbed Fang's head. The old dog whimpered happily and rolled like a puppy, showing its belly.

"Moon's waxin'," Hagrid observed. "Good time fer startin' something new. Good time fer feedin' the plants. Must be a good time t' begin takin' the potions an' gettin' stronger, too. Not that I know much 'bout potions, o' course. Or Healin'. Still, seems as good a time as any. You'll be feelin' better, Perfesser. I know it."

Severus knew that Hagrid couldn't possibly know anything of the sort, but he appreciated the half-giant's attempt to cheer him up. And he was somewhat correct about the waxing moon. Although it could easily be that the waxing moon would favour the toxins. They wanted to grow and multiply, too. His shoulders slumped at the thought.

Hagrid looked over at him. "Sorry, Perfesser. Di'n't mean t' make you feel worse. I'm jest not very good at knowin' what t' say sometimes. It's only that . . . sometimes you get a feelin' about a creature...not that yer a creature, o' course...but I jest get that feelin' now, that y'll be a'right. That's all."

"Thank you, Hagrid." He was ham-handed about it, but he meant well. He was one of the few people whom Severus felt he could take at face value, more or less.

They sat in silence a while longer, then Hagrid slapped his thighs and took in a deep breath. "Well, Fang and me better be gettin' t' bed." He stood, then looked down at Severus. "Y' know, Perfesser, if yer worried 'bout the whole magic thing, if that's botherin' you, well, it shouldn't. Everybody knows yer powerful magic, an' the Healers will make sure you stay that way. Yer jest not usin' it right now. Anybody'd be a fool t' think yer any weaker 'cause yer choosin' t' rest up a bit."

Severus looked up at Hagrid and gave him a quick, crooked grin. "Good night, Hagrid. Sleep well."

"You, too, Perfesser. Hope yer bed's more comfterble now!" He started to walk away, then he turned and said, "Besides all that, Perfesser, yer a great wizard, and th' most important thing about bein' a great wizard, is havin' a great heart. All great wizards got great hearts. Jest gotta give it room t' grow, that's all. Jest give it some room." With that pronouncement, Hagrid whistled to Fang, who had wandered down to the edge of the water, and the two headed around the castle, back to the small cabin that Hagrid had called home for more than fifty years.

Severus shook his head at the retreating form. Hagrid loved the world's least lovable creatures, and only he could possibly have come out with such a statement about him. Severus quirked a small smile to himself. Hagrid and Hermione had that in common, if nothing else. He was one of the more tolerable Gryffindors, at least in small doses, though he would never have admitted that to anyone.

Severus stood, stretched slightly, then set off toward the small door at the base of the North Tower. Six o'clock would arrive very soon.

Next

Chapter Eight: Business as Usual

Sunday, 30 August 1998

Severus tries to carry on with his preparations for the new school year despite the set-backs.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Eight: Business as Usual

Chapter 9 of 118

Sunday, 30 August 1998. Severus tries to carry on with his preparations for the new school year despite the set-backs.



Chapter Eight: Business as Usual

Sunday, 30 August 1998

Severus stifled a yawn. He didn't know whether his current inability to concentrate was due to lack of sleep, the potions he'd taken that morning, or just the general malaise he'd been feeling in recent weeks. Whatever the cause, it seemed an exercise in futility to continue to try to read, so he put aside his Potions journal for another day.

Nothing else on his desk caught his attention, and he looked across the room at the clock. Another hour and a half before his third dose of the Nagini potion. Lunch was also being served at noon that day, although staff would wander in any time between noon and twelve-thirty. Since the Nagini potion hadn't had any obvious noxious side-effects and he wasn't due for his next dose of Ferron's Elixir until that evening, he believed that he would attend lunch in the Great Hall. Until then, perhaps a nap . . . Severus was not, as a rule, a napper, but he could think of nothing better to do at that moment, and he was sleepy.

Just as he determined that a nap might be in order, there was a sharp rap on his office door.

"Come in." It was irritating not to be able to open the door to his visitors, nor to be able to ward it behind him. He was making due with the door's ordinary lock, using the great iron key that Shunpike had given him the previous day, having retrieved it from Hagrid. Shunpike had cleaned and oiled the locking mechanism, which hadn't been used in several decades, and the deadbolt lock now worked easily. Still, any first-year student who could utter *Alohomora* could gain access to his office as it was. Fortunately, his quarters were still protected by a password, though he couldn't use his more elegant password charm or any additional wards. He tried to remind himself that conditions were not as dire as they had been before Riddle's defeat, and that with or without magic, he could handle any snot-nosed little miscreants who might try to invade his privacy on a dare or a whim.

The door opened and a smiling Headmistress stepped into his office. "Good morning, Severus! How are you feeling today?"

"I had been about to take a nap," he replied grumpily. This time, it was the truth he told her.

"Ah, I see. Well, this won't take long." Minerva sat down in one of his guest chairs and held out a large folder to him. Unlike the Headmaster, she did not Transfigure the chair into something more comfortable, but she did seem to have an irritating twinkle in her eye. Severus wondered whether it was something that one acquired when one became Headmaster or Headmistress, although he could not imagine Phineas Nigellus Black ever twinkling at anyone about anything.

"It's just the schedules you drew up for me last week," Minerva continued. "I made a few very minor adjustments, and then duplicated them for you. If you would hand them 'round at the staff meeting tomorrow morning, I would appreciate it. You may then field any questions about them, if you would."

"Hmpf. What sorts of changes?"

"I would like staff on meal duty to be in the Great Hall five minutes before the meal is to begin, so I added that, and I was also aware of a conference that Albus wants to attend in two weeks, so in order to accommodate that, I just exchanged his name and Ezra's on the schedules."

"I presume that the full staff will be in attendance at the meeting tomorrow?" Most of the staff had arrived by the Friday morning meeting, but there were still a few who hadn't and whom Severus hadn't yet met.

"Yes, everyone has arrived over the last few days. We have a full complement in the castle now," Minerva replied. "Ezra arrived last night, and Olivia Ouellette and Caspar Lloyd both arrived this morning. Filius and Shunpike arranged for the three to have quarters in the staff wing on the fourth floor. The house-elves prepared the suites for all of the new staff over the summer, so there's nothing to concern you there, unless any of them has a problem or special request. They've been told to go to you, so just use your judgment if they do. I am sure that Swelka and Mr Shunpike will assist you if there are any changes they require."

Swelka was the aged house-elf who oversaw all of the house-elves in the castle. Although Severus had been Deputy Headmaster since Dumbledore's supposed death in March of ninety-seven, his service to Minerva as a spy during the war had taken precedence over everything else, and so he had scarcely had time to deal with the duties traditionally delegated to the Deputy. Minerva had managed, and Hogwarts had functioned by relying upon years of tradition and habit. That couldn't continue indefinitely, though, and Minerva was definitely taking a firmer grasp of the day-to-day operations of the school and expecting more from her deputy.

"I will speak to them at lunch, then," Severus said with a nod.

"And you will still be meeting with Amanda this afternoon?" Minerva asked.

"I considered cancelling the interview, but putting it off seemed pointless. The questions are all acceptable. And it's not as though she's going to ask me to demonstrate spells. I thought I'd rather get it over with, continue with business as usual."

Minerva nodded. "Probably wisest, particularly as the *Prophet* wants to run the interview on Tuesday to coincide with the first day of classes. They're doing a capsule profile of each of the staff members, both old and new. Filius approved them for accuracy, but they're all fairly innocuous, anyway."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Flitwick approved them?"

"They were sent to us a few weeks ago, before you returned to the school. They wanted time to make corrections if need be. The only ones he didn't approve were Cahill's and Ouellette's, and that's because they were only hired last week. I read them over yesterday, since you were indisposed."

"Hmpf. Well. You know them better, anyway," Severus replied uncomfortably. He wondered whether Minerva was regretting keeping him on as Deputy Headmaster. He would certainly prefer Flitwick to himself if he were her, especially now that he was practically a Squib.

"Yes, I do. It took me only a few minutes; it would have taken you longer, and I knew that you weren't feeling well. I'm glad you seem better today. I admit, I've been worried about you."

"Mm. The side-effects from the Ferron's Elixir seem to be diminishing, and I've noticed little reaction to the Nagini potion when I take it . . . although I do feel more tired than I should," Severus said hesitantly.

"You do look tired," Minerva replied, "but from what Albus told me, that's to be expected from the Ferron's Elixir. He was distressed to hear that you experienced such severe nausea from it, though."

"That is abating, and Madam Pomfrey has given me an antiemetic potion that I can take a half hour before the Elixir, and that has also helped," Severus said, not minding the concern in Minerva's voice.

"When is your last dose?" Minerva asked.

"I do not know," Severus replied, "though I think I'll be finished with the Nagini antivenin on Monday night. I believe I will be on the Ferron's Elixir only through Friday, however, at which point, Melina will perform the spell treatments."

"Please let me know if you need any time away from your classes this week or next," Minerva said earnestly. "I wouldn't want you to damage your health permanently out of some stubborn desire to brave your way through the first week of classes. I know that I could get Murdoch to step in for a few days, or, if he isn't able to, Albus could and we could have someone else take Defence."

Severus nodded shortly. "I will bear that in mind. But I can make adjustments for the few days of classes next week. I have the sixth- and seventh-year classes brewing simple potions from the OWLs curriculum, ones they have brewed before, so I will not do any demonstrations. Such review is useful for them, in any case. Each morning, Twiskett will remove the ingredients required for the day and then re-ward the potions cupboard so that the students will have no need to access it and I won't have to leave it open and unwarded all day. It will be adequate, though I would not care to make such adjustments for any longer than absolutely necessary."

"That reminds me: Albus has offered to ward your office for you using a simple password, just as he did during the *Adfectus* incident. Lock and key are fine for basic security, but some more imaginative students might try to open the door, regardless, if they should notice that you are not using any magic."

"I would appreciate that. It has bothered me to have my office unsecured by my usual wards."

"I'll let him know, then. He's planning to be in his office after lunch if you'd like to stop by and discuss it with him."

Severus nodded. To ask her to act as an intermediary would be childish. He could certainly speak with the former Headmaster himself. It was Hogwarts business, and he was Deputy Headmaster. That reminded him of a question that had occurred to him a few days before.

"It is . . . interesting that he has decided to continue in the Defence position," Severus remarked. "I was wondering whether any other headmaster or headmistress had

continued to teach after no longer holding the head position."

Minerva shook her head. "It is entirely unprecedented, as far as I know. Most headmasters and headmistresses in the last few centuries have died in the post, and those who haven't, have retired at a relatively old age. Headmaster Dippet died just months before he was scheduled to retire. In earlier centuries in the school's history, headmasters would usually retire after a decade or two, often when they were still relatively young, but to my knowledge, none ever returned to teach at Hogwarts after retirement. Most found other occupations for their time, ones which were more remunerative and less personally confining. There have, however, been several Heads of House who left Hogwarts and who later returned to teach, or who stepped down as Head of House but who continued on as an ordinary member of staff. And, of course, the deputy position has been flexible ever since it became regular practice to have a deputy. In Dippet's day, it was considered an unwelcome chore and used to rotate amongst the Heads of House until Albus came on staff and was willing to take it indefinitely, as did I."

Severus quirked a slight smile. "An unwelcome chore? And have the duties changed so much since then?"

Minerva laughed. "Not very much in some respects, quite a bit in others," she replied. She looked at him fondly. "I'd like to think of us as a team, Severus. You and I together can make a mark on Hogwarts. We have a great opportunity here, and we shouldn't waste it. No Dark Lord, a Board of Governors that is younger and more progressive than it's been in years, a Ministry that doesn't want to meddle, parents who want to put the past behind us...it's a wonderful time for Hogwarts. Enrolment is even up. As you know, we're admitting several twelve-year-old students whose parents had declined to enrol them last year. They're all 'half-blood'...at least one parent is a Muggle or Muggle-born...and their parents hadn't felt that it was safe for them to attend Hogwarts last year. A few still declined the second invitation...one father wrote back saying that he would not see his daughter attending a school that had been the site of a bloody battle in which students had fought and died, and I couldn't blame him. But I'm excited about the future of the school, and I hope you are, too."

"It is an opportunity for Hogwarts, as you say," Severus said, not wanting to dampen Minerva's enthusiasm, but unable to share it. Nonetheless, he was pleased that she didn't seem to be considering replacing him. "I will endeavour to assist you in anyway you require." He shifted in his chair. "I am sorry that my current condition places limitations on me. It is, no doubt, a burden for you."

"It's a temporary condition, though, I'm sure, and it's hardly a burden for me. It's not as though there's anything I need you to do that requires you to use magic that I couldn't just as easily have someone else do in the interim." Minerva hesitated. "There is one concern I have . . . I know that you are revising your plans for the first week's classes, and I'm sure you've taken into account whether any of the potions are potentially dangerous, but I am concerned about the possibility of accident. I don't want you to damage your core by performing magic in an emergency, but I believe you would if there were an accident that placed students at risk."

Severus shrugged. "It is unlikely that will happen. I have chosen to have them brew potions with the least possibility of an error causing any dangerous consequences, though when dealing with dunderheads, it seems they can always find some new way of creating catastrophe. But I see no way around it...unless you wish to relieve me of my teaching duties."

Minerva shook her head. "No. I trust your judgment there. If you feel fit to teach and have made changes to your lessons to accommodate your current condition, then I trust your ability to do so. However, as you say, there could be unforeseen problems. That is why I would like to suggest that you have Twiskett on hand in the classroom. He could easily contain any explosion or noxious fumes if there were an accident, and in the meantime, he could simply stay out of sight."

Severus did not respond immediately, though he kept himself from frowning. He disliked the idea of having the house-elf in his classroom, yet he could see the merit in it, and if it were another teacher who was involved, he would endorse the idea himself. "Very well. I am sure he can remain out of sight, and perhaps he can make himself useful between classes, clearing away and so forth."

"Good! So that's settled." Minerva stood. "I'll see you at lunch?"

He nodded. He had declined to join Gareth and Hermione for lunch at the Three Broomsticks, but at any rate, it was best he remain at the castle, regardless of his health. He was Deputy Headmaster, after all, and with ten new members of staff, a few of whom had only arrived at the castle in the last couple days, it was important to be available to assist them in their preparations for the coming term. He couldn't leave it all to Minerva; she was already making accommodations for his condition. He'd pull his own weight and make sure she did not regret that she'd made him her deputy.

After lunch, Severus dutifully followed Poppy to the infirmary, where she cast the diagnostic spells that Melina had prescribed. He did not want to be harassed about it, so he decided it was better to go on his own than to wait for Poppy or Minerva to remind him. Poppy seemed pleased with the readings, which she transferred to parchment to owl to Melina. When she asked him to come to the infirmary to take his next dose of Nagini potion, and then again when he took his evening dose of Ferron's Elixir, he agreed. She wanted to cast diagnostics before and after he took the potions, and said that they were reaching a "delicate phase" in his treatment.

"And how was the Ferron's Elixir this morning?" Poppy asked before he could escape out the door. "Did it still cause nausea?"

"I took the antiemetic potion a half hour before the Ferron's Elixir," Severus replied, "and I was still nauseous, though perhaps not as badly as yesterday evening. It was certainly better than it was yesterday morning."

"Hopefully, by tomorrow morning you will be hardly nauseous at all, even without the antiemetic, though it would probably be best that you continue to take that until you have finished with the Elixir. I think I should see you take that dose, as well, and I'll also come by your room on Tuesday morning when you take the Elixir and your last dose of the Nagini potion...unless you prefer to come to me."

"Tuesday? I thought I would be done with it tomorrow. Three days." He hadn't believed he would still be taking it once classes began, though the Ferron's Elixir was worse and he didn't know when he'd be finished with that one.

Poppy shook her head. "If you had taken your first dose on Friday evening, you would have been finished with it on Monday night, but you'll still have one more dose to take on Tuesday morning. The Ferron's Elixir you'll be on for a few more days yet, but we may need to adjust the dosage. I spoke with Melina this morning, and she said that she would come by the castle to check on you tomorrow afternoon. I presume you will be in?"

"Of course. The Hogwarts Express will be arriving at five. Before this happened, I had planned to meet it, although now I believe I will leave it to Hagrid and Rath, that new assistant of his."

"I am sure that would be fine," Poppy replied. "Hagrid enjoys meeting the train, and it's not something that Minerva usually did when she was deputy."

Severus bristled. He had not told her in order to be reassured of his decision. Indeed, he believed that he should make it a regular practice to meet the Express...and to see it off, as well. "I am not Minerva McGonagall...and *she* is not Dumbledore."

Poppy's eyebrows rose. "I simply meant that it isn't as though the students would notice and find it odd if you weren't there. It's probably a fine idea to meet the train. And good for you to put your own stamp on the job, so to speak. But you'll meet the firsties when they get to the castle and give them their welcome, and that's what's important."

"Hmph. Probably send them screaming back into the lake...without the boats," Severus replied moodily.

"You got them all up to the Great Hall for the Sorting last September," Poppy said with a laugh. "I don't remember hearing tell of any of them fleeing, by water or otherwise."

"Last year, I was . . . distracted. I barely said two words to them in welcome or to prepare them for the Sorting. The Dark Lord, Riddle had called me that afternoon. My mind was elsewhere. I did not spare any thought to welcoming them...nor to frightening them off," he added with a slight, wry smile.

"I still remember arriving at Hogwarts for the first time. It was a windy day, and old Ogg...who seemed quite terrifying when you first met him, but who was actually quite a

kind soul, if a bit gruff and tactless...old Ogg had trouble keeping us all in the boats, the water was so choppy. By the time we reached the castle, I was soaked through and my teeth were chattering, whether from fear or cold, I'm still not sure," Poppy said with a chuckle. "Albus was Deputy Headmaster and he set us at our ease. He met us at the docks down below and helped each of us from the boats, then dried us all off. I'd been quite nervous, but by the time we got up to the Great Hall for the Sorting, I was still nervous, but happily, excitedly nervous and not sick nervous. I understand that when Dippet was the Deputy, he used to actually take the boats with the students. Minerva was welcoming, but rather stern and serious, I believe. So each Deputy has had a different way of greeting the first years. You don't have to do it the same as any of them."

"I will speak of the Sorting, then," Severus said thoughtfully, "as Minerva always did, but I do not believe I can be . . . welcoming. I believe that if I were to attempt that, far from setting the little dunderheads at their ease, I'd have them diving for cover and wishing they were Squibs." The corner of his mouth twitched, inviting her to appreciate his joke.

Poppy grinned. "Oh, I doubt that very much, Severus. As I say, be yourself, which isn't as bad as you seem to think...if you tried to act like Albus, you probably *would* frighten them!...but I think you can be welcoming in your own way. Think about what you might want to hear if you were arriving as a first-year this September, and think about what is important to you about Hogwarts and what you'd like them to value in their experience here. Half of what you say will likely be forgotten within minutes, anyway, with the excitement of the Sorting and joining a House, but you can make a subtle impact on them." She looked up at him speculatively. "You know, I'll never forget that speech that Blaise made about you when he accepted his Merlin. You managed, despite your double role, to say some powerful things to your Slytherins over the years. I think you could do the same with the firsties. And everyone knows about your 'stoppering death' speech. You have quite a way with words when it suits you, Severus."

Severus inclined his head in acknowledgement of what Poppy had said. Despite not having wanted her reassurance, now that he had it, he was glad of it. He was pleased, as well, that she seemed to think he had a way with words. It shouldn't matter to him what the Hufflepuff matron thought of him, but she had become something of a friend, certainly a loyal one, and her good opinion warmed him.

"I will do my best *not* to frighten them for a change, then," he said, a glint in his eye, but a humorous one. He paused. "I will wait until their first day in my classroom to do that."

Poppy just chuckled at that, then as he headed toward the door, reminded him once more to come to the infirmary to take his next dose of potion. Severus acknowledged her with a nod, then walked down to the Defence Against Dark Arts office to speak with Albus.

"I'm glad to be of help, Severus," Albus said, after the two had finished discussing what kind of password wards he would set for the Potions office. "I can't imagine that this is the way that you wanted to start your first year of teaching free of Riddle."

"It is what it is," Severus said shortly.

"Is there anything else I can help you with? If there is, simply say the word."

"No . . . except . . ."

"Yes?" Albus asked expectantly.

"You are aware that Zabini wants to put up another plaque memorialising Professor Sinistra, this one in the dungeons near Slytherin House."

Albus nodded. "Minerva mentioned it."

"She has left it up to me, since it is in Slytherin's area," Severus said.

"Have you come to a decision?"

Severus sighed and slouched in his chair. "No. If I approve it, I will be unhappy with my decision. I do not want to see it daily, to be frank, and I don't approve of the wording they have chosen for the plaque, which I think could be divisive. I also think that the plaque would risk eventually becoming meaningless for others, an empty memorial that no one really sees any longer because they see it every day."

"I understand that."

"But if I disapprove it," Severus continued, "it could seem . . . disrespectful of Sinistra, for one. It could also create some tension with Zabini and his greatly enlarged family. Looking toward the future, I would prefer to avoid that."

"I see," Albus said with a nod. "I think that Zabini would respect whatever decision you reached, although I understand your desire not to appear to stop him from memorialising Aurora. And I also agree that some might find your decision disrespectful to her, though I know that it would not be that." He thought for a moment. "You know, Severus, I have an idea . . . it's up to you, of course, but we are planning on having Aurora's portrait done. We've had some tentative discussions with Renwick Douglas about it, but we had not made any firm plans. Perhaps you might participate in the commissioning of the portrait, pay for some portion of it, if you like, and hang that somewhere in Slytherin. You could explain to Zabini that you, as Head of Slytherin, are providing the portrait as a tribute to Professor Sinistra's life, therefore the other memorial plaque would be . . . an inappropriate addition. You would, of course, word it differently, but he would surely respect that, as would everyone else, and no one could believe that you were slighting her memory."

Severus considered the suggestion. He was unsure whether he was prepared to see a portrait of Professor Sinistra regularly, but it did appeal to him despite that...certainly more than the plaque Zabini had suggested. It would not have to mark the spot where she had died, for one, and any tag or plaque attached to the portrait could simply identify her. People would still remember her and her sacrifice, but they could also see her as the Hogwarts teacher she was. That raised a question.

"How will the portrait be done, since she is not available to sit for it?" Severus asked. While it was possible to paint a wizarding portrait of an actual person after they had died, it was more difficult to do it then than it was to do it when they were alive and the artist could draw upon them for the portrait charms, which gave the image some semblance of the individual's personality and, for the most complex portraits, even some of the individual's memories and experiences.

"Several people have agreed to provide Pensieve memories for Renwick to work with," Albus explained. "We will be asking one or two of the students who were present at her death to loan us their memories of that moment. Even Firenze has agreed to loan a few memories. If you have any that you would like to contribute, I am sure he could use them."

"It does sound like a possibility," Severus said slowly. He had money to spare after being awarded two Orders of Merlin, but he knew that wizarding portraits were expensive, especially those done by a sought-after artist such as Renwick Douglas. "How much would be appropriate for me to contribute to the commission in order to have a say over where it is hung?"

Albus smiled. "I am sure that Minerva wouldn't set a price tag upon that...if you wish it for Slytherin House or for anywhere near Slytherin, your classroom, or your office, I am sure she would agree even if you didn't give a single Knut toward it."

"They don't come cheaply, though," Severus said. "I do not wish to feel that others are paying for something that I am claiming."

"Of course not. But Renwick is Minerva's nephew-in-law...he married Branwen; you remember her, Severus...and he is not charging his usual rate for it. I think, though, that that's something you should discuss with Minerva, if you do prefer that alternative. We had been going to hang it near the entrance to the Astronomy Tower, but the dungeons would be fine, too."

"I will speak to her about it, then. Thank you."

Albus smiled brightly. "I'm glad I could help! Please stop by any time, Severus. I'm always available to you."

Severus nodded and stood. He didn't think he would make it a habit of stopping by without a reason for it, but he was glad now that he had seen Albus. He could manage to work with him, he thought, even if he did still resent Albus's faked death and all that went with that.

Albus stood and hesitated before speaking. "I also imagine that you thought that once you were as free of me as you were of Riddle, you would not still be contending with curse injuries."

Severus bristled. "Do not imagine that you know how I feel, Dumbledore. No, I did not believe that I would still be dealing with such things, but because I believed that I would be dead, as well as the two of you. And whatever our relationship was before you *died*, you are not Riddle, and I resent your presumption that I equated the two of you. Or do you forget that I mourned you? Or do you believe that I mourn him?" he asked bitterly.

"Of course not," Albus said softly. "I didn't mean that you equated us, not precisely, only that we both were . . . tied to that previous existence and to your double role, that's all. And you and I did not always have the easiest of relationships, and although our relationship has changed now with the end of the war, it is still not easy."

Severus could not deny that, but he did not respond.

"I'm no longer even your headmaster, Severus. I am a colleague. A simple teaching colleague, not even a fellow Head of House. Perhaps we can have a fresh start."

Severus snorted. "Just like that? A fresh start. Forget the years...forget the years and what I did, and what I did for you? Forget all of that? Forget the lies of the previous two years? Forget that I thought that I . . . that you . . ." Severus swallowed hard, then continued. "Forget that I thought we were friends despite everything, forget that I thought I cared about you?"

"No, of course not. We can't do that. But I would like us to start fresh because I do care for you, because I care for you no less now than I did on the day that my heart was stopped. And because you mourned me." Albus looked at Severus with soft eyes. "It was not an easy thing to do, to see that and not be able to even offer you comfort, let alone to tell you that I still lived. It was the only way that we saw. And we did want to try to save you from the Vow, and for more than just an ignominious death at Riddle's hand in the end."

"I know all that. I know all that, and I wouldn't change any of it. But knowing it and understanding it has nothing to do with my feelings about it. It probably doesn't make any sense at all, but it doesn't change anything."

"All right," Albus said with a nod. "I know it's still hard for you; you've made that clear. But if I can do anything to make it easier, please tell me."

Severus averted his gaze. A part of him wanted to do as Albus suggested, let go and start fresh. He knew, too, that he wouldn't feel so hurt and so resentful if he didn't still care about Albus. Part of it was also that he felt he had been made a fool of in his grief. He didn't like feeling that strongly about someone that he could grieve as he had. As he had Lily, for years. And it seemed that his grief was always inextricably entwined with feelings of guilt, as well, and that was even worse. But he did not wish Albus away, or dead, and he did know that Albus cared for him, despite knowing all of the terrible things he had done.

"We shall see," Severus said finally. "It isn't even the first of September yet." He returned his gaze to meet Albus's and allowed himself a slight sigh. "I don't think I have the energy to get well, to carry on with my Hogwarts duties, *and* to work on any relationships...with you or with anyone else."

Albus smiled slightly. "Take care of yourself first, Severus. Get well. And Minerva tells me that you and Gareth are becoming friends. That's a good thing. You probably don't want my advice on anything right now, but I hope that you do develop more friendships. Gareth is a fine young wizard, and probably a good tonic for you. Get out and become more friendly with some of your colleagues, as well. You aren't constrained by your double role any longer...and not just with me. I do hope you'll visit me again, but I also hope you'll take the opportunity to become more sociable with other members of staff. You'll be fit again soon enough. Try to enjoy your new life."

"I doubt my colleagues are looking forward to a new sociable Severus Snape," Severus replied derisively.

"You may be pleasantly surprised, my boy. Give people a chance, hmm? And yourself!"

"Hmpf. We'll see. I have to go meet Teller; I'm expecting her in a few minutes." He paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Thank you for your help today. It was useful."

"Of course. I'll meet you after dinner to set your password wards, then?"

"We can walk down together," Severus agreed.

NEXT

Chapter Nine: A Delicate Phase

Monday, 31 August 1998

With the start of the school year almost upon him, Severus undergoes another examination as he enters a delicate phase of his treatment. He receives an owl from Hermione and anticipates a visit from her.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Filius Flitwick, Twiskett, others

Author's Note: If you like Filius Flitwick or just like little ficlets, I recently posted a new Flitwick flashfic "[Awkward](#)," in the set of "Cheering Charms" here on the Petulant Poetess. "Cheering Charms" is a set of loosely related fluffy flashfics focussing on Filius Flitwick. (Try saying *that* five times fast!)

Chapter Nine: A Delicate Phase

Chapter 10 of 118

Monday, 31 August 1998. With the start of the school year almost upon him, Severus has another examination as he enters a delicate phase of his treatment. Filius gives him a hand with the new staff, and he anticipates a visit from Hermione.



Chapter Nine: A Delicate Phase

Monday, 31 August 1998

Severus sat on the edge of his bed, hunched over. He'd made it back from the infirmary, where, under the watchful eye of Poppy, he'd taken both the Nagini potion and his morning dose of Ferron's Elixir. She had cast diagnostics before and after each potion, and after he had swallowed the Ferron's Elixir, her brow had furrowed slightly at what she saw.

"You're still within normal parameters, Severus," she announced, "but I'm glad that Melina will be by to see you this afternoon and check you out. Your deep-core readings are right on the edge, and I'd like her to double-check them. I'm going to see if she can get here earlier, in fact."

Severus swallowed and nodded. The nausea was much better, but still not completely gone, and yet it seemed that the headache was worse. He certainly felt enervated, more so each time he took the potions, and this morning was particularly bad. He decided to concentrate on the fact that the nausea had improved. He'd never be very good at looking at the "bright side," but, as Hermione was always encouraging him, he could try.

He'd received a note from Hermione the evening before; she'd regretted that he hadn't been able to come to lunch at the Three Broomsticks, but she hoped she would be able to see him soon. She asked if she could visit, and somewhat impulsively, he had written back immediately and invited her to come up in the morning.

So now Severus was sitting on the edge of his bed, willing the Headache Potion to ease more than just his headache, and hoping that he would feel at least somewhat better before Hermione arrived. She'd seen him much sicker...near death, in fact...but he hated to have her think of him as Severus-the-invalid. He didn't mind that she cared about him, but he wished that she could care about him when he was well, and that it didn't seem that he was sick all of the time.

"Twiskett!" He might feel better if he ate something.

Twiskett arrived with a light crack.

"I'd like some breakfast, please. Just toast and tea."

Twiskett nodded, waited a moment to see whether further instructions would be forthcoming, and when none were, he departed almost silently, for which Severus was grateful.

Severus lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. Hermione wouldn't be here for at least another few hours. He would have some breakfast, then a nap, then a shower. Damn. He couldn't nap. There was a staff meeting in less than an hour. The shower would have to do. If the meeting didn't go too long, he might be able to take a short nap after that.

Twiskett returned with his breakfast, which included an unasked-for soft-cooked egg, and Severus began the chore of feeding himself. Perhaps when he saw Melina, she would be able to do something for how tired and weakened he felt. He couldn't imagine trying to teach. And the Sorting was that evening. He would have to stay awake for the Welcome Feast.

After finishing his breakfast, Severus forced himself to his feet and went to get ready for the staff meeting, beginning with a shower and a shave. He was glad he had never become accustomed to using a shaving charm, or even a Charmed razor, since at least most of his morning routine was undisturbed by his new magic-free regimen. The light in his bathroom came on as soon as he opened the door...a handy charm that Minerva had cast for him even before he'd returned from his outing with Gareth on Friday. Severus liked it so well, he thought he would keep it even after he was recovered and was using magic again.

He dressed carefully, his hair still damp from only being towel-dried. If it wasn't dry before he had to leave for the meeting, he'd have to call Twiskett to do it for him. Considering how little he normally used his house-elf, he was certainly making up for it now, Severus thought with a sigh. As much as he disliked his current dependent state, however, he had to admit to himself that it was nice to know that even now that he wasn't the Order's spy, people still were willing to help him and take care of him. Minerva, Poppy, Hagrid, and even Albus, had all been very helpful. Twiskett might take care of him because it was his job, or even Poppy...although she did go out of her way to try to make it the least unpleasant as she was able...but much of what Minerva, Albus, and Hagrid had done for him went well beyond the requirements of colleagues or employer.

His hair was only slightly damp at eight forty-five, so Severus decided to forego calling Twiskett to dry it. He shrugged on a teaching robe, but left it open, then extinguished the candles and left his suite. Force of will combined with force of habit brought him to his office, where he murmured his three-word pass-phrase, turned the large key in the lock, and opened his door. The pass-phrase rotated among four different nonsense, multilingual phrases, so even if someone overheard him and could catch each of the non-English words, they would be unlikely to be successful with it unless he had already opened his office door three more times in the interim. They had chosen unrelated French, German, and Italian words, ones easy enough for Severus to recall and repeat correctly, but difficult for the casual bystander to catch and remember...particularly if that bystander were a student. Not perfect, but better than just the key alone.

Minerva had also placed a portrait on his office door, the one that had guarded her own quarters for decades and had been moved up to the Headmistress's sitting room as soon as she had taken the new suite. Albus assured Severus that the portrait was an even better door warden than most, and that even in the unlikely event that some other person had the correct pass-phrase, the Silent Knight would be cautious about allowing them entrance. The Knight had then removed his helmet and bowed to him, assuring Severus that he would do his utmost to keep out anyone who did not have a legitimate reason for entering the office. Severus was struck by how very like Lucius Malfoy the portrait appeared, despite the Knight's age...he appeared to be a Muggle of about seventy...yet how different, as well. His expression was open, his bright blue eyes, kind, and his smile, warm; he seemed as alive as any portrait Severus had ever seen. Remarkable for a wizarding painting of such apparent antiquity.

"I will keep your domain safe, Professor," the Knight had said softly. "I'll not leave this frame for any reason, even if it means my . . . my destruction. I have pledged it to my lady."

Severus had found the portrait peculiar, but if Minerva assured him that with or without passwords, the Silent Knight would ward his door securely, he believed her. She had had the portrait for decades, after all, and had taken the unusual step of bringing it with her when she moved into the Headmistress's suite. And other than the initial greetings they had exchanged when Albus had set the password charm, the portrait did, indeed, remain silent, which suited Severus well.

Severus gathered up the parchments he would need for the meeting, and as he bent to pick one up from where it had drifted to the floor, a wave of dizziness and tingling rushed over him. He straightened slowly and lowered himself into his desk chair, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. It took a few moments, but the light-headedness passed, though he still felt a slight tingling in his hands. He clenched his teeth, as much in anger as in determination, and stood.

He'd been under worse pressure and in worse circumstances. He was not going to let a little wizarding illness and a few potions side-effects keep him from doing his job. The students would be arriving that evening, and he was not going to have his first duties of the new school year delegated to Flitwick. He would take care of the new staff members that morning and the new students that evening. The Sorting, after all, required no magic and little stamina. He merely had to stand there, call out the students' names, and place the bloody Sorting Hat on their heads. He would not let the Dark Lord get the upper hand now, not when the wizard was dead and burned. He'd take the

potions and finally recover fully from Nagini's last bite.

He stepped into the hall and locked the door behind him, exchanging silent nods with the portrait, then strode down the hall towards the stairs that would bring him to the ground floor corridor nearest the staff room. And perhaps some of the lassitude he had felt over the last few months would disappear with the final traces of Nagini's venom. With that thought, Severus picked up his pace.

Severus scribbled a note on the parchment in his hand. He was beginning to weary of standing, but Laura Walker Manning had approached him just as he had pushed away from the staff table, and they'd gone over beside the fireplace, out of the way of the other staff members, who were still milling about. He considered sitting in the large, worn wingback chair just a few feet away, but dismissed the idea as soon as it occurred to him. Manning was a relatively petite witch, but Severus still appreciated the advantage his height gave him, an advantage he would lose if he were to sit. Besides, it seemed that everyone had been informed, however discreetly, of his illness, and he did not want to appear in any way "delicate."

"I understand that it may be a few days before it can be attended to...or longer," Laura added hastily, clearly not wishing to seem to be making demands, "but I thought I'd ask about it now before we both become more busy once the students arrive."

"It is, as you note, not of the highest priority, but I will speak with the Headmistress about it. It is she who would create the internal Floo connections you are suggesting. I have no objection to those for your and Professor Manning's use, and I doubt that the Headmistress would, either. In theory, the others might be useful, as well." Severus frowned, as much from the strain of standing as from displeasure. "However, the prospect of the students simply Flooing about the castle . . . I understand your rationale, but I am not sanguine about the likelihood of connections between the House common rooms and the library, even during the limited hours that you suggest."

"I would appreciate your bringing the idea to her attention, though, Professor," Laura said. "I know there are many arguments against it, but I thought it an idea worth considering, at least. Some of the books can be quite heavy, and the common rooms are all quite a distance from the library. Slytherin's the furthest, I believe. It would save the students some precious study time, particularly just before curfew."

"Mm. The exercise is good for the..." Severus caught himself before he used one of his usual epithets. "The students are used to the exercise, and they have never had access to the internal Floo network." He disliked the idea, himself, but he wanted to avoid alienating the new staff too soon, so he did not express this opinion, and he would naturally inform Minerva of the hare-brained notion. "The Headmistress, of course, has the final say in such matters."

"Of course." Laura smiled up at him, her hazel eyes bright. "Thank you for your help with all this, Professor. David and I have had quite a transition in our lives in a very few days...moving from a four-bedroom house in Bournemouth to just a few rooms here, well, we're both excited about it all, but it's quite a change."

"If you have any other . . . problems, bring them to me," Severus said awkwardly, knowing he sounded less than inviting, but it was better than telling the woman that he was just doing his job, he thought. "And, er, thank you for your assistance with the *Prophet* articles the other day."

Laura shrugged and grinned. "I think you helped me more than I helped you, to be honest. Not to speak ill of my predecessor, but Madam Pince's notions of organisation were evidently not intended to assist anyone in finding anything. More a system of obfuscation than of organisation."

Severus tried to give an appreciative smirk. "I am certain that it worked for her for many years," he said ambiguously. He shifted his weight discreetly. He really needed to sit down.

"Well, I don't want to take any more of your time, Professor." She looked over her shoulder. "I see I'm not the only one who wants to speak with you."

Severus barely restrained a grimace, but when he saw who it was, he let out a slight sigh of relief. Filius. It might be seen as a polite gesture if he sat down rather than towering over the older Head of Ravenclaw. He blinked, taken aback when Laura bent and quickly kissed the Charms teacher on the cheek. Hogwarts staff simply did not go about offering gestures of affection in public, and certainly not in a staff meeting...even if the staff meeting had ended fifteen minutes before and there were fewer people remaining in the room. Filius himself blushed, but he smiled and seemed pleased.

"Do you mind if I take the Deputy Headmaster away from you for a moment, Laura?" he asked. "I just have a few points of business to discuss with him before the Sorting tonight."

"No, not at all. I need to put the finishing touches on my presentation for Professor Cahill's fifth-year class on how to use the library for their history research...probably just adding a lot of caveats about, 'of course, this will change with the reorganisation of the library!'" she said with a laugh. She turned back to Severus. "Thank you again, Professor."

Severus stepped back, half in subconscious fear she might decide to kiss his cheek...though that was absurd...half in order to be closer to the welcoming embrace of the armchair.

The new librarian had scarcely moved away when Filius said, "Why don't we have a seat, Severus, if you have a few minutes?" The Charms teacher flicked his wand and a leather ottoman scooted closer, and he perched on it.

Severus tried to make a show of reluctance as he sat down, but his weary body seemed to sigh in relief of its own accord.

"You wished to discuss something with me?"

"Actually, Severus," Filius said in a low tone, "I thought you looked as though you could use a bit of a breather."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Aside from that, I thought I'd see if there was anything I could help *you* with," Filius continued. "I noticed that both Professor Lloyd and Laura seemed to give you rather long descriptions of some needs they have."

"Lloyd's concerns will easily be dealt with by the house-elves, I believe," Severus said, glancing at his list. "Although at the moment, we cannot do anything about the orientation of the windows in his classroom. Perhaps the next time Professor McGonagall makes some larger changes to the castle . . ."

"Surely the house-elves can deal with the windows," Filius said, furrowing his brow and trying to remember the classroom he had assigned the new Ancient Runes teacher. "They are rather long and narrow..."

"Perhaps I misspoke," Severus interrupted. "It is more the orientation of the room...the orientation of the *building*...to which he objects. He would prefer south-facing windows. His apparently now face the Quidditch pitch, and he finds the view *aesthetically displeasing*." He said the final words with an unveiled sneer.

"We could find him a different classroom," Filius began helpfully.

"I do not believe that would be a profitable expenditure of *our* time, however," Severus said. He sighed. He didn't even have windows in his quarters, let alone in his classroom, aside from the Charmed false window that Albus had created for him in his bedroom. That window had the view that Lloyd apparently coveted: out across the loch toward the verdant mountains on the other side. "Perhaps . . . if you know of one that would suit and he is able to move into it overnight before classes begin tomorrow . . . otherwise, I would prefer he simply wait until the winter holidays. And he might adjust to the aesthetics of the Quidditch pitch in the meantime."

"I'll look into it, then!" Filius said. "And Laura? Are she and Davey settling in well? They seemed to be, but I saw that you spoke rather at length with her."

"Hmph. She would like Floo connections between her husband's office and her own in the library," Severus said.

"I am sure that Minerva would be happy to do that. It will only take a few minutes. Was that all?"

"There were a few minor details about the cooking facilities in their suite," Severus said, "though as they both take their meals in the Great Hall, she agreed that they weren't a priority. Nonetheless, I told her to speak to their Hogwarts elf about them. I believe they are all things that can be accomplished quickly and without requiring my...or the Headmistress's...attention." Severus paused. "She also had several . . . suggestions about the library and how it might be improved, aside from the reorganisation she has already begun. Those *will* require our attention. Possibly something that the Headmistress will wish to discuss with the Heads of House first. One of those ideas . . . I found it . . . untenable."

"Really? What is it?" Filius asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Frankly," Severus said, glancing over at the few remaining staff on the other end of the room and lowering his voice, "I thought it daft. She would like to have the library connected by Floo to the House common rooms between the hours of eight a.m. and nine p.m during the week with shortened hours on the weekends. As a convenience to the students."

Filius's eyebrows rose. "The students Flooing back and forth . . . I don't know . . . but actually, it's a rather surprising idea, but perhaps we should consider it."

"They are sure to abuse it, use it as a short cut, or as a way out of trouble if they're up to no good. And although it's unlikely a student could override the Headmistress's Floo protocols, there are security considerations...someone could attempt to Floo through to another House's common room, for example..."

"Of course, but we could discuss it. Laura always was such a bright girl. She'll be quite the innovator, I'm sure!" Filius smiled, pleased with the new librarian's initiative. "You'll remember their daughter, Christine, from school, Severus. She's my goddaughter, you see, so they're something like family to me. I was very pleased to see that we could offer both Davey and Laura a job. It worked out so well." A cloud passed over the Ravenclaw's face. "Of course," he added quietly, "we would all prefer not to have had to replace Aurora."

Severus nodded. A chill passed over him and he could not suppress his shiver.

"You know, Severus, let me take care of Caspar and the Mannings today. You have the Sorting ahead of you, after all. And I saw that Mr Rath stopped and spoke with you. Did he need anything?"

"No." Severus's mouth suddenly felt parched. He swallowed and cleared his throat. "He was simply informing me that he will be down at the dock to meet the boats with me this evening. Hagrid is bringing them across as usual."

"Good. Rath is a decent sort, if a bit quiet. He'll cooperate with you well, I believe. He won't say much, but tell him to do something, and it'll be done."

Severus wanted to retort that that was what the Assistant Groundskeeper was being paid for, but his headache was returning full force, and he only wanted to get out of the staff room and down to his rooms. "I'll leave them to you, then," he replied instead.

Filius slipped off his ottoman. "See you this evening, Severus! I'll let you know what changes we make to Caspar's classroom."

Severus stood, trying to make it seem effortless, but then he faltered and almost groaned aloud when he saw who was coming through the staff room door: Poppy Pomfrey was returning to the room, and with her was Melina O'Donald.

There was to be no nap for him before Hermione arrived, he thought, glowering down at the two Hufflepuff witches who were smiling up at him.

Sitting on the edge of an infirmary bed, Severus wished he could interpret Melina's expression as she cast one diagnostic spell after another, a few of them sending tingles, chills, or other peculiar sensations through his body.

Finally, the Healer nodded. "Very good. The deep core readings aren't yet a cause for concern, although I will show Poppy one other spell I'd like her to cast to check your magical core each time you take the Elixir. I still want to test a few drops of your blood in vitro and check the venom levels, but you are responding well to both potions. We're entering a tricky phase, though, Severus," she said as she sat down in the chair beside the bed. "I am concerned about the dosage of the Ferron's Elixir. I will need to have Poppy monitor you when you take it each time. I realise that you wouldn't prefer that, but it is important. And if you begin to feel ill, you need to alert Poppy immediately."

"*Begin* to feel ill," Severus grumped. "I already feel ill all of the time. Between the headache that varies only between nagging and raging, and the general exhaustion, I certainly don't feel *well*."

"You said the nausea was better, though?" Melina asked.

"Better, but not entirely gone," Severus admitted.

"The fatigue . . . is it accompanied by any specific symptoms? Loss of coordination, vertigo, muscular weakness, shortness of breath, double-vision..."

"Some dizziness, usually when I'm standing for a while or when I change positions. Not muscle weakness, exactly, but I don't seem to have any stamina."

Melina performed a few more tests, having Severus follow the tip of her wand with his eyes, grip her hands, and then stand and do a few coordination and balance tests.

"Everything looks all right now, aside from a bit of unevenness in your grip strength, which is probably because you quit doing your rehab exercises too soon, but if you notice any of the symptoms becoming worse, you *must* tell Poppy. It is unlikely, but it could be a sign of impending magical drain. I will want to see you again on Wednesday...perhaps during your lunch hour...just to check your condition and see if we need to adjust the Ferron's Elixir further. Poppy will contact me sooner, of course, if she notices anything amiss or if you develop any troubling symptoms. I'll test your blood myself before I leave Hogwarts this morning, though I am fairly sure I'll find the same results as I just did." Melina patted him on the shoulder. "You are doing well, Severus, and by the time we perform the procedure on Friday, you'll be in good shape to recover fully, provided you take care of yourself and let Poppy know of any changes you notice, even if you think they're benign. Keep eating, even if you haven't much appetite, whatever appeals to you. Don't worry about how healthy it is. I'll have Poppy provide you with some supplements."

Melina leaned out the open door and called to the matron, who appeared quickly. She repeated to Poppy what she had told Severus, adding, "Don't let him talk you into leaving him on his own to take the potions. That's been fine up to this point, but I will be more comfortable if you are there to take the readings immediately before and immediately after he takes them...and as you know, if there's going to be a problem with the Ferron's Elixir, it usually appears immediately after a dose is taken."

"I've boned up on treating magical drain in adults," Poppy said, "just in case."

Melina smiled at them both. "I doubt it will come to that. We'll adjust the dosage after you've finished the Nagini potion tomorrow morning." She turned to Poppy. "Reduce the Ferron's Elixir by a half a dram beginning tomorrow evening. And report the results of the diagnostics immediately, regardless of the time or what they are." She looked back up at Severus. "Let me take a few drops of blood, then I will be in touch, Severus. After all you went through this spring, I'm sure you'll get through this, too."

Severus sat in his favourite chair, which had moulded itself to his form over the years, and drowsed. Candles blazing around the room added not only light, but warmth, and without his customary cooling charms, even his dungeon quarters were beginning to feel overly warm to him. It crossed his mind that he could call Twiskett and have him

light the lamps instead, but he was so near sleep, he didn't wish to stir himself enough to do even that.

Suddenly, a sharp rap on the door startled him, and he sat up straighter and blinked. At the next knock, he was on his feet and crossing the room with more speed than he had managed in days. Hermione.

He opened the door, and there she was, dressed in jeans, a satiny blouse in ruby red, and a lacy crocheted white cardigan with belled sleeves. She was toting a covered basket, too, which she held out toward him as she smiled in greeting.

He felt himself smile in return. "Good morning, Hermione."

Next

Chapter Ten: Jam Tarts

31 August 1998

Severus has a pleasant visit from Hermione, and they take a "brain holiday," though they can't escape uncomfortable topics.

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, Twiskett

Author's Note: Some of you may recognize the Silent Knight...yes, he's still Minerva's loyal servant! If you want to reacquaint yourself with the core of his story, he's featured in the *Resolving a Misunderstanding* chapter ["The Silent Knight's Tale."](#) (Link goes directly to that chapter.)

Chapter Ten: Jam Tarts

Chapter 11 of 118

Monday, 31 August 1998. Severus has a pleasant visit from Hermione, though they can't escape uncomfortable topics.



Chapter Ten: Jam Tarts

Monday, 31 August 1998

"Hi, Severus! Mum and I spent Friday putting up jam, then we made some tarts on Saturday. I thought you might like some."

Severus took the basket from her and nodded, stepping back to allow Hermione entry. "I am uncertain when I will be able to eat them, however. The potions have some unpleasant side-effects."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "The tarts should stay good for a several more days yet; I put freshness charms on them. The jam, of course, you can eat any time. I'm sorry you're sick again."

Severus stiffened. "It will pass."

"Of course. Gareth didn't give me any details, but it sounds as though Melina caught whatever it was just in time."

"You needn't worry." He set the basket down on the small round table in the back of his sitting room. He hated seeing the concern on Hermione's face.

"I can't help it. I care about you. And you were so sick before . . . you seemed to be getting better."

"I thought I was."

"What happened?"

Severus gestured to her to have a seat on the sofa. "Nothing *happened*, Hermione. It's just more of the same." Aware that he sounded cross and dismissive, he added, "Nagini's venom had some continuing effects. It was not completely gone from my system. The magical components of her venom were still there, causing trouble and apparently beginning to grow or multiply, sapping my own magic."

"That sounds dreadful!"

"The Dark Lord's reach is long," Severus said softly. Unconsciously, his right hand grasped his left arm where his brand once had been.

"But he's dead, and so is Nagini," Hermione said forcefully. "Once Melina has finished treating you, you will be fine...you will be fine, won't you?" The note of concern crept back into her voice.

Severus shrugged. "That is what Healer O'Donald reassures me. Yes."

"Gareth told me you have to rest your magic."

"I am not allowed to use it." Severus frowned. "Exercising my magic could cause the effects of the venom to increase and for my magical reserves to decrease. In addition,

one of the potions I am taking acts on my magical core, and it can be dangerous to use magic whilst taking that elixir."

Hermione thought for a moment. "When can you use magic again? It must be difficult, especially here at Hogwarts, not to use your wand."

"No spells, no potions, no wandless magic...especially no wandless magic." Severus met Hermione's worried eyes. "It will be at least another week. If it's not forever."

"Forever?" Hermione blinked.

He shrugged slightly and shook his head. "It probably won't come to that. But . . ."

"But you are afraid that it might," Hermione said softly.

"What good is a Potions master at a wizarding school if he can't use magic?" Severus asked bitterly. "Worse, I could lose it altogether, become hardly more than a Squib. As it is, I can't even use any Charmed objects that depend upon my magic to activate the charm. I never should have returned."

"You mean to Hogwarts? But you will be fine, I am sure of it. Mr Weasley never had any problems with his magic after he was bitten; he recovered completely..."

"It was different for him," Severus interrupted. "For one thing, his bite wasn't as severe, and for another, Nagini's venom changed over time. The mundane components remained the same, and some of the magical ones that were inherent to her nature, but the Dark L, Riddle, had been doing things to enhance her power, including feeding her magical creatures. She ingested the magic with the bodies."

"I thought that magic disappeared after we died," Hermione said, confused.

"The active magic, yes. But there's still magic remaining. Think a moment, Hermione. If magic disappeared completely from our corpses when we died, the same would be true of all other magical creatures and plants. And a Charmed object always retains some amount of the maker's magic. And remember Riddle's Horcruxes. They required not only a physical object to hold them, but some magic to encase them and tie them to the object; that magic still resonated with Riddle's own, and his magic called to it whenever he cast a spell. We die, and our spirits may go wherever it is that spirits or souls go, but there is always some lingering magic remaining...though you are right, it does dissipate over time. That is why some magical potions ingredients must be used fresh, depending upon the source."

"Of course . . . I suppose I see that." Hermione smiled. "This reminds me of our brain holidays, but a bit too serious."

Severus smiled. "Hello, my name is Severus and I am a recovering Death Eater. Care to take a brain holiday with me?"

Hermione laughed. "Well, we could discuss all this later, when you are better and it isn't all so serious anymore. But we could take a different sort of brain holiday now!"

"Do you have any particular destination in mind?"

"Oh . . . what about Transfiguration? Gareth and Alroy have discussed my Animagus training, and I'm going to begin meeting with Alroy one afternoon a week. Right now, he just has me doing more reading, but pretty soon, I'll begin doing some of the preliminary exercises."

"I thought McGonagall was going to have you concentrate on just the apprenticeship for now," Severus said.

"Gareth said that as long as I don't neglect my apprenticeship, I can get a start on my Animagus training. Alroy's agreed not to give me any exercises that will tire me too much or require monitoring yet." Hermione made a face. "I hate having them make all the decisions about what I study and when, but it's part of the deal!"

"You are an apprentice, Hermione, or you will be tomorrow. Your life isn't your own any longer," Severus said warningly.

Hermione laughed. "Well, it's not that bad. I think Gareth will be okay about most things. I get weekends off...that's when I'm meeting Alroy, on Saturdays...and if things go well this autumn, he's going to let me take a Muggle class or two next term and just adjust my Arithmancy schedule."

Severus nodded slightly. "You are fortunate, then. He would be within his rights as your master to insist you study nothing but Arithmancy."

"I know. And I get every weekend off, both Saturday and Sunday, and that's more than the law requires. And," Hermione said with a sly grin, "Professor Dumbledore put in a 'renegotiable' clause for me."

Severus's eyebrows rose. "Renegotiable?"

"Yes, after six months, and Gareth agreed to it. I still would have to continue in my apprenticeship for at least another six months, of course, or until I qualify, but I can renegotiate the terms or even decide to take an extended break. If I take a break, he's not obligated to take me back at the end of it, though."

"Why would you do that? I can understand wanting to renegotiate some specific term that you might decide in retrospect was unfavourable to you, but breaking your apprenticeship in the middle...it would be frowned upon by other masters and employers, and it would not be in your best interests educationally, either. You need the continuity and intensity of training, or doing an apprenticeship is pointless. You will have wasted the first six months with nothing to show for it."

"Oh, I don't intend to take a long break from it; it's just one option. I thought . . . I'd like to take Muggle courses. Maybe I might decide I want to take more than one or two at a time, that's all. Or there might be some other opportunity that I don't want to pass up."

"Opportunities are fine, but you don't want to throw away your apprenticeship on a whim."

"Don't worry about it, Severus. I doubt I'll be leaving my apprenticeship until I attain my mastery."

"Hmmp. Good, then."

"But I've been reading more about internal Transfiguration. Alroy said that if everything is going well, I might be able to begin trying it by Christmas." She sighed. "That seems so far away. I'm sure I could perform internal Transfigurations sooner."

"Perhaps, but as you say, your first obligation is to your apprenticeship. You will likely find yourself so well occupied that you have no time to contemplate the pace of your Animagus training."

Hermione smiled. "You're right, of course. I just always want to dive in and do as much as possible."

"But thoroughly, Hermione. That is important." He looked over at the basket. "You know, I just might try one of those jam tarts."

Hermione brightened. "Oh, good! I hope you like them."

Severus started to reach for his pocket for his wand, which wasn't there, but stopped himself. He stood, retrieved the basket, and set it on the coffee table in front of them, then sat back down in the chair at the end of the couch.

"You made them with your mother? No magic?"

"No magic. I actually am not very good at cooking, either with or without magic, but at least I know my way around a Muggle kitchen. I'd be hopeless in Mrs Weasley's kitchen." Hermione stopped, remembering that the Weasleys' kitchen was now bereft its mistress. "That is, I don't know how to cook using magic."

Severus nodded, subdued. It was never a comfortable thing for him to remember those members of the Order or of the staff who had died, and Molly's and Sinistra's deaths weighed particularly heavily upon him. Had he lived at their expense? Or at least, at Sinistra's expense?

"I'm sorry . . ."

"It does not seem that we can speak of anything without the conversation turning toward . . . more serious matters," Severus said. "It is simply the way things are, Hermione."

"What about those tarts, though? If you think you could eat one."

"My potions were a few hours ago. I believe a tart would be welcome. And some tea to go with it. I should have offered when you arrived."

"Tea would be nice."

"Twiskett!"

Twiskett arrived with a hollow pop.

"Tea, please, a large pot," Severus requested.

Twiskett smiled shyly at Hermione and nodded.

"And light the lamps," Severus added.

Twiskett snapped his fingers and the lamps lit; another little flicking of his fingers, and all the candles but one were snuffed. When there were no further orders, he disappeared with a small snick.

After Twiskett delivered their tea, Hermione poured for them. Severus took two tarts from the basket and set them on the table.

"They look nice," Severus said, trying to think of something appreciative to say. The jam filling was beautifully glazed and the crusts, golden brown.

"Thank you." Hermione blushed. "Actually, these are ones that Mum put together. I helped with the jam and rolling out the crust, but . . . well, the edges on hers were nicer. Mine were kind of blobby."

"You have had little opportunity whilst at Hogwarts to practise any culinary arts," Severus pointed out. "I am sure that your skills will improve if you wish to spend the time on such things."

Hermione nodded as he took a bite of the tart, waiting anxiously for his reaction. He chewed, swallowed, and took another bite. She relaxed. She supposed that taking a second bite meant he liked it.

"Did you know that they used to teach a twice-weekly course in Culinary Charms and Housewitchery at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

Severus nodded, mumbling something through another bite of jam tart.

"I didn't. Well, I found out, obviously. When I was doing research for Harry a couple years ago." Hermione didn't mention that that was when she had discovered the identity of Severus's mother. "But they were optional courses, I guess. They never gave NEWTs in them, and they stopped even giving OWLs in them by the fifties. I don't know when they stopped offering them."

Severus took a sip of tea. "It was when I was a student. It wasn't something I would have been interested in or noticed...but Madam Penrose still came in and taught a Housewitchery course one afternoon a week until my fifth or sixth year. She retired or got sick, and they never hired anyone to replace her. I don't think there was much call for it. It was more of an organised activity than a real course."

"I would have been interested," Hermione said.

"You're interested in everything, though," Severus said with a smirk.

"Not *everything*," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes.

"Who used a Time-Turner her third year to try to take every optional course offered?"

"But I dropped Divination! You knew about that? About the Time-Turner?"

"Mmph. How else were you to take all the classes with the conflicting schedules?" Severus asked rhetorically. "Not that I was told until after the foolishness had begun. I would not have approved."

"Would you have forbidden it?" Hermione asked, eyes wide.

Severus twitched. "I could not have forbidden it. I had no say in the matter. My class was not one of the ones affected and you were not a student in my House. It was up to the Headmaster and his Deputy."

"But you would have."

"It is moot. I was not even asked an opinion. And I understand from the impossible events at the end of the year that it proved a useful device." His tone was grudging. "For at least some people."

Hermione remembered that although she and her friends might have been relieved that they could effect the simultaneous rescue of Sirius and Buckbeak, Severus likely had experienced it all quite differently. Especially since he'd been hexed. And she'd been one of those who had done it. He had done what he'd thought was best, and even though he hadn't liked them, he had tried to save them. Of course, his dislike of Sirius had probably played a role, too. Finally getting revenge for Black's prank all those years ago . . . and for his presumed betrayal of the Potters.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said. "We were all in the dark, really."

"Some of us more so than others," Severus said, setting down his teacup.

His shift in mood was palpable, and Hermione felt a sudden chasm open between them, as though the events of the last few years hadn't happened and she was sitting with the Potions master who "had seen no difference" when she had been struck by the curse on her teeth, the teacher who had hated Harry from the moment he'd set foot in his classroom, the one who had made so much of their school experience unpleasant, to say the least.

"I'm sorry," she repeated softly.

Severus shook his head slightly, seeming to contemplate his tea. "It was all . . . It was a lifetime ago. I don't even know what I feel about it all any longer. Too much has happened. And for you to apologise or express regret...you really had little to do with any of it, Hermione. Not then. And not what had already happened, what couldn't be

changed." He raised his head and looked at her. "You can be glad that you had the Time-Turner, that you could change what seemed to be the inevitable. And not for the last time, either. My own . . . inevitable death . . . my unexpected survival . . ."

"I know that you said that you sometimes wish you hadn't lived," Hermione said. "Do you still feel that way?" Immediately, she regretted the question.

Severus grimaced. "You cannot know. When I returned to Hogwarts last week, I thought I might have some normalcy, even though I'm not sure what that is. But it seemed better, a little better, at least, than sitting at Spinner's End. Now, though." He took a breath. "I tell you not to worry, but I don't want to become a Squib. I don't even want to have to recover from this. I don't think I have the energy left to do it. Hard enough, just living."

Hermione reached across the coffee table and took his hand. "Is there anything I can do? Anything I can do to help?"

He shook his head and folded his fingers around hers. "Nothing . . . except . . . another brain holiday? If you can visit again. We'll both be busy." He cleared his throat. He feared he was sounding maudlin.

"Of course! I'm sure we can find the time. But if there isn't anything I can do, you should still ask for help from anyone who can help," Hermione said. "If you aren't well enough to teach this week, I'm sure that Professor McGonagall would understand and..."

"I must teach," Severus interrupted. "The Headmistress already inquired. I don't want her to think I'm incapable. Or for the students to learn of my current state. I need to get on with it. She's already made allowances for me, for my illness, for my absence this summer. Flitwick is practically her deputy already." He sighed. "I don't want to be ungrateful, but I want everything to be as normal as possible."

Hermione frowned. "As long as you don't ignore your health. I'm worried that you'll do too much. You seem so tired. What about your classes?"

"Strong coffee will help. And I'm not doing any demonstrations until I can use my magic again."

"But there might come a time when you think you have to use your wand. You could hurt yourself. And you might just overtire yourself even if you don't."

Severus grunted and released Hermione's hand. "It's not that dire. Madam Pomfrey is being annoyingly conscientious in checking on me every few hours, and the Headmistress is requiring me to have Twiskett present whilst I teach, just in case one of the students has an accident. As for my wand," he added, trying to lighten his tone, "I am not carrying it, so I can't use it. The way that I feel now, I doubt I will forget I'm not supposed to perform any magic. The potions I am on are quite enervating. I actually felt in better health before the Healer got her hands on me."

"Well, I still think you should ask for help if you need it. I'm glad that you are being well-looked-after, but don't be stubborn. I am sure that Professor McGonagall wants you healthy, and if she wanted to replace you as deputy, I think she already would have done it."

"Speaking of which, I need to speak to Flitwick about some staff issues, and it is almost lunchtime."

Hermione stood. "Do you need anything from Hogsmeade? I should have asked before I came up this morning, but I have the entire afternoon free. Or if you need anything else? Something I can do?"

Severus stood and quirked a smile at her. "The only thing I needed this morning was a brain holiday with you. I have appreciated your visit. I am sorry if it was not pleasant for you, especially on your last day as a free witch before you begin your apprenticeship."

"Oh, no! I enjoyed it! And if you need any help . . ."

"No, I have my classroom set up, with the house-elf's help, and Flitwick is assisting me with the few other tasks I might have had today. The Sorting is this evening; I thought I would take the afternoon to . . . to prepare for that." He needed a nap, but didn't want to say that to Hermione.

"All right, but if you change your mind, just owl me. I'll only be settling into my new room this afternoon, or maybe helping in the garden. Nothing that I couldn't leave."

"Have a good afternoon, Hermione. I will owl you when the Healer pronounces me fit for magic, and we can take another brain holiday. Perhaps in more pleasant environs." He walked her to the door.

"I enjoyed spending time with you. I hope you enjoy the jam and the rest of the tarts."

Severus smiled. "Thank you for those. I will enjoy them, I am sure."

As he opened the door, Hermione reached up and touched his shoulder, then she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. He barely had time to be startled by that when she was out the door and hurrying away. His fingertips went to the spot where her lips had just brushed his skin; he felt his face warming as he incongruously thought that he was glad he had shaved that morning. He closed his door with a gentle click, still smiling.

Next

Chapter Eleven: Don't Frighten the Firsties

Monday, 31 August 1998

Severus greets the first-years, and it's a more memorable occasion than he'd anticipated. He obtains a new admirer before the Sorting.

Characters: Severus Snape, Rubeus Hagrid, Poppy Pomfrey, Twiskett

Chapter Eleven: Don't Frighten the Firsties

Chapter 12 of 118

Monday, 31 August 1998. Severus greets the first-years, and it's a more memorable occasion than he'd anticipated. He obtains a new admirer before the Sorting.



Chapter Eleven: Don't Frighten the Firsties

Monday, 31 August 1998

Severus looked out across the dock at the first-years, who were clambering from the boats with varying degrees of ineptitude, though two of the boys sprang from them as though they'd done nothing more difficult than step across a crack in the pavement. He noted with approval that both of the boys then assisted their less-adroit classmates out of the boats, speeding things up considerably. With the two boys helping, Hagrid and Rath herded them together, and the new students were soon standing in a more or less orderly fashion in front of him.

Severus opened his mouth to begin his very carefully prepared speech of welcome when one of the girls in the front, a very little thing with dark hair and large brown eyes, whispered something to the girl next to her. Severus raised his eyebrow, then when that had no effect, he frowned at her, but had no time to do more before the girl threw up. All over his robes and his carefully polished boots. The students gasped. It looked as though the girl had indulged in every variety of sweet available on the Hogwarts Express, including every flavour of Bertie Bott's Beans, and all of it had come back up.

Severus hissed and stepped back, and the mess disappeared. The students gasped again. It hadn't been Rath, who had only just turned around in time to see the mess disappear, and certainly not Hagrid, who was just now getting over his shock and coming towards him and the girl. It must have been Twiskett, who was quite seriously following Minerva and Poppy's orders to take care of him. Severus hadn't appreciated Minerva's suggestion that Twiskett shadow him during classes, but perhaps he would prove useful. It had certainly impressed the first-years when the vomit had vanished from his robes without even the appearance of a wand.

"What is your name?" Severus asked, directing an icy stare at the girl, who was now holding a handkerchief over her mouth. At her look of distress, he said, "Never mind. Go with Professor Hagrid. He will see that you..." *Don't frighten the firsties, Severus*, he thought, hearing Poppy Pomfrey's voice. He took a breath. "He will see that you are taken good care of and brought to the Great Hall."

A muted, "Thank you, sir," came from behind the handkerchief.

"Bring her to Pomfrey," Severus directed Hagrid softly, "then get her back to the Great Hall before the Sorting begins."

There went his wonderful welcoming speech . . . no matter what he said now, they would only remember that the girl had thrown up all over him.

"Welcome to Hogwarts. Shortly, we will be going up to the Great Hall, where you will all be Sorted into Houses," Severus looked them over. There were forty-eight new students, forty-seven now that Hagrid had taken the dark-haired little girl away. They looked to be the usual assortment of gawky preadolescents. It was the largest group of incoming students that Hogwarts had seen in more than two decades. He was not looking forward to grading the additional incompetently written essays or sloppily brewed potions. But a few of the students looked promising, a bit more circumspect and self-contained than the others. Perhaps they were among the half-dozen twelve-year-olds of whom Minerva had spoken.

"I am sure that you have all heard about the Hogwarts Houses," Severus continued, cutting his speech short and now caring only that he get it done and without frightening any of them back into the loch...or into vomiting on him. He had been going to say something about the different Houses and each of the Heads of House, but somehow, the moment for that had passed. "Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each with its own characteristics, ones that you will share with others in your House, whether by nature or by nurture. Work hard and exemplify the finest traits of your House, and you will bring honour to yourself, to your House, and to Hogwarts.

"We will proceed together to the Great Hall. Mr Rath will stay with you as you wait for the Sorting to begin. Do not fidget," he said sharply, looking at a few of the children who were already doing just that. "Remain quiet and when you hear your name, come forward."

Someone whispered something.

"What was that?" He disliked the interruption, but the last time he'd tried to ignore a whisper, the whisperer had thrown up on his highly polished boots. He fixed the speaker with his gaze.

"Um, nothing," came the nervous reply.

"He wanted to know if it would hurt," the boy next to him volunteered. A few people giggled. Severus glared and the laughter ceased.

"It will not hurt," Severus said. "Generations of Hogwarts students have been Sorted in this way, and I have never heard that any of them suffered any pain." Embarrassment, perhaps. Simply sitting on the stool and waiting to be pronounced a Slytherin had embarrassed him, he remembered. All those eyes on him. And there had been relief that he hadn't been Sorted into the same House as Black, but into a real pureblood wizarding House, the one that his grandfather had belonged to, and his mother, as well.

"Each House has its virtues," he continued. "Whichever House you are Sorted into will provide you with your home for the rest of your Hogwarts career. Mr Rath, if you would follow and make sure that none of them gets lost . . . or worse," he added after a heartbeat. He couldn't help himself, he thought with a slight smirk, but this way they might all stay together with no stragglers.

He turned sharply and began up the stairs leading from the docks to the castle.

Severus sat on the edge of his bed in much the same position he had that morning. His head ached, he was exhausted, and he wanted to go to bed, but he had to wait for Poppy to arrive so that he could take his antivenin potion. He had taken his evening dose of Ferron's Elixir immediately after the Welcoming Feast, and had felt so ill as a result that he hadn't thought he would make it to Slytherin to give his yearly speech to the House. As it was, he had made it shorter than usual...though he had still recited a few of his favourite Salazar Slytherin quotations...and had left the prefects to deal with whatever came up. Which might be Suzie Sefton's dinner. She'd looked rather green about the gills when he'd left.

He shook his head. Of all the first-years to be Sorted into Slytherin. When he saw that Suzie Sefton...or "Suzanne," as the Hogwarts book had her, though Filius had written "Suzie" beside her name on the Sorting list...was the girl who had thrown up on him, he was sure that she would be Sorted into Hufflepuff, or possibly Gryffindor. After all, she not only lacked the good judgment not to eat herself sick on sweets, but she was a Muggle-born. But no, she had smiled up at him when she sat on the Sorting stool, her eyes shining, and the Hat hadn't even settled upon her head when it called out, "Slytherin!"

Apparently, Hagrid had told her what a wonderful wizard he was, and one of the most courageous heroes in all of wizarding history, and then Poppy had added a few kind words, as well, so that by the time she entered the Great Hall, tiny dark-eyed Suzie Sefton knew that she wanted to be in *his* House. Foolish girl. So he had one Muggle-born amongst the purebloods, and out of the twenty-six students who had either a Muggle or Muggle-born parent, not a single half-blood had been Sorted into Slytherin, although they were divided fairly evenly amongst the other Houses.

The half-bloods included one of the two competent boys from the boats, twelve-year old Andrew Campbell, whose mother was a Muggle-born. The other boy was Campbell's eleven-year old cousin, it turned out, Cyrus Sprangle, and a pureblood. Campbell had been sorted into Gryffindor and Sprangle into Ravenclaw. Of the forty-

eight new students, Slytherin only received ten of them. It was unusual, though not unprecedented, for the Sorting to divide the students unevenly, but Severus was unsurprised that the year after the Dark Lord's fall, Slytherin should be less than popular. Still, of all the students to be Sorted into Slytherin, Severus thought Suzie Sefton one of the more unlikely ones.

And then there was the Bloody Baron. It hadn't occurred to Severus that he hadn't seen the House ghost since returning to the castle. The Baron was not a particularly sociable ghost, anyway, and Severus only noticed his absence when the other three House ghosts had appeared for the Feast and the Slytherin ghost had not. Bloody ghost . . .

"Twiskett!"

The house-elf appeared in his bedroom doorway without even a pop. Must have been lurking about silently and invisibly in the sitting room.

"When Madam Pomfrey arrives, please show her in. I am going to get ready for bed...and please remain visible when we are alone," Severus added. It was a bit unnerving to think of the house-elf following him about invisibly. If he wasn't alone, he wanted to know it. "But thank you for your assistance with the cleaning charm this evening."

Twiskett nodded happily and stepped back into the sitting room.

Exhausted from the long day and longer evening, Severus began readying for bed by removing the gold and silver double-snake ring he had put on in preparation for the Welcoming Feast. A gift from Zabini after the Merlins, Severus wore it only occasionally, but had thought it fitting to wear that evening. Many of the Slytherin students had similar rings, denoting either their participation in the Battle of Hogwarts or their simple allegiance to Snape despite being required to remain in the Hospital Wing during the battle itself. Severus recognised that the youngest of them had had no choice in the matter: Zabini had simply rounded up the first- through third-years and taken them with him and the others, not wanting to leave them possibly vulnerable to any older Slytherins who had aligned themselves with Goyle and the other Voldemort sympathisers. Severus hoped that there would be no dissension arising between those who wore the rings and those who had none. He would have to speak with them about that, and about not condescending to any who hadn't been a Snape's Slytherin. That would be one way of creating a new generation of Death Eaters, even if they went by some other name.

Severus placed the ring in his nightstand drawer. He would take it out only on special occasions rather than wear it regularly and possibly create a divide within his House...which was as he had planned, anyway. His two Merlins were there in that drawer, too, his Merlin third-class and his Merlin Without Peer, and a small flick knife that had been a gift from Gareth McGonagall and with which he had injured the snake Nagini, whose venom was still causing him trouble. Shoved to the back of the drawer was his watch, the watch that Albus had given him on his "death bed." Severus couldn't bring himself to carry it again, nor to look at it and be reminded of his tears and his guilt when he had believed that Albus was dying to spare him from the Unbreakable Vow. By the time it became clear that Albus was alive, both Riddle and Bella believed him to be dead and the Vow, moot.

Severus paused before he closed the drawer. He drew out the Order of Merlin Without Peer, a large medal of platinum surrounded by gold. "Severus Snape, 1998, *Theurgus Absque Pari*." Mage without peer. An engraved wreath of holly and ivy encircled both sides of the medal, though his Merlin third-class bore the classical laurel wreath of heroes. Rather than the cup and the sword that adorned the obverse of his Merlin third-class medal...and all other Merlin awards, as far as Severus knew...his Order of Merlin Without Peer depicted a throne carved of stone sitting upon a hill, the sun either rising or setting behind it. On the reverse side of the platinum medal was an apple bough, laden with apples of gold, and the text read, "With the Eternal Gratitude of the Wizarding World."

Severus had never asked the meaning of any of the images, though he assumed that they had some association with the myths of Merlin's end and his continued safeguarding of the greatest wizarding mysteries with the true throne of the king. He had never seen any images quite like these in any existing wizarding iconography about Merlin, however.

Theurgus Absque Pari. Severus gripped the large medal tightly, though he couldn't wrap his fingers entirely around it for its size. Melina had said it, too: he was a wizard without peer. No matter how enervated he felt, he would make it through this, if any wizard could.

Twiskett woke him a few minutes before six. Severus wanted to groan and crawl back under his covers. Instead, he rolled over and swung his legs out of bed as he pushed himself upright. He blinked in the low lamplight. This morning was something of a milestone: the last dose of the Nagini antivenin potion. That potion never seemed to cause him as much distress as the Ferron's Elixir, although perhaps the combination of the two was not a good one, but he was glad nonetheless to be finished with one of the treatments.

When Severus stepped from his bathroom after a quick shower, Twiskett was there, standing in the centre of his bedroom. The house-elf had made the bed and laid out his clothes for the day, his usual uniform of black trousers, white shirt, black braces, black waistcoat, black jacket...this one with a Nehru collar...and his favourite unadorned black teaching robe. His silver cufflinks were on the bedside stand, and his short black boots waited at the foot the bed. Severus usually got his clothes from his wardrobe himself, but he appreciated the house-elf's effort to make his morning easier. Twiskett had even placed his carefully folded underwear and socks on top of the shirt.

Severus nodded to the house-elf, who turned on his toes as Severus crossed the bedroom.

"Ma'am Pomfrey is here," the little grey fellow said softly. "She waits with a cup of tea."

"I will be out when I am dressed."

Twiskett nodded solemnly and, with a succession of two quick pops, Disapparated from the bedroom to the sitting room. Severus heard the murmur of Poppy's voice as she spoke to the house-elf. She didn't sound impatient, but Severus was not about to hurry, in any case. Despite taking his time, it took him only a few minutes to dress, then he combed his damp hair once more before going out to meet her and take his final dose of Nagini potion.

"Good morning, Severus!" the Hogwarts matron greeted him cheerfully. "Twiskett kindly provided me tea whilst I waited. There's another cup, if you'd like some."

Severus shook his head. Poppy took one more sip of her tea, then stood and drew her wand. Severus waited, apparently patiently, as she cast her diagnostic spells and recorded the results. When she was finished, he picked up the vial of potion, uncorked it, and swigged the last of it down without measuring it into the spoon. Poppy furrowed her brow.

"One dose remaining," Severus said in response to her frown. "I took what was remaining."

"It may not have been precisely one dose, though," Poppy replied. She refrained from scolding the Potions master about the importance of the proper dosage of a potion, however, and simply cast her diagnostics again.

"I want to take the readings again in five minutes," she said as she sat down to drink the rest of her tea. "And then I'll be down again just before eight with your Ferron's Elixir."

"I do not wish to be late for breakfast," Severus said curtly.

"I can meet you in the antechamber to the Great Hall, then, and give it to you there at the usual time."

"Mm." They had done that the previous evening for his third dose of antivenin potion for the day, awkward as it had been for him to have left the table in the middle of the feast. When he'd returned to his seat at the staff table twenty minutes later, he was grateful that most of the students were eating their cakes. He had believed that he would be able to get back to his bedroom and lie down before his scheduled speech to the Slytherins, but then it seemed he'd hardly been in his suite for ten minutes when Poppy had come knocking, his Ferron's Elixir in her hand. At least after this morning, he would only have the twice-daily Elixir to take.

"Sure you don't want some tea, Severus?" Poppy asked.

He glared at her. Of course he was sure. He hated it when people asked him questions like that.

Poppy just shrugged, finished her own tea, and ignored Severus's sullen presence across the table from her until it was time to cast the diagnostic spells again.

She shook her head when she was through. "I don't know, Severus. I am going to Floo Melina with these results, but I believe she may want to see you before tomorrow. I'll let you know when I see you at breakfast."

Severus wanted to swear, but he merely nodded and rose to see the school matron to the door.

"See you upstairs in an hour and a half, then, Severus!" Poppy was infernally cheerful considering that she'd given him his potion at midnight and then again now, only a little after six in the morning.

He closed the door behind her.

"Melina was out on an emergency call when I tried to reach her, but I left the results with her secretary at the clinic and with her husband at home, and they both said that they'd give them to her as soon as they saw her. Brennan said he was going to try her on her . . . her mobile?" Poppy said, sounding a bit unsure about the last bit.

"Mobile telephone. Doesn't need any wires," Severus said shortly.

"Yes. Brennan said he could leave her a message if he doesn't reach her directly. So she will Floo me soon, I'm sure. As soon as you've taken the Elixir and I've taken your readings, I'm returning to the Hospital Wing so that I don't miss her if she tries to contact me."

After the usual diagnostics, the Ferron's Elixir, and then more diagnostics, Poppy frowned. "I would be happiest if you would join me in the infirmary, Severus, and wait for Melina to contact me..."

"I cannot. I must teach this morning." He sat down in a nearby ornately carved wooden armchair. He swallowed. Any desire for a cup of strong coffee and breakfast had fled. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I will be fine."

"Come to the infirmary at noon, then. I'll try to have Melina come see you then. Even if she can't, she may have instructions for me, and I will want to cast some more diagnostics to make sure you're stable."

Severus nodded. "After the last class of the morning." He swallowed again. Damned nausea. And he'd taken his antiemetic before leaving the dungeons, too. Long practice of enduring post-Cruciatuus tremors allowed him to stand, though his knees felt weak. He looked at Poppy levelly. "I am fine." He blinked, and his vertigo lessened. He would be fine.

"All right. But contact me immediately if you feel unwell...more unwell than usual. Dizziness, double vision, magical flux, tingling, prickling, burning, or other paresthesia, aphasia..."

"If I suffer from aphasia, how am I supposed to contact you?"

"Just see me at noon, if you still insist on teaching this morning," Poppy said, ignoring Severus's sarcasm.

He sneered reflexively.

"And *don't* overtax yourself!" For once, her tone with him was sharp.

Scowling, he turned and went to the door. As he reached for the door handle, Poppy got in one final word: "I don't want to have to explain to Minerva why she needs to find a new Potions master the first week of the term!"

He opened the door, entered the Great Hall, and was assaulted by the hubbub of students excited about the start of the year. He felt no such excitement. He didn't know whether he ever had. A wave of nausea came over him, and he stalked from the Hall and away from the babbling voices and the aroma of food.

Next

Chapter Twelve: The Stages of Brewing

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

Severus tries to make it through the first morning of classes.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Kevin Harper, Twiskett, and others

Chapter Twelve: The Stages of Brewing

Chapter 13 of 118

Tuesday, 1 September 1998. Severus tries to make it through the first morning of classes.



Chapter Twelve: The Stages of Brewing

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Severus looked out over the apparently diligent class of third-year Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs. They had completed the first assignment he had given them, which was simple ingredient preparation...slicing, chopping, coarse grinding, fine grinding, dilution, solution, and a few other basic methods of preparation...and it was obvious to him that the exercise had not been pointless, though it was equally clear that some students had failed in a few of the most basic tasks. No wonder some of them couldn't brew anything other than inert sludge...when they weren't exploding their cauldrons.

Now they were writing essays on the five preparation methods of their choice, describing each one and detailing the effect that ingredient preparation has upon brewing. Since they were only third-years, he expected little depth in their essays, but he had some hope that a few of them might at least be able to describe five of the methods of ingredient preparation, especially as they had just performed several of them.

Severus took a slow breath in, held it a moment, then released it more slowly. Reading any essays he assigned this week would have to wait until he was recovered. He swallowed, then again inhaled and exhaled slowly. He probably should have tried to eat something before teaching, even before he'd taken the Ferron's Elixir.

He'd eaten very little at the Feast the evening before, and when he'd returned from the Slytherin common room, had only eaten one of Hermione's jam tarts, washing it down with vanilla nutritional potion. Going without breakfast was not usually a problem for him, but that morning, his energy was at low tide, and not eating didn't help that.

Somewhere, the low gong sounded, reverberating through the castle and announcing the end of the class period. With great rustling of parchments and scraping of benches, the students deposited their essays on his desk and filed quickly out of the room. When the last one had gone, Twiskett appeared and closed the door.

Severus stood, decided he felt too shaky, and sat back down again.

"Gather up all of the samples," Severus said. "Keep them separate, and make sure that the students' names are on everything." He'd grade that all later, too.

Severus didn't bother watching Twiskett collect and organise the samples. He closed his eyes and put his head in his hands. Only one more class, sixth-year NEWTs level, then lunch. Except he couldn't go directly to lunch. That Pomfrey witch had told him to go to the infirmary. Severus swallowed. He hoped she planned on feeding him. He opened his eyes and held out his right hand. He was shaking slightly. Whether it was an effect of the potion or from hunger, it didn't matter. He'd taught when he was in worse condition. Of course, he'd been able to use his magic on those other occasions. His head throbbed.

He looked up. Twiskett was sitting on one of the student tables in the front, his skinny grey legs swinging slightly.

"Anything else, Professor Snape, sir?" Twiskett asked after Severus had gazed at him blankly for several seconds.

Severus blinked. "No, thank you, Twiskett. You have been efficient."

Twiskett smiled. "Professor may be hungry?"

"A little," Severus admitted, "but another class will be here in a few minutes."

Twiskett's brow wrinkled, then he said, "I leave for just a minute, be quick quick. Professor Snape not to do anything. I be back!"

The house-elf snapped his fingers, leaving Severus alone for the first time since Minerva had asked him to take special care of his Professor and not leave him alone. True, Twiskett stayed in the sitting room when Severus was in the bedroom, but he kept the door open, and Severus would not have been surprised if he were to wake in the middle of the night to see Twiskett checking on him, perhaps standing on the edge of his bed and looking down at him with his large brown eyes.

The admonishment not to do anything was unnecessary; not only did Severus feel too enervated to do anything more than sit there, but Twiskett was back within seconds of leaving. The little elf held out a short flask. Nutritional potion.

"Thank you, Twiskett." The house-elf had even chilled it for him just as he liked it, Severus noted as he drank the orange-flavoured potion. That should hold him until he could have lunch.

He shivered slightly. The dungeons were cool, and the temperature of the potion did nothing to warm him up. Just as he was about to ask Twiskett to cast a warming charm on his teaching robe, there was a tentative knock, the door opened, and a head peeked around. On seeing Professor Snape at his desk, Jamie Brett opened the door a little wider and stepped in. Twiskett immediately vanished.

"I'm a little early," Jamie said uneasily.

"Sit." Severus was in no mood to engage anyone in conversation about class times.

The sixth-year Ravenclaw stepped forward and found a seat in the front, but off to one side. He could see well if there were any demonstrations or any formulas on the board, but he wouldn't be directly in front of Snape's desk. Jamie immediately pulled out his Potions book and his kit, keeping his head down and avoiding eye contact with his teacher.

The open door was an invitation for the rest of the students to come straggling in. It was a larger sixth-year class than he usually had, but, of those who hadn't simply qualified on the basis of their previous years' grades, all had achieved "Outstandings" on their OWLs, and Severus had no desire to quibble about the legitimacy of their test scores compared with their class performances the previous year. Still, that all of the students who had attained the required grade also wished to continue with Potions at the NEWTs-level was unusual, but not a single student had dropped it from their schedule. Perhaps it was a byproduct of his fame, or infamy, and after the novelty had worn off, the class would shrink.

The last two students through the door were black-haired Kevin Harper, who had grown a few inches over the summer but who was still as skinny as a beanpole, and Alice Fellows, a quiet, slightly plump Hufflepuff with straw-blond hair, very pink cheeks, and eyes as blue as Harper's bright ones. She smiled at Kevin as he took the seat next to her. Wonderful. Young love. Best to separate them, give them other partners, or they'd be melting cauldrons left and right. But not that day. Severus blinked. He'd planned to have this class do some brewing, but watching them for errors would require more attention than he felt he could muster at the moment. All of the classes could do ingredient preparation that day.

He cleared his throat. The room became silent. Good. He hadn't completely lost the ability to command their attention.

"Potions brewing is an exacting art, as you all should know by now, having made it into the NEWTs-level class. Be aware that simply because you are here now does not mean that you will be here at the end of the term. NEWTs-level Potions is challenging, and it carries dangers for any who do not take it seriously. I do not permit such students to remain in the class. If you do not apply yourselves, you will find that you have more free time for other pursuits." Severus paused and looked around the room. There were five Slytherins, four of whom were wearing double-snake rings, gold and silver, the metals of the combatants. He would have to remember to speak with them about treating the other Slytherins with respect, whether they had been with Snape's Slytherins or not. "If you find that you are here in error, or if you are thinking that you would prefer the additional hours of free time, you may leave now. Inform your Head of House that you are dropping the class."

When no one made a move to leave, Severus raised an eyebrow. "Very well. So many *serious* students. As serious students of the art and science of potions brewing, you are all aware of the importance of paying undistracted attention to your potion at *every* stage of brewing." He surveyed the class. He blinked. The room seemed hazy. Undistracted attention. He blinked again. The students came back into focus.

Not much more, and he could set them to work and just rest. "Every stage of brewing," he repeated. "What is the first stage of brewing?"

The class was still and silent.

"That was not a rhetorical question," Severus said impatiently.

Jamie Brett raised his hand, as did Letitia Pepper, who was wearing one of the gold and silver rings.

"Mr Brett." Severus nodded at him.

Jamie stood. "Potions brewing begins with the gathering and organising of the ingredients required by the formula. Err, of course, knowing what potion you're going to brew comes before that."

Severus kept his eyes on the student. "And after you have gathered and organised the ingredients?"

Jamie swallowed nervously, but his voice was clear and unwavering. "You make sure you have the proper equipment and environment for brewing the potion."

Severus nodded. "Sit." He looked over at the Slytherin witch. "Miss Pepper, what is the next stage in brewing?"

"Laying everything out in order?" she said hesitantly, rising half-way out of her seat.

"Mr Brett covered that. One organises one's ingredients. Anything else to add to that? No?" Severus looked around the room to pick someone at random. Enough of Ravenclaw cleverness and Slytherin show-offs. "Mr Twiffle. What is the next stage in brewing?"

Norbert Twiffle stood. His answer came out in a squeaky croak; either his voice was changing or he was terrified. The Hufflepuff cleared his throat and began again. "Determine the order you need the ingredients in and how they have to be prepared, then begin to prepare the ingredients. Depending on the formula, you might be able to prepare all of the ingredients ahead of time so that they're ready to use at the proper stage."

"What do you mean by 'prepare'?"

Twiffle cleared his throat again. His voice was certainly changing. Severus didn't care if he sang falsetto, as long as the answer was correct.

"Measure them out. Um, cut them up or grind them or whatever you need to do so they're ready to go into the potion."

Severus blinked. He didn't think that students normally turned yellow with fear. White, perhaps, or red with embarrassment. He blinked again, and Twiffle looked normal once more.

"Adequate response, Twiffle." It was far too warm in the room. "Preparation." He paused, taking a breath. "Preparation . . . proper . . . prop . . . prep..." Something was wrong. His hands tingled, his vision was blurred, and he felt as though he were burning up. Something was very wrong.

Severus pushed up on the desk, trying to stand, but he immediately fell back into his chair, his hands trembling uselessly. An electric surge seemed to go through him, and his hands clenched the air spasmodically. A rushing, like the wind or a river, voices calling, then nothing but incoherent noise and internal fire.

Poppy jumped at the crack of Apparition. She turned and immediately ran forward. "Severus!" Her wand was out, and she took the semiconscious wizard from his small companion and Levitated him onto the nearest bed. "What happened, Twiskett?" She began to cast diagnostics even as the house-elf responded.

"Professor Snape is teaching. Suddenly, gasping, he shakes like that, then he falls out of his chair. I bring him right here."

"You did well, Twiskett." Poppy shook her head. "Dear God, Severus, I hope your stubbornness hasn't cost us dearly." She passed her wand over Severus's rigid, though still trembling, form. A pale green light glowed around his body for a moment, then disappeared, and Severus seemed to relax, though he lay unmoving and barely breathing. Poppy took each of Severus's hands and curled his fingers around the ends of her wand, then turned back to Twiskett. "Do you know where Severus keeps his wand? Yes! Excellent. You must fetch it immediately."

The house-elf's eyes widened and he brought his hand to his mouth.

"Immediately. Professor Snape's life and magic depend upon it. There will be no questions about it. Go, go!"

Twiskett straightened resolutely, nodded, and was gone with a sharp crack.

"Perlie! Strilpa!"

Poppy's infirmary elves popped over to her.

"Perlie, go immediately to Melina O'Donald and bring her back. I don't care what she's doing. Check the clinic first, then her home." Perlie was gone in the blink of an eye. "Strilpa, you fetch the Headmistress. If you do not find her in her office, have Blampa fetch her from wherever she is. And then get Dumbledore. He's probably teaching."

Before Strilpa could Disapparate, Twiskett was back, holding Severus's wand in both hands. He held it out to Poppy.

"Thank you, Twiskett...Strilpa, go! Never mind the wand!" Strilpa had seemed frozen, fixated by the sight of a house-elf holding a wand in his hands. "Get the Headmistress! Twiskett, you go to Dumbledore. Bring him here."

"No need." Albus was hurrying through the door. "A quick-thinking, fast-moving student came and told me what happened in Professor Snape's class. I left him in charge of my class." Albus stood beside Severus's bed and passed a hand over the other wizard's head, then took out his wand and repeated the action. "You have his own wand," he said softly as Poppy stepped up next to him. "Very good."

Poppy took back her wand of mistletoe and unicorn tail hair and replaced it with Severus's own hemlock wand. "Melina should be here shortly. Magical drain, as you can see...magical burn-out, actually. I've treated a few children with some degree of magical drain, but this is different. I don't know . . . Oh, Severus! Why didn't I make you come with me this morning!"

"I'm sure it came on quite suddenly," Albus said. "From what Mr Harper said, Severus didn't even know what was happening until it was upon him."

"Yes, but I noticed that there were fluctuations, variations, this morning before breakfast. Ones that were worse than they were when I'd checked him less than two hours before. I should have insisted."

"If he believed he was well enough to teach, he would have been difficult to persuade," Albus said. "I know that beginning the school year in as normal a manner as possible was important to him. Did you report the results to Melina?"

"Yes, of course. I spoke to her just an hour ago. There was an emergency with a curse patient, or I would have told her sooner. Melina was concerned about the readings and said that it was important that she see him at noon. She was going to come then. But now..."

"I am here now," Melina said, reeling and catching herself after a dizzying Side-Along from Perlie. She shook herself and hurried toward the bed, her wand out.

She ran an appraising eye over Severus. "Good, you slowed it some; let's see how much." She cast a diagnostic. "Mmm." She cast a few more, and symbols floated above Severus's body. "Mmmhm. Nnng. Hm. Huh. Mmm."

The symbols rose, gathered, and dispersed far too quickly for Poppy to follow them, and despite Albus's apparently rapt attention to them, she wondered if he was able to understand them, either.

"Will you quit hemming, hawing, and making other noises, and just tell me: how bad is it? Is this my fault?"

"Poppy, let's not even begin discussing fault right now. Unless, of course, you're really Nagini in disguise," Melina said, wishing her wand to erase the diagnostics and begin casting again. "I've seen worse. Not many worse, but worse. And..." She paused as she cast a particularly complex spell over Severus's lower abdomen that involved several intricate twists of her wand. "And they all recovered."

Poppy glanced over her shoulder at the sound of the Floo activating. Minerva stepped out and rushed across the room.

"Severus!"

"Almost done, Aunt Min," Melina said, raising her left hand to keep her aunt from coming any closer.

Melina cast one more spell, then she let out a sigh and dropped her wand. "Poppy, do you have any Takehari Solution?" At Poppy's response, Melina swore under her breath. "Send one of your elves to the clinic for it. Tell her to see Spinnet. She'll get it for her with no delay or questions. I'll worry about signing it out properly later."

Twiskett popped out from under Severus's bed. "I go now." And without waiting for approval, Severus's house-elf Disappeared.

Albus had quietly explained to Minerva what he knew of Severus's condition, and she was now standing at the head of the bed.

"Can I touch him?" she asked.

"Best not to. Not at the moment. Poppy has stabilised him, and he's not in danger of uncontrolled burn at the moment, but best not to have any stray magic touching him."

"I can control my..."

"Yes, I know. Don't argue with me," Melina said. "You will be able to help. Just not yet." She looked around the room, holding up her wand and turning in place. "This isn't the most magically active part of the castle, but I suppose it will have to do. It's better than many I've worked in, anyway."

"Most magically active?" Minerva asked. "We can move him. Either to the Hogwarts Heart or to the Old Grotto." She glanced over at Albus. "The Grotto is one of the major loci of Hogwarts magic, isn't it, Albus?"

"Yes, those would be the two most highly charged locations," he agreed.

"Which is easier to access? I don't want to disturb him. Rather to do it here than to have him go into intense drain again," Melina said. "Hogwarts is already more highly charged than just about anywhere I've treated anyone. Best place to suffer magical burn-off, if you're going to do it."

"The Grotto is hard to reach," Minerva said. "It's in the lower dungeons under the loch, and there are both physical and magical barriers. The Heart . . . we could Floo him through to my office and then Levitate him into the Library and down the stairs."

"No, no Levitation now that we have his drain somewhat under control. We'll need to carry him. The Floo is fine, though." She looked over at Albus, and for the first time since she had arrived, Melina quirked a small smile. "A pity you're not still 'Robbie,' Albus. It'd be nice if you were eighty years younger!"

Albus smiled. "I am not doddering yet."

"Good thing, too," Melina replied. Poppy had already Summoned a stretcher from across the room. She and Poppy, in well-coordinated movements, untucked the sheet from beneath Severus and pulled it up around him.

"I have to disable the charms on the stretcher," Melina explained, "so if you two would take the handles, Poppy and I will move him over."

Albus took hold of the handles at the head of the stretcher and Minerva took those at the foot, and Melina disabled its charm. With few words, Poppy and Melina used the sheet to shift Severus from the bed to the stretcher.

"Keep it level! *Level*, Minerva!" Melina said sharply. She began to buckle a belt around Severus's chest. "Poppy, you deal with the Floo. This will require very good coordination. The Floo is very large on this end, but not nearly as big in the office. You'll have to move quickly, be careful not to let go, and Minerva, you step in first and then out as quickly as you can. If you don't think we can do this, I'll have to let him be Apparated by the house-elves, but I'd prefer not to disturb his magic that much." She looked at Severus. "Of course, we could just clear the corridors and carry him up, but..."

Minerva shook her head. "I'll take care of the Floo; I'll go through first and fix it so we shouldn't have a problem. Give me a minute to enlarge the fireplace, and then come through. It's a very short trip and you shouldn't have any problem holding onto him. It will take me only a moment to make the change."

Melina nodded, and Poppy took the handles at the foot of the stretcher as Minerva hurried to fix the Floo.

"Let's set the stretcher on the bed. No point in wearing ourselves out or tipping him off," Poppy said.

"Were either of you with him when this happened? I wasn't clear on that point from what Twiskett said."

"No," Albus replied. "He was teaching. Apparently, he was in the middle of speaking when he started to shake and collapsed back into his chair. Kevin Harper told me that Severus began to have a sort of seizure, then ended up on the floor. Mr Harper said that he wasn't on the floor for more than a second before Twiskett appeared from nowhere and Disappeared with him."

At the mention of Twiskett's name, the house-elf reappeared with a snap, a large leather satchel in his hand.

"Spinnet sends Takehari Solution, a diffuser, and other potions for Professor Snape. She said Healer Davis sees your patients this afternoon."

"Thank you. Pop through and tell Minerva...the Headmistress...that we will be along in a minute. She's in her office waiting for us."

The grey elf nodded and vanished with a short, hollow clomp.

"Have you ever administered Takehari's Solution before?" Melina asked Poppy.

"No, but I saw it demonstrated when I went on a Mungo's course a few years ago," Poppy replied.

"I have," Albus chimed in.

Melina raised an eyebrow. "I won't even *ask* under what circumstances." She shook her head and muttered something about alchemists and other dilettantes who all thought they were Healers, too. "All right. Unbuckle the safety belt and open his robes, Albus...take care to suppress your magic as you do so! Make sure that he doesn't

let go of his wand. Poppy, get his shoes and socks off. Then if you will hold the diffuser over him as I pour out the Solution, that would make it easier for me."

Melina reached into the black bag that Twiskett had brought, sorted through it, nodding in approval, and pulled out a shiny, almost opalescent disc. "Wish she'd put in the bigger one." She handed the diffuser to Poppy, then took a pair of scissors from her bag and handed them across to Albus, who had unbuttoned the waistcoat and was just finishing with the buttons of the white shirt. "Just cut through the rest. Better if he were naked, but we don't want any more delay. Get his chest and abdomen exposed, and cut away any underwear."

As Albus began to snip through Severus's undershirt, Melina took a long-necked flask from her bag. She raised an eyebrow to see that Poppy was unbuttoning the trousers.

"No point in cutting through these. The fabric's heavy, anyway," the matron explained. She unbuttoned the black braces that held his trousers up.

Albus paid no attention to their conversation, just moving down to cut the elastic waistband on Severus's underpants, carefully lifting them and cutting through the side of the pants down to the thigh.

"Do you need this moved aside more?" he asked, gesturing toward the shorts.

"Don't worry about it," Melina said. "You can leave them for now."

Albus carefully folded the underwear back to cover him.

"That's fine. Go tell Minerva why we're delayed, then have her summon two or three others, whoever she thinks might be useful in reversing this drain, and have them wait in the Heart. Have to be highly magical, familiar with Severus, familiar with Hogwarts magic, and ready to be generous. The Heads of House would probably be best...they know the Hogwarts wards, I understand. Poppy and I can manage the Solution from here."

"The Floo..."

"One of you can come through and wait if you want to deal with the Floo powder for us. We can carry him." Melina was already turned away from Albus and focussed on Severus, and if Albus hesitated in following the Healer's directions, she didn't notice. She pulled the garments further away from Severus's body, fully exposing his chest and abdomen, careful not to disturb the wand around which his fingers were curled.

NEXT

Chapter Thirteen: Breakfire

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

After being whisked to the infirmary by Twiskett, Severus...his life and magic both in danger...receives powerful treatment. It's touch-and-go for Severus as Madam Pomfrey and Healer O'Donald work to save his magic.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Filius Flitwick, Pomona Sprout, Melina O'Donald

Yay! I haven't been shouting into the void! Thanks to everyone who reviewed the previous chapter;-)

Chapter Thirteen: Breakfire

Chapter 14 of 118

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"You take the left trouser leg, I'll take the right," Melina said.

Poppy's eyebrows rose, but she said nothing, and when Melina tugged, she did, too, and Severus's trousers were off. Melina checked to make sure the wand was still securely between his hands.

"Cut off the sleeves. I don't care if that robe was designed by the late Madam Mink Malkin herself or if the jacket is the last one he owns. We're doing this properly and I saw no reason to make Dumbledore uncomfortable...he can be a real Victorian sometimes," Melina added as she used a scalpel to slice through his left jacket sleeve.

"I've noticed," Poppy said. "I presume that he's different with Minerva, but getting him to undress for a simple routine examination the first year I was the matron here was harder than catching a Snidget."

"I think he has a complex, personally," Melina opined. "Before we told him of the Plan, he absolutely refused to allow me to examine him thoroughly. But on the other hand, he's actually gone skinny-dipping with a few of us. Of course, we were all in the water most of the time, and wrapped in towels or robes as soon as we got out, but it still

surprised me." She finished cutting through the shirtsleeve and handed the cufflink to Poppy, who slipped it into her robe pocket with his other one.

"Hard to imagine that," Poppy said.

"Mmm. He's an odd duck, but a lovable odd duck," Melina said, pushing the remnants of Severus's clothing aside. "All right. Ready with the diffuser. You remember how this works. You hold the diffuser parallel with his body as I charm the Solution from the flask." She paused, thinking. "Yes, I will charm it from the flask. I don't think I would have the proper control over it if I tried to do it manually. You remember the sequence of application? No matter, I will tell you as I go." Melina looked over as the Floo activated, but didn't break her stride. "We begin and end with the lower abdomen. When we get to the hands, I will need you to turn them over, one at a time, palm up. Try not to entirely break his contact with his wand, though it will be difficult to do whilst you are handling the diffuser."

"I can do that," Minerva offered, overhearing as she came up to them. "Just give the signal, and I can move his hands for you. Albus is busy fetching Filius and Pomona."

"All right, but try to suppress the magic flowing through your hands. It shouldn't interfere, but..."

"I used to have to do something like that when visiting Quin," Minerva reminded her niece. "And I was doing wandless magic before you started school. ~~And~~ control my magic, you know."

Melina quirked a smile at her aunt. "Right. Sorry. Ready?" She looked at the two other witches, who nodded. She leaned over Severus, looking into his face. His eyes were closed. "I don't know if he can hear us or understand anything." More loudly, she said, "Severus, we're going to treat you with a potion now, Takehari Solution. It will feel strange and possibly uncomfortable, but it shouldn't hurt."

Melina indicated to Poppy to position the Charmed diffuser parallel to Severus's lower abdomen. "An inch closer to him," she corrected. "Good. We'll begin there, then move up to the chest just above the sternum, then slowly move the diffuser up to his throat as I continue to administer the potion."

As Poppy held the disc over Severus's pelvis, Melina waved her wand. The flask, which was Levitated over the diffuser, began to tip, and at a flick of Melina's wand, a minuscule amount of iridescent blue potion flowed in a thread-like stream toward the surface of the diffuser. As it hit the pearly disc, it almost instantly appeared on the other side of it, this time as a golden vapour that drifted down toward Severus, where it disappeared into his skin, leaving it glowing slightly.

"Up," Melina said as she halted the flow of potion. Poppy positioned the diffuser over Severus's sternum. Melina again allowed a narrow thread of potion to flow onto the diffuser. The golden glow settled over Severus's skin and spread. At Melina's gesture, Poppy slowly moved the diffuser in a straight line over his chest toward his throat, where Melina had her pause a moment before she again stopped the potion's flow.

"Now the forehead, just between the eyebrows first, then the centre of his forehead," Melina directed. This time as she administered the potion, she closed her eyes and began to chant softly. The glow of the potion as it hit Severus seemed to intensify and spread, pulsing slightly as it did so, and brighter veins of gold appeared in the midst of the diffuse glow, travelling down his head to his neck and then seeming to trickle over his shoulders and into his arms. Melina opened her eyes, looked at Severus, and nodded slightly. "Now the genitals."

Again, the potion flowed in an iridescent blue thread from the flask and emerged on the other side of the disc as a golden vapour.

Melina directed Poppy to the feet next, and this time the potion glowed slightly more red as it seemed to seep into Severus's skin. Melina reached out with her left hand and touched the edge of the disk, continuing to pour the Solution over it until Severus's feet glowed with the same golden colour as the other areas of his body.

She stopped the flow of potion and said, "Hands now, Minerva."

"Right or left?"

"Left first, then right."

This time, as the vapour drifted toward Severus's left palm, there was a sparkle of bright white light, and Poppy looked away, seeing spots. Melina simply continued the slow trickle of potion onto the diffuser and waited for the flashes of light to cease. When the left palm glowed with gold, Melina said, "Now the right."

Minerva curled the fingers of Severus's left hand back around the end of his wand, then carefully took his right hand and turned it so that it lay on top of his wand. The potion almost seemed to crackle as the vapour touched his right palm, and there was a sharp burst of white light. Melina murmured something, and Poppy did not know whether it was an incantation or merely a private comment to herself, but the light shrank into itself, and the golden glow seemed to draw together in the centre of Severus's palm. Melina nodded in satisfaction.

"Now the lower abdomen again, and he will be ready to move to the Heart for the rest of his treatment."

Again, the golden glow seemed to suffuse his abdomen, and then brighter, more distinct veins of gold spread from his centre upward toward his chest, neck, head, and back down into his arms, and likewise downward into his groin, legs, and feet, and Melina softly chanted an incantation as the golden glow spread. Poppy was glad when she received the signal to remove the diffuser. It had not felt at all heavy when she had first taken it, but it had seemed to grow heavier as she held it and maintained the proper distance between its surface and Severus's skin.

"Can we cover him before we move him?" Minerva asked. She didn't think that Severus would appreciate being laid bare to his colleagues, even if it did save his life.

"Of course! He doesn't need to be exposed for this next stage," Melina replied as she packed away the potion and diffuser.

Poppy was already Summoning a sheet, and she draped it over Severus from his feet to his chest, carefully lifting his arms and settling his hands and his wand on top. He seemed so still and weak to her; a knot of concern formed in her stomach.

"His chest, too, I think," Minerva said, knowing that Severus was sensitive about the way he looked and about the claw marks on his chest, as nearly invisible and unremarkable as they might seem to others.

Poppy nodded and placed another folded sheet over his chest and shoulders. She smoothed it carefully over him, then tucked it and the other sheet in around him. Her fingertips lingered a moment just above his right hand, then she shook her head, sighed, and dropped her hand to her side.

"Do you think they're ready for us yet?" Poppy asked as she buckled the safety belts around him.

"Whether they're ready or not, we're on our way," Melina replied. "We could do this with just the three of us, but I'd prefer to have a few others there, as well. I've found it more effective, not to mention that it's not as tiring for the participants if there are more to draw from. But there's something about the combined disparate magics that strengthens the core more. Of course, spontaneous staunching of a magical drain is something rather different...although perhaps . . ." The witch's brow furrowed, then she took a breath and grabbed the handles at the head of the stretcher. "That's all speculation and research for another day! Let's go! Minerva, you toss the Floo powder, if you will, and Poppy and I will manage Severus."

When the three witches arrived in the Headmistress's Library, they found that Albus had removed part of the staircase wall in the Heart of Hogwarts and rigged up a temporary lift of sorts, consisting of a long board and two sets of pulleys and ropes.

"I thought this would be easier than trying to carry him down the stairs," Albus said.

"Yes, if we don't tip him out and kill him," Minerva said under her breath.

But Melina and Albus got the stretcher settled and tied onto the board, and Severus was easily lowered into the Heart, where Minerva and Pomona then lifted him onto the round stone table in the centre of the room. Poppy thought that Severus looked thin and frail on the large table, more so than when he'd been lying in the infirmary bed, and his face was as white as the sheets tucked around him, even the flickering torches in the chamber not bringing any colour to his pale cheeks. Again, Poppy wondered whether she could have prevented his collapse that morning, but she knew that blaming herself would not do anything to help him now.

Melina instructed the others to stand in a circle around the table. After casting a quick ping off each witch and wizard, she said, "Poppy, your magic is most resonant with his. I'd like you in the middle on his left. Minerva, you at his feet, Albus next to Minerva, and Filius and Pomona...yes, that's right." Melina herself stood at his head.

Filius's head and shoulders came only just above the table, so Melina quickly conjured a small stool for him.

"All right, now all of you are familiar with this procedure, at least in theory, correct?" When everyone nodded, Melina continued, "You will allow your magic to flow through your wands out over the table to meet above Severus's body. Think about your care for him as you do so. Although I will direct the magic, your combined intents to strengthen and heal Severus will help him. Minerva, you, if you are able, help me to draw on the magical field. It should be an asset even if you can't..."

"Of course. That is a simple matter. Although it might be a bit awkward to coordinate casting my own with the proper intent whilst drawing on the Hogwarts field for you . . . but I'm sure..."

"I could help you, my dear," Albus interrupted.

"No," Minerva said firmly.

"I thought his ties were cut when he died," Pomona said quizzically, glancing at Albus, then back at Minerva.

"They were. I reintroduced him to the wards this summer," Minerva said quietly. "I merely gave him back the standing he would have had as a former Head of House. I thought it only right."

"Of course," Filius said, cutting off Pomona and forestalling any further discussion of Albus's status or the fact that the Heads of House had not been consulted in the matter. "Let's begin." He looked down at Severus, his eyes sad. "Severus comes first. You'll be all right, Severus. We're all here for you." He looked up at Melina, who was standing beside Minerva. "Can he hear us?"

"I don't know. Possibly. It's unlikely he has much understanding of what's happening even if he can hear us, but I'm sure that knowing that he is surrounded by people who care about him can only be a good thing."

At that moment, Severus's head moved slightly, turning toward the side of the table where Filius and Pomona stood. Filius's expression immediately brightened.

"He can hear us!" the small wizard said, encouraged. "That's right, Severus! We're here! You'll be fine."

Melina didn't say anything to that, instead just gesturing to Albus to move down a little bit.

"As I was explaining, simply allow your magic to flow from your wand. Form a healing intent, the desire to strengthen Severus and his magic, to share your magic with him. I will do the heavy lifting," Melina said. "Minerva, you do what you can to focus the Hogwarts magic around Severus. It would be useful if you could gather a shell above him and illuminate it so that I can detect it easily, but the field here is so strong, the field alone will help regardless of what you manage."

Minerva raised an eyebrow, then she made a small, quick arc with her wand. The room became alive with colour. With a slight flick of her wrist toward Severus, she drew the streams and waves of magic together to create a pulsing cloud of colour, and with a little twist of her wand, she brought it to hover just over Severus's heart.

She turned her head and looked at her niece. "I believe I'm ready now," she said drily. "I simply wished to do that before we began casting."

Melina let out a short chuckle. "Very good. If you could move it just a bit further down, however, closer to his pelvis...yes, that's good. Now, because of the nature of Severus's underlying condition, I will be doing some additional procedures on top of mending his drain. At one point, I will need you to stop casting and move back away from the table, so watch for my signal."

"You're doing the procedures you were going to do on Friday?" Poppy asked.

Melina nodded, beginning to raise her wand.

"But I thought that Healer Baton was going to assist you," Poppy interrupted.

"I will have to do without him," Melina replied.

"He was going to serve as the sympathetic, though," Poppy persisted.

"I'll need another volunteer," Melina said, "or I'll have to skip that particular treatment and do it later."

"You may use me," Albus immediately offered.

"No, I'll do it," Poppy said. She raised her eyes and met Melina's. "He is my patient, Melina, and you said my magic was most resonant with his."

"Good. Poppy will do it," she said, looking at Albus, who nodded. She looked back at Poppy. "You are aware of the effects and risks, I presume...although the effects aren't very predictable."

"Well enough," Poppy said with a nod, her gaze returning to Severus's frail form.

Melina wasted no more time with conversation, indicating instead with her raised wand that she was about to begin. The others raised their wands in unison, Minerva, Albus, Pomona, and Filius all practised in similar casting from their work with the Hogwarts wards.

Poppy, too, raised her wand. She was less practised in this particular kind of magic, especially in coordinating it with others, but she was adept at coordinating Healing spells with others, and her experience there stood her in good stead as her gentle magic flowed smoothly through her wand to meet with Melina's stream of magic. As the magical energy coursed toward Melina's guiding stream, Melina made small adjustments of her wand, seeming to braid the magic together. Their magic joined and became a single, indistinguishable thread, and Melina, her wand twisting patterns in the air, guided it through the bright cloud of magic that hovered just over Severus's abdomen.

Poppy could just hear Melina's sing-song chant that would bind the magic together and bring it into Severus's own. If the Takehari Solution had done its job, the burn-out should have ceased completely, leaving him still in danger of magical exhaustion, however. Melina's treatment for Severus's magical exhaustion was somewhat different from the treatments Poppy had used on children who had overextended their core or who had suffered a magical accident which cause magical drain, but Severus's exhaustion was more complicated, resulting both from the underlying illness brought on by the residue of Nagani's cursed venom and from side-effects of the potions with which he had been treated, particularly the Ferron's Elixir.

"Texere, texere, contexo, contexere. Contexo, contexere!"

"Contexo, intexo. Intexo, intexere. Detexo, detexere!"

"*Detexere, integra. Integra, integrior, integerrima!*

"*Integra, integerrima. Magia compacta, magia indivisa!*

"*Texere, texere, contexere, detexere!*

"*Magia compacta, magia indivisa, magia una!*

"*Introire! Introire! Penetrare, penetrare, penetrare!*

"*Integra, integrior, integerrima!*

"*Theurgus confectus, Theurgus confectus!*

"*Theurgus perfectus, Theurgus perfectus!*"

The magic that was shimmering from each wand, each strand a slightly different colour from the other, coalesced and continued to pass through the cloudy shell that Minerva had drawn over Severus and made visible. As it emerged from the shell, a brilliant white light, almost too bright to bear looking at, slowly streamed into Severus, swirling itself dextrally and entering him at a spot a few inches below his navel.

Severus stirred, though his eyes didn't open, and it appeared he would have moved his arms had he not been tied down to the stretcher with a strap across his upper arms. As it was, his left hand lost its hold on the end of his wand, but Melina reached over and, still chanting, settled the wand back beneath his hand.

Melina continued her incantation for a few more minutes, then she indicated to Filius and Pomona that they should step aside. Another minute, and she nodded to Albus and Minerva, then as she sealed off the magic with one last twist of her wand, she gestured to Poppy. Poppy lowered her wand and breathed out a long, slow breath. It had not been as tiring as she had thought it might be, probably because there had been so many of them to lend Melina their magic to give to Severus.

At a word from Melina, Minerva cast a spell that made the shell of Hogwarts magic disappear again, although Poppy thought that there was still a concentration of magic hovering above Severus. The Heart of Hogwarts really was fascinating, as was the way that the Headmistress could manipulate the magic there. Poppy would ask if she might be allowed to watch the next time Minerva and the Heads of House renewed the wards or did some other coordinated work on Hogwarts. She knew there was almost no information about the wards in *Hogwarts: a History*, having read it at Minerva's urging a few decades before and having picked it up occasionally since then to find out some fact or other, and there was no mention of the Heart at all. Even the Headmistress's Library was mentioned only in passing as being located in the Headmistress's Tower. She wondered whether Minerva had another book that told more about the Heart, and if she did, if it might be permissible for her to let her take a look at it. It wasn't a subject that naturally interested Poppy, but having seen more of the Heart, she was now intrigued by it.

Poppy watched as Melina cast several diagnostic spells and seemed satisfied with what she saw. From what Poppy was able to discern, the procedures had been a success so far, and Severus was out of any immediate danger, although he still appeared to be unconscious. Now Melina would have to deal with the remnants of the underlying problem: Nagini's venom. The antivenin potion Severus had been taking had, without doubt, drastically reduced the magical poisons, but there were still minute amounts of it distributed widely throughout his body, and although there might not be enough to cause Severus any difficulties now, there was the real danger that they would begin to grow and multiply again, and more rapidly the more that Severus exerted his magic. They would all be back here again in a few months' time if they did nothing about the poisons.

Poppy recognised the next spells that Melina cast as being Healer's variants of the standard revealing spell. Melina shook her head, dissatisfied with something.

"Filius, Pomona, Albus, I would like to thank you for the assistance you have provided, but I need to do a few delicate procedures, and if you could leave now, that would be best," Melina said. "You may wait up in Minerva's office, if you like. Minerva, I would appreciate it if you would remain here, though, in case Poppy and I need your help again."

Pomona, Filius, and Albus went toward the stairs, Pomona resting her hand on Filius's shoulder.

"I hope he will be all right," Pomona said, looking back, her brow furrowed with concern. "Did it help, what we did?"

"Yes, it did, very much," Melina reassured her. "His burn-out is completely reversed and his exhaustion is repaired. He's now simply suffering from the aftermath of his ordeal. I could wake him now if we needed to, but he probably wouldn't be very coherent, and it will be easier to perform the next operations if he is still unconscious. I want to get rid of the rest of the toxins today before they can begin to multiply again."

Pomona nodded, seeming relieved.

"Tell him we're pulling for him!" Filius said. "We'll be waiting for you, Severus!" he said more loudly.

"If we're not finished by the time afternoon classes begin," Minerva said, "you should all go to your classrooms and teach. We'll contact you when we're through and let you know how he is. Pomona, could you put a sign on the Potions classroom door cancelling classes for the day and make sure that the door is locked. Filius, get a message to Professor Carter in the Great Hall and have her announce that all students who have Potions today should report to the library, instead."

Filius and Pomona started up the stairs, but Albus hesitated at the foot. "You are sure you don't need me?" he asked.

"No, we're fine," Melina replied. "I know you're worried about him, Albus, but I think that Severus would appreciate a bit of privacy."

"Ah. I see . . . well, I'll leave you three to it, then," Albus said with a nod.

"We will call you if you can help, though, Albus," Melina said. "And one of us will send you a Patronus when we're through, letting you know how he is, and you can help us get him back to the infirmary."

As Albus started up the stairs, Melina nodded to Poppy. "Help me with these sheets. I'm not getting enough information from the diagnostics with him covered up."

They unfastened the straps holding Severus to the stretcher, then Poppy took off the sheet that covered Severus's chest as Melina pulled down the other sheet.

"May I cast a warming charm for him?" Minerva asked.

Melina nodded, and Minerva cast a charm to warm the room and the air around Severus.

Melina cast the revealing charms again, and this time, tiny, shimmering prickles of deep red light appeared over Severus's bared skin. There were two larger concentrations of them near his diaphragm and pelvis, and smaller ones around his throat, but there were others dispersed across his body, even to his fingertips and toes. Melina closed her eyes briefly, and Poppy thought she sighed.

"I had hoped to be able to extract it all without having to use you, Poppy, but as you can see..." Melina gestured over his body "...I will need a sympathetic, at least if I'm to do it thoroughly and without it taking hours."

"That's all right. I'm prepared to do it," Poppy said.

"You might as well conjure a couple chairs for yourselves, Aunt Minerva. It's still going to be a while before either of you needs to do anything."

Minerva obligingly conjured two armchairs for herself and Poppy, and the two witches watched as Melina began to move her wand over Severus's body, beginning at his shoulders, seeming to tweeze out threads from his body with the tip of the wand, then Vanishing them with small crackling pops. Poppy could see now what she meant about it taking hours if she were to try to eliminate the remnants of poison by wand without using a sympathetic. It seemed that Melina was focussing on the larger concentrations of the curse-laden poison, reducing their size and intensity. It also looked to Poppy as though some of the toxins were moving away from the area that Melina was working on.

"Are they moving?" she asked. "It looks almost as though the poison's trying to escape you!"

"Part of it is just their natural flow, but yes, I believe that it is reacting to my magic, pulling away from it," Melina replied.

"Is it intelligent, then?" Minerva asked worriedly.

Melina paused in her work and rolled her shoulders, easing the tension in them. "No, not intelligent. It's just a reaction. Like the ends of two magnets pushing each other away." She returned to her careful, painstaking work, drawing out the magical poisons and destroying them one small bit at a time.

Severus twitched and moaned softly as she drew on the toxins clustered around his diaphragm.

"It's all right, Severus," Melina said softly. "I'm just removing all this nasty poison from your magical system. Just be still. Not much longer." She looked over at Minerva. "Could you talk to him for me, Aunt Min? I can't talk and do this at the same time. Reassure him. He's probably in discomfort."

Minerva stood and approached the table. Severus gasped and let out another soft moan, his head turning slightly first one way then the other.

"Just don't touch him," Melina said as she exploded another bit of Nagini's magical poison.

"I'm here with you, Severus," Minerva said. "Poppy, and I, and Melina. Melina's Healing you now. I don't know how it feels as she's doing it, but I'm sure you'll feel much better once she's done. We have been worried about you. It will be a relief for all of us when you're well again."

Minerva continued to talk to Severus, her words seeming to calm him, and Melina worked her way down Severus's body, reducing but not completely eliminating all the little red sparkles that indicated the presence of Nagini's magical toxins.

After twenty minutes, Melina finally stopped. "All right, that's as much as I'm going to do. We'll get the rest through you, Poppy, but before we do that, I need something to drink. Any chance of a glass of water, Minerva?"

Minerva smiled and nodded. "I'll go fetch us all some tea and bring some water for you, as well. Would you like something to eat, too?"

Melina shook her head. "Not until we're done, but the tea will be nice. Thanks, Aunt Min." She smiled and looked down at her patient. "He's doing well." She put a hand on Severus's shoulder and drew a sheet up over him with a flick of her wand. "You'll be back to terrorising Hufflepuffs again in no time, Severus." She laughed.

After Minerva had returned with the tea and they had each had a cup, Melina stretched. "Ready, Poppy?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take off your shoes, stockings, pinny, and hat...mainly because you'll be more comfortable that way...and then get up on the table, lay down beside Severus, and roll up your right sleeve. Then . . . you just need to relax and trust me, mainly. You'll be pretty tired when we're through, so I hope you haven't any plans for this evening!"

As Poppy sat and removed her shoes and stockings, Minerva said, "I'm not entirely sure what it is you're doing. I've heard of sympathetics, of course, but . . ." She looked quizzically at her niece.

"Ah. I will induce in Poppy what I need to Heal in Severus, in an intense but managed condition, and then as I Heal her, the effect will carry over to Severus through a magical bond I'll create between them, but amplified through the bond, then it will echo back from Severus to Poppy, bringing the poisons and illness with it, which I will then dissipate. It's rather taxing on the sympathetic, but properly done, there's no danger to her, and it's something I've done many times before."

"What do you want me to do?" Minerva asked.

"There's a small black box in my bag. When I'm ready for it, you can hand it to me."

Minerva opened the black satchel and found a hexagonal black box that felt heavier than its size would have suggested. "Is this it?"

"Yes, thank you," Melina replied. "Just hold onto it for now. Okay, Poppy, up on the table, wand in your right hand."

Poppy hoisted herself up to sit on the edge of the carved stone table, then she swung around and lay down beside Severus at his left.

"Will you have to uncover him again?" she asked.

"No, no need for that, but if you could just pull his left arm out from beneath the sheet and settle it next to him. Yes, alongside like that," Melina said with approval.

"I hope he doesn't wake up and decide to hex us all in his confusion," Poppy said as she observed Melina take Severus's right arm and fold it on top of the sheet, making sure that his right hand still held his wand.

Melina shook her head. "Highly unlikely, even for Severus," she said with a little chuckle. She smoothed Severus's hair back from his forehead. "This is the last procedure for today, Severus. We're going to rid you of Nagini's curse for good and all. It may feel strange and uncomfortable, but Poppy here is going to help you, and Minerva's here, too."

Severus let out a slight sighing moan, then was still again.

"Well, don't know how much he understood, if anything, but let's begin," Melina said. She raised her wand and thrust it toward Poppy's arm. *Alligare energiae!*

A pulsing, multicoloured, translucent, intangible cord of magic suddenly appeared, wrapped around Poppy's right arm and Severus's left, then running from their wrists to the centres of their bodies. It was thick and twisted as a heavy rope, but although Poppy could feel its warmth and energy, and sense where it entered her abdomen, it had no weight or heft to it.

Melina held out her hand toward Minerva. "The box."

Minerva placed the box in Melina's hand, and at a whispered word from her, the lid opened on invisible hinges to reveal a transparent ball resting in a concave hollow. Melina flicked her wand and the bubble floated free, glistening slightly, like a soap bubble. Melina brought the bubble to float above Poppy.

"What is that?" Minerva asked.

"It contains a minute amount of concentrated extracted magical toxins from Nagini's venom." Melina smiled slightly. "We really will have to thank Albus again for his foresight in removing Nagini's venom sacs before he burned down the Shack."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "Nagini venom? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Very, but not as I'm going to use it, and I will be in control of it. Of course, if I were to pass out in the middle of the procedure or something, that would be a problem, and you'd have to get another Healer in here immediately, but otherwise, it's perfectly safe. It's possible, though unlikely because of the nature of the extraction, that I may need you to perform the Prospirator on Poppy for a minute or so, but no longer. That's one reason I wanted you to remain here. But it's all quite harmless," she said cheerfully.

Minerva did not look much comforted by that, but Poppy seemed unperturbed as she gazed up at the bubble and waited for Melina to begin the procedure.

Melina cast. "*Vapor afflare!*"

The bubble disappeared and a fine, thin mist settled over Poppy and vanished.

NEXT

Chapter Fourteen: Of Ice Cream, Kittens, and Jet Planes

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

Severus undergoes another procedure, and he dreams, past and present merging.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Melina O'Donald

Author's Note: As I always say, the Latin in these stories is "magical spell Latin," not to be confused with classical Latin, medieval Latin, ecclesiastical Latin, or pig Latin! ;-)
) Don't expect grammatical correctness.

Thanks for your reviews!

Chapter Fourteen: Of Ice Cream, Kittens, and Jet Planes

Chapter 15 of 118

Tuesday, 1 September 1998. Severus undergoes another procedure, and he dreams, past and present merging.



Chapter Fourteen: Of Ice Cream, Kittens, and Jet Planes

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

Minerva watched, her knuckles white, as Poppy stiffened in reaction to the venom extract entering her system. Poppy let out a long breath and relaxed consciously despite the sensations that assaulted her. It felt as though there were fire ants circulating with her magic, stinging her several times a second, the prickling and burning jumping unpredictably from one area to another, and then just sweeping through her like a fiery tide ebbing and flowing, now stronger, now weaker. She concentrated on breathing calmly, and she felt Melina's magic begin to treat her, little soothing strands spreading through her and deadening the effects of the extracted magical toxins.

Poppy became more aware of the magical cord binding her and Severus together, and she sensed the Healing strands of magic pulsing through it. She was startled as between each pulse of magic toward Severus, she felt a responding pulse wash back toward her with increasing strength. She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes as the backwash created a pressure within her magic; she'd never experienced anything like it before, but she felt as though she might burst from it, then as it created a dull, throbbing pain behind her eyes, she wished that she *would* burst, the pressure was so intense. The fiery, acid prickling continued, though the cooling spells did, as well, and Poppy held her breath against the burn in her magical system and the throbbing pain behind her eyes.

"Does she need the Prospirator?" Poppy heard Minerva ask in agitated tones.

The Healing spells ceased for a moment and the waves of pain were worse, though the pressure lessened, and Poppy felt Melina cast a diagnostic, though it seemed dull and distant.

"No, she's fine," Melina said. "You have to remember to breathe, Poppy. I'm sure you're uncomfortable, but you need to breathe."

"Uh-huh," Poppy responded. Breathe. In and out. The Healing spells began again; Melina's chanting soothed her, and breathing regularly became easier. She still felt the fiery effects of the Nagini venom extract as it coursed through her magic, but they were definitely subsiding. She remembered Severus lying beside her, and she added her own Healing intent to Melina's as the Healing passed from her to him and then echoed back again. As she was Healed, he would be Healed. The flow of magic between them continued, and Poppy continued to think of Severus and send him her Healing intent with Melina's.

"Now open, Poppy. I have a potion for you. It's only a few drops, but you'll need to swallow it down," Melina said.

Poppy opened her mouth, but kept her eyes closed, and she tasted a few drops of a bitter potion hitting her tongue. She swallowed, but very nearly gagged on it. As the potion took effect, her eyes popped open. It felt almost as though her magic was sizzling in her body, though that was hardly possible, and then the sizzle passed through the magical bond to Severus. As it flowed back to her, it was cooler, and the flow between them was gentler than before. The pressure behind her eyes began to ease and she glanced over at Minerva, who looked very distressed. Poppy smiled at her, trying to reassure her friend, but then closed her eyes again to concentrate on Severus.

It seemed that the worst was over, and Poppy found herself becoming drowsy as the magic continued to flow from her into Severus and then back to her again, over and over again. She'd lost all sense of time when she heard Melina say, "All right, now. Time to close off the connection and finish with Poppy. You may touch Severus now, if you like, Minerva, but don't go near the binding. It's still active even though I stopped the flow."

Poppy opened her eyes again and blinked. She could still feel Melina's magic moving through her, but there was no more discomfort, not even the slightest prickling, though she felt utterly exhausted and completely limp.

Melina grinned down at her. "Still with us, Poppy?"

"Mmhm." She swallowed, sighed, and closed her eyes again.

"I just have a couple more spells to cast, then a little more potion for you, just as a precautionary prophylactic, and a few diagnostics, then you'll be done."

With some effort, Poppy turned her head to watch Melina cast the final spells. "I feel done. Completely. Overdone, in fact."

"You've done a good day's work, then," Melina said with a smile. "Here's the potion. Just a few more drops."

Poppy obediently opened her mouth for Melina to administer the potion one drop at a time. Its bitterness caused her to shudder and wrinkle her nose, and Melina laughed.

"It's the same antivenin potion you've been giving Severus by the spoonful for the last week," Melina said.

"My sympathy for him has doubled," Poppy said, grimacing.

Melina patted her arm. "Your sympathy for him was wonderful, Poppy. The procedure went much faster than I'd anticipated. I'd expected it would take at least an hour longer than it did. You're probably pretty tired now, but a good meal and a good night's sleep, and you'll be fine in the morning."

"And Severus?" Poppy asked, turning her head to look at the wizard lying next to her. His cheeks already had a little colour to them. "He looks better."

"It will take him a few days to fully recover. He'll need a lot of rest, but he's fine. Now I just need to check you over, make sure everything's as expected."

Poppy relaxed as Melina cast a diagnostic spell. "I'm starving," Poppy said. "I'm sure we've long missed lunch, but I have no idea what time it is."

"Close enough to call the next meal tea," Minerva said as she stroked Severus's forehead. "Why isn't Severus waking up, too?"

"He's been through a lot, Aunt Minerva," Melina replied. She swished her wand and the bond between Poppy and Severus disappeared. "He'll become more aware of things over the next few hours. We should make sure there's someone with him continually until he's completely awake."

Poppy felt suddenly cold without the magical cord wrapped around her arm. She sat up and pushed herself off the table, holding onto the edge until she was certain that she wasn't going to fall over.

"Were you going to contact Albus?" Poppy asked Minerva.

Minerva nodded, then cast her Patronus, which leapt cheerfully through the floor on its way to find Dumbledore.

"We'll need to get him some fresh clothes, too," Minerva observed. "A nightshirt, dressing gown, and a change of clothes for tomorrow. Once Albus is here, I'll call Twiskett and have him gather a few things for Severus. I don't think he appreciates wearing Albus's red and gold striped nightshirts."

Melina laughed.

"As for someone to stay with him, I can for some of the time," Minerva continued, "but I know someone else who I believe would be happy to sit with him for a while, too. I'm sure you just want to eat something and get into your own bed, Poppy."

"You're right about that," Poppy said, stifling a yawn.

Melina had packed away her potions and other paraphernalia, and now she was standing beside Severus, looking at him but not casting any spells. She took his right wrist in her hand, feeling his pulse, then nodded.

"He'll probably begin to become more aware fairly soon," Melina said. "Severus! Severus! Can you open your eyes for me?"

Severus's head lolled toward her, and he muttered something unintelligible, but his eyes didn't open.

"That's okay, Severus," Melina said, squeezing his hand. "You take your time. You're in the Heart of Hogwarts now, but as soon as Albus arrives, we'll be bringing you back to the infirmary where you can rest."

"But Daddy said I could have a kitten," Severus slurred. "He promised."

Melina restrained a chuckle and patted his hand. "You just rest now, Severus. You're a little confused now. You'll feel more like yourself soon."

"Mmm. I like ice cream." Severus let out a sigh and seemed to relax.

"I will see about getting you a wee bowl of ice cream, then, Severus, when you're well enough and the Healers say you can have some," Minerva said. She patted his head, then turned to Melina and whispered, "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing. He's just a little confused. Probably dreaming about something. I doubt he will have any recollection of anything that happened after he collapsed in the classroom up to the point when he finally wakes up and is fully conscious."

"I'm going to go ask Blampa about organising a meal for us all up in my office. I'll send Albus down when he gets here." She started for the stairs, then stopped and turned towards Poppy. "And you look as though you should sit down, Poppy, or you'll need a *Mobilicorpus* to get you out of here, too!"

Poppy laughed, but sank gratefully into one of the armchairs. Melina came over and sat beside her.

"So, would you have volunteered if you had known what you were in for?" Melina asked with a smile.

"Of course! It was very unpleasant, but I knew it would be over fairly shortly, and I did feel as though I should have done more to prevent his condition, insisted he not teach this morning. Besides, it was interesting. I'm glad I did it. I'll probably be more glad in the morning, though. I'm getting a headache," she said, rubbing her forehead.

"Lunch will fix that, and if you still have one after we've eaten, I'm sure we can scrounge some Headache Potion from somewhere!"

"Not the Erumpent horn!"

Both witches started as Severus suddenly spoke. He was quiet again, though, so they just shrugged.

"He must be hallucinating," Poppy said.

"Mm, I'm not surprised. Shouldn't be long, though, until he's lucid again. A few hours, four or five at the most."

The door above them opened, and Albus looked down at them through the opening in the wall.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He's doing well," Melina replied.

"Good! Very good indeed!" Albus turned and started down the stairs.

Melina and Poppy both stood as Albus entered the chamber. He went directly to the table and looked down at Severus. "He's still unconscious?"

"Only semiconscious. More asleep than unconscious," Melina said.

"He's been a little . . . incoherent," Poppy said. "So if he says something odd, don't be startled."

"Minerva said that the treatments worked," Albus said.

Melina nodded. "He'll recover perfectly now."

"And how is our sympathetic?" Albus asked Poppy. "Are you feeling well, my dear? You look a bit peaked."

Poppy smiled at him. "I'll be fine, Albus. As I was telling Melina, it was quite an interesting experience. I'm just a little tired is all."

Albus nodded, then looked down at Severus again. "Well, then, to get you back to the infirmary, my boy! Minerva's arranging some lovely company for you, but I'll sit with you until then." He glanced over at Poppy. "I only had one class left today, so I cancelled it. I'm sure the fourth-years are all outdoors enjoying the lovely afternoon now."

"Up to no good," Severus suddenly said.

They all laughed, but Severus just sighed and didn't wake up.

"So, the lift again?" Albus asked hopefully. He liked his gadgets, and he felt this one had been particularly ingenious. Pulleys were such great fun.

"No, magic is fine. We can just restore the charms on the stretcher, but if you could direct it, Albus, Poppy and I would be grateful. I'm sure Poppy's even more tired than I am, and I'm pretty tired."

"Certainly!" Albus said. "We'll just do up his straps again, and we can all be on our way!" He flicked his wand and the straps buckled themselves around Severus.

"Did you have lunch?" Poppy asked as they headed toward the stairs, Melina first, then Severus floating on his stretcher, followed by Albus, then Poppy.

"I had a very quick bite between classes," Albus replied. "I'll be fine until dinner. That's why I told Minerva I would sit with him whilst you three eat, then this evening, he'll have other company."

Melina nodded in approval. "That's fine. I'll pop over just before bedtime to check on him again, but if he's coherent and resting easily, you can just have a house-elf on duty in the infirmary in case he needs anything during the night. I think he'll have a very smooth recovery now."

There was a bang and a flash, and Severus felt as though he would choke. He was scared, so scared, and the room was hot, burning hot, and his mother was angry again.

"Where did you get that?" she demanded.

"I bought it for Sammy on my way home from the mill, Eileen. He'd been looking at it for weeks..."

"He is *not* playing with Muggle toys! And his name is *not* 'Sammy'!"

His mother snatched the little grey aeroplane from his small hands, threw it into the air, and it vanished with a flash. The explosion seemed to tear through Severus, running rivulets of hot lava through his veins.

"Eileen..."

"My father would have a fit if he saw the kinds of things you're bringing home to Severus," his mother hissed. "And don't let him hear you call Severus by that other name again! I don't know why I let you talk me into it, even as a middle name. At least it's only on his Muggle birth certificate, not his wizarding registry of birth."

Severus looked up at the spot where his aeroplane had disappeared, and tears welled up in his eyes. The fire of the explosion seemed to burn through him still. The aeroplane was gone, but the burning remained.

"Don't cry there, now, Sam, er, Sev. There's a big boy, that's my man! Big boys don't cry in front of their mothers," his father said, placing a gentle hand on his head.

"Big boys don't cry like little Muggle girls," his mother said in disgust. "Look at you, all dirty, the both of you. Go get cleaned up before Father arrives for dinner. Just because *your* father looks like a dirty Muggle doesn't mean you should, Severus."

His father reached down and picked him up, hoisting him over his shoulder like a sack, something that usually made him laugh and giggle and kick his feet. "Off we go, Sev, off to wash and get ready for tea!" He started up the stairs with him. "I'll bring you to the airfield this weekend, Sev," he whispered. "We'll watch the real jet planes taking off."

There was a roar, and he was on a jet plane, or no, he wasn't on a jet. He was so confused. It was still hot, burning hot, and his sheets were wrapped too tightly around him. He couldn't move. "Daddy! Daddy!" But his father wasn't there. He had the mumps, that was it, the mumps like a common Muggle, his grandfather had said. Muggle mumps. But he would have ice cream when he was well, and a kitten, too, his daddy had promised. Daddy's a dirty Muggle. "Daddy!"

There was a cool hand on his forehead, but his father wasn't there. He tried to turn, but Grandfather must be punishing him again. He couldn't move. *Petrificus totalus!* He'd remember that one, and when he got older, he'd do it, he'd do it to Grandfather. He'd show him he wasn't a dirty little Muggle. He would do magic, he would do it better than Grandfather. He'd show him!

Who was there? Someone, someone kind . . . not his father, though. He felt magic around him. He was losing his magic. He remembered now. He was losing his magic. The snake ate the kitten and he was losing his magic. He was burning in a fire, he was being punished, punished for . . . he couldn't remember. But there was something else, something was nice. There was something else besides the fire. Maybe it was Lily. She wasn't a dirty Muggle. She was a witch, magic like him. His grandfather had called her a Mudblood. Someday he would teach his grandfather not to say things like that about her. "A Mudblood or a half-blood bastard," he'd said, then he'd looked at Severus and repeated, "half-blood bastard," before turning away.

The fires still raged in him, and he remembered burning, burning as he carried another boy in his arms, a little wizard child. Carrying him through a fire. He burned. A

leopard doesn't change its spots. And he burned still. He was evil, evil, and he burned, losing his magic in a fire, his magic burning away.

Ice cream would be nice. So nice and cold. His father had brought him ice cream. That had been a long time ago. He remembered that there was a nice witch, though, a good witch, he heard her voice now. The nice witch might give him ice cream if he was good. He'd be good, a good wizard.

He was cold now, cold and hot at the same time. Where was he? Nothing made sense. A potion, he heard someone say there was a potion. His potion? One he had brewed? He couldn't remember. If he could only think . . . but strange sensations overcame him, pinching, cramping, stinging, stretching, itching, but it wasn't burning any longer. The fire was being quenched. No more fire. Now there was movement, swaying and bouncing . . . not an aeroplane, though. No, no jet planes, though there was a roar and a flash of green. Green flashes, *Avada kedavra*, and they were dead, as dead as the dried up flies on his sooty windowsill at Spinner's End.

But he wasn't in his bedroom, he was at school, he was at Hogwarts, he was sure of it now. He could hear Professor Flitwick. He had Charms with Professor Flitwick. He had to do well in Charms. It had been one of his mother's best subjects. All Princes excelled at Charms, his grandfather had told him. Charms was useful in the study of the Dark Arts, he'd said, and all Princes were good at that, too. If he were a real Prince, he'd do well at Charms, but he was a half-blood Prince.

Professor Flitwick was nice, and Charms was a good class, Severus decided. It was nice. Light and warm, but not too hot, not burning like the fire. He was confused. He couldn't be in Charms, it seemed to him. There were other people around, people who cared about him. He relaxed. It was all right. Was his father there too? No, this was Hogwarts, his father couldn't be there. His grandfather . . . no, the old man was dead, and he'd never please him now. Professor Dumbledore . . . Professor Dumbledore was there. And he'd never please him, either. Never. Dumbledore was a Muggle-lover but he couldn't love a half-blood Prince. Sneaks and cheats and terrors like Potter and Black and Lupin, Dumbledore loved them, but not him, not even when he . . . when he . . . what had he done? He couldn't remember. But he could feel that there were people there who loved him, and Dumbledore was there with them, too. And now his magic, could he feel his own magic, was his magic coming back or had it all burned away?

More voices . . . so many people now. Was that his grandmother? She was worried . . . worried about him . . . but no, she was dead. And a Muggle. She couldn't be there. She was dead and he couldn't even remember what she looked like, only her eyes. Dark eyes, only her dark eyes . . .

"She's dead because of you, Eileen! *You*, keeping her baby boy from her, keeping her little Sammy from her, telling me not to see her, and I listened to you! And now she's dead, dead of a broken heart! You're an unnatural freak! No wonder you all stay hidden! Nasty freaks, the lot of you!" His father was drunk and his grandmother was dead and his mother was frightened, frightened just this once, frightened of her angry Muggle husband, but when he threw the empty bottle and it seemed to explode as it hit the wall behind her, she stood straighter, a look of contempt on her face. Then he hit her, hit her hard across the face. Severus stayed hidden under the kitchen table, covering his eyes as he heard his father's body crash against a cupboard . . . crashing, crashing, falling . . . his head hurt, and he wanted to cry, but he could not cry. Wizards don't cry. There was pain, but no burning, no burning any longer, but now someone was plucking at him, pulling at his magic. His magic was vanishing, vanishing, he'd be a dirty Muggle like his pathetic father. His magic . . . the only thing he had . . .

"No!" he tried to shout, and he tried again. "No!" Someone plucking at him like the strings of the fiddle his father had brought him and his grandfather had disintegrated. It hurt, it hurt to lose his magic, to have someone pulling at it, taking it away a little at a time. He wanted to struggle against it, but he couldn't. He tried to move, to shout, to pull away, but the plucking continued. A nightmare, it was all a nightmare, just a dream, and someone had once told him that he could control his dreams, someone who cared about him, a good, wise witch, Minerva, Minerva had told him. That's why he couldn't move, he was dreaming, and yet he couldn't wake up and he still felt the plucking at his magic, and that felt real.

No, he was fine, he was fit, fit as a fiddle, fitter . . . he would be all right, Minerva said so. He heard her talking to him, and he trusted her. She loved him, he thought, and she wouldn't lie to him about it. He would be all right. Just a little more to go, just a little more, she said, and he'd be fine. The plucking stopped, and it seemed he really might be fine, but he still couldn't wake up. Perhaps he had died.

Then he felt magic flowing into him, healing, warm, liquid magic, washing away the last of the Dark snake, the last of the poison left him by his Dark master, whom he had betrayed, and he felt someone there beside him, someone whose magic was cleansing him, the remnants of Darkness leaving him, and her pure, light magic entering him and strengthening him. Another kind, good witch, someone who didn't think he was a nasty snake or a dirty half-blood, someone who cared about him. He could hear someone else chanting, and he knew he was being Healed, that he would be well. He'd been a good boy, and he would get better. And he might get a kitten if he was good, and Daddy would bring him ice cream when he was over the mumps. Ice cream, he liked ice cream . . . but now, now, he would just sleep.

"Yes, we'll be fine, Minerva! I'll call Wilsby or Blampa if we need anything," Albus said softly, smiling up at her. "You have something to eat with the others, then go do what you need to do. I know that the first day of the school year is normally very busy even without medical emergencies and disrupted class schedules."

"All right, thank you, Albus." Minerva leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I need to see how classes went, check in with Filius and Pomona, and talk to Sharon Carter. Then I need to find out if Olivia Ouellette would mind seeing to Slytherin House this evening, and ask her to take Severus's rounds. I'll offer to meet together with her and the Slytherin prefects. I have to make an announcement at dinner about tomorrow's Potions classes, too."

"Very good, my dear! You know that I'm at your disposal!"

"Do you suppose you could take Potions tomorrow? And for the next few days until Severus can teach again?"

"Of course, but who will you have take Defence?"

"I'll do that. It would save having to find anyone else on such short notice, I am very familiar with your lesson plans, and it's only for a few days," Minerva said briskly.

"Thank you, Albus! I'll stop back after dinner. I'm sending Poppy to bed after she eats, but if Severus seems unwell, send one of the house-elves to fetch her. She'll come."

"I will call her if necessary, but you need to go eat, yourself. You look stretched thin."

"Hardly, but I am hungry! See you later." She bent and gave him another quick peck on the cheek, then hurried from the infirmary for her office, where Melina and Poppy were already enjoying their meal.

Albus looked over at Severus, whose eyes were still closed, but who now seemed more genuinely asleep, rather than unconscious. Albus stood and stepped up to the bed, then he reached over and touched the other wizard's hand. He smiled. Severus's magic felt strong now, and it thrummed evenly beneath his fingers. Severus sighed and stirred in his sleep.

"Ah, Severus, my boy," he said softly, "will I ever be able to stop worrying about you?"

Severus shifted and turned his head; his eyes blinked, then closed.

"Are you awake yet, Severus?"

"Mm, Professor? Professor Dumbledore," he mumbled. "I'm sorry. Didn't want to . . . don't know . . ."

"Yes, it's Albus! I don't think you have anything to be sorry about. You just rest. Would you like some dinner?"

"Pr'fessor . . . hates me. Why does he hate me . . ."

Severus whimpered and twisted beneath his sheet. He clearly was not fully awake yet.

"Severus? Severus, wake up, my boy. It's Albus here. I don't hate you. You know I don't hate you! I'm very proud of you. You're still dreaming." He caressed Severus's forehead.

Severus's eyes opened. He looked up at Albus and blinked. "Where am I?"

"You're in the Hogwarts infirmary. You were very sick today, but you'll be all right now."

"There were other people here," Severus said. "I heard other people."

"Yes, but they had to get something to eat and get some rest. Minerva was with you, too, but it's the first day of school, so she has a lot to do. I'm sure she'll be back later, though."

"Mmm." Severus closed his eyes and sighed.

"Are you hungry? Would you like me to call for some food for you?"

Severus shook his head slightly, his eyes closed.

"Do you need anything?"

He shook his head again. "Sleep."

"All right, my boy. You sleep." Albus patted his shoulder. "There will be someone here when you wake up again."

Severus opened his eyes. "Was there a jet plane?"

Albus looked surprised. "A jet? No, there was no jet, no aeroplane."

"Oh." Severus seemed to think about that. "I thought . . . I thought I was with my father, and there was a plane. It's confusing."

Albus nodded. "I'm sure it is. But after you've rested, it will be less confusing."

"Are you staying?"

"Of course, son, I'll stay," Albus said softly. "As long as you like."

Severus closed his eyes. "Still no kitten," he mumbled as he fell back to sleep.

Albus smiled and settled back into his chair.

Minerva came in quietly, and Albus looked up at her and smiled.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He woke up briefly, but he was still very confused," he whispered. "I offered him something to eat, but he just wanted to sleep."

"That's fine." She held up a small container. "I did bring him some ice cream, though. He was asking for it earlier. Or at least, he mentioned it. I don't know if he'll want it, but I thought I'd bring it."

"How is everything else?"

"The day went fairly smoothly, fortunately...although Laura had to give Suzie Sefton a potion this afternoon because she ate something that didn't agree with her. Fortunately, as a mother, Laura's had experience with such things. She also told Suzie that just because an older student in her House offers her a sweet, it doesn't mean she has to eat it."

"Did Laura think the other student intentionally made her sick?"

Minerva shrugged. "She thought it was possible, though Draco said that it was just an ordinary buzzing humbug from Honeyduke's. Droobleberry flavoured."

"Malfoy gave her the sweet?" Albus asked suspiciously.

"No, Malfoy was looking for Poppy and found Laura. He's apparently decided to look after the new Muggle-born in his House. Laura said that Draco didn't even blink when the girl vomited all over his robes after she'd given her the first dose of potion."

"I suppose that at my age, nothing should surprise, but . . ."

"Anyway, other than the two sick Slytherins, it was a very smooth start to the year," Minerva said. She looked over at Severus. "I'm thinking about our own sick Slytherin at the moment. Do you think I should wake him? See if he'd like his ice cream? Gareth and Hermione will be up in a little while, too."

"Yes, why don't you. And if he doesn't feel like eating, we could get him some nutritional potion. I don't think he's eaten at all today."

Minerva moved closer to the bed and spoke more loudly. "Severus, Severus, it's Minerva." She touched his arm lightly. "I brought you something. Would you like to wake up for us?"

Severus took in a deep breath and opened his eyes. He looked up at Minerva and yawned. "What time is it? Am I late?"

"No, you're not late for anything. I brought you some ice cream."

"Ice cream?" Severus seemed to wake up a bit more. "I've been sick."

"Yes, you have been, but you're getting better."

"But not the mumps."

"No, not the mumps," Minerva replied with a slight laugh.

"But you brought me ice cream?" He sounded hopeful.

"I did." She held up the container. "It's just plain vanilla, but it's good. Do you want it?"

"Yes, please," Severus said, trying to sit up.

Albus, watching from his chair, flicked his wand and the head of the bed rose.

Minerva took the lid off the container and conjured a spoon. "There you go, Severus! Do you need any help with it?"

He shook his head and took the ice cream. He looked at it and then up at Minerva. "It's all mine?"

Minerva seemed a bit puzzled, but she nodded. "Yes, it's all yours. I had my dinner earlier."

Severus started to take a spoonful, but he paused with it halfway to his mouth. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Severus." After he had had a few mouthfuls of ice cream, she asked, "How are you feeling?"

He swallowed his ice cream and thought a moment. "Tired. And I have a headache."

"Would you like a potion for your headache, my boy?" Albus asked from the corner.

Severus took more ice cream and shook his head, seeming to notice Albus for the first time. When he'd swallowed, he said, "No, thanks."

Minerva waved her wand and conjured a straight-back chair for herself and watched for awhile as Severus ate his ice cream. "Do you remember what happened this morning?" She was concerned that he still didn't seem entirely lucid, though he was clearly better than he had been.

"This morning . . ." Severus paused. "Potions . . . I was teaching Potions," he said. His eyes seemed to clear. "I was teaching, and I didn't feel well, but I thought I'd be all right until I saw Madam Pomfrey later. But then . . ." He closed his eyes and sighed slightly. "Madam Pomfrey must be . . . upset with me. She didn't want me to teach this morning."

"Poppy's more upset with herself that she didn't keep you from teaching," Minerva said, "but she's glad that you're now on the mend. And the good news is that Melina did the procedures today that she'd been going to perform on Friday, so your recovery is actually a few days ahead!" She tried to sound cheerful about that and not think about the scare he'd given them all and how sick he had been when he'd arrived in the infirmary.

Severus set down the container of ice cream on the edge of the bed, and Minerva took it for him. "I don't remember very much," he said. "How did I get here?"

"Twiskett brought you."

"Twiskett . . . My class...what happened with the class? All of my classes?"

"Jamie Brett gave the sixth-years an essay assignment based on the material you had already covered," Albus said with a grin, "and the other classes were lucky enough to be cancelled."

"Yes, it was the sixth-year class." Severus closed his eyes and groaned. "That must have made a wonderful impression."

"I think they were quite worried about you," Albus replied. "And they all did Mr Brett's essay assignment. You have a pile of parchments waiting for you. On the topic of the effect of ingredient preparation on potions brewing, or something equally broad but interesting to consider."

"Lovely."

"You have more visitors coming, Severus," Minerva said. "Did you want the rest of your ice cream? Or something else to eat?"

"No. I'm tired."

"I'm not surprised," Minerva said. "I'll fetch you a nutritional potion, then. You just close your eyes and rest."

When Minerva had left, Severus turned his head and looked at Albus. "You were here earlier."

"Yes. I've been here for a while."

Severus nodded and closed his eyes again.

"Here we are, Severus," Minerva said as she returned. "Vanilla nutritional potion. Perhaps not as tasty as the ice cream, but it won't clash!"

"Thank you." He drank down the potion. "You said something about visitors." He looked unhappy.

"Yes, just a couple people who would like to keep you company for a little while. It will give you a break from us staid old teachers," Minerva joked.

Severus was about to respond that he didn't want any visitors when the infirmary door opened and a curly head peeked around the corner.

"May we come in?"

"Of course, Miss Granger! Is my nephew with you?"

"Naturally, Aunt Minerva," Gareth said as he came through the door. "Have to look after my new apprentice, you know, make sure she got here safely!"

"Well, we'll leave you young people to entertain Severus," Albus said, standing.

"Just don't tire him too much," Minerva said softly.

"We won't," Hermione replied.

"Albus," Severus said, his voice slightly hoarse.

Albus turned toward him. "Yes?"

"Um . . . you'll be back later."

"Of course."

Severus nodded as though it didn't matter, but Albus smiled brightly and followed Minerva out of the infirmary.

NEXT

Chapter Fifteen: Bacon Butties and Baked Beans

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

Severus begins his recovery and has visitors...and an unusual craving.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Hermione Granger, Gareth McGonagall, Wilsby

Chapter Fifteen: Bacon Butties and Baked Beans

Chapter 16 of 118

Tuesday, 1 September 1998. Severus begins his recovery and has visitors—and an unusual craving.



Chapter Fifteen: Bacon Butties and Baked Beans

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

Gareth flicked his wand, pulling the armchair closer to the bed, and motioned for Hermione to take that seat as he sat down in Minerva's wooden chair.

"The Headmistress said you were very sick today," Hermione said. "What happened?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't know, actually. I can't remember anything, but I apparently . . . apparently I collapsed in my classroom."

"How do you feel now?" she asked.

"Tired." He glanced over at Gareth, then looked back at Hermione. "A little confused. But better than I have."

"Aunt Minerva said that you should recover fully," Gareth said.

Severus nodded. "Healer O'Donald apparently performed some procedures that she had been going to do on Friday."

"That's good!" Hermione said. "Does that mean you won't need to take any of those potions any longer?"

Severus shrugged. "I presume so." He looked at the two of them. "Your apprenticeship began today."

"Yes," Hermione said. "I have a new work schedule, and Gareth's set me exercises to do."

"You aren't wearing an apprentice cap," Severus observed.

Hermione shook her head. "I have one, though."

"She only has to wear it if we meet with clients together," Gareth explained.

Severus lifted his lip in a slight sneer. "Does that mean that you'll be dressing more respectably, too? A robe, perhaps?"

Gareth laughed. "No, I'm the master. I get to choose what I wear, Snape."

"Clients might appreciate not having to stare at your knees," Severus said.

"Stare, Snape?" Gareth grinned. "Like my knees that much, do you?"

Hermione laughed, but Severus glowered at her.

"I'm sorry, Severus. It was just funny. We shouldn't tease you when you've been ill."

Severus took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It is nothing."

"How long will you be in the infirmary?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know. Not long, I hope."

A Patronus flew into the room, a bee, and it circled Gareth, who tilted his head and accepted the message. He frowned.

"I have to go, Hermione," he said. "Sorry, Snape. That was Mum. I've got to get back to the house."

"Is everything all right?" Hermione asked.

Gareth shrugged. "I think that she simply feels peculiar being alone in the house at night, since Gluffy's with his sick sister today. I'll just let her know I'm on my way." He drew his wand and cast his Patronus; a happy collie bounded through the wall on its way to Hogsmeade.

He stood and looked down at Severus. "I hope you feel better. Sleep well!" He clapped his shoulder. "I'm sure you'll be back to your usual miserable self soon!"

"Hmmpf."

"I'll see you later, Hermione. You remember the pass-phrase for the door, or should I wait up?"

"I have it down, thanks," Hermione replied.

"Night, all! Give my best to Aunt Minerva and Uncle Albus if you see them."

As the infirmary door closed behind him, Severus said, "You can go with him, if you want to, Hermione."

Her eyebrows rose. "No, I'm fine. Did you want me to leave?"

"No, I just thought . . . you've already spent too much of your time sitting with an invalid."

"You aren't an invalid, Severus. I don't see you that way. And I enjoy spending time with you." When Severus didn't say anything, Hermione added, "If I were the one who was sick, wouldn't you want to visit me?"

"Of course I would." He sighed. "I'm just tired, and tired of being sick."

"Well, it sounds like you're not going to be sick much longer, and if you're tired, why don't you sleep? I don't mind. I brought a new book on the history of Arithmancy with me. I can read and you can nap."

"Reading a book on the history of Arithmancy might prove a soporific, and you might fall asleep, too," Severus said with a slight smile. "The history of Arithmancy?" He couldn't imagine a more dull history-of-anything. "Is that actually interesting to you?"

Hermione nodded and pulled the book from her bag. "More interesting than the exercises Gareth's given me, but that wouldn't be difficult."

"Bored already?"

"It's only the first day," Hermione said. "We're covering basics at the moment. I'm sure it will get more interesting."

Severus nodded and closed his eyes. He opened them again and said, "I'm sorry, Hermione, but I don't think I can stay awake."

"You don't need to," she replied, opening her book. "I didn't come here to keep you awake or to be entertained. I just wanted to sit with you for a while."

Severus nodded, his eyes closed, and he slipped into sleep.

Hermione looked up from her book when the door to the infirmary opened.

"How is he?" Albus whispered after he reached her.

"He's slept most of the time," Hermione replied softly.

Albus nodded. "Was he lucid when he was awake?"

"He seemed to be, though he did say he felt confused and couldn't remember what happened."

"Healer O'Donald said he would likely remember little, and it's not surprising that he's confused."

"How long will he be in the infirmary?"

"I do not know. At least another day, I believe, if only to make sure that he does not overextend himself."

"Like he did today," Hermione said.

"Indeed," Albus said with a nod. "Thank you for coming to sit with him, Hermione. Healer O'Donald wanted someone with him all evening."

"I was glad to. I was worried about him when Gareth got the Headmistress's message this afternoon, so it was good to be able to see him for myself."

"You may, of course, stay as long as you wish, but I think I will sit with him for a while now, too." Albus conjured another armchair. "Melina will be here in an hour or so to check on him. If she finds him well enough, we will have a house-elf stay in the infirmary overnight and we can go to our own beds."

"Where is Madam Pomfrey? I haven't seen her at all," Hermione said.

"She was tired after assisting with the procedures today, so she is in her quarters resting. If we were to need her, she would come over, of course."

Severus stirred and Albus and Hermione looked up. Severus blinked at them blearily.

"I am sorry if we woke you," Albus said.

"What time is it?" Severus asked.

Hermione looked at her watch. "Almost nine. At night," she added.

"Feels later," Severus replied.

"Are you hungry?" Albus asked. "Would you like anything to eat?"

Severus nodded.

"Anything in particular strike your fancy?" Albus asked.

"A bacon butty and tea," Severus said. "With a lot of butter on the bread."

Albus chuckled. "I am not certain whether that's something which Melina or Poppy would completely approve of, but if that's what you would like! Wilspy!" Albus called.

Albus's ancient house-elf appeared with a pop, a soft smile on her face. "Yes, Master Albus?"

"Severus would like a bacon butty, with extra butter, and tea, please," Albus said.

Wilspy's smile grew and she turned to Severus. "Would you like the bread toasted first? And brown sauce on it?"

Severus shook his head. "Just bread with butter. White bread. And a dish of baked beans."

Wilspy bobbed her head. "A nice supper for a young wizard," she said. "I bring a very nice supper for you." She turned to Albus and Hermione. "The same for you?" she asked.

Albus hesitated. "Don't tell Minerva," he whispered conspiratorially, "but a bacon butty sounds very good right now."

Wilspy raised a finger to her lips and winked, then said, "You were a good boy and ate your veg today. No extra butter for you, though. And young miss? You would like a

bacon butt?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "No, thank you, ma'am."

Wilsby laughed heartily and Disapparated, her laughter still ringing in their ears.

"You don't have to call a house-elf 'ma'am,'" Severus told her, an amused expression on his face.

Hermione shrugged, but Albus chuckled. "Sometimes, I feel I should call her 'ma'am'! Ever since she's returned to the castle, I've felt like a child again. She missed fussing over me, I suppose."

"She's yours?" Hermione asked.

"She's a Dumbledore house-elf, yes," Albus replied. "She took care of me when I was a boy, and then she became mine several decades later. She was my nurse, my playmate, and my confidante as I was growing up."

Hermione blinked. "I wouldn't have thought you would own a house-elf." She tried not to sound disapproving.

Albus's eyes twinkled at her. "She is not my possession, Hermione, though she is not a free house-elf. We are bound. I have an interesting book you might enjoy on the history of house-elves and the origins of the relationship between wizarding families and house-elves. Not all families are like the Malfoys and Blacks, you know."

Hermione nodded. "Of course not."

"It might give you some ideas about how to improve the lot of so many house-elves if you understood the history better," Albus suggested.

Hermione looked slightly dubious, but agreed.

"I'll send the book to you, then." Albus looked at the book in her lap. "It might prove more stimulating than *The Development of Arithmancy over the Millennia*"

"This is very interesting," Hermione said, defending her choice of reading material again.

"I am sure it is," Albus said with a smile.

Wilsby popped back with an entire trolley heavily laden with food.

"For young Master Severus, bacon butt, white bread, extra butter," she said, flicking a finger and lifting lids as though presenting Cordon Bleu delicacies, "baked beans, macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes with gravy, fried bread, and rice pudding. For the young miss, chocolate digestives and lemon shortbread, and for Master Albus, a bacon butt." She smiled at her audience and waved her hand with a flourish. "And tea!"

They all thanked her, and she winked away quietly.

Albus chuckled at Severus's expression. "You look as though you don't know where to begin, Severus. All childhood favourites?"

Severus glanced at Albus as he reached for his bacon butt, but didn't answer, simply taking a blissful bite of his sandwich.

Albus conjured small tables for himself and Hermione and poured all three of them tea. Hermione nibbled a lemon shortbread and watched Severus devour his sandwich.

"It's good?" she asked as Severus finished the bacon sandwich...Albus hadn't finished half of his yet.

"Mhm," Severus said with a nod, chewing his final bite.

"It must have been!" Hermione said with a grin. It had looked disgusting to her, all the butter oozing out, and she'd never been fond of bacon, but it was good to see Severus eating with such an appetite. "How's yours?" she asked Albus.

"Excellent. Nicely crisped bacon. Would you like a bite?"

"Mmm, no, thank you, I don't think so." She looked at her watch. "I actually should leave soon. Madam Gamp retires early, and I don't want the perimeter charm to wake her if I get back late." She stood and went over to Severus, who was now eating his mashed potatoes and gravy.

Albus set down his sandwich. "I'll just step over to the Floo and let Minerva know I'm still here and that Melina hasn't arrived yet."

Severus put aside his potatoes and looked up at Hermione. "Thank you for coming, Hermione. I am sorry I wasn't better company."

"You were perfect...you did just what you should, sleeping, getting your rest, and eating." She reached out and touched the back of his hand with her fingertips. "I was worried about you, even after seeing you yesterday, but now I can tell you're recovering. I'm glad that the Headmistress let us know."

"So am I. It was good to have you here . . . Will I see you again?"

"Of course. I'm just in Hogsmeade, after all. I will owl you tomorrow."

Severus nodded. "I will look forward to that." He looked past Hermione across the room to where Albus was bent and speaking into the Floo. "I know you have to go. You should Apparate from the gates, Hermione. It's a long, isolated walk to Hogsmeade at this time of the evening."

"I doubt there will be anyone lurking in the bushes, Severus."

"Just because the Dark L, Riddle, was defeated does not mean that there aren't other unsavoury people in the world, Hermione. You need to be careful."

"It's also not London," Hermione said.

"In London, at least there might be other people around," Severus pointed out. "Do take care."

"I will. It's faster to Apparate, anyway." She glanced over her shoulder at Albus. She had the embarrassing feeling that he was trying to be discreet. Well, might as well take advantage of it. She bent and kissed Severus's cheek as she had done the previous day, but this time, she didn't rush away. "Good night, Severus. Get well so that we can take another brain holiday together." She stepped away from the bed and called out to Albus, "Good night, Professor Dumbledore! Thank Professor McGonagall for me!"

"Ah, good night, my dear!" Albus turned and smiled at her. "Give my regards to Gertrude, if you would."

"I will!"

Albus returned to his armchair and picked up his sandwich again. "A good idea, Severus, a bacon sandwich." He took a bite and washed it down with some tea. "Something reassuring about a good bacon sarnie."

Severus just nodded and ate his cheesy macaroni. He couldn't remember the last time he had had such an appetite, or the last time anything had tasted as good as this supper did. He looked up as Albus finished his sandwich. He was a little uncomfortable with his company, but he recognised that it would be ungrateful of him to tell him to leave now that the other wizard was finished eating. And he didn't really want him to go, either.

"There's more mashed potatoes, if you want them," Severus said, indicating a small bowl of mashed potatoes and gravy.

"No, thank you, Severus. They do look tasty, though. Wilsby's mashed potatoes are wonderful. But if you aren't going to eat all the fried bread . . ."

"Help yourself," Severus said, picking up a piece for himself. His father used to do fried bread for him in the morning before school, and sometimes when he'd wake and hear his father returning late from work, he'd go downstairs, and his father would make them both bacon butties, just for the two of them. The sandwiches had always tasted especially good, eaten whilst sitting at the kitchen table, the outside world all dark and his mother asleep upstairs. Bacon butties and baked beans. Severus set down his fried bread and looked at the baked beans. He hadn't thought of that in years. All of those special times...simple, but special...overshadowed by later events, his father's increased drinking, his parents' arguing, then his father leaving. His mother had said they were better off without him.

"Everything all right, Severus?"

He nodded. "Fine." He drank his tea.

"Minerva said that Melina expects to be here at ten. I thought I'd stay at least until she's finished."

Severus nodded again, staring at the baked beans.

"What about the rice pudding, my boy? Wouldn't that taste nice?"

"Don't speak to me as though I'm a half-wit, Dumbledore," Severus said, though his voice held no venom, merely weariness.

"I'm sorry. I tend to get enthusiastic about things like rice pudding. You know me."

Severus raised his eyes and met Albus's. "Do I? I don't even know myself."

Albus picked up the teapot. "There's tea left."

Severus nodded, and Albus poured him another cup.

Albus drank some tea, then he said softly, "I know we still have unfinished business between us, Severus. I had hoped I had made amends, for my part, for things long past . . . but it seems that perhaps recent events have reawakened some old feelings. And that's understandable. But I hope that we can overcome any difficulties between us."

"Albus, you always want to talk about these things when it's the last thing I want to do. I can't even think about it right now. When I want to hash anything out with you, when I get angry, when I have the *energy* to get angry, you just want to smooth things over, or you apologise and think that's enough." Severus shook his head and sighed. "I don't know what would be enough. I just know that I can't talk about it right now."

"Then eat some rice pudding," Albus said.

Severus chuckled shortly and reached for the pudding. It did look good, nice and creamy. "You want some?"

"Maybe just a spoonful," Albus said.

Severus took a spoonful for himself then held out the bowl, and Albus took some. Severus nodded. "Good pudding."

"Very."

They each took another spoonful.

"You'll stay until O'Donald's come and gone, then?" Severus asked.

"I thought I would."

Severus nodded. "Thanks for the meal."

"I'm glad it hit the spot."

"Couldn't eat like this every day, though."

"I could, but Minerva won't let me...nor will Wilsby, for that matter."

Severus quirked a slight smile. "Good thing, too, probably."

Albus chuckled and dipped his spoon into the pudding again. "It makes cheating much more fun."

"A new definition of 'dangerous living,'" Severus said, stifling a yawn.

"We'll have to get used to it."

Severus set down his spoon and put his head back, closing his eyes.

"Tired?"

Severus nodded.

"Well, then, why don't I get rid of all this"...Albus ate one last spoonful of rice pudding, then waved his hand and banished the dishes, trolley, and tables..."lower the lights, pull the curtain all the way around, and you can nap until Melina arrives."

Severus muttered something unintelligible and sighed.

When Albus lowered the head of the bed, Severus barely stirred. Albus then flicked his wand, lowering the lights and pulling the white curtain all the way around the bed, and settled back into his chair to wait for Melina.

"Very good," Melina said warmly. "If I didn't know better, I almost wouldn't even think you'd been so ill. You'll need to rest the next few days. It will take a while before you'll manage to stay awake for more than a few hours at a time, but if you take proper care of yourself, you should be fine to teach by Monday."

"Monday!" Severus said. "But..."

"Monday," Melina repeated firmly. "You may begin to use your magic...gently!...before that, possibly by Friday or Saturday. I'll come by to see you tomorrow evening, and we'll see then about when you might be able to return to your rooms. I'm glad to hear that your appetite is returning. Be sure to eat a lot of fruit and vegetables, and plenty of protein. As you feel able, get some exercise, too. Take walks, get some fresh air." She picked up her bag. "Poppy will be checking on you in the morning, and I'll leave instructions for her. If you need anything during the night, a house-elf named Perlie will be here, or you may call your own elf, if you prefer."

"Hmmpf."

"Severus, I want you to recover well from this, and you'll actually recover faster if you rest longer before beginning to teach again. I have no doubt that you could push yourself and begin teaching again by Thursday, but there's no point to it. You need this time. You probably should have taken it to begin with. I can almost guarantee you that if you follow my advice, in two weeks' time, you'll scarcely think about having been ill, but if you don't, you'll drag through the entire month of September. You don't need to do that. There's no war on, Severus, and no one to prove anything to, either."

"All right . . . I didn't intentionally allow this to happen today," Severus said somewhat petulantly. "I think I'm just so used to putting up with not feeling well, I didn't recognise that the symptoms were worsening. I also wished to fulfill my duties," he admitted. He had been afraid, he realised...afraid of losing his magic, but also afraid of losing his position, of becoming expendable.

"Right now, your duty is to yourself." Melina grinned. "You're a Slytherin, isn't there some Slytherin maxim or other about duty to oneself first?"

Severus disliked it when non-Slytherins tried to quote Salazar Slytherin; he didn't even like it when most Slytherins quoted the Founder of their House, since they usually didn't do so accurately or with any insight. "You wouldn't understand."

Melina shrugged. "In this case, Slytherin or not, I'd say that you can only fulfill your other duties if you first take care of yourself. So do that."

"I said I would. No need to pound it into my head," Severus said sullenly.

"I just want to be clear with you, that's all. I'll see you tomorrow, Severus. Sleep well!"

Melina drew aside the curtain slightly and stepped out, and Severus could hear her murmuring, saying something to Albus, then he heard her quick step across the floor and the door open and close as she left.

Albus peeked around the end of the curtain. "Severus?"

"I haven't gone anywhere."

"Melina said you're doing well, that you'll be fully recovered in no time at all! I can't tell you what good news that is to me."

No time at all . . . Albus certainly had a different view of things.

"Minerva is seeing Melina down to the gates, but she said to tell you she will check in on you before she returns to the Tower."

Severus nodded. He certainly had had a stream of visitors, although he hadn't seen the one person whom he would have expected to see in the infirmary. "Where's Pomfrey? I haven't seen her once."

"No, perhaps not, but she saw a great deal of you." Albus blushed. "What I mean to say is that she was here when Twiskett brought you in, obviously, and then she took part in the procedures this afternoon."

"I don't remember any of that. I must have arrived between ten-thirty and eleven. How long did everything take?"

"They finished shortly before three-thirty, but then we had to get you back to the infirmary, and that took a little time," Albus replied.

"Back to the infirmary? Where was I? St. Giles?"

"No, the Heart of Hogwarts. You were suffering severe magical burn-out when you arrived in the infirmary, the worst possible kind of magical drain. Melina believed it would be helpful if you were treated in the area of the school with the highest magical field, so after they'd done a few initial treatments here, we moved you to the Heart...via the Floo to Minerva's office...and then back here again."

"Oh." Severus's eyes were closing, but he tried to keep them open. "Still, Pomfrey's usually one to hover about the infirmary when she has a patient." She was probably still angry with him for collapsing in his classroom when she hadn't wanted him teaching that morning.

"I have no doubt that she will hover sufficiently for your satisfaction tomorrow, Severus," Albus said with a twinkle. "I'll sit with you a little while, until you fall asleep, at least. Then you can feel properly hovered over, hmm?"

"Hmmpf."

"Don't forget that if you need anything in the night, you can call Perlie."

Severus was already dozing.

"Good night, Severus, sweet dreams!"

NEXT

Chapter Sixteen: A Sympathetic New Start

Wednesday, 2 September 1998

Severus spends one more day in the infirmary, then returns to his own rooms to finish his recovery and begin his new life.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Perlie

Chapter Sixteen: A Sympathetic New Start

Chapter 17 of 118

Wednesday, 2 September 1998. Severus spends the day in the infirmary, then returns to his own rooms to finish his recovery and begin his new life. ****End of Part One****



Chapter Sixteen: A Sympathetic New Start

Wednesday, 2 September 1998

Poppy, her dressing gown wrapped around her, stepped into the darkened infirmary. "Perlie!" she called softly, her eyes adjusting to the dim light.

Perlie trotted over to her from her little table and chair. Poppy could see the silhouette of another house-elf sitting on the other side of the table.

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey?" Perlie whispered.

"How has Professor Snape been?"

"He sleeps. He wakes up once and uses the loo, but then he sleeps again." Perlie looked over her shoulder. "Gervo keeps Perlie company," Perlie said.

"That's fine, Perlie," Poppy said with a nod. "I'm going to go back to my rooms and get ready to start the day, but come fetch me if Professor Snape wakes up. I'll be back in about twenty minutes, then you can go get some rest. Take the day off, too...no arguments, Perlie. You can keep Gervo company whilst he works today, if you wish, lend him a hand."

Perlie perked up at the idea of helping Gervo with his work that day, and she nodded agreeably.

When Poppy returned to the infirmary twenty minutes later, the early morning light was beginning to suffuse the room with a pale glow. After dismissing Perlie and her companion, she looked in on Severus, who was lying on his side, sleeping peacefully. She cast one general diagnostic of his physical condition and one for his magical system. Both gave results within normal ranges. She pulled the long white curtain closed around Severus's bed, then went to her office and called a house-elf for some tea.

Poppy didn't mind rising early; however, waking up before five o'clock that morning had felt too early. She couldn't fall asleep again, though, and she had lain there wondering how Severus was, so she simply got up and walked over to check on him. She had slept deeply for more than ten hours, and there was no point in simply lying in bed waiting for breakfast time to come. There was always something she could find to do in the infirmary, even when it was slow and there weren't any patients.

She sipped her tea as she looked over the few parchments that had been placed on her desk the previous day. After reading the instructions that Melina had left for her, then filling out a form she'd left her for her St. Giles paperwork, Poppy read Laura Manning's report and wrote herself a reminder to set an appointment to examine Suzie Sefton sometime that week. Over the course of the first few weeks of school, she liked to check over any new Muggle-born students, anyway, since they'd never had the opportunity for a wizarding health check. She also examined any other first-year students for whom she had no health records. Sefton would be a priority because she had been sick to her stomach three times in two days. Poppy had treated her, of course, that first night before the Sorting, and then again after the Feast, but she hadn't had the time to do more than take a cursory look at the girl and give her a standard stomach potion. From everything that the girl had listed that she'd eaten on the Hogwarts Express, it was hardly a surprise that she'd vomited after the boat trip across the lake. Still, best to make certain there was nothing else going on. She'd have to tell Severus, too.

She heard movement coming from the infirmary, so she got up and left her office, just in time to see Severus, dressed in a grey nightshirt, pulling aside the curtain.

"Good morning, Severus! How are you feeling this morning?"

"Better," he said shortly.

"On your way to the loo?"

He grunted his assent, but didn't move.

"If you need help, give me a yell," Poppy said cheerfully. "I'll call for some breakfast for us. Are you hungry?"

"Very."

"Good. I am, too. I'll order us a good hearty breakfast. Have a taste for anything in particular?"

He shook his head. "But I'll have coffee, not tea."

"Right!"

As Severus shuffled sleepily toward the loo, Poppy called Strilpa and ordered two full breakfasts for them.

Severus emerged from the loo, looking slightly more awake.

"Our breakfast should be here shortly, Severus. Whilst we wait, I'd like to check you over."

Severus nodded and pulled the long white curtain further aside, then sat on the edge of the bed.

"Any headache, body aches, nausea, anything like that?" Poppy asked as she drew her wand.

"No. I just feel muizzy-headed. Like I could go back to bed and sleep all day."

"You'll probably feel that way for a while. What about your magical system? Any unusual sensations? Prickling, palpitations, magical surges?"

"No." He paused, reflecting, then shook his head. "No, it feels normal."

"Good! Now just a few spells," Poppy said, flicking her wand and casting the first one.

Severus sat and waited patiently as she went through the series of standard diagnostic charms. Some produced glows of different colours, depending on what they measured, and others generated symbols that floated about his body.

Poppy nodded and smiled. "So far, so good." She took his wrist and felt his pulse and his magical circulation. "Excellent, Severus. Melina will be pleased."

"I can leave now, then," Severus said, slightly questioningly.

"Not just yet. Melina wants you to stay in the infirmary at least for the day, and so do I. I want to be able to keep an eye on you, make sure everything stays as it should."

Severus sighed, resigned. He didn't particularly feel like getting dressed, anyway, and he wasn't about to walk through the corridors dressed in his nightshirt and dressing gown.

"Why am I still so sleepy? Not just tired, but drowsy," Severus asked.

"It's the expected aftereffect of the treatments you underwent yesterday, but you also had a severe magical drain, and even though it was effectively reversed and treated, it takes a while to recover from that."

"Mmm."

There was a crack of Apparition, and the aroma of fresh coffee reached them.

Poppy said, "Smell that? Breakfast has arrived." As if on cue, Severus's stomach growled, and Poppy laughed. "And just in time, it seems!"

Severus rolled his eyes, but Poppy simply chuckled.

"Would you like me to fix you a bed tray, or would you prefer to sit up at a table with me?" she asked.

"I will eat at the table," Severus replied, slipping off the bed. He reached out to Summon his dressing gown, but then remembered the prohibition against using his magic. He felt perfectly well, albeit tired, but after the fiasco the previous day, he thought it best to comply with the Healer's orders. He nodded as Poppy handed him his dressing gown. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Poppy said. "I'll go set out our breakfast."

She left him to put on his dressing gown and shuck on his slippers. A minute later, he stepped around the side curtain to find that she had conjured a table, tablecloth, and two wooden armchairs, and had arranged their breakfast on the table: fried eggs, sausages, grilled tomatoes, sauteed mushrooms, and a rack of wholemeal toast; there was even a small bowl with a few Clementines in it. A pot of coffee sat beside one place-setting, and a pot of tea beside the other.

"Help yourself to whatever you would like, Severus," Poppy said, reaching for a slice of toast.

Severus took two eggs, toast, a few small sausages, and some of the sauteed mushrooms. They ate in silence, both with good appetite. After he finished, Severus pushed away from the table.

"You should have an orange, Severus," Poppy said. "You need the vitamins."

"Hmmpf." He sat and took one of the small oranges and peeled it by hand, enjoying the aroma that was released as he broke through the peel and pulled it away from the fruit.

Poppy poured herself another cup of tea. "Would you like me to fetch you any reading material? A book or two from the library? Or you could have Twiskett fetch you something from your quarters, if you prefer."

"I think I'll just sleep for a while," Severus replied. "This afternoon, I will have Twiskett bring me the student essays from yesterday." He popped an orange section into his mouth, chewed and swallowed. "Have they cancelled Potions for the day, or have they someone else teaching for me?"

"Dumbledore's taking your classes until you return," Poppy said.

Severus furrowed his brow. "Who is teaching Defence?"

"Minerva."

"Oh."

"If you feel up to reading student essays, that's fine, but you don't need to. I'm sure they'll keep."

"I don't want them to 'keep,'" Severus said moodily.

"As I said, that's fine," Poppy replied. "I have a few things to do this morning, but I'll be here if you need me. If I step out, I'll let you know and Strilpa will be here to fetch me if necessary."

Severus nodded and stood.

"One other thing, Severus."

"What is it?" he asked impatiently.

"Slytherin House business," Poppy said. "One of your first-years, Suzie Sefton, has been ill, sick to her stomach, a few times since arriving on Monday."

"Oh, yes." He snorted. "Once all over me."

"Yes, and she was sick again yesterday. I wasn't available, but Draco Malfoy found Laura Manning, and she got some stomach potion for her." Poppy grinned. "And you aren't the only Slytherin she's thrown up on...Draco's robes were covered with her lunch."

"Draco?"

"Yes. He was there when she vomited in the entrance hall, so he brought her up here to look for me, and then she threw up again all over him when Laura gave her the potion."

"So, what is the issue? You want to give her an examination?"

"Yes, and I'd like to do it today, hopefully before she's sick again. I want to make sure that there's no underlying illness, and I am going to keep an eye on her and make sure that she doesn't have bulimia."

"Fine. If you would let me know so that I can pull the curtain, I would appreciate not being seen by her...or any of my students."

"Right, no student visitors then," Poppy agreed with a nod. "We can keep the curtain pulled if you like, or you can have one of the private rooms. It's easier to keep an eye on you if you're in the main room, but I think you're well enough to have your privacy if you prefer."

"I prefer," Severus said drily.

"That's fine...pick a room, any room," she said cheerfully, waving her wand and banishing the remnants of their meal. "I'll bring you your things after you're settled. Twiskett brought you some fresh clothes yesterday; the ones you were in are probably beyond repair, other than your trousers. We had to cut everything off you."

Severus frowned. "My teaching robe, too?"

"One of the house-elves might be able to repair that well enough." Poppy shrugged. "You could let Twiskett try his hand at repairing everything, if you like."

"Hmmpf. That was one of my favourite teaching robes."

"Yes, well, you aren't being buried in it, so be thankful for that," Poppy replied.

Severus just shook his head and left to find the nearest private room and collapse back into bed.

Severus woke a few hours later. Poppy was drawing aside the curtains to let in the bright morning sunshine.

"Gods, close those curtains." Severus rolled over, away from the window, and folded his pillow over his head. He heard Poppy's reply muffled by his pillow, but didn't respond. He'd been having a nice dream. He rarely had nice dreams. Maybe if he didn't wake up too much, he could recapture it.

Alas, it was not to be. Poppy came around to the other side of the bed and touched his shoulder. Severus closed his eyes more tightly, but she persisted.

He opened his eyes. "I thought I was supposed to get bed rest. You won't let me teach, but you won't let me sleep, either."

"You have a visitor," Poppy said. "It's a student, but I thought you'd like to be told."

"I said, no students," Severus replied crossly, rolling onto his back. "Who is it and what does he want? Or she."

"It's Kevin Harper, and I don't know what he wants."

"Tell him . . . tell him to go away." Severus sighed. "Unless it's urgent. Otherwise, have him come back later. Or make an appointment with me. I can see him once I'm discharged. Whenever that may be."

"He is a prefect," Poppy began.

"I *do* know who the prefects are in my own House, Madam Pomfrey," Severus interrupted. "I have not become completely addlebrained by your cures. If it's about Potions, have him talk to Dumbledore. If it's about Hogwarts or Slytherin, he can talk to Minerva. I'll see him if it's urgent, but I really was having a decent lie-in for once, so if it isn't, just deal with him and send him on his way." Severus rolled over, turning his back to her, and folded his pillow over his head again.

"I also have a potion for you to take," Poppy said loudly enough for Severus to hear through his pillow, "so I'll be back in a few minutes with it."

Now Severus was fully awake. He rolled onto his back. "I thought you said I was fully recovered. No more potions."

Poppy quirked a smile. "I'll be back after I've taken care of Harper for you."

Wonderful. Potions. They just loved to torture him. Severus shook his head as Poppy left. He knew that without Healer O'Donald's discovery of the magical toxins and her subsequent intervention, he would likely have suffered severe damage to his magical core, perhaps beyond being able to be Healed, but he hated being a patient. It wasn't so bad when he was really feeling sick, but now that he felt better, he just wanted to get on with things and forget ever having been ill. Well, once he'd caught up on his sleep.

A few minutes later, Poppy reentered the room carrying his clothes and a small vial of clear liquid.

"Here are your clothes and your wand. I'll just put them in the drawer here."

"I thought I wasn't to use any magic until at least Friday," Severus said, puzzled and wondering how his wand had got to the Hospital Wing.

"You aren't, but we had your wand here yesterday when you were being treated, so I just kept it here for you." Poppy flicked her own wand and raised the head of the bed partway.

Severus frowned. He did not like others handling his wand without his express permission, which was never, and he knew that he hadn't been carrying it. "How did you get it? And why?"

"Twiskett fetched it for me, on my orders, and I told him that no one would say anything about his handling it, so don't punish him for it," Poppy said.

"I do not punish my house-elf," Severus said stiffly. What kind of person did Pomfrey take him for? He supposed the answer to that was obvious. He was a miserable bastard most of the time.

"I did not mean to imply that you punish him physically," Poppy said, reading his expression. "But do not rebuke him for it. It helped save your magic."

"I am sure that Twiskett would not handle my wand, or any other, without good reason. As to *why* you did, I am not so certain. What was the purpose?"

Poppy just chuckled. "I used my own wand for you until Twiskett returned with yours, but it helped to contain your magical burn-off, closing the circuit between your hands."

"Oh. That bad?" Albus had mentioned magical burn-out, but he still hadn't realised that his situation had been so dire.

"I've never seen magical drain that bad, Severus," Poppy replied seriously, "and even Melina said it was one of the worst cases she'd ever treated, and she's encountered it far more than I have."

"So, what's the potion?" Severus asked, nodding toward the vial in Poppy's hand.

"Nothing too nasty," Poppy said, "just a little something Melina wanted me to give you to speed your recovery. It will help keep your electrolytes balanced. Even though you've been eating and drinking, and you're in fairly good shape, we want to keep it that way."

Severus took the vial from her, unstoppered it, and swallowed it down. He couldn't help grimacing at the taste.

"Like some water?" Poppy asked.

Severus nodded, and Poppy poured him a glass from the carafe beside the bed. After he had drunk half the glass, he said, "How did you treat the burn-out? And what other treatments did I receive? Dumbledore said it took hours."

"I stopped the initial drain using the standard dampening and staunching spells, but then Melina did the rest of the treatment. I just assisted her. She administered Takehari Solution, which completely stopped the drain and strengthened your overall magical system, then we brought you to the Hogwarts Heart, and several of us donated some magical energy, which Melina incorporated with yours..."

"Several of you?"

"Minerva, obviously, since she's Headmistress, Albus, and me, and Filius and Pomona joined us, too," Poppy said.

Severus stared at the ceiling. Discomfort crawled over him as he contemplated them all standing around him, casting spells as he lay helpless. He shivered.

"Severus? You all right?"

Severus looked at her and nodded. "And the other treatments? Minerva said that Melina had completed the treatments she'd been going to do on Friday." His memory of his first hours awake were very fuzzy, but that one was quite clear.

"Yes. After Filius, Pomona, and Albus had done their part, they returned to their teaching duties, and Melina performed spell extraction on the magical toxins, removing as much of it as possible that way before completing the Healing. There wasn't a lot of it left, but it was fairly diffuse, so she was only able to reduce it by about a third using that procedure. The rest was removed using sympathetic magic, so it's completely gone now, and all traces of its effects, as well."

Severus took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Sympathetic magic: that was a rare and difficult magic, and although it had many Dark applications, it was also a powerful method of Healing. He had never asked Melina how she was planning to treat him on Friday; he had simply assumed it would be a standard set of potions and spellwork. He wondered who the sympathetic had been...he and Minerva had a fairly close connection, and although a personal relationship between the sympathetic and the patient wasn't necessary for sympathetic magic to be successful, it did help. He believed that Minerva would do it for him; the lengths she had gone to in order to save his life during the war attested to that. But he had seen Minerva the evening before, and she had looked fine. Being a sympathetic was supposed to be exhausting. It obviously couldn't have been Albus, either, although Severus had no doubt that if required, Albus would have served as sympathetic for him.

Severus met Poppy's eyes. Albus had said she was tired; Severus had believed that she simply had finished her duties in the infirmary and hadn't cared enough to check in on him as long as there was someone else with him.

"Who was the sympathetic?" Severus asked softly.

"Melina had planned to have Healer Baton be the sympathetic, but as he was not here, I stepped in," Poppy replied. "Now, would you like to sleep or are you hungry?"

"Wait, wait, wait," Severus said, holding up his hand. "You can't leave it at that, then just ask me if I need a nap."

Poppy shrugged. "Leave it at what? There's not much more to say. Once Melina completed the sympathetic Healing, we were finished. We brought you back to the infirmary, got you dressed in the nightshirt Twiskett brought us, and left you to sleep. Albus stayed with you."

"But sympathetic magic . . . and you were the sympathetic." Severus paused. There could be peculiar, lingering aftereffects of sympathetic magic if done improperly. Not to mention that, from what he had read, being a sympathetic could be a difficult and enervating experience, even painful. "I hope O'Donald knew what she was doing."

Poppy quirked a smile. "I had no doubt that she did, or I would not have volunteered."

He looked up at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. I slept like a log, ate like a horse, and I feel fine this morning," Poppy said briskly. "And I haven't had any strange aftereffects. The procedure did what it was supposed to do, and no more."

Severus nodded. "Good."

"So, more food? I have to admit to still having quite an appetite," Poppy said with a grin. "I'm going to have a bite, but if you would prefer to sleep, that's fine."

"I could eat something," Severus admitted.

"Fine. I'll ask Strilpa to get us some toasted crumpets, jam, and tea. Anything else?"

"Cheese." He had a hankering for cheese.

"Right, then." Poppy nodded. "I'll be back in a trice."

"Wait."

Poppy turned at the door.

Severus hesitated. "Thank you. And . . . sorry if I have been . . . curt."

"You're welcome. I'm glad you're getting back to your usual self." Poppy left, closing the door quietly behind her.

Severus sat at the small desk in his sitting room, staring at a blank parchment. After Melina's visit that evening, he'd been discharged from the infirmary with directions on eating and sleeping, and an appointment to visit Madam Pomfrey the next morning. Now he sat in his room and tried to think of what he should write, and to whom he should write first. The latter problem was most easily solved. He pulled Hermione's letter toward him and glanced over it once more. He would answer her letter first.

2 September 1998

Dear Hermione,

I received your owl this afternoon. Thank you. I appreciate your concern, but I believe I may finally be on the road to full recovery...physical and magical recovery, at any rate. I have returned to my rooms, although I am still under somewhat restrictive orders. Professor Dumbledore will be teaching Potions for the rest of the week, but I will

be back in the classroom on Monday.

I do welcome your suggestion that we meet for lunch. I am unfortunately unable to leave the castle until Friday, when I will be able to resume wand-use. If that fits with your schedule, perhaps we could meet at the Three Broomsticks at 12.30 on Friday.

Severus paused and thought a moment.

Please give my regards to your master and to Professor Gamp.

It was pointless to ignore the witch's existence and the fact that Hermione was living in her house. She had been gracious enough to visit him after the Hogwarts Victory Feast, after all, offering a fresh start on new footing. He doubted that she would care to see him again, and he most assuredly did not want to see her, but as uncomfortable as it was for him, he could acknowledge the woman's presence in Hermione's life.

I anticipate your response.

Sincerely,

Severus

He reread the letter, nodded to himself, and folded it in three, then wrote Hermione's name on the outside. He usually used a Sticking Charm, but as he could not use any magic, he searched his drawers and found a roll of Spell-o-Tape.

Next letter. He sighed. He didn't have to write any other letters. He doubted anyone expected anything from him. And he disliked putting anything in writing that might later be held over him. He sighed again. He would begin with the easiest one. He'd always liked Flitwick, after all. He'd been one of his favourite teachers when he'd been a student.

2 September 1998

Dear Professor Flitwick,

I understand that you assisted Healer O'Donald yesterday when the situation arose. I would like to express my appreciation for your time and energy. I am doing well now and have returned to my rooms, thanks in large part to your generosity.

Thank you for your assistance. I have also appreciated the work you have done for Hogwarts over the past few months, and particularly in the week leading up to the Sorting.

Sincerely,

Severus S. Snape

Deputy Headmaster, Hogwarts

After signing his name, he looked at his signature. He never used his middle initial. Never. He had no idea what had caused him to use it then. He shrugged. It did seem to add a flourish to his signature. Perhaps he might begin to use it regularly.

He pulled out another fresh parchment and wrote a similar, though shorter, letter to Pomona Sprout. That was easy enough and quickly finished. Now for the most difficult letter.

2 September 1998

Dear

He already was stymied. If it were Hogwarts business, he would easily simply use the title "Professor," but this was more personal. The letter was not only for him and for his new practice in common courtesy and gratitude, but also for the recipient.

Dear Albus,

Thank you for your help yesterday. I understand you participated in relieving the drain. I appreciate your continuing

Severus crumpled the parchment and tossed it into the wastebasket. He would have to ask Twiskett to disintegrate everything.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I understand that you assisted in the Healing procedures yesterday. Thank you for the time and energy you once again expended on my behalf. As you likely know by now, I have been discharged from the infirmary and am recovering well.

I appreciate the time you spent yesterday evening in the infirmary. I hope that it did not disrupt any plans you may have had. Thank you, as well, for teaching Potions this week. I am permitted to read student essays, so please have them delivered to me at the end of each day.

Sincerely,

Severus S. Snape

Severus reread the letter and frowned. He didn't like it. Not familiar enough in some respects and too familiar in others, but he was becoming sleepy again and decided that it would have to do.

2 September 1998

Dear Minerva,

Once again, I owe you my deep thanks and appreciation. You will be happy to know that your niece declared me fit enough to return to my own rooms, and I will even be able to use my wand again in a day or two.

You have my assurance, Minerva, that I will return to all my duties soon, and I will be an effective deputy for you. Please do not hesitate to update me on any Hogwarts business of which I should be aware, and if there is any paperwork that I can do for you over the next few days, I am at your service.

With gratitude,

Severus

There, that was done. He could thank Poppy, too, he supposed, but she was the Hogwarts matron and had been performing her duty, and O'Donald was most certainly acting in her professional capacity and he had no doubt that he would receive an accounting for it. Minerva had paid for all of his initial treatments and visits to St. Giles, but when he had inquired about why he was not receiving any bills from St. Giles and had learned that Minerva had been paying his expenses from her own pocket, he had put a stop to it. He had acquiesced when Minerva had strongly declined his offer of repayment, but he had paid the subsequent St. Giles bills, although he suspected that Melina reduced her own fee. What she chose to charge was her business, though.

Severus began to put his quill and parchment away, but then quickly drew out a sheet of blank parchment and scrawled one last note.

2 September 1998

Dear Madam Pomfrey,

Thank you for your care over the last few days. I apologise for not always being an easy patient.

If you ever were to require a sympathetic for yourself, I would place myself at your disposal.

Sincerely,

Severus S. Snape

Deputy Headmaster, Hogwarts

He glanced over the letter. Not particularly subtle, nor flowery, but Poppy was a straightforward Hufflepuff. It would do. And he thought that she would understand his offer for what it was, an expression of appreciation. After having thought about it that afternoon, he realised that despite Poppy's breezy attitude about being the sympathetic, it could not have been a pleasant experience for her, and he appreciated even more the fact that she didn't behave as though she had done anything special for him, something which had created a debt. The Hogwarts matron was all right, as Hufflepuffs went, and she'd always been more than decent toward him.

Now to call Twiskett and have him deliver the letters to the Hogwarts denizens and owl the one to Hermione, and then to bed. It was only eight o'clock, and he'd slept most of the day, but he felt as though he would fall out of his chair if he tried to stay awake one more minute. Just as well he wasn't teaching the next day. He'd sleep through his classes, he was sure of it. Monday, though, Monday would be the start of his new life as Hogwarts Potions master and Deputy Headmaster, and things would sort themselves out . . . he hoped.

~End Part One~

~to be continued~

Author's Note: If you've enjoyed seeing little Suzie Sefton, I've written a "sister story" to A Long Vernal Season called ["The Sorting of Suzie Sefton"](#). It's complete in four chapters. Have fun!

NEXT

Part Two

Chapter Seventeen: An Ambush for Minerva

Friday, 2 October 1998

Albus is having his own adjustment issues; Severus gives him advice and arranges an ambush.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Quin MacAirt

~*~*~*~

UPCOMING CHAPTERS IN PART TWO:

(Slight spoilers...chapter titles subject to change)

Chapter Seventeen: An Ambush for Minerva

Friday, 2 October 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Quin MacAirt

Chapter Eighteen: A New Man

Saturday, 17 October 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Nineteen: Of Scotch, Choices, and Ambiguity

Saturday, 24 October 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Wilspy

Chapter Twenty: A Ghostly Halloween

Saturday, 31 October 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Verity Septima Vector, and others

Chapter Twenty-One: Fancy Dress

Saturday, 31 October 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Verity Septima Vector, Pomona Sprout, Filius Flitwick, Suzie Sefton, and others

Chapter Twenty-Two: Not Onerous or Dreary

Sunday, 1 November 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, Madam Rosmerta, Gareth McGonagall, and others

Chapter Twenty-Three: Collegiality

Sunday, 1 November 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Alastor Moody, Verity Septima Vector, and others

Chapter Twenty-Four: Dawn Light Reflected

Monday, 9 November Saturday, 14 November 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, Filius Flitwick, Firenze, Aurora Sinistra (portrait)

Chapter Twenty-Five: Preoccupation

Saturday, 21 November 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Twenty-Six: Laid to Rest

Saturday, 21 Sunday, 22 November 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore

Chapter Twenty-Seven: 'Twas the Night Before the Night Before Christmas

Wednesday, 23 December 1998

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Poppy Pomfrey, Twiskett, various other Hogwarts staff members

Chapter Twenty-Eight: A Happy Birthday?

Saturday, 9 January 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Hermione Granger, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall, Twiskett

Chapter Seventeen: An Ambush for Minerva

Chapter 18 of 118

Friday, 2 October 1998. Albus is having his own adjustment issues; Severus gives him advice and arranges an ambush.

****Beginning of Part Two****



PART TWO

Chapter Seventeen: An Ambush for Minerva

Friday, 2 October 1998

Severus pulled out his watch and glanced at it discreetly beneath the table. Only eight forty-five. They hadn't even been meeting an hour. It felt much longer. He did wish that Laura Walker Manning would stop trying to press her causes with the other faculty. He greatly preferred having her come to him or to Minerva, and if either of them thought an idea worth considering, then it could be brought before the entire staff, if necessary. Sometimes it seemed as though Ms Manning came up with her notions, most of them barmy, as she was sitting in the meeting, and thought that her stream of consciousness ramblings were of interest to everyone else. Filius seemed enthusiastic about all of her ideas...at least hearing them, if not implementing them...and he would sometimes join in with the brainstorming.

Severus caught Minerva's eye, and he twitched his eyebrow slightly. She nodded once, looking down at the agenda in front of her.

"Ms Manning, those are interesting ideas. Perhaps you could compose a memo outlining them and have it prepared in advance of the next staff meeting. In the meantime, I believe we should move on to the next item on the Headmistress's agenda," Severus said. He thought his work on his diplomatic skills was bearing fruit: Laura smiled at him and agreed to do as he suggested.

"Now, on to the next issue," Minerva said. "Hogsmeade weekends. Last weekend . . . I was displeased. However, it was the first Hogsmeade weekend of the new school year. It is to be expected that there may be some . . . snags. Professor Snape advises me that he has instructed new staff again on what is permissible and what is not permissible and what actions are to be taken when a student or students are discovered participating in impermissible activities. If you even *suspect* that a student is about to engage in such an activity, it is incumbent upon you to step in before the student gets into trouble. Participation in Hogsmeade weekends is a privilege, not a right. Do not let the students persuade you otherwise. Most especially, do see that none of them ventures down Sow's Alley. The establishment of Madam Luvley, whether her shop or her . . . her other business, is completely off-limits to Hogwarts students. I do not care whether they are of-age or not. What they do during holidays is their business and that of their families, but whilst they are in attendance at Hogwarts and participating in Hogsmeade weekends, they shall abide by Hogwarts rules." Minerva looked around the table. "You all understand this now, I presume? Good. Now Professor Flitwick will discuss preparations for Halloween."

Severus suffered through twenty more minutes of planning for the students' fun and frivolity...he sometimes wondered if even the faculty forgot that Hogwarts was a school, a place of learning, not a place to party...and he was relieved when Minerva declared the meeting adjourned.

He left the staff room quickly and started down to the dungeons. He disliked Friday evening staff meetings as much as anyone; even if he had little social life to speak of, he still liked the weekend to begin after his last class on Friday. Of course, there were usually other duties between then and Monday morning, but it was never good to begin the weekend with a staff meeting.

He heard someone's footsteps behind him on the stairs, and he slowed and looked back. Long, deep rust robes with bronze flecks appeared above him. Albus. Severus paused and waited for the other wizard to catch up with him.

"Severus!" Albus smiled. "How are you this evening?"

"Fine. On my way to check on Slytherin."

"Ah, well, I don't want to delay you, but perhaps after you have done that, we could spend a little time together?"

Severus opened his mouth, then closed it.

"I thought . . . an hour or two. We could play chess. Or just chat."

Severus still didn't think that he would ever want to "chat" with anyone. It sounded so . . . inane. But it was an important social skill.

Severus twitched one shoulder. "Meet me at my quarters in thirty minutes."

"Excellent, my boy!"

Severus had already turned and was striding down the corridor toward Slytherin. If someone was going to invite themselves to his suite and he acquiesced, he saw no reason to issue a friendly invitation himself.

Thirty minutes later, Severus opened his door. Albus was punctual.

Albus stepped into Severus's sitting room. "I brought us a treat, my boy, something I believe you will enjoy."

Oh, lord, some disgustingly sweet and gooey dessert, no doubt, or some peculiar new Muggle game he had discovered. The last one had involved pulling sticks from a carefully constructed tower and being the last one to successfully remove one of the sticks and place it on top of the tower. Severus hadn't seen the point in playing the game, but had humoured Albus and played it with him, Minerva, and Gareth the previous weekend. Albus had said it was a cooperative game, of course, and that there were no winners or losers, but it was clear to Severus that that couldn't be true. After winning three times in a row, Severus had pleaded fatigue and excused himself. He thought the others were growing bored with being beaten, anyway.

"Please, have a seat," Severus said, somewhat stiffly, but attempting to be polite.

"Thank you, thank you." Albus sat down on the couch, removed a hip flask from his pocket and placed it on the coffee table. "I didn't bring glasses with me, though I could conjure a couple."

"I have glasses." Severus walked over to a cupboard, then he looked back over at the silver flask. "What is it? I only have short tumblers, tall glasses, and wineglasses."

"Oh, a pair of wineglasses would be fine," Albus said brightly.

Severus carried two small cut-glass wineglasses over and set them down in front of Albus, then he sat down in his favourite armchair.

Albus removed the top from the flask with a few twists. "This is something very special, my boy. I'd been saving it, and this is the last of what is left, apart from some that I saved for Minerva's birthday on Sunday." He began to pour a beautiful deep golden liquid into one of the glasses. "I thought that before it was gone, it would be nice to share with you. I believe it is something you will appreciate."

"What is it?" Severus asked again.

"Centaur-made mead," Albus replied. "Rather rare to come by. I've had this for several decades, kept in a Charmed jug, meting it out on special occasions. That spring when we implemented Minerva's plan, I realised that I had been waiting too many years for the appropriate occasion to finish it, and that it might have been too late. After we defeated Riddle, I considered opening it, but there were too many sadnesses mixed with the joy of victory. Now, though, I thought tonight might be right to share it with you, and then to finish it this Sunday with Minerva."

Severus picked up his glass and held it beneath his nose, breathing in the aroma slowly. "Wonderful," he murmured. He inhaled once more, his eyes closed, then opened them and looked over his glass at Albus. "And what is the occasion tonight?"

Albus smiled slightly. "Your health." Albus's eyes moved to Severus's watch chain. "Our friendship. New lives for us both."

Severus nodded and took a small sip of the mead, letting it roll over his tongue, the aroma passing over his palate and rising into his nose. It was slightly sweet at the start, but complex, faint floral essences giving way to spice, and finishing dry as he swallowed. He knew next to nothing about wines and other alcoholic beverages, never being much of a drinker, but his nose and palate were well refined from his work with potions. And this was exquisite. It had to be the best thing he had tasted in his life.

He let out a long breath and raised an amazed gaze to Albus's face. "This is . . . a privilege to drink." That sounded weak to him. "It is remarkable. Thank you for sharing it with me." Then remembering his manners, he raised his glass. "To your health, Albus."

"Slàinte mhor!" Albus replied with a smile. He took a sip of his mead. "I am pleased to share it with you. It is the first time since before you began school that I have found reason to open the jug."

"Thank you, Albus." He quirked a grin. "I was afraid you'd brought one of those desserts with you that you like so much."

Albus laughed. "I realise that you are not partial to sweets. I enjoy sharing things which I like, but I do also enjoy seeing others enjoy them."

They sipped in silence for a while. Severus thought the old wizard looked tired and . . . sad, though he could hardly imagine the reason for it. He shifted in his chair.

"Are you well, Albus?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, I'm fine, just fine."

"Good." Severus took another sip of his mead.

"There is a favour I'd like to ask of you, though," Albus said.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing too difficult, I should say," Albus continued. "But it is Minerva's birthday on Sunday as you know, and she has agreed to go out to dinner with me, but I would like to take her away for the weekend, leave tomorrow morning. I've made the arrangements. Everything's set . . . Normally, I would simply whisk her off, you know, make it a surprise, but, well, she's the Headmistress now. It's more difficult. I knew she would be displeased if I didn't tell her in advance, at least that we would be going away for the weekend. But now she says she can't leave the school for that long, not so early in the year, not after everything that happened last year. I was hoping . . . perhaps you could help me to persuade her to change her mind? Reassure her that she is leaving Hogwarts in good hands?"

Severus sat up straighter. "Does she not trust me for one weekend?" He snorted. "Unless she has some better reason for not wishing to spend the weekend with you away from Hogwarts," he said firmly, "she will be leaving with you in the morning."

"Thank you, Severus. I think she's just trying to be responsible."

"Hmmpf. I will speak to her immediately, then." Severus set down his glass and began to stand.

"It can wait a little while," Albus said. "We can finish our mead first. Besides, she and Quin are reminiscing right now, and I don't want to interrupt them."

"That why you're here?" Severus asked, relaxing back into his chair. He had seen Quin at dinner that evening, seated beside Albus and charming everyone on that side of the staff table. "Avoiding the reminiscences?"

"No. I planned on sharing the mead with you, in any case, and I thought I would enlist your help with Minerva, so I thought this would be a good opportunity bring the mead down and spend some time with you," Albus replied. "Quin did try to tell her that she should go away for the weekend, but she wouldn't listen to him, either. I thought that as her Deputy, you might have the best shot at persuading her. I also admit that looking at the Muggle snapshots does become tiring after a while, though. The early days of the Golden Cup Parks and Resorts they're onto now. He brought along old photographs he'd found of the early years, mostly from the early seventies, and he and Minerva are having a grand time looking through them."

"You do not wish to see these pictures?"

"I've seen many of them before. Besides, they're their memories, most of them. Other than the earliest photos, I'm not in any of them...not that that would be a requirement for me to enjoy seeing them! But they're good friends and I know they will have a good evening, and I wanted to spend some time with you. I thought . . . I just thought it would be nice."

"Why aren't you in any of them?" Severus asked, puzzled. He thought that Albus and Minerva did almost everything together; they weren't attached at the hip or anything, but still, it seemed odd.

"After Quin was cursed, I wasn't able to see him. I tried. But after his reaction the first time, we decided it was best if I didn't. I did write him letters, though, once he was comfortable enough to be able to receive those."

"Ah, I see. If he's at all sensitive to magical signatures, even wearing Muggle clothing wouldn't hide it from him that you're a wizard."

"Yes, he is sensitive to that. He also had only known me within a magical context. He apparently couldn't dissociate me from the idea of magic. He seemed to do better with Minerva, though, so I encouraged her to try to . . . to acclimatise him to her presence. Eventually, she was able to see him with no difficulty. She helped him to get back to work, too. It took a while, but once he was able to function fairly normally in the Muggle world, she thought it best for him to stay busy in those businesses that weren't connected with wizardry. They did have to avoid booking any magic acts at the resorts, though. Even Muggle 'magic' would cause him to have a turn."

"I am sorry to hear that, but glad that he is now . . . functioning normally within the wizarding world again."

"Yes, he, too, has a new life," Albus said with a nod.

"You do not say that with your usual enthusiasm," Severus observed.

"I am very happy for him." Albus smiled. "He and Alroy are working well together on Alroy's wizarding ventures, he has found a new place in London that he's refurbishing, and he's reacquainting himself with all his old friends. He has many plans and is settling in well, I believe."

Severus picked up his glass and looked at its sparkling golden contents. "And you, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I should ask you that, Severus. You have looked well these last few weeks, seemed to be working well with the new staff. Slytherin House is also settling in nicely, I think."

"Mmm. Things have settled down. We had a few . . . issues to deal with. But we are trying to get over any internal House problems so that we can focus on the start of the Quidditch season. Now if we could find a House ghost before Halloween, I would be . . . not unhappy."

"I thought you were interviewing some of the ghosts that gravitate to the dungeons."

"I have attempted that. Some of them are incoherent. They are . . . stuck in loops. Others are more coherent, but are not sufficiently Slytherin. Utter buffoons, some of them. In fact, most of them were not members of Slytherin House when they were alive. I do not know why they like to float about the dungeons." Severus sighed. "I do not believe they are attached to the House, only to these levels of the castle."

"Perhaps you should just let one of them . . . rise to the occasion. See who naturally gravitates to the position. It may take a while, but that's how the original ghosts became attached to the Houses. And it was gradual. I don't believe that Hufflepuff and Gryffindor had House ghosts until long after Ravenclaw and Slytherin did. Decades."

"I do not wish to wait decades," Severus replied. "Besides . . . I am still concerned about . . . new ghosts. Ones I don't think anyone here would wish to see...ones I certainly do not wish to see...and I do not want one of them becoming Slytherin's House ghost."

"I know what you fear most," Albus said softly, setting down his half-empty glass, "but truly, Severus, I do not believe that there was sufficient . . . soul remaining in Tom for him to manifest as a ghost."

Severus nodded, looking away. "His presence I . . . I fear that the most, but there are others, so many others, whom I do not wish to see, and who would be terrible images of Slytherin."

"We did a cleansing of the grounds after the battle, you know. Aine, her aunt, Alroy, and I. There should be no lingering spirits from the battle, at least not here at Hogwarts."

Severus was silent for a moment, staring glazedly into his glass. "Even if that was effective . . . there were some who died in the castle. In the infirmary. Or elsewhere."

"Oh, dear boy, I wish you had confided in me earlier!" Albus said. "You are worried that Professor Sinistra will suddenly appear and ask to be the House ghost."

Severus shrugged.

"First, Aurora Sinistra may have died suddenly, but she died doing what was important to her. She was taking care of her students to the last," Albus said. "She left others to carry on after her...Snape's Slytherins, Severus. She may have had a violent and unpleasant death, but I do not believe that she would either have chosen to become a ghost or had that state thrust upon her. I believe that she passed on. If she lingered, it would have been briefly, to make certain that her children were well-taken care of. But if she were a ghost, I do not believe that she would manifest to you or to the students if she believed it would upset you. I do think, though, that if she were aware of your sense of guilt over her death and she *had* become a ghost, she would appear long enough to . . . to let you know that she is all right, that she had chosen her role and that you do not bear any guilt for her fate."

"Perhaps," Severus said. "I do not like or understand ghosts. I wish I were not saddled with finding a new one for the House. But some take it as a matter of . . . House pride that we should have a ghost. Even if I wanted to wait decades for a ghost to find our House, I know most Slytherins want one much sooner."

"Perhaps I could help you." At Severus's expression, Albus said, "Or Olivia Ouellette. She is a Slytherin. You could ask her. If you phrased it correctly, she might feel it was an honour for her but one which not reflect badly on you, either."

"Ouellette. I will consider that. Thank you, Albus. Speaking of Professor Sinistra, is her portrait still due to be ready at the beginning of November?"

"Yes. Renwick is making excellent progress. I thought we could all meet and discuss the dedication...if, of course, I am included in the meeting. It may just be the Heads of House and Minerva."

"You had a hand in commissioning the portrait, Albus, why would you not be included in planning its dedication?"

"Oh . . . the semester is underway, my position as the Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor hardly would make me a natural candidate to participate in the meeting."

"It's not that kind of business," Severus said with a frown. "And this is not the first time you have said something like that. Are you regretting your decision to return this year and teach? I know that I had my doubts about returning myself, but I think that in the long run, it was a good decision, at least for this year."

"No, not exactly. I can't imagine what I would be doing if *were*n't teaching. I think, if I may confess it, Severus, that I would feel even more superfluous than I do now." Albus blushed. "Not a particularly proud admission."

"Superfluous? Albus Dumbledore, superfluous? I can scarcely credit that!" Severus said. "You are very important to the school, that much is self-evident, but it's also obvious that you are very important to a good many individuals, as well. You are hardly a disliked Potions master with a dubious reputation and even more suspicious history."

"Oh, well, perhaps not . . . *superfluous*. But . . . I had thought it would be different." Albus seemed reluctant to say more.

"Different how?" Severus prodded.

"I thought it would be more like it was last year, I suppose, but without the Polyjuice and the war."

Severus smirked. "You could remedy half of the equation, I suppose. Go back to using the Polyjuice. You could choose someone different this time, though. Or several someones different. Minerva could have you try a different wizard every day, then choose one of them for you. Of course, knowing Minerva, she would probably prefer the wizard sitting here now." Severus shook his head and took a sip of mead. "Do you know how many wizards would practically sell their souls to have what you have now, Albus?"

"I know . . . I haven't any right to feel this way." Albus sighed.

"That is just as idiotic," Severus replied. "You feel the way you feel. What's missing? Something must be missing. Something other than war and pain."

"No . . . and I'm fine. Just fine."

Severus rolled his eyes. "You are *not* fine. You didn't come down here just to share the mead and talk about the Slytherin House ghosts. What's wrong, Albus? Speaking as an unhappy wizard with experience, I can say that you do not want to become unhappy. Especially when you do have reason to be happy."

"It's not a pleasant thing to admit . . ."

"Given the things that I have had to admit to you, I think you can manage," Severus said drily.

"I feel as though I'm not useful." He blushed. "Unimportant, I suppose. I am used to making decisions. Of having people listen to me. Being at the centre of everything." He played with his wine glass. "I always tried not to become . . . egocentric." His blush grew. "I was very egocentric as a boy. I guess that no matter how hard you work at a trait like that, you don't escape it."

Severus sipped his mead and looked at Albus for a few moments. "You know, Albus, the reason you are in the position you are in now is that you are a very generous, compassionate person. If you like being in the thick of things, if you like making decisions, if you enjoy having people look to you for inspiration, that doesn't necessarily mean you're egocentric, at least not in the bad sense you are implying. Besides, if you were truly as egocentric as you seem to believe you are, you have enough practice being in the limelight to be able to steal it if you wanted to. And if you were that self-centred, I also think you would have ranted about your displeasure a long time ago. You wouldn't be sitting here on my couch telling me that you're having a hard time with your new role."

Albus shrugged and smiled embarrassedly. "Still . . . I should be grateful."

"Are you not grateful?" Severus asked with a lifted eyebrow. "I doubt that. You probably are grateful. I think that your difficulty is exactly what you said: you are having a hard time adjusting to your new role. The lack of excitement is probably part of it. You obviously don't want another Dark Lord to come along just so that you have some excitement, but you aren't used to a quiet life. You also aren't used to being on the sidelines, not in charge. It's new to you. You need to get used to it." That advice sounded as useful coming out of his mouth as it did when other people said the same thing to him.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Why don't you start working with the Wizengamot again?" Severus asked.

"Ah, well . . . even if I could adjust my teaching schedule to be able to participate in some of the cases, um, I was . . . well, once we had finished revising some of the sentencing laws, I retired from the Wizengamot. It was time to let others take that on."

Albus seemed more subdued than he had. Severus felt as though he was not a good person to try to cheer someone up. He just made them more depressed.

"Well, what about something else at the Ministry?" Severus asked.

"Oh, I'll always be an unofficial adviser when they need me, of course. And to the Wizengamot, as well, but . . . one reason I retired is that it is time for me to step aside and allow others to shape the wizarding world. My influence . . . you have to admit, Severus, that these last decades have not been a shining example of how the wizarding world could be, falling far short of any ideal."

"You didn't create it alone, Dumbledore," Severus said. "You did your best. There were many competing interests. If you hadn't participated, it could have been much worse. Besides, there are different opinions about what the ideal wizarding world should look like. Tom Riddle had a very clear vision of his ideal world, and he tried to force it upon us all. You didn't try to force your vision on anyone, probably because your ideal of the wizarding world precluded the possibility of forcing it on us."

"Perhaps."

"Why didn't you become Head of Gryffindor again? That would have provided more responsibility. You would have been busier."

"I told Minerva not to consider me. I don't know whether she would have, anyway. I also don't know if I would have wanted to do it. That was a different part of my life, and even then . . . I was Deputy Headmaster, but with Dippet's health as it was, I was essentially Acting Headmaster most of the time that I was here. But I also thought, I truly *believed*, that I would enjoy this more than I am."

"It's only the beginning of October, Albus. Give yourself time to find a rhythm. And you must have other things that you have wanted to do. You used to complain that you didn't have any time to do the research that interested you. You could do that. There's alchemy, for example. Or Potions. You haven't done any serious work in Potions for a long time, but you made some excellent contributions when you did."

Albus shrugged.

"Or you could . . . really, Albus, I don't know! You have so many interests! Indulge them!"

"I am finding time to read books I've been waiting years to read. That's enjoyable," Albus said.

"That's good, then." Reading books did not sound to Severus as though it would satisfy Albus's yearnings, though.

"I also don't like having a teaching schedule," Albus admitted. "I feel very constrained. I have a lot of free time, but it's not when I choose to have it."

"Welcome to most people's reality, friend," Severus said with a smirk. "Really, I am trying to help, but I just don't know what to suggest."

They sat quietly for a few minutes.

"If I quit, you could become Deputy Headmaster," Severus finally ventured.

Albus laughed. "Oh, now that is one thing I cannot imagine, Severus. No, I could not be Minerva's Deputy. We would drive each other mad."

"You worked well together before."

"She was a very different Deputy than I would be able to be, and she needs someone like you, my boy. And as for her as Headmistress . . . I am very proud of her, and I support her in all that she does, but her style is not mine, and I also find some of the ideas she's considering to be . . . the opposite of anything I would have done. But she may be right."

"What sorts of ideas?"

"You should speak to her about them. She just bounces them off of me. I don't think she's ready to share them with anyone else yet."

"Do you wish that you were Headmaster again? Would that fix things?"

"Even if it were possible, no." Albus shook his head. "Aside from the fact that Minerva is now relishing her role and it would be most unfair to deprive her of it, even if that were not a consideration, I know that . . . well, I'll put it this way, Severus: Hogwarts has had a father for many, many years, and perhaps it is time for her to have a mother. Minerva is what Hogwarts needs right now."

Severus nodded. "I see that. But I still think you need to find more to do with yourself, ways to fill your time that would be meaningful for you."

"You are right, my boy. I shall begin to think about that." Albus sighed slightly and took a sip of the mead. "I always believed I would die as Headmaster. It seemed inconceivable that I would not. And Minerva is so much younger than I, that even if I wanted to go off to a cottage and plant vegetables and flowers, bake little treats, and potter about in my laboratory and such, I can't." He chuckled. "The very few visions of retirement I ever had consisted just of that. It seemed fitting, a graceful and natural way to spend my later years. But Minerva couldn't retire now. She'll likely want to be working long after I die. Our age difference has created minor difficulties over the years, but in the last decade or two, they seemed to have disappeared, other than that I knew I would predecease her by a good many years. And now here is one difficulty that I hadn't really considered: Minerva at the height of her career at a time when I'd prefer to be cultivating orchids and playing with potions out in my shed at the cottage."

"If you dislike teaching, you could still retire at the end of the year."

"Oh, I don't *dislike* teaching, and I feel I've made some positive changes to the Defence curriculum. I also believe that I'm able to contribute significantly to the children's education. But it's not anything like what I thought I would be doing now...if I weren't pushing up daisies, which is what I actually expected." Albus took the final sip of mead from his glass, closing his eyes and savouring it. He opened his eyes and yawned, covering his mouth. "Besides, it would be worse to be here in the castle, sharing quarters with Minerva, seeing everyone else at work, and having nothing to do myself."

"Hmmm . . . a pity, that. If she worked at the Ministry or somewhere, you two could live in that little cottage and you could have dinner ready for her when she came home. You could find all kinds of things to do during the day whilst she was at work, I'm sure. Even do some consulting, pop around the country . . ."

"No point in thinking about that, though," Albus replied. "After all that Minerva has done over the years...and I know that she has made many personal sacrifices, for me and for the school...it wouldn't be fair to ask her to quit just so that I can indulge in a little daydream, a dream that I might not even like if it were reality!"

Severus thought a moment. "Albus, you know, you *are* important to people. You may not be the big cheese any longer, at least not formally, but people do look up to you and rely on you. And many of us are very fond of you." Severus shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "That mead must be quite powerful. To get to the point, I believe you simply need to shift your focus. It's advice I'm not good at taking, myself, but I do try. Look around and see the ways in which you are . . . useful, important, influential, what-have-you. And try to make new opportunities. Be inventive. There must be something new that you haven't done that you have always wanted to do...other than grow daffodils and bake biscuits."

"You're right, of course, my boy," Albus said.

"And I really think that you should talk to Minerva about how you feel," Severus said.

"Perhaps. But after her birthday. I suppose that was one thing that really brought it all home to me, that she's the Headmistress now and things are different. Her unwillingness to leave the school for the weekend."

"I think that if she had any idea how important this is to you, she would not have hesitated...or she would have tried to find a compromise other than just going out to dinner with you."

"I don't want her to feel badly, though. She is doing what she is meant to be doing now, and she takes it very seriously, as well she should. I just wish she wanted to spend the weekend with me as much as I want to spend it with her."

Severus thought a moment. "If your roles were reversed, would you have left for the weekend? You don't need to answer me. Just think about it. If there had been a madman wreaking havoc on the wizarding world for years and on Hogwarts just the previous year, and you were in only your second year as Headmaster, the first one postwar, and Minerva were teaching, and she wanted to bring you out for the entire weekend so early in the year, would *you* have jumped at her suggestion?"

Albus opened his mouth, but Severus shook his head and held up his hand. "Just think about it," Severus said. "I think you're personalising this too much, Albus. I don't think that Minerva has one iota less desire than you do to spend the weekend together. She simply has responsibilities. Responsibilities which she can place upon me. She simply needs to be made comfortable enough to do what she wants to do, and I'm certain she would prefer to spend the weekend alone with you than here at the school." Severus pushed up on the arms of his chair. "In fact, I think it's time that I go tell her that she's relieved of duty for the weekend, for health reasons." He quirked a grin, his eyes suddenly lively. "Yes, that's an idea!" He gave a short laugh. "Albus, we are stopping in the Hospital Wing on the way up. You shall have two co-conspirators helping you get that weekend away!" Severus reached down and took Albus's arm, helping him to stand. "This will be fun, old man," he said affectionately.

"Thank you, Severus." Albus put his arms around the younger wizard and hugged him, Severus patting his back awkwardly.

Fortunately, the moment didn't last too long, and Severus led Albus out of his rooms to head up to the infirmary. As he closed his door behind him, Severus said, "Good thing that centaur mead is exceedingly rare and you're almost out of it, Albus. I wouldn't want to make a habit of this sentimentality." He turned and grinned at Albus. "We will have some fun, though!"

Albus laughed and the two headed up to the Hospital Wing.

Quin laughed, gasping, tears in his eyes. "Seems you've been ambushed, Minerva," he said, looking up at the indignant witch standing in front of him.

"So, pack your bags, Minerva," Poppy said briskly, pocketing her wand. "I do not expect to see you again until Monday morning! Severus, I presume that you are prepared to be Acting Headmaster for the weekend?"

"There is no question about it," Severus said calmly. "You are relieved of your duties, Headmistress. You may pass the care of the wards to me immediately." He suppressed a smirk. "I do not wish to have to involve the Board of Governors."

Minerva finally laughed and flopped back into her chair, hands raised in the air. "All right, all right! You've all won! I give up!" She shook her head, still laughing. "You just won't let me resist temptation, will you? I don't know as you're all the best influence on me, but I shan't complain at the moment."

"Very good thing, too," Severus said sternly. "You are not to resist any of Dumbledore's temptations this weekend, Headmistress."

Poppy laughed at that. "Severus is right, Minerva. You and Albus go have a good time. Be as hedonistic as you like." She winked at Albus. "You don't need to share all of the details with me when you return, but you will need to report back the broad outlines so that I am certain that Albus has rendered you fit for your duties!"

Severus nodded. "I will not hand the reins over unless I am assured by Madam Pomfrey that you are in proper form to resume."

"I'll leave it all up to Albus," Minerva replied. She looked up at her beloved, who was twinkling down at her. "I place myself entirely in your hands."

"I look forward to that immensely," Albus said with a bright smile.

"So do I," Minerva said with a matching smile. "So do I!"

NEXT

Chapter Eighteen: A New Man

Saturday, 17 October 1998

Severus meets with Draco Malfoy about Draco's decision. Later, he and Minerva discuss their plans for the Halloween party. Will Severus get into the spirit of the occasion?

Characters: Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Eighteen: A New Man

Chapter 19 of 118

Saturday, 17 October 1998.

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Chapter Eighteen: A New Man

Saturday, 17 October 1998

Severus returned, feeling hot, dirty, and tired, from his visit to Albus's new playroom, as Minerva called it. When finished, it was to be part laboratory, part library, part study. He had been helping Albus configure the room and begin to move his furniture and books in. Severus felt more like a house-elf than a Potions master by the end of the

afternoon. Still, it had been satisfying to see the large room take shape, and to see Albus's enthusiasm mount.

Minerva had given Albus the disused chamber at the very base of the Headmistress's Tower as a private workroom. When they had been away for Minerva's birthday a couple weeks before, Albus had apparently spoken to her at least a little about his sense of loss, and she had offered him the use of a room within the castle as a laboratory, much like the one he apparently had out on their island.

Severus was not entirely sanguine about the prospect of Albus performing experiments in a room at the base of the Headmistress's Tower, but Minerva wasn't bothered by it. There had been no entrance to the room, all of the chambers between the ground floor and the upper levels having been abandoned and closed off many decades before, so he and Albus had created a door out to the side of the castle, where Albus planned on planting a small walled-in garden in the spring. Albus had spoken of vegetables and flowers when he'd discussed his malaise with Severus, but when planning the garden, it seemed he was actually more interested in herbs, with perhaps a few flowers along the borders. Severus was glad that he would not be enlisted into the gardening project. At least he hoped he wouldn't be.

In addition to the exterior exit, Albus had broken through the ceiling of the large chamber, and he planned to have a staircase that would lead all the way up to the second floor, where his Defence classroom and office were. A cold draft had come from the hole, and Severus wondered in what condition they would find the levels between the ground floor and the level containing the Hogwarts Heart. That would be a project for another day, however.

Now Severus wanted to clean up and put on a fresh teaching robe before he met with Draco Malfoy, who had requested an appointment with him after Potions the day before. Draco hadn't said why he wanted the appointment, but Severus presumed it had to do with their discussion early the previous month. As Narcissa and Lucius had requested, Severus had addressed Draco's estrangement with his father and his desire to change his name. Draco had declined to discuss his father at all, except to say that his mother was a noble witch to remain married to her husband despite their circumstances. He did tell his Head of House that he still had made no decision about his name, but that he preferred to do it sooner rather than later. It seemed likely that Draco had now come to a decision.

At half past four, freshly shaved and in a complete change of clothes...the ones he'd been wearing when he was helping Albus smelled peculiarly dank...Severus sat at his desk. There was a knock on the door, and he flicked his wand, opening it. The tall, slightly stooped, blond young wizard darted a glance to either side, then he took two quick steps and entered the office, immediately closing the door behind him.

Draco's appearance was no different than it had been in previous weeks. His student robe draped perfectly on him, and all the clasps were done up the front from waist to chest. Beneath his black student robe, Draco wore a plain dove-grey robe of fine material. His shoes were well-polished, as were their silver buckles. His single adornment was the small Slytherin emblem on the left breast of his student robe.

"Professor Snape." Draco bobbed his head once. "Thank you for seeing me on a Saturday, sir."

Severus gestured to the chair in front of his desk. Draco nodded again and sat.

"Sit up straight," Severus directed, and Draco shifted in his chair, sliding his butt back further on the seat, but hardly seeming any straighter.

"I need permission to leave the Hogwarts grounds next week," Draco began. "You see, I have come to a decision regarding the issue that we discussed before."

"Regarding your name."

"Yes, sir." Draco sat up slightly straighter and pushed his blond hair back from his forehead. "I have decided that I will change my last name. I have been in correspondence with a solicitor in London. She has agreed to meet me next week. She has appointments available on Wednesday morning and Thursday afternoon. Thursday afternoon would suit my class schedule better, sir. If I may have permission to leave."

"Who is the solicitor?"

"A Ms Candace Terwilliger-Jones. She has a positive reputation. She seems to know what she is doing. She employs Squibs. They do work for her with the Muggles."

"I have no objection to your meeting with the solicitor on Thursday. I will speak with the Headmistress, but I believe that you can begin making your plans to travel to London."

"Thank you, sir." Draco seemed to relax.

"What have you decided upon?" Severus anticipated that the boy would say he was taking his mother's surname, Black.

"Out of respect for my mother's wishes, I will retain 'Malfoy' as a middle name. I do not plan to use it, however. After the change has been approved, which Ms Terwilliger-Jones says should take two to four weeks from the time I sign the papers, I will be known as Draco Newman." He blinked and straightened, then he smiled. "Draco Newman, sir."

"It is a fine choice," Severus said with an approving nod. "I hope you do not have unrealistic expectations of what a name change might accomplish for you, however. People have very long memories."

"People can think what they like. I am doing it for myself. Before she sent Mother and me to Sweden, the Headmistress told me I had a chance to make something of myself, to make my own future. I don't think I could . . . I think it would be more difficult for me as Malfoy." He said the name "Malfoy" as if it left a bad taste in his mouth.

"And your father?"

"Lucius Malfoy made his choices," Draco said coldly. "He made choices that affected Mother and me both. And his choices were bad ones. For more reasons than he will ever admit, I believe. I will not be bound by being a Malfoy."

"It once gave you pride..."

"Would *you* want to be a Malfoy now, Professor Snape?" Draco shook his head, not expecting an answer. "I had a long time to think when Mother and I were in Sweden. To think, to read, to do things to take care of myself for once...and to take care of Mother. I want a fresh start, a new beginning. I want to be a new man. A new kind of pureblood wizard."

"You know that there are a great many 'pureblood' witches and wizards who never identify themselves as such, Draco. They think of themselves simply as witches and wizards. I think that if you wish to become a new man, you might consider doing that, yourself."

Draco's eyebrows came together as he thought about that. "Yes, all right. I will do that."

"I see that you continue to spend time with Miss Sefton. She sits beside you most meals."

Draco nodded. "Suzie's just a kid, only turned eleven on the day she took the Hogwarts Express. She's a little homesick." Draco shrugged. "And she's a Muggle-born in Slytherin. She doesn't always understand what's going on. People take advantage of that...or they try to. I've clued her in, though. Yeah, she'll be okay."

"I was pleased. You have done well, looking after her. I was considering discussing with Minerva reinstating you as a prefect..."

"No, sir, I'd rather not." The pale boy's cheeks went pink. "I don't think people listen to me the way they used to."

Severus narrowed his eyes as he considered the slim young man sitting before him. The boy had changed over the previous year and a half. "Yes, we will make you a

prefect. It is unusual, but this year is an unusual one. You and Miss Lovegood returning for your sixth and seventh years, for example. Then there are the first-years who entered at age twelve."

"Professor..."

"You will need to learn new ways of persuading people to listen to you, Malfoy," Severus said. "If you think you're up to it."

"Newman, please, sir." Draco thought a moment. "And I'm up to it. If you and the Headmistress wish."

Severus nodded. "I will speak with her and let you know."

"Professor, do you suppose, I know it won't be official for a while, but do you suppose you could let it be known that I'm Draco Newman now? Ms Terwilliger-Jones said that I can call myself whatever I want to as long as I'm not trying to do anything illegal by it."

Severus took in a deep breath. "I will inform the staff at the next meeting. That is not until Wednesday evening, so you will need to wait. And do not be surprised if people forget your new name, or even resist using it. Once you are legally Mr Newman, if you have trouble with any staff seeming to resist using the new name, as opposed to simply forgetting, do not speak directly to them. Tell me. But be aware that quite likely people *will* simply forget, particularly the teachers who taught you for six years before this. You may do as you wish with your peers. I suggest you simply ignore those who call you Malfoy."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"One other thing, Mr . . . Newman. Do not sign anything without having someone else who you trust look at it. If you have no one to bring with you to the appointment, bring the papers back here, and I will look at them. There are one or two others on the faculty who might read them for you, as well. Professor Dumbledore, for one. You don't want to discover there's some peculiar clause that you didn't recognise."

"Giving up my first-born son, or something?" Draco grinned. "Okay, I'll bring them back here. Ms Terwilliger-Jones suggested I might want to do that, anyway, that she'd explain it all to me, but that I might want to have someone else read the papers over, too. I trust her. She's all right, I think. She's married to a Muggle-born."

Severus snorted. "Simply not being a pureblood racist does not make a person honest or good, even if they employ Squibs and marry Muggle-borns."

"I got her name from Mr Greengrass. She's done some contracts for him."

"All right. I'll ask Professor Dumbledore what he knows of her. Or perhaps . . . Alroy MacAirt. As a businessman, he might have a better idea. I will look into her for you." He only remembered that there had been a Candace Terwilliger in Ravenclaw who had been in his year at Hogwarts. They'd taken classes together, but he could barely form a mental image of her. She didn't stand out one way or the other, except that she was studious. And what someone was like as a teenager was not always a predictor of how they might be as an adult or in their profession, so it scarcely mattered that he did not remember her well. He would inquire of MacAirt.

"Thank you, Professor. I will see you when I return on Thursday."

"Thursday is my evening off. I do expect to hear that you returned to school before curfew, however, and we can meet the next morning." Severus twitched a slight smile at him. "Come to my quarters at seven. You may breakfast with me."

"Sir? Thank you, sir. I'd like that."

"It will save time." Severus hesitated. "I am also proud of you, Draco."

"I will try not to disappoint you, Professor."

"Do not disappoint yourself, Newman. Now get along. Dinner begins shortly. And if you could see to it that Miss Sefton eats in moderation this evening and avoids the foods that don't agree with her?" It seemed that half the Hogwarts menu didn't agree with Suzie Sefton.

"I do try, Professor!" Draco said with a grin as he stood. "Do you know, she thinks you're the greatest. I don't know whether she'd rather *become* you or marry you, but she's got it bad."

Severus barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. "As you say, she will eventually feel less homesick and more comfortable here. I am sure she will outgrow it...or redirect it. Watch yourself, Mr Newman!"

Draco chuckled. "Good evening, Professor. See you at dinner."

Minerva listened quietly, then she nodded. "Of course he may leave on Thursday to see his solicitor. I remember Miss Terwilliger...Ms Terwilliger-Jones now...very bright, very intense. She was in your Transfiguration class, remember?"

"I remember her existence, but little more," Severus said.

"I'll mention this to Albus. I'm sure he would be happy to examine the papers, make sure that nothing clever has been inserted that might disadvantage Draco, disavowing any Malfoy inheritance, for example."

Severus snorted a laugh. "He'd probably put that in of his own choosing, I would imagine, given the way that he feels now."

"But he should not. The way he feels now may change. And he doesn't want to do anything irrevocable that he might regret later."

"Inheritance is rather a moot question at the moment, anyway, unless the Malfoy fortunes change significantly. Lucius told me that he was permitted by the Ministry to sign over to Draco what assets were remaining in certain accounts rather than have them taken by the Ministry for the victim restitution fund. That's likely why the Ministry took the manor at terms so advantageous to them. But at least they didn't visit the sins of the father upon the son, or whatever the expression is."

"Malfoy did try to protect Draco's interests, then," Minerva said.

"More probably he simply didn't want everything to go towards restitution, and he would rather keep it in the family, I'm sure."

"Was there anything else? If not..."

"Yes. I would like to have Malfoy...Newman...be reinstated as a prefect. I think it would be good for him, good for Slytherin, and good for Hogwarts."

"I don't know . . ." Minerva reflected. "I am inclined to agree with you on certain levels, but I am concerned about whether he would set the kind of example you need in Slytherin right now."

"He has taken Suzie Sefton under his wing, so to speak. A Muggle-born witch. He says he is trying to keep her, in her naivete, from being taken advantage of by other Slytherins, and I'm inclined to believe him. I think we should reward him for his efforts to change." His eyes narrowed. "Perhaps if I had been rewarded instead of being ignored when I did something I thought was right...or punished when others had done the same as I had done or worse...things might have been different for me."

"I did not say that we should ignore him or his efforts, Severus," Minerva said. "Yes, we will give him a prefect's badge. But it will be probationary. You can put that

however you think best, Severus. But if he tries to abuse his position and I hear about it, he will no longer have the badge." She sighed. "And it is unfortunate, but true, that he will need to be an exemplary prefect, one completely beyond reproach. There is no getting around the fact that he may call himself 'Draco Newman' now, but he was 'Draco Malfoy' for all of his young life before this. I do not want to be seen as condoning any pureblood bullying or even just ordinary bullying. He will need to be careful. What others might be able to get away with, he will not."

"I know this." He certainly knew that he himself would be under scrutiny for as long as he lived, people waiting to see whether he stepped out of line.

"Very well. I will inform Professors Flitwick, Sprout, and Carter and deal with any objections they might have. You may return the prefect's badge to him . . . next week. After you announce his name change at the staff meeting. We will tell the staff about him being a prefect at the same time."

"Good. I will inform him," Severus said, starting to rise.

"Wait, Severus, there's something I needed to discuss with you," Minerva said.

Severus leaned back in his chair.

"It's nothing . . . very significant, but . . . you know that I had an appointment at St. Mungo's yesterday."

Severus nodded.

"I'd made an appointment with Healer Baton. Poppy recommended I see a Healer because I have been having headaches on the side where I was injured in the spring, and that eye has been bothering me a little, too. It was purely precautionary, and I don't want you to worry, Severus," Minerva said, noting Severus's expression of consternation. "It's nothing at all, really, but I do need to take certain measures to alleviate the symptoms. Simple things, like taking more breaks when I work than I am used to taking, making sure that my work area is always well-lit, that kind of thing. It's nothing to worry about. But to err on the side of caution, I have agreed to return for follow-up appointments for a while, just to be sure that nothing more serious develops. So I wanted to forewarn you about that. I'll let you know before each appointment, of course, so you will know I'll be gone from the castle. Also . . . I'm not telling Albus. He doesn't know I've been having headaches and he doesn't know that I went to Mungo's. I don't want him to worry needlessly, since there is nothing wrong with me. So I would like to keep this just between us, you, me, and Poppy. Don't say anything to him."

"As you wish. And you may call on me for anything else that might help, you know."

"I know that, and I appreciate it."

"Won't Albus be curious about your trips?"

"Perhaps. If he notices. They'll be during the day when he's teaching."

"It might be better to mention it to him," Severus said.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "He already fusses over me enough. He'd probably set me a curfew if he began to imagine that I was ill." Minerva sighed. "I might tell him, but not just yet. There's really nothing he can do except fuss and worry, anyway."

"I think that if you wait, he will be displeased."

Minerva sighed again. "I will tell him sometime before my next appointment, then. Which, by the way, is the ninth of November. I hate to worry him needlessly. You remember how he was whilst I was recovering from that injury. I half-expected him to put me in a Charmed sedan chair and have me floated about everywhere...if he let me go anywhere at all."

"You *were* very ill. You very nearly died," Severus pointed out.

"I know, but I didn't. Albus can go overboard sometimes, and it's worse when he's bored. He always has to take things in hand, fix them. Sometimes there's nothing to be done, nothing to fix. And he felt responsible for my injury, as though he somehow could have prevented it. No, better to have him see that I am perfectly well and to understand that these are merely precautionary checks. I'll wait to tell him until just before my appointment. Speaking of Albus and boredom, thank you for helping him with his playroom today. I know that he had a good time, and it was more fun for him with you there."

"Of course. I told him I would help him as I am able as he finishes the room and the staircase. I am interested to see what the other levels of the Tower hold. Dumbledore says some of them haven't been opened in two hundred years. I wonder whether there was anything left behind in them when they were closed up."

"I am sure that he will appreciate the help."

"Has he given thought to the other side of things?"

"You mean, the fact that he doesn't feel in charge of anything any longer?"

Severus nodded.

"He is forming a Muggle-book club. You will get a notice for it, I am sure. Staff and upper level students both will be invited to participate. And you'll be hearing about this from him, but do not let him know that I told you first, he wants to create a bowling alley in the upper dungeon..."

"He wants to *what*?"

"He wants to create a bowling alley. He has some thought about creating bowling teams. It wouldn't be open all the time; only according to a schedule or for special occasions."

Severus let out a deep, heartfelt sigh. "I hope he puts sufficient noise-dampening charms on the damned thing if he does it. And keeps it in an area where people won't be traipsing about near Slytherin House."

"I am hoping his enthusiasm for the idea will wane, myself," Minerva said, "but I did not want to be a wet blanket. I am hoping that he will find something outside of the school with which to busy himself, perhaps with a charity or something of that sort."

"You would think that reading the dunderheads' essays would tire him out too much to want to take on very many other projects," Severus replied. "But I am glad he has found some outlets for his energy."

"He and Filius are having a good time with the prefects planning the Halloween party."

Severus's lips twitched a smile. "Has he told you what his costume will be? No? Well, I'll not spoil your surprise, then. He's very pleased with himself."

Minerva laughed. "Yes, but he is looking forward to making an entrance...and surprising me, as well. I'm surprised he told you."

"I think he was bursting to tell someone. He knows I can keep a secret," Severus replied with a short chuckle. "What are you coming as?"

"I have a few ideas . . . since the theme is famous Muggles, I thought perhaps either Amelia Earhart or Jeanne d'Arc. I am unsure about which era I feel more comfortable in."

"Your hair is almost the right length for either of them." After her injury, Minerva had left her hair shorter, coming to just above her shoulders. It waved quite becomingly about the nape of her neck, Severus thought. "You could always use a Glamour to shorten it a bit more and give yourself a fringe."

"I may change my mind, but I have to decide soon. What about you?"

"I don't know." Severus shrugged. "I've been busy fielding questions from my prefects about famous Muggles, and which ones might be acceptable...I have already nixed Genghis Khan, Lucretia Borgia, Stalin, and Hitler as inappropriate for a member of Slytherin House in this post-war era...but I haven't given it much thought, myself. Perhaps Thomas Becket."

"Not very cheerful," Minerva observed.

"Well, neither are yours: Earhart crashed her plane somewhere and was never found, and Joan of Arc was burned at the stake."

Minerva laughed. "I will try to think of someone else then. If I weren't worried about scandalising everyone, I would come as Mata Hari or Boudica."

"They're no more cheerful. Mata Hari was executed and Boudica, after any number of other indignities, committed suicide rather than be enslaved by the Romans."

"Perhaps I should go to the library and try to find a more cheerful character. Florence Nightingale?"

"No good. She witnessed terrible things in the Crimea."

"But she died in her old age in her sleep, I believe."

"It could become a bit wearing to carry a lamp about with you all evening, though," Severus pointed out.

"I'm sure she didn't carry a lamp all of the time," Minerva said. "I'm not certain about her anyway. She's more Poppy's sort. I'll think of something."

"Personally, if you want to go for someone with a dramatic life, I'd enjoy seeing you as Mata Hari, with bells on," Severus said with a smirk.

Minerva laughed loudly at that. "I don't know whether to take that as a challenge or a warning!"

"The boys' reactions could be quite fun to watch," Severus said. "Might be worth it."

"It might at that," Minerva said, chuckling. "But I could wear a long dress, not necessarily anything too revealing, just . . . suggestive and exotic. And not some short tunic as I would have to don for Jeanne d'Arc, or trousers for Amelia Earhart."

"Or what you'd need to wear as Boudica...she probably wore bearskins or something."

"I very much doubt it. She was hardly a cave woman. But I also doubt her clothing was particularly modest."

"Don't come as Boudica, Minerva. I'd only think of her gruesome fate," Severus said with a shudder.

"Very well. Mata Hari? What do you think of when you think of her?"

"I think glamour, cleverness, and feminine wiles," Severus said. He grinned. "Perfect for you, even if she was a spy."

"Calumny, sheer calumny! It'll be Mata Hari or the aviatrix, then," Minerva said with a nod and a sparkle in her eyes. It was good to see Severus enjoy himself, even if he was teasing her. "Now, what about you?"

"Thomas Becket still sounds like a good choice to me."

"You'd hardly look any different...all dressed in black, I always picture him."

"Why do you think the costume appeals?" Severus asked with a smirk. "Besides, I thought a black cassock, white chasuble, and a long black cape. I don't know how authentic it would be, but it would work. Put a big cross around my neck, and I'm Thomas Becket."

"Since Albus won't tell me who he's coming as so I can't pair up with him, perhaps we could choose a couple of characters who match. Like Antony and Cleopatra," Minerva suggested.

Severus barked a laugh. "I am sure that Albus would appreciate my coming as your paramour."

"Oh, he has a sense of humour. He wouldn't mind."

"They are both tragic figures, and didn't Cleopatra commit suicide, too? Besides, I don't want to wear a Roman tunic. I don't have the legs for it."

"Yes, well, I'm not coming as Henry the Eighth just so you can come as Thomas Becket and wear black," Minerva said.

"That was Henry the Second, I believe. You have your tyrannical Henrys confused. What about . . . Sir Walter Raleigh and Queen Elizabeth? I could wear a long cloak. Something in velvet," he said, seeming to like the idea of a long velvet cloak.

"Or John Brown and Queen Victoria...you could borrow a kilt from Gareth," Minerva suggested seriously. "You're about the same height."

"Knees, Minerva." His brow furrowed. "I'm sure we can think of something."

"Robin Hood and Maid Marian?"

"Knees again, Minerva. And I can't see either of us in those roles, anyway. You're no Maid Marian. Besides, they're fictional. I believe I prefer to dress as an actual famous Muggle if I must participate."

"Queen Isabella and Christopher Columbus?"

"I think we'd have the same knee problem."

Minerva laughed. "Everyone has knees, Severus. I never noticed anything remarkable about yours."

"And my legs are spindly."

"They are not."

"Hmn." Severus thought a moment. "We wouldn't have to be an actual pair . . ." he said slowly. "If you came as Amelia Earhart, I could come as Charles Lindbergh."

"Didn't he have disagreeable politics or something?" Minerva asked.

"Everyone has disagreeable politics, Minerva. That's the nature of politics."

"Still, that is a good idea. That or something similar."

"Well, it's getting late," Severus said. "You don't want to get another headache for lack of rest. I will see you in the morning. Let me know if you settle on a pair of characters for us, otherwise, it's Thomas Becket for me."

"You think about it, too, Severus! See if you can't find someone more exciting. Good night! I'm glad you're getting into the spirit of it!"

"Hmph. Good night, Headmistress." He nodded to her. "Sleep well."

NEXT

Chapter Nineteen: Of Scotch, Choices, and Ambiguity

Saturday, 24 October 1998

Severus gets a preview of Albus's costume for the Halloween fancy dress party, and the two wizards talk about past and present.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Wilspy

Chapter Nineteen: Of Scotch, Choices, and Ambiguity

Chapter 20 of 118

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Chapter Nineteen: Of Scotch, Choices, and Ambiguity

Saturday, 24 October 1998

Severus sighed and took a sip of his drink. It was Scotch, which he didn't drink normally...well, normally, he didn't drink...but Albus had offered him a choice of Scotch or crème de cassis. Needless to say, for Severus, it was no choice.

"Are you almost done there?" Severus asked as a patterned silk waistcoat flew across the room and was caught by Albus's outstretched hand. Albus's robes and a long white undergarment of some sort were cast over the inlaid wooden screen behind which he was changing clothes.

"I'm having a bit of trouble with the front panel of my breeches," Albus replied.

"Well, I'm not helping you with that." Severus took another sip of the whisky. He shrugged a shoulder and took a good-sized swallow. He needed it if he was going to help Albus with his costuming, he reasoned.

"No, no need! I've got it, I think!" There was more shuffling from behind the screen, then a gold-coloured frockcoat on its hanger lifted itself from the peg on the wall near Severus's chair and floated gracefully across the room and around one end of the four-part screen.

It seemed a long interval after that, but just as Severus was taking his last swallow of whisky and girding himself to help Albus with his buttons and laces, Albus stepped from behind the screen.

"Well, what do you think, my boy?" Albus asked, gesturing with a fancy silver-headed black walking stick and turning on his heel to demonstrate his costume from all angles.

Severus thought he needed another drink. Or perhaps he'd already had his limit.

Albus cut a fine figure, and he would certainly be hard to recognise for anyone used to his normal appearance...or perhaps not. Dressed in the clothes of a dandy of two centuries before, Albus still exuded the eccentricity that accompanied so many of his more florid robes. What was most disguising was the lack of any beard. Although Albus had trimmed his beard a month or so earlier, it still reached the middle of his chest, and although at the same time, he had trimmed his hair so that it only came to his shoulders, it was normally a luxuriant white mane. Not so for the wizard who stood before him: Albus now appeared completely clean-shaven with no sideburns, and Severus could not detect the Glamour, though he presumed a standard Revealing Charm would show that Albus was using one. His hair was also now significantly shorter, tied with a velvet ribbon in a short ponytail at the nape of his neck. He had charmed his hair to appear the auburn it once had been when he was a younger man, and then he had overlaid the new coif with white powder. At first, Severus thought that Albus's Glamour had included one to make him look generally younger, but then he saw that it was merely an effect of the other changes to his appearance: Albus still had his usual laugh lines, though the ones around his mouth were more apparent without the beard, and the few creases in his forehead were likewise untouched.

Once he got past the initial impression made by the Glamour, Severus inspected Albus's costume: tight-fitting dark red satin knee breeches above white stockings and black buckled shoes, a pale gold, patterned silk waistcoat coming just to his waist, a darker gold cut-away coat with a wide, high collar, and under it all, a bright white linen shirt with ruffles at the wrists and a wide ruffled stock at his neck. Severus waved his finger in a circle, and Albus turned in place. Yes, the costume was quite effective, and

Severus thought Albus carried it off quite well, the fit of the costume emphasising his still broad shoulders and narrow hips.

On his left hand, Albus wore his plain gold wedding band, which he now wore more often than not. Minerva wore hers occasionally, as well, and although Severus detected no pattern to when she chose to wear it, it did seem he had seen her with it more frequently on weekends. He noticed because she tended to play with it when she wore it. On his right ring finger, Albus now wore a large gold ring with a ruby stone. Gaudy, but appropriate for the costume, Severus supposed.

"Well?" Albus asked hopefully.

"I believe you need make no changes," Severus said. One corner of his mouth turned up. "You'll have them swooning, Dumbledore."

Letting out a sigh of relief, Albus smiled broadly and reached for his crème de cassis. "I hoped it would turn out well. I thought that for the party, I'd pin a little scarlet pimpernel flower to one of my lapels, just so people would have an easier time guessing who I am."

Severus laughed. "I doubt more than a handful of them have even heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel," he said. "Though I suppose that's the point behind the thing, you and Filius wanting them to get a dose of the Muggle world."

"It's fun, too," Albus said. He Transfigured his overstuffed armchair into a more elegant, delicate Queen Anne chair with curved wooden arms, then sat in it gracefully, crossing his legs. "And a little self-mockery can be quite amusing."

"Shouldn't you have a sword?" Severus asked.

"I considered that detail, and I decided on this instead." Albus stood and demonstrated, pulling a narrow sword from his black walking stick and flourishing it. He put it away and resumed his seat. "I doubt I will have occasion to pull it out, but if anyone asks, I have it!" He grinned. "What about you, my boy? Still going with Thomas à Becket?"

"No." Severus heaved a long suffering sigh. "McGonagall convinced me to go with something more . . . colourful," he said with distaste.

Albus laughed. "What did young Gareth persuade you to wear?"

"Humph. I'm coming as a British hero. A genuine historical figure, *not* a fictional one," he emphasised.

"Yes?" Albus prodded when Severus didn't elaborate.

"T.E. Lawrence," Severus said, "in his . . . Lawrence of Arabia phase." He sounded morose, as though he'd been sentenced to wear shackles and chains all evening.

"Oh, marvellous! You will have fun with that, Severus! And you can still . . . swirl and swish."

"I do not 'swirl and swish,'" Severus grumbled. "I billow. However, that did make it a more palatable selection."

"Have fun with it, Severus! Don't always feel you have to grouse about everything as a matter of form! You *are* allowed to enjoy yourself, you know!"

"Mm, I suppose." He looked down into his empty glass.

"Let me pour you another," Albus said, picking up the crystal decanter of whisky. "Ice again?"

Severus nodded. "One cube. Don't stir it."

"Wouldn't think of watering down your drink, Severus...not yet, anyway!" Albus took Severus's glass and waved his hand, ridding it of the remainders of the previous melting ice cube, then he dropped a fresh cube in and poured the Scotch over it.

Severus looked around himself as he took the drink. Some of the stone wall remained exposed in what was to be Albus's laboratory area, but the rest was panelled, and there were already a few bookcases of books along one side. He had also added two windows that looked out into the garden. "Your playroom is shaping up quite well. Wouldn't have thought that when we first broke through the wall and saw the mess the chamber was in."

"I am quite pleased," Albus admitted. "The loo went in a few days ago, so if you need to use the facilities, they're through the door there. No more need to go up two flights of stairs to find a lavatory."

Severus smirked. "You could always just step outside to your garden." A courtyard had been created outside the Tower, with eight-foot high stone walls and a wrought iron gate, but it would remain empty and barren until springtime, when it would be ready for Albus to plant his garden.

Albus laughed. "It would be just my luck to have someone passing by the gate and peeking in just as I'm relieving myself!" He laughed again, then grew serious. "Thank you again for your help, Severus. It has meant a lot to me, and not just the assistance, but spending the time with you."

Severus looked down and shrugged. "Good that I could help." He looked back up at Albus. "You know what you need? A pocket watch. Borrow yours back, just for the party."

Albus shook his head. "I can find one somewhere or Transfigure a facsimile. And I'm sure that Sir Lawrence wore a pocket watch, even under his Arabian robes!"

Severus nodded and sat back. It was strange, talking to Albus whilst he was in costume. Familiar and yet unfamiliar. At least he looked more-or-less like Albus, unlike when he was Robbie and Severus hadn't even known who he was. It had been the eyes, primarily, that had hidden Albus from him then. The rest of the Polyjuice disguise and Albus's behaviour as Robert Crouch had been practically flawless, but it had been the eyes that had kept Severus from seeing past the deception. It was not simply that every time he saw the wizard's grey eyes looking back at him that he had seen Gertrude Gamp in them, but that it was Albus's sharp blue eyes that had not looked out at him. The intelligence was still there, no doubt about that, and the real Robert Crouch was no mental slouch, but Albus's eyes . . . Severus was certain that if everything else about Albus were changed but his eyes, he would still recognise the wizard. Those eyes, which revealed and obscured so much . . . they could twinkle with humour, sparkle with delight, harden with resolve, cloud with sadness, even blaze with anger, but Albus was always there behind them, and when he Occluded, he was still there, gazing out at the world and taking it all in, reading you even as you were unable to read him.

Severus shook himself. "A watch might be a suitable accoutrement for my costume," he said. "Better than McGonagall's suggestions."

Albus reached somewhere within his costume and pulled out a pipe with a long, delicate curved stem. "D'you mind?" he asked, raising the pipe.

"It's your playroom," Severus said.

Albus began the ritual of filling and lighting his pipe. "I smoke rarely, but I found I did miss it last year. What ideas did Gareth have?"

"His wildest idea involved a camel...he thought perhaps we could Transfigure one of Aberforth's goats."

Albus laughed. "I doubt you could persuade my brother to allow you to do that."

"Yes, even McGonagall discarded that notion very quickly. Then he thought I should carry a rifle or a revolver. It might be historically accurate, but I did not wish to carry one, even a nonfunctioning replica. I have agreed to carry a knife in my belt, however. McGonagall's found an ugly one with a most garish hilt. He says it looks well with the costume, however."

"I am sure he's right, then," Albus said, puffing his pipe.

"He also suggested a whip." Severus made a moue of distaste. "Apparently the man was a masochist. Enjoyed being whipped bloody. Derived some kind of bizarre sexual satisfaction from it."

"People do develop strange tastes," Albus said. He had switched from crème de cassis to whisky, and his cheeks were taking on a pink glow. It could simply have been embarrassment with the topic of masochism, however.

"It is disgusting." Severus took a swallow of whisky.

"It's a fancy dress party, Severus, not a life choice!"

"If the students ask me about Lawrence, I am not going to tell them that he engaged in masochism," Severus said, frowning.

"No, that would be an unnecessary detail for a Halloween party. If their interest is piqued, they can find out such things on their own." Albus took a sip of Scotch. "Do you know what character Minerva has chosen?" he asked innocently.

"Yes." Severus smirked.

"I haven't seen her costume yet."

"No."

"You aren't going to tell me?"

Severus barked a short laugh. "If you would like me to tell Minerva what your costume is, I will tell you what hers is."

Albus chuckled. "No, no, that's all right."

"I will tell you one thing: her character is also from the first half of this century and was also a real person."

"Gertrude Bell?" Albus asked, reminded of her by Severus's T.E. Lawrence costume.

"No."

"Was she British?"

Severus shook his head. "You won't guess it. Let her surprise you."

"All right. That's fair enough," Albus said. He puffed on his pipe and the two sat in silence, nursing their drinks. "What do you know about Thomas à Becket?" Albus asked, suddenly changing the topic.

"Not much. Just the basics. He worked for the king, then the king decided he wanted his own man as Archbishop, so Becket was ordained a priest and made Archbishop. But the king hadn't counted on him now being loyal to the Church and not to him once he was Archbishop, and the king wasn't happy about that. So Becket ran away into exile, where he should have stayed, because after he returned to England, he was assassinated. Whereupon, suddenly everyone loved him. The pope, who wouldn't help him much whilst he was alive, decides he's a martyr and saint, and the king, so distressed by his drop in public opinion because of his rumoured involvement in the murder, did a barefoot pilgrimage or something, then he slept in the man's crypt overnight." Severus shuddered.

"Yes, more or less, that's it. . . . All of them in the story, ambiguous figures. Even the assassins," Albus said.

"The assassins, ambiguous?" Severus snorted and reached for the decanter. He raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Help yourself, my boy." Albus let out a sigh. "They believed they were serving their king. No doubt they hoped to be rewarded for their service, but nonetheless . . ."

"They murdered. Their rationale is unimportant. And they killed a man who was defenceless." Severus scowled and took a swallow of Scotch. "There is never a good murder. Believe me, I know. No justis justification for it."

"Mmm. Are you familiar with T.S. Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*?"

Severus shook his head and blinked, trying to clear his head. "I know of its existence."

Albus set his pipe down in a small pottery dish on the squat coffee table in front of them. He gazed blankly across the room toward the dark corner where his laboratory bench stood. "There is a line in that play . . . a line that seems . . . when I remember it, it seems to sum up so much of what I have done, and what I have done wrong . . ."

The silence lengthened until Severus, uncomfortable, asked, "What's the line?"

"I don't remember it exactly . . . but something like . . . the greatest temptation of all . . . is doing the right thing for the wrong reason." Albus sighed and picked up his glass, though he didn't drink from it.

"It's the right thing to do, and if you'd do it for the right reason anyway, what does it matter if you do it for the wrong reason?" Severus asked, unsure whether his question had been clear. His mind seemed rather cloudy at the moment. He looked at his glass of whisky and put it down. He didn't normally drink, this was his third glass, and two was already over his limit. He was still sober enough to recognise that.

As for Dumbledore's quotation, Severus knew very well he had done the right thing for the wrong reason when he'd turned away from the Dark Lord all those years ago, but he had done it. He also knew that he'd probably never have done it for the right reason. He was very glad for a wrong reason in his life...in that instance, anyway. "Why should it matter? Does it actually matter at all?"

"Maybe not to the rest of the world . . . although they will always question whether it was the right thing to do. But always, it should matter to you. To me, I mean. To whomever. To the person acting. It should matter to me."

"Things have turned out well, and I think you always considered others . . . the impact of what you did. You wanted to do the right thing," Severus said, "even when you didn't. And sometimes, any other choice would have been worse."

"Especially then, especially when other choices could have been worse, when all the choices seemed bad. Especially then, to know you did something for the right reason . . . that's important." He shook his head. "But maybe you just *want* to believe you've chosen for the right reason, because you know what the right reason is, but you've really chosen for your own reasons . . . to know the difference . . . how to know the difference? Or to choose the wrong thing, even when wanting to do the right thing, because you *think* you're doing it for the right reasons and that your own reasons must be leading you wrong. Believing that anything that coincides with your own desires must be wrong, so you reject that choice . . . and then end up doing the wrong thing as a result."

Severus shook his head. "You over-complicate it all. Don't think so fucking much, Dumbledore. At least not whilst drinking . . ." He looked over at the decanter. "At least not whilst drinking whisky."

Albus blinked and looked back over at Severus. He smiled slightly. "Of course, you're right. At least tonight. May I freshen your drink, Severus?" he asked, looking at Severus's glass with its half-melted ice cube.

"Are you trying to lubricate me sufficiently to ask me some favour which I shall be loathe to do in the morning in the clear light of day? Or are you trying to get me to tell you what Minerva's costume is?"

Albus chuckled. "No, no. Just trying to be a good host. What about some coffee?"

Severus nodded.

"Wilsby!"

Albus's aged house-elf popped into the room after only a short delay. She was wearing what appeared to be a lacy white valance over a deep red tablecloth. "Yes, Master Albus? You boys should not be staying up too late!" She looked at the two glasses of Scotch and the half-empty decanter and tutted, but smiled.

"We need coffee, my dear," Albus said.

"You do!" Wilsby agreed briskly. "I be back!" She flicked her finger, cleaning their glasses of the remainder of the whisky before she winked away.

Albus laughed.

"You do have an impertinent house-elf, Albus," Severus said. "But she is amusing. And she seems to take good care of you."

"She does. I am very fortunate to have her and Minerva to take care of me. And to bring me to my senses, occasionally."

"The latter must be a full-time job," Severus said with a short laugh.

"I think they both deserve some kind of hardship allowance!" Albus agreed, chuckling.

Wilsby returned with a tray floating in front of her. "Two cappuccinos. And I brought sugar for you, Master Albus. You take no sugar, Master Severus?" she asked, turning to Snape.

"Almost never," Severus confirmed.

"Don't let him stay up too late!" Wilsby said before she Disapparated with a small pop.

"Was she directing that at you or at me?" Severus asked, reaching for his coffee cup. It looked and smelled heavenly.

Albus put two teaspoons of sugar in his coffee and stirred it gently. "I don't think it really matters...probably both of us."

"I wish she would not call me 'master,'" Severus said irritably. "I am not her master. She is not my elf." It also reminded him too much of the Dark Lord.

Albus chuckled. "She does not mean 'master' in that sense, Severus! She calls you that because she thinks of you as a young boy...'master' as opposed to 'mister.'"

"Hmmp. I am not a boy, either." He felt only slightly assuaged by that bit of information.

"Neither am I." Albus sighed and put his spoon on the edge of the saucer. "Far too much living done since I was a boy. Too much."

Severus sipped his cappuccino. It was very good. He considered the wizard sitting across from him, Albus's wistfulness clear in his features, the Glamour seeming to reveal aspects of him that were normally masked.

"You know, every character I considered had some . . . distasteful aspect to his character, or to the manner of his death. Aside from the fact that, as you say, it is just a fancy dress party and not a life choice, Gareth persuaded me that the things that I found . . . unappealing about Lawrence were not as important as other things that he did in his life, whether for better or worse. And everyone's a hero or a villain, McGonagall said, depending on what you look at, and sometimes, they're both." Severus shrugged. "You may sometimes have questions about things you did that you might have done differently, or decisions that you might chosen in a different way, Albus, but the fact that you worry about it . . . I think that is part of what makes the difference." He placed his empty cup in his saucer, then looked up at Albus, again taking in the costume and the changes that the Glamour made and the features that the Glamour revealed.

Severus stood. "I should be going. And you should get to bed, or your house-elf might hunt me down tomorrow and scold me."

Albus smiled faintly and nodded. "Good night, my boy. Sleep well."

"And you." Severus stopped beside Albus's chair. He touched his forearm lightly. "You may find yourself . . . one of those ambiguous characters whom you spoke of earlier," he said softly, "but . . ." He swallowed. "But I know you did what you thought you had to do, and that you wanted to do the right thing. Even with me. Even if I'm still angry sometimes. And, if it makes any difference to you, Albus, I, um . . . it's all right. It's all right with me."

Severus strode to the door leading to the staircase and left as quickly as he could, closing the door firmly but gently behind him.

Albus blinked back a few tears. "Thank you, my boy," he whispered to the empty room.

Ten minutes later, a knock came on the stairway door. It could only be one person, since only she knew the password to the door at the top of the stairs.

"Um, wait, wait just a moment!" Albus called somewhat hoarsely. He felt for his wand and waved it, removing the Glamour and the hair powder, then he stood and Summoned his over-robe and put it on over his fancy dress. "Come! Come in, Minerva!"

She stepped in, a smile on her face. "I'm glad I knocked, if you were up to something!"

"Oh, no, just . . . trying on my costume. Want it to be a surprise, after all."

"Did you and Severus have a good evening?" she asked, looking down at the empty glasses and coffee cups.

Albus nodded. "Yes, yes, very."

Minerva gazed at him, then touched his cheek gently. "You're all right?"

"Fine."

"You look . . . distant. Distracted."

"We talked." Albus sighed. "It was good."

Minerva nodded. "I think you should come up to bed."

"Yes, my dear. Give me a few minutes to take care of my fancy dress. I will be up shortly, right behind you!"

"All right." Minerva kissed his cheek. "I will look forward to it." She turned to leave.

"Minerva?"

She looked back. "Yes?"

"Nothing . . . just, thank you. Thank you for coming down for me." He quirked a little smile. "Maybe we could have that warm snuggle tonight that we didn't have time for this morning?"

Minerva smiled. "You can count on it."

NEXT

Chapter Twenty: A Ghostly Halloween

Saturday, 31 October 1998

Severus attends the Hogwarts fancy dress party, which suffers a strange interruption.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Verity Septima Vector, others

Author's Note: *I hope you enjoy this chapter. I will be out-of-town next week (the second full week of October) and will not be online very much, if at all, so my review responses may be delayed a bit. Thanks very much for your reviews, though! I appreciate them. I do respond to reviews, so if you have a question, feel free to ask it in a review, and if I can answer it, I will!*

Chapter Twenty: A Ghostly Halloween

Chapter 21 of 118

Saturday, 31 October 1998. Severus attends the Hogwarts fancy dress party, which suffers a strange interruption.



Chapter Twenty: A Ghostly Halloween

Saturday, 31 October 1998

Severus was confident that Slytherin House would acquit itself well at the party. Although some of the Muggles chosen were more infamous than famous, including Brutus, Dick Turpin, and Billy the Kid, he could recognise no tyrannical megalomaniacs on the list that the prefects had provided him the previous day. Although there would be no award for overall best costume, there would be awards on a House-by-House basis, each House's costumes being judged by the other three Houses. Minerva thought that would make it fun for the students without engendering any inter-House rivalry, which she was trying to tone down that year. In fact, she was using the Halloween party to initiate a new plan of hers, in hopes that there might be more friendships made across Houses.

Minerva was instituting a new fortnightly mixed seating arrangement in the Great Hall at dinner time. The long House tables would be done away with for that night, substituting instead many round tables, each of which would seat eight students. At each place, there would be a token indicating Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, or Slytherin, and a student could sit in any seat that had their House token. Each table would have two tokens per House. Between the losses of the previous year, the uneven Sorting that autumn, and those who had decided to leave school after their OWLs, the Houses were somewhat unevenly divided, but Minerva felt that there would still be enough mixing even if two or three of the tables had fewer than eight people.

Severus was sceptical that the plan would do very much to encourage friendships among those of different Houses, but he didn't see that it could hurt. A few of the staff who had been at Hogwarts for years were worried that Minerva meant this as the first step to the complete dissolution of the House system, but Minerva said that as long as she was Hogwarts Headmistress, there would be four Houses, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin, and that the Founders' Houses were an integral feature of Hogwarts, which, in her opinion, could not be eliminated without changing Hogwarts into a different school altogether. Albus had been very quiet during the discussion at the staff meeting, seeming to have no opinion or feeling on the matter one way or the other.

Afterward, Severus had asked him what he thought of the new mixing at dinner, and Albus said that he thought it was good for the students to get to know each other better, and eliminating the House tables once every two weeks might help that along. Severus pressed him for more about what plans Minerva might have for the future and what he thought of them, but Albus simply smiled, shrugged, and said that Minerva was Headmistress and that it was important for her to be able to implement her plans without the previous Headmaster interfering, even if only by airing his opinions publicly.

"She always seeks my advice, Severus. She bounces her ideas off of me before she mentions them to anyone else. She knows what I think of each idea that she proposes, and she considers my opinions. I also know of other plans that may or may not ever see the light of day in the staff room or a Board of Governors meeting. It would be grossly unfair of me to try to sway others one way or another simply because I may or may not like some of the other plans that might follow as a result...or which might never come to pass. No other headmistress or headmaster has had to have the previous headmaster on staff. Former headmasters and headmistresses have all conveniently resigned, retired, or died, leaving the next one to take over as best they saw fit. I had the benefit of the headmasters' and headmistresses' portraits to advise or inform me in the privacy of my office; I did not have Headmaster Dippet sitting in staff meetings chiming in with his own ideas on how things should be done. It makes matters no easier that I am also married to her. When it isn't a question of Minerva's authority, I am happy to give my opinion, and at length." Albus smiled. "And you are her deputy, Severus. I do not hear you debating her policies with her at the staff table, yet I am sure you discuss your opinions openly with her during your private meetings

with her or during meetings with her and the Heads of House. You recognise when it is appropriate to question or challenge her and when it is important, in your role as Deputy Headmaster, to support her."

"But if you like the plan, why not say something supportive?" Severus asked. "People may think you disapprove of it if you say nothing."

"If anyone were to ask me, as you just did, I would tell them that I support the plan whole-heartedly. But I would rather not try to sway anyone one way or the other. I also don't want to appear as though . . . as though Minerva can't be the Headmistress without me there to guide her, or without me there to persuade people to support her. It is a complicated situation."

Thinking it over, Severus could see Albus's point. No wonder the wizard was having power-withdrawal. Not only was he more-or-less unwelcome on the Wizengamot, though it had been his decision to retire from it, but at Hogwarts, he had to squelch any of his natural impulses to speak up and join an argument about something in a staff meeting. Perhaps that might change over time as people became used to him being just another faculty member and stopped seeing him as Headmaster Dumbledore, which had been his role for forty years. Then he could speak up for or against something without people whispering, "well, if Dumbledore doesn't like it...and he's her husband!...there must be something wrong with it," or, "of course he supports it, he's married to her," or, "if Dumbledore's supporting it, it must be his idea," and the like.

Severus looked in the mirror and adjusted the black, double-corded agal around his long white keffiyah. He turned his head to look at his partial profile, first one side, then the other. Not bad, though it did seem to be lacking something. He didn't know what it was. Since his head was covered by the long keffiyah, he hadn't bothered with doing anything to change his hair, so that couldn't be it. He shrugged.

He reached out and Summoned the long, garish, curved knife from the top of his dresser and stuck it in the front of his belt. The belt, a multicoloured woven affair that Gareth had found for him in a rummage through a Muggle thrift shop in Edinburgh, was, with the knife, the most colourful part of his costume. Over the white, kaftan-like thawb, he wore a long, fine woolen bisht of deep blue. The cloak had been grey, but McGonagall hadn't liked the effect when he saw the entire outfit on him earlier that day, and he had performed a permanent Colour Change Charm on it. Severus could have charmed the cloak back to grey or even made it black, if he had really wanted, but he liked the deep intense blue that Gareth had chosen, and it picked up some of the colours in the belt and the coloured glass on the hilt of his knife.

Gareth had wanted him to wear sandals, but not only did Severus not want to wear sandals, he had pointed out that it was unlikely that given Lawrence's activities ~~he~~ had worn sandals. They had compromised by deciding on a pair of tan lace-up desert boots; although Severus thought the boots seemed somewhat anachronistic, they did the job and were comfortable. Severus didn't remember the last time he had possessed a pair of boots in anything but black. Even his dragonhide boots were black.

Severus stepped back and tried to view more of himself in the mirror, wishing for once that he had a full-length mirror so that he could judge the effect of the entire costume. He turned, swirling his cloak about him, and he quirked a small smile. Not as much billow as his usual robes, but there was still something satisfying about it. It was a bit peculiar not wearing any trousers, but McGonagall had told him that the cuffs peeking out from under the thawb ruined the effect. For a very brief moment, he considered charming his thawb so that it couldn't be raised by anyone and the hem would remain at his ankles where it should be, but such a charm would affect the drape and flow of the fabric. He shook his head. Daft idea. No one was likely to turn him, the Hogwarts Potions master and Deputy Headmaster, Head of Slytherin House, upside down, or try to raise the skirt of the robe to expose his underwear.

He Summoned his watch from the top of the dresser and wound the chain several times around his belt, shortening it so that neither the watch nor the fob dangled. He hoped it was secure enough that way. Frowning, he drew his wand from the wand pocket that Twiskett had sewn into the side of his thawb, and cast a spell on the watch chain to keep it from loosening. He wished he had thought of a watch pocket when he'd had the elf put the wand pocket in.

He opened the watch and glanced at it: time to leave to meet Minerva. She was dressing in Madam Pomfrey's rooms so that she could surprise Albus. She and Severus agreed to walk in together as Headmistress and Deputy. Perhaps he could look in a longer mirror whilst he was at Poppy's. Surely the matron had a full-length mirror. On the other hand, he didn't want to appear vain. He'd just wait and see.

Severus took the back way up to the matron's rooms on the fourth floor, only running into two students, both Ravenclaws, one of whom said, "Cool, Professor!" when they saw him. Severus merely grunted and glared. He was losing his touch if students were beginning to feel free to express themselves like that. They'd soon lose all respect for him if he let it continue. On the other hand, Hermione had felt free with him, and she hadn't lost her respect for him. Not that he wanted his students to become as familiar with him as Hermione was, and he certainly did not want to be friends with any of them, but perhaps it might not hurt too much if he allowed them a bit of slack now and again. Special occasions, such as fancy dress parties.

He presented himself to Madam Pomfrey's door portrait and waited for her to fetch her mistress. The portrait was of a long-dead Astronomy teacher's wife, a Mrs Framingham, who had taught housewifery twice weekly to give her something to do whilst in residence at Hogwarts. After her, there had been two more housewifery instructors until Albus finally allowed the nonacademic subject to die a long-overdue death when the last one retired when he was a student in the seventies. Mrs Framingham, a cheerful witch in a gingham frock and a peaked black cap, returned a moment later.

"The witches are in the bedroom. I've been asked to allow you entry to the sitting room, and they will join you shortly."

The door clicked open, and Severus pushed on the door handle. He had only rarely been in the matron's private quarters, and he felt awkward standing in the unfamiliar space and waiting for the witches to emerge.

The door to the bedroom opened a crack and Madam Pomfrey's face appeared. "We'll be just a tick, Severus. Help yourself to a drink from the sideboard, if you like. Have a seat! You look terrific, by the way!" She disappeared again, and he could hear Minerva grumbling about something, then Poppy laughing.

Severus smirked and glanced at the bottles arrayed on the sideboard. He didn't pour himself a drink, though. He sat in one of the two upholstered armchairs, rearranging the drape of his keffiyah about his shoulders, bringing one end around his neck. There was something very satisfying about wearing the headdress. It was long, it flowed, it could be rearranged in a number of ways, including being wrapped about the face to hide one's features. Yes, an admirable piece of clothing. A pity he could find no reasonable excuse to begin wearing one daily. In black, of course.

He was interrupted in his musings by the entrance of the two witches, and he stood. His eyebrows rose as Minerva came in. "You are not Mata Hari," he said, looking Minerva up and down.

"No," she said, sighing, but with a smile. "I decided that if any of the boys decided to do further research into the lady in question, they might discover photos of her in her . . . more revealing attire. Imagining me then in such a state of undress might do them irreparable damage. So, the aviatrix it was!"

Poppy laughed heartily.

"And you are . . . a . . . scientist?" Severus guessed, looking at the matron's clothing, which included a long, smock-like dark grey lab coat over a long, drab, dark blue dress. The neck of an Erlenmeyer flask emerged from one of her smock pockets.

"Madame Curie," Poppy said.

"Playing against type, I presume," Severus said drily.

"What?!" She sputtered indignantly.

"I simply meant that, although you are clearly not unintelligent, you are more inclined toward taking care of people, being . . ." How could he dig himself out of this one, he wondered. "Being a generously warm caregiver. Madame Curie spent her time in laboratories, not with people. She is also . . . drab. You are not. That is all I meant."

"Oh. Yes. I had thought that, too," she replied, mollified. "I'd become stir-crazy if I had to spend all day every day in a laboratory with little human contact. And who are you? A sultan or . . . an Arabian king?"

"He's Lawrence of Arabia, of course," Minerva said, her eyes twinkling.

"Oh. I remember the film. I saw it with Murdoch years ago." Poppy looked him up and down. She drew her wand. "Do you mind, Severus? A slight change? A little bit of a Glamour? If you don't like it..."

"If I do not like it, you will remove it," Severus said with a nod. Perhaps she knew what it was that didn't look quite right.

The matron waved her wand, and Severus felt a tickle of magic brush over him. Another tickle of magic made him blink.

"What did you do?"

"Take a look for yourself, Severus," Minerva said, smiling with approval. "Very nice job, Poppy."

"There's a mirror on the bathroom door," Poppy said, opening that door so that he could see himself.

Severus stepped in front of the mirror. He raised an eyebrow. Poppy had made two simple changes, but Severus could see their effectiveness immediately. His skin was now tanned and his eyes were blue. The blue eyes blinked back at him. He almost didn't recognise himself. He quirked a brief smile and nodded.

"Very good. Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

"Madame Curie, please!" She turned to Minerva. "Shall we all go down together?"

"Actually, I told Albus that you would stop by his playroom for him, Poppy. I hope you don't mind. I know I should have asked you first, but..."

Poppy laughed. "Are you kidding? And be the first to see Albus in fancy dress? And, I presume, walk in on his arm?"

Minerva smiled. "I knew you'd see the advantages of my plan."

"No one consulted me," Severus said, a slight scowl on his face, but his newly blue eyes sparkling.

"You said you'd be happy to meet me here and go down to the Great Hall with me," Minerva said with some consternation.

Severus's lips twitched with humour. "That's when I thought I'd be walking in with Mata Hari!"

Minerva laughed, and Severus chuckled.

"I do think that when you see Albus's costume, Minerva, you may regret your choice," Severus said. "He will turn heads."

"So will you, Severus," Poppy said. She eyed him. "You cut quite a fine figure."

"Hmph. It was McGonagall's idea. He helped me find most of it, too."

"Ah, but *you* are the one wearing it, and you look very . . . dashing," the matron replied. "It was a good choice. Gareth has an excellent eye."

Severus rolled both of his. Nonetheless, he was pleased that his costume was an apparent success, at least with Minerva and Poppy.

"Albus put in a doorbell yesterday," Minerva said. "It's the little black handle next to the door. Just pull down on it."

"All right, I get the hint! I'm on my way...but I would like a dance with your escort later," Poppy said as she opened the door.

"We shall see!" Minerva replied.

Poppy winked at her, then left and closed the door behind her.

"Let's give them a few minutes, then we'll go down," Minerva said.

"We may want to give them ten minutes, in case Albus is having the same problem with his costume as he did when he showed it to me."

"Hmm, intriguing! What problem?"

"I will tell you later. I will say that I declined to help him with it," Severus smirked. "He managed by himself. Poppy might be more adept and willing. I am somewhat disappointed that you are not Mata Hari, but I think you are right that Earhart is a more appropriate choice for the Headmistress of Hogwarts."

Minerva smiled at him conspiratorially and whispered. "Don't worry...the Mata Hari costume and jewellery will not be wasted. I thought I'd throw Albus a little private dance party later tonight."

Severus groaned and covered his eyes. "Please, Minerva, I *did not* need to know that!"

Minerva laughed. "So you think we should still give them a bit more time?"

"Yes. We will also make a more impressive entrance if we wait a little. Filius and Pomona are having a couple of their students announce the characters as they enter. We should try to enter among the last in order to make a greater impact."

"I think I'll have a drink whilst we wait, then," Minerva said. "Would you like something?"

"Water," Severus said.

"Soda water? Tonic water? Bitter lemon?"

"Bitter lemon . . . haven't tried that."

"Bitter lemon, then. Ice?"

He shook his head, and she shrugged, then poured herself a small sherry. She handed him his bitter lemon and raised her glass. "Slàinte!"

"Cheers." Severus tasted his drink. He paused. He tasted it again, then he drank off half the glass. "Very good."

Minerva smiled. "I thought you might enjoy that. People often drink it with gin, especially in warm weather."

"So I have heard. I think I would prefer it this way, without the gin."

"Found a House ghost yet, Severus?" Minerva asked, sitting down in the armchair and crossing her trousered legs.

Severus sighed and sat down on the couch. "Not yet," he admitted glumly. "The Fat Friar came to see me this morning, said he had the perfect ghost for us. I told him to bring the ghost by to see me, but I haven't seen him since." He had hoped to find a ghost before Halloween, but his students would just have to be disappointed.

"I wonder who it could be," Minerva mused. "Over the years, I've met most of the resident ghosts. The majority of them are rather . . . self-absorbed. Not that ghosts don't tend that way, in any case, but the House ghosts are much more interactive, even the Baron was, despite his perennial silence. They are more *present* than a lot of the other ghosts."

Severus nodded. "That was part of the problem with many of the ones whom I . . . viewed." One could scarcely say he had interviewed them. "They seemed very stuck, for lack of a better description. One of them, in fact, kept repeating the same three things." He shuddered. "It was gruesome, actually."

"What did he say? Or don't I want to know?"

"It was a she." He took a swallow of his drink. "Not the baby. Not the baby, too. I'll put the baby in the ground with you."

"That is awful."

"Especially the way she was saying it. And she had a little cloth or blanket in her hands. She kept twisting it. It was as though she was stuck in a nightmare. I'm surprised that she even knew to come to see me."

"Word spread amongst the ghosts," Minerva said. "She probably just went to you because everyone else was."

"Mm." He opened his watch, then snapped it closed. "We should go now, whether Dumbledore's ready or not. We want fashionably late, not tardily unnoticeable, if we are to make a grand entrance." He stood and offered Minerva his arm. "Shall we, Headmistress?"

Minerva rose and placed her hand on his elbow. "I don't feel particularly elegant in this outfit...you outdo me in the elegance arena this time, Severus."

"But you look like an adventurous free spirit." He cocked his head, looking at her in her Amelia Earhart persona, with her short, lightened brown hair, brown leather flight jacket, tan shirt and trousers, and a long paisley scarf tied loosely around her neck. "It suits you."

"Enough of the mutual admiration society," she said briskly. "Let's go make our entrance!"

They walked down the stairs, a few students passing them on their way down, some of them turning for a double-take, clearly unsure which sight was more amazing: their Headmistress in trousers or her Deputy, tanned, blue-eyed, and in his flowing Arab dress. Severus could hear a low buzz coming from the Great Hall as they approached the ground floor. Filius had said that they would have dinner first...the house-elves waiting for the Headmistress to take her seat before serving, which had apparently been the regular practice at Hogwarts at one time...then bowls of punch and snacks would appear and there would be music, the tables moved to the edges of the room so that anyone who wanted to dance, could. There would be a break during which the voting for best costumes would take place and everyone could help themselves to fancy Halloween-themed desserts. This would all be followed by more dancing.

Severus felt there was too much dancing on the schedule and that the party would go too long, but at least he hadn't had to do very much of the planning or preparation. And perhaps it would tire out the students so that he could spend a quiet Sunday reading, or go into Hogsmeade and meet Hermione and Gareth for a drink. It was convenient that his two friends both lived in the same house, even if it was uncomfortable for him in other respects, most particularly the fact that Hermione was living with the witch whom he had permanently maimed in a terrifying attack in that very same house.

He shoved these unwelcome thoughts to the back of his mind as he and Minerva stepped up to the open doors of the Great Hall. Most of the round student tables were filled, and it appeared that Minerva's House-mixing plan was being accepted with no dissidents: each table had no more than two students from the same House. It did seem that the students were tending to sit with others in their own year, but that was to be expected, he supposed.

"May I announce you, Professors?" Jamie Brett asked politely.

Severus nodded shortly. "Lawrence of Arabia and Amelia Earhart."

The Ravenclaw pointed his wand at his throat and cast a nonverbal Sonorous Charm. "Amelia Earhart and her escort, Lawrence of Arabia!"

"Nice nonverbal charm, Brett," Severus said gruffly. It was, after all, a special occasion.

Jamie's eyes shone. "Thank you, sir!"

It was obvious as he and Minerva walked up to the staff table, which was still on its raised dais, that the students were enjoying seeing their teachers in fancy dress. He thought that the students themselves had done well in assembling and creating their costumes. There were a number of duplicates, particularly a few prominent kings and queens of England, but for the most part, they were individual and usually recognisable.

Poppy and Albus...Madame Curie and Sir Percy, the Scarlet Pimpernel...stepped toward them from the table where they had been speaking with a few of the students, first- and second-years, including Suzie Sefton. Severus truly hoped that Suzie would restrain her desire to try everything she'd never eaten before. Her stomach just didn't do well with new foods. She was adventurous enough for a Gryffindor, and heedless enough, as well. Severus still did not know why the girl had been Sorted into Slytherin, aside from her apparent instantaneous crush on him.

Minerva smiled. "My, you were right, Severus," she said in whisper. "Albus's costume is striking."

Severus nodded. Madam Pomfrey looked even more dowdy beside Albus, his costume was so colourful. Of course, he wouldn't tell her that. He knew enough about women to realise that would be a very bad idea unless he wanted to alienate her, which he didn't.

Several of the staff were already seated, so after Minerva had exchanged a few words with Albus, the four went up and took their seats, Poppy sitting to Albus's left rather than taking her usual seat at the end of the table next to Pomona. Filius had moved, as well, taking Poppy's seat beside Pomona. Severus supposed it didn't matter if they played musical chairs that night, since the House tables had been eliminated for the evening.

A moment after Minerva sat in the Headmistress's chair, the meal appeared on the table. Severus ate little at first, keeping a sharp eye on the students. It seemed that everyone was relaxed and having a good time, but he thought that the staff should be more vigilant than they were being. He would certainly have to patrol the usual trysting places later that night. Parties seemed to put the students in a randy mood, particularly when there was dancing. Severus didn't entirely disapprove of dancing, but he was uncomfortable with it, and had been since he had been a student, and he did think that it made his work more difficult, keeping the students from engaging in more intimate embraces than was allowed.

Severus particularly disliked finding younger couples together in some state of undress. It was unseemly, and a part of him felt positively repulsed by it. Another part of him simply felt angry, as though he had been deprived of some experience when he had been their age and still was being deprived, and at an age when it would be more appropriate for him to be engaged in relations than it was for the teenagers...though their hormones and lack of maturity commonly led them into such trysts. But any kind of closeness was difficult for him, and Severus couldn't imagine developing a relationship with someone to an extent sufficient for him to engage in any intimacies. And he certainly couldn't imagine anyone with whom he had no relationship spontaneously deciding that he was attractive and allowing him to initiate that kind of contact with her, let alone her initiating intimate contact with him. He was unpleasant, and everyone who knew him at all, knew that. Anyone who might allow that would have to be desperate. Or generous and feeling sorry for him.

"You look very good tonight, Severus. Excellent costume," Verity Vector said. "Lawrence of Arabia, if I heard correctly?"

Severus nodded. He glanced over at her, this time taking in more than her elaborate headdress. He hadn't a clue who she was. Someone classical. And someone who dressed highly immodestly. Her royal blue cloak was pushed back from her shoulders, leaving her bare arms free as she ate her meal, and her white gown, though gathered in pleats over her bosom, was obviously only a single layer of thin fabric, the curve of her breasts clearly visible. Severus felt his groin tighten. He looked away and cut into his slice of roast beef. Vector, whom he had never found a particularly attractive witch, though she was pleasant enough, had a very feminine figure. He'd never noticed it before, as he'd rarely seen her in anything other than her teaching garb. He could see Minerva's point about the Mata Hari costume, even if she were to wear something more modest than Vector was wearing. One thing for an ordinary member of faculty to dress on the outre side, quite another for the Headmistress to wear anything bizarre or suggestive. Trousers were probably sufficiently strange for the students. Showed she had legs under those robes she wore. He took another look at Vector's costume, trying to avoid staring at her breasts.

"You are . . . Helen of Troy?" Severus guessed.

Vector speared a carrot and shook her head. "Dido, Queen of Carthage."

"Ah. Interesting choice." He didn't know what else to say. He couldn't very well ask her whether she was wearing any underwear, which was at the forefront of his mind. He steered his thoughts to his mashed potatoes.

"Dumbledore certainly looks fine tonight," Vector remarked.

"Yes."

"I had wanted to come as Marie Curie, but then I learned that Poppy had already decided on her, so this was a last minute choice."

"I see." He still wondered about her underwear. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. He thought he could see her nipples. Back to mashed potatoes.

"Filius is especially cute tonight," Vector said with a sentimental smile.

Severus looked down the table and nodded. "Einstein," he said, recognising this famous Muggle instantly. Filius had let his fluffy white hair do as it liked that night, rather than taming it with a charm or wearing a hat, and he wore a large white moustache. Even Severus could admit to himself that the Charms teacher looked cuddly in his baggy cardigan jumper...although he'd never admit it aloud. "Highly appropriate for Ravenclaw. Who is Sprout?"

"Molly Pitcher. Some colonial American, I understand."

"I take it that Rath is Robin Hood?" Severus asked, indicating the taciturn assistant groundskeeper. He even had a quiver of arrows slung over the back of his chair and a longbow leaning against the wall behind him.

"Yes, and Hagrid is Little John and Shunpike's Will Scarlet." Vector, who had arrived in the Great Hall early to help Filius and Pomona, named off a few of the other characters for Severus. "Laura is Sylvia Pankhurst, a suffragette, David is Joseph Priestley, Sarah is Emily Bronte, Caspar is Gallileo, and Liv is some writer. Wolf?"

"Virginia Woolf?" Severus asked, having heard the name, though not knowing anything about her.

"Yes, that's it."

"And Cahill?" Severus lowered his voice, not wanting to draw the attention of the deadly dull History of Magic instructor sitting on Vector's other side.

"He's Teddy Roosevelt," Vector whispered. She glanced over at him quickly. "He didn't have to do much to himself, other than the clothes."

Severus snuck another look at the History teacher. Vector was right: Cahill was the spitting image of Teddy Roosevelt, right down to the mustache. He had Transfigured his eyeglasses to resemble those worn by the American president, and he wore an ugly three-piece brown tartan suit, but other than that, Severus didn't think he'd even changed the way he combed his hair. He was unsure whether that was a good point or a bad point when judging the costume, and he had no idea what criteria the students would use in voting.

Of all the male staff, Severus thought that Albus had the best chance of winning. His costume was beautifully done, and he certainly looked very handsome. Of the witches . . . Vector was certainly a candidate, particularly if most of the boys caught a good look at her in the right light. Severus wasn't able to avoid noticing that when she stretched out an arm to reach for a bowl of peas, the light shone through the gauzy fabric, outlining her breast. He had to concentrate on his meal and hope that no evidence of his reaction was evident. He pulled closer to the table.

"Do you know who Benetti's supposed to be?" he asked. She had charmed her hair white, tying it back in a ponytail, and was wearing a sort of khaki safari shirt. She also had a stuffed chimpanzee sitting on her shoulders. She looked as though she was having a good time sitting with Robin Hood and his merry men.

"Some British animal person. Don't remember who," Vector said. "Works in jungles. Studies chimps. Dame Somebody-or-other."

"Ah." Severus didn't know who that would be, either. He tried to see the Head of Gryffindor, who was sitting on the other side of Hagrid. "And Carter?"

"Sharon was already here when I arrived, so I'm not sure." Vector reached for her glass of wine, and Severus quickly averted his gaze. "Probably some very obscure Muggle," she added. "She has an advantage, being the Muggle Studies teacher."

"I can't even see what she's wearing, except that she has a hat on." Hagrid completely blocked her from his view.

"Western hat, cowboy kind of outfit. Bunch of medals and badges on her jacket, boots, gun belt, the works."

"Gun belt?"

"I presume the guns are fake," Vector said, "but she's got two pearl-handled revolvers, like in the films."

"I'll have to ask her," Severus said.

"Are you speaking of Sharon?" Minerva asked on his other side.

"Yes."

"Annie Oakley. American performer of some kind," Minerva said. "Filius is going to create lists of everyone...their real identities and their alter egos, so to speak...for the voting later, then after the party he's having the prefects put together a book with everyone listed in it with brief biographies of each Muggle. Mr Creevey is going to take photos...not individual ones, just general party photographs...and they'll be added to the book, as well. They're going to put it on sale to raise money for the Worthy Scholars Fund."

Severus nodded. The Worthy Scholars Fund had been called the Indigent Scholars Fund when he was a student. He probably would have been eligible for at least some book money, particularly after his mother had died, but he had never wanted to draw attention to his somewhat impecunious state. "Worthy Scholars" sounded less objectionable. There were probably additional "worthy" students following the war, although Zabini seemed to be providing fairly well for the Slytherins for whom he had attained guardianship.

Filius stood on his chair and signalled for quiet, then asked that the students please stand so that the tables could be cleared and rearranged. A few moments later, the centre of the Hall was clear.

"The Headmistress and Deputy Headmaster have graciously consented to begin the dancing," the Charms master announced brightly.

"I have?" Severus asked, looking at Minerva.

"I presumed, Severus. Headmistress's prerogative!" She laughed and held out her hand.

Severus sighed and stood, taking her hand. "Just a moment, Minerva," he said as they passed Albus and Poppy. He bent and whispered something to her.

"Reserving a dance, Severus?" Minerva asked.

"No," he said softly as they walked out onto the dance floor. The music began, he bowed stiffly, then took one of Minerva's hands in his and put his other arm around her. He leaned closer and whispered in her ear. "I was asking Madam Pomfrey to have a quick word with Professor Vector, perhaps help her with a charm on her costume."

Minerva turned her head and looked at him quizzically. "Charm?"

"Something to make her garment . . . more opaque. I do not believe that Professor Vector can realise how much of her is visible in certain lights," he said softly. "I did not feel comfortable telling her myself, but I thought . . . well, just that she should know."

Minerva smiled. "Very collegial and gentlemanly of you, Severus."

"Mm." He increased the distance between them.

By the time the first dance was finished, the floor was fairly well filled, though primarily with staff and older students, the younger ones standing more or less awkwardly along the sides.

"Do you think this much dancing is appropriate when there are so many of the younger years present?" Severus asked with a frown.

"Oh, didn't you see? The first- through third-years will only be here through the voting and dessert, then Hagrid and his merry men have organized activities for them in that old Defence classroom on the first floor. It's large enough to accommodate all of them. I think that Helena's going to join them for a while, too, before she heads home."

"She should stay at the castle more frequently," Severus said as they stepped up to a table that had bowls of punch set out on it.

"I don't see why," Minerva replied. "She has very light duties, and it was part of our agreement that she be able to live in Hogsmeade. She is always in attendance when she has meal or patrol duty."

"Hmmp." He looked around him at the students. He would keep an eye on the punch bowls. He suspected no one in particular, but there was always the chance that given the opportunity, one of the students would try to spike the punch, whether with alcohol or with some other substance. He handed Minerva a glass of punch and ladled one up for himself.

"Miss Earhart, may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

Poor Minerva, Severus thought as the Headmistress plastered a smile on her face and took Ezra Cahill's hand. He glanced around for Albus. He was still dancing with Poppy, in animated conversation with her about something. He sighed. He could think of only one way to save the Headmistress from the History teacher's tiresome drone, other than cutting in himself. And Madam Pomfrey *had* requested a dance with him. She'd probably been teasing Minerva, but nonetheless, if he were dancing with Poppy, Albus could then cut in and rescue Minerva.

He set down his glass of punch and walked onto the dance floor, quickly finding Albus and Poppy, who were apparently discussing some new treatment for scrofungulus. Not party talk, in his opinion, but better than inane chit-chat. He tapped Albus on the shoulder. "Pardon me, Sir Percy, but may I cut in?"

Albus grinned at him. "Of course, my boy! Madame Curie, do you mind? We can continue our conversation later."

"You might want to rescue your wife," Severus said as he took Poppy's hand, but looking at Albus. He gestured with his head toward the dancing couple. Minerva looked dazed and Cahill was talking nonstop, as usual.

Severus began to dance with Poppy, but watched Albus as he approached Minerva and Cahill. Minerva's relief was evident in her face when he cut in.

"What was that?" he asked Poppy, who had said something to him.

"Never mind," the matron said. She shook her head. "You didn't really want to ask me to dance, did you?"

"What? Of course I did." He looked down at her. She really did look far less than attractive in that outfit, but she was a friend of sorts, and she looked hurt. He pulled her slightly closer. No need to dance at arms-length, and this way, he'd see more of her face and less of her costume. "I thought perhaps you were teasing Minerva when you said you wanted to dance with, um, Lawrence of Arabia, but I thought I would see . . ."

"No, I was teasing her, but I did want to dance with you. You look very impressive this evening. That costume was a good choice...but I'd still have wanted a dance with you this evening even if you'd come as Quasimodo."

"I had been going to come as Thomas Becket, the martyr, but no one else seemed to like the idea." He sighed.

Poppy laughed. "I'm glad. I don't know as he would be as much fun to dance with."

Severus quirked a smile. She wasn't unattractive when she laughed. "It would still be me, the same miserable Potions master, whether I was Becket or Lawrence."

Poppy grinned. "Well, I'm still pleased you came as Lawrence. By the way, thank you for the advice about Verity's gown. She had no idea."

"I was concerned that when she stood, if she ever completely removed her cloak, even more of her would be visible below the waist," Severus said. "I thought she would be uncomfortable if she learned that too late."

"It was very considerate of you. I didn't mention that you told me, though. I thought it might embarrass her."

"It would embarrass *me*," Severus admitted, remembering his arousal when he caught a glimpse of Vector's breasts through the thin material.

Poppy laughed again. She certainly was cheerful, and oddly, it didn't bother him when she laughed at something he said even when he hadn't meant it to be funny. She didn't sound mean, but as though she would laugh at herself just as easily.

"Would you care for something to drink?" Severus asked as there was a pause in the music. "The punch, or something from the staff table?"

"Just some punch, I think," she replied, following him off the dance floor.

He was just ladling some punch into a glass for Poppy, trying to include some fruit, as well, when the Fat Friar suddenly swooped in through the wall behind him. Severus jumped, splashing punch on his white thawb. He gritted his teeth and turned to confront the ghost.

"Good evening, Professor!" the Friar said happily, completely oblivious to the Potion master's mood. "I have brought him! Your new House ghost! If, of course, he meets your satisfaction." The ghost turned and gestured behind him, but there was no one there. "Come, come!" the Friar said, apparently to no one at all. "Don't be shy! This is Professor Snape, the esteemed Head of Slytherin House."

A slump-shouldered figure shimmered into visibility, faint, but clearly male.

"You need to introduce yourself!" the Friar chided. "Let Professor Snape see you!"

The figure shimmered further into ghostly materiality. Someone on the other side of Severus dropped a glass, and he heard a gasp.

"Francis!"

Severus looked over at the Headmistress. She took a step toward them just as Albus turned and caught sight of the new ghost. Albus froze and stared.

"Francis Flint?" Minerva asked, trembling slightly.

"Minerva," the ghost said softly. "Yes. It's me. Francis." He looked around him, taking in the party. "Do you remember when we danced, Minerva?" He sighed. "So long ago . . ."

"You know this ghost?" Severus asked.

"Yes, we know him," Albus said softly. "I didn't expect to see you again, Francis, not on this earthly plane."

"I waited for Val. I waited. The house burned, and I still waited. I heard that the Dark Lord had been killed, and I waited, then I heard that he had returned and then that he was killed again, and still I waited. Val never came for me." He sighed again. "The Friar convinced me that I should relocate."

"It's a block of Muggle flats now," the Friar said. "I thought the Muggles might have more peace, and Francis might, as well, if he took up residence here at Hogwarts. Especially with the current opening in Slytherin House!" He seemed pleased with himself. "The best for all of us!"

At least this ghost seemed fairly articulate and oriented, as far as ghosts went, Severus thought. But would he be unsuitable in some other way? He was clearly a relatively recent ghost, since both Minerva and Albus knew him, but not so recent that Severus had any idea who he was.

"Who is he?" Severus asked, directing his question at Minerva and Albus.

"He is Francis Flint," Minerva replied. "He was a Slytherin when I was a student."

"Was he . . ." He didn't want to ask whether he had been a Death Eater, not now that all attention was upon them, the music silenced and all the students watching the proceedings with interest.

"He wished to oppose Tom Riddle," Minerva said. "Oppose him in some small way. That's why he was killed."

"I told Val we should go to you. I begged her to go to you. But she was proud, and it was too late for me. Did she? Did she finally go to you for help? Were you able to save her?" Francis asked.

Albus looked around at the audience. He seemed uncertain whether to say anything in front of the entire Hogwarts population. Finally, he nodded. "Yes, Valerianna came to me. . . . we told her that we would help her." He sighed and rubbed his clean-shaven jaw. "We wanted to help her."

"She told us that she had things she had to do first. She wanted to attend your funeral, and then she was going to go to Gringotts and do a few other tasks," Minerva continued. "She said that she would meet us the next day. We had plans to bring her into hiding, but she never arrived at the meeting place. She had disappeared immediately after your funeral. A few days later, her body was found. I am sorry, Francis."

"But she never came for me. Alive or dead. And I waited for her." He looked downcast. "How long has it been?"

"Twenty years," Albus replied. "Valerianna died less than a week after you were killed."

The ghost seemed to deflate. "She did not look for me."

"She may not have been able to," Albus said gently. "I know that she was very upset by your death and she blamed herself. We told her not to attend your funeral, but she insisted."

"May I stay here, Headmaster?" Francis asked hopefully. "I grow tired of living in a Muggle flat."

"I am no longer Headmaster," Albus said. "Minerva is the Headmistress."

"May I stay?" Francis asked, pivoting toward her.

"You may stay here, of course," Minerva said. "But I cannot speak for Slytherin House. Whether you become the House ghost is a decision for Professor Snape to make."

"I cannot make such a decision here and now," Severus said as everyone's attention turned to him. "I will meet with you tomorrow morning. The Friar or one of the other House ghosts can show you where my office is. Do not follow Peeves. He is as likely to bring you to the Owlery as to the dungeons."

The ghost of Francis Flint smiled. "I remember Peeves! No, I won't follow him. Thank you, Professor."

"Don't thank me yet," Severus muttered.

"Friar, if you and Sir Nick could acquaint Francis with some of your usual haunts, make him at home, perhaps find him an empty cupboard somewhere, a place where he can go if he's feeling crowded, I would appreciate that," Minerva said. She looked around her at everyone watching and found Filius standing in front of Pomona. "Now, Professor Flitwick, I believe we need more music! Something cheerful."

"Something modern!" Filius agreed. He waved his wand and Filius's idea of contemporary Muggle music began to play. Severus recognised it as being an old Elton John song, "Rocket Man." Not the most upbeat lyrics, perhaps, but at least the melody was cheerful and it had a good rhythm, and the students seemed happy enough with the change from waltzes and Big Band music.

Severus watched as the Fat Friar and Sir Nicolas floated up through the enchanted ceiling, Francis Flint between them. This was one of the strangest Hogwarts parties he'd attended, and there had been some notably strange ones in the past.

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-One: Fancy Dress

Saturday, 31 October 1998

Severus must dance, and the students vote on the best fancy dress.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Verity Septima Vector, Pomona Sprout, Filius Flitwick, Helena Benetti, Suzie Sefton, and others

Author's Note: You may remember Francis Flint and Valerianna Yaxley (née Crouch) from *Resolving a Misunderstanding*. Anyone who was curious about what became of Valerianna and Francis after they married, you have your answer!

Anyone who hasn't yet read the one-shot, "Enter, Peacetime," you'll likely want to read it before Chapter 23 of *Long Vernal Season* is posted. (["Enter, Peacetime"](#) is here on TPP.)

Chapter Twenty-One: Fancy Dress

Chapter 22 of 118

Saturday, 31 October 1998. Severus must dance, and the students vote on the best fancy dress.



Chapter Twenty-One: Fancy Dress

Saturday, 31 October 1998

Severus sighed and agreed to ask each of the witches on staff to dance. "I doubt they will appreciate it as much as you seem to think, Minerva." He had been perfectly happy to patrol the perimeter of the room, make sure that the students weren't up to no good.

"You are the Deputy Headmaster. And if I had to dance with Ezra," she said, lowering her voice, "you can dance with the witches. It's not as though there are any who are like him. And they *will* appreciate it. You underestimate yourself, Severus."

"Hmph." Sarah Duffy came close to being as bad as Cahill, with her giggling and general foolishness. Gods, how he hated giggling! Witches should outgrow girlish giggling by the time they were full-grown women. He repressed a shudder at the thought of dancing with Duffy. He could just hear the bony witch giggling now.

"Begin with Helena, since she will be leaving early with the younger students," Minerva directed briskly.

Lovely, he only had to begin with the youngest and most attractive witch on staff. She probably wouldn't even be available to dance with him.

Severus finally found the petite witch on the other side of the Great Hall, dwarfed by Hagrid, with whom she was attempting to dance without being trampled. Even with her Charmed white hair, she was beautiful. Kind, too, to be dancing with Hagrid. Severus touched Hagrid's elbow. "Excuse me, Professor Hagrid, er, Little John, but may I cut in?" He glanced at Benetti. "If the lady consents."

"I'd enjoy that, Professor," Helena said with a bright smile. She looked up at Hagrid. "Thanks for the dance, Hagrid. See you later with the kids!"

At the Headmistress's behest, Filius had switched back to swing and other Big Band music. Apparently Minerva wasn't a fan of Elton John, David Bowie, or the Kinks, which Filius had conjured after the ghosts had departed. The Kinks' "You Really Got Me" seemed to really get her, and she had found Filius and told him to play something that wouldn't make her want to jump out of her skin and throttle someone.

"So, have you found your new House ghost, Professor?" Helena asked as she put one hand on his waist and the other on his shoulder just as "In the Mood" began.

"Perhaps. I wish to learn more about him first. He seems acceptable at first glance," Severus replied, trying to figure out what to do with his right hand, since Helena's stuffed chimpanzee was now clinging to her left side. It seemed to be charmed to hold onto her.

"Here, let me take care of Andy," Helena said, stepping back.

"Andy?"

Helena laughed. "My chimp. I named him Andy. He seemed to need a name." She drew her wand from her trouser pocket and sent the large plush toy flying across the room over everyone's heads, setting him down in her chair at the staff table. "There, that's better."

Severus took her hand and drew her closer. "It would be a convenient way to avoid dancing too closely with someone," he suggested. "Keep Andy latched around your waist."

She looked up at him. "I hadn't thought of that." She shrugged and stepped closer. "I wouldn't with you. What woman would pass up the chance to dance with Lawrence of Arabia?"

"Hmph." She was an attractive witch. Apparently she had no qualms at all about dancing with him. But she was Canadian. Perhaps she didn't know any better. "And who are you, if that is not an ignorant question?"

"I hope that it *is* an ignorant question, otherwise, I don't know why you would ask it!" Helena said with a laugh. "It is, however, not a stupid question. I'm Dr Jane Goodall. Anthropologist and animal behaviourist. I study chimpanzees and work to preserve their habitat."

"I see. It will be educational for the students to see the variety of Muggles there are. Do you know who Professor Carter has come as?" he asked as he caught sight of the witch's Stetson. "This Annie person?"

"Annie Oakley." At his blank expression, she added, "*Annie, Get Your Gun?* Sharpshooter? Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show? Better shot with a twenty-two than any man? Ring any bells? No? Well, she was famous, and there's been a musical about her, and television shows. She shot the ash from the Kaiser's cigar."

"Sounds a practical use of her talents," Severus said drily, causing Helena to laugh again. Perhaps this would not be such an onerous task, he thought. Although it would likely be downhill from Helena.

They danced until the music paused, then Severus stepped back and bowed. "Thank you for the dance, Ms Benetti...Dr Goodall."

"Thank you! I enjoyed it."

Severus nodded and looked around for another witch. Olivia Ouellette was in conversation with Rath. She would be his next partner, then. He presumed that she wouldn't mind dancing with him, since she had danced with Albus earlier. He had heard that the new Transfiguration teacher had a girlfriend, although he didn't know whether it was true or not.

"Professor Ouellette, may I have this dance?" He hated asking that. Why couldn't the witches come up to him and ask him, instead?

"Delighted, Colonel Lawrence," Ouellette replied. "It's Virginia Woolf, by the way."

"Yes, Ms Woolf." He nodded and led her in a quick foxtrot to a lively swing tune, one of the few dances he knew. It was not unpleasant, but he wondered whether he was boring or merely bored. It was difficult to tell.

From Virginia Woolf, Severus moved on to dance with the radical suffragette, Sylvia Pankhurst, otherwise known as Laura Walker Manning, Hogwarts librarian. After their dance, a waltz, he bowed slightly and returned her to her husband. He felt someone tug at his sleeve. He turned, annoyed. No one there. He looked down. Suzie Sefton. He looked past her. A few of her little friends were watching.

"Hi, Professor Snape."

"Miss Sefton." He nodded. "You are ill? I believe Madam Pomfrey is here somewhere." He looked around, searching for the matron in her dull, shapeless costume.

"No, sir. I haven't had dessert yet." She giggled.

"I see. Please do exercise some self-restraint, Miss Sefton. If you are ill, you will not enjoy the activities that Professor Hagrid has arranged for you."

"Yes, sir." She continued to look up at him most disconcertingly. "You're Lawrence of Arabia tonight?"

"Yes. He was a British hero. I am sure that Ms Walker Manning can direct you to information about him, if you are interested." She seemed to be waiting for something. "And who are you this evening?" A smile lit her face: that must have been what she'd been waiting for.

"I'm Posh Spice," Suzie explained. She pointed at her friends behind her. "And Kelly, Toni, and Mary are Ginger, Sporty, and Baby Spice. I wanted to be Scary Spice, but I didn't know how to charm a pretend pierced tongue and I didn't want to really pierce my tongue, and nobody else did, either, and I'm not really dark enough to be right for her, anyway, so we don't have a Scary Spice, even though she's really awesome, but Draco said that's okay, that we all look great anyway. He helped us charm our hair." She twirled one of her short locks. "He said if we tried it, we'd probably all be Baldie Spice!" She giggled. When Severus just looked at her, trying to imagine Draco charming a bunch of eleven-year old girls' hairstyles, she heaved a great sigh. "That's a *joke*, Professor. There is no Baldie Spice."

"Ah, yes, of course. Very amusing," Severus said with a nod.

"Yeah, Draco's pretty funny, like you." Suzie looked up at him with admiring eyes. Gods, save him from adoring munchkins!

"I am glad he was able to assist you and your . . . spicy girls."

"Spice Girls, Professor, not *Spicy*."

He nodded. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"Draco said I could sit next to him during dessert. He's Isaac Newton. He has the coolest hair. I think it's a wig. I hope we're going to have dessert pretty soon."

"Quite likely. Do not overeat," Severus said, hoping this signalled the end of the conversation.

"Would you, um, would you like to dance?" she asked.

Severus stared at her. She was an eleven-year-old in an absurdly short sequined dress and high heels that she could barely wobble around in. Even with them, she seemed to come scarcely to his sternum. "I am afraid that . . . that . . . my feet hurt," he said. "I think that perhaps you might wish to ask the most senior Slytherin student, Mr Newman. Draco." He felt himself flush. "I have fallen arches."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! That sounds awful," the little Spice Girl said sympathetically. "And isn't Draco's new name wild? He came up with it himself. I think it's wicked cool!"

"Indeed. I believe I should sit down. Or my arches might fall more." He nodded curtly. "Good night, Miss Sefton. Enjoy your activities."

He made his way back to the staff table and sank into his chair with a sigh, rearranging his white keffiyah back over his shoulders and removing his dark cloak. Dessert should be served soon, and then there would be the costume voting, and the youngest students would be sent off. He might be able to sneak into a dark corner and avoid dancing with the rest of the witches, if he were lucky. He probably had used up all his luck in escaping Miss Sefton, however. He wondered how quickly the rumour of his fallen arches would spread through the House. Oh, well. Better that than trying to dance with a miniature Spice Girl.

Minerva and Albus came up to the table and took their seats, Minerva removing her warm flight jacket with a look of relief. Dessert miraculously...or elvishly...appeared in front of him, and ooo's of delight came from the students as they all scrambled for plates of pie, cake, biscuits, and other sweets, and found places to sit. Severus was just finishing his pumpkin pie when Filius raised his wand, sounding a series of chimes. Everyone turned their attention to him.

"Now we will have voting on the Best Fancy Dress for each House," the little wizard announced. He flicked his wand. "You will find lists of the Muggle characters in the centre of each table. Members of each House may vote for one witch and for one wizard for Best Fancy Dress in each of the other three Houses and the staff. In other words, each of you vote for best in each House except for your own. Votes will be automagically tallied and appear on my master parchment." He held up his cream-coloured parchment. "Please, vote for only one witch and one wizard per House, and the same for the staffs' costumes." Filius turned toward his colleagues with a smile. "You, I am afraid, will be voted upon, but will not be voting!"

There was rustling and murmuring as the students consulted each other and examined the lists, occasionally looking around and refreshing their memories of what the various costumes looked like.

"Would you like some port whilst we wait, Severus?" Albus asked, holding up a decanter, then pouring Minerva a glass.

"No, thanks," Severus replied, reaching instead for the small coffee cup turned upside down on its saucer. He turned it right side up, and it filled itself with espresso. He took a sip.

A few minutes later, Filius sounded his chimes again. "Thank you very much! Voting is now complete! I would like to call the Head Girl and Head Boy up to read off the names of the winners! Mr Bain? Ms Donovan?"

Lawrence Bain, dressed as William Shakespeare, and Niamh Donovan, dressed as the pirate Grace O'Malley, stepped up to the staff dais. The Ravenclaw Head Girl took the list that Flitwick gave her, then cast a Sonorous Charm.

"Gryffindor, best male Muggle fancy dress, Dennis Creevey, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, cavalier, buccaneer, naval commander, inventor, and governor," Niamh announced. Flitwick handed her a small gold trophy, which she handed to Dennis when he bounded up to the dais, impressively dressed as a dashing young cavalier.

"Gryffindor, best female Muggle fancy dress, Ginevra Weasley, Jeanne de Clisson, the Lioness of Brittany, pirate and fierce avenger of her husband's death," Niamh read, and Ginny trotted up and accepted her trophy, flashing a quick smile at her fellow pirate. Apparently, Niamh, Ginny, and Luna had all decided to come as pirates, with Luna dressed as Anne Bonnie.

Niamh then read out the winning Hufflepuffs, Gwendolyn Cheever, for her Marilyn Monroe costume, and Stan Raffles for his Henry Stanley impersonation, complete with pith helmet.

Lawrence Bain, the Hufflepuff Head Boy, then took the list from Niamh and read the names of the winning Ravenclaws, Berry Johnson as Sojourner Truth and Jamie Brett as Sherlock Holmes. The winning Slytherins were Kevin Harper as Daniel O'Connell, the Emancipator, and, much to Severus's surprise, bouncy little Suzie Sefton in her glittery Posh Spice outfit. She waved to him excitedly as she tottered back down with her little trophy, holding it out for Draco to see. Severus couldn't help but smile slightly.

"And now for the staff awards," Bain said, "the winning witch is . . . Professor Carter as Annie Oakley!"

Sharon gave a little laugh and seemed embarrassed as she went up and accepted the small trophy.

"And the winning wizard," said Niamh, "is Professor Snape, Lawrence of Arabia." She looked at him and held up the last little gold cup.

Minerva nudged his ankle with her foot. He tried not to glare as he got up and walked down and took the cup from Donovan. He could feel the heat rise in his face as he walked back to his seat. He hoped that Poppy's tanning Glamour would hide his blush. As he sat down, Hagrid and his merry men stood and Filius instructed the younger students to follow Professor Hagrid for an hour of games and other activities.

"Congratulations, Severus!" Minerva said.

"I thought that Dumbledore would win," Severus said. "I did not wish to win."

"I think it's nice for you, Severus," Albus said, leaning toward him. "That the students would vote for you demonstrates that they don't all hate you as you still seem to believe."

"They should. Or at least fear me."

"Respect, Severus," Minerva said. "That is what you want from them, not fear. You have lived in such a way as to confuse the two."

"Hmmpf."

"So, have you danced with all the staff yet?" she asked as the music began again. "There must be a few left."

"No." He sighed. "Must I?"

"Come, my boy, I'll share the duty with you," Albus said with a twinkle. "Minerva, you go have that dance with Caspar he asked you for just before dessert was served. Severus, shall we?"

"I'm not dancing with you."

Albus laughed. "I wasn't suggesting that! I'll start with Sarah. Why don't you ask Pomona?"

Severus restrained his desire to roll his eyes, and he walked down to Pomona, who was just finishing a piece of chocolate cheesecake.

"Professor Sprout, would you care to dance?" he asked stiffly.

"Oh, I'd love to!" Pomona said enthusiastically, taking one last swallow of her drink.

Severus was not pleased that the lively swing tune had given way to a slower, more romantic jazz piece. Pomona had her arms around him, and as she was a very short but rather buxom witch, she was uncomfortably close. She didn't seem as though she felt uncomfortable, though. Severus was certain there was something inappropriate about two Heads of House dancing this closely in front of the students, though no one seemed to be paying any attention to them.

"Wonderful fancy dress, Severus," Pomona said. Rather alarmingly, one of her hands had snaked beneath his long keffiyah, and Severus wished that he had left the cloak on, as her hand was stroking the soft material of his tawb, beneath which was only one thin undershirt. He was glad now that his dagger had a large and gaudy hilt. She could only get so close to him and no closer.

"Thank you, Professor. Yours is..." he looked down into her bountiful cleavage and blushed, moving his gaze back up to her face "...yours is also, um, authentic."

"I appreciate your asking me to dance," she said warmly. "I enjoy dancing with Filius, but sometimes it is pleasant to dance with a wizard taller than myself." She smirked and winked. "In the vertical position, I mean. Otherwise..."

"Thank *you* for the dance, Professor," Severus said hastily, not wanting to hear anything about Flitwick's skills in horizontal dancing with the Herbology teacher. The mere suggestion of that image would haunt him, he was certain. "It is my pleasure." Not really, but it was the polite thing to say.

"You looked gobsmacked when Niamh announced your name," Pomona said, fortunately changing the subject, though not to one any more comfortable for Severus.

"I was surprised," Severus admitted. "I had believed that Albus had the best chance of winning. His costume is striking."

"He was the runner-up, you could say," Pomona replied. "You received eight more votes than he did, but the two of you each received more than any of the others combined."

"And of the witches?" He shouldn't ask, but he was curious.

"That was much closer. Sharon won, obviously, but Minerva, Helena, and Verity all received almost as many votes."

Severus forced himself to make small talk with Pomona about the students' winning fancy dress, and was grateful when Filius came up at the end of the dance and relieved him. He bowed and handed her over to her partner. He looked around. Albus was now dancing with Sharon Carter, both of them looking as though they were having a good time, and Minerva was still dancing with Caspar Lloyd. He wished he could have a good time dancing. He had enjoyed dancing with Helena, but she had left with Hagrid and the children. Besides, Minerva had asked him to dance with each of the witches on staff.

He found Verity Vector standing by herself in a corner. "Professor Vector, would you care to dance?"

"Minerva put you up to it?" she asked with a grin.

"Not exactly," Severus said uncomfortably. "I think she wants me to . . . mingle."

Vector nodded. "Yes, sure, I'll help you mingle. I have to warn you, I'm not a very good dancer. Not like Minerva. I do enjoy it, though."

Severus shrugged. As long as she didn't step on his feet, he didn't particularly care. The music switched again to a very lively swing piece just as they stepped out to dance. It looked to him as though Albus was tossing about his latest partner, Poppy Pomfrey, turning her and twirling her, then pulling her back energetically, but they both seemed to be having fun. Severus decided that he wouldn't try anything that lively. Nothing anywhere near that lively, in fact. He wondered how an old wizard like Dumbledore had ever learned anything beyond a waltz, or maybe a tango. Minerva had probably encouraged him.

He and Vector didn't even attempt to make small talk over the music, but they made it through the dance without stepping on each others' feet. She thanked him pleasantly, and Severus slunk over to a corner. It was time to start watching the punch bowls and making sure the students weren't canoodling, he decided.

Sadly, he only had five minutes of peace when Minerva appeared at his side. "You're not dancing, Severus. Are your fallen arches bothering you?" Severus did not like the amusement in her eyes.

"Suzie Sefton asked me to dance. I did not wish to be rude or hurt the girl's feelings. That was the best excuse I could think of in the moment."

Minerva laughed. "Come dance with me, Severus, then you can cut in with Poppy again and I can have Albus back for the last dance."

"Oh, Minerva," Severus sighed. "All right." Reluctantly, he let her lead him out to the dance floor.

"You did enjoy yourself a little, didn't you?" she asked as he put one arm around her.

"It was better than some of the parties I've been required to attend," he said grudgingly. "The Dark Lord's parties, in particular."

"Oh, Severus," Minerva said, grimacing, "why did you have to bring that up?"

"Sorry. But it hasn't been bad at all, really," he said, hastily trying to find something pleasant to say. "I danced with Helena Benetti, and she seemed to enjoy it. An international Quidditch star. Hadn't done that before. And Pomona enjoyed dancing with me, she said."

"Good." Minerva sighed and leaned on him a little. "It's not always easy for others, either, Severus. Nor for me, no matter what you may believe. Trying to have fun after everything that's happened. But that's why we fought. To return to the ordinary pleasures and joys of life in the company of family and friends."

"Of course."

They danced in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts, and Severus gradually steered them across the dance floor toward Albus and Poppy, who were chatting as they danced. Severus let Minerva go and bowed slightly. "Thank you for the dance, Headmistress." He turned to the other dancing couple. "If I might have the last dance with Madam Pomfrey?"

"Of course, my boy," Albus said. "Thank you for the enchanting dance, Poppy." He turned and bowed deeply to Minerva. "My dear Headmistress, may I have the honour of this dance?"

Minerva laughed and took his hand. "I would love it."

Albus took her into a close embrace just as Filius was announcing the last dance.

"Tired, Severus?" Poppy asked as he placed one hand in the centre of her back and began to lead her in the dance.

"Not particularly," he replied.

"You seem subdued."

"I do not like parties. I do not like dancing. Sometimes I wonder . . ."

"What?" Poppy asked when he didn't continue.

He shook his head. "Nothing." He wondered why he was even there at Hogwarts, let alone why he still lived.

"Listen," Poppy said softly, "we don't need to dance. Let's just sit and have a drink, hmm?"

"I did not mean I did not want to dance with you..."

"I know. It's okay, Severus," Poppy replied, dropping her arm and tugging his hand. "Let's get a piece of that chocolate cheesecake."

"All right."

They were sitting and eating chocolate cheesecake as the music faded away and the lights came up. Time to make sure that the students all returned to their dormitories and didn't linger to find secluded nooks and do any canoodling.

"Thanks for the cheesecake, Poppy," Severus said as he pushed away from the table and stood. "And for the dance."

"Good night, Severus." She smiled up at him, looking somewhat wistful. "Don't take too many points tonight. It is Halloween. Time for the students to enjoy themselves. And for you, too."

He nodded shortly. He would take whatever points the situation required. But perhaps he might leave some of the patrolling to the prefects. He did want to get back to his quarters. It was late, and for some reason, it felt as though it had been a long and exhausting evening.

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-Two: Not Onerous or Dreary

Sunday, 1 November 1998

Severus's life seems to be edging away from onerous and dreary, but is it becoming more enjoyable? He has lunch with Hermione and Gareth...maybe that's a start!

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, Madam Rosmerta, Gareth McGonagall, others.

N.B.: If you haven't yet read ["Enter, Peacetime."](#) a one-shot, it would be good to do that before Chapter Twenty-Three is posted.:-)

Author's Note: If you've enjoyed seeing little Suzie Sefton, I've written a "sister story" to A Long Vernal Season called ["The Sorting of Suzie Sefton"](#). It's complete in four chapters. Have fun!

Chapter Twenty-Two: Not Onerous or Dreary

Chapter 23 of 118

Sunday, 1 November 1998. Severus's life seems to be edging away from onerous and dreary, but is it becoming more enjoyable? He has lunch with Hermione and Gareth—maybe that's a start!



Chapter Twenty-Two: Not Onerous or Dreary

Sunday, 1 November 1998

Severus had owled Hermione and Gareth and asked them to join him for lunch at the Three Broomsticks, and Hermione had responded promptly, accepting the invitation for both of them. He would have to be back to the castle by dinner, since he was on the schedule for that evening, but his day was free. Relatively speaking. He did have an appointment later with Flitwick, and as long as he was at Hogwarts, someone could find him and ask something of him.

There was a chill in the air that day, the crispness that heralded the rapidly approaching winter, the nights growing longer and daylight, shorter. The sun was bright, though, and the early November sky was a brilliant blue that seemed to go on forever. He walked briskly down to the Hogwarts gates, then Apparated to the edge of the village. It was a very short hop, but it would give him more time to stop in Scrivenshaft's, which had opening hours between one and five on Sunday afternoons. He wanted to purchase some new quills. He was sick of the ones he had been using for the last couple decades. If Albus could trim his hair and beard and toss out half of his robes...the gaudier half, thank Merlin...he could use something other than the black quills he had used for so long. They were only goose quills that had been charmed black, anyway.

In the end, he decided on one dark but iridescent quill, one dark pine green quill, and two plain grey and white goose quills. He looked at the others, but he just couldn't imagine using scarlet, purple, royal blue, or even emerald green. They would distract him when he was writing, he was sure of it. He glanced at the parchment, and found some note-sized parchment that the shop would personalise. He usually simply cut his parchment to size, and he was perfectly capable of writing his name and other particulars on the parchment, or even charming a ream of parchment, if he so desired. Nonetheless, the designs that they had on display were attractive.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape. Is there anything I can help you with this afternoon?" the shop clerk asked.

"I have what I need," Severus said, handing the man the quills he had selected.

"Of course, sir. I noticed you were looking at our personalised note parchment. There is a design that we don't display, but which might be of interest to you."

"I don't need note parchment," Severus said.

"Allow me just to show you this design, Professor. We could personalise it further if it is to your taste." The short wizard smiled up at him. "And provide a courtesy discount for you."

Severus shrugged and followed the man to a desk in the back of the shop, where the wizard pulled open a drawer and flipped through several parchments until he found the one he was seeking. He handed it to Severus. The profile of two snakes, intertwined in a circle, one gold, one silver, each with a single emerald eye. Inside the circle were two snake-like S's.

"Several of Snape's Slytherins have ordered this design for their note parchment. I understand from Mr Zabini that your own ring is different." The shop clerk looked at Severus's hands, which were bare.

Severus held the parchment with the example design and looked at it. It was appealing, but he couldn't imagine using such a thing for his personal correspondence, and certainly not for Hogwarts business.

"Thank you for showing me the parchment, but I think not."

"What is your ring, sir? I could..."

"No, thank you...I will remember that you have it available, however," Severus said, "if ever I am unable to charm my own parchment." The man's face fell. "These are fine designs, and I am certain that they will continue to be popular amongst your clientele."

The wizard brightened. "I hope so, sir. It is an honour to serve Snape's Slytherins."

He raised one eyebrow. "I hope you find yourself as honoured to serve others who are Slytherin."

"Of course! It was my wife's House." He smiled. "I was in Hufflepuff."

"Hufflepuff?" He nodded. Hufflepuff and Slytherin, what a combination, he thought. He couldn't imagine what had drawn the two to each other, unless his wife enjoyed his devotion and knew she wouldn't have to work too hard for it. "Yes, also a fine House. As are they all."

That was his most recent mantra. As Deputy, and particularly as Minerva's Deputy, he knew that he was expected to display respect for all Houses, and it was Minerva's desire that Hogwarts become more unified with less prejudice between the Houses. Since that could only help in the rehabilitation of Slytherin House's reputation, he had

no reservations whatsoever about giving her his full support. Not that he wouldn't have supported her, anyway, but at least this was an easy duty to observe.

Severus paid for his purchases, then he glanced over at a display of Arithmancy parchment, which was on a special mark-down sale. Twenty percent off the regular price. Living in Hogsmeade, Gareth and Hermione likely were aware of the sale, but he would mention it to them in case they needed more of the specialised parchment.

He left the shop and crossed the street and headed for the Three Broomsticks. He had suggested one-thirty for lunch, hoping that the Sunday lunch crowd would have thinned some by then. He'd had a surfeit of teeming humanity the night before at the party. Not that it had been as tedious as he'd dreaded it would be, but it was too much mingling, socialising, pleasantries...and dancing with witches he had no desire to dance with...and he hoped for a quiet corner where he could have a congenial lunch with two people whose company was welcome. He would never admit such a thing very loudly, of course, but it was an odd and gratifying experience to have two such acquaintances, ones who weren't colleagues. He'd never had such acquaintances before. A friend and a . . . whatever it was that Gareth McGonagall was. A friend, he supposed. Although he could be annoying and sometimes his intensity was wearing. But Hermione's company would be a tempering influence during lunch, he thought. McGonagall seemed to behave himself somewhat better in the company of witches, and he didn't tend to tease him as much, reserving that for the witches. It was apparently one of his ways of flirting with them. Irritating wizard . . .

Severus entered the Broomsticks and looked around.

"Table, Professor?" Rosmerta called to him.

He nodded.

"For how many?"

"Three."

"O'Fallon, get Professor Snape a table for three."

A stringy young man, whom Severus didn't recognise, nodded at him and led him to a small table.

"I would prefer one not in the centre of the room," Severus said.

The boy nodded and looked around. "Jest a sec." He stepped toward a table in a corner that was still covered with the plates, glasses, and remains of a meal. He made an odd gesture with his hand and the detritus disappeared. Another small gesture with a twist of his wrist, and O'Fallon appeared to have conjured clean glasses and silverware.

"I prefer not to eat and drink using conjured utensils," Severus said icily. He could just see a conjured glass losing its materiality just as one lifted it, and then being drenched with water.

"Ain't conjury," the boy said. "All real, an' solid enough for ya." The wizard's eyes narrowed. "Use yer wand an' check'em if ya don't believe me." He turned away, muttering. "Bleedin' eejits all want their stuff flyin' t'rough the air."

Severus took a seat, annoyed by the strange boy.

"Sorry about O'Fallon, Professor," Rosmerta said. "He's a bit . . . uncouth, but he's basically a good lad. His father died a few months ago, and he's come to Hogsmeade to live with his uncle. Lots of talent, but no schooling. I said I'd give him a job. I don't think he's happy here. I doubt he'll be staying in Hogsmeade long." She shrugged.

"How old is he?"

"Sixteen. I think that when he has his next birthday, I'll have seen the last of him," Rosmerta replied.

"He's practising under-age magic," Severus said, frowning.

"He's got a waiver. His father was teaching him at home before he came to live with his uncle, so his uncle got him a waiver to use his wand at home with him, and as long as he sticks to wandless magic, he can use magic at work, too. From what I've seen, he can do as much or more without his wand as most of your sixth-years can with theirs."

"Hmph."

"What can I get you, Professor?"

"I'll have water...no, bitter lemon, if you have it," he said, remembering the drink he'd tried in the matron's rooms the night before. "And new glasses and silverware, please. Ones from the kitchen, not the ether," he added with a sneer.

"These really are from the kitchen," Rosmerta said. "Some trick O'Fallon has. Like reverse banishing. Dead useful in the hospitality trade...if he had a more winning personality, he might go far, he's bright enough. But the boy has no schooling and very few social skills. Add to that an adolescent chip on his shoulder the size of Ben Nevis, and I don't know what will become of him. A real waste."

"Indeed." There was an idea tickling the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite latch onto it. He shrugged and waited for his drink.

Another witch brought him a pitcher of water and his bitter lemon...he should have specified no ice, he thought...and asked him if he would like to order. He told her he was early and waiting for his lunch companions. When she left, he drew his wand and flicked the ice cubes from his drink then Vanished them. He removed the straw and sipped the bitter lemon, wondering why he had never tried it earlier.

Each time the door opened, Severus glanced up. The fourth time, it was Hermione and McGonagall. They saw him immediately. As they approached the table, Severus rose from his chair slightly, then sat back down.

"Hi, Severus!" Hermione said cheerily.

"Hermione," he responded, nodding to her. "McGonagall."

"Have you ordered yet, Snape?"

"No. I waited for you."

"Did you have a good Halloween?" Gareth asked.

"Passable," Severus replied.

"I went to a party at Grimmauld Place," Hermione said. "It got a little wild...the twins had some new products they were trying out on everyone, willing or not...so I left a little after midnight."

"Did you attend a party, McGonagall?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "You could say that. I went up to Grandmother Siofre's. She was doing a more traditional celebration. She felt it would be good for Eoghan. Good for everyone, with all the deaths recently."

"Eoghan," Severus said questioningly.

"Mm, Eoghan Tyree. Her late brother Murdoch's . . . great-great-grandson," he replied, thinking about it. "His parents died a few years ago in one of the early McTavish Street attacks after Riddle's return, his Grandma Lydia was taking care of him, but she died the next year...natural causes, she was Murdoch's widow, and not a young witch...so Grandmother Siofre and Johannes adopted him. Anyway, Grandmother Siofre thought that Eoghan is old enough now to appreciate a traditional Samhain and to celebrate the lives of his parents and Lydia. It was fun, though. We had a huge bonfire, and there was plenty of food and drink. Uncle Morgan and his family were there, and he brought his fiddle, so we danced, too. Great fun, that. Branwen and Renwick brought their kids, so Eoghan had a grand time with them." He grinned. "The kid's probably still asleep!"

"Yeah, you should talk!" Hermione said. She jabbed at Gareth teasingly. "Sorry we were a little late, Severus, but this one didn't get out of bed until after noon."

"And I'm ravenous," Gareth said, jabbing her back, "because *this* one didn't let me have anything to eat!"

Severus stilled his jealousy at their playfulness. He wished he could be . . . freer, at least with Hermione.

The same wait-witch came to take their lunch orders, and Severus ordered the Sunday special, since Hermione had ordered it, though he didn't know what it was, and Gareth asked for steak, mushrooms, fried eggs, and chips. "Oh, and some veg on the side," he added. "Don't care what."

As the wait-witch walked away, Severus said, "Since this was my invitation and we are celebrating, in a manner of speaking, the lunch is on me."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Severus!"

"What're we celebrating, mate?" Gareth asked, pouring himself a glass of water.

"Slytherin House has occasion to celebrate," Severus said. "We have a new House ghost."

"Really? What's it like?" Hermione asked. "Is it . . . like the Baron?"

"He is a Slytherin, himself," Severus said. "He was killed by the Dark Lord...Riddle...in nineteen seventy-eight because he had been trying to persuade his wife to withdraw her support from him, and the two were on the verge of removing all their assets from Gringotts and fleeing the country. He was killed as a lesson to his wife, which was supposed to ensure her continued loyalty and the gift of her assets...*all* of them, not just the fiduciary ones...for Riddle's own use and enjoyment. Unfortunately, she went to Dumbledore for help, and that got her killed..."

"Professor Dumbledore refused her?" Hermione asked, stunned.

"Of course not," Severus replied impatiently. "She was foolish enough to attend her husband's funeral afterward. She was kidnapped, Riddle discovered that she had gone to Dumbledore for help...she apparently wasn't much of an Occlumens...then her Gringott's accounts were plundered and she was tortured to death. The ghost didn't know what had happened to his wife. Minerva told me about it this morning at breakfast. I gathered she hadn't liked the wife much, but had wanted Albus to help her. Seems to feel sorry for the ghost, too."

"What's the bloke's name?" Gareth asked.

"Francis Flint. His wife's name was Valerianna."

"Seems to ring a bell . . ." Gareth shook his head. "That was the year after Riddle killed Dad. Didn't like him interfering in his plans, capturing his Death Eaters and getting them sent to Azkaban, that sort of thing. It was a hard year for us. I think that Valerianna was a cousin of some sort, but Flint . . ." He shrugged. "I'll have to ask Mum. She'll know."

Hermione, aware of Severus's unease with the direction the conversation was going, changed the subject. "What about the Hogwarts Halloween Fancy Dress Party, Severus? Was it a success?"

"I believe it was judged so, yes," he replied.

"Gareth wouldn't tell me what your fancy dress was. He said you'd prefer to tell me," Hermione said.

Severus looked at Gareth. "Thanks. Awfully."

Gareth laughed. "Did you bowl them over, Snape?"

"Hmph. I do not know. But it was acceptable. You should have told me I required a Glamour, however, McGonagall."

"A Glamour?" Hermione asked.

"Mhm."

Their meal arrived, and Severus looked pleased as he picked up his knife and fork. Sauerbraten with spaetzle, mashed swede, and shredded red cabbage cooked with apple and caraway. Ordering the same thing that Hermione had, he'd feared getting rabbit food.

They ate a few bites of their meal, then Hermione said, "You still haven't told me what Muggle you went as or why you needed a Glamour."

"Lawrence of Arabia," Severus said, feeling satisfied with his meal. Lovely whole peppercorns in the sauerbraten, which was delightfully tangy. "And Madam Pomfrey finished the effect for me, cast a Glamour to make me tanned and blue-eyed." He raised his hand and beckoned to the waitress. "A glass of red wine, please. I don't know what kind...something dry. Would you like some, either of you?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm still recovering from last night."

"I'll have one, thanks, Snape."

"Two glasses."

"Blue eyes and a tan?" Hermione asked, smiling. "You must have made quite an impression."

He shrugged a shoulder. "Dumbledore came as the Scarlet Pimpernel. Personally, I thought he had the best costume amongst the staff."

"Did they give a prize for best fancy dress?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. Your friend Ginny received the award for best-dressed Gryffindor witch. They awarded them on a House-by-House basis," Severus explained. "She was a pirate."

Hermione laughed. "Good for her!"

Gareth took a sip of his wine, which the wait-witch had just brought over. "Did they give any for the staff? And did Aunt Minerva end up coming as Mata Hari?"

"She decided on Amelia Earhart," Severus said, scooping up a forkful of noodles in the sauerbraten gravy. "She looked quite fine. Very . . . sporty."

"So, did the staff get voted on?" Gareth persisted.

"Yes. Professor Carter, the Muggle Studies teacher, came as Annie Oakley, an American Wild West Muggle. She won."

"They didn't give one to the best dressed wizard?" Gareth asked, not quelling his smile. "I bet I can guess who won that!"

"It was almost a tie," Severus said. "But you are correct."

"You won?!" Hermione asked, her eyes shining. "That's great for you, Severus! I mean, after everything that's happened. Well, they must have been able to appreciate your costume."

"As opposed to hating the wizard who was wearing it?" Severus asked, smirking. "But it was very close. I think that Dumbledore's costume was better. It was more elaborate than mine."

"You won, that's what counts," Hermione said.

"Perhaps." Yes, it was what counted, he thought. He had won. Even if it had been for something silly, it was still a rather satisfying sensation.

The three ate the rest of their meal, Gareth regaling them with funny stories, some of them about his father, whom he seemed to idolise. Finally, Severus rolled his eyes and held up his hand.

"Stop, McGonagall. You can't honestly expect us to believe that he charmed Nifflers from Venice using a penny whistle, can you?"

Gareth grinned. "Believe it or not, as you like. Dad did like to embroider a bit when he told a tale, but at the core, there was usually some truth. In this case, a lot of truth. He got a medal from the mayor of wizarding Venice, and a letter of commendation, as well. I'll show them to you sometime. The Nifflers were beginning to invade the Muggle areas of Venice, wrecking havoc in St. Mark's, so it was a good job Dad came along when he did! The Venetian wizarding government was having a terrible time, chasing after the Nifflers, recovering stuff the creatures had stolen, and running around doing memory charms on the Muggles. Had to borrow some Memory Charmers from Rome and wizarding Constantinople to keep up," Gareth said, pushing away his plate, which had very recently contained a large slab of apple pie, but which he had devoured in no time flat.

"Hmph." Severus pulled out his pocket watch and examined it. "I have a potion base steeping, so I need to return to the castle before it is unusable and I have to begin again. I also have an appointment with Flitwick. He wishes to do a series of duelling demonstrations for the students, and I agreed to assist him in the planning. I must leave shortly. It has been pleasant, however."

"Thanks for inviting us," Hermione said. "And congratulations on the House ghost! I'd like to meet him sometime...if he's sociable."

"He seems more interactive than the Baron was," Severus said. "And although he seems somewhat of a Milquetoast, and melancholy, as well, he does not seem shy. Perhaps you could come up to the castle one day soon and meet him." He hesitated. "We could have tea."

Hermione smiled happily. "I'd really like that!"

Severus nodded. "I shall owl you, then."

After he paid at the bar and left, he walked back up to Hogwarts. It was a fine day, still bright and sunny. Perhaps there might be some aspects to his life that were not entirely onerous or dreary. One corner of his mouth quirked up, and he picked up his pace. Time to add the desiccated Flobberworm larvae to his potion base, then meet with Flitwick about the duelling demonstrations. Classic old-school duelling, Flitwick had said. That might not be onerous or dreary, either . . .

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-Three: Collegiality

Sunday, 1 November 1998

Severus has an ordinary afternoon when an unexpected visitor drops by.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Alastor Moody, Verity Septima Vector

Chapter Twenty-Three: Collegiality

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Sunday, 1 November 1998. Severus has an ordinary afternoon when an unexpected visitor drops by.



Chapter Twenty-Three: Collegiality

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Filius waved cheerfully as Severus left his office. Flitwick's plan for a series of duelling demonstrations was quite ambitious, but Severus thought they would be popular amongst the students, especially if Flitwick were successful in recruiting the volunteers from outside the Hogwarts staff whom he planned to invite. His list included the Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt...although privately, Severus thought it unlikely the Minister would agree to participate, he thought it wouldn't hurt to ask him...Bill Weasley, Potter, and Nymphadora Tonks Lupin, and various other former members of the Order of the Phoenix, a few Aurors, Blaise Zabini, and a few people whose names Severus recognised but whom he did not know.

Severus himself had agreed to participate in one of the duelling nights, and he could tell that Filius was excited about that. He had sent him off with two books, one a slim, early nineteenth-century volume of duelling rules and protocols, called *The Gentleman at the End of Your Wand* which struck Severus as being more than mildly suggestive of something other than duelling, but that could just be his own twisted mind at work. Flitwick reminded him that a few of the rules in the book had been superseded, and in any case, they didn't want to traumatize the students with any dramatic injuries to the participants. It was to bring some fun and excitement back to duelling, rather than the dread seriousness it had been during the war.

The second book Filius loaned him was slightly thicker and contained descriptions of several famous duels from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Flitwick had blushed and told him that he was in that book, himself, for a duel he'd participated in as a young wizard in nineteen-oh-eight. Severus had asked whether Dumbledore were in the book anywhere, and Flitwick had clarified that as Albus hadn't participated in many formal sporting duels, only in actual combat, he didn't appear in the book.

"You should have been here for his duel with Malcolm McGonagall back in fifty-seven, though. That was something. Modified the rules a bit, relaxed them in some regards and did away with any timing, made it less formal. It was still one of the best displays I've ever witnessed...from both wizards. Malcolm was very talented and imaginative. I have a record of it somewhere here," he said, looking around himself at the clutter in his office. "I was the referee, so to speak, but I merely recorded it and declared the winner. It might be fun for you to view a recollection of it in Dumbledore's Pensieve sometime." Filius chuckled. "If you do borrow the memory from someone, be sure you get to see the dragon, too."

"There was a dragon in the duel?" Severus asked, confused.

"No, no. Malcolm completed a number of challenges prior to the duel. One of them was riding a dragon. I've only seen that three times in my life, and I have to say, I enjoyed watching him riding Isolde...the dragon...almost as much as I did the duel." Filius chuckled again, shaking his head. "A remarkable fellow."

"Hmph." Perhaps the tale of McGonagall's father charming the Nifflers from Venice wasn't quite as far-fetched as he'd believed. He still thought the younger wizard's admiration for his father bordered on unrealistic hero-worship, but then, he had been assassinated, targeted specifically by the Dark Lord, when Gareth was quite young. Perhaps it was natural. Severus wouldn't know. In any case, Minerva's brother's exploits did provide for some entertaining tales.

Severus headed toward the dungeons, feeling relaxed after a productive morning, a satisfying lunch with his friends, and a good meeting with Flitwick, and he was just coming down the stairs from the first floor as one of the great oak doors opened below him, letting in a gust of chilly November air. He stiffened and his next step faltered briefly as he saw the wizard who came through the door. The expression on his face turned sour. No way to avoid the man, either, not without turning around and fleeing. And Severus Snape, although he understood the value of a discreet withdrawal or a strategic retreat, he did not flee from a wizard in his own home...for that was what Hogwarts was. His home and his domain. He was Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts. He did not flee.

He continued down the stairs as the other wizard closed the great door behind himself.

"Professor Snape."

"Moody." Severus returned the other wizard's nod, but didn't pause, simply turning down the corridor that led to the dungeon stairway. He heard the man's uneven tread proceeding up the stairs, and he let out a long breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

He hadn't seen Moody since the Merlin awards dinner, and then only from a good distance, and he hadn't spoken to the mad old wizard since that last meeting at Grimmauld Place when the man had given him a pathetic apology for having cursed him in the back. Cursed him with a highly painful, hard-to-heal, and potentially fatal spell.

He had felt well until he saw the former Auror. Severus shook off the memory, trying to think instead of the present. He would check on his potion again, then go to his office and read a few student essays before dinner. Then that evening, he could read the books that Flitwick had loaned him.

Flitwick was a decent wizard, and his series of duelling evenings would be an interesting display of skill. Flitwick would do a brief demonstration duel with one of the witches or wizards who was to participate in the main duel that evening, and then the other two would duel each other with him as the referee and judge; he would also be in charge of maintaining audience safety, protecting them from any stray spells. On any occasion that Flitwick actually participated in a full duel, they thought that either Dumbledore or the Transfiguration teacher, Olivia Ouellette, could do the judging and security. According to Flitwick, Ouellette had been quite a talented duellist when she was young, though she hadn't participated in a sporting duel in twenty years. Flitwick had already spoken to the Slytherin witch about it, and she seemed willing to help, though she didn't want to be involved on a regular basis.

Flitwick promised to consult him again before he firmed up any plans, and before he scheduled him for any duels. He had suggested, however, that he might want to duel the Headmistress.

"It would be quite a drawing card, Severus, you and she duelling," the little Charms master had said excitedly. "It could be a great opener! We might even attract visitors from the Ministry."

Severus hadn't liked that idea particularly. He couldn't imagine casting a hex at Minerva, and he wasn't comfortable with the idea of her casting one at him, either. He suggested instead that Filius recruit Albus for the first one, and perhaps Potter, if the boy would agree. Severus didn't want to see Potter at the school again, but it would be a drawing card, if that's what Flitwick was looking for. The two wizards who helped to defeat the Dark Lord...*Riddle*, he reminded himself...the two of them duelling, that would certainly bring them out of the woodwork, no doubt about it. He would have to speak to Minerva about security precautions if they did begin to have outsiders attending the duelling demonstrations.

After checking on his potion, a challenging long-brewing one that he was trying for the first time, Severus went back to his office and took out his new dark iridescent quill and began reading the sixth-year essays on Scintillating Solution, comparing the modern method of brewing it to the traditional method. He'd not assigned an essay on that topic before, so that was somewhat refreshing for him, although most of the answers were pedestrian regurgitations of the material available in their Potions textbook. A few of the students, however, had given the subject some additional thought, and one of them, Jamie Brett, actually had a few interesting insights. He might be worth spending a bit more attention on, that one. He might have a future in Potions, though Severus believed that he was interested in working in the Ministry in International Magical Cooperation, as his mother did. Perhaps he could persuade the boy that such work would be wasted on anyone with a modicum of creativity. Or that if he pursued Potions, he might find a position with the Department of Mysteries, if he was set on a career with the Ministry. He should have Flitwick speak with him, as well. Flitwick was Brett's Head of House, and Severus believed that he had once worked for the Department of Mysteries himself...although that had been decades ago.

Severus finished reading a dreadful essay by Letitia Pepper, on which he wrote a note saying that if she wished to continue in Potions, she would have to do more than copy information from a two decades-old Potions textbook. Had she really believed he wouldn't recognise that seventy percent of her essay had been copied verbatim? Even if he hadn't recognised the actual text, since it wasn't a Potions textbook they used at Hogwarts, the sections that she had copied were so obviously written in a different style from her own poor prose, he would have known she hadn't written it herself. After very little contemplation, he put a large red T at the top of the paper, as much for the insult to him as for the content of the essay. If she thought he'd be easy on her because she wore a double-snake ring, she was sorely mistaken. Severus had just set the essay on top of the pile of completed parchments to his left when there was a knock at his door.

"Enter!"

The door opened, and there, unwelcome, was the wizard whom he had encountered an hour before, Alastor Moody, his magical eye spinning dizzily in its socket then

coming to rest and focussing upon Severus.

"What do you want?" Severus demanded.

"To talk." He held up a bottle in a brown paper bag. "Brought some firewhisky."

"It is not even dinnertime yet," Severus said icily. "And even if it were later, or I was inclined to drink in the afternoons, I do not know why you would think I would want to drink with you. I don't even want to speak with you."

Moody took one step into the room. "Came to see Flitwick. 'Bout the duelling. Thought I'd stop by and see you as long as I'm here."

"I hope that he does not plan to have us duel," Severus snarled. "I would see to it that it was a very short duel. Very short, indeed."

"No, he has someone else in mind for me," Moody replied, not responding to Severus's tone. "Look, Snape, can we talk? It's important."

"To whom?" Severus asked, but he nodded curtly and closed the door with a quick flick of his finger. As soon as he closed the door, he picked up his wand and held it loosely in his hand. "What is it, Moody?"

Moody sat heavily in one of the two wooden chairs in front of Severus's desk. "Wanted to know how you were doing. I, um, know it must be . . . odd for you. Difficult, maybe. And I'm no stranger to the difficulties of adjusting to a new life. Peacetime can be hard on an old warrior, probably harder on a former spy," he said frankly, setting the bottle on Severus's desk. "I'm glad you've got a new life, though, and that I've got a chance to say my bit to you. About what went before. About us, you and me."

Severus merely looked at him impassively.

Alastor cleared his throat. "What I'm saying is, I'm sorry. I am very sincerely sorry, Professor Snape. For everything over the years. For my doubts . . . for my behaviour, especially. Wouldn't have been wise not to have some doubts, not to be wary of you, but I treated you badly. I know that. And it wasn't justified, it wasn't right. Not just the curse. That was wrong, but everything else, and the things I said about you, and the way I tried to undermine you in the Order and with Dumbledore and Minerva . . . I've been thinking about it a lot. Don't expect you to say that bygones are bygones, but I wanted to tell you. And that's all. Except that I hope you can get past it...past what went before during the war, past the old life, I mean. Not what I did to you. Wouldn't expect that. But I needed to say it." Alastor shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Severus stared at him. He hadn't understood a word past "I'm sorry," it seemed.

"Well . . . guess I'll be going, then," Moody said when Severus continued to stare at him without saying anything. He nodded at the bottle. "Keep the firewhisky. Twenty-year-old Old Ogden's. The good stuff."

Severus nodded.

Moody stood and started toward the door.

"You brought me back," Severus said suddenly. "You were with Aberforth, Healer Egidius, and Miss Granger."

"Aye. I was with them. Dumbledore sent me. It was an honour. Part of the hero's escort." Alastor nodded. "When I saw you, I thought I was too late. Thought . . . you were dead. Or would be soon. And it wasn't a happy sight for me, whether you believe it or not."

Severus simply stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Good evening, then, Snape," Moody said. A lop-sided grin flashed across his face. "And congratulations on your new House ghost. Knew Flint back in the day. Ministry lackey. Not a bad sort, but not like you...not much backbone, that one. Still, he'll serve you well, I think."

Severus nodded. "Good bye, Moody."

Alastor closed the door behind him.

Severus gazed at the closed door for a few minutes. His life was strange. He wouldn't ever have dreamed that, if he survived the war, this would be his life. Not that he had believed he could possibly survive the war. He had been certain that he would die and that he would have no life at all. On the off chance that he were to survive and the Dark Lord didn't, he had believed he would be an utter pariah at best, a lifelong prisoner of the Ministry at worst.

There were times, like listening to Moody just then, when he felt a giddy sense of complete displacement, a sense of vertigo combined with a feeling of detachment, as though he were a distantly floating spectator, not a participant, in his life. He didn't know what he could do to feel more present in his own life. Sometimes, it was almost as though he were becoming a ghost, himself, one of those ghosts that were not very well-oriented or connected to the present and their current surroundings.

Severus shook himself. He had felt fine during lunch. Slightly bemused at times, and occasionally irritated, but not detached or confused. He simply had to get on with the business of living. He glanced down at the remaining essays he had yet to grade. His teaching, his duties, his few friendships with Minerva, Hermione, Gareth, and Albus, those things were what he should focus on. Then perhaps the disjuncture between his present life and his previous existence would not seem quite as great, a sometimes dizzying chasm his mind could not bridge.

He set his new quill in its holder, straightened his parchments, and pocketed his wand. The firewhisky bottle caught his eye as he stood. Another sense of displacement overcame him, but he reached for the bottle and took it from its paper bag. A new, unopened bottle. He set it back down, then left for dinner. He hoped the pudding was good that night, since he had to remain until the meal was over, a tedious duty, but an ordinary kind of tedium. It might even be good for him, but he snorted to himself as he closed and warded his office door, turning the large key in its lock for good measure. No, meal duty would simply be dull, not salutary.

Severus took his seat beside the Headmistress's elevated chair, and Vector sat down next to him.

"Hi, Severus."

"Professor Vector."

"Last night's party wasn't bad," she remarked as she Summoned the pitcher of apple juice and it slid across the table toward her. "Better than most Hogwarts parties."

Severus nodded.

"By the way," she said, offering him the pitcher, "I worked out that I have you to thank for not flashing my goods to the entire school last night."

Severus darted a quick glance at her, the heat rising in his face.

"So, thank you, Severus."

"It was, um, I just thought you should know."

"I couldn't tell when I looked in the mirror before I came down. The light wasn't right. Thank goodness I had the cape on during dinner."

"Indeed."

"You know, you're my boss now, in a way. You haven't been my student for years. You don't need to call me 'Professor Vector' unless you are more comfortable with that."

Severus nodded. "Of course." He glanced over at her. "What do you prefer?"

She shrugged slightly. "'Septima' is fine. People who have known me since I was in school often call me 'Verity,' but I've gone by 'Septima' since my apprenticeship."

"I see. I've been unsure which you preferred, as the Headmistress generally calls you 'Verity,' yet others call you 'Septima.' It was confusing."

Vector chuckled. "I grew up in a confused situation. My father called me 'Septima,' and my mother called me 'Verity.' Apparently they hadn't been able to agree on a name, so that was their way of agreeing to disagree. My brother and sister usually called me 'V.S.' or 'Veese,' or even 'Vee Seven,' and their kids call me 'Aunt Vee Seven' or 'Aunt V.'"

Severus nodded. He remembered his father used to call him "Sammy" when he was small. But his parents hadn't agreed to disagree. His mother had had her way in that as in most other things.

"So, as long as you don't call me 'Aunt Vee Seven,'" Vector said agreeably, "I'm happy with whatever you wish to call me...even 'Professor Vector.'"

Severus quirked a smile. "Thank you, Professor."

Verity chuckled, and the meal arrived on the table. Minerva and Albus soon joined them, and the conversation turned to other topics, to changes in the Ministry, Flitwick's upcoming duelling demonstrations, and league Quidditch. Severus tuned it all out and focussed on his food, roast pork with potato dumplings in gravy.

Eating dinner in the Great Hall felt different than it ever had before, even during those relatively peaceful years before Potter came to Hogwarts, when he was awaiting the Dark Lord's return and holding everyone at arm's length, uninterested in anything but marking the days until the Dark Wizard rose again and he could have his revenge. Now, he was only marking days, unsure of what he might look forward to, and everything in his life seemed different. Even the hum and buzz of the conversation around him felt different.

He looked over at Albus, who was in earnest conversation with Caspar Lloyd about the British and Irish Quidditch league teams, and Minerva interjected a slightly sarcastic comment about their mutual fascination for the Holyhead Harpies. Vector overheard and let out a guffaw. Severus smiled.

The difference, he thought, was not in his colleagues, but in himself, and he thought that it was pleasant to be a "good guy" after so many years, to have otherwise congenial but nonetheless distant colleagues become more comfortable with him now because he was more comfortable with them. And because he behaved better himself these days...Vector would have been mortified if she had discovered too late that she had been "displaying her assets" to the entire school. In earlier years, he might have informed Vector in order to gain something for himself...if only her gratitude, or even her embarrassment by making a snide remark to her himself...but the night before, he had only been concerned about how she would feel if she learned too late of the transparency of her gown. He had put himself in her place, and rather than taking any satisfaction in the prospect of another person's mortification, he had identified with it and averted it. It was a good feeling, and a surprising one.

Perhaps Minerva was right: he didn't need to hold himself aloof any longer. He might never escape his past, and he might never have more than two or three friends, but his day-to-day life could be more comfortable. Around his colleagues, he could at least behave as though he were normal, as though he were one of them, as though he deserved to be among them, even if he wasn't and didn't.

Severus didn't know how long the feeling of acceptance and well-being would last, but he decided that he would allow himself to enjoy it whilst it did last, rather than talking himself out of it. For that evening, anyway. No doubt Potions with the second-years on Monday would cure him of it. He smirked and helped himself to the apple crumble that was making its way down the table.

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-Four: Dawn Light Reflected

Monday, 9 November Saturday, 14 November 1998

The portrait of Aurora Sinistra is dedicated.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, Filius Flitwick, Firenze, Aurora Sinistra (portrait)

Author's Note: The occasion when Moody cursed Severus in the back appears in *Deaths' Dominion*, chapters 16 and 17 ("Twisting on racks" and "When sinews give way"). The story of Alastor Moody escorting Severus back to Hogwarts after the battle is mentioned in *Death's Dominion*, but it's told in-full in the one-shot, ["Enter, Peacetime."](#)

If you've read *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, you'll recognize the reference to Malcolm McGonagall and his duel with Albus. It takes place in Chapter 135: A Spree, if you'd like to refresh your memory of it. You may also recall that the story of the Niffler invasion of Venice was one of the stories Malcolm first told Gertrude the day that they met...much to Minerva's mortification...but getting Gertrude to laugh. And that's what made Gareth McGonagall possible!

Chapter Twenty-Four: Dawn Light Reflected

Chapter 25 of 118

Monday, 9 November – Saturday, 14 November 1998. Severus is given a task and he makes a deal. The portrait of Aurora Sinistra is dedicated.



Chapter Twenty-Four: Dawn Light Reflected

Monday, 9 November Saturday, 14 November 1998

"So next Saturday, there will be a public presentation ceremony in the Great Hall," the Headmistress said, "and then a smaller dedication in the dungeons after lunch. Any staff who would like to attend the dedication may, but be aware that the space is limited. We will have special public viewing hours for the students later on Saturday after the dedication, although since they are all in residence, they can visit it whenever they wish." She looked over at Severus. "Professor Snape has made it clear to the students in his House that that area of the dungeons is to be . . . an area for all students at all times outside of curfew, not only for Slytherin."

"A harassment-free zone?" Pomona asked, eliciting a few chuckles from some of the other staff at the meeting.

"I would not have put it that way," Minerva said coolly.

"It was not the most felicitous expression," Albus interjected. He smiled genially at Pomona. "I am sure that Pomona only wished to compliment Severus on the strides he has made with his House, and that you, my dear, have made with the school, in reducing any inter-House friction. And, of course, to remark upon the excellent cooperation amongst the Heads of House in resolving conflicts between students in different Houses."

Pomona opened her mouth, but Filius put his hand on her arm, and she closed it.

"Exactly!" the little wizard said. "We can be very happy that we are moving together into the future! A harmonious future!"

Severus coughed, covering what would otherwise have sounded like a snort of derision. Which, in fact *would* have been a snort of derision. But he liked Flitwick, and Flitwick did like harmony. He tended to encourage harmony, as well. And given that, in Severus's experience, the opposite of harmony was chaos, and Severus did not like chaos, he did not wish to deride Flitwick's sentiments.

"As I was saying," Minerva continued, "the students may visit the portrait on Saturday after the dedication, and on Sunday, there will be a few hours in the afternoon when members of the public can view the portrait. The prefects will be recruited to escort any guests to the dungeons and back to the front doors so that we don't have random people wandering about the castle. Professor Hagrid and Mr Rath will see to it that the guests are let onto the grounds and into the castle, and Mr Shunpike will be on hand down in the dungeons to keep an eye on things, as well. Any other staff who would like to volunteer to . . . welcome our guests, may do so."

"When is the portrait arriving?" Vector asked. "And may we see her, er, it beforehand?"

"The portrait will arrive on Friday night. Renwick Douglas has tested the animation charms and pronounced the portrait ready, but he has put it back to sleep until it is here at Hogwarts. He plans to activate the portrait on Saturday during the presentation ceremony. That is his usual procedure for public portraits. So although you may certainly see the portrait prior to the ceremony, it will be asleep and not interactive."

After a few more details of the Sunday viewing were discussed...primarily the roles of the prefects and their supervision...Severus was relieved to have Minerva adjourn the meeting.

"Severus, a word if I may?" Minerva said as he gathered up his parchments and prepared to leave.

"Of course, Headmistress," Severus replied with a nod, sitting back down.

"Not here, though. My office?"

"Certainly."

"Meet me there in fifteen minutes, then. I just want to catch Professor Sprout before she reaches her rooms. I have a special role for Mr Bain and Miss Donovan, and I need her to send Bain to me tomorrow morning before his first class. I've already spoken to Miss Donovan when she came to see me on another matter."

Twenty minutes later, Severus was becoming bored with waiting when Minerva came in, out of breath.

"So sorry, Severus. We got talking, and suddenly I realised what the time was! Thank you for waiting."

"Of course."

"I was wondering about the order of the speakers. I had thought to speak first, but just to introduce the speakers and thank everyone for coming. Could you give the first speech? She was in your House..."

"And murdered by members of that same House. I think not, Minerva. I will say a few words at the end, if you wish, but no speech."

"Please, Severus."

He shook his head.

"I do not want to appeal to anything other than your House loyalty, but you do know why she was where she was when she took her last breath."

Severus let out an explosion of breath. "You do not want to appeal to my sense of guilt, but you're willing to do it if you have to, that's what you're saying."

"I simply believe that it would be most appropriate and fitting, particularly as the plaque names you as the first donor. And it would be good for you and for the school if you did."

"I don't know . . ." He always gave in to Minerva; he didn't know why he bothered protesting, he thought with only a little resentment. Then he looked up at her, a glint in his eye. "I will if I can be the first to speak to the portrait. Alone and before the ceremony."

"Renwick is going to activate the charms at the presentation ceremony."

"I don't give a . . . a fig what Renwick has planned. He can put her back to sleep again if he wants. Or she can just pretend, like all of these portraits are doing right now," he replied, gesturing towards the multitude of portraits of previous headmistresses and headmasters. "I want to speak with her."

"Aurora isn't in the portrait," Minerva said gently.

"No, I know that, but you said the charms had been well-done, as well, almost, as they would have been if she had been alive when it was painted. It may not satisfy me,

but I want to speak with it. It is going to be hanging just feet away from the Potions classroom and I will have to see it every day. I want to speak with it first. I need to be prepared."

Minerva nodded. "I will speak with Renwick about it, then."

"Good! And I will make your speech, as you wish."

"There's one other thing you can do for me, Severus. If you're planning on going into the Forbidden Forest to . . . to gather potions ingredients again in the next few days, find the centaurs. See if you can speak to Firenze. Let him know about the presentation and dedication. If you don't plan to go, please instruct Hagrid to find them and pass on the message."

"Firenze? I know he was on staff with her, but it is doubtful that he would be interested in attending such an event. He hasn't attended any of the others, none that I remember, anyway."

"This is different. He and Aurora were close. He even allowed Albus to extract some of his memories of her and borrow them for Renwick to use. They were . . . close."

"Close. As in . . . *close*?" Severus felt a sense of distaste creep over him.

"They were very good friends. They cared for each other very much and spent a lot of time together. Only Renwick viewed the memories that Firenze loaned us, so I do not know what they were, but I believe they were . . . of a tender nature."

Severus swallowed uncomfortably and averted his gaze. "I will find him, then, when next I am in the Forest, and tell him. I suppose I've heard stranger things."

"Thank you, Severus."

He nodded.

"From what I saw, Severus, it was a very sweet relationship, so I hope you don't say anything to Firenze about it."

"Right." To each his own, Severus thought. Or her own. Or its own.

Two days later, Wednesday evening, it was cold but fine, and after dinner, Severus headed out of the castle and into the dark. He was not wandering the Forbidden Forest in search of potions ingredients, as Minerva had supposed, but for another private purpose; however, as long as he was going into the Forest, he would do the opposite of his usual practice: rather than avoiding any area that showed signs that centaurs had been there recently, he would seek them out and follow them in hopes of finding some part of the herd. And put on a brave face and hope that any who he found were in a good mood and well-disposed to speak to him.

Using a lantern rather than just relying on a *Lumos*, Severus chose one of the easier paths to find and follow in the dark. He heard cracks and snicks and rustles at irregular intervals, and he would stop, stand still, and listen, but the noise would not repeat, and he would hear only the light breeze whispering through the tree branches. Finally, after he had the sense that he was being watched and followed, he stopped.

Feeling a bit foolish, speaking aloud alone in the dark wood, he said, "I have come to speak with Firenze. I have news from the Headmistress of Hogwarts."

He stood and waited, then walked back the way he came, stopping at intervals and repeating, "I have come to speak with Firenze. I have news from the Headmistress of Hogwarts."

Surely there was someone better suited to this task than he, he thought after he had stopped for a fourth time. Hagrid, or perhaps Albus, or even Rath, who spent a lot of time in the Forest and seemed more comfortable there than anywhere else.

Determined that this would be the final time he would repeat his announcement, even though his sense that he was being followed and watched had only increased, Severus stopped and began again.

"I have come to speak with Firenze. I have news..."

There was a crack of a twig breaking underfoot, then the clear tramp of heavy hooves coming toward him, the footfalls only slightly deadened by the dead leaves and fallen pine needles that carpeted so much of the forest floor in that area.

Severus stood and waited. A moment later, the centaur most familiar to him, Firenze himself, stepped toward him, seeming to glow, though there was no moonlight in that place. Severus bowed stiffly and Firenze inclined his head.

"Professor Snape. I am told you seek me. I expected you again in the Forest tonight, but did not anticipate that you would wish to speak to any but the dead."

Severus ignored his statement. "I have come from Headmistress McGonagall. You are aware that there was a portrait commissioned of Professor Sinistra. It will arrive in the castle on Friday, the day after tomorrow, and on Saturday at eleven o'clock...approximately three hours past sunrise...it will be unveiled and presented to the public. There will be speeches at that time. After lunch, there will be a more private dedication of the portrait when it is hung in the dungeons near Slytherin House. The Headmistress wishes to invite you to attend either or both. On Sunday afternoon, the castle will be open to the public for any others to view the portrait."

"Walk with me, Professor," Firenze said, leading him through the Forest in a direct line back to the Hogwarts grounds. Severus followed, and when they reached a path wide enough, he stepped up to walk beside the centaur.

They reached the edge of the Forest, but Firenze continued to walk with him towards the castle.

"The tranquility that you seek you will not find in the Forest, friend Professor," Firenze said solemnly, "nor will I find dawn light inside your stone walls. However, just as you will again seek your peace in the Forest, so too do I wish to view the portrait. But, I think, not at the wizards' ceremonies." He stopped and turned his head, looking down into Severus's eyes. "I will come and you shall allow me to view the portrait in private, if this meets the Headmistress's approval. Meet me at the edge of the Forest where we just came out, tomorrow, an hour past full darkness. During your dinner hour, it is. Tell me the Headmistress's decision. Perhaps there will be a glimmer of the dawn light reflected there in your dungeon. But just as you hope to find some echo of peace in the Forest where it does not lie, I should like to see the dawn light once more if I can, even if only in a reflected shimmer. Moonlight on water whispers of the sun."

Severus nodded, but before he was able to respond any further, Firenze had turned and broken into a canter. Strange creatures, centaurs. Severus was not entirely comfortable around them, not even Firenze, and he found their conversation nonsensical at times, bewildering at others. Severus did not like to be bewildered.

It was still early, so he decided to see Minerva immediately and, slinging his cape over one shoulder, went directly to the gargoyle. *Táin Bo*."

Minerva had progressed to classic Celtic legends and myths for her passwords, which Severus found far preferable to Aesop's fables, even if he occasionally found them almost unpronounceable. It had taken him several tries before he had the emphasis in "Morrigan" down to the gargoyle's satisfaction. He placed the blame on the Headmistress's accent. He hoped that she moved on to find a new inspiration for her passwords soon.

When the door didn't open to him automatically, Severus knocked once. The door opened, and Severus stepped in to find Minerva in a meeting with Flitwick.

"Hello, Severus. We'll be a few more minutes. If you'd like to wait outside, or return later?" Minerva asked.

"I shall wait, although if I may use the library, I would prefer that."

"Of course, help yourself," Minerva replied.

Severus was deeply engrossed in a book on spell design, reading the chapter on the difference between a spell's purpose and the caster's intent and how to use both when creating a new spell, when the door opened.

"Thank you for waiting, Severus."

"Of course." He closed the book somewhat reluctantly and rose to reshelve it. He could return at another time and continue reading it, bring parchment and quill and take notes.

"Interesting book?" Minerva asked as he stepped out of the library to join her.

"Quite."

Severus sat down in the chair opposite Minerva's desk.

"Tea?"

"No, thank you. I wanted to report to you that I spoke with Firenze this evening."

"Oh, good! What did he say?"

"Essentially, he does not wish to attend any of the ceremonies. He would, however, like a . . . a private viewing, if you agree."

"Of course. That's not a problem at all. Just arrange a time with him to meet you and you can bring him down to see it. If you would be so kind," Minerva added.

"Yes. I anticipate he will wish to do so after curfew when there are no others around."

"Simply arrange it with him however best suits you both. Thank you for talking to him, Severus."

He nodded. "I will tell him tomorrow, then. He wishes to meet me at about six."

"That's fine. And how are you? How are you feeling?"

"I am well. I have had no sign of any relapse, and Madam Pomfrey gave me what she called a 'once over' on Saturday. She found no problems."

"Good. And your life in general? Feeling more settled?"

"It is fine. Nothing remarkable."

"Any worries, concerns, anything I can help you with?"

Severus shook his head. "No, Headmistress. Thank you."

"I thought that after the dedication, I would have the staff up to the suite for sherry and mince pies, any who care to come."

He nodded. "That sounds appropriate."

"I hope you will join us."

"Perhaps." No, he thought not.

"Thank you again for speaking with Firenze."

"Of course." Severus stood. "Good night, Headmistress."

"Good night, Severus. See you tomorrow at breakfast."

Renwick Douglas, a tall, long-legged wizard with a bristly red beard, stepped into the Headmistress's sitting room and nodded to Snape. "She is ready for you, Professor Snape. She is alert and oriented. As oriented as may be expected this early in her awakening. That improves rapidly with time."

"Does it, she, it . . . does the portrait know who will be speaking to her?" Severus asked.

"I told her," Douglas said with a nod.

Severus stood.

"Go on, then, Severus," Minerva said encouragingly.

Severus stepped into the study and closed the door behind him. The portrait was on an easel, facing away from the door. Severus could feel a tightness growing in his chest, and his pulse seemed to race. He swallowed and tried to draw some saliva into his dry mouth.

He let out a long, slow breath, and then he stepped around and faced the portrait. He stared. There was a good reason that Renwick Douglas was the foremost wizarding portrait artist, famed for both his artistry and his Charms mastery. Even simply as a painting, it was remarkable, and when Sinistra tilted her head and turned her gaze toward him, Severus would not have been surprised if she had stood and stepped out of the frame.

The portrait of Sinistra smiled when she saw him. "Professor Snape! My first visitor. You are still at Hogwarts and Head of Slytherin?"

Severus nodded. "Yes."

"And how are the students? Who in the fifth-year class went on to NEWTs level Astronomy this year?"

"Most of them, I think. I would have to check the enrolment lists," Severus replied.

"And who is teaching Astronomy this year?"

"David Manning. He was in Ravenclaw."

"Yes, I remember him. We had the same Astronomy master. Of course, he was an apprentice many years before Aurora was. He was married, wasn't he?" the portrait asked. "And they had a daughter . . . what was her name . . ."

"Yes, he is married. His wife Laura works here, too. She's the librarian." Whatever Severus had expected, it was not this mundane conversation.

"So, you wanted to see me first, before anyone else, according to Renwick," Sinistra's portrait said. "Did you want to know something? I do not remember everything of Aurora's life, but if I can help you, I will."

It was odd to hear the portrait speak of the real Sinistra in that way. He blinked. "Yes . . . I wanted to say . . . I am sorry that you . . . that you had to take care of Slytherin so often in my absence, and I am sorry that you had to take care of them on that last day."

"I was always happy to care for the Slytherins, Professor Snape. And it wasn't your fault that there were a few bad apples in the barrel. They didn't spoil the rest of them."

"Do you . . . do you remember your death?"

"Aurora's death? Yes, I remember it. Such a surprise. I should have expected something of the sort, but I didn't. Yes, it was a surprise."

"I am sorry. I wish I could trade places with you. It isn't fair that you died and I lived. I knew I was going to die, but then . . . I didn't."

"You do not truly wish to trade places with Aurora, I do hope not," the portrait said with a shake of her head. "I had a marvellous life, a full life. Not a very long one, perhaps, but Aurora Sinistra loved the life she had, and the memories I have are good ones. Some sadness, of course . . . there must be sadness, Renwick said. And so I have some of her sadness, too. Sadness for those poor boys who killed her. Sadness that my parents lived to see both their children die before them. And now . . . now I find myself feeling a new sadness," she said looking thoughtful. "I am very sad that you wish you had died, Professor. I know Aurora better than almost anyone, and I know she would not want you to feel that way. She was fond of you, you know. Thought you had a good sense of humour . . . though she was sad as she saw it dying over the last few years. But she liked you."

"Did she really . . ." He took in a deep breath. "I should go. I do not know whether Douglas will, um, deactivate you or not in the meantime, but you . . . you will wish to be fresh for the ceremony tomorrow morning."

Sinistra smiled. "I do not believe I will tire. Although it could be pleasant to sleep, I believe."

Severus nodded. "Thank you, Professor. I am glad we spoke."

"Please, you may call me Aurora, if you are comfortable with that."

"Indeed. Good night, Aurora."

Severus unrolled his parchment and looked at it again. He had read it a hundred times in the last two days, it seemed, and changed something on almost every reading. He wished he had known her better. Minerva had said to speak from the heart. If he knew where to find his heart, he might have an easier time doing that. As it was, he had done his best to write something that would honour Sinistra without bringing dishonour to their House or embarrassment to the Headmistress. And although to show his own heart might not be possible for him, he had tried to show some humility that might, in its display, exalt the Slytherin who had died serving his House. It was a short speech, but people hated long speeches, anyway.

He looked up when he heard his name. He had tuned out everyone else who was waiting with him in the antechamber to the Great Hall.

"It is time to go out to the Hall," Minerva said. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be, I suppose," Severus replied.

On the raised dais a few minutes later, Minerva had introduced him as Head of Slytherin House, and he stood and stepped over to the podium. He had considered using a Sonorous Charm, but had decided against it. If everyone were quiet...which they had better be, considering the occasion...he would be easily heard even in the back of the Hall.

"Today we honour Professor Aurora Lucia Sinistra, who brought honour to Hogwarts and to Slytherin House. Her care and concern for all Hogwarts students surpassed that required by mere duty, and her last minutes on earth were spent bringing some of those students, students in her own House of Slytherin, to a place of safety.

"As a teacher, Professor Sinistra understood the beauty of her discipline and tried to convey that beauty to her students. It is a testament to her success that almost all students who sat their OWLs in Astronomy went on to the NEWT-level class; they had not only achieved a sufficiently high mark in the class, but they had developed an appreciation for her subject.

"As a colleague, Professor Sinistra was always willing to do whatever was required of her and more. She often assisted me with Slytherin House matters, and always with an understated but clear enthusiasm. There were times when I felt as though it was I who was doing her the favour in asking her to help.

"She was loyal to Hogwarts, to the students, to the Headmaster, and then later to the Headmistress. Whatever the threat, whether from within or without, her loyalty and service were unwavering.

"I regret that although I served with her for so many years, and even our time as students here at Hogwarts overlapped, I nonetheless knew her so little on a personal level. But despite standing aloof as was required of me in my position, I know that Aurora Sinistra was a warm-hearted witch, and an open-hearted one, as well. She took each person as she found them, and she accepted them. She was a sharp-witted woman, and generous. She carried humour with her as an easy grace, yet understood the value of discipline.

"If this portrait of Aurora Sinistra reflects any part of the person that she was when she walked among us, then may we be reminded of the values of loyalty, service, generosity, kindness, and humour. And however much I might have yet to learn of the values she exemplified, I hope I am able and fit to that task, and that if she were here to see, she would . . . find me adequate."

Severus stepped back and took his seat, looking into the middle distance and seeing nothing of the Hall. As he had read his speech, he had remembered how in that last day during the extraordinary curfew, Sinistra had helped monitor meals in the Slytherin common room, and how he had tried to convey his thanks, so inadequately, and she had smiled at him warmly. He did not remember speaking to her again after that. At least his last words to her were those of thanks, he thought.

Albus spoke next, speaking of her fondly, relating anecdotes from her time as student and teacher, leaving the audience chuckling, and then Renwick Douglas spoke. He had known Sinistra himself, though not well, and he spoke of the honour it had been to try to capture her likeness on canvass and to capture some part of her personality and memories. One of the greatest challenges, he said, had been dealing with the many memories that people had donated, more than twice what he had ever used before when creating a posthumous portrait, fifty-two in total, from family, friends, colleagues, and students. He said that he hoped that his effort had brought Sinistra's memory to life for future generations of Hogwarts students.

Douglas waved his wand, and the portrait, on its easel and beneath a heavy drapery, glowed dramatically, then the cloth folded back and over the top of the easel, revealing the portrait. Aurora Sinistra sat straighter in her chair and looked out over the Great Hall filled with students and visitors. She smiled and waved once, then she looked up at Renwick and nodded. Severus could see that she said something to him, but he couldn't hear what it was.

Douglas turned back to the audience. "She thanks you for coming today, and she invites you to visit her and speak with her personally if you wish. I believe that the Headmistress has made provision for students and public to visit the portrait, and that she will discuss those details in her closing remarks."

The ceremony came to a close with Minerva's final remarks, and everyone was asked to vacate the Great Hall so that the house-elves could prepare it for lunch. Guests

began to leave the castle and grounds under the watchful eyes of Hagrid, Rath, Shunpike, Sprout, Carter, and a few prefects. Students milled around, finding places to hang about whilst waiting for lunch...and, Severus suspected, getting up to no good, but he felt too enervated to go out and bark at any of them, and he didn't think that taking points would give him any pleasure that day. Instead, he retired to the antechamber where a few other staff members also were, and where the newly unveiled portrait was now waiting to be brought down to the dungeons for its dedication.

Severus was glad that the dedication was going to be short, with Minerva the only speaker, and his only role to affix the plaque on the wall next to the portrait. Somehow, it seemed that the day had already been a long one. He was glad, too, that he was meeting Firenze late Sunday night, rather than that night. Sunday curfew was earlier than Saturday curfew, so he could bring Firenze into the castle an hour earlier than if he were to do so that night. Curfew would find him in his own quarters that night, he thought, and an early night to bed.

"I saw the reflection of the dawn in the moonlight on water," Firenze said, his deep voice melodious but sad, "and was left pondering the deeps and the shallows."

Severus merely nodded and waved his wand to create a ramp on the stairs leading from the dungeons. The two climbed the flight up to the ground floor and when Severus unbarred the main doors, Firenze bowed to him.

"Good night, Professor Snape," he said. "Thank you for your assistance."

"Of course. Good night, Firenze. Walk safely your path." Albus had suggested that as an appropriate parting phrase.

Firenze smiled. "And you, Professor. You, newborn foal that you are, you will find your path confusing, but it will lead you forward if you allow it to. Do not permit yourself to step into the mire or to turn back along the path that brought you here, or you will find your way more hazardous." Firenze reached out with his left hand and touched Severus's forehead lightly. "I see . . . a blossoming spring for you. Walk safely your path, Professor."

Firenze turned and left, disappearing through the light mist and into the Forest.

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-Five: Preoccupation

Saturday, 21 November 1998

Flitwick's series of duelling demonstrations begins, and Severus tries to cope with a new preoccupation.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall

Author's Note: If you'd like to see the summaries for the last few chapters of Part Two, drop by my WordPress blog or my lj (mmadfan.wordpress.com or mmadfan.livejournal.com).

Chapter Twenty-Five: Preoccupation

Chapter 26 of 118

Saturday, 21 November 1998. Flitwick's series of duelling demonstrations begins, and Severus tries to cope with a new preoccupation.



Chapter Twenty-Five: Preoccupation

Saturday, 21 November 1998

Filius Flitwick heaved a great sigh.

"It will be perfectly adequate in the Great Hall," Severus said.

They were standing at the window in Filius's sitting room in Ravenclaw Tower, watching the rain come pouring down, a cold, heavy, miserable rain that November could bring with it. The skies had opened that morning, and it seemed all the water in the heavens was determined to drown the Hogwarts grounds. The water level in the loch was rising, no doubt, though they could barely discern its grey presence through the deluge.

"Adequate," Filius said miserably. "I wanted . . . spectacular . . . splendid . . . fabulous . . . heart-stopping . . . riveting."

"It's to be expected that we will need to adjust to the weather on occasion," Severus replied. "Particularly in November . . . and December. And, I suppose, January through March, as well. Then April can be unpredictable..."

"All right, all right!" Filius said with a chuckle. "Flexibility. We shall be flexible!"

"I am certain it will still be the success you hope for," Severus said, turning away from the window. "And it may stop raining before the duel."

"Even if it does, desiccating spells wouldn't be sufficient to dry out the Quidditch pitch in time for the duel. Not enough for my satisfaction. No, the Great Hall it must be. I'll speak with Swelka about setting up tiered seating so that everyone can see well."

"I will do that," Severus said. "Unless you have specific requirements..."

"That would be fine, thank you, Severus! Some brightly coloured benches would be nice. Something cheerful!"

Severus nodded. If Flitwick wanted cheerful benches, he would get cheerful benches. He smiled slightly to himself. Flitwick did tend to make people want to do things for him, and do them gladly. Even down to getting the black bat of the dungeons to order up cheerfully coloured benches in the Great Hall. Filius had a way about him. It was almost a surprise that the weather wouldn't cooperate with him.

Severus wasn't sure how he'd managed it, but Filius had roped Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic, into participating in the first duel. He and Potter together were bound to attract a good-sized audience, though with the rain, probably not as many outsiders would attend as they might if it were a fine day. That was just as well, in Severus's opinion: not only was the Great Hall a good deal smaller than the Quidditch stadium and would seat fewer people, even with tiered seating, but it was less of a security risk if there were fewer outsiders. Minerva wasn't concerned...not that she wasn't being cautious, but Severus thought that she and everyone else had become lax over the months since the Dark Lord had been killed there on the Hogwarts grounds.

In the last few weeks, Severus had developed a fascination, almost a morbid obsession, with the Dark Lord's death. Now that Slytherin had its own House ghost again, and one who had opposed the Dark Lord...though not very vocally, still fatally for the poor wizard...Severus was less worried that the ghost of Tom Riddle would return to haunt Slytherin House. He had, in fact, given Flint strict orders that if he encountered the ghost of any known Death Eater, he was to inform him immediately, and he was to try to keep Slytherin House Death-Eater-ghost-free. Severus did not explicitly mention the Dark Lord himself, but he presumed that Flint understood that he did not want even the whisper of that wizard's ghost near Hogwarts.

Severus's preoccupation with the Dark wizard's death extended itself to an anxiety that he wasn't really dead. Intellectually, he knew that the Dark Lord's Horcruxes had been destroyed. Hermione herself had killed Nagini, and then Albus had burned her body and ignited the Shrieking Shack, burning it to the ground. The final Horcrux, the one contained in Harry Potter, had been destroyed by Voldemort himself. There was little evidence of that except for Potter's own description of the event...and the fact that the *Avada Kedavra* had hit him with an explosion of green light, and yet Potter still lived. Impossible unless Riddle had drawn out his own bit of soul and separated it from Potter's body. Potter's scar was less evident than it had been, as well, though that was no proof positive.

Still, Severus believed that there had been no remaining Horcruxes by the time of the battle, that during that final battlefield confrontation, only the shell of Tom Riddle's own reconstituted body held any of Riddle's soul, whatever that might be. That meant only one thing: if Riddle's body was dead, the Dark Lord himself was gone. And dozens of witnesses had seen Riddle die...or had seen him dying, being killed by Potter with the assistance of Minerva and Dumbledore. Gareth McGonagall had once told Severus that he himself hadn't seen the entire process, though he believed that by the time he again had to fight off Death Eaters, Riddle was already dead, or very near to it.

Severus had recently asked Albus to show him the spot in the Forbidden Forest where he and Potter had burned the Dark Lord's remains, but Albus had stared at him for a moment, then shook his head and turned and left without saying anything else. Severus didn't know why he had the need to see that spot, just that he did, and it was becoming an itch he couldn't scratch and couldn't ignore. Over the last several days, he had walked in the Forest, hoping to find the location himself, thinking it must be obvious. Surely nothing would grow on the ground where such evil had burned.

He had questioned Madam Pomfrey closely about how long Dumbledore had been gone from Minerva's side when he had left to go with Potter and cremate the remains, but without knowing what method they had used to burn him, or how much of a body was left to burn, it was difficult even to use that as a measure of how far into the Forest they had gone. He knew only that they likely hadn't gone to the far side of the Forest, but had done it somewhere in the centre of the Forest...or perhaps even closer to the Hogwarts grounds...but beyond that, he couldn't tell.

It bothered Severus that Albus hadn't trusted him with the information. He wouldn't tell anyone, surely Albus knew that. He simply needed . . . needed something tangible, needed to know that the Dark Lord was really gone, obliterated, nothing left of him, nothing left of that Dark creature Tom Riddle had become. A couple weeks before, he had asked Minerva, in an off-hand sort of way, whether Albus had told her where in the Forest they'd burned the body, and she had raised an eyebrow, said, "No, why would he?" and then turned back to her reading.

Severus dug out the newspapers that Hermione had brought him when he was recovering from the initial effects of Nagini's bite, seeking photographs of the actual battle, then he went to the library and found additional newspapers. Unfortunately, they all reprinted the same seven battle photographs. Colin Creevey had taken a few from the windows of the Great Hall, it seemed, before returning to the Hospital Wing and taking more. The three early photographs that the newspapers published showed the initial defence of the castle, the Death Eaters arrayed with Voldemort near the front, projectiles landing amongst them and the Gryffindor defenders emerging from the castle and beginning their attack. One of them showed Arthur Weasley falling to the Dark Lord's curse, and Alastor Moody moving to stand over his body to keep all other Death Eaters at bay. Whatever else Severus might think of him, Moody was no coward, and no shirker.

The other four photographs were actually better in some ways, the elevated perspective from the Hospital Wing offering a greater swath of the battlefield to view and allowing Creevey to snap pictures of different areas at different times. The two photographs that interested Severus, however, were those that showed Potter confronting the Dark Lord, Albus and Minerva on either side of him, and Zabini and Gamp beside them. For the first time, Severus noticed Gareth McGonagall in one of the pictures, lying on the ground, raising up on one elbow, looking toward Voldemort and toward Potter, Minerva, Dumbledore, and the Slytherins.

Unfortunately, although there were two of the final confrontation, none of the photos showed what Severus would judge to be the Dark Lord's actual demise. Not that he really would have been able to tell; between the distance from which the photographs had been taken and the other witches and wizards moving about, casting and dodging curses, it was difficult to say precisely what was happening to the Dark Lord...to Tom Riddle...even the one for which Creevey had zoomed the lens was not very detailed.

Severus considered his recent preoccupation as he walked down to the kitchens to find the head house-elf, Swelka, and he decided it was just as well that it was a rainy day. His walks in the Forbidden Forest were likely an unhealthy obsession, not to mention that they were somewhat dangerous, despite his own substantial skills at defence and handling magical creatures...or at least, at evading them. The rain would keep him on the straight and narrow for that day, and perhaps if he could go a week without looking for the cremation site, he might be able to rid himself altogether of the desire to find it. He had spent years wanting to escape his enslavement to the Dark tyrant, but now he was seeking him. It made no sense at all.

He didn't want to *find* him, though, he reminded himself as he tickled the pear and opened the entrance to the kitchens. He wanted to be certain the bastard was dead. Completely, irrevocably, never-coming-back dead, dead as a doornail, or deadier.

Swelka was happy to accommodate the request for bright, colourful tiered seating in the Great Hall, and immediately assigned four house-elves to the task of preparing the space for the duel. Severus said that he would complete the duelling platform himself, and gave her the specifications for the area they should leave empty in the centre of the Hall. Several years ago, Lockhart had orchestrated the pathetic...though ultimately instructional...demonstration for the students, and the conceited fop had used the entirely wrong measurements. The initial portion of the duel required a narrowly delineated paseo, but the actual duelling space for an indoor duel was much wider than the platform that Lockhart had used. Severus had read Flitwick's books carefully, and he would reproduce both the indoor and outdoor arenas as the classic rules required. He would have to ask Flitwick which of the two standard outdoor configurations he preferred, ovoid or rectangular.

As soon as lunch was over, Severus shut the doors to the Great Hall and watched as the house-elves efficiently cleared the room and then raised tiered benches on either side of the Hall. The benches were plain wood to begin with, but once they were erected, one section at a time glimmered and changed colour. One corner of Severus's mouth turned up. They would please Filius, he was sure: they were every colour of the rainbow, red right through violet. Finally, the elves raised a black platform of the proper size in the centre of the Hall.

Gervó, the house-elf in charge of the transformation, popped over to Severus and asked whether there was anything else required. Severus shook his head.

"Thank you. I will complete the work." Not that there was much remaining to do, but he would measure everything off and place the markings himself, and make certain everything was correct. He pulled the small rule book from the pocket of his teaching robe.

He was consulting the page on indoor arenas when one of the doors opened. He looked up, annoyed, but it was Albus.

"Dumbledore. I thought it was one of the students." He turned back to the diagram again.

"Preparing the space, I see," Albus remarked.

"Mm. When I'm finished, could you check it for accuracy? The colours, measurements, and so on?"

"Of course."

Albus waited until Severus was finished casting the white, red, and yellow lines that demarcated the various portions of the platform.

"The colours are in the correct places," Albus said. "I'll just take a few measurements." He cast some spells, measuring the lengths of the straight lines and the placement and curvature of the curved lines, then he nodded. "Perfect."

"Good. Flitwick will be pleased," Severus said. He gestured toward the multicoloured benches. "I also believe he will approve of the seating. He was disappointed about not being able to hold the duel in the Quidditch stadium, but this should help."

"Indeed." Albus looked around him, but his gaze quickly returned to Severus. "I did not come here to discuss today's duelling demonstration, however."

"No?" Severus replaced the rule book in his pocket. "Do you require something?" he asked, reminding himself that Albus was one of his teaching staff, not the Headmaster, and that as the Defence teacher, he might have a request of some sort...although it also might be something more personal, perhaps to do with his playroom or some plans he had in mind for Minerva.

"Are you planning on taking a walk in the Forbidden Forest today?" Albus asked.

Severus scowled at the introduction of that topic. "It is raining."

"Yes, it is. But . . . I have noticed that you have been making regular excursions into the Forest. Have you been gathering potions ingredients, by any chance?"

"Do you require something from there? I am sure you could gather it yourself, once the rain lets up. I have no intention of going out in the Forest in the wet in order to pick something for you to do some hobby brewing." He paused. "You are welcome to look through my personal potions cupboard, if you wish, however, and see if I have what you need."

"No, it's not potions I'm interested in," Albus said. "It's you. It is worrisome to see your frequent trips into the Forest. I want to request that you desist from these expeditions into the Forest."

Severus stared at him, feeling his irritation mount to anger, and his anger increase to fury, but he bit back the words at the tip of his tongue before he could say them. Instead, he turned away from Albus and paced off one of the long white lines along the centre of the platform. At the end of the line where a short yellow line intersected it, Severus turned on his heel and stared across the long room at Albus.

"Professor Dumbledore. I am the Deputy Headmaster and Head of Slytherin House. I have not forgotten that you were once the Headmaster here. But you are no longer." His voice shook slightly. Severus swallowed and tried to gain control of his breathing. "If I wish to take walks in the Forbidden Forest or anywhere else in Hogwarts, the grounds, or its environs, you have no say in the matter."

"I could speak with Minerva..." Albus began.

"Oh, so *now* you're willing to play the husband-of-the-Headmistress card, when it comes to interfering with me and my private activities."

"That is not it, Severus. I would be going to her as a concerned member of the staff, and as your friend. You need to cease your search for your former master's remains. You won't find them, in any case."

Severus felt like saying something rude and cutting, but all he could think of at that moment were insults from his childhood, and none of them would do more than make Dumbledore laugh, he was certain. "It is none of your business, Professor Dumbledore, what I do with my time. And I will speak to the Headmistress for you. Save you the trouble. Good day!"

Severus stalked the length of the platform, picking up speed as he went, then he stepped off the platform and flew across to the doors of the Great Hall, where he landed lightly. He turned once more to face Albus. "You are not the only one with rights here...and not the only one with power, either. And I am not the only one with secrets still hidden."

"Severus..." The heavy door shut with a low thunk, and any words that Albus may have uttered were closed into the Great Hall with him.

Severus practically ran up the stairs to the second floor and the Headmistress's gargoyle, ignoring the students whom he swept past in a flurry of black.

"Sétanta."

The gargoyle winked at him and moved aside, opening the door to the spiral stairway.

Severus stepped up onto the first step, and as the door scraped closed behind him and the stairs began to corkscrew higher, Severus blinked back the tears of hurt and anger that had been threatening to rise since Albus had spoken to him as he had. Still a bastard, he was. Both of them were. He'd thought they'd become closer, but this just proved to him that Albus didn't really trust him, didn't really understand him. To think that Albus believed that he wanted to find his "former master"...it wasn't like that at all, but Albus hadn't bothered to ask why he was seeking the incineration site. Albus never did. Oh, no, the all-knowing Albus Dumbledore already knew, so why bother asking? Misjudged and maligned again, as always, Severus thought bitterly.

Severus took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose when he reached the top landing. He was not going to be *Snivellus*. He swallowed past the lump in his throat.

More collected, he opened the door to the Headmistress's office. She wasn't behind her desk, but a moment after he had stepped in, she emerged from the Headmistress's Library. She smiled at him.

"Everything set for the demonstration this afternoon, Severus?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Severus replied with a nod. "It is prepared. But that is not why I am here."

"You don't look well," Minerva said as she drew closer and noted his overall pallor and the contrasting bright pink spots on his cheeks. "Are you all right?" He looked almost feverish.

He nodded stiffly. "However, I have an issue with one of the teaching staff."

Her eyebrows rose. "Let's sit then. Tea?" She gestured toward the armchairs by the fireplace.

"No, thank you." He took in a long, slow breath and let it out as he took his seat. "To be frank, it is a problem with Professor Dumbledore."

"I see." Her brow furrowed. "Or rather, I don't see, but I am sure you can clarify what your difficulty is with Dumbledore."

Briefly and tonelessly, Severus gave a verbatim account of their exchange in the Great Hall.

"Ah." She didn't say anything for a few moments, then she got up and looked out the window towards the Forbidden Forest. It had stopped raining, but it was grey and a cold fog cloaked the grounds. "First, I will say that you were right in what you said to Dumbledore. You are the Deputy Headmaster. It is not his place any longer to make any official requests of this nature. And it was a bit unfair of him to say that he would speak to me about it, at least in the way that you reported he said it..."

"I did not embroider, Minerva. Nor did I omit anything."

"I trust that. But as right as you were and as . . . maladroit as Dumbledore perhaps was in his approach to you and his choice of words, ~~he~~so was right. And I do not think that he was asking you as Headmaster or something of that sort. I think that he was asking you as a friend and as the former leader of the Order of the Phoenix, the wizard who had the responsibility for disposing of Riddle's remains, but primarily as your friend. If Dumbledore had wished to make it an official Hogwarts request, he likely would have spoken to me about having a word with you myself right from the start. When it comes to Hogwarts business, he understands my role and his own." Minerva stepped away from the window and returned to her chair across from Severus. "In fact, Severus, I had been considering having a word with you about it, myself, but thought I would wait first and see if you came to me, or if you might simply give the search up on your own."

"You, too." Severus looked away.

"No, not that way." Minerva reached over and placed her hand on his arm. "Severus, I care about you. You know that I do. I don't think it's healthy for you to be looking for the spot where Riddle's body was burned. It's becoming obsessive."

"Do you think I don't realise that? I wanted to deal with it on my own. I did not need Dumbledore coming to me about it, particularly not with his insinuations...as though I somehow..." Severus grimaced. "The thought makes me ill, actually, but he seems to believe that I want to . . . to pay my respects or . . . or god only knows what."

"Tell me about it, Severus. What *do* you want?"

"I worry, I worry that he is not dead. That there is something of him remaining. I dream of it, nightmares. I got the notion in my head that if I could find where he had been burned, witness it for myself, it would . . . lay it to rest for me. I *hated* him," Severus said vehemently. "I wanted him destroyed. I want to see where he finally was incinerated, done away with completely. It's just that I . . . since I couldn't see him die, I thought that it might help if I saw where he'd been burned. I thought it might make it more real for me. But Dumbledore didn't trust me enough to tell me where they brought his body, and he doesn't understand. He acts like . . . like I am asking something I am not. He called him my *former master*, as though there might be some lingering allegiance." Severus raised his lip in disgust.

Minerva looked at her clock, a tall grandfather clock she had brought from her childhood home that autumn. "We have to go now. Guests will begin to arrive for the demonstration, and Kingsley will be here in fifteen minutes. But I think I can help you, Severus. Come see me tonight at . . . ten. Meet me in the library here." She nodded and stood. "I will do what I can to help. And I will have a word with Albus."

Severus rose from his chair. "You know, I didn't*want* to find the site. I just felt that I had to. Do you understand?"

"I think so. And don't be too hard on Albus. He really is simply worried about you." Minerva rubbed Severus's upper arm. "He wants you to turn toward the life you have now, not become obsessed by the past and by the toe-rag's death."

"You think that I don't want that? Do you believe that I would rather wallow in the painful, miserable past? I don't know how to live this life I have now, and still having the past dragging so heavily behind me makes it no easier for me. I thought that by doing this, finding the site, I could cut away some of the chains of the past."

"I will do what I can to help you with that." She looked up at him seriously. "I promise, Severus."

Shacklebolt had stayed for dinner, and he had sat between Minerva and her Deputy, so they had no opportunity to speak of the subject again. It didn't bother Severus, however, since it also meant that Albus was one chair further away than usual. He wasn't ready yet to speak with his true "former master" again; his hurt still festered.

The duel had been a success, Severus thought, and Filius had been very pleased. Flitwick and Shacklebolt had done a demonstration first in order to explain some of the rules and to display a few of the standard duelling spells, although there were a good many more that could be used. Sporting duel spells were defined more by what was forbidden than by what was permitted.

After the fifteen minute demonstration, Potter had stepped up onto the platform and the duel commenced, the two wizards bowing to each other and then pacing off the twelve steps each that were required by the indoor duelling rules. Severus had not paid as close attention to the duel as he had anticipated, his attention continuing to be drawn back to Dumbledore and the insinuation he had made earlier that afternoon.

In the end, neither wizard was clearly defeated by the other, but Filius had scored the duel, and Shacklebolt had won by three points, which, from the reading Severus had done, was a very close score. Severus didn't know whether duelling scores could bear any relation to a wizard's or witch's actual defensive skills in battle. There were no rules in battle aside from those one imposed on oneself, such as Dumbledore's own policy of never casting a curse intended to kill.

It must be nice to be able to be so self-righteous, Severus thought to himself as he returned to his rooms after dinner. Must be a pleasant thing to be so powerful and so lucky that one could make such a rule and survive when others with less power or less luck would be killed. Severus didn't think it was because Albus was not ruthless enough to kill; his willingness to do what he had to during the war...allowing people to die in Death Eater attacks even when he had advance notice of them; cutting himself off from Potter when he believed it prudent, even if it was painful to them both; demanding a loyalty that included demanding his own murder; sending his spy off with orders to do whatever was necessary to maintain his position, right down to killing innocents if it was "unavoidable." All of that showed ruthlessness. Such ruthlessness might have been necessary during the war...in fact, Severus believed that it *had* been necessary in order to defeat the Dark Lord, and certainly in order to assure his own survival...but he still resented having been required to perform such deeds whilst Dumbledore had been able to escape doing such things himself and then been celebrated in the *Daily Prophet* because of his ability to avoid killing directly, even on the battlefield.

Severus sank into his favourite chair, feeling broody and injured. It wasn't as though he believed that Dumbledore had emerged unscathed from what he'd been required to do, and what sacrifices he had required of himself, but Severus's hurt was still present and so he wasn't feeling generous toward him. He didn't know how Albus could possibly believe that he still held any loyalty for the Dark Lord. He had none, he hadn't for years, and he had never had any affection for him. It hurt that Albus could believe such a thing of him.

Sighing, Severus thought that perhaps Minerva might be right, that Albus hadn't intended to imply that he had some kind of loyalty toward Riddle, but that was how it had felt, and it felt to him as though Albus had thought he was in danger of falling into the Dark Arts again. Albus had no faith in him any longer, it seemed, and it made him wish he had died in the Shrieking Shack.

Needing distraction until his meeting with Minerva later that night, Severus pulled out a book that Gareth had given him a few days before when he'd stopped by the castle. Severus didn't know how the other wizard had managed it, but he'd got hold of an advance copy of the latest Nero Newcastle novel, *Potions with No Peril is No Play Time*. There hadn't been a new Newcastle novel in almost two years, but since he had never had any time or energy to read anything of that sort in the last two years, anyway, Severus had hardly noticed.

It was with reluctance that Severus put down his book, only two chapters remaining, and got ready to meet Minerva. Maximilian Powers seemed to get better with every

new novel he wrote, Severus thought, and this was the best Nero Newcastle novel yet, even if it was a bit romantic for his taste, as they often were. But it looked as though Newcastle might actually get to keep the witch at the end. Usually the Newcastle novels ended with him losing the witch for some tragic reason...sometimes she would turn out to be on the wrong side, and Newcastle would have to sadly surrender her to the Ministry authorities; other times, she would tragically die, often in Newcastle's arms. Perhaps this novel might have a happier ending, though. Newcastle had gone through a lot already, after all. Despite his preference for the love-'em-and-leave-'em Trajan Tyne character, Severus thought it might be nice for Newcastle to get his witch this time.

He wondered whether McGonagall knew when the next Trajan Tyne novel was going to be published, and whether he could get an advanced copy of that one, too. The Trajan Tyne novels were darker, grittier, and, although Tyne always achieved his objective in the end, there was always a melancholy note to the finale. Severus was glad that it appeared the author had survived the war. He presumed that Maximilian Powers was just a nom de plume for whatever wizard actually wrote the novels.

In a better mood when he left his sitting room than he had been in after dinner, Severus walked up the long flights of stairs to the gargoyles once more, and then rode the spiral stairs up to the Headmistress's office. Perhaps he had over-reacted that afternoon with Albus, he considered, but whether he had or not, that fact didn't do anything to mute his preoccupation with Riddle's death.

He stepped through the office door, and Minerva rose from behind her desk.

"Oh, Severus!" She came around and crossed the room to him. It looked as though she had been crying.

"Minerva? What's the matter?" He let her put her arms around him and hold him tightly, responding by embracing her gently and patting her shoulder. "What happened? What's wrong?"

Minerva let out a long shaky breath and let him go, blinking back more tears and wiping her eyes. "Nothing. It's just . . . you'll see in a moment. Come." She took his hand and led him into the Headmistress's library.

There on the long table sat Dumbledore's Pensieve and three vials containing silvery memories.

"These are for you to view, Severus. The first one I borrowed from Albus." Her voice cracked. "That is one I hadn't seen before. I viewed it just now before you arrived. You'll see . . . you'll see why it disturbed me. The other two are ones I drew out myself for you to see. I hope that they help you to put Riddle to rest in your own mind, banish him from your thoughts, or at least banish the fear that he might return."

Severus nodded. "Thank you, Minerva."

"I will stay here with you as you view them, but I'd rather not see them again unless you need me with you."

"That's all right. I can view them alone," Severus replied.

"You can leave any of them early if you need to," Minerva reminded him. "And remember that I will be right here."

She poured the first memory into the Pensieve. Severus took a breath, then entered the memory, the memory that Dumbledore had loaned them.

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-Six: Laid to Rest

Saturday, 21 Sunday, 22 November 1998

Severus has some of his fears addressed and a worry laid to rest.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, others

Chapter Twenty-Six: Laid to Rest

Chapter 27 of 118

Saturday, 21 – Sunday, 22 November 1998. Severus has some of his fears addressed.

Note: Thank you to Hogwarts Duo for rereading this chapter after my "final polish" for at least the third time and giving me her feedback!



Chapter Twenty-Six: Laid to Rest

Saturday, 21 Sunday, 22 November 1998

Severus straightened and looked at Minerva, who was still sitting beside him.

"I wish you hadn't had to see that," he said softly, now understanding her earlier tears.

He had just seen himself tortured by the Dark Lord and bitten by Nagini. Viewing it had been horrifying, humiliating, and somehow ennobling, all at the same time. Seeing himself tortured and almost killed, but from a new perspective, was a jarring and deeply unsettling experience.

He had also seen Hermione lop Nagini's head off with one furious blow. She had looked magnificent: determined, strong, and heroic. It was strange, seeing her hold him and care for him, and seeing Albus's tender care, his gestures of affection toward him even as he provided the medical care necessary to save his life. He witnessed Hermione Portkey away with him, and then he watched as Dumbledore removed the venom sacs and upper fangs from Nagini, storing them safely away in the belt in which he had carried the potions and syringe, and then binding the four unconscious Death Eaters together. The last thing that Severus saw before the memory ended abruptly was Albus casting an incineration spell at Nagini. Flames leapt up from her body and climbed the curtains, Albus grabbed onto the rope binding the Death Eaters together, and then the memory ended.

"I knew what had happened," Minerva said, her expression pained, "but seeing it was so much worse. It seemed to go on forever. As I was watching it, even perfectly aware that you were safe and sound at Hogwarts in the here-and-now, I was so afraid for you, and seeing your suffering was difficult to bear. I don't know how they stood there and watched that." She blinked rapidly and tried to smile. "Do you know that Hermione had large, dark bruises on her shoulders where Albus had been holding onto her? He was terribly apologetic to her, but she said that it was what they had both needed at the time to keep them from jumping in and getting all three of you possibly killed. She said she'd hardly even noticed them for a few hours, not until you were out of danger of dying."

Severus sighed and nodded. It was hard to understand the effort that had gone into saving his life, and every time he remembered the people who had died, he felt guilty. So much effort on the parts of so many people, just to save his life, and yet so many good people had been killed; there had been no one there to save them.

He licked his dry lips, then he gestured toward the other two vials. "These are from you?"

Minerva nodded. "Yes."

"Where is Dumbledore tonight? I should . . . thank him. For the loan of the memory and the Pensieve."

"He's gone to London. I hope you'll be able to see him when he gets back, but he might be late."

"I see." He looked at the silvery memories in their vials. "Which one next?"

Minerva took her wand and drew out Albus's memory from the Pensieve and returned it to its empty vial, then she lifted another and poured it in. "This one. It's short. Somewhat disturbing to view, I imagine, but perhaps not as bad as the previous one." She sighed. "Though worse in one respect. There is a death in it."

Severus nodded in acknowledgment, then he entered the memory. It was early morning, just before dawn, and there were Death Eaters on the lawn outside Hogwarts. Minerva stood in the open doorway and watched Potter walk out toward a heap on the grass. Severus approached it. Malfoy. The man was a wreck. Severus watched as Potter spoke softly to the other wizard, telling him that Draco and Narcissa were safe and in the care of the Order, they were not dead or prisoners of Tom Riddle. Some life came to Lucius with that news, and Severus could see relief in the wizard's sunken eyes.

The rest followed much as the newspaper reports had related, with a few additional details. Despite witnessing Percy Weasley's murder, Severus paid close attention to the Dark Lord's next *Avada Kedavra*, and the way that Potter pushed himself up between himself and Malfoy, seeming to catch the curse in the centre of his chest. He watched as Albus, in the form of a blue-eyed phoenix, appeared and carried away Potter's apparently lifeless body, infuriating the Dark Lord, who aimed his wand at the two. A split second later, the earth shook, throwing the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord to the ground, and despite the seriousness of the scene played out before him, Severus smiled. Young McGonagall had knocked the Dark Lord on his arse with his earthquake spell, which created a large fissure in the green lawn. That was some spell. The memory ended as McGonagall turned, Ginny tossed over one shoulder, and began to run toward the castle.

Severus straightened and looked at Minerva. "I see what you are showing me now. The destruction of the final two Horcruxes and then, I presume, the Dark Lord's actual demise."

Minerva nodded. "I thought that this might help you really *feel* that he was gone, not just know it intellectually. I hope that...never mind. The next memory is a little longer than the last one, but I thought you would also appreciate seeing Blaise's defiance, and the way that he spoke of you."

Severus didn't say anything, just watching as Minerva restored the memory from the Pensieve, letting it run back into her own memory. He unstopped the third vial and poured its silvery contents into the Pensieve, then dipped into it. He watched the final confrontation between Harry, Albus, Minerva, and all their accompanying Slytherins...Gamp, Slughorn, Zabini, and close to a dozen other Slytherin students, all stepping forward, united in their support of Potter. He could see other Slytherin students lying scattered on the ground, cursed, but he knew that they had all survived, so he didn't spare his attention on them. Severus looked on as Gareth wounded the Dark Lord with his short dagger, and then he continued to watch as Potter drew out every drop of blood from the shell of Riddle's body, continuing to drain it even after the wizard was dead. Potter, Weasley, Letitia Pepper, and young Baddock stood in a circle to protect the remains from being touched by any Death Eaters, then the memory ended.

"Thank you, Minerva," Severus said, letting out a long breath as Minerva returned the memory to herself. "I do feel more as though he really is dead. I think I can live with this, stop wandering the Forbidden Forest."

"Good. You must understand that Albus was just worried about you. He had concerns about what you might do if you found the spot, though he assures me that it would be very difficult for anyone to find it. He felt badly when he realised it was your fear and desperation that was compelling you to seek it out, not some other sentiment or a desire to gather any of the remains for some purpose."

Severus looked appalled. "He thought I wanted to . . . to keep some of his ashes? Or to make a potion with them?"

"He didn't know. He realises how unlikely that would be, especially after all you've been through. But he thought that you might have believed you could do something . . . positive with them. Albus honestly didn't believe that you had any negative motivations, but that you might have a mistaken idea about something you could do with them."

"Still . . ." Severus shook his head. "If our positions were reversed, I suppose I might have drawn the same conclusions that Albus did, but it's still hard for me to believe that he'd imagine I would want to gather that monster's ashes for any purpose at all."

"He should have talked to you about it, asked you why you were looking for the site."

"Yes, he should have. He always only wants to talk when it suits him, though, you know that."

"I know even better than you do, Severus!" Minerva replied with a brief chuckle. "But I know him well, and I know how to get him to talk about things when he needs to discuss them, and not just on his schedule or when he believes it necessary...usually, anyway."

"He's lucky to have you, Minerva."

Minerva smiled. "And I am lucky to have him."

"Indeed," Severus agreed. "We both are, but he can be a bit of a . . . hmm, well. He's got his quirks. He does know now that I have no interest in either keeping or using the remains, doesn't he? Hard to think he'd believe such a thing of me, not after all this time. I thought he trusted me."

"Yes, he knows that, and he does trust you. Albus was simply worried, even afraid for you/was worried, too, remember. I even tried to get you to talk to me about how you were doing, and you said nothing. You had clearly become obsessed with your trips into the Forest. I'm sure you'll both have an opportunity to come to an understanding, though since he's not back from London yet, I don't think it will be tonight."

"If he gets back soon, send him down to me?"

"Aye, I will do that," Minerva said as she pocketed the vial with Albus's memory in it.

"I doubt I'll sleep much tonight, anyway," Severus said, rising. "I'm glad to have seen that, but it's not precisely a good bedtime story, now, is it?" He quirked a smile.

"Oh, I don't know about that, Severus! You should hear some of the stories Melina enjoyed when she was young...and then her children after her! Some of those stories were positively bloody."

"Kids are funny like that," Severus said.

"There was one they liked that wasn't bloody, and I'd always give it a happy ending for them. Do you know the children of Lir?"

"Lear? Like Cordelia and . . . I don't know the others. Something about the father being the salt in her soup?"

Minerva laughed heartily. "No, you're thinking of King Lear, one of Shakespeare's characters. Though possibly he borrowed from the original Irish or Welsh tale. Let me tell you a pleasant bedtime story, Severus, and we will wait for Albus. Perhaps he will be back by the end of it."

Severus shook his head, chuckling.

"I'm serious, Severus! Let's go out to my office, call Blampa for some hot chocolate or warm peppermint milk and a plate of digestive biscuits, and we can sit by the fire and I'll tell you a story, hmm?"

"All right, whilst we wait," Severus agreed, his eyes smiling. "And someday, I'll tell you one of the stories my dad used to tell me when I was small. There's only one that I remember well, but it was my favourite."

"Oh?" Minerva opened the library door. "What's it about? Anything bloody in it? I'll be soon having a new great-great-nephew to entertain...don't tell Albus that, though: he's convinced it's a girl, silly wizard. I could add your story to my repertoire."

Severus quirked a grin. "There's a bit of everything in it, even space aliens. I'll not give the plot away, though!"

Almost an hour later, feeling more relaxed and somewhat sleepy, his stomach full of warm peppermint milk and digestive biscuits, a flock of swans in silver chains flying through his imagination, Severus headed down to the dungeons. Albus still hadn't returned, but Minerva promised that she would tell him that he wanted him to stop by the next day.

He might have few friends, and no family, Severus thought as he got ready for bed, but he did have Minerva and Albus, and that was better and more than many men had. Even if Albus was occasionally infuriating.

It was still dark when Severus crawled blearily from his bed and staggered out to the sitting room. The banging on the door did not cease. He jerked it open. He blinked.

"Dumbledore? What d'you want?" He rubbed his face and suppressed a yawn. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty. A good time for what we will be doing."

"I am still asleep. What will we be doing?" Severus asked as Albus stepped into his sitting room.

"Get dressed. It's cold out, so dress warmly. And wear sturdy shoes. We're going into the Forest. It's icy."

"Can I have a cup of coffee first?"

Albus held up bag he'd been carrying slung over one shoulder, and opened it, displaying two flasks. "Hot coffee for you, tea for me. We'll have a bit of breakfast when we get where we're going."

Severus went back into his bedroom and dressed quickly, then followed Albus out of the castle, leaving through the door at the base of the North Tower. They walked in silence for a while; when they had gone a few dozen yards into the Forest, Severus asked, "Are you taking me where I think you are?"

Albus, just ahead of him, nodded. "I needed to speak with Harry about it. We had made a pact, essentially, that neither of us would ever reveal the location to anyone. I explained the situation. He agreed it was . . . appropriate to make an exception in your case." Albus looked over his shoulder at him. "It goes without saying that even the fact that you are aware of the site must remain a secret."

Severus nodded. "Yes, that would be wise."

They walked for twenty more minutes, and Severus found himself quite bewildered. He was very familiar with the Forbidden Forest, and yet it seemed that there were paths, gullies, and steep embankments that he had never encountered before, and in the darkness, the heavy undergrowth and the over-hanging branches of the trees seemed to take on sinister and threatening shapes. He followed the light emitting from Albus's wand and tried to avoid turning his ankle on the slippery leaves and tangled roots in their path. They began to go uphill, and Severus wished he could take the time to cast a charm on his boots to create a better tread.

"Still with me, Severus?" Albus asked softly, turning around. "Now through here, this is the tricky part."

Severus climbed over the large rocks and tree trunks, then slid, almost falling, over the edge of the exposed roots of a large fallen tree into some soft loam in the hollow below, and landed hard on his stomach, his breath knocked out of him. The not-unpleasant odour of mouldering leaves and turned earth was strong, and Severus scrambled out of the hole, looking wildly around for Albus's *Lumos*. Albus had stopped, though, waiting for him.

"It becomes narrow here, my boy, and it's quite icy. Easy does it. Don't slip."

Severus stood and nodded. Albus led him through a narrow, stony way between some great moss- and lichen-covered rocks that created a natural barrier in front of them, then they emerged on the other side of the boulders, into a small clearing with huge trees on the steep slopes to either side of them, the large rocks behind them, and the side of a craggy, vertical cliff face in front of them.

Albus beckoned to him, and Severus stepped closer, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. A cold, dank breeze came from a narrow crevice in the cliff face.

"There is quite a nice cave here. I used to enjoy visiting it many, many years ago . . . There is another entrance to it, but it's a long system of tunnels and caves, with many great chasms in between here and there, and we are far from the other opening."

"It's in the cave?" Severus asked tentatively.

"Just inside the entrance here, not all of the way in. We raised that stone and moved it aside," Albus said, pointing to a large flat rock that protruded from the entrance of the cavern. "We placed the bag with the remains there, then we incinerated them as thoroughly as possible. There wasn't much flesh left to him after Harry reclaimed what was his, just a bit of skin and sinew stretched tight over bone, and it was a quick job to burn it. I then cast a pulverising spell to grind the ashes and remaining bits of bone to a fine powder. Then we replaced the stone over it all, just as it had been."

Severus stared at the stone and shuddered.

"There is nothing of him left, son," Albus said softly, coming over and placing a hand on Severus's arm. "Nothing but powdered ash and cinder."

Severus nodded.

"Come." Albus tugged on his elbow. "Come."

Albus led him to the stone, and he tapped it with his foot. "This is the site." He searched Severus's face for his reaction. "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to . . . to spit on his grave or something."

"Be a waste of good spit, don't you think?" Severus said, though his eyes were fixed on the rock in front of them.

Albus smiled. "Let's have our breakfast." He held up the bag. "I had Wilspy pack it for us."

They sat on another flat rock not far from the entrance to the cave. Albus cast a warming charm and spread a picnic blanket on the rock, then handed Severus his flask of hot coffee.

"Wilspy remembered your enjoyment of the bacon butties, so we both have bacon sandwiches to go with our tea and coffee," Albus said. He handed him a wrapped packet with two thick sandwiches in it.

The sky above was growing lighter as sunrise approached. Severus unwrapped his sandwich and took a satisfying bite. It was a strange breakfast spot, but it seemed that as Severus drank his coffee and ate his bacon sandwich, the place was gradually losing its sinister atmosphere.

"Thank you, Albus," he said as he finished his first sandwich.

"Feel better now?"

Severus nodded. "Much better. Especially about . . . your trust in me."

"I am sorry I didn't understand sooner, and I am sorry that I hurt your feelings. I didn't know what was compelling you. I was worried about you. I should have asked why you wanted to know where the site is. It wasn't lack of trust; it was fear for your welfare."

Severus took a bite of his second sandwich and chewed. "A nice spot. Too nice for Riddle, but nice for a picnic."

"Indeed."

The two men finished their breakfast, then packed everything away in Albus's bag. The walk out of the Forbidden Forest took as long as the walk in had taken, but it seemed easier, perhaps because of the approaching dawn, or perhaps because Severus knew now to watch for slippery leaves, slick, rime-covered stone, and jutting tree roots. Or perhaps it was simply because one nightmare, at least, seemed laid to rest.

It was close to eight when the two men reached the Hogwarts grounds, and the sky was growing lighter. Albus was glad that it was a Sunday and he didn't have any duties that day. He said good-bye to Severus in the entrance hall and climbed the stairs to the second floor and the entrance to the Tower, glad to be able to ride up to the office from there. He was feeling every single one of his one hundred fifty-eight years on earth, and although the walk out to the site had initially invigorated him, by the time they returned to the castle, his energy was flagging. When Albus had returned from London at midnight, Minerva had told him he should wait to show Severus the site, do it either late one night during the week or wait until the following weekend, but once Minerva had explained Severus's worries and confided her own concerns to him, Albus didn't want to wait, particularly since he understood that he had hurt Severus with his implications.

Minerva believed that Severus was more fragile than he would allow them to see. She thought that he was still vulnerable, and the stress of having Albus appear to believe that he held some allegiance to Riddle or that he was in danger of becoming fascinated with the Dark Arts again could, Minerva feared, cause him to fall into a black despair. Albus knew that Severus had occasionally felt suicidal during the years after Riddle returned, but his desire for revenge had kept him going even when nothing else would, and the younger wizard would eventually emerge from his despair. With the war over and Severus building new relationships, Albus had believed that Severus was doing well, and he was disturbed to think that Severus might still be in danger of falling into a suicidal depression. Whether Minerva were right about that or not, Albus still had believed it best to show Severus the cremation site sooner rather than later, and close to the time when he had viewed the memories of Riddle's end.

Minerva was in the sitting room drinking her morning tea and reading the *Daily Prophet* when Albus walked in.

"How did it go?"

Albus nodded. "Well, I think. We had a nice picnic breakfast. He seemed at ease as we ate." He smiled slightly. "He does enjoy Wilspy's bacon sarnies."

"You look knackered."

"I am."

"You should go back to bed for a while."

"No, I think I'll wait until this afternoon and take a nap then." He smiled. "Perhaps the Headmistress might care to join me?"

"I might, at that!" She walked over and gave him a hug. "I think I still need more of a cuddle after seeing that memory of yours last night."

"Glad to oblige, my dear!" Albus kissed her cheek and held her close. He thought he might need a bit of a cuddle, himself.

"Since you're staying up, if you change out of your walking robes now, you could come down to breakfast with me," Minerva said. "You need something to balance out your bacon sandwiches, I'm sure. Some porridge would do you good, and a banana."

"All right, just give me a minute. I really should shower..."

"Why don't we save the shower for after our nap?" She winked. "You might be rested up enough to enjoy my company!"

"I *always* enjoy your company in the shower, you know that! But I think that is an excellent idea." He stopped in the doorway to the bedroom and turned. "You know, I should go on early morning expeditions more often if they get me an afternoon nap and shower with you after!"

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-Seven: 'Twas the Night Before the Night Before Christmas

Wednesday, 23 December 1998

Severus finds himself hosting a Christmas party, much to his chagrin. And what Hogwarts Christmas party would be complete without a little Charmed mistletoe?

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Twiskett, various Hogwarts staff members

Author's Note: You probably recognized that each of the memories that Severus viewed were scenes from *Death's Dominion*, Chapters 27, 28, and 29 ("Shall not die

windily," "Though they sink through the sea," and "They shall rise again"). Albus and Harry's disposal of Riddle's corpse is alluded to in Chapter 30, "Death shall have no dominion," and in the one-shot, "Enter, Peacetime."

If you're interested in the story that Minerva tells Severus before sending him off to sleep, she bases her story on an actual tale; if you Google "children of Lir" or "children of Llyr," you'll probably find many variants of the original myths.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: 'Twas the Night Before the Night Before Christmas

Chapter 28 of 118

Wednesday, 23 December 1998. Severus finds himself hosting a Christmas party, much to his chagrin. And what Hogwarts Christmas party would be complete without a little Charmed mistletoe?



Chapter Twenty-Seven: 'Twas the Night Before the Night Before Christmas

Wednesday, 23 December 1998

Severus grumbled as Twiskett took his boots from him with a flick of a finger.

"I polished them myself yesterday."

Twiskett gave him a sceptical look, complete with raised eyebrow, which demonstrated he had been observing Severus for a very long time.

"All right, the day before yesterday. But it's a good potion. One of my own."

Twiskett shrugged one shoulder and disappeared with his boots. Damned house-elves; let them sleep under your bed just once, and they took that as leave to become completely impertinent. And, of course, to think they have leave to handle all your things, including your wand...to save your life, but nonetheless. . . .

Severus didn't have time to get into a complete sulk before Twiskett returned, boots floating above his head. Severus grabbed them and sat on the edge of the bed to shove his feet into them. They did look more acceptable. Better than acceptable. They shone like new.

He knew that he was just in a bad mood because of the party that the Headmistress was throwing for the staff. He opened his wardrobe with more vehemence than was required. The staff party that the Headmistress *and* the Deputy Headmaster were throwing for the staff. He had protested loudly, long, and often, but to no avail. Not only was he required to attend, but he was required to behave as a host. Minerva should have been a rabbit, not a cat, with all of her hare-brained ideas, he thought as he pulled a long black jacket from the wardrobe and tossed it onto the bed, quickly following it with a waistcoat, also black. She'd reassured him that there wasn't much to it. Then she had had him help her decorate the room for the party. He really shouldn't stand for it. It was hardly dignified. But he humoured her. As usual.

He turned to see Twiskett with another article of apparel floating in front of him. Twiskett smiled. Severus rolled his eyes.

After putting on his waistcoat and tucking his watch into his pocket and adjusting its chain, he fiddled with the silk necktie that Twiskett had brought him. Minerva had given it to him the previous day, asking that he wear it to the party. "Be a little festive, Severus!"

A little festive, indeed! After fussing with it in front of the dresser mirror for a few minutes...well, several seconds...Severus threw the cravat down in disgust. It wasn't even a proper tie. He didn't know what he was supposed to do with it.

Twiskett popped around in front of him, perched on top of the dresser. He pointed at the tie and looked hopeful.

"It's hideous," Severus said. "It's . . . *green*." Christmas tree green, Minerva had called it.

"It's a present," Twiskett reminded him softly.

"And it's too long. And too wide."

"It's a present."

Severus sighed deeply. "Very well."

Twiskett picked up the neckcloth with the tips of his long fingers and tossed it over Severus's head. He wiggled his fingers, and Severus felt the stock wind itself back around his neck, its ends coming down in front and then tying itself with a simple flip. Twiskett smiled and tucked the tie into the front of Severus's waistcoat, flicked a finger to adjust the top of the tie so that it puffed out a bit, and then he gave him a friendly pat on the tummy.

"Thanks," Severus grunted. Twiskett Disappeared from the dresser and popped down behind him. Severus looked in the mirror. Hmm, not as dreadful as he had thought it would be.

Severus stepped back and picked up his jacket. As he was shrugging it on, he heard Twiskett rattling around in the drawer of his bedside table. Increasingly impertinent. But useful.

Twiskett closed the drawer and turned around, holding up Severus's double-snake ring. He hadn't worn it in months. The elf smiled and tugged on the cord around his

neck, pulling out his own double-snake, this one in the form of a pendant. He held Severus's ring out to him.

Severus shrugged and put the ring on his right ring finger. He supposed that if he was going to play host, he might as well get fully into the role. He still thought that Albus would have been a better host than he, but Minerva said to view it as an educational experience, and hopefully, an enjoyable one, as well.

He walked up to the first floor, wishing he had access to some of the secret passages and short-cuts that the Headmistress did. But then he would arrive at the party room sooner, and he did not want to do that. But he was a host, so he could not be late, either. Minerva had decided to hold the party in the old Defence classroom, which had been used for the younger students' activities on Halloween, since it was larger than the staff room but more out-of-the way than the Great Hall...which would have been too large, in any case. The room hadn't been used as a classroom in several decades, though it was occasionally used for demonstrations.

He had helped Minerva to hang holly, ivy, glittery Charmed icicles, and fairy lights. Minerva had also introduced him to her Charmed sprig of mistletoe, giving him a light kiss on the lips as it hovered over their heads. She had laughed at his expression, then showed him the little bit of matching mistletoe twig that she had in her pocket, explaining that she used that rather like a wand to control where the mistletoe would appear.

"You plan on directing the mistletoe over the heads of unsuspecting couples?" Severus asked, consternation on his face.

"Oh, perhaps. Or popping it over the head of some individual and waiting for someone to come give them a little kiss and free them," she said with a laugh. "There was a different one available that would pop about the room randomly, but I thought that might be a little too . . . dangerous. Some people might find themselves in very awkward positions. I don't want to humiliate anyone . . . maybe embarrass them just a little, but only in fun."

"I think it is childish. And beneath you," Severus said stiffly.

"And you needn't worry, Severus," Minerva replied. "Your encounter with the mistletoe is already behind you...unless there's another witch you'd like a kiss from. You were one of the people I was considering when I decided against the random version. I thought it might make you embarrassed if a bit of mistletoe suddenly appeared above you and required you to act upon it. This one should be just a little fun, and if I see that anyone is very uncomfortable, I can simply pop it away again."

"Hmpf. It is still childish."

"Oh, probably, but sometimes it can be fun to be just a little childish...or childlike. Not to go too far, of course."

"I can see that I was correct in resisting helping you with this party. I wish I had been successful."

"Severus, it's just a game. That's all. And do give me some credit. I know the staff well. They'll have fun with it." She looked at him with that damned twinkle in her eye she seemed to have acquired recently. "And do be sure to tell me if there is another witch...or wizard!...whom you would like to have a little canoodle with!"

"No, thank you!" She seemed to be becoming as barmy as Albus. It must be a hazard of being Head of Hogwarts.

Minerva laughed. "All right! But if you change your mind..."

"I won't!"

"Well, maybe someday."

"I am quite certain it would be a traumatic experience for whomever I was forced to kiss," Severus grumped.

"I doubt that, but I wouldn't want it to be one for you, either, Severus dear," she said, patting his arm. "Now come help me with the table decorations."

Severus rolled his eyes and followed Minerva over to the tables and helped her finish decorating them.

Stepping into the high-ceilinged room that evening, Severus was impressed, despite the fact that he had helped decorate it earlier in the day. Now that it was dark out and the candelabra were lit, the icicles twinkled, the fairy lights glimmered, and some soft, old-fashioned Christmas music floated through the air, the effect was very pleasing, especially with the various swathes and wreathes of greenery hanging from the walls, ceiling, and buffet table. The house-elves had delivered a motley assortment of comfortable chairs, a couple settees, and several small round tables at just the right intervals to place one's drinks or plates of snacks. It certainly looked festive, comfortable, and inviting. Minerva waved to him from across the room.

"Thank you for coming a bit early, Severus," she said as she crossed over to him. "I anticipate that people will begin arriving soon. Albus said something about drinks first with Sharon, Filius, and Pomona, so they'll be coming together. I hope they aren't too late." She seemed happy, but a little nervous as well.

"I am certain that Professor Flitwick will ensure their timely arrival," Severus said. "And Hagrid never misses a party, so he'll be here early, too, I'm sure."

"I'm always a bit nervous that people will arrive in awkward intervals and become bored," Minerva confided. "But the room looks very nice, don't you think?"

"Indeed. That was my initial impression," Severus said, looking around the room. "Not overdone, but . . . comfortably festive."

Minerva smiled. "I'm glad you're getting into the spirit of it. I was worried this afternoon that you planned to have a miserable time."

Severus snorted. "I do not *plan* to have a miserable time at parties, or at any other occasions. It is simply the way they usually work out."

"Ah, well, let's hope tonight is different, eh? At least that it's not completely miserable!"

One corner of Severus's mouth turned up. "I might be able to manage that."

"Now do try to mingle and be welcoming, Severus."

"I cannot change who I am," Severus retorted.

"I'm not suggesting you change into someone else, just that you add to your repertoire of skills. It will stand you in good stead when you become Headmaster."

Severus's eyebrows rose. "Have you been sampling the mulled wine already, Minerva? Headmaster? Hardly." He paused and a look of concern flitted across his face. "You aren't ill, are you? The Healers at Mungo's haven't found any problems, have they? You aren't planning to step down!"

"No, no, Severus, no worries on that score. I am in fine health. Good for another sixty or seventy years, I expect. Not that I can imagine being Headmistress for that long, but I have no plans to retire very soon, either."

"Other than your sudden incapacity or unexpected retirement, I cannot imagine any circumstances under which I would become Headmaster. The Governors wouldn't have it. I would be terrible at it, too."

"I doubt that, but here come Hagrid and Rath! Go greet them and show them the drinks table, Severus."

Severus snorted. "One way to make myself popular: show people where the booze is," he said sotto voce before setting off across the room to greet the two wizards, leaving Minerva laughing lightly.

The guests arrived in quick succession after that, usually in twos and threes. Severus continued to direct people to the drinks table and the food buffet, which allowed him to minimise the exercise of his small-talk skills, since everyone then turned their attention to the food and drink. Poppy came in on her own, and she complimented him on his tie before he could move her along to the buffet.

"It was the Headmistress's idea," he said.

"It looks fine on you," Poppy replied. "Very seasonal, too."

"Mm. The drinks table is over there, where the crowd is, and you may help yourself to food on the buffet," he said, gesturing across the room. "Enjoy your evening."

"Thanks! You, too!"

Albus, Pomona, Filius, and Sharon arrived next, and all of them commented on how nice the room looked, and Pomona also complimented his tie. He was beginning to think there was a conspiracy amongst the witches to draw attention to his new article of apparel. His suspicions grew when Vector, arriving with David and Laura Manning, also nodded in approval and told him it was a handsome tie.

"It is a tie. There is nothing extraordinary about it," Severus replied.

Vector's eyes widened. "I was simply trying to tell you that you look nice tonight."

"Did Minerva tell you to say something?" he asked suspiciously.

Vector laughed. "No, Severus. You really *do* look nice. It's pleasant to see you in something festive and a bit different from the usual. If you've been getting compliments, enjoy it!"

He directed her to the drinks table.

A whoop of laughter came from the other side of the room, and Severus looked over just in time to see Sharon Carter bend over and give Filius a kiss. She grinned as the mistletoe disappeared with a little pop, and Filius laughed and blushed. Severus looked for Pomona, and saw her pointing and laughing. The mistletoe popped over to her next, emitting a little ring, and as she wasn't near anyone, she couldn't move until someone came over and gave her a kiss.

"Happy to oblige!" Hagrid, the closest wizard, said with a grin. He came over, then bent and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. Now both of them were stuck under the mistletoe.

"A proper kiss, Hagrid!" Pomona said, putting her arms around his waist as far as they would go.

Hagrid obliged with a peck on the lips, and the mistletoe vanished. It didn't immediately reappear, though, so Severus assumed that Minerva was going to play with her mistletoe throughout the party. He hoped that she remembered not to trap him into kissing anyone. Not that he was incapable of kissing a witch, of course, but he really didn't want to be the centre of attention like that, having people giggling and pointing. He felt himself begin to blush at the mere thought.

Albus appeared at his elbow, a glass punch cup in each hand. "Mulled wine, Severus?" he asked, holding out one of the cups.

Severus took it, though he didn't want it. "Thank you."

"You should get yourself something to eat."

Severus shrugged. "I'm not particularly hungry."

"There are a few nice little tidbits over there that might tempt you."

"I am aware. I helped Minerva plan the menu," he replied with a long-suffering sigh.

"Minerva was very pleased to have your help."

"Do you know about her mistletoe?"

Albus chuckled. "Oh, yes. Her idea of helping people to relax and have fun."

"She's becoming as manipulative as you," Severus said.

"Oh, heaven forfend!" Albus replied, his eyes twinkling. "Never that bad, I hope!"

The corners of Severus's mouth twitched briefly. "No, that would probably be impossible, you're right."

Albus laughed heartily. "Go have a nibble of something, Severus!"

Severus wandered across the room, unsure how to enter a conversation already in progress, and decided that getting a "nibble" of something would occupy at least a little time, and he could also find something more palatable to drink. He abandoned his cup of mulled wine on a small table as he passed by, and made his way to the buffet. Although he wasn't hungry, he picked up a plate and put a little of almost everything on it but the sweets. A few people smiled and said something to him about the food, but he couldn't think of anything clever or witty to say in response, so he just tried to look pleasant and nodded. He thought he probably looked more frightening than pleasant, but he was doing his best.

He really wasn't good at parties. During the years after he had first joined the Death Eaters, he sometimes had to attend parties held in the Dark Lord's honour, or simply at which most if not all of the other guests were Death Eaters, and he had played the bored young intellectual, playing a role even before he became a spy. He had learned what kinds of nasty rejoinders would elicit laughter or nods of approval, and he had honed that skill.

Contrary to popular belief, most Death Eaters wouldn't have been caught dead in orgies or the bloody mass rape of prisoners; they were too finicky and such displays would have offended their sense of aesthetics. Not that many of them were averse to a little casual partner swapping at parties...some found that a sign of sophistication. They'd also often warm up for their festivities by participating in some recreational Muggle-baiting...which could be quite nasty, sadistic, gruesome, and inhuman...or by indulging in a little terrorism of some well-known Muggle-lovers. But when in their own homes, the pure-blood Death Eaters liked to maintain the appearance of gentility and civilisation. The Dark Lord's return changed that as he became more deranged and more obsessed with punishment, pain, and the display of raw power. Even finicky pure-bloods had to at least feign enjoyment of the Dark Lord's entertainment, and to participate lest they became the focal point of the next floor show.

Bella and her group had been an exception to the rule; she had been pleased to bring the horrors of the worst torture of Muggles into her own living space, and to engage in open debauchery as it pleased her. She was a favourite of the Dark Lord, and always had been, and when Bella had turned a hungry eye toward him, Severus had felt fortunate, honoured, and excited, among other things, but most of all, he had experienced a heady sense of power, believing that his connection with Bella would ensure him a place in the Dark Lord's inner circle. He had quickly realised his error. Rectifying that error was not as quickly accomplished.

Malfoy had actually tried to warn him off a "relationship" with his sister-in-law, but Severus had thought that Lucius was just trying to keep him from rising within the Death Eaters ranks and coming to threaten Malfoy's own position. When Severus told him as much, Lucius gave him his usual supercilious smile, shrugged slightly, and told him that he hoped he had fun. They hadn't spoken of it again. And Severus most assuredly hadn't had fun.

Needless to say, Severus knew he could not rely upon any skills he had developed when interacting with Death Eaters, and yet his former manner of interacting with his colleagues was neither necessary nor desirable. He observed the others, and he saw the way Pomona smiled when David Manning recommended a particular savoury pastry, and then she called Filius over to try it, feeding him from her own fork. Severus could not imagine feeding anyone from his fork...and he presumed it was their close relationship that made that acceptable behaviour...but he could try that "sharing" technique demonstrated by both Manning and Sprout. He would attempt it at his first opportunity, which came up alongside him at just that moment.

"Lovely party, Severus, great food," Vector said as she surveyed the buffet. "I don't know what to try next."

He had noticed at meals that Vector appeared to enjoy dishes with apples in them.

"Here, have you tried this, Professor?" Severus asked, putting a miniature apple turnover on a plate and handing it to her. "You may enjoy it."

"No, I haven't. Is it good?" she asked as she picked it up between two fingers.

"It is apple," he replied, not having tried it.

She bit into it, chewed slowly, and nodded. "Yes, it is, very good. Thank you, Severus!"

He smiled slightly. One little success. But now he didn't know what to say next. It was ridiculous. He sat next to her every day at dinner, he had taught with many of these people for years, and yet he had no idea how to socialise with them. Fortunately, at just that moment, there was a little ting-a-ling, and the mistletoe appeared above Albus, who was in conversation with Sharon Carter. She laughed and put her arms around his neck as he bent and gave her a sweet kiss on the lips. The mistletoe popped away, and Sharon gave Albus a swift hug and whispered something in his ear that made him laugh.

Severus raised an eyebrow, but he knew that Minerva was in control of the mistletoe. He supposed that if she wanted Albus kissing the very young, rather pretty Head of Gryffindor, that was her business.

"You look positively scandalised, Severus," Vector said with a smirk.

"No, simply . . . bored."

Vector chuckled as if she didn't believe him. "He's known her since she was two days old, did you know that?"

"Hmm?"

"Albus and Minerva were among Sharon's very first visitors after she was born. This summer after she was named Head of Gryffindor, Albus showed me a photograph. Sharon, very tiny and wrapped in pink, her parents, and Albus and Minerva. And now that tiny baby is the Head of Gryffindor."

"Oh."

"Still scandalised?"

"Hmpf. I was not scandalised." He put a Kalamata olive in his mouth so he would not have to say anything more. He could not be scandalised by such foolishness. It was, after all, a far cry from partner-swapping.

There was another little ting, and Severus and Vector immediately looked over to see Caspar Lloyd looking up at the sprig of mistletoe floating over his head. He tried to step out from under it, but he couldn't move away. He looked around hopefully.

Olivia Ouellette walked over to him and ruffled his hair. "You always were one of my favourite Gryffies, Cas. Always pulling a stunt of some sort." She gave him a friendly peck on the mouth, and the mistletoe popped away.

"Poor Caspar...he was probably hoping for someone like Sharon or Helena," Vector said, helping herself to some cheese.

"I didn't think that Ouellette, well, I'd heard that, um . . ."

"That she doesn't like men?" Vector asked. At Severus's nod, Vector said, "She likes 'em just fine, as friends. She does prefer her lovers in a different flavour, however, you're right about that."

Severus put some hummus and a piece of tomato on a bit of pita bread. Minerva had been careful to make sure there were a number of vegetarian dishes available. It would never have occurred to him to do that in particular, but all of the vegetarian selections were actually quite tasty. There was another ting-a-ling, and it was Albus again, this time with Helena Benetti, the youngest member of staff and the most beautiful witch at Hogwarts. Probably one of the most beautiful in Britain at the moment. Minerva must feel quite secure. Of course, Albus probably saw Helena as a mere child, and no doubt, she saw him as a sweet, grandfatherly figure. Albus was blushing, though, as Helena stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. Severus supposed Albus wasn't so grandfatherly that he couldn't appreciate the young witch's beauty and vitality.

"Some blokes get all the luck," Caspar grumbled as he came up beside him and reached for a little cheese custard tart. "Old Dumbledore gets an international Quidditch star with looks to die for, and I get . . . her." He gestured at the witch who had joined them at the table and was looking over the sweets.

"Yes, Albus is the lucky one," Olivia agreed as she scrutinised the mince pies. "He got Helena, and I was stuck with you, Lloyd!" She grinned at the Ancient Runes teacher, who laughed good-naturedly.

Vector joined in the laughter, and Severus smiled slightly. He wasn't very comfortable with most teasing. It could be difficult for him to distinguish different sorts of teasing, and he was aware that he was probably too thin-skinned most of the time. McGonagall had told him that just the week before when they ran into each other in Hogsmeade. The other wizard had teased him about his presence in the village on a weekday evening, said something about secret assignments, and Severus had bristled in response. He wished he could be easier with others, at least with his friends. It was very tiring to be constantly on guard, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop, the next blow to fall.

He felt suddenly claustrophobic, surrounded by these laughing, smiling people at ease with one another, and he stepped back. He forced himself to breathe calmly as he edged his way around to the drinks table, where he picked up a bottle of butterbeer and then retreated to a corner and sank into an upholstered armchair. He didn't like butterbeer, but his mouth was dry, and it was the only thing that he could pick up without having to pour it into a glass. And he didn't want anything very alcoholic.

Severus uncorked his butterbeer and took a sip. He was probably the picture of cool poise and self-assuredness, but he didn't feel that way. He was ridiculous, he thought. To survive the Death Eaters, to fool the Dark Lord year after year, to serve him, to perform gruesome acts with aplomb, and through it all to maintain his sang-froid...at a cost to himself, but nonetheless, to do so successfully. And now to find this ordinary life so fraught with challenge and anxiety-inducing interactions with colleagues who were innocuous compared to his former comrades among the Death Eaters...it was absurd, and he felt contempt for himself.

Watching the party's ebb and flow, but not paying attention to any of the interactions, Severus considered that it was far better to remain aloof than to attempt to become something he was not, an ordinary, collegial wizard. Besides, it was likely a sign that he didn't belong if it was so difficult for him to interact. He was different. Perhaps even superior in some ways, a serious scholar . . . Severus sighed and took the last swallow of his butterbeer. No, that was the lie he used to tell himself when he was younger; he wasn't going to use that any longer. He was just different. Even now, an outsider. Different, but not superior. Many of his colleagues were certainly serious scholars...Cahill was deadly dull and unimaginative, but serious...and there were at least a few who could even be considered brilliant, and that was not including Dumbledore in their number. Vector was no intellectual slouch. Sprout, as much as Severus might find her occasionally irritating and annoyingly motherly, was quite a dedicated and enthusiastic scholar of Herbology. Caspar Lloyd was not only a scholar of Ancient Runes, but spoke over a dozen languages and could read several other ancient ones, and was an expert on the effect of tone, pitch, and resonance on verbal spell-casting. Ouellette had written a number of important papers in the field of

Transfiguration.

And then there was Flitwick, cheerful, light-hearted, musical little wizard that he was...and who was just now recovering from a pseudo-passionate kiss from Vector...Flitwick was a talented Charms master and had been quite a brilliant scholar in his younger days. And as a duellist, he still wasn't shabby. He had offered to practise duelling with Severus over the Christmas holiday, since Severus was scheduled for two duels in the spring. That was a pleasant prospect, Severus thought. Something to look forward to. He still didn't know who Filius planned to have him duel, but since he was trying to put together interesting pairs, Severus was hopeful they would both be challenging.

There was a ting-a-ling, and Albus was now kissing Poppy under the mistletoe. It seemed to Severus that it took a little longer than usual for the mistletoe to disappear that time, their kiss lingering as they waited for the tell-tale pop releasing them, and he glanced over at Minerva, who was looking quite smug and amused. Poppy and Albus were laughing now, though, so Severus supposed it was all acceptable.

"Is this a mistletoe-free zone?"

Severus looked up at Vector. "I do not know."

"If I didn't know better," the witch continued, perching chummily on the arm of his chair, "I would think that Albus was in control of that mistletoe...I think he's kissed almost every witch in the room now, and even one wizard. But he's been surprised, I'm sure of that." Vector looked over at him, her eyes narrowing. "On the other hand, I don't believe you've been stuck once, Severus. Are you directing it?"

Severus snorted. "That is not my idea of entertainment."

"Mm, I suppose. I thought it was random, but I'm seeing a pattern emerging." She grinned. "If I hadn't had a few drinks, I could probably do a quick calculation and tell you who it is, because it certainly isn't random."

"Who hasn't been stuck under it, other than me?" Severus asked.

"Rath has just managed to escape it. There were a couple of occasions where it appeared over a witch with whom he had been speaking just seconds before." Vector frowned. "But I don't think that he's doing it."

"It's more of a witch's game, don't you think?"

"Mmm, I suppose, but all of the witches have been kissed, I think."

"Who kissed the Headmistress?" He had missed that.

Vector laughed. "Shunpike, Hagrid, and Cahill in rapid succession. Poor witch! Not long ones from any of them, but, well, it's a party, so I won't say anything." She looked around, then bent closer to Severus. "All right, I will say something," she whispered. "No witch with any taste would willingly kiss Cahill. That's why I know it can't be Minerva who's doing it."

Severus smirked.

"I think this must be a mistletoe-free zone, though," Vector said, taking a sip of her firewhisky. "If it's not, then I know you're the culprit, as unlikely as that might otherwise seem."

"Perhaps it is someone who doesn't like me," Severus replied. "I am certain there are a few of them. Or someone who is foolishly enamoured of me and doesn't want to see me kissing other witches."

Vector laughed. "Well, if it were someone who didn't like you, they'd plague you with the mistletoe, I'm sure, and if it were someone who was enamoured of you, she'd make sure that she was caught under it with you at least once."

"I suppose." Severus put his empty butterbeer bottle on the floor beside his chair. "I am going to get another drink. May I get you anything?"

"No, thanks, I'm nursing this one. It's my last for the evening." She looked rueful. "I'd have another, but I am working on a paper, and during the holidays is the only time when I have enough uninterrupted time to do any serious, extended work. So I need to be fit tomorrow."

"I can recommend bitter lemon, plain, in that case. It is a pleasant nonalcoholic drink, and I made sure that there was some available tonight." Severus thought that Vector was amused by that, but she smiled warmly and thanked him.

That hadn't been so bad, Severus thought as he walked over to the drinks table to pour himself a glass of bitter lemon. He really did have to do something about this kissing business, though, or he might be teased about not being kissed, which was more likely at this point, since it seemed it was now the norm to be caught under the mistletoe.

Filius was in the corner fiddling with the musical box, presumably setting it to play something other than the holiday music...although it hadn't been bad, it did become a bit cloying. He hoped that Filius would play something that would make Minerva jump out of her skin. He smirked. Something like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, or the Mekons. Gods, it had been a long time since he'd thought of the Mekons . . .

Listening to Muggle music, unless it was at least a couple hundred years old, was not on the list of acceptable activities for a Death Eater. On the other hand, Severus couldn't count the number of times when a Death Eater had declared...with a perfectly straight face...that Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart had all been wizards, and that the Muggles had simply coopted their music. Muggle "theft" of wizarding property was one of the great themes of the Dark Lord's rants, right down to declaring that Muggle-borns had "stolen" their magic from legitimate wizards (how a nonmagical Muggle was supposed to have done that was never explained), and that if a Muggle-born hadn't stolen their magic, then they were actually the half-blood bastard child of a wizard who couldn't keep his cock under his robes. As a result, there were a paradoxically large number of Squibs who had been attracted to the Dark Lord's philosophy, since the Dark Lord had declared that the only reason for Squibs was that they had had their magic stolen from them at birth.

"Enjoying yourself, Severus?" Minerva asked, coming up beside him. She reached for the ladle to the mulled wine. Her cheeks were quite pink.

"It is fine...allow me." He took the ladle and put some mulled wine in a fresh cup for her, adding a bit of the fruit to it.

"I saw you speaking with Verity a few minutes ago."

"Yes, about that . . . people are going to grow suspicious if I never am caught under the mistletoe. In any case, it will make me stand out."

"I see," Minerva said softly. "Any requests?"

"As long as it's not a wizard and it's not Duffy, I don't care." He fought a blush. "Just don't let it last too long."

"Right."

"Is Filius going to start some new music or what? He's been over there fiddling with your box for a while now."

"Yes, but he's unfamiliar with the music available on it, so he's consulting a list." Minerva smirked. "He declared it a 'pleasant, eclectic, but unadventurous' selection of pieces when I gave the list to him. I think he plans on giving us some new charms for it."

"I have some recommendations for him," Severus said, smiling. "Do you know the Clash?"

Minerva rolled her eyes. "No, but from the sound of it and the smile on your face, I doubt I'd enjoy it."

Severus chuckled. "Probably not."

"Well, get out there and mingle, Severus! I can't perform my mistletoe magic if you don't mingle."

"Hmpf."

He stepped around to the other side of the table and slowly made his way over to a small group who were engaged in lively conversation. There were a number of witches there. Before he'd made it to his target, however, there was a ting-a-ling over his head, and he looked up to see the mistletoe. Laura Walker Manning had been crossing the room at the same time, heading toward the buffet. The librarian grinned up at him.

"The Deputy Headmaster! Honoured, I'm sure, sir!" she said with a laugh.

Severus gave her a half smile, bent, and gave her a light kiss on the lips. The mistletoe immediately vanished, and Laura continued on her way. They had attracted some attention, but it hadn't been bad, and she'd been a good sport about it.

Pomona looked up at him as he approached the group he had been heading toward when the mistletoe had struck.

"Hi, Severus! Where have you been keeping?" she asked.

Another annoying thing about Pomona, he thought: she asked unanswerable questions. He sidestepped the question. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, it's quite good. The food is fabulous! Did you plan the menu, or did Minerva?"

"It was a cooperative effort," Severus replied smoothly.

"So, Severus," David began, "we were just discussing the ethics of human blood-use in potions and spellwork. What do you think?"

"It is not a simple question," Severus said. "First, you need to define what you mean by 'blood-use,' which may seem straightforward, but is not, then there are the questions of both purpose and source, which in turn raise further questions. It is not something that I can respond to by declaring myself in favour or opposed to it."

Across from him, Albus smiled. "Quite. I said something similar a few minutes ago."

"There is also a difference between using blood or other human organics in a potion and using it in a spell. There are different dangers, for one, and it seems to me that one could approve of some type of blood-use in potions work but not in spell-casting, or vice versa." He took a sip of his bitter lemon.

"I think it is disgusting to use something like that in a potion," Sarah Duffy said with a shudder.

"You won't even take potions with any animal-derived ingredients, Sarah," Pomona said, "so that's not a surprise coming from you."

"That's not so! I'll take them if the poor creature didn't have to die for it. And no live ingredients!" The witch shuddered and grew pale. "But I don't see anything wrong with using human blood for a spell of some sort, as long as the person donated it willingly and didn't die of blood loss. But putting human blood in a potion...that's cannibalism, whether the person dies or not! Disgusting!"

"That is a misconception regarding blood-use in brewing potions," Severus replied. The witch obviously knew little about Potions. "There are occasions when no blood is actually incorporated into the potion, or in which only minute amounts of extracted components are required. And not all potions are meant for ingestion."

Duffy didn't look any happier with that explanation.

"There are entire systems of magic and potions-brewing that do not use any animal-derived ingredients at all," Pomona said. "When I was in..."

She didn't finish her sentence, as she was interrupted by a ringing. She looked up at the mistletoe. It was floating between her and Severus.

"Oh, well! Severus?"

Severus thought that Pomona looked overly pleased to be getting a kiss from him, but she was a very physically affectionate witch, he had noticed. She put both hands on his waist. Very tactile. Almost the exact opposite of him. He attempted not to look displeased, and he bent, putting one hand on the short witch's shoulder, and gave her a gentle kiss, which she returned. There was a pop, and the mistletoe disappeared.

"Thanks, Severus!"

"My pleasure," he replied politely.

Pomona laughed. "Nice of you to say."

The conversation moved on, away from any serious debates about blood or ethics, and Severus stayed and nodded politely at intervals. He wished that he could leave early, but Minerva had specifically stated that without a very good reason, a host couldn't leave his own party early. It didn't seem fair to him. Can't kick the guests out, can't leave . . . it would just go on and on. He smirked to himself as he imagined an unending party, always with the same guests, same food, same drink, same music. Now that would be hell.

"Something funny, Severus?" Sharon Carter asked. She had come up just after he had kissed Pomona.

"Not really. . . . Well, yes, but not very nice."

"What?" Sharon persisted. Now everyone was looking at him, expressions of expectation on their faces.

"I was just imagining a never-ending party, where the guests never change, the food and drink are always the same, and the music always repeats, on and on unceasingly."

"That sounds like hell," Olivia Ouellette exclaimed.

The corners of Severus's mouth turned up. "Exactly my thought."

Everyone laughed.

Minerva came up to the little group and put her arm around Albus's. "I missed something?"

"Ah, my dear, Severus just told us that a party with us is hell!" Albus replied with a twinkle.

"What?" Minerva laughed, though she looked taken aback.

Olivia broke in. "Dumbledore is refining the punch line to its minimum, but leaving out the essential details!" She related Severus's "joke," and Minerva laughed.

"Well, this party won't be unending, and Filius has changed the music, so I think we're safe from being trapped in Severus's nightmare. In fact," she said, looking up at Albus and giving his arm a squeeze, "I think that this music is actually danceable."

"I can take a hint," Albus said, and the two moved away, dancing to the music Filius had selected, soft, but with a Latin beat.

"Would you like to dance, Severus?" Sharon asked.

"I try to avoid it." As he saw her blush, he remembered how he hated going up to witches and having to ask them to dance, and as a wizard it was an accepted and expected role for him. "However, I believe this evening to be an exception. If, of course, that was an invitation . . ."

She grinned. "It was!"

Severus danced one dance with Sharon, then he retired to his corner armchair. It wasn't very sociable of him, but he'd done his duty, he thought. And watching the party was actually rather enjoyable now. Albus and Minerva stepped over to the buffet, and Severus saw Minerva reach into her pocket. Some poor unsuspecting soul was about to be caught under the mistletoe, he was certain. He looked around the room, waiting for the little ringing. And there it was. Severus snorted. Rath hadn't escaped this time, and he was standing with Caspar Lloyd. Severus suppressed a shudder. He was glad he had specified to Minerva "no wizards." Somewhat to his surprise, though, Rath gave one of his small, dry smiles, and leaned over and gave the shorter wizard a kiss.

He really had not needed to see that. But Caspar hadn't minded, apparently, though it hadn't been much of a kiss, either.

Minerva was at it again, though, and now Poppy, who was sitting beside Flitwick on one of the nearby settees, was her victim. Filius giggled, Poppy glanced over at Pomona, shrugged, and then she gave Filius a kiss. She got up immediately afterward, though, and wandered over to Severus.

"It's Minerva. It's got to be Minerva," Poppy said grumpily. "She thinks she's funny."

"Unhappy with the mistletoe game?" He would have thought that the Hufflepuff matron would have enjoyed that sort of thing.

She shrugged. "I'm just tired of it, that's all." She sighed. "I'm actually just tired. It's getting late. I think I'll be retiring soon. I need my energy for my family the next couple days. A lot of little children running around. I love them, but Violet's kids...my niece and nephew...are procreating at quite a rate."

"Together?" Severus was appalled. Pure-blood families sometimes encouraged the marriage of cousins, even first cousins, but there hadn't been any sibling marriages in centuries. It was disgusting.

Poppy, though, laughed. "No, no, no. That's why there's so many of them. First Ivy and her husband have one, then Geoffrey and his wife have another...there's now five, and another one on the way."

"Ah. I see."

"It's a lot of noise and activity, and Aunt Poppy has to have energy to play!"

Severus quirked a smile. "You are leaving in the morning, then?"

"No, in the afternoon, and I'll be back in the evening on Boxing Day."

Severus nodded. He seemed to remember that from the schedule. Minerva, Albus, and all the Heads of House were the only ones who were going to be in residence all three days from Christmas Eve Day through Boxing Day. Even Hagrid was going to be gone on Christmas Day that year, though Rath was staying. It didn't matter at all to Severus, since he had no family, and his only friends outside of the school were going to be with their own families, themselves. He knew that other staff didn't like having to be at the castle over Christmas, but he had nowhere else to go unless he went to Spinner's End, and that would be depressing. Minerva herself had handled scheduling everyone else's holiday, which was just as well. He didn't want to have to worry about accommodating others' family plans or dealing with conflicts and disappointment. Minerva would be much better at that.

"I hope you enjoy your holiday," he said.

"You're staying here for the entire holiday, aren't you?" Poppy asked.

He nodded. "But I do have plans." He did. He and Gareth were meeting for drinks over the weekend, and when Hermione returned from her skiing holiday with her parents, they had tentative plans for dinner at the Three Broomsticks one night. It wasn't much, but he didn't want people to believe he was just stuck at the castle.

"Good. Well, I do think I'll be taking my leave now. Thank you for the lovely party, Professor!"

"Good night. Have a good Christmas."

"You too!"

Severus watched the witch walk over and say good-night to Minerva and Albus. It looked as though her departure was the signal to others that the party was coming to an end, since several others went over and spoke to her, then waved to him in his corner chair, and wandered out. Severus rose and went over to Minerva and Albus.

"The party is breaking up," he observed.

"Yes, sadly," Albus said, sounding genuinely sad about it.

"It was a success, I believe, Headmistress," Severus said.

"Yes," Albus agreed. "Except in one respect."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"I have kissed every witch but one...and even two wizards," he said with a rueful chuckle, "but the one witch I have wanted to kiss has not met me under the mistletoe!"

Minerva smirked. "That," she said softly, "is what you get for accusing me of only wanting an excuse to kiss all the good-looking wizards on staff!"

Severus snorted a laugh at that. "It didn't look to me as though you suffered at all, Albus."

"No," Albus agreed with a twinkle, "I didn't suffer! Though I do think that Filius will be keeping a wide berth for a while!"

Minerva laughed. "I had actually meant to have you kiss Pomona, and they moved at just the wrong moment! Caspar didn't seem to mind, though."

"We're both Gryffindors, my dear, ready to try almost anything once, just throw caution to the winds!" Albus chuckled.

After Hagrid had come up and said good-night, giving her a kiss on the cheek without benefit of mistletoe, Minerva said, "That was what gave me the idea for Rath,

actually...Caspar being so good-natured about it with you."

"And Carleton didn't mind," Albus said.

"No, it was for his benefit. Caspar quite likes the ladies, himself, I believe."

"Did Lloyd ever get to kiss Helena?" Severus asked.

"No." Minerva chuckled and her eyes gleamed. "Actually, Olivia told me what Caspar had said about being jealous of Albus's kiss with Helena..."

"So you had him kiss me, yes, I know, very amusing, my dear." Albus shook his head. "Do you see what I have to put up with, Severus? I'm just a toy to be played with to her!"

Severus barked a laugh. "I think you enjoy it, too."

"He's got your number, Albus," Minerva said. She looked around. Only Filius and Pomona remained, cuddled together on a sofa, looking very comfortable, but fortunately...from Severus's point-of-view...not engaging in any kissing or other intimacies.

"Can we leave now?" Severus asked.

Minerva and Albus both laughed. "If you wish, but I still owe Albus his one special witch...but only after this, I think." She reached into her pocket, and before Severus knew what had happened, the mistletoe was hovering over his head. He grimaced and moaned.

"Well, make a witch feel unloved and unappreciated!" Minerva said, acting put out, though she had a twinkle in her eyes.

Severus rolled his eyes, but cooperated when Minerva pulled him down and gave him a kiss.

"Good night, Severus dear. Thank you for humouring me and for helping with the party. Everyone enjoyed it." She squeezed his arm, smiling, but with tears welling in her eyes. "I'm very glad you're still with us. We both love you, you know."

Too much mulled wine, Severus thought. Minerva did become sentimental after a few drinks. "Yes, thank you. It was a nice party."

"And don't forget Christmas Eve in our suite!" Albus added brightly. "Presents!"

Severus nodded. He couldn't very well forget, since either Albus or Minerva had mentioned it at least once a day for the last week.

"Good night, Albus, Minerva. See you in the morning, I am sure," Severus said.

As he moved away, he heard the ting-a-ling, and he looked back to see Minerva gathered in Albus's arms. The mistletoe didn't vanish, and it didn't look as though they would be through anytime soon. In fact, they might appreciate more privacy, he thought. He walked over to Filius and Pomona.

"May I walk you back to Hufflepuff, Professor Sprout? I am just leaving, myself."

"No, no, that's fine. I thought I'd go up to Filius's rooms and then Floo back to mine from there, um, later."

"I see." Severus glanced back at Albus and Minerva. Still under the mistletoe. He cleared his throat. "I believe that perhaps we might like to leave the Headmaster and Headmistress to their, um, mistletoe."

Filius raised his head and turned to see the couple. He smiled. "Yes, Pomona dear, I think we'd be more comfortable up in Ravenclaw Tower."

Pomona grinned and winked. "Let's leave them to it, then."

As they left the room, Severus closed the doors, cast a precautionary Imperturbable, and then a very light ward that would prevent access but not egress. It would wear off in a few hours, but it would serve its purpose, he thought. "Happy Christmas," he said softly, then he turned and went down to the dungeons and his own suite.

Note: There is now a companion one-shot to this chapter, called "[Minerva's Mistletoe](#)," which I've posted here on TPP. It's rated MA for some very brief erotic content at the end of the story. It features Minerva, Albus, Severus, Poppy, and several others.

NEXT

Chapter Twenty-Eight: A Happy Birthday?

Saturday, 9 January 1999

Severus has a birthday. They do come every year, after all, and everyone has one. Nothing special about it, right?

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Hermione Granger, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall, Twiskett, others

Author's Note: Question for you: would you like to see a preview of the Part Three chapter titles, characters, etc., at the end of the next chapter, which is the final chapter in Part Two, or do you think it's better to post it only to my blog and lj? There are nine chapters in Part Three. I don't think it would be terribly spoilerish, just a bit of an appetizer, and people could avoid them if they wanted to.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: A Happy Birthday?

Chapter 29 of 118

Saturday, 9 January 1999. Severus has a birthday. They do come every year, after all, and everyone has one. Nothing special about it, right?

End of Part Two.



Chapter Twenty-Eight: A Happy Birthday?

Saturday, 9 January 1998

Severus rolled over and opened his eyes in the dimly lit bedroom. He blinked. Twiskett was standing beside his bed with a tray. Severus could smell the coffee. He blinked again. Twiskett never brought him coffee in the morning unless he called for it specially.

"What time is it?"

"Early." Twiskett smiled.

"Mmm." Severus groped for his watch on the bedside table. Not even six-thirty yet. He snapped it shut and lay back down, pulling his covers up around his neck. "Leave the coffee."

Severus sensed some reluctance from the house-elf, but Twiskett cleared a space on the other nightstand and set the tray down there. He lingered a moment, then popped away with a small crack.

Fifteen minutes later, having reached that point where he was afraid of dozing off and oversleeping, Severus sat up and waved a hand to light the lamps, then pushed back to sit against the headboard. He Summoned the tray and settled it on his lap. He rarely indulged in coffee or breakfast in bed, but then, he was rarely treated to coffee or breakfast in bed. He poured coffee into the cup and then picked up the pitcher of cream. There was a folded parchment beneath it, and Severus took it with his left hand as he poured the cream with his right.

The parchment had been folded only once, and Severus's lips twitched as he saw the message in peacock blue ink. Silly elf. He might be impertinent, but . . .

"A Very happy Happy Birth Day to Professor Snape and most warm happyful Wishes for a Aussuspicious Year! Faithfully, Twiskett of Hogwarts." Then there was a rather sweetly drawn picture of a smiling red flower beside the signature.

Cheeky little elf. He'd never received a birthday card, or any other kind of card, from a house-elf before. He'd known they could read and write...though he thought they needed some spelling tuition...but he couldn't remember ever having seen anything that Twiskett had written before this. It was a touching effort, Severus admitted to himself. Cheeky, but touching.

The *Daily Prophet* had published his birth date in its biography of him that September; now it was common knowledge. Severus scowled slightly. The coffee and note from Twiskett were nice, but he did hope that his birthday was not going to be marked by such displays all day long. At least he knew that Minerva and Albus had plans for him for the evening and would probably leave him alone for the rest of the day, as he preferred it. The students weren't returning from holidays until the next day, but there were still some in residence, including a few Slytherins. He hoped that they didn't feel obligated to celebrate the occasion with some insincere well-wishes. Since he was planning on being out of the castle for a good part of the day, that shouldn't be too much of a danger.

Gareth had invited him to lunch, and Severus was meeting him and Hermione in Edinburgh at Aphrodite's Apple at one. Gareth had asked him whom else he would like to invite, to feel free to invite anyone he wished, but Severus said he didn't want any fuss. The truth was, he couldn't think of anyone else whom he could invite. Minerva and Albus were having a late dinner for him in their suite at eight, and other than the two of them, there wasn't anyone, not really. He might feel more at ease with some of his colleagues, but he was still alone. Christmas had been nice, but the days since then had emphasised to him that he was alone and solitary. But that was what he was used to. And he did have lunch plans with Gareth and Hermione, Gareth's treat. That was already more celebration than he was used to. The previous year, it hadn't been marked at all.

Severus finished the pot of excellent coffee that Twiskett had brought him...he didn't think it was the usual brew, more likely some nice Costa Rican, or perhaps Guatemalan, very tasty...and he sent the tray out to the sitting room table. He showered, then went to the wardrobe and selected one of his favourite black waistcoats and long jackets...though many people couldn't tell the difference between his different suits, he could. This waistcoat had a delicate chevron pattern woven through it, and the jacket gently cut away just above the hip.

After debating with himself for a few moments, he decided that as it was a special occasion and he was going out to lunch, he would wear a pair of grey trousers. Then he chose a narrow grey bow tie, rather than his black one, which was what he always wore on those rare occasions when he wore a tie at Hogwarts. Severus couldn't even remember having worn the grey tie before, although he had worn the grey trousers occasionally. They fit him better than they had the last time he'd tried them on, he noticed as he buttoned his braces; he had put on a little weight, he guessed.

As it was a Saturday, and a holiday, to boot, breakfast wouldn't be served until eight-thirty, so Severus spent the next hour reading the most recent edition of *Modern European Potions*. Twiskett popped in a little after eight with the *Daily Prophet*.

"Thank you, Twiskett. And thank you for the note and the coffee," Severus said, taking the newspaper from the elf. "It was a nice way to begin the morning."

Twiskett smiled shyly and blushed.

"I shall be gone most of the day. You may spend it however you wish," Severus said. "Do not worry about tidying my rooms. No work today. Time enough for that tomorrow. Do something just for fun."

Twiskett looked slightly puzzled. He was unsure what he could do if he weren't performing his usual duties. He'd been working.

"Thank you, Twiskett. That will be all for now."

At breakfast, everyone sitting at a long oval table, staff and students together, Severus chose his seat carefully, not wanting to sit beside a student...he never wished to sit beside a student if he could avoid it...nor beside Albus, who was often irrepressible, and who might wish him a voluble "Happy Birthday," thus setting off a cascade, or an avalanche, of insincere happy birthday wishes. Albus's wishes would be sincere, Severus didn't doubt that, and perhaps a few others' might be, but having to respond to any of them would tax his reserves of good will, which never ran very high, in any case. So Severus took the chair between Poppy Pomfrey and Sharon Carter. Carter was pleasant enough for a Gryffindor, and they rarely spoke outside of meetings, so she was safe, and he thought that Pomfrey, even if she remembered that it was his birthday, would understand that he would not want the occasion marked in any way, and would be discreet.

Minerva liked to direct the conversation during the holiday meals for the students' sake, though she did so adroitly and without forcing the discussion if it flowed naturally away from her chosen topic. Severus believed that the topic for that morning was to be Albus's Muggle book club and what books should be on the list for upcoming sessions. As a number of the students present were too young for the club and of the others, none were Muggle-born or half-blood, Severus doubted the topic would be a success. Severus had considered attending the book club, but he didn't want to feel obligated to read the books, and if he did read the books, he didn't particularly want to be forced to express his opinions of them to a motley collection of his colleagues and the few sixth- and seventh-years who attended.

Indeed, conversation did revolve around Muggle literature, but Severus was just as glad for it, since that meant that no one was likely to wish him a happy birthday, forcing him to respond.

"Are there any specific parameters for the choice of books?" Vector asked.

"Nothing terribly specific," Albus replied. "I prefer them to have some sort of literary or social merit, but I interpret that quite broadly. If it shows something about Muggle life and society, it can be last week's best seller, not necessarily a classic."

"Does it have to be in English originally, or are translations permitted?" Severus asked, curious about the breadth of books Albus was considering. After having perused the first announcement regarding the formation of the book club, he had ignored the succeeding ones.

"There are a good many classics, both modern and ancient, that would require us to read them in translation," Albus said. "We read Plato's *Republic* in November. We then followed it with Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. It was lighter reading during the exam period. Both provoked interesting conversation."

"I suggest, then, that you have them read something by Kafka," Severus said. "I read a few of his novels several years ago. I found them most . . . insightful."

"Depressing stuff," Vector said. "I would like to read something more fun. Agatha Christie, for example. They may not be great literature, or even terribly well-written, but they are enjoyable, and they offer a bit of insight into Muggle customs and devices during the period. There's always justice in the end, too. I like that in a book. Reading Kafka . . . when I was young, I had more of a taste for that kind of thing. But after recent events, something a bit less dire would be nice."

Severus snorted, but returned to eating his sausages and fried eggs and let the conversation flow on without him. Poppy leaned toward him.

"After breakfast, Professor, if you could stop by the Hospital Wing?" she asked in a low voice.

"Of course." His brow furrowed. "Any particular reason?"

"I just have something for you, that's all." She gave him a quick smile. "Just a little something."

Severus nodded. She had never marked his birthday before, except occasionally to say "Happy Birthday," and she was one of the few in the castle who had always known when his birthday fell. He doubted it could be a birthday present. Nonetheless, he had to tamp down a sense of anticipation. After all, he didn't like birthdays, and he disliked celebrating his. Everyone had one, and they came every year. All it meant was that you hadn't died yet. He paused and looked across the table at Minerva, who was smiling at something that Pomona had said. He supposed he did have something to be grateful for that year, even if he had no desire to celebrate it.

He pushed his plate away, and it vanished neatly.

"That was a great sigh, Professor Snape," Carter said.

He raised an eyebrow. "I did not sigh. I merely finished my breakfast."

She smiled slightly and nodded. "Have plans for the day?"

He hated such questions, but they were a part of life. "Nothing in particular. I will be going into Edinburgh later, though."

"It should be a nice day for it," Sharon remarked, glancing toward the windows. It had been grey and dismal for the past few days, but that morning, the sun was shining.

"Indeed."

On his other side, Poppy stood.

"Excuse me, Professor Carter," Severus said, placing his napkin on the table and pushing away. "Have a pleasant day."

Severus accompanied Poppy from the Great Hall and they walked up to the Hospital Wing together.

"Did I hear that you have plans for the day?" Poppy asked.

"I am going to Edinburgh later."

She nodded and waved her wand to lift the locking charm from the infirmary doors.

"I hope you have a nice day. Sharon's right: it's a beautiful one. Cold, but it looks like it will be sunny all day." Indeed, sunshine was streaming in through the large windows in the infirmary.

"You have something for me?" Severus asked as Poppy opened her office door.

"Yes. It's just a little something." She smiled up at him. "I actually found it a couple months ago and thought of you when I saw it. I considered giving it to you for Christmas, but since we've never exchanged gifts, I thought that might make you uncomfortable, feel obligated to reciprocate, and this was just a whim. Then I remembered that your birthday's in January, so I went ahead and got it for you."

Poppy opened one of the bottom drawers in her desk and pulled out a package wrapped in dark green paper. She handed it to him. "Happy Birthday, Severus."

"I, um, thank you. You didn't have to . . ."

"Oh, I know. It was just a whim, as I said. Sorry about the Christmas wrapping paper," she added. "It was what I had."

He nodded. "Should I open it now?"

"Of course!"

Severus carefully lifted the edges of the paper and broke the Sticking Charms, then he folded the paper and set it on Poppy's desk. He raised the top of the white box, revealing crumpled red tissue paper. He removed some of it and felt a cushioning charm release. Something breakable, then, he thought, reaching in and pulling out the object, a small ceramic apothecary jar.

"It's . . . lovely," Severus said, turning it in his hand. It was lovely, too. The underlying glaze was white, but it had delicate designs decorating it in blue, black, and green, some purely ornamental, others seemingly functional. It was wider at the top and bottom than in the middle, where it gently bowed inward. It tingled warmly in his hand. He examined some of the symbols near its base. "It's wizarding, not Muggle."

Poppy nodded. "I had Murdoch look at it. He said that the original charm on it is still there, though it's weak now. It's early fifteenth century. Murdoch thinks it was probably made in Spain, though he wasn't certain."

Severus held it out to her. "I can't accept this."

"What? Why not?" she asked, not taking the jar from him.

He shook his head. "You should give it to Dumbledore...or keep it yourself." It was too much.

"But I wanted to give it to *you*. I thought of you immediately when I saw it. It wasn't expensive, if that's what you're thinking. It honestly wasn't. If it had been, I would have admired it and moved on. I got it at a Muggle flea market. I don't think they had any idea what they had...even aside from its wizarding provenance, I mean. I did feel slightly guilty when I bought it, but I figured it was better to have it back in wizarding hands. Your hands, specifically." She grinned. "Please, do take it. I thought you could keep it on your mantelpiece or the desk in your sitting room. A pretty little decoration. You could even keep your Floo powder in it, if you feel it must serve a practical purpose."

"All right. Thank you." He quirked a smile. "I don't know as I'll be keeping my Floo powder in it, but it is pretty."

"You're welcome. I hope you have a very happy birthday, Severus," Poppy said. "Enjoy your day!"

He nodded. "Thank you." He looked down at the small jar in his hand. "It's already better than most . . ." Most days and most birthdays. It was still early, though. Plenty of time left for that to change.

Severus met Filius outside the Room of Requirement at ten. The little Charms master was already there, holding the door open for him. Severus stepped in and smiled at the room that had been provided to them: light and bright with a high vaulted ceiling, the illusion of sunlight streaming in through leaded glass windows, pale grey flagstone floor, but a raised brick-red platform of correct proportions in the centre of the room.

"Do you like it, Severus?"

"Yes. Very impressive."

"I'll have to bring you to the actual hall one day, then," Filius said. "It is the duelling hall of a private academy. Have you heard of the Steinhof Akademie der magischen Künsten?"

"Yes. It used to be some kind of research academy, didn't it?" Severus asked.

"It still is, in a sense. But it used to be a small, privately owned academy for promising students aged sixteen through twenty-one to study more intensively after leaving school, but either before or instead of an apprenticeship. I went there after I left Hogwarts and studied for another year before I began my Charms apprenticeship...that's where I got my real start on duelling, too. They had an excellent duelling master. Even when they had paying students, they had always welcomed independent scholars to come use their library, and their library certainly is as good as those of Hogwarts and Durmstrang. It had to close down during the Grindelwald years...an early casualty, closing in nineteen-ten, since Grindelwald couldn't tolerate any perceived competition with his own academy of the Dark Arts. Grindelwald called it an academy of all magical arts, but the emphasis was clearly on the Dark application of magic.

"Anyway, after the Steinhof Akademie reopened in 'forty-seven, it no longer had a faculty and took no students," Filius continued with a sad shake of his head. "It had two librarians, though, and anyone who wished was welcome to come and use the library at no charge, though donations were welcome. For a nominal sum, you could even stay in the Schloss and take your meals there. In the late sixties, Riddle's Death Eaters attacked and killed both librarians and several members of the family, including two of the house-elves, and stole a number of books. Fortunately, they were driven off before they could set the library on fire. But that was the final death knell for the academy. I received a letter from Herr Schwarz a few weeks ago...the current head of the family...and they're considering reopening the library for researchers. But whether they do or not, I often visit them in the summer for a week or so, and I'm sure they'd be pleased to meet you and show you the library and duelling hall. You could come for a few days. It's in northern Germany, not too far from Hannover. I could do a Portkey for you."

"Oh, I . . . I . . . that would be nice, I'm sure, but I doubt they would welcome a stranger..."

"Hardly a stranger, Severus! My friend! I know they would be pleased to welcome you and show you their hospitality."

"Well, I suppose we shall see," Severus replied. Filius would no doubt forget once summer arrived and it would be a moot question.

"You will be happy to learn that I have determined your opponents for your duels. I still need to check with the first one...he's agreed to duel, of course, but I hadn't asked about you specifically. That would be the first duel in April."

"Who am I duelling?" Severus asked. Filius did sometimes become carried away when he was excited about something and then forget to get to the point.

"Gareth McGonagall for the first one, and Albus for the second. I think you're well-matched with both of them. Gareth hasn't quite your skill or training, of course, but he has a lot of energy and inventiveness, and Albus, well, no one could be a true match for Albus, but I think you'll give him a good challenge...if you don't mind, of course, Severus. I thought that for that duel, we'd do something rather special, if you are both agreed."

Duelling Albus . . . he supposed he could do that. It was not what he had expected...he had believed he'd be paired with a couple of the Aurors on the list...and he doubted he could win that duel, but he could try, give it a good shot. McGonagall. He could beat him, Severus was sure of that, but he was less certain whether he wanted to duel the younger wizard. He would have to think about it, discuss it with him.

"Severus?"

"Yes, fine. I will speak with McGonagall about it myself, if you like. I am seeing him later today."

"Good! Thank you!"

"You said you had something special in mind for me and Dumbledore."

"Yes, a wandless duel. We would alter the rules, obviously. It would be quite exciting, I believe! I've only seen one wandless match in my life, and it was thrilling! A wonderful close to the year's duelling series, I think."

"A wandless duel?" Severus was speechless. He might have been able to acquit himself well in a regular duel under the traditional rules, but wandless . . . Albus would kill him. Not literally, of course, but it would be a very short contest.

"Yes! Brilliant idea, isn't it?" Filius rubbed his hands together.

"It's daft. I'm sorry, Professor, but I can't do that."

Filius's face fell. "But your wandless skills are among the best I've ever seen!"

"Yes, if I want to Summon something or close a door! Possibly do some Legilimency on someone with a wide-open mind, but not on Dumbledore...although even Legilimency would be of limited usefulness in this kind of duel, anyway." He shook his head, thinking about it. "I can do a wandless Shield Charm, but it's not particularly powerful, and it doesn't last long...just long enough for me to Summon my wand...and I doubt it would hold against anything Dumbledore cast at me. The duel would only be a thrilling sight if you want it very short, ending with my rapid defeat." He could probably manage a few other spells, but not many more, and not enough to give him a chance against someone of Dumbledore's ability and power. His wandless Stunner might knock out an unwary fly, but it wouldn't faze Albus, even unshielded.

"But you have almost five months to prepare, Severus! I can train with you, and I'm sure there are others who will, too. I thought that if I use my wand and you practise your wandless skills, you could become adept enough..."

"In only a few months? I don't know . . ." It could be a challenge to improve his wandless defence skills. He'd always wanted to, but it was a difficult thing to do on one's own. "All right, I'll give it a try. But don't do any publicity about it until I'm certain that I can attain the level of proficiency that would enable me to acquit myself well and not just be an embarrassment."

"Oh, good!" Filius said brightly. He Levitated himself up to the duelling platform. "I thought we could begin by strengthening your wandless *Protego*. I'll just cast little Stingers, so if they get through, it won't hurt too much."

Severus nodded, pocketed his wand, and clambered up onto the platform, hoisting himself up with his arms.

"There are stairs at the other end," Filius said helpfully.

"Mm."

For the next hour, Severus first practised his Shield Charm, then when he began simply dodging the jinxes to avoid being stung, they switched and he began to cast a series of wandless Stingers and other minor jinxes. None made it past Flitwick's *Protego*, so Filius pocketed his wand and decided to try doing a wandless Shield Charm, himself. His wandless *Protegos* weren't very effective, though, and Severus's jinxes began to get through it. Filius reported that they only tickled slightly, or brushed against him weakly, which irritated Severus. The challenge kept him motivated, though, and he agreed to meet Filius again the following Saturday for more practice.

He would have to come up with new strategies, Severus knew that, if he were to have any chance at all of not making a complete fool of himself. New strategies . . . new spells, ones not designed to be cast using a wand . . . and perhaps cast them verbally, too. That might strengthen and focus the spells, since he wasn't using his wand. Although verbal spells could present their own weaknesses . . . Perhaps some spells that were entirely unrecognisable to Albus, if that were possible. He would have to think about that. A new way to spend some of his "free time." Better than a Muggle book club, he thought.

At a few minutes before one, Severus stepped into Aphrodite's Apple. The aroma of apples was strong, but pleasant. He looked around, but didn't see Gareth or Hermione.

"Good afternoon, Professor. Table?"

"Yes, please. I am . . . I believe I am meeting two others."

"Right," the wait-witch said with a smile. "Table for three, then."

He had hardly pulled out his chair and sat down when Gareth and Hermione came in and spotted him. Severus didn't know why he had doubted they would be there. They'd never stood him up before. He rose slightly from his chair as they approached.

"Sorry if we're late, Severus," Hermione said. "I couldn't tear Gareth away from his computer."

"Computer? In Hogsmeade?" Severus was puzzled.

"I wish!" Gareth said, sitting down. "No, I have to keep it over at Melina and Brennan's. I was trying to catch up on my email. I don't get over there more than once a week, and that's if I'm lucky. It didn't help that she kept looking over my shoulder. Don't think she's heard of 'privacy' before."

"I was just trying to get you to hurry, that's all. I don't care about any of your emails. I don't read Italian, anyway."

"That was only one email," Gareth grumbled. "The others were all in English. I need to work out something other than using their spare room. A flat someplace...where I can have actual privacy!" He grinned over at Hermione.

"I don't know," Hermione said as the waitress brought them a basket of warm apple and onion bread, a pitcher of fresh cider, and the menus. "It seems to me you have a good deal there...you don't have to pay rent, Melina and Brennan don't mind your dropping by whenever you want, and when I'm not hanging over your shoulder trying to get you to get a move on, you have privacy."

"I suppose . . ." Gareth sighed and helped himself to some of the bread. He looked at the menu. "I know what I'm having. I'm ravenous." He set the menu down. "So, how's the birthday boy? Having a good day so far?"

Severus ignored the appellation and nodded. "It has been satisfactory. I had another practice session with Flitwick this morning, then I went to the little bookshop down the street here and bought some presents for myself. In fact, I have something we need to discuss, McGonagall."

"That sounds serious."

Severus shrugged. "I suppose." He glanced at Hermione. He would prefer to discuss this with McGonagall in private, but that didn't seem as though it would be possible. "Flitwick tells me that you have agreed to participate in one of his duels."

"Yes, I did. I've never duelled, not really, just done some Defence work, but I think it could be fun."

Severus was even more doubtful of the wisdom of Flitwick's idea now, but he'd leave it up to McGonagall. "He wants to pair us up. Have the two of us duel. I told him I'd talk to you about it."

"The two of us? Well, yes, I suppose."

"I could practise with you," Hermione offered, looking at Gareth. "We did a lot of that sort of thing in Dumbledore's Army. Not under duelling rules, but I'm sure we could get a copy of them and study them."

"You've already got a lot going on with your new classes starting soon, your Animagus training with Alroy, and you also happen to have an apprenticeship," Gareth said.

"It would be fun, though. We could do it on the Sundays when I'm not at my parents'."

"If McGonagall wants to do it," Severus said. "I thought I'd be duelling an Auror."

"If you'd rather not, Snape, I understand, but I think it could be interesting. Fun. You'd probably mop the floor with me, but I'd try not to make it too easy for you."

"It's not only that, but also . . ." Severus glanced at Hermione, then leaned toward Gareth. "I am just concerned because of our . . . our history. And your mother. If she wanted to come and watch you."

"Let me worry about whether that should even be a concern or not, Snape."

Severus shifted uneasily in his chair. "I wouldn't want there to be any reason for hard feelings between us, either." He hadn't very many friends. He wouldn't care about beating anyone else, but he didn't want to alienate Gareth.

Gareth laughed. "I'm a big boy, Severus. Honestly. It's a sporting duel, a contest. A game. Even if my pride is injured slightly, I'd hold it against Flitwick before I would against you. And I love that little man, so don't worry. Besides, who's to say that pigs won't fly and I might not actually beat you?"

"All right. I'll let Flitwick know it's on. I think he's planning for the second week of April for that one."

"Are you doing another duel besides that one, Severus?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. With Dumbledore." Severus quirked a smile at them. "You can come watch me get knocked on my arse then."

Gareth laughed.

The waitress returned to take their orders. Gareth ordered roast pork with apples, which came with noodles and sauerkraut. Hermione wanted the savoury potato pancakes filled with Stilton and thinly sliced apples. With some hesitation, Severus asked for the steak prepared in a tangy apple and quince marinade; it came with a side of chips and a carrot, cabbage, apple, and raisin salad. He thought it all sounded peculiar, but Gareth reassured him that it was very good.

"Now, Hermione persuaded me not to embarrass you by singing 'Happy Birthday' to you in public, mate...though I do *lovely* rendition, if I do say so myself!...but I do have a little something for you." He unbuckled his sporran and pulled out a small package.

"You're bringing me out to lunch..." That alone was more of a gift than Severus had expected from Gareth.

"Just something I thought you might like," Gareth said, drawing his wand and casting a charm on the package, unshrinking it, though it still wasn't very large. He handed the flat, rectangular present to Severus. "Happy Birthday, Snape."

Severus took the present and looked at it.

"You have to unwrap it to appreciate it fully," Gareth said with a grin.

Severus looked around, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to them, so he quickly unwrapped the silver paper from the present, and Hermione put it in one of his shopping bags for him. He held the framed parchment and nodded.

"I do like it. Thank you, McGonagall."

"I remembered that you'd liked that map I'd bought for Uncle Morgan, so I started looking for something similar that you might like. Every time I've gone around to the Dusty Tome, I've asked Tarrant if he'd found anything new. And when I saw this, it caught my fancy and I hoped you'd like it."

"He's had it for more than a month," Hermione said, "and he's fretted about it ever since, whether it was the right thing or not."

"I do not 'fret,' child!" Gareth drawled, lifting one eyebrow.

Hermione just giggled. "You do a fair imitation of it, then!"

"I do like it, very much." Severus said, examining the parchment closely. It was an early version of the Headache Potion formula, but that was not the interesting thing about it. The copyist had illuminated the manuscript and included small drawings of the potioner at work. They were small, but detailed, and the ones above and below the potion formula were in colour and charmed to move. In the first, the potioner was stirring the potion clockwise as tendrils of steam rose, and in the one at the bottom of the parchment, potion repeatedly dripped into a small glass retort from an alembic, ten blue drops, then the retort would be empty and the potion would begin again to drip. It was quite a clever old parchment. It was also likely quite expensive. It had to be several hundred years old. But he couldn't reject it, not if McGonagall had spent weeks looking for it. "Thank you, McGonagall."

Gareth grinned. "You're welcome!"

"I shall have to find a good place to display it," Severus said, thinking also of the apothecary jar that Poppy had given him. Perhaps he could display them together.

"There's a card that goes with it...it must be with the wrapping paper," Gareth said to Hermione. "It tells a little about it, its age and so on. You can read it later. The frame has a protective charm on it, that's why there's no glass, and it may need renewing, but not for a couple decades, probably."

"I will look after it well."

"Here, I have something for you, too," Hermione said. "It's not ancient or anything..."

"Whatever it is, I am sure I will like it," Severus said, meaning it. If Hermione gave him a set of handkerchiefs, he would like them.

"It's two things, actually. One is sort of a joke, just for fun," she explained as he hefted the present she handed him.

It felt heavy and like books. He loved getting books as gifts. Good books, anyway. Sometimes Albus would choose things he thought were edifying, but which Severus wasn't interested in. He'd always try to slog through them, though. His Christmas present had been a bottle of cognac and several volumes containing the complete works of William Shakespeare. That hadn't been bad, but it wasn't the first thing he would reach for when he wanted something to read. Hopefully, Hermione's choices would be a bit different.

"Just tear off the paper, mate," Gareth said. "There's no shortage of the stuff."

Severus simply gave him a glare and continued to carefully break the Sticking Charms and set the paper aside in one large piece.

He raised an eyebrow. The book on top was, he hoped, the joke. *'Halloween at Hogwarts?'* he read.

"Yes, they were selling it to raise money, remember? I noticed there were several photographs with you in them, so I bought a copy for myself"...she blushed..."that is, I thought it was fun, and it was a worthy cause, so I bought a copy for myself, then I bought a few more copies as Christmas gifts. I thought about giving it to you then, but decided to wait until your birthday."

Severus raised his arm, displaying the cuff of his sleeve. "I am wearing the cufflinks you gave me for Christmas," he said. "I've worn them several times." He had been surprised to discover that among the gifts waiting for him in the Headmistress's suite on Christmas Eve were ones from Hermione and Gareth. Gareth had given him a new daily journal and a Charmed fountain pen, and Hermione had given him the monogrammed cufflinks with three intertwined S's.

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you liked them. But look at the other book."

He placed the Hogwarts book on the table. The second book was quite different from the first. "I had been going to purchase this...I almost did today, in fact," Severus said. "A bit of luck I didn't."

"Oh, I'm glad! When I saw your bags and realised you'd been to the bookshop, I was worried," Hermione said. "I had checked with Professor McGonagall, and she said that she'd tell Professor Dumbledore not to give you a copy for Christmas, and she was fairly certain you hadn't bought a copy yourself yet. I was hoping you hadn't in the meantime."

The posthumous collected writings of Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel had only been released the previous month, although it had been in the works for several years. Dumbledore had been one of the editors and had written the forward to it, and Severus had read it over for him before he had submitted it to the publisher that September. Severus had been intrigued by what the forward had to say about the book, but it was expensive and he'd thought he'd wait a bit before laying out the money for it. He wouldn't really have time to read it until summer, anyway. Now, though . . .

"Open it up," Hermione said.

Severus opened to the flyleaf. Hermione had inscribed it, marking the date, wishing him a happy birthday, and signing it "Love, Hermione," but there was also an inscription from Albus further down the page. He gazed at it unblinkingly.

"I thought since he wrote the forward . . ." Hermione said nervously.

Severus nodded. "Thank you." He swallowed around the lump in his throat. *To Severus, a brilliant Potions master and a brilliant light in my life. ~ Albus Dumbledore.* He looked up at Hermione and Gareth. He saw the framed parchment beside his place. "Yes, thank you very much. This birthday..." He swallowed again, and he could feel heat rising in his face. "This has been . . ." He blinked. "Excuse me, please." Severus rose with a lurch, leaving the book on his chair and striding rapidly away across the crowded restaurant.

Gareth put a hand on Hermione's arm as she began to rise, intent on following him. "I don't think you want to follow him into the gents', Hermione. Let him have a few minutes of privacy."

"What's wrong? Was there something wrong with the book?"

"How many birthdays do you think he's celebrated? I mean, really *celebrated*, not just crossed off the calendar? And this is his first after the war, and one he didn't expect to see. I don't think anything's wrong. I think he just . . . he just isn't used to being happy. Sometimes, Hermione, even being happy can hurt," he said softly.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" she asked, turning and looking toward the dark hall where Severus had disappeared.

Gareth shrugged. "Don't know. I hope so. But he'll be back for his lunch, and he'll enjoy the book you gave him." Seeing Hermione's concerned expression, he patted her arm and added, "And if he doesn't return in a few minutes, I'll go see if he's okay."

Severus did return in a few minutes, just as the food was arriving. He moved the book, then sat down and picked up his knife and fork as if he hadn't been gone. The rest of the meal went quietly, and Severus asked Hermione about the university courses she had chosen...an economics course and one in political theory...and the wizards were unsurprised to learn that Hermione had bought the textbooks and had read them over her Christmas holiday already.

After they finished their main courses, the waitress brought out an apple-spice cake and three plates.

"I ordered it yesterday," Gareth said. "I hope you don't mind. If you'd prefer something else, feel free to order it. I thought this cake sounded good, though."

Severus nodded. Hermione cut the cake for them, giving Severus the first piece. It was chock-full of walnuts and sultanas and smelled richly of apple, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and other spices, and the icing was thick and creamy. All three of them agreed that it was very tasty, even Severus.

After Gareth paid, the three left through the McTavish Street exit, Severus carrying his two shopping bags of books and presents in one hand and a box tied with string with the rest of cake in the other. They walked slowly toward the small park further down the street.

"This was enjoyable. Thank you, McGonagall. And thank you again for the gifts...even the Halloween book," he said, quirkling a smile. "One less copy of it in circulation!"

Hermione laughed.

"I'm going to stop and see Uncle Murdoch. It's been a while since I've been in McTavish Street," Gareth said. "Coming with, Hermione? Or returning to the house?"

"I need to get back. I have to practise my Animagus exercises yet today, and I need to review the calculations I did yesterday, so I can't. Say 'hello' for me, though."

Gareth nodded. "What about you, Snape? Coming along?"

"No, I think I'll get back to Hogwarts. Start reading my new book."

"Right. See you later, Hermione...I may go out after, so tell Mum and Gluffy not to wait dinner for me. Good to see you again, Severus. Owl me, and we'll go out for drinks one night this week. Tuesday or Thursday, maybe."

Severus nodded.

"Thanks, Severus," Hermione said, her hand on his arm.

He looked puzzled. "What for?"

"For spending part of your birthday with us. It was fun. I hope the rest of your day is good, too."

"I am having a late dinner with the Headmistress and Dumbledore. I anticipate that will also be enjoyable."

Hermione smiled. "Good. Stop by next Saturday and we can go for lunch...Magister McGonagall does let me out to eat on my own, you know!"

"All right. I think I can. I'll let you know."

Hermione squeezed his arm and reached up to give him a kiss on the cheek, ignoring the passers-by and Severus's slight but perceptible flinch. "Have a great fortieth year, Severus S. Snape, of the mysterious middle name."

"Yeah, mate, what *is* with that extra 'S'?" Gareth asked.

Severus hesitated perceptibly. "Samuel. But I would prefer . . ."

"Right, our lips are sealed," Gareth said. "Come safely home, you two! I'm off." He gave them a wave and walked quickly toward the apothecary, his loden cloak swirling around him.

Moments later, there were twin cracks of Apparition as Hermione left for Hogsmeade and Severus for the castle.

The tray from his morning coffee was still on his sitting room table. Severus picked up the note that Twiskett had given him. "Happy Birth Day." Severus snorted a laugh and propped the parchment up at the back of his desk against a stack of books. He stared at it. "Happyful Wishes for a Aussuspiciousus Year."

"Twiskett!" Severus paused and waited. Hmm, well, he had told him to take the day off. "Twiskett!" He shrugged and turned to unpacking the rest of the books he had bought earlier that day.

A minute later, the grey elf popped into the sitting room as Severus was shelving the Hogwarts Halloween book in one of his bookcases.

"Ah, you are here," Severus said. He looked the house-elf up and down. He was rather a mess. His knees were dirty, his face was smudged, and his towels were soiled. In contrast, his hands looked freshly washed "You were outdoors?"

Twiskett nodded. "Helping my granddad."

"Your . . . granddad?"

Twiskett's head bobbed in affirmation.

"And where does he work?"

"Paddocks, creatures, Forest, gardens. Not greenhouses."

"I see. You are enjoying your day?"

Twiskett nodded seriously.

"I have something for you. For you to share...with your grandfather, if you like, or with a friend." He wondered whether Twiskett had a girlfriend. He had no idea how house-elves mated, but he knew that the Malfoy house-elves had slowly dwindled in number over the years until only Dobby had remained. Malfoy had once said something about unsuitable mating. "Do you have a special friend? A girlfriend, perhaps?"

Twiskett blushed the deepest lilac Severus had ever seen, and he smiled shyly and bobbed his head once.

"Very well, share this with your girlfriend, then. Or with your girlfriend and your grandfather, or with whomever you choose. There's quite a lot." Severus held out the box with the cake in it. "It's birthday cake from my lunch. Go on, take it."

Twiskett took the box in both his hands and looked up at Severus with wide eyes.

"Now go. I wish to read in peace," Severus said gruffly, settling into his chair. "You may serve me tomorrow."

Twiskett smiled and nodded, then Disapparated almost silently.

Up in the Headmistress's suite after one of Severus's favourite dinners, beef stroganoff with extra mushrooms and fresh noodles, Albus handed Severus a small box tied with a narrow gold ribbon.

Severus pulled on the ribbon, and it untied easily. Lifting the lid, he saw the gift and pulled it out, turning it between his fingers.

"It's a stick pin. You can wear it in your lapel, but I gave it to you to wear with your cravat, the one that Minerva gave you, or with any others you might get that are similar to it."

"It's very nice, thank you, Albus." Severus nodded.

"I realise that red is not your usual colour, but it's a garnet, your birthstone, so I thought it might be acceptable."

Severus nodded. "I will wear it when next I wear the cravat. It did seem to be missing something. This would do well with it. Thank you."

"It also belonged to his father," Minerva said. "One of the few things he has...had...of his."

"I do appreciate it," Severus replied, setting the gold pin carefully back in its box. "I hope to have more occasions to wear it."

Albus chuckled. "You needn't try too hard, my boy. I know it's not your everyday look. You can save it for special occasions."

"And this is from me," Minerva said, handing him a long, flat box with a little bow on it. Her eyes sparkled.

Severus lifted the lid and folded back the white tissue paper. One corner of his mouth turned up and his eyes crinkled. "You are joking, aren't you? Or am I supposed to wear these when I wear that green cravat?"

"Not at all! They're for daily use. I wanted to expand your wardrobe, true, but I thought that braces would be a safe place to begin. You will know you are wearing them, but no one else need see them! I thought they were amusing."

Severus shook his head, smiling at the braces, which were grass green and had many little silvery snakes, rather sweet little snakes, slithering up them.

"There are clips, too, that you can attach so you can wear them with trousers without buttons...if you have blue jeans, for example." Her brows came together. "Do you wear blue jeans?"

"I have jeans, yes. I wear them. Usually black ones, though." He couldn't imagine wearing these braces with his jeans. He had a black leather belt, old and well-worn, that he liked with his jeans. But perhaps with his suits, under his waistcoat. "I will try these tomorrow. Thank you, Minerva." He leaned forward in his chair and kissed her cheek. "And I will think of you every time I wear them."

Albus chuckled at that. "It is very good, then, that I discouraged her from her other choice!"

Minerva laughed, too, and Severus looked at Albus quizzically.

"She was going to buy you some rather colourful underwear!"

Severus's eyes widened.

"It was just a thought...a very fleeting thought I had when we were passing some in the shop!" Minerva said, laughing harder at his expression.

"Thank you, Albus!" Severus said. "I'm in your debt for that!"

Minerva and Albus both laughed, and Severus smiled.

"Now for cake! You do have room for cake, don't you, Severus?" Albus asked.

"I could manage a little."

"Good, I'll fetch it myself," Albus said, rising and going into the little kitchen. When he came out a moment later, he was carrying a dark chocolate cake covered with lit candles. Minerva began to sing "Happy Birthday," and Albus joined in.

Severus felt the tears well up in his eyes that he had been subduing all day. He took the handkerchief that Minerva handed him, and wiped his eyes. Albus set down the cake, which had a ring of small white candles surrounding two that were in the shape of a three and a nine. Severus wiped his eyes again, then took a deep breath and blew out all the candles in one go. He smiled slightly, then he picked up the knife and asked how much cake each of them would like.

This was the best birthday he'd had since he was six, Severus thought as the knife smoothly sliced into the cake. Maybe even better. It wasn't supposed to be like this, not for him, but he wasn't going to complain about it or question it. There would be enough to complain about tomorrow, he was sure. In the meantime, he placed a slab of deep chocolate cake on a plate and handed it to Minerva. He met Albus's eyes and smiled.

~**END PART TWO**~

~*to be continued*~

NEXT

PART THREE

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Tear Shed

Saturday, 6 March 1999

Severus goes into Hogsmeade to ask Hermione to lunch, but spends the afternoon with Gareth.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall, others

Author's Note: I'll post Chapter Twenty-Nine fairly soon, but in the meantime, I'm going to begin posting a little *Long Vernal Season* "sister story," which I think you might enjoy: "The Sorting of Suzie Sefton." It's a short fic about Suzie Sefton and her introduction to the wizarding world. (That was a surprise, wasn't it?) Naturally, Severus will make his appearance, too.

Sneak Peek at Upcoming Chapters in Part Three

Ratings for chapters range from T and M to MA

PART THREE

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Tear Shed

Saturday, 6 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Thirty: A Tour of the Past

Saturday, 6 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, Gareth McGonagall, Gertrude Gamp, others

Chapter Thirty-One: A Date with Hermione

Saturday, 6 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger

Chapter Thirty-Two: Disquiet

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, others

Chapter Thirty-Three: At Spinner's End

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Thirty-Four: Uncertainty

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Thirty-Five: Friendship

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Gareth McGonagall, others

Chapter Thirty-Six: A Darkly Smouldering Magnetism

Monday, 8 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Minerva McGonagall, Sarah Duffy, others

Chapter Thirty-Seven: An Exercise in Harmless Flirting

Monday, 8 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, others

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Tear Shed

Chapter 30 of 118

Saturday, 6 March 1999. Severus goes into Hogsmeade to ask Hermione out to lunch, but spends the afternoon with Gareth. ****Beginning of Part Three.****

Author's Note: If you've been reading ["The Sorting of Suzie Sefton."](#) I have posted the fourth and final chapter. Enjoy!

Thank you to Di & Hogwarts Duo for their feedback on an early draft of Part Three!



PART THREE

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Tear Shed

Saturday, 6 March 1999

The door opened. Severus saw the wizard who opened it and breathed easier. He never felt comfortable approaching that door, and if he were a praying man, he would be offering prayers each time it opened to him. Praying man or not, his prayers had been answered, since the door had never yet been opened by the witch whose eyes he still could not meet. He swallowed and tried to draw some saliva into his suddenly dry mouth.

"Snape! Looking for Hermione?" Gareth asked.

"It's Saturday, and I know she has duties on Saturdays, but I was in town and it's almost lunchtime. I thought that you would let her join me for lunch," Severus said. His heart was beating uncomfortably fast, and not only at the prospect of asking Hermione to lunch, since they had met for lunch in Hogsmeade before, but at having to ask Gareth a favour in doing so and at the possibility that Professor Gamp might appear behind her son at any moment.

"I'm sorry, Snape. I normally would, but Hermione's not here today. She didn't have any Muggle classes last week, so she worked all of Tuesday and Thursday and had today off, instead. She and my mother went into London for the day." Gareth grinned. "I think Hermione's going to drag her all over the place and completely exhaust her. It will be good for her."

Severus blinked. He did have things he could do in Hogsmeade, but the primary reason he had come into town on that beautiful early spring day was to see Hermione. He hadn't put much thought into it, knowing that if he thought too long about it, he would find too many reasons not to do it.

Gareth cocked his head, looking at him with a slight smile. "You know, I was just about to have my own lunch, all by my lonesome. There's plenty for two. Care to join me?"

Severus took one step back. "I couldn't." He shook his head.

"Why not? You don't have any plans now," Gareth said. He opened the door wider and stepped back. "Come on in."

Severus's mouth felt like the Sahara. "No, thank you, McGonagall."

Gareth sighed and looked at Severus with sympathetic eyes. "Just come in for a while. You've never been here before. I'll show you around...there's a great garden out back...then if you're hungry, you can stay for lunch."

Severus looked beyond Gareth into the house. "I..."

"You have never been here, Snape. Do you understand me?" Gareth said gently. "I am inviting you in."

"Your mother..." Severus began, shaking his head.

"My mother will be in London all day. I'm not even expecting her for dinner," Gareth said. "It's all right, really."

Severus stepped into the house. As Gareth closed the door behind him, Severus said, "Your mother wouldn't like it if I were here."

"I am inviting you in, Snape, and Mum . . . she is adjusting well. I don't know as she would be prepared to sit down to a meal with you in her own home, but she knows that you and Hermione are friends, and she hasn't had one word of objection to it...not even a look of disapproval. I've never hidden it from her when you and I have seen each other. She lost her anger against you a very long time ago, much before I could lose mine." Gareth hesitated. "I think that if she were to meet you unexpectedly on a dark night, she would have a reaction still, but she would understand if I invited you to lunch whilst she was out. She never objects to my having friends here when she's out."

"I am not just one of your other friends, though. I wouldn't want her to come back and see me here," Severus said. "I know that it has been an adjustment for her to return to Hogsmeade and this house, you've all told me that, and I'm actually surprised that Hermione managed to drag her into London for the day." He quirked a slight smile. "Though I suppose that if anyone could manage that, it would be Hermione."

"She won't be back until late," Gareth replied. He paused, looking at him seriously. "You know, Snape, I think it would be good for you to come in. I really do." He reached out and touched Severus's upper arm. "You have as much courage as any Gryffindor, Snape. Come in, all the way in, and chase some of the past away with the present."

Severus suppressed his impulse to sneer. The sneer would be only for himself. After their first heated introduction to each other, McGonagall had been unflaggingly civil to him, even when he himself had been obnoxious. More than that, he had been generous and seemed to be becoming a good friend to him, something that Severus found astonishing. Gareth had a kind of open-handed warmth about him that Severus had seldom encountered. Even Minerva, as good as she had always been to him, and as generous as she had been...more generous than he believed he deserved...even she did not have the same freely flowing, easy warmth about her. Yet McGonagall was no weakling or pushover, either, nor was he rash or impulsive, despite being comfortable expressing his feelings toward others. And although Severus had not witnessed

it, he understood that McGonagall had fought fiercely and ruthlessly in the battle that had brought an end to the Dark Lord.

Severus followed Gareth into the sitting room. It was bright and cheerful, with large windows that looked out to the side garden. He tried to forget the last time he was here, when it was dark and he had chased the old witch through the house. She had already made it to the back door and had opened it when he had come up behind her. She turned to face him, her wand ready, but he was faster. She had fought like a demon, and the other three Death Eaters were already scattered about the house. He saw her raised wand, and he smiled. Then he cut off her wand arm.

Severus stepped back. "I should go," he said. He felt sick. "Tell Hermione, tell Hermione I was by." He stepped back again.

Gareth turned and saw his face. "Don't go, Snape. Stay. Walk through the house with me."

"Why?" Severus asked sharply. "Do you wish to torture me, McGonagall? Is this the moment that you have been waiting for?"

"No, no, believe me, it's not. When I believed I hated you, I never would have believed that it would bother you to be here. Had I given it any thought later, I would have imagined that it would bother you. When Hermione took the apprenticeship with me, it was clear that it disturbed you, and not just that she took the apprenticeship or that it was with me or even that she was living here under the same roof with me, but that she was moving into my mother's house. The house where you cut off my mother's arm," he added bluntly.

Severus tightened his jaw, but did not respond except to take another step back.

Gareth stepped closer to him. "You don't even like to walk up the path to the house. You will escort Hermione to the front gate, and you take your leave of her there. The few times you've come to the door to fetch her, you looked as though you would be sick." He shook his head and took another step closer. "This is important for you, Snape. The house is here, and it holds its history. You are here, and you have your history. You always will. You have come so far, grown so much beyond that time when you were last here. Do not allow the past to be present here with you now. It shaped you, but do not let it control you."

"It does not control me," Severus objected. He took another step back and encountered the doorframe.

Gareth quirked a slight smile. "You remember our first encounter? In Aunt Minerva's office?"

Severus nodded.

"You were very forbearing," Gareth said, stepping closer to him. "You could have said or done a good many things to shut me up, but you did not. I was not immediately certain what to make of that fact. There were so many possible explanations for it. And then I went down and apologised...Aunt Minerva has a way of making you see yourself with a rather disturbing clarity sometimes; she's a bit like Mum that way...anyway, I apologised, as far as I was able at the time, and you said some things to me that startled me. You did not dissemble or attempt to excuse anything you did. You were not the man I had expected."

Severus swallowed and tried to move back, but simply pressed himself against the doorframe. He felt much as he had that first day in Minerva's office. "Hermione has told me what you say about me, that I am still the same man."

"That is not all I say about you, and I doubt that Hermione would tell you that and not my entire statement. You are the same man, Snape, but you are more. You will never shed that past and leave it behind you. Perhaps it would be a kinder world if you could, but we need our pasts, I think. They shaped who we are now, and we can learn from our mistakes. To lose your past, as painful as that past may be for you, wouldn't be good for you. You are becoming a good man, Snape," Gareth said, reaching out and resting his hand on his arm. "You are a man I am proud to call my friend, and if anyone sneers at that, they learn not to."

"I still am uncomfortable here," Severus said, looking over Gareth's shoulder into the sitting room beyond. "I feel...it is hard to say how I feel."

Gareth gave him a lopsided smile. "Why am I not surprised by that?"

"I am not like you, McGonagall. I cannot so easily even identify what I feel, let alone speak of it." Too many years of pushing aside any feelings but anger, resentment, and the occasional bit of humour at another's expense.

He had been a sensitive boy, though his sensitivity had been inwardly directed and rarely extended itself toward others. But when, after having already made his entire day miserable, three Gryffindors had found him crying behind the greenhouses one afternoon during his first year at Hogwarts and then had begun harassing him with taunts of "Snivellus," he had vowed to learn to control his emotions and never show weakness. It had become a habit of a lifetime.

"Do you remember when we first met, we stood very much as we are now? What did you feel then, Snape?" Gareth asked softly.

Severus looked into Gareth's face then looked away. "I was nervous. I felt uncomfortable that you were so close. I felt somewhat threatened, but I did not believe you would actually do anything to me. I felt . . . guilty, I suppose."

"And now?"

Severus looked back at Gareth and met his eyes. He smiled slightly. "I feel nervous, uncomfortable that you are so close, threatened, though I know you will do nothing to me, and," he said softly, looking beyond Gareth into the room, "I feel guilty."

"But does it feel the same as it did then?"

"No," Severus said. "It does not."

"How is it different?" Gareth asked, moving his hand from Severus's shoulder to his cheek.

"The last time you did that, you had a knife in your hand," Severus replied.

Gareth chuckled. "The 'knife that tasted blood,' yes, I remember that, too. My own blood when I was foolish enough to nick myself with it. I'm glad I didn't have a similar accident with you." He took another half step closer and his thumb grazed Severus's cheekbone. "How else is it different?"

"You stepped on my foot last time." His throat felt strangely tight.

"Yes, I did. I am sorry for that. I didn't use my heel, though, just the arch of my foot. But I am sorry I hurt you, Snape."

"It maintained my attention," Severus replied drily.

"There are friendlier ways of maintaining your attention, however," Gareth said softly. "How else is it different? Is there no other way? Do you really feel the same way that you did then?"

"No, my nervousness is different," he admitted. He swallowed. "I've come to trust you, McGonagall. And now, I feel nervous because . . . I do not know."

"Because you feel vulnerable, perhaps?" Gareth asked as he raised his right hand and rested it against his chest. "But vulnerable emotionally, not physically threatened?"

Severus shook his head, but then he said, "What are you doing?" He took hold of Gareth's right wrist and removed his hand from his chest, though Gareth's left hand was still gently cradling his face.

"I am opening you up, Snape," Gareth said. "You need this." He pulled his wrist from Severus's grasp and raised it to his chest again. "Trust me, trust me."

"I should go." His mouth felt like a desert again.

"Stay, stay, my friend." Gareth drew his hand up over Severus's chest and gently squeezed his shoulder. "Trust me. Allow yourself some freedom. Feel something new. Feel something good and recognise it." He tugged gently at the knot closing Severus's cloak, and as the cloak slipped from his shoulders, Gareth sent it to fold itself over the back of a chair.

"I am leaving now," Severus said, though he made no move away.

"You may leave when you wish, but I do hope you will stay." Gareth moved his hand to the top button of Snape's waistcoat. "You tell me to stop at any point, and I will stop. If you do not say 'stop,' then you need do nothing. Simply accept and allow yourself the freedom to feel."

"I do not want to," Severus replied.

Gareth didn't respond to the statement, but ran his finger along the buttons of the waistcoat. "So many layers, Snape, so many layers. A carapace against the world? Against contact with others? At least you are wearing one less layer than usual. No teaching robes." He unbuttoned the top two buttons of Severus's waistcoat. "Remember, just say, 'stop,' and I will stop. I simply want you to feel."

"Why are you doing this? I should go. I need to leave."

Gareth unbuttoned the last button of the waistcoat, then he ran his hands over Severus's chest, up under his outer jacket. He pushed the jacket off his shoulders. "I think you need to stay, my friend."

Severus closed his eyes as Gareth pulled the jacket completely off of him. He did not know why he did not push the younger wizard away, why he didn't simply turn into the open doorway and leave, why he didn't say "stop."

"Don't think, Snape, just feel," Gareth whispered.

He sent Severus's jacket over to settle across the back of the chair with his cloak, then he pushed off his waistcoat and it joined the jacket. Gareth's hands went under his black braces next, and, thumbs hooked around them, he pushed them off his shoulders.

"Such a high collar," he said softly as his hands approached Snape's throat. "It makes me sad to see it, to see you so. You need to relax." He slowly began to unbutton Severus's shirt.

"Why are you doing this?" Severus asked. "Do you wish to make me uncomfortable?" He raised his hands and began to rebutton his collar.

"No, I wish to make you comfortable. I wish to bring you some human warmth." Gareth unbuttoned the buttons Severus had just rebuttoned. "Why do you not tell me to stop?"

"What are you doing?"

"I am unbuttoning your shirt." He paused. "To discover yet another shirt." Gareth looked into Severus's eyes. "It does make me sad to see you so. To know that you have needs and desires and that you have erected so many barriers."

Severus jerked back and pushed Gareth's hands away, alarm in his eyes. "I have no desire for you."

Gareth smiled. "Not for me specifically, perhaps. But you do have desires, but more importantly, you have needs. You need human contact and you need to learn to receive love and human warmth. But you don't need to have any desire for me. Simply accept my touch, Snape. And my affection for you." He raised his hands to Severus's chest again. "It will be easier to accept the touch of others, and to reach out and touch someone whom you care about, perhaps someone whom you desire."

Severus shook his head as Gareth began to pull his shirttails from his trousers. He was even closer now, and Severus could feel the other wizard's breath on his face. What he felt now was something he would not wish to identify, and he closed his eyes.

"Don't." Severus's voice was a whisper.

"Shall I stop?" When Severus did not respond, Gareth unclasped the cufflinks on his sleeves then sent them over to the table beside the chair where his clothes had folded themselves. He smoothed his hands over Severus's shoulders and down his arms as he removed the shirt and sent it to join the jacket and waistcoat.

"Don't," Severus repeated. He opened his eyes to meet Gareth's and was surprised to see tears in the other wizard's eyes.

"Trust me," Gareth said softly. "Just trust me." He drew his wand from the loop beside a buckle of his kilt, and Severus watched as he used it to neatly cut his undershirt from its neck to its hem at the bottom.

He returned his wand to its loop, then he removed Snape's undershirt as he had his other garments. Gareth laid his hands against Severus's chest, then he leaned forward and kissed the other wizard's cheek. Severus winced. Gareth raised his right hand and caressed his face, barely touching it.

"Feel, Snape." Gareth passed his hands down over his torso and back up again, brushing his palms across his nipples.

"Gareth," Severus said softly, "I need to ask you to stop."

Gareth dropped his hands. "It is about you and your needs, Snape, not about me or mine. If you wish me to stop, I will stop, but I think that you would benefit more if I did not. Do you really want me to stop?"

"I . . . you need to understand, I do not . . ." Severus grimaced. "I do not desire that kind of contact with you. Not with you, precisely," he added, "with any wizard."

"That kind of contact?" Gareth asked. "Do you mean sex?"

Snape nodded shortly.

Gareth shook his head. "This is about human warmth and intimacy. It is about you taking pleasure and comfort in the touch of another who cares about you. It is not about sex." He raised his hand and brushed Severus's hair back from his face. He smiled at him. "It could be, but it isn't. And it is probably better that it isn't."

"You like wizards, men," Severus said somewhat questioningly.

"That should be evident by now, I would think," Gareth responded, "but I do not prefer them."

Severus frowned. "I had thought you liked Hermione."

"Of course I like Hermione. And she is an attractive witch. A bit young for my taste, but attractive. But she is also my apprentice. I do have certain boundaries, you know," Gareth said. "Besides, I know of two other men who are very interested in her, at least one of whom she is very fond indeed. I would not wish to interfere there. And, of course, my mother would have my head if I were to behave improperly toward her."

"Two wizards? Who are they?" Severus asked as Gareth took one step back.

"Well, one of them is Tarrant McPherson..."

"Your friend. I taught him. He was a dunderhead."

Gareth laughed. "Well, he doesn't strike me that way, and Hermione seems to like him."

"And the other one?" Gareth had said "men," not "wizards"; it could be practically anyone.

"I think you know who that is, Snape," Gareth said.

"Is it that Muggle boy in her economics class?" She had mentioned him several times. They took coffee together after class was over. Whenever she mentioned him, he struggled with his jealousy. He had become better at accepting Hermione's relationships with others. The quickest way to lose her friendship, he had decided, was if he became unreasonable and possessive.

"I wasn't referring to him, though he might like her, too. I don't know." Gareth shook his head smiling. "The one I was referring to has not expressed his interest, as far as I know. I'm not even sure if he recognises it himself." Gareth reached out and placed his hands lightly on Severus's chest again. "He has certain difficulties in expressing himself sometimes." He caressed him gently, running his hands over his chest. "But I like him anyway," he whispered. He stepped back towards Severus again.

"You know," Severus said hoarsely. He had been so careful. How could Gareth have guessed? He had never said anything to anyone.

"I see," Gareth replied. "I simply see." He leaned forward and brushed his lips against Severus's cheek, then he whispered in his ear, "Tell me to stop, Snape, if you really want me to stop. Otherwise, just let yourself feel."

Severus closed his eyes. He didn't know why Gareth cared about him, but he did not doubt that he did care. He was warm and kind to him, though sometimes brutally honest, too, but never in order to hurt him. Severus could almost feel the affection flowing from Gareth through his hands, which were gently caressing him, stroking his chest and stomach, reaching around him and rubbing his sides and back. Gareth's curly head was beside his, barely touching it, and he could feel the younger wizard's breath against his neck. Gareth bent his neck and kissed his shoulder softly, then repeated the kiss. Despite himself, not only did he feel Gareth's affection, but he felt a physical response to his kisses, to his gentle touches. He did not want this, Severus told himself, he did not want any of it, but he did not protest, and when Gareth moved over to kiss his other shoulder, he did not pull away.

Gareth moved his lips over his shoulder to the side of his neck, and without thought, Severus leaned his head back, exposing his throat. He felt Gareth's lips caressing his pulse point and then the hollow below his Adam's apple. He let out a vague, choked cry, and Gareth drew back and looked at him. He brought his hand up and caressed Severus's cheek.

"It's all right, Snape. You are safe with me," Gareth murmured.

Tears squeezed out from Severus's tightly closed eyes. His teeth were clenched together. Gareth gently rubbed Severus's tight jaw.

"Relax, relax," Gareth said, then kissed Severus on the other side of his face before nuzzling him gently. "It's all right. It's all right."

Severus shook his head and a sudden gasping sob ripped from him. Gareth embraced him, holding him close.

"I have you, Severus. I have you."

Severus felt his knees give way and he sagged into Gareth's arms. He wept on the other wizard's shoulder, only semi-aware of the soothing crooning in his ear, soft words of reassurance. His tears subsided and his breathing calmed. Gareth was still rubbing his back.

He did not move, trying to remember the last time he had anyone hold him like that, the last time someone had wanted to touch him, kiss him, be close to him in order to bring him pleasure and comfort, not to hurt him. Minerva had been good to him, and she had held him and let him make love to her, and she continued to be a good friend who showed him affection, but if it had not been for the *Actus Affectus* curse, she never would have been so physically intimate with him.

Before Minerva, almost every woman he had been with since he was twenty he had paid or made some other exchange with. And before that, there had been Bella. He hadn't loved her, but he had craved her and he had craved her attention. Some part of him wanted her to love him, though, and he did as she asked in the relationship, until one day, she asked too much. She enjoyed watching others have sex, directing them, and the kinkier, the better. He believed the stories that circulated about how she had decided which Lestranger brother to marry.

He had thought that he was her favourite, or one of them, until she wanted him to be a part of a foursome with the brothers and he didn't want to be the middle of the sandwich with her, and she had rejected him for it. He knew that what he had done with Bella had not been about his pleasure or comfort...it had been about her pleasure and no one else's. She wanted to be desired and obeyed, and she never cared about how the other person felt, as long as they wanted her and she could manipulate their desire.

Before Bella . . . he had once kissed Lily. They had both pretended it hadn't happened. Perhaps if he hadn't been such a nasty prat, it might have happened again.

Severus sighed.

"Better?" Gareth asked quietly.

Severus gave a quick nod, but did not move away. He felt frozen. Frozen and embarrassed, yet paradoxically, he also felt comfortable. Gareth was now stroking his hair, running his fingers through it.

"Why are you doing this?" Severus whispered. "I don't understand."

"Because I see you and I care about you," Gareth answered. He smiled and kissed the side of Snape's head. "It's ironic. I once said I would never shed a tear for you, that it would not bother me if you died with misery in your heart. And yet, I do shed that tear, and I don't want you to live with misery in your heart. I want you to have a chance for happiness. I don't know how you can be happy when you close yourself off to others."

Severus leaned back against the doorframe again, his eyes closed, his head back. He was not surprised to feel Gareth's fingertips brush over his throat again, and he shivered as the caress proceeded down over his chest, lingering briefly at one nipple, then proceeding in slow, gentle circles over his stomach. As Gareth caressed his stomach, circling his navel with one finger, he brought his other hand from where it had rested on his lower back, and Severus felt both hands at the waist of his trousers. He did not move.

Gareth unhooked the waistband, then he asked, "Should I stop?"

Severus didn't answer, but as Gareth began to unbutton his trousers, he pushed Gareth's hands out of the way and unbuttoned them himself. He opened his eyes and looked at Gareth.

"I don't know what I want," Severus said softly.

"Let's just see, then, what you like," Gareth replied, taking his hand and stepping back. "Come over here to the couch with me."

Severus nodded, then he looked down at his trousers. "Should I?"

Gareth smiled at him fondly. "If you wish. It would be nicer for you, I think."

"My boots..."

"Yes, it's usually easier to remove those first. May I help?" He crouched at Severus's feet and looked up at him, still smiling.

Severus looked unsure, but he raised his left foot.

"If you take hold of my shoulder, that would make it easier not to tip you over."

"You aren't using your wand," Severus remarked as he leaned forward and rested his weight on Gareth's shoulder.

"I prefer the personal touch," Gareth replied as he removed first Snape's left boot then his right. He stood and placed his hand on Severus's waist. "Do you remember when you wouldn't let me wash your feet?"

Severus nodded. "You were unexpected. I did appreciate it," he said quietly, "even though I didn't say it at the time."

"I thought you might have." He stepped back toward the sofa. "Come join me."

Now that he could take off his trousers, Severus didn't think that he wanted to, but he followed Gareth, feeling awkward. Standing in front of the sofa, Gareth stopped Severus, putting both palms against his chest. He watched Severus's face as he drew his hands down over his torso. He put his hands down the front of Snape's trousers, running them around his hips to his buttocks then back again, and began pushing the trousers down.

"I don't know," Severus began.

"Let's see," Gareth said. "Let's just see." He pushed Severus's trousers down, crouching, then standing again smoothly.

Severus hesitated only a moment, then he stepped out of them and kicked them aside, but Gareth picked them up and sent them to fold themselves up with Snape's other clothes.

Gareth smiled at Severus and guided him to sit on the couch. He knelt and removed Severus's socks, then he rose up on his knees, placing his hands on Snape's thighs. He rubbed them gently. "I am glad to see you have put on a little weight," he said. "You feel more solid, healthier."

"What do you want me to do?" Severus asked.

"Just feel, that's all, just feel."

Gareth began to gently massage Severus's left leg, beginning with his calf and proceeding up to his thigh. He first kneaded the muscles, then ended with feather-light strokes of his fingertips over his skin. When Gareth began to massage Severus's right leg, Severus closed his eyes and leaned back. He held his breath when Gareth reached the top of his right thigh, and he was unsure what he felt when Gareth stopped and stood. He opened his eyes to see Gareth standing between his legs, looking down at him, his eyes travelling from his face to the growing bulge in his pants and back to his face.

Gareth gently cupped Severus's face and brushed his thumb over his cheek. "All right, Snape?"

Severus nodded. He wondered what Gareth was going to do next, and tried not to anticipate what it might be.

Gareth took hold of his shoulders and urged him to lie down on his stomach. Severus let out a long, slow breath as he felt Gareth rubbing his shoulders. As he relaxed into his touch, he felt tears rise in his eyes again, and he remembered another massage, one that Poppy had given him shortly before the final battle, when all his muscles were knots, pain was his existence, and he was certain he would die. He had wept then, and she had let him, accepting his tears and his pain as they released beneath her professional but warm and caring touch. Her care had been an unlooked-for kindness, a gentle mercy, at a moment when all was bleak and his resignation and despair, complete.

Gareth's hands moved over his back, kneading and rubbing. When he reached the waistband of Severus's pants, Severus found himself holding his breath again. He felt a slight twinge of disappointment when Gareth's hands did not proceed lower, but then he shivered as he felt Gareth's warm palms on his shoulder blades and then his soft lips on his back, his short beard brushing his skin. He felt Gareth nuzzle aside his hair and kiss the back of his neck as his hands gently moved up to curl around his shoulders. If Gareth still hated him, if it were all an act, he could kill him. Humiliate him, and then kill him. But Severus sighed softly and relaxed as Gareth's lips moved over his shoulders, gently brushing and sucking. He could feel Gareth's shirt grazing his back as the younger wizard bent over him. This wizard was his friend, a true friend.

Severus pressed his hips into the sofa's cushions. Against his will, his erection was growing. He didn't know what this meant, but at the moment, he followed Gareth's advice not to think, only to feel.

As Gareth's kisses and gentle caresses meandered over his back, he wondered whether Gareth was doing this only because he felt sorry for him or whether he enjoyed it. He pushed that thought from his mind as well.

Gareth's lips were painting patterns over his lower back, and his hands were warmly pressed against Severus's sides. He paused a moment, not moving away, but his breath soft against Severus's skin.

"All right, Snape?"

"Yes." Severus hesitated. "Are you going to take off your shirt?"

"Do you want me to?"

Severus shrugged. Gareth stood, and Severus turned his head and watched Gareth untie the lacing at his throat. His sleeves were rolled up, so he only had to tug his shirt from his kilt and then pull it off over his head. Severus looked at him. He felt no sexual desire for the body he saw before him, but he felt a bit of envy for the broad shoulders and well-muscled torso that the younger wizard possessed. He had curly hair across his chest, slightly darker than the chestnut hair of his head, and a narrow line of fine hair that led down his stomach and disappeared beneath his kilt. He wasn't wearing a sporran, probably because he was at home, relaxing on his own, and had no need of it. Severus wondered whether Gareth had felt any pleasure touching him, but though he glanced at the apron of his kilt, he couldn't tell.

"Is this all right?" Gareth asked.

Severus nodded.

Gareth sat on the edge of the couch and urged Severus to roll over onto his side and give him more room. He toed off his shoes. He looked Severus in the eyes and reached out with one hand to caress his chest.

"Did you like that, then?" Gareth asked, still caressing Severus gently. "Would you like me to continue?" At Snape's nod, he asked, "Is there anything specific you would like?"

Severus blushed despite himself.

"There is, then," Gareth said with a smile. "What is it?"

Severus shook his head. "Nothing." He swallowed. "We should dress. They may return."

"No, they won't. Not for a while." He tilted his head. "I guess I will just have to discover what it is you would like." He took Severus's left hand and raised it to his mouth. He kissed his palm, eyes closing as he did so, then he gently kissed the pads of each of Severus's fingertips, opening his eyes to look into Severus's face. "That's nice, but that is not it." He kissed his palm once more before gently laying his hand back down. "Something I have missed, perhaps."

Gareth's eyes moved to the front of Severus's pants. To Severus's embarrassment, his erection was very noticeable through the cotton fabric.

"But not that, I think," Gareth said softly. "But perhaps . . ." He shifted over slightly, then said, "Roll back over onto your stomach, Snape."

Severus let out a breath as he did as Gareth asked. He felt his hands on his lower back, then felt them move lower, over his buttocks. Gareth rubbed his buttocks through the fabric. Severus closed his eyes tightly.

"This?" Gareth asked. "Yes, this." He watched Snape's face as he massaged him through his pants, then he said, "It might be better without these, don't you think?"

Severus didn't respond in any way, but when Gareth slipped his fingers beneath his waistband, he raised up his hips and used one hand to help him remove his pants. When Gareth's hands returned to his buttocks and began to massage him, Severus released a long breath.

"You like this, then?" Gareth asked softly. "You have a nice arse, Snape, if I may say so. Firm, rounded, muscular, and nice slim hips. Very nice." His firm massage became a more gentle kneading, then he began simply to stroke his fingertips lightly over his buttocks, smiling as he saw goosebumps rise on Severus's skin.

Severus felt Gareth move down on the couch, though his gentle touch never ceased. He gasped as he felt Gareth's lips join his fingers, softly kissing him, moving over his skin. The sensation was intense; his buttocks had always been sensitive for him, but no one had ever kissed him there. He was slightly disappointed when Gareth's lips moved higher, making their way up his back to his shoulder blades. He kissed Severus between the shoulder blades.

"This is for you, Snape. I only want to bring you pleasure and warmth."

Gareth resumed gently massaging Severus's buttocks with one hand, running the fingers of his other hand through his hair.

"Do you want to roll over?" Gareth asked.

"I'm, um, no."

"Onto your side?"

Severus shook his head.

Gareth responded by slipping off the couch onto his knees beside him. He rested his head on Severus's back, one arm draped around him.

"You could roll over if you want," Gareth said. "I won't do anything that you don't want. And there is no need to be embarrassed. Most of it is just a purely physical reaction, you know. You feel relaxed enough with me to have it, though, which is nice. But you don't need to worry that it means anything significant about you...other than that you're healthy. That's a good thing."

Severus rolled onto his side and was relieved to see that Gareth merely rested his head against his chest and didn't glance down at his slight erection.

"Are you comfortable?" Severus asked.

Gareth smiled. "Yes, I'm comfortable." He kissed Severus's chest. "Thank you for asking."

Severus raised his hand and tentatively touched Gareth's cheek. "Would you like to lie beside me?"

Gareth lifted his head. "If you would like that, yes, I would."

Severus nodded.

Gareth drew his wand, puzzling Severus for a moment, but he cast a spell and the couch became several inches wider. He lay down beside Severus, resting his head on the cushion next to his, his face just inches away from Severus's face, embracing him with one arm. Severus looked into Gareth's eyes. He didn't know how he came to be in this position, and he was suddenly uncomfortable. He closed his eyes.

He felt Gareth caress his cheek. He shook his head slightly and Gareth moved his hand to rest on his shoulder.

"Just let me hold you a while, Snape. It will be all right."

Gareth embraced him, one hand gently rubbing his back. His breath was warm on Severus's face.

"What next?" Severus asked, his voice rasping slightly.

"Nothing, nothing unless you want me to touch you elsewhere," Gareth said.

"No, I mean, after today."

Gareth kissed his cheek. "After today, we are friends, I hope, as we were before." Gareth paused. "I hope that is acceptable to you. I didn't mean this to be the beginning of a different relationship between us. Although if you ever need a massage or just a friendly shoulder to lean on, you know that I'm here."

Severus nodded, relieved, and he relaxed again, taking pleasure in the warmth of Gareth's body beside him. He wasn't attracted to Gareth, he told himself, but there was something arousing about the thought that the curly-haired wizard might desire him. He opened his eyes to see that Gareth was looking at him.

Gareth raised a questioning eyebrow.

"What is it?" Gareth asked.

"Nothing."

"I can tell it's not nothing. You can tell me."

"No, I can't." He opened his eyes.

Gareth nodded. "That's all right. I said this was about intimacy, and about your pleasure, your comfort," he said softly. "And I meant it. I think it's time for lunch now."

Gareth rolled off of the couch, and without glancing down Severus's body, he picked up his shirt and pulled it on, his back turned. He picked up Severus's pants and handed them to him.

"You all right, Snape?"

Severus nodded, sitting up and pulling on his pants, glad that Gareth didn't appear interested in his slight erection. Gareth Summoned the rest of Severus's clothes for him, then sat beside him on the couch as Severus put on his socks.

"After you're dressed, we can go out to the kitchen and we can have lunch. I hope you like lasagna. I just took it from the oven when you arrived, so it will need a reheating charm, but it should still be fine."

"I've had bad lasagna and good lasagna," Severus said.

Gareth grinned. "Well, you're about to have some *great* lasagna. I spent a lot of time in the Mediterranean in the last several years, and so I'm partial to certain flavours. If you like Greek food, that's sort of my specialty. You should come to dinner sometime."

Severus looked around him, as if remembering where he was. "Thank you, but I don't think so."

"I could probably arrange for you and Hermione to have your dessert alone together. In a few weeks, it will be nice enough to eat out in the garden. It could be quite romantic."

"What of your mother?"

Gareth thought for a moment, watching Severus as he buttoned his shirt.

"Well, she has dinner with Uncle Albus and Aunt Minerva relatively regularly," he said. "One time when she has dinner plans with them or goes to the estate, I'll tell her that I've invited you here. I think that if I approach it right, and I give her some time to get used to the idea of you being in the house, being my guest, she'll be fine."

Severus shook his head. "I don't know, McGonagall."

He put on his waistcoat and buttoned it, feeling the pocket for the reassuring weight of his watch, the watch that Albus had given him. He had thought at the time that Albus was dying. After he had discovered Albus's grand deception, he'd put the watch in a drawer and tried to forget it. He was angry and hurt by the deception, though he could clearly see its benefits and understood that he couldn't have been told about it. Nonetheless, remembering the pain he had felt when Albus died...when he had believed that Albus had died, and died a long, painful death...and remembering the guilt he had felt over it and his sense of grief and loss, he'd found it difficult to shed his anger. He had even been angry with Minerva, though less so, even knowing that she had been the architect of the deception. But as time went by, his gratitude grew, his anger lessened, and one day in September in the Great Hall, he had looked over at Albus, and he suddenly felt immensely thankful that Albus was alive, that they were both alive. A few days later, he brought him the watch.

"This is yours, Albus," he said softly, handing him the watch in the same soft pouch that Albus had given it to him in.

"No, no, it is yours. I gave it to you because I wanted you to have it. And someday, you may have a child to pass it on to. That thought makes me happy."

Severus shook his head, thinking that the deception had made Albus battier than ever if he thought he would ever have children, but he accepted the watch and now carried it daily again, placing it on his bedside table every night and winding it every morning.

Reassured by the presence of his watch in his pocket, Severus slipped on his jacket, but didn't button it.

"I think I should leave now. I appreciate your offer of lunch, but your mother may return. I don't want to disturb her."

"I would appreciate your company, and they have plans for the entire afternoon. The earliest they might be back is teatime."

Severus nodded shortly. He was hungry. His appetite had continued to increase in recent months, and he found himself both able to eat more and enjoying his meals as he hadn't for years. Lunch might be agreeable.

NEXT

Chapter Thirty: A Tour of the Past

Saturday, 6 March 1999

Gareth gives Severus a tour of his mother's house, and Severus tells him about his family. At the spur of the moment, Severus invites Hermione on a date.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, Gareth McGonagall, Gertrude Gamp

Author's Note: Anyone hoping for a Severus/Gareth romance on the heels of this chapter, you will be disappointed; however, there will be more Severus & Gareth moments of various sorts in upcoming chapters.

Chapter Thirty: A Tour of the Past

Chapter 31 of 118

Saturday, 6 March 1999. Gareth gives Severus a tour of his mother's house, and Severus tells him about his family.
Severus invites Hermione on a date.

Author's Note: If you read the previous chapter and thought it cut off in a peculiar place, it did. It seems to have happened after I initially posted it, however, so if you read the chapter early...or after I corrected the glitch...you probably didn't notice anything wrong. If you did, however, you lost about a third of the chapter, so you likely ought to pop back and read that now. Apologies for the inconvenience...and many thanks to KingPig for pointing out the problem to me!



Chapter Thirty: A Tour of the Past

Saturday, 6 March 1999

"I hope you don't mind eating in the kitchen," Gareth said as he dished up the lasagna, two large portions for each of them.

Severus shook his head, then realised that Gareth had his back to him and couldn't see him. "No, this is fine."

Gareth put two small bowls on the table and gave them each some spinach salad. "There's Stilton in the salad...I hope that's something you eat...and a lemon juice and olive oil dressing."

Severus nodded, and the two wizards began to eat. Gareth glanced up occasionally to look at Severus, who was eating his way first through the salad then his lasagna.

Finally, Gareth said, "So?"

Severus looked over at him, an eyebrow raised, then he understood. "It's good. Thank you."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing is wrong with it," Severus replied, taking a sip of water.

"Does it need something?"

"Nothing. I do not cook. This is good."

Gareth let out a short laugh. "I suppose from you, that is sufficiently high praise to feed my ego."

Severus quirked a small smile. "It is actually the best lasagna I remember eating."

Gareth laughed again. "No need to be that effusive, but I do appreciate it." He shrugged, smiling. "I'm afraid I'm a bit needy about my cooking. I could fix someone a boiled egg, and I would need to hear that it was cooked to perfection. I try not to be too annoying about it though."

Severus nodded, amused by Gareth's statement. "I will try to remember that. The salad is very good, too," he added, thinking of Gareth's generosity toward him. A few words could cost him little.

"I have fruit, if you would like dessert," Gareth offered. "We also have some ginger newts on hand for when Aunt Minerva visits."

Severus shook his head.

"More lasagna, then?"

"That was more than I normally eat," Severus replied. "It was good, but I don't think I could manage more."

"Very well, then, how about that tour of the house?"

Severus hesitated. He had become much more comfortable, but he didn't think he wanted a tour.

"Come on, I'll show you around," Gareth said encouragingly, rising from the table.

Severus followed reluctantly as Gareth showed him the dining room, which was strewn with parchments, books, charts, and tables.

"This is where Hermione and I do most of our work, so we usually eat in the kitchen," Gareth said. "Mum's study is through there." He pointed at a closed door.

Gareth led Severus up the stairs. "That's my mother's bedroom, Hermione's there, at the end of the hall, there's another guest room here, and I use this room as a study," he said, opening a door to reveal a small, cluttered room with a desk, two chairs, and bookshelves along the walls. He opened another door to a large, bright room. "And this is my bedroom."

Severus felt sick. The lasagna was sitting like a rock in his stomach. That had been the room in which they had found Professor Gamp, about to prepare for bed.

"It used to be my parents' bedroom," Gareth said, "but my mother prefers to use my old one. It's a little smaller, but it has a nice view to the back garden and is part of the extension Dad put on when she was expecting me. This one looks out front." He walked over to the window and looked out, then turned around and looked at Severus.

Severus was standing stock-still just inside the doorway, pale and sweating. The room looked almost entirely different than it had when they had surprised Professor Gamp, but it seemed that an image of it overlaid his vision of the room as it was currently. He closed his eyes. He heard Gareth's footsteps as he crossed the room. He felt Gareth take his hand. Without resisting, he let Gareth pull him across the room to the bed.

"You need to lie down. Come, lie down," Gareth said gently as he steered Severus toward the bed.

Severus lay down as directed, then he felt the bed move as Gareth sat beside him.

Gareth caressed his forehead. "Can I get you anything?"

Severus shook his head and opened his eyes. "You shouldn't be kind to me. Don't be kind to me. I deserve to be punished for what I did here." His voice came out a harsh croak.

"I believe you have punished yourself enough over the years, and you have paid for your choices in the past."

Severus closed his eyes again. "I should be punished. I should be repaying you. I should be giving you whatever you want. Instead, you are . . . you are being good to me. I don't understand it."

"What would you have me do, Snape? Treat you with disdain? Take some kind of vengeance against you? Punish you? That wouldn't help me...or my mother...and I don't believe it would help you, either."

"I feel . . . I need to . . . I don't know," Severus said.

"Think of all you have done to help save the wizarding world. I know that if you hadn't made the sacrifices you did, we would all be much worse off. Much worse."

Severus shook his head, trying to think about what Gareth said. He opened his eyes, then he slowly raised his hand and caressed Gareth's face. His hand shook as he touched Gareth's chest. He watched his hand, feeling detached from it, as he brought it lower. He swallowed, then whispered, "I could bring you pleasure, do whatever you wished me to do."

Gareth stopped his hand as it drifted toward the front of his kilt. He raised his hand to his lips and kissed it gently. "No, Severus. No."

"Why? You..."

"I wanted to help you and bring you pleasure for your sake. I did enjoy it. I care about you. I find you attractive. But you are talking about letting yourself be used."

"But I want to, I need to," Severus said.

"You said you needed to be punished," Gareth said, looking pained. "I don't want you to use being with me as a punishment. How do you think I would feel? I don't want that from you or from anyone."

Severus turned his face away and closed his eyes. He felt ashamed.

"Now I will never know whether you are accepting my touch, *my friendship*, because it is bringing you warmth, because you like me, or because you see it as punishment," Gareth said, sighing.

Severus looked back up at Gareth. "I do appreciate your friendship," he whispered. "I enjoy your company, even when you're being aggravating."

Gareth grinned. "That's good, I suppose."

"And what you did earlier, the way you touched me, I did like that. It was difficult to accept at first, but I liked it." Severus swallowed. "You saw my reaction. I don't think I would have reacted that way if I didn't like it."

Gareth shrugged. "Some people get off on being humiliated or hurt."

"I do not." Severus recalled again his brief relationship with Bella and what he had tolerated in order to gain her attention and to feel more like a genuine Death Eater. It had only felt nasty.

Gareth looked into his eyes. "I believe you, or you would not see touching me as punishment." He looked away for a moment. "I do wish you didn't see it as being so dreadful, though."

"Touching you isn't dreadful," Severus said. "It isn't." He raised his hand to the other wizard's face again. "Really. It's just that . . . I was willing to do whatever you wanted, even if it wasn't something I wanted. But just touching you is fine. And I enjoyed having you touch me," he added very softly.

Gareth smiled and nodded. "How do you feel now? Better?"

"Still sick." Severus stared at the ceiling. "I stepped into the room, and I could see it just as it was all those years ago."

"I am sorry."

"We thought she would be asleep. She was not. We thought she was a weak old teacher. She was not. We thought she would be alone. She was not. We thought we were powerful and clever. We were not."

Gareth looked away and closed his eyes. After a moment's struggle, he asked, "Why? Why her? If she was just a weak old teacher?"

"She was Dumbledore's friend. A friend of Dumbledore was a target for the Dark Lord, whether they were dangerous in themselves or not. And he said that she was a blood-traitor. That she was a Muggle-lover. That people like her were insidious, like a poison to the wizarding race."

"But you knew her. She had taught you."

"I didn't hold any personal animosity toward her. I hadn't given her a thought since she retired, though I would sometimes see her on a Hogsmeade weekend from a distance. It wouldn't have mattered how I felt, though. Even if she had been my favourite teacher. The Dark Lord wanted her killed. He said that she was a blood-traitor. That was sufficient."

"My father and Robert's father were both pureblood wizards."

Severus shook his head. "It wasn't just marrying a Muggle or Muggle-born that made you a blood-traitor in his eyes. Supporting Muggle protections, believing that Muggle-borns were equals with purebloods, that would also make you a blood-traitor. Eventually, it was sufficient simply to oppose him to be considered a blood-traitor."

"And you believed this?" Gareth asked, looking back at him.

"I wanted to be superior." Severus snorted. "I believed I was superior. I thought that becoming a Death Eater would confirm my superiority, that it would show everyone. I thought that Dark Magic was more powerful than any other and that it would protect me from my enemies. My enemies were enemies of the Dark Lord. I was angry with the world, and I wanted revenge and power. It seemed all to fit. But I just grew more disgusted with myself."

"What about your family? Half of them were Muggles."

"My father left us when I was about nine. My Grandfather Prince had never approved of his daughter marrying a mere Muggle. He made life misery for us all. He used to try to beat the Muggle out of me. My mother was more intimidated by her father than she was in love with mine. I think she had thought somehow that marrying my father would help her escape a life she hated, but she found herself in a life that was worse. My parents seemed to fight all of the time. As for me, I tried to be the best little wizard my grandfather could ever want to see, and I rejected my father even before he rejected us."

"But where are they now?"

"My grandfather died the summer before I entered Hogwarts. I never was able to show him what a good little wizard I was," Severus said bitterly. "My father died later my first year. Of liver cirrhosis, I think my mother said. My mother killed herself when I was seventeen. It was a lovely coming-of-age present for me."

"Leaving you to join the Death Eaters."

Severus shrugged. "I loved my mother, but I also hated her. When she killed herself, I hated her for doing it, but I also felt freed. I thought I could create a new Severus Snape who had never had a drunken Muggle father and a cowed, beaten mother. I felt freed, and one of the first things I did was sign over my life and my soul to the Dark Lord."

Gareth cupped Severus's face. "You will be more than all of that. You already are." He leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

Severus pulled away and Gareth sat up.

"Time for us to finish the tour. The back garden is next," Gareth said.

Severus rolled away from him and got off the bed. "You are too fucking persistent, McGonagall."

"Come on. I'll show you my magical acanthus."

"It won't be in bloom yet," Severus replied caustically.

"It has some nice new shoots," Gareth said, ignoring Severus's tone. "I was pleased, since we only put it in in the autumn. I didn't expect any new growth until next year. I've been giving it lots of loving care, though, and Rosemary helped me set a microclimate around it, and it's doing very well."

Severus followed Gareth through the hall and down the stairs. When they reached the hallway leading to the back of the house, Severus stopped.

Unaware that Severus wasn't right behind him, Gareth said, "Back here is a storeroom, a plant room where we start seedlings, and my dad's old study. It still has all his stuff in it. We don't use it, really, but we don't keep it closed up, either. There's some stuff there that you would be really interested in, I think...Snape?" He turned around. "Coming?"

Severus nodded stiffly. As Gareth opened the backdoor, Severus asked, "Don't you know what happened here?"

"Many things happened here, Snape," Gareth replied. "If I thought of it only as the place where you cut off Mum's arm, I don't think I could manage. It does pass through my mind occasionally as I come in or go out, but I cannot dwell on it. It was harder for my mother, of course, but she is living here again. I should think you could manage to walk through the door."

Severus reflexively looked at the floor as if expecting to see evidence of his crime.

"No spot there, friend. Long gone," Gareth said softly, opening the door.

"If your mother lived on that island for years, what happened to the house? You didn't live here."

"I spent a few weeks here during the summer the first two years. Aunt Minerva stayed with me, and Albus was here part of the time, too. We left it vacant after I left Hogwarts. Every so often, Robert or one of our other relatives would send a house-elf to check on it and perform maintenance, and Aunt Minerva and Uncle Albus also kept an eye on it. There were wards in place. My mother thought that after I finished my apprenticeship, I might like it, but I saw no reason to move back here. If she had returned after Voldemort's first defeat, I might have done, but she didn't. I stayed with Robert and Thea, and then did my apprenticeship, and she was still on that island. Why return? It wasn't the right time yet."

Severus followed Gareth through the garden, which seemed larger than it was due to the clever layout of the winding path and some visual tricks played using different raised beds and plants of different heights and shapes.

"Mum and Gluffy do most of the work on the garden. After all that time alone together, they work together in an almost uncanny way. They don't even speak, and watching them, you would think they had choreographed everything in advance. It's a little weird."

After Gareth had shown Severus the ornamentals, including the acanthus which he was so proud of, the herb garden, and where a vegetable garden had been started at the side of the house near the kitchen, he brought him back into the house through the kitchen.

"Tea?"

"I should go. I have work waiting for me."

"Just a quick cuppa," Gareth said, opening a cupboard and taking out a tin of tea.

Severus hesitated. He didn't have any immediately pressing duties, though he should be at dinner. That wasn't for a while yet.

"All right." He looked around. "Can I do anything to help?"

"You can get the milk from the cool cupboard behind you."

Severus put the bottle on the table. Gareth had put out teacups and saucers and was now pouring hot water into the teapot over the tea leaves.

"I got this pot in Amsterdam for my mother several years ago, before my apprenticeship. It's charmed to strain the tea leaves, and it has an automagical Cosy Charm, too. I bought it to make things easier for her, but I must say, I have grown spoiled by it myself."

When Severus was at Spinner's End, he just used Muggle teabags and a big mug and cast a rewarming charm if it cooled. He didn't mention that, though.

"You mentioned Gluffy before, and so has Hermione. He's your house-elf?" Presumably the same house-elf whom Wilkes had disabled when they attacked Professor Gamp. The loyal creature had first crashed a dresser down on Tovin, killing him before he could finish casting a Mace Hex at Gamp, and then he had deliberately Apparated directly in front of his mistress just as Wilkes cast a curse at her, giving her the opportunity to Petrify Wilkes and flee to the stairs. Malfoy had already cast a curse at Gamp, opening up one side of her face, but in return, she had Stunned him. Only Severus had been left to chase the witch down and murder her, and she had been ineffective in casting any spells that would hit him, though she had taxed his defensive magic. When he went to retrieve Malfoy and Wilkes, Severus had left the house-elf lying where he was. Could have been a piece of furniture for all he'd cared at the time.

Gareth nodded. "Yes, one of Mum's, actually. Never took one with me. Too peripatetic. Gluffy's at the Gamp estate today, visiting relatives."

"Whose relatives?"

"His, of course. The house-elves at the estate are all Gamp elves, so most are relatives of Gluffy's. I suppose I should call it the MacAir estate now, but force of habit. It belongs to Alroy and Rosemary. Actually, it's still Mum's until she dies, then it passes to Alroy, as her older brother's grandson, but she obviously didn't need it when she was on Eilean Tèarmunn, and she has this house, so after Grandmother Columbine died, Mum told Alroy to take it and treat it as his own. Alroy doesn't make any major changes to the house or grounds without asking her, but as long as he leaves her room and the library alone, I don't think she would give a fiddle what he did with the rest. Rosemary has really done a lot with the gardens."

"Rosemary . . ." Severus remembered that Poppy had pointed out a Rosemary at the Merlin awards, and he'd heard her name several times since, but he couldn't remember how she would be related to Gareth, and he hadn't remembered her from school, although she had apparently been at Hogwarts around the same time as he.

"My cousin on the McGonagall side. She's actually Melina's daughter, but she's closer to my age. She's an Herbologist."

"So your cousin married your other cousin?"

"My mother is Alroy's great-aunt. My father was Rosemary's great-uncle. They aren't cousins themselves. They married last summer and they're expecting their first child soon. You must remember Rosemary. She was only a couple years behind you at Hogwarts. Rosemary O'Donald. She was in Ravenclaw. Black wavy hair, very fair skin, dark blue eyes, looks a bit like her mum?"

Severus shook his head slowly, but then he said, "Was she a prefect?" When Gareth nodded, he said, "Yes, I remember her. She took her NEWTs before I began to teach, though, so I don't have more than a vague memory of her." If she had tormented him or had offered him some access to power, to the Dark Arts, he would have remembered her. Everyone else had been beneath his notice, so unless they were on a Quidditch team or had done something else to distinguish themselves, he never spared them a second thought.

"You *must* remember my cousin Morgana, though," Gareth said. "She was in your House."

"I remember her existence, and I remember that she was quite striking looking, she and her twin both were, but I was not particularly sociable. I didn't really know her at all. If I wasn't in a class with someone, I probably didn't know them, and I only got to know a few of the older students, even in Slytherin." Almost all of whom became Death Eaters, he added to himself.

"That's too bad. You would have liked her, I think. She's got a biting wit." Gareth poured them each more tea. "She had a hard time of it after she left school, though. She was quite brilliant and very ambitious. She went to work for the Ministry. A lot of people, non-Slytherins, took an immediate dislike to her because she was a Slytherin, and they identified Slytherins with Death Eaters and pureblood ideology, which she never cared about. Purebloods in the Ministry who sympathised with Voldemort, or who even may have been unidentified Death Eaters, didn't like her because she wasn't a Voldemort supporter. After five years of frustration at the Ministry, never receiving promotions despite her excellent work, she left. She didn't just leave the Ministry, either. She emigrated to Australia, where people think that whatever House you were in at Hogwarts is simply quaint or amusing. I spent almost a year there with her not long after my apprenticeship, but it was too far away from home even for me. She's done well there, though. She's Deputy Minister for Information Sorcery in the Australian Ministry. She's aiming to be First Minister one day...if that's enough of a challenge for her. She's still very hands-on, loves research, doesn't just do paper-pushing. I think she should go into private business."

"She had a brother, too. In Gryffindor. He was also a prefect." Severus began to remember more about them, recalling a time when the McGonagall boy had broken up a confrontation he'd had with Black and Potter. He'd been surprised that the prefect hadn't automatically taken sides with his fellow Gryffindors, but had just told Snape to get out of there and then begun to yell at the other two about fair sport and not setting ambush for someone, two against one.

"Yes, it made for quite a bit of friction when David and Morgana were made prefects and Aiden and Branwen weren't."

"Aiden?"

"David's twin." Gareth grinned. "My grandmother has always thought that Uncle Morgan and Aunt Fiona must have used a potion or a spell to have all four at once, though they swore they didn't. Two sets of identical twins, though, is pretty unusual, especially simultaneously. Needless to say, my aunt and uncle decided that four at once was enough. Aunt Minerva calls them 'the litter.'"

Snape quirked a smile. He could easily imagine that. "I knew that Minerva had family, of course, and I had seen Melina occasionally, but until last year, I didn't realise how large her extended family was."

"We're a little scattered, I suppose," Gareth said with a shrug. "What about your relatives, Snape?"

Severus shook his head. "My mother had no siblings. A couple elderly cousins of my Grandfather Prince's may still be alive, but I haven't any real family. My Grandfather Prince was estranged from most of his. He was not a pleasant person, and when my mother married my father, she was even more cut off from his side of the family. I never knew my grandmother, but she was a Black, so I'm distantly related to the Blacks. Narcissa is my third cousin, I believe, but I didn't know her or her sisters until I came to Hogwarts."

"You're related to more than just the Black family, I'm sure. We may even be related somehow, the way the families all intermarry. I think my mother's maternal grandmother was a Black, in fact...and there are Princes in the Tyree family somewhere."

Severus just snorted at that.

"What about your father's family?"

"Even if there are any, I never knew them. He was an only child. My grandfather died shortly before I was born, and Bubbie...that is, my grandmother...died when I was very young, and I didn't see her often. I have only a vague memory of her. My father spoke of his parents and grandparents occasionally, but after he left us, my mother . . ." Severus just shook his head. "There's no one."

"Have you ever told Hermione about your family?"

"I have told her that I haven't any. There is nothing to tell her."

"You could tell her what you told me today," Gareth said.

Severus snorted again. "As if being a former Death Eater weren't enough ugly truth. There would be no point to it."

"If you don't want Tarrant to have a chance with Hermione, you will need to open yourself up."

Severus shook his head. "We are friends. I cannot interfere with her relationships. Not even with that dolt."

"I am not talking about interfering with her relationships. I am speaking of making yourself an option for her, letting her know how you feel about her."

"I am too old for her. And I am not a nice person. I would not be good for her. I barely can manage a friendship with her; anything more would be disastrous. I would hurt her, or simply fail at providing her what she needs, what she deserves to have. Besides, you said that she likes Tarrant. Very much, you said."

"I never said that," Gareth corrected. "I said that she likes one of the two wizards very much. I think she may very well return your feelings. But she may give up hope if you don't do something. You don't have to rush into anything. Just let her know how strongly you care for her, that she is important in your life."

Severus didn't respond to that. He knew that Hermione had become fond of him when she was a student, much to his surprise. Even more surprising, he had found that he enjoyed her company, that he looked forward to seeing her, and that he wanted to protect her. When he had been half-conscious after being bitten by Nagini, lying with his head in Hermione's lap, one of his first thoughts was that he had certainly died. As he drifted in and out of consciousness, he was aware of her gentle touch and her words, begging him to stay, to live, to breathe. And when, later that summer, he found her address and went to visit her, she hadn't asked him why he was there. She was simply glad to see him.

Gareth cleared the tea things away, then he turned back to Severus. "You should tell her, Snape. Make some overtures. She would be pleased, I am sure, and I don't think you would be disappointed."

"We go to lunch a few times a month," Severus said. "And she writes me letters. Long letters."

"Do you write back?"

"Not really. Sometimes. I send her a note occasionally if she asks my advice." Severus quirked a slight smile. "As she did when she was frustrated with your method of beginning her apprenticeship."

Gareth laughed. "Ah, yes, she was unhappy about that, having to restrict herself to basic Arithmantic calculations, standard conversions of letters and numbers, and not using any other symbols and no spells. What did you tell her?"

"I told her that mastering the fundamentals of a discipline is important and that returning to basics and really fully understanding them as though they were second nature to her would give her a foundation for the more advanced work. I also pointed out that she had greater intellectual maturity than she had when she took her first Arithmancy class and so her understanding would likewise be more mature." Severus stood. "I also told her that for the first month of my apprenticeship, I did nothing but brew Boil Cure Potion every day, six days a week."

"Boil Cure Potion?" Gareth asked, laughing. "That *is* basic. You must have hated it."

"I did at first, but then as I grew bored, thinking I could brew it in my sleep, the quality declined although I did not do anything that I could identify as wrong. I learned that my attention was necessary even with the simplest of potions. I became obsessed with the potion and with becoming more and more precise in my timing, measurements, and intention. It was a valuable lesson, although I do not believe that if I were to take an apprentice, I would proceed in quite that way."

"Well, as I said before, you needn't dive headfirst into a relationship with her, and you needn't make any long-term plans or make any pledges, but I think you should explore it. Try doing some little romantic things for her. Bring her small gifts. They don't have to be expensive or flamboyant. Just little things. Flowers are always nice, or chocolates."

Severus remembered the chocolates that he had given Hermione during her sixth year. He had been under the *Actus Affectus* spell and hadn't been himself, but he still remembered how her eyes brightened when she realised that the heart-shaped box of chocolates were for her. It had been a very large box. He couldn't do that again, that had been overly flamboyant, but he could buy her a small box.

As Gareth led him back into the sitting room, he said, "Or you could begin by giving her little gifts that were thoughtful but not necessarily romantic, if you want to take it even more slowly."

"I suppose I could. And if she only wants a friendship with me, it wouldn't be as embarrassing."

"Ah, I think they're back," Gareth said as a soft chime sounded somewhere above them. "That's the perimeter charm."

"I knew I should have left. I'll go out through the back door," Severus said, agitated.

"No, you won't. You can't Disapparate from there, so you would have to walk around the house to the front gate. Anyone who saw you would find it more startling to have you apparently lurking around in the gardens. You stay here, just have a seat on the couch, and I'll go let them in and let Mum know you're here."

Severus nodded unhappily. He supposed that was better than having her meet him unawares. A minute later, and he heard voices as Gareth greeted his mother and Hermione. The sound of Hermione's voice made him nervous, but he also felt the same slight sense of imminent arousal that he sometimes felt when he first heard her voice after not seeing her in a while. He looked up. To his surprise, Professor Gamp was the first person through the door to the sitting room. She was dressed in Muggle clothing...trousers, in fact. Severus stood.

She looked at him, pausing slightly as though assessing his appearance, then she nodded and said simply, "Professor Snape."

"Professor Gamp," Severus replied, cringing inwardly at the slightly rough squeak in his voice, but his mouth and throat felt parched, despite the two cups of tea he had just drunk.

"I am not a teacher any longer. You needn't use that title," she replied. "And you are long out of school, yourself."

He nodded in response, unsure what to say. Severus could see Hermione standing in the doorway behind Professor Gamp, and Gareth, behind her...too close to her for his liking. She edged her way into the room.

"Madam Gamp and I went into London today. We wore ourselves out," she said brightly.

Gertrude looked down fondly at Hermione. "You mean you wore me out." She looked back over at Severus. "She is being kind to an old wreck."

Severus felt frozen in place.

"You are not an old wreck, Madam Gamp," Hermione said. "I had a good time today."

"So did I," Gertrude said quietly. "But I am tired. I think I will go upstairs now." She looked at her son, still standing in the doorway. "I would like to speak to you."

Gareth nodded and followed his mother when she left the room. Severus felt as though his legs were completely numb.

"I'm surprised to see you, Severus," Hermione said as she put a large, striped paper bag down on the floor. "Surprised, but pleased."

"I doubt that was the reaction that Madam Gamp had when she learned I was here. Surprised, no doubt, but not pleased."

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't hear what Gareth told her, but her expression never changed. But then, getting her to show a reaction of any kind can be difficult. She seemed to enjoy the musical we saw this afternoon, though."

Severus nodded.

"So, would you like some tea?" Hermione asked.

"No, thank you. We just had some. I was just leaving."

"Do you have to? We haven't had a real visit in a couple weeks, I think."

Severus hesitated. "I should get back to Hogwarts for dinner."

"Oh. That's disappointing," Hermione said. "But if you Apparated to the gates, you wouldn't have to leave right away, would you? We could talk for a little while."

"I don't think I would be comfortable doing that."

Hermione's face fell, though she masked it quickly. "I'm sorry. I don't want to keep you."

"I had thought to be gone before Professor Gamp returned," Severus explained.

"I see. It was convenient that we were out all day, then," Hermione said.

"No, no, it wasn't. I was in town, and I came to see if you wanted to go to lunch. It would have been more convenient if you had been in," Severus said.

Hermione smiled brightly. "I wish I had been, then."

"You had a good time in London, though."

"Yes, but still, I wish I could have had lunch with you, too," Hermione said. "Can't you stay for just a little while? Madam Gamp is upstairs now. She knows you're here. She

never says anything bad about you."

"I doubt she sings my praises, though," Severus said drily.

"She wouldn't be likely to do that, anyway. She is not very effusive." Hermione sat down on the couch, patting the cushion beside her, indicating that Severus should sit beside her. "Did you and Gareth have a good afternoon?"

Severus fought the flush he felt building. He swallowed. "It was interesting."

"What did you do?"

"We talked. He showed me the house." He stripped me nude, and I let him touch me and kiss me, he thought to himself. Severus sat when Hermione patted the couch again. "He gave me lasagna for lunch."

"He's a good cook," Hermione said.

"The lasagna was good."

Hermione giggled. "I hope you told him."

Severus gave a brief smile. "I did."

"I have an entire act I do for him to tell him how wonderful his cooking is...just to tease him, you know."

"You still enjoy living here with them, then?"

"Yes, and the apprenticeship is wonderful. One reason I brought Madam Gamp out today was not just because I think she needs to get out, but as a way of thanking her. It's like having an apprenticeship with two people, she helps so much, and they're both so talented."

"Doesn't it bother Gareth to have his mother interfering in your apprenticeship?"

"She's not interfering. She's helping. He never minds. They work well together, actually."

"And Gareth?"

"What do you mean?"

"How are you getting along with him?"

"You know that already. After the first bumps, I like the way he's organised my apprenticeship, and he's great to work with. I love it."

Severus nodded, no more comfortable than he had been when Professor Gamp first left the room. He was acutely aware that he was sitting in the same spot he had sat when Gareth had handed him his underpants. What if Gareth said something to Hermione? Or did something in front of her? What would she think? He felt Hermione's hand on his arm and looked over at her.

"What is it? What's wrong?" she asked.

"Being in this house is uncomfortable, that's all," he said, not meeting her eyes.

"You spent the afternoon here, though," Hermione pointed out.

"And it was not an entirely pleasant experience."

"Well, you must have enjoyed yourself at least a little," Hermione said, "or you wouldn't have stayed so long. I know that Gareth likes you."

Severus nodded. He remembered how Gareth had massaged him all over. He swallowed. He had never touched his erection, though, and Severus was torn about how he felt about that. As he remembered Gareth's touch and his own arousal, he could feel his cock beginning to react. He glanced at Hermione. If she had walked in then, it would have been disastrous. He couldn't possibly ever show his face again. But if she were to walk in, alone, and McGonagall weren't there, and he had been lying on the couch, nude, his penis engorged and erect . . . she would likely be embarrassed and horrified in actuality, but then in actuality, such a thing would never happen. But he wished it had been Hermione who had wanted to touch him and kiss him, though he had to admit that he would probably have fled. He still wasn't sure why he hadn't stopped McGonagall, why he hadn't simply left the house. Had he wanted that and not known it? Did he want an intimate relationship with Gareth? No, he didn't think so. But he trusted him. And it had been very comforting, very relaxing, very safe . . .

Severus successfully kept himself from flinching when he felt Hermione brushing his hair back from his face.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to stay. I'm sure that it's different now that his mother's here," Hermione said softly.

He shook his head. "It's all right." He turned his head to look at her, and she dropped her hand. "Would you like to go to dinner with me?"

"Now? Tonight?" When he nodded, she said, "I thought you had to get back to the school."

"There are other teachers who will be there. I am not required to be present this evening. I simply know that Minerva likes us to be there when possible." Remembering Gareth's encouraging words, he said, "I would like to take you out to dinner, Hermione. If not this evening, perhaps one night next week?"

"Or both?" she asked with a smile. "We had a huge meal for tea, so I'm not very hungry right now, but I'd still like to go out to dinner with you tonight."

Severus smiled and nodded slightly. "Both would be fine."

Hermione looked down at her Muggle trousers and jumper. "I should change. This was fine for an afternoon in London, but..."

"It's fine, Hermione." He looked at her, into her warm, happy eyes, and tried to think of what more to say. "You look lovely."

Hermione blushed visibly. "Thank you."

"We can just have something light to eat tonight. We could go to a Muggle pub somewhere, if you like."

Hermione nodded. "That would be nice. Just let me bring my shopping upstairs. I'll be just a minute." She stood and picked up her shopping bag.

Something occurred to Severus. "Do you have a pub you would like to go to?" The few Muggle pubs he was well-acquainted with were rather seedy, nowhere he would want to bring Hermione.

"I know a couple places." She hesitated at the door, turning back to him. "I don't mean to sound dumb or impertinent, but is this a date? Like *adate* date?"

"I thought if you wanted it to be a date, yes," Severus said hesitantly.

Hermione grinned. "Good. I wasn't sure."

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-One: A Date with Hermione

Saturday, 6 March 1999

Severus takes Hermione on a date, but it gets off to a rocky start.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, others

Chapter Thirty-One: A Date with Hermione

Chapter 32 of 118

Saturday, 6 March 1999. Severus takes Hermione out to dinner, but the date has a rocky start.

Rated for language.



Chapter Thirty-One: A Date with Hermione

Saturday, 6 March 1999

When she returned ten long minutes later, Hermione was wearing a different jumper...two jumpers, in fact. One was a thin, sleeveless v-neck slipover, and the other was a cardigan, both of pale blue cashmere, and she had a light jacket over one arm. She had also put a different clip in her hair, drawing it back from her face.

"I saw Gareth and told him I didn't know when I'd be back. He said he wouldn't call the MLE and report me missing unless I didn't show up for breakfast," she said with a laugh.

Severus fought a blush. "I will have you home much before that, I am sure."

Hermione laughed again. "He was only joking, and so was I." She took his arm and walked him out to the hall. As they reached the door, she stopped and looked up at him. "Now, what I need to know is whether this is a first date or whether I might have not recognised our earlier ones."

Severus swallowed. "I suppose it's our first, if you want to look at it as a date." He wasn't sure he wanted to call it a date. That sounded much more threatening than simply taking Hermione out for a meal sounded. He hadn't been going to dive in; he had been going to give her hints of his interest, bring her little presents, and then see what her response was. He hadn't expected her to ask about dates.

"But if I wanted to look at it as, say, our third date, I could do that?"

"I...why would you want to do that?" Severus asked curiously.

"Well, Severus, think about it. There are certain things that are said about a third date." She opened the door for them. "And besides, if it's our third date, you don't need to be so nervous about it."

"I am not nervous. We have gone out and done things together before. This is no different."

"Third date, Severus. Think about it," she said, smiling at him and taking his hand. "I'll Apparate us from the garden gate. Come on."

The pub Hermione chose was in a town not far from where her parents were now living in Cornwall. She had Apparated them next to a skip in an alley off of a nearly empty car park, and they had to walk almost twenty minutes to reach the pub. She apologised, saying that it was the closest point she knew of to Apparate to safely without being noticed. Severus didn't mind; he enjoyed the walk with her, though he felt self-conscious when she took his hand. As they approached the busier district, Severus had the sense that everyone was staring at him and wondering what he was doing with such a young girl. Hermione didn't seem to notice, though, and chattered happily away about the museums she and Professor Gamp had visited that morning.

Finally, in a low voice, Severus said, "Do you mind not holding my hand just now?"

Hermione immediately released his hand.

"I'm sorry," Severus said softly.

"It's all right. You aren't used to it." Seeing his eyes, she said, "It really is all right, Severus."

"Everyone is staring at us, haven't you noticed?"

"I don't know as they are staring, but they do look at us...more at you, I think. You *are* dressed a bit unusually, Severus. You may not be wearing robes, but your clothes are not precisely ordinary Muggle day wear, you know."

He did tend to attract unusual glances when he was in Muggle areas dressed as he ordinarily did at Hogwarts, but he was sure that their glances were lingering longer, and he told Hermione that.

"I suppose it may be because we're together, but I'm not going to speculate about it," Hermione replied. "And after all you've been through, you shouldn't care, either." She smiled up at him. "I am very happy to be out with you."

Severus returned her smile. "As long as you are happy, then." He stopped, looking down at her. "You have the most beautiful smile I have ever seen."

Hermione's smile widened at that. "Thank you! You do, too, really, when you smile. I like it sometimes when you smile just a little, just the faintest hint of a smile around your lips, but your eyes smile more and your worry lines just drop away. It makes me happy."

Severus offered her his arm then, which she took gladly.

"We are impeding traffic here," Severus said. "Where is this pub?"

"Not much farther. You know, I never asked whether you had any Muggle money with you," Hermione said.

Severus stopped stock-still. His first date with Hermione, and he only had wizarding money with him.

"I hadn't thought I'd be leaving Hogsmeade today," he said. "I just have the money I was going to use to pick up a few things from town."

"That's all right. I have money with me, and I have my cash card, too, if we need more."

"I can't have you pay," Severus said in dismay.

"Well, it's either that, or we go hungry and we are both disappointed. I don't mind, honestly, Severus."

"Yes, but bringing someone out on a first date, asking them to go to dinner, and then not paying for it . . . what a dunderhead!" he said, his face a picture of displeasure.

"All the more reason to see this as our third date, then," Hermione said practically.

Severus was about to ask why it would be more acceptable to be a dunderhead on a third date than on a first when they arrived at the pub. Unfortunately, it was a busy night, and as they didn't have reservations, there would be a twenty minute wait, which Hermione didn't blink an eye at.

"Twenty minutes isn't long," she said, taking off her jacket. "We can have a drink at the bar whilst we wait."

"For which you will also have to pay," Severus said moodily.

"Now look, Severus, if you are going to be that way about it, that's fine...if you want our date to be punctuated with episodes of irrational bad temper over something that can't be helped. If not, then I think we should not think about it again and just enjoy ourselves," Hermione said as she took a seat on a barstool.

"This was a mistake," Severus said, his voice hard.

"I don't think so," Hermione replied calmly.

"You don't want to be out with someone who has 'episodes of bad temper,'" he said. She might as well have called him a cry-baby who was having temper tantrums, he thought, glaring hard at the dark surface of the bar in front of him, as though it were responsible for all his troubles.

"I didn't say that. I said that was fine if that's what you wanted. I am glad to be out with you either way. I would simply prefer it if we both enjoyed ourselves."

She ordered a half of cider. When the bartender looked at him, waiting for his order, Severus felt like snarling at him. Instead, he just shook his head and said, "Nothing for me."

He half expected Hermione to ask him if he was sure that he didn't want anything, and he was ready with a stinging retort. When he looked at her, she was studying her coaster. It had a beer advert on one side and some kind of joke or quiz on the other. He sat down on the stool next to her. She put the coaster on the bar as the bartender returned with her drink.

Hermione took a sip of her cider.

"Are you ignoring me now?" he asked.

"No. Just thinking and waiting." She turned toward him in her stool, smiling slightly. "I am glad this date is so important to you, but you don't need to have it be perfect, and you don't need to ruin it if it isn't exactly the way you think it should be."

"This was a bad idea," he said, staring at the bar again. "I didn't even mean to ask you out tonight. And I didn't think you would see it as a date. It was just a bad idea."

"I don't think it was."

"I can barely manage a simple, civil friendship with you. This is too much."

"Well, why don't we say it's not a date, then? I think I can wait for a third date," she said softly.

He raised his eyes and looked at her. She had been happy it was a date. Gareth had been right about that. She was interested in him. He remembered Tarrant.

"What about Tarrant?"

"What *about* Tarrant?"

"I thought he was interested in you."

"His interest is irrelevant to our conversation," Hermione said, shrugging off the thin cardigan and draping it over the back of her chair.

Her other jumper was sleeveless, and Severus could see the lovely curve of her breast beneath the soft, clingy cashmere. He wondered whether Tarrant had seen her in it, whether he had touched her breasts through it or had slipped a hand beneath it. Perhaps he had seduced her and they had had sex, and a vision shot through his mind of Hermione naked, riding the strong, handsome young wizard, of him pushing her to a bed and thrusting into her, of the two writhing together, sweaty and passionate. He closed his eyes and turned back to the bar.

"What will he think if he learns we have been out together...out on a date?" Severus asked.

"It really isn't any of his business, and I can't imagine what he would think, but I don't particularly care," Hermione said.

"If this is a date," Severus said softly, "I don't want you to go on dates with other men." He looked over at her again. "That is, if we are going to continue. Having dates. If we aren't, if you don't want to any longer, that's different."

"It's definite, then," Hermione said with a smile. "This is a third date. Because if this were a first date, it would be far too early to suggest that we not see other people. Even a third date is a little early, but that's all right."

"So you'll tell Tarrant that you aren't going to see him anymore?"

"No," Hermione said. "I will make it clear to him that we are friends and nothing more, however. And I won't go on dates with him. But I might still go out with him as a friend."

Severus swallowed. He didn't see the difference. Tarrant would still have her time, and eventually, he would have her forgetting about him. She would realise that Tarrant was more pleasant to be with, more charming, more handsome...that wasn't difficult, though...and she would choose Tarrant.

"Severus, you don't need to worry." She reached over and touched his arm. "Do you think that I would lead you on? That I would pretend to be exclusively with you, but see other men?"

"Have you slept with him?" he asked hoarsely.

"What?"

"I shouldn't have asked that. I am sorry."

"No, you shouldn't have asked that." Hermione sighed and was quiet for a moment. "I don't know why you wouldn't trust me."

"I look at you, and I trust you; I look at myself, and I think you would have to be crazy not to want to be with someone else. I don't think you're crazy."

"It's a good thing I'm the one looking at you, then," Hermione said with a smile.

They heard the hostess calling out, "Snape."

"Our table's ready," Hermione said. "Are we still eating here?"

Severus nodded.

After they had been shown to their table, Severus excused himself to go to the lavatory. As he washed his hands, looking into the mirror, he thought about what Hermione had said. He had been a complete prat. It was as though he wanted their date to be a failure. He didn't, though, he really didn't. And he didn't want to drive Hermione away.

When he came back, he said, "I'm sorry, Hermione. I cannot promise not to have another episode of bad temper tonight, but I will try not to, and I do want to enjoy it and have a pleasant time for us both."

Hermione smiled. "That's good, then. I hope you don't mind, but I ordered us a couple appetisers. The waitress will be back for our entree order."

"That's fine. I also want to say that I'd like to start the date over, at least from the point where we walked in the door here. Just forget everything I said. ~~Is~~ too early for us to talk about not dating others, and everything else I said . . . can we pretend I didn't?"

"It was good that they had a table for us as soon as we arrived, isn't it?" Hermione said with a grin. "By the way, I have a solution for you. For your discomfort with having me pay."

She slid something across the table to him, and when she removed her hand, he saw there were three twenty-pound notes there. He blinked.

"That is surely too much for dinner."

"It is. It's a loan. I think if I paid for dinner and you paid me back, that would feel odd...to me, anyway...but if I loan you some money just so that you have some in your pocket and you happen to pay for dinner out of it, that's different. You can repay me when you take me out to dinner later this week."

Severus picked up the cash. It felt a bit peculiar, but it seemed a solution, and he was relieved. "Does that leave you with any money, though?"

"Enough. Other than having dinner with my parents tomorrow, I'm not planning on going anywhere in the next few days. And I have my cash card if I need it."

When the waitress arrived, Hermione ordered lemon sole and Severus ordered steak and kidney pudding.

"It's good to see you have an appetite," Hermione said.

"Yes, but if I am not careful, I might begin to gain too much weight," Severus said.

"Doubtful," Hermione said. "So, is this our third date?"

Severus looked at her teasing smile and found the corners of his mouth responding to it. "Yes, I suppose it is." Now that he thought about it, he seemed to remember that there was some tradition that after the third date, the woman would let the man take a liberty or two. "We will have to determine what our first two dates were, though, and come to some agreement about that."

"Yes, we will have to think about that very carefully," Hermione said with mock seriousness. "The first date is particularly important. We have to be especially sure about that one."

"Indeed. We have to start off on the right foot, after all," Severus agreed.

As they ate dinner, Severus found himself forgetting they were on a date and simply enjoying Hermione's company. They ordered coffee, but no dessert.

"How are your parents?"

"Good. I think they've adjusted to the changes in their lives, and they aren't bothered anymore by the memories of their time away."

"It must have been very jarring at first."

"You know that I considered not having them remember any of that time, but I thought that would be worse. I felt bad enough about altering their memories like that and taking them away from everything they knew, but it was the only way I thought they would be safe. They didn't have an easy time of it in Australia, either. There were all kinds of things that they didn't know, memories that they thought they should have but didn't. It was disorienting for them." Hermione sighed. "I did the best I could, but memory charms are tricky, and altering a person's entire identity and what they believed they knew of their past is even more difficult than I had thought it was."

Severus looked at her thoughtfully. "I know that what you did saved your parents' lives, but it was a very dangerous thing to do, especially for someone as young and inexperienced as you were, regardless of your talent, diligence, and intelligence."

"I know," Hermione said sombrely. "I could have damaged their minds irretrievably. But I was very careful, and I believed that they would be in greater danger if I didn't."

"If you had died, what would have happened to them?"

"They would have continued in their new lives, become more comfortable in them with each passing year. They would have been fine."

"They could not even have mourned you," Severus said softly.

They were quiet as they finished their coffee and Severus paid their bill.

"There are Muggle Protection Laws for very good reasons," Severus said as they left the restaurant.

The evening was very chilly, and Hermione shivered. She should have brought something warmer with her than the light jacket.

"There is always the temptation," Severus continued, "to do what we believe is best for them, but which really may be best for us."

"Would you have had me leave my parents vulnerable? To do all of that work, to fight so hard, and have my own parents killed?"

"No," Severus said softly. "Just to remember it. I don't think that saving your parents was wrong. But you are an exceptionally bright and talented witch, Hermione. You could be quite dangerous if you were inclined that way. You are not, but you need to remember yourself."

"I didn't do it lightly, or anything else I did in the war," Hermione replied, bristling slightly at the admonishment.

"Even leading Umbridge to the centaurs and that giant? To her possible death?"

"Of course not. It was expeditious. I admit that, but I didn't have a lot of time to consider our options. I still didn't do it lightly."

"You have intelligence, determination, and a strong, decisive will. I am very glad that you also have scruples."

"Ron used to say I was scary...brilliant, but scary." Hermione gave a short laugh. "Probably why he's out boinking blondes now. I'm sorry...that was crude of me."

Severus smiled. "But true, from the rumours I have heard." They turned down a path that led them across a park. "Potter was at the school this week."

"Was he? Why?"

"I don't know, but I know that he received permission to bring Miss Weasley out to dinner. When your name is Potter and you're the hero of the wizarding world, I suppose the rules won't ever apply to you." The words were bitter, but his tone was sad.

"You're a hero, too," Hermione said.

Severus let out a short laugh. "Perhaps to some, but the rules will always apply to me, and people will always be watching to make sure I don't break any, even the smallest."

"Professor McGonagall doesn't feel that way, I'm sure!"

"No, not Minerva, and not Albus," he admitted, "but for the rest of the world . . . yet I can't say that I envy Potter his position, either, really. The rules may not apply the same way, but people will always be watching him, too, and there will always be some who will be waiting to see him fail or act in a way that causes him public embarrassment. His children will be watched, too, if he ever has any. They will be expected to be as heroic and golden as their father."

"I suppose, but that's a long way off, and maybe by then, there will be something else to hold everyone's attention." Hermione took his hand and gave it a tug. "Let's sit a while."

Severus resisted the urge to pull his hand away, and he sat on the bench Hermione indicated.

Hermione looked around. "Do you think we could risk a Warming Charm?"

"I think I could cast one wandlessly if you're chilly."

"A little," Hermione said.

He looked over at her. A third date . . . "Or you could simply sit a little closer," he said.

Hermione smiled and slid over next to him as he gingerly put his arm around her shoulders.

"Warmer?" Severus asked.

Hermione nodded and leaned her head against him. "This is nice."

"It is," Severus said softly. "And completely incredible."

"Why did you ask me out to dinner? You planned to go back to the school."

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Hermione asked, genuinely puzzled.

"You seemed happy to see me. I had a moment of courage, I suppose." He couldn't very well tell her that he had a moment of extreme attraction to her stimulated by memories of Gareth touching him when he was naked on the sitting room couch.

"I am glad you did. Now that the war's over, perhaps you could use that ample courage of yours in other areas more often."

Severus swallowed. It wasn't the same thing at all. It was like the difference between the physical threat that he had felt from Gareth the first time he met him and the emotional vulnerability he had felt that afternoon. It was very different.

Hermione placed her hand on his chest. He thought that perhaps he should respond in some way, but he didn't know what to do. What he really wanted was to pull her trousers down, unbutton his own, and fuck her right there on the bench. But what he wanted more than that was a relationship with her and, eventually, to make love to her. Right then, though, he couldn't do any of that. He was glad that it was dark and the nearest street lamp was a few yards away. He didn't think that his erection would be noticeable even in better light, but he wouldn't have wanted to risk having Hermione notice. He wanted to let her know he was attracted to her in a more subtle and romantic way than for her to see a bulge in his trousers.

"I think we should be getting back," Severus said. "I think that we can Disapparate from here if we step into the shadows."

Hermione agreed and stood, taking his hand. They walked toward a tree near some bushes where the shadows were deep.

"I will Apparate us together," Severus said. "I should see you home."

"That would be nice, but don't Apparate us directly to the front gate. Let's walk a bit."

Severus nodded and took hold of her arm. He Apparated them to the end of the lane, and they began to walk back to the house, Hermione placing her hand in the crook of his elbow. When they reached the gate to the short fence around the Gamp property, he stopped.

"Walk me to the door?" Hermione asked.

Severus nodded and unlatched the gate. When they reached the door, Severus turned toward her.

"If I understand correctly," he whispered, "the third date holds a particular significance."

"If you want it to," Hermione replied, looking up at him.

Severus slowly raised his hand and touched her cheek, glad that they were too close to the house to be seen from the windows, but glad, too, that he was still constrained by the proximity to it and its occupants. He could not forget himself, even for a moment, he thought.

"I had a nice evening, Hermione," he whispered as his fingertips grazed her cheek. "Thank you."

Severus bent his head and touched his lips to hers. He felt her arms come up around him. One of her hands was at the back of his neck, the other, on his shoulder blade. He kissed her very softly and gently, and as he felt her exhale, he kissed her again, bringing her lower lip between his own and sucking it once, gently, before parting his lips and kissing her again. He drew back and looked down into her face as she opened her eyes. In the scant light, he thought she appeared flushed. She certainly did not appear to be in any hurry to step away from him. He had kept one hand at her face and the other lightly resting at her waist. If after three dates, he could kiss her good-night, he wondered how many dates they would have to have before he could thrust his cock into her pussy; then, disgusted with himself, he pushed the question from his mind. That was not why he was there. He should not be having such crude thoughts about her. He was not some randy teenager, and Hermione . . . she was young and sweet and deserved to be treated with consideration.

"Would you like to have dinner with me on Friday?" he asked. "A late dinner, after dinner at Hogwarts? I could attend for a short time and then leave and meet you."

"Yes, I would like that. Would you pick me up here?"

Severus nodded. A girl liked to be picked up at home, he thought. "I think I could be here by quarter to seven. I'll try."

"You don't have any detentions scheduled for Friday evening?" Hermione asked with a smile. "That doesn't sound like you."

"No, and if anyone dares to misbehave between now and then, I will set their detentions for early Sunday morning. That should be punishment in itself."

"What should I wear?" Hermione asked. "Will we be staying in Hogsmeade or going someplace Muggle?"

Severus hesitated. Muggle might be better. Far less chance anyone would recognise them.

"Would you enjoy another Muggle evening?" he asked.

"That would be nice."

"Muggle, then," Severus said, stepping back. He wished there were some way he could ask her not to wear trousers. He liked the way they looked on her, but if on the fourth date, one was allowed more liberties . . . well, he supposed it was better not to think about that.

"I will owl you," Hermione said as she reached for the doorknob.

Severus nodded and watched as Hermione took her wand from her purse, then, holding the doorknob, she pointed her wand at the door and uttered what sounded like a string of nonsense words, but which was the current password that, combined with a certain wand-movement, would allow her to open the door.

"I'll see you in a few days, Severus. Thank you for dinner."

After the door closed behind Hermione, Severus walked to the gate, carefully closing and latching it behind him. He looked back at the house. There were lights on in Gareth's large front bedroom. Hermione's room was on the other side of the house.

He wondered if she had gone straight up to her room or whether she had stopped in the kitchen first. Or perhaps Professor Gamp was up, sitting in her study, reading or working, and Hermione went to see her. No, she probably would not have wanted to tell her about her date with him. But she may have stopped to say good-night. And then she would go upstairs. Would she tell Gareth that she was back? Joke with him about not needing to call the MLE? What would he say to her? Would he be dressed? Or would he be in bed, reading, perhaps nude? Hermione would knock on his door, and he would call to her to come in. He would be sitting up in bed, strong, muscular, and virile, only a sheet over him, and he would put his book aside. He would ask Hermione if she had a nice evening, and she would tell him something, something vague and polite, or she would tell him that he had kissed her good-night at the door, and McGonagall would say that if he had known she liked to be kissed good-night, he would have done it a long time ago. Hermione would tell him that she wouldn't mind one then, and she would walk over to the bed, lean over, and kiss him. He would pull her down onto the bed with him, and Hermione would feel his cock. She would pull away and stand next to the bed, but only long enough to tear her clothes off and join him. McGonagall would fuck her all night long, and in the morning, she would have completely forgotten him.

Severus shook himself and blinked. He saw a silhouette in the window. A man. McGonagall. Severus Disapparated with a crack.

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-Two: Disquiet

Saturday, 6 March Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus has many mixed feelings, and his worries escalate.

Rated MA.

Warning for some sexually explicit language and imagery, het fantasy.

Characters: Severus Snape, others

Author's Note: Updates may be erratic for a couple weeks, hence the second early update in as many days. I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter Thirty-Two: Disquiet

Chapter 33 of 118

Sunday, 7 March 1999. Severus has many mixed feelings, and his worries escalate.

Rated for some sexually explicit language and imagery.



Chapter Thirty-Two: Disquiet

Saturday, 6 March Sunday, 7 March 1999

Despite the fact that it was Saturday, it was still after the late weekend curfew by the time he returned to Hogwarts, and Severus saw no one on his way back to his rooms. He wished he had caught a student. It would have been nice to have someone to vent a little spleen on.

Lying in bed, he thought that he had spent the most peculiar day that he had in a long time. He should have stopped Gareth. He probably should have left altogether. But it had been nice to go to dinner with Hermione. She was so lovely. She had the nicest skin. It seemed to glow. He remembered how it had felt to touch her cheek and kiss her lips. So soft and lovely. Of course, she was young. He was not precisely an old man, but there were days when he felt ancient.

His physical health had improved over the last several months. Once he had recovered from his injuries the previous spring and from the shock of learning that Albus wasn't dead, he had gradually begun to sleep better, regain his appetite, put on weight, and his libido was returning. After the final course of treatments that autumn, his health had continued to improve. He felt better than he had in years. He still had nightmares, but they weren't as frequent, and he could usually wake himself up from them and fall back to sleep. Severus thought that he looked better than he had, too, though he would never be a handsome man. None of that changed the fact that he was twenty years older than Hermione. Not that twenty years was very much, really, especially in the wizarding world, but Hermione was only nineteen. Ten years from now, the age difference wouldn't be as significant; now, though . . .

He couldn't wait ten years. Put more precisely, ten years from now would be too late. She was here now and so was he. And although he still wasn't clear about what her relationship with Tarrant was, he was sure that if he did not take advantage of this opportunity, he could lose it forever. He could lose her, lose her to Tarrant or to some other wizard. Perhaps even to McGonagall. She wouldn't be his apprentice forever. He might have scruples about having a relationship with her whilst she was his apprentice, but there would be nothing to stop him afterward. He said that she was a bit young for his taste, but he did find her attractive, and Severus always noticed the way he talked to her, meeting her eyes, smiling at her, laughing at her jokes, leaning over and whispering to her as though they shared a secret. And McGonagall was an attractive wizard, no question about that. Much more attractive than he was. Straight white teeth, perfectly proportioned face, that curly chestnut hair, much like Hermione's own, broad shoulders, strong arms and chest, and very virile. And he would be a sensual lover. A sensual and energetic lover. It was difficult to believe that Hermione wouldn't be attracted to him.

No, he certainly couldn't wait ten years for Hermione. He didn't want to wait ten years, or even two. Now that he had expressed his interest and she returned it, he would forge ahead. It might not work, but he would try. He wanted her to fall in love with him. He thought that he was in love with her, that he had been in love with her since he had died with his head in her lap. But he wasn't dead, and she'd seen to it that he lived.

Too warm, he pushed one of his blankets off and rolled over onto his back. He still often had sleepless nights, and he had become used to staring at his ceiling. He rarely stared at his ceiling until a reflected dawn began to filter through his Charmed window any longer, but this might be one of those rare nights.

His mind wandered back to McGonagall. What had possessed him to let McGonagall touch him as he had? It had been completely unexpected, and it had not been something he had believed he wanted. And yet, as McGonagall had touched him, slowly removing his clothing piece by piece, despite his weak protests, he had found himself craving the next touch. The massage had been far too sensual for him...coming from another man. It might be fine for others, but he had never been attracted to other men. Still, he remembered the day that Gareth had spent with him when he'd been recovering after a particularly nasty set of curses had nearly killed him. Gareth had smoothed potion on his healing back and then had helped him in the shower. Gareth had done nothing inappropriate, and he had simply touched him gently, but Severus had felt cared for. Perhaps he had craved McGonagall's touch again and hadn't known it. His eyes closed, he remembered how it had felt to have him massage and kiss his back. He had even kissed his buttocks, soft, light, gentle kisses. His touches were sensual, and his kisses, more so.

Severus reached beneath his sheet and moved his nightshirt up, taking his cock in his hand and stroking it. He remembered how it had felt to kiss Hermione, and he remembered her breasts' gentle curves beneath her soft jumper. He would like to touch those breasts as he kissed her, to feel her soft skin against him, to lie naked on top of her as he kissed her. He imagined lying naked on top of her. They were on the sofa together. He was kissing her and touching her. He would lift his hips as she parted her legs, and he would press his cock against her, and she would reach down and guide it into her. He would kiss her and fuck her, pressed into her, rolling his hips as he entered her, thrusting repeatedly. Gareth would be there. He would see them. He would see them and he would want them both. He would want to fuck Hermione, but he couldn't, because Hermione was his. He would want to fuck him, too, but he couldn't; he wouldn't let him. Gareth would strip down and he would begin to kiss and massage his back as he fucked Hermione. His cock would be inside Hermione's slick warmth, and Gareth would be kissing and massaging his buttocks.

Severus gasped as he came. He lay still for a moment, then he summoned his wand to his left hand. He cleaned up the wet mess he had made of himself and his sheets, then he swung out of bed and went into the bathroom. He washed up, feeling fresher afterward than he had with just the charms.

Looking in the mirror, he said to himself, "You are one sick fuck, Snape."

He splashed his face with water. Being with Bella, even for such a short time and so long ago, must have ruined him for being with anyone sexually in a normal, healthy way. And after that, his life had been so constrained, he hadn't had any opportunity, or even desire, to develop a relationship with anyone. Still, it had been only a fantasy, he thought as he padded back into the bedroom. And it wasn't as though he wanted to have either of them, even in fantasy, do some of the things that Bella used to do to him. And just because he had McGonagall enter the fantasy, it wasn't the same as what Bella had done with her multiple partners, and it was only fantasy, not reality.

As he climbed into bed, Severus decided that the fantasy wasn't so bad, except that in real life, he would worry about Hermione's pleasure, and not just his. And he didn't

think that he would really like it if Hermione only just lay there and let him fuck her. He wanted her to be passionately involved and he wanted her to come. He admitted that part of the reason he wanted her to orgasm was that it would affirm his ability as a lover, but he also wanted her to come just because he wanted her to have the greatest pleasure possible and he wanted to be the one to give it to her.

Severus settled back against his pillow and rolled over. He wished he knew what to make of Gareth. More to the point, he wished he understood how he felt toward him. When he merely thought of young McGonagall's body, he felt absolutely nothing, except a bit of envy, but when he remembered the way it had felt to have him touch him, he began to feel aroused, and when he thought about the other wizard getting an erection on his account, that was arousing, too. Yet when he thought of some other wizard becoming excited and attracted to him, it was quite the opposite of arousing. It was McGonagall himself who caused that reaction.

Severus's friendship with McGonagall was an unlikely friendship in some ways, when he thought about it, but he enjoyed sparring with the Ravenclaw, and he appreciated the younger wizard's easy, warm way. He even enjoyed his infuriating honesty and bluntness. And although McGonagall could be easy-going and let things roll off of him, he could also become angry and bite back when pushed.

Severus thought about his moment of weakness in McGonagall's bedroom, when he had wanted McGonagall to take from him, to punish him in some way, to treat him, perhaps, as Bella had all those years before, as a thing to be used. What he had really wanted was some relief from his guilt. That wouldn't have brought him any real relief, though, and he would have ruined their friendship for them both.

What did he want from Gareth? He thought that it would have been an easy thing for McGonagall to have seduced him when they were there on the couch. Just one touch at a time, he could have brought the encounter from being sensual and erotic to being erotic and fully sexual.

He had broken things off with Bella all those years ago because she had wanted him to let one of the LeStrange brothers bugger him as they were having intercourse and the other brother was doing the same to her. Even if she had only wanted to watch whilst LeStrange took him from behind...and she did like to watch...that would have been too much for him. He couldn't believe that he would want Gareth to do that to him. He'd been fairly pathetic with Bella, he had realised in retrospect, but he'd still had enough pride and sense of self to walk away then.

He should have walked away after Bella had first used a combination of spells and sex to cause him pain and her, pleasure, and would not stop no matter what he said. He had been sore for the next few days, and urinating had been painful; even his testicles had hurt. He had been too embarrassed to seek any treatment for it, though he did brew a couple of potions that had helped. He was not a masochist, and he didn't know why he had allowed her to do that. He had asked her to stop, but she never did, until finally he simply endured it. It seemed that the more he had wanted her to stop, the more she had enjoyed it. But then, Bella had enjoyed having him cause her pain, too, though not to the same degree. She always had to be in control.

Severus sighed, punched his pillow, and rolled over onto his other side. He wondered whether anyone else in the world had ever been as much of an idiot as he had been. When he had worked with Hermione before the Dark Lord was defeated, she had once pointed out to him that she was about the same age as he had been when he took the Dark Mark. She wouldn't have done anything so colossally stupid, though, and she never would have allowed herself to be used, even for a day, as he had let Bella use him for weeks.

Gods, he hoped he wasn't Hermione's Bella. He wouldn't treat her as Bella had treated him, but he was a nasty bastard, he did have a mean streak, and he had been surrounded by violence for much of his life and was prone to striking out both verbally and physically when angered. As much as his disposition may have improved, and as much as he was trying to be a new man and overcome his past, he was still nasty and temperamental. That evening had been a perfect example. They could have been having a good time, but he had had to become obsessed first with the fact that he didn't have any Muggle money with him, and then with Hermione's relationship with Tarrant. He had behaved like an obnoxious child. Hermione hadn't put up with his behaviour, but she had put up with him. She had been very clear that his behaviour was unpleasant and she didn't like it, but that she would let him behave like an idiot if he wanted to. He had tried self-sabotage, and she had stopped him in his tracks.

Severus remembered Hermione's smile when he had apologised. There had been a time when the words, "I'm sorry," could scarcely be pried from his lips...most of his life, in fact. No, he wasn't her Bella. Even if it were a mistake for her to see him, it couldn't be of the same type as the one he had made with Bella. Or that he had made when he had willingly allowed himself to be branded with the Dark Mark.

Hermione could become his anti-Bella. He would be a better man for her. She brought out the best in him. He would let her. He loved her.

The image of Hermione's smile in his mind, Severus drifted off to sleep.

On waking, Severus called Twiskett for some coffee. He looked out his Charmed window, which displayed a view of the lake, and saw that it was raining. It made no difference to his day. Each Sunday was much the same as any other for him when school was in session, only varying by whether he was assigned curfew checks or mandatory meal attendance or not. Since he was Deputy and he drew up the assignments, he could easily avoid having any duties on the weekends. At first, he had taken advantage of that, but a few weeks into September, he had found that without any obligations on the weekend, he was restless. The previous year, he hadn't bothered altering the assignments; he walked the corridors at all hours, anyway, whether it was his turn or not, so it made no difference to him. After three peaceful weekends that autumn, though, he had revised the October rotation.

That day, he had no requirement to attend meals, but as a matter of practicality, he would. At least he could leave when he was through eating instead of waiting until the students left. He didn't mind patrolling the halls...there was some pleasure to be taken in that...but he disliked sitting through a meal watching others eat after he had finished. Knowing that about Severus, Albus had traded some of his patrols for some of Severus's meals, and now it had become a regular part of the schedule. Albus, after all, enjoyed sitting at the table with the other staff and chatting with them, whereas Severus usually found it tedious.

Severus stepped into the shower. The peace he had felt before he fell asleep seemed to have dissipated, and now he felt a creeping anxiety. What if McGonagall said something to Hermione? What if he told her about what had happened, how they had spent their time together? Or what if Professor Gamp guessed and asked him about it...in front of Hermione? She was polite to him, but she must hate him, no matter what Gareth said about her. She must know her son's sexual proclivities, and if she wondered what they had done between lunchtime and teatime . . .

Then there was Hermione herself. He did want her, and he was not so much of a fool as to believe that Hermione wasn't interested in him. Now. But he knew his nature and he also knew hers. She was always taking on the cause of the underdog. She was kind and sympathetic, and if she believed that someone was being treated unfairly, she wouldn't simply stand by and watch. He was sure that that sympathy had played a role in her becoming attached to him when she was a student. He also didn't doubt that she had affection for him and enjoyed his company. But would that affection withstand a closer relationship? She dealt with it well when he was miserable and unpleasant now, but even she would eventually lose her patience with him. And he did try not to say cruel, biting things to her, and he had little desire to lash out at her that way. But there would come a time when he would say something cruel to her, and eventually he would say something unforgivable. And if he hurt her, struck out at her, hit her or cursed her . . . the mere thought of hurting Hermione caused him an almost physical pain.

His grandfather had hit and hexed his mother, his father had even hit his mother once, sometime in that last year or so that he was with them; he had been drunk, and his mother's defensive curses had taught his father very quickly, even drunk, not to touch her. His grandfather had used both hexes and his cane to beat the Muggle out of him. His father had never hit him, though. He had thought that his father had loved him, but he hadn't even tried to bring him with him when he left. He hadn't even said good-bye. Even thirty years later, that memory still hurt.

If he ever hit or hexed Hermione, he wouldn't need Hermione to leave him, he would leave her. He could never allow that; even once would be too much. No matter what else happened between them, even if she hurt and betrayed him, he could never believe that she deserved such a thing and he could never strike out in anger. At some point, if they continued dating, he would have to tell her that.

Before Riddle's defeat, he had thought that he would have to tell Hermione about all his misdeeds one day. That day had never come, even after the Dark Lord fell. At first, he was recovering from Nagini's bite, and then there were all the postwar celebrations. Hermione had to leave and retrieve her family from Australia and relocate them once again. He had visited her in Cornwall, but it had been a time to discuss the immediate future, not the past. Then she had revised for her NEWTs, which had been administered at the end of August since the end of the school year had been disrupted. After that . . . it never seemed the right time. Hermione was always full of conversation about her apprenticeship or her Muggle classes or the latest Ministry policy...which interested her far more than it did him, although her enthusiasm for policy-

making was charming.

Severus stepped out of the shower. He would tell her about his time as a Death Eater, and he would do it soon. Of course, she might decide before then that it had been a mistake to go out with him. But he would tell her soon.

He passed the morning reading essays, which was enough to put him in a bad mood, apart from his other worries. He didn't think that the students listened to anything he said or understood anything they read. Severus doubted that some of them had even bothered looking at the textbook, let alone any of the recommended texts. Every year, he put together a list of recommended reading for each class, and every year, it seemed more pointless to him. Hermione had been one of the few students who had ever read the recommended texts, but she was exceptional in every way.

After lunch, Severus found himself growing more restless. He tried not to think about Gareth, but by midafternoon, he decided that the only way that he could put it out of his mind was if he talked to the other wizard. He needed to know whether he had said anything to anyone, and he hoped that Professor Gamp had not been angry with Gareth for letting him into the house. And he just felt he needed to see him for some vague, unidentifiable reason.

Severus penned a quick note and sent it off by owl, short and to the point: "*GM...I need to see you....S.S.S.*"

Forty-five minutes later, the owl returned.

"Snape...come down to the house. I'm home....McG."

"McGonagall...Alone....S.S.S."

The next note directed Severus to meet him at the Hog's Head. That wasn't alone. Not only was it not alone, it was in public. He had never felt uncomfortable in public with Gareth before, but after their intimate encounter, he now had an irrational fear that people would see them together and believe they were a couple.

In the interest of getting it over with, though, he decided against further correspondence, and simply sent back a note saying, "*McG...14.45...SS*"

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-Three: At Spinner's End

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus meets Gareth in Hogsmeade and Apparates him to Spinner's End so that they can have a private discussion.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

UPCOMING

Chapter Thirty-Four: Uncertainty

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus finds himself in a situation he brought about but nonetheless hadn't expected.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Thirty-Five: Friendship

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus is grateful for his friendship with Gareth, but wants there to be no misunderstandings about it. Gareth reassures him, but Severus nonetheless worries about what the events of the day may mean.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Thirty-Six: A Darkly Smouldering Magnetism

Monday, 8 March 1999

A member of the Hogwarts staff is attracted to Severus when he accidentally seems to flirt with her, which alarms him. Filius teases him gently about it. Later, Severus has a conversation with Minerva and discusses his relationship with Hermione.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Minerva McGonagall, Sarah Duffy, others.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: An Exercise in Harmless Flirting

Monday, 8 March 1999

Severus decides to try out some harmless flirting after having been told that he has "a darkly smouldering magnetism." It doesn't go quite as planned.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Surprise!

~To Be Continued in Part Four~

Chapter Thirty-Three: At Spinner's End

Chapter 34 of 118

Sunday, 7 March 1999. Severus meets Gareth in Hogsmeade and Apparates him to Spinner's End so that they can have a private discussion.



Chapter Thirty-Three: At Spinner's End

Sunday, 7 March 1999

At quarter to three, Severus approached the Hog's Head. Gareth was waiting for him outside the pub, leaning nonchalantly against a wall.

"Hey, Snape!" he greeted him, straightening up. "Here? Or we could go back to the house. Mum's there, but we could go up to my study."

"I said 'alone.' You are in danger of becoming a dunderhead if you don't understand the meaning of the word 'alone,' McGonagall," Snape hissed. He looked around. "We need to talk."

"Wherever you like," Gareth replied coolly.

"There's only one place I can think of at the moment. Come with me." Snape turned on his heel and went around to the narrow, smelly, dark alley beside the pub, and Gareth followed.

"I'm Apparating us," Severus said, grasping the other wizard's arm. With no further warning, he Disapparated with a crack, bringing Gareth with him.

Gareth regained his balance and looked around him. Dusty, dingy, seedy . . . the windows were covered with a layer of rain-streaked grime, the wallpaper was faded and stained in spots, there was a thick coating of dust everywhere, and the furniture...well, threadbare would have been an improvement.

"Where are we?"

"My house," Severus said shortly. "I haven't been here since August." He glanced around him. "I do not care to stay here even when I must." He looked at Gareth as if challenging him to say something about the room, but the younger wizard just nodded, swiped some dust off a wooden straight-backed chair, and sat down.

Severus waved his wand, ridding the room of the dust, then he looked down at Gareth. Now that he was there in front of him, he did not know what to say.

"Was your mother angry with you yesterday?" he asked finally.

"For having you at the house? No. She did ask that I try to tell her in advance next time, but as your visit was unexpected, that wouldn't have been possible."

"Was she upset?"

"I don't know. She didn't appear to be. She was tired from being out in the crowds with Hermione, but other than that, I can't say." Gareth smiled up at him. "Are you going to sit down? I feel rather as though I'm being interrogated with you hovering over me like this."

Severus sat. "What did she say about my visit?"

"Not very much. She knows we're friends, Snape. It may have been something of a surprise for her that you were there, but it couldn't have been a complete shock."

"That's what I mean. She knows we're friends. Did she ask about what we did?"

"No. I did tell her that you'd arrived at lunchtime expecting to see Hermione, so you and I had lunch together, but she didn't ask." Gareth gave a crooked smile. "I assure you, Snape, even if the possibility occurred to her, she would not ask me if I stripped you naked in the sitting room...or anywhere else in the house."

Severus blushed. "About that, it was private."

"Of course it was. It was private and it was something just between the two of us."

"And you won't say anything to anyone."

"Of course not. It would be rather counterproductive if I were to do that...I wouldn't be inclined to tell anyone at any rate, but it was something special for you. I wanted to make you feel good. I know that you wouldn't appreciate having it known by anyone else. It was for your pleasure and to help you open up more and accept love and a warm human touch."

Severus put his head in his hands.

"I am sorry, Severus," Gareth said softly, "if it had the opposite effect."

Severus shook his head slightly. "And you?"

"What do you mean?"

Severus continued to look down, his forehead resting in his hands. "Do you . . . regret it? Or are you ashamed of having touched me?"

"I wouldn't regret it on my own account, Snape, only for your sake if you are upset about it. And I am certainly not ashamed of touching you. You're my friend."

Severus sat in silence, struggling with the confused emotions bubbling in him. Finally, he said, "I am sorry about yesterday in your bedroom. On both our accounts. It offended you and even the suggestion debased me."

"You mean . . . what you said about punishment and repayment?"

Severus nodded shortly.

"It's all right. You were under some stress at that moment," Gareth replied.

Severus raised his head. "Because it's not true. And I did enjoy what you did. Very much. Too much."

"Too much?"

Severus searched for words. "It made me very sensitive. I was aroused. Then I saw Hermione, and I became more aroused, more Anyway, that's why I asked her out."

"I don't quite understand, but that's good," Gareth said. "She was very happy that you asked her out on a date."

Severus nodded. "But I shouldn't have asked her out because I was aroused."

"If you would have wanted to ask her out even if you hadn't been aroused, I don't see the problem. It's not as though you were sexually excited and asked out a perfect stranger, or you asked her out only so you could get her to go to bed with you. You and Hermione have been on the verge of dating for so long, it was becoming almost comical...and I don't mean that I laughed about it, Snape. It's just an expression."

"I wanted to, though. Get her to go to bed with me. I kept thinking about it," Severus said.

Gareth sighed. "That's not the same thing as taking her out, getting her drunk, and seducing her just so you could satisfy your desires."

"I still thought about it after I went to bed," Severus said softly, "and about you."

"I think that's natural."

"I . . . I wondered whether you were aroused by me. I thought you were, but . . ."

"It wasn't about that. It was about you. And it wouldn't have mattered to me whether you became excited or not as long as you enjoyed it, relaxed, and felt loved. It was simply a nice side-effect that you enjoyed it as much as you did," Gareth said with a quick grin.

"But were you?"

"Severus, I do find you attractive...though it may seem odd to you. And yes, I was aroused, as you put it. But you don't need to worry that I am going to try to seduce you."

Severus could feel the heat creeping up into his face. "You wouldn't want to?" he finally asked, trying to avoid acknowledging to himself what he had wanted to hear, and what he wanted McGonagall to do at that moment.

Gareth leaned back. "Ah, I see," he said. "In theory, it would be nice. And yes, I was sufficiently attracted to you to have enjoyed such a thing. But you needn't worry. I won't try to seduce you."

Severus looked down. He didn't know what he wanted from McGonagall, but he did know that his answer was still disappointing.

"Only half of me was worried that you might," he whispered. He looked back up at Gareth. "Do you think about me? Think about me that way?"

"Notice you that way, yes, but if you're asking whether I fantasise about you, to be truthful, I don't. Last night as I was getting ready for bed, I did think of how nice it had been to touch you, though. It was also very gratifying to see you enjoy it." Gareth grinned. "To my mind, if it got you worked up enough emotionally and sexually to induce you to invite Hermione on a real date, that could only be a good thing."

Severus searched for words. "I don't think so. I am glad I asked her to dinner, but . . ." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "My life up until several months ago was very complicated, and yet in some ways, very simple. I had a simple, single purpose. I was certain that I would die, and if I didn't die and the Dark Lord was defeated, that I would be tossed into Azkaban for the remainder of my life. Apart from a very brief, bizarre time a few years ago, my sex drive waned...spying for and on a psychotic megalomaniac has a tendency to kill one's libido even before repeated bouts of the Cruciatus does. Yet even before the Dark Lord rose again, everything I did seemed to focus on his eventual return. It seemed unwise to entangle myself with anyone, and although, particularly when I was younger, I was not celibate, sex was never . . . it wasn't Taking care of my needs on my own seemed sufficient, even preferable."

"Working at Hogwarts couldn't have made it easy, either," Gareth said. "It's not a normal life even if you aren't a spy. Hard to develop normal adult relations. Living there more than nine months a year . . . I couldn't do it, not as an adult."

Severus shrugged. "Minerva has made some changes now that she's had more time to think about the school and isn't consumed with the war. We have more time when we are allowed to leave the grounds for extended periods, even overnight, particularly for the regular faculty, but the Heads of House still have more responsibilities. She is considering allowing faculty to rotate and have entire weekends off, but that has created some questions about inequities, since it is difficult for anyone who is a Head of House to leave their responsibilities for that long."

"They did something like that for my mother after she had me," Gareth said, "but it was an exception. She actually spent almost every weekend at home, only returning to Hogwarts if there was something specific she had to be there for. She even spent a lot of week nights with us, but I never knew whether that was officially sanctioned or if she simply did it. I can also just barely remember going up to the castle with my father in the evening, being put to bed, and then leaving with him first thing in the next morning. But we didn't do that often after I was about five. She also didn't have any responsibilities outside of teaching and the occasional curfew patrol, so I don't think anyone cared where she spent her time otherwise."

"Be that as it may, it is not a particularly normal life for any adult, even if they aren't a spy, as you say." Severus looked around him. "The only reason I kept this house was to have somewhere to go during the summer. By the end of each August, I hate it." Hated it before that, if truth be told.

Gareth cast a glance at the room, but didn't say anything.

Severus gave a short laugh. "You see, McGonagall, what a pathetic life I have had. No friends at Hogwarts...although some of the staff tried to be collegial...none outside of Hogwarts except former Death Eaters who had somehow escaped Azkaban, and what kind of friend could I be to them, or they to me? And to be honest, I believed that was as I wanted it. I trusted almost no one and disliked almost everyone. I had no life."

"Aunt Minerva thinks of herself as your friend," Gareth said. "I think she has for a long time. So does Uncle Albus."

Severus shook his head. "They are friends of a sort. But my relationship with Albus was complicated, and Minerva had been my teacher. They are friends, though, yes." Severus sat back in his chair. "I suppose my point is simply that over the last several months as I have felt healthier and less like I am in almost constant danger of death or torture, my libido has begun to return. But that was not problematic until yesterday."

"Problematic?"

Severus looked at the younger wizard, meeting his eyes and remembering the sensation of his lips on his buttocks. He could feel a tingling in his groin. This wasn't normal, he thought, but looking at the healthy, strong young wizard in front of him and remembering his hands and lips on his body, he could feel his arousal growing. McGonagall

had said that it was about intimacy, not about sex, but it had been sexually charged, nonetheless. This strong, handsome wizard had wanted to touch him and bring him pleasure, touch *him*, Severus Snape, who had inspired so much fear and revulsion in others. He did not desire Gareth, but he wanted to be desirable, and thinking about the way that Gareth had touched him so sensually, he wanted that touch again.

Severus nodded slightly and said in a low voice, "Problematic, McGonagall."

Severus continued to stare at the younger wizard.

"I'm sorry, Snape," Gareth said quietly. "I had intended to give you some human warmth and comfort and hoped it would open you to closer relationships with others, including Hermione. It pleased me to hear that you invited Hermione out. I am sorry if you see that as a problem."

"That is not the problem," Severus replied. "You might be able to help with the problem."

"You need to tell me what the problem is, then," Gareth said.

Severus did not want to tell him. He did not even want to admit to himself that he wanted the younger wizard's attention. He wished Gareth would simply seduce him. He could simply enjoy it whilst it was happening and then not blame himself afterward.

Finally, Severus said, "It was like food to a man who had been starving and didn't know it. And now that appetite has been reawakened and he hungers. Hungers and believes it would have been better to have been left to starve in peace."

Gareth shook his head. "I couldn't let you starve, my friend. There is no reason for it any longer. You now live in a world in which you don't have to anticipate that every touch could bring pain. There are people around you who want to be your friends. It is a difficult thing for them, though, when you close yourself off to them."

"That does not change how I feel now, though."

Gareth looked at him quietly for a moment, then he said, "I did tell you that if ever you needed a massage or a friendly shoulder, I would be there for you."

Severus was silent.

Gareth stood and stepped toward him. "Is that what you would like? Another massage?"

Severus looked down.

Gareth knelt in front of him and laid his hand lightly on Severus's knees. "Is that how I can help with the problem, Snape?" He reached up and brushed Severus's hair back from his face.

Severus said nothing, but he did not move away. He felt Gareth's caress graze his cheek and jaw, and he closed his eyes. Gareth traced his lips with his finger, and Severus parted them. Gareth lightly brushed Severus's bottom lip with one fingertip. Severus kept his eyes closed as he felt Gareth unbuttoning the top buttons of his shirt and loosening his collar. Gareth's fingers were touching his throat, then his hand slid to the back of his neck. Severus did not resist when Gareth pulled him down toward him; he felt his lips on his throat.

"Is that how I can help? Or is there something more?" Gareth whispered. He brought both hands to cradle Severus's face and kissed his lips lightly. "Something more?"

Severus struggled with the urge to tell him that he wanted more; he won the struggle and remained silent.

Gareth began to unbutton Severus's jacket, then his waistcoat. He placed his palms against Severus's chest and leaned forward to kiss his lips once more.

"Say 'stop,' Snape, and I will stop," he whispered.

Severus let out a long breath and nodded.

Gareth unbuttoned Severus's shirt, then he ran his hands over his bare chest. No undershirt that day.

"You know, Snape, this is a little awkward for a massage. If you would like one, I think we should move."

Severus opened his eyes to look at the man kneeling in front of him. "Upstairs."

With a smile, Gareth nodded, and as he stood, he took Severus's arms, urging him to stand, too.

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-Four: Uncertainty

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus finds himself in a situation he brought about but nonetheless hadn't expected.

Rated MA.

Warning for sexually explicit language, het fantasy, homoerotic scenes, and fluffy slashiness.

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

WARNING FOR SLIGHT SPOILER BELOW

Author's Note: Remember, this is not turning into a Severus/Gareth fic, as much as some of you might be beginning to like that idea! Severus will find that his relationship with Gareth does help him in his other relationships, though, and they will continue to be good friends, and Gareth will continue to play an important part in his life.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Uncertainty

Sunday, 7 March 1999. Severus finds himself in a situation he brought about but nonetheless hadn't expected.

Warning: Some slashiness ahead. The story is not becoming a Severus/Gareth romance, however. Sexually explicit language, het fantasy, homoerotic scenes, and somewhat fluffy slashiness.



Chapter Thirty-Four: Uncertainty

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus numbly led Gareth up the creaking, darkened staircase and into a bedroom that was cleaner and less run-down than the sitting room was, though it was scantily furnished. He turned on the bedside lamp. It did appear that the bed linens were fresh. Standing behind him, Gareth removed Severus's jacket and waistcoat, sending them to drape over a wooden chair. He pushed his braces down next, then untucked his shirt. He embraced Severus from behind, running his hands over his chest and stomach, resting his cheek on his shoulder. His hands moved lower, and he began to unbutton his trousers. Severus stood straight and unmoving.

Gareth pushed down Severus's trousers, then, still embracing him from behind, he caressed his abdomen with one hand and his left thigh with the other. His hands moved to Severus's hips, and Severus's breath hitched as they converged on his partially erect penis, touching it through his pants. Gareth took hold of the waistband of his pants and then pulled it out and down, coming to his knees behind Severus as he shoved the pants down around his ankles. He rose up on his knees, lifted Severus's shirt, and nuzzled his buttocks.

Severus shut his eyes more tightly and clenched his fists, but he did not move away or ask Gareth to stop.

Gareth stood and steered Severus, hobbled by his pants and trousers, toward the bed. Severus grimaced as he felt Gareth's hands on his back, urging him to bend over and rest his upper body on the bed. Severus folded his hands above his head and felt Gareth removing his boots, socks, trousers, and pants. He felt Gareth sit down on the bed next to him, and he turned his head, opening his eyes and looking at him. He had removed his sporran and jacket and was now taking off his own shoes and socks, first removing a short dagger in its sheath from where it was tucked into the top of his left sock, beneath a garter. Severus watched him place the knife into his boot.

"That's a knife," Severus said, staring.

"It is a dagger. My *sgian dubh*." Gareth looked over at Severus. "You don't think that I'd bother to carry a decorative item around with me, do you?"

"I thought you were right-handed."

"Right-handed by nature, ambidextrous by choice and some effort. My dad was ambidextrous, could use his wand in either hand. It came naturally to him. After my mum lost her wand arm, I began to use my left hand a lot. I didn't even realise I was doing it at first, but then I decided to work on it. I can use my wand almost as easily with my left hand as my right, and most other things, too, even write. But," Gareth said, reaching over and running his hand over Severus's back down to his buttocks, "that is not why I carry the *sgian dubh* on my left. If I am using my wand in my right hand, I don't have to switch hands."

Severus nodded. That would have been obvious to him if he hadn't been distracted. "You used it during the final battle." There were stories about how wildly and ruthlessly Gareth had fought; he appeared to have no compunction about killing a Death Eater. Severus believed the stories. He also believed the other stories, the ones that said that Gareth had kept others from killing Death Eaters who were already immobilised and that he had treated the half-dead Malfoy with gentleness and concern.

"Mmhm. It's charmed so that I can throw it and it returns to me...handle first, of course," Gareth said with a grin, moving his hand beneath Severus's shirt and squeezing his buttocks.

Severus closed his eyes. He could have had a dagger in the heart or in the back. Instead, he was bent prone on the bed of his childhood home, his arse exposed to another man. The thought flitted through his mind that perhaps death would have been better.

Gareth slipped off the bed and knelt behind him. Goosebumps travelled over Severus's body as he felt Gareth's feather-light kisses to the backs of his thighs and his hands gently brushing over the sparse hair on his legs. Gareth's lips moved from his thighs to his buttocks, and Severus let out a shuddering sigh.

He felt the younger wizard kiss and nuzzle his buttocks, his breath, warm from his parted lips. Gareth sucked and lightly bit him, and Severus gasped.

"Move up further on the bed and roll over onto your back," Gareth said softly.

Severus pulled himself fully onto the bed and lay back with his head on the thin pillow, placing his hands above his head. He watched as Gareth's gaze travelled over his body, stopping at his erection. Unlike the day before, when Severus had not wanted Gareth to notice his erection, now he wanted him to see it, and what else he wanted. . . he was not sure. He knew that he had a nice long cock. He had seen Bella's other lovers, and that much, at least, he was not unsure of. It was one of his attributes that she had liked, and when he was younger and used to pay prostitutes for a blow-job, some of them had had a hard time taking him all in. He had returned to the ones that could swallow around the head of his cock and take him into their throats.

Gareth sat beside him on the bed and began to run one hand over his chest then down his abdomen and back up. He bent toward him, lips parted, and as he began to tease one of Severus's nipples with his fingertips, he took the other one between his lips and flicked his tongue over it. Severus closed his eyes and bunched the pillow in his fists. His cock was heavy and needy, and it was all he could do to keep himself from taking it in his hand and masturbating.

Gareth stretched out beside Severus and placed his hand at the side of Severus's jaw, turning his face toward him. He kissed his closed eyelids, then his cheeks, then his jaw. He hovered above Severus's mouth, his breath coming between parted lips to touch his lips.

Severus opened his eyes and Gareth kissed him lightly on the chin.

"This isn't a massage," Gareth whispered.

Severus blinked.

"Would you like a massage, Snape?" Gareth said softly, his mouth so close to Severus's own that he could have licked the other wizard's lips.

Severus swallowed, then he whispered, "Yes."

"Do you want to roll over onto your stomach?" Gareth asked, his hand tracing patterns over Severus's lower abdomen. "I rather like this myself." He turned his head to look down Snape's body. "I like the view it affords."

Severus knew that his racing pulse was evident, and his erection certainly was. "This is fine," he said, feeling as though his mouth was parched.

"Good." Gareth closed his eyes and kissed Severus's lips.

Gareth pushed up with one arm then brought one leg over Snape as he rose up to a kneeling position, straddling Severus. He moved down the bed so that he was straddling Severus's legs, his eyes fixing on Severus's cock. He leaned forward and began to stroke his hands down over Severus's chest again, massaging it lightly. Severus closed his eyes again, trying not to think about the fact that the last person to kiss his lips and to touch his cock had been Minerva, Gareth's aunt.

"I would like to massage you," Gareth said. "I like touching you, Snape." He drew his hands down to Severus's hips and began to gently rub him, the edge of his left hand grazing his cock as he did so.

Severus took a gasping breath and felt Gareth's hands come closer to his erection. When Gareth's right hand first rested against his cock and then grasped it, he only gasped and clutched at the sheet.

"Is this what you want?" Gareth asked softly as he squeezed his cock. "Or do you want more? I think you want more."

Gareth rose up on his knees and placed his left hand at Severus's side, then he lowered himself along Severus's length, and Severus felt his weight on him, then his lips on his. Gareth kissed him softly several times, each kiss more sensual than the last, then he parted Severus's lips with his own and his tongue sought Severus's. Severus cooperated as Gareth drew his tongue into his own mouth, sucking gently. As he sucked it, his hand squeezed Severus's cock. Severus moaned.

Gareth sat back, looking down at Severus and at Severus's cock in his hand.

Severus pushed up against his hand.

"Oh, gods, I want . . . I want . . ." Severus moaned.

Gareth let go of him, and Severus opened his eyes to see Gareth rise up on his knees. Gareth reached out and took hold of one of his arms, which were still above his head. Gazing at Severus's face, watching his reaction, he lifted his kilt with one hand and brought Severus's hand beneath it with his other. Severus did not pull away, though he breathed harder and his pulse raced as Gareth moved Severus's hand up under his kilt toward his cock.

"You wanted to know if touching you aroused me," Gareth whispered. "Feel this, and you tell me."

Severus swallowed as his fingers touched the other wizard's erection. Gareth let go of his wrist, but Severus did not move his hand away. He touched him tentatively, watching Gareth's chest move with his breath. Gareth, still watching Severus's face, unbuckled first one side of his kilt then the other, letting it fall away. Severus dropped his hand and looked at Gareth's full erection. There was no doubt that the wizard was aroused. And he looked enormous, long and thick, the head of his cock darker where his foreskin had pulled back and exposed it. Severus swallowed, nervous and apprehensive.

Severus watched as Gareth tugged at the laces of his shirt. His cuffs had buttons, and he unbuttoned them quickly, then pulled his shirt off over his head. Severus looked at him, kneeling on either side of his thighs, naked, his erection large and dark, and he thought that this had been the worst idea he had had in a long time. He closed his eyes to the sight. Gareth knew what he was doing, and he did not. He had wanted Gareth attracted to him, but he had not thought beyond that. He had wanted Gareth to seduce him, and if his twitching cock and racing heart were any evidence of it, he was being seduced. What would Gareth want from him? What would he do to him? If he said stop, would Gareth stop? Or would he, like Bella, simply continue, frenzied, until he was sated?

Severus felt Gareth's fingertips on his chest again. They were tracing some fine, silvery old scars.

"What are these from?" Gareth asked.

"A werewolf. Claws, not teeth, obviously."

"I'm impressed."

"Impressed?"

"That you were facing it. Facing a werewolf is no easy thing. Very brave," Gareth said. "Not that I have, but I've heard stories."

"I lacked the room to turn around easily," Severus said.

"How did you get away? Did you kill it?"

Severus shook his head shortly. "I am surprised you haven't heard about this, with everything else that you were told about me." He opened his eyes. "It was Lupin. When we were at school. Only I didn't know he was a werewolf. Potter pulled me back." Severus closed his eyes again.

"That's awful. Good thing Potter was there."

Severus grunted. He could feel his erection fading. He might now have an adult's understanding of why Dumbledore did what he did, and he might be on better terms with Lupin, but none of that made it a pleasant memory or kept bitterness from seeping into his heart.

He felt Gareth lean over. He was kissing his chest, not randomly, but kissing his scars. He could feel Gareth's erection brushing his skin.

When he had kissed the last visible scar, Gareth kissed his way up Severus's chest to his throat, coming to lie flat on him. He pushed Severus's legs apart so that his were between them. Severus blocked out any thoughts from his mind and focussed on the sensation of lips on his skin. He turned his head, and Gareth kissed the side of his neck then brushed Severus's hair out of the way and took his earlobe between his lips. Severus felt him suck it, then he felt Gareth's tongue in his ear, moving in and out, and the younger wizard was rolling his hips, pressing himself rhythmically against his cock. Severus choked back a moan.

Gareth moved his lips to meet Severus's and began to kiss him. Severus felt him reach between them and guide their cocks together, their lengths rubbing against each other.

Severus gasped and pulled out of the kiss, grasping Gareth's upper arms. Gareth immediately stilled.

"Should I stop?"

"No, no, I need more, I need more," Severus said with a moan. He pressed up against Gareth.

Gareth traced the outline of his face with one finger, then he kissed him lightly before saying, "Trust me."

Severus felt Gareth's hand move between his legs, then he felt his finger at his anus, and he immediately stiffened.

Gareth brought his lips to Snape's ear and whispered, "Trust me, Severus. I think you'll like this. If you don't, I will stop."

"I don't want to be buggered," Severus said bluntly.

"No plans to do so," Gareth said. "I can understand that. I prefer this myself, too. Let me try it, and if you don't like it, I promise you I will stop."

Severus nodded.

Gareth's finger teased his anus. "Now just relax. And if you push back against my finger when I first enter, it will make it easier."

Severus swallowed and tried to relax. He felt Gareth's finger enter him. It was peculiar, but not uncomfortable. Gareth's finger slowly entered more deeply, then he felt him moving it around.

"Now I think you'll like this," Gareth said.

Severus held his breath, but then as Gareth began to rub and press against a spot inside of him, he gasped.

"Bring one hand down and help guide our cocks against each other," Gareth said as he began to move on top of Severus again.

Gareth raised himself up on one hand to look down at Severus. Severus opened his eyes and saw Gareth smiling down at him.

"Nice?" Gareth asked.

Severus nodded, but then he said, thrusting his hips up, "I need more, more."

Gareth removed his finger and whispered a cleaning charm, and Severus was worried for a moment that either he was going to bugger him or he had been offended. But it was neither.

Gareth lay flat on top of him and embraced him before rolling over onto his back and bending his legs.

"Your turn, Snape."

Severus lay on his side, raised up on one elbow, and looked at Gareth, then swallowed. "I don't know what you want me to do."

"Whatever you want to do," Gareth replied, reaching over and stroking Severus's cock.

"Anything?"

"Anything. I will tell you to stop if I don't want you to continue," Gareth said. "And whether you would prefer me on my back or bent over on my knees, either would be fine. You said you needed more."

Severus felt himself flush as he realised what Gareth was saying he could do.

"I've never done that with anyone before," he admitted. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"Then it might be easiest for you if I am bent over in front of you. Just do it slowly at first, get the feel of it, and don't do it too hard. It's different from fucking, particularly in that position. I don't think you want to have me bleeding on you," Gareth said matter-of-factly.

Severus shook his head. He remembered watching with Bella when she had Rabastan bugger Barty Crouch. She liked to see blood, and Rabastan showed no restraint or any evidence that he cared whether he caused young Crouch any pain or injury when he fucked him. It had excited Bella, and she had ridden his own cock hard, putting a spell on it so that he couldn't come and his cock would stay erect for her pleasure. It had been painful.

Severus felt his erection flag at the memory. Was he doing this because he was as sick and perverted as they had been? But then he saw Gareth's face, and he remembered the warmth he felt from him. It didn't feel perverse. And Gareth was concerned about his pleasure.

"Are you sure?" Severus asked, thinking of what Gareth had said about preferring a finger himself. "I got the impression that you don't like it."

"I admit that I prefer digital stimulation, and I also prefer to be the one, um, penetrating," Gareth said. "But it's not as though I haven't done this before, and if you aren't rough, I will enjoy it enough."

Severus shook his head. "No, when you were touching me, I was very aroused," he whispered, "and I would have liked to have been inside of . . . of someone, but I don't want to do that. Not enough to do it if you aren't eager for me to." He felt himself blush realising that he had just implied that he wanted to bugger him.

Gareth's hand wandered down to Severus's cock and his fingers began to stroke it languidly. Gareth licked his lips and looked into Severus's eyes. "You could make me eager, Snape," he whispered. "Or I could make you more eager."

He had wanted to be seduced, but now he was being offered choices, and more than just the choice to say "stop." He did not want to make a choice. Severus closed his eyes. He wanted sex. He wanted to feel someone with him, enjoying him, and he wanted to feel pleasure himself, he wanted to fuck and come. The image he had created the night before of him sliding his cock into Hermione's pussy came to him again. He could feel Gareth's hand teasing his erection.

Gareth rolled over and pushed him back onto his back. He kissed Severus as he began to stroke his cock and guided his own to rub against it. Severus bent his knees so that Gareth was held between his legs.

Gareth broke his kiss with a gasp. "Do you want to come, Snape?"

Severus nodded. "But I don't know if I can."

Gareth grinned. "Oh, I am very sure you can."

Severus felt Gareth slide down his body, then he felt him kiss the head of his cock. He breathed in sharply, and when Gareth's hand began to move lower on his erection and Gareth's tongue emerged to circle the head of his penis, Severus said, "No, stop!"

Gareth looked up at him, eyebrows raised.

"Don't do that."

"Why not?" Gareth asked, puzzled.

Severus stared at him for a moment, then he said, "Because when I was younger, I used to go to prostitutes and pay them to do that. You are not a prostitute."

Gareth smiled. "I am very glad you feel that way...I would not want you to think of me as some variety of prostitute. But I still want to do that. I assure you, it won't be the same for either of us. And I do want you to come. A little oral sex is usually quite good for that."

"Why do you want to?" Severus found the idea of going down on any man's penis absolutely revolting.

"As I say, I want you to come, and I also care for you. It's not as though I would do this with just anyone, Snape, despite some people's notions of my sexuality and lack of discrimination." At Snape's questioning look, he added, "Some people think that I should settle down, and they also believe that I would have sex with anyone who walked into my bedroom, and that there's something peculiar about finding both men and women attractive."

"Well, that *is* peculiar," Severus said. He didn't care who other people slept with, and if some men found other men attractive, he simply didn't care, as long as no one was trying to force him to have sex. And, of course, there were some women who were lesbians. He could understand that much better. Women were very attractive, breasts, hips, thighs, pussy, everything, though he did sometimes wonder what they found to do with each other without a penis. Bella hadn't been interested in other women, except to watch them being fucked by men, so he hadn't seen anything like that. It was an intriguing thought, though. He shook himself. "What I mean is, most people do find the opposite sex attractive, and those who don't, are gay. Are you sure you're not gay?"

Gareth threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, my dear, sweet Severus!" He reached down and caressed his cheek fondly. "I assure you, I am not gay. I'm bisexual, I suppose, though I always think that's a strange term; reminds me too much of 'bifurcate,' and I don't distinguish my lovers that way or cut myself in two for them. But no, I'm not gay. I think I may even prefer having sex with women...and I'd say they're probably my affectional preference at least, if not sexually, as well."

"You *think* you prefer it with women?"

"I usually believe I prefer it, but then sometimes I am with a particularly stunning and talented male lover, and I think just the opposite." Gareth stretched out beside Severus, casually playing with Severus's cock. "I have a confession of my own. However screwed up you may think you are, we all have our weaknesses. Mine is that I find it difficult to be in any kind of long-term romantic relationship. I do think that I may eventually meet someone and fall in love and all that, but it hasn't happened yet. There have been a few times when I thought I might be falling in love, but something always happened...sometimes I even did something almost deliberately to break up the relationship...and so I have not yet 'settled down.' Uncle Albus used to bother me about that until the last few years...chastity, constancy, and moderation. He never mentions it anymore except occasionally to inquire about my social life, but he doesn't lecture or anything like that now. He's finally mellowing." Gareth laughed.

"And you like to, not to be crude, but you like to suck cocks?" Severus asked, his eyebrows raised. "The thought disgusts me, actually. Not having it done to me, or having other men doing it to each other, but the thought of doing it myself."

"I don't mind it, and with some men, I positively become aroused doing it. But not with all lovers. Sometimes, I just want sex. Just raw sex, my cock up their arse, as long as we're being frank and a little crude," Gareth said with a smile. He squeezed Severus's waning erection. "You have a very nice cock, and I also like you. Besides, with your usual high-buttoned collars and multiple layers of clothing, the thought of putting my mouth around your most private and sensitive asset is extremely arousing, and I hope you don't take that the wrong way."

"Really?" Severus found himself becoming more excited again.

"Mhmm, and if I were to have a fantasy about you, it would be about unbuttoning just your trousers, taking your cock out, and getting on my knees and licking and sucking you until you came."

Severus licked his lips and swallowed. "You would want to do that?"

"Very much."

"I want to get dressed, but not you," Severus said, pulling away and sitting up.

He dressed as Gareth watched, then he took his wand and cast a cooling charm on the front of his trousers. He waited a moment, then cast another. He looked over at Gareth and said, "I learned that's a more pleasant way of reducing an erection than using a deflating charm." Severus avoided thinking about the fact that it had been Minerva who had shown him that.

Gareth gave a crooked smile. "I take care of my inconvenient erections in a different way." He looked him up and down. "Button your jacket."

Severus was wearing a jacket with several buttons down the front, and it took him a moment. When he was through, Gareth got off the bed, knelt in front of Severus, parted the lower half of his jacket, then found the buttons of his trousers. He unbuttoned them, then he pulled on the waistband of his pants and drew them down as he pulled out Severus's partially erect penis with his other hand. He looked up at Severus, taking in his many layers of clothing, then he put his lips around the head of his cock, flicking his tongue over it. He kissed the tip and kissed it again before engulfing his penis with his mouth. The sensation was exquisite, warm and wet and just the right amount of pressure from his lips and tongue. He felt Gareth's teeth lightly scrape the base of his cock, then Gareth covered his teeth with his lips and drew up hard and fast along his entire length before flicking his slit with his tongue and then plunging back down again.

Severus looked down and watched the wizard at his cock, his curly chestnut head bobbing, and he wondered whether Hermione would want to do that, and he imagined that it was Hermione's curly head, Hermione with her mouth around him, excited by what she was doing, enjoying it. He wanted her to desire him, all of him.

He was now fully erect, and Gareth was pressing his tongue hard against his length as he licked him, then he took him into his mouth again, sucking, going down and taking him deep into his throat. Severus fought the urge to take hold of the wizard's head and guide him, pushing him down further, but he grabbed his shoulders instead. He moaned as Gareth swallowed around him and moved his head up and down.

"Oh, fuck, fuck, I'm going to come," Severus gasped.

He expected Gareth to pull off of him, but instead, the younger wizard took him entirely into his mouth and down into his throat and began to swallow. Severus moaned as he ejaculated, gripping Gareth harder and then putting his hand on his head to hold him in place. Finally, he sighed and relaxed and Gareth gently pulled off of him then sat back on his heels.

Severus sat down on the bed, tucking himself away and buttoning his trousers, and looked at Gareth's penis. It was as erect as it had been before. He gestured to Gareth to get up on the bed beside him, then wordlessly, he pushed him onto his back. He lay down on top of him and looked into his eyes as he reached between them and took Gareth's cock in his hand. He began to squeeze and stroke the way he liked it himself, then, remembering how it had felt to have Gareth's woolen kilt rubbing him the day before, he let go and began to press and rub himself against the younger wizard, his trousers providing friction.

Severus pushed Gareth's legs apart so that he would have better contact and leverage and held him down by one shoulder, then he reached between them, took a breath and prepared to do something he had never dreamed of doing. His finger sought Gareth's anus. The younger man bent his knees and pulled his legs back toward him. Severus slipped his finger inside more easily than he had thought possible. He began to move his finger, still rocking against Gareth's penis. He didn't know what he was looking for, but then he found a spot that made Gareth gasp, and he began to massage it as he pressed himself rhythmically against Gareth's cock.

"Oh, gods, Snape, yes, like that. Like that, just there," Gareth moaned, his eyes tightly shut.

Severus could feel his own erection growing again, and he paused, withdrew his finger, causing Gareth to moan at its absence. He uttered a quick cleaning charm, then he pushed back onto his knees and began to unbutton his trousers. He pulled his erection from his pants, then looked down at Gareth and his hard cock, a droplet of precum beading on its tip.

"Is that offer still open?" Severus asked softly.

Gareth, his breath coming in short, heavy gasps, looked at Severus's cock and nodded.

Severus lowered himself again, taking his own cock in his hand and guiding its head to Gareth's anus. He knew that there were lubricants one could use, and lubricating charms, but he had none of the first and couldn't think of any of the second, and so he simply pushed slowly and firmly against Gareth's anus.

As the head of his cock entered, Severus let out a long, low moan. Gareth seemed to be holding his breath, and Severus continued to slowly push his way into the other wizard's body. Gareth's anus was tight around his cock.

"Merlin, now I know why you like this," Severus said with a gasp.

He began to move, pumping slowly. He felt awkward and unbalanced, but remembering Gareth's erection, he sought it with one hand. He stroked it, but soon ceased trying to coordinate his movements. He put both hands on either side of Gareth and pumped, trying to stimulate Gareth's cock and balls with the movement of his torso. Hearing Gareth's throaty gasps, he closed his eyes and thought of his momentary fantasy in the park with Hermione, of pulling down her trousers, unbuttoning his own, and then just fucking her there, thrusting into her pussy. She would shout and writhe and tell him what a good lover he was, and she would beg him for more. He would fuck her and fuck her and she would come and tell him she loved him.

Severus shuddered as he came, stilling and lying on top of Gareth. A moment later, he felt his cock pushed out. He rolled off of Gareth. Opening his eyes briefly, he looked over at the younger wizard. His cock was relaxing, and he had come. Severus thought that he really should cast a cleaning charm on his clothes, but he just closed his eyes.

Finally, drawing some saliva into his mouth, Severus asked, "Was that all right?"

"A little rough there at the end, but yes, it was all right. Very all right." Gareth chuckled softly. "It didn't feel to me as though you didn't know what you were doing."

"I'm sorry if I was rough. I was very involved," Severus said. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't. It wasn't that rough." Gareth elbowed him so that he would turn his head and look at him. "And you made me come. You could have stopped after I swallowed you; I could have taken care of myself. That was very good."

"I still shouldn't have. I could have hurt you."

"You didn't. I actually did enjoy it, Severus," Gareth said, reaching over and caressing his face. "It felt good. It really did. That's why I came. It was only a little rough toward the end. I wouldn't have said anything, except that if you do it again sometime, you might want to know."

Severus turned his head back and closed his eyes. There wouldn't ever be a next time with anyone. If he were lucky, Hermione wouldn't break up with him before he'd had a chance to touch her breasts. He really wanted to touch her breasts. And suck them, putting his lips around her sweet nipples and suckling. Sliding into her pussy was the only thing he could think of that would be better than that.

Severus swallowed. He felt Gareth's hand on his chest, just resting there. He wanted to tell him to get his hand off of him, but after what they had just done together, he didn't think that would be right.

"How do you feel now?"

"I don't know." He didn't know. He felt sexually satisfied and physically tired, but he had a vague sense of unease that he didn't understand.

The two men lay there for a while, Gareth draping his kilt across himself. Severus again had the thought that he should clean his clothes, but he didn't move.

"Gareth?"

"Yes?"

"I feel odd."

"Odd how?"

"Slightly sick," Severus replied.

Gareth didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry. That probably sounded insulting to you," Severus said.

"A little, but mainly, I still don't really know how you feel."

"I think I feel guilty."

"I see. About what?"

"I feel like I used you. And I feel like I cheated on Hermione."

"You have had one date with her and you haven't slept together. I don't think you need to feel that way. Besides, this was different. It was not like you're starting to have an affair with me whilst telling Hermione you want to date her exclusively."

Severus didn't tell Gareth about the "third date." It sounded silly and juvenile. And Hermione had only said that to let him know that he could kiss her good-night and she wouldn't be offended. Still, what Gareth said made sense, and it wasn't as though he were with another woman. He was with a male friend and they just happened to have sex. That didn't sound any better to him.

"I still feel as though I used you."

"Did you? I don't know," Gareth replied ambivalently.

"Even bringing you here."

"Why did you bring me here?" Gareth asked.

"I wanted to make sure you hadn't told anyone what happened yesterday." Severus sighed. "And now this is worse than yesterday."

Gareth sat up, found his wand, and cast some cleaning charms on himself and then on Severus's clothing and penis. He dressed quickly.

He looked down at Severus where he still lay with his eyes closed. "I think you brought me here not only because you wanted to make sure that I didn't tell anyone what we had done in private, but because you wanted it to happen again, and you wanted me to do more than I did yesterday. You probably feel like you used me because you didn't want to admit that to yourself. I am sorry. I shouldn't have come upstairs with you. I thought you really wanted this, that you wanted to be seduced and that you wanted it to be me, but I think you were just feeling sexually frustrated and thought this would take care of it for you. That would have been all right, if you'd understood what you wanted and then chosen to do it. And then at the end, it was nice that you wanted me to be satisfied, too, but I think that may have been too much for you. I think you feel sick and guilty because you didn't really think about whether you really wanted to have sex with me or if you would have rather just sat on the toilet and masturbated and waited for the opportunity to have sex with someone whom you really wanted to be with."

"I'm sorry." Severus opened his eyes and saw his friend fastening his sporran. He hadn't wanted to hurt Gareth's feelings. "I didn't think it would be like this." He swallowed.

"I didn't really think about it, but I guess that somewhere, I believed that you would just . . . just massage me as you did yesterday and that this time, you would massage my cock. And that it would be like yesterday, but just a little more. I did want you to be aroused by touching me, but until we were here, doing this, I didn't think about what that would mean." He took a breath. "I was aroused by your touch and your desire, but that was all I wanted. That and my own sexual release. I didn't think of it as having sex exactly. Then once we were here, I saw your desire and your arousal, and you were . . . you were very good to me. I am sorry, McGonagall. You are right. I didn't really want to have sex with you when I brought you up here. I just wanted some release for myself."

"No desire for me?" Gareth shook his head. "You may have very little desire for me, but you must have some, or you wouldn't have put your cock up my arse. I was surprised when you did...but I had been on the verge of coming when you stopped to unbutton your trousers, so I didn't say anything. You seemed sure what you wanted to do."

Severus thought a moment. "I did want to do it. I was very excited."

"What excited you, Snape?"

"Feeling your cock and knowing that I was doing that to you. Rocking against you and stimulating my cock at the same time. And you were lying there on your back, naked, and I had my finger up you and you liked that. But then, when I was . . . when I was doing it . . ." He didn't know if he should mention his fantasy about Hermione. It seemed indelicate and insulting.

"It's all right; you don't need to say any more," Gareth said softly. He sat down on the bed next to him and carefully tucked Severus's cock into his pants and then buttoned his trousers for him. When Gareth finished, he bent and kissed the front of his trousers. He sat up and looked into Severus's face. He seemed slightly sad. "Next time, mate, you seduce me if you want anything like this. Otherwise, nothing but massages from now on, if you still like them."

Severus tried to smile. "I might still like them."

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-Five: Friendship

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus is grateful for his friendship with Gareth, but wants there to be no misunderstandings about it. Gareth reassures him, but Severus nonetheless worries about what the events of the day might mean for himself. They go to dinner, then Severus returns to Hogwarts and runs into Dumbledore.

Rated MA.

Warning for sexually explicit content, fluffy slashiness.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Thirty-Five: Friendship

Chapter 36 of 118

Sunday, 7 March 1999. Severus is grateful for his friendship and intimacy with Gareth, and Gareth reassures him about it. The two go to dinner in Edinburgh, then Severus returns to Hogwarts, where he runs into Dumbledore. Later that night, he mulls over the events of the day and considers what they might mean for him.

Warning: Some fluffy slashiness ahead. Sexually explicit content in part of the first half of the chapter.



Chapter Thirty-Five: Friendship

Sunday, 7 March 1999

Severus watched as Gareth began to put on his shoes and socks.

"McGonagall?"

"Yes?"

"Did you want to have sex with me?"

"I didn't come here with you this afternoon with that in mind, but yes, once it seemed clear to me that you wanted more than a massage, I did," Gareth replied, not looking at him.

Severus thought about what Gareth had said about how some people thought he was indiscriminating and would sleep with anyone.

"Why?" Severus asked.

Gareth paused and looked over at him. "Why did I want to have sex with you?"

Severus nodded.

"I don't think there's any one single reason, Snape." He tugged on his left shoe. "But I like you. I wanted to be closer to you. I wanted you to feel some warmth and intimacy. And, of course, I find you sexy." He looked down at him and grinned. "Those unfathomable eyes of yours combined with your layers of armour...very sexy."

Severus thought about that. "You like me."

"Mhm. Not that I want to have sex with everyone I like, of course. Or even have sex with everyone I find sexy. Well, maybe with everyone I find sexy. But I don't, because although I may want to have sex with them, I don't want to have *had* sex with them, if you know what I mean. The sex might be good, but afterward . . ."

"Is that how you feel now about me?"

Gareth lay back down next to him. "Are you asking whether I regret it?"

Severus nodded.

"No, not for myself, although I will regret it if you don't want to be friends any longer because of it. I do regret that you are feeling bad about it, and I wouldn't have done it if I had known you would."

Severus turned his head and looked at the younger wizard beside him. McGonagall used the word "friend" with him so easily. He suddenly felt a stab of sadness and he didn't know why.

"What is it, Snape?"

"I don't know."

Gareth raised his hand and caressed his cheek. "There are moments," he whispered, "like now, when I wish I could take your pain away. Turn back the clock and tell you not to become a Death Eater. Take you someplace safe away from that temptation. Show you kindness, teach you to love yourself. And now, since I cannot do that, I wish I could take away your sadness, even just for a moment. I wish I could hold you and kiss you and take your sadness away."

Gareth approached him slowly, and Severus closed his eyes as Gareth kissed his cheek. He felt his breath on his lips, but Gareth did not kiss him there. He opened his eyes, raised his hand and pulled Gareth's head toward him. He kissed his lips, then raised himself up, still kissing the younger wizard's lips, turning him and pressing him back against the pillow. Kissing a man felt odd, and Gareth's beard brushed against his face. He put his hand on Gareth's shoulder, pressing him into the bed. He kissed his lips, sucking them, moving his lips against them, then parting them and seeking entrance with his tongue. He licked Gareth's teeth, then he stroked the roof of his mouth. He began to tease his tongue with his own, hooking his left leg around Gareth's left leg and coming to lie partially on his chest. He broke the kiss only for a quick breath, then he began to kiss him again. One of Gareth's hands was trapped, but the other was at his waist and moved around to embrace him.

Severus continued to kiss him, eventually returning to the soft, sensual sucking of lip on lip. Finally, he pulled away and took a deep breath and put his head, face-down, on the pillow beside Gareth's. Gareth managed to free his trapped hand and he fully embraced Severus.

Gareth exhaled. "What was that for, mate?" he asked softly.

Severus shook his head.

"Well, it was very nice. Hard for me to believe you led as deprived a life as you say, though I do believe it." He rubbed Severus's back. "But if you don't want to seduce me, you probably don't want to be doing that again. At least not quite like that."

"Sorry."

"It's not a problem. It was very enjoyable. As is this. Though a tad warm. And a bit more arousing for me than I think you would appreciate."

Severus raised up on his elbows and looked down at him. "You still desire me?"

"I will confess to being just a little jealous of Hermione, if I may," Gareth said with a smile. "Those kisses were . . . well, she or some other witch has something to look forward to. Particularly if your tongue is as talented down below as it is up above."

Severus felt himself blush immediately. "I am glad it was acceptable," he said, trying to cover his embarrassment. He had never done that to a woman. Perhaps if he had been with Bella longer, she would have had him do it to her, no doubt making it as unpleasant as possible for him. But he had never been with a woman with whom he would have cared to have tried it until Minerva. Sex had always been about exchange, usually money or potions for sex, and he found the thought of licking some witch's private parts disgusting, though not as revolting as the thought of giving another man a blow job.

On the other hand, if he were with a witch he cared about . . . when he was with Minerva, he had offered to do that for her. He had wanted to bring her pleasure, but she had declined his offer, saying that it was something very intimate and that someday, he might want to do it with another witch, but that she didn't want to create that memory for either of them. And she had been right. After the curse was released, he had had a hard time looking her straight in the face for days afterward, and it was weeks before he felt comfortable with her. If he had done that with her...though the thought aroused him at that moment...he was sure neither of them would have been happy about it afterward.

"Snape?" Gareth touched the side of his face. "Snape?"

"What?"

"You were a million miles away."

"Just remembering something." He looked down at Gareth's face, so very close. He still hadn't moved off of him. "May I trust you? Can I tell you something?"

"Anything."

"It's embarrassing"

"Don't worry about that."

"I have never done that to a woman. I have kissed women, though not many, really...as I say, I didn't have relationships. I just . . . I had paid companionship. And I never did the other with one, what you said, down below."

"I think you will be good at it," Gareth said with a grin. "It's a different talent than doing it to a cock, and I think you have that talent."

"I wouldn't know what to do," Severus said softly.

"Let the woman's responses guide you, but when in doubt, the tip of the tongue on the clitoris is a good way to start."

"You enjoy doing that, too?"

"Very much. One of the things I like about being with a woman, eating pussy."

Severus grimaced.

"Sorry if my language offended."

"It's not that. I just can't imagine it."

Gareth gave him a squeeze. "Someday, give it a try. As long as the witch is clean, it's pleasant. It doesn't taste bad at all. And if you can get a couple fingers up her pussy at the same time..."

Severus made another face.

"Sorry. If you can use a couple fingers to stimulate her vagina whilst you're, um, performing cunnilingus," Gareth said, trying to choose terms that wouldn't offend his apparently sensitive friend, "if you can do that, you can give her an amazing orgasm and have her wanting more." He patted Severus's back. "I'm sure you will do just fine. Just don't forget you're with her and remember her pleasure."

"I have to admit, it doesn't sound as bad as doing it to a man sounds to me," Severus said, "and I like the idea of having a witch wanting more."

He sighed and relaxed back down on top of Gareth. "I don't like being an inept dunderhead. I'm sure I'll seem bumbling and ignorant," Severus mumbled.

"I don't think that's necessarily so," Gareth said softly, brushing some of Snape's hair off of his own face. "Just take your time. And you don't have to be a sex god the first time you make love to a witch, or do everything all at once."

"Hmmpf." He remembered how, when he was with Minerva, he had come after she had barely touched him, and how embarrassed he had been. But he had been under the spell and not himself at all. And she hadn't wanted to have sex with him; she did it only to save his life.

He snorted to himself. A wizard whom a witch will only sleep with in order to save his life. Pathetic. But Hermione seemed to be attracted to him. And Gareth was definitely attracted to him. He wouldn't have let him bugger him if he weren't. And he had made Gareth orgasm. If he didn't like other men and he could still get one to come, surely he could be at least adequate with a witch. And it was Hermione he wanted, after all, he thought, and a vision arose in his mind of Hermione and the curve of her breasts beneath soft cashmere. His groin tightened.

"Snape? I don't know what your current intentions are, and I like being this close to you, but all of this talk about sex combined with your weight on me is getting me aroused, in case you hadn't noticed with the sporran in the way. It's getting a bit uncomfortable. You might want to shift over a bit."

Severus pushed up to look down at Gareth. "You're still aroused by me?" he asked softly.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Severus shook his head, but he looked down at the other wizard and felt the same wistfulness he had felt when he had begun to kiss him so passionately. This was probably a bad idea, he thought, but he bent and kissed Gareth. Gareth had said that he shouldn't kiss him like that if he didn't want to seduce him. He thought he wanted to seduce him. If he could seduce him, he would know that he could do it. And he liked Gareth. He didn't use the word "friend" as easily as Gareth did, but he liked Gareth very much. And Gareth had let him bugger him, put his cock up his tight arse. The thought of how that had felt increased Snape's ardour, and he began to tug and pull on Gareth's shirt until he could slip his hand beneath it.

He kissed him and caressed his chest, seeking his nipple. He felt Gareth clutching at him, grabbing his buttocks and kneading. The sensation made him press himself against Gareth, his erection returning. Severus wasn't sure what to do next to seduce him, but he tried to push the wizard's sporran out of the way, unsuccessfully. He broke the kiss and sat back on his heels. Gareth's left leg was trapped beneath him.

Severus reached up under Gareth's kilt and found his cock. He took it in his hand and rubbed his thumb over its smooth head.

"This time, McGonagall, I do know what I want. I want you. I want sex with you." It felt good to say that. He squeezed the other wizard's cock.

Gareth unfastened his sporran and moved it aside. Severus pushed up the kilt, not bothering with the buckles. He stroked Gareth's cock, watching as the other wizard closed his eyes.

"Oh, gods, yes, Snape, yes, oh, yes," Gareth moaned. "That's very good. Very good."

Severus thought about what he wanted next. He licked his lips. As much as he might theoretically think it would be an interesting experience, he did not think he could bring himself to go down on Gareth's cock. But if he were ever to do that to anyone, it would be to McGonagall and no other wizard. He wasn't sure whether he could swallow, though, Severus thought as he spread some precum over the head of Gareth's cock. But that couldn't be difficult once he'd started.

"I want to touch you, Severus, please, I want to touch you."

Severus unbuttoned his braces from his waistband, then he unbuttoned his trousers and shoved them and his pants down a little. Gareth looked at him and reached toward his cock. Severus moved off of him and up toward the head of the bed. Gareth rolled onto his side, his kilt falling to cover his penis again, and he put his hands on Severus's legs, urging him nearer. He raised up on one elbow and watched himself stroke Severus's erection. He approached it with his head, and Severus closed his eyes as he anticipated the other wizard's mouth on his penis. He was not disappointed, although Gareth stopped before he came. Having already come twice, Severus thought it would take much more stimulation for him to come again.

"Touch me again, Snape," Gareth whispered.

Severus reached down and moved the wizard's kilt aside and found his cock. He squeezed it and stroked it.

"I want you to come, McGonagall," Severus said softly, his voice low and deep. "I want you to come for me."

Severus lay beside him again, turned on his side toward him. Gareth put his right leg around him and pulled him closer. Severus explored with his left hand until he found his anus. He slipped his finger in easily.

"You liked having my cock in you, didn't you McGonagall? Tell me you did," Severus whispered as he began to massage him inside. "It was good, wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes, it was good." Gareth's eyes were closed.

"And you liked sucking my cock?"

"Very much," Gareth said with a gasp.

"And you like having my finger up your arse?"

"Mmm-hmmm." Gareth was breathing harder.

"And did you like putting your finger in me?"

"Yes," Gareth said, pressing himself into Severus' hand, which had stilled its movement, and grabbing his buttocks and pulling him closer.

"You are very good at sucking cock," Severus said in a low growl. "Very good. And you know what to do with your finger in my arse."

"I tried," Gareth said, opening his eyes as Severus removed his finger, wondering what he was doing.

"You said that you like 'penetrating,'" Severus said softly, wiping his finger on the sheet then whispering a cleansing charm. "Do you like it really?"

Gareth nodded.

"And you're good at it? As good as sucking me off?"

Gareth nodded again.

Severus caressed the younger wizard's face. He kissed him softly on the mouth, then looked into his eyes. In a very low voice, he asked, "Would you rather bugger me or have me suck you off?" hoping for the former, not the latter.

Gareth blinked. He raised himself up and pushed Severus's shoulder, urging him to face the mattress. A few more encouraging prods, and Severus was crouched on the bed, his buttocks raised. Gareth pushed Severus's shirt and jacket out of the way and paused to remove his kilt. Gareth kissed each cheek, then he rubbed at his anus with his finger before entering with it.

"I want this to be good for you, Severus," Gareth said softly.

Severus felt a tingle of magic coming from Gareth's inserted finger. He swallowed. He wished he knew what he had done, but he trusted Gareth.

"That will make it easier for you. Stop me if you don't like it, and definitely stop me if it hurts. Even if I'm about to come, I will stop."

Severus nodded and wiped some sweat from his forehead. He should have undressed. But any thoughts about the temperature were chased from his mind when he felt the head of Gareth's cock at his anus. He stiffened.

"It's all right if you don't want to do this," Gareth said.

"I do."

"You need to relax, then, or it might hurt."

Severus consciously relaxed. He felt Gareth insert his finger again, then he withdrew, pressed his cock against his anus, and Severus felt stretched as Gareth's cock entered him. It was much bigger than his finger. It was sliding in easily, probably because of whatever charm Gareth had cast, but it was big. It felt huge.

"Wait," Severus said with a gasp. "Don't stop. Just slower."

Gareth stopped pressing into him, pausing, then he very slowly began to press in again. Severus wondered how long it would take for him to completely enter him. He seemed much larger than he had looked...and he had looked very big...and it was uncomfortable. But then Gareth was entirely inside him, and Severus could feel his body pressed against his buttocks. Gareth reached beneath Severus, urging him to rise up a bit more so that he could take hold of his penis. Without moving inside of Severus, Gareth stroked Severus's cock until he moaned, then he began to slowly pull out a little way and then push back in. Severus groaned again. Gareth was good at this, he thought as the other wizard pushed back into him a third time. It was beginning to feel good, and it wasn't painful.

"Is it all right, Severus?" Gareth asked.

"Yes, yes, it's fine." Severus gasped again as he felt the head of Gareth's cock pulled back further and then pushed back in again, hitting some heretofore unknown wonderful spot. Gareth was still stroking his cock, and as he was massaged by Gareth's cock inside and his hand outside, Severus felt a mounting tension in his groin. "Oh, it's good . . ."

"I want you to come first, Severus," Gareth said softly. "Come for me. You are so sexy. Your eyes, your voice, your arse, your cock, all so sexy."

Severus tried to keep himself from moaning, but he heard himself moan anyway.

"Such a sexy lover, Snape, so good," Gareth crooned as he stroked Severus's cock and pressed himself into him.

"Oh, gods, Gareth, oh, gods, I'm coming," Severus said with a cry. He gasped as he ejaculated.

Gareth cradled his balls in his hand and continued to pump inside of Severus. It seemed only a moment longer, and Gareth was pressing himself deep into him, coming hard.

"Snape, Snape, Snape," Gareth moaned, his legs trembling as he ejaculated. "Oh, Snape, sweet Snape, so good, so good, so good."

Ten minutes later, Severus turned his head and looked at Gareth lying on his back beside him. He seemed to be asleep. Severus pushed himself up off his stomach and gazed down at the younger wizard's face. He thought he could see something of Minerva in his features, though stronger, more masculine. He touched his face tentatively, and when the other wizard didn't stir, he traced the line of his beard. Severus didn't know how he could have come to have this wizard's affection and friendship; it wasn't because he deserved it. It was simply a gift. He felt overwhelmed by an unaccustomed sense of gratitude and warmth.

"You are my friend, Gareth McGonagall," Severus whispered, tears coming to his eyes. "You are my friend . . . and I love you."

Gareth took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Severus snatched his hand away quickly.

"I love you, too, Snape, you miserable old bastard," Gareth said with a slight smile.

"I didn't mean...I didn't know you were awake."

"It's okay." Gareth stretched.

"What I mean is, I didn't mean it the way you think," Severus said.

"I don't know what you think I think you meant, but I thought that what you said was pretty unambiguous," Gareth said as he rolled away and looked around for his kilt.

"I just don't want you to think, well, you know . . ."

"If you are worried that I think you are going to start following me around reciting love poetry and showering me with gifts and begging to spend your every waking moment with me, don't worry," Gareth said, buckling his kilt around him. He looked up and into Severus's eyes. "I didn't think you said you were in love with me."

Severus literally breathed a sigh of relief. He got up from the bed and fixed his pants and trousers, trying to find the ends of his braces where they had disappeared under

his waistcoat. Gareth unbuttoned the waistcoat and pulled the braces down for him, then he found his sporran and fastened it around his own waist.

"Gareth..."

Gareth turned toward him.

"I wanted to tell you that I can't imagine ever doing anything like this with any other man. You're . . . you're extraordinary."

Gareth quirked a grin. "Well, if Severus Snape loves me, I must be extraordinary."

Severus blushed darkly and looked away.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to make light of your feelings. It means a lot to me, it really does," Gareth said. "It's all right. Don't worry, Severus. You're my friend, and I do love you, in my crackpot way, and I won't be telling anyone either about this or about what you said. I wouldn't want to hurt you. Besides, it's a very private matter, something just for us."

Severus turned and cleaned off the bed. He couldn't believe he had said what he had. It was not like him. But none of this seemed to be like him.

"Are the plumbing facilities turned on? Because if not, I am going to have to go out back and find a convenient corner to pee."

"Yes, the water's on," Severus said, trying to remember what state he had left the bathroom in. He thought he had cleaned it before he had left last time. "And if you need a loo roll, they're kept in a cupboard opposite the sink."

"And where is the loo?"

"Top of the stairs." It was a large but highly Spartan bathroom, all the fixtures dating to the late forties, just postwar, and the floor tiles cracking in places because they had been poorly laid. He hated this house.

"Ta," Gareth said as he went in search of the facilities.

Severus sat down and looked around the room. It had been his room when he was a child. He had never taken his mother's room, didn't use it at all. Whenever Pettigrew had been there, he'd had him sleep in a small windowless room all the way at the top of the house. More of a box room than a bedroom. He'd shoved everything aside and pulled his old childhood mattress down from the attic and put it on the floor with a couple blankets. That was good enough for the rat.

He got up and walked over to the window, moving aside the old, stained blind and peering out. There was a street lamp across the street, its bulb flickering weakly, and nothing moved in the shadows. It was ugly and dirty, even uglier and dirtier than it had been when he was growing up. There hadn't been so many abandoned houses then. A crumpled newspaper blew down the street. He heard a step behind him, and he dropped the blind and turned around.

"Your hall light needs a new bulb," Gareth said.

"It has for fifteen years," Severus said. "Let's get out of here." He turned off the bedside lamp.

"I'm peckish. What about you, Snape? Hungry?" Gareth asked as he followed Severus out of the bedroom and into the dark hallway.

Severus shrugged. He was hungry, but he could easily put it out of his mind.

"Got any food in the house? Any beer?"

"If there is anything here, it is unlikely to be edible," Severus said shortly.

"Let's go out, then. A pub. Or a chippie," Gareth suggested.

"Hmn."

"I have money, regular and Muggle."

"So do I." He still had Hermione's loan.

"Good! So, is there something around here? If not, I know some nice spots we could Apparate to."

"Your mother will wonder where you are."

"Doubtful. Or she may wonder, but she won't be concerned unless I'm not there in the morning to supervise Hermione."

At the mention of Hermione, Severus felt that peculiar feeling he'd had before, and he wondered if it was guilt. But Gareth was right, he and Hermione had only been on one date, and it wasn't as though he and Gareth were embarking on some kind of an affair. But he'd had the nerve to tell Hermione he didn't want her dating other men, and then the very next day, he'd had sex with someone. It was the first sex he'd had in more than two years, but that was merely ironic, not a justification.

"So, is there anything nearby?" Gareth asked as they reached the sitting room.

Severus turned. "What?"

"A pub or something?"

"There's a chip shop and an off-license, but it's a Sunday and the off-license is closed." Severus thought a moment. "There's also a pub a little further, but it's not the sort of place I'd bring you, nor the sort of place I'd go dressed like this."

Gareth grinned. "How would you dress?"

Severus looked at him and didn't suppress his sneer. "Like a local Muggle, how do you think?"

"I'd like to see that."

"Yes, well, you won't today," Severus said drily. "I can't think of anywhere else close. There are a few other places not too far, but they aren't worth taking the time to walk to, or even Apparate to."

"Then shall we Apparate somewhere else, then? If not Muggle, then Diagon Alley or McTavish Street?" Gareth asked.

"Did you have somewhere in mind?"

"I know a great place in Muggle Edinburgh not far from McTavish Street," Gareth said. "It's small and a little crowded, though. Would that bother you?"

"Not overly."

"I brought Mum there once last summer, but she'd not been back long, and we had to leave. It was too crowded for her."

"It was good that she was able to spend an entire day with Hermione in London, then," Severus said, trying to avoid thinking about why Madam Gamp had been in exile on an uninhabited island for almost twenty years.

"Mum's nothing if not dogged. I was afraid that she might have lost her spark completely, but she keeps going. She says she's just too stubborn to quit even when she wants to."

Severus nodded. He remembered how she had fought, how she had picked up her wand with her left hand even after he'd cut off her right arm. "I am still very sorry," he said softly.

"I know you are. But let's not talk about that. Edinburgh?"

Severus nodded. "You cannot Disapparate me from here, though. It is a protection I put into place several years ago and which I have not removed. You may Disapparate yourself, or I can give you a Side-Along, but you cannot Disapparate with me in a Side-Along. If you tried, you would Splinch yourself."

"Then shall we step outside?"

Severus led him out the front door, then turned and felt in his pocket. He withdrew a key and locked the door behind him.

"Don't know why I bother," Severus said bitterly as he walked toward the street. "I should just burn the place down. Or remove the wards, leave the door open, and let vagrants have it."

"Kids would just use it to do drugs and have sex," Gareth said. "You could fix it up."

"I hate it."

"You might not if you did something with it."

"You have to care about something enough to want to fix it up," Severus said.

They stepped off the property onto the cracked pavement.

"Get us out of here, McGonagall."

Gareth stepped closer to him, took hold of his arm with both hands and pulled him toward him. "Away, then," he whispered, and with a crack, he Disapparated them both.

Severus walked up toward the castle from the main gates. Dinner had been filling and very good. He'd drunk beer, which he rarely did, but Gareth had ordered one for him whilst he'd been in the loo, and so when the waiter brought it, he drank it, then ordered another. McGonagall had amused him with stories of his travels, as he usually did when they were out together. It seemed he had been almost everywhere, and it also seemed he never had to earn a living, though he often stopped in one place for months at a time and took an extended Arithmancy commission, but always returning to Scotland and to wherever it was that his mother had been in seclusion on that island somewhere. He mentioned a few of the friends he had made and lovers he had taken, waxing on particularly about a Swiss witch, a sixty-year-old widow by the name of Anitra whom he had been with several years before.

"She was something else, Snape. Lively, funny, very active, and very down-to-earth. Gorgeous, too. She had breasts you could just worship, and then her...well, you know. Beautiful and sexy. She reminded me a bit of Poppy, actually, except she had blond hair with a bit of silver running through it. Anitra was an incredible lover, but I also just loved to be with her. When I was with her, I hated to leave, and when I wasn't, I was thinking about her. Very much longer, and I would have come to believe I was in love with her."

"What happened? Why did you leave her?"

"Lost the commission I was working on for one of her cousins and was escorted off the grounds of the family estate and told never to return."

"Because you were involved with her?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I simply had the temerity to contradict the household's Seer...Bertoldo is amazingly wealthy; his family estate is more like a small village...and so the Seer told him that I was a bane and would bring ill-fortune down upon them. So I had to leave."

"Wasn't she a bit old for you?" Severus asked.

Gareth shrugged. "Not too old for me, though perhaps I was too young for her. I was only twenty-five. Even if *had* fallen in love with her, I don't know if she would ever have felt the same about me. Maybe if I go back when I'm fifty and she's eighty-five, she might," he said with a grin.

Severus thought that was peculiar, but then he remembered the *Actus Affectus* and the object of his affection...Minerva. She was more than thirty-five years older than he, and he had found her immensely attractive when he was under the effect of the curse. He still did find her somewhat attractive, if he was honest with himself about it. But he couldn't imagine having a long-term relationship with her other than a friendship, even though he loved her increasingly the longer he knew her.

After they'd eaten, they had walked back to McTavish Street, where they had each Disapparated separately. Severus presumed that McGonagall had Apparated home; he had Apparated directly to the Hogwarts front gates. It was late, almost curfew, and although he had had no specific duties that day, he also had told no one that he would be gone, either, let alone for as long as he was. When he had left, he'd had no plans to be away for more than an hour or so.

He started down to the dungeons. He would check on Slytherin and then go to his rooms and finish reading the essays he had started earlier in the day. As he walked down the stairs, he heard footsteps in the corridor ahead of him. He sighed when he reached the bottom of the stairs and saw who it was.

"Severus! Good to see you. I was just looking for you. I returned Mr Stratton and Miss Huxley to their dormitories. I found them in an unused classroom down the south corridor on the fourth floor. I shall speak to Minerva about warding that unused section of the castle against students again. I believe, however," Albus said with a grin, "that Mr Stratton and Miss Huxley will be unlikely to try to find another such location any time soon, given their embarrassment. I only took ten points each, but I believe that you might wish to fashion an additional lesson for them."

"What were they doing?" Severus asked.

"Come, Severus, you know what they were doing," Albus said with a smirk.

"How involved were they, is what I meant," Severus clarified.

"Very involved; completely, one might say, though not fully disrobed."

"They're only fifth-years," Severus said in disgust.

"Old enough, Severus, old enough. I also think that they would benefit from a visit to Madam Pomfrey...separate visits," Albus added, then, changing the subject, he asked,

"You were out?"

"Obviously."

"Did you have a good evening?"

"Fine."

"Did you happen to see Miss Granger, by any chance?"

"No. She has Sunday dinner with her parents twice a month."

Albus smiled broadly. "That's lovely, Severus. You and she are becoming quite good friends, I am happy to see."

"Hmmp. Her company is tolerable."

"Of course it is," Albus said brightly. "Well, I'm going to do a quick pass through the castle then toddle off to bed. I will see you at breakfast!"

Severus looked in on Slytherin, hauled Stratton and Huxley out, gave them each a lecture, took ten points more from them for having been caught, and assigned them a week of detention to be served with Shunpike, the caretaker. He was not going to give up his date with Hermione on Friday to supervise detention with a couple of randy teenagers. Remembering what Albus had recommended, he penned a quick note to Poppy asking her to schedule separate appointments with Huxley and Stratton. Rather than send it to her, he would just give it to her at breakfast and ask her to schedule them as soon as possible.

He looked at the pile of essays, shook his head, and decided they could wait. Instead, he opened a cupboard in his sitting room and pulled out a bottle that Albus had given him at Christmas. Albus knew he rarely drank and even more rarely had guests, so Severus didn't know why he'd given it to him, unless it was a subtle attempt to encourage him to do more of one or the other...probably the latter, since Albus, though no teetotaler, was known for his moderation.

Severus examined the label. Muggle brandy. V.V.S.O.P. He was unsure what that meant, but he believed it was a mark of quality. He poured some into a tumbler, put the bottle back into the cupboard, and settled into his favourite chair with his feet up.

Dumbledore had mentioned Hermione. He wondered at what point in their relationship it would be appropriate to mention to people that they were dating. The thought disturbed him. McGonagall knew that they had been on a date, as did Professor Gamp, presumably. Either one of them could mention it to Minerva or to Albus, and then who knew who else would be told. He certainly didn't want to be the subject of gossip, or of Albus's joking comments...he could just see Albus asking him, an amused twinkle in his eye, if he wanted Madam Pomfrey to give him a facts-of-life-lecture. And the more people who knew, the greater the likelihood that there would be people who objected to it.

He had been so concerned about what McGonagall would say about their encounter the day before that he hadn't considered the fact that he or his mother might mention his date with Hermione to someone else. And Hermione herself might say something to someone. He took a swallow of brandy. If he weren't prepared to have people know that they were dating, he never should have asked her on a date. He should have said it was just a friendly dinner. But when she'd asked whether it was a date, he hadn't known what to say; he hadn't even planned to ask her on a date. They had been seeing each other on a friendly basis for months, and Severus couldn't deny his feelings for her or his attraction to her. It seemed a miracle that she cared for him as she did, as much a miracle as his survival, and that she would want to go out with him, that was beyond miraculous. If she wanted to date him, she must be open to the idea of eventually becoming intimate with him if they continued to see each other.

He had been honest with Gareth that afternoon: he had been like a starving man, but it wasn't merely that he was starved for sex. It was the intense intimacy that he had felt with Gareth when he had touched him. It was certainly a highly erotic intimacy, but it had felt to Severus as though it was something that went beyond sex. Gareth had said it that afternoon: even if he had not become aroused, Gareth would still have been pleased as long as he had relaxed, enjoyed it, and felt loved. And he had, but he had also been sexually excited.

It seemed to him that he had only compounded the difficulty which he had wanted to see Gareth about that afternoon. Now, not only had he had a sensual and slightly erotic encounter with Gareth the previous day, but he had actually had sex with him, and he hadn't simply allowed himself to be seduced and brought to climax himself: he had wanted it, and he had actively participated in it. He had allowed another man to fuck him and he had enjoyed it. Not just any man, though. Gareth McGonagall. That seemed to make a difference. Severus finished the brandy and poured himself another glass, bringing it with him into his bedroom.

All those years ago, despite the other humiliations that Bella had put him through and that he had accepted despite not enjoying them, it had been her desire to have him buggered that had made him walk away. He had never been attracted to men, and he had never wanted one to touch him like that, let alone have one fuck him. What would Hermione think if she knew about him and Gareth? Let alone if she knew that they had done it the day after he had asked her out on a date. She might not want to touch him, and she would certainly be within her rights to see his relationship with Gareth as incompatible with dating her. If Gareth were a woman, she definitely would. Fortunately, she did not know, and there was no reason she ever would.

As he got ready for bed, Severus decided that he would have to tell Gareth that it had been a mistake...not doing it, but doing it after he had asked Hermione on a date. He didn't regret it precisely, but it couldn't happen again. He still wasn't certain how it had happened that day, but it had felt good. He wondered suddenly whether he was actually gay and just hadn't known it because of his lack of sexual experience, but lying in bed, he tried to imagine having sex with other men, and he felt nothing. He decided to imagine specific men and called to mind a few men whom he knew. Arthur Weasley. The thought made him want to laugh. Bill Weasley. Somehow, he could imagine that wizard, married though he was, as being interested in such a thing, but imagining being with him actually turned him off.

Remus. He remembered an occasion a few years before when the werewolf had come to visit him; he had brought Severus a bottle of firewhisky and proceeded to drink half of it himself. He was a sick, blubbery slob by midnight, and he had hung off of Severus, much to his disgust, then Severus had put him to bed in his own bed and slept on his sofa. That was the last visit Lupin had paid him before Severus grew angry and essentially told him to piss off and never darken his doorway again. One reason for Severus's lost patience wasn't merely his general bad temper and persistent dislike of the werewolf, but the memory of Lupin, completely drunk, reaching up and pulling him down to the bed and kissing him...not on the mouth, but nonetheless, it had disgusted him. No, the thought of doing anything sexual with Lupin was not at all arousing, although Severus did try to imagine it, even imagining making Lupin strip, and then buggering him whilst he himself was still fully clothed, but that didn't even make his cock twitch, though it did amuse him slightly.

Flitwick. He liked Flitwick. Was quite fond of the little Charms master, in fact, although he doubted that they could be described as friends. It seemed too bizarre, though, to imagine himself with the diminutive wizard in a sexual way. Somehow . . . fetishistic. Besides, Flitwick appeared to be seriously involved with Sprout. Another thought that didn't bear pursuing.

Albus. While the thought of Albus touching him or hugging him, or even kissing his cheek, only made Severus slightly uncomfortable, he couldn't bring himself to begin imagining doing anything sexual with him without feeling quite sick. He supposed it was because Albus had become like a father to him. It was odd, Severus mused, that he did not think of Minerva as a mother-figure. Although perhaps she felt somewhat maternal toward him herself. She certainly felt protective of him. If she felt motherly toward him, it must have made it even more difficult for her to submit to intercourse with him to free him from the *Actus Affectus*. At the thought of intercourse with Minerva, he felt a growing tightness in his groin. Although he no longer wanted to have a relationship with her as he had wanted when he was under the curse, he did still love her, and if he were honest, he would have to admit that he was still somewhat attracted to her, though he rarely thought about her attractiveness. It was both unseemly and moot, given her relationship with Albus.

Severus remembered what Gareth had said earlier that evening about Anitra being a lot like Poppy, implying that he thought the school matron was attractive. Severus considered Poppy. He really hadn't given her much thought in that regard. She was pretty, and she did have a nice figure, particularly when she wasn't wearing her starchy matron's robes with the white pinny and hat. And she did appear to have nice breasts. He wondered what attracted Gareth to her. It might be her breasts, since he had mentioned Anitra's. Severus imagined what it might be like to pull open the bodice of Poppy's robes and expose her breasts. They looked very full; he didn't know whether they would be as . . . pert as Minerva's were. Minerva's breasts weren't small, but they could look you straight on, and she had lovely nipples. But even if Poppy's fuller

breasts didn't have nipples that pointed right at you, they looked soft and wonderfully rounded. He could take one in each hand, raise them up, then bend over and lick her nipples. As Severus imagined licking Poppy's nipples, he felt his cock getting hard.

He had to sit at the same table with Poppy the next morning. It was not a good idea to be thinking about her like that. But at least it showed him one thing, Severus thought with relief. He hadn't suddenly discovered he was gay. Rather a ridiculous idea, anyway. Even if he'd been in denial for his entire adult life about his sexuality, he surely would have noticed being attracted to men and not to women...and it was doubtful he would believe himself in love with Hermione.

He would simply have to tell Gareth that in addition to their physical contact with each other being private, it was something that couldn't happen again. If he was going to develop a relationship with Hermione, even if they weren't dating exclusively yet, it seemed that having sex with someone else wasn't appropriate. Even if it was just sex with another wizard.

It may have been inappropriate, but it had felt very good, Severus admitted. He had come three times with Gareth. He couldn't remember another occasion when he had come three times with someone. He hadn't even thought he would be able to come once, he had been so nervous. Severus remembered what it had felt like to press into Gareth, how tight his anus had been around him, and he threw back the covers and got out of bed.

Severus decided to take a shower and put on a clean nightshirt. He didn't think it was normal to be this libidinous at his age. That was something for teenagers. But he had been without sex and intimacy for a long time, and Gareth had been good to him. It would have been nice to have been able to curl up in bed with him and have him hold him all night long. He cringed at that thought. Best not to drink brandy before bed. It made him disgustingly sentimental.

Severus turned on the cold water and resolved not to think about Gareth any longer. They would be friends as they had been before that weekend, and that was all. It would be as though nothing else had ever occurred between them. He would tell him that the next time he saw him.

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-Six: A Darkly Smouldering Magnetism

Monday, 8 March 1999

A member of the Hogwarts staff is attracted to Severus when he accidentally seems to flirt with her, which alarms him. Filius teases him gently about it. Later, Severus meets with Minerva, and he discusses his relationships with her.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Minerva McGonagall, Sarah Duffy, others.

Chapter Thirty-Six: A Darkly Smouldering Magnetism

Chapter 37 of 118

Monday, 8 March 1999. Severus is alarmed when a member of the Hogwarts staff is attracted to him when he accidentally seems to flirt with her. Filius teases him gently about it. Later, Severus meets with Minerva, and they discuss his friendships and his relationship with Hermione.



Chapter Thirty-Six: A Darkly Smouldering Magnetism

Monday, 8 March 1999

Monday morning at breakfast, a Horned Owl delivered Severus a letter in a familiar square envelope with familiar, precise hand-writing on it. He wanted to open it and read it immediately, but as always, he slipped it beneath his teaching robe and into his frockcoat pocket. If he had no time to read it before his first class, he would read it before lunch.

When his last morning class left the Potions classroom, he closed and warded the door behind them, drew the envelope from his pocket, slit it open with a whispered spell, and slid Hermione's letter out. Short, shorter than usual, anyway, but she thanked him for dinner on Saturday, told him about her afternoon with her parents the day before, and said that she was looking forward to their date on Friday. Severus wrote a quick reply to thank her for her note and say that he was looking forward to dinner on Friday, as well. He did not use the word "date," but he hoped that his response was sufficient to let her know that it was important to him, too. He was late to lunch after having to go all of the way to the Owlery from the dungeons and then back to the Great Hall, but he also managed to avoid having to engage in idle chit-chat with anyone, so that was fine with him.

That afternoon as the students were brewing their potions, he tried to read the student essays he had neglected over the weekend, but his concentration was torn in too many directions. In addition to first Hermione and then Gareth invading his thoughts, he had to keep an eye on the dunderheads to make sure they didn't blow anything up or poison the class with deadly fumes...he had to send Gwendolyn Cheever and Philip Hargraves to the Hospital Wing after Hargraves dropped scarab beetle wings into their potion instead of dragonfly wings. He had been able to contain the fumes and banish them, but not before the two had inhaled it. He dismissed the class and had two other students escort them to the infirmary.

By the time his last class filed out, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws both unhappy by the number of points taken, Severus was in a foul mood. He slammed down to his quarters to find Headache Potion only to discover he had none, so he grabbed a vial of a general analgesic that he had remaining from his days as a spy and took a gulp of it, not bothering to measure. Closing his eyes, he settled back into his wingback chair and put his feet up.

Severus jerked awake. Oh, gods, he was late for dinner, and he was on the schedule to attend. He swept out of his rooms and up the stairs, then strode through the Great

Hall toward the staff table. His usual seat was taken, and everyone had shifted. Albus again. He was constantly moving around lately, and everyone simply shifted cheerfully. Or not so cheerfully, in his case. Because he hadn't been there, the only seat now available was between Flitwick and the Divination teacher, Professor Sarah Duffy. She was not as annoying as Sybill Trelawney had been, and she wasn't a lush, but she was still unrelentingly cheerful. He couldn't imagine how anyone with any true gift for divination could be that cheerful, given how nasty life was and how many horrific things there were to foresee. No wonder Trelawney drank, Severus thought. Maybe this one did potions. He looked over at her discreetly as he took a sip of water, trying to see her eyes. Duffy glanced over and saw him looking at her. She smiled. Severus did not return her smile, but took the opportunity to look into her eyes. No unusual dilation, constriction, or glassiness. The whites were bright, not dull or yellow. But not all potions affected the eyes. She was beginning to flush, though. Perhaps she was on some kind of mood elevator.

"Did you have a good day, Severus?" she asked brightly.

"No." He looked away and began to eat his mashed potatoes. He had never invited the witch to address him by his first name, she simply did. It was bothersome.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But Mondays can be like that."

"Any day can be like that," Severus said.

"Of course." Duffy took a bite of her egg dish. She didn't eat meat. Another odd thing about the witch.

Severus hoped she would start speaking to Professor Cahill on her right, but he had no such luck.

"Perhaps your evening will be better," she said.

"Perhaps."

"Some pleasant company might help."

"Hmmpf," Severus said, his mouth mercifully occupied with his roast beef.

"Would you like to come by later? I have some nice wine. I could open that, and we could just spend a little pleasant time together away from the students."

Severus stopped eating and looked over at her. "You are inviting me to join you in your rooms for a drink?"

"Well, yes, I suppose. Just . . . casually," Duffy said, blushing.

"No, thank you." Severus suppressed a sneer. After having taught at Hogwarts for more than six months, Duffy should have noticed that he was not the sort whom people invited to their rooms for a drink.

"It was just an idea."

"I have a meeting this evening with the Headmistress," Severus said. He wanted to discourage her, not alienate her completely. He was no longer a spy, he reminded himself. If he had cared to accept her invitation, there would have been no reason not to, and no reason to suspect her of spying on him, either.

"I see. Perhaps some other time?" Her voice seemed to crack nervously.

Severus gave a nod. "Perhaps."

That seemed to please Professor Duffy, and a few minutes later, she rose from the table and excused herself, taking particular leave of Severus. He nodded at her.

After she had left, Filius leaned over toward him. "You know, Severus, you shouldn't go about staring into a witch's eyes like that. You could give her the wrong impression."

"What? I didn't...oh, that. I wondered if she takes potions, she's so infernally cheerful all of the time. I was just checking her pupils, not attempting Legilimency."

Filius chuckled. "That was not what I meant. I think she thought you were flirting with her."

Severus gave a snort. "That is absurd. I have given no indication that she is any more than a colleague."

"Still, watch how you look at a witch unless you want to have her become more friendly," Filius said cheerfully as he took a bite of trifle.

"Or slap me, I suppose," Severus said with a sneer. "Although she'd be unlikely to do that at dinner in the Great Hall."

"Or you might have someone else hex you...I don't know as I'd want you staring into Pomona's eyes like that," Filius said, a twinkle in his own eyes. "She thinks you have a...what was it she called it? A *darkly smouldering magnetism*, I think she called it."

"I do not find that amusing, Flitwick," Severus said stiffly.

"I am quite serious...well, not about hexing you, and I think that Pomona is relatively flirtation-proof at the moment, but she did say that about you. Just in a general, admiring sort of way, though."

"Really?"

"Mhm...just a couple weeks ago, in fact." Filius smiled up at him. "And I agree with her. Peacetime suits you, Severus."

Severus had nothing to say about that. He looked at his trifle. He disliked trifle. He sighed and looked out at the Hall full of students and wondered when they would finally finish feeding their faces and leave.

"You're on duty tonight, Severus?" Filius asked, noticing the scowl on Snape's face and the fact that he hadn't left the table as soon as he finished eating.

Severus nodded. He did still have several meals a month when he scheduled himself for mandatory attendance. It didn't seem quite fair to trade all of them with Albus. Besides, he didn't want so much curfew patrol now that his life wasn't dominated by a madman and he could actually relax.

"I'm not, and I'd be happy to stay for you," Filius offered, "in case you would like to change your mind and join Sarah for that drink."

"I do have a meeting with Professor McGonagall later," Severus said. He looked over toward Minerva, who was talking with Poppy.

"I thought I'd offer, since Pomona has to stay tonight."

Severus hadn't thought about that when he had drawn up the schedule, though he knew that Flitwick and Sprout were in some sort of intimate relationship.

"Would you like it if I scheduled you for the same meals in the future?" It would be an easy enough change to make.

Filius smiled. "That would be very good of you, Severus. We didn't want to ask and seem to be requesting a special favour."

Severus shrugged. "It makes no difference. I will be distributing the April schedule next week. I'll put in the change before I do that."

"One other thing, Severus," Flitwick said tentatively.

"Yes?"

"Would it be possible to get the schedules further in advance? It's difficult to make plans when we get them only two or three weeks ahead."

"Further in advance?" Severus thought. "Yes. I could do quarterly schedules rather than monthly ones, if that would help." Minerva had always done monthly schedules, so that was what he had done. Of course, she distributed them a full month in advance. He hated drawing up the schedules and found himself putting it off. He rarely had plans and it didn't occur to him that two weeks' notice might be insufficient. And, of course, the meal shifts were new, a way of giving staff more flexibility whilst still ensuring that there would be enough staff present at each meal.

"That would be useful," Filius said happily. "Last month, Pomona and I had a hard time trading shifts with people so that we could attend my great-great-niece's christening and still not have our other plans disrupted."

He had heard nothing about that. "You didn't ask me."

"We didn't want to impose on you."

"You didn't want to impose on the ex-Death Eater," Severus said sharply.

"You are right. We did not. You have earned it after all those years when you had no time of your own. I don't think anyone would blame you if you took yourself off the schedule altogether for a while, or at least gave yourself lighter duties."

"Oh." Severus thought about that. He still wasn't used to the notion that people might have some sympathy for him, sympathy tinged with gratitude and not merely pity or distaste. He looked over at Flitwick, who was sipping a cup of herbal tea. "I wouldn't mind being asked next time."

Filius smiled broadly. "I will remember that!"

An hour later in the Headmistress's Office, after they had finished their other business, he told Minerva about his plan to draw up the schedules on a quarterly basis rather than monthly.

Minerva nodded. "That sounds fine. If there are changes that need to be made to the schedule, revised schedules can be distributed at a staff meeting, and if there are new conflicts, we can take care of them then."

"I will distribute the April, May, and June schedules at the staff meeting next week, then," Severus said, "and announce the plan to provide quarterly schedules from now on." He didn't like this aspect of being Deputy Headmaster, but it was better than a Cruciatus from the Dark Lord.

"How have you been, Severus?" Minerva asked. "I haven't seen much of you lately."

"I attend to my duties," Severus replied stiffly.

"I didn't intend to imply you did not," Minerva said. "I was merely making a remark."

"I have been fine."

"Getting away from Hogwarts occasionally, I presume."

Severus nodded.

"That's good. How is Miss Granger?"

"She is fine. You could ask your nephew," Severus said.

Minerva smiled. "I'm glad that you and she were able to maintain a friendship beyond your work together last year."

Severus didn't know how to respond to that. He twitched one shoulder.

"Did you see her yesterday?"

Obviously, Albus hadn't spoken to her about him last night. "No. She has Sunday dinner with her parents twice a month. She spent the day with them."

"Oh, I had noticed you were gone, so I simply thought you might be seeing her."

"I do have other friends," Severus said, though at the moment, he couldn't think of any others but Gareth.

"It is good to see," Minerva said with a smile. "Gareth, I know, seems to like spending time with you. I have to say that I couldn't have predicted you two would become friends, but it's nice."

"He is less irritating than most people," Severus said, feeling slightly guilty, as though he was betraying Gareth's friendship by not acknowledging it, but Minerva just chuckled.

"I find him rather annoying myself at times," she said.

"He can be annoying, but in an entertaining way," Severus acknowledged.

"As long as he entertains you," Minerva said, her eyes sparkling with humour.

Severus looked away, struggling to Occlude, fighting his embarrassment. Minerva could not possibly know what they had done together. She meant it only in a general way, he was sure. He was reminded again about all of his concerns about Hermione and Gareth.

"Minerva . . ."

"Yes?"

Severus shifted in his chair. What did he want to ask her?

"You know that I haven't had very much experience in relationships. Even my friendships over the years weren't genuine, but were with other Death Eaters...other than my friendship with you, of course," he added hastily.

"I know. That is why I am pleased to see you having something more of a life, Severus. I did have some fear that you would either fall into old habits here at Hogwarts, or that you wouldn't return to teaching and would lock yourself away somewhere and let yourself rot. I am very glad that didn't happen."

Severus nodded. "But I don't always know...this sounds completely absurd to you, I'm sure...but I don't always know what to do, or how I even feel, and I do the wrong thing all of the time. Even with Hermione . . . I don't think I am capable of friendships or anything more."

"I think you're capable of being a very good friend, Severus, although I'm not surprised that you don't always feel comfortable or confident. Just take things slowly."

Severus wondered how much he could say to Minerva. She knew him as well as anyone, or better.

"What would you think if I wanted to begin dating someone?" he asked.

"I think that would be a very nice thing. I would worry that you would do something to sabotage it, since you do have a tendency to do that to yourself, but I would still be pleased."

"Even if it were with a former student?"

"Miss Granger, you mean? I think that would be fine. It's obvious that she is fond of you and you've been seeing each other for a while. I wasn't even certain that you weren't dating her."

"You thought we might be in that kind of relationship?"

"I thought it was a possibility, given the apparent bond between the two of you," Minerva replied.

"Oh." He thought a moment. "I might hurt her. I am afraid of hurting her."

Minerva smiled. "More afraid of hurting her than being hurt yourself?"

"I don't know as I'd say that, but it worries me more."

"There's always the possibility that we could hurt someone we're in a relationship with...whether it's a romantic relationship or just a friendship. We simply try not to, but sometimes it happens anyway. And then we do what we can to make amends."

"And what about..." Severus stopped himself.

"What about what?"

Severus could feel himself beginning to flush. "Pleasing her. Intimately."

"I am sure you could, if you were both interested in that," Minerva said practically.

Severus grimaced. "I shouldn't ask this, or even bring it up obliquely, but I remember the time when I was affected by the *Adfectus* curse. I was far from a suave and polished lover."

"You were also not yourself, Severus. By the time we released the curse, your judgment and your emotional control were quite strongly affected. I think that when you can focus on the person you are with, when you are fully yourself, you will be able to bring some of your polish to that, just as you do other areas of your life."

Severus shook his head slightly, unsure of what to think of what Minerva just said. "Was I completely inept?" he finally asked, embarrassed, but needing to know.

"No, far from it. Considering my own situation and the fact that I didn't think that I was capable any longer of being receptive to anyone's touch but Albus's, I can say that you were not completely inept...I would not have described you as inept at all. Somewhat inexperienced, perhaps, but I didn't think that had a negative effect on your abilities. You were very sweet, you put effort into pleasing me, and you learned quickly. It will be different for you, both when you are unaffected by the curse and when you are with someone whom you care about, someone who chooses to be with you."

"I am still sorry about that, Minerva. I know you never would have chosen anything like that with me."

"Better you than some others it could have been," Minerva said.

Severus smirked. "At the time, Albus said he was grateful that it hadn't been someone like Mundungus."

Minerva chuckled. "Yes, that *would* have been difficult to bear, and difficult for me to muster any warm feelings toward him. I did want you to feel loved, you know, Severus, not merely . . . tolerated. It was one reason it took me so long to do it...I didn't want to simply have it over with. It was a complicated situation. But that wasn't what I'd meant, actually...that it hadn't been someone like Mundungus, but someone else. I was thinking more of . . . of someone with whom I had a different relationship than the one I had, and now have, with you."

"How do you mean?"

"If it had been someone . . . perhaps someone from my past, or someone . . . oh, someone for whom I might have had such feelings if I had never known Albus. It might have been harder for me not to feel guilty . . . to feel as though I had indulged myself. And Albus, it was hard enough on him at that point in his life, anyway, he was under so much stress and felt so uncertain of himself...so if it had been with someone whom he thought I might actually have some romantic interest in, it would have been even more difficult for him. Then for me to remain friends with the other wizard . . . it would have been far more awkward than it was with us, Severus. I don't know if you can understand that, but it was good that it was you. I care about you, I love you, but you and I together...we are friends, and we're both happy with that."

"There are others you could have fallen in love with, wizards other than Albus?" Severus asked. Somehow over the years, he had come to think of the two as an almost inseparable unit, and it was difficult to imagine Minerva with anyone else, although he knew that when Minerva was young, she had once dated an Auror about her own age.

"Oh, yes. I think that if I had never known Albus, there might have been another wizard whom I could have loved and with whom I could have had a happy life. I don't know as I ever would have been as suited to anyone as I am to Albus, and I find that my presence in his life and his in mine has been so important and meaningful that it's difficult to imagine any other kind of life, but I have been fortunate in having known some fine wizards."

"And you were thinking of one of them in particular just now?" Severus asked, curious.

Minerva nodded. "But it is a moot subject. The *Adfectus* struck you, and we got through it together."

"I still am sorry. I wish I had stepped in sooner to stop Parkinson. It never would have happened if I hadn't found Hermione's predicament amusing and stopped to listen."

"It's long past, now, and you have nothing to be sorry about. In fact, as I've told you before, I am now grateful for the *Adfectus*, that it did, indeed, strike you and that you came to find me after," Minerva said. "If it hadn't been for the *Adfectus* and your coming to see me when it hit you, I doubt you ever would have told me about the Unbreakable Vow, and I am quite certain that a good many more people would be dead as a result, including Albus. So making love with you was not a bad thing. Besides, I'd like to think that we're closer friends as a result of that and everything else we've been through together. If anything, I should ask your forgiveness for the deception we created and then for treating you so coldly for so many months."

"You have apologised for that already," Severus replied.

"I know. I'm glad you seem to have forgiven us."

"Yes. I understood it, why you did it. It is no longer something that occupies my mind," Severus said. "And with all you have forgiven me, I think it would be unreasonable of me to hold a grudge."

Minerva smiled. "I suppose that is close enough to an acknowledgment of forgiveness for me to not worry about it any longer."

"It is. That is what I meant," Severus said. "I've told you before not to worry about needing my forgiveness, and that's what I meant then, as well."

"Thank you. It is good to hear you say that." She took in a deep breath and let it out. "Now, is there anything else we need to discuss? If not, Albus is waiting for me."

"I have essays to read," Severus said gloomily. "And I have to stop in the infirmary and see Poppy about two students I sent her at the end of the day. They were not at dinner."

"Have a good evening, then, Severus. I will see you tomorrow at breakfast." Minerva gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as she let him out the door.

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-Seven: An Exercise in Harmless Flirting

Monday, 8 March 1999

Severus decides to try out some harmless flirting after having been told that he has "a darkly smouldering magnetism." It doesn't go quite as planned.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, others

Chapter Thirty-Seven: An Exercise in Harmless Flirting

Chapter 38 of 118

Monday, 8 March 1999. Severus decides to try out some harmless flirting after having been told that he has "a darkly smouldering magnetism." It doesn't go quite as planned.

End of Part Three



Chapter Thirty-Seven: An Exercise in Harmless Flirting

Monday, 8 March 1999

Severus went down to the Hospital Wing to see Poppy and check on the nitwits. It could be that she required more information about what they had done to themselves, although she had been at dinner and hadn't come over to talk to him, so he presumed not. He remembered his thoughts about her the night before. He wondered if she would agree with Pomona that he had a darkly smouldering magnetism. Of course, Pomona had probably been teasing Filius about something. She probably hadn't meant it. But Filius might be right about Duffy. She had blushed. It was possible that she had blushed because she thought he was flirting with her. She hadn't minded, either, if that was the case. She had asked him down for a drink. Duffy was a bit scrawny for his taste, though, and she was a giggler. He also couldn't imagine being with anyone involved in divination.

Poppy, though, she *was* attractive, now that he thought about it, and he liked her. She was a warm, caring witch, and she a sense of humour. She had always been good to him, even beyond the requirements of her job. She had even volunteered to be *Obliviated* once, simply for his sake, though he had declined her offer. He wondered how Poppy would react if he looked into her eyes. He had never really flirted, but he could recognise it when he saw it. Gareth flirted. He'd seen him flirting with various witches, and even with Hermione, though he didn't seem to flirt with her as much now that she was his apprentice. Flirting usually involved smiling. He thought that if he smiled at Poppy for no apparent reason, she would think he needed her professional help. Besides, he had bad teeth. Even when he did smile, he didn't usually show his teeth much. But looking into her eyes, he could try that. If she found him attractive, she might blush. He wasn't entirely sure why he would want to flirt with Poppy, but it was harmless, and he liked her. People always talked about harmless flirting, after all. If he didn't do anything too overt or too odd, there couldn't be any harm in it. It would be good practice.

He rapped on the door to the infirmary, then pulled it open. Poppy came out of her office as he walked toward it.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," he said, deciding that beginning politely might be a good start to some harmless flirting.

"No, not at all, I was just going to close up and leave for the evening, so you caught me just in time," Poppy said.

"I am sorry to detain you. I came to ask about Cheever and Hargraves," Severus said.

"Oh, they're fine," Poppy said briskly, turning to close up her office and ward it for the night.

It was difficult to flirt with someone whose back was to you, Severus thought. "May I escort you to your quarters as we discuss their conditions?" he asked, feeling stupid.

Poppy turned and smiled at him. "My rooms are just around the corner, Severus. That would be a very short conversation. You're welcome to come in and join me in a cup of tea."

Severus walked with her to the infirmary doors. "How are they?"

"They will be more careful in the future," Poppy said as she warded the infirmary doors behind them. "By the time they reached the Hospital Wing, their escort was having quite a time with them."

"Hallucinations?" Severus asked. He wondered whether he should have accompanied them.

Poppy gave her password, *Titan*, and opened the door to her suite. She looked up at Severus. "Coming in for that cuppa?"

He nodded shortly and stepped into her rooms.

"Yes, hallucinations, both visual and auditory," Poppy said, taking off her hat and pinnie. "The other students were able to tell me what they'd been brewing, but didn't know what they had done to create the effect. I presumed that they didn't use dragonfly wings, but some other substance. I treated them, but the hallucinations lingered for a while. Have a seat, Severus. I'll bring us some tea."

"You don't need to. I should be going now. I just wanted to be sure they hadn't caused themselves permanent damage. The paperwork for that sort of thing is most onerous," he said, trying to smile and hoping Poppy would know he was joking.

Poppy laughed. "No, no permanent damage, though I can tell you some of the more amusing things they said if you stay for tea."

He wasn't sure now about his flirting. It was probably too late for him to develop that skill. But she had laughed at his rather pathetic joke.

"All right. That would be nice, thank you," he found himself saying.

He took a seat on the couch as directed and waited for her to bring the tea from her tiny kitchen. When she brought it out, she set a cup and saucer in front of him and bent to pour the tea. With her attention on what she was doing, Severus allowed himself to notice her breasts. If Anitra had similar breasts, he thought, he could understand what Gareth had liked about them. Poppy had removed her pinny and hat as soon as they entered her suite, and he had a nice view of her cleavage as she poured first his tea and then her own.

"Milk?" she asked raising her eyes to meet his.

He paused a moment, looking into her eyes as he had Duffy's earlier in the evening, then he said, "If it's no trouble."

Poppy shook her head. "No trouble at all. I prefer it with milk, too."

She hadn't precisely blushed, but he thought her cheeks were a little pinker. But that could be the steam from the tea. She returned a moment later with a small pitcher of milk and held it out to hand it to him. Severus quite deliberately touched her hand as he took the pitcher from her, just brushing the tips of his fingers against her skin.

"Thank you." He met her eyes again. The colour in her cheeks heightened, then he looked down at the pitcher, which she was still holding onto. She let go.

Severus poured just a little milk into his tea. He raised it to his lips, and as he sipped it, he looked over at Poppy, who had sat down beside him and stirred her sugar into her tea. As she picked up her cup, she glanced at him, and he gazed into her eyes again, then lowered his own cup and looked away.

"Very nice tea," Severus said, setting down his cup.

"I'm glad you like it."

"Perhaps sometime I might return the favour . . . though you are unlikely to find yourself in the dungeons," Severus said.

"I might do if I were invited," Poppy said.

"I will remember that," Severus replied, trying to think of other things that one did in order to flirt besides staring into someone's eyes. If he did that too much, she might find it peculiar. He had touched her hand when he took the pitcher, but as he was not known for touching people, if he were to do that randomly, Poppy would certainly find that odd, as well. He didn't want to be too obvious about it. Laughing when she said something funny . . . he didn't think he could laugh convincingly, but he could smile. "You mentioned that Cheever and Hargraves were amusing."

Poppy smiled broadly, "Yes, they each thought they were talking to people and creatures that weren't there."

She proceeded to tell him about some of the things they had said when hallucinating, and Severus found himself smiling without expending any effort on it, and when she said that Cheever started promising to save invisible purple hamsters from the predations of equally invisible green Kneazles, Severus choked on his tea. It was not simply its absurdity, but the way that Poppy described it. It seemed that she had been encouraged by his smiles, and she'd become even more lively and descriptive.

Poppy handed him a napkin.

"Sorry," Severus said, wiping his mouth then blotting his trouser leg. He had spit his tea on her robes as well as on himself. He almost reached for his wand to finish cleaning her and himself as well, but instead, he took the napkin and dabbed at the tea stain on Poppy's robes, patting it gently and very aware that he was touching her thigh.

"That's all right. I should have avoided the squeaky hamster voices until after you'd swallowed," Poppy said with a smile.

Severus raised his eyes slowly from her leg, up her body, to her face, and then he met her eyes. He held the napkin still, resting his hand on her thigh.

"It was most unfair of you," he said softly. "You should warn a wizard."

The napkin still in his hand, Severus squeezed her leg slightly. Now there was no doubt in his mind that she was blushing, though he was not sure whether it was one of pleasure, attraction, embarrassment, or something else. Either his flirtation was a success or he had made her uncomfortable. Or both. He began to move his hand away and wondered whether he should apologise for having touched her inappropriately, but then her hand met his and she took the napkin from him.

"You missed a spot," Poppy said, and she took the napkin and dabbed at the lapel of his open teaching robe, then moved it aside slightly and wiped at the front of his jacket.

"Thank you," Severus said. Now what did he do? He had intended some harmless flirting, but this was beginning to feel like something different. "I should go. It's getting late."

"It isn't that late yet," Poppy said. "But I am sure you have better things to do than to humour a school matron by pretending to enjoy her dull company."

"No. That is," he added hastily, "I'm not humouring you. Your company isn't dull and I am enjoying it. But I have imposed upon your hospitality long enough."

He made a move to stand, but Poppy placed a hand on his arm.

"It was good to see you, Severus. And I am very happy you are doing so well. I remember . . ." She touched the side of his face with her fingertips, and he didn't flinch. "I remember when you returned last spring almost dead, and I remember how convinced you were that you would die before the end. I am very glad that you didn't."

"So am I," he whispered, and finding himself meaning it for the first time. "You were very good to me, Poppy. Always. I am sorry if I was sometimes less than grateful to you."

Poppy smiled slightly and nodded. She brushed his cheek with her thumb. "You are still a conundrum, Severus Snape. I don't know what to make of you."

He quirked a slight smile. "That's all right. I don't know what to make of myself most of the time."

She removed her hand from his face, but then took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "You will. Thank you for coming by. You're welcome any time, you know."

If he said or did just the right thing, he thought, he could possibly seduce her. Or perhaps not. She might appreciate a flirtation but not be susceptible to anything more than that, and then he would offend her. Besides, he didn't want to seduce her. He worked with her, and he already had sufficient complications in his life with Hermione and Gareth...and Gareth wouldn't be a complication for long. He would make it clear to him that that weekend had been an anomaly that would never happen again. He wondered what Gareth would say if he knew that he was in Poppy's sitting room flirting with her and that he found her attractive. Very attractive.

"Severus?"

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"About you," he said before he could stop himself.

"Really?" At Severus's brief nod, she said. "I hope they were good thoughts. You seemed dazed for a moment."

He quirked a crooked smile at her. "You put me in a daze, I suppose." He saw her blush again. It seemed that he was becoming better at this flirting, though he hadn't intended that to be flirtatious. "If I am a conundrum, you are dizzying," he said in a low voice. When she didn't react or pull her hand from his, he turned his hand over and squeezed hers softly. "That is not at all a bad thing."

Poppy laughed softly. "You are teasing me, Severus. You shouldn't do that to an old school matron."

"No, I'm not. And you shouldn't speak of yourself that way, Poppy. You are more than just the school matron; I know that even if I have not been fortunate enough to be better acquainted with you before now. And you are not old." He saw her pulse was racing. This was a bad idea. He knew it. He was convinced of it. But he did not stop with that. He raised his hand to touch her face as she had touched his. "I hope we can become better acquainted with each other."

Now Poppy did pull away, turning her head from his touch and releasing his hand. "Now I know that you are teasing me, Severus."

"I'm sorry I offended you," Severus said. "I am inept, but I did not intend to be offensive." He stood.

"Severus," Poppy said, "you don't need to leave if you don't want to. I simply . . . you surprise me."

She reached out and took his wrist. He sat back down, this time, closer to her. This was such a bad idea, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Should it be a surprise that I would want to get to know you better, Poppy? We have worked together for years. You have seen me at my weakest. You have taken care of me...and cared for me, even when I did not care for myself." He remembered her Healing massage, and his tears, how she had helped him to survive the pain of those last few months of the war, and how even that autumn, she had volunteered as the sympathetic in the procedure that had finally fully Healed him of Nagini's bite. It must have been painful, but she had only mentioned it when he had asked her about it, and she had never mentioned it again since. She had even remembered his birthday. She was a friend, it seemed, and yet he had scarcely recognised her friendship, as unaccustomed to it as he was.

"Gratitude, then," Poppy said.

"More than gratitude," Severus said truthfully. He didn't know why he was moving from harmless flirtation to seduction. "But I understand why you would think that. And we do work together." He looked into her eyes. "I can be very unpleasant. If I were you, I would not have even invited me in for tea."

Poppy didn't say anything for a moment. "As I said, you are a conundrum, Severus. I do hope you will come for another visit sometime, though."

Severus felt relieved. He could leave now, cease his seduction, and yet not leave her offended by him, perhaps even leaving open the possibility of closer friendship. That would be a good thing.

"Thank you, I would like that," he said.

Poppy stood as he did, and walked him to the door.

"Good night, Severus," she said, her hand on the doorknob.

"Good night," he said softly. She really was attractive when she smiled at him. Such bright grey-blue eyes and pretty lips. He remembered imagining opening her bodice, exposing her breasts, and licking her nipples. He felt himself blush.

"Severus?" Poppy looked up at him, unable to open the door because of the way that he was standing in front of it.

Severus, mesmerised by his own movements, watched himself reach up and caress her face. He watched as his fingers grazed her lips and moved lower to her throat. She did not object or move away. His fingers came to rest at her pulse point.

"Your heart is beating hard," he whispered, staring into her eyes. "Why is that, Poppy?" He felt her swallow. "Are you afraid?"

She shook her head.

"Good," Severus said. "I wouldn't want you to be afraid." He bent his head and slowly approached her lips with his, giving her time to move away, and closing his eyes only when his lips met hers. He kissed her twice softly, then he drew back and looked down at her again. "I wouldn't want you to be afraid of anything."

He placed his hand on hers where it still held the doorknob. "Good night, Poppy. I look forward to seeing you again."

Severus opened the door and stepped through, leaving behind a bewildered Poppy Pomfrey as he rapidly strode away down the hall.

~END OF PART THREE~

~to be continued~

NEXT

Chapters in Part Four are all rated M or MA.

PART FOUR

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Playing with Fire

Monday, 8 March 1999

Severus plays with fire. Will he be burned?

Characters: Severus Snape, others

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Morning After

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Forty: A Matter of Timing

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Sarah Duffy

Chapter Forty-One: A Fast Learner

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Forty-Two: Confessions

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Forty-Three: Distractions

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Forty-Four: No Unmixed Pleasures

Wednesday, 10 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, others

Chapter Forty-Five: An Esoteric Spell

Wednesday, 10 Thursday, 11 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Forty-Six: A Complicated Life

Thursday, 11 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Gareth McGonagall

~End of Part Four~

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Playing with Fire

Chapter 39 of 118

Monday, 8 March 1999. Severus plays with fire. Will he be burned?

****Beginning of Part Four****



Chapter Thirty-Eight: Playing with Fire

Monday, 8 March 1999

Severus fairly flew down the stairs toward the dungeons. He was playing with fire. And he was in love with Hermione. She had breathed for him when he should have been dead. He had to be in love with her. They were dating. He shouldn't even be pretending to seduce other witches, let alone kissing them...even if kissing Poppy had felt so lovely. He pulled his teaching robe closer around him, fastening the clasp at the waist. He had more than just a slight reaction to the thrill of the kisses, those almost illicit kisses, and although he doubted that it would be evident under the long frock coat he was wearing that day, he didn't want there to be any chance that someone might see him and notice his erection.

Despite the distance between the infirmary and his rooms in the dungeons, his erection had scarcely subsided at all by the time he closed his door behind him. He tore off his teaching robe, tossing it over his couch, then unbuttoned his frockcoat and dropped it on top of the robe. He unbuttoned his trousers and sat down in his favourite chair, his feet up, and took his cock in his hand. Closing his eyes, he tried to focus on his cock and not think about Poppy. He had barely given himself three strokes when there was a knock at the door. He groaned and quickly tucked himself away.

He opened the door only a crack and looked out, ready to bite the head off whatever Slytherin dared disturb his evening, but it was Poppy.

"I forgot to tell you. I made the appointments with the students that you requested, Stratton and Huxley."

Severus nodded numbly.

"Was there anything specific that you wanted me to mention to either of them?" Poppy asked.

"No, just whatever you usually tell them," Severus said, still hiding partially behind the door.

"I could come in and we could talk about it," Poppy suggested.

"Come in? I don't know...just a minute." He closed the door in her face and grabbed his teaching robe, pulling it on as he reopened the door.

"Sorry," he said as he let her in.

"I can come back later...or we could discuss it in my office tomorrow, if you prefer," Poppy said.

"No. I just don't think there's anything to discuss. Dumbledore's the one who caught them. You could ask him precisely what they were doing, if that is helpful. He did not go into detail with me."

Poppy chuckled. "He'd be more likely to go into detail with you than with me, Severus. But I will ask him if you think that is best."

Severus nodded.

Poppy looked around the room. "You know, now that you have time to think about things like this, you might want to discuss having your rooms upgraded. I never did understand why you didn't take Slughorn's old rooms. He had them quite tricked out."

"I did not deserve any luxury. You may have forgotten, but when I became Head of Slytherin, it was only because I was not in Azkaban."

"Albus made you take these rooms as some kind of punishment?" Poppy asked, incredulous.

"No, but when I refused Slughorn's rooms, he didn't offer to make any changes to these. I chose them and took them as they were."

"But over the years..."

"Over the years, I have occasionally thought of things that might be nice, but I never knew ~~where~~ *where* would return. I could not become soft. And it is easier to be angry and bitter when you are living in ugly rooms." Severus looked around him. It wasn't as bad as Spinner's End. "Dumbledore did insist on putting in a new shower and bath for me several years ago, but I told him no frills." He quirked a slight smile at her. "In retrospect, I should have asked for a few frills."

"Yes, you should have," Poppy said with a smile. "Still, these aren't bad. A little dark, though."

"Bats like the dark," he said.

Poppy chuckled. "You are no bat, Severus. I would have noticed by now, I believe. But with these robes and the way you sweep and swoop," she said, taking hold of the lapels of his teaching robe, "you do a fair imitation of some kind of flying beast. Not a bat, though."

She stepped closer to him. Looking down at her, Severus was very aware of her creamy cleavage.

"What, if not a bat?" he asked softly.

"A great owl or eagle. Some kind of raptor ready to swoop down on its prey and carry it away," Poppy replied. She looked up into his face. "I felt a bit like prey this evening, Severus."

"You did?"

"Yes. And I wondered why. That is why I am here, to find out."

"Do you really want to find out, Poppy? Are you sure you want to know?"

She nodded, her eyes not wavering from meeting his gaze.

"You are not afraid?"

"Not afraid."

"I am a Death Eater. You should be afraid," he said in a low voice and looking for a reaction, waiting for a tell-tale flicker of fear in her eyes.

She shook her head slightly.

Wondering how she could trust him, Severus raised his hand and touched her face, tracing the line of her jaw then caressing her throat, watching her expression as his fingertips moved lower, down toward her cleavage. He slipped his fingertips just under her robe, moving his caress to her breast. Her lips parted and he could feel the pounding of her heart.

"This is why, this is why," he whispered.

"Tell me why," Poppy said.

"You are an attractive witch. You are . . . you are intoxicating," Severus said, slipping his hand further into her bodice, feeling her soft, sexy breast.

"I need to know . . . what you want," Poppy said.

Severus shook his head. "I don't want anything."

"Your hand has other ideas," she replied.

"I do not want to offend you," Severus said. He removed his hand. "You have taken care of me, and I am grateful for that."

"Just tell me what you want, Severus."

"I don't want a relationship," Severus said softly. "I don't want that, but I find you very attractive. I am sorry. I ought not have said anything or touched you as I have. I am sorry."

Poppy moved her hands to touch his chest beneath his robe. "You took off your jacket," she said.

"Yes."

"And put your robe back on...for me?" She moved her hands over his chest and down over his stomach. "I liked the kiss you gave me, Severus. Do you suppose you have another for me?"

Severus bent his head and kissed her softly as he had before. One of Poppy's hands moved lower, and he gasped and straightened as she touched his erection.

"You were not joking about being attracted to me," Poppy said, looking up at him and pressing her hand against his erection. She brought her other hand to caress his face. "You know, we don't have to make any sudden, earth-shattering changes to our relationship, Severus. But I would be more than happy to help you to relieve some of this," she said, rubbing her hand against him. "If you don't think you will be terribly disappointed by this old witch, that is."

"I told you, you are not old," Severus said hoarsely. "But I would disappoint you, I am sure."

"Doubtful."

"You must have low expectations," Severus said, trying to joke.

"Not at all. But you have me intrigued," Poppy replied.

"Why would you do this?"

"As I say, you have me intrigued, Severus. Your behaviour this evening was atypical, but I believed you when you said that you were not just teasing me. Was I wrong to believe that?"

"Yes," Severus whispered. "I did not mean to be quite so . . . so . . ."

"Seductive?" Poppy asked.

He nodded. "I do find you attractive, though. And I didn't lie to you. I just . . . I suppose I thought it might be nice to flirt a little bit. I shouldn't have. I didn't know what I was doing."

"You did quite well at first, but you moved very quickly from flirting a little bit to flirting a lot. I have to say, though, Severus, that you really were quite seductive, and if you didn't know what you were doing, then once you do know what you are doing, you will be very dangerously seductive." She had dropped her hands to her sides and stepped back.

"I am sorry, Poppy." Severus looked down.

She raised her hand and caressed his face. "So am I. I am a foolish old witch, I suppose, past it all . . . but it was rather nice to think for just a little while that . . ." She shook her head and reached for the doorknob. "I shouldn't have come down here."

"Wait, Poppy. You don't understand. You aren't a foolish old witch. I am attracted to you, very much. You could feel that for yourself." He took her hand and brought it toward his erection, though he did not touch her hand to it. "I would ask you to stay, but it . . . you . . . I can't."

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked. "Don't tell me whether you think I should stay, or whether I will be disappointed or you will be disappointed, or whether you think that it will change things between us. Just tell me whether you want me to stay."

No other considerations . . . "Yes, I want you to stay."

"And what do you want?" Poppy asked softly.

"I want to touch you, and I want to kiss you," Severus whispered. "And I want more."

"Then I will stay unless you tell me to leave," Poppy said. "And we can be lovers tonight and colleagues tomorrow."

"Why? Why would you stay?"

"You intrigued me, as I said, and your words and touches aroused me. And, if this doesn't sound too pathetic to you, or too selfish, it has been a while since I've been with a man."

"No, that doesn't sound pathetic or selfish," he said, thinking of his own lack of experience. It was unlikely that she was inexperienced, though, and he doubted that she would have come down to his rooms if she were. "And that's all?"

"I also do care for you, Severus, very much, you must know that. I wouldn't want to be intimate with you if I didn't."

"Yes, stay," he said. "Stay."

He leaned forward and kissed her again, this time putting his arms around her and drawing her close. His kiss grew more passionate, and she responded, her lips moving with his, her tongue meeting his, stroking and teasing. He pushed her toward the couch, never breaking the kiss except to change his angle and return.

Severus sat, pulling Poppy down with him to lie across him. He cupped and kneaded her buttocks with his left hand as he held her close with his right arm. Finally, he broke away and looked down at her. He couldn't believe that she was there with him, so close and warm. He didn't know what to do, but he knew that he did not want to hurt this witch in his arms.

"If you want to leave, at any time, you just say so," he said softly. "And I need to warn you that I have somewhat limited experience. If I do anything that doesn't feel good, tell me. I don't want to hurt you, Poppy. I want you to be glad you came down to me and stayed."

Poppy nodded breathlessly.

He ran his hand over her chest then brought it lower to caress her breasts through her robes.

"May I?" he asked.

She nodded, then she sat up, reached behind her and touched the first of her Charmed hooks, releasing them. She looked at him, and he brought his hands forward and pushed her robes down and off her shoulders. He felt a Support Charm release as he pulled her bodice down to reveal her breasts. Gods, this was better than any fantasy.

Cupping both breasts in his hands, he raised his eyes to meet Poppy's. "Very beautiful," he whispered.

She smiled and caressed his face, pushing his hair back.

Severus shifted so that Poppy was leaning against the arm of the sofa, her legs across his, and entranced, he watched his fingers as they stroked the skin of her breasts, coming to tease her nipples, then he leaned toward her and closed his lips around her left nipple as he cupped her breast with his right hand and teased her other nipple with his left hand, remembering what Minerva had said about a touch going from pleasantly stimulating to unpleasantly rough very quickly. He heard Poppy moan, and raised his eyes to look up at her. It had been a moan of pleasure. Her head was back, her lips parted, her eyes closed. He smiled as he moved to lick and tease her other nipple, flicking his right thumb over the one that he had just abandoned.

As he suckled and flicked, Severus groped with his left hand trying to raise Poppy's skirts. She reached down with her right hand and helped him tug them up. He slipped his hand beneath her skirts and caressed her leg as he moved it higher. She bent her right leg, granting him greater access, and he found her knickers covering her feminine softness. They were damp. He began to rub and press against her, and Poppy raised her hips, arching her back.

"Oh, Severus! More, more, Severus," she gasped.

He reached up and pulled on the waistband of her knickers. When removing them seemed too difficult at that moment, he simply pulled on them with a slight burst of magic, ripping them off. Poppy didn't react except to push against his hand as his fingers slid into her folds. He moved his mouth to her other breast again, pausing to look down at her. She was moaning and gasping as he rubbed her clitoris, and her breasts, her beautiful, sexy breasts, were flushed and peaked. Any inhibitions that she may have had disappeared as her arousal increased.

He began to suckle her left breast again. Poppy was moving on him, arching her back, bouncing and wriggling against his moving hand, and her buttocks were rubbing against his erection. He slipped a finger into her vagina, stroked for a minute, then withdrew it and inserted two. Still teasing her nipple with his tongue and lips, he began to rapidly pump his arm, thrusting his fingers into her vagina and his thumb against her clit. He raised his head to watch her face. She was grasping his leg and the front of his robe, and she was moaning more and more loudly.

He remembered what Gareth had said to him the day before, telling him he was sexy. She might like to hear him say something.

"You are gorgeous, Poppy, so sexy, so very sexy, Poppy, so passionate and sexy, come, Poppy, come," Severus said in a low, intense voice. His cock was heavy and straining against his clothing as his own excitement grew.

"Oh, gods, yes, Severus, don't stop, don't stop! Oh, don't stop!" Her legs were trembling as she gasped and cried. "Yes, I'm coming, Severus, Severus! Ah, ah, ah!"

Her grip on him tightened as she peaked, then she relaxed back down onto his lap and opened her eyes, looking at him. Severus removed his fingers and wiped them discreetly on his robes.

"All right?" he asked softly.

She smiled at him and reached up to touch his face. "Very. Kiss me?"

Severus leaned forward and kissed her lips, pulling her toward him. He nuzzled her ear. "I think I would like to get you out of your robes. They are somewhat of an obstruction to providing you the pleasure I wish to bring you." He licked the shell of her ear and was rewarded by a sharp gasp.

"If that's the case, I can't get out of them fast enough, since what you were able to do when obstructed was nothing to sneeze at," Poppy said.

She kissed him, putting her arms around his neck. She drew back and looked into his eyes. "We also cannot forget about you."

"Believe me, Poppy, I am having a great deal of pleasure," Severus whispered. "You have amazingly beautiful breasts, and feeling your arse rubbing against me as I am touching you, it is all very, very good."

Poppy gave him a quick kiss on the lips, then she moved off and stood in front of him. Her ripped knickers fell to the floor, and after she unhooked the waistband of her under-robe, her robes joined them. She was now only in Charmed stockings, having lost both shoes at some point. She brought one foot up to rest on Severus's knee and she rolled down the stocking of that leg, then she did the same with the other. He grabbed her legs and pulled her toward him and onto the couch so that she was raised up on her knees and straddling his legs. He cupped her buttocks with both hands, pulling her closer. He buried his face in her breasts and felt her combing her fingers through his hair.

Severus raised his face and looked up at her. "You are wonderful. Thank you," he said softly.

"We can thank each other in the morning, I think," Poppy said. "But now, I would say that you are the one with clothes getting in the way."

She moved back off of him and took his hand. "Would you undress for me, Severus?"

He gave her a slight smile. "You have said that to me before, though never in quite that way, and in very different circumstances. I have to admit that this is the first time I will be happy to comply, although I must also admit that I am more nervous than usual."

"Believe me, I never dreamed I would be undressing for you, so if I can stand here naked in front of you, you shouldn't feel nervous."

She pushed his teaching robe off, and he began to unbutton his waistcoat. Her hands went to his trousers, and she smiled as he let her unbutton them. As soon as she finished, she ran her hand over the length of his cock then slipped her hand into his pants to touch him. Severus couldn't restrain a slight groan as her thumb spread his moisture over the head of his cock. He quickly shed his waistcoat then pushed off his braces.

Taking her hand from his pants, he kissed her palm, then sat and quickly shucked off his boots and pulled off his socks before standing again and removing his trousers and pants at the same time. He removed his cufflinks, then rather than curse the fact that he had too many buttons, he simply unbuttoned the first few and pulled his shirt off over his head.

Poppy's eyes were on his cock. He stepped forward and caressed her cheek.

"What next?" he whispered.

She looked up at him. "Whatever you want, Severus. Whatever you want."

He pulled her close and bent his head to kiss her, one hand squeezing her buttocks. His cock was pressed against her stomach, and although Poppy was certainly fit, she was soft, much softer than Gareth's muscular male body was. He loved her softness.

He looked down into her eyes and caressed her cheek with his thumb. "Before you arrived, I was prepared to take care of my erection quickly and expeditiously," he whispered. "Now, though, I want to take my time. May I take my time with you, Poppy?"

His voice sent thrills through her, and she nodded mutely. He picked her up and carried her into his bedroom. He set her down on the bed, then waved his hand, lighting the lamps, bringing them to a soft glow.

Severus looked down at her and ran his hand over her body from her shoulder, down her side, then over her stomach to her hip. He let out a long, appreciative breath.

"You are so beautiful, Poppy. Very beautiful."

She shook her head, but he only climbed onto the bed with her, straddling her legs as she rolled over onto her back.

"I wish I knew what to do to give you all the pleasure you deserve, but I will do my best," he said softly. "If you don't like something, you must tell me."

Severus lowered himself to lie on top of her. As her fingers caressed his back, he kissed her shoulders, her chest, her breasts, pausing and suckling briefly at each breast, then moving lower, kissing her torso, her stomach, her lower abdomen. The sensation of her skin beneath his lips was more sensual than he would ever have believed it could be. Moving down the bed, he kissed her knees, then he slowly made his way back up, kissing her thighs. Bringing his right leg between hers, he gently urged her legs apart. Gently, softly, slowly, he kissed and licked her inner thighs, pleased to hear her gasps. Slipping one hand beneath her left knee, he urged Poppy to bend her leg and open herself further to him.

He moved back up to kiss and lick her lower abdomen just above her thatch of dark hair, tickling her skin lightly, and he began to tease her clitoris with his finger and thumb again. Severus sat back on his heels and watched as he spread her folds and played gently with her clitoris. It seemed to him that Poppy was holding herself still with some effort, and her breathing was heavy. He rose up on his knees and lay down on top of her.

He rubbed her clitoris and whispered in her ear, "May I kiss you here?"

"Oh, gods, yes, Severus," she moaned.

"I . . . I need to know if you like it when I'm doing it, or if you need something different," he said softly, still rubbing her clit.

"Yes, yes, fine, oh, please, Severus," Poppy gasped.

He kissed her cheek, then he moved back down the bed and came to lie between her bent legs. He separated her folds with his fingers, then closed his eyes, held his breath, and approached her. Gareth had said flicking her clit with his tongue was a good way to start. He stuck out his tongue and it met her clitoris, and Poppy gasped. He flicked and licked her nub lightly, first one direction then the other, and he was rewarded by Poppy's moans.

"Yes, good, Severus, so good, yes, like that, don't stop, please, yes, just like that!"

She was arching her back and moaning as he flicked gently but quickly. When her moaning grew louder and she wriggled against him, he began to rhythmically press his tongue against her nub as he slipped two fingers into her vagina. She rocked up to meet him as he thrust his fingers and licked her clit.

"There, there, like that, Severus, just like that, inside like that, oh, gods, Severus, Severus, I'm going to come again!" She let out several crying moans, pounding her hands against the mattress, and Severus was surprised by a sudden flow of warmth into his mouth, but he continued to lick and thrust until she collapsed back onto the bed and gasped for breath.

Severus sat back and looked at the witch on his bed. A witch *ir/hi*s bed. And he had made her come...more than once. And she had ejaculated, something he had heard of but never seen before. There was a beautiful, warm, sexy witch in his bed. Not some whore or pathetic reject. No one he had coerced or paid or forced. A sexy witch who had wanted to be with him, one who cared about him. He felt tears come to his eyes, and he blinked them away.

Poppy caught her breath and looked up at him. She smiled slowly. "Come here, Severus. Come here to me."

She held him in her arms and kissed him, his lips, his cheeks, his jaw, his lips again. She brushed back his hair from his face.

"That was wonderful, Severus. I find it hard to believe that you are inexperienced."

"You did say it had been a while since you'd been with someone," Severus said self-deprecatingly.

"Not so long that I can't tell that you are a wonderful lover," Poppy whispered. She smiled to see the pleasure lighting his eyes. "But there is still the matter of this," she said, reaching between them and touching the head of his ready cock. "You are very, very ready. I am impressed by your self-control."

"I was thinking of you, Poppy," Severus said softly.

Poppy kissed him, kissing his lips repeatedly, holding him tightly, and when he drew back, breaking the kiss, Severus was surprised to see tears on her cheeks and more flowing freshly.

"What is it, Poppy? What's wrong?" He wiped her tears away with his hand. What had he done?

"I am so sorry, Severus, so sorry for all those years you suffered."

"Is that why you're here with me?" Severus asked, stiffening, thinking he was being used as a pity fuck.

"No, that's not what I meant." She caressed his face, looking into his eyes. "It simply makes me very sad to think of all that time, and to know that . . . that there was this tender, patient, thoughtful, wonderful lover buried within you. To know that you have so much potential, so much warmth in you, and yet you lived as you did for so long. I can't bear to think of it."

Severus kissed the tip of her nose lightly. "That is very sweet of you to say, Poppy, but I don't think that this person was there then, or that he could have emerged earlier. And I'm still a pretty miserable fucked-up bastard, and I know that. I often dislike myself. I can still be mean and nasty, and I don't always regret it when I am. Sometimes, I even still enjoy saying something cutting and hurtful for the most petty of reasons." He swallowed. "But I am trying. And I am very glad that you enjoyed that."

"It was pure ecstasy, Severus. You brought me pure ecstasy," Poppy whispered. She kissed his lips softly.

He blushed. "That was the first time I ever did that," he said very softly, "what I did, kissing you there."

"I never would have known that," Poppy replied. "Thank you. That means a lot to me, Severus. It really does."

She moved her hand down his shaft and watched as he closed his eyes. She stroked him a few times, then shifted, bringing her leg over his hips and moving her crux to his cock. Lying on her side, she guided him into her vagina, slipping over him. Severus let out a long, low moan as she fully sheathed him.

"You have a huge cock, Severus," Poppy whispered as she began to move and rock against him. "So very long, very good."

Severus didn't even try to keep from moaning. His gasps and moans were joined by Poppy's, and he finally rolled her over onto her back and began to pump. He stroked in and out, shifting and moving, watching her face, looking at her breasts, lying on top of her and feeling his sweat run to meet hers, and he wanted her to come again, but he

didn't know whether he could last. He tried to think of something dull. The three steps to brewing Boil-Cure Potion. It didn't seem to help, but then he shifted again as Poppy arched her back and met his thrusts, and she began to moan more loudly. This was power, he thought, the power to bring her pleasure, the power to make her moan with desire and arousal. And it felt good, so good to move in and out of her, shifting and thrusting, burying himself in her over and over.

Severus thrust again and again, drawing out and pushing in, crushing himself against her softness, inside her warmth, and then Poppy was coming, shouting, grabbing him hard as he continued to thrust into her, grinding his pelvis against her. He felt his balls tighten and his own orgasm burst forth; he buried himself deep within her as he ejaculated.

Gasping and trying to catch his breath, Severus collapsed on top of Poppy. "Fuck, that was good," he mumbled. "Mm, sorry. My language..."

"S'okay. I will second that: fuck, that was good," Poppy said with a deep, contented sigh. "I am very glad I came down here tonight."

"So'm I," Severus said, rolling off of her onto his back, his eyes closed. "Perfect."

"Absolutely," Poppy agreed, rolling onto her side and putting an arm around him. "And incredibly good for first-time sex. Maybe because we've known each other so long. But mostly, I think, because you were so thoughtful and took so much time with me. Thank you."

"Thank *you*," Severus said. "I never did anything to deserve your company for ten minutes, let alone for this." He opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her, smiling slightly. "I'm glad I decided to see whether I could flirt with you."

"So am I, Severus." She traced the outline of his lips with one finger. "You were positively seductive. And I didn't mind being seduced by you. I might not mind it happening again sometime, either."

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think that we should act any differently toward each other in public."

"Of course not," Poppy agreed. "We will be colleagues again in the morning."

"You do deserve to have a relationship with someone, Poppy, and I hope you understand..."

"Yes, I understand, Severus. Really. And if I'd wanted to have some other kind of relationship with you, I likely wouldn't have come down here tonight. I think my expectations would have been different."

Severus nodded and closed his eyes.

"Do you think we could get into bed? The dungeons are a bit cooler than I'm used to," Poppy said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, of course!" Severus Summoned his wand from the other room and cast a Warming Charm as he moved so that she could pull the covers back and climb into bed. "I'll be right back!"

He padded quickly into the bathroom and dampened a flannel. He brought her the flannel and a big towel. He remembered how Gareth's cum had run out of him into his pants the night before, and he thought that there must be some spell to prevent that sort of thing, but his experience was limited to ordinary cleaning and washing charms, and he didn't know if he could use something like that on Poppy's tender parts, particularly not inside her.

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him when he returned.

"I thought you might like to freshen up. Unless you'd prefer charms, but I don't know what you might like to use," he said awkwardly.

Her smile grew. "Thank you, Severus. That is very thoughtful of you." She made use of the flannel and spread the towel under her.

Severus began to get into bed when he suddenly had a thought that froze him in place.

"Severus? What's wrong?"

He turned and looked at her. "I am a dunderhead. I think I need one of those lectures you give. We didn't do anything about contraception. I didn't even ask about it. I don't know if you need it, but if you do..."

Poppy shook her head and smiled. "Don't worry about it, Severus. I'm a mediwitch, remember? You know there are potions one can take afterward. I have a few doses upstairs. I will just take one in the morning."

"All right." He lay down beside her. "I am sorry, though. I should have thought of that in advance. If you were someone else, I could have just caused you a real difficulty. And myself."

"You know, if you are thinking of becoming more sexually active than you were in the past," Poppy said, "it might not hurt to have a refresher on the different spells and potions, just practically speaking. I'll get some information together for you and send it to your office for you to look at at your leisure."

Severus was acutely aware at that moment that not only was he much less experienced than most wizards his age, but that he was also much younger than Poppy and that she had been the school matron when he had been a student. It was odd. He wondered how she felt about it.

"Poppy?"

"Mhm?"

"I was just thinking . . . wondering . . . have you thought about the fact that when I was a student, you were the matron then, too?"

"I have thought about that, but not tonight, not until you just mentioned it," Poppy replied. She moved closer to him and put an arm around him. "Does it bother you? You said . . . you said you didn't think I was old."

"I don't. You aren't. You're scarcely middle-aged, for a witch." At Poppy's laugh, he said, "All right, you're middle-aged. But I wasn't thinking about it like that. I was wondering whether you think it's strange to have sex with someone who was a student when you were matron."

"That was quite a few years ago, Severus. You've been my colleague far longer than you were one of my charges."

"It's none of my business, and you don't have to answer, and I hope it doesn't insult you, but have you had sex with anyone else who was a student whilst you were matron?"

"Umm, yes, there was one wizard about twenty years ago. But he'd been a seventh-year student when I first started here at Hogwarts, and so he really wasn't very much younger than I was. Ten or eleven years, I think. Then we got together quite a bit after he'd left school."

"I see. I was just curious." He thought about Hermione. She was still so young and had been his student so recently. People would surely talk. The fact that he had been a Death Eater, even a reformed Death Eater and confirmed war hero, wouldn't help matters. That October, he had learned that Minerva had actually encountered some opposition to his continued retention. People were talking about a "clean sweep" and a "fresh start," by which they meant sweeping him away. Minerva had never even mentioned it to him, only working on trying to convince him to stay on for at least one year. If he had known, he probably wouldn't have returned to Hogwarts. He would

have gone and sat in Spinner's End and rotted.

Poppy yawned. "Do you sleep with the lamps lit?"

"What? No . . . I just thought . . . well, if you were going to leave, I would wait to extinguish them," Severus said.

"Oh. You want me to leave?"

"Don't you think you should? It's unlikely anyone will see you leaving my rooms now, but in the morning, students could see you. That would be very indiscreet." It wasn't as though he were ill and needed her professional attentions. She wasn't wearing her matron's pinny, either.

"I thought I could just Floo from your rooms to the Hospital Wing in the morning before breakfast. No one would know where I spent the night. But if you would rather I leave..."

"No, I don't. I didn't think of that." Severus rolled over, pulled her to him, and kissed her. "I would like you to stay."

Poppy smiled. "Good. Then I will."

Severus waved his hand and extinguished the lamps. "Good night, Poppy."

Poppy gave him a squeeze. "Good night, Severus."

He fell asleep with a smile.

NEXT

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Morning After

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Severus has a very surprising but pleasant start to his day. Poppy finds someone waiting for her in the infirmary.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Morning After

Chapter 40 of 118

Tuesday, 9 March 1999. Severus has a very surprising but pleasant start to his day. Poppy finds someone waiting for her in the infirmary.

Parts of the first half of the chapter contain sexually explicit imagery and language.



Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Morning After

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Severus woke, and as he rolled over and felt someone beside him, he remembered making love with Poppy the night before. He had slept very well. Of course, he had had more sex in the last two days than he'd had in the last decade. That might have contributed to it. Endorphins or something. He put his arm around Poppy and curled himself around her. His hand came to rest on one of her breasts, but he restrained himself from playing with it. It was early still, and she didn't need to wake yet. A few minutes later though, he felt her stir, and he kissed the back of her head.

"Good morning, Poppy," he whispered, hoping that she didn't have morning-after regret.

"Mmm, Severus," she said with a sigh. "This is nice."

"This is especially nice," Severus said, caressing her breast.

She wiggled against him. "I think you have something rather nice, too. And getting even nicer."

Severus laughed softly and kissed her shoulder. "I can think of something I could do with it," he said, pressing his cock against her.

"So can I," Poppy replied, turning in his arms.

She took his cock in her hand and stroked it, then she pushed the covers off and rolled him onto his back.

"I even like to look at you," she said. She smiled and stroked a finger up his length. "Your cock looks very happy right now."

"It is," Severus said, admiring her breasts in the half-light.

Poppy slid down the bed, kissed the head of his cock, and then lowered her mouth around him. Severus stiffened, then relaxed; Poppy wouldn't do that if she didn't want to, he told himself, and her mouth and tongue felt good around his cock. She licked and bobbed, then Severus felt her reach between his legs. She raised her head and looked at him.

"I thought I'd try something. If you don't like it, tell me," she said.

He felt her finger at his anus as her tongue swirled around his balls, then her mouth closed around his erection again as she inserted a slippery finger. She looked up to see his reaction. His lips were parted, his eyes were closed, and his breathing was fast. She lowered herself around his cock again as she withdrew her finger. She inserted two fingers, rubbed, and Severus moaned.

Poppy raised up again. "All right?"

"Gods, yes," he gasped.

She put her mouth around his cock and slowly began to move up and down, pressing with just the tip of her tongue as she moved down his length and back up again, and pulsing her fingers on the wonder-spot she had found so quickly and easily.

He came suddenly, shouting and spurting cum as Poppy lowered her mouth around him and swallowed, his cries inarticulate and primal.

Poppy kissed his shaft as she removed her fingers from him. She wiped them on the towel that was still in the bed, then she Summoned her wand from the other room and cast a quick cleansing charm on her hand before moving up to lie beside him. She rested her head on his shoulder and he put an arm around her.

Severus turned his head and kissed her forehead. "I can't believe you did that, but it was wonderful."

"Which?"

"Either. But especially, you know, with your fingers."

"I had a feeling you might enjoy that," she said.

"Why?" He wondered if she could tell he'd had anal sex recently. She was a mediwitch, after all. That would be embarrassing.

"Many men do. Not all, of course. And I thought that since you say you're inexperienced, maybe it was something you hadn't tried before, or if you had, it might have been quite a while ago. And a lot of witches don't like to do it."

"I can understand that," Severus said. He was squeamish at the thought of touching someone's anus, despite what he'd done with Gareth. "Do you like it? Done to you?"

"Female anatomy is different. Some women do like to have their rectal area stimulated. There are a lot of nerves down there. But I don't like it. I don't dislike it terribly, but it doesn't do a thing for me," Poppy said with a shrug. "You'll need to see, depending on who you're with."

"It seems as though for years, I barely thought about sex," Severus confessed. "I was too consumed by everything else in my life, particularly once the Dark Lord returned. I got used to not having sex, not thinking about sex, not even missing sex. Now, though . . . especially the last few days, it seems that I think about it all the time."

"Probably because you're feeling more relaxed, healthier...and your diet is much better. It will calm down. I doubt you'll become obsessed by it." She raised her head and grinned at him. "If you do, though, I'd be happy to help you out again."

"I will remember that," Severus replied, returning her smile with a small one of his own. "You are incredibly sexy, you know. I was thinking about you yesterday and the day before...trying not to, but it seemed that once I'd noticed how attractive you are, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I still didn't intend to seduce you...I wouldn't even have thought that possible."

"I am glad you did," Poppy said softly, "even if it never happens again."

Severus swallowed. It couldn't happen again. He was taking Hermione on their second date on Friday. He couldn't have sex with other people when he was dating Hermione. But they weren't really dating yet, he reasoned to himself. And it wasn't as though he'd intended to have sex with Poppy. Of course, it wasn't exactly an accident, either. You couldn't accidentally have sex. Whoops! I just accidentally stuck my cock in you and fucked you. So, sorry! It was an accident! He smiled to himself.

"What are you thinking?" Poppy asked, noticing his smile.

"Just that one can't accidentally have sex. Mistakenly, perhaps, but hardly accidentally," he said. His hand began to play absently with her breast, stroking it and teasing her nipple.

"That does sound unlikely," Poppy agreed with a chuckle. "So, are you thinking this was a mistake? Do you regret it?"

"I don't know. I do know that it felt very good," Severus said, "and that I liked waking up next to you this morning. But it doesn't seem like a good idea to do this again."

Poppy nodded against him. "I actually woke up in the middle of the night and was confused for a moment about where I was. When I remembered and felt you beside me," she said, holding him bit more tightly, "to be honest, I almost left. I have known you for a long time, and I was afraid that you would wake up and have regrets and, well, that it might be unpleasant."

"I can understand that," Severus said softly, "but I'm glad you stayed. I think that I would have been upset if I'd woken up and you were gone without saying anything."

"I thought that if you did that to me, just left, I would be royally ticked off and quite hurt, and I decided to take my chances that you wouldn't wake up and wish I weren't here. Besides, if we don't want this to affect our daily relationship, I think it's best to part this morning on good terms."

"I can try," Severus said. "I need to use the loo, but if you need it first?"

"No, thank you. I went when I woke up earlier."

"I didn't even notice you get up or come back," Severus said as he swung his legs out of bed.

"You were very sound asleep, and I tried to be quiet."

Severus used the loo and washed, though he didn't take a shower, thinking that might be rude, especially since Poppy would need to leave soon. He could very easily understand her worries about his reaction when he woke up. He could be very nasty, and he was certain that he must have said some unpleasant things to her over the years. After the *Adfectus* was released, he had been an utter bastard to Minerva. He had regretted it immediately, but that was his usual method of dealing with anything uncomfortable or unwelcome. Perhaps waking up next to Poppy, happy that she was there, was a good sign that he was becoming a little less of a bastard, a little more comfortable in his life.

Walking back into the bedroom, Severus warmed to see Poppy lying on her back in his bed, a sheet and blanket only pulled up to her waist. Seeing her there, reclined on his bed, she looked like a goddess, or one of those beautiful mortal women whom gods take for lovers. She opened her eyes and smiled at him, one of her hands drifting over her breasts. He stopped, transfixed.

"See something you like?" she asked.

He nodded, watching as her hand moved languidly from breast to breast, then down her torso to push the covers aside. Her left leg was bent, and he could see her crux. His cock was growing heavy. He took one step closer to the bed. Her hand drew circles over her stomach and lower abdomen.

"Don't stop."

"You like this, Severus?" Her voice was low.

"Yes," he whispered from between dry lips.

His erection was full, and his cock twitched as he watched her hand move lower. When her fingers reached her crux, he let out a breath and took another step closer, his cock bobbing.

"I need something right here," Poppy said, running her fingers over her clitoris to her opening, "and I see you have something very nice there. It might be just what I need." Her eyes were focussed on his cock.

"Do that again," he whispered as her hand travelled back up over her stomach.

"What? This?" she asked, bringing her fingers back down to touch her clitoris and open her folds. She smiled at his reaction. "Do you have something that might help me here?" She continued to touch herself.

Severus stepped up beside the bed. "Would this do?" he asked, touching the head of his cock.

Looking at his erection, Poppy nodded. She rolled toward him then knelt on the bed in front of him. She reached out and touched him, stroking his length with her fingertips.

"I think that will do quite well," she said.

Severus pulled her toward him and bent his head, kissing and nipping her shoulder, running his hands over her back and buttocks, her arms around him holding him tightly.

He turned his head and whispered into her ear. "You have such a nice pussy. I liked to see you touching it."

She drew back and looked at him, and he thought for a moment that he had offended her, but she simply moved further back on the bed so that he could see her and she began to rub herself with two fingers of one hand as she played with one of her breasts with the other. She lay back and spread her legs, still touching herself.

"You like this, Severus? You like watching me?"

He nodded; his tongue emerged to lick his dry lips. He wanted to ask her if she could come touching herself, but he didn't think he should.

"Do you want to help?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said hoarsely.

She smiled. "You have a very fine cock there, Severus. Don't you think it needs something?"

"Yes, but not yet," he said, hoping that she wouldn't stop touching herself.

"You do like this . . . I don't mind indulging you if I can indulge myself later."

"Yes," he breathed as he watched her begin to roll her nipple between her fingers.

Poppy closed her eyes. She bent her legs more as she began to rub herself harder and faster. Her face was flushed.

"Come, Poppy, I want to see you come," Severus whispered.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. "Can't quite. I need some help. Lend me a hand?"

He nodded and reached toward her. "Don't stop, though." He put two fingers into her and began to thrust, their hands meeting as he moved his fingers in and out and she continued to rub her clitoris. She wriggled against his hand, and he drew out completely only to insert three fingers.

"Up, up," Poppy gasped.

He changed his angle and smiled to hear her moans grow louder.

"Talk to me, Severus," she groaned.

"You are so beautiful, so sexy, Poppy," he said in a deep, low voice. "I love to see you pleasure yourself. You excite me so much. Seeing you makes me want to fuck you, put my cock where my fingers are, and fuck you till we come." He hoped she didn't mind the raw language, but he didn't know what else to say. "I want to put my cock in your pussy and fuck you."

Her buttocks were raised off the bed and she was gasping and moaning.

"I want to eat your pussy, Poppy. I want to lick you and suck you until you come," he said with a growl.

"Oh, gods, yes," she shouted.

Severus could feel her coming around his fingers.

She relaxed back down onto the bed. "Gods, Severus, you have such a sexy voice," she said as she caught her breath.

He could hardly keep himself from breaking out in a grin. She had come again for him. He touched her and talked to her and she came, passionately and strongly. Minerva had been right; when he was with someone who chose to be with him and he was himself, he was more than adequate. He didn't think that Poppy had been pretending. Of course, he had to owe much of it to Minerva. He was quite sure that he had been a terrible kisser before she had showed him what she liked. And Gareth. He was such a sensual lover. When in doubt, he could ask himself what Gareth would do. Of course, he was probably different with women. He would have to ask him the next time he saw him.

Poppy looked up at him and smiled in amusement. "You certainly look pleased with yourself, Severus."

He blushed. "I'm just happy you are happy," he said.

"Very, but that was just a warm-up for me," she said, eying his cock. "And you did say that if I indulged your desire to watch me, that you would indulge me."

His blush deepened. He couldn't masturbate in front of her. Just touching himself whilst she was watching seemed odd. Bella once had him masturbate for her, though he hadn't wanted to, then she had cast that spell, and it kept him from coming as she used him for her pleasure. By the time she had finished with him, orgasm was more a painful relief than it was a pleasure for him. And she loved watching others having sex, especially watching someone forcing himself on someone else. Severus suddenly felt a clenching knot in his stomach.

"Severus? What's wrong?" Poppy asked, sitting up, concerned with the sudden change in his expression. "We don't have to do anything else. Honestly." She rose up on her knees and caressed his face.

"It's not that . . ." What could he say to her? But she was a mediwitch, she knew about sex. "I just suddenly worried that what I had you do...was it kinky? Was there something wrong about it? Wanting to watch you?"

"Oh, no, Severus," Poppy said, shaking her head. "No, there was nothing wrong with that. I think it's actually quite normal to find that arousing, especially for a man. And you didn't force me to. I didn't feel as though I had to do it. I enjoyed seeing you become aroused by me. And you lent a hand, so to speak. Did someone tell you there was something wrong with it? Or with liking to look at women?"

He shook his head. "No." He wished he could tell her about Bella. He had mentioned her very obliquely to Minerva, but he hadn't said very much about her or what they had done...what he had let her do to him.

"What is it then?"

"I just worried that it was kinky," he said, feeling foolish.

"There's good kinky and bad kinky, Severus. Bad kinky is when people get hurt or force each other to do things that they don't want to do. Good kinky is something just a little out of the ordinary for you, but still arousing and completely consensual and harmless," Poppy said gently. "Some people think that having sex in any way other than the woman lying flat on her back not moving and the man on top is kinky. This was just something lovely and erotic, Severus, something warm between the two of us. Nothing at all kinky about it, and certainly nothing bad."

Severus took her in his arms and held her close to him, burying his face in her hair and kissing her neck.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Now, what about this?" she asked, reaching between them and touching his partially erect penis. It twitched as she ran her fingers over it.

"Breakfast begins in a half hour," Severus said.

"That's plenty of time. Besides, skipping just one breakfast shouldn't hurt us. You could go up a little late, after I've left here, and I could just have a bite in the Hospital Wing. I often do that."

Severus closed his eyes, enjoying Poppy's caresses of his balls and penis. "That is an idea."

"Mhmm," Poppy said, kissing his throat. "I want you, Severus. I want you one more time. You are such a strong, sexy lover, and you have such a good cock. It feels so good in me."

He returned her kisses, kissing her head and face wherever his lips could touch her and running his hands over her body. "I'm glad you like my cock in you," he whispered. "I like to have my cock in your cunt..." He paused and stilled his hands. "Sorry."

"I don't mind if you use that word with me, just as long as you aren't calling me one." She drew back and looked up into his eyes. "You do need to be careful who you use it with, though, and how. Some women could find it offensive."

He nodded. "I was just getting carried away, thinking about being with you."

"Please, do get carried away," Poppy murmured, squeezing his cock.

"I think I will carry you away," Severus said, lifting her by her buttocks and stepping away from the bed. He was pleased to feel her legs come around his waist as she put her arms around his neck. "I will carry you away," he whispered, "and I will fuck you until you come."

Poppy closed her eyes, her head back, relishing the sensation of his cock rubbing against her folds. Severus carried her to the nearest wall and pressed her back up against it. He rocked his hips, rubbing his erection against her.

"Tell me what you want, Poppy, tell me," he said. "I want to hear you say it."

"I want you to fuck me, Severus."

"Do you?" He pressed his erection against her folds.

"Oh, yes, Severus, fuck me until I come," she moaned.

He lifted her more as she pushed up with her hands on his shoulders, and he felt the head of his cock slide over her clitoris. He shifted slightly, and his cock was at her entrance. He thrust up as he lowered her onto his erection.

"Oh, gods, Poppy, this is so good, so good," he moaned. His entire cock was surrounded by her wet warmth, and he began to thrust, pounding her against the wall. "I'm fucking you, Poppy, come for me, come for me, Poppy." He kept thrusting, grinding against her, pumping hard and fast as her gasps became moans and cries of pleasure.

Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as she came shouting his name. Severus stopped and looked at her, his eyes shining.

"Good?" he asked.

"Oh, very good, Severus," she said as she caught her breath.

"I have more left," he said.

"More fucking left?" she asked with a laugh. "Then fuck me, Severus."

Pressed up against her, Severus began to push and pull, moving less energetically this time, grinding against her clitoris as he rolled his hips.

"How many times can you come, Poppy?" he whispered in her ear as he moved his cock in her. "How many?" He sucked her earlobe.

"You can find out," she said, tightening her grip on him and flexing her muscles around his cock as she wriggled against him.

"I want to be record-breaking," Severus said. "How many times?"

Poppy let out a laugh. "Such a Slytherin! So much ambition!" She kissed his cheek. "Just do it and we'll count," she said.

"It's two already," he said.

"Talk to me, tell me how much you like this," Poppy said, "talk to me in that sexy voice of yours."

"You know you are sexy, Poppy. You have the sexiest breasts. I see them and I want to suck and lick them," he said, still moving in her, stretching her with each thrust. "That's what I noticed first, your sexy breasts. I couldn't help thinking about them, dreaming about them. Those wonderful nipples, sucking your nipples. And you have such a sexy pussy. I want to touch it, fondle it, rub you, put my fingers deep in you, and when I'm done with that, I want to eat your pussy. I want to lick you and taste your wetness. I want to put my tongue in you and I want to lick your clitoris. And then I want to fuck you. I want to put my cock in your pussy and fuck you, fuck you hard until you come. Push you up against the wall like this and fuck you. Just fuck you hard. Fuck you and fuck you until you come."

"Oh, gods, again, Severus, yes, yes, yes," Poppy shouted as she came. "Oh, yes, oh, yes, oh oh oh, Severus. Oh . . ." She sighed and rested her head against his shoulder.

"Three. Tied with last night," Severus said with a wicked grin. "Think we can double that?"

"Lie down on the floor," Poppy said with a gasp. "Put me down and lie down on your back."

Severus lay down and watched as Poppy straddled him, guiding herself down onto his cock. The thought flashed through his mind that Bella used to do that, but he immediately dismissed it. This felt nothing like being with Bella had felt. His cock was enveloped in her soft, wet, warmth, and he could feel her squeeze around him as she settled all the way down.

Poppy began to ride him, sliding back and forth on his cock, sometimes sitting up, sometimes bent forward. He watched her breasts, then reached up to fondle them.

"I'm coming again," she cried, riding him harder and faster, pounding her clitoris against him. "I'm coming again! Oh, Severus!"

He felt her orgasm pulse in waves against the head of his cock, and he gripped her thighs. He knew what he wanted next. If he didn't do something different, he would come soon himself, and he wanted to get to six.

After she had rested, catching her breath as she lay on top of him, he said, "Now I want to taste you, Poppy."

She raised her head and looked down at him. "You really want to get to six, don't you? I would be perfectly happy like this."

He shook his head. "Six. And," he said with a grin, "in the sitting room, I think."

He brought her into the sitting room and had her sit down in the wingback chair.

"This is my favourite chair. I sit in it at the end of every day. Now when I sit in it, I can remember you sitting naked in it, your beautiful breasts there for me to see, and I can remember eating your pussy in it. No matter how bad my day is, that will be a good thought."

He had her sit forward with her legs hooked over the arms of the chair. When she leaned back and put her arms up to hold onto the wingback, he smiled down at her parted folds, then he knelt in front of her. First he simply nuzzled her, then he circled her entrance with his tongue before beginning to lick rapidly from her entrance to her clitoris and back again. He flicked the tip of his tongue across her clit, then inserted two fingers and began to rapidly move them in and out as he stimulated her clitoris with his tongue. He felt her shift beneath him, and he looked up at her face. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing through her mouth.

"More," she whispered.

He began to lick her again, and she rocked against him.

"Oh, almost, Severus, almost," Poppy moaned. "Your fingers, the angle, toward the front, harder, harder."

He began to thrust his hand again at a new angle, and his tongue could feel his thrusting fingers as he licked her. He felt her grab his head, but she did not push him toward her, she just held on.

"Yes, Severus, yes, just like that, gods, gods, yes," she cried, and then she came, sobbing, her orgasm engulfing her until she went limp.

He kissed her stomach then gently brought her legs down from the arms of the chair. He stayed on his knees in front of her, kissing her thighs and nuzzling her as she began to comb her fingers through his hair.

"I don't know if I have anything more in me," Poppy whispered. "That was almost too good, especially after the others. I didn't think it would end. I thought I would die, it was that good."

He looked up at her, his eyes soft. "Really? Or are you just saying that because you're tired and want to quit, or because you want to please me?"

Poppy shook her head. "No, it really was that good. I am telling you because I knew it would please you to know."

"Was it the best you've ever had?" Severus asked hopefully.

Poppy smiled. "It was right up there, Severus," she said, caressing his face, "and I've had very, very good."

"Can we try for one more? Even if we don't make it?"

Poppy laughed. "Yes, we can. Besides, you still need to come."

Severus shook his head. "I want to, but I need to tell you that I never knew how good it could feel just to do this, to make someone feel so good, to know that I did it."

She caressed his jaw. "Yes, you did it, dear Severus."

"Should we go back into the bedroom?" he asked.

"No, I think here is just fine. And I think we can make another memory for your chair and possibly create a greater likelihood that I can come again this time, too, since you seem set on trying for it."

"You want me to sit in it?"

"No, although if we were ever to do this some other time, that would be nice," Poppy said. She moved him out of the way as she stood, then she leaned over the arm of the chair. "I need another cushion."

Severus Summoned one from the couch, and she placed it in the seat in front of her and leaned forward, her buttocks in the air, only her toes still touching the floor.

"I'm ready when you are, Severus."

"Did you want me . . . where?" he asked, unsure precisely what she wanted since she had said she didn't like anal sex.

"Where did you say you liked to be?" Poppy asked.

"In your . . . pussy," he whispered.

"Yes."

He guided himself into her, then he stopped, looking down at her, creating the memory of what it felt like to have his cock all the way in her as she was bent over in front of him. Slowly, he began to thrust, pistoning in and out of her, feeling the head of his cock hit her deep inside with every thrust. His movements quickened, and Poppy began to moan.

"That's good, Poppy, it's so good. So good to be inside you, so sexy, Poppy," he said as he pumped.

"Harder," she groaned. "Harder, please."

He began to move faster and more forcefully, reaching around her and finding her clitoris. He teased her nub as he continued to move in and out, faster and harder. He didn't think he could last any longer when Poppy began to pound the cushions. Her buttocks trembled against him, and he could hear her cries muffled in the pillow in front of her.

"Shit, yes! Yes!" Severus shouted, thrusting again as he came, then holding himself still against her.

He moved back and let his cock slide from her. He gently removed the cushion from in front of her, and he urged her around as he sat down, pulling her into his lap.

His lips on Poppy's forehead, Severus glanced at the clock on the chimneypiece. Twenty minutes before his first class. He hadn't finished correcting their essays, but he didn't care.

A few more minutes ticked by, and he said softly, "I think that was my breakfast."

Poppy looked up at him then followed his gaze to the clock.

"Oh, Merlin," she moaned. "I should be gone already."

"Your clothes are out here, at least. You can start getting dressed."

"My wand is somewhere in your bedroom, I'm not sure where, could you bring it to me?"

Severus nodded and left her to find her robes from the night before. He took longer than Poppy would have thought necessary, but when he returned, she saw that he had shaved and put on a pair of trousers and a clean shirt, and he was carrying two mugs.

"Tea. From Muggle teabags, and no milk or sugar, I'm afraid," he said, putting a mug down on the table beside her as she put on her stockings.

"Thank you," Poppy said, reaching for her wand. She held up her knickers and cast *aReparo* on them, then stood and pulled them on. There was a long mark along where they had been torn.

"Sorry about your knickers," Severus said.

"That's all right...it was in a good cause," she said with a smile, trying to take a sip of her hot tea, then blowing on it.

Severus pulled out his wand and cast a mild cooling charm on it for her. "How is it now?"

She sipped. "Perfect."

He drank his tea. Five minutes before his first class. He couldn't even remember which one it was or what they were brewing that day. Oh, yes, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw fourth-years. That was an easy class, with fewer complete dunderheads than usual.

"I have to go," he said, setting down his mug and reaching for his frockcoat and teaching robe.

"You probably need a freshening charm on those. The robe, anyway. You were wearing it last night." She raised her wand. "May I?"

Severus nodded and pulled on his jacket as she cast the charm on his robe.

"You can stay and finish your tea," he said, thinking that there had been a time when he wouldn't have willingly let her remain alone in his rooms.

"That's all right. I've had enough. I'll get something from one of the house-elves. You should, too, when you have a break between classes."

"I'll be fine," he said awkwardly.

She put her hand on his chest and reached up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Severus."

He shook his head. "Thank you," he said softly, then he watched as she Flooed away.

The clock on his mantle told him he should be entering his classroom at that moment. He turned and left in a swirl of black robes.

Poppy stepped into the infirmary to find someone waiting for her.

"Good morning, Minerva," she said, hoping she didn't look too much as though she had just spent the last two hours being fucked by the Potions master...or by anyone else.

"Good morning."

"Did you need something?" Poppy asked, suddenly concerned that there had been an emergency during the night and they hadn't known where she was. But a house-elf could have found her, or Minerva could have used one of her Charmed parchments. It would have been embarrassing, but they could have found her.

"I came down to see you last night. Albus was playing Go with Filius and they were in the middle of what looked to be a long game, so I thought we could spend some time together. I went to your rooms and you didn't answer your door...Mrs Framingham said you weren't in. You weren't here in the infirmary, either. Then when you weren't at breakfast, I was a little worried about you, so I came up to see you."

"Oh, well, I was just out. Getting some morning exercise," Poppy said. She knew she was blushing.

"Severus wasn't at breakfast, either," Minerva said.

"I'll have to speak to him about not falling back into bad habits and not eating regular meals," Poppy said briskly. "Speaking of which, I'm ready for my breakfast. Care to join

me for a cup of tea?"

Minerva followed Poppy back to her rooms. When they walked in, Minerva observed the teapot, two cups and saucers, and a small pitcher with some milk still in it. Poppy saw her gaze.

"Sorry, didn't bother cleaning up. I'll just get rid of this and we can have something. I might call a house-elf," she said. "Is there anything you would like?"

"Who did you have for tea?"

Poppy stopped partway to her small kitchen. "What?"

"I had a meeting with Severus yesterday evening. He mentioned that he was going to come to see you."

"Yes, he did. Two of his students poisoned themselves accidentally. I gave him tea," she said, going into the kitchen.

Minerva followed her and stood in the doorway and watched her pulling fresh teacups from her cupboard and cleaning her teapot.

"You don't usually leave your teapot standing with tea left in it like that," Minerva observed.

Poppy shrugged. "I'm not always as careful about such things as you are, Minerva. You always have to have everything just so. I'm surprised you haven't driven Albus crazy."

Minerva raised an eyebrow, but didn't respond to that. "Severus stayed for tea with you. Isn't that nice. He seems to be becoming more and more sociable."

"Yes, well, it was just a cup of tea," Poppy replied as she put fresh tea leaves in the pot.

"It will be nice to see him having a real life after all he's been through," Minerva said. "Hermione has been good for him, I think."

"It's nice she took the apprenticeship with Gareth," Poppy said.

"It makes dating much easier for them, since she's just down in Hogsmeade."

"Dating? Who?"

"Hermione and Severus, of course," Minerva replied, taking the teacups out into the sitting room, leaving Poppy to bring the tea and milk.

Poppy blinked, took a breath, and followed Minerva out. She carefully set the teapot down. Her mind was buzzing. It had just been one night. It had just been sex. Just sex. Just one night. They both said that. But she hadn't known he was dating someone. He hadn't said anything about it. If he and Hermione were dating, they weren't having sex. Or they were, and Severus had lied to her. He had made her feel special and sexy, and she thought that she had brought him pleasure and had met needs that had gone unfulfilled for years. She knew about the *Adfectus*, Minerva had told her, but that was once, under the influence of a spell. She had the impression from Minerva that Severus wasn't experienced, and she certainly thought it quite credible that he hadn't had sex during the years after Voldemort returned. She knew what his physical and mental state had been then. She had believed him.

She poured their tea. "I didn't know that Hermione was dating Severus," she said. "I didn't know that Severus was dating anyone."

"Were you going to call a house-elf for some breakfast?" Minerva asked.

"No, I'm not as hungry as I thought I was," Poppy replied, feeling sick.

"Did you spend the entire night with him?" Minerva asked.

The lid of the teapot clattered as Poppy put down the pot, almost dropping it. "What?"

"Did you spend the entire night with Severus?" Minerva repeated.

"How dare you ask such a thing? He came up here to discuss a Potions accident. We had tea. If there were anything more to it, it would be absolutely none of your business," Poppy said indignantly.

"Poppy, you are wearing the same robes you wore yesterday. There is a tea stain on your skirt and I have not known you to put dirty robes on first thing in the morning. Your hair is a mess. You were not at breakfast. Severus was not at breakfast. You left your teacups out, half-filled with tea. You were not here when I came down late in the evening. You obviously were here earlier in the evening with him. You were not here this morning. You Flooded through to the Hospital Wing. Where did you Floo from? You weren't just out for a walk."

"You have no right to speculate about such things, Minerva. You were sleeping with Albus when you were Head of Gryffindor and he was Headmaster, and you kept it secret. For years. You told me, but you still snuck around with him...you did!...keeping it a secret from almost everyone. Even after you were married. But you wanted your privacy and I respected that. And then for all of last year, you led me to believe you were having an affair with a married man. Robbie was Albus, and so you weren't, but nonetheless, you did let me believe it. And in front of the school, too. And I never, not *once*, said anything in judgment to you about carrying on with Robbie. So you have no right to ask me where I was last night. I was in the castle. If there had been an emergency, a house-elf could have found me. If I'd wanted to tell you, I would have, but now I don't even have that choice, and it was private, something very private." She blinked back tears, refusing to let Minerva see her cry.

Minerva shook her head. "What were you thinking? More to the point, how did you do it? Was he vulnerable? Did he mention to you that he was nervous about his sexual abilities? Consult you as a mediwitch? Ask for some spells or some literature to help him along? And you thought the personal touch would be more effective?"

Poppy was livid with anger. "You are suggesting something foul, Minerva, and I cannot believe that you would do that. How many years have we known each other? How can you believe that? What is it? Are you jealous? You think that it would take a spell for Severus to want a woman? And you think that Severus would just . . . just go along with that, my 'personal touch'?" She shook her head, tears in her eyes. "I can't believe you could think such a thing of me. Don't you think that maybe it was the other way around? Maybe he used me? Played on my stupid Hufflepuff sympathy, flattered a lonely old witch?"

"Severus talked to me before he came to see you, Poppy. He was in a vulnerable state. He didn't say very much; that's not like him. But he was nervous about his lack of sexual experience and worried that he was completely inept in the bedroom."

Poppy sat down heavily. "So I was an experiment for him," she said softly. She raised her eyes and looked at Minerva. "That's what you're saying. Either I seduced him, playing on his vulnerability and taking advantage of my position as Hogwarts matron, or he was using me."

"I didn't mean that. I am sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you took advantage of his vulnerability deliberately. I know that you wouldn't do that. Or that he was only using you. I'm sorry," Minerva said softly.

"After all these years, that you would think that I..."

"I didn't mean that. I just . . . Sometimes I don't choose my words as well as I might. I'm sorry."

Poppy closed her eyes and tears squeezed out. She tried to remember what it had felt like to wake up with Severus's arm around her, how he had amused her with his

comments, and even with his insecurities, although they had only warmed her heart, and she had felt no derision for him. She could remember him telling her that the reason he was able to hold back and bring her pleasure was that he was thinking of her. She had known that he wanted her affirmation, that he wanted her to tell him that he was a good lover, and he certainly was a good lover. He had seemed so happy, too. And yes, somewhat vulnerable, as Minerva had said, and even oddly naive, but she hadn't felt that he was incapable of saying "no" to her.

She never should have followed Severus down to the dungeons. Had it been almost any other wizard, and certainly any on the current staff, she wouldn't have. It had been a mistake to follow Severus. Perhaps he had counted on that, luring her to his lair. When she was with him, it had felt right and normal and good. Now, she was unsure. Severus was a Slytherin and a former Death Eater. Could he have played her just to have sex, pretending to be inexperienced and nervous? But surely he would not have had a conversation with Minerva about his insecurities that very evening. He would have no way of knowing that they would talk, or that Minerva would break his confidence and tell her what he had said. Was he using her just for practice so that when he and Hermione first did it, he would not feel nervous? Even that wouldn't be so bad if he had told her at some point during the night that he was seeing Hermione...or just that he was seeing some nameless witch...and he was nervous about having sex with her. She wouldn't have particularly liked it, but she could have understood it. And it had been just for the night. They had both said that...as she had put it, lovers for the night, colleagues again in the morning. He hadn't misled her into thinking he wanted more, and she hadn't wanted more. She still didn't.

No, Poppy could not believe that the time they had spent had been a part of some underhanded scheme of his. He had flirted with her, that much was true, and his flirtation had become seductive, but he had been surprised by himself, and he hadn't expected her to follow him back to his rooms. She was sure of it. She remembered his pleasure and his warmth, his thoughtfulness, the way he had brought her a towel and a warm, wet flannel. He had let her spend the night. He had made her tea. She blinked and tears ran down her face.

"Excuse me a minute, Minerva," she said, her voice slightly hoarse. "I need to take a potion."

She went into her bathroom, but there was none in her supply there. Of course there wouldn't be. She so seldom had any opportunity to even flirt with a man that she probably hadn't restocked it in three or four years; she never would have noticed, and it probably wouldn't have been any good any longer, anyway.

"Sorry, I need to go fetch some from the infirmary," Poppy said, coming back out into the sitting room.

"I can get it for you," Minerva said softly. "Contraception?"

Poppy nodded. She had almost forgotten, she had been so disturbed by Minerva's suggestions. Whilst Minerva was gone, she washed her face, brushed her hair, and put it back up. She certainly had looked frowsy. Anyone seeing her would have guessed she had come directly from someone's bed.

She came back out and took the vial that Minerva handed her, downed it in one gulp, then made a face. "I should have had something to eat first. My stomach will be off all day now."

Poppy sat down and looked dazedly at her teacup. "I had no idea that he was dating anyone, Minerva. It wasn't like you think, not for me, anyway, and I don't think for him, either. But I didn't know he was in a relationship. I wouldn't have done anything if I had any idea. He didn't say anything."

Minerva opened her mouth to say something, but Poppy interrupted her. "It really wasn't at all like you suggest. I just can't believe . . . it's not like Severus to do what he did and say what he did. I think he meant it all. He would have had to have created layer upon layer upon layer of scheming and duplicity, and I think I would know if he had. I think he was sincere. It was hard for me to believe that he was as inexperienced as he said, though from what you told me after the *Adfectus*, I believed he told me the truth about that. I still had no clue that he was involved with anyone. That must be why he said it couldn't happen again...which I concurred with completely, even before we did anything."

"Poppy..."

"Please, don't lecture me, Minerva. I don't want the memory tarnished any more than it already is. I wanted to hold onto it and have it be a good memory."

"Poppy, I'm sorry if I did that, but I do need to tell you..."

"I don't want to know. You have said too much as it is."

"Yes, I have, and I wasn't precisely accurate in one of my statements," Minerva said.

"What?"

"He told me that he *wants* to date Hermione, not that he *is* dating her. But they have been seeing each other a couple times a month, and she writes him several times a week."

"Oh...well, that's something different, then, isn't it? Why did you let me believe that they were dating?"

"To see your reaction. You weren't admitting to spending the night with him," Minerva said, averting her gaze. "I'm sorry."

Poppy looked at her stonily. "You never used to be like that, Minerva. Severus was far more honest with me than you just were. I think that Severus has improved. You, though...you don't need to behave like you did during the last year of the war, and you certainly don't need to mislead me, of all people, to get me to talk to you. Although it really wasn't any of your business and it still isn't."

"I am sorry. Much of what you say has merit, and I am sorry, Poppy, but it's my business...perhaps not to the degree that would excuse my behaviour this morning, but it is. I am the Headmistress. Although discreet relationships among staff are perfectly acceptable and I wouldn't dream of saying anything about them, I was genuinely concerned about both you and Severus. I want him to stay on here at Hogwarts. I want him to be prepared to become Headmaster one day. I want him to have the success he is capable of. I don't want to see him backslide into his former ways. I don't want his life here to be in chaos and have him flee. I don't want to see him hurt. I also don't want you hurt, on a purely personal level..."

"Minerva," Poppy said, shaking her head in exasperation, "you forget that we are both adults. Severus may be somewhat stunted in his social development, but he is not a child, and I certainly am not. And do you forget that you're talking to me? I am very unlikely to do anything to hurt him; of any witch here at Hogwarts, I think he'd be safest with me. I have seen what he's been through, and I know him a bit better than most. I would like to believe that one reason Severus chose me to flirt with, even if it was a subconscious decision, was that he knew that he could trust me. Other than the fact that he's attracted to me, of course."

Minerva waved her wand and rewarmed their tea and poured them each a cup. "You are right about that, I'm sure. And I suppose I could not have expected you to pop through your Floo and announce you'd spent the night with Severus."

"That would *not* have been discreet," Poppy said with a shake of her head.

"But there's also Hermione to think of. She's young. She's clearly enamoured of Severus even if nothing has come of it yet, and I was the one who encouraged her to get to know him better. When she was still a student here, I encouraged her to develop a friendship with him. I feel responsible."

"I doubt that you are as responsible as you feel," Poppy replied. "She wouldn't have become friends with him, or he with her, if there wasn't some foundation for it. Your encouragement may have made her feel more confident about it, but I doubt it made her decide to try to be his friend, let alone encouraged her to develop a crush on him. And she's young, but she's still an adult. Even if a romantic relationship between them doesn't work out, that happens. It can happen to anyone. Sometimes it comes to a friendly end, sometimes it peters out, and sometimes it ends messily. It isn't your responsibility."

"I am sorry, Poppy. I honestly didn't mean what I said the way it came out. You are an attractive witch, and it shouldn't surprise me if Severus thinks so. It doesn't surprise me that he does, in fact. I'm still surprised you spent the night together, though. I never would have pictured the two of you together. It's hard to fathom."

"Why not? I care about him. I like him. I worry about him. He's always been less unpleasant to me than to most people, which, coming from Severus, is practically a declaration of life-long friendship and devotion. He is quite attractive...and yes, I know that I haven't always thought so, but I began to see him a bit differently after the *Adfectus*, partly because of what you told me about how sweet he could be, but he also seemed changed, and I thought I could see some . . . some glimmer of his soul. I don't know, that sounds foolish, I suppose. But I hadn't given him a second thought that way, not really, other than just noticing him as an attractive male. I suppose I never would have thought we'd end up, you know, in bed...but that's as much because of the age difference and his general disposition as anything else. And I *never* would have thought that *he* might find *me* attractive. So when he began to flirt with me last night here over tea, I wasn't sure at first that that was what he was doing, but ~~he~~*was* flirting, and far more . . . seductively than casual flirting calls for. Although," she said thoughtfully, "that could just be because of his eyes. He has a way of looking at you. Just thinking about it gives me goosebumps."

"Well, I won't mention it again. What you do, what he does, and anything the two of you may do together, it's all none of my business as long as you're discreet." Minerva quirked a grin. "I would recommend looking in a mirror before you return next time, though."

"There isn't going to be a next time. We agreed on that, both before and after," Poppy said.

"I shouldn't ask this, but . . . you said you were surprised he was inexperienced. You, um, you had fun?"

Poppy grinned, then, thinking about the "six times," she laughed. "I had a great deal of fun. It was really something. He must have learned something between being with you and being with me, or maybe it's just because he wasn't under a spell and his life has become more normal in the interim, but I have to say that Hermione...or some other witch...will be very lucky."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"Really." Poppy blushed. "If you breathe a word to another soul, I will never speak to you again...and I just may forget about forgiving you for your earlier comments...but it was the best sex I've had in years, and much better than first-time sex with someone has any right to be. It was almost as good as the best I had with, um, well..."

"My brother," Minerva said, making a slight moue at the thought of her brother having sex.

"Yes. And you mustn't laugh, or ever let on to Severus that I said anything, and I can hardly believe I'm telling you this, although it might convince you that it was a good thing for both of us, but he wanted me to come twice as many times this morning as last night, and he achieved it, being the ambitious Slytherin that he is. Six times this morning." Poppy was beet red. That should show Minerva that she'd had the wrong idea. "He really wanted to bring me pleasure. He enjoyed it. He was very, very sweet about it. It had me in tears, actually. And he does have a lot of scars, I think. Someone sometime did something to him. I could tell, though he wouldn't talk about it. But I've seen it before, though never in a personal context like that. I'd like to believe that it was good for him, that /was good for him last night."

"Well, that is something," Minerva said, blushing herself. "I'm glad. And you certainly have every right to be angry with me about my implications, both intentional and unintentional."

"You know what I think, Minerva? I think you were actually feeling curious, just generally curious because it was Severus in particular, and you needed to justify questioning me. If you had thought I'd been with some other unattached staff member for the night, Caspar or someone, I don't think you would have done much more than give a slight disapproving cluck and tell me to check my hair next time. That's what I think."

"I . . . I just . . . maybe you're right, but I do worry about him. I feel responsible for him. You know the lengths that Albus and I went to to save his life...and not just because he was key to defeating Riddle. I guess I do feel a bit possessive about him."

"You're not his mum, Minerva...good thing, too, or that entire *Adfectus* episode would be even more bizarre than it was...and he's a big boy. If he wants your advice, you can give it to him, but I don't think you should interfere."

"I don't interfere!"

"Yes, you do. You and Albus both. You aren't as bad as he is in some ways, but you're worse when it comes to people's personal lives. He isn't nearly as meddlesome as you can be sometimes...and I mean that in the most loving way."

Minerva flushed. "All right. But sometimes, I just see things very clearly..."

"And sometimes you don't. Like this morning. You almost had me believing that what I had with Severus was some kind of seedy, disgusting encounter, and it wasn't like that at all. You did have me believing that he and Hermione were already a couple and I was 'the other witch.' I know you didn't mean to be unkind, but it was very hurtful."

"I said I was sorry about that," Minerva said.

"I know, and even though I'm still angry about it, I'll forgive you. I am just using it as an example."

"I do usually figure out on my own when to stop meddling, though, as you put it."

Poppy laughed. "Yes, you do have that much sense. You know, I'm getting hungry. Join me in sharing a few buttered crumpets?"

The two witches shared crumpets, drank tea, and talked about other things, restoring their comfort with each other. When Minerva got up to leave, though, she turned to Poppy with a sparkle in her eye.

"*Nine* times and you're never going to see him again? You have more will-power than I would, I'll give you that!" She winked at her friend and left Poppy looking at the closed door and thinking of a surly but occasionally very sweet wizard with eyes the colour of night.

NEXT

Chapter Forty: A Matter of Timing

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Severus broods. Of course.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Sarah Duffy

Author' Note: I've begun posting the Table of Contents for A Long Vernal Season with chapter summaries, dates, and characters (including OCs) to my blog (<http://mmadfan.com/>). It's updated through all of Part Four with a preview of the chapter titles through Part Five. (There are a few spoilers in upcoming chapter summaries, to forewarn you!)

Chapter Forty: A Matter of Timing

Chapter 41 of 118

Tuesday, 9 March 1999. Severus broods, but is that a surprise?



Chapter Forty: A Matter of Timing

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Severus was feeling somewhat sore, very hungry, and peculiarly out-of-sorts by the time his last class of the morning ended. He growled and snapped as he tried to make his way through a stampede of students on their way to the Great Hall. He must be getting soft; they didn't jump out of his way before he reached them anymore. He hadn't had a snack, and he was ravenous. He had also been distracted by thoughts of Poppy, which became worse as the morning wore on. He thought not only of her, but of Hermione. He felt conflicted. It had been bad enough when he had only had sex with Gareth. In a way, he could justify that to himself. It had been an extension of what they had done the previous day, before he had asked Hermione on a date, and Gareth was a man...and although he wasn't entirely certain why that should matter to him, it did.

With Poppy, it wasn't even that she was a witch, or that they hadn't had a previous physical relationship, but that his desire for her was very different from what he had wanted from Gareth, and much more intense. And it had been very, very good. Even as inexperienced as he was, he knew it had been. Poppy had certainly thought so, and he had enjoyed it in a way he had never enjoyed sex with anyone, even with Minerva when he was under the *Adfectus*, and that spell had added to the pleasure of their coupling and his orgasm. The sex with Gareth had been good and highly unexpected, but there had been something that had been missing. It wasn't affection. He had felt a great deal of affection from him. Sexually, he hadn't felt as free with Gareth, and it hadn't felt as all-encompassing as sex with Poppy. Of course, Poppy was a witch, not a wizard, and that probably had been a factor, as well.

He never should have asked Poppy to stay, Severus decided as his second-year Slytherin-Gryffindor class pulverised their lace-wings. It had been wrong of him to do that after he had asked Hermione on a second date. He couldn't say that having sex with someone else was all right just because he hadn't dated her very long. That was a slippery slope, he told himself. If it was okay between the first and second dates, what about between the third and fourth? Or after dating for a month, as long as they hadn't been intimate? At what point would it become no longer acceptable to have sex with other people? No, he shouldn't be having sex with anyone else now that he was going to be dating Hermione.

By the time the second-year class was stirring the final potions, which varied in their degrees of greenish-yellow, Severus told himself that that idea was too extreme. He and Poppy had known each other longer than Hermione had been alive. She had saved his life, just as Hermione had, though perhaps not as dramatically. Poppy was an attractive witch, and kind and good. He and Hermione had shared one kiss after a date that he hadn't intended to be a date. He had made no pledges to her, and he had retracted his request that she not date other people, and she had agreed it was far too soon for such a thing. For all he knew, she could be boffing someone else. That Muggle boy she had economics class with. The thought upset him. If she was having sex with other people, he had a right to have sex with others, too.

As he outlined the steps of that day's potion for the third-year Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw class, he told himself that his justification for having sex was as absurd as the notion that asking someone out on a second date was tantamount to a declaration of sexual exclusivity. He still couldn't shake his sense that he had betrayed Hermione somehow, and yet he hated the thought that his time with Poppy had been wrong. It hadn't felt wrong. But he knew that sometimes he was very good at fooling himself and telling himself that something was all right just because it was what he wanted to do.

By the time he had Vanished the potions brewed by the entire sixth-year class, telling them that they were all incompetent dunderheads who were incapable of brewing a cup of tea, let alone a potion, he decided that the entire problem was that he was not suited for relationships with others. Any kind of relationships. Even attempting a friendship with a normal person wasn't possible for someone like him. Going out on a date with Hermione had been wrong, letting Gareth touch him on Saturday and fuck him on Sunday had been wrong, and Poppy . . . that had been wrong, too.

But the thought that being with Poppy had been wrong, when the memory of her passion and her warmth was so present, so fresh...that seemed more wrong. He remembered waking up next to her. He couldn't think of a night, an entire night, he had ever spent with anyone in his whole life. And she had been so warm and giving. It had been sex, but it had also been more than just sex. Perhaps that was why he felt guilty. It wasn't just the sex, nor just that Poppy was a witch and not a wizard, and whatever that might mean. Being with Poppy had felt meaningful to him. He had lost himself in her when they were together, and it had felt wonderful. He had thought he didn't want it to happen again, and Poppy had agreed that they were lovers for only one night, to return to being just colleagues the next day, but it had been so very good. He liked her, he liked being with her, he cared about her . . .

The thought of having a relationship with Poppy beyond that one night was absurd. The two of them together. That was more absurd than the thought of him with Hermione. He must be in love with Hermione, though. He simply had loved being with Poppy. And he would like it to happen again. Yes, he admitted to himself, regardless of what either of them had said, he would like it to happen again.

By the time he sat down to lunch, Severus was thoroughly confused. He saw Poppy come in and take her seat. She didn't pay him any more attention than usual, though he did think she looked lovely and quite cheerful. She wasn't plagued by doubts apparently. Whatever he did, if he had made a mistake by sleeping with her, he couldn't take it out on her. It wasn't her fault if he had bad judgment, after all. Not about her, but the timing. It was all just such bad timing. He blamed it all on Gareth. If he hadn't touched him, kissed him, massaged him, made him *feel*, he wouldn't have asked Hermione on a date, at least not so soon. If he hadn't been with Gareth, he wouldn't have had his already-increasing libido stimulated, and if he hadn't been with him, he wouldn't have begun thinking about Poppy's breasts and become so very aware that she was an attractive witch. He could be comfortably miserable at that moment, and not so confused and torn in two.

It was all just a matter of timing, Severus thought as he ate his chicken sandwich without tasting it. If he had left before Hermione had come home on Saturday, he never would have asked her on a date. He'd still be acutely aware of his reawakened sexual desire, but even if he had seen Gareth the next day and still had sex with him, then gone to dinner with him and consequently begun contemplating Poppy's sexual attractiveness, and then seduced her, somewhat accidentally, he might have done all that, but he wouldn't be feeling torn. It was all because he had gone on a date with Hermione and asked her out on a second one. He might still long for her and believe himself in love with her, but he wouldn't be so confused about what he should do and whether what he had done was right or wrong. He would simply wish to be able to be with Poppy again.

Severus kept himself from sighing and began eating his vanilla custard without tasting it. He couldn't turn back time and change things. He didn't know what to do. Perhaps he was making it all too complicated. He was so used to being under pressure and having difficult decisions to make with no good choices, perhaps he was over-analysing everything. One thing was certain, he didn't think that he should be expending so much energy and emotion on it. He should just enjoy it. He hadn't had very much pleasure in his life, after all. He had earned some, surely. He would just make one decision at a time.

As he sat and watched the seventh-year class brew their potions, he wondered whether Gareth would envy him. He had slept with Poppy. He had had sex with her. He had made her come nine times. If they had had more time, he thought that he could have brought her even more pleasure. It would have been nice to have had her sit on the chair with him, having her ride him and come. He could hold her breasts and tease her nipples and suck them whilst she moved on his cock. She might be able to come a few times doing that. He knew there were spells that could increase a wizard's lasting power, but the only one he could remember was one of the ones that Bella had used, and that one was unpleasant, to put it mildly. He never had wanted to last with the prostitutes, so he never bothered to learn any. He would have to see whether there were any texts in the Restricted Section, or perhaps in the Headmistress's Library. If he still had his grandfather's books, there would likely be something in them, but the Dark Lord had taken them, all of the good ones, and he'd never got them back. Maybe Gareth knew some good spells.

The class ended and he had them leave their potions on his desk. He closed and warded the door behind them. They were his last class of the day. He very quickly glanced over the potions and assigned each one a grade. At this point, he could tell by the colour and consistency who had brewed them, and he was rarely wrong. He didn't care about that at the moment, though. He just jotted down the grades and banished the potions.

Severus sat behind his desk again and looked out at the empty classroom, but not seeing it. If he learned a good spell from Gareth, he could have Poppy ride him until she was sated. He would enjoy that, unlike when Bella did it. Poppy was gorgeous, her breasts bounced when she rode him, and she loved to give him pleasure, too, he could tell. She had sucked his cock and put her fingers in his anus, after all, and when he had seemed unsure about something, she was warm and sympathetic. She would never restrain him and take her pleasure whilst causing him pain. If they ever tried anything he didn't like, he knew she would stop. He wouldn't even have to say anything. She seemed to be able to tell. Poppy was very sensitive. But he would love to have her sit in his lap on his chair and have her ride him and ride him until she came again and again. He would tease her breasts and tell her how sexy she was. Gods, that was power! And although Poppy was obviously not inexperienced, he didn't think that she was an easy lay, either. He had made the starchy Hogwarts matron desire him, and he had given her pleasure over and over.

His thoughts were arousing him, but he just took enjoyment in the arousal. Yes, Gareth might be able to teach him some spells. And if he did, they would have to practise them. And he would want to know why he was interested. He could tell him that he had fucked Poppy and she had come nine times, but that wasn't enough, that they were both insatiable. Gareth would be envious. He might want to have him tell him how it felt to fuck her, how sexy her breasts were. He could tell him about it whilst they were practising the spells. They could spend a night pleasuring each other. Gareth might go down on him again, swallowing his cum.

Severus pressed his hand against his erection. He needed to see Gareth. He needed to ask his advice about Hermione and to ask him about sex spells. They wouldn't really practise them, though. That wouldn't be a good idea. He would just do that on his own. Not that he would actually be able to use them with Poppy . . . even though he wanted to. Maybe with Hermione someday. After they had been together for a while. And after they had had regular sex and he knew what she liked. Hermione would need to be treated with the deference she deserved.

He pulled out a piece of parchment and wrote a note to Gareth. It was Tuesday night. Hermione wouldn't be back from her Muggle classes until at least ten o'clock or later, since she always went out with friends afterward. Not that it would matter if she were home or not. His note was short and to the point: *"McG...Must see you. Spinner's End. Tonight....S.S.S."*

He went up to the Owlery and sent off his note, then started down to the Great Hall for dinner. On his way, he met Poppy on the stairs, also going down.

"Good evening, Madam Pomfrey," he said, meeting her eyes.

She smiled at him. "Good evening, Professor Snape."

"On your way to dinner?"

"I have to stop by the Hospital Wing first. I was just paying a house call on Professor Flitwick."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He hoped it wasn't the sort of house call she had paid him. Despite Flitwick's attachment to Pomona, he had heard stories about the little wizard's unusual sexual prowess. He remembered one long-forgotten Defence teacher leaning over and whispering to him that if a witch had had sex with Flitwick even once, she was putty in his hands and would do anything to have sex with him again. Severus thought that was an exaggeration, but even so, there might be a kernel of truth to it.

Poppy chuckled softly. "One of his first-year Hufflepuffs had a bit of an accident," she whispered. "Filius was covered with short purple fur. It was very funny."

Severus quirked a smile at her. He found himself walking down the fourth-floor corridor toward the Hospital Wing with her.

"I wish I had seen him."

Poppy looked around then lifted her finger to her lips. "Shh, don't tell anyone, and it's a little bit of a violation of professional ethics to share this, but I took a photograph of him. Purely for purposes of his health records, of course. I thought it important to document."

Severus nodded seriously. "Yes, very important to document."

"I just want to drop off the camera before I go down," she said as she approached the door to her rooms.

"I will wait for you," Severus replied.

They stepped into her sitting room and he closed the door behind them. Poppy took the camera from her skirt pocket and put it in a cupboard, then began to take off her matron's cap.

She turned and looked up at him. "Did you have a good day, Severus?"

He hesitated. "My morning started off very well, but once I left my rooms, it was not as pleasant. The afternoon was better."

"Well," Poppy said with a smile, "it would have been very hard for the rest of the day to be as nice as the start to my morning was."

"Yes, it was very good," Severus said in a low voice, looking down into her eyes. "Truly . . . exceptional."

"It was the best one I can remember in a very long time," Poppy agreed, feeling a flush rise in her cheeks.

"No regrets?" Severus asked.

Poppy shook her head. "None. I hope you don't have any."

He raised his hand and caressed her cheek briefly. "Reservations and questions, but not regrets," he said softly. "It was wonderful. And if I did have any regrets, I would not blame you, and I would still be grateful."

Severus didn't understand the tears in Poppy's eyes. "What is it, Poppy? I am sorry if I said the wrong thing. I am not very good with these kinds of things."

"No, no, Severus," Poppy said, taking his hand and bringing it to her lips, kissing his knuckles. "It isn't that you said anything wrong. It is that what you said, it was supremely right. Perfect. It makes me certain that it was not a mistake to go to you last night."

Severus cupped Poppy's face with his hand. He didn't know what to say. After a long moment, Poppy reached up and put her hand behind his neck and drew him down into a kiss. It began softly, sensually, but rapidly became more passionate as Severus pulled her toward him, one hand on her buttocks, the other still caressing her face. He pressed himself against her, and she could feel his erection beneath his robes. She rolled her hips and he moaned into her mouth.

Poppy broke away and looked up at him, lips parted, panting.

Severus nodded. "Yes," he whispered.

He kissed her as she unhooked his robes then unbuttoned the bottom buttons of his frockcoat. He untied her pinny and broke the kiss long enough to lift it over her head. As she unbuttoned his trousers, he kissed her neck and fumbled with her Charmed hooks until they all unfastened at once. She gasped against his chest as he kissed her shoulders and pushed the bodice of her robes down. Poppy reached inside his pants and grabbed his cock, squeezing its firm length. He let go of her, looked down at her breasts, then knelt quickly and reached up under her skirts to pull down her knickers.

"Now, now," he said urgently.

Poppy stepped back out of her knickers and pulled him toward the couch. When she backed up against it, Severus pushed her down and lifted her skirts. She spread her legs, and he half-knelt on the floor, half on the couch beside her, and put his fingers into her.

"Oh, so slick, such a sexy fuck," he growled.

"I want you, Severus," Poppy gasped as he teased her clitoris.

He slid back onto the couch, and Poppy sat up, moved aside his robes and jacket, pushed down the front of his pants, and straddled his lap as he lifted her skirts out of the way. She lowered herself onto his cock with a loud gasp. Severus closed his eyes tightly and let out a low groan, holding Poppy by her waist. Poppy rode him urgently, rising and falling, pushing against him and rubbing her clitoris against the wool of his frockcoat. Severus opened his eyes as Poppy's moans grew louder and more desperate. Her eyes were closed, her lips were parted, sweat was running in small rivulets down her face, and her breasts were bouncing against his chest. Her repeated shouts and rocking against him as she came brought him right to the edge. He held onto her and pushed her to the floor and kept up the rhythm, pumping, thrusting, and then coming, pushing into her with a shuddering groan.

Severus lay on top of her, his chest heaving, waiting for his heart rate to slow, then he rolled off and rested on the floor beside her, his legs crowded by the sofa. He groped for his wand, then cast a cooling charm, first on Poppy, then on himself.

She chuckled breathlessly. "Thank you, Severus. I think a shower would be even better, but if we're going to get to dinner, we don't have time." She found her wand. "If I may, I can cast a few nice cleaning charms for you."

He turned his head and gave her a crooked smile. "You haven't had to do that for me for professional reasons for quite a while."

"I definitely prefer to cast them for this reason," Poppy said, returning his smile.

After she cast the charms, she said, "I didn't think we were going to do this again, Severus."

"I didn't either," he said as he straightened his clothes.

"Let me just check myself in the mirror...you can go on ahead, if you'd like," Poppy said as she headed for her bathroom.

"No, I'll wait for you." It wouldn't be very gentlemanly to fuck her then just walk out, especially when they were both going to the Great Hall. He might usually behave like an unmannerly boor, but he could be courteous when he wanted to be.

Poppy fixed her hair quickly, then cast a Glamour to reduce the pink in her complexion. Minerva would be curious enough when they entered the Great Hall together...late. No point in giving her or anyone else anything to speculate about.

They entered the Great Hall walking side-by-side at a perfectly appropriate collegial distance, Severus attempting to keep a semblance of a sneer on his face. When he saw the staff table, it was all he could do to keep from grimacing. Albus was having them play musical chairs again, and Benetti was attending dinner that night, which she rarely did when she wasn't scheduled to be there. There were only two places left, next to each other, and one of them was next to Duffy. He hoped that Poppy would take that seat. He wouldn't mind sitting next to Cahill, for all that the new History teacher was almost as big a bore as Binns had been. At least he was a living bore, not a dead one, Severus thought, though he might be able to bore his audiences to death.

Severus wished that he had had some say in who had been hired to fill the vacant positions, but Minerva had promised to leave him alone during the summer and let him think about whether he wanted to return to Hogwarts. Of course, her notion of leaving him alone was different from his. She had written him letters two or three times a week, though rarely mentioning anything at all to do with Hogwarts, but always ending them expressing her hope that she would be seeing him in the autumn and that she looked forward to working with him as her Deputy under more normal conditions than they had. She must have had great faith that he would return, because she never advertised for another Potions teacher.

Happily, Poppy sat beside Duffy, leaving him with Cahill on his right. Cahill was holding forth on some obscure wizarding laws of the sixteenth century, and Filius was politely nodding his head. Severus thought that probably whatever Cahill was talking about, Filius already knew or wasn't interested in. Aside from Dumbledore, Filius was the most well-read wizard he knew, though he didn't know very much about the Dark Arts, as opposed to Dumbledore, who knew more about those than most Dark Wizards did.

Severus listened to Cahill drone on, his peculiar cadence and pomposity grating on his last nerve, and thought about what he and Poppy had just done in her rooms. That certainly hadn't been a good idea, but it had felt very good. She really was a sexy fuck, he thought, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. She hadn't put her pinny back on after she had pulled the bodice of her robe back up, and he could see the creamy skin of her chest, and he knew that beneath her robes were equally creamy breasts with darkly rosy nipples. He averted his eyes and turned his attention to his food.

A sexy fuck. He couldn't imagine saying such words to Hermione. He could see him telling her that she was attractive and that he wanted to make love to her, but he couldn't imagine talking to her about fucking. But if they were fucking, there would be no need to talk about it. Whilst they were fucking, he could just tell her he loved her, if that wasn't too mawkish to say during sex, and that she was beautiful, all the ways that she was beautiful. He might feel differently after they had been together for a while, of course, but in the beginning, he would be very gentle and careful with her and learn what she liked and didn't like. If they got that far, of course. Their relationship might end before that...another reason to be very careful with her feelings. He didn't want to lose her altogether if they broke up. It would be hard to see her with someone else, but he valued her friendship and he didn't want to lose it.

He had been such a fool with Lily. If he hadn't behaved so badly, they might at least have been able to reestablish their friendship. Potter might not have liked it, but Lily wasn't one to let her husband choose her friends for her. She had backbone. But he had behaved badly, then he had behaved more badly, and then he had joined the Death Eaters. That was a clear friendship-ender there.

Minerva was right, he thought as he finished his pork roast. He seemed to make very self-destructive decisions sometimes. Usually when he was acting out of anger, hurt, vengefulness, spite, bitterness, or hubris...or occasionally, sheer stupidity, though that wasn't usually the case.

Even if being with Poppy was a bad idea, he didn't think it was of the same sort as his other mistakes. He wasn't acting out of bitterness or spite, certainly, although he

might be being selfish and self-centred. He glanced over at Poppy again. They were talking about Quidditch. Duffy was clearly quite a Quidditch fan. She was telling Poppy about some Beater, whom she apparently thought was the epitome of male attractiveness. Severus really didn't think that such a thing was an appropriate subject for the staff dining table. Students might overhear, for one thing, and it was mixed company. He thought that if he began waxing on about the pulchritude of some female Quidditch player, particularly in terms similar to those Duffy was using...she had just said something about "sex on legs...or a broomstick," then giggled...he would be hexed and chased from the Great Hall by hordes of indignant witches. He was pleased to see that Poppy was not giggling or contributing her own assessment of some wizard. She did nod and say something about him certainly being an attractive wizard, but that was perfectly appropriate.

"Severus, Severus?"

Severus turned his head toward the two witches. "Yes, Professor Duffy?" He tried to be coldly polite, but not too cold, since he didn't want Poppy to find him offensive.

"You can call me 'Sarah,' you know," she said with a little giggle. Gods, the woman was annoying.

He nodded in acknowledgment.

"I was wondering if you would care to join me for that drink we discussed having yesterday?" she asked.

Severus froze. He would like to put her in her place, and he certainly would like to discourage her from inviting him any time in the future, but he was trying to be on his best behaviour, especially with Poppy sitting right there between them. He hoped Poppy didn't think that he wanted anything to do with Duffy.

He looked at Poppy. In an instant, he knew that she was aware of his predicament, and an amused look crossed her face and then was gone.

"I do hope, Professor Snape," Poppy said, "that you have not forgotten your promise to me."

"Promise . . ."

Poppy shook her head as if disgusted with his memory. "You promised that you would discuss that toxic concoction that Cheever and Hargraves created yesterday, what they substituted for the dragonfly wings, so that I can devise a better remedy if it should happen again. You did say that they were going to have to brew the potion again in detention and that they're both dunderheads. They might do the same thing again."

"Ah, yes. I did." Severus nodded. "I am sorry, Professor Duffy, but I must decline again."

"After, perhaps?" the Divination teacher asked. "That won't consume your entire evening, will it? I'm sure that Poppy will be happy to let you have the rest of the evening to yourself."

At that moment, a Horned Owl flew in and headed straight for Severus. He took the letter, which was just a small parchment folded in three and sealed with a charm. He broke the seal and looked at the letter, holding it so that Poppy couldn't see its contents. Cahill on his other side was now talking about the evolution of laws governing inter-being relationships and was unlikely to try to read it. It was almost as short as his own note had been. *"SS...8 o'clock. SE = your place? No reply nec unless other....McG"*

He refolded the note and turned back toward Duffy. "Madam Pomfrey and I will be having a very short discussion, but I have another engagement directly thereafter," he said with relief. Looking at Poppy, he added, "If you are finished with your dinner, we could have our discussion now."

NEXT

Chapter Forty-One: A Fast Learner

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Severus enjoys his new-found power to bring pleasure.

Rated MA.

Warning for sexually explicit content.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Minerva McGonagall

Author's Note: If you're unfamiliar with the other fics in the *"Resolving a Misunderstanding universe"* (to which *A Long Vernal Season* and *Death's Dominion* belong) and are interested in reading them but haven't any idea where to begin, there's a new post* on my WordPress blog that might help you out, which divides them into three separate, manageable sets. All of the fics can be found at the Petulant Poetess. Ratings range from K+ through MA, and there are several one-shots.

*An active link to the page doesn't work, so you can cut and paste this [http://mmادfan.com/list-links-to-mmادfan-fics/my-fics-sorted-by-type/resolving-a-misunderstanding-universe-stories/](http://mmadfan.com/list-links-to-mmادfan-fics/my-fics-sorted-by-type/resolving-a-misunderstanding-universe-stories/) It's also available on my LJ, though in a slightly different form.

Chapter Forty-One: A Fast Learner

Chapter 42 of 118

Tuesday, 9 March 1999. Poppy extricates Severus from an awkward situation, then Severus enjoys his new-found power to bring pleasure.



Chapter Forty-One: A Fast Learner

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

As Severus walked up the stairs to the Hospital Wing with Poppy, he said softly, "Thank you."

Poppy grinned. "She didn't seem your type, and you looked like a cornered animal for a moment, so I thought I could give you an excuse, and then if you really did want to meet her for a drink, you could simply reschedule your bogus appointment with me."

"I don't. She asked me last night, as well," Severus said as they walked toward the infirmary doors. "She has somehow received the mistaken impression that I am interested in her. I am not, not in any way."

Poppy closed and warded the infirmary door. "I'm glad, actually...it reassures me that you haven't so entirely changed."

"It would be messy even if I were attracted to her. She'd be like a limpet, I think. It would be most distasteful," Severus said, raising his lip in disgust.

"Not necessarily," Poppy said, gesturing to him that he could have a seat in one of her office's guest chairs.

"Are we really going to discuss the potion?" Severus asked, still standing in the doorway to her office.

"No, not unless you want to."

He shook his head and stepped into the room. Rather than take a seat, though, he crossed over to look out the windows behind her desk.

"Do you really have another engagement this evening?"

He nodded. "Yes, I'm meeting a friend at eight."

"Oh."

Poppy came to stand beside him. After a few minutes of silence, she said, "It's none of my business, but who are you meeting?"

Severus looked down at her, an eyebrow raised. "You are right, it is none of your business."

Poppy nodded slightly, and they continued looking out the window in silence.

"What are you thinking about?" Poppy asked.

He turned slightly toward her and looked down, a slightly amused expression on his face. "That question is even more impertinent than your last," he said. "Far more personal."

"Well, it's not as though you would have to tell me, or tell me the truth. You could tell me you were thinking about grounds maintenance or something."

Severus turned toward her completely, taking her arm and turning her to face him. "I was not thinking about grounds maintenance," he said in a low voice. His hand travelled up his arm to her throat and then to her face. "My thoughts were far from that." He caressed her cheek. "I was thinking about you. About us. I was thinking about this evening before dinner in your rooms. I was wondering whether I should regret it because we had agreed it wouldn't happen again, and I cannot regret it. I was thinking of you, Poppy, and how much I like being with you and wondering whether it will happen again, and I was wondering whether it would change things between us if we did do it again . . . and again . . . and again. What it would do to us . . . to you. And to me. Because it was so very good, and I want it to happen again even if I shouldn't."

His soft, low voice and gentle caresses gave Poppy shivers, and his eyes seemed to capture her gaze and hold it, to hold her with invisible bonds, warm, soft, gentle bonds. She tore her eyes away.

"I don't know, Severus," she said, shaking her head. "I don't know. But it was very good." She raised her eyes to his again. "Even the encounter before dinner, as quick as it was, was good."

Severus bent his head and approached her lips slowly. She did not move away. He kissed them gently, seductively, then he whispered, his breath hot in her ear, "I want to bring you pleasure again, Poppy. I want to bring you pleasure and see you come."

Poppy's eyes were closed and she was shaking. With some effort, she took one step back away from him.

"You are wondering whether you should regret it," Poppy said. "You don't yet, and I don't want you to. If we do it again, you might regret it. I wouldn't want that."

"Would you regret it?" Severus asked.

"Unless something dreadful or unthinkable happened, like someone walking in on us, or you stopping in the middle and telling me that it was all a joke and that you find me repulsive, I don't think I would regret it," Poppy said.

Severus stepped toward her. "We can make certain that the first does not occur, and the second is not only unthinkable, it is impossible. If that ever happens, test me for Polyjuice or a curse, because you are so far from repulsive that I can scarcely keep myself from touching you now, and it is no joke." His eyes caressed her from her face to her breasts and back again. "What we did last night and this morning should be proof to you that it was no joke."

When Severus took another step toward her, he was so close that their clothes were brushing together. His gaze never wavering from Poppy's eyes, he drew his wand and cast three spells in quick succession, warding her office against intrusion and eavesdroppers, then he cast a spell on the window, shielding them from any passing glances from the grounds below. Severus bent his head and kissed her forehead, then her cheeks, then her lips, sucking at them gently. He reached behind her and with one touch, released her Charmed hooks.

"You are a fast learner," Poppy breathed as her robes unfastened themselves for him.

Severus merely smirked and pushed down her robes, freeing her arms and baring her to the waist. He stared down at her breasts as he took them in his hands as though weighing them, then he teased her nipples with his thumbs. Still caressing her right breast with his left hand, his right one explored her waistband, looking for the secret to its release. Poppy moved to assist him, but he shook his head and pushed her hands aside. He found the clasp and stepped forward once more, forcing Poppy to back against the bookcase. He released the clasp, and her loosened robes draped around her hips. He pushed them down with both hands and they fell to the floor.

Poppy reached to embrace him, but he shook his head again, then kissed her lips lightly. It occurred to her that if he wished to cause her humiliation, he could undress her, then remove the wards and banish her clothing or something of the sort, but she did not believe he would do such a thing to her. Not this Severus Snape. Not the Severus Snape who was kissing his way from her breasts down her abdomen, who was pushing her knickers down, who was kissing her thighs as his fingers began to fondle her between her slightly parted legs.

She was breathing heavily by the time Severus stood, took her by the arms, and pulled her away from the bookcase. He held her close to him, his clothed body warm against her naked one, his hands caressing her back and buttocks.

"Do you want more, Poppy?" he asked in a whisper.

She nodded.

"I never wanted to eat pussy before," he said, still holding her close and whispering in her ear, "but now that I've tasted you, I want you again. You become so passionate when I lick you there, so very hot. I love to see you lose control and come when I lick you and kiss you. You are so sexy, Poppy, such a very sexy witch. Do you want to come again like that? Do you think you can come again? Can you come again for me?" His tongue darted out and licked the shell of her ear.

"Oh, gods, Severus, don't tease me," Poppy moaned.

He pulled back a little and looked down at her. "But I do love to tease you, Poppy, and to know that it excites you, that it makes you want more, that you want more from me. You do want more from me, don't you, Poppy? Or should we call in Cahill to take care of your needs? Or another wizard? You could have your pick, Poppy," he said as he brought his hand between them and began to rub her again. "We could line them up, every wizard in the castle over seventeen, and you could have your pick, if you like. Or do you want more from me?"

"From you, Severus," Poppy gasped. "From you."

Severus turned her toward the desk and lifted her to sit on it. He moved aside a few things, then pushed her back to lie on the desk. He knelt and pulled her toward him, and she put her legs around his neck. With two fingers, he parted her folds.

"So hot and sexy," he said, stroking a finger lightly over her clitoris. "It makes me want to fuck you, seeing your pussy like this."

He watched himself draw a line with his finger over her clitoris to her entrance and back. Poppy wriggled and arched her back, gently urging him toward her with her heels, but Severus just watched himself play gently with her clitoris and folds. He had never really had the opportunity to spend so much time just looking at a witch's private areas, though it seemed that each witch was as different down there as their faces were, different sizes, different shades, different proportions, but they were all the same, too. Clitoris, inner and outer lips, the entrance, dark and looking so small, but a baby could come out of it, and a cock could slide in. He couldn't see her anus at that angle, but she might let him look at it sometime. She was a mediwitch, after all. She seemed to take these things very matter-of-factly. And she had seen his, though not under these kinds of circumstances. But she had put her fingers in him that morning.

Poppy bounced on the desk, trying to get him to increase his stimulation. Severus smiled. She wanted him. He slipped a finger into her entrance and moved it in and out quickly, his finger becoming coated with her wetness, then he put in two fingers, and was pleased as she began to moan. He pounded his hand against her rapidly, trying to angle his fingers up as she seemed to like. He added a third finger, stretching her, but she seemed to like that, as well, and he moved his hand so that his thumb hit her clitoris each time he thrust his fingers into her. He was glad that hours of stirring potions had strengthened his arms, because he wanted to make her come and then have her come again. He didn't want to tire and disappoint her.

Poppy's legs stiffened and trembled as she arched up off the desk, shouting wordlessly, then whispering his name as she settled back down on the desk.

"Good?" he asked.

"Very," Poppy said, beginning to sit up, but Severus reached up with a damp hand and pushed her back down.

"I still want to kiss you and lick you here, Poppy. I don't want to leave until I have," he said, bringing his mouth close to her and breathing against her clitoris. "May I, Poppy?" His tongue darted out and flicked her nub.

"Yes," Poppy replied breathlessly.

He kissed her clitoris then moved down to her entrance, kissing it then sticking his tongue out and putting it inside her, pressing his lips to her and rubbing against her. He heard her gasp as he rubbed her, so he licked her from her entrance to her clitoris, then closed his lips around her nub as he put a finger into her. He began to lick and flick rapidly across her clitoris, moving his head to provide her with the most stimulation he could, and pumping his arm, his finger moving in and out of her.

Poppy kicked her heels against him uncontrollably, and he inserted a second finger and thrust more vigorously as she began shouting his name.

"Severus, oh, Severus, yes, oh, yes, please, Severus, please, Severus, Severus, oh, gods, Severus!"

Severus thought he would come just listening to her scream his name in ecstasy, but he kissed her clitoris gently and removed his hand, then sat back on his heels, letting her legs fall from around his neck and off his shoulders. He could hear Poppy panting, and he smiled.

"Was that adequate," he asked as he stood, "or would you like me to go and recruit some other wizards for you to take your pick from?"

She shook her head and looked at him as he came around the desk to stand beside her. "No, that was more than adequate." She grinned. "I'm also worn out. You wear me out, Severus."

"Are you sure? There are some very attractive wizards in the castle. I think Duffy would describe them as 'sex-on-legs,'" he said teasingly.

"I'm sure," Poppy said drily.

"What about Flitwick? If you are unsatisfied, Pomona might loan him out. I have heard he has great sexual prowess," Severus said.

Poppy laughed. "As sure as I may be that you are right about his 'prowess'...though I'd love to know where you heard that...I doubt that Pomona would be so generous. She is quite happy with him at the moment. And even if she would, I am more than adequately satisfied."

"What about Cahill?"

"Do you think he knows how to do anything with his tongue but talk?" Poppy asked. "He'd probably bore me to death. I doubt he could do anything with that mouth of his but bore someone."

Severus chuckled.

"I love to hear that, Severus," Poppy said, smiling up at him. "It is like a precious gem every time I see you smile or hear you laugh."

Severus smiled softly down at her and caressed her face. "But we have not dealt with your needs, yet, Poppy. Do not distract me in my mission to make sure you are fully satisfied. There are other wizards, you know." His lips twitched in amusement. "Hagrid, for example. I am sure he has a very long tongue . . . and that he is quite well-endowed otherwise."

Poppy shook her head. "No, Hagrid is sweet, but he's not quite my type. And I boggle to think of the charms I'd have to use on myself to be able to have him fit. You, on the other hand," she said, reaching out and touching him through his layers of clothing, "you are very well-endowed but not so much to require extraordinary measures."

"Am I?" Severus asked, knowing he was but wanting to hear her say it again.

"Very. You have a wonderful cock," Poppy replied.

"Well, what about . . . Draco Malfoy? Or Newman, as he now prefers. He had quite the reputation as a ladies' man, but since he's returned to Hogwarts, I believe he has not had the opportunities he once did. He would probably be immensely grateful to have the opportunity to provide such a sexy witch pleasure," Severus said.

Poppy shuddered. "No. Not only is he still a student...though older than most...but he is too young for me, and even if he were older, he is not my type." Too soft and "pretty boy" for her taste.

"Is there no one, then?" Severus asked.

"No one, just you, and you were more than adequate in meeting my needs." She looked up at him with fond amusement. "If you want the full truth, Severus, you were superb, and I cannot think of any wizard I would prefer to have sex with than you."

Severus bent and kissed her lightly. "I have to go now," he whispered.

"We don't have time to take care of you?" Poppy asked, touching him through his clothing again.

"No, but I am fine." He looked down into her eyes, and he felt as though there was something he should say, but he didn't know what it could be.

"I didn't expect this from you, Severus," Poppy said as she sat up. "It's not why I invited you up."

"You rescued me from the clutches of Duffy. I was very, very grateful," Severus said, raising his wand and using a nonverbal charm to clean his face. "I felt it only proper to express my gratitude to you."

Poppy chuckled and kissed his cheek. "That was some gratitude! Duffy's not so bad, you know."

"She may be no Dark Lord, but she's not someone I would wish to encourage in their attempts to socialise with me. Especially as I had the impression she had more than that in mind."

Poppy began getting dressed. As she pulled her robes on, she said, "We really shouldn't do this again."

"I know."

Poppy fastened her Charmed hooks behind her and picked up her knickers. "It is very good, though."

"It is."

"You probably have to leave to meet your friend," Poppy said.

"Yes, in a few minutes. I wanted to wait to open the door until you're dressed."

Poppy smiled up at him. "You know, Severus, we never did take care of you, since you have to leave now. I think we should. It wouldn't count as doing it again, really. It would just be finishing what we started this evening."

"Even the quintessential Hufflepuff has a little Slytherin in her," Severus said, quirking a smile.

"Mmm, but I want a big Slytherin in me," she said, reaching out to touch his cock through his layers of clothing again.

"We shall have to see," Severus said softly. "I need to go meet my friend. He'll wait, but not long."

"It's a wizard, then," Poppy observed.

"Mhm."

"I thought . . . well, I considered the possibility that you might have a date, but then I decided you wouldn't do this with me just before you left for a date with another witch."

"No, Poppy, I wouldn't," Severus said, though feeling oddly guilty about his answer. "Would you mind letting Minerva know I'm leaving the grounds? I didn't the last time I left, and I was gone longer than I'd anticipated. I'd tell her myself, but I don't want to be late."

"Severus?" she said as he turned for the door.

He looked back at her questioningly.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Just have a good night."

He nodded at her, then was gone, and Poppy heard the infirmary door open and shut. She sighed and wondered what she would tell Minerva about why she was the person informing her of Severus's absence. Minerva would doubtless wonder about that.

She thought that she should have told Severus that if he became involved with another witch, they couldn't have sex any longer, that it wouldn't be fair to the other witch, even though they weren't really involved with each other. She doubted that Severus would do that anyway, even as inexperienced as he was, he wouldn't, but it was better to be clear about that. And to be clear with herself, as well: it was only sex. Very good sex, but they were also only colleagues. It wasn't as though she hadn't had the occasional one-time tryst or brief fling with a colleague over the years. If both parties were careful and clear about it, it didn't have to be messy, though one could still regret it, and so she was very choosy about who she would sleep with...as good-looking and superficially charming as Gilderoy Lockhart was, she hadn't slept with him, though it was clear that he had believed she would and was quite shocked when he finally realised she wasn't simply playing hard-to-get but really didn't want to sleep with him. He then implied that there was something wrong with her sexuality if she didn't want to go to bed with him. Lockhart seemed to believe that any witch or wizard whom he approached should be eager to have sex with him, and anyone else had to be frigid.

Well, nothing for it but to go up and tell Minerva that Severus had left the grounds, Poppy decided. She reached the Headmistress's Office and took a deep breath as the door at the top of the stairs opened to her. Minerva was sitting at her desk, and it looked as though she was working on budgets.

"Poppy! I didn't expect to see you tonight, though I'm grateful you came." She made a face. "Severus really is not very good at the budgets and expense reports yet, and it's giving me a headache trying to figure out what any of this means. I need a break."

"I would think that would be something he would be quite good at. He seems to have an orderly mind. You have to as a Potions master."

"Oh, I think he's quite capable of doing a very good job, but he dislikes it and doesn't take enough time with it, just seems to dash it all off," Minerva said, getting up and coming around the desk. "It was a mistake for me to have told him he didn't have to use the same methods I used. I hate to feel as though I'm trying to make him into my image, but I think this is one area where I will have to show him what I want to see and how to do it."

"He might prefer to have a specific structure. It might be easier to do," Poppy said.

"Mmm, but I presume you didn't come up to talk about expense reports."

The two witches sat down in the armchairs near the fireplace.

"No, I didn't. Severus wanted me to give you a message. He said to let you know that he left the grounds for the evening."

"And he couldn't tell me himself?"

"He got an owl during dinner, so he didn't have a chance to. He had to meet his friend at eight."

"It's after eight now." Minerva smiled. "I noticed that you came into dinner together...and then left together."

"Oh, that was a coincidence," Poppy said quickly. "I just happened to run into him on my way down to the Great Hall from my visit to Filius."

"Filius? He was at dinner before you...I only noticed because you and Severus were the last to arrive."

"I needed to return something to my quarters...my camera. Filius had an accident and I took photographs."

Minerva quirked a smile. "Pomona told me about that. I was disappointed to see him restored. I had hoped he would come to dinner with his short purple fur!"

Poppy laughed. "Well, purely in the interests of his medical history and for Hogwarts records, I took some pictures, and as Headmistress, you may need to see them." She was relieved. Minerva couldn't possibly know that she and Severus had had another encounter before dinner. Or that they had after dinner.

Minerva laughed with her about the pictures. "We may even need to use them during a staff meeting as an example of the dangers in the classroom and what to avoid!"

"Filius was very good-natured about it. He always is," Poppy said.

"So, you and Severus spent some time together after dinner?"

Poppy tried not to blush, but the vision of Severus kneeling in front of her, pleasuring her, rose in her mind, and she could feel the heat in her face. "A little bit. It was just a ruse. Sarah has been trying to invite Severus to her quarters for a drink and he isn't interested, so we said that we had to discuss a Potions accident."

"I see . . . you know, Poppy, I've been thinking about what I said to you this morning. That was just one point-of-view, and not necessarily the right one, if there is a right one. If it weren't for the fact that I know that Hermione has some interest in Severus and he in her, I would probably have not said anything negative." She quirked a smile. "I would have been curious and hoped that you might tell me who you were with just because we're friends, but I wouldn't have pressed you about it if you didn't volunteer any information, even though I was sure it was Severus."

"That's all right. You apologised earlier. No need to again," Poppy said.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is this, you were right," Minerva said. "It was your private business. But I also think . . . you don't need my approval if you want to see him again. I know you want to be discreet, and I'm sure you wouldn't want anyone else to know, but if you do see him again, you don't need to feel you have to hide it from me because I might disapprove. I don't know as I do disapprove, actually. You don't have to tell me about it either, but you don't need to hide it."

Poppy nodded. "I don't know if we will see each other again. It's not as though we're in a relationship. We said last night and this morning that it was just for the night, just one night, and then back to being colleagues in the morning. We both meant it, I'm sure."

"I think I heard a 'but,'" Minerva said perceptively.

Poppy sighed. "We met, as I told you, when I was returning from Ravenclaw Tower. I think Severus had been to the Owlery. We were just talking about Filius, just chatting as we might have done any other time. I wanted to return my camera to my rooms. Severus came with me. We were only going to step in and step out." Poppy shook her head. "We didn't. It was as though I couldn't help myself. He touched me, and once he touched me, I just . . . It was hot, Minerva. Fast, wild, and hot. Quite literally hot. And then after dinner, we went to my office. We were just going to talk, but it seems we can't be alone together without, well, you know."

"He certainly sounds as though he has a lot of stamina...last night, this morning, before dinner, then after dinner again. Making up for lost time, I guess," Minerva said.

"In my office, we didn't make love. Well, we did, I suppose, but . . . he put wards on the door and he just, um, took his time. He didn't disrobe at all, if you know what I mean. I never would have thought that Severus would be that kind of lover, if I had ever thought about it. Of course, he loves to know that he has brought me pleasure...he takes quite a lot of pride in that. Male ego, but from him, it's really very sweet, and I don't mind indulging his need to hear me tell him he's good. Of course, part of the reason for that is that he is very good. He did seem tentative and unsure at first last night, but then he seemed to relax with me, and he learns very quickly."

"So do you want to see him again?" Minerva asked.

"He's Severus, you know? A part of me wants to see him again...see him again! It sounds as though we're just drinking a friendly cup of tea together. A part of me wants to be intimate with him again, but I know it's just sex for him, and I also know that Severus is a bit of an injured puppy. Not precisely the exemplar of emotional health and mental stability. I can see that it could get messy. Messy with colleagues is very bad. You were right about one thing this morning, Minerva. Severus does have some vulnerabilities, and he hasn't had a normal life. He could wake up one morning and decide that this was all a huge error and that I'm nothing more than a whore, just cheaper than most. Or he could believe it was a mistake and simply treat me coldly. I could live with that, I suppose, but I admit that I would be hurt and it would ruin what friendship we do have. It could be messy in so many ways. But he did tell me this evening before dinner that even if he ever did have regrets, he would never blame me. He can be very unexpectedly sweet sometimes."

"You didn't mention the biggest danger, Poppy, and that, to me, makes it an even more real danger," Minerva said.

"What is that?" Poppy asked.

"The danger that you could become attached to him, or even that he could fall in love with you. That could be very messy if it were one-sided."

"He's still Severus. We haven't changed. It's just sex. It's very intimate sex...I suppose that's why it was so much better than most first-time sex...but it's just sex. It's not as though anything else has changed between us. And it might not happen again, anyway."

"All right. But you know . . . you said it yourself, Severus hasn't had a normal life," Minerva replied thoughtfully. "He hasn't had many normal relationships, especially as an adult, and from what I understand, his parents were hardly a model of marital stability. You said it was very intimate sex. I don't think that his sex life has normally included very much true intimacy. I think he may have made it feel that intimate because so much of his sex life was unfortunately centred around prostitutes and quick pick-ups. He doesn't see you that way, and so he went to the opposite extreme. He can be like that, you know...quite extreme. If it wasn't going to be a two-minute blow-job from a prostitute purely for his pleasure and her monetary gain, then it had to be very intimate and very focussed on you and your pleasure. That kind of intimacy can lead to very strong feelings...for either of you. I think you're right to be a bit cautious, a little wary."

"But he really did enjoy it. And I didn't ask him to do any of it. He was also just very kind and sweet. I don't expect him to be so sweet in other contexts, but he was very thoughtful." She remembered the mug of tea in the morning and the wet flannel the night before. "Awkwardly thoughtful sometimes, but thoughtful. And when I woke up this morning, he was holding me." She smiled, thinking of his little kiss on her nose the night before. Suddenly, Poppy's eyes widened. "Do you think that Severus could think that he's in love with me?"

"He probably doesn't yet, and he might never think that, even if you're intimate every day for the next year, but it is a possibility. But you have to guard your heart, too, Poppy. I know that you don't enter into sexual relationships often or lightly. The more you are intimate with him, the closer you will feel to him, and the sweeter he is to you, the more you will enjoy it and want it to continue. He is not known for being sweet and thoughtful, though I have seen that side of him. For Severus Snape to be sweet to you must feel very special...and rightly so. I do think it says a lot about his trust in you and his affection for you. I am not minimising that. But you need to be careful."

"I'll be fine, Minerva," Poppy said. "I've had a few other brief flings, and with some very nice and attentive wizards, too. I don't think I'm in any danger. Besides, I think it's

already over. It was just a thing that happened...he hadn't even planned to do anything more than flirt a little, and I think even that decision was fairly spontaneous. It isn't as though he's had some long-simmering attraction to me that he finally acted on. He actually told me that he'd only noticed I was attractive a couple days ago and then couldn't stop thinking about it, and that's why he flirted with me. Not the most polished thing to tell a witch you've known for more than twenty-five years, but delightfully artless, I thought."

Minerva chuckled. "Yes, delightfully artless. Somehow insulting and flattering at the same time."

"When he said it, the way he said it, it sounded so . . . seductive, and sweet at the same time. And not at all insulting," Poppy said with a smile. "But anyway, it was just a very short fling. Hardly more than a single tryst, really."

"Mmhm, yes, so says the witch who can't be alone in her rooms with him for two minutes without having it fast, hot, and wild," Minerva said with a smile and a shake of her head. "I just hope you enjoy yourselves as long as it lasts, and that when it's over, you're both glad it happened and neither of you is hurt."

"Don't worry about that, Minerva. It's just a brief fling, and it's already over."

NEXT

Chapter Forty-Two: Confessions

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Severus goes to Spinner's End to meet Gareth. He confides in him, and he tells him about something from his past that he never discusses with anyone. Gareth also gives him some advice about Hermione.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Forty-Two: Confessions

Chapter 43 of 118

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Warning for some sexually explicit language and some very mild slashiness.



Chapter Forty-Two: Confessions

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Severus Disappeared as soon as the gate closed behind him. Now that he was going to see Gareth, he'd almost forgotten why he wanted to see him. He had no time to stop in the dungeons and leave his teaching robe, but the night air was chilly, and the robe added another layer of coverage for his erection, as well. It might have subsided more by the time he reached the gates, but he passed Cahill on the stairs, and that reminded him of bringing Poppy to ecstasy and knowing that Cahill would only bore her. As he passed others, he couldn't help but feel slightly smug that no one knew that he had just left the Hogwarts matron sated and yet still wanting more. On his walk down to the gates, he tried to think of precisely why he wanted to see Gareth, and he remembered thinking that Gareth might know some good sex charms that he could use with her and practise with him. The result was that when he Disappeared, he still had an erection.

Gareth turned at the sound of Severus's Apparition. It was drizzling, and Gareth's hair was damp, though it looked as though he'd cast *armpervius* after waiting a while and getting wet.

"Hey, Snape! Thought you'd stood me up," Gareth said.

"Sorry. I was distracted," Severus replied. "Let's get inside."

He turned on a small lamp in the living room, cast a warming charm on the room, and began to take off his teaching robe. Gareth flung his short cloak over the back of a chair.

"What did you need to see me about?" Gareth asked. "It sounded urgent."

"I thought it was at the time. I don't know as I would describe it that way now, but I do still want to talk to you." He looked at Gareth and stepped toward him, unbuttoning his frockcoat. "I have made my life more complicated. Again, because of you...or what happened between us."

"Hold up there, Snape...I told you that if I had made things harder for you, I was sorry. I don't want to wreck our friendship over it."

Severus ignored Gareth's protest. "What would you say if I told you that I spent the night with someone last night? The entire night?"

"I don't know...I know it wasn't Hermione, and it wasn't me, so I would be surprised. Are you saying you did?" Gareth had the beginnings of a smile.

"Oh, yes, I certainly did. And I just came from her. A most attractive and passionate witch. That's why I was distracted, McGonagall."

"You move fast. I wouldn't have expected that." Gareth looked at him with some puzzlement. "But it's good ... I think."

"And it's your fault, McGonagall," Severus said in a low voice, "for mentioning Poppy and comparing her to your lover."

"Poppy? Poppy Pomfrey? You were with her?" At Severus's nod, Gareth said, "Now that does stun me. I didn't even know you liked her, let alone found her attractive."

"I do like her, of course I do. You should know that. But I hadn't really noticed how very attractive she is. Once you mentioned it, I kept thinking about her, then when I had to see her yesterday evening ... I seduced her."

"You ... you *seduced* Poppy? If I'd only known it was that easy! But she sees me as Gertrude's son and Murdoch and Minerva's nephew," he said with a sigh, then he looked at him sharply. "I hope that you were good to her."

Severus didn't take offense, but felt himself smirking. "Oh, I would say that I was very good to her, and I think she would, too. Do you think I would have just come from her if she didn't think so? I did only make her come twice tonight, though, which is why I was late ... and why I am still ... somewhat excited. I was concentrating on her pleasure."

Severus had opened his frockcoat. He took it off and tossed it on top of his teaching robe. Gareth's eye caught sight of the bulge in front of Severus's trousers. Instead of remarking on that, though, he said, "No waistcoat today, Snape. You must have felt positively underdressed!"

"No time this morning. I was in a hurry after making love to her." Severus couldn't suppress his smile this time. "She came six times, Gareth, and that was just in the morning. You were right about oral pleasure, too. She loved that, and I found it wasn't bad at all. It was arousing to see how excited I could make her. I wouldn't have tried that if you hadn't talked to me about it...and I took your advice on how to start."

Gareth sat down in the same wooden chair he had on Sunday. "Did I create a monster?" he said with a laugh.

"It was really good. I could hardly believe that she would want to be with me, and I was a little nervous, but after we made love, she even wanted to stay the night."

"Poppy stayed with you. Overnight. In your rooms." Gareth still seemed stunned.

Severus nodded. "I had flirted with her when I went to see her about some school business. She invited me in for tea, and I thought I would just try to flirt a little. By the time I left her, I was so aroused myself, it was embarrassing."

Gareth laughed. "Flirting isn't supposed to be quite that intense, mate."

"Yes, I *know* that," Severus said. "I became encouraged by her reaction, I suppose. But I had scarcely reached my room and was about to take care of my problem, when she was at my door. We talked and decided to have sex."

"You just ... talked ... and decided to have sex?" Gareth asked, his perplexity showing on his face.

"Essentially. We agreed it would be just the one night, though."

"Just the one night, but you just came from her, and with quite the stiffy, too."

"We actually had sex in her rooms before dinner, too. We didn't intend to."

"I have unleashed a monster on the witches of Britain!" Gareth laughed.

"Not on *all* witches. I have no desire to begin flirting with just any witch," Severus replied quite seriously.

Gareth chuckled and shook his head. "So ... why did you want to see me? Just to tell me you'd gone to bed with a witch I had a crush on when I was ten?"

"You had a crush on her when you were *ten*?" It was Severus's turn to be surprised.

"Yeah, and again when I was twenty." He gave a quick grin. "I don't think I've outgrown the second one yet."

"I did want to tell you, but also ... I feel guilty. I don't and I do. I don't regret it, not really. But now I think about Hermione, and I think that I shouldn't have done it. And then, as soon as I think that, I think that it was actually a very good thing and that there was nothing wrong with it. I am very confused. I also was wondering..." Severus hesitated.

"What? Spit it out, Snape."

"I just was thinking about charms and spells and wondering if you knew any good ones."

"I know a lot of charms and spells, Snape...are you talking about sex charms?"

Severus nodded. "I only remember one, and it was very unpleasant." He sat on the couch. He looked down at his hands folded in front of him. "I don't tell people about this, McGonagall, but right after I became a Death Eater, I had a sexual relationship with one. She was sadistic. She was a true sexual sadist. No playacting with her. No safe words. No limits. No boundaries. I was young. I thought that having rough sex meant that I was a true Death Eater. But this wasn't even rough sex. And I wasn't really the one having the sex. She was having sex; I was just there for her pleasure. She used to like to watch wizards buggering whilst she was fucking me. She had two favourites, brothers, and she'd have them take turns buggering some young Death Eater, and doing ... doing other things to him and to each other, and if the one being fucked cried from pain, it excited her. The things they'd do ..." Severus shook his head with a shudder. "I left her because I didn't want to be buggered whilst fucking her. She did worse things to me, I suppose, and I'd seen her do even worse to others, but that was what made me refuse to continue with her. One of the things she used to like to do was restrain me and use a charm that would maintain my erection and not allow me to come, and it hurt, a burning and slicing pain like hot razor blades. The longer the spell was on, the more it hurt, and she would be fucking me the entire time. The more pain she caused me, the more excited she became. I know there are other spells that are good, though, and I would like to be able to please Poppy...well, not necessarily Poppy, but a witch...and I would like to know some nice charms to enhance the sex for her but without hurting me."

"Oh, Severus." Gareth's face was writ with pain. He got up from his chair and knelt in front of Severus, placing his hands on the other wizard's knees. "I am sorry. And I am very sorry if what we did together reminded you of that."

"It did at first, but it was nothing like it. And you didn't force me, or even make it difficult for me to refuse you if I had wanted. I told you Sunday night how I felt about you, and I meant that," Severus said softly.

"I care about you, Snape. And I will admit to being strangely attracted to you even that first day we met, even though I hated you then. Those eyes of yours ... But I would never, *never* have done anything sexual with you if I had known you had had such an experience. Especially with the wizards." Gareth's eyes filled with tears. "I am so sorry."

"Please don't feel that way. With you, it was good. It was nothing like with her. It made me feel differently about myself and about sex." Severus reached out and touched

Gareth's face. "Don't. I didn't tell you in order to make you cry." He gave a small smile. "I don't usually manage to make Ravenclaws cry. I'll make you cry some other time. And I don't want to talk about it. It was a long time ago. Another lifetime. I just wanted to explain why I don't know any appropriate charms."

Gareth laughed shortly, rubbed his eyes, and sat back on his heels. "I know a few, and there are two that you might like to use with witches. One of them does help you last longer, but it just causes your orgasm to be withheld briefly and your arousal to be slightly diminished, and then your arousal will grow again and you can come unless you cast the spell again. It can be slightly uncomfortable only because if you're very aroused and you cast it too close to when you're about to orgasm, the stimulation and the ... the frustration, I suppose, can be a little uncomfortable, but it isn't what I would call painful. The other one is difficult to learn, but is much, much better. I'll give you a copy of it."

"A copy?"

"When I was going through some of my father's things about ten years ago, I came across a notebook with a loose parchment in it. It had the spell and directions for forming the intent and casting it. I don't like to think of my parents having sex, but apparently it was something of his." Gareth blushed. "And I should not tell you this, but you will not *believe* whose handwriting the spell was in."

"Your mother's?" Severus asked, not having any idea.

"No. A wizard's." When Severus looked at him blankly, Gareth whispered, "Uncle Albus's! I couldn't believe it. If there was anything more bizarre than thinking about my parents having sex...and it was clear they were very physically affectionate with each other, so I could accept that even if I didn't want to think about it...it was the thought of Uncle Albus, well, using that spell with someone, even Aunt Minerva. I thought they just had a nice, sweet platonic marriage, I guess. Naive of me, but true."

Severus actually laughed. "I might not have thought of Dumbledore using some kind of spell...or sharing it with someone, since I can't imagine him having that kind of discussion with a wizard...but I never thought that he and Minerva were in a platonic relationship."

"Go ahead, laugh, Snape," Gareth said with mock irritation, rocking back on his heels. "Make fun of my childhood idealisations."

"So what does this spell do that it requires such a lengthy description?"

"You can come repeatedly without ejaculating or losing your erection. It wears off after a couple hours, but it is good. I like it especially when I'm with a witch."

"That does sound very good. Why don't you use it all the time?"

Gareth shrugged. "Most of the time I like it just natural, and I usually like my sex with men to be fairly quick...quicker, anyway, than what we did...and I also don't want to teach other wizards how to do it. I like having it be my secret, I suppose. And it does seem to feel better when you don't use it every time. But when I've been in a longer relationship with a witch, I've used it fairly frequently."

"Thank you for sharing it with me," Severus said.

"You know, Snape," Gareth said, running his hands up Severus's legs, "you were pretty aroused when you arrived, and all this talk about sex is beginning to have an effect on me. Have you worn yourself out today?"

"What did you have in mind, McGonagall?" Severus asked, his voice low.

"I thought that if the starving man was still feeling peckish even after his feast, I might be able to help." Gareth's hand went to the front of his trousers. "And, of course, I might also enjoy it."

"Upstairs," Severus said softly.

"Can I see you first?" Gareth looked up at him. "I'd really like to ..."

"What do you want? This?" Severus quickly unbuttoned his trousers.

Gareth reached out and rubbed his penis through his pants. It wasn't as big as it had been, but it reacted to his touch. He smiled, his lips parted, as he pulled the front of Severus's pants down and his cock popped out. Severus just sat and watched Gareth stroke his penis and fondle the head of his cock.

"Did she like it, Snape?" Gareth whispered. "Did she like your cock?"

"She did. She was very appreciative."

"I bet she liked it so much, she sucked you," Gareth said, "because I want to."

"Kiss it first," Severus said softly.

Gareth approached Severus's erection and gently kissed the head, but he didn't stop there. He kissed down his shaft and then licked back up again. Severus closed his eyes as Gareth circled the head of his cock with his tongue then kissed it again.

Gareth looked up. "Let's go upstairs."

"Get undressed first. I want to know that you desire me," Severus said.

"Where is the wizard who didn't want me to touch him on Saturday?" Gareth asked.

"He's still here. He just wants the rest of the world not to touch him. He has simply made a few exceptions to that. You're one of them, McGonagall."

Gareth stood and pulled his shirt off over his head before sitting down and removing his short boots and socks, then he stood again and took off his sporran and put it on the chair behind him. His erection poked at his kilt.

"Take off the kilt, too," Severus directed.

Gareth unfastened the buckles and draped the kilt on the back of the chair.

Severus looked him up and down. "I don't know why you would want to be with me, McGonagall. I am not attracted to men, but I can tell an attractive man when I see one. You are what one witch of my acquaintance would call 'sex-on-legs.' You could be with anyone. Witches must respond to you very readily, and men, too, if they are into that sort of thing."

"You aren't bad yourself, Snape. And different people have different things that they find attractive. As odd as it may seem to both of us, not every witch finds me attractive," Gareth said with a grin.

"I would love to look like you. If I had looked like you, I think my life would have been much easier," Severus said, admiring the other wizard's long legs, slim hips, broad shoulders, strong chest, curly hair, and seemingly perfect facial features.

"Do you really think that my appearance saved me from the pains of life? Losing my father, having my mother maimed, having to go live with my brother and his wife in a

strange country, having a constant sense of displacement for most of my adolescence and even as an adult?"

"No, no, I suppose it didn't," Severus said softly. "But people look at you and are inclined to like you even before they know you, I'm sure, at least most of the time. I was an ugly child and I didn't improve as an adult. People would look at me and immediately have disdain for me. I didn't care, but it might have been easier if I hadn't been ugly."

"Severus, you are not ugly. You are not conventionally handsome, but you are not ugly. I think sometimes, you ~~do~~ look ugly. I have seen some scowls on your face that would shatter a mirror. And when you're bitter or angry, it shows on your face, and with your sharp features, the expression is exaggerated. You can look pretty frightening when you're angry, too. I think you actually like that sometimes, but it certainly won't win you any beauty contests. I think you have some very nice features, and I think you are actually quite good-looking in an unconventional way."

Severus snorted. "Like a bulldog is so ugly it's cute? I don't think so."

"No, you aren't cute." Gareth grinned. "Sometimes you can be quite cute without meaning to be, but when describing your appearance, that's not the first word that springs to mind. Your eyes are your best feature, especially on those occasions when you manage to smile. You also have rather nice hair now that you aren't pouring Shed-Stop Potion on it every day. You could update the style, though. You have had that haircut since you were a teenager. You're stuck in the past. And you have an interesting face. Good cheekbones, a strong jaw. Your nose has character."

"Your nose is perfect, McGonagall. Somehow, hearing someone with a perfect nose tell me that mine has character doesn't mean very much."

Gareth shrugged. "You're also very sexy, Snape. Poppy wouldn't have come down to you in your rooms if you weren't. And don't tell me that there's something wrong with her, because I won't hear it."

"She did say that it had been a while since she'd been with a man. Maybe she was desperate," Severus said.

"Lovely, Snape. You come here in a good mood...or what passes for a good mood for you...telling me how you seduced Poppy and that you made her feel very good, and now you've talked yourself into a bad mood. You have a talent for that."

"Life is filled with disappointments and betrayals. Tomorrow, she's likely to wake up and regret it all."

"Look, do you think that she would have just jumped into bed with any wizard who flirted with her? If you do, then you don't know Poppy Pomfrey very well. And if she wakes up tomorrow and regrets it, it will only be because you do something between now and then to make her regret it. Face it, Snape. Sometimes in life, good things do happen, often when we don't expect it. Now, are we going upstairs, or should I get dressed again?"

Severus sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry," he said grudgingly. He rubbed his eyes. "Do you mind if we go upstairs but don't do very much? I am tired."

"We don't have to go upstairs at all."

"No, I want to. But we can't stay long."

"You know, Severus," Gareth said, walking toward him, "we could just stay down here. I would like to get those trousers off you, though. Do you ever just wear robes and no trousers?"

"Almost never. Only if I have to. And I still wear underpants with them. I occasionally wear a light robe under my teaching robe rather than a jacket and waistcoat, though." Severus stood up and pushed his braces off.

"Too bad." Gareth pushed Severus's trousers and pants down, coming to his knees in front of him.

Severus closed his eyes as Gareth began to pleasure his cock with his mouth and hands. It was pleasant, but Severus didn't feel as though he would come. After going at it energetically for a while, Gareth stood. He put his arms around Severus, then he whispered in his ear.

"Would you like to fuck me again, Snape?"

Severus thought for a moment. "No, no, not tonight, Gareth." He put one arm loosely around the younger wizard and thought for a moment. "I don't like the idea that I led you on and you're unsatisfied, though."

"It's all right, Snape. If I had just spent hours with a very sexy witch satisfying her needs, I don't know as I'd want anything else, either."

"Can I ... I don't want to do what you just did. Not exactly. But I want to know what it's like to do it."

"I thought it disgusted you?"

"It does disgust me. But you're different. And I don't want *to do* it. I just want to try it." Poppy had done it for him; he wanted to know what it felt like.

"Sort of an experiment, eh? Well, that's all right. You can. And I won't be offended if you still find it disgusting."

"Could you sit down on the couch?"

Gareth looked at the stained couch, but nodded and sat.

Severus sat down beside him and touched Gareth's cock. "Lean back a little. And don't look."

Gareth leaned back and put his head back. "I'll close my eyes."

Gareth felt Severus's hand around him, then his breath met the tip of his penis. A few heartbeats later, he felt Severus's lips brush over the head. He tried to maintain a slow and even breathing, but his breath hitched slightly when he felt Severus's tongue on the head of his penis, first just a tentative touch, then a quick lick. Gareth thought Severus had finished his experiment, but then his tongue circled his crown. Severus's hand moved down Gareth's shaft, and his tongue followed it. There was another pause, and he felt Severus lower his mouth over him, taking his cock into his mouth. He felt Severus gag, and Gareth almost raised his head and said something, but then Severus paused, his mouth still around him. He felt him take a breath and swallow, and then he lowered his head more, taking in almost all of Gareth's cock, the head of his cock in his throat. Gareth gasped, then held himself still as he felt Severus swallowing around him. Severus raised his head, and again, Gareth thought he had finished, but Severus went down on him again, and then once more. Finally, he pulled up off of him and sat back.

"Sorry. I couldn't do more," Severus said.

"I didn't expect that much," Gareth replied, opening his eyes.

"It wasn't so much that it was disgusting...though I'd never do it to anyone else and I don't see the appeal...but it was actually difficult. I didn't realise." He thought fleetingly of the prostitutes whose heads he had forced lower and how he had tried to control their movements. He had been as bad as Bella, in a way. They were getting paid, and he hadn't tried to cause them pain, but still ...

"It's getting late, Snape. I need to get going."

"So do I."

They both redressed. "Gareth?"

"Mm?"

"What am I going to do about Hermione?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think I'm in love with her, but ... it doesn't feel right to be dating her. I thought that everything else felt wrong...being with you, sleeping with Poppy, even flirting with Poppy...because dating Hermione was the right thing. Now I think that the timing is all wrong. If I hadn't asked Hermione on a date, nothing else would feel wrong. Well, knowing me, something would, but not the same way. I just feel that it was too soon. I think I should have waited longer before asking Hermione for a date. I hadn't even intended to ask her on one, either; it just happened."

"I can't answer that for you, Snape, but if you think you're in love with her, it seems reasonable to want to go out with her. You just have to figure that out for yourself. You might want to talk to her about it. Have an honest talk. You don't have to tell her that you've been having sex with other people...I would advise against that...but you could tell her how you feel and that it may be too soon for you to date. Tell her you need to learn more about yourself first. You haven't had a normal life. You deserve to have some fun and some pleasure and discover what you like and what makes you happy...and that may come from dating Hermione, but it might not, not yet, anyway."

"But I don't want to lose her."

"You want to have your cake and eat it too, as they say. Don't hold on to her just so that you don't lose her but all the while behaving just as you would if you weren't dating her. I don't think that you've done anything wrong yet, but if you keep seeing Hermione and your relationship develops, you can't continue having sex with other people. That is, I suppose you *could*, but I doubt very much that Hermione would like that and I think that you would feel guilty about it. And if you keep seeing Hermione, I wouldn't feel right about having sex with you, either. Either date her or don't date her, but don't try to have it both ways."

"I don't know what to do," Severus said glumly.

"And I can't tell you. You should talk to Hermione, Severus. It involves her."

"I don't want to hurt her and have her feel rejected."

"If you go about it in the right way, she may be a little hurt, but she doesn't need to feel rejected. I think she'd rather you be honest with her. And if you remain friends, you could still have an opportunity with her later."

"Or we could remain friends and I could be an usher at her wedding."

"But if you date her when you're so confused, you could do something to really damage your relationship with her...your friendship, too...even if you weren't interested in sleeping with anyone else. That would surely be worse."

"I thought of that, too." Severus turned off the light and opened the front door. "Thanks, McGonagall. I wish you could tell me exactly what to do, but talking to you helped."

"You know, there is an upside to this."

Severus locked the door. "What's that?"

"Poppy. You can still see her."

"I don't think so. I'd like to, but we agreed it was just a one-time thing."

"And then you had a before-dinner appetiser in her rooms and some dessert in her office. Don't count it out, mate," Gareth said with a grin. "I'll make a copy of that spell for you. I can send it to you with Wol."

"No, not by owl. In person," Severus said.

"Thursday, then? My mother is going to the estate for dinner and is staying overnight, and Hermione will be at her class. Just come down any time in the evening."

Severus nodded. "I'll owl you if I can't make it."

"Night, Snape."

"McGonagall."

Severus Disappeared.

NEXT

Chapter Forty-Three: Distractions

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

Poppy and Severus both find themselves distracted. Severus learns more about Poppy.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey

Author's Note: FYI, if you're wondering about Gareth's age relative to Severus's, Gareth was born 24 September 1964. (Severus was born 9 January 1960.) Tarrant McPherson, Gareth's friend whom we met in Chapter Five, "Alternative Treatment," was born 29 August 1965.

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Chapter Forty-Three: Distractions

Tuesday, 9 March 1999

It was after curfew, and the corridors were blessedly empty and quiet as Severus walked from the front doors to the stairs leading to Slytherin. When he reached the lower level and heard light footsteps ahead, he assumed that it was someone finishing curfew patrol. He didn't think that it was Albus's step. If it was a student, though, he would have them cleaning the Owlery with a toothbrush for wandering the dungeons after curfew.

It wasn't a student. It was Poppy.

"Severus! I was just looking for you. I . . . I just wanted to speak to you briefly," she said, blushing.

Severus nodded. "Let's not stand in the corridors talking." He strode toward his rooms, slowing his pace when he saw Poppy trotting to keep up.

They reached his rooms and Severus gave his password, deliberately not using his silent password charm, despite Poppy's presence. He could change it in the morning, and it exhibited his trust in her. Besides, as matron, Poppy could enter his rooms at any time using a special password. Only Minerva had more access to every part of the castle, including all staff living quarters, than the Hogwarts matron did.

As soon as the door was closed, Poppy said, "Did you have a good evening?"

"Passable," Severus replied. He looked down at Poppy, wondering if she had come to tell him it was all a mistake, then deciding that she wouldn't have made such a late trip to see him just to tell him that. "It started off especially nicely."

"I thought so, too. That's why I came down. I didn't want to bother you, but I was thinking about it and I wanted to tell you that. I wanted to thank you, I suppose."

Severus didn't say anything; he just continued to look at her.

"Well, I guess I should be going. I hope you have a good night and sleep well, Severus."

She was leaving, he thought. Say something, Snape! "Do you have to leave right away? We could talk...I have some brandy."

Poppy smiled. "I would like that."

"Have a seat wherever you are comfortable," Severus said as he went to the cupboard for the brandy. "I don't have any proper glasses for it." He wondered whether he should Transfigure them.

Poppy sat down on the couch. "That's fine. Whatever you have."

He handed her a short tumbler of brandy.

"Cheers," Poppy said.

"Cheers." He removed his teaching robe, then sat down beside her.

They sipped their brandy.

"You know, I shouldn't feel awkward," Poppy said, "we've known each other so long, but I do. I think it's because I'm distracted."

"Distracted?" Severus smiled slightly. "I can't imagine what could be distracting you. Unless you're distracted by some of the same thoughts I'm having right now."

"What thoughts are those?" Poppy asked.

"Thoughts of stripping you naked and having sex with you in my chair again. Thoughts of undressing for you and feeling you touch me. Thoughts of pushing you to the floor and fucking you like I did before dinner. Thoughts like that."

"Those are distracting thoughts, and they are very similar to my distracting thoughts."

"What are your distracting thoughts?" Severus asked as he took her glass from her and moved closer to her on the couch.

"Thoughts of opening your fly, taking out your cock, then raising my skirts and lowering myself onto you. Thoughts of getting undressed with you, taking a shower with you, and our pleasuring each other. Thoughts of getting naked with you, straddling your face, and sucking you whilst you lick me. Thoughts like that."

"Now those thoughts will be distracting me, too. We might be able to rid ourselves of these distracting thoughts if we were to act on some of them," Severus said.

"That sounds like an excellent idea. Very therapeutic. Perhaps we could begin with my first idea, and then go to one of yours?" she said, beginning to unbutton his trousers.

"Poppy," Severus said, taking hold of one of her hands and pressing it to his chest, "before we do this. I want to tell you something."

She looked up at him, nervous about what he would say.

"This has meant a lot to me. Being with you. Your passion. Your . . . your generosity. Your kindness. It has been confusing for me, but it has been important to me. I am not a nice man, but being with you has made me wish I were. I really wish I were." Severus leaned forward and kissed her lips softly. He looked into her eyes for a moment, then he said, his voice low, "Now let's get on with that idea of yours."

He kissed her as she unbuttoned his trousers, one of his hands kneading her breast through her robes. The thought went through his mind that it was incredible that he would be in his rooms with his hand on a witch's breast, an attractive witch, a witch that McGonagall, handsome, sexy, virile Gareth McGonagall, wanted but couldn't have. Even if Gareth ever did have her, he'd had her first, over and over, and she'd loved it. Severus felt strong, powerful, and sexy, and he didn't think he'd ever felt all those

things at once before.

Severus made a small sound of pleasure as Poppy reached his penis, moving his pants down over it. She broke the kiss to look down at his erection.

"You were ready very quickly," she said breathlessly.

"You are very sexy," Severus said, not wanting to tell her that he'd been in a partial state of arousal since he'd left her.

"I'm glad you're ready, Severus," she whispered, stroking him with her fingertips.

She moved onto his lap, facing him and pulling up her skirts.

"What is this?" Severus asked. "No knickers tonight?" He cupped her sex with his hand and pressed. "Do you always wander the Hogwarts corridors without your knickers, Madam Pomfrey?" He began to rub her.

"Only when I'm feeling . . . hopeful," she replied, her breath coming faster.

"And so very slick already," Severus said, bringing his voice down to the danger level. "You really do want it, don't you?"

"Mmmm." Poppy nodded, her eyes half open, concentrating on the sensation of Severus's hand rubbing against her. "I've been thinking about you. Thinking about you and what you do to me. It was very arousing."

"No wonder you have been so distracted."

Severus leaned forward and kissed her, pulling her towards him as she rose up on her knees and took his cock in her hand. She guided him into her, moaning into his mouth as she lowered herself, engulfing his cock.

Poppy rode him slowly, rising and falling, rocking back and forth. Severus had both hands up under her skirts, grasping her buttocks and helping to guide her movements. They broke their kiss and looked at each other, Poppy's gaze moving from his face, down his body, and back up again. Her skirts had fallen to cover them where they were joined, and she found that very sexy.

"I like having your cock under my skirts, Severus," she said softly.

"I like having my cock inside of you," Severus replied, "anyway you want it. And you do want it, don't you? Tell me, Poppy."

"I do want it. You feel so good, you feel so good." Poppy closed her eyes and moaned, rocking on him.

"This is like having a secret fuck, isn't it, Poppy?" Severus asked in a whisper, watching Poppy's flushed face, her breath coming from between parted lips. "Like having a secret fuck under your skirts."

"Yes, yes, it is," she gasped.

"We could be in my classroom right now, fucking like this, and no one would know. You could come see me, and when the students left the classroom, you could come over to me, raise your skirts, and have a secret fuck with me. When you were done, I could open the doors and let the next class in, and no one would know I'd had my cock up your skirts, that you came down for a quick, secret fuck with the Potions master."

As he spoke, his voice in her ear, Poppy's moans grew louder. "Gods, yes," she moaned.

"I like thinking of you walking around the castle without your knickers on, looking for me, feeling hopeful."

Poppy rode him faster, and Severus could feel his orgasm building. He didn't want to come yet. He wanted her to come first. He wished he knew Gareth's spell.

"Fuck me and come, Poppy, come on my cock, come, Poppy, yes, yes, come." He watched her expression change as she came, her moan choked from her throat, her head thrown back. "Keep going, Poppy, yes, Poppy, yes, I'm coming, oh gods, Poppy, I'm coming!"

His orgasm seemed to rip through him as he ejaculated up into Poppy, whose orgasm was still pulsing around him as she rocked against him. Severus held her still and gasped, pulling her toward him and embracing her hard. His heart was pounding and he was panting, his mind a blank except for his awareness of his fading ecstasy and his still-very present sense of well-being.

Poppy rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. She was glad she had rubbed a potion onto her genitals that morning and again after Severus had left that evening, or she would be very sore by now. She wondered whether he were sore. He was a Potions master. He surely knew of soothing potions even if he'd had only a rare occasion to use them himself. He may not have any on hand, though.

She turned her head and kissed the side of his jaw, which was slightly stubbly, then she whispered, "Are you feeling at all sore, Severus?"

"Hmm? Hadn't thought about it." He took a long breath and let it out slowly, feeling warm and good holding Poppy in his arms, his penis still surrounded by her warmth though his erection was deflating fast.

"If you are and you haven't anything on hand for it, I have something in my rooms that's nice to rub in afterward."

Severus opened his eyes. "Did I make you sore? I didn't mean to."

"It's good sore. It was good sex, so it was good sore, but when I realised that I was hopeful about seeing you again tonight, I used a little so that we could do it again if you wanted."

Severus moved her so that she sat back and he could look into her face. He felt a strange impulse to tell her he loved her, but he didn't love her, and so he ignored the impulse and kissed her instead.

"You're wonderful to me, Poppy," he said, smiling down at her and brushing some of her hair back.

She returned his smile. "I think it's mutual, Severus." She gazed at him fondly. "I love to see you smile."

"I didn't even know I was," Severus said. He looked at her in amusement. "I hope that doesn't become a persistent condition."

Poppy laughed. "I'm sure that the next time a student melted a cauldron, you would find your condition cured."

"Mmm . . . but I think I would like to reserve my smiles for special people, like you. I don't want to walk about smiling at people without knowing it."

"True. People might begin to worry, think you're sampling some peculiar potions," Poppy replied with a chuckle.

Severus remembered how Hermione had joked with him the previous year about something similar, and he felt a sudden sense of unease.

"Severus? Are you all right? I didn't mean that seriously," Poppy said.

"I know you didn't. It just reminded me of something. Nothing of your concern."

"Severus, I'm sitting on your lap with your penis in my vagina. I care about you. I'm going to be concerned."

Severus closed his eyes and bit back a sarcastic response, struggling with the desire to create distance between them by deriding her feelings and their current physical proximity. He felt Poppy's fingertips stroke his face.

"I'm sorry, Severus," she whispered. "Whatever it was, I'm sorry."

"It wasn't a bad memory. Just uncomfortable at the moment," he replied softly.

Poppy kissed his forehead. "I should go now. Let you have some privacy."

Severus opened his eyes. He wanted her to stay, but it was better if she didn't, and she probably wanted to leave, anyway.

When he didn't say anything, Poppy moved off to sit beside him, then found her wand and cast a nonverbal spell on herself.

"What was that?"

"So I'm not dripping everywhere," she said with a smile.

"What about contraception?" Severus asked, suddenly remembering his earlier concerns. The thought passed through his mind that she might not do anything and he could suddenly discover he was a father. That was a terrifying thought.

"Taken care of. I took a potion this morning for last night, and then this evening, I thought I should take other precautions, just in case, so I took another potion. I'll be all right for a few weeks. Not," she added hastily, "that I think we will continue for a few weeks, but it seemed convenient to do that and not worry about it again."

"Very wise," Severus said. "And you are so sexy, you might find yourself with someone else sometime soon."

Poppy smiled and shook her head. "Doubtful."

"I am sure there are other wizards who would want to enjoy you," Severus said, hoping he wasn't being insulting to her, but liking the idea that he was with a witch whom other wizards wanted to fuck.

"Mmm, perhaps, but I likely wouldn't want them," Poppy said.

Severus put his arm around her and drew her close. She put her head on his shoulder and relaxed, telling herself she shouldn't enjoy this too much. It was Severus; they may be having great sex, but their relationship wasn't changing. Lovers in secret, for however long it lasted, but otherwise, just colleagues.

"I assume you've had a lot of relationships in your life, many other lovers," Severus said tentatively. She was so fuckable. He wanted to hear that she'd been with other wizards who had wanted her, good, attractive wizards whom other witches also found appealing, not ones like Cahill.

"I wouldn't say I've had a lot. I've had a couple good relationships, and I've had few flings, and there were a couple of trysts that were . . . exciting but didn't go any further than the one time."

"Like us?"

Poppy shook her head. "Not like us. Even if it had ended this morning after I left here, not like us."

Severus thought about that. "What was different?"

"I suppose part of it was the sheer number of times we did it. But also . . . it was very intimate, Severus. Very intense. Very warm. It could be because we have known each other for so long and felt comfortable with each other."

"Have you had affairs...flings...with other staff members before?" Severus asked.

"Are you jealous?" Poppy asked, pulling back and looking up at him.

"No. Really, I'm not. You're here with me now. I'm just curious. And interested to know who else had the good taste and good fortune to be with you in the past."

Poppy looked at him for a moment, thinking about what he'd said. "Well, in terms of relationships, you know one of the wizards, but he's not here at Hogwarts."

"Who was it?"

"Murdoch, Minerva's brother." She twitched a slight smile. "Another talented Potions master."

"Murdoch?" He had seen that they were friends, but he hadn't imagined that they'd ever been involved.

"Mhm. We met years ago, in the late fifties, after Minerva started teaching here. I thought it was love at first sight. He was gorgeous, I thought, funny, smart, warm, attractive, strong, successful, a great father. I was pleased when he returned my attentions."

"What about his wife?"

"He wasn't married at the time. I wouldn't have looked at him that way if he had been. His first wife had died several years before."

"So what happened? You're still friends, but he's married to someone else?"

Poppy nodded. "We took things slowly at first. We met during the summer and we saw a lot of each other, but then the school year began and we didn't see as much of each other. We finally made love for the first time over the Christmas holidays, believe it or not. I spent a lot of my time with him, and it felt very good. I was in love. We caught time together over the next few months, then during the summer, I spent almost all of my time with him. I practically moved into his flat, for all intents and purposes. At the end of the summer, he asked me to marry him. It was the last week of August. How could I make any kind of decision or commitment about that when I was going back to school? So I told him I would think about it.

"We saw each other when we could, and he asked me again at Christmas. I needed more time. At the end of June, he asked me again. I told him that I didn't want to leave Hogwarts, but that if he could live with the long separations during the school year, I would marry him. He needed time to think about it. At the end of the summer, he told me that he wanted to marry me, but he wanted me to live with him. I could help him with the apothecary, which I enjoyed doing during the summer, or I could work at the St. Giles Clinic for Magical Maladies in Edinburgh, he said, or even Floo back and forth to St. Mungo's. Whatever I liked except living away at Hogwarts. But I didn't want to work in the apothecary year round, and I'd done hospital work at St. Mungo's and a rotation at St. Giles when I was training. I liked Hogwarts much better. It's *mine*, you know? So, we broke it off. We did the same thing over and over again for years, on again, off again. Finally, after about fifteen years of this, we both decided that if we continued like that, we would end up hating each other, so we returned to being just friends and never looked back. He didn't, anyway. He met Estelle a few years later, and they were married within a year."

"And his wife doesn't mind that he's friends with you? After you were lovers for so many years? She doesn't have a problem with that?"

"No, there's nothing between us now. They love each other and are married. Murdoch and I are just friends, and neither of us would change that."

"Don't you love him any longer?"

"Of course I do. But it's not the same. And he's happy. I want him to be happy."

"I think I'd be upset and jealous if someone I loved married someone else," Severus said, knowing that it was true, remembering Lily and her marriage to Potter...and he hadn't even had the same relationship with her that Poppy had had with Murdoch.

"It was the right thing for both of them. It wasn't right with us. Neither of us would compromise enough. We were worn out. By the time they married, I couldn't feel jealous any longer."

"And there were other relationships?"

"A few, but they weren't as long or as . . . important to me. And I doubt you knew any of them."

"What about flings? And trysts? You mentioned them." He looked her up and down. "You must have had some hot, sexy affairs."

Poppy smiled. "Some."

"Did you ever have sex with anyone else here at Hogwarts?" Severus asked.

"You really are curious, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry. I just . . . I'll be honest, Poppy, I like the idea that you were with other wizards before and now you're with me. That you are so attractive to attractive wizards, and you chose to be with me, too."

"I see . . . yes, I've had some flings with other staff at times. Not in a very long time, though."

"I know I shouldn't ask, but who?"

"Oh, Severus . . ."

He began to tease her breast through her robes, then he kissed the side of her throat. "Can I guess and you can tell me if I'm right?"

Poppy laughed. "You are incorrigible." She looked up at his shining eyes and shook her head, smiling. "If you want to. But some additional persuasion might help coax it out of me."

He reached behind her and released her Charmed hooks. "Hmmm . . . another Slytherin, perhaps? Slughorn?"

"Oh, gods, no, Severus. He's definitely not my type. And he just . . . no."

Severus pushed her bodice down. "Ummm . . . an attractive wizard . . . Albus? Before Minerva, of course."

"No, no, no. He is attractive, of course, very attractive, but no. He and Minerva have been together for a long time, and before that, I thought of him as my former teacher...my very *old* former teacher...and my boss. It wouldn't have occurred to me then, though I was glad to see Minerva with him."

"Hmmm . . . you already told me Hagrid's not your type, though I'm surprised you're not at least intrigued by the idea of sex with him."

"Please, Severus, I don't want to contemplate that."

"Still . . ." He licked her ear and suckled her earlobe, trying to think of an attractive wizard. "What about Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"Oh, good god, no...though not because he didn't try. Thought he was god's gift to witches *and* wizards!...that one," Poppy said, shuddering.

"A lot of witches find him very attractive," Severus said, whispering into her ear, and glad that she hadn't had sex with Lockhart, but that Lockhart had wanted her.

"As did he. Sex with him would be all about him and how wonderful and attractive he was, I'm sure. No, I thought he was handsome," Poppy admitted, "but not at all attractive once I got to know him. He became less attractive the more you saw him."

"Mmm . . ." He began to play with one of her exposed breasts, teasing her nipple. "What about . . . Lupin?" He didn't like Lupin particularly, but he was admired by others.

"No. Although . . ."

"What?"

"I shouldn't tell you this, Severus. It would embarrass him if he knew you knew."

"As much as I wouldn't mind causing him embarrassment sometimes, I wouldn't do that for your sake. I wouldn't."

"When he was teaching here that year, he had me around for a drink. I have drinks with colleagues all of the time, so I didn't think anything of it. I stepped into his sitting room, and he had candles, flowers, and soft jazz playing. I tried to ignore it, but after he'd had a couple drinks...and I think he'd had one before I got there...he tried to kiss me. It was sweet, but I wasn't interested. He was disappointed."

Severus smirked. He couldn't help but feel pleased. He bent his head and kissed her breast lightly. He nuzzled her.

"My guesses have not been very good so far. I won't insult you by suggesting you might have been with Filch."

"Thank you for that!"

"Mmm . . . such sexy breasts," he said. He kissed her nipple. "Is there anyone whom I knew, or are you letting me play the guessing game because I don't know any of them?" He closed his lips around her nipple and suckled lightly.

"Um, yes, you do, and one's still on staff . . ." She let Severus push her back against the arm of the sofa.

He flicked her other nipple with the tip of his tongue. Suddenly he raised his head. "Flitwick?"

"Don't *ever* tell anyone. Minerva doesn't even know."

"You had sex with *Flitwick*?" he asked, astonished.

"Yes. He's a good wizard, Severus."

"I know. I like him. I don't like many people." He blinked at her. "So that's how you knew that he's rumoured to have sexual prowess...and not from rumours!"

Poppy blushed darkly. "It was interesting. And very good. But just one night. A long time ago."

"And what about Pomona?"

Poppy looked even more embarrassed. "She, um, well, she, um . . . she knows."

"She was *with* you?" Severus asked incredulously. He couldn't imagine Poppy in a threesome...and although he might *wike* to imagine it, it wouldn't be with that couple, certainly.

"No, of course not! It was years ago. The two of them had stopped seeing each other, seemed to be separated permanently. Murdoch and I had just broken up for the second time. Filius and I were friends, we were both lonely, we had dinner, we got a little tipsy, and we ended up making love. I'd thought it was good, very good, but then afterwards, we had a late night snack, he got more drunk, cried about Pomona...which made me feel just wonderful, as you might imagine...and then a couple weeks later, they were back together again. Unfortunately, he felt compelled to tell Pomona that he'd slept with me. He apparently felt guilt-ridden. They'd been separated for several weeks, hadn't even been together for very long before that, and Pomona had seemed to be dating someone else already, so I hadn't seen anything wrong with it, especially as I . . . well, I rather fancied Filius myself, even though I had originally tried to get the two of them together. I had no idea they'd get back together again, let alone so soon, and so I did feel a little odd about it and somewhat uncomfortable when I saw them together, but it wasn't too bad until Pomona came to see me and told me she knew."

"She must have been furious!"

"No, she wasn't. Unhappy that he'd told her, but not angry. She just wanted to tell me that Filius had told her about it and that she would rather not have known, but that I shouldn't worry and I shouldn't avoid her." Poppy shrugged. "It was a little awkward for a while, but that's all. If he and Pomona hadn't got back together so soon after, I don't think it would have been awkward at all. Now she and I just laugh about it."

"So, was he as good as I heard?"

"Where did you hear that?" Poppy asked.

"That Defence teacher, Stillman, the one with the halitosis."

Poppy wrinkled her nose. "Yes, I did try to get him to take something for it, but he didn't see it as a problem. His diet was dreadful. I can't imagine how he heard anything about Filius. It couldn't have been from another witch...no one would have got close enough to him."

"But was he? Flitwick, I mean, was he really good?"

"That's a rather indelicate question, Severus. Why are you so curious?"

Severus shrugged. "I am thinking a lot about sex lately. I'm wondering about what's good and what's not. Since Flitwick isn't exactly Adonis, I was wondering what his secret is."

"Well, aside from the fact that he's sweet, smart, kind, funny, and attentive, let's just say that he requires almost no recovery time, he's highly disproportionate, and goblin genes somewhere in his past have given him some interesting muscles that other wizards don't possess," Poppy said with a smirk, seeing Severus's expression.

"So he's . . . well-endowed?"

"Yes, and he's a good lover. The extra muscles help, too."

"Don't tease me, Poppy. What muscles?" He did his own teasing, though, circling the tip of a finger around one of her nipples, then flicking it lightly. "I won't tell anyone. I promise."

"Around his, um, base. He can move it like another limb. Up and down, back and forth, in circles. It was very . . . stimulating."

Severus was speechless. He could make his bounce a bit, but that kind of control...no wonder witches liked being with him.

Poppy chuckled. "Now you'll be sitting next to him in the Great Hall and you won't be able to think about anything else. Serves you right for questioning me about it."

"I think you're right. I'd rather not have known." He sat back, then looked at her again. "Wasn't sex boring for you after that?"

"No, sex is about more than having an unusually adept anatomy. And if you're concerned about yours," she said, "it is more than adequate, and sex with you is far from boring. If I say any more, it will go to your head, I'm sure."

She sat up and began to pull her robes back up. "I should leave. It's very late."

"Do you have to? Do you want to?"

"Do you want me to stay?"

Severus nodded. "Then we might do it again in the morning, and it will still only count as a part of what we started in your office, really." His lips twitched a smile.

Poppy looked at him and cupped his face with her hand. It was a bad idea, but Severus looked so relaxed, his eyes so lively, his worry lines melted away, his lips so kissable . . . "I'd like that, Severus." She kissed him softly.

NEXT

Chapter Forty-Four: No Unmixed Pleasures

Wednesday, 10 March 1999

Severus finds that unpleasant thoughts can interrupt even the most pleasurable moments.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey

Author's Note: If you're interested in key events in the RaMverse chronology, I just uploaded a new doc over at my WordPress blog, "What Happened When in the RaMverse." It lists some events from 1935 through 1998. (My blog is at mmadfan.wordpress.com; a link to the post is also available on my LJ.) I tried to make sure there were no spoilers for the upcoming chapters of LVS or for any potential future fics, but I may have missed something.

There's quite a bit of other information available on my blog about the different fics, and there are links in the sidebar of the blog to lead you to it.

Chapter Forty-Four: No Unmixed Pleasures

Chapter 45 of 118

Wednesday, 10 March 1999. Severus finds that unpleasant thoughts can interrupt even the most pleasurable moments.



Chapter Forty-Four: No Unmixed Pleasures

Wednesday, 10 March 1999

Severus woke to the most delightful sensation. He thought he was dreaming and tried to fall back to sleep to recapture the dream, but the sensation went on and on. Someone was kissing and teasing the head of his cock.

"Mmm, Poppy . . ." His hand found her head and he twined her hair through his fingers. She had let it down when they'd undressed for bed the night before.

"I'm glad you're awake. I didn't want to do more before knowing that you wanted me to continue."

"Please do . . ." He didn't open his eyes, relishing the sensation of Poppy's breasts rubbing against his body as she pleased his cock, licking, sucking, and swallowing.

She stopped before he came, though, kissing her way back up his body.

"Good morning, Severus."

"It is," he said, opening his eyes and looking up at her face above him. He shouldn't think he might be able to get used to this. It was more than the one-time tryst, but it was just a fling. A brief fling. Not even an affair. "Kiss me."

Poppy kissed him, then kissed him again. "I know it's been a short night," she whispered, "but I thought we might have more time this way and at least one of us might make it to breakfast this morning."

"I don't care about breakfast," Severus said, embracing her and rolling her over onto her back.

He kissed her, sucking her lower lip, then kissed everywhere on her face that he could reach. He found her ear and kissed it, then remembered the sensation of Gareth's tongue in his ear. He licked her ear, then began to move the tip in and out. Poppy moaned and put her legs around him. Severus kissed her ear once more, then looked down into her face as he shifted his hips, seeking her crux with his cock, he reached down to guide himself in, but then he thought of Flitwick. He may not have those extra muscles, and he might not be able to do very much moving around once he was inside her, but he could still give her a little taste of that. Up and down, back and forth, and in circles, she'd said.

He took hold of his cock and pressed the head against her clit. She liked his tongue there. She might like this, too, Severus thought. He began to rub the head of his cock against her clitoris, up and down, back and forth. He was rewarded by gasps and moans as she grabbed his buttocks.

"Can you come like this, Poppy? I want to see you come, come for me, Poppy, come for me!"

It felt so good to rub against her like this. The sensation was marvellous. She was wet and soft. Watching her face, he kept rubbing and stroking himself against her, and she came, shuddering and shouting.

Poppy opened her eyes and looked up at him. "Are you sure that you are Severus Snape? The Severus Snape who had no experience with sex?"

He smirked at her. "I am a fast learner. Besides, it's easy with you. I see what brings you pleasure, and I do it. And I enjoy it very much. I rather liked that myself."

"But you still haven't come," Poppy said.

"You had a very intriguing idea last night."

"Which one?"

"The last one. If you want to do it."

"The last one . . . Ah, me over your face and pleasuring your cock," she said.

He nodded.

"You like that idea?"

"Very much. I never thought I'd like eating pussy, if you'll excuse me for saying that rather crudely, but I do love it with you. And the thought of having you doing the same to me...if you want to...whilst I'm doing that, it excites me." His cock twitched, emphasising his arousal.

"All right, we will try that. I'd like it. But if you don't like it, just push up on me, and I'll move," Poppy said.

Severus threw back the covers and lay down on his back. Poppy moved around to straddle his head then lower her mouth down onto his erection. She began to lick and

flick the head of his cock as she stroked his shaft with one hand. Severus reached up and drew her down to him. The position felt odd to him, and slightly claustrophobic, but Poppy's tongue was pleasuring him, so he pulled her closer and found her clitoris with his tongue. Poppy closed her mouth around him and moaned. The vibration seemed to go right through to his balls, and he licked harder. She moaned as she licked and sucked, and then as she began to come, she sat up, holding onto his cock, shouting breathlessly.

As her orgasm began to subside, Poppy began to pleasure him again, but Severus pushed her up and said, "No, I don't want to come yet. Let's take a break."

Poppy moved off of him and lay beside him. She kissed his cheek. "You know, if you like, there's a spell I know that can help you last longer if you want to."

Severus paused, staring at the ceiling. "A spell?"

"Yes, if you like. It's not necessary. Whatever you want." She didn't understand the peculiar expression on his face.

"What kind of spell?"

"As I said, it just holds off orgasm for you, makes it so you don't have to work at holding back if you want to last longer."

"Does it hurt?"

"Hurt? It shouldn't hurt. I've never had it cast on me, since it's a spell for wizards, but I've never heard of it hurting. If it did, there'd be something wrong. It's easily cancelled." She put her fingertips to the side of his face and turned it towards her. "Severus, was there a reason you asked that?" she said softly.

He shook his head. "Just wondering."

"If you think it's unnatural or you don't want to do it for any other reason, that's fine. It was only a suggestion."

He nodded, looking away from her. This was Poppy. She cared about him. She wouldn't do it just for her pleasure, and she wouldn't do something that would hurt him just so that she could have more sex and find excitement in his pain. She hated to see him suffering, he knew that. He didn't know why her mention of a spell caused his stomach to clench so.

She raised up on one elbow and looked into his face. She caressed his cheek. "Severus, I suggested it only because you were trying to keep from coming just then. I thought you might like it. I can see that the suggestion disturbed you."

"No. I was just curious," he said flatly, his eyes closed.

Poppy kissed his cheek. "Severus love, did someone do something to hurt you? A spell that hurt you during sex?"

"I'm not very experienced, Poppy, that's all." She must think him completely foolish, he thought.

She caressed his face. "I would never suggest anything that I thought would hurt you, sweet Severus. Never. I think you know that."

"Of course." He opened his eyes. "You always took good care of me, even when I behaved like a complete bastard and didn't appreciate it. You were always very generous to me. I know you wouldn't hurt me."

"And that hasn't changed. I certainly wouldn't want to hurt you when we were making love. I would feel bad even if I did something accidentally." She kissed him softly.

"I know." Severus couldn't understand his reaction. He had just asked Gareth about sex spells the previous day. He should be happy that Poppy knew one and wanted to show him.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," Poppy said. "We've spoken freely about sex. I didn't think you would mind my mentioning it. I know that some wizards might find it . . . inappropriate that a witch suggest using spells or anything else. But you liked my other ideas."

"It's not that, Poppy," Severus said.

"Did someone hurt you? Did someone use a spell during sex and hurt you?" she asked, wondering if he had been sexually abused as a child. Is that why Severus was so angry at the world, why he had become a Death Eater? One of the reasons he had never had a normal adult sex life? "When you were young?" she asked.

"Poppy, I just . . ." He looked away from her.

"Don't be ashamed, Severus. It's not your fault if someone did something to you."

"It is," he said hoarsely.

"No..."

"Yes! Yes, it is. I let her," Severus said vehemently. "I let her and I hated it and I still came back. I did finally stop. I just couldn't do it any longer. But I let her. I should be ashamed. I am ashamed."

"No, you shouldn't be. You can talk to me about it if you want to."

He shook his head. "I was a Death Eater. I deserved everything that came with that."

"I'm so sorry, Severus," she said softly. "You didn't deserve it, though. No matter what."

"I thought it was normal. That it made me a tough, strong Death Eater. But it was awful. And it wasn't even normal amongst Death Eaters. Just her and her little circle." Severus swallowed and turned his face away. "I can understand if you want to leave. If having me touch you . . . if it seems foul now."

"Severus Snape, look at me," Poppy said, her finger gently on his jaw. "You are a strong, sexy, thoughtful, passionate lover. I feel excited when I'm with you, and I feel secure. I know you would never do anything to me against my will. I love to have you touch me. There is absolutely nothing foul about it."

He looked at her and sighed. "I don't really think about it anymore. I didn't. Not until recently. The last time it did more than cross my mind was a few years ago . . . just to think, though, how nice it was...how nice it would be...for someone to care about my pleasure and ask me what I'd like. Lately, though . . . I've thought of it, remembered it. It's partly because I've been feeling more sexual, but also because I've been facing more of my past."

"Did that witch use a spell that hurt you?" Poppy asked.

Severus nodded. "It was similar to the one you describe, but it was cast on the erection almost immediately, and the longer it was on, the more it . . . the more it hurt, but the erection wouldn't go down and there was no orgasm. When she lifted it, it would be a painful relief to ejaculate, but it didn't feel like a normal orgasm."

"Oh, Severus, that sounds awful! We don't have to use any spells at all. Sex with you is wonderful, and you certainly don't need to think you have to use one on my account."

"But I would like to, actually," Severus said, turning in bed slightly and looking at her. "Not that one, obviously, but I was thinking about it yesterday. I thought I'd do some research or ask someone." He reddened. "I didn't want to ask you, even though as a mediwitch, you might know some, or just from your own experience. I was thinking of you, of wanting to please you and still having pleasure myself."

"Let's just forget it for now," Poppy said. "If you want me to teach it to you sometime, though, or you have any other questions about things like that, just tell me." She gave him a kiss. "Even if it's weeks or months from now and you're with someone else."

"Do you want me to be with someone else?" Severus asked.

"No, but I'm being practical. I know this is . . . it is what it is. I wouldn't be surprised if you found some nice witch and started a relationship with her. You deserve it."

"Would you be jealous?"

"I have no right to be jealous, Severus. I would certainly think that any witch would be fortunate to have you as a lover, though that isn't everything in a relationship."

"But you might be a little jealous?" Severus asked.

Poppy laughed. "Severus, that is an unanswerable question." She kissed him. "Let's not think about that now."

"Then we'll have to find something else to do." He returned her kiss. "Would you find it insulting if I asked if I could look at you?"

"You have looked at me before, Severus."

"I mean . . . I liked coming out of the bathroom yesterday and seeing you in my bed. You were gorgeous and sexy. You looked like a goddess, and no god could be luckier than to find you in his bed. And . . . I . . . I liked looking at you last night in your office before I pleased you. Seeing you . . . in your private places."

"Ah, I see. You find it arousing to look at me?" Poppy asked, a slight smile on her lips.

Severus licked his lips. "Very."

"Then look . . ." she said softly. "Look."

She rolled away from him and stretched out, lying partly on her side, one arm over her head. Severus sat up and looked at her, taking in her entire body, then pausing and looking at her breasts.

"I liked seeing you touch your breasts yesterday," he whispered.

Poppy began to brush one hand over her breast, watching his face as he focussed on her. She circled one nipple with the tip of her finger, and smiled when he licked his lips.

"May I . . . see . . . more?" he asked, looking at her crux.

She lay back, spreading her legs, bending her knees and bringing her feet together, then spreading her legs further as she pressed her thighs to the bed and drew her feet toward her.

Severus moved to kneel in front of her. He reached out with one hand and spread her labia, then he touched her clitoris. "This, this is so sensitive." He circled her entrance. "And here, I want this, to be in you, deep in you."

"I would like that, too," Poppy said softly.

He lay down on top of her, but did not move to enter her. He kissed her cheek, then he whispered in her ear, "If it's not too peculiar or private or insulting or wrong . . . I would like to look at you more."

"What do you mean?" Poppy asked.

"Your buttocks . . . and . . . your anus," Severus whispered.

It was at times like this when Poppy was completely certain that Severus really was inexperienced, but that he was also very curious.

"You certainly are curious, aren't you?" Poppy said, smiling up at him as he raised himself on one arm.

"I like to be thorough," he replied, a slight gleam in his eye. He caressed her cheek and his expression softened. "And you are so beautiful and sexy, I want to know every bit of you."

"Do you want me to roll over? Or I could just put a pillow under my hips. Then you could see everything at once."

"You are very kind to me," Severus said, moving off of her. "I know it must seem peculiar to you. I don't think most witches would be so patient."

"What else can I say to a man who tells me that I'm beautiful and sexy and he wants to know every bit of me?" Poppy replied with a laugh, putting a couple pillows under her hips.

Severus moved to sit in front of her. He looked at her vulva and her anus, then separated her buttocks for a better view.

"You are sexy everywhere. Even here," he said, touching her anus.

Severus remembered how good it had felt to put his cock into Gareth. From what Poppy had said, she didn't like having anything in her there. But maybe just a little touch. Not his cock, but his finger. She might not mind, and if she did, he would stop. And she might even enjoy it a little bit. He bent toward her and began to lick her clitoris. When he was certain that she was enjoying that, he began to rub his left index finger against her anus, still pleasuring her with his lips and tongue. He remembered how good it had felt when she had moaned when her mouth was around him, so he hummed against her. Poppy moaned and raised her hips. She was gasping and moaning, and she hadn't objected to having him rub her anus, so he began to slowly insert his finger into her as he continued to pleasure her with his tongue. She groaned, and Severus paused, but when she didn't say anything, he resumed.

"Oh, gods, Severus, so close, so close," Poppy gasped.

He sat back, withdrew his finger, then inserted it from another angle as he moved forward and guided his erection into her with his right hand. She moaned more loudly as his cock filled her. Severus moved his finger, and he could feel it against his cock through the wall of her vagina. It was awkward, though, and he removed his finger. He began to pump, raising and lowering his hips, bracing himself, rolling his hips with every thrust, rubbing against her clitoris, Poppy rocking beneath him, thrusting up to meet him as he drove into her.

Poppy began to come, just gasping, wordless, choking cries coming from her. Severus raised himself up on his hands, still pumping into her, watching her face. Then the sensation of his own building arousal overwhelmed all else, and it seemed to him that all he felt was his cock, and he closed his eyes, coming, shouting, almost howling, his orgasm exploding on him suddenly. With a low, long groan, he collapsed, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

Severus opened his eyes, then pushed off of Poppy and lay on his back beside her.

"How was it?" Severus asked as he caught his breath.

Poppy rolled over on her side and placed her hand on his chest, stretching out her legs and pushing the pillows aside. "It was marvellous, and I cannot imagine anything less from you."

"That's a lot to live up to," Severus said, rubbing his forehead.

"Are you all right?" Poppy asked. "Headache?"

Severus nodded.

Poppy moved to sit by his head and she began to rub his scalp, a bit of magic tingling through her fingertips.

"How does this feel?"

"Good," Severus replied.

She rubbed his head for several minutes until Severus sighed and said, "Much better."

He opened his eyes and touched her cheek lightly before dropping his hand. "We should dress," he said, "and I need a shower."

"Yes, and we should both try to be at breakfast," Poppy said with a sigh.

"That's the second time you've said something like that," Severus observed as he got out of bed. "We've presumably both been absent from breakfast at the same time before. I doubt that anyone will draw any conclusions if neither of us is there this morning. Although I am hungry."

"Minerva noticed yesterday. She drew conclusions because she knew you were going to see me the night before, and she was in the infirmary when I Flooded through looking less than freshly coiffed."

Severus, who had begun to open the wardrobe, stopped, frozen. "Minerva knows?" His voice cracked.

"She asked me. I initially told her that it was none of her business, but then it was obvious that she had figured it out, so I told her I'd spent the night."

Severus just stood there, staring unseeing into his wardrobe.

"Believe me, Severus, I was not pleased, but I saw no point in trying to lie about it."

"Why didn't you tell me? Are there others you've told?"

"No, only her. I told her it was just a . . . a one-time thing. I said it was something private between you and me. She won't tell anyone else. I wouldn't have said anything to her under any other circumstances."

"You should have told me," Severus said.

"I didn't really think to tell you. Besides, I know you value your privacy. But I didn't hide it from you. I just didn't think to say anything."

"Is she angry with me?"

"What? Why would she be angry with you? No, she's not angry with you."

"She probably wondered what you were doing with me, with such a . . . such an inexperienced wizard."

"I doubt it. I didn't go into any detail, but once Minerva was over her surprise, she asked if I had fun, and I said that you were wonderful and that I did have a lot of fun."

Severus didn't say anything. Minerva knew.

"You have to admit, Severus, it wasn't something predictable. It's not as though either of *us* had thought we might get together, even for one night. I certainly never would have thought you'd be attracted to *me*, of all people. I was pleased when you were, though."

Severus felt Poppy's gentle hands on his back.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I shouldn't have told you. It was thoughtless of me. I know her opinion is important to you."

He shook his head. "It can't be helped. She is very observant."

"Yes, and Minerva cares about you. She was also worried about you. I told her you and I are both adults, and she should know me well enough to know that I care about you. But she won't say anything to you, I'm sure, and it's all right."

"I don't care," he said, his voice tight.

"You *do* care, I can see that. I don't care to have her speculate about our involvement, either, even though she's probably my closest friend."

"And she didn't laugh or ask you whether you had lost your mind?"

"Of course not!"

"I, um, I think I will talk to her about it. Try to explain."

"You don't owe her an explanation. She's your friend and she's my friend...and she's the Headmistress...but you don't owe her an explanation."

"You told her I was good?"

"I did. I told her we'd both enjoyed it and that it was a good thing. I wouldn't have spent the night in your bed if that wasn't so."

"I don't want her to think you had bad sex with me and stayed because you felt sorry for me."

"She doesn't think that. I made it very clear that you were a wonderful lover."

"Was she surprised?"

"I don't know. I don't know that she would have been surprised. You are good at so much that you do. Why wouldn't you be a spectacular lover?"

Severus just shook his head. He couldn't tell Poppy about the *Adfectus*. Could he?

"Do you remember the September before Albus died...when we believed he died?" he asked tentatively. "Albus made Minerva sick and then she disappeared for a few days, and then I did?"

"Yes," Poppy said softly.

"We were together. Together, together. Minerva and I."

"You . . . you don't have to tell me this, Severus."

Severus froze. "You know."

"She told me the day after. But she just needed to talk to someone about her feelings. It had been emotionally difficult for her to make love with someone other than Albus."

"She wasn't going to tell anyone."

"It was about her, too, Severus. And that's what she talked about. Herself. Her feelings. To the extent that she mentioned you, she did so fondly. Minerva feels very protective toward you. That's why she was worried about you. We don't speak about the *Adfectus*, and I have never breathed a word to another soul...I haven't even talked to Albus about it, though he knows that I know."

"As long as it was you she talked to," Severus said softly. "I knew that she told Professor Gamp for her calculations, but she said she didn't tell Gareth. At the time, he hated me. She didn't think that it would improve his attitude toward me. And I thought she'd told Robbie, but Robbie was Albus, so she hadn't. But she didn't tell me that she told you."

"It was two different things. I'm sure that all she told Gertrude was that you had been hit by the *Adfectus* and that she was the object of your affections. With me, it was a personal conversation to help her to cope with all of the feelings she went through."

He nodded and turned around. "As long as it was you. I know it was hard for Minerva, but . . . I wonder now why you came down to see me."

"Because you flirted with me, Severus. You remember that. You kissed me before you left my rooms. You were very seductive. I may be a Hufflepuff, but I do have some nerve, you know. I felt attracted to you, and I wanted to know if you had really wanted to seduce me, so I came down here," Poppy said. "You were there. You know what happened. It had absolutely nothing to do with Minerva or the *Adfectus*. It was about us."

He nodded and stepped away. "I need a shower. I will see you later in the day."

"Severus? This has been good. I will feel awful if you have been hurt by it."

Gareth's words echoed in his head. Gareth had worried about hurting him, too. He stepped backward toward the bathroom.

"No. It's fine. It was just fucking. I need to shower." He saw her flinch at his words. "Don't worry about it. I mean that."

"Severus...I can't leave with you feeling like this."

"Poppy, I don't know how I feel. I am fucked up. I've been fucked up for a long time. You didn't do it to me. And you're right. It was good. We were good together. You don't want me hurt; I don't want you to feel bad, either. I may be fucked up, but I do know that. Don't feel bad, Poppy." He stepped back toward her and bent to kiss her cheek. "I will see you later."

"All right. I'll try to make it to breakfast, too."

Severus looked up over his coffee cup. Poppy had just walked in. She looked lovely. Had she always looked so lovely, and he had just been blind, he wondered. As he'd showered, he hadn't let himself think about his conversation with Poppy. He just felt the water run over him, washed his hair, scrubbed his body, and soaped up his genitals. He was a little sore. Sore from fucking one of the sexiest witches in Britain, he thought. He might be ugly, with a hook nose, bad teeth, and a mediocre body, but he got sore from fucking a sexy, desirable witch. And it was good sore, not bad sore. Good sore from good sex. Great sex.

He dried off, then used his wand to dry his hair. Gareth had shown that spell to him a few months before. The spell he had used to use had left his hair full of static, which hadn't mattered when he had been using Shed-Stop Potion on his hair.

He brushed his teeth and looked at his reflection. He did look better than he used to, he thought. A little added weight and a lot less mortal danger could do that for a wizard. He wondered about his hair. Gareth had said he should change the style. He wasn't sure about that. He should ask Poppy what she thought.

By the time he got to the Great Hall, Severus was feeling better. Minerva had seen him the previous day, after all. If she had wanted to ask him about what he'd done with Poppy, she could have set up a meeting with him. She hadn't. She had only said something about still working on the budgets. And he had talked to Gareth. He had told him that he had spent the night with Poppy. He had even told him about performing oral sex on her. That was far from discreet. But he'd wanted to brag to someone, and Gareth appreciated Poppy's sexiness. Severus knew that he would be impressed. Poppy hadn't volunteered to tell Minerva the way that he had gone out of his way to tell Gareth. He should probably tell Poppy that he had talked to someone, too, but he wouldn't say who it was. That would probably make her very uncomfortable.

As Poppy crossed the Great Hall, Severus tried to catch her eye, but she went and sat down at the other end of the table next to Pomona in her usual chair. He didn't worry about it. He would see her later in the day. She'd been looking very fresh and pretty, though, and it didn't appear that she was upset at all. He would have to see her and make sure that she was all right, that he hadn't offended her. And he could get some of that potion from her. The soreness would wear off by itself, but the potion would be nice. It would show her that they were back to normal. He hoped they were back to normal.

After his last class of the morning, Severus left immediately, warding the door behind him, rather than waiting as he usually did. He could grade the potions later. He stood in the entry hall outside the Great Hall and watched the students go in for lunch, glowering at any who were too unruly. He was waiting for Poppy, but he just acted as though he merely wanted to terrorise the students.

Poppy arrived, glanced at him and nodded, then went into the Great Hall. He waited a moment, looked disdainfully at the students entering with him, and they moved away from him. With his longer stride, he caught up to Poppy before she got to the staff table. If Albus could play musical chairs, so could he, Severus thought, following her to her seat and sitting to her left.

Poppy looked up at him, and he could see her puzzlement. They had said that everything would be the same between them in public. But there was nothing wrong with sitting next to her at lunch. They'd done it before. He was supposed to sit next to Minerva, but it seemed he rarely did these days, so no one would notice. Minerva might, but that didn't matter to him any longer.

Conversation was no different from usual, and he spoke little, but he brushed Poppy's arm with his several times as he ate. He wished he could think of something to say that would let her know that he was okay and that hoped she was, too, but he couldn't think of a thing. Finally, pudding arrived, and he got up from the table. He acted as though he was about to leave and then thought of something. He put his hand on the back of Poppy's chair and leaned over to talk to her. He said the only thing that occurred to him.

"You can have my dessert, Poppy."

She smiled and thanked him. His expression barely changed, but his eyes softened, and he nodded, then spun on his heel and strode off.

Double Potions with the sixth-year class would kill him, Severus was sure of it. It seemed that the afternoon was dragging, and by the time the sixth-years filed in, he didn't think that he could wait any longer to see Poppy. Instead of having them brew that day's potion, he escorted them to the library and left them there with an obscure assignment that would take them hours to complete. It would be good discipline for them. And there was an outside chance that it might help them on their NEWTs.

He walked into the infirmary. Poppy was with two students. Years of spying on a paranoid megalomaniac helped him keep from tearing his hair out by the roots. Instead, he calmly entered Poppy's office, picked up a journal on pediatric Healing, and sat down with it, doing a perfect imitation of a man engrossed in his reading. Fifteen minutes later, Poppy had finished with the students and sent them on their way.

"Severus," she said, shutting the door behind her, "don't you have a class now?"

"They are quite well occupied. I needed to see you and know that you were all right. I was . . . worried that I upset you."

"I'm fine. I was a little upset with the way you said it was just fucking, but I knew that you were uncomfortable and didn't know how to react. I took that into account. I'm fine now. And I appreciated your dessert. Now, hadn't you better get back to your class?" Poppy asked briskly.

"I . . . all right." Severus didn't know what else to say. He supposed that was all he had come for, to hear her say that she was fine, but he felt disappointed. "I have them doing research in the library, though. I had thought we could talk."

"I don't know that we have anything to talk about," she said, straightening a pile of parchments. "I am sorry I told you that Minerva talked to me about the *Adfectus*. You were about to tell me, and you were willing to make yourself vulnerable that way. I should have let you. I thought I was saving you from having to repeat something difficult, but I should have let you. I don't know that there's anything more to say."

"I had wanted you to understand why it upset me that Minerva knew. It wasn't your fault that she did. She notices things, and she's able to add things up. I understood that. I wanted to tell you about the *Adfectus*, explain it to you, try to explain why Minerva is important to me. When you said you already knew, I couldn't do that any longer. And then it made me wonder why you came down to see me. I know what happened between us, and I trust that, but for a moment, I worried. I wasn't myself during the *Adfectus*. I am not experienced. I told you that. But under the *Adfectus*, my emotions were so close to the surface." He shook his head. "I don't think I can explain it. I was upset that Minerva knew what happened between you and me because it was private, but also because of my feelings for her. And, as embarrassing as it is to admit, I was pathetic when I was with her. She was kind, and I doubt she would tell you I was pathetic, but I was. I was generally pathetic and I was a pathetic lover. I knew the situation was difficult for her. I tried to make it easier. I asked her what she liked, what I could do for her, but I was inept. And even if I hadn't been inept, the situation was abnormal. She could have told you what a bad lover I was, if not when she told you about the *Adfectus*, then yesterday when she talked to you. I don't know precisely what difference I thought it would make between us. I couldn't process it. I didn't know what to say. I tried not to say too much, but even then, I managed to hurt you. I am sorry."

"That's all right. I've known you a long time. I know your moods, even if you are more relaxed than you were when you were a spy. And with me these last few days, you've been very . . . sweet, actually. I was touched. So to hear you say it was 'just fucking' in the way that you did bothered me. I got over it. Otherwise, you were fine. Obviously surprised, but not unkind." Poppy shrugged. "For what it's worth, Minerva didn't say you were pathetic in any way. At the time, she told me that you were good to her. I had been a little concerned because, to be honest, you could sometimes be unpleasant. More than unpleasant. When she told me about the *Adfectus*, she reassured me that you had treated her well. Yesterday, I told her that you were a wonderful lover. I think she was pleased to hear it."

"Poppy, that doesn't worry me any longer. I just want to make sure that you're all right. I want you to know . . . I wanted you to know that I care about you."

"I gathered that when you gave me your dessert." Poppy smiled at him.

Severus took a step toward her. "I wanted to say something, but I couldn't think of what. I hoped you would understand when I sat next to you that I didn't like the way we left things."

"I know." She reached up and caressed his face. "I'm glad that you came to see me. I feel sorry for those students in the library, but I'm glad that you came to see me."

"So am I. I also could use your services. I have some soreness. You mentioned a potion."

"I did mention one. I don't have any here, though. It's in my quarters."

"Would you mind sharing?"

"Not at all. I could bring it back to you, or you could come with me now."

"I will come with you so we can take care of it as soon as possible."

Severus followed Poppy into her quarters.

"It's in my bedroom," she said, beckoning him to follow her.

Severus looked around him. She had a nice, light room decorated in pale blue and yellow. It was pretty and soft, like her.

Poppy picked up a squat jar from her dressing table and handed it to him. "You're welcome to borrow it or put it on now."

"I think I may need help with the proper application of the potion," he said, his voice low. "Could you help me, Madam Pomfrey?"

"You are right," she agreed, her eyes sparkling. "It is important to apply it correctly. Show me where you're sore. I will apply it for you."

Severus took off his teaching robe and laid it on her bed, then he removed his frockcoat and dropped it next to the robe.

"How much would you like me to undress for you?"

"I believe it is best to have complete, unobstructed access to the affected area," Poppy said, trying to maintain a straight face.

Severus sat on the bed and removed his boots and socks, then he took off his waistcoat and placed it with the rest of his clothes. Finally, he unbuttoned his braces and trousers and removed those with his pants.

"Where is your soreness?" Poppy asked.

Severus moved aside his shirttail and indicated his penis.

"You will need to remove your shirt in order to do this properly. We can't have it get in the way."

Severus quickly removed his shirt, then, for good measure, he pulled off his undershirt.

"I am surprised you don't roast in all those layers," Poppy remarked, looking at the pile of clothing on the end of her bed.

"The dungeons are cool. And there are charms."

Poppy unscrewed the lid to the jar. "Show me where it hurts."

Severus pointed to his penis, which was beginning to expand.

"Where should I begin?" Poppy asked with faux seriousness.

"Here," he said, touching the head of his penis.

Poppy began to smooth the potion over the head of his cock, doing it very slowly, then she put some potion on two fingers and began to circle the edge of his crown.

"More?" she asked.

"Yes. I think I need intensive treatment."

Poppy smiled and continued down his shaft, putting more potion on her fingers. "I think it should be well applied. Massaged in so that we can be sure that it is absorbed."

"That is a wise idea. I am glad you are doing this. I might have done it wrong," Severus replied.

He closed his eyes as Poppy stroked his cock.

"How is the soreness?" she asked, her hand closed around his full erection.

"Completely gone," he said.

"You know, I think that we ought to test it out. Make sure that you are completely functional."

"I fully concur," Severus replied with a nod. "Do you have a suggestion for how we might do this?"

"I believe I can assist with that. I wouldn't mind if you were to test your functioning on me. Of course, we should make this *thorough* test. I don't think we can be absolutely certain unless it is thorough. So you should lie down on the bed whilst I prepare."

Severus lay down and watched Poppy undress and drape her clothing over her vanity bench.

"I think we should be sure that you are functional in different positions," Poppy said with a poorly suppressed smile. "We'll begin with me on my back, if that is acceptable to you."

"I trust your judgment." The corners of Severus's mouth twitched.

Poppy lay down beside Severus and he rolled on top of her, pushing her legs apart with his own, supporting himself on his hands. He shifted until he could feel his cock at her opening, and he entered slowly.

"What is your assessment, Madam Pomfrey?" he asked as she let out a soft sigh.

"It feels good, quite good, but in order to be sure, I think you will need to move. In and out."

Severus pumped a few times, then said, "Satisfactory?"

"Perhaps just a bit more," she replied, letting out a slight moan as he immediately began moving again.

"This seems to be achieving some results," Severus said with a smirk.

"Quite." Poppy's face was flushed and her eyes dark. "Now, I think, lying on your left side."

They lay face-to-face, and Poppy put her left leg around him as he guided his cock into her.

"Very nice," Poppy said. "How does it feel when you move?"

Severus began to push in and pull out, and Poppy moved with him.

"Mmm . . . very good," Poppy said, trying not to moan. "But we need to see how it is when you enter from behind."

"I think from behind and standing up," Severus said.

"Excellent suggestion," Poppy replied with a nod.

Poppy bent over her bed, and she felt Severus find her entrance with his fingers then push up into her with his cock.

"This is very good," Poppy said. "Most stimulating." She was gasping now, with no more pretense of aloofness.

"I think we need to see if my cock can make you come. Can you come?" He thrust into her over and over again.

"Oh, just . . . oh, like that, yes . . . good, good, yes . . ." She moaned, feeling his long, hard cock in her, repeatedly hitting her sweet spot as he thrust, his hips moving against her buttocks, his hands at her waist, holding her still as he pounded into her.

"Oh gods, Severus, you're so good, so good, oh oh oh oh! Severus!" Poppy gasped and shouted his name as she came, powerful, hot waves of pleasure coursing through her as his cock continued to thrust in her.

Running his hands up her sides, Severus leaned over and kissed her back as he pulled out, then he said, "Now I believe that we need to see if I can come, in order to fully test my functionality."

"You have no objections from me," Poppy said, taking in a deep breath and letting it out in a long, content sigh.

He rolled Poppy over and pushed her farther back up on the bed. Kissing her lips gently, he lay on top of her and moved to position his erection between her legs, then he guided his cock into her. She moaned softly as she put her arms around him and ran her hands over his back. His eyes closed, Severus began to rock his hips, twisting as he pushed into her, then pulling part way out and doing it again, pumping slowly.

"Oh, so good, Poppy, so good, love it, Poppy, so good, so good deep in you. Never want it to end." He kissed her and moaned. "You're so good. So hot and sexy. Oh, Poppy, Poppy."

Severus groaned and began to move faster, thrusting harder as Poppy arched her back and moved in time with his thrusts, his cock pumping in and out, and her excitement mounting with each thrust.

"Severus, Severus, oh oh oh!" Poppy gasped and moaned, her hands grasping his buttocks as she came again, a long, deep orgasm as strong as the last.

Severus began to come as Poppy did, pushing hard into her, trying to go impossibly deep into her as he ejaculated.

"Oh, gods, Poppy, oh, fuck," he choked. "Gods, oh, gods, oh, Poppy, oh, oh...I love you! I love you, Poppy! Love you! Oh, gods, oh, Poppy, Poppy! Oh, oh, Poppy!"

He collapsed on top of her, panting, tears rolling down his cheeks. He could feel her hands stroking his back and combing through his hair.

When his brain was finally clear, he wished he could hide. He remembered what he had said. It had just popped out. Worse, it seemed he had been crying. Really crying, not just his eyes watering a bit.

Poppy kissed the side of his head. Severus swallowed and rolled over onto his back, his eyes closed. Maybe she hadn't heard him. She had been coming. It might all have been a blur to her. He felt Poppy's hand on his cheeks, wiping away the last of his tears, then she kissed his cheek.

"That must have been very good," she said.

He nodded.

She caressed his chest for a while, and when he didn't move or say anything, she said, "It was quite intense. Given how many times we've done it in the last couple days, that's a good thing."

He nodded.

"It was good for you, wasn't it, Severus? It didn't disappoint you or hurt?"

"No, it was very good," he whispered.

"I'm glad. It was for me, and I thought it must have been for you, too, but I wasn't sure."

How do you tell a witch whom you've just had sex with that you didn't mean it when you told her you loved her? Severus didn't know which was more embarrassing, his apparent confession of love or his tears.

"If you're embarrassed about the tears," Poppy said softly, "don't be. It just happens sometimes. It can be a very emotional experience, and our bodies just do that."

"Not that much, though," Severus said, clearing his throat. He had teared up before with her, but nothing like this.

Poppy rose up on one elbow and kissed him gently on the lips. "I think we should get dressed now, Severus. I should check on the infirmary before we go down to dinner. If anyone had come by with anything important, they would have tried to find me here, but otherwise, they may have left a note. You're welcome to lie here for a bit if you want to, take your time getting dressed."

He nodded. "Thank you."

Severus watched Poppy dress. He still hadn't told her that he had talked to Gareth. Maybe telling her about that wasn't such a good idea.

"Poppy?"

"Yes?"

"What I said earlier, when we were in the middle of it, I didn't intend to say it."

"We yell out all kinds of things when we're in the middle of making love. As long as you don't call me by some other woman's name, you probably won't offend me," Poppy replied. "Not that we'll do this again."

"Of course." With a sense of deflation, Severus thought of his date on Friday. "That's for the best."

"Back to normal, and on good terms," Poppy said briskly. "I'll pop in before I go to dinner, but you don't need to wait for me if you want to leave before then."

Severus nodded sleepily.

NEXT

Chapter Forty-Five: An Esoteric Spell

Wednesday, 10 Thursday, 11 March 1999

Severus learns a new spell. And could he be learning to enjoy some good-natured teasing?

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Forty-Five: An Esoteric Spell

Chapter 46 of 118

Wednesday, 10 – Thursday, 11 March 1999. Severus learns a new spell. And could he also be learning to enjoy some good-natured teasing?

Warning for some brief slashiness ahead, partway through the second half of the chapter. But it's a kind of fluffy slashiness with a bit of humor.



Chapter Forty-Five: An Esoteric Spell

Wednesday, 10 Thursday, 11 March 1999

He didn't remember falling asleep, but he was waking up, Poppy's hand on his bare chest, her lips on his forehead.

"Time for dinner, Severus," Poppy said. "In the interests of discretion, I thought we could go separately."

Severus nodded and stood. "You go now, I'll dress."

Poppy smiled and looked him up and down. "Yes, dressing might be a good idea. Though I do enjoy seeing you like this, it might not be appropriate for dinner."

"You like looking at me naked?" Severus asked, looking down at himself. He might not be underweight any longer, but he knew he was far from an ideal specimen of manhood.

"When you're in my bedroom or yours, you understand. Not when I've treated you. That's quite a different thing altogether," Poppy said, mistaking his concern.

Severus shook his head. "I can't believe you like looking at me at any time for any reason."

"Why not? You're long and lean...fit, now that you're eating. Your buttocks are nicely firm and rounded, and when you're aroused, you have quite an impressive erection."

Severus began to pick up his clothes. "There are men with much better bodies than mine."

Poppy shrugged. "It's a matter of taste, I suppose. I don't think I have any single body type that I prefer, although I have to admit that fat turns me off. Not a few extra pounds, just a little bit of extra weight, you understand, but flabby rolls, or a really big belly."

"Murdoch is a big man," Severus said, thinking of the tall, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, heavily-muscled wizard. He didn't look like an apothecary and Potions master to him. He looked like a Muggle stevedore or something. He might have been a good Beater. Severus didn't know how strong Murdoch's magic was, but he wouldn't want to be punched by the man.

"Yes, he is. Quite brawny," Poppy replied with a nod. "I have to go now...feel free to use my bathroom, look for anything you need, and help yourself." She turned and started to leave.

"Poppy?"

"Yes?" She paused in the doorway.

"Thank you. Even if we don't ever speak of it again, it was good. I won't ever regret it."

"I hope not, Severus," Poppy said softly. "See you at dinner."

After Poppy left, Severus went into her bathroom and opened her cupboards, finding a fresh flannel and towel. He washed, ran his fingers through his hair, then dressed. He was still unsure of whether he should have told her about telling Gareth, but it was too late now. They were going back to just being colleagues. It wasn't as though Gareth would say anything, he was sure of that.

He thought that Poppy might understand his desire to brag, and it wasn't as though he had gone to a pub and traded raunchy stories with other wizards, or as though he'd bragged to her colleagues, people she had to work with every day. He doubted that she would appreciate Gareth knowing, either, but he really was Severus's only friend. The only friend he could share that kind of thing with. He couldn't imagine telling Albus. The few times they had had any kind of discussion that touched on sexuality, Albus had always described things obliquely, even after he had accidentally witnessed Albus and Minerva having sex when he was afflicted by the *Adfectus*. It was clear from the activity he had seen that Albus was no prude in the bedroom, but he wasn't one to discuss sex, either.

Severus went down to the Great Hall, and for once, he sat where he was supposed to, at Minerva's right. Albus was in his correct place at her left, and the rest of the table had also sorted itself out so that everyone was in their correct seats. He felt slightly disappointed about that, since it meant that Poppy was all the way down at the end of the table and he couldn't even see her. He was nervous about sitting next to Minerva, too, although she would never say anything to him in public about such a private matter as his fling with Poppy, he was sure.

"Albus and I are going to be gone during dinner tomorrow, Severus. I know you aren't on the schedule, but I would like you here. I wouldn't normally even mention it, but I've noticed you have been going out in the evenings lately. I hope you haven't made any plans."

"I have plans, but for after dinner."

"I will speak to Filius and Pomona, then, and make sure they'll both be here later in the evening...and Sharon, as well." Minerva speared a piece of asparagus. "I am glad to see you getting out, Severus, but you seem to be having a sudden flurry of social activity recently."

Severus shook his head. "Not really. I have errands, and I do sometimes visit a friend. It is merely a coincidence. I will be leaving Friday evening, as well, but after dinner again. I may also take some time over the weekend. I will try to make you aware of my absences in advance."

"I'm not scolding you, Severus," Minerva said.

"I understand that you would like to know when I'm going to be absent from the castle for more than an hour or two. It is a reasonable request."

"We do need to discuss the budgets. If you have time this evening, I would like to meet with you about them."

He was behind on his class work. Too much time spent with Poppy and Gareth. But it had been good time, and he did feel much more confident about sex and about himself. More confident...he was practically a sex god! That's what Gareth had created, not a monster, a sex god. Years of scowling and maintaining a deadpan expression kept him from grinning, but Severus felt as though he was grinning on the inside.

"Severus? Can we meet this evening?" Minerva asked, repeating her question.

"Yes, of course. I have other work to do, so I would like to meet right after dinner."

"That's fine."

Severus only paid half-attention to what Minerva went on to say. When he was with Hermione...or with any other witch...he would be able to please her, he was sure. He wouldn't seem like a pathetic adolescent in the body of a forty-year-old man. He wasn't quite forty yet, but even though his health was better, there were still long-term effects from the years of stress and abusing his body, and Severus knew he looked older than his age, especially for a wizard. But that didn't bother him as long as he was capable of pleasing a witch, and Poppy found his body acceptable. Maybe he wasn't really a sex god, but he was certainly more than adequate. Of course, it would be a while before he could go that far with Hermione. They were dating, after all, not just having a fling.

If they were dating, Severus still felt torn about that. Gareth had said to talk to Hermione about it, but it certainly didn't seem like a good topic of conversation for a second date. Or a fourth. But if he continued dating her, continued doubting its wisdom, and later decided that the timing was wrong, it would be harder on Hermione. Unless she already wanted to break up with him at that point, in which case he might have ruined their friendship.

He would sleep on it, Severus decided. It was only Wednesday evening. He had two more days to decide what to do. And Gareth might have more advice for him when he saw him the next evening.

Severus walked up to the front door with more confidence than he'd felt on previous occasions. It helped that he knew that Professor Gamp was visiting relatives overnight, but he also simply felt more comfortable.

Gareth opened the door to him before he was able to knock, his perimeter charm having alerted him.

"Snape, come on in."

Severus followed Gareth into the kitchen.

"I just finished my dinner. I was going to have another beer. Would you like one?"

Severus wasn't a beer-drinker, but he accepted the proffered bottle. Apparently Gareth drank directly from the bottle. Severus flicked a finger to remove the cap. It wasn't too bad. It was pleasantly bitter.

"I have the spell up in my study. Not the sort of thing I wanted lying around in public!" Gareth said with a grin.

Up in Gareth's small, cluttered study, Severus moved some papers off a chair and sat down, then looked at the spell. Thankfully, Gareth had copied it out by hand rather than simply duplicating the original. He thought it would be very peculiar to read it in Albus's handwriting. There were even two pictures, just line-drawings, and they didn't move, but Severus tried to imagine Albus drawing pictures of the male anatomy and failed. Albus doodled a lot, but he'd never seen him doodle anything sexual...unless one included the cartoons of bumblebees drinking nectar from flowers. Severus thought those were certainly suggestive.

"Is it actually difficult to cast?" Severus asked. He was very adept. He couldn't imagine having trouble with it.

"It's wandless, for one, and for another, the effect has to be on a discrete part of the anatomy. I imagine that a Healer or mediwitch or mediwizard would have very little trouble casting it if they were used to wandless magic, but otherwise, yes, I thought it wasn't easy," Gareth said. "The first time I tried it, nothing happened at all; the spell simply failed. The second time, I had to cancel it because I wasn't orgasming at all...I had completely inhibited the orgasm and not just the ejaculation. The third time, I seemed to cast it properly, but it wore off quickly and I ejaculated during my third orgasm despite not cancelling the spell...you have to end it in order to orgasm with ejaculation, unless you just let it wear off. It's not an erection spell, so without stimulation, the erection will fade even when the spell is still active. As you can see from the notes, if you let the spell wear off rather than cancelling it, after a couple hours, your penis will simply go flaccid unless you continue to maintain stimulation and then ejaculate. There's no requirement to ejaculate, though. You could just let it wear off, but unless you were tired or interrupted, I don't know why you'd want to."

"I am adept at wandless magic, and I have confidence that I will master it quickly," Severus said.

Gareth grinned. "You'll have to let me know. Despite your confidence, though, you should practise on your own first...it could be embarrassing to have it go wrong when you were with someone. I didn't copy this note, but Uncle Albus wrote that it had taken him a few tries to get it right. It's apparently a translation of an ancient Pali spell. He learned it in Pali, years and years ago, then he westernised it to make it easier to cast and he added the instructions."

Severus didn't like the image of Dumbledore masturbating to practise the spell, no matter how young he'd been at the time. "I am trying to imagine the circumstances under which Dumbledore would share this spell with your father. Did he just walk up to him at his wedding, wink, and hand him an envelope? Had they been discussing sex and he brought it up? I can't imagine him discussing sex with Minerva's brother, even though I never knew your father."

Gareth shrugged. "Obviously, I would never ask Mum about it...she doesn't even know I found the spell...but I think that she and Albus had been an item at one time after her first husband died. Maybe they used it and she asked him for it, or she asked Minerva to get it from Albus. Until I found this spell, I thought that her involvement with Uncle Albus had consisted of sedate afternoon teas and the occasional chess game. And waltzing. Dancing I could imagine; Mum used to love to dance. It was a peculiar thought, Mum and Uncle Albus together like that, but they've always been close."

"Your father must have been a good deal younger than your mother," Severus observed, wondering whether a preference for older witches might run from father to son. Minerva was only in her mid-seventies, but Gamp must be at least one hundred.

"Only ten years younger. Aunt Minerva is a lot younger than her three brothers. Murdoch is her youngest brother, and he's twelve years older than she. My father was her oldest brother. He was seventeen when she was born."

"Ah." Severus took a swallow of beer. "Did you know that Murdoch and Poppy used to be a couple?"

"Oh, yeah. They were still together for a while when I was a kid. By the time they broke up, even I, as young as I was, could tell that their relationship was making them sad. I think they loved each other, but . . ." Gareth shrugged. "Guess it wasn't meant to be."

"I still don't know what to do about Hermione. I think about going out with her, and initially, I feel . . . happy at the prospect, but then I think about . . . about the timing, and her age, and my own disposition, and I don't think I'm ready to date her. Once I come to that conclusion, I think that if I wait, I will lose her to someone else, even though I don't even have her yet. But I know that I can be very possessive. I can be jealous and nasty. I could ruin things whether we date or not if I'm too possessive. And I also think about . . . just my freedom, I suppose. That was never a consideration until recently. But I have spent two decades bound to others. Is it wrong to want to enjoy my freedom?"

"No, of course it isn't. You are seeing that you have other options. You also haven't had much pleasure in life. It's not wrong to want to enjoy yourself and discover more about yourself."

"Being with you helped me understand that. And I also discovered more about myself." He looked Gareth up and down. "I never would have thought I would willingly put my mouth on another wizard's cock, for example. You made me curious, and you made me feel that it was all right to try it, even if I never want to do it again. Thank you for letting me try it on you. I hope it didn't make you feel used. I wouldn't have wanted that." He knew what it felt like to be used, in many different ways; he didn't want to do that to Gareth.

"No. I actually felt special," Gareth replied.

"I shouldn't say anything more about Poppy, but I trust you won't say anything to anyone, particularly her." At Gareth's reassuring nod, Severus continued, "I experimented a little with her, too, though differently than with you. She was very patient with me yesterday morning. She let me examine her, all of her private areas, and touch her, too. I'd never been able to do that with anyone before, but I'm comfortable with her and she made me feel it was safe to ask her."

"Again yesterday morning?" Gareth asked, shifting the focus of the conversation away from Severus's experimentation. "I thought you two weren't going to see each other again."

"I invited her in for a drink after I got back from seeing you, so she stayed. We didn't just have sex. We did talk, too. And after we went to bed for the night, we just curled up and slept together. Until we woke up in the morning, anyway. I saw her again in the afternoon, as well. But that was the last time. We are agreed about that. We only saw each other at meals today."

"I don't know, mate. Sounds to me as though you could have something more with Poppy if you wanted it. An affair or something, anyway, even if not a great love. Are you sure that doesn't have more to do with your reservations about Hermione? Wanting to be with Poppy? Your feelings for her?"

"But I'm in love with Hermione. I know that I must be. I wouldn't prefer to be with Poppy over her," Severus said, although even as he did, he wondered about it himself.

"Maybe, maybe . . . but that doesn't mean that you wouldn't like to spend a little more time with Poppy. I think that's what you meant about 'timing' the other day. You want to be able to wait to date Hermione because you want to continue with Poppy. You just weren't ready to admit it to anyone, even to yourself."

Severus sighed and drained his beer bottle. "You may be right. But Poppy isn't interested in more. And it isn't just her, you know, McGonagall. As you pointed out the other day, I can't very well have sex with you if I'm with Hermione. Or if I were to continue with Poppy. It wouldn't be right, even though it's only casual sex between friends and you're a man."

"You are interested in having sex with me again?" Gareth asked.

"Speaking theoretically. If we just happened to," Severus said with a smirk.

"You know, Snape, you might have more success learning that spell if you know what it feels like to have it cast on you. Purely as an educational experience, I would be glad to help you out with that," Gareth said with a grin. "And you would also know whether it was a spell that was worth learning. You may decide you don't want multiple orgasms."

Severus could feel his cock growing at the thought of multiple orgasms. "That might be a worthwhile experiment. If you think, of course, that you can make me come more than just once."

"We will just have to see."

Gareth got up and came over to Severus. "Of course, you have to have an erection, first." He rubbed the front of Severus's trousers. "You already have a nice start on one. You *are* a randy one, aren't you? Let's go into my bedroom and see if we can encourage it along."

By the time Severus had stripped, thinking about having multiple orgasms whilst Gareth was pleasuring him had given him a full erection. Gareth, naked, walked up to him, put his hand around his cock, and Severus felt a tingle of magic go through his cock to his balls and then deeper into his groin. Gareth grinned.

"Show off," Severus said.

"I got very good at it," Gareth said, "though this is only the second time I've ever cast it on someone other than myself."

"I hope you did it correctly, and I'm not sterile or impotent or something."

"Highly unlikely. Besides, if years of *Cruciatus* and other nasty curses didn't make you impotent, my little spell surely couldn't."

"I was pretty nearly impotent for years."

"Temporary condition, mate," Gareth said, stroking Severus's cock. "Stress can do that to you. I am here to give you something far from stress."

Gareth knelt at Severus's feet and closed his mouth around his erection. Severus closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of lips, teeth, tongue, mouth, and throat on his cock. Gareth was still the most talented person he'd ever had pleasuring him orally, though Poppy was very good, particularly when she put her fingers up his arse at the same time. As Gareth licked, sucked, and swallowed around the head of his cock, Severus remembered how Poppy had looked when she came, gasping and flushed, how she would call his name . . . Severus wound his hands through Gareth's curly hair as he came. It felt like a usual orgasm, but without the ejaculation...perhaps not quite as good as the very best orgasm, but certainly better than some.

When Gareth removed his mouth and stood, Severus looked down to see his cock just as erect as before. Gareth smiled at him, obviously pleased with himself.

"That was most interesting," Severus said.

"*Interesting?*" Gareth said, an eyebrow raised. "Well, that was only one."

Gareth drew back the covers on the bed, then he lay down on his side and patted the space in front of him.

"Aren't you going to cast it on yourself?" Severus asked.

"Would you like me to?"

"I think that would be more satisfying for both of us," Severus replied, thinking that he didn't want Gareth to feel as though he were only an experiment, an experience, for him.

Gareth cast the spell on his own erection as Severus lay down beside him. Gareth embraced him, kissing his mouth, one hand kneading Severus's buttocks. Severus could feel their cocks rubbing together, and he rolled Gareth onto his back, continuing to return his kisses as he rocked against Gareth, rubbing his cock against Gareth's as he did so. Gareth moaned and put his legs around Severus. Severus could sense Gareth giving in to the stimulation, pushing against him and grasping him more tightly. Severus, knowing he had brought Gareth to orgasm, shuddered and came himself.

Severus kissed his way down Gareth's body until he reached his cock. He didn't think he could manage quite what Gareth had done for him, but he took Gareth's cock in his hand and began to stroke and pull his shaft, then he kissed the head of Gareth's cock. When he flicked out his tongue and began to flick it across the head of his cock, Gareth moaned and writhed in pleasure. Severus continued to stimulate Gareth's erection with his hand whilst he licked and kissed the head of Gareth's cock. He felt Gareth push himself up so that he could see his dark head at his penis.

"Oh, gods, Severus, this is good, so good." He lay back down and a moment later, Severus heard him gasp as he came, pulsing but not ejaculating.

Gareth pulled him up beside him and kissed him. "You are so much more than you were, more even than you believe, Snape. You are so generous with me."

Severus shook his head. "No, not really, but I'm glad that you enjoyed that. It was not as hard as actually doing what you did, and I knew you weren't going to ejaculate, so that made it easier."

"Do you want to fuck now? If you want to do that."

"Do you want that? You said you prefer to be on top."

"I do prefer it, but it will test the spell, and it was pretty good when you did it before."

"I will try not to be as rough as I was last time."

"I want to see your face, though, Severus, so if you would do it the same way you did before?"

Severus pushed Gareth onto his back and spread his legs. "I want you to come, too, McGonagall. I'm going to fuck you until you do," he said with a growl. He began to push the head of his cock against Gareth's anus. Gareth grimaced.

"Just a second," Gareth said. Severus removed his cock and Gareth touched his anus and whispered, *Unguo*."

Severus pushed against him again and Gareth groaned, but did not stop him. Severus slowed. When he was halfway in, he stopped.

"All right?"

Gareth nodded. "It's good." He looked into Severus's eyes. "I want your cock in me, Snape. All the way in."

Severus pushed all the way in. It was so tight. "This is good, McGonagall. I'm going to come easily. I might come twice," he said as he began to pump.

"Don't need to be quite so ginger about it," Gareth said, gasping. "A little harder won't hurt."

Severus smiled, a dangerous glint in his eye. "I can oblige."

He pumped harder, trying to watch Gareth's face for any sign of discomfort as his own arousal grew, then he was coming, and this orgasm was even better than the last. He stilled, panting.

"More, Snape, more, I'm on the edge, gods, Snape! Almost there!"

Severus resumed his movement, raising himself up on his hands and, fascinated, watching Gareth's cock as he came, pulsing without ejaculating. He closed his eyes and remembered putting his finger in Poppy's anus. She would be tight if he put his cock in her there. She didn't like it, though. But still he imagined that instead of his finger, he had put his cock up her. She was tight and he would come. Gods, Poppy was so sexy, warm, and beautiful. The way her lips felt against his, the way she felt in his arms, the way she tasted . . .

Severus grunted as he came again. He pulled out and lay down beside Gareth, waving his hand and Summoning his wand. He cast a cleansing charm on his still erect penis.

Gareth looked over at him and grinned. "Good?"

Severus nodded. "I think it will be worth the effort to master this spell," he said seriously.

Gareth laughed and kissed his cheek. "You can be very funny sometimes. Positively cute."

"Hmmpf. I am Severus Snape, and I am *not* cute."

"Right, Snape." He looked at him. "You do have a cute arse, though. Any chance I could enjoy that cute arse?"

Severus turned and looked at him, thought a moment, then nodded. "But lift the spell for both of us this time. For me, anyway."

"Mmm . . . after we've enjoyed it."

He had Severus roll over onto his stomach. He began to massage Severus's buttocks, kissing and nipping them, then he rubbed his anus with one fingertip. Severus wondered vaguely whether it was normal to enjoy having one's arse massaged quite as much as he liked it.

"I want in, Severus," he whispered. "Invite me in?"

"Enter," Severus said softly.

Gareth raised Severus's buttocks and knelt behind him. He put his finger into his anus and cast a spell to lubricate him thoroughly, then he withdrew his finger, and Severus felt the pressure of Gareth's cock entering him. He knew what to expect, so it didn't seem as uncomfortable as it had the first time, though he did still have the sensation that he might rip or burst, Gareth was so large. After a few thrusts, though, Severus began to enjoy the sensation of Gareth's cock stimulating him, then he felt Gareth's hand on his erection, stroking his cock as he pumped. He felt something change, and then he was coming, ejaculating forcefully. He was barely aware of Gareth's louder gasps, but then Gareth shuddered and pressed against him.

Severus lay on his back, moving to avoid the wet spot on the sheets. The two men lay in silence for a while, catching their breath.

"That was rather good," Severus said.

"I thought it was," Gareth said with a yawn.

"The spell is impressive. I am surprised more people don't know it."

"It's esoteric sex magic. Most people are satisfied with the more traditional spells just to achieve a fast erection or hold off orgasm. They're easier to cast. Besides, some people don't have much imagination, or they don't really like the person they're with...even if they're married to them...and once is enough just to gain a release, or, as a friend of mine used to put it, to get their rocks off."

"Hmm. It's not like that with Poppy. It's wonderful. Even with no spells. I can't imagine it ever being anything less with her."

"That's good." Gareth paused. "You know, I'm a little bit jealous. If I had even one night with her . . . I would try to keep her, if I were you."

"You're in love with her?" Severus asked, feeling a peculiar sensation in his gut as he did.

"No. But I'd want to keep her, not lose her, if I had a chance of having her...ironic, isn't it, given that I have never had any kind of really deep relationship with her? We're friends, but not even very close friends, really, though I've known her since I was a child. She was dating Uncle Murdoch when I was small, so she was always at family gatherings."

"Why would you give up everyone else for her if you have such a relatively distant relationship? I don't understand."

"I don't either," Gareth replied with a slight shrug. "I just like her, and I think she is dead hot. I have for years. I wasn't completely joking about having a crush on her since I

was twenty."

"Not to malign Poppy...and I do think she's 'hot,' as you say...but she's so much older than you. Than either of us, but you're even younger than I am. When you were twenty, she must have been, what? Fifty? Fifty-five?"

"Fifty-seven. I know. Some people would certainly find it odd, probably think it has something to do with seeking a mother, which sounds perverted to me. What goes through some people's heads, anyway? It's their speculation that's perverted, to my mind." He shook his head. "But I do tend to find older witches attractive. Anitra was a lot older than I. I don't think I've ever been with a woman more than a year or two younger than I am. The others have been at least ten years older, for the most part. Witches just seem to get better with age. The strongest, most passionate, most intense lovers I've had have been witches over fifty. I have more eclectic taste in wizards, at least in terms of age. I do tend to like them on the slim side, though." He ran his hand down over Severus's flat stomach to his narrow hips, as if demonstrating.

"Do you have another lover right now?" Severus asked, curious.

"No. I've met up with an old girlfriend occasionally in the last year, but especially when I was in isolation with my mother on the island doing that secret work, I couldn't. And now I'm living with my mother and Hermione. Puts a little crimp in things. It doesn't completely kill my social life, but it's different from being on my own. But my life, even my social life, doesn't revolve around sex, whatever impression I may have given you recently."

"I didn't think it did. You're very physical for an Arithmancer, but it's clear you're bright and curious. I don't think you'd be happy doing nothing but living a life of hedonistic indulgence."

"I don't know why you think an Arithmancer wouldn't be physical, but you're right about the rest...especially the 'bright' part. I'll have to document that for posterity." *Severus Snape declares Gareth McGonagall 'bright,' rather than just 'not a dunderhead.'*" He laughed.

"I shall deny it all," Severus said with a smirk.

Gareth was about to respond when the perimeter chime sounded.

NEXT

Chapter Forty-Six: A Complicated Life

Thursday, 11 March 1999

Severus is confused about his choices, but finally comes to a decision. He and Hermione talk.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Forty-Six: A Complicated Life

Chapter 47 of 118

Thursday, 11 March 1999. Severus is confused about his choices, but comes to a decision. He and Hermione talk.***End of Part Four***



Chapter Forty-Six: A Complicated Life

Thursday, 11 March 1999

Gareth swore as the perimeter charm faded. "Hermione's home early, unless we're having an unexpected visitor. Quick, get your clothes, go into the bathroom, and dress," Gareth said as he leapt up and fastened his kilt around him. "I'll go down and tell her that you and I have been in my study. If she comes upstairs, you're just using the loo."

Severus was already gathering up his clothes and trying to find both socks, finally resorting to a nonverbal *Accio*. Gareth was out of the room and down the stairs as he picked up his boots. He started into the bathroom, but then caught a glimpse of Gareth's bedroom. The bed was clearly visible from the hallway. And it was clearly well-used. Severus dumped everything on the bathroom floor, then turned and focussed on the bedroom door and gestured, closing it.

He sat on the toilet and let Gareth's cum run out of him as he pulled on his socks, his undershirt, and his shirt. Standing and pulling on the rest of his clothes as quickly as he could, Severus saw the advantage to Gareth's minimal clothing. Putting on a couple layers of robes would be faster than this. Even using a buttoning charm, he felt that it was taking him too long to dress.

Severus checked the mirror, remembering that Minerva had guessed where Poppy had been and what she had been doing partly on the basis of her appearance. He thought he looked a little flushed, but he was warm. He couldn't smell himself, but thinking he might smell of sex, he cast a freshening charm followed by a cooling charm.

Four minutes after he had entered the bathroom, Severus slipped into the study, picked up his empty beer bottle and went down the stairs.

"McGonagall! Where's the beer you promised me?"

He walked into the sitting room. Hermione was sitting on the couch. She looked up at him and smiled.

He nodded. "Good evening, Hermione. Don't you have class tonight?"

"Yes. I usually go out with friends after, but I wasn't feeling very well, so I went to Diagon Alley and Flooed to the Three Broomsticks."

"Let me get you that beer, Snape," Gareth said, taking his bottle from him. "Lager or stout?"

"Whatever you're having," Severus said. He hadn't really wanted another.

Severus sat down next to Hermione. "You are not feeling well?"

"Just a little nauseous and dizzy. I didn't think I should Apparate feeling like that."

"Do you have a fever?" Severus didn't wait for her answer, drawing his wand and casting a thermometer charm. "Hmm, your temperature is slightly elevated. Wait here a moment."

He rose and joined Gareth in the kitchen.

"I thought I'd leave you two alone for a little while."

"Hermione is ill. She has a low-grade fever. Could you provide her with something to drink? And what potions do you have on hand?"

"Go check the potions cabinet in the upstairs bathroom. If you don't find what you need there, Mum has some in her room, and I'll check for you."

Severus nodded and went to find potions for Hermione's nausea and her temperature.

Twenty minutes later, Hermione was drinking herbal tea and Severus was drinking a cold beer, apparently the way Gareth preferred his lager. Gareth declared that although stout was fine at room temperature, lager was better chilled, though his mother drank them all at cellar temperature and claimed that cold beer caused her stomach cramps.

"Are you feeling better, Hermione?" Gareth asked.

"Much, thanks. I can't imagine what it was. I never get sick."

"You should see a Healer," Severus replied.

"It's nothing, I'm sure," Hermione said. "If I still feel odd when I wake up, I'll go see Mother Wayland in the morning."

"You will do no such thing," Severus said firmly. "That old witch has no qualifications. I wouldn't trust her to treat a mosquito bite."

"But everyone in Hogsmeade sees Mother Wayland," Hermione protested.

"Mrs Wayland may have that reputation, but I assure you, Hermione, not everyone in Hogsmeade sees her for their ailments. And she may be perfectly charming and have no ill intentions, but if you are still sick in the morning, you should see someone who is qualified."

"If she's still sick in the morning, Snape, I'll bring her to the clinic in Edinburgh or down to Mungo's," Gareth said.

"I am sure I will be fine. I feel fine now."

"That is the potions at work. If you are ill, you may need more than such general remedies," Severus said.

"Do you mind if I take my leave of you for the moment?" Gareth asked. "I will just be up in my study. Come up before you leave, Snape."

Severus nodded and Hermione said she would say good-night before she went to bed.

After Gareth had left, Severus said, "Are you really feeling better?"

"Much, really. And this tea of Madam Gamp's is wonderful. Some kind of mix of leaves, bark, and pulverized dried berries, I think."

"That's good. If you do not feel well enough for dinner tomorrow, we can do it another time," Severus said.

"I'm sure I'll be fine, but if I'm not, I'll owl you," Hermione said.

"Hermione . . . I . . . about dinner . . ."

"Do *you* want to cancel dinner, Severus?"

"No, no, I certainly don't." Severus rose and began to pace. "You remember that when we were out, I was unsure of the wisdom of . . . of the date?"

"Yes."

"This is probably the worst time to talk to you about this, when you aren't feeling well."

"I'm feeling fine. What are you saying?"

"Would you listen to what I have to say? Everything? I may not say what I need to the way it should be said, and I am unaccustomed to having any conversations of this sort. I need to know that you will listen."

"Of course I will," Hermione said readily.

"First, before I say anything else, I need to tell you that I care for you very much. I think you know that I do, and that I enjoy your company. You have become very important in my life."

"You are important to me, too, Severus."

"And now . . . if you would hear what I have to say . . ." Severus sat beside her on the couch. "Hermione, when I sat here on Saturday and asked you to dinner, you know that I had not planned on it. But I felt . . . affection toward you. And an appreciation for you. You are so very lovely, Hermione, so I asked you out. It became a date. And now...please, don't say anything just yet...now, I feel that the timing isn't right. For either of us, though primarily for myself. And it was probably unfair of me, and it may have been completely selfish...though when I am with you, I wish to be anything but selfish...but I wanted to be able to date you in order to to keep you from seeing other people. Yet I still want to...no, *need* to...learn more about myself. I need to discover who I am and what I want when my life is not dominated by moral debt, servitude, and the demands of a sadistic megalomaniac.

"I have had a narrow existence for years. I knew that I did, but I thought it was only my due, whilst at the same time being completely resentful of it. But only now have I discovered how truly narrow my existence was, and much of it through my own fault, and not merely because of my circumstances. I feel as though I am coming alive. I am learning to live and I am trying to be a better Severus Snape. I'm not always succeeding very well at it, but much of what success I have achieved is due to you, Hermione, to you and your friendship. I never want to lose your friendship. You are . . . if ever you needed me, I would help you. I would do whatever I could, and if anyone injured you, I would find it difficult not to make them pay in kind. But I think, for so many reasons, reasons I cannot even fully articulate to myself, that the timing is wrong for us to date. I would either hurt you or I would become increasingly possessive, because I would come to believe that you were all I had, and I would revert and be grasping and jealous and you would be hurt even more.

"It is very hard for me to tell you this, and not only because I don't want to hurt you, but because I do want to . . . to be closer to you. But when...and if...you ever consent to date me in the future, it will be meaningful to me. Now, though, it's not the right thing for me. I am sorry, Hermione. I need your friendship. I don't want to lose that. Please forgive me."

"I see." Hermione blinked. "I see and I don't see."

"Would you still go to dinner with me tomorrow? If you aren't sick?"

Hermione looked at him a moment, and then nodded. "Yes, all right."

"I am sorry."

"I am just surprised. This is the shortest relationship I've ever been in. One date, a second planned, and then . . ." She shrugged.

"I'm not rejecting you. Please understand that. And if you want to tell anyone who may have known that we were out on a date that it was you who decided we were better off as friends, that would be fine. It would certainly be more credible. People would think I was not in my right mind. You are so young, beautiful, attractive, and brilliant, and I'm an older, scarred, former Death Eater. No one would disbelieve you if you said you changed your mind."

"I haven't told many people. Just Gareth and Madam Gamp. And my mother. But I'll deal with it. I need to think about what you said, but obviously, I accept it. I really haven't any choice."

"I'm sorry. I was going to tell you tomorrow. But I thought I shouldn't wait."

Hermione nodded and looked down into her empty teacup.

"Hermione? Are you still looking forward to dinner? If you want to wait a while before we see each other again, I would understand, but I hope I haven't ruined our friendship. That is what I wanted to save."

"Yes, I still want to go to dinner. But let's just have something at the Three Broomsticks like usual."

"If that is what you would prefer."

She nodded.

"It is unfair of me, and I have no right to ask it, but could I give you one last kiss...the last for now?"

"Severus . . . it is unfair to ask that."

Severus stood. "I need to go say good-night to Gareth."

"Kiss me good-night first," Hermione said softly.

Severus sat down on the edge of the sofa, angled toward her. He cupped her cheek, then he closed his eyes and brought his lips to meet hers. He kissed her softly.

"You are an extraordinary witch, Hermione," he whispered, "and I don't expect for you to wait for me to finally grow up, or whatever it is that I am doing, but I hope you know that I care for you and never wanted to hurt you."

"Go say good-night to Gareth. I'm going to take a walk in the garden, get some fresh air before I go to bed."

"Not too much. You need your sleep and to take care of yourself."

Hermione nodded.

As Severus began up the stairs, he watched her walk down the hall toward the back door. He only had a moment of discomfort at the association of the door with his past as a Death Eater. It was overshadowed by concern for Hermione and a sense that, despite trying to do the right thing, he had done something wrong.

The door to Gareth's study was partially open, so Severus pushed it open and entered. Gareth looked up at him as he shut it behind him.

"How is Hermione feeling?"

"Worse than when you left us, I'm sure, but for different reasons," Severus said, sitting down heavily.

"You talked to her about the dating?"

"I told her that I didn't think the timing was right for either of us. I tried to explain to her why I thought it was wrong for me without saying that it's because I want to be able to see other people, but she'll probably figure that out after she thinks about it."

"It isn't just about seeing other people, though, is it? If you didn't even consider that, do you think that you would still say the timing was wrong?"

Severus was silent a moment. "I was going to say 'no,' but I think that I simply wouldn't have discovered that the timing was wrong until later. I would realise it only when I felt other needs and desires competing with my desire to . . . to possess her. I don't think I can have the kind of relationship with her that she deserves, and one that wouldn't risk our friendship and hurt her even more...even if there were no other people involved."

"Then you did the right thing."

"Why do I feel as though I didn't? I thought that now that the war was over and I didn't have to choose between evil and greater evil in order to survive and undermine the Dark Lord, it would be easier to make the right decision, to do the right thing and feel good about it."

"Life isn't that simple even when you're not in the middle of a war, Snape. You didn't want to hurt her, and you are giving up something you want, even though it's hard to, and even though you believe that it's better for you both this way."

Severus nodded unhappily. "She's still going to dinner with me tomorrow night, but just to the Broomsticks."

"That may be awkward at first, but don't get discouraged if it is. It will be easier to go back to being just friends now than it would have been weeks from now."

"I'll remember that." Severus stood. "Thank you for your help, McGonagall."

"I'll walk you down."

"Hermione's in the garden. It's chilly. Make sure she doesn't stay out too long."

Severus Apparated to the Hogwarts gates, then walked slowly back up to the castle. Now he wished that he had waited until their date on Friday to speak with Hermione, although he couldn't imagine how he would have done that while they were on a date in public. It was probably better to have done it as he did.

He heard footsteps on the drive behind him, and he glanced back. Albus and Minerva. He picked up his pace. He really didn't want to speak with anyone just then.

"Severus!"

Lovely. He stopped, took a breath, and turned around, unable to pretend he hadn't heard Albus.

"Headmistress, Professor," he said with a nod.

Albus chuckled at his formality. "Did you have a good evening?"

"Interesting," Severus replied. "And you?"

"We had dinner with Alroy and Rosemary," Minerva replied. "It was very nice. Gertrude was there, and so were Quin and Aine and a few others."

"It felt almost like the old days," Albus said.

Severus grimaced. Gertrude. Professor Gamp had known about the date. Had she said anything? This only confirmed what he had known as a spy: never tell anyone anything they don't have to know. And maybe not even then.

"You look like thunder," Albus said.

"It has been a long week," Severus replied. "I am merely looking forward to its end."

"Yes, you're going out tomorrow evening, aren't you? I hope you have a good time," Albus said.

"Who told you that?" Severus asked sharply.

"Minerva mentioned it."

Minerva raised an eyebrow. "I did not know that it was supposed to be a secret, Severus."

"It's not. I'm just tired of having people talking about me behind my back," he said.

Minerva took his arm and squeezed it. "It wasn't like that, and you know it. Something's bothering you."

"If there were, this would not be the time or place to discuss it."

"Severus is right, Minerva. Why don't we all go up to our sitting room and have a nice chat?"

"No, thank you, Albus," Severus said as the front doors opened to them. "I have no desire to discuss anything with anyone right now, least of all, anything personal."

"Are you sure?" Minerva asked, letting go of his arm as they entered the castle. "It's early yet. We don't have to talk about anything serious, just chat and relax."

"No, thank you, Minerva. I am glad you had a good evening," Severus nodded to them. "Good night."

Severus reached his rooms, taking out some of his bad temper on a few Slytherins loitering in the corridor. They claimed to be on their way back to the common room, but Severus was sure they were up to no good. He took no points, but told them that if they were out after curfew, he would make them rue it.

He removed his jacket and slung it across the back of the sofa, then he sat in his chair, remembering how Poppy had sat in it and let him pleasure her. If anyone had told him a year ago that Poppy Pomfrey had that much sex in her, he would have sneered. He certainly wouldn't have believed them. He hadn't seen her with anyone in particular, although he'd had the impression that she had been seeing someone for a short time early in his teaching career. On the other hand, he hadn't cared about the personal lives of the other staff and might never have noticed. But she was attractive, kind, and caring, and she was interested in sex. She was choosy, and she had chosen to be with him. She had spread her legs and let him pleasure her orally, right there in his chair, then he had bent her over the arm of the chair and he'd fucked her. Well, she had suggested it, but still, he had fucked her right there. And she had been in his bed, actually slept with him twice.

By the time he had thought of how lovely it had been to wake up with Poppy in his bed, his arms around her warm, soft body, feeling the rhythm of her heart and the thrum of her magic, the scent of her hair and skin so close, Severus was feeling better. He was still concerned about Hermione, but he had done the right thing. Gareth was right, it would have been much harder if he'd done it weeks from then.

There was someone at his door. His mood worsened immediately, but he got up and answered the door. Minerva.

"Minerva, is there a problem?"

"No, I just thought I would come down and see you. You looked as though you could use a friendly ear."

"I was fine and then you knocked on my door," Severus retorted. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I assume you did not come down here in order to disturb me. Come in."

"No, I didn't mean to disturb you. Albus told me to leave you on your own, but I thought you might like to talk, just the two of us."

Severus closed the door. "I really don't, Minerva."

"You reacted when Albus mentioned you were going out tomorrow," Minerva replied.

"I thought perhaps he had heard it from someone other than you," Severus said. He gestured toward the couch. "Have a seat."

"Who else would he have heard it from?"

Severus shrugged. "You were at dinner with Professor Gamp. I thought she may have said something."

"No, I don't think your name was mentioned this evening, and Gertrude would be unlikely to bring it up herself."

"Hmpf."

"You are going out with Hermione tomorrow, then?"

"Just for dinner at the Three Broomsticks."

"You mentioned to me the other day that you were thinking of dating, and it seemed you were interested in Hermione. Is this a date? Shouldn't you be happy about it?"

"It is not a date. We are not dating. I thought we might, but we aren't."

"I see . . ." Minerva hesitated. "So why did mention of it disturb you?"

"Because I do not want people discussing my private life, being the object of gossip," Severus replied sharply.

"It is inevitable that people will talk about other people, Severus. I don't think you can avoid it. And it's not always gossip. Sometimes it's just conversation, and sometimes it's because people care about you."

Severus didn't respond.

"Well, I see you don't want to talk."

"No, I don't. But I do appreciate your coming down to see me. My life has become very complicated. I thought the complications had ended when I woke up and the Dark Lord was dead and I was still alive."

Minerva smiled and shook her head. "Life is complicated. Sometimes more complicated than others, but if you live in society and have relationships with people, it will be complicated at least occasionally."

"I should have just gone to Spinner's End and rotted," Severus said glumly. "It would have been a nice, peaceful, undisturbed rotting."

Minerva chuckled. "I'm glad you didn't. Besides, I think that between Albus, Hermione, and me, you wouldn't have found it so peaceful."

"Hmpf."

"And just think of the new friendships you are making. They must bring you more than just complications."

"I don't know . . ."

"I know that Filius has enjoyed the time you've spent in duelling practice. He won't say what you're doing, just teases Albus with little hints, but he is clearly enjoying it, and your company as much as the practice."

"Flitwick is congenial to spend a few hours with on a weekend afternoon," Severus admitted with a nod, "and our relationship is uncomplicated, but it is also not . . . not particularly close."

"What about Gareth?"

Severus shrugged slightly. "He is a complication. But he is also a support. It is most peculiar."

"It often is. Were you with him this evening?"

Severus nodded. "He invited me, since his mother would be away for the night. I prefer not to disturb her with my presence in her house."

"Yes, I can understand that. And Hermione?"

"She has classes on Thursdays. She did come home early, though. She was feeling unwell."

"Something happened with Hermione? Is that why you were upset at the mention of your date tomorrow?"

"It is not a date, Minerva..."

"I meant it in a general sense, Severus. But . . . did something happen?"

Severus let out a breath slowly. "We had a conversation. That is to say, I spoke to her. I believe I hurt her feelings, and I did not want to do that. It bothered me."

"You don't want to talk about it?"

Severus shook his head. "I already spoke with Gareth about it. I am fine."

"I see . . . and there's nothing else you want to talk about?"

"Look, Minerva, you don't need to beat about the bush. Poppy told me that you know."

"I won't pretend I don't know what you're talking about," Minerva replied, "but you don't have to talk to me about your relationship with her if you don't want to."

"Good. Because I don't want to. And I hope you haven't told anyone else."

"No, of course not. I wouldn't betray Poppy's confidence like that...or your privacy. I was surprised, though. I hadn't thought you were interested in her. You mentioned Hermione the other day in my office. Right before you went down to see Poppy."

"I hadn't been interested in Poppy. I'm still not interested in her, not really, not that she'd want it even if I were. It's not like that," Severus replied, capitulating. "And Hermione . . . the timing is just all wrong. That's what I told her. That the timing is wrong for us to be any more than friends. I can't date her casually. I could try, but my feelings toward other people are complicating my feelings toward her. And despite that, I still feel possessive toward her. I have had to work on not being jealous of the time she spends with other people, of the relationships she has with other men, no matter what they are. I think I have done well in controlling that, but if we moved from friendship to something more, I think I would be worse. I do not want to lose Hermione completely because I don't like her spending time with her friends and then have jealous fits about it."

"Hermione was supportive and loyal at a time when you needed it very much. She saved your life. It is natural for you to develop stronger feelings for her, but she isn't your only friend now, Severus. I don't mean to minimise your feelings for her, but they could change. You will probably always care for her as a friend, but you may discover that you . . . that your feelings were born of that desperate and trying time. I think that is one reason you feel possessive toward her. Because you had so little then, during those last months of the war, and every moment that you spent with her was precious to you. You didn't want to share her. That possessiveness is not love, though."

"I know that," said Severus, disgusted. "But she is still important to me. I don't want to lose her. And I know how I feel about her. It won't change."

"Perhaps not, but do not be surprised if it does, or if your understanding of your feelings changes."

"You don't understand, Minerva." Severus shook his head.

"In any case, I think you did the right thing for you both."

Severus grunted.

"What about Poppy?"

"There is nothing to say about that," Severus replied. "However, if you are concerned that I will become jealous and possessive of her, I will not. And if you disapprove of what we did, you needn't worry. We have agreed that it wouldn't happen again."

"I don't disapprove at all. I just thought that perhaps you might like to see more of her," Minerva said, "develop more of a social relationship."

"We are colleagues. I am certain we will continue to remain collegial," Severus said stiffly.

"I know that she likes you. She told me that she enjoyed being with you. If you like her and you enjoyed her company, too, perhaps..."

"I am glad that she enjoyed it, and I like her, as well. I would prefer not to discuss our relationship, however. It doesn't seem proper."

Minerva smiled and nodded. "All right. I'm done prying. But if you change your mind about Poppy, I have a feeling she would not object to spending more time with you other than collegially."

Severus nodded. He wished that were true. "It's late. Would you like me to escort you to the ground floor...or to the gargoyles?"

"No, thank you, Severus. As Headmistress, I believe I am quite safe in your dungeons. Besides, I think I will take a short-cut."

~End of Part Four~

~to be continued~

NEXT

PART FIVE

Chapter Forty-Seven: Exotic Concoctions

Thursday, 11 March Friday, 12 March 1999

Severus and Hermione go to dinner in Hogsmeade. On his return to the castle, Severus accepts an invitation to a party. Filius Flitwick makes very powerful cocktails.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Filius Flitwick, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, Poppy Pomfrey, Ezra Cahill, others

COMING UP IN A LONG VERNAL SEASON:

Warning: Spoilers in the Chapter Descriptions!

PART FIVE

Chapter Forty-Seven: Exotic Concoctions

Thursday, 11 March Friday, 12 March 1999

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Filius Flitwick, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, Poppy Pomfrey, Ezra Cahill, others

Chapter Forty-Eight: A Wager with the Headmistress

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Goaded by Minerva, Severus places a wager on the abysmal Hufflepuff Quidditch team to beat Gryffindor in that day's game.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Forty-Nine: Normal Life

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Severus counsels a student.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Ginny Weasley, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Sarah Duffy

Chapter Fifty: A New Project

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Severus comes up with an idea, which he shares with the Headmistress, then Minerva assigns Severus a new project to work on...with Poppy.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Fifty-One: Just a Fling?

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus begins work on the project with Poppy, and later he practises the new spell on his own, but without success.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Verity Septima Vector

Chapter Fifty-Two: Technique

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus masters an esoteric spell.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Fifty-Three: Dinner at Delancie's

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus and Poppy spend time together in the afternoon, then go to dinner in Diagon Alley.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall, Mr Delancie, others

Chapter Fifty-Four: Dangerous Consequences

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus teaches Poppy the consequences of her flirting.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey

To be continued in Part Six . . .

Chapter Forty-Seven: Exotic Concoctions

Chapter 48 of 118

Thursday, 11 March – Friday, 12 March 1999. Severus and Hermione go to dinner in Hogsmeade. On his return to the castle, Severus accepts an invitation to a party. Filius Flitwick makes very powerful cocktails. ****Beginning of Part Five****

Rated for some sexually explicit language and a very brief sexually explicit scene about two-thirds of the way through the chapter.



PART FIVE

Chapter Forty-Seven: Exotic Concoctions

Thursday, 11 March Friday, 12 March 1999

Severus lay in bed, attempting to blank his mind and fall asleep. But every time he began to relax, a witch's face popped into his head, and not the one he would have expected. He had been worried about Hermione. He was still worried about her. He was almost certain that he was in love with her. But it was Poppy's face that kept returning to his thoughts. And not just her face. Her breasts, her legs, and everything in between. Her face as she smiled at him, her face as she came, her face as she laughed, and her face as she wept for him. Most especially, though, her face as she came. Despite having had sex with Gareth earlier in the evening, he felt his cock react to the thought of Poppy coming, Poppy coming with his cock in her, Poppy coming with his fingers in her, Poppy coming with his tongue on her clit. It was all Minerva's fault. She shouldn't have mentioned that Poppy might like to spend more time with him. He just might have to begin practising Occlusion regularly again if he couldn't get such images and thoughts out of his mind.

They had an agreement, and that was that. It wouldn't be a smart thing to let it happen again, even if they were tempted. And he would be sure to avoid any temptations. Besides, if he even made a move toward her now, she might misinterpret it after what he had accidentally blurted out the last time they'd made love. And if she approached him, that would be more worrisome. She might hope that he had meant it and be looking for something he couldn't give her. That was unlikely, though...she'd probably be more worried that he had meant it. She could never really want to be with him, a former Death Eater, with all of his psychic baggage, moral debts, and emotional problems. It was good that he wasn't in love with her, he thought; it would be far harder for him if he were. He was grateful she had spent any time with him at all.

It had been a peculiar, spontaneous thing, their getting together, Severus mused. She hadn't even thought of him that way before he had flirted with her, he was sure, and he certainly hadn't thought of her that way until Gareth mentioned her attractiveness. She had become highly sexually attractive to him, but his feelings toward her hadn't changed, not really. He did like her, of course, but she was still just the warm-hearted mediwitch who had taken care of him when he had needed her professional services, a colleague who was somewhat more congenial to spend time with than others, a friend who was understanding and affectionate; that was all. Even though she was dead sexy. And even though he really wanted to be with her again, fall asleep with her in his arms, and wake up with her beside him.

His attraction for Poppy wasn't like it had been with Minerva, he thought, when he had suddenly discovered her attractiveness at the same time he discovered that he loved her. He still did love Minerva, very much, and always would. And she still was somewhat attractive to him. Oddly, though, he thought that even if Albus really were dead, he

wouldn't want a romantic relationship with Minerva. He didn't think they were actually compatible enough to be lovers in a long-term relationship...although if she ever needed his help, he would give it. Of course, Minerva didn't feel the same about him as he did about her, and that probably played a role in his feelings, too. She was still a good friend, though, and despite the fact that he would have preferred not to discuss either Hermione or Poppy with her, at least not right then, it had been kind of her to be concerned about him.

Poppy, on the other hand . . . she really was very attractive to him in a very basic way, even if he hadn't discovered that until recently. Severus suspected that, although the *Adfectus* had only revealed to him that he loved Minerva deeply and truly and had not itself manufactured the love, there was some aspect of the spell that had encouraged or enhanced his physical attraction to her, perhaps not manufacturing the attraction, but magnifying it. He doubted that he would have ever become so aware of her as a sexually attractive witch if he had discovered his love for her in a more normal, ordinary way...whatever that might mean for a wizard as confused as he was and as bitter and aloof from others as he had been for so much of his life.

With Poppy, however, his experience was almost the opposite: he had come to like and respect her during his time at Hogwarts, and his affection for her had grown over the past couple of years. He had been aware of this, but hadn't really thought much about it until he had discovered his attraction to her. Their physical intimacy had unveiled the depth of the affection he already felt for her, and this new aspect of their relationship...temporary though it was...had certainly enhanced his regard for her, and it had brought him to feel even closer to her. A sense of warmth and tenderness came over him as he thought of being closer to Poppy, both emotionally and physically.

It was just as well that they weren't going to continue their fling, or he would begin to fancy himself in love with her, Severus thought as he fell asleep, but he would still miss it.

Severus opened the door for Hermione as they left the Three Broomsticks. It had been somewhat awkward, particularly when he repaid her Muggle money, reminding them both of their single date, but then they began to discuss their day, and they both relaxed a little. Hermione was trying to decide whether or not she should forego the classes that she had thought she would take during the summer. Alroy told her that she would never make any progress in her Animagus training if she didn't have more time to devote to it, and was encouraging her not to take any Muggle classes over the summer but to spend the time working with him.

Severus felt that his decision not to date Hermione helped him to give her better advice, thinking about what was best for her rather than considering what would be better for him, or whom he would prefer Hermione to be spending her time with. He encouraged her to concentrate on her Animagus training. Muggle classes could wait. He was also no longer as jealous of Alroy now that he realised that he was married and about to become a father. Not that that would stop some wizards from making a play for an attractive young witch whom they were mentoring, but he didn't think that Alroy was that sort. Besides, he had other friends of his own now; Hermione wasn't his sole friend...and if he hadn't lost her friendship after having aborted their dating, he felt fairly confident that she would remain his friend even whilst they each spent time with others.

As they walked down the high street toward the lane that led to Professor Gamp's house, Severus asked Hermione if she would like to do anything else that evening, but she said that she had had a long week and she wanted a quiet, early night.

"You are really feeling better, though?" Severus asked.

"Yes, just fine. I think it was from having done too many Animagus exercises yesterday afternoon and then Apparating all the way to London immediately after. I woke up feeling fine this morning, although Gareth still made me take it easy today. I always thought that apprenticeships were supposed to be something more like indentured servitude with some educational benefits, but he's very flexible with my schedule, even if he is a bit rigid about what he has me doing. I am learning a lot, though. I have to say that I think that Arithmancy is highly underutilised. And the commissions we get tend to be very unimaginative. Of course, I don't think that Gareth particularly tries to get work."

"The Ministry uses it. I don't know to what extent, but they have an Arithmancer in each Department, I believe. I think that the Department of Mysteries has several, but as they are the Department of Mysteries and highly secretive, that is pure speculation."

"I doubt that they are any more imaginative at the Ministry than most other people are, and it certainly didn't seem to inform any of their decisions during the war. You can make great demands of Arithmancy; it has so much potential."

"But the results are complex and require interpretation, which most people don't have the patience for, preferring divination...and without sufficient information, or with some key fact unknown, Arithmancy is no better than reading tea leaves."

"That's not so. You can do magical transmutations, and you can do reductions and expansions on the calculations. You can even ask your calculation to reveal unknown variables...you might never discover what the variable is, but you know it's there and that it is influencing events. I'm learning how to do those operations right now. Arithmancy is a powerful tool. It helped save your life, Severus."

"You, Minerva, Albus, and the Healers saved my life. But I am glad that you enjoy Arithmancy, Hermione."

They reached the gate to the property.

"Thank you for having dinner with me, Hermione. I hope you have a good weekend."

"I think it will be, although I had wanted to go to the Quidditch match and see Ginny play, but after not doing very much today, I'd rather not ask Gareth for the time to go."

"It would probably please Miss Weasley if you were there."

"We'll see. Good night, Severus. Maybe we will see each other sometime next week."

"Yes, that would be nice. I have duties, of course, but perhaps one evening."

"We could get Gareth to come with us. I think he gets bored. He's done so many interesting things in exotic places in the world, and now he's in Hogsmeade living with his mum and supervising me."

"Yes, if he likes." The three of them hadn't gone out together in a couple months. "Good night, Hermione."

Severus walked for a few minutes before Apparating to the Hogwarts gates. He felt peculiarly deflated. It had been a perfectly nice evening, but something had changed. It was as though once he had admitted to Hermione that he wanted to date her and yet they weren't dating, his anticipatory pleasure was diminished. He thought that she was also a little distant, though he could hardly blame her for that. But this was supposed to have been a date. He should have found some nice secluded spot to do a little romancing at about this point of the evening, trying to get beyond the first kiss to something more, perhaps touching her thigh beneath her skirt...though she had been wearing jeans that evening...or trying to caress her breast. Instead, they'd had a quick meal at the Three Broomsticks and he had walked her home and left her at the gate to the house. They had scarcely even touched on anything personal at all in their conversations that evening.

Gareth had said that things might be awkward for a while. That was probably all it was. It had still been nice to see her.

He entered the castle and ran into Pomona Sprout, almost literally.

"Severus! I thought you were out...I was going to look for you, but Albus said you weren't in tonight."

"I was out. Now I am in." Severus wanted to get to his rooms. He had nothing against the Head of Hufflepuff, but although they had always been cordial with each other and collegial as their jobs might require it, he found her less than diverting. He never quite understood what Flitwick saw in her.

"I just wanted to tell you..." She looked around as if for spies, then beckoned him to follow her into the staff room.

Severus bit back a sigh and followed her, unable to imagine why she would want to speak with him in private, but not sufficiently interested to try to imagine it.

"Filius and I are having a little get-together in Ravenclaw Tower tonight after curfew. Just drinks and a few snacks, nothing fancy, but we would like it if you came. If you are able to," she added nervously.

Staff had occasionally asked him to join them when they had impromptu parties, but as he almost invariably refused the invitations, most stopped asking him. He would only go if Albus twisted his arm or if he had some other reason for it...they did tend to drink and gossip at these things; he could sometimes learn some interesting information.

"I am unsure I am able," Severus said.

"Minerva and Albus will be there, and a number of other staff. You might enjoy it."

"I may, but do not expect me." He hesitated. "I do appreciate the invitation, however."

Pomona smiled cheerfully. "I won't expect you, but I will be optimistic!"

Severus walked down to Slytherin and checked on the common room. He liked to drop in unexpectedly. Kept them on their toes. He told the captain of the Quidditch team to keep a close eye on the Gryffindor strategy the next day when they played Hufflepuff. After the Easter holidays, the next match would be Slytherin-Gryffindor, and although it wasn't quite as much fun as it had been when Minerva had been Head of House, the rivalry between the two teams was still strong.

He spent the next hour in his office, reading third-year essays. It was painful. He hated having to teach them to write along with trying to teach them Potions, but half the time, he couldn't tell whether they understood anything about the topic. They certainly couldn't express whatever it was they had managed to understand. He had to proceed on the assumption that if he didn't understand what they were trying say, they didn't understand what they were saying, either.

Curfew came, and Severus checked the corridors outside Slytherin. Duffy was on patrol that night, and he didn't think she liked coming down to the dungeons, and he doubted that she checked very carefully. He started toward his quarters, then hesitated. He could go up to Flitwick's just for a little while. He wouldn't have to stay long. No one would probably talk to him, anyway, other than Albus and Minerva. He was not good with small talk and parties. Flitwick had always been decent to him, though, and he'd spent a lot of time practising duelling with him over the past few months. Filius would probably be pleased if he showed up for a little while.

Severus turned and headed up to the seventh floor and Flitwick's suite.

He presented himself to the portrait guarding the Head of Ravenclaw's rooms, and the portrait automatically opened the door to him. He must be on a guest list of some sort. There were a few people there already, but the first person he noticed was Poppy. She was wearing mauve- and lilac-coloured robes with an abstract leafy pattern woven through the fabric, and she looked very pretty, like a flower in a soft, misty spring dawn.

Pomona, dressed in dusky blue and brown, was at his elbow within seconds. "Severus! I'm glad you could come! Would you like a drink? Filius is playing bartender tonight and is getting very experimental, so you can have anything you like."

"I think just water, thank you," Severus replied.

"Oh, go talk to him. Make him happy and ask for something exotic. He could make you something nonalcoholic but interesting, if you like."

Severus nodded stiffly and crossed the room to where Filius had set up a bar, trying not to look at Poppy, who was standing nearby talking to Vector. They were supposed to be behaving normally in public...and in private, as well. He wouldn't have avoided her at a gathering before this, but he would not have sought her company, either. He had noticed Albus sitting in an armchair over in the corner, Hagrid, Cahill, and Sharon Carter gathered round and listening to him tell a story. It was remarkable to see Cahill with his mouth closed for once. Severus had thought the man never listened. He scarcely stopped talking long enough to draw breath.

"What can I get you, Severus?"

"I was instructed to request something exotic."

Filius laughed. "Do you have something specific in mind?"

Severus looked at the array of bottles in front of and behind Filius, bending over to see them better. He had no idea what would qualify as an exotic drink.

"This all looks exotic to me," Severus said.

"How about I mix something for you?" Filius said, reaching for a glass.

A minute later, Severus sipped the dark drink. Filius looked up hopefully.

"I think I would prefer a glass of water...sparkling with a twist of lime," Severus added, trying to make it more interesting for Flitwick.

"Something else, then? I'd thought since you like coffee, something with Kahlua ..."

"It was sweeter than I would prefer," Severus said.

"Here, try my drink, Severus."

It was Poppy at his elbow, holding up her glass and turning her straw toward him. He did not drink through straws unless he was too sick to lift his head. He closed his lips around Poppy's straw and looked her in the eyes as he sipped.

Severus averted his eyes then turned to Filius. "That would be acceptable."

"Between the Sheets one more time, then!" Filius said cheerfully.

Severus almost choked.

"That's the name of the drink," Poppy explained quickly. "And don't ask Albus what he's drinking unless you want to embarrass him."

Severus looked over at Albus. His drink was creamy. Severus did not want to know what it was called.

"Whatever happened to martinis and gin and tonic?" he grumbled as he watched Flitwick mix his drink.

"I can fix you one of those, too," Filius said, wanting to please.

"Minerva is drinking a..."

"Please don't tell me," Severus said with a grimace, accepting his drink from Filius.

"A Tequila Sunrise," Poppy finished as the two stepped away from the bar. "Filius is just trying out some drinks from a bartending book Pomona got him for his birthday, and he's finding the ones with suggestive names amusing, so he's pushing those."

"What did he serve me the first time, do you know?" Severus asked.

"No...you could ask him."

Severus shook his head. "I cannot imagine Albus requesting a drink with a suggestive name," he said.

"He didn't. I think Minerva requested it for him. Filius has a list of some of the drinks and their ingredients."

"All right, what is Albus drinking?" Severus asked in a low voice.

Poppy looked around, grinned, then beckoned him closer. He bent toward her. She placed one hand on his shoulder, cupped her other by his ear, and whispered, "A Screaming Orgasm."

Severus could feel her breath on his ear. He straightened and looked down at her. His eyes seemed amused, although his expression did not appear to change otherwise.

"Do you think it is as good as ours?" he asked, pleased when Poppy blushed. "Our Between the Sheets is quite . . . tasty." He took a sip through his straw as he looked into her eyes.

"I don't think it could be as good," Poppy said. She blinked.

"It is very complex," Severus replied with a nod, then taking another sip.

"So you did get an exotic drink, Severus! Good for you!" Pomona said, suddenly appearing at his side. "I am sure Filius was pleased. Is it one of the ones with a naughty name?"

"I recommended it to Severus," Poppy said. "I thought he would like it. It's not too sweet."

Pomona looked up at Severus. "There's food, too. Help yourself!" She gestured toward a table set up in the opposite corner of the room.

Severus just nodded.

"It might be a good idea, Severus," Poppy interjected. "These taste nice, but they are quite alcoholic."

"I'll leave you in Poppy's capable hands," Pomona said, patting Severus on the arm. Severus twitched, but only slightly.

"Would you care for something to eat?" Severus asked, turning toward Poppy.

"Let's see what they have."

They walked over to the table, and Poppy filled up a plate with different little snacks. Severus put two black olives on his plate.

"You should eat more than that," Poppy said.

"It is all peculiar looking," he replied softly, not wishing to offend his hosts, but he picked up something that looked like a devilled egg, though the white was purple and the yellow was green. "And I can't tell what's in anything."

"Here, try this, I think you'll like it," Poppy held out a small pastry.

He took it from her, brushing her fingers as he did so. "I will trust you." His voice was low and dark.

Severus bit into it slowly, Poppy watching him. He chewed it, raising an eyebrow, then he put the rest into his mouth and nodded. "It is acceptable."

Poppy smiled. "Spanakopita. I thought you might like that."

"I believe I may have had it before."

"Ah, Madam Pomfrey," a pompous voice said from behind him. "It is eminently fortuitous that I should see you this evening at this board of sustenance! You may be interested to learn of certain researches I have conducted into the history of the wizarding dietary regimen from the earliest days of this millennium through to our own modern and enlightened times, tracing the patterns of salubrity and longevity in relation to dietary ingurgitations and correlating such with the vigour of the wizarding race."

Severus could feel his eyes begin to glaze over by the word "fortuitous." Cahill didn't stop talking, going on and on in that peculiar, repetitive cadence of his that seemed to bear no relation to what he was saying. Severus and Poppy sipped their drinks and cast each other glances.

"Madam Pomfrey," Severus said, taking advantage of a pause as Cahill took a rare breath. "I apologise for interrupting this fascinating discourse, but I believe that you were going to introduce me to another of Professor Flitwick's concoctions." He held up his glass and rattled the ice cubes. "Time for another."

"If you will excuse us, Professor Cahill," Poppy said, and she turned with Severus and headed back to the makeshift bar, where Filius was chatting with Carter and Hagrid.

"Did you have any idea what he was talking about?" Poppy asked under her breath.

"Other than that he was pleased to see you, no," Severus replied.

"So, is there something you would like to try next? I could ask Filius for his list."

"I thought that Albus's drink sounded interesting."

"It is sweet, however. You might prefer a Slow Screw whilst I have a Screaming Orgasm."

"I think I might enjoy that," he replied, looking into her eyes, his voice low and resonant.

They moved to the bar. Poppy put down her empty glass. Filius excused himself from his conversation and came over to see them.

"The same again?" he asked brightly.

"I believe that Severus will have a Slow Screw whilst I try a Screaming Orgasm," Poppy replied.

Severus fought a blush, but Filius just chuckled.

"Hagrid had one with whipped cream on his," Filius said, looking up at Poppy.

"I will try that, then," Poppy replied.

"And would you prefer a Slow Highland Screw, Severus? It's my own invention. I add a splash of Scotch."

"Fine."

Filius combined orange juice, sloe gin, and Scotch in what appeared a haphazard manner, shook it with some ice, and poured it into a tall glass. Severus took a swallow of his drink and only long-developed reflex control kept him from coughing.

"Well?" Filius asked.

"It's different," Severus said. He took another swallow. It grew on him. "That was a large splash."

"I see Cahill headed this way...sorry, Filius!" Poppy said urgently, her hand on Severus's elbow. She and Severus turned away quickly.

The two went over to where Albus was sitting. Minerva was perched on the arm of his chair. It looked as though Albus had switched over to hot cocoa, but from the sparkle in Minerva's eyes, Severus thought perhaps she had had a few stronger drinks. He was glad there was no Dark Lord trying to invade the castle that night.

"Poppy! Come here, my dear! Pull up a chair." Albus smiled up at them both.

Poppy looked around, and she was about to say it seemed that all were taken when Albus drew his wand and conjured one for her, in colours to match her robes, and with a pattern of little fleurs-de-lis. Severus stood behind Minerva, listening to the conversation, or trying to appear to, but watching Poppy across from him as she drank her Screaming Orgasm with whipped cream and licked the cream from her lips. Such lovely lips.

Albus turned his head and looked up at Severus. "I am happy to see you here, Severus."

"I thought it might be a diverting way to end the week," Severus replied, taking a swallow of his drink.

"Have you been trying some of Filius's concoctions? Or is that orange juice?"

"It is something he calls a Slow Highland Screw. I believe it has some orange juice in it. Between the Sheets was interesting, as well." Severus glanced over at Poppy. "I believe that I must take my leave, however. My own sheets are calling me."

"Can't you stay a while longer, Severus?" Minerva asked. "There's going to be music soon."

"It has been a long week," Severus replied. "And I think I should make a quick pass through the corridors." He looked around him. He did not completely approve of the amount of drinking going on, but people were having a good time. Except for poor Hagrid, who had been cornered by Cahill and was looking utterly bewildered. Severus finished off his drink, trying not to slurp at the end. He really did not like drinking from straws. Unless it was from Poppy's straw. That had been rather peculiarly titillating.

Duffy arrived just then, and Severus knew that it was definitely time to leave. He said good-night to Minerva, Albus, and Poppy, looking down at Poppy's glass, then at her face, thinking that he could certainly give her a real screaming orgasm.

He managed to slip out after saying a quick good-bye to Pomona. Duffy was at the bar, and her back was to the door. He walked down the stairs, stopping on the landing between the fourth and fifth floors. Unless Poppy took another staircase, which would be illogical, as this one was the closest to both Ravenclaw Tower and the Hospital Wing, she would come past him. Of course, she might stay at the party. Just because he was thinking about giving her a real slow screw and a screaming orgasm didn't mean that she was having similar thoughts.

Severus stood in the shadows in the corner of the landing. After a few minutes, he heard light footsteps above him. They were coming closer. He looked up and saw Poppy coming down the stairs. She didn't see him. As she turned on the landing to go down to the fourth floor, Severus stepped out of the shadows, put his hand on her shoulder, and pulled her back toward him. She only gasped lightly, then she turned around and looked up at him.

"Severus! You gave me a fright!" she said in a hushed voice.

"I'm sorry."

"Were you waiting for me?"

"And if I was?"

"I was thinking of looking for you," Poppy whispered.

"You found me," Severus said.

Poppy gazed at him a moment, then she stepped closer, and Severus stepped back into the shadows. She followed. In the dim light, Severus could see her chest move with her breath, her creamy cleavage visible. He reached out and touched her, just brushing her throat and chest with his fingertips. He raised his eyes and looked into hers.

His fingers still playing across her skin, Severus murmured, "You did not want to stay at the party and have another Screaming Orgasm?"

"I thought I might find better elsewhere," Poppy breathed.

Severus grabbed her and pulled her into the shadows, lifting her and kissing her, pressing her against the wall. Poppy returned his kiss passionately, rubbing his back with one hand and reaching under his frockcoat with her other to massage his buttocks. Severus pounded his hips against her rhythmically, as though he was fucking her, then he insinuated one hand between them and began to rub her crux through her robes.

"Yes, Severus, but not here, not here," Poppy gasped.

Severus looked down at her and kissed her again, drawing her tongue into his mouth and sucking it. He broke away, stepped back, and looked around. He heard and saw nothing.

With a tug at her hand, he started down the stairs, pulling her behind him, then he stopped and looked up at her.

"Where to?"

"My rooms. They're close."

He nodded, and the two trotted down the steps. They reached the fourth floor and began to head for the Hospital Wing, but as they passed a side corridor, Severus stopped and pulled Poppy into it. It was dark but for some moonlight filtering through long, narrow windows along one side of the hall.

"I warded this against student entry a few days ago," he said in a hushed voice. "No one ever comes down here." He pushed her into an alcove. "I can't wait."

Poppy put her arms around his neck, kissing him, and he began to hike her skirts up, then held them in place with a light Sticking Charm. He stepped away and quickly

unbuttoned his frockcoat and his trousers as Poppy pushed down her knickers.

Severus approached her again as he freed his erection from his pants. Poppy put her arms around his neck, and as he lifted her, she hooked her right leg around him, then her left. Holding her under her thighs, Severus pressed her against the wall and sought her entrance with his cock. He gasped as he entered her, then he muffled her cries and moans with his mouth as he repeatedly thrust into her, his shaft pumping into her as the head of his cock hit her deeply with each thrust. He pounded and thrust fast and hard without any pause; she stiffened and her grip on him tightened. Severus broke their kiss as he felt her pulse against him, watching her face as he continued to pump his cock. Poppy threw her head back, exposing her throat as she gasped and tried not to shout. Then Severus was coming as her orgasm still rippled around him. He pushed in once more as he came, deep inside her, pressing his forehead against the wall beside her head. He rested there, panting.

Severus swallowed, then he stepped back, letting go of her as her legs uncurled from around him. Poppy leaned against the wall, her eyes closed, catching her breath. Severus blinked, then he looked at her skirts and released the charm holding them up.

Poppy pulled up her knickers, then she let out a sigh and put her head against his chest, embracing him with her arms beneath his jacket.

Severus swayed slightly, then he whispered, "I do believe I am drunk." He hadn't really felt it until that moment.

Poppy giggled softly. "I know I am...just a little. Filius makes strong drinks."

"That was still very good. Even drunk, we're good. We are very good fuckers. We fuck good together. Or well. We fuck very well." Severus gave a short, sharp laugh.

"I think we should go to my rooms and drink some tea. And a lot of water. And maybe take a prophylactic Headache Potion."

"You are the professional. I will follow your advice," Severus said. He let go of her and gestured toward the corridor. "Lead on!"

Poppy giggled again. She pointed at his trousers. "We may not see anyone...or no one may see us...but you might want to button up."

Severus looked down. He smiled. "It would be very naughty to walk around Hogwarts with my dick hanging out. Even if it's not hard."

"Very naughty, Severus," Poppy said, beginning to tuck him away and button his trousers.

"T'sall Cahill's fault. I didn't get to eat enough. My ingurgi...ingurgi...ingurgitation was insufficient," Severus said, watching her button him up.

Poppy laughed. "He really is hard to take, isn't he?"

"Can't imagine why Minerva hired him. She's us'ally so sensible. I'm surprised he hasn't killed any students from deadly...um...deadly boredom."

"I think it was hard to believe that Binns was really gone. We all kept thinking he would just rematerialise somewhere."

"Hope he's happy," Severus said, putting his arm around Poppy's shoulders as they walked to the main corridor.

"Should we be walking this close together?" Poppy asked.

"I'm your patient. You are patiently treating me for excess...excessive Cahill ex...posure."

Poppy laughed, and Severus kissed the top of her head. "I like making you laugh, Poppy Pomfrey."

They made it to her rooms without encountering anyone, though a few portraits roused and watched their progress.

Severus sat down on the couch and Poppy went into her kitchen. When she came back out with a tall glass of water for him, he had slumped sideways against the arm of the sofa, looking a bit like a rag-doll.

"Severus," Poppy said, poking him. "Here's some water. Drink the entire glass."

"Then I'll have to pee," he said, taking the glass from her. "I think I already have to pee." He looked up at her and said very seriously, "I don't drink, you know."

"You had your share tonight, and so did I. You drink that water whilst I fetch us each some Headache Potion from my bedroom. And if you have to pee, you know where the toilet is."

He nodded. "I always try to pee in toilets. I don't like peeing in the woods or into a bottle."

Poppy smiled. "Well, you're in luck. There's a nice, modern loo just feet away. Drink your water!"

Poppy was in the bedroom when she heard Severus go into the loo. She was none too steady, herself, but she thought that she was a bit better off than Severus. The liquor had obviously hit him suddenly and hard. She had rarely seen him drink anything alcoholic over the years that she had worked with him. As a spy, she supposed, Severus probably hadn't thought it safe to drink and become vulnerable, and given his character, he probably didn't like the idea of losing control, either. Poppy smiled, thinking of his serious declaration that he preferred to pee in toilets. He was most definitely drunk.

She came back out just as Severus was stumbling toward the couch.

"Here's your Headache Potion, Severus. I took mine, now you take yours."

Severus sat down with a thump and looked up at her with pitiful eyes. "I don't think I feel very well, Poppy."

"You take this potion and I'll get you some nice tea."

"I don't want to be sick."

"I know you don't, love. Just take your potion and lie back."

Severus nodded. "You are like an angel," he said.

Yes, most definitely drunk, Poppy thought with a smile.

A few minutes later, Poppy was back with a pot of tea. Severus was lying on his side holding his stomach.

"You need to get out of that jacket, Severus. You're sweating. You'll make yourself sicker."

Severus let her help him out of his frockcoat, then flopped back against the back of the couch, closing his eyes.

"Now, drink your tea, Severus."

"I feel sick."

"I know you do. The tea has a lot of ginger in it. It will help."

Severus opened his eyes. "Are you sure?" he asked sceptically. Tea was hardly a potion, after all.

"I am sure."

"Okay, Poppy."

He sat up and took the cup of tea she poured him. Severus sipped it, then he looked up at Poppy as she poured her own tea.

"You are a wonderful witch, Poppy."

"Thank you, Severus."

"I'm just a sad, pathetic, miserable bastard," he said morosely, "and you are a wonderful witch."

Oh, dear, happy drunk to maudlin drunk to miserable drunk. "You are wonderful, too, Severus, or you wouldn't be with me. Drink your tea."

Severus drank his tea.

Poppy sat down in an armchair next to the sofa. She had a Hangover Potion, but it wouldn't work until a few more hours passed, at least. If she drank enough fluid before she went to bed, she might not need it. She looked over at Severus. He was sipping his tea with his eyes closed. When he finished it, she took his cup from him and refilled it.

"I don't think I should drink things with funny names," Severus said, seeming slightly steadier as he took the cup from her.

"It's the mix of alcohols, and they were very strong. We probably drank them too fast, too."

"Mmm." Severus drank more tea.

"Feeling any better?" Poppy asked a few minutes later.

Severus nodded.

"How's your tummy?"

Severus gave a crooked smile. "My 'tummy' is fine. The ginger helped. I just feel fuzzy and sleepy now."

"Good. Do you want something to eat?"

"I don't think so. I just want to go to bed. I should leave now."

"You would be welcome to stay, but you probably want to be down in Slytherin."

He nodded and sighed. "That's one chain that hasn't been cut."

"Is that the way it feels to you?"

"Most of the time, yes." He yawned, covering his mouth. "When I came back this autumn, I thought I was returning for my last year. It still might be. I don't know."

"You are thinking of resigning?" she asked, her eyes wide.

Severus shrugged. "I might. I don't know. I can't think of what else I would like to do. No idea has appealed to me. I could take my Order of Merlin money and open an apothecary or a general potions shop, but if I do that and it flops because no one wants to buy potions and ingredients from a Death Eater, I could lose everything. And the Ministry might say I'm a hero, but I am sure they would find a reason not to hire me, and I don't think I would want to work for them, anyway, and anything else that I've thought of sounds even worse than that. I might just live on my Order of Merlin money. If I'm careful, it could last a long time, particularly if I did some brewing on the side and sold to apothecaries and St. Mungo's."

"Have you talked with Minerva about it?"

"Not since August. I told her then that I might not be back for good, and my new contract ends on the last day of July this year, so she knows."

"Maybe you could just take a sabbatical," Poppy suggested.

"That sounds wishy-washy. I think I should be decisive. And I'd have to submit a plan for research."

"Minerva might not require that."

Severus snorted. "The Board of Governors would, though. Most personnel decisions are in her hands, but certain things still need to go through the Governors. Thankfully, the Ministry has rescinded most of its ridiculous laws that allowed it to meddle, so the Ministry's not a factor."

"The Governors wouldn't require that if it were an unpaid sabbatical. Minerva could just give it to you without their approval, like a leave of absence. You could do what you like for a year, and then come back."

Severus shook his head. "I think if I were to leave, I would never come back."

"I hope that whatever you choose to do, you are happy, but I hope that you stay. I'd miss you."

"You are probably one of the few who would," Severus said drily, though warmed by her words.

"I think more people would miss you than you realise," Poppy replied. "And if you stayed and more people came to know you better, I am sure that number would increase."

"Hmpf." He looked up at the clock. "I should leave."

"It is very late," Poppy agreed. "Let me give you some Hangover Potion to take in the morning."

Severus stood and pulled on his frockcoat as Poppy fetched the potion.

"Here you go. You can't take it any sooner than five hours after your last drink, or it doesn't work very well."

"I know that," Severus replied.

Poppy smiled. "Sorry...habit!"

He twitched a smile and took the potion from her. It was in the original bottle and there was only one dose left. "Do you have some for yourself?"

"That's the last, but I'm sure I can snag some from Pomona or someone in the morning if I need it. I'm fine."

Severus put the potion bottle in his pocket.

"Would you like to use the Floo in the infirmary?"

He shook his head. "I will appreciate the walk. It will help clear my head."

Poppy walked him to the door. "I'll see you tomorrow, Severus."

Severus paused, then he bent and kissed her cheek. "Good night, Poppy."

NEXT

Chapter Forty-Eight: A Wager with the Headmistress

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Goaded by Minerva, Severus places a wager on the abysmal Hufflepuff Quidditch team to beat Gryffindor in that day's game.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Forty-Eight: A Wager with the Headmistress

Chapter 49 of 118

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Chapter Forty-Eight: A Wager with the Headmistress

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Severus woke feeling like something had taken up residence somewhere in his body and had died there. Maybe in his mouth. Or his stomach. Or his brain. Or all three.

Severus dragged himself into the bathroom and rinsed his mouth then brushed his teeth. Now just his brain and his stomach. He used the toilet and remembered the potion Poppy had given him. It took him some effort, but he went back into the bedroom, found his frockcoat, dug the potions bottle from its pocket, and swigged it. Five minutes later, Severus was feeling almost like himself, except tired. Not surprising after less than four hours sleep.

He showered and dressed, debating his teaching robes, and decided that he could wait until the Quidditch game to wear those. Looking at the clock, Severus was satisfied to see that he still had ten minutes to spare before breakfast would be served. He would be late if it weren't a Saturday.

Sitting in his favourite chair, he hoped that Poppy was feeling all right. He should have let her keep the potion. He closed his eyes. He never should have waited for her on the landing as he had. A sure sign that he had been drunk. Perhaps not the lying-in-wait, but having kissed and groped her the way he had right there in the stairwell. Anyone could have come by and caught them. And it might have been less likely that someone could have discovered them in the side corridor, but it was not completely impossible. He would have compromised them both. Poppy hadn't objected, though, and he thought that if she'd been completely sober, she would have. He tried to remember what he'd said after they'd had sex, and he decided that none of it was too embarrassing, at least not in front of her.

His relationship with Poppy had just become even more complicated, Severus thought with a sigh. Not that they had a relationship. They did, but they were only colleagues. Colleagues who sometimes got together for a fuck, though it had never occurred to him that such a thing might be a possibility between colleagues. Friends, then. They were just friends and colleagues.

It was only supposed to have been one night. There was no point in pretending anymore that it was only one night with a little bit of an extension. He would have to try to avoid temptation. He would have to talk to Poppy about that. They would both have to avoid temptation. If they did, then they might be able to occasionally get together and have sex, just for a little physical relief and a little human warmth, some intimacy, a little cosy cuddling . . . a kind of friendly sexual intercourse between colleagues now and then. Perhaps once a month or so. And then if he did leave Hogwarts, he would remove himself from temptation entirely. And if either of them wanted to end it completely because they'd found someone else, that would be fine. Severus felt a twinge, but suppressed it. He might miss the sex if Poppy found someone else, but that was all. He wouldn't be jealous. After all, it would prove that he had been intimate with a very attractive witch. He would be mature about it if she decided she wanted to date someone. He couldn't be jealous. Yes, he would talk to her about avoiding temptation. Together, they would manage it.

That determined, Severus left for the Great Hall. When he entered, he suppressed a smirk. Half of those who had been at the party when he was were not there, and those who were, looked peaked. Years of spying enabled him to cross the Great Hall and take his seat without appearing as tired as he felt, and, thanks to Poppy's potion, he loaded his plate with breakfast...omelette, sausages, and toast...and turned over the coffee cup by his place. It automatically filled itself.

Minerva looked over at his plate and closed her eyes, making a moue of distaste. Severus smirked. Albus was eating his usual breakfast, but Minerva had a slice of toast on her plate and a cup of black tea. Poor Minerva, sitting between two wizards with hearty appetites. Severus poured some cream into his coffee and drank it.

"Milk for your tea, Minerva?" he asked, Summoning the milk pitcher for her.

She shook her head.

"Good party last night," Severus said.

"Mmm."

"Flitwick certainly made some imaginative drinks," he continued.

"Don't remind me," Minerva said.

Severus looked over at her. "Not feeling well this morning?"

"No," she replied shortly.

"Not hungover?"

"I do not get hangovers."

"Because if you are, you might be able to get some potion from someone."

"I offered her some this morning, Severus," Albus chimed in from Minerva's other side, "but she insisted she was fine. Mind over matter, she said."

"I'll be fine once I eat," Minerva said. "It was the pasties last night. I think they were off."

"Shall I speak to the house-elves about that, Minerva?" Severus asked solicitously. "We can't have them serving bad food."

"No. They were probably just sitting out too long."

"The freshness charms must have failed," Severus said shaking his head. "They are getting sloppy in the kitchens."

"No, I think it happened after I put them on my plate. I didn't eat them right away," Minerva said.

Severus suppressed a smirk and took a mouthful of fluffy omelette as he glanced over at Albus, who looked amused.

"Did you try the spanikopita last night, Minerva? It was lovely. The cheese, the spinach . . . I think there was olive oil in it, too. And those purple eggs . . . mmm, tangy. I think they had some hot wasabi in the green yolks." Severus said, watching Minerva blanch. "The eggs this morning might not be purple, but they're tasty. You should try some. I think they have Muenster cheese in them."

Minerva began to push back from the table. Albus took her hand and held out a small vial, smiling at her.

"A little Hangover Potion, my dear?"

"It's not a hangover," Minerva said stiffly, but she uncorked the vial and swallowed the potion.

A minute later, she was eating her toast, and when she finished that, she helped herself to the omelette. Severus and Albus looked at each other. Albus grinned and Severus gave him a crooked smile.

Severus looked up just as the doors opened and Poppy walked in. That morning, she was wearing robes of robin's egg blue with an under-robe of deep yellow peeking out from beneath the over-robe. She wasn't wearing her matron's hat and pinny, but she often didn't wear those on weekends unless she was actually in the infirmary. Severus watched as Poppy stopped to speak with a student, one of the Hufflepuff Chasers. She smiled and nodded, then continued up to the table. Instead of going to her usual chair down at the end of Albus's side of the table, though, she came and sat beside him.

"Good morning, Minerva! You are looking well this morning, Albus." She smiled at Severus.

He nodded to her.

"I hope you don't mind if I sit here, Severus, but with so few people at breakfast, I'd be all by myself down there."

"Not at all, Madam Pomfrey," Severus replied. He looked at her and gave a swift wink, then he continued, a dead-pan expression on his face, "Perhaps the other staff are also suffering from eating bad pasties last night."

"Bad pasties?" Poppy asked, turning over her bowl, which filled with steaming porridge.

"Mmhm. It seems that our kitchen house-elves are becoming lax in the execution of their duties, as incredible as that may seem. They used inferior freshness charms on the pasties last night, and Minerva was a victim of their carelessness."

Poppy grinned. "I don't think I had one of those bad pasties, although I will admit that I had a hard time forcing myself from my bed this morning. Only the prospect of a hot shower and a pot of tea got me up. It was that last Screaming Orgasm that did it, I think," she said, lowering her voice.

Severus shot a glance at Minerva, but she was busy spreading lemon curd on her toast and didn't appear to have heard. On her other side, Albus seemed to have gone pink. Severus considered teasing him about his drink the night before, but decided against it. He'd already had enough fun teasing Minerva, and it might draw Minerva's attention too much.

"I think that in the future, I will stay with drinks whose ingredients I know and whose names are more mundane," Severus said.

The conversation turned to the Quidditch game scheduled for that afternoon, and Severus mentioned that he had noticed Poppy speaking with one of the Hufflepuff Chasers.

"Just asking him how he was feeling. He had a minor ailment earlier in the week," Poppy said.

The other three perked up, looking for news that might make a difference in the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor game.

"And no point in asking me about it, particularly as he is perfectly well today. So don't change your bets if you are betting on Hufflepuff to win!"

Minerva snorted. "Can you see me betting on Hufflepuff against Gryffindor?"

"I have made it a practice for more than forty years not to engage in wagering on the Hogwarts matches," Albus said.

"You could change that practice now, Albus," Poppy said. "You are not Headmaster any longer."

"What about you, Severus?" Albus asked. "Having a little flutter?"

"No. Unless Slytherin is playing, I see no point to it. A Slytherin victory is only made sweeter by accepting Minerva's payment," Severus said with a smirk.

"Bet on Hufflepuff, then, Severus," Poppy said. "Minerva will accept the wager, won't you Minerva?"

Minerva, her mouth full of toast, nodded, a gleam in her eye.

Severus hated to tell Poppy that, healthy Chaser or no, the Hufflepuff team was abysmal that year and could not win against Gryffindor. She always seemed such an enthusiastic supporter of her House team, regardless of how they were doing in any particular year.

"I don't know. Perhaps I should maintain neutrality," Severus said.

"Chicken, Severus?" Minerva asked with a smirk.

"No, simply attempting to be . . . dispassionate."

"I think that it's because you'd have to bet on Gryffindor if you wanted to place a wager on a winning team," Minerva said.

"The game hasn't been played yet, Minerva!" Poppy retorted.

"It doesn't even need to be played," Minerva said dismissively. "We could all just go out and award the win to Gryffindor right now and spend the afternoon doing something else."

Poppy spluttered indignantly.

"I'll bet on Hufflepuff," Severus said, "but if I lose, Poppy, I will be very unhappy."

"What are we wagering?" Minerva asked.

"I don't know . . ." It was more difficult now that Minerva was Headmistress and not Head of Gryffindor. They couldn't bet duty shifts or supervising each other's detentions.

"If you lose, Severus, you must wear a red teaching robe for a week," Minerva said.

"Oh, no, no..."

"Oh, yes, yes! I will make it a tasteful red. You needn't worry that you'll be in Gryffindor scarlet. You would look quite handsome in burgundy."

"Two days," Severus countered.

"Five," Minerva said.

"Three."

"Four...and they have to be weekdays!"

"Hmmpf. All right . . . and if you lose . . ." Severus thought a moment. What did he want? Time. No chain to Slytherin House. He looked up at her in her Headmistress's chair. "If you lose, you will stay in my rooms for a week...at night, of course...and I will take one of the guest rooms. That way, if someone comes knocking on the door in the middle of the night to say that little Suzie Sefton is puking her guts out again, you can take care of it. I'll be available, of course," he said hastily, "if there's anything that actually requires my personal attention."

"No, I can't do that..."

"Why not? Just let the staff and your office portraits all know where you can be found...making it clear, of course, that you are staying there ~~instead~~ of me, and not with me. If you want to bring Albus along, he's welcome!"

"Not a week, though, Severus. One night."

"Oh, no, if my loss would be four days, then yours has to be at least four nights," Severus countered.

They finally settled on two nights, a Friday and Saturday of Severus's choice, and three nights if the point difference was greater than twenty, although Severus agreed to be sensitive to any prior plans that Minerva and Albus had made.

"Be prepared to wear red, Severus!" Minerva said as she got up to leave.

Severus smirked, but as soon as she and Albus were out of earshot, he turned to Poppy and said, "We'll sit together at the game. I was going to be watching Gryffindor in anticipation of the next game with Slytherin, but now that the stakes are higher, I'll be watching them both, and I'll share my observations with you, you can tell Pomona, and she can relay them to the Hufflepuff captain during any rest periods."

"Is that quite fair?" Poppy asked.

"Why not? If you wouldn't hesitate to share your observations with Pomona to the benefit of your team, why would you hesitate to pass on mine? I know that a few years ago, Flitwick pointed out to Minerva a weakness of one of our Chasers, and she told Wood."

"You're right." She put down her teacup and stood, and Severus did, as well. "You really don't think Hufflepuff will win, do you?"

"I would have said it was hopeless, but there is an outside chance that I won't be wearing red."

"Why did you take Minerva's bet, then?"

Severus shrugged slightly. "You are always enthusiastic about your team. I didn't like the way Minerva dismissed that enthusiasm, said the game didn't even need to be played. I'm going to find Pomona and tell her what her team did wrong against Slytherin last time, and what weaknesses of the Gryffindor team they might be able to exploit. Not that I can think of many."

Gryffindor was the strongest team that year, with Ravenclaw following close on. Hufflepuff was trailing in overall points, and that they were weaker than the Slytherin team seemed impossible. Draco had not tried out for the team and he had not been asked to. There was resentment, only gradually fading, that he had appeared not only to have turned against the cause that the Malfoys had espoused for so many years...and persuaded, cajoled, or bullied others into joining...but that he had apparently escaped the consequences of that allegiance, and he had certainly escaped the dangers of the final confrontations.

"I'll go see Pomona with you," Poppy said.

Severus nodded.

It was a perfect March afternoon, a brisk wind blowing, but the sun, bright, and the sky, brilliant blue. Severus arrived in the stands set aside for staff before Poppy did, and when Cahill tried to take the seat next to him, Severus gave him a Death Eater glare. The annoying man brushed at his mustache and tried to take the next seat down. Pomona was supposed to sit next to Poppy. Severus glared again. When the pedant tried to sit in the seat anyway, Severus stood over him and glared. He moved down one place. Filius might want to sit there. Severus lifted a lip in a snarl. Cahill got up and moved down two rows. That felt good. Unprofessional, but good.

In the end, he let Poppy have the end seat and sat between her and Pomona, since both witches wanted to hear his comments, and Filius sat next to Pomona, thanking Severus for saving them seats together. Severus had pointed out to Pomona the numerous weaknesses of the Hufflepuff team earlier that morning, leading her to complain that it seemed Severus thought the team could do nothing right. Severus hadn't responded to that. She grumbled that it seemed the only way they would win would be to completely replace all the players. As that was clearly not an option, she and Severus had decided on the worst and most easily remedied problems, and she had gone and had a long talk with the team captain.

Ten minutes into the game, Severus was groaning inwardly. Maintaining his outward calm, he turned to Pomona and asked, "Did you tell the captain that your Seeker pays too much attention to everything else going on and not enough on finding the Snitch?"

"Of course I did!"

"Well, either the message wasn't passed on or he is abysmal at following directions. He's been watching the Bludgers and the Beaters. At least he's ignoring the goal area," Severus said with ill-disguised sarcasm, "that's an improvement."

Severus believed that the only way for Hufflepuff to win would be if they caught the Snitch early in the game. Twenty minutes into the game, Hufflepuff requested a pause after both one of their Chasers and one of their Beaters crashed after running into each other, and the referee, Benetti, granted it. The two appeared to be fine and were dusting themselves off. Pomona waved to Stan Raffles, the team captain, and he flew over to her.

"Bobby's still not looking for the Snitch!" Pomona cried excitedly.

"Tell Pinter that the Beaters' job is to watch the Bludgers and the other Beaters," Severus added, "and if he trusts his teammates, he'll leave that job to them." Of course, Severus could easily understand why Pinter *didn't* trust his incompetent teammates, but that was beside the point.

Raffles, a sixth-year, looked at Snape sceptically, but Pomona said, "He's right...now go!"

They saw Raffles fly over to Bobby Pinter, a scrawny second-year, and speak to him. Seconds later, the referee declared the game in play again, and they zoomed back as the Quaffles and Bludgers were re-released from the referee's holding spell.

Severus shook his head. It was pitiful. Gryffindor, sixty-two, Hufflepuff, ten, and they were only twenty-one minutes into the game. Dennis Creevey scored another goal. Ginny Weasley was flying above the other players, always adjusting her level to accord with that, and whenever a Hufflepuff Beater managed either to direct a Bludger in her direction or, even more rarely, fly above the others, she would simply dive below them. At one point, with a slight sneer on her face, she even flew tauntingly in the shadow of one of the Hufflepuff Beaters for about thirty seconds before returning to her patrol seeking the Snitch. The sneer was the closest thing to a smile that Severus thought he'd seen on the girl's face since before the Dark Lord's defeat, though Hermione had recently said that she was adjusting and that he was simply unlikely to have seen her in any situation in which she would smile. But he had seen her at the last Gryffindor-Ravenclaw match, and even in victory, she had shouted with the others, holding the Snitch aloft as she made a quick circuit of the stadium, but Severus hadn't seen her smile.

Severus could understand why Bobby kept his eye on the Bludgers. The Hufflepuff Beaters were laughably bad. One of them almost fell off her broom when she swung her bat and missed a Bludger, and the other one, incredibly, had managed to hit the Bludger so that it impacted the tail of his own broom, sending him into a spiral dive he barely recovered from. The Hufflepuff Beaters certainly seemed to have no strategy except to find a Bludger and hit it in a random direction. Severus imagined that Poppy would be busy treating Bludger blows on the Hufflepuff team after the game. Bobby did manage to keep from being hit; even when one Bludger looked as though it would hit him square in side, he rolled away from it, making a three-hundred sixty degree rotation, the Bludger just skimming his arm and tearing his sleeve. Severus thought the boy wasn't a bad flyer, and in another year or two and on a more competent team, he might actually be pretty good. Hufflepuff had suffered a few losses of their older students in the attack on Hogwarts, ones who would now be in their seventh year, but so had Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Severus didn't know why the team was so poor, but he didn't think it was for lack of flyers to choose from.

Severus had been concentrating on the game, but when Gryffindor scored a goal, his eye went to the Gryffindor stands. Hermione had come to the game after all. She was standing and cheering, looking pink-cheeked and bright-eyed and utterly young and lovely. A pity he had wagered against Hermione's team, but it looked as though he was going to be wearing red teaching robes, and she could have a good laugh at his expense. He could tell her himself, playing up the humorous aspects and grumbling about it. Severus could almost hear her laughter. Momentarily distracted by his thoughts of Hermione, he looked around in confusion when there was a sudden roar, Poppy and Pomona jumped up, and the Hufflepuff section of the stands went wild as the Gryffindors, including Hermione, stood in stunned silence.

Severus looked up to see Bobby Pinter doing loops and flying widdershins around the stadium, his left hand held out, the Snitch fluttering in it. Severus stood and almost gaped. Poppy grabbed his right arm and jumped up and down, then Pomona reached across him to shake his hand and then Poppy's. The announcer could scarcely be heard over the pandemonium...Ravenclaw was almost as excited as Hufflepuff since they had lost their last game to Gryffindor, as well as because the Gryffindor loss pushed Ravenclaw closer to becoming the number one team. Severus was unsure of what the point totals for each team were at the moment, but not only had Gryffindor not caught the Snitch, losing them one hundred fifty potential points, the game had lasted only a little over a half an hour, so they hadn't racked up many points from their goals, either.

Poppy and Pomona tried to drag Severus down to the pitch with them and Flitwick, but he resisted, and began down on his own after the crowd had thinned some. He was just leaving the stadium when he heard Hermione's voice behind him.

"Severus!"

He turned and looked warmly at her, pleased that she had come to look for him after the game.

"Good afternoon, Hermione."

"Not very. Gryffindor lost," she replied sharply.

"That was unexpected. I had not anticipated that outcome," Severus replied.

"Ginny's upset," Hermione said.

"She's a good Seeker. This was just a fluke."

"I suppose, but I saw you sitting with Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout. Were you cheering for Hufflepuff?"

Severus snorted. "I do not 'cheer' anyone. Even the Slytherin team, although I might give them an encouraging shout now and then."

"But you wanted Hufflepuff to win?" Hermione asked, sounding put out.

"Yes, although I believed it highly improbable."

"Slytherin doesn't have a chance for the Quidditch Cup this year, so why would you care if Gryffindor loses? I thought you believed that there was too much inter-House rivalry. Do you really hate Gryffindor that much?"

"That is blowing things out of proportion, Hermione. It was only a Quidditch match. I had a wager with the Headmistress. I expected to lose, but I am not displeased that I did not."

"You helped them. I saw you speaking with Stan Raffles when he flew over to talk to Professor Sprout."

"Their Seeker was paying attention to everything but looking for the Snitch. We merely pointed that out to him. The team is so incompetent, I believed it was too little too late, but the only way they could win was if they caught the Snitch early enough in the game. Their Keeper and their Chasers are abysmal. Gryffindor could have won if the game had continued only another twenty or thirty minutes even if Pinter had still caught the Snitch."

"Ginny's very upset at losing to Hufflepuff...they're the worst team the school has seen in decades."

"Look, Hermione, Miss Weasley has survived far worse than losing a game to Hufflepuff. Pinter actually has a little potential, if he were on a team that wasn't so bad. He just got lucky and had a moment when he wasn't watching the Bludgers flying toward him and saw the Snitch before she did. He's a good flyer. There is no shame in losing to a good Seeker, even if his team is abysmal."

"I don't think she'll care about that," Hermione said, "and I doubt you ever said that to Malfoy when he lost to Harry."

"Not precisely, because the Gryffindor team was never as bad as Hufflepuff is this year, but I did try to encourage him to look at it as a challenge to be better than Potter. Potter was good; if he could beat him, he'd know he was, as well. His father didn't see it that way, so I doubt that Draco heard me. And his name is 'Newman,' not 'Malfoy.'"

"You actually said that Harry was good?"

"You'd have to be blind not to see that, though I certainly never would announce it over the wizarding wireless."

"I still can't believe you bet on Hufflepuff, especially if you didn't think they would win."

"The Headmistress was engaged in some unbecoming and premature gloating this morning. I was simply provoked."

Hermione shook her head and sighed. "I'm going to go see Ginny again, then it's back to multi-symbolic magical transmutations of simple Arithmantic equations."

"Enjoy the rest of the afternoon," Severus said, thinking that he was quite glad he was well past his own apprenticeship. Grading essays was sufficiently dull for him; he couldn't imagine having to do routine, repetitive exercises.

"You, too."

It was a pity about Ginny Weasley, Severus thought as he walked back up to the castle. Ever since she'd lost both her mother and her brother Percy, who had died saving her, the girl had lost a lot of her spark. Perhaps that was why Minerva was so ready to grant Potter permission to take her out for dinner...more for her sake than his. Still, it was only a lost Quidditch game. A disappointment, but a far cry from death on a battlefield.

NEXT

Chapter Forty-Eight: Normal Life

Saturday, 13 March 1999

During dinner in the Great Hall, Severus deals with a troublesome colleague in a novel manner. After dinner, he counsels a student.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Ginny Weasley, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Sarah Duffy

Chapter Forty-Nine: Normal Life

Chapter 50 of 118

Saturday, 13 March 1999. During dinner in the Great Hall, Severus deals with a troublesome colleague in a novel manner. After dinner, he counsels a student.



Chapter Forty-Nine: Normal Life

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Severus spent the rest of the afternoon preparing for the next week's classes. He was well-organised, so much of the preparation, that which could be done in advance, was usually done before the first of September, but that year had been different. Nonetheless, his preparations were minimal. After doing a very rapid rough inventory of ingredients to be certain that there were sufficient quantities on hand of what would be needed in that week's potions, Severus sat down with a stack of student parchments. Whatever people might think of his teaching methods or his dedication to teaching, Severus did try to design most of the students' assignments with the purpose of having them understand the material and successfully sit their OWLs and NEWTs, and he also tried to understand whatever it was that particular students were

weak in. When he'd been spying on the Dark Lord, he hadn't been able to devote as much time or mental energy to helping individual students overcome their weaknesses as he had earlier in his teaching career...although he still felt no inclination to help them if they were lazy dunderheads who just needed a swift kick...but now that he could begin focussing on his teaching again, he was putting more effort into helping the students whom he believed to be trying and who were not complete dunderheads.

Ginny Weasley was one of those who wasn't a dunce, but her performance had significantly declined that year. Even her essays were suffering, he thought, looking at the one in front of him. She had never been brilliant at Potions, and her essays had never stood out as exceptionally insightful, but this year, they had been barely adequate. Her brewing was even sloppy, and again, she had never been truly outstanding, but she had always been attentive and competent, doing well enough in her OWLs to enter NEWTs-level Potions, and well enough in class the previous year to continue with it. He had even changed her brewing partner after the Christmas holidays, placing her with a very careful and meticulous Ravenclaw, but rather than that improving her work, giving her a new level to strive toward, he found that Ginny gradually began to rely on him to do all the work.

Severus closed up his office to go up to the Great Hall. He was pleased that he and Poppy had been able to spend some collegial time together without jumping on each other...of course, they had been with other people almost all of the time, and that would hardly have been appropriate. He could scarcely suppress a smirk at the thought of them suddenly turning to each other in the middle of Pomona's sitting room and beginning to kiss and undress each other. Or at the Quidditch game. Still, they had avoided any temptations. He hadn't spoken to her about that yet, but he thought she must be agreed about the wisdom of abstaining from any further sexual relations, at least for the time-being. Certainly their imprudent behaviour the previous night should be enough to demonstrate to them both that they should exercise restraint.

He took his seat and began to eat quickly. He ate even more quickly when he saw Duffy speaking with Vector, who usually sat to his right. Vector nodded, agreeing to something. Severus hoped that it had something to do with some Hogwarts business, but those hopes were dashed as he saw Vector taking a seat toward the end of the table where Duffy usually sat, and Duffy continuing on down to sit beside him. He wished that Minerva weren't engrossed in conversation with Albus and Caspar Lloyd, the Ancient Runes teacher.

"Hi, Severus!" Duffy said cheerily as she sat down next to him.

"Professor Duffy," he said with a nod, but keeping his eyes on his plate and shovelling a forkful of diced turnips into his mouth. He didn't know how it was that when Poppy greeted him cheerfully, he didn't mind it...he even liked it...but when Duffy did, it grated on his nerves.

"You don't need to be so formal with me! It's Sarah!" she said.

Severus chewed his turnips until they were pureed, then he grunted an unintelligible response, by which he meant, "bugger off," and then he stabbed a piece of beef and put it in his mouth and chewed. Duffy was prattling on about the Quidditch game...she was a Hufflepuff, so she was thrilled they had won...and Severus was trying to ignore her and her high-pitched squeals of bethrillment, or whatever one could call it, when he suddenly felt a most alarming sensation. Someone's bare foot was creeping over his ankle. Good gods, did the witch have no sense whatsoever? Even with the long tablecloth on the table that night, it was possible for students to see their feet if they were sitting in just the right place. He shook off Duffy's foot, then he turned to her.

"I look forward to nights when they serve beef, don't you? It's never quite rare enough for me, though. I like mine with the blood still oozing. In fact, fresh cut from the animal is best...did you know that if the animal's heart is still beating when you . . . strip its flesh and eat it, the blood is so much tastier? Of course, that is a delicacy that has become rare in recent days. Haven't had a proper piece of raw meat for about a year, now. And forget blood pudding. Just drinking it . . . straight . . . from . . . the . . . jugular," Severus said slowly, eying Duffy's skinny neck, "*that* is the proper way to appreciate it."

Duffy turned green and leapt up, rushing toward the side chamber and slamming its door open, one hand over her mouth.

Minerva looked over at him. "Severus? What's wrong with Sarah?"

"I believe she discovered that our tastes are not compatible," Severus replied with a smirk.

"She looked as though she was going to be sick," Minerva said.

Severus just ate a carrot, but unable to suppress his sense of satisfaction.

"Sev-er-us!" Minerva said. "What did you do to Sarah?"

"I didn't *do* anything, Minerva," he replied. He lowered his voice. "It is what she did to me. She was trying to play footsie with me under the table."

"That *is* inappropriate . . . unless certain precautions have been taken," Minerva said. "So what did you say to her? Did you threaten her that if she tried it again you would do something hideous to her?"

Severus shook his head. "No . . . I merely expressed my opinion of the beef being served. Vegetarians...they're all hypersensitive aesthetes, you know."

"I've never seen her bothered by others eating meat before this."

"I may have been a bit descriptive about my preferences. And exaggerated a little," Severus said. He looked at Minerva, an undisguised expression of satisfaction on his face. "But if she comes to you suggesting that I might have peculiar proclivities, you will know why."

"What did you say?" Minerva asked curiously.

"I rather implied that I like to eat animals alive and drink fresh blood. The thought of which would also put me off my meal if I actually let myself consider it very long." Severus took a drink of water.

"Oh, Severus," Minerva moaned. "Why? You need to be careful about what you say to people."

"She is lucky I only disgusted her. Her physical assault on me could have provoked far worse."

"Hmpf. I will speak to her. I will explain that you have a peculiar sense of humour. I will also explain to her about etiquette in the Great Hall when there are students present."

"Yes, do. I doubt she'll be putting her feet or hands anywhere on me again, but you might save some other hapless soul," Severus said.

"She isn't that bad, Severus."

"That's what people tell me, but I would prefer she expended her energy on a different wizard. And she is old enough to know better than to try to play footsie in the Great Hall, particularly with me."

Minerva rose. "I had better find her before she starts telling people that you're a cannibal or something," she said with a sigh.

"I'm sorry, Minerva," Severus said.

"Just be careful, Severus. Duffy was well-disposed to you, though I doubt she is any longer, but there are still some who aren't. It may not be right, but you need to be careful about whom you joke with...or torment."

Severus nodded, trying to feel more contrite than he did.

After Minerva had left, Albus leaned over. "So, you are now having to beat off the ladies, eh, Severus?"

"Hardly," Severus said drily. "Duffy is simply desperate, and she apparently misunderstood my attempt a few days ago to determine whether she was so cheerful because she was indulging in recreational potions."

"I don't know, Severus," Albus said, moving over into Minerva's chair, which Severus hadn't ever seen him do since he returned from the dead. "There are probably a good many wizards who would find her quite attractive."

"Let her play footsie with them, then," Severus said under his breath.

"Oh, so she is that enamoured of you!"

"No, she is that foolish."

"Well, if not her, then someone else. Hermione, perhaps?"

"We are friends only," Severus said, wishing they hadn't served rhubarb pie that evening, which was one of the few desserts he hated to miss.

"Minerva and I were friends for years before we became a couple. A friendship is a marvellous basis for a strong, solid relationship."

"From what I know, Minerva hadn't been your student for well over a decade at that point. Miss Granger was my student only last year. Some might say it is even premature to form a friendship with her."

"But you are not saying you would not want to."

"In some completely hypothetical world, I might, and there is absolutely no hypothetical world in which I would want to be in a relationship with Duffy; neither of which means, however, that in the real world, I want to embark on such a thing with Miss Granger at this time. And I do not wish to discuss the topic beyond that," Severus said, putting a piece of pie in his mouth. Mmmm . . . nicely sour.

"Very well, but there are other lovely witches in the world..."

"Who are crackers enough to want to be associated with a Death Eater?" Severus asked crossly.

"Some very nice witches who would enjoy spending time with you, Severus."

"That is probably a minuscule number."

"What about Sharon Carter? She is quite nice, and only about ten years younger than you are."

"She was a poor Potions student. I was surprised when she scraped an Acceptable on her OWL," Severus said.

"That isn't everything. She's really quite bright. And very pretty...that lovely blond hair and those dark eyes," Albus said.

Severus shrugged. "She's all right, but I doubt we have anything in common. Outside of staff meetings, we never speak."

"We could change that!"

"Not interested. Doubt she is either," Severus said, trying not to rush eating his pie. It was the best thing the Hogwarts elves made, in his opinion.

"What about someone you've known better a little longer, then? Madam Rosmerta, for example. She's quite vivacious and, um, womanly," Albus said. "I'm sure I could arrange a little social occasion for the two of you to become better acquainted."

"Not a shred of interest on either of our parts, I'm sure." Certainly not on his. He couldn't imagine why Dumbledore would want to fix him up with the landlady of a public house, no matter how "womanly" she was. "We've nothing in common, other than that she serves food and drink and I occasionally eat what she serves."

"Well, then . . . Verity Vector. She's intelligent and well-read. You've known her for a long time and get along with her quite well."

"Septima and I get along because we rarely speak to each other, though she is pleasant enough. Besides, she was my teacher," Severus said. He looked up at him. "You know, I really do not desire to be set up with anyone, Albus. I appreciate that you are trying to assist me in my social life, but if you were anyone else, I would have simply picked up my pie and left to find somewhere to eat it in peace."

Albus looked disappointed, but he nodded. "Very well." He was quiet for a minute. "I was happy to see you at Filius's party last night."

Severus nodded. He was almost to the point of his slice of pie. He always started his pie at the edge crust and worked his way toward the point. That was the best bit.

"It's good to get out and socialise with your colleagues, see them under more relaxed circumstances."

"Mhm," Severus said. Only the point left.

"Did you enjoy yourself? I was glad to see that Poppy was keeping you company. She seemed to be having a good time."

At the mention of Poppy's name, Severus almost swallowed his last piece of pie without tasting it. "It was fine. The drinks were peculiar, and Cahill was there, so it was not uniformly enjoyable. I did escape before Duffy saw me, though."

"Simply escaping the clutches of a witch you're not interested in should not be the highpoint of your evening, Severus."

"Believe me, it was not." Severus stood up. "Now if you will excuse me, I have things to attend to."

Severus didn't see the broad smile on Albus's face as the old wizard watched him stride out of the Great Hall.

Severus stepped into the entrance hall just in time to see Ginny Weasley disappearing out the front doors. Curious, he pushed open one of the doors and watched Ginny, alone, heading around the castle. Severus followed her out. She was headed toward the Quidditch stadium. In no hurry, he followed. She didn't stop at the broom shed, but went straight into the stadium.

When Severus walked in, he looked around for her. She was just sitting down in one of the lower rows in the Gryffindor stands. She didn't appear to notice him, though he didn't see how she could have failed to at that point.

Severus climbed up to the Gryffindor section of the stands. Ginny didn't look in his direction until he was standing beside her.

"Miss Weasley."

"Professor Snape. I'm not doing anything wrong," she said somewhat defiantly.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Have I implied that you were?"

"You are standing over me in an empty Quidditch stadium. The implication lies in the fact, not in your words," she replied, turning back to look out over the stadium.

Severus made his way into the row behind her, then stepped down to stand on her other side. She made no acknowledgment of his presence, and he sat down next to her. He didn't say anything; he simply sat, looking out.

After five minutes, Ginny turned her head slightly toward him. "What are you doing here, Professor Snape, if you aren't here to take points or give me detention?"

"I am sitting and looking and thinking," Severus replied. "Good view from here."

"It's better a few rows up."

Severus nodded. A few minutes later, he said, "I was at the game today. You played well."

"We lost."

"You played well."

"Not well enough."

"Are you contradicting me, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny was silent.

"Hufflepuff has a truly abysmal team this year," Severus said a few minutes later. "I don't remember a worse team in all my years as a student or as a teacher."

"Thanks for pointing that out," Ginny said with some sarcasm.

"You are rather disrespectful of your elders today, Miss Weasley."

"I apologise," she said flatly.

"I feel sorry for Pinter," Severus said after a minute.

Ginny let out a short laugh. "He won the game."

"By a complete fluke. You are the better Seeker and are on a significantly better team."

"That just makes it worse. So why do you feel sorry for him?"

"The boy is only a second-year, but it looks as though he has some flying ability."

"That's no reason to feel sorry for him," Ginny said disdainfully.

"He's also on the worst Hogwarts Quidditch team in decades. You have a lot of talent, Miss Weasley," Severus said slowly. "Imagine that you are made Seeker of your team when you are a second-year, and that team is the worst team in memory...Professor Dumbledore doesn't even remember a worse team, and he has been on the staff of Hogwarts for more than sixty years. You are Seeker on your team, but you can't concentrate on playing Seeker because your Beaters are incompetent, so you spend all of your time trying to avoid being hit by Bludgers...or even by your own hapless teammates, as they seem to have a talent for running into each other. You're twelve years old, a Seeker with potential, and you're playing on the worst Quidditch team imaginable, one so bad that people come to watch your team play for the comedic value."

Ginny sat silently for a moment, then she said, "I still don't feel sorry for him."

"I understand that," Severus replied. "It is hard to feel sorry for someone else when you're feeling sorry for yourself."

Ginny straightened, her face flushing. "I do not feel sorry for myself!"

"That is good."

The two sat a while longer, and the sky grew darker.

"Why was it important for you to win this game?" Severus asked.

"It's always important to win. That's why you play the game. If you don't want to win, there's no point in playing."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Winning is always good," Ginny said.

"I was speaking of playing the game. Do you enjoy playing?"

Ginny shrugged.

"If you don't enjoy it, you don't have to play. This is only Quidditch."

"I don't enjoy anything anymore," Ginny said sullenly.

"There are some things that we must do whether we enjoy them or not. Quidditch is not one of them. On the other hand, I understand that it can be quite a positive thing to do something that we do not want to do and are not required to do, but which we do for the sake of others. There are also benefits, I am told, to affirming social bonds by doing things with others even when they are not things we would ordinarily choose to do."

Ginny just looked out over the dark pitch.

"Why are you playing Quidditch?"

"It's what I do. My team counts on me. My father wants to see me having a normal life." She shrugged. "This is normal."

"Normal. I have never had a normal life, Miss Weasley. Tell me what that is."

"Why are you doing this?" Ginny asked angrily. "Why don't you just go away?"

"Because, Miss Weasley, you are not having a normal life. You are miserable."

"It can never be normal again. Nobody understands that. It's just . . ."

"It can never be the way it was. It is pointless to even pretend it could be. Completely futile," Severus agreed with a nod.

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"No, Miss Weasley, it's intended to make you think. You are not a complete dunderhead."

"I can't think," Ginny said. "I just feel . . . dull."

"You can think. It simply will require more energy. Pull yourself together! Concentrate!"

"I don't even remember what you said."

"Then that is your first task."

Ginny thought a moment, then said, "You said that..."

"Good, you remember," Severus said, interrupting. "Now think about why I said what I did."

"Because you take sadistic pleasure in tormenting your students," Ginny grumbled.

"That is a mere side benefit," Severus said, amused.

Ginny thought. "I suppose I am thinking that the way things were is normal life. And now I'm trying to have a normal life, but nothing is the way it was. It seems like a parody of normal life to me. So . . . maybe my idea of a normal life needs to change. But I don't know how." She sighed. "And I don't want to disappoint my father. Or anyone else."

"Your father, I am sure, wants you to be happy. He would not want you to feel as though your life was a parody. If playing Quidditch used to be enjoyable and is no longer, find something that is. And if you can't find it, then have others help you. You have a loving family. You don't need to be alone."

Ginny swallowed and look down. "It's not just that . . . it's . . . what I . . . Professor Snape, why did you become a Death Eater?"

Severus went completely still. He paused. "What is it that you want to know?"

"Did you become a Death Eater because of Voldemort?"

"There would have been no Death Eaters, at least by that name, if there had been no Dark Lord," Severus replied.

"What was he like?"

"He was brilliant, powerful, ruthless, sadistic, completely without any compassion for others, and with no compunction to destroy anything or anyone to get what he wanted, which was just more power. He demanded not just loyalty, but adulation. I believe that if he had not been defeated, if he had taken over the wizarding world, he would have eventually fashioned himself as a god to be worshipped. He sought immortality. He feared losing any power, which he believed death would strip him of. He was brilliant and utterly evil."

"Why did anyone join him if he was so evil, if he had no compassion?" Ginny asked.

"Many people believed that joining him would give them power. Some people were simply afraid not to. He was also charismatic, particularly in the early days, I understand. He had no compassion, but he did know how to play on others' desires and fears. He could make some of them feel quite . . . special. Important to him. He had a kind of charm. But he only exercised that charm as long as it was in his interest. He could become a raving lunatic at the slightest provocation. If you were no longer an asset to him, you would be lucky just to be ignored by him. If not"...Severus shrugged..."a swift death might be the next best thing."

Ginny hesitated. "Did you . . . did you feel bad about . . . about him dying or about betraying him?"

"No. No, I did not. He deserved no loyalty. He murdered and caused terrible suffering and encouraged others to do the same. He brought out the worst in anyone who followed him. He was like a plague. You do not weep for the death of a plague. He chose all that he did, including attacking Hogwarts and confronting Potter. I have had moments when I felt it was unfortunate that I also had to betray the few friends I had once had when I was young, but they were scarcely the kinds of friends whom one should remain loyal to."

Sitting in the dark, Severus could hear Ginny let out a sigh.

"I still have dreams," she whispered. "Dreams that become nightmares. He was so charming, so understanding. I thought he cared about me. But then awful things began to happen to me and I didn't remember them. I dream about him now, and then it becomes a nightmare. It is all mixed up in my nightmare. I dream that he killed Percy, and then I dream that I killed Percy, like I did the chickens, and I dream that I killed Tom. Not in the battle, and not like he was then, but like young Tom Riddle. I dream that I turn my back on him and it kills him. Sometimes, he turns into Harry before he dies, or Harry turns into him. He always dies, though. I can hear him crying, begging me not to kill him, not to let him die. It is never exactly the same dream, but that part is always the same. I feel bad for letting him die, but then I feel worse that I feel bad. And when I wake up, I feel sick. I don't want him to be alive, I'm not sad that he's dead, so I don't understand why I feel this way in my dreams, or why I even have nightmares about him dying like that."

"Have you had these nightmares ever since the diary was destroyed?" Severus asked.

"I had different nightmares then, but they went away. These started after . . . after he was killed."

Severus paused, then he said, "A lot of people died, Ginny. You saw them die. You saw your brother die before your eyes, saving your life. Your mother was killed. Friends were killed and wounded, teachers . . . I have no doubt that you know that you were not responsible for the bad things that happened after the Chamber of Secrets was opened. You didn't choose to follow the Dark Lord, and not even because you were fooled by him, since you did not know who he was at the time; he simply used you to obtain what he wanted for himself. To him, you were an object to be used. And I am sure you know all of that. But the last several years have not been normal, to say the least. They have been filled with violence, death, pain, fear, destruction . . . you have been involved in it all and deeply affected by it. It is unsurprising to me that you are having nightmares and that you have conflicted feelings and a sense of guilt. You can't go back to the way things were because everything has changed for you, and the way things were . . . that wasn't normal. That was some attempt at normal in very abnormal times. You can create a new normal for yourself, but I think you need to talk to someone about how you feel. You don't need to be alone."

Ginny stared out into the darkness for a while, then she said softly, "Is that why you are here?"

"I have had concerns about you," Severus said ambivalently.

"What do you want?"

Severus looked over at her, her fiery hair lost in the shadows of the night, but her skin still the milky white of the moon.

"I do not know what you mean."

"From me," Ginny whispered. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing...although if you could expend more effort on your Potions work, that would benefit us both."

"You don't want something else from me?" Ginny asked. "You are a Slytherin. You must want something."

"It is unfortunate that Slytherins are believed to have no motivations but those that will bring them some material gain."

"I could still give you something," Ginny said.

Severus felt Ginny's hand on his knee. He picked it up and placed it in her lap. "You need to return to the castle, Miss Weasley. It is very late and it's becoming too cold to be out here."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to right now. You can think about it some other time," Severus said gently. "Come, I will escort you. I was serious when I said that you need to talk to someone. I think I know someone who would be happy to listen."

"I could talk to you."

"I am not an appropriate person to talk to."

"You understood."

"Miss Weasley . . . I am not an appropriate person for you to talk to now. I know someone who I believe would be better. Let's go back to the castle."

Ginny got up and followed him down, out of the stadium, and back to the castle.

"I don't want to talk to Professor Carter," Ginny said as they walked. "I know she's my Head of House, but I don't know her and I don't feel anything for her at all."

"I was not going to suggest Professor Carter," Severus replied.

"It would be weird to talk to Professor McGonagall. She tried to talk to me before, in my second year, and I never knew what she wanted me to say."

"She probably just wanted you to talk about how you were feeling."

"I think I could talk to you," Ginny said.

Severus thought a moment. "We could all meet sometime, the three of us, if you would still like that in a few weeks."

"It's because I touched you, isn't it?" Ginny asked in a whisper. "That's why you don't want to talk to me."

"Not precisely."

They entered the castle and Severus started up the stairs with Ginny.

"You aren't going to Slytherin?"

"Not yet. I thought we could go to the Hospital Wing together."

"I'm not sick," Ginny said.

"I know you aren't. But Madam Pomfrey is a very good listener and a very compassionate witch. She is not just a school matron. She is a warm and understanding person. Don't think of her as the school's mediwitch."

"What should I think of her as, then?"

"You can decide that."

They approached the infirmary.

"Wait here for me," Severus said. "I'm just going to see if Madam Pomfrey is in her quarters."

Severus left Ginny to watch from a few yards away as he spoke with Poppy's door portrait. A moment later, the door opened.

"Severus!" Poppy seemed delighted to see him.

"I have brought someone with me," Severus said softly.

Poppy looked around him and saw Ginny standing nervously in the corridor.

"I think that she could benefit from some . . . counselling," Severus said. "We talked for a while, and I will tell you about that more fully later, but she is plagued by nightmares, grief, and guilt, and I believe that she may be . . . fragile. I told her I was bringing her to you not in your capacity as the school matron but as someone who is a good listener. I was afraid that if I waited, I would not be able to get her to come see you. I don't know as she needs anything more than to have someone who will listen to her, but if she does, I have faith that you will know how to handle it."

Poppy smiled and nodded. "Ginny!" she called out. "Come in and join me for a cup of tea."

"Curfew..." Ginny began.

"If we talk too long, I will see you back to the Tower so that there will be no questions," Poppy said.

Ginny nodded and followed the mediwitch into the sitting room.

NEXT

Chapter Fifty: A New Project

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Severus comes up with an idea, which he shares with Minerva. Minerva then assigns Severus a new project to work on...with Poppy.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Fifty: A New Project

Chapter 51 of 118

Saturday, 13 March 1999. Severus comes up with an idea, which he shares with Minerva. Minerva then assigns Severus a new project to work on—with Poppy.

Rated for sexually explicit content beginning approximately halfway through the chapter.



Chapter Fifty: A New Project

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Severus left the two witches and made a pass through the castle, beginning on the seventh floor and working his way down. There were students out, but none were doing anything objectionable, so Severus merely reminded them of the approaching curfew and suggested that they might prefer their common rooms. He could tell that each student he encountered was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for him to find fault and take points, but speaking with Ginny had saddened him. There was no satisfaction to be had in taking points and getting the students to jump. He doubted that there was a single student at Hogwarts, save perhaps some Muggle-born first-years with no wizarding relatives, who had been unaffected by the events of the last several years. Most of them not to the extent that Ginny Weasley had, but none were untouched. And who was to weigh and measure the suffering of any one of them, quantifying it in some way? A person's suffering was their own.

When he reached the second floor, he went to the Headmistress's gargoyle and rode the stairs up. He had a vague idea in the back of his mind, and he wanted to discuss it with Minerva. He opened the door at the top of the stairs and stepped into Minerva's office just as she was coming down the stairs from her suite.

"Severus! I didn't expect you...or anyone...tonight." Minerva was dressed in a long green silk dressing gown.

"I am sorry, Minerva. I had something I wanted to discuss with you, but I see that you have retired for the evening."

"It's all right...it's not terribly late...but why don't you come on up? We can chat in the sitting room."

Severus hesitated, but then nodded and followed Minerva up the stairs.

"If this is about the bet..."

"No, not at all. It's almost entirely unrelated," Severus said.

"Almost unrelated?"

"Only tangentially so," Severus said as they entered the sitting room.

Albus was there, his feet up, also in his dressing gown. Severus didn't think he had anything on under it. Then he looked at Minerva again, and he got the same impression.

"I can wait until tomorrow," Severus said. "I don't want to interrupt your evening."

"Nonsense, although if you could give us a moment?"

"Of course."

Albus had already slipped into the bedroom, and Minerva joined him. They both came back out a minute later, and Severus was pleased to see that they both appeared to be wearing more layers.

"So, what brings you to see me?" Minerva asked.

"I just had a conversation with Miss Weasley," Severus said. He recounted their conversation to the two, and his belief that she would benefit from some counselling. "I brought her directly to Poppy. For many reasons, I do not believe that I am an appropriate person for her to talk to, but I thought that Poppy might be able to help her."

"How did you come to speak with her in the first place, Severus?"

"As I said, I saw her leaving the castle and followed her out."

"But why? I am very glad you did, of course..."

"I have seen that she has changed. Hermione told me that she was very upset today about the Quidditch match." Severus shrugged. "I thought I might be able to help her see that the loss today was no reflection on her abilities and perhaps find out what else was bothering her. Her work in Potions has become rather slapdash."

"I am glad that you brought her to see Poppy." Minerva sighed. "I did try to speak with her during her second year, but she would sit and nibble a biscuit and barely say a

word. I should have had her talk to someone else when she wouldn't talk to me."

"She mentioned that. She said that she never knew what you wanted her to say. I think she was concerned about your expectations of her. She was probably also still embarrassed, perhaps feeling guilty about what happened."

"Thank you for letting me know, Severus," Minerva said.

"I told you about Miss Weasley primarily to explain the origin of my idea. It's not even an idea, just the beginnings of one," Severus said. At Minerva's nod, Severus continued, "There are many students who have suffered, not only Miss Weasley. I doubt very much that she is the only one suffering from nightmares or from feelings of guilt and grief. I think we should try to help them. It probably would have been best to have done something directly after the events of last May, but I don't believe it's too late to do something now."

"What did you have in mind?" Minerva asked.

"Nothing terribly specific," Severus said, "but I thought that perhaps some of the other staff might be enlisted to help. Not to be formal counsellors, but to be available to students just to listen to them, then if a student needed more, it could be a way of getting them to see someone with more training. I am sure that some students have talked to their Heads of House or other teachers they might trust, but I think that if we made some kind of formal announcement that certain staff members were available to talk with about any troubles they might have...whether relating to the war or not...and made it an explicit option, more students might do that. I also thought that...and this is something that I would never have participated in myself and would dislike even now, but I recognise some students might benefit from it...perhaps we could have discussion groups. Not therapy, just an informal but organised opportunity for students to meet in small groups and share their thoughts and feelings. If we did that, more students might decide that they would like to talk to someone individually. They would see that they aren't the only ones who are still affected by the war, and it might make it acceptable to talk to one of the volunteer staff members."

"That is an excellent idea!" Albus exclaimed. "We should have done something like this much earlier."

"Yes, I like it, as well," Minerva agreed. "Of course we will have to think about how to implement it, consult professionals..."

"I don't think it should wait very long, though, Minerva," Severus said. "I also think that one reason we haven't done anything like this before now is that we have all been affected, too, and we've all tried just to carry on, but as I told Miss Weasley, nothing is the same as it was, and there's no point in pretending it is, and what we have lived through over the last several years was not normal anyway, particularly for certain people who were more affected than others. I think that if we offer something like this to the students, we should have the volunteer staff members speak with a professional counsellor, and not only in order to learn how to provide support to the students, but to help them. It wouldn't do for a staff member to become so distressed by their own experiences when talking about the war that they were unable to help the student...although I suppose from a theoretical perspective, it would not be a bad thing for a student to know that the person they are talking to also suffered. They shouldn't become debilitated by it, though."

"I think you should be in charge of this project, Severus..." Minerva began.

"No, no. I just had the idea," Severus protested. "I have no experience in this. I'm an emotional cripple, myself. I wouldn't have a clue. And if I were involved, there are many students...maybe most of them...who would avoid participating even if they would otherwise want to."

"I think you should take it on with Poppy," Albus suggested. "You two could work together. She has the experience you lack, and you can help her to implement the programme whilst she could be the public face for it, as it is unfortunately probably true what you say about students avoiding it if they saw you as the one in charge. They may respect you, but you have never endeared yourself to most of them, I'm afraid."

"I don't know," Severus said, although he liked the idea of working with Poppy.

"It's decided, Severus," Minerva said. "You should speak to Poppy tomorrow about working with her on this."

Severus nodded, resigned but also looking forward to having a project with Poppy. As her colleague, of course. Just two colleagues working together. He hoped it wouldn't be too difficult to maintain their professionalism with each other.

"I'm very pleased, my boy," Albus said, beaming at him. "Very pleased, indeed. I am glad that you thought of this."

He avoided Albus's eyes, looking instead toward Minerva. "I have recently discovered the value in talking to someone trustworthy about even very private matters. It is something I have never been inclined to do before, except when . . . except when forced . . . as a spy . . . or as punishment. It seemed punishment to me, having to reveal difficult experiences. I resisted speaking of such things to anyone else, and even if I had been so inclined . . ." Severus sighed and shook his head. "Even if I had been, I was in no position to do that until recently. I still do not find it easy. I doubt that I ever will. But I recognise that it can be a good thing for me, and not merely more pain, more punishment."

They spoke for a few more minutes, then as Minerva was showing Severus out, he asked, "Do you believe that it would be appropriate for me to write to Arthur and tell him about my conversation with his daughter?"

"Why don't you talk to him?" Minerva suggested. "Owl him and see if he can meet you. You needn't go into detail about precisely what Ginny told you, but you could express your concerns and tell him he might want to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her."

Severus nodded. He had always respected Arthur Weasley, and the man had always been fair to him.

When they reached Minerva's office, Severus said, "I didn't want to mention this in front of Albus, Minerva, but one reason that I believed that it would be inappropriate for Miss Weasley to talk to me, despite her expressed wish to do that, is that she . . ." He had no idea how to express the sense he had received from her.

"She what?" Minerva asked.

"I may have misinterpreted her action, of course, and I feel it indelicate to mention it, though I will tell Poppy tomorrow, but Miss Weasley asked me what I wanted from her, as though I was expecting some kind of payment for having sat and talked with her." Severus stopped, hesitating.

"Yes?"

"I told her, of course, that I wanted nothing from her...I believe I said that it was unfortunate that people believe a Slytherin can be motivated only by the promise of material gain." Severus felt even more uneasy, but he continued. "I may be misinterpreting her action, as I said, and it may have meant nothing, but Miss Weasley said that she could still give me something, and then she put her hand on my knee. She may not have meant anything in particular by it, but it made me uncomfortable. I told her it was time to go back into the castle and brought her to Poppy."

"She was grateful, Severus, and likely confused. You spoke bluntly, listened to her, but didn't coddle her. You helped her. She probably felt a surge of affection for you. That, combined with her own sense of need, probably led her to do what she did. I think you handled it very well and with great sensitivity."

Severus snorted. "I don't see that I was particularly sensitive at that moment, but I did not want to make things worse for her."

"And now I am feeling a surge of affection for you," Minerva said. "Give me a hug, Severus."

Severus patted Minerva's shoulder awkwardly as she embraced him hard.

Minerva stepped back and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "It was difficult, but it was all worth it, especially to see you here now. I am so pleased that you lived and that you didn't lock yourself away somewhere to rot after it was over."

"It's still difficult, Minerva," Severus said softly. "I don't think it will ever really be over for me, but I think I'm learning to live with it."

"It will keep getting easier," Minerva replied.

He nodded. "I didn't believe that it would, but I see that it is, and it isn't simply that I've learned to bear it better, which was all I had hoped for. Things can become confusing and uncomfortable, but that is something that I will learn to cope with. I don't know what to do much of the time when I feel uncomfortable, but I am trying not to simply respond with anger, which has always been the easiest thing for me to do when I didn't know how else to react."

"That will improve, too. I am proud of you, you know."

"I realise," he said softly, "that I could not do it without the help and friendship I have found in some very unexpected places. I suppose I was also somewhat aware of that when I followed Miss Weasley out to the Quidditch stadium, some sense that I might not be very good at helping anyone, but I was there and I could try. And I could relate to some of her feelings and knew that I wouldn't want to be coddled if I were she."

"You did a good thing tonight, Severus."

He shrugged. "Perhaps something small, but I also remember that I interrupted your evening with Albus, so I will say good-night now and leave you to continue it."

"Good night, Severus...we love you, you know. Albus, too."

Severus swallowed past a lump in his throat and jerked a nod, then opened the door and left quickly.

Severus heard someone on the stairs above him. He stopped to listen. It was now past curfew; there shouldn't be any students out. The footsteps came closer, and Severus believed he recognised them. When he saw Poppy, his eyes lit up.

"Poppy!"

Poppy smiled happily and trotted down the stairs to him. "Let's find somewhere to talk."

He nodded. "I thought we should speak, as well."

They both stood there a moment just looking at each other, then Severus said, "The staff room is closest."

Poppy indicated her agreement by starting down the stairs with him. Once in the staff room, Poppy closed the door behind them.

"You did a good thing bringing Miss Weasley to me tonight," she said.

"I thought you might be able to help her. Did she tell you what we talked about?" Severus asked.

"A little. I'd like to know more, though."

Pacing in front of the fireplace, Severus summarised his conversation with Ginny and his visit to the Headmistress after he had left her with Poppy, this time not omitting Ginny's offer to give him something and placing her hand on his knee.

"I agree with Minerva," Poppy said. "I think she was just confused, grateful, and needy. I don't think you need to worry about that. You handled it very well."

"I actually don't think I handled it at all. I essentially ignored it. I thought if she hadn't meant it sexually, and I said something about it, it would be tremendously awkward and offensive, but if she had meant it sexually...I had no idea what to say. I didn't want to get into it and have her feel rejected and embarrassed. It is disturbing to me that she would think I would want to exploit her in that way, but she probably didn't realise that was what she was doing."

"You were fine, Severus. You were gentle and you redirected her, which may have been the best you could have done in that moment."

"Do you mind working with me on this project?" Severus asked.

"Of course not! It makes perfect sense for me to work on it, since in addition to being the wonderful witch you told Ginny I was, I am still the school matron," Poppy replied with a smile.

Severus went slightly pink. "I don't know as I said precisely that you were wonderful...you are, of course...but I told her that you were very understanding. That wasn't what I meant though. I didn't mean to ask whether you minded working on the project, but whether you minded working with me. Someone else might be..."

"Why would I mind? Not only are you the Deputy Headmaster, but it was your idea and you did well with Ginny."

"I thought . . . never mind," Severus said.

Poppy's brow furrowed. "Do you not want to work with me?"

"I do, yes. I just wanted to be certain you would not find it uncomfortable."

"Do *you* find it uncomfortable?" Poppy asked.

"Slightly. I find that I must remind myself that we are colleagues." He swallowed. "And that we must avoid temptation. That gives me some discomfort, but I am certain it will be easily overcome."

"We can overcome it quite easily at the moment by tabling our discussion until another time, one more suitable for working together as colleagues," Poppy said.

"It is very late," Severus agreed. "Perhaps we could discuss this idea tomorrow."

"I think that is an excellent idea, Severus." Her eyes looked him up and down. "And right now . . . we could try tabling our temptation in a different way."

Poppy stepped toward him and placed her palms on his chest, rubbing his pectorals lightly as she looked up into his eyes. She stepped forward again, pushing him gently backward.

"Would you like to table our temptation, Severus?" she asked huskily, stepping forward again. "I can think of a very good way to table our temptation."

"We shouldn't. Last night . . . we could have been seen. You could have been compromised," Severus said, though he continued to back toward the table.

"We were a bit impulsive," Poppy admitted, speaking slowly and deliberately. "You were certainly very *impulsive* on the stairs." She ran her hands down over Severus's chest, then she began to unbutton his frockcoat starting from the bottom. "Now that Binns is no longer among us, sleeping in front of the fireplace, we are in no danger of

being disturbed this late at night." She began to unbutton his waistcoat. "And you know a few handy spells, I am sure, that would discourage anyone who might be passing from opening the door and that would provide us with, how shall I put it?" she asked as she began unbuttoning his shirt. "Some acoustic privacy?"

Severus took his wand out, then he cast a series of spells on the door and placed his wand on the table behind him. As Poppy began to unbutton his trousers, Severus found the hooks at the front of the waist of Poppy's bright blue over-robe and unhooked them all quickly, then he pulled at the lacing at the bodice of her deep yellow under-robe, loosening it, tugging until he felt her Support Charm release. Just as he did that, Poppy had finished unbuttoning his braces from the front of his trousers. She pushed him against the end of the table, and Severus slid back to sit on it.

Poppy drew her wand and cast a spell, removing his boots and socks.

"Impatient?" Severus whispered.

"All those buttons, all those layers," Poppy said softly as she picked up his right hand and found his cufflink. "It seemed . . . efficient."

She reached for his left wrist and removed that cufflink, as well, then she ran her hands up under his shirt and pushed it, his waistcoat, and his frockcoat off.

"As Deputy Headmaster, it is my duty to point out that this is not an appropriate use of the staff room or this table," Severus said.

"Noted," Poppy said as she pulled his undershirt up.

Severus finished pulling his undershirt off. Poppy looked at him and smoothed her hands over his chest.

"Very nice," she whispered. "Worth getting through all those layers. I believe you have put on a little weight just in the last week. You feel nicely solid."

"Is that your professional opinion, Madam Pomfrey?"

"My professional opinion . . . is that you are feeling quite healthy. My personal opinion is that you feel . . . quite sexy."

"I think I prefer your personal opinion," Severus said as he began to push Poppy's bodice down. "And in my personal opinion, you have extremely sexy breasts." He watched himself fondle them, and his dark eyes grew even darker.

Poppy shrugged off her over-robe, letting it fall to the floor, then she stepped back and pulled her under-robe off over her head. His lips parted, Severus watched her, and when she pulled her knickers down and stepped out of them and her shoes, he licked his lips. Now wearing only her Charmed silk stockings, Poppy stepped towards him again.

"Lie back," she whispered.

Severus hesitated, taking a moment to gaze at her body, her full breasts with their darkly rosy nipples, her rounded hips, the slight feminine curve to her tummy below her navel, and the womanly thatch of curly hair that he knew led to delectable secret places. He lay back and closed his eyes, feeling Poppy pull his trousers off of him and then remove his pants as he raised his hips.

Poppy lifted his dangling legs and helped him slide back to lie lengthwise on the table. She pulled out a chair, stepped up on it, then joined Severus on the table, kneeling and straddling his abdomen.

Severus reached for her, pulling her closer, bringing her right breast to his mouth. His tongue flicked her nipple, then flicked it again before he kissed it. He opened his mouth and took as much of her breast into it as he could, then he slipped his lips down to close around her nipple. He began to fondle her left breast with one hand as he sucked at her right, Poppy's arms supporting her on either side of his head. Poppy gasped when Severus's left hand met her crux and he parted her folds. One finger began to slide back and forth over her clitoris.

"Oh, gods, Severus," Poppy moaned. "I need more."

Severus kissed her breast, then whispered, "Slide up here, let me use my tongue on you. Sit on my face and let me eat your pussy."

Poppy did as he asked, and he took hold of her buttocks as she lowered herself over his mouth.

Gasping as he licked her, Poppy said, "I should turn around..."

Severus shook his head, eliciting a moan at the sensation, and he gripped her harder. Poppy bent over to brace herself on her arms. She moaned more loudly. The stimulation from his tongue and lips on her clitoris was exquisite.

"Oh, gods, so good, so good," Poppy gasped, "so good, Severus, so good!"

Her arms and legs shook as her orgasm ignited. Severus continued to lick and flick and rub his face against her, carrying her through a long, pulsing orgasm as she wriggled against him. As she peaked, she let out a strangled cry of ecstasy.

Panting and catching her breath, Poppy felt Severus's hands pressing lightly on her thighs, and she moved back off of him.

"Sorry," she said breathlessly. "I hope you could breathe."

"I could," Severus said. He embraced her, pulling her down on top of him. "I enjoyed that very much." He caressed her cheek. "You could kiss me and have a taste," he whispered.

Poppy kissed his lips, then her tongue entered his mouth and teased his tongue lightly. She drew back up and looked down at him, her eyes soft, a slight smile gracing her face.

"I cannot believe I am here with you, Severus," she said softly.

"I don't know whether I'll ever be able to look at this table in quite the same way again," Severus said with a smirk.

Poppy caressed his face, brushing back a few strands of hair, then outlining his lips with the tip of one finger. "I meant that I cannot believe that I am here with Severus Snape."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "So you've used this table before?"

Poppy giggled, and he smiled. "No, that we are doing it here is remarkable...and I haven't done it with anyone else here...but that you and I are together, that you, Severus Snape, are making love to me, that is even more remarkable."

He looked up at her quietly for a moment, caressing her back lightly, then he said, "It amazes me. It amazes me that I am having sex at all, but what truly astounds me is that you are the witch with me. You aren't some disgusting old hag..."

"I should hope not!"

"Or pathetic reject," Severus continued, "or a desperate witch who would sleep with me no matter who I was, or someone who has some fantastical and unrealistic idea of who I am, or even someone who just feels sorry for me. You are attractive, confident, and intelligent, and you know me. You know me, and you're still with me."

Poppy looked at him more thoughtfully, still gently caressing the side of his face. "Don't take this the wrong way, but would you sleep with me because you were desperate?"

"Yes, I would. Desperate, not desperate, uninterested in sex, or horny as hell, I would sleep with you and make love to you, Poppy Pomfrey," Severus replied softly.

Poppy kissed his lips gently, then with increasing passion. His arms were around her, his hands caressing wherever he could reach, touching, feeling, kneading, caressing. Poppy rolled her hips, feeling his erection against her, then she broke away with a gasp.

"I want you, I want you inside me," she said in a low, urgent voice.

Severus brought his hand to the back of her head and pulled her down into another kiss, his tongue stroking the roof of her mouth. He broke the kiss and wound his fingers through her hair.

"Yes, yes, I want that too. But . . . but . . ." His eyes seemed to search her face. "Poppy, I trust you, I trust you and I want you. I want to feel safe. I want to know that trust, I need to. I need to, Poppy, please," he said, his voice sounding his desperation.

"You are safe, you are, Severus," Poppy replied, kissing him. "Always safe with me. I hope never to betray your trust, not even inadvertently. I will never knowingly betray your trust. I promise."

"I believe you." Severus swallowed. "Could you . . . could you prove it to me? No, I need to feel it myself. Please?"

Poppy looked confused. "What...how? I don't know what you mean."

"You remember that I told you about the way that I allowed myself to be used by a witch when I first became a Death Eater?"

Poppy nodded.

"I know that I can trust you. Sometimes when you have begun to do something that was . . . superficially similar to something she did, I remembered that it's you and how different you are from her, and then you continue, and it feels so good, so warm, so sexy, so exciting, and any apprehension I have just drains away into pleasure," Severus said.

"I am very glad," Poppy replied. "That is all I want, for you to feel good, to feel pleasure, to know my affection for you."

"Then would you . . ." Severus looked away a moment and swallowed.

"What? Severus? If I can, I will," she said.

"She used to restrain me when she, um, when she was on top. I hated it," Severus said. "But I was thinking that when you are on top, it feels so good. I love to see your pleasure and watch your breasts, and you feel so good around me. I love to feel you riding my cock and to watch your face when you come."

"I'm glad," Poppy said softly. "I wish that it hadn't had those associations for you. I wouldn't have done it if I had known."

"No, I am very glad you did. Very glad. You replaced that sense of disgust and fear with something very different," Severus replied. "And that is why, if you don't think it's bad or wrong, that's why I was wondering if you would . . ."

"Tell me," Poppy said gently.

Severus averted his eyes. "I thought I would feel that safety with you if you . . . restrained me," he whispered. "If you restrained me and made love to me."

"Oh, Severus . . ." Poppy caressed his face. "I would if you want, but I am afraid it may be too soon. I don't want to do anything that would cause you any distress or pain."

"I want to feel that safe with you, Poppy."

Poppy nodded. "All right. But I only know the kinds of physical restraint spells used in Healing, and they deliberately are designed so that the person restrained cannot cancel the spell themselves. I worry that you will feel helpless and trapped if you can't lift the spell yourself."

"You could conjure bonds that I could break wandlessly," Severus suggested, "but you don't have to. I want to feel helpless with you, but safe. Completely safe, but completely helpless. You can use one of your spells. I trust you."

Poppy looked at him a moment and thought about it, then she nodded. "But no attempt at being brave, Severus. If you are bothered, if you feel anxious, if you are at all uncomfortable, you must tell me, and I will lift the restraints immediately. Will you promise me that?"

Severus relaxed, unaware that he had been tense. "Yes, I promise. I might be a little nervous at first, but I want to feel that and have you take it away. I know you can do that."

"I am not a miracle worker," Poppy whispered. "I cannot fix everything."

"I know, but please, do this for me?"

Poppy leaned toward him again and kissed him, then she Summoned her wand and sat up, straddling his hips. She swallowed, then she said softly, "Your arms first. Wherever you want them. Get comfortable."

Severus raised his arms above his head, bent slightly at the elbows, and nodded.

Poppy was about to cast the spell when she stopped and Summoned a small cushion from a chair across the room.

"For your head," she said as she lifted his head and placed the velvet pillow under it.

Severus twitched a slight smile.

"Comfortable?"

Severus nodded.

Poppy swept her wand over first one arm then the other, and Severus felt soft, cottony bands at his wrist and just above his elbows. When he turned his head, he could see nothing, but an experimental attempt to move against them proved that he was, indeed, restrained against the table.

"Should I remove them?" Poppy asked, seeing him pulling against the invisible bonds.

"No, just testing," Severus replied.

Poppy moved so that she was now kneeling beside him. "Now your legs. Make yourself comfortable."

Severus separated his legs slightly and relaxed, then nodded to her.

She Summoned two more small velvet pillows from the sofa and placed them beneath his knees. Looking up at his face first, she swept her wand over each leg, and Severus felt the same, soft bonds at his ankles and just above his knees.

Poppy licked her lips nervously. "Are you all right, Severus?"

"Fine." He was feeling very vulnerable and a little nervous, but he was comfortable enough.

"Any others you would like?" she asked.

"One just above my hips, please, across my stomach."

Poppy cast that spell. "You be sure to tell me if you are in any discomfort or mental distress."

"I'm a little nervous and I feel vulnerable, but I'm fine."

"Good, but if I think you are becoming anxious and not telling me, I will release you entirely with one spell."

"That is why I trust you, Poppy."

"Now, let's make a little test here," Poppy said.

She bent over and kissed him through the bond across his middle.

"I could feel that!" Severus exclaimed.

"That was the test," Poppy said with a smile. "And this?"

She brushed her hand across his abdomen where the invisible bond held him to the table. His cock twitched.

Severus nodded. "I can feel that, too."

Poppy leaned toward him and kissed his lips, taking his bottom lip between hers and sucking it. She kissed his throat, first one side then the other. She sat up and looked at his face.

"All right, Severus?" she whispered.

"Good."

Poppy kissed his throat again, then his shoulders, working her way down to his pectorals, kissing her way across his chest. She reached his right nipple and circled it with her tongue. At his gasp, she looked up at him, but it seemed to have been a gasp of surprise and pleasure, so she kissed his nipple, then licked it with the tip of her tongue again before moving over and doing the same to his other nipple.

Kissing and licking her way down Severus's torso, stroking his sides with her fingertips, Poppy smiled to see his skin twitch under her light, teasing kisses. His heart was beating rapidly, and she looked up to see his face.

"Still all right, Severus?"

"Gods, yes . . . don't stop," he replied with a gasp. "I'll tell you if I don't like something."

Poppy passed feather-light kisses over his lower abdomen, always just avoiding his erection, and her fingers stroked his chest lightly. She could feel Severus try to press up against his bonds, but he said nothing, only gasped, so she brought her mouth to his balls and gently took one side into her warm mouth and licked softly, then did the same to the other side before licking up the length of his cock. She kissed its tip, swirled her tongue around it, then she rose up and looked down at him.

Severus opened his eyes and looked up into hers, but said nothing. Poppy straddled him, then she leaned forward, supporting herself with her arms on either side of him, and kissed his mouth. She swayed back and forth as she kissed him until her crux came into contact with his erection.

"Mmm," she moaned into his mouth.

Poppy pushed back up and took his cock in her right hand. She moved it against her folds, spreading her wetness over its head. Severus's breathing grew heavier. Poppy moved back against his cock, letting its head enter her shallowly. She squeezed her muscles and it popped back out. She did that several times, tantalising Severus as he began to moan and press up against his bonds. Poppy smiled as she sat up and then lowered herself to completely engulf his penis.

"You are so long," Poppy breathed, "so long and hard. Such a good cock." She squeezed her muscles around him. "You stretch me. Can you feel how you stretch me?" She shifted on him, squeezing his cock as she rotated her hips.

"Mmm, yes, yes, so deep in you," Severus gasped. "So very deep. And so good...oh, gods, Poppy, like that, yes, like that. Oh, gods, you feel so good!"

Poppy continued to squeeze him inside of her as she rolled her hips and rotated against him, rubbing her clitoris as she did.

"Does it feel good, Poppy?" he asked. "Tell me. Do you feel good? Do you like this?" He opened his eyes and looked up at her face.

"Oh, I do like it, Severus. I love to feel you in me, so big, stretching me, pressing and stimulating me, and I love to rub my clitoris against you, feeling you inside and out."

"Do that more, rub against me and tell me it's good," Severus said, watching her breasts.

Poppy rubbed against him, sliding forward and back on his cock as she rubbed her clitoris over his pubic bone, his cock stimulating her as it moved in and out.

"It's good, Severus, so good to feel you inside me," she said.

"Tell me more, tell me you like to ride my cock, that you like fucking me," Severus said.

"Oh, I do love to ride your cock, Severus, to fuck you. You know I love to fuck you." She saw his eyes fixed on her breasts, so she raised one hand and began to fondle her breast. "And I like to have you look at my breasts whilst I'm fucking you. You wish you could touch them, don't you?"

"Gods, yes," Severus breathed.

"I love to know your cock is happy inside me, that you like having me ride you! I love to ride you, Severus, to have you inside of me, to make love to you!"

"Come, Poppy, come on my cock!"

She could see him straining up against his soft bonds, and she moved faster, first sitting up and sliding back and forth, then lying against him as she raised and lowered her hips, and then sitting up again and pounding hard against him.

"Yes, Poppy, yes, come, come, fuck me, fuck me and come!" He gritted his teeth, hoping that he could hold back his orgasm long enough for her to come first. "Fuck me hard, Poppy, fuck me and fuck me!" He strained up against the restraints.

"Oh, gods, yes, Severus, yes, yes, ah ah ah!" She continued to ride him as she came, her head back, her mouth open, her breath coming in gasps.

Severus could feel his own orgasm approaching. "Yes, yes, like that, like that, I'm coming, Poppy! I'm coming inside you! Oh, gods gods gods!"

He couldn't move as he came, but Poppy settled down on him and held him tightly within her as he spurted his cum, then as she saw his face relax, she lay down on top of him and relaxed, herself, her head resting at his shoulder.

Severus licked his lips and said, "Want to hold you."

Poppy blinked, reached for her wand, concentrated, then waved the wand and released all the bonds. Severus immediately put his arms around her and moved his head to kiss her hair.

"How do you feel?" Poppy asked.

"Perfect. Perfect. Thank you." He kissed her forehead.

Poppy nodded and sighed happily.

"You were very good," Severus said a few minutes later.

Poppy chuckled slightly. "I'm glad it was all right for you."

"Better than all right." He paused. "Did you enjoy it?"

Poppy nodded. "Yes, I did, especially once I stopped worrying that it was bothering you and trusted that you would tell me if you wanted to stop. I loved being able to kiss and touch you all over. That was wonderful." She turned her head and kissed his shoulder.

Severus ran his fingers over her back for a while, then he said, "I think that took care of our temptation, but it didn't really avoid it."

"No, it didn't. Do you wish we had avoided it?" Poppy asked.

"No. I thought we should avoid temptation, but perhaps we should simply regulate it a little," Severus said.

"Regulate it how?"

Severus shrugged. "Only on certain days? Or between certain hours? I don't know."

"We could try that. Only on weekends?" Poppy suggested. "We wouldn't have to do anything just because it was the weekend, but we could allow ourselves to give in to temptation."

Severus nodded. "I think the weekend should begin at dinner on Friday and end at breakfast on Monday, though."

"Sensible," Poppy agreed.

"And maybe we could say it's all right to give in to temptation on a weekday as long as it's after curfew and we haven't been together in at least a day."

Poppy twitched a smile. "That would mean we could do it any weekday as long as it was after curfew," she pointed out.

"Oh. Well, as long as it's been at least . . . a day and a half. And if we're together at curfew, it's allowed until breakfast of the following day, but then we can't give in to temptation that night. We have to wait until the next day."

"We probably couldn't do it every day, anyway," Poppy said with a light laugh. "I think we would get quite tired. Exhausted."

Severus sighed. "We weren't supposed to be doing it again at all."

"Do you wish we hadn't after that first night?" Poppy asked.

"No." He thought a moment as he continued to caress her. "You don't feel obligated, do you? Just because I approach you?"

"No, I don't feel obligated. And tonight, I believe I did the 'approaching,' and I certainly did the fucking," Poppy said. "If I ever don't want to, for whatever reason, I will tell you."

"Good." He thought a bit more. "Why would you not want to?"

Poppy smiled. "I don't know, Severus. Maybe because I was tired, maybe because I had something else I had to do, or I might feel under the weather, or just not be in the mood. And you, I hope, will tell me honestly if you don't feel in the mood."

"Yes." Severus couldn't imagine that at the moment. It seemed he was constantly randy recently. Of course, if he'd had sex shortly before she approached him, he might not be as easily aroused. But he didn't think he'd turn her away.

"And if you start to see someone, start dating another witch," Poppy said, "you must tell me. That's very important to me. It would be distressing for me if I discovered I was having sex with someone who was dating another witch. That is not something I do. I would be very upset."

Severus nodded, very glad that he had told Hermione that the time wasn't right for them to be dating. "And if you begin dating, or if you even wish to consider it and break this off, I will understand," he said, though he selfishly hoped she wouldn't, at least for a while.

"Good," Poppy said. "I don't see that happening any time in the near future, but I would not start seeing someone else without having told you and without having stopped having sex with you first."

"But if you just happen to have another tryst with someone, if it isn't dating," Severus said, "that's all right. It's not as though I have any claim on you that way. I'd rather not know if you did, though."

"I don't know, Severus . . . I don't think I will do anything like that. Not whilst we're still . . . still seeing each other. But if you have an opportunity to enjoy being with another witch . . . that's up to you. As you say, we haven't any claim on each other." Poppy was quiet for a minute. "Do you have your eye on any witch in particular?"

"To have sex with?" Severus asked. "No, I don't. And I don't see that happening, either." He thought of Gareth. That seemed different to him. Besides, she had asked him about witches. Not that she would think to ask him about wizards. He pushed that thought from his mind.

Poppy thought about Hermione, but decided not to say anything. Severus probably thought of her as someone he might like to date, someone with whom he wanted a relationship, not as someone he was considering having sex with, even if that might be included in his idea of dating. He wanted more than just sex with Hermione, he wanted a relationship, Poppy was sure. But he had promised to tell her if he began dating someone, and that was good enough. It had to be good enough. She had sensed some hesitation on his part when he spoke of having sex with someone, but she supposed that he was just uncomfortable with the conversation.

"We had better get dressed," Poppy said.

"Yes. It is unlikely that anyone would come in, and I did put a charm on the door that should make anyone approaching it uninterested in opening it, but it's not completely infallible. If Albus were to come down, it would merely make him curious."

Poppy looked at him in alarm.

"Don't worry. He and Minerva were ready for bed when I left them, so I doubt he'll be wandering around the castle tonight."

"Thank goodness that Minerva had that little kitchen put in up there. He used to get a taste for hot cocoa in the middle of the night and come down to the kitchens for it himself, and that would bring him too close to the staff room for my comfort," Poppy replied as she got off the table and started to dress. "Now he makes it himself. Unless they have run out of milk."

"I am sure he and Minerva are tucked up in bed now," Severus said, looking for one of his cufflinks and finding it under a chair.

The lamps were only on low; Severus waved his wand to bring them up to full so they could see what they were doing.

"My hair must be a mess," Poppy said, wishing there were a mirror in the staff room.

"It is tousled," Severus said. "But lovely."

"I probably won't see anyone, but I'd rather not look as though I just came from a roll in the hay," Poppy said, pulling her hairpins out and trying to put it back up neatly without the benefit of a mirror, finally waving her wand to gather it up and pin it. "How is it now?"

"Much better," Severus said with a nod. At the mention of hay, he had looked reflexively up at the portrait above the fireplace. Little Boy Blue was still asleep. Severus hoped he hadn't woken up at all whilst they were there. He didn't care if a portrait watched them except for the fact that they gossiped almost as much as the living did.

"I am glad we tabled our discussion," Poppy said.

"So am I." Severus stepped toward her and cupped her face with his hand. "Poppy," he whispered. "Poppy."

He bent his head as he put one arm around her and pulled her close. His lips met hers and they moved softly and sensuously over hers. He broke the kiss and slipped his hand behind her head, pressing it to his chest. He kissed her hair and nuzzled her.

"Thank you, Poppy. I felt completely vulnerable and utterly safe with you tonight."

"I am glad of that, Severus." Poppy closed her eyes. She thought that the idea of avoiding temptation might have some merit. But she was just tired, and the intimacy had made her vulnerable, as well.

"Would you like to come down and stay with me?" Severus asked.

Poppy looked up at him and pulled away slightly. "It is very tempting, and I would like to, but I probably shouldn't. If there's an emergency..."

"A house-elf can find you, and Minerva can swear her to secrecy," Severus responded. "But if you'd rather not, that's fine." He dropped his arms.

"I would like to, but I just don't think it's wise. I'm tired, it's very late, last night was a short night for us both, too, and I think that some other night would be better," Poppy said.

Severus nodded. "All right."

"I'll see you tomorrow, and we can discuss the project," Poppy said.

"After breakfast?" Severus suggested.

"Good. We can meet in my office...unless you would prefer yours."

"No, yours," Severus said, thinking that his office was not a particularly pleasant place to meet with someone. He doubted that Poppy would be disturbed by his collections, but the office was still unpleasant. And gloomy. He had sufficient light at his desk to read by, but the room was gloomy. Hers was light, bright, and pleasant.

Severus removed the wards from the door. They stepped out of the staff room.

"Good night, Severus," Poppy said.

He nodded. "Good night."

Severus watched Poppy walk toward the front hall and the stairs leading up to the main part of the castle, then he turned and walked in the other direction, to the stairs leading to the dungeons. Although he had walked down to the dungeons on his own...this late and even later, and at all times of year, thousands of times...that night, Severus felt peculiarly alone. They couldn't stay in the staff room all night, though, and he was tired. It would be good to get to bed.

Severus entered his quarters and looked over at his chair. There was no point in wishing that Poppy had come with him. They had had good sex. They both just needed to get some sleep in their own beds. Sex did not include sleep. It might have been nice to wake up and have sex again before breakfast, that was all. But he had had more sex in the last week than he'd had in the last twenty years. Real sex, not a blow job or a quickie from someone he'd paid or made a trade with.

Severus stripped quickly, hanging up his jacket and waistcoat and tossing his trousers, shirt, and underwear into the laundry for the house-elves to clean. He never saw Twiskett collect the laundry or return it, but it would disappear and later reappear in his wardrobe, clean and fresh, with any holes, loose buttons, or ravelling threads carefully and undetectably repaired. It was one of those few things in which he had found comfort when he was working all those thankless years. Not having to worry about feeding himself had been another one. Of course, during the last several years, his appetite had dwindled to practically nothing, not that he had ever been a big eater. There had been little in his life in which he had been able to take any pleasure or find any happiness at all. Now, though, he had some friends, he had sex, and he had almost had a girlfriend. And he had Poppy, which was best of all.

Bringing a fresh nightshirt with him into the bathroom, Severus wondered again whether he had made a mistake with Hermione. As he brushed his teeth, he decided that even if he had, it was still preferable to all of the things that could have gone wrong if he had dated her. And he still had sex. He had sex with Poppy, in fact. And with Gareth occasionally. But with Poppy . . . Gareth was good, and he liked Gareth and was grateful to him, but Poppy . . . sex was something more with her. It wasn't just the sex, he decided, but the growing friendship between them. That would be something lasting, he hoped.

Severus climbed between the sheets and waved his wand to extinguish the lamps, then placed the wand on his bedside table. Severus didn't know precisely what it was about sex with Poppy, but it really was very good. It had been good the very first night, and it only seemed to get better. Severus closed his eyes and remembered how he had lain on the table and allowed her to bind him, arms, legs, and torso. His heart had beat faster, and he had reminded himself that he was helpless but that he was safe, that he was with Poppy and he was safe. He was more than safe, it seemed to him. By the time she had taken his balls so very gently in her warm, wet mouth, he felt something that he couldn't identify, a feeling akin to relief, but beyond mere relief, and when she had taken the head of his cock into her vagina, bringing it in, expelling it, and bringing it in again, he had strained against his bonds, wanting more, but knowing that she would give him more, knowing that the straining was an indication only of his desire for union with her, and not of any struggle to be freed from the bonds. It had been unexpectedly arousing to have her take her time pleasuring him. Poppy had taken her pleasure, but she had given it, too, and he had thrilled to see her coming and then to join her, orgasming hard and deep inside of her.

Severus rolled over and punched his pillow, dismissing from his mind any stray thought that he wished that Poppy were there beside him, sleeping in his arms. He relaxed, his eyes closed, and he fell into a deep sleep filled with dreams that he did not remember in the morning, but which left him with a sense of well-being when he awoke.

NEXT

Chapter Fifty-One: Just a Fling?

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus begins work on the project with Poppy, and later he practises the new spell on his own, but without success.

Rated M/MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Verity Septima Vector

Author's Note: The RaMverse chronology, 1935–1998, entry in my WordPress blog has been updated to include the chronology in the post itself, rather than only as a download. Since a lot of people read on devices to which they cannot or prefer not to download docs, I copied the content into the post. The downloadable version is still there for people who want it. The link to it is in the sidebar of the blog (<http://mmadfan.wordpress.com/>). There's also a RaM chronology from 1840–1957, if anyone is interested in that, as well as links to other RaMverse information.

There's a live link to my blog on my author's page [here](#).

Chapter Fifty-One: Just a Fling?

Chapter 52 of 118

Sunday, 14 March 1999. Severus begins work on the project with Poppy, and later he practises the new spell on his own, but without success.

Author's Note: Rated for sexually explicit language and some sexual imagery at the end of the chapter.



Chapter Fifty-One: Just a Fling?

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Poppy went up to her rooms and made herself a cup of dandelion and lemon balm tea, bringing it into the bedroom with her. She set it on her dressing table, where she sat and took her hair down. She sipped her tea and brushed her hair out. The image that looked out of the mirror at her was unremarkable, she thought. Light blondish-brown hair, greyish-blue wide-set eyes, fair skin, straight nose, high cheekbones. She had always believed her chin to be too pointy, but with years, she no longer cared about that. She had the beginnings of fine laugh lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Pretty enough, she supposed, but no beauty, never a beauty.

Now Minerva, with her bright eyes that looked different in different lights, ranging from hazel to deep green with darker circles around the irises, her long, thick, dark eyelashes, and her black hair, now with a little silver running through it after the stresses of the final years of the war, *she* was beautiful, and she carried herself with grace, the grace of a confident cat. Poppy knew that she simply walked when she walked, propelling herself along. She had a certain amount of energy and vitality, of course, no plodder, she, but she had recognised long ago that she would never be graceful and elegant.

She had never been terribly displeased with her appearance, though, nor had she been vain about it, and unlike so many witches she knew, she didn't really think there was anything she would change about her body. Oh, perhaps it might be nice to be a little bit taller, to have slightly longer, slimmer legs, but when she looked at herself naked in the mirror, the overall impression pleased her, and she knew that there were wizards who had certainly found her figure more than pleasing. She was round in the buttocks and breasts, with wide hips but a well-defined waist and fairly slim build. She took good care of herself, and even in middle age, she was fit enough. Still, she was no energetic, brilliant, fresh-faced, soft-skinned nineteen-year-old Gryffindor who had snatched Severus from the jaws of death, who had actually breathed for him.

With a sigh, Poppy stood and began to undress. As she removed her shift, she spied a single mark on one of her breasts where Severus had apparently kissed her a bit vigorously, just leaving a slight bruise. She pressed it, but it didn't hurt, so she left it alone. She went into her bathroom and washed, then brushed her teeth, wondering whether Severus was in bed yet. She had to admit to herself that she had liked sleeping with him and waking up next to him, though his bedroom was not particularly aesthetically pleasing. She was a Hufflepuff; her dormitory had been underground, as well, in a different part of the upper dungeons, but she didn't remember them being as closed-in feeling as Severus's rooms. If it weren't for the Charmed window that Albus had put in, which gave Severus a reflected view out over the lake, it would feel almost like a prison cell with slightly better furnishings and a bit more space. The walls were even dark grey. Perhaps that was what he wanted. What he *had* wanted. He had simply never thought to change it.

Poppy pulled on a light nightdress and curled up in bed. She wished she had just gone down with him, that she hadn't thought about it. But it was best that she hadn't. Her affections were too stirred up. They were still only colleagues. It had probably been a bad idea to agree that they should not try so hard to avoid temptation. Not that they had been succeeding very well, anyway. It was really only acknowledging reality. But when he had said her name and kissed her, then embraced her so sweetly, she had felt from him something that she knew he hadn't meant to give. Poppy remembered Minerva's words, her reminder that Severus was not used to being in relationships, that he went to extremes. He didn't mean to make her feel loved, and despite his ecstatic declaration when they had made love in her bedroom, he certainly didn't love her, except perhaps in a very general sort of way. And that was why she had to be so careful. She couldn't allow herself to believe for a minute that this was anything more than a fling for him, a fling until he decided to date Hermione or some other witch. She could still enjoy it, though. Just not too much.

In the morning, Poppy awoke with a headache, which she thought ironic, given that the day before, she hadn't, despite having drunk so much at the party. She showered and dressed, and when her headache was still with her, she took a dose of Headache Potion before going down to breakfast. She was half finished with her breakfast when Severus arrived and made his way to his place between Minerva and Vector.

Severus sat down and immediately turned over his coffee cup. Vector was a good one to sit beside. She never bothered him with idle chit-chat...or unwanted games of footsie. He was glad that Albus was again sitting in his correct chair, otherwise coming in late as he had might have forced him to sit next to someone less pleasantly uninterested in conversation.

Severus took a sip of coffee to help begin clearing the few cobwebs from his brain, then Summoned the platter of eggs and began to serve himself.

"Perhaps you might enjoy some steak tartare instead," Vector suggested drily.

Severus looked at her with a raised eyebrow and reached for the sausages.

"Or perhaps some blood pudding? Oh, sorry, you like your blood uncooked," she said with a smirk.

Severus pushed a few slices of square sausage and some grilled tomatoes onto his plate, then he looked at Vector and added some blood pudding.

"Why ever did you say such things to Sarah?" Vector asked.

Severus opened his mouth to reply, but then he put a forkful of eggs in his mouth instead. It was only slightly embarrassing to him that Duffy had tried to play footsie with him; it would be very embarrassing to her, particularly the fact that she had had the poor judgment to try it with him. In the Great Hall. With students present. He chewed and swallowed. She had already paid for her misjudgment, and they did have to work together. He was Deputy Headmaster. Noblesse oblige, or something of the sort.

"I was feeling whimsical," Severus said shortly.

Vector barked a short laugh. "You will need to work on your sense of whimsy, Severus."

Fortunately, she proceeded to eat and ignore him, just as he preferred it. He had been a little late to breakfast because he had sent an owl to Arthur Weasley asking to meet with him some time in the next day or two. He hadn't been at all specific, not even mentioning his daughter's name, but Severus hoped that had conveyed a sense of some urgency without alarming the other wizard.

Severus glanced over at the Gryffindor table. Ginny was there, sitting with a few other girls in her year. She was just eating and nodding as the other girls were talking. He wondered if she was even listening to the conversation or whether she had honed her ability to appear to be engaged in the conversation without paying any attention to it. She used to be talkative and vibrant, and her personality seemed to have undergone a dampening, as though all the colour and light had gradually been drained from her.

The Easter holiday would be coming up in a couple of weeks. He would suggest to Arthur that he bring Ginny home a few days early, take an extra week with her. When she returned after the Easter holiday, Severus hoped that he and Poppy would have the counselling programme ready to launch. It would mean speaking to the staff very soon about volunteering their services and finding a professional to whom they could speak, themselves. Poppy maintained good relations with St. Mungo's. She probably could come up with someone competent in the time allotted.

Severus turned his empty coffee cup upside down then right side up, and it refilled. He watched Poppy, dressed that day in deep blue robes with an under-robe of paler, silvery blue, stop at the Gryffindor table on her way out of the Great Hall. She smiled and talked with Ginny and the girls she was sitting with, giving Ginny a pat on her shoulder. Severus's expression softened as he watched her. Poppy was so warm and kind, so beautiful; Severus averted his gaze, afraid he would be seen staring after her as she left.

After finishing his coffee, Severus left the Great Hall and went up to the Hospital Wing. The doors to the infirmary were unwarded, so he assumed that Poppy was in her office. He walked across to her office, whose door was open, but she wasn't there. He stepped back out to see Poppy crossing the open ward from one of the private rooms at the end. She smiled when she saw him.

"Good morning, Severus! Ready for our meeting?"

"Yes, I have given it more thought, as well," Severus replied as they entered her office.

Two hours later, they had a rough timetable, lists of names of Healers and others who might be able to help, and a preliminary plan outlined. Poppy stretched.

"I think that is enough work for a Sunday, what do you think, Severus?" she asked.

"I have a few other things I should do today, but nothing urgent."

"Lunch isn't for another hour. Would you like to have a cup of tea with me?"

Severus nodded and followed her to her quarters, waiting as she activated the wards on the infirmary doors. As Poppy fixed their tea, Severus sat on the couch, remembering how they had had tea there less than a week before. It was difficult to believe that at this time the previous Sunday, he had had his first date with Hermione and was looking forward to their second, Gareth had given him a sensual, erotic massage but had not yet had sex with him, and he had not even considered that Poppy might be a sexually attractive witch, let alone touched her intimately. Now, he had had sex with Gareth, something he would have considered a complete impossibility, he was in the midst of a passionate fling with Poppy, and his second date with Hermione had been over before it started.

He stood as Poppy entered with the tea tray.

"Sit down, relax," Poppy said, smiling.

Severus nodded and watched as Poppy fixed their tea, this time, not hiding his attention to her cleavage as she bent over slightly to pour. Poppy handed him his cup.

His expression softened to a near-smile, he thanked her.

"You're welcome."

As she watched Severus silently drink his tea, Poppy wondered whether having tea with him was a good idea. It was only tea, but it wasn't work and it wasn't sex. But she had other colleagues in for tea. Severus was simply becoming more sociable. They were interacting as colleagues, she reminded herself.

"You look pensive," Poppy said as he set down his teacup.

Severus twitched one shoulder slightly. "I was thinking of how much things have changed in the last several months, and how very much they have changed in the last

week." He looked over at her, seeming to memorise her features. "And so much for the better. Thank you for inviting me in for tea on Monday, and thank you for not laughing at my poor attempt at flirtation or slapping me when I kissed you at the door." He reached out and caressed her cheek. "And I am grateful for this week and the time we have spent together."

Poppy felt an increasing sense of worry as he thanked her. Severus was not known for effusive gratitude. Was he about to say that they shouldn't see each other any longer? That was probably the wise thing to do, but she didn't want to do the wise thing.

"But?" Poppy asked, her voice a hoarse whisper.

Severus looked puzzled. "But? I don't understand."

"I just thought you were going to qualify it all," Poppy said, reaching for her teacup.

Severus shook his head. "No. I wasn't."

"Good. And you are welcome, but I have enjoyed it too." She smiled at him and took his hand. "It's been very good for me. I am grateful, too. It's meant a lot to me. I know that you trust me and you have done things with me, shared things with me, things that you haven't shared with anyone else before, and that we..."

"Poppy, oh, Poppy . . ." Severus leaned forward and stopped her words with a kiss. "I want to make love to you," he said huskily.

Poppy responded to his kisses, but then she gently disengaged from him. "I think we should get ready to go down to lunch. We, um, we just had sex last night, and the night before that. You don't need to feel that every time we are alone together, we have to have sex."

Severus looked down, his hands folded in front of him, his hair a curtain hiding his face.

"Severus? Talk to me. Don't just close down like that," Poppy said.

"I'm not. I should leave."

"No, you don't have to. Unless you want to."

"I shouldn't impose upon you," he said, standing.

"Severus...you misunderstand me!" Poppy stood and took his arm, trying to see his face. "I don't want you to leave. Please."

Severus looked down at her and nodded. "I just wanted to be close you," he whispered. It was hard, this wanting her, this *needing* her so much.

"Come here, then, sit with me," Poppy said, pulling gently on his arm, "because I would like that too."

Severus sat down on the couch, and Poppy curled up beside him, her head resting on his shoulder. Severus sighed slightly and put his arms around her, then he kissed the top of her head. Poppy's hand rested on his chest, and she closed her eyes. A few minutes later, Severus nuzzled her hair and held her a little closer.

"This is nice," Poppy said, thinking that she shouldn't enjoy it so much, but she did.

"It is. Very," Severus whispered. "I still want to make love to you, but later. I wished you had stayed with me last night. I like lying next to you in bed, so close, and waking up with you there. I feel I shouldn't admit it, but it is true. It is as good as the sex...different, but still very good."

Poppy nodded. It was very good, but it would give them an unwarranted sense of closeness. One of them would be hurt, and it would likely be she, if they continued to give in to this desire for intimacy. It was just a fling. Severus didn't really know what he was doing. He had been so emotionally and tactilely deprived for so long, he was like a man who had finally found an oasis after being lost in the desert. He would realise at some point that she was not the only source for the kind of sex and closeness he felt with her, and that he could experience the same, only better, with someone he could fall in love with. She would not kid herself that she could be that person. Nonetheless, she did not move from his embrace.

Just as they were getting up to go down to lunch, an owl came and banged on her sitting room windows. Poppy opened them to it, and it flew over to Severus. Poppy fetched some owl treats.

"That's Wol, Gareth's owl, isn't it?" she asked.

"I don't know. I suppose so." Until recently, he'd only occasionally had an owl from Gareth, and Gareth had always used the school owls with his return messages when Severus had owled him first. One Horned Owl looked much like any other to him.

"A letter from Hermione?" Poppy asked, trying to sound as though she were only vaguely interested in it.

"No," Severus said, looking at the envelope. "I believe it is from McGonagall."

Poppy nodded, smiling. "He's a good lad." She looked at the envelope. "If you would like to read it now, I need to freshen up before going downstairs."

Severus nodded and waited until she had left the room to slit open the envelope. He was fairly certain that McGonagall would not send anything indiscreet via an owl, but he *had* offered to owl him the sex spell, so Severus was not going to take any risks.

The note was brief, though not as brief as his others. Apparently he was feeling hemmed in and he wanted to know if Severus would be free to meet for a drink later that day...sooner, rather than later. He suggested the Three Broomsticks.

Poppy came out of the loo. "So, ready to go?"

Severus nodded, slipping the letter into his pocket.

"How is Gareth?" Poppy asked as they left.

"Bored, apparently. Stir-crazy. He wants to meet for a drink later."

"Oh, I shouldn't have let Wol return without your reply!"

"I haven't decided whether to go or not." He looked down at her. "I assume you have better things to do with your Sunday afternoon," he said softly, "but I had hoped we could spend some of it together."

"We still could even if you meet Gareth for a drink."

Severus nodded. "I shall consider that."

They entered the Great Hall, and Severus went to his place and Poppy went to hers. Lunch on Sundays was always a big meal at Hogwarts, and Severus helped himself to slices of beef and both mashed potatoes and Yorkshire pudding, feeling rather greedy as he poured gravy over it all, then, thinking of his health, he added a spoonful of

peas and another of carrots.

Minerva smiled at him. "You have a hearty appetite today," she observed.

"Mm," Severus said, his mouth full of mashed potatoes.

"Having a little potatoes with your gravy?" she asked with a laugh.

Severus cut into the puffy pudding, ignoring Minerva. She always ate at least two helpings of Yorkshire pudding every time it was served, so she shouldn't talk.

He supposed he could meet McGonagall for a drink at the Three Broomsticks. He didn't really want to. McGonagall must have other friends he could meet for a drink. That Tarrant was one of them...Hermione had met him through Gareth.

He could ask Poppy to go with him, Severus thought, but that could be awkward, and Poppy probably wouldn't want to go anyway. And it might be a bit too much like a date, he supposed. He could have McGonagall come up to the castle. They could have a quick drink in his rooms, and then he could get him to leave when it was dinnertime.

Severus ate everything on his plate, nodded to Minerva, then he stood and walked down to see Poppy.

Bending close to her, he said softly, "I am going to invite Gareth up here to have a drink."

Poppy nodded. "Give him my best."

"If you would like to see him, you could join us."

"No, you two have your drink. I think he probably wants a wizard's company right now. I'll write up a memo for Minerva on our meeting this morning. Let me know if you hear anything from Arthur, though, and if you would like me to meet with both of you."

Severus nodded, and then, feeling as though he should have said or done something else, he left the Great Hall. The only thing he could think that he could have done was kiss her, and that was very clearly not appropriate, even if they were more than just whatever it was they were. Albus and Minerva were now openly married, yet they still were very restrained and respectable in front of the students, although Albus had kissed her under the mistletoe in the Great Hall that Christmas, causing those students present to goggle...those who hadn't turned away in embarrassment. It had been a fairly lingering kiss, too, though not overly passionate, given the audience.

Severus walked down to his office to compose a note to Gareth, imagining that it was Christmas, and there was mistletoe hanging in the Great Hall. Everyone was present, the entire school, and he and Poppy would pass under the mistletoe. Everyone would be watching, waiting for the great git to kiss the poor, staid Hogwarts matron, assuming that they would both hate it, that it would be a quick, necessary peck on the lips, but instead, he would bend his head toward her and kiss her lips gently, then she would put her arms around his neck, not letting him go. His kiss would grow more sensual, and Poppy would lick his lips, they would open their mouths and deepen the kiss as he put his arms around her, one hand on her buttocks, pulling her close against him. She would moan and grind against him, and when they finally stepped out from under the mistletoe, the wizards would all be envious of him and the witches would all see him in a new light and wish they had been the witch under the mistletoe, but to ensure that didn't happen, he would blast the mistletoe away. Then he and Poppy would proceed to the staff table as though nothing at all were different.

He felt quite smug by the time he sat down to write his note to Gareth. He told him to come up at any time that afternoon; he would be in his quarters. If he wanted to drink anything other than brandy, firewhisky, or some house-elf-provided butterbeer, he should bring it with him. Not the most elegant invitation in the world, Severus thought as he owled it, but it was not meant to be elegant.

Back down in his rooms, sitting in his favourite chair, Severus remembered the spell that Gareth had given him. He hadn't had any time to practise it. He got up and went into his bedroom, where he opened the wooden box in which he kept his cufflinks and what other few pieces of jewellery he possessed, lifted the false bottom and removed the parchment with the spell. Not particularly secure, but secure enough now that he wasn't a spy.

Severus brought the spell back out to the sitting room with him, rereading it, then whispering the incantation *Cacumen apsterrere emicatus*. Should be easy enough. Gareth had cast it nonverbally. He certainly could.

Severus sat in his chair, spread his legs, unbuttoned his frockcoat and then his trousers, and pulled out his penis. He closed his eyes and began to think about Poppy. Sucking her breasts. Sometimes he wished he could suck them both at once. Having her bind him and ride his cock. His cock in her hot, juicy cunt, pounding into her against the wall in the corridor. Having everyone seeing them fucking, how she screamed his name in ecstasy as she came, all of them turned on, knowing what a sexy fuck she was and that she was his to fuck.

Gods, he was about to come, and he had almost forgotten about the spell. He opened his eyes and blinked, trying to focus, then, his hand around his cock, he cast the spell. He felt his penis tingle, and the tingling seemed to go into his balls. It didn't feel precisely as it had when Gareth had done it, but Severus decided to see what the result was, first picking up the parchment and looking at it for the instructions on how to release it. *Finite apsterrere*. That was straightforward enough.

Severus closed his eyes once more and began to stroke his erection again. He thought of Poppy, Poppy needing him desperately, so desperately that she would come down to his classroom whilst he was in the middle of teaching, saying that she had an emergency that only he could help her with. He would dismiss the class, but before they had even left, she would come up to him and start unbuttoning his trousers, saying that she needed his huge cock in her, that she had to have him, she couldn't wait. He would oblige her by pushing her back onto his desk, exposing her sweet pussy, and then he would kneel down and begin to prepare her for his cock by licking her clit. She would scream and beg him for more and he would stand and thrust his cock into her, pumping and pumping until he came. She would come over and over again, and he would keep fucking her.

Severus came with a grunt. To his disappointment, he ejaculated. Not very much, just a weak little spurt, but it still wasn't a dry orgasm, and his erection began to fade. Shit. It hadn't even been a very satisfactory orgasm.

In the bathroom, washing his hands, he heard someone at his door. It was just as well it hadn't worked, or he'd still be masturbating. Sighing, he dried his hands and went out to answer the door.

NEXT

Chapter Fifty-Two: Technique

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus masters an esoteric spell.

Rated MA. (A mild MA.)

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Fifty-Two: Technique

Chapter 53 of 118

Sunday, 14 March 1999. Severus masters an esoteric spell.

Rated for sexually explicit language, content, and some very mild slashiness.



Chapter Fifty-Two: Technique

Sunday, 14 March 1999

"McGonagall, come in."

"Snape!" Gareth grinned at him. "I was very glad to get your owl. I had to get out of the house. Living with two witches, even ones I love, is driving me batty."

"I wasn't expecting you so soon," Severus said, closing the door.

"I brought some beer," Gareth replied, holding out a canvas bag, its contents clanking together. "Gluffy's at the estate again, Mum's in one of her moods where she locks herself in her study and doesn't come out, and Hermione's moping about pretending to practise her Animagus exercises, but basically just being bitchy...sorry, Severus, but even the best of witches can get that way sometimes. Nothing pleases her. I offer her tea, she wants coffee; I make soup and cheesy toast for lunch, and she asks what else there is. I tell her if she wants something different, she can do the cooking, and she rolls her eyes and goes off to pout in her room. I try to be more than just her Arithmancy master and be her friend, but she makes it very difficult sometimes. I forgot how moody teenagers can be. By the time she went off in her sulk, I felt like having her organise our parchments and then perform multiple variant calculations on the names and birth dates of everyone in the Ministry just to give her a taste of what an apprenticeship could be like for her. But I didn't. I let her pout a while, then I brought her a bar of chocolate and told her I was going out."

Severus put the canvas bag on the small table toward the back of the room and took out two beers, handing one to Gareth and opening the other for himself, then taking a seat in the wooden chair across from him, the table behind him.

Gareth grinned. "Becoming a beer-drinker, Snape?"

"It is still early. I do not wish to drink anything stronger. Besides, I went to a party on Friday night and drank too much."

"Did you get a bit squiffy, Snape?" Gareth asked, amused.

Severus quirked a crooked smile. "A bit. I was a little indiscreet with Poppy, I'm afraid."

"Really? At the party?"

"No, not at the party." Severus felt like rolling his eyes. "In the stairwell. And then again in a side corridor."

"You two did it in the stairway?" Gareth sounded astounded.

"No, of course not." Severus smirked. "Very nearly, though. We waited until we reached a more secluded corridor."

Gareth shook his head and took a swig of beer. "Sounds like you and Poppy have quite a thing going."

Severus shrugged. "I suppose, but I don't know what that thing is. I thought it was just . . . just fucking. Just one night. A . . . a tryst, to put it less crudely. It's become a fling, I guess. But 'fling' always sounded so carefree and unsubstantial to me, and this doesn't feel that way. It's so good, McGonagall. When I am with her . . . it's hard to describe. I don't have the words. And it's not just the sex. That's very, very good, but just being with her . . . I feel . . . I feel calm . . . safe." He sighed.

Gareth finished his beer and Summoned another. "Sounds like you're getting more involved with her than you thought you would."

Severus nodded shortly. "It's not possible, though."

"Why not?"

"She wouldn't be interested. And we are agreed that if either of us begins to see someone else, we will stop having sex. That's all it is. Just sex. She doesn't want more. She even said that if I had the opportunity for a tryst with another witch, and I wanted to take advantage of it, I should, as long as it wasn't dating, in which case we'd have to stop seeing each other first. She wouldn't have said that if she wanted more."

"Oh." Gareth took a swallow of beer, his brow knit in thought. "And what did you tell her?"

"I knew it wouldn't be fair of me to ask her not to have sex with someone else if she wanted to, so I told her the same thing."

"And her response?"

"That she didn't think she'd be doing that. But she doesn't sleep around casually, McGonagall. She isn't that sort of witch."

"Still . . . I don't know whether the two of you have a life-long romance or not, but you might want to begin consider redefining your relationship. Talk to her about it. You keep *saying* 'it's just fucking,' but you act like it's far more than that to you, even if that is what draws you to her again and again."

"It is so good . . . I shouldn't say anything to you. I know how you feel about her."

Gareth shrugged. "It's no great unrequited love, but I do envy you. I never believed I had any chance with her, so don't worry about me. Besides, there are other witches in the world. If you want more with Poppy, I say, go for it."

"But . . . I'm in love with Hermione," Severus said.

"Are you? Or do you love her as a friend? She is an attractive girl, no doubt about it. You have been leading such an isolated life for so long, her friendship has been very important to you. You almost died. You would have died except Uncle Albus and Hermione were there and saved you, and then when you think you're dying, what is it you see that gives you comfort? Hermione's face. That's got to affect a man, not to mention that she clearly has a kind of crush on you. It wouldn't be surprising if you developed a thing for her. It doesn't mean you're in love with her."

"I am," Severus said vehemently, opening another beer and flinging the beer cap across the room.

Gareth was quiet for a minute, then he said, "All right. Then don't get too close to Poppy. For her sake. She may know that it's just a short-term relationship, a fling, as you put it, but that doesn't mean that she couldn't begin to feel more for you. You need to make sure it stays just sex. Don't get too close to her. Even having sex frequently might lead to that, so be careful. You don't want to hurt her."

Severus scowled at his beer bottle.

"And if you don't like that, then you need to reevaluate everything, my friend. What you want for yourself and what you want with Poppy. And whether your feelings for Hermione are incompatible with that."

"And if they are?"

Gareth shrugged. "You need to decide that. I have probably said and done too much already."

"No, no, you haven't. You have been a good friend, McGonagall," Severus said with a sigh. "I don't know if anything will ever happen between me and Hermione. She is still very young, and I still want my freedom."

"Freedom to do what?"

Severus was quiet for a moment. "To fuck attractive witches." He raised his eyes to meet Gareth's. "Not a very pleasant admission, is it?"

"And what other attractive witches do you have your eye on, other than Poppy?"

"None at the moment. There really aren't very many to choose from."

"I'm sure there must be some. According to you, you're just looking for sex, after all...no strings sex...so you don't have to be too picky."

"Why? Poppy and I can have sex. As long as we are doing it, why fuck some second-rate witch whom I don't like? You're almost as bad as your uncle, though in a different way. Last night he was trying to think of a witch to fix me up with...not just for sex, though, I'm sure."

"No, that wouldn't be like Uncle Albus. He seems to think that all sex should be deeply meaningful. Tries to offer his own misspent youth as an object lesson in the values of chastity, constancy, and moderation. 'Settling down' seems to be a virtue of its own to him." Gareth looked slightly amused.

"Hmmpf. It's easy for him to say that. He has Minerva," Severus said.

"You have a bit of a thing for her, don't you?"

"What?" Severus asked, aghast.

"You have a bit of a thing for Aunt Minerva. I can see it. You fancy her. And even when you were being your most bastardly, you would always do whatever she asked. You would look up at her, you would go all gooey, and she had you," Gareth said with a smirk.

"I do not have a bit of a 'thing' for Minerva, and I do not go 'gooey' over anyone," Severus said stiffly. "We were Heads of House together for many years. I am her Deputy. She is a friend. Do not sully our relationship by suggesting such a thing."

"That's all right, Snape. She's a pretty remarkable witch. I'm not saying it like it's a bad thing," Gareth replied. "She's very fond of you, too, I can tell. Probably looks at you like a son."

"That is even more ridiculous." Severus took a swig of beer, thinking that that was a particularly disgusting thought, given that they had made love when he was afflicted by the *Actus Affectus Amor Verissimus*. "We are close friends. I am friends with both her and Albus, and for a long time, my relationship with Albus was complicated in a way that my relationship with Minerva was not."

"So, have you made any progress practising that spell?" Gareth asked, changing the subject.

"I haven't had very much time to practise. I went to the party on Friday night, then yesterday was busy, and there was a Quidditch match in the afternoon. In the evening, I counselled a troubled student, and then after curfew, I was with Poppy. Today it's been busy, as well. I didn't have any time until just after lunch today. I gave it a try before you arrived."

"And the results?" Gareth asked, interested.

"It was difficult, as you said," Severus admitted. "It was not successful."

"What happened?"

"It didn't take properly. When I came, I had a small ejaculation, and the orgasm was weak, as well." He set down his empty beer bottle and opened a new one, then handed another to Gareth.

"Did you examine the diagrams and really read the instructions?" Gareth asked.

"I do not require an anatomy lesson, and yes, I read the instructions," Severus said, put out. He might not have as much experience with sex as McGonagall, but he certainly understood the mechanisms of it.

"You'll get it. You can try it again now, if you want," Gareth said with a grin. "I could watch and comment on your technique."

"Hmmpf. You would enjoy that, wouldn't you, McGonagall?"

"I have to admit I would."

"I do not masturbate in front of others," Severus said coldly.

Gareth, ignoring his tone, looked him up and down. "Was that a request? Because I would be quite happy to lend a hand."

"I am perfectly capable of practising on my own," Severus said.

Gareth tilted his head and gave a little shrug. "I could give you advice. And if you were successful, I could provide a little variety for you. Masturbating becomes rather dull after the first couple orgasms, believe it or not."

"I don't know if I can now, anyway. It was just before you arrived." He didn't really think that he wanted to have sex with Gareth, though he supposed that the other wizard might be able to offer him some advice. It was also oddly titillating to think that Gareth still found him attractive and wanted to watch him.

"Give it a shot. As I say, I'd be happy to lend a hand. Or tongue. Or other body part."

Severus unbuttoned his trousers. He stared at Gareth as he pulled out his penis. "Pointers?" he asked.

Gareth looked at Severus's penis and shifted in his seat. "Um, first, you should have a full erection."

"I did the last time," Severus said. "Almost made myself come thinking about Poppy whilst I did it, and then I remembered to stop and cast the spell."

"You should do it sooner than that...partly because you need to be able to concentrate enough, but then, too, you don't have to worry about stopping, you can just let go."

"You would like to watch, wouldn't you?"

"Not if it makes you uncomfortable, Severus," Gareth said softly. "If you want to practise now, I am happy to leave you alone and head back down to Hogsmeade, or stay and touch you myself. I do like to touch you, you know."

Severus said, "I don't know if I can do it in front of you. Just sit there and be quiet."

Severus closed his eyes, blanking out his awareness of the wizard sitting across from him, then he took his cock in his hand and began to pull and stroke as he thought of Poppy. Poppy, naked, letting him suckle her breasts as he rubbed her pussy. She wanted him, she wanted him very badly. Sexy, hot, Poppy . . .

He almost forgot the spell again, but he remembered before he became too aroused, and as he cast it, feeling it tingle through his cock all the way deep into his groin, he opened his eyes. Gareth was there, sitting across from him still. He smiled at Severus.

"Very nice, Snape," Gareth said with a nod of approval.

"Now it's your turn, McGonagall," Severus whispered.

Gareth made a move toward him. Severus shook his head. "That is not what I meant," Severus said, stroking his cock languidly.

"Ah. I see."

Gareth took off his sporran and placed it on the floor beside his chair, then he unbuckled his kilt and folded it back. His penis was already partially erect. Gareth gazed at Severus as he took himself in his hand and squeezed, then began to stroke upwards, spreading his legs and taking his balls in his other hand, cupping them and rolling them lightly.

"Spell?" Gareth asked.

Severus nodded. "If you like."

Gareth cast it. This time, Severus was paying more attention, and he noticed that Gareth seemed to give his cock a little squeeze as he cast and that there was an extremely brief, almost imperceptible glow.

"You squeezed," Severus said.

"Just a habit. I don't do a lot of wandless magic, other than in Arithmancy. I find it helps me focus my magic."

"There was a little glow I hadn't noticed before."

"Yes. It was probably too light in the room the last time I cast it on you. I didn't notice it myself for quite a while, but it is always there, I think."

"What colour is it? I didn't quite see."

"Kind of yellowish, I think. Or gold. Why?"

Severus rolled his eyes and Gareth laughed.

"Never seen you do that before," Gareth said, choking.

"What?"

"Roll your eyes. Such a drama queen, Snape!"

"I am *not* a drama queen!"

"Right. So what's with the eye-rolling?" Gareth asked.

"I didn't roll my eyes, either. But just when I think you might be exceptional for a mere Arithmancer, you ask a question like that."

"If I didn't ask, I'd never know. Which is more stupid? I hope your pedagogical methods are better in a classroom of kids, Snape," Gareth said good-naturedly.

"When you do Arithmancy, you cast transmutations, reductions, and expansions. There are a certain range of colours that each of those can take. You have probably noticed that as the spell is taking effect, the colour will shift slightly as it affects the calculation. I am sure you have some sense after practising Arithmancy for so long what the shift means and what you can expect from the transmutation...and, in deference to your sense of injured pride, I will admit that the shifts would mean nothing to me. I only know that they are there."

"Yes, I'm introducing the concept to Hermione, but there is no shift in colour with this spell. I don't think I've noticed it with any regular spells, in fact."

"There is actually a slight, but almost undetectable, shift for most Transfigurations and Healing spells when they take effect, and even for many charms and other spells. It's brief, practically instantaneous, and is usually very close to the same colour of the spell...if the spell even has a colour itself...so it's usually only detectable using special means, unlike in Arithmancy, where it's obvious."

Gareth knit his brow, his cock forgotten, though still in his hand. "Why? Why so obvious in Arithmancy and not in other kinds of magic?"

Severus shrugged. "Your mother would probably know, or Dumbledore. I have only made a study of it because of my work at trying to mask spells, making one spell look

like a different one. It also can make a spell more effective if you understand how it resonates. It becomes more focussed and stronger. Knowing that this spell is a pale gold should help me to cast it more effectively."

"You should take an apprentice yourself, Snape," Gareth said, taking a swallow of beer.

Severus snorted. "As though anyone would trust a Death Eater...or a Death Eater's apprentice...particularly with Potions."

Gareth tilted his head noncommittally and reached for his beer. "That's a discussion for another time. I'm beginning to wilt. The discussion of spell theory is mentally stimulating but not very titillating."

"I want to see you unwilt, McGonagall," Severus said, "then I want to see you come."

Gareth began to stroke himself again, quickly becoming fully erect, then his eyes closed. His breathing heavy, he said, "Talk to me, Snape."

Severus hesitated only a moment, trying to think of what to say to a man, then he said, his voice low and silky, "You must be proud of that cock of yours, McGonagall. It's very big and you know how to fuck with it. You even fucked me, McGonagall, stuck your cock right up my arse and fucked me till I came. Your cock was right up my virgin arse, and you're so good, you made me come even though I don't like cocks. But I liked yours. And now you're letting me watch you masturbate until you come. Do you think I find it exciting to watch you masturbate? I actually do. I never would have imagined it could be exciting, but watching you pull your cock...yes, come, come, Gareth!"

Gareth's cock twitched and pulsed as he came without ejaculating. Severus had been lightly stroking his own erection as he watched Gareth, and now he stroked harder, closing his eyes.

"And now I'm going to come, McGonagall. Fuck, I'm coming! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Severus came hard, but the spell was a success, and he didn't ejaculate. He opened his eyes and smiled at Gareth, not a toothy grin, but still, a broad smile for Severus.

"Very good, Snape," Gareth said. "Don't be disappointed, though, if it gives out with the next orgasm."

"You are even more of a pessimist than I am sometimes, McGonagall."

"I'm not saying that it will, and even if it does, you have got the spell essentially mastered, and it's just a matter of getting it to last until you release it."

"Hmmpf. That happened to you, didn't it? It worked but gave out early?"

"Yes, on the third orgasm, so don't feel bad. You're already doing better than I did...and maybe if you hadn't waited so long to cast it the first time you did, it would have taken. You are a very fast learner, Snape."

"I told you," Severus said smugly. "What next?"

"You want me to do anything for you? I could think of a few things." He licked his lips.

"What do you think about when you masturbate?" Severus asked.

"Most of the time, nothing much. I just concentrate on the sensation. If I'm in a relationship, I might think about that person. If I'm not in a relationship, then sometimes I think about a particularly good lover, or I imagine being with someone I lust after."

"Talk to me, McGonagall," Severus said in a low voice. "Talk to me about a witch you fucked. Tell me everything you did. I want to come whilst you tell me about what you did."

"Mmm, all right," Gareth said. "Imagine this. Gorgeous, tall Mediterranean beauty. Olive skin, long, wavy black hair, nice round arse. I met Lieke at a party, though I'd seen her around before that. There was a big pool, and she was in this little tiny Muggle bathing suit."

"What were her breasts like?"

"Oh, they were wonderful. Full but firm, and her tan could be called seamless. She must have sunbathed naked. And her nipples were big and dark. But I didn't see them yet. I saw them later. I followed her into the house when she went to find more ice..."

"Were there other people there?"

"Yes, but they were all at the pool. I followed her into the kitchen. She turned and saw me. I was getting quite the erection just looking at her, thinking what we could be doing together. It was very evident because I was wearing only my swimming shorts. She looked me up and down and asked me if I need some ice for my swelling."

Severus smirked.

"I told her that I'd rather suffer unless I could relieve it in another way," Gareth said. "She walked up to me, right there in the kitchen, and said that she thought she might be able to help with that. She tugged once on that little top of hers, and it fell right off. I took those gorgeous breasts in my hands and licked her tits as she pushed off the rest of her suit. I took her down to the floor..."

"In the kitchen?" Severus asked.

"Oh, yes, right there in the kitchen. I started licking and kissing her body all the way down to her cunt. She had only this little thatch of hair that her bikini had covered, but she still had a luscious pussy, dark and all woman. She was screaming as I licked her nub, pounding her fists on the floor. I thought someone might hear us, so I rose up on my knees and reached for the bowl of ice on the counter. I took a handful and rubbed it on her pussy, but it didn't cool her off at all. She wriggled and squirmed as I rubbed her. I even put a piece of ice in her, and she was so hot, it melted fast, and I sucked and licked her as it ran out. She sat up, pushing me back, then she sat on my face and pulled down my shorts and started sucking me whilst she fucked my face. I cast a spell so I wouldn't orgasm yet, but she came again as I tongued her. I pushed out from under her, but I held her there so that she was crouching on the floor in front of me, her arse in the air. I pushed my cock into her and started to fuck her hard. She was so juicy and hot...that's right, come, Snape! Come!"

Severus shuddered, opened his eyes, and let out a long breath, then he said, "You can't stop there."

Gareth grinned. "I was fucking her from behind, still holding off my orgasm, and she was moaning as my cock pumped in and out, and she came again. She just kept coming and coming. Lieke was one hot fuck. When she finally relaxed, I pulled out of her and she looked back at me, then turned around, still on her knees, and looked at my cock. She said I still had a swelling that needed to be taken care of. She stood up, grabbed my penis and pulled me backwards into the dining room. When she got me there, she pushed me down into a chair and conjured bonds, tying my hands behind my back. She straddled me, her tits brushing my chest, then she sat on my cock. There we were, I was tied up on a chair in the dining room, my cock was up her pussy as she fucked me, both of us moaning, and would you believe that someone walked in on us?"

Severus opened his eyes again. "What happened?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"It was a mutual friend, Andreas. He just looked at us for a minute...Lieke had stopped moving as soon as he walked in...and then he asked if it was a private party or if he could join us. Lieke got up...and I almost cried, I'd been so close to coming...and she told Andreas that there was an admission price. She wanted to watch Andreas suck me off before he could do anything else. She knew Andreas well, and apparently he'd been lusting after me for a while, but I didn't know it. He also liked both women and men, but I'd thought he was only interested in witches since that's all I'd seen him with."

"So he joined you?" Severus asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Oh, he joined us, he joined us both. The three of us had a very good time together, both of them so sexy, both of them together . . ." Gareth said, his eyes closing as he stroked himself to orgasm.

Severus watched as Gareth's penis pulsed as he came.

Gareth opened his eyes and reached for his beer.

Severus had come again as Gareth was talking; this time, it hadn't felt as strong. He blinked at Gareth.

"Do you do that often?"

"You mean with more than one partner? No. That was actually my first time, about ten or eleven years ago, and I've only done it once since then. I like concentrating on one lover, and I like the depth of intimacy with only one other person, especially as we get to know each other better. Not that it wasn't hot, of course."

"Did you see her again?"

Gareth laughed. "Yeah, when she and Andreas got married. I was his best man."

"They got married?"

"They did. They'd just been friends until that afternoon at the party, then one thing led to another, and they got married."

"That's . . . bizarre," Severus said.

Gareth shrugged. "I thought it was one of my more interesting encounters. Most of them are much less unusual. But that's why I told it to you, because it was different. I thought you might find it exciting."

"Yes, and I did come again, but it wasn't very good. I didn't ejaculate, though," Severus said, looking down at his penis.

"So, tell me a story, Snape."

"I haven't got one. My early experiences were unpleasant and painful, for the most part, the ones that weren't with prostitutes or, well, with witches who might as well have been prostitutes, and I don't want to compromise Poppy by saying anything more than I already have."

"Didn't you have any other lovers?" Gareth asked curiously.

Severus's mind flashed to Minerva. "Just one, but that is even more private, and it was only one time, really."

"Mind if I ask you a very personal question?" Gareth asked.

Severus rolled his eyes. "I've just masturbated in front of you, McGonagall. How much more personal do you think you can get? It's not as though I'd be compelled to answer you."

"I've just been wondering . . . for some time now, actually . . . since even before, um, well, before I liked you very much. Since that first shower."

"What?"

"Are all Death Eaters like you?"

Severus's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Just wondering whether it was part of becoming a Death Eater," he said, gesturing with his beer bottle. "You know, being cut?"

"Cut? We were branded. You've seen the mark where it used to be. You saw it before then. It was a brand, a burn, not a cut."

"I meant . . . your penis. Are all Death Eaters circumcised?"

Severus opened his mouth, then closed it. He swallowed. He'd been teased some about it when he was in school at Hogwarts, but no one had mentioned it since then. He'd thought it was normal until he'd gone to school, Muggle primary school, and realised that the other little boys looked different. He thought it was a stupid question on Gareth's part, but Gareth had likely not had occasion to see other Death Eaters naked.

"No," Severus replied shortly. "It was done when I was a baby."

"Oh." Gareth didn't look as though his curiosity had been satisfied. "Why? If I may ask. I know it's personal, another bloke's cock, even though we're . . . you know."

"Because my father was," Severus said. "And my father was circumcised because his mother was Jewish. His father, Botoolph Snape, was C of E. I do not believe that any of them were particularly religious. However . . . after what my grandmother and her parents had escaped when they came to England in nineteen thirty-three, I think that my grandmother believed it to be an important symbol of their heritage. That is what my father told me when I asked why I looked different from the other boys at school. My mother apparently was displeased about it. Obviously, though, it wasn't something I discussed with her, particularly not after my father left us. And, to correct a . . . a misstatement I made to you once, my middle name isn't 'Samuel.' I was named after my father's grandfather, who had been a concert violinist, Shmuel Morgenstern. Shmuel is Samuel in English, and Samuel is what my great-grandfather went by every day, and my dad used to call me 'Sammy' when I was little, but that's not what's on my Muggle birth certificate. It's actually Shmuel." He waited for Gareth's reaction to his peculiar Muggle middle name, the one his mother had hated so.

"Ah . . . I see." Gareth thought for a moment, considering what his friend had told him about his Muggle family. "And you became a Death Eater. You are a puzzle, Snape. A lovable puzzle, but a puzzle."

"Shut up, McGonagall." Severus took a swig of beer, clutching his penis in the other hand, absently squeezing it. "It could have been worse. I could have been named for one of my own grandfathers, Botoolph or Drusus."

Gareth laughed. "Actually, 'Severus Drusus Snape' doesn't have a bad ring to it. Very posh and pureblood, very hoity-toity. Or 'Drusus Botoolph'..."

"Just leave it, McGonagall!"

"Okay, Severus. You're right. Sorry. And I actually like the name 'Shmuel.' It has character and strength, rather like one of my favourite wizards," Gareth said. He looked down at his erection. "Let's release the spell and come now. Even having you here, masturbating becomes dull."

Severus nodded. "I didn't know what you meant before when you said that, but I do now."

"It's different when you're with a witch, though. Then it's really good." Gareth looked over at Severus's cock. "You want me to pleasure you?"

Severus hesitated. "No, I don't think so. I want my first time ejaculating after I cast this spell myself to be with someone else...really with someone else, not like this...and to be with Poppy. No offense, McGonagall." He didn't really want to have sex with anyone other than Poppy again, not for a while, anyway, but he didn't want to admit that to Gareth.

Gareth smiled and nodded. "None taken. I think in that case, if you don't object, I'm just going to release the spell and let my erection fade."

"No, that's fine." Severus looked at his penis. "How will I know if the spell really worked if I do that?"

"It was sufficiently effective, Snape. You can practise again by yourself if you want to make certain."

They each released the spell. Severus fixed his trousers, but there was still a noticeable bulge.

"You want another beer, McGonagall?" he asked as Gareth put down his empty bottle.

"Sure." He didn't bother to buckle his kilt around him.

Severus flicked the bottle caps off two bottles of beer and handed one to Gareth.

"How long does it take for the erection to go down after ending the spell and not orgasming?" Severus asked.

"A little longer than usual, I think, but that just may be because of the level of arousal. Obviously, I don't do this very often." Gareth held the cold bottle against his cock, turning it so that the condensation spread over his shaft.

"You might want to cover yourself up," Severus suggested.

Gareth shrugged, but he put his bottle down on the table next to him and felt for the ends of his kilt. He looked up.

"What's that?" Gareth asked.

"Bollocks! Someone's at the door! Get into the loo...quick, just go though the bedroom!" Severus said as Gareth opened the wrong door and stopped, seeing the bedroom.

Buttoning his frockcoat in front of him and hoping that it covered him enough, Severus stood and drew his wand to open the door, then he spied the parchment with the spell on it lying on the floor next to his chair. He picked it up and shoved it into his pocket. Instead of using his wand to open the door, he walked over and opened it himself.

Chapter Fifty-Three: Dinner at Delancie's

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus and Poppy spend time together in the afternoon, then go to dinner in Diagon Alley.

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall, Mr Delancie, others

Chapter Fifty-Three: Dinner at Delancie's

Chapter 54 of 118

Sunday, 14 March 1999. Severus and Poppy spend time together in the afternoon, then go to dinner in Diagon Alley.

Author's Note: *Rated for several paragraphs of explicit sexual content partway through the chapter.*



Chapter Fifty-Three: Dinner at Delancie's

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus opened the door, looked at his unexpected visitor, and blinked.

"Hi, Severus! I wrote that memo and did a few other tasks, then I thought I'd come down and accept your invitation," Poppy said. "If it's still open, of course," she added, taking in Severus's peculiar expression.

"Naturally. I was simply surprised to see you, since you had said you weren't interested," Severus said, opening the door wider. "Please, come in. McGonagall is in the loo."

Severus pulled another chair around for Poppy. "We've been drinking beer," he said, "but if you would prefer something else, I have brandy and firewhisky, or I could call a house-elf for something else."

"No, a beer would be good, thanks," Poppy said as she took a seat.

Severus went over to a cupboard and took out a glass for her.

"I don't need a glass, Severus. From the bottle is fine," Poppy said.

Severus removed the cap from a bottle of beer, then handed it to her.

Poppy looked toward the loo door. "He's taking a while." She glanced at the empty beer bottles. "But I can see why."

Severus was saved from having to say anything by Gareth's emergence from the loo.

"Poppy! It's nice to see you," Gareth said warmly, "and looking so very lovely as usual. That blue is perfect for you."

Poppy smiled brightly at him. "Thank you. Severus mentioned that you were coming by for a drink, and I hadn't seen you in a while, so I thought I'd drop in and say hello."

Gareth bent and kissed her cheek before sitting down. "It's a wonderful surprise."

Severus felt slightly uncomfortable with the situation. Poppy didn't know that Gareth knew about them, but he was fairly certain that Gareth wouldn't let on that he knew. He also felt peculiar when Gareth kissed her, though apparently it was something that Poppy expected, since she put her hand on his cheek as he kissed hers. In addition, Severus thought that if he didn't pee, he would explode. Fortunately, his erection had subsided significantly in the last few minutes.

"Excuse me, Poppy, but as you noticed, we've had a couple beers, and I need to make a visit myself," Severus said as he stood.

Poppy nodded to him, and as he stepped into the loo, he heard her asking Gareth about how his mother was. A safe enough topic, Severus thought, even if it still made him uncomfortable to contemplate.

After using the loo, Severus returned through the bedroom, stopping to put the spell back in its place in the bottom of his cufflink box.

"I will come down to Hogsmeade sometime this week and take Gertrude out for lunch or dinner," Poppy was saying as Severus reentered to the sitting room. "I'll have to look at my schedule, but I'll owl and let you both know. I hadn't realised how long it had been since I'd seen her."

Gareth nodded. "I'm sure she'd like that."

"And how is Hermione doing?" Poppy asked.

"Well, she is progressing very satisfactorily with her Arithmancy and she's enjoying her Muggle classes, too," Gareth replied.

Poppy took a sip of her beer.

"You mentioned that she's in a bad mood today. Has she decided what she's going to do this summer?" Severus asked.

"Not yet. I think that's one of the reasons for her mood today. She's trying to decide." Gareth looked at Poppy and explained, "She wants to take another Muggle course, but Alroy wants her to spend more time on her Animagus training. I got the impression that he suggested he might not continue with her training if she couldn't do that. Naturally, being Hermione, she wants to be able to do it all, but her apprenticeship is her first priority. I've already been flexible with her schedule, but it still takes most of her time. She needs to decide whether to take her Muggle courses or concentrate on the Animagus training."

"It seems obvious to me that the Muggle courses can wait. She can take them later if she wants to," Poppy said.

"That is what I suggested to her," Severus said.

"She'll likely do that," Gareth replied. "She's just agonising over it right now because she can. I also think that some of her Muggle friends from her current class are all taking the same course this summer, and she feels she'll miss out on something."

The three talked a while longer, the conversation moving on to other topics, to Severus's relief, then Gareth stood.

"I had better be going, Snape," he said, bending to pick up his sporran, which he had forgotten in his run to the loo. "It was very good to see you, Poppy. You really should come down sometime and have dinner with us. Perhaps over the Easter holiday. I think that Hermione will be spending most of it with her parents, so unless I can get Mum to take a bit of a holiday for herself, it will just be me and Mum for a week."

"You give Hermione the Easter holiday?" Severus asked. He'd had two days' holiday when he was an apprentice: Christmas day and New Year's Day.

"Yes. I only had a long weekend over Easter when I was an apprentice, but it seemed a good thing for us all to have longer, so she has ten days off. She has some time this summer, too." Gareth grinned. "I'm just an old softie, you know."

"You are that," Poppy said with an affectionate smile. She stood and gave him a kiss and a hug. "Let Gertrude know to expect my owl!"

"I will," Gareth replied.

Severus saw Gareth out the door, feeling rather sore about Poppy's warm embrace of Gareth. Of course, he told himself, Poppy had no idea how Gareth felt about her or she would be much more circumspect, he was sure.

Poppy smiled at him. "So, are you tired of company, should I leave?"

Severus walked over to her and gazed into her eyes. He shook his head. "I enjoyed McGonagall's company, but I am glad he is gone so that I can enjoy yours and have you all to myself." His thumb caressed her cheek. "He was right about the robes. I should have told you. You have beautiful eyes. These blue robes make them seem very blue. The pale violet ones you had on the other day made them a most unusual shade of grey, and you looked lovely in those, too. You look absolutely beautiful, Poppy."

Poppy blushed and shook her head slightly.

"Don't contradict me," Severus said in his most dangerous low voice. "You don't want to contemplate what I might do if you contradict me." He kissed her lips lightly but sensuously. "You really don't."

"Why, what would you do?" Poppy asked, her colour heightened and her pulse racing.

"I would have to . . . convince you to agree with me. Using whatever means necessary," Severus replied, his eyes raking her face and travelling lower to focus on her cleavage.

"I don't know, you might just have to do that," Poppy said. "I am not sure I believe you."

"You are beautiful and sexy," Severus said as he began to take her hair down, tossing her hairpins onto the table behind her. "Lovely honey brown hair." He bent and kissed her eyelids. "Beautiful eyes." He kissed her lips then licked them. "Tasty and beautiful lips. Mmmm. You have the most wonderful lips."

"Still, I am not convinced," Poppy said.

"I have not begun yet," Severus said with a smirk. He looked at her, his chest moving with his breath. "Take off those robes. It's not just your robes that make you beautiful. Take them off."

Severus stepped back and watched as Poppy slowly undressed.

"The stockings and knickers, too," Severus said. "Don't cover up anything."

Poppy removed her stockings and knickers. Her nipples were tight peaks.

"Are you chilly?" Severus asked. "Or are you excited?" He didn't wait for her reply, but waved his wand, casting a warming charm on the room. He put his wand on the table. "Let me see if it excites you to undress for me."

Severus stepped forward and reached out, touching her left breast. His hand travelled down over her body to her crux. He slipped one finger in to touch her folds.

"You are wet," Severus said. He began to stroke her clitoris with his finger. "Very wet. Are you excited, Poppy?"

"A little," she said.

"You lie," Severus said with a growl. "I am going to have to take extreme measures, I can see that, to convince you that I was telling the truth when I told you that you are beautiful and to teach you not to lie to me."

Severus pulled Poppy to him, holding her firmly against him as he began to kiss her throat, one finger still at her clitoris.

"Your pulse is racing," he whispered in her ear. "Are you excited?"

"Only a little," Poppy said breathlessly.

"Oh, you are a liar," Severus said. "Such a liar."

Severus led her to the bedroom door and opened it. "Go in and lie down on the bed," he directed.

He watched Poppy cross the room, then he closed the door behind her. He undressed quickly, then opened the door to the bedroom again. Poppy had drawn back the covers and lain down on her side, propped on one elbow, her head in one hand, waiting for him.

"Beautiful," Severus said. "Very beautiful and sexy." He walked up to her and ran his hand over her side. "Such a sexy figure."

"Really?" Poppy asked.

"Don't you see this?" Severus asked, pointing at his erection. "Very sexy. Beautiful, creamy skin, sexy figure, mmmm, such breasts."

"You're just randy. I'm not sexy," Poppy said, trying not to grin as she teased him, but still pleased that he was attracted to her...and not just attracted to her, but that he would say she was beautiful, too.

"You just want me to prove it to you, don't you?"

Poppy looked at his erection. "I've done fairly well so far."

"You like that? You like my cock?" Severus asked.

"Just a little," Poppy said, her eyes sparkling.

"I think you like it more than a little. I think you like it a lot. I think you like it so much, you want to kiss it. You do, don't you?"

Poppy licked her lips. "May I?"

"I insist you do," Severus replied, taking the last step to the bed so that his legs pressed against it.

Poppy pushed up on one arm and leaned toward him. She kissed the head of his cock, then her tongue flicked out briefly and touched him.

"You do like it. You shouldn't have done that if you didn't want to do more," Severus growled. "Now you have to suck me, because I know how much you want it."

She kissed his cock again, then she lowered herself on him, licking him as her head bobbed.

"That's enough!" Severus said after only a few seconds. "I don't want you to enjoy yourself too much. Besides, I have a surprise for you." He took hold of his cock, then he said more hesitantly, "If this works, I think you'll like it. But it's a new spell."

"What is it?" Poppy asked curiously.

"Let's just see if it works."

Severus closed his eyes and concentrated, then he cast the spell nonverbally. He opened his eyes to see Poppy looking at his cock closely. She glanced up at him.

"It doesn't look any different," she said.

Severus smirked. "That's good."

"I am still not convinced," Poppy said.

"I am going to have to convince you, then," Severus said, pushing her back on the bed and climbing on top of her. "You are beautiful and sexy, Poppy."

He used his own legs to spread hers more, then he leaned down and kissed her, one hand on her shoulder and the other beside her head. He moved his hips until his cock found her crux, then he pushed forward and slid into her, still kissing her, breaking away to take a gasping breath, and then kissing her again.

"Oh, so hot, so sexy, so beautiful," Severus murmured as he pumped into her.

Poppy's hands went to his buttocks, squeezing and kneading as he moved in her. She gasped and writhed, arching her back, then she watched as he raised himself up and looked down at her.

"You are so beautiful, I'm coming now, I'm coming, Poppy!" He thrust harder and came, pulsing but not ejaculating.

Severus relaxed and lay on top of Poppy for a moment before pushing back up and smiling down at her as he began to pump again, his erection as firm as it had been before he came.

"And now it's your turn, Poppy. I want you to come, too."

Poppy stopped him, putting her hands at his waist. "What...?"

"I told you I thought you would like this spell," Severus said with a slight smirk. "I learned it for you. Because you are so beautiful and sexy and I want you to enjoy my cock as much as you want."

"You came? Really?"

"I did. I came because you are so hot and sexy, and I can come again and again for as long as you want me," Severus said, very pleased with himself.

Poppy blinked, but her smile grew. "I am very glad that you will enjoy it so much yourself, Severus."

"I know," Severus said, kissing her cheek softly. "That's why I thought you would enjoy it. You want us both to enjoy it; you always want me to be satisfied, too. You are so good to me, Poppy. That is part of your beauty."

"All right, Severus, you have me convinced, but don't stop. I was enjoying that, especially the masterful Severus Snape who was taking what he wanted...because I trust you and know you wouldn't do anything I didn't want, and that, dear Severus, is a part of *your* beauty."

Severus kissed her again, then began to move inside of her, thrusting and pumping slowly until her moaning grew louder, then he began to stroke harder and faster. As she came, he let loose and came again, orgasming but without losing his erection. He found he was still too sensitive to move very much immediately following the orgasm, but within seconds, he began again.

Poppy urged him onto his side and put one leg around him, then she closed her eyes, rolling her hips as he thrust.

"Ah ah ah, Severus, I'm coming again! Don't stop, don't stop! Yes yes yes!"

She rested against him, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. Severus was kissing her face, murmuring to her, telling her she was sexy and beautiful. She turned her mouth toward his and kissed him, pulling his lips between hers, then sucking his tongue into her mouth and gently suckling its tip. He moaned and began to move his hips again. Poppy pushed him onto his back, then sat up and began to slide back and forth on his cock. Severus raised his hands to her breasts, fondling them as she rode him, watching as she reached her peak again.

"Gods, Severus, oh, gods, Severus, so very good, ooohhh!" Tears ran down her face as she came, and he felt her vagina pulse around him.

Severus gently rubbed her back as she rested on top of him.

Poppy lifted her head. "You're still hard," she whispered.

"I'm not very good at this yet. I didn't release it when I should have. But it's fine this way. If you're tired, I can end the spell and just let it subside on its own."

Poppy shook her head. "I'm tired, but I want you to be satisfied, too."

"I don't know that I'm not," Severus replied.

"Fuck me again and come, Severus," Poppy whispered.

"Are you sure?"

Poppy smiled. "Very sure."

Severus kissed her, then rolled her back onto her back. He pulled out of her and put his hand around his cock. The instructions said it wasn't necessary to touch the penis to release the spell, but Severus wanted to be certain. After he had cast the nonverbal *Finite*, he slipped back into Poppy.

"You are beautiful and sexy, Poppy. Such a sexy witch," Severus said as he moved in her.

"Mmm, still so good, still so good," Poppy said, her hips rising to meet him.

Severus came quickly, his orgasm seeming to encompass his entire body as he ejaculated. Gasping for breath, he collapsed on top of Poppy. As he returned to himself, Severus became aware of her arms around him as she gently caressed his back and buttocks. He kissed her cheek softly and, with some effort, pushed up on one arm and rolled off of her. Poppy put her head on his chest and one arm around his waist.

Severus sleepily caressed her shoulder. "I'll get better at that," he said.

"It was very good," Poppy said.

"I think it could be more fun for you, though," he replied, thinking he should have spent more time on foreplay for her. That was actually one of the most enjoyable things about making love to Poppy, the foreplay. Touching her skin everywhere, kissing her, licking her, feeling his own skin against her warmth. He sighed happily and pulled closer to her.

"Mmm, however you would like to use it," Poppy replied. "It's a nice spell, though. I've heard there were such spells, but never knew anyone who knew one. Where did you find it?"

Severus smirked. "I am very resourceful when motivated," he said.

"I would say so," Poppy said, snuggling up against him.

Severus waved a hand and drew the sheet up over them.

"I think it's dinnertime," Poppy said.

"I don't have to be there tonight, and I don't think you do, either," Severus replied.

"We should still eat, though."

"Mmm. Are you hungry?"

"A little."

Severus opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her. "Are you lying to me again?" he asked with a smirk.

"I wouldn't dare," Poppy laughed.

"I suppose we should get dressed and call Twiskett for some supper," Severus said reluctantly.

"We don't have to just yet."

"I don't want you to be hungry." He gave her a quick kiss then got out of bed. "I'll bring you your clothes." As she pushed off the sheet and sat up, Severus looked at her with a soft expression on his face. "You are beautiful, Poppy. I look at you, and I see beauty."

Poppy just blushed and said, "Our clothes, Severus."

Severus made a quick trip to the bathroom, then brought their clothes into the bedroom and draped hers carefully at the foot of the bed.

As he began to pull on his own underwear, he said, "Since we don't have to be here this evening, would you like to go into Hogsmeade for something to eat? Or Diagon Alley?"

Poppy hesitated. This was feeling too good to her, and now this felt like a date. She would just have to remind herself that it wasn't.

"We don't have to," Severus said. "If you don't want to be seen with me. I know it could be..."

"Why wouldn't I want to be seen with you? Yes, I would like that. I wasn't thinking that at all," Poppy said.

"It's all right. I'm used to people whispering when they see me on the street. It doesn't happen very much in Hogsmeade, but in Diagon Alley, I'm still something of a freak show," Severus said. "I shouldn't even have suggested exposing you to that." He should have suggested a Muggle evening, as he had with Hermione, he thought, but he hadn't much Muggle money in his possession at the moment.

"Too bad, because now I have my heart set on going to Diagon Alley this evening," Poppy said as she rolled on her stockings and activated their charms.

"Why don't we just call Twiskett? It would be faster, and you're hungry."

"Not so hungry that I can't wait for dinner in Diagon Alley," Poppy said, standing and Summoning her shoes from the sitting room.

Severus nodded. Now he was nervous. He hadn't planned to ask her out to dinner. This was as bad as having asked Hermione on the unintentional date. And now he was on a date with Poppy. Whatever he might say to her or to anyone else, it felt like a date to him. He wanted her to have a good time. He wanted her to enjoy being with him and to feel romanced. They were having sex, but he wanted her to know that he cared about her and didn't see her as some kind of cheap whore. Severus looked at her out of the corner of his eye as he sat and pulled on his boots. Gareth was right, he had to make up his mind about her and what he thought their relationship was. He also needed to figure out what he really felt for Hermione, other than an obstinate gratitude and undeniable physical attraction, and what it was he felt for Poppy. He did think he might want more with Poppy, though, Gareth had been right about that. Talking to Poppy about it, however . . . no, that wasn't an option. She still thought of this as a fling with particularly good sex with a younger colleague. He didn't want her to stop wanting to have sex with him just because he was thinking about their relationship beyond the sex. He'd have to find a subtle way of getting her to think about their relationship and getting her wanting more, as well.

"I just need to use your loo and put my hair back up, and I'll be ready," Poppy said cheerfully.

In the loo, putting her hair up, Poppy was less cheerful. Accepting an invitation to dinner was probably a bad idea. She would feel closer to him, something she wanted to avoid, but once he'd said that about a "freak show," she couldn't change her mind. There was no way that she was going to let him think that she was embarrassed to be seen in public with him. It was just a meal, anyway.

She left the loo through the door to the sitting room. Severus was crouched in front of the fireplace, but he stood as Poppy closed the door.

"I just told Minerva that we are going out for something to eat," Severus said, trying to sound casual about it.

Poppy nodded. "Good. It's chilly. I should stop by my rooms and get a cloak."

"You can wear one of mine," Severus offered. "I can Transfigure it for you."

"Yes, well, all right," Poppy replied, somewhat surprised.

Severus returned from his room a moment later with a lightweight black wool cape.

"Put it on so I can get the size right," Severus said, draping it over her shoulders.

First, he cast a spell to shrink it to fit her, then he cast another to change the colour to match the blue of her robes.

"Thank you, Severus."

He nodded and took his long black cape from the coat tree in the corner of the sitting room. As he did the clasp at the neck, his sense of anxiety increased. Poppy was going out in public with the great black bat of the dungeons. Whatever she might feel for him, collegial, friendly, or otherwise, it would be embarrassing for her to be seen with him. He'd not been a popular figure in Diagon Alley before the end of the war; afterward, he had become an object of fascination, the Death Eater who had fooled the Dark Lord, the Death Eater who had almost died and then been brought back to life by a wizard whom everyone had believed to be dead. Unfortunately, despite the two Orders of Merlin he had received, not all of the fascination was positive. Too many people assumed...correctly...that he had still participated in Death Eater activities even as a spy. Despite the stories of a few occasions in which he had foiled the Dark Lord's plans...including the attack on Scrimgeour's granddaughter's family in which he had saved everyone and risked his life to rescue a four-year-old boy, a story which Severus believed that Minerva had leaked to the *Prophet*...many people distrusted him and some clearly despised him.

"I think we should just go to Hogsmeade," Severus said as they left his rooms. "The Three Broomsticks. Or McTavish Street." In Edinburgh, they were more discreet about their interest in him, although he rarely spent any time there, either.

"If you want to. I really had my heart set on Diagon Alley, though, since it has been so long since I've been to London," Poppy replied.

As they walked through the castle, they began to encounter others, mostly groups of students returning from dinner or on their way to the library or elsewhere. Severus strode along, trying simultaneously to appear completely dissociated from the witch beside him whilst being considerate of Poppy's shorter stride.

Severus almost let out a sigh of relief when they finally stepped through the front doors to leave the castle. The two did not speak until after they had passed through the gates.

"Are you sure about Diagon Alley?" Severus asked.

"Yes, unless you don't feel up to Apparating," Poppy said, not wanting to force him to go if he really didn't want to, but still wanting him to know that she would go to London with him.

"I can Apparate us both," Severus said.

Poppy nodded and stepped toward him, taking his arm.

Severus nodded. "Hold on."

Poppy closed her eyes, felt the sensation of Side-Along Apparition, then opened them to find that Severus had brought them to a spot close to the Leaky Cauldron.

"Where would you like to go?" Severus asked.

"The Leaky Cauldron would be fine," Poppy said.

Severus frowned. The clientele of the Leaky Cauldron was somewhat mixed and the quality of the food was uneven. He ate there occasionally, but not often...though he usually timed his visits to London so that he wouldn't need to eat whilst he was there. There was also a place that had opened up in the autumn, the Love Apple, run by the same family that ran Aphrodite's Apple in McTavish Street and specialising in tomato-based dishes, but he didn't think that he wanted to bring Poppy someplace with a name like that, not this time, anyway. The Goblin's Knee down by Gringotts was small, dark, and intimate, a place for lovers to bring their dates, the Phoebus Café didn't serve meals that late on a Sunday, and the only other places he could think of were dives in Knockturn Alley, worse than the Leaky Cauldron. There was Delancie's. The Muggle-born proprietor had reopened his restaurant a few months before. It had needed a complete renovation, since after Delancie had gone into hiding shortly following Dumbledore's faked death, the restaurant had been essentially destroyed by Death Eaters. The restaurant was very expensive and very posh, but Severus also thought it might be one place where the clientele and the staff all might be polite enough not to stare at him too much.

Severus started to walk down the street, Poppy skipping to catch up with him. He slowed his pace.

"Not the Leaky Cauldron, then?" Poppy asked.

"No, not the Leaky Cauldron," Severus replied. "We don't have reservations, but I thought of Delancie's."

"Delancie's? All right," Poppy said. That would be very expensive. Hardly just a casual supper. But without a reservation, it was unlikely that they would get a table, anyway.

They walked in, Poppy catching her breath after what had felt like a forced march up the length of Diagon Alley. Severus looked much cooler and more collected than Poppy felt at that moment.

A young, well-groomed wizard looked up. He blanched. "Professor Snape!" He saw Poppy. "Madam Pomfrey." He blinked, then his training took over. "Table for two...do you have reservations, sir?"

"No, Easton, we do not." The young wizard had left school after his fifth year about five years before. He had been mediocre at Potions and most other subjects, from what Snape could remember of him.

Easton ran his finger down a list in front of him. "One moment, sir, ma'am. I do not see a table available, but I will check with Mr Delancie."

Severus shook his head, but the young wizard was already gone, disappearing behind a door which was covered in dark leather with brass decorative fixtures.

"Let's go," Severus said curtly.

Poppy put her hand on his elbow. "Let's wait and see."

Severus was torn. He doubted that Delancie would come out and scornfully tell him that his kind weren't welcome in his restaurant, but it was still a possibility that he would send a similar response out with Easton, just more politely worded. He had been doing more stupid, ill-conceived things in the last week than he had in years. He looked down at Poppy's bright eyes. He would wait.

Just a moment later, Delancie emerged, Easton behind him. The elegant, grey-haired wizard smiled genially. "Professor Snape, Madam Pomfrey, welcome! May I show you to your table? Easton will take your cloaks."

Severus looked a little reluctant to hand over his cape, but he did, just giving Easton a slight warning glare as he gave it to him. Easton merely bowed in response.

"I thought you were fully booked," Poppy said as the proprietor led them through the restaurant. She felt a bit awkward, dressed as she was, since the other patrons were in much finer robes. She hadn't even bothered with any make-up charms that day.

"I always have at least one table which I keep available for very special guests, such as yourselves," Delancie replied. He bowed slightly as, with a sweep of his hand, he presented them with their table, then he held Poppy's chair for her. He took the menus from a waiter who had quietly appeared at his elbow, and handed them to Poppy and Severus. He looked straight at Severus and said, "There will always be a table for Severus Snape at my restaurant. Tomás will take your orders. Please do let him know if there is anything that does not meet your satisfaction."

Tomás recommended a wine, which Severus agreed to after glancing at Poppy to check for her approval. Severus had been here only once with Albus several years before. He tried not to look surprised by the prices. With the Order of Merlin money, he reminded himself that he could certainly afford it, but he did not carry very much cash on him. He remembered that Albus had signed for their meal; he certainly hoped he could do the same, or he could barely afford the wine they had just ordered. Deciding that since he didn't have the cash to pay for anything, he thought that they might as well not pay any attention to the prices at all and simply assume that he could sign and have it taken from his Gringotts account.

"This is quite something," Poppy said, looking at the menu. She looked around at the other diners. The tables were all set at discreet distances, and there were plants set at intervals, a few painted screens, and other decorative fixtures, all of which lent a sense of privacy for the diners regardless of where they were sitting. Their own table was small and round, and Delancie had somehow quickly banished two of the four chairs as he had seated them.

"What would you like?" Severus asked. He tried to behave as though this was a perfectly ordinary occasion. "I thought a few appetisers before the meal would be nice."

"If you like . . . I would be happy with just a main course," Poppy said, surveying the right-hand column trying to find the least expensive dish.

"I forbid you to do that," Severus said sternly.

"What?" Poppy asked, surprised.

"Order only a main dish, for one, and for another, choose it by looking at the prices. It is not allowed."

"I haven't very much money with me," Poppy whispered.

"I am offended," Severus said, putting down his menu. "I invited you out to dinner. I certainly do not expect you to pay for it."

Poppy blushed. "I just wasn't sure. I'm sorry."

Severus nodded. "I am glad that is clear." The corners of his mouth twitched. "We can split the bill if we go to Madam Puddifoot's."

"You never go to Madam Puddifoot's," Poppy pointed out.

Severus shrugged. "Someplace else, then, some other time." He leaned toward her and whispered, "I was actually thinking about the prices, too, but I'll just sign for it, so don't think about them. Just pretend it's all free. That's what I'm going to do."

Poppy smiled up at him, glad when the corners of his eyes crinkled and his dark eyes lit up. "You can be quite devil-may-care at times, Severus. I hadn't seen that side of you until recently. And you really had me going...thinking you were offended."

"No, although perhaps slightly miffed that you would think I'd drag you to the most expensive restaurant in wizarding Britain and expect you to dig through your purse for your last Knut," he replied, his face reflecting his amusement. "As for devil-may-care...perhaps it is your presence that causes me to throw all caution to the winds, Poppy Pomfrey."

Poppy laughed. "I don't know if I want to be responsible for that, Severus. You might begin singing in the streets and who knows what else!"

Severus gave an exaggerated shudder. "That will never happen. If it does, you can tie me down in the next bed over from Lockhart and the two of us can be raving loons together."

Poppy laughed again.

Tomás returned with their bottle of wine, and Severus asked him to bring the four most popular appetisers, with Poppy adding the proviso that they did not want any escargots. Severus ordered roast lamb cooked with rosemary and garlic, with a barley pilaf and white asparagus. Poppy ordered chicken breast stuffed with Stilton, oyster mushrooms, and fresh sage, served with pea risotto and sautéed rocket and mustard greens.

Severus raised his glass. He looked at Poppy seriously. "What should we drink to?"

Unnerved by his dark, intense gaze, Poppy couldn't think at first, but then she said, "To your health and happiness, Severus."

"Keep looking after me, Poppy, and perhaps I shall have both," Severus replied softly.

Poppy raised her glass and touched his, confused by her emotions at that moment. This was supposed to be a casual fling between colleagues. Having a meal with Severus was fine in theory, but this felt like something else. She sipped her wine and tried to think of something to say, something that would get the focus away from the two of them.

"Did you and Gareth have a good afternoon?"

"Fine. He was looking for diversion, I believe. He is unused to living as he is now, I understand, and it is not always easy."

"Did you hear from Arthur?"

"No, not yet. I did try to stress the urgency of meeting with him, but I was not specific about why. Perhaps I should have been."

The waiter brought their appetisers and recommended wines that would go well with their main courses. By the time they had eaten the appetisers and almost finished their main courses, Poppy was feeling much more relaxed. Their conversation had turned to the mundane, primarily about Hogwarts, but Severus's sardonic comments, accompanied by a glint in his eye and something that was somewhere between a smirk and a smile, had Poppy laughing.

"By the way, what's this I hear about you eating animals alive?" Poppy asked.

"Oh, that. I will tell you the truth of it, but don't tell anyone else. I just told Vector I was feeling whimsical," Severus said.

Poppy laughed at that.

Duffy had the extremely bad judgment to try to play footsie with me at the staff table in the Great Hall. I wished to discourage her attentions, so I made some comments about the meat being served and then described some of my supposed carnivorous preferences. I believe I was successful."

"She did *what*?" Poppy asked, not believing her ears.

"I felt a shoeless foot creeping up my ankle. It was hers. She had arranged with Vector to trade places. Why she thought that was in any way an appropriate manner of expressing interest, particularly in the Great Hall at mealtime, I do not know," Severus said.

"That is strange," Poppy said. "Not that she would be interested in you, but, as you say, that she would do that."

"Minerva gave me a bit of a scolding about my jokes," Severus admitted, "and I do understand her concern, but I thought I was rather restrained."

Poppy chuckled. "Yes, considering how you might have responded, you really were restrained. You could have been much more openly nasty, and you could have embarrassed her publicly."

"Running from the staff table ready to vomit likely embarrassed her, but I was uncomfortable, as well. Can you imagine what would happen if I were to do something similar to a female teacher? Started grabbing her thigh under the table or something?"

Poppy grinned. "Duffy probably would have liked that."

"Hmmpf. But I was trying to display my lack of interest in her. There was no call for that. If I had been flirting with her, that might be different, but I was ignoring her as well as I could."

"She probably thought you were just shy." Poppy smiled. "And you are a little shy, really. It's very endearing."

Severus felt himself blushing. "I'm not shy with you. Not any longer. Not very much."

Poppy's smile grew. "I am glad. Particularly under certain circumstances such as those this afternoon. I enjoyed that."

"I will get better at that," Severus replied.

"Perhaps I could help you practise," Poppy suggested.

"That would be useful," Severus said, feeling the heat rising in his face. It wasn't only his face that was reacting; the blood flow to another area of his body was increased as well.

Tomás arrived at their table, asking whether they would like dessert and discreetly banishing their plates when assured that the two were finished with their main courses.

"I do not want any dessert," Severus said. "Madam Pomfrey, would you care for some?"

"No, just tea. I don't think I could eat anything more," she said.

"I will have coffee," Severus told the deferential waiter.

When Tomás was gone, Poppy turned back to Severus. "I enjoyed this evening very much. It was a lovely treat. Thank you."

Severus gazed at her warmly. "I am pleased that it was satisfactory...and presumably more enjoyable than the Leaky Cauldron."

"I would have enjoyed the Leaky Cauldron this evening if I had been with you, but this was much nicer, and as I said, quite a treat."

Tomás returned with their tea and coffee, and the two fell silent for a moment. After the waiter left, Severus lifted his coffee cup, then he felt something on his ankle beneath the long table cloth. He raised his eyebrows and looked at Poppy, who was innocently drinking her tea. He felt her toes inch their way under the cuff of his trousers.

"Madam Pomfrey," Severus said in a darkly smooth voice, "are you attempting to gain my attention?"

"Why would you ask that?"

Severus quickly moved his legs to trap her foot between his ankles. "That is a very dangerous way of getting my attention. You do not know how I might retaliate."

"The last witch survived," Poppy remarked, eating the little biscuit that came with her tea, not attempting to pull her foot away.

"I would not use the same manner of retaliation twice," Severus said. "And I doubt you would react as the last witch did."

"You did flirt with me," Poppy pointed out.

"Mmm, I did." His eyes seemed to generate heat as they slowly moved from her breasts to her eyes. "The consequences may still be dangerous."

"And why would that be?"

"Stirring up my passions, Madam Pomfrey . . . you do not know what I may be moved to do."

"I think I would like to find out," Poppy said.

"A Hufflepuff with the curiosity of a Ravenclaw and the bravery of a Gryffindor," Severus said speculatively.

"No, thoroughly Hufflepuff," Poppy said. "A badger is not to be taken lightly, you know."

"So I have heard. Very fierce when cornered, and very protective of those in its care," Severus said. "Am I in your care?"

"Very much, Severus," Poppy said softly, "very much."

Severus released her foot as Tomás approached the table.

Severus looked at the bill that Tomás handed him and didn't blink, then he accepted the quill that Tomás offered him and signed the bottom of the pale blue Charmed parchment.

"And your wand, sir," Tomás whispered.

Delancie's apparently used Gringotts secure payment system, and at the cost of their meal, Severus could see why. He passed his wand over his signature, causing it to glow slightly and the parchment to turn white. It would confirm to Gringotts that he had been the signer. If he were not, payment would not be made. He didn't understand how the system worked, but the goblins provided the specially Charmed parchment for the bills, and he had never heard of an instance when Gringotts had refused payment, so he assumed that if the parchment turned white, it indicated that the signature was valid.

"Thank you for dining at Delancie's," Tomás said with a smile and a slight bow, just sufficient to indicate respect but without being obsequious.

Severus nodded. "The food was..." He scowled at Poppy, who had just kicked him under the table. "The food was excellent, as was the service."

After Tomás left, Severus said, "What did you kick me for?"

"I thought you were going to say that it was adequate or satisfactory or one of your other usual ways of damning with faint praise," Poppy said.

"I am perfectly capable of being polite," Severus said irritably. "Do you really believe that I would deliberately embarrass you...or myself...at a place like this?"

"I'm sorry, Severus." She could see from the set of his jaw and his lowered eyebrows that he was upset. "I do know better than that. It was just an automatic reaction on my part. I apologise."

Severus looked surly, but he stood and took Poppy's hand briefly as she rose from her own seat.

As they were walking to the front of the restaurant to retrieve their cloaks, he said, "I understand. I have to kick myself occasionally to remind me to be polite."

"I'm forgiven, then?"

Severus looked down at her, his expression softening, and he said, "Yes. Of course."

Severus assisted Poppy with her cloak, then put on his own. They stepped out into the cool night air and Poppy smiled up at Severus.

"Thank you for forgiving me," she said.

"There was nothing to forgive," Severus replied. "It was not an unreasonable assumption."

"But I am sorry for hurting your feelings."

"Mmm, I believe I will recover, but there is still the matter of ..." Severus paused as they passed a few people on the pavement. "There is still the matter of the consequences for your previous actions," he continued in a low voice.

"Let's get back to Hogwarts," Poppy said, feeling as though Diagon Alley was far too busy for a Sunday night.

Severus nodded and they stepped into the doorway of a closed shop.

"Side-Along?" Severus asked.

"I'm fine to Apparate, but it would be nice," Poppy said.

Severus held out his arm and Poppy took hold, stepping closer to him. He nodded to her and, with no further warning, Disapparated.

At the Hogwarts gates, Poppy looked up at Severus and said, "I wanted to get away from the crowds."

"Understandable," Severus replied, opening the gate for her. "I also have curfew patrol tonight, for which I am late."

"I am sorry! We could have skipped the tea," Poppy said.

"It is not a tragedy for me to begin my rounds fifteen minutes late," Severus said. "I enjoyed our dinner too much to rush at the end."

"I did too."

As they walked back up the drive, Poppy wished she could take his arm, but it would look unusual to anyone watching, and besides, they were not a couple. They were colleagues. And they had sex. Even if they were a couple, it would be indiscreet to take Severus's arm, and he would not appreciate that.

"I will escort you to your rooms and begin my rounds from there," Severus said.

"Thank you," Poppy said.

Up in the Hospital Wing, Severus brought Poppy to her door. "Thank you, Poppy. I enjoyed our evening."

"So did I. Your cloak..." she said.

"I will fetch it later. Good night, Poppy." He touched her cheek lightly and nodded, then turned and left, his black cloak billowing about him as he strode away.

NEXT

Chapter Fifty-Four: Dangerous Consequences

Sunday, 14 March 1999

Severus teaches Poppy the consequences of her flirting. **End of Part Five**

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Fifty-Four: Dangerous Consequences

Chapter 55 of 118

Sunday, 14 March 1999. Severus teaches Poppy the consequences of her flirting.

End of Part Five.

Author's Note: *Rated for extensive sexually explicit content, language, and imagery throughout the chapter. And some playing with a little toy . . .*



Chapter Fifty-Four: Dangerous Consequences

Sunday, 14 March Monday, 15 March 1999

Poppy put the borrowed cloak on her couch, then she left her rooms again, stepping over to the infirmary to see whether there were any messages. There were only two, one from Pomona, saying that she had given one of her students a dose of Headache Potion and if the girl wasn't better in the morning, she would send her up to see her; the other was from Albus, just saying he had stopped by to say "hello" and he hoped that she was having a good evening with Severus. Lovely. Either Minerva had mentioned it or he had been present when Severus told Minerva they were going out for the evening. It couldn't be helped. She and Severus were working on the counselling project together. It was perfectly reasonable for them to go to dinner together. Not that she could think of any other occasion since Severus had been on staff that they had dined alone together any place other than Hogwarts, and even then, it had been when he was in the infirmary overnight and she had tried to keep him company whilst he ate. He had usually been sullen, surly, nasty, ungrateful, and had possessed a knack for putting her off her food. This had been nothing like that.

As soon as Poppy returned to her rooms, she went into her bedroom and got a fresh nightgown from a drawer in her wardrobe. In the bathroom, she drew a bath, scented it with rose oil, and undressed. She lowered herself into the hot bath with a sigh. Her muscles were aching from the unaccustomed sexual activity. She was quite fit and exercised regularly, but having sex stretched a body in very different ways. She had soaked drowsily for about ten minutes and was thinking about washing her hair when she heard her portrait, Mrs Framingham, calling to her from her sitting room.

"Coming, coming!" Poppy shouted. "Tell whoever it is, I'll be there in a minute."

Poppy sloshed unhappily from her bath, stuck her wet feet in her slippers, dried herself very quickly and not very well, then wrapped herself in her soft, oversized, turquoise blue Turkish bathrobe and went out to see what emergency had interrupted her bath.

Poppy opened her door to see Severus, leaning in a negligent, relaxed, and very un-Snape-ish way against the wall, waiting for her.

"Severus! I hadn't expected to see you again tonight."

Severus straightened fluidly, looking her up and down, his eyes only slowly making their way to her face and then meeting her own eyes.

"What a pity that is," Severus said in low, measured tones. "It would have been very flattering to be greeted like that if you had been expecting me."

Poppy blushed. "Would you like to come in?"

Severus stepped in past her. "I did say that I would return for my cloak." He reached out and touched the cloak, still Transfigured to fit Poppy, then he turned sharply. "And there is the matter of . . . *consequences*." He stepped toward her, and she backed up, closing the door behind her as she did. "I did say that there were consequences for such brazen flirtation."

Severus's low voice, sounding dangerously sexy, caused a warm throbbing in Poppy's crux, and she could feel her arousal growing as he stepped toward her again, still in his long black cloak. She licked her lips and looked up into his eyes. They were like black coals, but with a fire behind them.

"Brazen flirtation?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, very brazen," Severus said. "And there *are* consequences . . . that kind of flirtation can do things to a wizard."

He touched one finger to her cheek, running it down over her throat to her chest, parting her robe, then he took her hand in his.

"Here is one of the consequences," he said, his voice a low growl, pulling her hand toward him and pressing it to him. He rubbed her hand over his erection. "And now you must take care of it."

Severus bent his head and kissed her hard, pulling her against him with one arm as he began to push off her robe with his other hand. He sucked at her lips and tongue as he ran his hands over her nude body, and Poppy clutched at his cloak. He nipped her throat then sucked her earlobe, making Poppy moan and try to pull him closer. He massaged her buttocks and ran his hand over her back.

"You smell nice," Severus murmured, nuzzling her neck, "and your skin is damp. And the ends of your hair. You taste like Turkish delight."

"I was in the bath," Poppy gasped. "Oh, gods, Severus, oh . . ."

He pressed her against the door, still kissing, licking, and nipping the soft skin of her throat and shoulders. She put a leg around him and tried to raise her self up, rubbing herself against him. Severus stepped back and held her at arms' length, one hand on each shoulder. His eyes smouldered as he first gazed at her body and then looked her in the eyes. "You need to take care of that consequence. Now."

He stepped close enough to her that she could reach his trousers, and with fumbling fingers, she unbuttoned them then pulled his pants out and down, her eyes moving from his face to his cock when it sprang free.

"You want this, don't you? Don't you?" Severus asked, his voice low and dangerous. "You had better want it," he continued, pushing against her, "because you are going to get it. You are going to get exactly what your brazen flirtation deserves."

He bent and kissed her mouth again, lifting her from behind as he did so. Poppy hooked her legs around him, under his cloak, and squirmed against him.

"Yes, Severus," she moaned as he sucked at her throat.

"Such a sexy fuck you are, Poppy Pomfrey, so brazen, so hot," Severus said, punctuating his words with kisses and gentle nips. "You hide behind those starched matron's robes, but you are sexy, so sexy and seductive. I will always look at you, wherever you are, and see you like this, naked and exciting, and I'll know what a sexy fuck you are. Do you want me to fuck you? Is that why you are wiggling against me? You're going to get it. I'm going to fuck you, and you are going to feel the consequences of being such a brazen flirt, such a sexy, seductive witch!"

Severus lifted her more and shifted to bring the head of his cock to her entrance. He gazed into her eyes. "Do you want it? Do you want it?" he growled.

"Yes, yes, Severus, please, yes!" She gasped as he entered her. "Yes!"

He held her wrapped in his cloak, her legs around him, and he thrust into her, repeatedly pushing in, the door thumping behind her, his breath hot on her neck and shoulder as he kissed and sucked her soft skin. He groaned into her ear.

"Gods, so good, Poppy, so good," Severus gasped as her moans grew louder.

His cock pumped into her as he closed his mouth around her shoulder, nipping and sucking, and as Poppy groaned more loudly, Severus thrust harder, banging against the door with each thrust, her breasts rubbing against his woolen jacket. Poppy's groans became breathless gasps, then she screamed his name.

"Severus! Fuck, fuck! Severus, yes!"

She shouted as she came, and Severus continued to pump into her, prolonging her orgasm, her hands, tight fists bunching his cloak.

"Yes, I'm coming, Poppy, oh gods, oh Poppy!" His legs shook as he thrust one more time, resting his own weight against Poppy. "Oh, Poppy, Poppy, you . . . you . . . oh, oh, Poppy."

Severus sighed and held her still for several long moments, then he turned his head and kissed her temple lightly. "Was that all right?" he asked softly. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, it was and I am," Poppy said weakly.

He straightened slightly and looked into her eyes. "I didn't hurt you? I wasn't too rough?"

"No, not at all. It was just right for this moment. Perfect, perfect, Severus."

"I didn't want to insult you or hurt you. I should have thought more about what I was doing," he said.

"No, it was good. You are comfortable with me. I'm sure that if I hadn't been willing, you would have stopped. It was fun, it was spontaneous. And it was very hot." Poppy smiled and caressed his face. "But I think you may want to let me down now."

Severus kissed her lips softly, not closing his eyes, then he pulled back, slipping out of her as she uncurled her legs from around him and her feet touched the floor. Looking at her with soft eyes, he gently touched her cheek, then kissed her forehead.

"Thank you, Poppy. Thank you for everything." He fixed his trousers and said, "You probably want to go to bed. It's late."

Poppy smiled up at him. "I need to finish my bath first. I was interrupted."

"Mmm . . . I believe I should help you with that, since I was the cause of the interruption," Severus said, a gentle smile on his lips. He bent swiftly, surprising Poppy, and picked her up in his arms. "To your bath, Poppy!"

When they reached the bathroom, Severus opening the unlatched door with his foot, he set her down and drew his wand. He put his other hand in the water.

"As I thought. Tepid." He looked down into Poppy's eyes. "You are not a tepid witch, and I doubt you like a tepid bath." He waved his wand over the tub, then tested the water again. "Good. Hot. Not as hot as you are, but that would be dangerous."

Severus touched the tip of his wand to Poppy's throat and stroked it down to her nipple, circling it, just letting a little magic flow through and tickle her skin. "Come to think of it, you *are* dangerous. Very dangerous."

"And you?" Poppy asked. "Aren't you dangerous?"

"Not as dangerous as you are. You seem so innocent, so proper, but you are very enticing, and a wizard doesn't know what danger he is in until you have ensnared him." Severus bent and kissed the side of her neck, sucking lightly.

He picked her up and deposited her in the bath, thoroughly splashing himself as he did, and making Poppy laugh.

"Hmm, you laugh, Poppy Pomfrey," Severus said with a smirk, dropping his cloak to the floor, his jacket following it. "I think that if I am to assist you with your bath, I will need to be more appropriately clothed. Or unclothed."

Whilst he was talking, he had taken off his waistcoat and unbuttoned his shirt. Poppy lay back in the bath and watched as he removed his cufflinks, shrugged off his braces, and dropped his shirt on top of the growing pile of clothing. He smirked as he saw Poppy's eyes stray to the front of his trousers. He bent and removed his shoes, then he very slowly unhooked his trousers and began to unbutton them, popping each button through its buttonhole and then pausing. When he had finished with all the buttons, he stopped, and he thought that he glimpsed some frustration on Poppy's face before he bent and pulled off his socks.

Severus straightened and looked down at Poppy. "You needn't wait for me," he said in a low voice, gazing at her breasts, her nipples just at the surface of the water. "If you care to . . . begin. Perhaps with those rosy nipples." He licked his lips.

"I suppose I could entertain myself," Poppy replied, languidly bringing one hand to her breast, then grazing her nipple lightly with her fingertips, her eyes still roving his body, always pausing at the front of his trousers.

Severus pushed open his trousers with both hands, the bulge in his pants clearly visible, watching Poppy as she continued to tease her nipple. His hands flat against his pants, he pressed his growing erection between them, then he pushed his trousers down and stepped out of them.

"I believe I am now suitably attired to help you with your bath," Severus said.

"Are you certain?" Poppy asked. "I do think that you might be more comfortable if you removed your pants. And that you would be able to more thoroughly assist me in bathing."

"If you would prefer," Severus said, feigning reluctance.

"I would most certainly prefer," Poppy replied, watching with a smile as he removed his pants. She held up her hand as he straightened. "Stop there." She gazed at him warmly. "You are truly a vision, Severus. You look absolutely scrumptious."

Despite himself, Severus blushed. "Really, Poppy, you don't need to..."

"Remark on how lovely you are to look at? You are. Your shoulders and arms are nicely muscled, and your chest forms a nice vee to your waist. And it's especially nice to see that there is some muscle there, and not just skin stretched over your ribs." At the memory of Severus's achingly thin body, Poppy suddenly felt tears rise in her eyes. His earlier suffering had always been difficult for her to see, even when maintaining her professional demeanour, but now, knowing him as she did, the memory seemed to bring her even greater pain.

Severus knelt beside the bath and touched her cheek tenderly. "What is it?"

Poppy shook her head. "Nothing, really, nothing. I am just glad that you are whole and here and healthy again."

"So am I. Especially being here." He put a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face, then kissed her lips softly. "I would not want to be anywhere else." He kissed her again.

Poppy smiled up at him. "Are you going to join me?"

The corner of Severus's mouth turned up slightly and he shook his head. "I am here to help you complete your interrupted bath."

He picked up a bath sponge and dipped it into the warm, scented water. He squeezed it out, letting the water run over Poppy's shoulders and chest, then he slowly moved the sponge over her skin, beginning with her throat and moving lower. His hand dipped beneath the water, and he began to wash her breasts, making slow circles around them.

"You have beautiful breasts. I love your breasts." He bent, using the sponge to push one breast up so that a nipple was fully exposed, and he kissed its dark peak, then licked it. He smiled. "Absolutely wonderful."

Poppy caressed his jaw. "You're sure you don't want to join me?"

"Your bath is the priority," Severus said, moving the sponge down her body, gently stroking over her stomach, circling her navel, then brushing the sponge back up over her breasts again. "I am enjoying it. You lean back and enjoy it, too. Just lean back, close your eyes, and enjoy it."

Poppy did as directed, letting out a sigh as she felt the bath sponge move over her breasts and torso again. She felt Severus raise her right arm and gently wash it from her wrist to her shoulder, then raise it further and wash beneath it before straying once more to her right breast. This time, his thumb teased her nipple before he moved the sponge on to her left breast, where he did the same. He washed beneath her left arm, then, taking her wrist in one hand and drawing it toward him, he washed her left arm, beginning at her shoulder and stroking downwards.

Poppy didn't open her eyes, but she sensed him moving away, then she felt Severus take her left foot in one hand and begin washing it with a flannel. She giggled slightly as the washcloth tickled the arch of her foot. Severus tickled her foot again, and she opened her eyes to see him smiling at her.

"Eyes closed! Relax!" Severus said, his eyes shining.

"Mmm." Poppy didn't protest, but closed her eyes and relaxed as ordered.

Severus washed her other foot, then he washed her right calf, then her left. He very gradually moved his way up her thighs, alternating between first her right leg, then the left, then back to the right again. When he reached her hips, he dropped the flannel and picked up the sponge to wash her lower abdomen again, and Poppy sighed in disappointment, but then she felt the water slosh as Severus climbed into the bath with her. She did not open her eyes, but she could feel him kneeling between her legs. She sighed again, this time in pleasure as she felt Severus run the sponge gently over her crux. He then spread her labia with two fingers of his left hand as he washed her with the bath sponge in his right.

"Mmm . . . nice," Poppy breathed.

"I must be thorough," Severus said softly. He continued to rub the sponge gently over her clitoris and labia, down to her entrance and back up.

"Please, be thorough," Poppy said with a moan as she felt him insert two fingers into her entrance.

Severus pulsed his fingers against the wall of her vagina as he rubbed her clitoris, and Poppy's breathing grew faster as he stimulated her. She felt on the verge of coming when he stopped and withdrew his fingers.

She opened her eyes, about to say something, but Severus admonished, "Eyes closed!"

Sighing, she closed her eyes. Severus pulled her toward him slightly so that she was further beneath the water, and then she felt why he had done that. The bath sponge was now at the cleft of her buttocks, and he was washing her and then rubbing her anus with the sponge. She felt him release the sponge, and then his finger was on her anus, gently rubbing her perineum and then her anus. His other hand began to play with her clitoris again, and Poppy's arousal began to mount once more, until she was moaning and squirming slightly, the water sloshing with her movements. Her mouth was open as she gasped and moaned.

Severus continued to rub her anus, then he slowly slipped his finger in at the same time as he entered her vagina with three fingers, his thumb still pressing rhythmically against her clitoris. Poppy gasped more loudly as he slowly withdrew his finger from her anus then reinserted it.

"Sexy, so sexy everywhere," Severus whispered. He slowly moved his finger shallowly in and out of her anus as he pulsed the three fingers of his other hand inside her vagina. "So beautiful, so wonderful, so sexy."

"Oh, gods, Severus! Please! I need more!"

She felt him shift and the water splash as he leaned forward, his face in the water, and closed his mouth around one of her nipples and began to suckle. The fire in her crux grew and then exploded as Severus came up for a breath and then took her other nipple into his mouth, nipping and sucking. Poppy's feet pressed hard against the bottom of the bathtub, raising herself up as she came, shouting and moaning.

Severus put his arms around her, embracing her and bringing her towards him, kissing her mouth. He leaned back, and Poppy followed him, rising up on her knees. She broke the kiss for a moment to look down into his face, but then she kissed him again as she took his erection in her hand and began to guide him into her.

Severus shook his head and broke the kiss. "No, not yet, love," he said softly. "Just let me hold you here for a while."

Poppy nodded and rested against him, her head on his shoulder, facing him, then she kissed his neck before relaxing again. She sighed happily as Severus's hands slowly traced patterns over her back. She could feel him relaxing beneath her, his breathing slow and even. She relished the sensation of his warm, solid body and his arms around her.

"This is nice," she said after a while. "But the water is getting cool, and I think I'm beginning to shrivel a bit."

"We could fix that," Severus replied, "but perhaps it is time to dry off." He looked up into her eyes as she raised her head. He felt a sudden pain shoot through him, an exquisite pain. He wanted this moment never to end. He did not know what he felt, but he wanted to feel it forever. He drew her head down and kissed her. Gods, he wanted her, how he wanted her . . .

Severus's hungry kiss and tightened embrace left Poppy breathless, and his clear desire for her inflamed her own passions. One of her hands gripped his shoulder, massaging, before she moved it lower and found his nipple. She brushed it with her fingertips, then rubbed it with the palm of her hand before taking it and gently rolling it between her fingers. Severus moaned and drew her tongue into his mouth and began to suck the tip of her tongue, causing Poppy to moan in response and rub her crux against his thigh.

Severus broke the kiss with a sharp gasp. "Out . . . bathtime is over. Mmmm." He kissed her again before pushing her away from him.

The two splashed out of the bath and Severus took her in his arms again, kissing her mouth, her jaw, and her throat, until finding her mouth again, rubbing and massaging her back and buttocks and pulling her hard against him. One of Poppy's hands gripped his shoulder as the other kneaded his buttocks, which she had learned that he enjoyed. As she massaged his rounded, muscular buttocks, she slipped her fingers into the cleft between his cheeks. Severus moaned, and as Poppy's hand still kneaded him, her fingertips found his anus and stimulated it, and his moan became a deep groan.

He pulled away from her, breathing hard. "No drying off," he said hoarsely.

"Overrated," Poppy said breathlessly.

Severus pushed her, stumbling, backwards toward the door to the bedroom. In his eagerness and still kissing her, he gestured with one hand, and the door opened with a loud crack. They both turned their heads and looked at the door. Poppy chuckled, and Severus joined her, laughing deeply and genuinely. The latch was broken and the door was hanging off one hinge.

"Oops!" Poppy said, her eyes sparkling.

Still smiling, Severus pushed the broken door with his foot, then he picked up Poppy and kissed her again.

"That will teach that door to keep us from the bed," Poppy said with a grin.

"We're lucky it was only a door that stood in the way, and not a wall," Severus said. "I may have forgotten myself and blasted a hole in it."

Severus carried Poppy to the bed, laying her down. As he climbed onto the bed with her, the two of them shoved the covers down, but without caring where they ended up. Severus lay between Poppy's legs and kissed and sucked her breasts. He kissed his way back up to her face, finding her lips, kissing them, savouring them, as his hands continued to explore her body.

"Gods, Poppy, want you, want you, Poppy, want you, need you, want you," he murmured as he kissed her and caressed her.

When both of Poppy's hands began to knead his buttocks, Severus groaned.

"Like that, do you?" Poppy asked.

"It's fucking marvellous," Severus said with another moan of appreciation.

"And this?" she asked.

Severus shuddered with pleasure as one of her fingers began to rub his anus. "Gods, yes . . ."

He pushed up and supported himself on his hands, looking down at her. "May I use the spell? Please?" His eyes shone darkly.

Poppy laughed. "Yes, yes, use the spell."

"You'll have to stop for a moment," Severus said.

"It's distracting when I do this?" Poppy asked, rubbing him again.

"Very, you brazen little thing, and you know it," Severus replied with a growl.

Poppy grinned, but removed her hands from him completely. She watched as he raised up a bit more, reached between them, and took his cock in his hand. He closed his eyes and concentrated, then cast, feeling the spell all the way into his groin. He knew he'd cast it properly, and he smiled.

"Are you ready, Poppy?"

"I think I am," she said with a naughty grin. "But if you're too insatiable, we may have to call in for a relief witch."

Severus shook his head. "I just want you. No relief witches."

"Most wizards would find the idea titillating," Poppy replied, smiling.

"Mmm, it is somewhat titillating, I suppose," Severus said. He paused and looked down at her. "This is another of my impertinent questions, Poppy, so feel free not to answer, though I do hope you won't slap me."

Poppy laughed. "I will try to restrain any slapping or hexing urges. Although I just might give you a little slap to that wonderful bottom of yours. Of course, you might enjoy that, so I'll refrain. What's your question?"

"Well, you know that I've been thinking a lot about sex lately." He reddened. "Not just thinking about it, either. After my experience with Bella, I came to think that having sex with more than one person...at the same time or whilst they were all in the same room...was perverted. Bad kinky, as you might say. But, um, someone recently mentioned something like that, and, um, it still seemed kinky, but not disgusting or perverted. Do you think that's normal?"

"What? Normal to have some kind of threesome or group sex or normal to think it's not perverted?" Poppy asked, making a mental note that the witch who had abused him was Bella.

Severus shrugged. "Either. Or both."

"I think it *could* be perverted or disgusting, depending on the people and the circumstances, but not necessarily. I also think it's not my place to judge if someone enjoys that sort of thing, as long as it's all consensual and no one is hurt."

Severus had begun playing with one of her nipples again. "This is very rude of me to ask, but have you ever . . ."

"Had sex with multiple partners at the same time?" Poppy asked. When he nodded, she said, "No, it's never appealed to me. It's also not the sort of thing that I'd likely have an opportunity to decline. But I don't mind imagining it. That's different."

Severus swallowed hard. "You mentioned some of your other lovers. Have you ever, um, have you ever been with a woman?"

Poppy gave a choked laugh. "No, Severus, I never have."

He blushed. "Sorry."

"I'm not offended," Poppy replied, trying to suppress her smile.

"I was just wondering because I'd been thinking about it. Wondering what they do with each other without, um, intercourse."

"I am sure they find other ways of pleasuring each other...just as we do...and there are always sexual devices. Dildos and such."

"Oh, yes, right," Severus muttered, not meeting her eyes. That had been a stupid question, without doubt.

"It's all right. Don't be embarrassed," Poppy said, caressing his cheek. "And I have to say that I am glad that you don't want a relief witch. I want you to want me when we're together like this and not have you move on to someone else."

Severus kissed her lips. "I do want you. Very much." A wicked twinkle entered his eye. "But you know, if I wore you out before I was sated, I might need one. Or more."

Poppy grinned. "You are a tease, Severus Snape."

"I could take you until you were exhausted," he said, moving so his cock rubbed against her belly, "and then I could call in the next witch."

"And she would see me lying here, completely sated," Poppy said, getting into the spirit of his game, "and she wouldn't know whether to be excited or frightened. Then she'd see that cock of yours and wonder what you could do with it."

"So I would have her lie down next to you. You would be completely relaxed after I'd fucked you so many times, completely relaxed, your hair everywhere, your skin glistening with our perspiration, and she would be fresh."

"With only the slightest idea of what she was going to get from you, but it wouldn't be until you had fucked her that she would really know," Poppy said.

"Would you be watching?" Severus asked, still rocking against her.

"I would wake up whilst you were lying on your back and she was riding you," Poppy said. "She wouldn't be too tired for that yet, and I would see her astonishment when she came and then you came, but you were still hard and ready for her."

"Oh, gods, describe that . . . describe it . . ."

"You would laugh dangerously and tell her that you had a lot more fucking in you, just as you told me that first morning in your rooms, and she would crawl off of you and decide to suck you because she would think that might finally satisfy you."

"And whilst she did that, you would roll over so that I could play with your breasts and suck them whilst she was sucking my cock," Severus said. "And I would come again, and this time, I'd just be even hotter, and I would pull her off of me, roll her over, and have her kneel in front of me so that I could fuck her from behind. It would excite her so much that she would begin to suck your breasts so that I could see her doing it. You would be too tired to move away, and she would suckle you and finger your pussy as she came around my cock, then I would pull out of her and begin to prod her anus with my cock, pushing again and again until I entered her. She would moan and begin to play with her own clit whilst she was still suckling your breast...oh, gods, I'm coming, Poppy!"

He pushed hard against her belly, and Poppy could feel his erection twitch and pulse against her.

Poppy caressed his face as he caught his breath. "For a man who until recently thought that threesomes were perverted, that fantasy certainly excited you," she said with a smile.

"Mmm, but it's only a fantasy. I don't want to have another witch in here with you," Severus said, kissing her cheek.

"That's good," Poppy said.

"What about another wizard? Having two wizards making love to you at the same time? That could be sexy," Severus asked. "Not that I would really want to share you like that, but just think, we could suck both your nipples at the same time, and you'd have four hands and two cocks to pleasure you."

"That is an intriguing idea," Poppy said with a smile.

Severus reached between them and took his cock in his hand. He began to rub the head of his cock against her clit. She spread her legs and let out a moaning sigh.

"And when I was fucking you, he could lick and kiss your breasts." He continued to rub the head of his cock against her, back and forth and up and down. "And he could stimulate your nub whilst I was inside you with my cock. You might really enjoy that."

"Mm, but I'm enjoying this more than enough," Poppy said, wriggling against him.

"Are you going to come, Poppy? Are you going to come for me?" He kissed her cheek and then breathed in her ear, saying, "You are coming, aren't you? My sexy Poppy, my beautiful, sexy Poppy." His tongue darted out and licked her ear.

Poppy squirmed and moaned, and then heat exploded in her genitals and moved through her body in waves of pleasure. Before they had subsided, Severus drew back and entered her, beginning to pump fast and hard. Poppy's orgasm was followed immediately by a second, stronger one, pulsing around his cock. She shouted out his name, her fingers gripping him and trying to pull him in harder, deeper, faster as she came. Severus felt his own orgasm flood through him, so intense that he saw stars for a moment, but the spell held and his erection remained.

Severus lay on top of her, catching his breath. Poppy felt completely boneless and utterly incapable of movement, but then Severus shifted, and she felt him still filling her, and her desire was not entirely quenched.

She kissed the side of his neck and whispered, "Let's roll over."

Severus raised his head and smiled down at her, a warm, slow smile. He put his arms around her and they rolled over together. Poppy started slowly, just clenching and relaxing her muscles around him as she rocked her hips slightly. The stimulation renewed her arousal, and she sat up and began to ride him, first sliding back and forth over him, her clitoris rubbing his pelvis, and then raising and lowering herself on his cock. Severus watched her face, his gaze shifting occasionally to her breasts as they moved above him, or to where their bodies were joined. Then Poppy was coming again, hard, and her loud moans excited him.

"Fuck me, Poppy, that's right, fuck me!" Severus said, his voice low but urgent. "It's so good! You're so sexy, fucking me!"

"Oh, gods, Severus!" Poppy's orgasm was no less deep for having already come, and as she reached the climax of her orgasm, she felt his hands gripping her thighs.

She looked down at Severus's face. His eyes were almost entirely closed, his head thrown back, and every sinew of his neck seemed clearly defined as he gasped and panted. Poppy stilled her movements and caressed his chest, drawing patterns with her fingertips. His eyes blinked open.

"I don't think that anything in life is supposed to be this good," he whispered. He touched her side, stroking it gently, then he pulled her down into his embrace. "I'm sorry," he said, still whispering, "I forgot to release the spell again."

Poppy laughed lightly, breathlessly. "Perhaps you do need a relief witch, then, although I'm certainly still willing and available."

Severus put a finger under her chin and urged her face up so that he could see it. He caressed her cheek gently, then cupped her face. "We can still take a moment for you to recuperate."

She raised an eyebrow. "For *me* to recuperate? Of course, I did do the hard work this last time, but you look tired, yourself."

Severus let out a short laugh. "I will just have to prove my stamina to you, then. You are not only brazen, you are impudent!"

"Very impudent," Poppy replied, moving her hand to squeeze one of his buttocks.

"I do like that," Severus said with a sigh.

"Then whilst we both recuperate, you may enjoy that," Poppy said, pulling off of him, feeling suddenly empty without him in her. She moved to one side. "Roll over."

"Yes, ma'am!" Severus said, one corner of his mouth quirking up.

After he had rolled over, Poppy straddled his legs and began to touch his buttocks, just teasingly light touches with the balls of her fingers. Severus tried to keep still and silent.

"Do you want more?" Poppy asked. "I need to know if you want more."

"Mm, yes," Severus replied, wanting it too much to pretend that he didn't.

Poppy stroked her fingers over his buttocks, then she began kneading rhythmically, and Severus let out a sigh. She smiled and increased her massage.

"And do you like this?" she asked, separating his cheeks and rubbing his anus with her finger.

"Oh, yes," Severus sighed.

"Do you think it would be all right, with the spell in place, if I did a bit more?" she asked. "I don't know whether massaging your prostate would be all right if you are not ejaculating. I don't want to hurt you."

"Try it. You can stop if it does," Severus said, trying to think whether he had come dry for Gareth that way when the spell was active, but unable to focus on those memories, particularly once Poppy introduced a finger into his anus.

Severus moaned as she began to massage him inside with one finger as she continued to rub his buttocks with her other hand. The speed with which she found the right spot and began to stimulate it made him grateful again that she was a mediwitch.

"Oh, gods, Poppy, that's so good."

She withdrew her finger, then reinserted two. Severus couldn't help but begin to move against her fingers, rubbing his cock on the sheet beneath him.

"Here, roll over again," Poppy said softly, removing her fingers. "I'll continue, just roll over."

Severus rolled over and spread his legs for her. She grabbed a pillow and put it under his hips. He moaned as she pressed against his anus again, entering and massaging. His eyes were closed, so he was startled when he felt her mouth on his balls and then one hand on his shaft, stroking him.

"Oh, fucking goddess, Poppy, I'm going to come! Fuck fuck fuck!" He jerked against her, and his cock pumped, but he did not ejaculate. "Oh, gods, Poppy, I'm sorry," he breathed as he tried to recover from the orgasm. "It surprised me. We don't have to do more if you don't want to. The erection will subside on its own."

Poppy lay down beside him, Summoned her wand from the bathroom, and cast a cleaning charm on her left hand. "I do think that would be rather a waste," she replied, stroking one finger along his length.

Severus rolled toward her and kissed her. "You are wonderful. And too good to me."

"We will probably both regret not getting enough sleep tonight," Poppy said, "but I think we will sleep well when we do."

"You know, Poppy, I was wondering . . ." Severus hesitated.

"What?"

"Never mind." He shook his head. "Just a thought. It's gone now."

"I will be distracted by curiosity until you tell me what the thought was," Poppy said, propping herself up on one elbow.

"It's just an idea, and I know you have said that, um, anal penetration doesn't do anything for you, but, um, I was just thinking, with this spell, um . . ."

"Ah. I see. You have been interested in that area of my anatomy, I had noticed," Poppy said.

"I had just thought that you might not mind if I was stimulating you in other ways, and that you might even enjoy it just a little if I put my finger there, and when you didn't object to that, I did try it with my fingers before. I hoped you didn't mind. You didn't say anything." Severus was blushing. "And I thought . . . tonight . . . I thought since you've come a few times, maybe with the spell, I could . . . you know."

"Yes, well, a finger and a penis are two very different propositions," Poppy pointed out, "and as you say, you had been stimulating me elsewhere when you were doing that. I didn't really object, and in fact, it is arousing for me to know that you want to touch me there, even if the touch itself isn't stimulating. But I did rather like it the time you had a finger in me when you entered me. It seemed to do something to the vaginal stimulation, as though your penis fit more tightly or changed the way it pressed inside of me. But . . . I just don't know, Severus. Do you mind if I think about it? Leave it for another time, anyway?"

"Of course. I'm sorry..."

"Don't be sorry. It's natural to want to explore different things. In fact, if you ever want me to, I would be happy to use something other than my fingers to stimulate you there yourself. I know you like that, and if you would like something more, we could try that." Poppy remembered what he had said about Bella. "But only if you want to and you would be comfortable with it. I know that what that other witch wanted to have you do might bring up unpleasant associations for you."

"Actually, with you . . . it sounds exciting. What were you thinking of?" Whilst they were talking, he had begun to play absent-mindedly with her clitoris and folds.

"Well, to the extent that I can think whilst you are distracting me like that," Poppy replied with a smile, but bringing her own hand down to stroke his cock, "I thought perhaps Transfiguring something into a small dildo. Nothing too big, nothing that would hurt. I could use that to..."

"To bugger me?" Severus asked. At Poppy's expression of alarm, he said reassuringly, "That actually does sound like something I would like from you. Could we?"

"Now?" Poppy asked. When he nodded, she smiled. "All right, if you would like."

Poppy bent and kissed him, then sat up. Using her wand, she Summoned the bath sponge. With a quick movement of her wand, she Transfigured the sponge into a facsimile of a penis with a bit of a handle at one end.

"That's small," Severus said. It was long, but hardly very much thicker than one of his own fingers. He frowned. "Let's have it bigger."

Poppy handed him her wand. "You make it the size you would like to try, then, and if it's too big or too small, we can adjust it."

Severus smiled. "Thanks for loaning me your wand." Loaning someone one's wand was not something a person did lightly, particularly given that his own was just in the next room.

Poppy returned his smile and nodded, then watched as he waved her wand and cast *Engorgio*. The first enlargement was insufficient, apparently, and he cast one more. The phallus was now as big around as his own penis and a few inches longer, with a wider handle at the end. He handed back her wand.

"That's a bit large," Poppy said, "so let me know if it's uncomfortable."

"You'll use a lubricating charm, though, so it should be fine," Severus said.

Poppy nodded and gestured to him to lie back with the pillow under his hips. He bent his knees and spread his legs for her.

She pointed her wand at his anus and said, *Unguo*."

Severus felt the charm tickle through him, and his cock twitched. Poppy grinned. "Glad you liked that, Sev. Er, Severus, sorry."

"That's okay. As long as you don't call me that in public," Severus said.

"I thought you didn't like it," Poppy said questioningly, remembering when a long-ago Defence instructor had made the mistake of addressing him by that nickname during a staff meeting. Poppy had never been entirely sure whether Severus's reaction to the appellation hadn't been a contributing factor to the wizard packing up and disappearing into the night one week before the start of the Christmas holiday. "That was always the impression I had."

"Not from just anyone," he said, a smile in his eyes. He reached out and squeezed her arm. *You* are not just anyone."

Poppy smiled and blushed, feeling her affection for Severus bubble happily through her. She bent and kissed his lips. He put his arms around her as she kissed him, relishing the sensation of her breasts rubbing his skin.

Severus gasped and moaned into her mouth as he felt the head of the dildo at his anus. Poppy continued kissing him as she rubbed it against him then slowly began to push it in, inserting it at the perfect angle to stimulate his wonder-spot.

"Mmm, gods, good," Severus murmured, breaking the kiss a moment.

Poppy moved to kneel between his legs, then she pressed the phallus further in, watching his face. His eyes were closed and his breathing was fast. She took his cock in her other hand and began to stroke it, then she pushed the phallus in so that only a few inches of the wider handle remained. She began to move it, pulling it out and pushing it back in as she stroked his cock.

"Oh, more, Poppy, more," Severus said, his fists bunched in the sheet beneath him.

Poppy lowered her mouth around the head of his cock, and Severus groaned. As she pleased his cock with her lips and tongue, she continued to stimulate him with the phallus, moving it faster, every thrust massaging his wonder-spot. He came again, his cock twitching and pulsing in her mouth, another dry orgasm despite the stimulation to his prostate.

"Oh, gods, Poppy, that was so good, so good," Severus said, trying to raise his head to look at her. "I hope you didn't mind. That couldn't have been particularly enjoyable for you. I'm sorry."

Poppy withdrew the dildo slowly and shook her head. "Don't apologise. There are many times when you have done things for me that weren't calculated to bring you

pleasure, too."

"But they always do bring me pleasure. I love it when I excite you and make you come. It's almost arousing enough for me to come sometimes," Severus said.

"Still, I enjoyed having you so happy," Poppy said with a smile.

Severus sat up slightly. "Let's use that again," he said. He cast a wandless cleaning charm on the dildo, and a second for good measure, then took it from her.

He reached for Poppy and pulled her down on top of him, kissing her. She lay between his legs as he kissed her, and then she felt something at her crux. Severus was rubbing the head of the dildo against her clitoris and her entrance, then it was in her and Severus was sliding it in and out.

Severus held onto her and rolled her onto her back. Continuing the motion of the phallus, in and out, in and out, he lowered his head to her breasts. He began to lick and suckle as he continued to fuck her with the phallus, his own hips rocking as he pressed his cock into the bed.

Poppy moaned and bucked. Severus increased the speed of his thrusts and moved his mouth to her other nipple. She was gasping for breath, crying out, her hands grabbing at him, his tongue flicked over her nipple and then he closed his lips around it and suckled. She was coming, he could tell she was coming, but the stimulation was still exciting her. He could give her more, he knew it, and she would take it all. He moved up her body and kissed her lips, pressing his cock against her belly.

"I want to fuck you now, Poppy, fuck you and come," he whispered.

"Yes, yes, please, and fast, fast," Poppy said urgently.

Severus withdrew the phallus then immediately entered her with his cock. He pumped a few times, twisting and grinding against her. He placed the head of the phallus at her anus.

"May I try this?" he whispered. "May I try, and if you don't like it, I'll stop, I promise."

"Yes, yes, yes, just do it, just do it," Poppy moaned, bucking her hips again.

She felt the phallus replaced with his finger. He inserted it and then whispered the lubrication spell. The tingle of magic made her wriggle against him, pushing up. Then his finger was gone and she felt the phallus stretching her. She held still and gasped.

"Should I stop?" Severus asked.

Poppy shook her head. "It's fine," she gasped. "Just . . . slowly."

Severus began to slowly thrust his cock in her as he continued to push against the phallus. He watched her eyes widen and felt her nails dig into him, but she did not tell him to stop. It seemed that she was tighter around him as the phallus went deeper, and he could feel its length through her vaginal wall, his cock moving against it as he continued to thrust. The stimulation was exquisite for him, but he watched her face, waiting for any sign that he should stop. When he received none, he pushed the phallus all of the way in, only the wider handle emerging.

"I'm going to try something," Severus whispered, stilling, his cock fully sheathed in her. "Tell me if you don't like it."

He placed his finger at the end of the phallus, thought a moment, then said, *Micare*." Severus smiled as he felt it begin to vibrate lightly. He'd always been good at creating new spells. There probably already was one for precisely what he wanted to do, but this worked, and nicely.

"Is this all right, Poppy?" he asked.

Poppy nodded, letting out a long breath. He kissed her, then he began to move in her again, the sensation of the vibrating dildo causing him almost ecstatic pleasure as it stimulated his cock. He came again, gasping and amazed at the strength of the *Apsterrere* spell to withhold his ejaculation and maintain his erection despite the intense stimulation.

"I want you to come, Poppy. Come, and then I will release the spell on myself, come, Poppy, come for me," he murmured, pumping into her.

Poppy swallowed, her breath coming in gasps. "I don't know . . . oh, gods, Severus!"

"Does it hurt? Am I hurting you?" he asked in alarm, holding still.

"No, no, just . . . oh, oh," Poppy moaned and closed her eyes.

Concerned about her despite her words, Severus used a *Finite* on the dildo to cease its vibration, then withdrew from her himself before gently removing the phallus. He kissed her lips and rested on top of her, nuzzling her soft skin.

"You didn't need to stop altogether, Sev, please, don't stop," Poppy said, raising her hips.

Severus kissed her again, then used a nonverbal charm to clean the dildo, and repeated the cleansing again as he had before.

"Why don't we try this instead," he whispered, sitting back on his heels.

Poppy closed her eyes, not knowing what to expect, but then she felt the phallus in her vagina. It began to vibrate, and she moaned and lifted her hips, wanting Severus to move it. She felt so close. His finger was at her anus again. He whispered the lubricating charm, then she felt the head of his cock where his finger had been.

"May I, Poppy? May we try?" he asked.

"Yes, just do something, please," she gasped, her hands in a bruising grip on his buttocks as he hovered over her.

Severus pressed into her. Tears came to his eyes, she was so tight. He stayed still for a moment, then he began slow, gentle movements, just pulling out slightly before pushing back in. His pelvis pressed against the end of the dildo, pushing it in with each thrust. He wanted her to come before he released the spell on himself, but the tightness around him and the vibration of the phallus caused him to orgasm again. He tried not to give any sign of it, but that was impossible. It was exquisite.

"It's good for you, Sev? Good?" Poppy asked, her breath coming hard.

"Oh, yes, yes, Poppy, always good with you." He kissed her.

"Then fuck me," Poppy groaned. "Gods, take that thing out of me and just fuck me. I am so close, so close. I just want you, you, Severus, you. Just you. In me, Severus, in me, in me!"

Severus pulled out of her, removed the phallus, cast a charm to clean himself, and then he entered her again, just dropping the dildo on the bed. He rocked slowly, her legs around his hips, but Poppy bucked up against him, and he quickened his pace. Their bodies were slippery with sweat, and his muscles burned from exertion. He kissed her neck, licking her and sucking her skin, loving the taste of her, then he reached between them and began to stroke her clitoris as he continued to thrust into her. Poppy inhaled sharply, then began to pant and moan, pushing against him, rocking beneath him, meeting his thrusts, then she was coming, not restraining her choked cries,

calling his name.

"Sev, Sev, Sev, Severus! Severus!"

Severus released the spell on himself, and in a few more thrusts, he exploded, ecstasy followed by euphoria as his orgasm finally ended in ejaculation.

"Oh, gods, Poppy, my love, my love, gods, Poppy, oh, you . . . you . . . oh, I love you, oh, Poppy, oh, I love you so, Poppy, Poppy!" Severus cried as he thrust one more time, his muscles straining as he tried to bury himself in her as deeply as possible as he came.

Severus tried to rest some of his weight on his arms and not all of it on Poppy, but he couldn't seem to move. His legs still shook from exertion and ecstasy, and his heart pounded hard in his chest as he gasped and caught his breath. He had said that word again, that four letter word, but his mind was a haze, and Severus couldn't really rouse himself to be concerned or embarrassed about it. Poppy had said that people shout all kinds of things when they orgasm. At least he hadn't shouted out the name of a woman he loved...like "Lily," or "Minerva," or "Hermione." That would be insulting. He had thought of no one but Poppy when he came, as he always did when he was with her. When he was with Gareth, his mind might stray to Hermione or to Poppy, imagining them to enhance his arousal, but when he was with Poppy, he only thought of her. Even when he had imagined the "relief witch," she had been faceless and anonymous.

Poppy turned her head and kissed his jaw, now slightly rough with stubble. Severus pushed up, swaying slightly on his exhausted arms, then smiling sleepily as he looked down at her flushed, sweaty face.

"I think we both need another bath," he said.

"We certainly do. But I'm too tired to even think about that. A quick shower in the morning will do." She chuckled. "It will be draughty in the bathroom with the door broken."

"Should I fix it for you?" Severus asked seriously, straightening his arms and looking over his shoulder at the door.

"No, my house-elf can do it in the morning. They're very handy with those sorts of things. Better than either of us would be."

"I am certain I could do a more than adequate job of it," Severus said as he rolled over and lay on his back beside her, "but I'll leave it for the house-elf." He was too tired to think about the different spells he would have to use. A simple *Reparo* would be insufficient, he thought.

"I am going to go to the loo," Poppy said, "and freshen up a bit. Would you like me to get you anything whilst I'm up, Sev? I could fix us some tea, if you like."

"Too late for fixing tea," Severus said, yawning. "A glass of water might be nice. Though I feel I should get it for you."

"You just lie there and rest. I'll be back in just a few minutes," Poppy replied.

When she returned a few minutes later, she brought him a glass of cold water and his wand.

"I hope you don't mind my touching your wand, but I thought you might wish to use it," Poppy said.

Severus grinned wickedly. "I never mind when you touch my other wand, so I think you may take it as given that I don't mind if you touch this one."

Poppy laughed and used her own wand to cast a freshening spell over the sheets so they were no longer sweaty and otherwise well-used.

"What's the time?" Severus asked.

"A little past one-thirty," Poppy replied.

Severus sighed deeply. "I wish I didn't have to dress again."

"You need to return to your rooms?" Poppy asked.

"Yes, I should. I shouldn't be gone this long as it is. If there were a problem in Slytherin and they couldn't find me, someone would have to go all of the way to the Headmistress's Office...if the prefect even knows the current password and can pronounce it. It would be my responsibility if something happened whilst I was gone with no provisions made for someone else to look after them."

"During the war..."

"That was different. Besides, during that time, they knew that if they could not find me, they were to look for Sinistra."

They both went sober remembering Sinistra and her fate.

"She was a good witch," Poppy said softly. "And an admirable Slytherin."

Severus nodded shortly. Sinistra had always treated him well; she was loyal to Hogwarts and to Dumbledore, and she had appreciated his position although they had never spoken of it, despite the fact that in the last two years of the war, particularly the last one when Slughorn wasn't there, she often had to step in for him. And then she had stepped in for him again when he was with Voldemort on that last day. Sometimes, it felt to Severus as though it really had been the last day, that he really had died and that this was some new life that he had been given. She, though, she had died and not been given a new life. Killed trying to corral the younger Slytherins into the deeper dungeons to protect them, trying to keep the older Voldemort-sympathisers from leaving and joining the battle, protecting the school and her students, and she had died at the hands of some of those whom she had taught only a few days before.

Severus sighed. "I have to leave, though." He looked over at Poppy, his eyes caressing her face with their gaze. "If I were selfish, I would ask that you come with me, but I think it's best that you stay here and go to sleep. No point in both of us having to get up and dressed."

"You could just put on your trousers and shirt...and your underwear and shoes, of course," Poppy suggested. "You can return for your other clothes tomorrow, or carry them with you tonight...or I could send them down with my house-elf. Just put on enough to be able to enter the corridor decently dressed, and then Floo to your rooms from the infirmary."

Severus nodded and forced himself to sit up. "I'll do that. I'll re-ward the infirmary from the inside. No need for you to get up."

Poppy watched Severus as he walked toward the bathroom. He paused and put his hand on the door, examining where it had split, where the door latch had broken away from the frame, and where three of the four hinges had been torn from the door. He shook his head and snorted in amusement.

Severus returned to the bedroom five minutes later, dressed in his trousers and shirt, carrying the rest of his clothing. He bent and kissed Poppy's lips. Her eyes opened.

"Good night, Poppy," he said softly. "Thank you for tonight. For going to dinner with me. For everything."

"I enjoyed it very much, and dinner was a real treat, as I said." She sat up and caressed his face. "I hope you sleep well."

"And you," he replied with a nod. "Are we still meeting tomorrow evening to discuss the project?"

"Yes. Seven-thirty?"

Severus nodded.

"See you tomorrow, Sev."

Severus kissed her once more lightly then left. Poppy heard the door to the sitting room close behind him.

~ *End of Part Five* ~

~ *to be continued* ~

NEXT

PART SIX

Chapter Fifty-Five: Not Falling in Love

Monday, 15 March 1999

Poppy makes a resolution, and Severus falls into a foul mood as the day wears on.

Beginning of Part Six.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Sarah Duffy

Preview of Upcoming Chapter Titles in Part Six

Chapter Fifty-Six: Out-of-Sorts

Monday, 15 March Tuesday, 16 March 1999

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Arthur Weasley, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Making it Through the Week

Tuesday, 16 March 1999; Friday, 19 March 1999

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Olivia Ouellette

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Barghest's Howl

Friday, 19 March 1999

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Hermione Granger, Madam Rosmerta, Pomona Sprout, Rubeus Hagrid, Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank, Olivia Ouellette, Tarrant McPherson, Auror Shakira Plummer, David Manning, Laura Walker Manning, Helena Benetti, and members of the Barghest's Howl

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Skimming the Lake

Friday, 19 March 1999

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Helena Benetti

Chapter Sixty: Perfect Timing

Friday, 19 March 1999

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Sixty-One: Late Night Advice

Saturday, 20 March 1999, in the wee hours of the morning

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Sixty-Two: For Old Times' Sake

Friday, 19 March 1999

Rated MA.

Characters: Poppy Pomfrey, Quin MacAirt

Chapter Sixty-Three: A Little White Lie

Saturday, 20 March 1999

Rated MA.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Sixty-Four: The Goblin's Knee

Saturday, 20 March 1999

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger

Chapter Fifty-Five: Not Falling in Love

Chapter 56 of 118

Monday, 15 March 1999. Poppy makes a resolution, and Severus falls into a foul mood as the day wears on.

Beginning of Part Six



PART SIX

Chapter Fifty-Five: Not Falling in Love

Monday, 15 March 1999

After Severus left, Poppy sighed, rolled over, and hugged a pillow to her chest. This wasn't good. Not good at all. She was beginning to feel as though they were in a real relationship, not just having a little fling. She couldn't let herself fall in love with him. Not only would she be hurt eventually when he finally decided to begin seeing another witch, or just when he became tired of her, but it was a foolish notion, anyway. He was not her type, not for the long term, and she couldn't imagine that she was his type. Even if they tried to have a relationship, it would fail. Their personalities weren't suited to each other. He was a sarcastic, sharp-edged Slytherin. She was a soft, bleeding-heart Hufflepuff. They would make each other crazy, they even might be hurtful to each other, and she didn't want that. Besides, she was too old for him, and he wouldn't want a long-term relationship with her, not once things cooled off.

She couldn't *really* want to be with Severus, Poppy told herself. She simply had been lonely and not known it. It had been a long time since she had been in a sexual relationship of any kind...the last had been a brief summertime affair with an old friend almost five years before...and she did like Severus's attention to her, and not just the sex. And it was very flattering that he was so open with her, expressing his insecurities, desires, secret wishes . . . Severus was paying her a compliment by exposing himself as he had, both emotionally and physically.

She would have to see to it that they did regulate the frequency with which they had sex. The newness of their relationship and their previous sexual abstinence for such a long time...greater for Severus than for her...drove them to have such frequent sex. If they really were in a true relationship and not just having a fling, the frequency would eventually abate on its own, anyway. As it was a sexual fling, that defined the relationship, and so they felt driven to have sex at every available opportunity, knowing, too, that each opportunity might be the last. And it was very arousing to do it in some of the ways they had. In the fourth floor corridor, as unwise as that had been, it had been very hot. Of course, they had both had too much to drink. But the time in the staff room, that had been very sexy. Just doing it there in the staff room on the table . . . despite being sexually exhausted, Poppy felt a tingling in her clitoris thinking about it. And he had wanted her to restrain him. She normally didn't find any kind of bondage titillating, but that had been quite titillating once she had relaxed. Much of it had simply been the fact that he had trusted her, that he had wanted to feel safe with her, that being restrained by her had made him feel safe, and that he wanted her to take her pleasure with him. And it had been wonderful to be able to kiss him and touch him wherever she wished.

That night, though, most of the anal sex had been a bit much for her, though it hadn't been painful, and she would have to tell him that in the future, a finger or a much smaller dildo were as much as she could tolerate, but she had enjoyed his pleasure and was glad to have given him another new experience. Poppy remembered the expression on his face when he orgasmed with the dildo vibrating in her vagina as he was in the other side, so to speak. He had tried so hard not to lose control, but he clearly had enjoyed that. Yes, if he enjoyed having intercourse whilst she had a vibrating dildo up her arse, she would do that, it would just have to be smaller. Of course, he also seemed to like anal intercourse . . . that alone, Poppy knew, would do very little for her, but she thought she wouldn't mind it occasionally if it were important to him...after all, he did spend a good deal of energy on assuring she was well satisfied. She would have to talk to him about it and see.

The situation might not arise, though. She would need to make sure that they stuck to their agreement and didn't have sex two days in a row, Poppy thought. It would be safer for her heart if she limited it even more than that. That wouldn't be difficult. They were both busy during the week, and they both had other duties and other friends. She was going to go into Hogsmeade and visit Gertrude, her niece wanted her to visit and see her new baby, she needed to go speak with Healer Glyndwr at St. Mungo's and she might stay and have dinner with her, and there could be other, unexpected draws on her time, as well. Severus seemed to leave the castle to visit friends, himself. But more important than the sex was the time they spent together when they weren't having sex. She would have to be better at maintaining collegiality, as well. She shouldn't have joined him and Gareth for a beer in his rooms. That was too friendly. And going out to dinner with him had been far too romantic. After they weren't having a fling any longer, they could become better friends, but not yet. Of course, if they weren't having sex, Severus might not want to see her at all any longer. Yet another reason to beware her heart.

Despite what she'd implied to Severus when he had asked her about her earlier relationships, she had only really been in love once, with Murdoch. She had seen other wizards, attempted to form relationships with them, but by the time that Severus had begun teaching at Hogwarts, she had decided that she had used up her ability to be in love, that her relationship with Murdoch had completely wrung it out of her. She'd had a few pleasant relationships in the first decade or so after Murdoch had married Estelle, but, other than Quin, none of the wizards stood out particularly, and her relationship with Quin hadn't gone anywhere for a variety of reasons, including his injury. Any time before Murdoch seemed rather a blur. There had been a very charming, energetic Healer when she'd worked at St. Mungo's, but although the relationship had lasted almost two years, it was far more like a fling, and they hadn't seen each other after she'd left Mungo's for Hogwarts. It had hurt her a little that he wasn't even interested in maintaining a friendship, even if they broke off their romantic relationship, but then Poppy realised that she really didn't care about staying in contact with him,

either, except that it hurt her pride that he didn't want to and had actually come out and said so.

By the late eighties, Poppy had decided to stick with discreet flings and brief affairs, and not many of those. She was choosy and she never felt desperate, so the relative scarcity of such opportunities didn't bother her. Her life was happy. When she went to the dungeons to see Severus that night after he had flirted with her, she had felt aroused by him and by the thought that the dark, private, inscrutable wizard had seemed attracted to her. She really had believed it would only be for the one night, that it was an exciting tryst and nothing more, because what more could there be? But somehow...even in just the last two days...her affection for him had grown, and she could not allow it to grow any further, at least not in any romantic way.

Exciting, clandestine sexual trysts, that was what she wanted, Poppy told herself. And she certainly was getting it. But their friendship and the sex had to remain separate. No allowing herself to believe she was falling in love. She knew to guard against it, and she would. A very bad friend, indeed, she would be to Severus if she allowed herself to become enamoured of him. He had a future now, and he deserved to find a witch and fall in love with her. She was not going to cling to him or try to keep him to herself; if she tied Severus to her by extending their sexual relationship, she could be closing off his opportunity for happiness with someone else. She would not do that to him. She knew how Severus had suffered during the war, and he now had the freedom to do as he wished, to make friends and to take lovers as he chose, unrestrained by his role as a spy. She would take care of him as a loving friend by ensuring that she did not become too attached to their physical relationship and, as unlikely as it seemed, making sure that she did not fall in love with him. An absurd idea, anyway.

Poppy rolled over, relaxed, and fell asleep, comfortable with her decision.

Severus sat up in a cold sweat, his vocal cords sore from the harsh scream that had woken him. He had become better at lucid dreaming, better at ending the nightmares before they became too nightmarish, turning them around on themselves, or, when he couldn't do that, waking himself from them before they plunged him into pain and terror. He was better at it, but not perfect. There were even nights when he would wake in the morning unaware of what he had dreamed the night before, and feeling well and rested. But then there were the nights when he still woke screaming, sometimes crying, as he had just woken that night.

The pain and fear were still pounding in his chest and flooding his body as he threw back the covers and scrubbed at his face with his arm, wiping his tears away. It was just as well that Poppy hadn't come back to his rooms with him. His screaming would have woken her, and though he knew that she wouldn't think less of him...she knew what he had been through, not all of it, but enough of it...it would still be embarrassing. Despite that, as Severus stood over his sink and splashed his face with cold water after first emptying his stomach, retching into the toilet, he wished she had been there. Perhaps he would not have had a nightmare if she had been. And if he had, she could have held him. He knew she would have. He wouldn't admit it to her or to anyone, but he would have liked that, not to wake alone after one of those dreams so terrible that the word "nightmare" seemed inadequate to describe it, and then to have someone soft, warm, and caring there to help him feel something other than the terror and the nausea, to have that someone be Poppy.

Severus showered and dressed, knowing he would not be able to fall asleep again, not until it was time for him to get up and teach. He heated some water in a mug and let a Muggle tea bag steep five minutes, then drank it down, still nearly scalding hot. He wanted coffee, but that would have to wait until breakfast. Of course, he could call Twiskett, but he'd never developed that habit, and he could also easily wait. As Head of Slytherin, he even had Twiskett assigned particularly to him, Twiskett's duties to Severus and to Slytherin House taking precedence over any other work he might be assigned by Swelka. Waking the house-elf just for a cup of coffee seemed unnecessary, though.

The house-elves usually considered it an honour to be selected to serve a member of staff rather than just do the general work in the kitchen, laundry, and elsewhere, but apparently serving Snape had once been considered the least desirable job in the castle. When, a couple of years after he had begun teaching, Albus had told him that, Severus had become incensed. He was never cruel to the house-elves, he said. He never had anything to do with them at all. He didn't even make the one assigned to him do anything other than clean his rooms and do his laundry. He learned then that that was precisely the problem. House-elves wanted to serve. Serving a Head of House was seen as a particular mark of status and reserved for elder house-elves. But since he never called on his house-elf, Spruffle, to do anything, Spruffle felt offended and debased. Severus had snorted and said something about the debasing uses that some purebloods had for their house-elves, so if the house-elf wanted to know what it really was to be debased and to provide a service, as well, he could have the elf suck his cock every morning. That attempt at humour had not been well-received by Dumbledore, and Severus cringed now, remembering it. Finally, they had simply found a young house-elf, Twiskett, who had many other duties, and had assigned him to Severus, telling him that the best way to serve this particular teacher was by performing his duties so well and flawlessly that his existence was never noticed.

Twiskett had stayed with him, invisibly tending to his needs for the past sixteen years. Very occasionally, when Severus had been sick or injured, he had called his house-elf to bring him meals or to fetch Albus for him, but those occasions were rarities. Severus rarely heard Twiskett speak. He would pop into his presence when called, wait for instruction, then leave. It was clear from his behaviour during the battle of Hogwarts that he did identify with Snape and had a peculiar loyalty toward him despite the little direct contact they had had over the years. He had joined the small group of students calling themselves "Snape's Slytherins," much to their surprise, though not to their objection. Twiskett had survived and he still served Severus in the same quietly devoted, unobtrusive way he had always done, as though nothing had changed and as though he had done nothing extraordinary, even though he was the first house-elf ever to be awarded an Order of Merlin. That autumn when Severus had become so ill again, Twiskett had even looked after him, quite lightly saving his life, or at least his magic. He was a good elf.

Severus went to his office and spent a productive two hours before breakfast. He was the first to arrive in the Great Hall, a few minutes before breakfast was to begin, but as soon as he sat down at the staff table, all of the place settings appeared on the tables. Hopeful, he turned his coffee cup right-side-up and it filled itself, and pitchers of cream and of milk appeared up and down the staff table. He reached for the cream and poured in a hefty amount.

He looked up as the doors to the Great Hall opened. Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout entered, followed by a handful of seventh-year Ravenclaws. Severus recognised all of them as studious little prats. Probably wanted to eat quickly and then go to the library for an hour before classes. He had done the same thing as a student, though only partly in order to have time to study. He also avoided having to see most of his peers if he did that. Fifth year, OWLs year, he and Lily would meet in the library every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning before classes began. Often, he wouldn't even go to breakfast, and she would bring him a bread roll and an orange or banana.

Severus sighed and turned his mind from the past. He was meeting Poppy that evening to discuss the counselling project. He knew that she wanted to meet with a Healer from St. Mungo's that week, and they would meet again after she had. Perhaps she would want to go back to her rooms after they met. Or to his. Or to his office . . . but his office was unpleasant, even for a meeting. He might find the idea of sex in his office titillating, but he was certain that Poppy would not, despite her general tolerance and her professional background.

Perhaps it was time to put his bottles and jars of floating bits and bobs away in a cupboard. Have the house-elves give the walls a whitewashing, and the office a thorough cleaning beforehand. Severus did not like having the house-elves clean his office, but he was not particularly mindful of it until the corners began to gather an obvious layer of dirt. And it took a while for it to become obvious because he kept the room so dimly lit. Yes, there was no reason for him to keep the office the way he had always had it. Over the Easter holidays, he would have Twiskett help him clean and refurbish his office. And perhaps he might think about doing something to his own rooms eventually, although they were perfectly fine as they were. He could ask Twiskett for more lighting, though. A few more lamps might make it more comfortable when people came around. Well, when Poppy came around. He wasn't certain what more he could do to his quarters beyond that. If he decided to stay at Hogwarts, he would talk to Minerva about it in June. He still didn't want to take Slughorn's old rooms...which the old Slytherin had used again when he had returned to teach Potions a couple years before...but it might be nice to make some improvements to his own.

Minerva and Albus came in, and with so few people in the Great Hall, Minerva didn't drop her hand from Albus's arm as she usually did in the presence of students. At social events, she would sometimes take his arm, but other than that, she and Albus scarcely behaved any differently in public than they had before he had apparently died, although they were seen together more frequently as they took walks in the gardens or went into Hogsmeade. Severus assumed that it was a combination of years of habit, Minerva's own reserve, and her desire for the students to see the two of them primarily in their roles at Hogwarts.

Minerva smiled at Severus as she took her seat next to him. "Good morning, Severus! Did you have a good evening?"

"It was quite congenial, thank you," Severus replied.

"Where did you go to dinner?" Albus asked as he helped himself to eggs and fried bread.

"Diagon Alley."

"Oh? The Leaky Cauldron?"

"No. I don't like the food there," Severus said.

"So where did you end up?" Albus asked.

Severus began to scowl, but Minerva interceded. "Albus, let Severus eat in peace. You know he doesn't like conversation at breakfast."

Severus was able to finish the rest of his breakfast without being quizzed by Albus, and as more students trickled into the Great Hall, he began to anticipate Poppy's arrival. They had had a late night, and there were mornings when she didn't come to breakfast in the Great Hall, but he nonetheless kept his attention tuned to the doors. The previous night had been spectacular, in his opinion. Not just the night, but from the time that McGonagall had stepped from his rooms and left him alone with Poppy, through their dinner at Delancie's, and then his return to Poppy's quarters after he had raced through his rounds...it was all more wonderful than he had ever believed life could be.

Poppy was so sexy, and stripping her of her bathrobe and taking her against the door had been incredibly satisfying. And then the bath . . . that had been so arousing, washing her nude, wet body, bringing her to climax, and yet despite his intense arousal, he had held her, and holding her had brought him satisfaction of a different sort. But then in the bedroom, he had fucked her and come repeatedly, and she had fucked him with the dildo as she sucked his cock. He had never dreamed that something like that could be so powerfully orgasmic, or that anyone would ever want to do such a thing with him. Severus could feel the strain of his growing erection. He hoped it would subside before he had to leave to teach; though his over-robe would hide it, it was distracting.

Poppy was beyond good to him, so generous and warm. He wished she would come in to breakfast, but as the minutes ticked by, he decided to try not to be disappointed. He had only wanted to see her, and that was all he could have done, anyway. She sat down at the far end of the table from him, and he had to teach shortly. There would be no time for conversation or anything else.

The morning Post Owls arrived, bringing letters and the *Daily Prophet*. A Horned Owl settled down beside his place, and Severus took the letter addressed to him and gave the owl a piece of sausage.

From Arthur Weasley. Severus looked over at the Gryffindor table. Ginny Weasley was there, sitting with her friends, but she was as unanimated as usual. Severus opened the envelope.

Dear Severus,

I found your letter unexpected, however, I assume from the tone that it is a matter of some urgency.

If you are able to come to London, we could meet for lunch one day this week. If your schedule does not allow that, I am available in the evenings, and I could come to Hogwarts to meet with you. If it is a matter that does not require my personal attention, you might prefer to speak with Bill. His schedule is more flexible than mine is.

Sincerely,

Arthur

Severus was displeased that Arthur had not made any specific plan to come up to Hogwarts, but he would owl him after morning classes and suggest that they meet that evening. In fact, he would offer to come to the Burrow. The mention of Bill particularly irked him. He may not have mentioned specifically why they needed to speak, but as he had written in his capacity as Deputy Headmaster and had signed his letter that way, it should have been clear that he needed to speak with him as the father of a Hogwarts student. The older brother would not do.

Breakfast was drawing to a close, and Poppy had not arrived. Severus stood, trying not to feel disappointed, and left the Great Hall and headed for the dungeons to teach. Another cup of coffee between classes might help him shake the cobwebs from his head after too little sleep the night before. It would have been nice to see Poppy's smiling face, though . . .

After his last class of the morning...he only had two, since the first had been a double session...Severus penned a quick note to Arthur, telling him that he would meet him at the Burrow at eight-thirty. He was meeting with Poppy earlier in the evening, but he didn't think that the meeting would last very long. It was a pity that he wouldn't be able to join her for some private amusement after their meeting, but perhaps they could see each other after he returned from the Burrow, even if all they did was sit together and talk.

Severus went to the Owlery and posted his letter to Arthur, then he took the stairs as quickly as possible back down to the ground floor for lunch. He kept his expression neutral as he stepped into the Great Hall and saw Poppy sitting at the staff table. As he walked toward the back of the Hall, he tried to discreetly catch her eye, just to make brief contact with her, but she seemed engrossed in conversation with Pomona. Albus had moved chairs again, and Cahill was sitting on Minerva's left and Vector on her right. There were two seats free, one down between Flitwick and Hagrid and another on the other side of the table between Poppy and Duffy. Severus gritted his teeth and took the seat between the two witches. Sitting beside Poppy should more than compensate for Duffy's proximity.

Unfortunately, Pomona and Poppy's conversation did not abate when he sat down...not that he expected Poppy to devote her attention to him, he told himself...and Duffy ate stiffly and mechanically, not even glancing at him once. She looked as though she would leap through the enchanted ceiling if startled. Severus had no interest in speaking with her, but it was uncomfortable eating beside someone who was clearly so uncomfortable herself. Severus sighed, and when Duffy twitched, flinching, he suppressed another sigh.

"Um, Professor Duffy," he said in the gentlest voice he could manage given his irritation with the witch.

"Yes?" she squeaked, not looking at him and, thankfully, not reminding him that her name was Sarah.

"I wish to . . ." Not apologise, no, that would be too much, even if it might please Poppy. Duffy *had* assaulted him, after all, her foot creeping unwanted up his ankle. "I believe we have experienced a misunderstanding. And that my sense of humour was . . . unexpected." Now, how to express that if she left him alone, he would leave her alone . . . "I will attempt to restrain myself from making such questionable jokes in your presence in the future. And perhaps you might consider something similar."

Duffy looked at him out of the corner of her eye and nodded stiffly before turning her attention to her lentil salad.

Severus ate his own lentil salad with some appreciation. Pleasantly tart with balsamic vinegar, it also had onion, bits of tomato, garlic, oregano, parsley, brown rice, olive oil, and even some Greek black olives. He had had it for the first time a few weeks before and enjoyed it. The house-elves were apparently becoming a bit more adventurous. He beckoned, Summoning the bowl of lentil salad and helping himself to more.

Next to him, Duffy eyed his plate. "You like that?" she asked timidly.

"Mhm."

"It's, um, it's my recipe." She gave a shy smile. "No fresh blood in it, I'm afraid."

Severus quirked a slight, crooked grin and shrugged one shoulder. "Nothing's perfect."

Duffy smiled, sighed, and returned to eating her own lunch. Severus gave thanks that she hadn't taken their small exchange as an invitation to further conversation. He listened as Poppy and Pomona discussed some outing they were planning. When he had arrived, they had been discussing the maturity of the current crop of Mandrakes. That had been a conversation he could have joined, but shortly thereafter, their conversation moved on to more personal topics, and he found no opening to add anything, so he simply listened. It sounded as though they were planning to go away for a few days during the Easter holiday. Severus kept himself from scowling. He and Poppy were going to be working on their project over the holiday, and he had looked forward to being able to spend more time alone with her, kissing her sweet pink skin, licking her everywhere, pleasuring her, fucking her, and then falling asleep with her in his arms.

It would only be for a few days, Severus told himself. It wasn't as though they would have worked on the project every day, anyway. And they couldn't fuck every day. Well, *he* probably could, he sometimes thought, but he wouldn't want to overtax Poppy. But to be able to fall asleep with her, to hold her and keep the nightmares at bay . . .

He looked over at Duffy, but she was now talking to Lloyd. It was better if he didn't talk to her, anyway, Severus decided. She might mistake it for friendliness if he did, and he did not want to become better acquainted with her. He was startled when Poppy and Pomona both stood, ready to leave.

"See you this evening for our meeting, Severus," Poppy said with a cheerful smile and a nod before she turned and followed Pomona down into the Great Hall.

They had said that they would behave as they always had in public, but Severus was disappointed that they hadn't spoken at all despite sitting next to each other for the entire meal. He hadn't even had time to respond before Poppy was off.

The afternoon went quickly, and when he came up to the Great Hall for dinner, he saw that Albus was not there yet. He could sit in his normal seat. He did wish that when everyone else played musical chairs, they would leave his chair alone. He liked sitting in the same place every meal, and he liked sitting beside Minerva, who always could tell when he wasn't in the mood for conversation, but when he was, she was a good conversational partner. Of course, if Albus moved around, he might still have someone less pleasant on his other side, but at least he wasn't sitting in some random spot at the table. He wouldn't mind if he could sit next to Poppy, of course, but that rarely happened.

Severus smiled to himself as he saw Albus take Poppy's seat next to Pomona. Now Poppy would have to seek another seat, and the one on his right was still free. Hopefully, she would come in before Vector did. They might not even speak very much, but it would be nice to sit beside her. He had been looking forward to seeing her all afternoon.

Severus helped himself to dumplings, gravy, and roast pork, then as he looked for the alternative to the broccoli, hoping for a vegetable he preferred to that, the doors to the Great Hall opened. He kept a straight face, but his heart leapt in his chest as he saw that it was Poppy. He watched discreetly as she approached the staff table. He couldn't quite see her as she walked past her usual place at the far end of the table, but as she came closer, he turned his head and looked up at her, giving her a small smile. Poppy smiled warmly and nodded in greeting, and then, to his disappointment, sat in the chair to the left of Minerva's, where Albus normally sat.

Severus began to lean toward Poppy to speak to her, but then Minerva, who had bustled in when Severus had been distracted by Poppy, pulled out her chair and sat down between them.

Severus suppressed a sigh and helped himself to broccoli as Minerva and Poppy began to chat about the upcoming Easter holiday. It seemed that Minerva knew about Poppy's plans, and Minerva expressed her approval that Poppy had changed her mind and decided to go wherever it was she was going. Severus scarcely heard the rest of their conversation. It was clear to him that Poppy had only recently decided to go away for the Easter holiday. Obviously, she was not required to ask his permission, or even consult him about it, but she had never even mentioned that she was considering a trip, even when they were discussing the project and how they would work on the details of the programme over the holiday.

He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter, that if it was something that she had only decided that morning and hadn't anticipated, she wouldn't have had a chance to say anything to him. And sitting next to Minerva . . . she had simply traded places with Albus. She was friends with Minerva. And it was more discreet than sitting beside him. At a near-empty table, who would choose to sit next to him, after all? And they had sat beside each other at meals several times recently. It might look suspicious if she chose to sit beside him again when she didn't have to. He didn't respond when Vector took her seat and greeted him, barely noticing her.

Despite what Severus told himself, he knew that he didn't believe it. Poppy had deliberately chosen not to sit next to him despite the opportunity to do so. It would not have been suspicious. No one would notice. It was just a meal. A meal which no longer appealed to him. He set down his fork, finished his glass of water, and stood. He saw Minerva turning toward him, but before she could say anything to him, he walked quickly away, down his side of the table so that he wouldn't have to pass Poppy. She didn't care about him, anyway. She didn't care and he didn't care that she didn't care. It had been foolish of him to look forward to seeing her. He was the fool, as always.

Severus didn't look back, striding through the Great Hall, his teaching robes billowing behind him, his back straight. If he had looked back, he would have seen Albus watching him, a peculiar and unreadable expression on his face.

NEXT

Chapter Fifty-Six: Out-of-Sorts

Monday, 15 March Tuesday, 16 March 1999

Severus's temper gets the better of him, and he reacts in a way he comes to regret. He ends the day with a visit to Arthur Weasley at the Burrow, where he is taken aback by what he encounters. Later, Severus tries to make amends.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Arthur Weasley, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Fifty-Six: Out-of-Sorts

Chapter 57 of 118

Monday, 15 March – Tuesday, 16 March 1999. Severus's temper gets the better of him, and he reacts in a way he comes to regret. He ends the day with a visit to Arthur Weasley at the Burrow, where he is taken aback by what he encounters. Later, Severus tries to make amends.



Chapter Fifty-Six: Out-of-Sorts

Monday, 15 March Tuesday, 16 March 1999

Poppy looked at the watch pinned to her collar. Two minutes late. Not like Severus. But perhaps he had run into a problem. He had been in a strange mood at dinner, she thought, and had left without finishing his meal. When she had seen that Albus was in her chair and Vector wasn't there yet, she had immediately thought to sit next to Severus, but then she remembered her resolve from the night before...early that morning, actually...and she had sat on the other side of Minerva's chair, where Albus normally sat. That was close, but not too close. Just as well she had, too, since he had left dinner early.

She heard the door to the infirmary open and looked out her office door.

"Good evening, Severus!"

He nodded. "Madam Pomfrey. Shall we? I have an appointment with Weasley at eight-thirty."

Madam Pomfrey? He was in a mood, Poppy thought.

Severus sat across from her, and for twenty minutes, they discussed the logistics of the programme, and Poppy mentioned that she had confirmed a meeting with Healer Glyndwr for the next day.

"I'll be meeting with Healer Glyndwr at St. Mungo's tomorrow at five," she said. "We'll probably go to dinner after."

"Glyndwr. All right." Severus flipped a page, found Glyndwr's name and made a note beside it. "If that is all, I will be on my way."

"How are you getting there?" Poppy asked. "To the Burrow?"

"Apparition. I will have to walk a quarter mile past their Anti-Apparition wards, but that is preferable to having to call through from the Three Broomsticks and wait for him to open the Floo for me." He stood.

"Be sure to tell him that I would be happy to speak with him. Ginny has been fairly forthcoming with me. I wouldn't share her confidences without her permission, but I could discuss our concerns about her in a general way."

Severus nodded. "Is there anything in particular I should tell him?"

"Just that she is depressed and that knowing she has the love and support of her family would be helpful to her. I also think your idea of having her take a few extra days holiday is a good one," Poppy replied.

Severus hesitated at the door. "Would you . . . when I return, should I come see you?"

"No, that's not necessary, not unless you learn something surprising," Poppy said. "You can simply speak to me about it at breakfast tomorrow."

He seemed to stiffen even more at those words. "Rather a difficult proposition when you sit down at one end of the table and I am in the middle."

"You *can* move, you know, if it needs to be more than a brief conversation, which is unlikely." Poppy was becoming annoyed with Severus's attitude. He had been curt for the entire meeting.

"As you did this evening? You and Minerva had quite a nice chat." Severus only just stopped himself from saying something sarcastic about her plans for the Easter holiday.

"Yes, we did. I noticed you left early. You didn't seem to enjoy your meal."

"I did not," Severus replied, his voice hard, remembering again how it had felt when first she had chosen to sit apart from him and then he had overheard that she had plans to go away over the holiday, plans that Minerva already knew about. "Good evening, Madam Pomfrey. I will prepare a written report on my visit to Miss Weasley's father. I will submit one copy to you and another to the Headmistress." He sneered. "It will save you the awkwardness of having to speak to me in public."

"Severus!" Poppy exclaimed, but Severus had already opened the door and left in a swirl of black robes.

Severus went straight to his office when he returned from Weasley's. The place had been a mess. It had never been a palace, and it had always been cluttered, but Molly had kept it clean. He had been tempted to ask Arthur whether he knew any household charms or not, but the poor wizard had been so flustered that he had shown up at eight-thirty, and clearly embarrassed by the state of the house, Severus didn't bother. Arthur was obviously not unaware of the piles of dirty dishes, some gathering mould, scattered newspapers, unopened correspondence, and even random piles of clean and dirty laundry, and Severus did not think that being told he was living in a pigsty would be particularly effective.

Severus had changed his strategy immediately. Instead of recommending that Arthur bring Ginny home early for the holiday, he suggested that they both go away for a couple of weeks. They could stay with family, or perhaps take a genuine holiday and get away, take a trip somewhere. They had money enough now, since Arthur had been awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class, as had Molly, posthumously, and Molly's award money had been given to Arthur.

Arthur was concerned about his youngest child, Severus was pleased to see, and it seemed that that concern overrode his own dim spirits.

"I'm fine when I'm at work," Arthur finally confided, "but when I get home . . . it simply all comes back. And then the house . . . I can't seem to find the energy to do anything, but the mess just makes me feel more down in the dumps. Fleur and Bill come by sometimes, and they do help, but with the new baby, they have their own home to take care of."

Severus, feeling awkward with such a personal conversation, shifted in his chair. "Have you considered moving? Going somewhere else? Getting a small, manageable flat? You could live in London, near the Ministry."

Arthur shook his head. "I can't bear that thought, but living here is becoming almost impossible. I don't know what to do."

"First, ask for help. Bill and Fleur may be busy with their new baby, but you have four other grown sons. You also have some other family, I believe. Beyond that, you need to talk to someone yourself. I think that would help you."

"I don't know anyone I can talk to. Everyone at work, they've either got their own troubles or they're sick of hearing about my losses. The boys are trying to get on with their

lives. I can't hold them back."

Severus kept himself from snapping harshly. Weasley certainly could act the martyr sometimes. "You are their father. You worked hard to feed and clothe them and put them through school. You came home every night after work, and from what I know of you, your only real vice is an obsession with Muggle gadgets. It is only right for them to behave like proper sons," Severus said. "If you need someone to talk to, I can give you the name of a Healer at St. Mungo's. If she can't help you directly, I am certain she can refer you to someone. For god's sake, man! Do you know how lucky you are? Molly is gone, and there is no way I can imagine how you must feel because I never have had anything like that. You lost a son, and again, I cannot imagine what that must be like. But you still have five sons and a daughter and many, many friends...who, I am sure, would find listening to you far less burdensome than you believe."

By the time Severus had left, Arthur had agreed to contact Healer Glyndwr and to visit a Diagon Alley travel agency and book a relaxing holiday for himself and Ginny. Severus himself had determined to contact Bill. He understood that there was only so much the eldest Weasley brother could do when he had his own new family, but perhaps when Arthur was on holiday, he could clean the house then arrange to have someone come in on a regular basis. A free house-elf, perhaps. Dobby might be interested in working for Weasley a few hours a week. He seemed to have an affection for Weasleys, though it wasn't as great as his attachment to "the great Harry Potter."

Severus wrote a very brief report of his visit, addressing it to the Headmistress, then he made a copy for Poppy. He sighed. He had not been very pleasant to Poppy that evening. He had taken her behaviour and placed far too much import on it. She had behaved with perfect propriety, if perhaps more aloofness than he would have preferred, and he wouldn't blame her in the slightest if she felt offended by his rudeness. He had been unreasonable and foolish. It was simply that he put more importance on their relationship than she did, and there was no reason for her to believe him to have any feelings stronger than her own. He had always stressed that they were only having a fling, after all, that they were only colleagues.

On the other hand, perhaps he had offended Poppy in some way before that. He puzzled about it, but he could think of nothing he had done that day that could have led her to be offended. Unless it was that he had spoken to Duffy at lunch. No, Poppy would have hardly noticed, and as long as he wasn't rude to the Divination teacher, Poppy probably wouldn't care. He hadn't had occasion to see her between lunch and dinner, and it was she who had decided not to sit beside him. He had sat next to her during lunch, after all...unless that was it, that she hadn't wanted him to sit next to her during lunch, or that she hadn't minded but thought that doing so two meals in a row was too much.

If it wasn't that, then perhaps he had offended her the previous night. He had believed that when he had left her rooms, Poppy had been happy, but it could be that he had said or done something before he left. Or it was the sex itself. He had thought it had been wonderful, but she had told him before that she didn't like anal penetration. She had let him, but it could be that she had just been caught up in the moment, or she knew that he was enjoying it and had just gone along with it because of that. Maybe she felt used and no longer comfortable with him.

Whatever it was, at least half of the problem was in himself, Severus recognised, and he valued his relationship with Poppy sufficiently to admit it. He would just have to do better tomorrow. Still, as he climbed into bed later that night, he felt that same stab of painful emotion when he remembered her holiday plans. No one ever included him in their holiday plans. Well, Albus had tried occasionally in years past, and Minerva had tried to coax him to join a family party one summer's weekend, but those were very rare occasions. And he had never gone.

He could understand not being invited along, but Poppy hadn't even felt he was important enough to her to inform him that she was taking a holiday. And she hadn't wanted to sit beside him, either, and when they had, she hadn't spoken a word to him, just continued her conversation with Pomona as though he weren't even there. She didn't care about him. It really was just fucking for her. And that's all it was for him, too. It didn't matter. But then he remembered her expression when he had left her after their meeting. He put that image out of his mind.

It was just a fling, Severus told himself as he tried to fall asleep. Just an ordinary fling. Not that he'd ever had room in his life for flings before, let alone room for relationships, so they weren't ordinary to him, but flings weren't relationships, he knew that. And he didn't want a relationship with Poppy. Not a romantic one. But he wished they were at least friends and not just . . . whatever they were. He rolled over. He had been better off when he had believed that he neither needed nor wanted friends. Life was easier then. Except for the duplicity. And the torture. And several other nasty things that he didn't want to think about before sleep.

Perhaps another fling would cure him of this one, if he could think of anyone he wanted to have sex with...and who would also want it with him. That was it. He would have another fling. A curative fling. If not a fling, then a tryst or two. If Duffy had been attracted to him, and Poppy was, surely there would be another witch who would not be averse to a good fuck. No strings attached. A stringless fuck, he'd heard it called. That was what he wanted. There weren't any strings with Poppy, either, of course...that was, perhaps, the problem, and it shouldn't be a problem. That was what he needed to cure. He should have another tryst, something hot and carnal. But this time, a tryst with someone with whom he was less likely to want more than that. Not that he wanted more with Poppy, not really, but they were friends, and he didn't want to ruin their friendship by behaving like an irrational prick. He had to remember the limits of their relationship, the limits of their sexual relationship, and not expect more from her.

He would go into Hogsmeade and find himself a stringless fuck. Maybe Gareth could introduce him to someone. One of his cousins, perhaps. He could fuck his way through the McGonagall family. Severus smirked to himself. It wasn't nice of him, and he really didn't think of Minerva that way at all, but the McGonagalls whom he knew were all good-looking. He remembered that Morgana, the Slytherin a few years above him, and her Ravenclaw twin sister, Branwen, were both very striking as teenagers. Morgana was in Australia, but Branwen, if she hadn't got fat, she might be a good fuck. Of course, she had a husband, that portrait artist. Who were some of the other McGonagalls . . . Severus thought for a moment. There was also Melina, and she was a bouncy, energetic witch. She'd probably be extremely good in bed, but she was still married to the elderly Muggle. Severus tried to keep himself from thinking about offering her some physical pleasures that the aging Muggle likely no longer could give her, or perhaps attending the husband's funeral and offering her comfort. She'd be dressed in black, a sorrowful widow, and he could seduce her.

Severus sighed and rolled over again. The thought of seducing a new widow wasn't as arousing as he might have thought it would be, and it made him feel slightly pathetic. And Melina had helped save his life, too. There was certainly little gratitude in even imagining such a thing. The same was true of Egeria Egidius; as attractive as Minerva's mother was, there seemed something unsavoury about imagining a tryst with her.

Who else, then? It was, after all, only fantasy. He would never act on it...at least he wouldn't have to unless it appealed to him.

Severus remembered Filius's statement about Pomona. A darkly smouldering magnetism, she'd said he had. From what he knew of their relationship, they had gone through a few periods where they had been separated...probably awkward separations, given not only that both of them worked in the same school but that both were Heads of House and had to work together. But apparently they hadn't had a separation like that in well over a decade, not since before he began teaching, and it seemed that they were happily devoted to one another. Nonetheless, as a fantasy . . . Pomona seemed to find him attractive. She was a bit more lushly rounded than his usual taste in witches, and she was older than either Minerva or Poppy, but she looked as though she had a lot of verve, and she did have an aura of earthy sensuality about her. It could be quite titillating to make her desire him, to seduce her, to fuck her senseless.

But Pomona was no Poppy. No one was. And a tryst with someone else might be good for him, but it could never be as good as it was with Poppy. Still, he might be able to find someone who just wanted a quick fuck with a war hero, one with a dangerous past as a former Death Eater. He would have to refresh his knowledge of contraceptive charms. Even with the *Apsterrere* spell in place and not ejaculating, he might not be completely safe. Best to cast one on himself and not rely on some witch who might think that getting pregnant with his baby was a good way to some easy money.

But it would have to be someone whom he didn't see every day, and not one of Poppy's friends. And someone who was attractive. Not that Pomona wasn't attractive in her own way, but she didn't hold any real allure for him. He still wondered about Filius's special attributes, and it wasn't difficult now to understand why the Herbology teacher was with him. It was harder for him to understand the Ravenclaw's apparent devotion to her. He shrugged to himself. He hadn't realised how sexy Poppy was until recently, after all, and if he had a "type," she probably didn't fit it, but he still loved her...no, he still loved having sex with her, he corrected himself quickly. And he did like her very much as a friend. He could understand how a wizard could fall in love with Poppy, even though he hadn't given her any thought until recently.

Severus rolled over. He would try to behave better with Poppy. After all, he had promised her that whatever happened, even if he had regrets about their relationship, he wouldn't blame her for it. He remembered the astonishment and injury on her face when he had taken his leave of her that evening. She cared enough about him to be hurt by him, and he didn't want to hurt her. If he continued to treat her as he had that evening, he would ruin what friendship they had and drive her away from him. He would

create precisely the situation he feared: Poppy despising him and wondering why she had ever slept with such a miserable bastard.

At that moment, *he* wondered why she had ever slept with such a miserable bastard. He didn't deserve her, he didn't deserve her at all, and she had been so generous to him, so kind, so good, so warm and loving. Whatever it was he had done that had made her not want to talk to him, he would fix it, and he would apologise for being such a surly bastard after their meeting. Just because she had said she didn't need to see him about the meeting with Weasley didn't mean that he'd had to be as rude as he had been. And she hadn't ever said she didn't *want* to see him, just that it wasn't necessary.

Recognising that he wasn't going to fall asleep, Severus waved his lamp on and got out of bed. He threw a teaching robe on over his nightshirt and stuffed his feet into a pair of black leather slippers. A little brewing might relax him. . . . He set off for his Potions lab.

Poppy lay curled in bed, hugging a pillow to herself, her sheets twisted around her legs. She blinked and swallowed. She ~~was~~ going to cry. She had no reason to cry. But she felt like crying.

She had kept herself busy that evening in the Hospital Wing, then retired to her rooms at about nine. She tried to read, but she kept looking at the clock. Severus was meeting Arthur at eight-thirty. He certainly wouldn't return to the castle until at least nine-thirty, and even then, he wouldn't come see her. Not that she wanted him to, especially not after the way that he had spoken to her that evening. If he had just left, though, and not said what he had about writing the report for both her and Minerva, she might have hoped he would. And it wasn't what he said, but the way he had said it.

Poppy blinked back her tears. When she'd gone to bed at eleven, she knew that he wasn't coming. But she hadn't expected him to, and she hadn't wanted him to, she really hadn't.

But she had hoped he would, she admitted to herself as tears leaked out and trickled down her cheeks. She didn't know why she was crying. Severus was Severus. Just because they had spent the last week having a fling didn't change who he was, and she knew better than to think it would change their relationship. She knew better, but she had still felt that they had become closer, even though it was just a fling. And she had thought they had been friends before that. It had been the sex that had done it: he wouldn't have spoken to her that way before they'd begun their fling. He was occasionally moody or rude, but not the way that he had been that evening. She didn't even know what had brought it on, except he seemed to loathe her now.

She shouldn't cry, she told herself. Not only was it just a fling, but she was too old to be crying about a few rude words from a wizard known for his moodiness. And she certainly knew enough not to expect anything from him. And she didn't care, really. She buried her face in her pillow. She really didn't care.

But she also didn't understand. She had been intimate with Severus in a way that she had only been intimate with one other wizard in her life. She had let go and trusted him, and she had believed that he trusted her. He had wanted her to bind him so that he could feel that trust and safety.

It had all been too much too fast, Poppy recognised. She had known it before, and she had told herself that she should limit her intimacy with him, but she hadn't. And fool that she was, she had let him into her heart, despite her very ineffectual denials to herself. She wasn't in love with him, she couldn't be, but she had let herself think about the possibility, and she had let herself enjoy the emotional intimacy with a wizard who was normally closed off, buttoned up, and aloof.

It was her stupid Hufflepuff desire to protect and nurture him, to enfold him in her arms and hold him warm in her heart. Stupid, she told herself. Stupid. She should know better. She had let her care for him run away with her, opening herself up to feelings that Severus did not and could not return. And now, they might not even be friends.

She should have just stayed in her rooms that night when she'd invited him in for tea. It had been an experiment in flirtation for him, and that was all it had been...until she followed him back to his quarters. An experiment was all it would have remained if she had had the good sense to stay in her own rooms and not follow him down to the dungeons. But no, she had to become foolishly aroused and curious, and it was just as Minerva had said the next morning: she had been an experiment to him and he . . . she had been enticed by his vulnerability. She hadn't meant to take advantage of him, and it hadn't seemed that way at the time, but if it had been a different wizard there that night who had done those things, he never would have got as far as the kiss, and she would have redirected his flirting very early on. And even if she hadn't, she was still certain that she wouldn't have simply followed some other flirtatious wizard back to his quarters. She just didn't do things like that.

It was hard for Poppy to reconcile the couch-cuddling Severus, the Severus who said he enjoyed waking up next to her, the Severus who had brought her out to Delancie's the evening before, and the Severus who took his time pleasuring her, with the Severus who had sneered at her, who had called her "Madam Pomfrey" in her private office, and who had told her he would write her a memo so that they wouldn't have to be seen speaking in public. Poppy blinked back a few more tears. It had been entirely unexpected, just as unexpected as his initial flirtation had been.

Poppy rolled over. She should just pretend the entire previous week had never happened. Pretend that they hadn't had sex, that he hadn't brought her pleasure, that she hadn't done things with him just because he enjoyed them even when she didn't enjoy them much at all, that he hadn't brought her out to dinner, that he hadn't made her tea, that he hadn't bet on Hufflepuff to win against Gryffindor because he hadn't liked the way that Minerva had spoken to her. That he hadn't told her that she could call him "Sev." She would just pretend it had all been . . . nothing. That was best. Otherwise, she might begin to believe that she had a broken heart. And that was impossible.

Severus carefully stoppered the potion with a new cork, then Summoned some wax from across the room. He frowned. Green. He cast a permanent colour-change charm on the wax, changing it to a warm Hufflepuff yellow. It would go better with Poppy's decor, he reasoned. Provided, of course, that she accepted his gift...and actually liked it well enough to keep it. He had used the most appealing flask he could find in his cupboards, clear with a slightly pink cast to the glass, a rounded bottom, and a tapering neck. He uncorked the flask and sniffed once more, then nodded before restoppering it and sealing it with the yellow wax, bringing the wax seal all the way down the neck of the flask so that even after it had been uncorked, the coloured wax would still decorate it.

He normally didn't do such frivolous brewing, but as soon as he had stepped into his lab, he had the idea for the potion and knew that it was just the thing for that night's brewing. He had been as exacting as if he had been brewing Draught of Living Death or Dreamless Sleep, and he'd been at it for over three hours. Part of that time had been taken running out to Greenhouse One and completely denuding one of Pomona's rosebushes of its blooms. Because of the method he was using to extract the scent, he hadn't really needed quite as much as he had taken, but he had thought that it was better to have too much on hand than to have too little. He would have to explain something to Pomona about her rosebush, he supposed. He hoped she hadn't had any plans for that particular bush, but of the half-dozen rosebushes that bore blooms, that was the one that had the most pleasing scent.

There was a little bit of the base potion remaining, and Severus thought that if Poppy liked this one...and if she was still speaking to him...he might make her some shampoo, as well.

Poppy had slept fitfully, and when Mrs Framingham entered the painting in her bedroom to announce she had a visitor, she was even less happy than she normally would be at being woken at . . . at four-thirty in the morning?

Suddenly aware that it had to be an emergency at that hour, Poppy sprang out of bed, her heart pounding at the sudden surge of adrenalin. She stepped into her slippers and was still putting her arms into the sleeves of her bathrobe when she entered the sitting room and waved her wand to open the door to the hall. She stopped stock-still, one arm in her robe and one arm still partway out.

"Severus?"

Severus took a tentative step into the sitting room.

"Is there an emergency in Slytherin? Or did Suzie Sefton manage to eat too many sweets before bed again?" She could see that he had only put a teaching robe on over his nightshirt, and his ankles were bare above his slippers feet.

"Neither." He paused. "You told me once, quite a while ago, that if I ever needed to talk, I could come see you, day or night." He swallowed.

Poppy blinked. "Yes, yes, I did." She finished putting on her bathrobe, tying its sash around her waist.

"Is the offer still . . . valid? I mean to say, that was during the war, and before . . . before everything."

"Of course. Yes. Come in." Poppy closed the door behind him. She was confused, to say the least. "Have a seat," she said, gesturing toward the sofa. "I can call for some tea or coffee, if you like."

"No. That's fine." Severus stepped further into the room as Poppy sat down in the armchair to the right of the sofa.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Nightmares? I could give you some Dreamless Sleep, if you like. Not for tonight," she added, glancing at the clock, "it's too late now, but for tomorrow."

"I have a small store of it. I try not to take it very often," Severus replied, finally sitting down on the edge of the couch. "But it wasn't nightmares about the past that kept me awake." He took in a breath. "You see, I was worried about something, something I'd done. I think I hurt the feelings of someone whom I care about, someone very important to me, and it weighed on my mind."

"I see," Poppy said. She wasn't completely sure she did see, however. Was he talking about her, or about someone else?

"Yes. You see, I felt . . . I believed that the person was behaving rudely to me, so I was rude in return. Except the person wasn't being rude, not really, and not intentionally, I'm sure. But I was deliberately rude. I didn't think about my behaviour at the time, I just . . . reacted, but it was still deliberate," Severus explained.

"Well, perhaps if you were to apologise, the person would understand. And if the person hurt your feelings without intending to, I'm sure that he, or she, would want to know."

"Do you think she might accept a gift? Would that show that I'm sincere?"

"It might be nice, but I'm sure that if this person is a friend, she'll understand without your having to give her anything." Was he speaking of Hermione, or of her, or of someone else altogether?

"I hope that she's a friend." Severus reached into the large hidden pocket of his robe and pulled out a flask. He held it out to her. "I'm sorry, Poppy," he said softly. "I hope I didn't hurt your feelings. I'm sorry I was unpleasant to you yesterday evening. I was just upset about something."

Poppy took the flask from him. She looked from the flask back up to his eyes. "I don't know what to say."

"Why didn't you want to talk to me?" Severus asked, trying not to sound whiny.

"Not want to talk to you?" Poppy looked confused. "I'm sorry, Severus, but it's only four-thirty in the morning, and I'm afraid I'm not following you. When? You mean about your meeting when you got back from Arthur's?"

Severus looked down at his feet. "I mean . . . at all. At lunch. At dinner. And then you didn't want me to come see you after Weasley, either."

"It's not that I didn't *want* to talk to you. I just didn't have a chance. And you weren't very pleasant in our meeting, although I still actually did hope you might come by to see me, just not about Hogwarts business, and that was despite the way you left."

"You didn't tell me you're going away for the holiday. I thought we were working together over Easter."

"I only just decided it this morning...yesterday morning. Pomona talked me into it. It's only for a few days and won't interfere with our project. I didn't even have *a* chance to tell you. I would have after dinner during our meeting, but you were so brusque and formal, and *you* obviously didn't want to talk to *me* about anything other than Hogwarts business, then the way you left . . ."

"You didn't speak with me during lunch, and then you didn't sit next to me at dinner. It felt like you were avoiding me," Severus said softly.

"In just one day?" Poppy asked, her eyebrows raised in astonishment. "Severus, we often go long stretches without speaking with each other. I just thought . . . we're supposed to be behaving normally around each other in public. And then you were so rude last evening after dinner, and I had no idea what I'd done, especially after the intimacy and warmth of the night before."

"I said I was sorry." He looked up at her. "I am."

"And I'm sorry if you felt that I was avoiding you. I hadn't intended it. And I never would have thought it would matter to you."

Severus shrugged. "It didn't, not really. I just . . . I had certain expectations, and I hadn't slept well the night before . . . I'd had nightmares . . . I felt . . . that it didn't matter to you, that I didn't matter . . ."

"Of course you matter to me! You know, I wish you had said something to me when we met yesterday evening. We could have cleared this up easily. I did consider sitting next to you at dinner, but I thought it might be better for us both if we didn't."

"Why? I don't think anyone would notice. Except Minerva, and she already knows that we're . . . we're . . ."

"You see, that's just it, Severus," Poppy said. "What are we doing? We said it was just a tryst, and then it became more, but you don't want a relationship...and I understand that. We're not anything, really. Friends, I suppose, but I can't imagine any of my other friends being so upset about my sitting beside Minerva instead of them, or delaying telling them that I'm going away for a few days. And if we were more than friends, well, behaviour like that, it's just not good."

"I . . . I haven't much experience with friendships. Or anything else." He snorted. "And this is why. I'm terrible at it."

"I don't know, Severus . . . but you know, whether we were just friends or were something more than that, I would expect to be treated better. To have you talk to me, to at least let me know what you thought I'd done. You have treated me very well in so many ways, but then you leapt to conclusions and were very unfair to me."

"I said I was sorry."

"I know." She lifted the flask and looked at it. "What is this?"

"Your bath soap was rose-scented, so I thought you might like a rose-scented lotion for after. It should keep your skin soft and supple." He blushed. "Which it already is, of course."

"Thank you. That's very thoughtful of you. Did you brew it?"

He nodded. "Just tonight. So it should stay stoppered and allowed to set for at least twenty-four hours before you use it for the first time. I wanted to give it to you as soon

as possible, though."

Poppy grinned slightly. "I see that." She glanced at the clock. "Now that we're up and quite awake, would you like some tea or coffee?"

Severus shook his head. "I should be going. You could probably still get a little more sleep. I should have waited to see you, but I . . . it bothered me," he admitted.

"It bothered me, as well," Poppy said softly. "After the other night, Delancie's and all we did after, I couldn't understand why you would suddenly behave as you did."

Severus looked away, his expression shuttered and unreadable. Finally he said softly, "I had been looking forward to seeing you, and I was jealous. I was jealous of the time you spent with Pomona, and of your holiday plans with her. I understand that now, but I still feel as though you were avoiding talking to me, especially when you didn't sit next to me at dinner." He raised his gaze to meet Poppy's.

"Maybe I was avoiding you, just a little, but not the way you imply. I thought it best if we tried harder to behave normally around each other. The last week . . . the last week was very intense for us both. It seemed wise to do what we had both agreed we were going to do: behave no differently in public than usual. And now, that seems an even wiser decision."

"You mean . . . you don't want to be seen in public with me?" Pain was evident in his voice and his posture.

"No, of course not! We just went to Delancie's together the other night. You can hardly get more public than that. I just think . . . obviously you put more import on my actions than you normally would, and then the way that you reacted...it really did hurt my feelings, Severus, I will be honest with you about that. It bothered me more than it should have. We can't go on as we have done."

"You want to stop seeing me," Severus said flatly. "In private, not in public."

"I . . . I don't want that, but I think it's best. For us both. For a while, anyway. Just for a while. So we can cool down a bit, think about things."

"I apologised," Severus said, standing. "I apologised, and still . . ." He shook his head and turned away. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair at all.

"Oh, Severus, I do appreciate the apology. And I understand. But I just . . . I am afraid we will hurt each other if we continue as we have done." She stood and placed her hand on his back. "Don't you think it's for the best?"

He shrugged and stepped away from her. "It doesn't matter what I think. I ought to go now. Since we're in private."

"Severus, that's not what I meant and you know it."

"Do you regret it all now?" he asked softly, still not looking at her.

"No. No, I don't," she said firmly. "I regret yesterday. I wish we could undo yesterday. But we can't, and it's probably just as well, since it showed us . . . it showed us that we can't go on this way."

"It's my fault. If I hadn't been jealous, if I had just let you be, you wouldn't feel this way. We could still see each other."

"It's that important to you? It's just a fling. It was supposed to be just a fling."

He turned around. He looked down at her, raising his right hand to her cheek. "It doesn't feel like a fling. I don't know what I want, but I don't want less. I want more. I want more. I know that you don't, but you wanted honesty from me, and that's the truth. I wanted you to sit next to me at dinner, and when you didn't, I was more than just a little disappointed. I was angry. I shouldn't have been. I know that. But it's because . . . because I wanted more, and yet I couldn't even have that, I couldn't even have your company during dinner."

Poppy met his gaze and her breath hitched. "Severus, I..."

Her words were cut off by his lips on hers, then his left arm went around her, pulling her close to him. She raised her hands to his shoulders, fighting with herself not to return his kiss, but submitting to him and losing her struggle with herself.

His right hand went around behind her head as he deepened the kiss.

"Mmm . . ." Poppy finally broke away, turning her head to the side. "Oh, Severus . . . we shouldn't."

"Why?" he asked, his voice rough in her ear. "Because it's not a fling any longer? I know I should run from here. I didn't want more than a fling, myself. I didn't even want a fling. I didn't even want to make love to you once. I never dreamed we would." He kissed her hair and his left hand massaged her buttocks. "But then you followed me down to my rooms that night, and we made love. Whatever we say about how it was just a casual fling, or what I may have said about it being just fucking, we made love, Poppy, you and I. And I didn't even know it."

Poppy pushed away from him, but his arms held her tightly. "Severus, let me go, please."

Severus kissed the side of her neck once more, but then he released her and stepped back.

"Am I wrong?" he asked.

"No, no, you're not wrong," Poppy replied softly. "But that doesn't mean that we . . . that we should keep going as we have done. I need to think, Severus, and so do you. You didn't even want a fling with me, remember? You said that yourself just now. Are you so sure you want more? And I don't know at all what I want. I do know that you are young yet, and that you deserve more than just a fling with an older colleague. There's nothing wrong with that, but you . . . you have known so little of life other than pain and violence. This has been a very intense time for us both. I don't know that you're really feeling what you think you are...and I don't even really know what that is. But I think that we both need to think about this."

Severus nodded and stepped back. "I see. I do see. And you are right. If you weren't, I doubt I would even be here now, either with my peace offering or even with any reason for apology. You are right." He let out a slow breath and lowered his eyes. "That does not mean that I will be happy about not seeing you."

"I didn't say that we couldn't see each other at all. Obviously, if we can't . . . can't be alone together easily, we might want to avoid that. At least outside of necessary Hogwarts business. But I don't see why we couldn't still . . . sit together at dinner, if we have the opportunity. Or go to the Quidditch matches together. We are friends. We were friends before all this. We could just become better friends whilst we're thinking about the other. Your friendship is important to me, and you're important to me. I think . . . I believe that once you've considered it, you'll see that's for the best for you. There are so many other witches for you to be with, Severus. Ones who are more appropriate than I am."

"I don't see that you're inappropriate for me...although the reverse is certainly true." He took in a deep breath and sighed. "But my jealousy and possessiveness have already created trouble for us. I will try to behave better in the future."

"And we can take a break from our . . . our fling for a while? Not just saying we will as we have done in the past, but really? I think that the intensity of the last week has caused us both to, well, it's probably best if we cool off and think about our options, don't you think?"

Severus shrugged.

"Why don't we just leave the subject for now? We can talk again."

"All right. Although if you've made up your mind, there's nothing I can see to talk about. It's not as though I can force you to continue. It wouldn't be the same if I tried to." He was being dumped, he thought. Kindly dumped, but dumped. Served him right, after the way he had treated Hermione. At least Poppy had never asked him out on a date, said she wanted to date him exclusively, and then changed her mind completely, as he had with Hermione.

"Let's just see." She rubbed his arm. "I do appreciate the lotion, you know. And the apology. I understand, Severus."

"Never mind. It's my own fault." He backed toward the door, and she dropped her arm.

"I'll see you at breakfast?"

He nodded.

"Remember that I won't be at dinner tonight. I'm seeing Healer Glyndwr."

He nodded again.

Poppy smiled. "I just don't want you to think I'm avoiding you."

"Of course."

"Severus, can we have a deal? Let's agree that if either of us feels something is wrong, we will talk about it? Let's try to avoid misunderstandings in the future, if we can."

"I am not good at such things."

"You can try. And you did nicely this morning. It's important to me. Because *you're* important to me." She stepped toward him and touched his arm lightly.

"Mm. I will see you later." It hadn't mattered: his apology hadn't made any difference.

Poppy nodded. After he had closed the door behind him, she whispered. "And I am sorry, too, Severus. But it's for your good, too. It's better this way for us both."

NEXT

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Making it Through the Week

Tuesday, 16 March 1999; Friday, 19 March 1999

Severus manages to make it through the week, though not happily.

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Olivia Ouellette

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Making it Through the Week

Chapter 58 of 118

Tuesday, 16 March – Friday, 19 March 1999. Severus manages to make it through the week, though not happily.



Chapter Fifty-Seven: Making it Through the Week

Tuesday, 16 March Friday, 19 March 1999

Poppy rubbed her eyes. She had managed to make it through the morning fairly well, despite her poor night's sleep, but two nights in a row of having only a few hours sleep were taking their toll, and her midafternoon slump was worse than usual.

When the words began to swim in front of her eyes, she gave up and called one of the house-elves who served in the infirmary.

"I am going to my quarters, Perlie. If anyone comes up to the infirmary between now and four-thirty, you can fetch me. And as you know, I will be out of the castle this evening. I doubt there will be any need for either you or Strilpa to stay in the Hospital Wing whilst I'm out, but listen for the Headmistress in case you are needed."

"Of course, Madam Poppy," Perlie said.

Poppy went straight to her bedroom and collapsed on the bed, just kicking off her shoes and tossing her hat across the room, not caring where it landed. Within seconds, she was asleep.

"Mmm, Severus, you shouldn't be so naughty," she murmured, rolling over and stretching. Her hands met air, and she blinked. There was no one there. She'd just been having a particularly nice dream, she realised with a sigh.

Poppy pushed herself up. She could tell from the angle of the light coming in through her windows that it was later than it had been when she lay down, and she reached for the small clock on her bedside table. Almost four o'clock already. She'd slept almost two hours, but she didn't feel refreshed. She felt hot, sweaty, and muzzy-headed. She knew better than to fall asleep in her clothes like that, and to sleep for more than an hour in the afternoon unless she was really sick.

A shower would help her wake up enough to be able to make it to her meeting with Healer Glyndwr. Gladys would be understanding if she bowed out of the dinner plans they had made for after their meeting, but Poppy had been looking forward to it. Besides, it would get her mind off of Severus.

As she showered, though, Poppy couldn't keep her mind off of Severus. Now, in the full light of day, she was unsure of the decision that she had made early that morning. She had been second-guessing herself all day, and it hadn't helped when Severus had walked past her at breakfast that morning, going directly to his own chair, even though Pomona's seat to her left was still free. Of course, that was what she had wanted, for them to behave as they normally did, but that didn't change the fact that she wished that where he sat at mealtimes was not now so fraught with symbolism. Then she thought about him all morning until she saw him at lunch, already in his place as she entered the Great Hall, and the seat to his right, still empty, and Albus sitting in her usual chair beside Pomona, but the place on Albus's other side, free.

As foolish as it was, she almost turned around and left the Great Hall rather than decide where to sit. But then she had walked up to the table, turned left instead of right as usual, and walked around to sit beside Severus. She had, after all, said that there was no reason that they couldn't sit together during meals, and she wanted them to be comfortable with each other as friends. But other than when she asked him to pass her the condiments and he had said, "you're welcome" when she thanked him, he hadn't said anything at all to her. It was an uncomfortable meal, with Severus silent on one side of her and Rath taciturn on the other, and it left Poppy sitting there and eating mechanically, wishing she had sat beside Albus after all.

When she'd finished her meal and put her napkin on the table, though, Severus had risen and taken the back of her chair, pulling it out slightly for her, then he had looked at her, nodded once, and swept past, leaving the Great Hall in a swirl of black robes.

Poppy might not admit it to anyone else, but she was not fool enough to deny it to herself any longer: she wanted more with Severus than just a fling. It had been a terrible temptation when Severus had come to her rooms that morning and told her he wanted more. She didn't know how much more she wanted...the mere idea of the two of them together in some kind of long-term relationship would strike anyone as absurd, she was sure...but she knew that she didn't like the strain between them, and that she wished she could undo the events of the previous day. But she also believed that something worse would have happened further down the road if they had continued to see each other as they had been. Severus clearly had difficulties in relationships, and if he had fits about the fact that she didn't speak to him at a meal or that she decided to go on a short holiday and didn't inform him immediately, how much worse would it be if they moved beyond a fling? And then his apology . . . it was sweet, but over-the-top.

It was as Minerva had said about Severus: he went to extremes. A brief apology from him when he returned from Arthur's would have been sufficient. She would have gone to bed forgiving him his bad mood. Instead, he stayed up half the night and brewed a potion for her. Then he couldn't even wait until dawn to give it to her, but had woken her at four-thirty in the morning. He was a man of extremes. She had always known this about him; it may even have been a part of what had attracted her to him that first night, and why she had followed him back to his rooms. But it wasn't healthy and it wasn't sensible.

Poppy didn't know if they could be friends now, but she hoped they could at least be friendly colleagues. They probably just didn't have enough in common to be real friends, anyway, she told herself as she towelled herself dry. But she had enjoyed spending time with him over the last week, and they had had a good time at Delancie's two nights ago. It wasn't only the sex she would miss, it was Severus himself. He was witty and intelligent, quite attentive to her, a good listener, and generally good company...when he wasn't being surly. Of course, the sex had been very good. She had begun to believe that she was past having another lover, and she had become comfortable with that idea. She wasn't averse to the idea of another relationship, of course; such a thing could happen at any time of life...look at Gertrude, after all. She had lost Reginald, and then, more than a quarter century later, had remarried quite happily. Just because one was no longer in the first bloom of youth didn't mean that love and romance were out of the question. But she hadn't been looking for a lover that night when Severus had flirted with her, and she hadn't anticipated ever falling in love again or having another romantic relationship.

Of course, what she had had with Severus wasn't like that. She liked steady, dependable men, and he was too moody; she was too old for him, and he was apparently enamoured of young Hermione Granger . . . No, it would never have worked out. But it was a pity that it couldn't have continued for a bit longer and then just gradually faded as he had found other interests.

This was for the best, though, she told herself again as she headed out the door. There was no reason that they couldn't be friends, if they both wanted that. And she should simply enjoy other aspects of her social life, as she always had done.

Severus ate his dinner with little appetite. This would have to be one of the meals he was required to attend that week. He hadn't been this tired in months. All he wanted to do was return to his rooms and go to bed. He was getting soft.

On his right, Vector was speaking with Laura Manning about some shopping trip they had planned for the following weekend. He didn't want to know about hairstyles, witches' robes, or make-up potions, let alone the relative merits of Muggle undergarments versus traditional witches' wear. He *certainly* had not wanted to know that Ms Walker Manning favoured brassieres over support charms. He tuned their conversation out and turned toward Albus, who was actually sitting to the left of the Headmistress's chair as he was supposed to.

"Where is Minerva this evening?" Severus asked. He had been unaware that she was going to be absent from the evening meal, and she usually told him in advance.

"She is dealing with an unhappy parent."

"Not a Slytherin student," Severus asked.

"Hufflepuff," Albus replied.

Severus glanced further down the table. Pomona was not at dinner, either. He shrugged to himself. Minerva would tell him about it at their weekly meeting, he was sure, unless he needed to know sooner. He was not good with Hufflepuffs. Except with Poppy. Although recent events and his recent behaviour demonstrated that he wasn't very good with her, either. He remembered the Hufflepuff proprietor of Scrivenshaft's, and his derision for the wizard's marriage to a Slytherin, thinking that the witch had found herself a nice, tractable little man for whom she would have to do little in order to hold. Now, Severus's only sneer was for himself.

"We're a bit light on staff tonight," Albus remarked, "or I would volunteer to take your shift so you could leave early. I told Minerva I would stay for her already, though."

"Mmm."

"Poppy is in London this evening, I understand."

"Yes."

"Meeting with someone about the project?"

"As I am sure Minerva already told you."

"Move over if you're done with your dinner, Severus. We can speak more easily."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You could move."

Albus smiled. "You are the Deputy Headmaster. It is more appropriate for you to sit in Minerva's chair." He smiled more broadly. "We can see how you look in it."

Severus scowled, but moved. Their desserts appeared in front of them. Key lime pie. Not bad, once you removed the soft meringue, which Severus did with a very slight flick of his finger, taking pride in the increased control he had over his wandless magic. He remembered Poppy's door and sighed gloomily. The tart pie no longer appealed to him. He picked up his fork and poked at it.

"So you didn't want to go into London with Poppy this evening?"

"It was not an option. She is meeting with a Healer from St. Mungo's; it is more appropriate for her to meet with the professionals. And as you point out, I am on duty this evening."

"Someone might have been happy to take your shift, though..."

"It was unnecessary for me to attend the meeting."

"But you could have gone to dinner with Poppy afterward."

"No. She and Healer Glyndwr are old friends. They are going to dinner afterward, I believe."

"Ah, Gladys! Yes, a lovely girl."

"Healer Glyndwr is hardly a girl." Severus had never met her, but he knew that she was older than he was by several years.

"Still . . . she is lovely. Perhaps Poppy might introduce the two of you. You might hit it off. Her late husband was an Auror, you know. Bailey. Fenton Bailey. Did you ever know him? No? They weren't married long. I always thought it a pity that she didn't find another nice wizard after he died."

"Albus, I have told you, I do not want to be set up with someone. And even if I were interested in such a thing, I doubt that Healer Glyndwr, an Auror's widow, would be interested in becoming involved with a former Death Eater. She is also in London; I am at Hogwarts. I am not interested in her."

"I just think you should get out and meet people, son. Have some fun. You took Poppy to dinner at Delancie's over the weekend; that was a start. Take her out again."

Severus shot a look at Albus. Damned nosy old wizard. "I never told you where we went to dinner."

Albus shrugged. "I heard it from someone. But if you had a good time with her, why not ask her out again? She's a fine witch. I think she likes y..."

"Damn it, Albus, just stay out of my affairs!" Severus said, his voice low but his tone, sharp.

"I'm sorry. I'm not meddling. Just making a little suggestion, my boy."

"Dinner with Poppy was Hogwarts business. That was all. She is a colleague." Severus threw his napkin down on the table and stood. Just because he had to be present in the Great Hall for the entire meal didn't mean that he had to sit at the table with a barmy old loon. He bent closer to Albus and said softly but fiercely, "And she would never be interested. Never. Not in me. Just leave me alone, Dumbledore. Go play with someone else's life for a change."

Severus stalked from the table and took up a position by the doors, ready to take points from any student who stepped even one toe out of line. Albus smiled and took a bite of his key lime pie.

Albus settled on the sofa and watched Minerva for a few minutes as she sat at the small writing desk in their sitting room and wrote. "You know, I was thinking, Minerva, that one day during the Easter holiday, we should have some people around for dinner. I made up a little guest list."

"Hmm, if you like," Minerva said, not looking up from the letter she was writing.

"I thought we would invite Pomona and Filius, of course. Sharon will be away for a week, but if we have Pomona and Filius, we should invite Severus. And I thought that Gareth might like to come, if he's going to be in town that week. And perhaps Gertrude. Helena Benetti, too; she always seems so much on her own here, and holidays away from home can be lonely."

"Mmm, I don't know as Gertrude will want to come, but we could tell her who else will be here and let her decide. You do remember that she and Pomona and a few others are going away part of that week after Easter, don't you?" Minerva asked, taking off her glasses, setting them down, and turning slightly in her chair so that she could see him. "You will need to schedule around that."

"Yes, my dear, and I still think you should go with them. You work too hard. You deserve a little holiday."

"I have too much to do, and I don't want to go this year. It will be nice to be here with you, as well," she replied. "Perhaps next year, or if they go again in July, as Pomona is suggesting."

"I will look forward to spending more time with you over the holiday, then, Madam Headmistress!" Albus said with a grin. "You might be able to squeeze me in amidst those important tasks of yours."

"You are hardly neglected," Minerva said drily, avoiding mention of the fact that when he had been Headmaster, he'd had much less time to spend with her than she made for him. "Now, who else is on your guest list?"

"I thought Poppy would be a nice addition, and Quin and Aine. Too close to the birth of little Minerva Aileen to invite Alroy and Rosemary, of course. And we could ask Quin whether he would like to bring a lady friend."

"You keep insisting that Rosemary's having a girl. You don't know that. Aine said it's a boy, and from Melina's expression the last time you said that, she thinks you're wrong, too."

Albus shrugged.

"I don't think that Quin is seeing anyone," Minerva added, "nor is Aine, as far as I know. She starts her job with the Dublin *Prophet* next week, though, so I don't know whether she'll have the time to come."

"I doubt she'll spend every moment working," Albus said. "And it's only an advice column, hardly something with breaking deadlines, or whatever they call them."

"All right. But you take care of the invitations. I have too much to think about at the moment," Minerva said, picking up her glasses and her quill again.

"I know you do, my dear," Albus said. He got up and came over and kissed her cheek. "You make too much work for yourself."

"Tell that to the Board of Governors," Minerva said, twitching away slightly as he tried to caress her. "And if you want us to spend more time together this evening, you'll let me finish this now." She looked up at him and softened her words with a smile. "I have been looking forward all day to beating you at chess tonight."

Albus chuckled and returned to the sofa and picked up the novel he had been reading, *Midnight's Children*, a Christmas gift the previous year from Melina. He was enjoying it, but as none of the books Melina gave him ever had happy endings, he wasn't sure whether he would finish it. He liked a good happy ending in his reading, since one saw them so rarely in real life. One could try to engineer them, however. He glanced back down at his guest list and smiled.

He'd made it through a week. Well, four days. But it was Friday, and he'd managed to talk to Poppy about the counselling project and his meeting with Weasley without making a fool of himself, having irrational fits of jealousy, or trying to jump her bones...which would be just one more way of making a fool of himself, since she had called a halt to their physical relationship. But now it was Friday night, and he had no duty that night or for the rest of the weekend. And he was restless, wanting to see Poppy, but knowing he had to avoid her.

He had owed Hermione that morning and asked whether she would like to have a late supper with him in Hogsmeade. Unfortunately, she replied that she already had plans for that evening. At lunch, he sent an owl to Gareth, but he also was busy that night, and hoping not to be back until "late." Severus assumed the younger wizard had a date that night.

At dinner, Severus looked up and down the staff table and sighed. There was not a one whom he felt comfortable in asking to accompany him to Hogsmeade for a drink that evening or sometime over the weekend. Poppy wasn't there, and he couldn't ask her even if she were. He would gladly have Minerva's company, but she rarely went out evenings and even more rarely when he was out of the castle, as well, and inviting Minerva would necessitate inviting Albus, and he was still irritated with the old wizard for his persistent interest in his social life. The same went for Filius: inviting him meant inviting Pomona. Not that Filius would *not* go out without Pomona, but Severus could not very well require that he leave her home.

Sarah Duffy was out of the question even if he might have found her company agreeable, which he didn't. Sharon Carter had irked him at the last staff meeting by complaining about the detentions he had set for a group of Gryffindors whom he had caught smoking "herbal cigarettes" down behind the North Tower. He rarely spoke to Laura and David Manning, and they were a unit, as well, which would only point out his own pathetically single state. Olivia Ouellette was well-known for eschewing intimate relationships with the opposite sex, and although she would probably respond positively if he were to invite her with a group of others, they didn't know each other well, and she might take his invitation amiss if it were just the two of them; Severus did not want the embarrassment of having her possibly mistake his intentions. Rath preferred spending his time out on the grounds and in the Forest, and Severus had never seen the wizard imbibe, not to mention that he seemed less inclined toward conversation than Severus himself. The two of them going out for a drink would be bizarre, with nothing in common and neither of them speaking. The idea of asking Shunpike was just as laughable. One by one, Severus went through the staff who were present at the evening meal and eliminated all of them until he reached Hagrid.

Hagrid. Reduced to drinking with Hagrid. Better to sit in his office and brood, he thought.

He was just finishing his pudding...rhubarb pie again, so that was a bright spot in his otherwise depressing evening...when Olivia Ouellette got up and walked down the length of the table, speaking first with Hagrid, then with Filius, then very briefly with Laura Manning, and finally stopping at his chair.

"Professor Snape, a few of us are going into Hogsmeade this evening for drinks at the Three Broomsticks. If you are available, you are welcome to join us."

Severus hesitated only a moment, then nodded. It would provide some distraction from his persistent thoughts of Poppy. But then he suddenly realised that Poppy might be going, as well, and that thought was simultaneously exciting and disturbing.

"Good. We are leaving the castle at eight-thirty, but feel free to join us later if you have things to do earlier."

"I must consult with the Headmistress first..."

"That's fine, Severus," Minerva said, having overheard Olivia's invitation. "Enjoy yourself."

"Slytherin..."

"Just be sure your prefects know to come to me if there's a problem. They can tell the Silent Knight. I'll have him go sit in with Aurora's portrait for the evening. They get along well. Then he can nip up to my office and let me know if little Suzie Sefton is . . . allergic to rhubarb pie," she said, looking down at the Slytherin table, where Suzie was happily eating a classmate's pie, having already finished her own.

"Rhubarb seems to have been on the acceptable list of foods that her parents allowed her to eat growing up, so I presume that she will neither overindulge nor be overly sensitive to it," Severus replied. The girl's parents owned a macrobiotic restaurant and small organic farm, and had limited their daughter's diet to foods they considered "wholesome"...to such a degree that every fried food, sweet, and unfamiliar flavour appealed to her even when it didn't agree with her. "The standard stomach and digestive potions seem to work well for her, as long as she doesn't eat anything with droobleberries in it, to which she has an allergy. Madam Pomfrey extracted the girl's promise, however, that she would eat nothing with droobleberries and the house-elves have removed droobleberries from the menu for any meals they serve in the Great Hall. Eating meat causes Miss Sefton to have, er, digestive irregularities for several days if she does not take a potion to counteract it. I believe, however, that she ceased eating meat and poultry on her own."

Minerva smiled and nodded. "I will remember that, thank you, Severus. It will also be useful to know when you collect on your bet." She took a sip of tea. "Have you decided when you would like to have your three nights of freedom?"

Severus shook his head. "Not before Easter, certainly." Now that he wasn't seeing Poppy any longer, he didn't want to have that much free time to think about what he could be doing with her if only he hadn't behaved so poorly. Even a Hufflepuff as generous as Poppy couldn't manage to overlook his bad behaviour and miserable disposition. He just wasn't capable of having a relationship without ruining it. He sighed and took a consoling bite of rhubarb pie.

"All right, Severus. Just let me know well enough in advance so that Albus and I can make our plans around it."

At eight twenty-five, Severus stood in an unused classroom on the fourth floor and looked out over the grounds. He wanted to see who was heading into Hogsmeade before he decided definitely to join them. A few minutes later, a small group left through the front doors, meeting Hagrid as he came around the side of the castle. He saw Filius, Pomona, Olivia, the Mannings, and, of course, Hagrid. Not an objectionable group, though others might join them later. Still, aside from not wanting to see Poppy...or wanting to see her more than he should...he really did have fairly acceptable colleagues for the most part. And nothing said that just because he joined them for a drink, he would have to stay long.

Nonetheless, as he made his way back down to the ground floor and out the doors, he was nervous. He was not very good at socialising, and he would no doubt offend his colleagues or possibly be the butt of some sport. He never knew how to react to teasing, and although he was getting better at it, even "good-natured" teasing from friends could be difficult for him to handle, and it often embarrassed him. Embarrassment made him angry and vituperative. There were times when he liked to have the spotlight on him and be noticed, but not for some foible of his that others found amusing or peculiar.

He shrugged to himself as he reached the gates. He didn't have to stay with them. And he didn't have to talk a lot. There were plenty of others who would be pleased to chatter away, he was sure.

NEXT

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Barghest's Howl

Friday, 19 March 1999

Severus joins some colleagues for a drink at the Three Broomsticks, where he runs into Hermione.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Hermione Granger, Madam Rosmerta, Pomona Sprout, Rubeus Hagrid, Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank, Olivia Ouellette, Tarrant McPherson, Auror Shakira Plummer, David Manning, Laura Walker Manning, Helena Benetti, and members of the Barghest's Howl

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Barghest's Howl

Chapter 59 of 118

Friday, 19 March 1999. Severus joins some colleagues for a drink at the Three Broomsticks, where he runs into Hermione.



Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Barghest's Howl

Friday, 19 March 1999

Severus entered the Three Broomsticks, and his nervousness returned as he looked around the full pub. The group of Hogwarts staff had taken a table in a corner beyond the bar near the exit for the lavatories. There might not be room for him. He glanced at the other patrons as he stepped further into the pub. The usual assortment, and to the extent they noticed him as he crossed the room, their eyes were not unduly drawn to him. Then he saw her. Hermione was there. Severus swallowed hard. She was there with Tarrant McPherson. And she had seen him. There was no avoiding walking past her table without taking a circuitous route through the pub.

"Hi, Severus!" Hermione said as he came closer.

He nodded to her. Tarrant stood slightly in a gesture of respect, then sat back down.

"Would you like to join us, Professor?" the young wizard asked politely.

As it was a table for two, it was clearly a mere politeness, though he supposed a third chair could be drawn up, but Hermione quickly cut in. "I think that Severus is here with other people, Tarrant."

Severus felt a knife go through his heart. His mouth was dry. He tried to draw some saliva into it before he said, "Yes, I am meeting some others. Thank you for the invitation, Mr McPherson." He glanced at Hermione, meeting her eyes only briefly, then looked back at Tarrant. "Have a good evening."

"You, too, Professor," he heard Tarrant say as he swept away from the table.

He had been twice a fool in less than two short weeks. Once with Hermione, and once with Poppy. Except he'd probably been a fool several times with each of the witches. He simply wouldn't think about it. Put it out of his mind. Sit with his colleagues, have a drink, and then leave. He knew he couldn't sustain a relationship with a witch, and no sensible witch would want a relationship with him.

Poppy had enjoyed the sex, at least. But not enough to want to continue their relationship. At least he knew that if he wanted to have a fling with a witch, she might be willing to have sex with him more than once. But she'd want no more than that. He was destined to be alone. No friends. No lovers. Certainly no family. But it had always been that way for him. This was nothing different.

"Severus! Severus! Come sit down!"

Filius was calling him enthusiastically, waving, as though Severus could not have noticed the large group of Hogwarts staff at the round table in the back. Severus made an attempt to put a pleasant expression on his face, or at least not frown at the little wizard.

"Come, pull up a chair between me and Hagrid," Filius said, shoving his chair over a bit and everyone else obligingly scooting their chairs or stools over to make room for another chair.

"Lemme, Perfesser," Hagrid said, pulling out his new wand...fifteen inches of oak and unicorn tail hair. Everyone at the table immediately held their breaths and sat still as statues, and Filius, short though he was, looked ready to duck. But Hagrid paid them no mind and screwed up his face in concentration. With a bit more swish and bit less flick than he should have used, Hagrid still managed to Levitate a chair at a nearby table...thankfully not a chair in use, though that would not have surprised Severus...and bring it sailing over the heads of the staff to settle with a loud thump beside him. Hagrid grinned with pride as Filius told him how well he had done.

Severus was thankful that he taught Potions and not Charms or Transfiguration, both of which the half-giant was now receiving tutoring in. A number of staff had offered to pitch in. Severus had fortunately been spared being recruited to help; perhaps there had been a slight blessing in being unable to exercise his magic at the beginning the school year. Minerva had hoped that Hagrid might be able to take his OWLs at the end of the year, but it was painfully clear that it would take far more time and tutoring for the wizard to come up to OWLs standard. Severus didn't even see why it mattered: Hagrid was firmly ensconced as Chief Groundskeeper (a new title now that Carleton Rath had been hired as his assistant), Keeper of the Keys, and teacher for the Care of Magical Creatures class. But again, no one had asked his opinion, and he hadn't volunteered it. Besides, he liked Hagrid, and there was something admirable in Hagrid's deciding to master wand-use after so many decades of having been deprived a wand.

"What are you having, Severus?" Olivia Ouellette asked. "I'm buying the first round."

As he folded his cloak over the back of his chair, Severus glanced around to see what the others were drinking. Filius had a bubbling, foaming, multicoloured drink with fruit in it...Severus had never seen anything quite like it before...but the others had more normal drinks, ranging from firewhisky to ale. It looked as though everyone was having something alcoholic, though.

"A beer would be fine."

"Didn't take you for a beer-drinker, Severus," Pomona remarked from the other side of Filius.

Severus finally let out the scowl that had been lurking behind his face since he had walked into the pub.

"The Golden Snitch house lager is quite nice, I hear," Filius said cheerfully. "It's a new brew they started this winter. Rosmerta said she's coming up with another one for spring."

In the meantime, Olivia had flagged down the wait-wizard and ordered Severus's beer, specifying the house lager.

"Did you say that Wilhelmina will be joining us later?" David Manning asked. "We may have to enlarge the table."

"Yeah," Hagrid said with a grin. "But she can sit right 'ere next to me." He thumped the bench he was sitting on. "Plenty o' room."

Severus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. The bench might comfortably hold two or three normal-sized people, and Grubby-Plank was a petite witch, but he couldn't see how anyone could share the bench with Hagrid...even Flitwick would be squeezed in that space. A few of the others chuckled, however, so he decided there was some inside joke that he wasn't privy to. Which was unsurprising. At least they weren't making fun of him, although Pomona's remark about his drink had been unwelcome.

When the wait-wizard brought his beer, he also put a plate of food down in front of Pomona, a mountain of chips and some kind of battered fried meat.

"Didn't get dinner," she remarked as she sprinkled her chips liberally with vinegar. "Mr and Mrs Boardman are convinced that the reason their daughter's grades are poor is that she is being 'led astray' by an older student." Pomona snorted. "I'd say that without Babcock's tutoring in Herbology, Paulette's grades would be even worse, and likely the same in every other subject."

"Malcolm Babcock?" Severus asked, his attention pricked up at the mention of a Slytherin student.

"Mhmhm. There's nothing to their complaints, Severus, so we didn't want to lend them any credence by inviting you to attend the meeting. I do want to have a word with Babcock, though, remind him that Paulette is younger than he is and that he should stick with tutoring her until she's a bit older. With your permission. Unless you would like to do that. Or we could speak to him together."

"I shall speak to him, tell him to keep his distance from her," Severus said.

"No need for anything that extreme," Pomona said as she swallowed a chip and slathered her meat with brown sauce. "Paulette just has a bit of hero-worship going on, and there's worse boys she could have picked. Better the Slytherin you know than the one...er, I mean, Malcolm's a good lad, and he's helping her in her classes." She glanced over at Filius, who had jostled her just as she had been recapping the brown sauce. "He just needs to remember that she's only a first-year."

Yes, she was one of the older first-years, and had turned thirteen that autumn. But Babcock was a good student, and Severus did not like the implication about members of his House.

"I believe the age difference is not that great," Severus said. "He's one of the younger sixth-years, and he's not a trouble-maker."

"In a few years, when she's a bit older, it won't make any difference, but now it does," Pomona replied. "So he needs to be careful." She laughed. "The Boardmans actually wanted Paulette moved into classes so that she wouldn't have to share them with any Slytherins, never mind that Malcolm isn't in any of them, since he's not her year. They're a bit paranoid, but after their grocery in Diagon Alley was burned to the ground last year, I suppose I understand why."

"You know, there's a new grocer's opening here in Hogsmeade," Filius said, changing the subject. "Down around the corner on Piggery Lane. I saw them working on the building when I was here earlier in the week."

"I heard they're going to have a lot of imported Muggle foods," Laura chimed in. "I hope that's true."

The conversation turned to the revitalisation of the British wizarding world's economy now that the threat from Voldemort was gone. Severus tuned out and drank his beer. Even going out with colleagues, he was reminded that Slytherin House was still viewed with suspicion and distrust, and that even a good young Slytherin like Malcolm Babcock would suffer from it. If Babcock had been a Gryffindor or a Ravenclaw, the parents would have been thanking the young man for saving their daughter from failing all her classes. At least the daughter thought highly of him...a bit of "hero worship," Pomona had called it, and as one of Snape's Slytherins, Babcock was not the least worthy of his House.

". . . and the Ministry is easing up on import restrictions of magical goods," David said. "They're trying new methods of inhibiting smuggling, too."

"Did I hear someone mention smuggling?" asked a witch in Auror red who had just approached the table.

"No, snuggling," Olivia said. "He was offering me a good snuggle."

The witch laughed. "Well, I hope you declined. I might just have to arrest him for snuggling without a permit!"

The wait-wizard brought another stool to the table as Olivia made introductions.

"I don't know if you all know Shakira Plummer. Shakira, you know Pomona and Filius, of course, and Hagrid; that's David and Laura, whom I've told you about, and Severus Snape."

Shakira nodded and smiled at the group. "Sorry I'm late, Liv, but we had another one of those attacks, and as it was in the North, it's my bailiwick." She ordered an ale and the house special. "Came straight from Leeds, so didn't have time to change duds."

"That's all right. I thought it was something like that," Olivia replied.

"Another suspected Death Eater attacked?" Filius asked, concern on his face.

"Mmm. Shouldn't say anything, though it'll be in the *Prophet* tomorrow. Not a suspected Death Eater, but a confirmed one. Somehow learned where he was living and tried to firebomb the house."

Severus set down his mug, carefully placing it on the wet ring on the coaster. A confirmed Death Eater living in a house in Leeds. There was someone he knew who fit that description.

"Some people won't let go, will they," Laura said sombrely.

"No. And no matter how I feel about the person, myself, he is living under the protection of the Ministry, and his case was properly adjudicated by the Wizengamot. Besides, it was in a Muggle neighbourhood. Any number of people could have been hurt. Fortunately, because of the MLE's wards on the house, the attack was unsuccessful."

"Any clues about who's doing this?" David asked.

Shakira shrugged. "We have some, but I can't discuss it."

"I hope you catch them soon," Pomona said fervently.

"You said the attack was unsuccessful," Severus said quietly. "Was anyone injured?"

"The . . . victim of the attack suffered some lung damage. There was a highly acrid smoke produced, and we had to enlist the Muggle authorities to evacuate the neighbourhood until we had the situation under control. But he was the only one hurt," Shakira replied, looking directly at Severus. She paused, then added, "His wife was at work."

"He was brought to St. Mungo's?" Severus asked, thinking that he should probably speak with Draco, although Draco "Newman" might not want to hear anything about his father.

"I am not at liberty to say. But he is receiving treatment and should be fine."

"That's a relief," Laura said. "I'm ready for another drink. Anyone else like one? And maybe some chips for the table."

"I will see what is keeping the waiter," Severus said, pushing away from the table, wanting an excuse to get up. He supposed he should buy a round of drinks. He was Deputy Headmaster, after all. "And I shall buy the drinks." He nodded in response to the chorus of thank-yous, and carefully noted mentally what each person wanted to drink. Filius's drink was called a Fwooper's Song. Severus did not care to know what was in it, but the little wizard's face was becoming quite red and his eyes were beginning to glaze over. Given that Filius usually seemed able to hold his liquor, a Fwooper's Song must be quite strong. He would tell the bartender to make the next drink weaker.

As he stood at the bar waiting for the bartender to come over to him, Hermione appeared at his elbow.

"Are you having a good time?" Hermione asked.

He looked down at her. "Lovely," he said flatly.

"Yes, um, I'm sorry I already had plans for tonight. It would have been nice to get together."

"That is why I owed you," Severus said.

"I got an owl from Ginny a couple days ago. She said she's quitting Quidditch after the next game."

"Did she, indeed?"

"She said it was your idea," Hermione continued.

"Another round of drinks and two large plates of chips," Severus said to the bartender, who was now standing expectantly in front of him. "Two ales, two lagers, one gillywater, one firewhisky, and one Fwooper's Song...make it weak this time. And Auror Plummer is still waiting for her ale and her meal." He put two galleons on the bar. That would more than cover the drinks and perhaps insure prompter service.

"Was it your idea?" Hermione asked when the bartender had left to check on Shakira's meal. "Did you tell her to quit?"

"No. I merely pointed out to Miss Weasley that she had many options to choose from."

"Do you want Gryffindor to start losing?" Hermione asked. "Do you have more bets placed against them or something?"

Severus looked down at her, his brow furrowed. Bad enough that she was out with McPherson, now she believed that he was counselling a Gryffindor to quit Quidditch just for his own personal gain. He thought she knew him better than that.

"You have remarked yourself that Ginny is unhappy. I suggest you speak to her about her reasons for quitting. You are her friend. You should support her decision," Severus replied. "And whilst you're at it, you might speak to your friend Ronald about his filial duty."

"His filial duty?"

"Yes. I understand that you were often a guest of the Weasleys when Molly was alive. You know the family well. Weasley has five grown sons, and none of them appear to be concerned about their father. If you believe that your friend Ginny is unhappy . . ." Severus shrugged. "Arthur lost his wife and his son, and his wife was at his side only because he had agreed to lead the Order of the Phoenix. Perhaps you might extend some of your concern to him, as well. Bill may be a new father, and Charlie travels with his job, but the twins and Ronald..."

"Ron travels, too," Hermione said defensively.

"Mmm, boinking blondes, as you put it. The Quidditch schedule should not preclude him from assisting his father in his need. Now, if you will excuse me, Hermione," Severus said, nodding toward his table, where the waiter was now serving everyone's drinks and settling two giant platters of chips into the centre of the table. "Enjoy your date."

He was disappointed, though not surprised, when Hermione did not protest that it wasn't a date and did not try to stop him from leaving.

Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank was coming up to the table as he approached.

"Professor," Severus greeted her with a nod.

"Hello, Professor Snape," Wilhelmina replied, breaking into a grin as Hagrid stood and waved her around the table to him. "Hello, everyone!"

"Would you care for my chair?" Severus offered as they made their way around the table. "I can get another one."

"No, no, that's not necessary," Wilhelmina said.

Severus tried to hide his confusion as Wilhelmina sat down between Hagrid and Olivia, sharing Hagrid's bench. She was pressed right up against Hagrid's side, and the half-giant put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze.

The wait-wizard immediately brought her three shots of firewhisky, Levitating them across the table and lining them up in front of her.

"Bring me a Golden Snitch, too," Wilhelmina called to him. She downed one of the shots, then took out her short pipe. Severus was glad that she wasn't sitting directly next to him when Hagrid drew his wand and offered to light her pipe for her. She puffed away as Hagrid winked at her and held his wand to her pipe, a small flash emerging from it. He seemed better at producing a flame than he was at Summoning a chair.

"So, Hagrid says you have big plans for the weekend," Pomona said.

"The Swedish Short-snouts are beginning their mating season. A friend of mine at the Scandinavian Preserve in Norway has invited us up for a visit to watch their mating rituals," Wilhelmina said. She leered and poked Hagrid in the ribs. "Maybe give this one a few ideas." She chortled.

Severus felt the heat rise in his face, but the others laughed along with Wilhelmina.

"Hmm, why do Transfiguration mistresses not have such interesting holiday spots?" Shakira asked Olivia, shaking her head in mock despair, but her face alight with humour.

"And what about Aurors? Do they have more interesting holiday destinations?" Olivia asked.

"I hear there's an island in the North Sea that's quite interesting," David piped up. "Complete with Muggle-repelling wards and a ruined fortress. Could be very romantic!"

"But cold," Shakira said, exaggerating a shiver at the thought of Azkaban. "This witch likes warmer climes."

"How's your father?" Filius asked, slurring slightly.

"He's fine. I got a letter from him just the other day."

"Ms Plummer's father is the..." Filius gave a little burp. "He's the wizarding governor of Trinidad and Tobago."

"So *you* could take Olivia on a nice holiday," Laura said.

The others talked about holiday destinations, and Laura asked Pomona where she was going on holiday over Easter.

"There's a wizarding resort on the North Sea, in Germany, actually, where we used to go regularly for years. We haven't been there for a long time, and it's probably changed, but I hope not too much," Pomona replied.

"She likes to look..." Filius hiccupped. "She likes to look at the wizards. Looks at the good-looking young wizards there. Handsome young wizards from all...from all over...over Europe."

Severus was very glad he had asked the bartender to make Filius's drink weaker. He hoped he actually had.

"She likes to look," Filius continued. "But no touching! No, no touching!" He slapped Pomona's arm playfully.

Pomona laughed, but leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

"No, I don't want any chips," Filius declared. "Music! We should have music!"

"I think we ought to be getting back," Pomona said. "Come on, Fil. We'll go have the house-elves fix you something nice to eat, soak up some of that Fwooper's Song."

"And we have to be going, too," Wilhelmina said, slipping off the bench she shared with Hagrid. "Our Portkey is scheduled in ten minutes, and I don't want to miss it."

"Got me bag right 'ere," Hagrid said. He reached under the table and pulled out a worn leather haversack.

"I don't want to leave yet," Filius said. "We just got here! And we should have music."

Pomona settled back down in her chair. "All right. But let Rosmerta take care of any music, Filius. Maybe Severus could speak to her?" She looked beseechingly at Severus.

Given that the witch had only just insulted his House that evening, Severus was not inclined to be generous toward her, but he had always liked Filius, even when he was a student, and the little wizard's state was on the verge of becoming embarrassing; he didn't want the Charms master to regret it in the morning.

Severus nodded. "Certainly." He stood as Hagrid and Wilhelmina were taking their leave of the others at the table.

He never should have come that evening, he thought as he made his way across the pub to where Madam Rosmerta was chatting with a few patrons. Aside from the fact that he was completely out of place, he had to have seen Hermione on her date with Tarrant, and then she had essentially accused him of coercing Ginny Weasley into quitting Quidditch in order to win bets, and now he was the only single person at the table. But worst of all, he now had an entirely new set of images of Poppy at some debauched wizarding resort, surrounded by handsome, exotic young wizards in . . . in thongs or something, massaging her toes and feeding her grapes. He didn't know where these images came from, but they stirred up his jealousy. He wanted to be the one massaging her toes and feeding her grapes.

"Madam Rosmerta, Professor Flitwick has requested music. It is likely that he will attempt to conjure some if there is none provided. And he has been drinking something called a 'Fwooper's Song,' so I do not know the quality of music he would produce."

Rosmerta's eyebrows rose. "Filius is a fine Charms master and his taste in music is excellent, but I agree, we cannot let him conjure music under the influence of Fwooper's Song. I will take care of it," she said with a decisive nod. "Three of the Barghest's Howl are here tonight. I'll persuade them."

Severus nodded, then slipped her a galleon. "For the musicians," he said. Noblesse oblige, he thought to himself, feeling slightly more cheerful.

"Ta, Professor!" Rosmerta seemed both pleased and surprised.

Severus sat down again next to Filius, who was still saying something about needing music.

"It is arranged," Severus said. "There will be music." As he spoke, Rosmerta and two waiters were clearing an area on one side of the pub and raising a platform. Two witches and a wizard stepped up, one witch carrying a violin and the wizard pulling out what looked like a practice chanter.

Rosmerta raised her wand to her throat and cast a Sonorus spell. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am very pleased to be able to tell you that I persuaded three-fifths of the Barghest's Howl to perform for us this evening."

There was enthusiastic clapping, and Filius tried to stand up on his chair, but Severus and Pomona each took one elbow and kept him seated.

"Thank you," said the witch with long red hair. "Thank you very much. For those of you who have seen us perform before, you know that we encourage lively participation."

"Yes!" shouted Filius happily.

The witch smiled in his direction. "I'm sorry that Will and Jackie aren't here with us tonight, but I hope you will enjoy our little offering." She turned to the other two and nodded. The shaggy-haired wizard, dressed in jeans and a colourful tunic...a kind of hybrid wizard-Muggle look that was becoming popular, but which reminded Severus of the unfortunate Muggle styles of his youth...raised his chanter to his lips, and the sound of a full set of bagpipes, complete with drones, emerged. The other witch tucked her fiddle between her jaw and shoulder and drew out a long note.

Severus did not know what to make of the music, which seemed like a peculiar blend of wizarding rock and traditional folk music. Fortunately, Filius seemed to like it.

"Thank you, Severus," Pomona said.

He nodded.

"And I'm sorry if I seemed . . . hard on Babcock earlier. He is a fine young wizard, and I told the Boardmans that. I was just hungry and tired and a bit out-of-sorts after having to deal with them. They were the second set of annoyed and unreasonable parents I had to talk to this week, and on an empty stomach again, too."

Severus nodded again. He could understand that.

"Do you have plans for the holiday?"

"I shall be working," he replied shortly.

"Shh, I'm trying to listen," Filius said.

Pomona got up and moved over to the bench that Hagrid and Wilhelmina had vacated.

"You aren't taking any time off? Of course, I imagine you might have quite a few students staying over the holiday this year."

"There are a few," Severus acknowledged, though most were going to the Zabini estate if they had no other plans. Blaise was establishing his Slytherin base . . . his empire. "But we also cannot leave the castle empty of staff."

"But you might be able to take a couple days off. I'm sure that Minerva would be happy to arrange coverage for Slytherin."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I have no desire to take a holiday." He would have nowhere to go, and he certainly wouldn't want to go anywhere alone, anyway. Not that he would want to go anywhere with anyone else, either. Again, the image of Poppy being waited on by handsome young wizards came to mind. He scowled.

"You could do something educational...something like Hagrid and Wilhelmina are doing this weekend. I'm sure they'll have fun, but it'll also be interesting. For them. Not the sort of thing I'd be interested in. But..."

"I will be here over the Easter holiday," Severus repeated. He wished that Filius weren't quite so inebriated. He greatly preferred conversation with him.

"You could bring someone with you, a friend..."

"Pomona, I do not wish to repeat myself. I am not going anywhere. Full stop." He took a sip of beer. He changed the subject. "I was unaware that Hagrid and Professor Grubbly-Plank were such good friends."

Pomona smiled. "Sweet, isn't it? They started seeing each other after the battle. Wilhelmina had a few burns from handling the dragon. Charlie got the worst of it, but Henrietta...that's the dragon...was rather cranky after the battle, and they both were well-singed. Anyway, Hagrid visited her in St. Mungo's, and then they just hit it off. I think it's lovely. Very romantic."

"I thought he was with that Beauxbatons witch."

"Olympe? That was just a flash-in-the-cauldron. I never thought they had anything in common, other than their size. Couldn't understand at all what Hagrid saw in her, to be honest." She smiled fondly down at Filius, who was happily tapping his fingers in time with the music. "And size has nothing to do with love."

Severus took another swallow of beer. Across the table from him, Olivia and her girlfriend were talking, the Auror's dark, slightly greying head inclined toward hers, Olivia's fingertips stroking Shakira's wrist. Laura was leaning against David, who had his arms around her from behind as they faced the musicians, contented smiles on their faces. Across the room, Severus could see McPherson holding Hermione's chair for her as she rose from the table. She took his hand as they walked out of the pub.

Severus scowled and downed the last few swallows of beer.

"Another, Severus? I'll buy," Pomona offered.

He shook his head. "No. I need to get back. I have . . . I have to check on my House."

"Minerva will take care of anything that comes up. You should relax and enjoy yourself. Besides, here comes Helena. You can't be rude and leave just as she arrives."

Helena smiled at them and set down her shopping bags.

"Just back from London?" Pomona asked, looking at the bags.

"Yes. I met an old friend from school for dinner."

"Sit down here next to me," Pomona said, scooting over and patting the bench between her and Severus. "Tell us all about it."

Severus wanted to let out a sigh. Girl-talk, or whatever it was, more talk about shopping, clothes, and old friends. And holidays, probably.

"Oh, there's not much to tell," Helena said, sitting down between the two, smoothing her skirt beneath her. "Becky stopped in London so we could see each other. She's actually on her way to Moscow, so today was really our only opportunity to meet."

"Moscow?"

Helena waved at the wait-wizard, who practically flew across the room to wait on the beautiful international Quidditch star.

"A half of cider, please," she requested. "Yes, Moscow. She's going to be working at the Canadian wizarding embassy there as an assistant to the deputy ambassador. She's looking forward to it." The Hogwarts flying instructor turned to Severus. "How are you, Professor?"

"Fine." Why did people ask such inane questions? What was he supposed to say, that he was miserable, jealous, and horny as hell? On the other hand, he supposed it was better than being ignored.

"These musicians are good," she remarked. "Reminds me of a group I saw once in Nova Scotia."

The red-haired witch was now singing a song about a wizard lost on a mountain, seeking a treasure he would never find. Severus wanted to roll his eyes. But Filius was enjoying it, singing along and only slurring slightly.

Helena looked up at him. "Don't like them, Professor?"

"This particular song is a bit sentimental. It is not to my taste." He could try to be diplomatic.

Her eyes sparkled. "Don't like sentiment, Professor? I would think it would appeal to you. You have certainly experienced a lot of life, and a lot of deep feelings, no doubt."

"Sentimentality has little to do with life," Severus said shortly.

Helena shrugged. "I suppose it depends. But love, loss, longing, joy, fear, triumph . . . these are good subjects for songs, I think."

"You are young."

"And you are not?" Helena asked, laughter in her eyes, but not her voice.

"Hmmpf."

"Malcolm's Song, sing Malcolm's Song!" Filius called out as the group finished a medley.

"We have a fan, I see," the witch said with a smile. She nodded and looked over at the wizard. "Luke?"

The wizard put his Charmed chanter down and stood from his stool. He paused a moment, then with no accompaniment, he began to sing a song in a minor key, a soaring song with many grace notes and vocal flourishes.

"Wind across the plains,

"Eagle in the mountain pass,

"Voice singing to the sky,

"Sun gleaming on pale cliffs,

"Blood warm in the veins,

"Never take me,

"Never take me,

"Never take me away."

Severus had never heard the song before, but evidently Filius had, and he sang along, creating a harmony, singing lyrics about hard stone, open sky, and freedom. Other than a handful of people singing along, the crowd was quiet, not chatting as they had during the previous songs, and the wizard's voice was plaintive and moving. Severus had a sudden, vivid vision of harsh sunlight and a brown, barren landscape, but accompanied by freedom from the strictures of society, of cities, towns, and the eyes of others. Personally, he liked walls and roofs and security, but listening to the song, he felt an inexplicable longing for open spaces and the freedom to roam the world and go wherever he wished. It was a powerful song, even magical, perhaps, and Severus felt uncomfortable, though obviously others were enjoying being entranced by it.

The song came to an end, and Filius clapped wildly. As the group began playing another tune, this one much lighter and very mundane, Luke singing something about taking a woman named Maggie in the wood, the crowd returned to their conversations.

Filius looked over at Pomona. "I want to go home now," he said simply.

Pomona nodded, and the couple rose and bid the others good-night.

"I will be leaving, as well," Severus said as he watched the two crossed the pub, Filius somewhat unsteadily.

"Let me just pay for my drink, and I'll walk out with you," Helena said. When she didn't see the waiter, she shrugged and left a few sickles next to her glass. She stood and picked up her shopping bags.

Author's Note: A barghest is a monstrous black dog that roams the moors and is known for its eerie howl. If you hear one, run away, for if you see one, you will surely die . . . Just ask Sybill Trelawney!

The "Malcolm" in "Malcolm's Song" refers to Malcolm McGonagall, Gareth's father.

NEXT

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Skimming the Lake

Friday, 19 March 1999

Severus walks Helena Benetti home, and they take a late-night flight.

Characters: Severus Snape, Helena Benetti

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Skimming the Lake

Chapter 60 of 118

Friday, 19 March 1999. Severus walks Helena Benetti home, and they take a late-night flight.



Chapter Fifty-Nine: Skimming the Lake

Friday, 19 March 1999

It seemed churlish to walk out empty-handed next to a witch carrying three shopping bags. Severus slung his cloak over one arm. "May I carry those for you?" Levitating

them would be impractical and rude in the increasingly crowded pub.

"Just this one, thanks," Helena said brightly, handing him the smallest but heaviest bag. "Birthday present for my mom," she explained. "Got it at Krebbin's in Diagon Alley. It's a model of Hogwarts in a crystal globe, like a snow globe, but really big. She collects snow globes. She'll love it."

Severus became aware that people were watching them leave the pub, probably wondering what such a beautiful, famous witch was doing with a wizard like him. But still, he stood straighter as he opened the door for them. It was gratifying to be seen leaving the Broomsticks with such an exquisite and talented young witch.

The two stepped out into the cool night air. "I think it's a bit tacky, myself," Helena said, "but the detail is pretty amazing, and the seasons change. As they are actually changing, I mean."

"Yes, I have seen it on display. I understand that it is a popular item. Though expensive." Severus cast a wandless Levitation charm, and the heavy bag floated along beside them. He made a gesture to Helena, and she let her bags go as he cast a second charm on them.

Helena shrugged. "I suppose. I still have a hard time with Galleons and Sickles and such. You'd think after almost a year here, I'd have it down pat. I actually do better with pounds."

"It is not a very logical system," Severus replied.

"Everything always seems either far too cheap or far too expensive," Helena said as they started out the street. "Did you have a good evening, Professor? Did I miss much?"

"You may call me 'Severus,' if you wish," Severus said. "It was fine. I learned about the holiday plans for everyone at the table."

Helena laughed at his long-suffering tone. "Going anywhere yourself over the Easter break?" When Severus shook his head, she said, "Neither am I. I did think about going home for a few days; I could get a Portkey, but . . ." She shrugged.

"You live . . . on Piggery Lane?" Severus asked. He only remembered that it was one of the side streets in Hogsmeade.

"Actually, Bog End," Helena said. She giggled. "Always thought 'bog' was a funny word."

"I believe it was once Boggart's End, but the inhabitants disliked the association," Severus said. Albus had told him something of the sort.

"I actually think that's better," Helena said as they turned the corner. "Bog End always makes me think of a toilet flushing, for some reason."

Severus quirked a smile. "Yes, I can see that."

"You don't have to walk me home," Helena said. "I can manage the bags."

"I am pleased to," Severus replied. "It isn't far. Although if I could make use of your own bog, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course!"

He should have gone before they left the pub, he thought, after two pints of beer. Embarrassing to have to ask a witch to use her loo. A strange one, at any rate. Not that Helena was *strange*, but he scarcely knew her.

"It's just here," Helena said as they reached a small house. "I have the rear half, so the entrance is around back. It's a bit dark. Have your wand free for *aLumos*?"

Severus obligingly took out his wand and cast a *Lumos* for them. It wasn't much, but it kept them from stumbling on the uneven path. A lamp came on at the back door as they approached, and he pocketed his wand again.

The door opened into the kitchen, and there was a small living room through a door just beyond that. Her flat was cheerful, though somewhat sparsely furnished. The lack of furniture was made up for by colourful hangings and other decorative objects that adorned the walls and shelves. Helena saw him looking at an intricately woven cloth with a beaded fringe on the shorter edges.

"My Grandmother McCarthy is Guyohkohnyo...of the Cayuga nation. That's something my Great-aunt Ida did for me, with some traditional patterns combined with a few of her own design. It's a shawl, but I like to look at it, so I hung it there rather than wear it."

"Ah. Very nice," Severus said.

"The bathroom's through my bedroom," Helena said, indicating a partially open door. "Help yourself."

Severus took as little time as possible, and when he returned to Helena's living room, she was sitting on the sofa, a broom across her lap and her wand in her hand, and apparently giving its charms a tune-up. She looked up and smiled at him.

"You know, Severus, I was thinking of taking a quick ride. Would you like to come along?"

"I haven't got a broom with me."

"I have a few. You can choose one." She opened her cupboard. "In fact . . . have you ever ridden a Thunderbolt?" She reached in and pulled out a broom with a shiny, black handle and a polished silver grip.

"A Thunderbolt? No, I haven't." Even though he was no broomstick aficionado, Severus almost salivated at the sight of the sleek, though somewhat oddly configured, broom. At one end, a handful of carefully groomed, fine, curved black twigs gave a nod at the origin of the broomstick, at the other, a wedge-shaped silver handle presented a rider with a perfect grip that would conform itself to the individual rider. Rather than having a straight stick, the Thunderbolt possessed a gentle s-curve about two-thirds of the way up, presenting the rider with a mount that perfectly combined comfort with control. He had been disinclined to accept her invitation, but the Thunderbolt presented an entirely irresistible temptation. In the wizarding world, it was like a Rolls Royce and a Ferrari rolled into one.

Severus reached out with a tentative hand and caressed the handle. It seemed to shiver and grow warm beneath his touch. "Do you think I could? Would it carry me?"

"It should. It's not as sensitive as a wand, and the Thunderbolts are pretty stable," Helena replied. "As long as you're a competent flyer, the broom should carry you just fine. It *is* much more sensitive than the broomsticks you're used to flying, though. You do need to be careful at first, especially when turning or changing altitude at high speed."

The Thunderbolt was one of only two commercially produced broomsticks in the world that had a core to it like a wand...usually the feather from a winged beast, such as a Hippogriff or a harpy. They were exorbitantly priced, but Severus presumed that Helena had got hers through some sports promotion.

"If anything were to happen to it..." Severus began.

"If anything happened to it, it would be an accident, I'm sure," Helena said. "And as long as you take it easy at first, get used to it, I doubt you'll have an accident with it." She grinned at him. "Want to come? I love flying at night, and there's a beautiful route I enjoy taking here. Say you'll come, Severus! I so rarely have company when I fly

these days. Please do!"

"Yes, all right," Severus said with a nod. Helena seemed so charmingly yet sincerely eager to have his company. Her smile was quite disarming. He quirked a smile. "You have twisted my arm."

"Okay, the first thing to remember when flying a Thunderbolt is that because of the core, they're far more responsive to intent than an ordinary broom. I hear that you're an Occlumens, so you shouldn't have trouble with that aspect of it. You just need to make sure that a mere passing fancy or indecision about which way to turn doesn't get picked up on by the broom as an intent. Being a dithery sort of person can easily send you into a tailspin, but you don't look dithery."

"I can dither about some things, though I'd never confess it publicly, but I doubt very much that flying would induce any 'ditherish' tendencies in me." One corner of his mouth twitched up.

Helena laughed. "Good."

"It seems . . . awkward, though, taking your best broom out," Severus said, still feeling cheered by Helena's own bright spirits, but with an uneasy feeling that something could go terribly wrong...especially riding such an expensive and sensitive broomstick.

"It's fun to give someone a treat," Helena replied. "Besides, I've been test-flying the new Nimbus Victory, and I owe them my report next week. I've made some tweaks to the charms, so I need to take at least a few more flights before I write the report. You'll also be doing me a favour by coming with me." Her bright blue eyes sparkled in merriment. "If the Victory has some problem and I have to make an emergency touchdown, you'll be on hand to save me!"

Severus nodded. "Very well."

Helena handed him the broomstick and smiled up at him. "You are always such a serious one, Professor Snape of Slytherin House." She tugged lightly at his lapel. "Do you ever wear anything but black?"

Severus stepped back, unsure what to say, but it seemed that she didn't expect a response, as she turned around and picked up the other broom from the sofa and set it to lean against the wall by the kitchen door.

"Let me just grab a cloak and change my shoes, and we can go," Helena said.

As Helena disappeared into the bedroom, Severus wondered whether the younger witch had been flirting with him or just being friendly. He wasn't sure whether he would like her to be flirting with him or not. She certainly was one of the most stunning women he'd ever seen, and she was well-liked by her colleagues and by the students from every House. Should he flirt with her? If she were unreceptive, he could insult her, and things could become very uncomfortable at school, particularly if she thought he was pressing his attentions upon her in his position as Deputy Headmaster. No, best to wait and see whether she were unambiguously flirting with him first, and then take things slowly, be sure of her intentions and expectations. He didn't want to find himself entangled in a messy relationship...or any relationship. Besides, he remembered that she had been engaged to Viktor Krum, who had been one of the fatalities in the Battle of Hogwarts. She might not wish to be involved with someone else this soon, whether it was a romantic relationship or even just a sexual fling. Even flirting could also be just that: a bit of flirting, not an expression of interest in anything more.

Severus looked over at Helena as she came out of the bedroom, a long, lightweight greyish-blue cloak around her shoulders, which shimmered as she moved. Not an Invisibility Cloak, but a Chameleon Cloak: once its charms were activated, she would blend in with the background much as with a Disillusionment Charm. A good cloak for flying.

She smiled up at him. "Ready?"

He nodded once and hefted the unfamiliar broomstick.

"Let's go, then. We'll start slowly, just take a few turns around the house before we go anywhere, let you get used to the broom."

They stepped out into the cool, crisp night air, and Severus was glad of his cloak. It would be even cooler at altitude. He noticed that Helena was wearing thin racing gloves, no doubt charmed to keep her hands comfortably warm so that she could maintain a good grip on her broomstick. He had no gloves, but he could always cast a warming charm if need be.

"First thing, mounting. It's got a different design to its cushioning charms. There's an additional charm that supports your knees, and there's a set of Charmed stirrups that emerge from the broomhead, such as it is, as soon as you've settled into the broom and properly positioned your knees."

Severus activated the broom so that it floated beside him, and then he clambered on somewhat awkwardly. He shifted his hands and settled his knees into the cushioning charm, bending his legs so that his feet came up behind him, then he felt the stirrups spring out. They hit him in the ankles and stung. He swore under his breath.

Helena laughed. "That still happens to me sometimes. It will feel peculiar at first, having stirrups, but believe me, you'll like them, especially with the manoeuvres you can do with that baby. Yes, that's right, just put your toes through them so they point toward the ground. Good."

It was an unusual flying posture, but quite comfortable now that he was in it, almost in a kneeling position. Severus could see how it could be good both for speed and for long-distance flying, as it was aerodynamic, but comfortable. Cored broomsticks weren't allowed in any regulation Quidditch games, but they were sometimes seen in racing, particularly some of the long-distance endurance races that spanned continents.

"Okay, now just rise up, straight up, maybe ten or twelve feet. This is one of the best brooms for hovering and vertical flying. There's very little drift to it." Helena watched him rise straight up in the air, wobbling only slightly side-to-side, but with no forward drift. She smiled and nodded in approval. "Very good!" She quickly was astride her own broom and she joined him in the air. "All right, the stirrups aren't there just for comfort, they also give you a measure of control. Fly forward very slowly and experiment with pressing first with one foot then the other. No, no, not that much!"

He spun in the air, and when he came to a stop, he nearly stalled and fell, he was so startled, but the broom twitched and quickly levelled off.

"Sorry, Severus. I wasn't clear in my description. You only need the slightest indication of pressure on the stirrup. Combine that with the usual weight shifts and intentional directions to the handle, and you have very precise control of the broom even at very high speeds."

"How fast does it fly?" Severus asked as he slowly flew in circles around her, first in one direction, then the other.

"This Thunderbolt model is supposed to top out at one-eighty, but I've only managed bursts of about a hundred forty-five on a straight course, and one hundred twenty, if you're talking still maintaining good control and manoeuvrability."

"Miles per hour...or kilometres?"

"Miles per hour. Don't you try to fly that fast tonight, though, Professor! We might be scraping you off the side of a mountain!"

Severus shook his head. He was now practising varying his altitude as he flew, finally doing a corkscrew up thirty feet above Helena and then corkscrewing back down to hover beside her. He could tell that she was working at keeping the Nimbus Victory from drifting forward as she hovered, but the Thunderbolt floated easily, hovering in place with no effort from him at all. He did a quick three-sixty, swivelling in place, and he smiled and shook his head in admiration.

"Have the basics down now, Severus? Ready for a little night flying?"

"I think so." He nodded. He was eager to see how fast he could fly once they got to a good cruising height.

They rose to fly above the houses and trees, and Severus followed Helena's lead, flying just to her left. They flew in the direction of Hogwarts at an easy speed, just coasting along. The night air was refreshing, and Severus shifted his hands forward, stretching, then relaxed into the flight.

"We won't cross the Hogwarts grounds, just skirt them, then fly over the Forbidden Forest. From there, I like to fly over the mountain opposite the castle, and then I take a zig-zag course around the mountains on the other side until I turn and come back. There's a lake that I like to skim over, but we don't need to do that, if you don't feel like it."

"Sounds fine to me," Severus said. "Lead on!"

When they reached the boundary of the Hogwarts grounds, they skirted the edge, but followed the wall around toward the Forbidden Forest.

"How do you like the new Victory?" Severus asked.

"It's not a bad broom, but they aren't going to like my report, I'm afraid," Helena replied. "It's going to need a little more work before they release it, and they want to have it out in May, in time for the anniversary."

Severus nodded, though she wasn't looking at him, and they were both silent. Severus glanced over at Helena. It was an anniversary fraught with emotion for them both, he was certain; although they might experience it differently, they neither of them would find it a purely happy occasion.

As they reached the tree line, Helena gradually picked up speed, and Severus increased his accordingly.

"Severus!"

Severus looked over at her, and she gestured, pointing up. He nodded, and they began to climb. They sped over the train tracks toward the mountain, Helena gaining altitude quickly, and Severus following easily, though her cloak made her body a mere blur in the sky. She hadn't pulled up the hood, however, and her long black hair billowed in the wind. He was now just behind her, and she looked over her shoulder a few times to make sure that he was still there. Reassured, she sped up and headed for the top of the mountain, cresting it at high speed, then dropping down and following the contour of the mountain on the other side. They were now going too fast to converse easily, but Severus welcomed the speed, the cold air in his face, wind whipping his hair back, the exhilaration of following the dips and humps of the mountain. The silver grip of the broom warmed to his touch; he would need no warming charm for his hands when flying this broom.

Helena led him southwest around the next mountain, and Severus could see lights from a few isolated houses and the twinkling of some distant Muggle village, but they rounded the mountain, and now the only twinkling came from the stars above. Helena looked back and signalled, hand down, palm toward him, and she slowed. He came along beside her.

"Want to skim the lake?" she asked, indicating the long, narrow loch they were approaching from the north.

"I'll give it a try," Severus said.

"Don't feel you have to fly too low or too fast, only as low and fast as you are comfortable flying," Helena said. "It's hardly worth an icy dip for just a bit more of a thrill."

"I will exercise caution."

"You do know how to swim?"

"Yes, but I don't plan on it tonight." He'd got the feeling of the Thunderbolt now, and he was sure of himself, but he wouldn't take any risks and get too close to the water. Speed, on the other hand . . .

"Good. Skim out to the far end of the lake then meet up before we turn and fly back? That okay with you?"

He nodded.

He'd never skimmed a lake on a broomstick before, though he'd seen it done. Potter, the show-off, had once tried it during their third year and ended up in the loch. He'd been fished out by a teacher...Professor Gamp, Severus remembered now...and served a week's detention indoors with Madam Pince.

Helena took off in front of him, pushing the Victory to its limits. As much as Severus had been eager to rocket forward himself, he slowed to watch Helena. She was magnificent: she flattened herself against her broom, her long black hair streaming out behind her, her arms out to her sides, holding onto the broomstick only with her legs, her ankles hooked around it. She picked up even more speed as she approached the surface of the lake, and she stretched out further, lying prone along the broomstick but her hands now dipping lower, skimming the surface of the water. The trick with skimming a lake was for the rider to get close enough to the water to touch it with her hands or feet but without getting the broom wet or caroming off the water, becoming unstable and crashing. A little splash back was acceptable, but if the broom hit the water, if the contact itself didn't cause the rider to crash, drenching it thoroughly would.

Severus nodded to himself and took off after Helena, pushing the broomstick to fly as fast as he dared, but he didn't bring it as close to the surface of the lake as she had. He brought it low enough to be able to reach down with one hand and skim his fingertips along the surface, but he then pulled up when the broomstick rocked from side to side. The Thunderbolt levelled off immediately, though, and he looked ahead to see that Helena was rapidly approaching the far shore of the lake, now bringing her broom up several feet above the surface and beginning to slow to normal cruising speed.

Leaning forward, Severus sped up, the occasional updrafts from the lake not disturbing the Thunderbolt in its flight at all. He was grinning when he pulled up next to Helena where she was hovering above the rocks at the edge of the water.

Helena smiled at him and held up her hand. "I knew I could get *areal* smile on your face with that broom," she said with a laugh. "Come on, Severus, high five!"

Severus shook his head and rolled his eyes, but he slapped her palm.

"That was fun," he admitted. He looked at her with admiration. "And you . . . you were . . . glorious. I can't believe you're teaching Flying at Hogwarts and refereeing House Quidditch games."

She shrugged.

"Why?"

"Have an hour? Or a week?" She shook her head. "It's too much to explain. I don't even know if I can."

Severus spun around just for the fun of it, then came up beside her again. "I have time." She might be well-liked and much-admired, but Severus didn't think she had any real friends at Hogwarts. She sometimes seemed as alone as he was. He remembered what Gareth had told him about the fact that being good-looking and out-going hadn't saved him from the pain in his life. He was there; he could listen. "I have the time, Helena."

Helena looked out across the loch. "All right." She nodded. "Let's rest before we fly back."

Severus flew over to a large, flat rock near the water's edge and set down, but got a bit caught in the stirrups and didn't dismount very gracefully. Helena followed him, and

when she landed and dismounted, she drew her wand. A quick swish, and there was a comfortable redwood bench with wrought iron arms and a gently curving back.

"Nice," Severus said as he sat down.

"Glad you like it," Helena said, "but it's one I do a lot. Nothing special." She gave Severus a slight smile as she sat down next to him. "I haven't shared it with anyone in a while, though, so I suppose that makes it special tonight."

"So, why are you teaching at Hogwarts?" Severus asked, not letting her changed the subject.

Helena sighed and tucked one leg under her. She stared out at the dark water. "You weren't around after...you were injured, yourself. And then over the summer . . ." She shook her head and sighed. "Rolanda couldn't come back. It was pretty clear that she wouldn't be well enough by September, if she ever were going to recover and be able to come back, or even want to return. The Headmistress was going to advertise the position, but I told her I would take it. I'd thought perhaps just until they could find someone else, but then as I thought about it, I realised that . . . that it would enable me to stay here, give me something to do, give me some time . . ."

"But why this? There must have been other things you could be doing," Severus said. "And why stay here at all?"

"It was easy. I could just do it. I was here, the job was here, I knew I had to do something, and this was easy. And it's turned out to be pleasant."

"All right, that's the short version," Severus said. "What's the story behind that version? I said I had time. I meant it."

Helena turned her head and looked up at him. "You are one surprise after another, Severus."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I never would have taken you for the . . . the listening type, the sympathetic ear." She looked away quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to sound like it probably did."

"Others have said far more offensive things about me," Severus said, one corner of his mouth turning up.

They sat quietly for a while, listening to the water lapping against the stones.

"You probably know that I was engaged to Viktor Krum," Helena finally said softly, not looking at Severus. "I flew with him during the battle. You know what happened, that he died. I saw him die. I tried . . ." Helena swallowed. "I tried, but it wasn't enough. There were Dementors. People were casting Patronuses, but there were so many Dementors. I'd never felt anything like it in my life. I cast my own Patronus, chasing away the one that had been after me, but there was another one . . . it was swooping down on Viktor. He tried to outrun it, but he . . . the Dementor must have affected him. He lost control of his broom. I tried to cast again, but I . . . I . . . I couldn't. Nothing happened. Then Viktor was hanging from his broom, and I tried to catch him, but I wasn't fast enough, not on my broom and not with my wand, and he fell." She blinked rapidly and wiped at her tears with her fingertips.

Severus didn't know what to say.

Helena took in a deep breath and let it out shakily. "Someone on the ground tried to break his fall with some spell. I followed him down, but I wasn't fast enough. Again." Helena choked back her tears. "It wasn't the fall that killed him. He landed hard, but he was still alive. A Death Eater killed him, blasted a hole right through his chest. He hadn't . . . he hadn't even been able to defend himself." She swallowed and tried not to cry. "And I was just a second too late. I killed the Death Eater, but I was too late."

Severus put a tentative hand on her shoulder. "I am sorry. I know that must have been hard, it must still be hard."

Helena nodded, unable to speak, her tears rolling silently down her cheeks.

Severus patted her shoulder, then he awkwardly put his arm around her. She turned toward him and buried her face in his cloak and began to sob. Severus rubbed her back and let her cry. He didn't think that there was anything that he could say to her that would help. Finally, he felt in his pocket and found a clean handkerchief. He offered it to her silently.

Helena wiped her face and blew her nose. "Thank you," she said softly.

Severus nodded. "Keep it."

"And thank you for not telling me that it wasn't my fault or that Viktor wouldn't blame me," Helena said, wiping her nose again and sitting back. "People always say those things, and they don't help at all. I know it all already."

"I know people like that. Well-meaning, but . . ."

Helena nodded. "But can you see that I just didn't feel like I could go back to everything at home as though it all hadn't happened? I felt as though . . . as though it would be like trying to pretend that Viktor had never been in my life, or trying to forget that I hadn't been able to help him when he needed me. Going back to everyone else I knew but who hadn't been here and who couldn't really understand, it just didn't seem right."

Severus nodded. "I see that."

"And my family would want to help me get over it, and I didn't want to get over it. Not yet." She put her head back and stared up at the stars. "They'll want me to do healing rituals. That's why I don't want to go visit at Easter."

"There's no point in punishing yourself forever, though," Severus said. "Suffering your grief and guilt so intensely. Not in the long-term." He couldn't follow his own advice very well, but it might still help her.

"I know." Helena nodded and sighed. "And I will . . . not get over it, I hate it when people say to get over it. But I will move forward, and when I do go home, I will be ready for the rituals. But I'm just not ready yet."

Severus, his arm still around her shoulders, gave her a squeeze. "Then wait until you're ready. And in the meantime, we are all very fortunate you are here."

Helena smiled up at him. "Thanks. It's nice to be appreciated."

"Believe me, you are appreciated...certainly by all the males on the Hogwarts Quidditch teams!"

"Hmmp." Her smile faded slightly, and she looked back out across the water. "You know the other thing that bothers me?"

"I'm sorry if I was rude," Severus began, suddenly realising that referencing her attractiveness probably wasn't the most suave or sensitive thing he could have done at that moment.

"Don't worry about that," she said with a sigh. "I'm used to it. But that wasn't at all what I meant."

"What, then?"

"Viktor was my 'fiancé,' not my husband. Some people . . . it's as though they think that I should grieve less because we weren't married yet. It's as if, had we married the day before the battle, I'd have a greater right to mourn long and deeply." She blinked rapidly. "It makes me damned angry, actually. Some idiots even seem to think it's

romantic...tragically romantic, but romantic."

"They are, as you say, idiots," Severus said.

"And I enjoyed meeting Becky today, but she never knew Viktor except as a figure in the sports pages of the paper. She *knows* what happened, and she's sympathetic, and she really was very decent, but I couldn't seem to talk to her about it." Helena sighed. "And it's not her fault. I know that. She is a good friend. Well . . . I suppose that's a sign that I'm right not to go home over the Easter vacation. Not yet."

"It might be good to be around people who know you, though, people who care about you, whether they can completely understand or not," Severus said.

Helena nodded. "I know. But I just can't yet . . . I will, though. After the anniversary. At the end of May. I'll go then."

"That is a good thing, though I hope you don't stay away."

Helena laughed softly. "My contract carries me through the end of the school year, so I'll be back at least for a little while. I've put off making any decisions about what I'll be doing after that, but I may stay...if not at Hogwarts, at least in Britain. I like Hogsmeade."

"Good."

"I feel better, Severus. Thank you for listening. You must have a lot of your own troubles and grief."

Severus quirked a smile. "I actually forgot them for a short time whilst you were talking about yours."

"Good!"

"And I've had friends around me, people to talk to," Severus said. He thought a moment. "You know, we're beginning a programme after the Easter holiday. A sort of counselling programme for the students. And the staff will be offered some counselling beginning the last few days of the holiday, especially if they volunteer to be available to the students to talk to, and they can continue with it, if they want to. It might be good for you." He hadn't thought of including Helena in the programme since she wasn't a full-time staff member and was only nominally on the faculty as the Flying instructor. But some students might actually prefer to talk to her...she was young, closer to their own ages than any other staff, she was pleasant, popular, attractive . . .

"I'd like that," Helena said. "A few of the Quidditch players seem quite affected by the battle and other events of the war. I'd like to be able to offer them a friendly ear. I don't know how helpful I would be, though."

"Anyone who requires more than that, there will be professionals available," Severus explained.

"All right, yes, count me in," Helena said with a nod. She looked up at him and gazed at him a moment. "Is this part of your job description as Deputy Headmaster?" she asked softly. "Take the staff for a flight or a walk and let them cry all over your cloak?"

Severus shook his head. "That's more the description of a friend, I think," he whispered, hoping she didn't mind him thinking of himself as a friend. Gorgeous, intelligent, popular, she could find far nicer friends than he.

She smiled, though, and her bright eyes met his dark ones. "Good. I'm glad." Her gaze moved from his eyes to his lips and back again. "Maybe you wouldn't mind then, if I . . ." She reached up and kissed him lightly on the cheek. She paused, holding herself still beside him, and he felt the warmth and solidity of her petite form leaning against him.

"Helena," Severus whispered, his breath meeting hers. He swallowed and parted his lips, then he bent his head and kissed her cheek lightly as she had kissed his.

Helena turned her head and rested her forehead against his shoulder. They sat there quietly for a few minutes, then Helena took a deep breath and sat back, leaning against the back of the bench.

"It's getting late," she said. "We should be getting back."

Severus nodded as she stood and her broomstick leapt into her hand.

"What do you say to a race?" Severus asked as he mounted the Thunderbolt, this time a bit more gracefully than the first time. "Just to the other end of the lake?"

Helena grinned. "I'd love it...just don't crash! The Thunderbolt is fast, but very sensitive at high speeds!"

Severus smirked. "Don't worry about me. Just try to keep up on that new broom of yours."

"All right...ready, set . . . go!"

Severus took off like a shot, amazed by the acceleration of the Thunderbolt. He looked back. Helena was gaining on him, and he urged the Thunderbolt faster. The acceleration of the new Victory might not be as impressive as that of the Thunderbolt, but Helena was an experienced and talented flyer, and the Victory was no slouch when it came to speed. He looked back again, and she was almost on his tail. Severus leaned into the broom, holding on tightly, concentrating on keeping the broomstick level and straight on course. He thought he had to be going at least ninety, possibly faster, but Helena continued to gain on him. She was now only a half a broomstick's length behind him. Gritting his teeth, Severus focussed on speed, transmitting his desire to the broomstick, and he felt the Thunderbolt accelerating. They were closing in on the far shore, and Severus just managed to push the broom in a final thrust forward, and he crossed the edge of the lake a full two lengths ahead of Helena. He wasn't high enough, though, and he had to pull up quickly to avoid hitting the treetops.

His heart pounding, Severus levelled off twenty feet above the tops of the trees and slowed to a gentle coast. He let out a shaky breath. He had been so intent on beating Helena, he'd almost crashed the broomstick into the trees. Only almost, though. He looked back and Helena drifted up to him, a broad grin on her face.

"An exhilarating broomstick, isn't it?" Helena asked. "I was a bit concerned you might have trouble pulling up in time, you were accelerating so much at the end, but it's very responsive."

"It's an amazing broomstick," Severus agreed. He smiled at her. "Someday, I would like to see what you can do with it. I'm sure I didn't get to one-twenty, let alone one forty-five."

"Maybe sometime." They flew around the mountain in silence, heading back toward Hogsmeade. "If you're free at all this weekend, maybe you could help me with the final speed tests on the Victory, and then when we're through, I could put the Thunderbolt through its paces for you." She looked over at him and grinned. "Your own private, one-broom, one-witch rodeo show."

He grinned back. "If you're the witch and this is the broom, it will be a very exciting 'rodeo,' I'm sure."

Helena laughed shortly and picked up speed. "Let's get back to Hogsmeade, then, so I can get some rest before the performance!"

They rose and flew over the mountaintops, taking as straight a route as possible back to the village. They landed several feet from her door, Severus having an easier time dismounting without being caught up in the stirrups this time.

"So, I've been thinking. Saturday or Sunday?" Helena asked. "Sunday is a little better for me, but I could meet tomorrow instead, if you prefer."

"Sunday is fine," Severus said with a nod. He had no duties that Sunday; he didn't even need to be at meals if he didn't want to be.

"Good! Then what about . . . ten o'clock? Then we could have lunch after. A picnic, maybe. I'll bring it."

"That would be fine," Severus replied.

Helena waved her wand, opening the door to her flat and turning on the kitchen light. Severus followed her to the door and handed her the Thunderbolt.

"Thank you, Helena. That really was a treat."

Helena leaned the two brooms against the wall just inside the door. "Thank you, Severus. I'm glad you joined me. It was fun." She looked up at him seriously. "And I appreciated our conversation, too. Thanks."

He nodded. She really was very lovely, high cheekbones, delicate jawlines, beautiful, glossy black hair, amazingly blue eyes set off by her dark skin, and a lithe, compact, fit young body with curves in just the right places, beautiful perky breasts, rounded hips, and a narrow waist. She was luscious. They scarcely knew each other, though, and they both had to work at Hogwarts . . . Nonetheless, Severus raised his hand and brushed his fingertips over her cheek. When Helena didn't react, he ran his fingers along her jaw. She seemed to shiver under his touch, and she closed her eyes. Slowly, he bent toward her. It seemed a long distance and time slowed. His lips met the smooth, soft skin of her cheek. Helena's hands rose and rested on his chest, but she did not push him away. Severus stepped forward as his lips moved down to hers, and she backed against the wall. He kissed her softly, then pulled back and looked down at her.

She shook her head. "Severus, I..."

"I'm sorry, Helena," Severus whispered. He began to step away, but she grabbed his cloak and pulled him back toward her.

She stretched up on tiptoes and pulled him down into a kiss. Helena's lips were soft against his, soft and sensual. Severus gathered her into his arms and lifted her up, his arms under her gossamer-light cloak, one hand under her firm buttocks, all the while continuing to kiss her lips and then pressing her against the wall. Her arms were around his neck, and now one leg hooked around him, pulling him closer as he deepened the kiss. She twined her fingers through his hair, and he lowered his head, kissing her throat, gently sucking and licking, then moving to her ear. She gasped and clutched him harder. Severus began to move his hips, pressing into her, moving slowly, rolling and rocking against her. His erection was growing as he pushed into her crux, stimulating them both through their clothing. The tip of his tongue traced her ear, then entered, and he teased her ear in time with his thrusts, which grew faster as his arousal grew.

"Ah, ah, haaaaahhhh!" Helena grasped him tightly. Both her legs were around him now, and her eyes were closed. "Oh, god, Severus, this is . . . oh, good, but . . . but we shouldn't . . . oh, but don't stop . . . but we shouldn't. Oh, god."

"No . . . no, we shouldn't," Severus said, stilling with his erection pressed against her. He was shaking, and his legs felt weak. He was extremely aroused, and he had no doubt that Helena also had been enjoying it. But something felt . . . off.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Helena said softly. "I'm sorry. If I were to . . . to do this . . . I would, with you . . . you understand. I would, but I just think . . . maybe it's not the right time. I hope you understand."

"No, you're right," Severus said, letting her go gently as she lowered her legs. He took in a deep breath. "I hope this hasn't, that I haven't..."

"We're still on for Sunday, aren't we?" Helena asked, looking up at him.

Severus averted his eyes and nodded shortly.

Helena reached up and touched the collar of his cloak. "I'd like to think I found a new friend today, Severus."

Severus smiled shyly and nodded. "Yes, all right." He turned and pulled the doorknob of the half-open door, then turned back. "I'm sorry if I..."

"Don't be sorry, or I'd have to apologise, too. See you Sunday!"

He nodded. "Sunday."

NEXT

Chapter Sixty: Perfect Timing

Friday, 19 March 1999

Severus seeks out Minerva to inform her of the attack on Malfoy and to ask her for personal advice. His timing is not as bad as it could be!

Characters: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Sixty: Perfect Timing

Chapter 61 of 118

Friday, 19 March 1999. Severus seeks out Minerva to tell her of the attack on Malfoy and to ask for her personal advice.
His timing is not as bad as it could be!

Warning: Contains an explicit ADMM lemon in the middle of the chapter, and a little fluffy bondage (no BDSM).



Chapter Sixty: Perfect Timing

Friday, 19 March 1999

Severus walked slowly up Bog End toward the high street. He didn't know precisely what was wrong, nor did he even understand why he had even kissed Helena as he had. She was attractive, he liked her, but . . . He thought that he had been looking for a stringless fuck, and whatever he might have had with Helena, if she hadn't stopped them, it wouldn't have been that. It couldn't have been. It would have been very hot, though. Until it imploded on them, as he was certain it would have.

But it hadn't been its potential messiness which had brought him into agreement with Helena, agreeing with her that it was not a good idea for them to engage in physical intimacy. It hadn't been worry that it might be messy or not "stringless." It had been the sense that it wasn't right. It had felt *good*, but it hadn't felt *right*.

Severus headed up the main street toward the edge of the village, not paying much attention to his surroundings. Perhaps it hadn't felt right because, no matter how many times he told himself that he wanted a meaningless tryst, no matter how strong his libido had become, he was no teenager, and he had been through too much not to value the relationships he had developed. Including his relationship with Poppy. He loved Poppy too much to have a meaningless tryst with someone else without first trying to save what they might have together. He loved her. He really did. It wasn't merely the product of his physical passion for her. He loved Poppy . . .

The realisation stunned him, and he almost stopped in the middle of the street. He stumbled over a clod of earth, but caught himself. As he straightened, a chill ran up his spine, and he suddenly had the sense that he was being watched. He took a step forward, and he heard a slight sound behind him. Staying still in the centre of the road was not an option. His mind raced. Danger or no danger, there was no point in providing anyone an easy target. Severus didn't even pause, he simply Disapparated with a sharp crack.

He arrived at the gates and looked around him. He heard nothing but the usual sounds of the night, and felt nothing, either. Severus shook his head. He had allowed his imagination to run away with him, no doubt. There was no danger to him. Even if there were some rabid anti-Death-Eater out there hunting down wizards and witches who he thought had escaped justice, it was unlikely such a person would waste their time on him. He had been a decorated hero who had helped to bring down the Dark Wizard, after all...and he was not easy to reach, either, since Hogwarts was one of the most secure places in wizarding Britain. He hadn't even had any anonymous hate mail in months, from either side. Not that that meant he was entirely safe, of course...and he knew better than anyone what evil he had committed...but nonetheless, there were far more likely targets than he.

Severus closed the gates behind him, feeling the nighttime wards click into place again as the gates latched. He would speak to Minerva about increasing the perimeter wards during the day, as well. If the madman attacking presumed or imagined Death Eaters ran out of good targets, he might try to target the children of Death Eaters, and there were a number of students whose parents had been genuine Death Eaters...imprisoned or dead Death Eaters, but real ones.

The danger to himself was negligible, Severus thought . . . he wouldn't worry Minerva needlessly, but the Headmistress was not a fool. She could figure out for herself that there might be someone who might seek revenge on him. Fortunately, whoever was behind the attacks hadn't killed anyone yet, although it sounded as if the attack on Malfoy that day...or the previous day, as he supposed it now was...had been a very near thing.

He glanced up at the castle. The lights in the Headmistress's quarters were dimmed, but there was a lamp burning in her office, probably her desk lamp. The infirmary windows that faced toward the front of the castle were dark, and Severus could not see Poppy's windows from where he was, as they were on the eastern side. The rest of the castle seemed peaceful, the only lights coming from dimmed lamps in the corridors, though the large lanterns burned brightly on either side of the main staircase leading to the great oak doors.

At the last minute, Severus veered away from the stairs leading up to the main entrance, deciding instead to walk around the castle toward one of the side entrances that led down into the dungeons. As he rounded the tower and came around to the east side of the castle, he looked up reflexively. There were lights on in only a few windows, those to Poppy's rooms; both her sitting room and bedroom were lit, though dimly. Severus paused beneath her windows, wondering about the realisation he had had whilst walking through Hogsmeade. He couldn't talk to Poppy about it yet, though, and certainly not at that hour, but if he did talk to her, he would need to be more certain of himself. He couldn't reconcile the feelings he had for Poppy with those he believed he had for Hermione. He felt like punching something. It shouldn't all be so difficult; it should be clearer.

Perhaps the next day, he could spend some time with Poppy and then some time with Hermione, and he might have a clearer sense of his own feelings for each of them. If he visited Poppy before breakfast, he might even be able to . . . to at least kiss her and hold her on her couch.

Severus glanced once more up at Poppy's windows before starting around to the lower entrance near the docks. He saw Poppy's silhouette behind the curtains covering the sitting room window. Even her shadow was beautiful, Severus thought. Then her shadow was gone as the lights went out in the sitting room. He could barely discern her moving about in her bedroom, but then that light was out, as well.

Despite entering the castle so close to the dungeons where his rooms were, Severus didn't go down, but turned a tight corner and went up a set of narrow stairs that brought him up to the ground floor, then he trotted up the stairs until he reached the second floor, where the entrance to the Headmistress's Tower now resided. He gave the password...Badb, this time. He did hope Minerva moved on to a new inspiration for her passwords before the next school year, at least. He hadn't a clue what most of the ones she chose even meant.

Severus mounted the spiral staircase, walking up the steps as they corkscrewed higher. He wasn't entirely sure why he felt he needed to speak to Minerva immediately; the next morning would surely do to tell her about the attack on Malfoy and his concerns about the school. She was apparently still up working, though, despite the late hour, and he might be able to talk to her about Poppy. She was the only other person who knew about them besides Gareth. Minerva might have some wisdom for him. She so often did. And she was one person whose care for him...whose *love*...he no longer questioned, even if he didn't understand it.

"So Poppy is out with Quin this evening," Albus remarked as they entered Minerva's office after dinner.

"Mmhm."

"Your idea?"

"Poppy needed cheering up. Quin is very good at cheering people up, especially witches. And he'll enjoy himself, too."

"And Poppy needs cheering up precisely why?" Albus asked.

"Oh, just the early springtime blahs," Minerva replied evasively.

"I hope that they enjoy each other's company, then," Albus said.

"I'm sure they will, or I wouldn't have suggested it."

"It didn't work the last time they tried dating. I think Poppy's better suited to someone different."

"I don't think either of them is looking at this as a date tonight," Minerva said, sitting down behind her desk. "They've been friends for a long time and have gone out before...even after they tried to date. Besides, that was when Poppy was still getting over Murdoch. Rebound relationships are not usually lasting ones."

"Mmm, perhaps," Albus said, leaning back against her desk and looking down at her. He reached over and unclasped the fastenings at the top of her outer-robe. He ran a finger up her throat and under her jaw to her chin. "I always thought it was because once Quin had fallen in love with you, he couldn't fall in love again...at least not with one of your own friends."

"Pish! Quin wasn't and isn't in love with me," Minerva said, pushing her chair back. "You are too much of a romantic, Dumbledore."

He smiled lightly. "I thought that was something you liked in me."

"I *do*, when it concerns us, but not when you're bringing in some third person." Minerva rolled her eyes.

"I just like the thought, I suppose, of some wizard pining after you for decades, nobly hiding his feelings for you out of respect for the bond you share with me. And I get to keep you."

"Not a very kind thought," Minerva said, "wishing someone to suffer from unrequited love."

Albus shrugged. "I don't suppose I would actually *wish* him to suffer from it, but it does make a very pleasant fantasy."

"Your fantasies have become rather dull, if that's where they're headed," Minerva replied with a laugh. "I remember when you had some very exciting fantasies, indeed. In fact, I remember very clearly some of the fantasies you've wanted to act out...to great effect, I should add. I wouldn't mind hearing one of those, and perhaps acting on it."

Albus grinned. "I was afraid I was becoming inconsequential in your life, Headmistress. Always such a busy witch! No more time for sharing fantasies with your Defence teacher."

Minerva raised her eyebrow. "Do you forget New Year's Eve? I thought that was a nice fantasy you played out."

Albus's grin grew. "Oh, it was! Very, very nice, indeed!"

"And it's not as though we haven't spent intimate time together since. We made love just the other night. And last weekend."

"I'm not counting, Minerva," Albus said. "It's not the frequency . . . it's just that we haven't taken much time ~~to~~*play* recently. Not since New Year's, in fact."

"It's difficult when school is in session," Minerva said. "And it's not that much different from when you were Headmaster, you know...better, in fact, I would have thought."

"And I am beginning to appreciate why you would become cross with me sometimes," Albus said with a smile.

"Yes, well, you also had all those other demands on your time. We spend far more time together now than we were able to for years before this. I'd think you'd be happy with that. I am. I enjoy being able to openly share quarters with you, wake up next to you every morning, kiss you good-night every night, and just spend more time together than we used to. I thought you enjoyed that, too. It's one reason I'm not going on the witches' holiday with Pomona and everyone."

"I do enjoy it, Minerva. It is good. It's nice to have a quiet domestic life together . . . but . . ." Albus shrugged, then sighed. "I know that you wanted to finish your correspondence and such tonight so it wouldn't be hanging over you this weekend and we can have time together tomorrow, so I'll let you get on with it," he said, pushing up from where he had been leaning against Minerva's desk.

Minerva nodded. "All right. Come down and get me later, though. If I'm not upstairs by eleven or so, come down and remind me."

"I certainly will. I don't want you burning the candle at both ends of the day, and I don't want you getting more of those headaches...you haven't had one recently, have you?" He stopped, showing genuine concern.

Minerva shook her head. "They're much better, especially if I take regular breaks and keep the desk lamp bright enough." She grinned up at him. "I knew we shouldn't tell you about them, that you'd only worry and fuss over me."

"You need to be fussed over, my dear." Albus bent and kissed her cheek. "I'll see you in a few hours, then."

At ten forty-five, Minerva stood and stretched, rubbing her eyes. She hoped that Albus hadn't fallen asleep or forgotten that he was to come down and get her after eleven...and that he didn't arrive too early. She did want to be prepared for him; it would make it much more enjoyable for them both if he were a little surprised. She smiled. No time for play, indeed! Silly wizard!

Twenty minutes later, she heard Albus at the top of the stairs. He called her name, but she didn't answer or emerge from her dark corner. She almost meowed a laugh when she saw his fuzzy bunny slippers come into view, but she restrained herself. She was crouched in the corner, and she'd left the office dark except for the one lamp on her desk. She saw Albus pause when he got partway down the stairs and saw her desk and that she wasn't at it.

"Minerva?"

Albus crossed over to Minerva's desk and looked down at it, apparently looking for a note, then, as she had hoped, he noticed that the door to the Headmistress's Library was open a crack. He went over to it and opened it further.

"Minerva?"

She had lit a small lamp in the library down at the end of the bookshelves, just around a corner, and as she had planned, Albus stepped into the library and started toward the other end of the room.

Albus jumped, startled when the door behind him closed. He turned around, but it was too dark, and his eyes hadn't adjusted yet. Minerva's had adjusted quickly, though, and she trotted on four paws up to him and wound around his ankles, then stood behind him, bumping her head against his calf.

"Merrrrrow!"

"Minerva!" Albus chuckled. "You startled me." He turned around and bent to pick her up, but she was faster. Before Albus knew what was happening, she was behind him, between him and the door again, and he heard the slight pop of her transformation into her ordinary form. Almost immediately, the small lamp at the other end of the library was extinguished, and Minerva had caught him from behind, putting one arm around his waist. She brought the other hand up and put it in front of his mouth, preventing him from saying anything else.

Albus felt her tugging at the sash that held his dressing gown closed, and he could feel that she was naked, or at least almost naked. He put up a mock struggle, but then allowed her to finish untying the sash. Her hand immediately went lower, touching his penis through his nightshirt. He was beginning to react to the unexpected assault, and when she began to stroke him, he moaned and he could feel the blood suffusing his cock.

Minerva's other hand, which she had removed from his mouth and placed on his shoulder, returned to cover his lips briefly, then she brought both hands to the shoulders of his dressing gown and pulled it back and part way off of him. Albus was puzzled as he felt her take hold of the sleeves, and he began to turn around, but she pushed his back with her palm, and he dutifully stood still for her. His erection grew as he realised that she was tying his sleeves around his arms, his wrists held firmly, though not tightly, together. Now she was pulling the sash from its loops, and she swung it over his head. Albus became slightly nervous, though he knew he could stop it at just a word to Minerva, or that he could simply use any number of nonverbal charms to release himself. He hoped she wasn't going to tighten the sash around his neck. They'd never discussed such erotic play, but it wasn't anything he wanted to try, even with Minerva, and he was up for almost anything with her.

It seemed Minerva had something else in mind, however, and the broad silk sash went around his mouth. He almost laughed, but stopped himself. *Asilencio* might be more effective than the sash, but it wasn't much fun. Besides, this way he could still moan, as he did when her hands returned to his erection, squeezing it and playing with it through his nightshirt. There was a pause, Minerva's hands disappeared, and Albus felt a whisper of magic, and his cotton nightshirt became silk. He let out a long, low groan as one of her hands returned to stroking him through the silk. She was rubbing against his back, her crux making repeated contact with his lightly bound hands. He could hear her breathing become more rapid as she became more excited herself.

Another pause, and he felt her magic sweep past him, then he heard her wand click as she put it back on the table at their side. She gently pushed the back of one of his knees with one of her own, and with her right hand on his right shoulder, she urged him to kneel. Beneath the sash, Albus smiled. She had conjured a very soft pillow for his aging knees. Such a very considerate abductress he had!

Now her hands were on his shoulders, and he felt her reach out with her magic through their bond into his magic, sensing whether he was in any discomfort. He loved the sensation of Minerva's magic coursing through his own, and since their magical binding a little over two years before, she had learned how, at will, to caress his magic with her own, and even how to "borrow" his magic, drawing on his strength, though she never did that without asking him first and had only done it a few times outside of the final battle.

She withdrew her magic, just leaving it to tickle at the edges of his, and she embraced him from behind, bringing him to sit back on his heels. Nipping at his shoulders, she began to move against him again, rubbing her breasts against his back and bringing her naked crux to rub against his joined hands. She breathed faster as she stimulated herself against him. He was just beginning to become slightly uncomfortable beneath her weight when he felt her Summon her wand from the tabletop. With a nonverbal spell, she split his nightshirt down the front, then she dropped her wand beside them, grasped his cock in her right hand, and cast the *Apsterrere* spell. His eyebrow rose, not because she had cast that particular spell, which he had taught her over forty years before, but because she had used the "naughty" variant of it. He would not be able to release the spell himself; only she could release it...although, as with the original version, it would wear off in a couple hours regardless of whether it was released or not. She must have something rather special in mind. Albus smiled again beneath his sash.

Minerva didn't let go of his cock. She was still straddling his legs from behind, but although she continued to press her breasts against his back, she kept her weight off of him. She stroked him quickly, squeezing and pulling expertly until Albus was moaning and rocking up in rhythm with her strokes. He came hard, panting and gasping against the sash covering his mouth. Minerva barely paused, however, this time bringing her other hand around to play with his cock lightly and gently as her right hand caressed his stomach and chest. Her fingertips found a sensitive nipple, and she flicked and tweaked and pinched until he squirmed. Good lord, it wasn't enough, he needed more, but her left hand on his cock just continued its gentle teasing as her other hand played first with one hardened nipple then the other. He moaned loudly through the sash, and Minerva nipped his shoulder then sucked at it.

Albus rocked up on his knees, pushing against Minerva's hand on his cock, but frustratingly, she removed her hand, first tickling one finger up his length and then over the soft skin of his head. She stood, tugging at the dressing gown wrapped around his wrists, helping him to his feet. Still behind him, so tantalisingly close that her nipples brushed his hair, but not close enough to meet his desire, she pulled his split nightshirt back off his shoulders to join the dressing gown bunched at his hands. He felt Minerva's fingertips gliding over his naked back, then she reached beneath his hands and squeezed his buttocks before repeating the soft, tickling touches to his back. Her hands withdrew, and he turned his head, but futilely, as he could not see in the almost pitch black of the library.

Minerva, however, had apparently cast her special charm on her eyes, and she was unhindered by the darkness. Albus heard a chair being pulled out from the table, scraping the stone floor as she turned it around, then her hands gently guided him to sit in the chair. She removed the sash from around his mouth, but pressed a cautioning finger against his lips, reminding him not to speak. For a moment, his hands were free, the dressing gown and nightshirt disappearing, but then he felt Minerva tying his hands loosely behind the back of the chair. Albus wasn't uncomfortable...there was a good deal of slack between his wrists...but he was definitely constrained from reaching out and touching Minerva.

Now she was gently, teasingly stroking his erection again, and he felt the warmth of her body and her magic close to him. There was a nipple at his mouth, and he obligingly parted his lips, taking her nipple between them, then flicking his tongue over it. He suckled more energetically, and as the pressure of his mouth increased, so too did the strength of the strokes to his cock. He strained toward her, and Minerva sped up, moving so that now her other nipple was at his mouth. She was breathing hard, squeezing his cock with one hand and gripping his shoulder with her other, when he came, whimpering against her breast as his penis twitched and jerked in her hand.

Massaging both his shoulders and upper arms, Minerva allowed Albus some time to recover, though he was still as hard as he had been when she had first cast the *Apsterrere*. She leaned forward and kissed his lips, sucking his lower lip and then flicking her tongue out to meet his. Her left leg went over both of his, and she sat on his lap, facing him and continuing to kiss him gently but sensuously. She slid forward, her crux meeting his hard cock, and she moaned and began to rub herself against him. Albus wished he could take her in his arms, urge her to mount him, and guide her up and down on his erection, but he couldn't do that without using magic to release himself from his bonds, and that would not be playing along with her.

So Albus took pleasure in the sensation of her damp folds sliding over his penis, her breasts brushing his beard and chest, her hands massaging his shoulders, and her lips teasing his own. When she began to move faster, though, breaking their kisses to pant and gasp, he almost couldn't restrain himself from releasing the sash from around his wrists. She came, pushing against him and moaning, and he followed, the suddenness of his orgasm taking him by surprise, and he groaned loudly.

Minerva rested her head on his shoulder, then she took a deep breath and stood. Her hands were at his wrists, and she untied the sash from one of them. She tugged gently, and he rose from the chair. She waved her wand and the door to her office opened, the light from the desk lamp seeming extremely bright after the utter darkness of the library. Albus squinted, but Minerva twitched her wand, adjusting her vision quickly, and led him into her office.

Still wordlessly, she drew him over to the small camelback settee by the fireplace and indicated that he should sit. This time, she did not tie him up, though she maintained a hold on one end of the sash. She pushed his knees further apart, then she knelt in front of him. Albus watched as she lowered her head and closed her lips around the crown of his penis. When he reached to touch her head, she jerked lightly on the sash, and he kept his hands to himself. Years of being with Albus had shown Minerva exactly what kinds of touches excited him, even driving him to the brink but not over it, until she would finally push him into ecstasy at the moment of her choosing. Her lips and her tongue alternated their teasing the head of his cock, and the fingertips of one hand caressed his balls. She never even lowered herself fully over his cock, only stimulating the crown, licking, kissing, sucking, flicking, and yet still he came, unable to keep himself still, rising up, legs trembling as he climaxed.

Minerva rolled back onto her heels, smiling up at him, eminently pleased with herself.

Albus broke his silence. "Saucy witch."

"Mhm. Very." She joined him on the small sofa, settling on his knees, straddling him. She leaned forward and kissed his lips lightly. She slid toward him and whispered in his ear. "I'm going to fuck you mad, Dumbledore." As she finished speaking, she took his cock in her hand, rose up on her knees, then slowly lowered herself onto his erection. Her eyes closed, and she let out a long moan.

She bounced slightly, then began to rise and fall on his cock, taking her time, squeezing him inside of her, rubbing her clit against him as she moved up and down.

"Do you like being fucked by the Headmistress?" she asked. "Tell me, do you like being fucked by Hogwarts Headmistress?"

"Yes, yes, I do." At an insistent tug of the sash around his wrist, he said, "Yes, I like being fucked by the Headmistress."

"Mmm, good, good, because I'm enjoying it. Are you going to come, Dumbledore, are you going to come? Be a good boy and come for me, come for the Headmistress!"

"Ah, ah, yes, I will...I will come for the Headmistress!"

She tugged at his sash. "More," she whispered into his ear, "and dirty, very dirty!"

"Fuck me, please fuck me, Headmistress! Fuck my cock! Please, I can't bear it! Fuck me hard!" He could feel his orgasm approaching. He hadn't climaxed this many times in a row in many months, and the lack of ejaculation was beginning to frustrate him as he was driven to the edge again, but he couldn't release the spell on himself. "Fuck me, fuck me till I come, oh, please, please, please, oh, gods, fuck fuck fuck!" Albus's orgasm was even stronger than the last one, and Minerva's followed it, her continued movement on his cock drawing out his orgasm and making him moan.

Minerva's breathing was heavy, and she went limp against him, kissing his shoulder and tasting his sweat on her lips. After resting a few minutes, she turned her head and whispered in his ear. "I do believe I still have your penis in me, Professor Dumbledore." She squeezed around his erection. "Am I correct?"

Albus nodded. "You are correct, my dear Headmistress, in this as in so many things."

She squeezed again, causing him to let out a shuddering breath. "You feel as though you still need another fucking, Dumbledore. One more good fuck?" Her words were warm in his ear.

"Yes," he replied, shivering at the sensation of her lips and tongue now moving over his ear.

"Yes, what, Dumbledore? Yes, what?"

"Yes, please, Headmistress, I need one more good fuck."

Minerva leaned back slightly and her mouth found his lips. She kissed him as she rocked, then she pulled away and smiled at him. "What about moving, then?"

"Where to? Bed?"

"Where *is* your sense of adventure, Professor?" She stood, and he immediately missed her wet warmth around him.

Minerva tugged at the sash, and Albus stood. She Summoned her wand from where it had rolled under the couch, then she waved it. All the furniture in the room moved back to the edges, leaving a large empty area in the middle. Another swish of her wand, and a large, thick down mattress appeared. Hands at his waist, she urged him to lie down, and she joined him, lying on top of him, kissing his lips and face.

"There's one more thing I want to do first," she whispered, "then I'll fuck the living daylight out of you."

Albus felt goosebumps come over him as they so often did when she used the word "fuck," which she used freely when she chose, although not every time they made love.

"I hope that is a promise and not just an empty threat, Headmistress."

"Oh, it is a threat! It is a threat I will make good on. But first . . ."

She moved to straddle his face, then she lowered herself to kiss the tip of his penis. Albus raised his free hand and cupped her buttocks, pulling her closer. His tongue flicked out, tasting her briefly, and he was rewarded by a moaning and swallowing around the head of cock. He flicked again, pulling her closer, soon licking her hard and fast, stimulating her clit until she literally screamed as she came, her mouth still around his cock as she shouted. His own buttocks clenched and trembled as his orgasm was suddenly upon him, cascading from his balls to his penis, then seeming to rush in waves back through his body as Minerva reached out with her magic and extended her orgasm into his. Everything went black for a few seconds, and when he was aware again, Minerva had rolled off of him. Now her crux was hovering just a hair's width from his still erect penis.

"Now, Professor? You want to be fucked mad now?"

"You're already driving me mad, completely mad! Don't stop, don't stop now!"

He hadn't finished speaking before she lowered herself, sheathing his cock inside her; she rode him until she was close to coming, her sweat rolling down her breasts to bead at her nipples, her eyes closed, her breath just gasps, and then he felt the *Apsterrere* released as she began to come, and this time, he exploded with his orgasm, his ejaculation strong and hard and pulsing. All he could do was hold on and try to remember to breathe through his ecstasy.

Minerva collapsed on top of him, her heart beating wildly and her breathing gradually slowing. With some effort, she turned her face and kissed his cheek.

"Playtime for Albus," she said. She smiled weakly. "I hope that showed you that I haven't lost my sense of play, my gorgeous one."

"That was unexpected and marvellous," Albus said, then adding teasingly, "I do admit to being a bit worried about that spell, though. I was wondering whether you were ever going to release it or whether I was just going to have a hard-on forever."

"Of course I was!" she said with mock indignation at his exaggeration. "I just had to make sure you really *really* wanted it and would really appreciate it." She pushed up on one arm and looked down at him with a teasing grin. "Did I succeed in fucking you mad?"

Albus sighed contentedly. "Completely. I wonder if someone can expire from over-orgasming. That would not be an unpleasant end." He pulled her down into his arms and kissed her. "Mmm, it feels so good to hold you like this, naked in my arms in the Tower office."

"We're putting on quite a show for the portraits tonight," Minerva said, smiling.

"We can only hope that the future residents of the Tower are this obliging when we're hanging up there."

"Mmmm. Good thing it's not really going to be *us*, though, just our portraits," Minerva said. "I can imagine that there might be some very unappetising things that take place here in the future."

"True. Even for the portraits as portraits, they aren't always pleasant, I'm sure." He kissed the side of her head. "Phineas Nigellus hates anything carnal going on. He claims to, anyway." He kissed her again.

"Eliphelet loves it, I should think," Minerva replied. "He was a randy sort, in a tasteless kind of way, when he was alive."

"That's what Dilys reports."

They lay there drowsily for a few minutes, Albus's fingers playing with Minerva's hair where it curled around the nape of her neck.

"We should begin to think about a shower and bed," Minerva said with a yawn.

"Mmm."

"Oh, no!" they both said in unison, looking at each other. The tingle from the gargoyle had reached them simultaneously.

"Who could it be at this hour?" Minerva asked standing and looking around in consternation. She had banished all of their clothing to the bedroom but Albus's fuzzy slippers, and even those were still in the library.

"Severus, your devoted Deputy, I imagine," Albus replied. "I really do not want my bits hanging out on display for the boy." He waved his hand and Summoned an old teaching robe that Minerva kept in the back of the office. He draped it around himself, though it didn't fit him, then Minerva's wand flew into his hand. Albus waved her wand, Transfiguring one of the chair cushions into a long, heavy dressing gown. "Here, put this on, my dear."

He stepped up to the door and leaned on it with one hand on the door handle as Minerva pulled the dressing gown on and tied it close around her.

"Your 'bits' are still hanging out, Albus," Minerva said with a nod toward the front of the robe, thinking that he would Transfigure it into something more suitable.

"Oh!" He pulled it closed, buttoning a few of the buttons across his stomach. It was a tight fit, but he was decent...just. "I can simply disappear, my dear."

There was movement outside the door as someone tried to use the door handle. The brass knocker thunked.

"Oh no you don't, Albus! You aren't going invisible and leaving me with all this here," Minerva said in a loud whisper, gesturing toward the mattress.

"Minerva?" Severus's voice came from the landing outside the door.

"Just a tick, Severus!" Minerva called. "*Albus!* Give me a hand or I swear I'll transform and leave *you* here to deal with him!" she whispered vehemently.

Albus chuckled and tossed her her wand, which she immediately waved, ridding the floor of the sweaty down mattress. She was just restoring the furniture to its usual positions when Albus pushed the door handle and opened the door.

"Oh, Albus! I was looking for Minerva." Severus looked past him at furniture sliding into place. A puzzled frown crossed his face, then he took in Albus's odd garb, his eyes stopping when they reached the long blue sash tied around one wrist. "Um, perhaps I ought to return in the morning."

"No, no need, Severus, come in, come in." He opened the door all the way and stood aside. "Your timing is perfect."

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-One: Late Night Advice

Saturday, 20 March 1999, in the wee hours of the morning

Severus receives some personal advice from Minerva.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall

Author's Note: For anyone wondering why Minerva uses a bright desk lamp when she has a charm that helps her to see in very dim light or near-darkness, it is because the charm does not provide her with the kind of near vision and good resolution that she would require in order to read letters, books, and other documents. Imagine night-vision goggles.

I hope the ADMM fans out there enjoyed this slight digression! I have also recently posted two new fics "[A Light at Dusk](#)," a non-RaMverse ADMM one-shot, and "[A Momentary Madness](#)," a short non-RaMverse ADMM fic, complete in five chapters.

Chapter Sixty-One: Late Night Advice

Chapter 62 of 118

Saturday, 20 March 1999, in the wee hours of the morning.

Severus informs the Headmistress of the attack on Lucius, then he receives some personal advice from her.



Chapter Sixty-One: Late Night Advice

Saturday, 20 March 1999, in the wee hours of the morning

"Sorry, Severus," Minerva said drily, handing him a teacup. "That was Albus's idea of late-night humour."

Albus had Summoned his bunny slippers from the library and gone upstairs ahead of them. Minerva had decided she didn't feel comfortable sitting in her office with Severus whilst wearing only a Transfigured bathrobe and not even anything on her feet, so she invited the younger wizard to wait for her in her sitting room. She was now fairly respectably attired in her usual nightgown, dressing gown, and slippers, with a shawl around her shoulders for good measure.

"The, um, clothes?" Severus asked.

"No, opening the door before I was ready to greet you...and whilst he was wearing my old teaching robe, too, I suppose."

"I'm sorry if I interrupted anything. I would have been happy to return in the morning."

"No, this was fine. We were just thinking of retiring for the night when you dropped by."

"I saw your office light on and simply assumed you were working," Severus continued, clearly uncomfortable.

"That was a reasonable assumption, and it really was fine," Minerva repeated. "But it is late. Was there something in particular?"

"Of course, yes." Severus was still not completely over the shock of finding Albus wearing a too-small witch's over-robe...and with the end of a long blue sash tied in a knot around one of his wrists, as well. He simply did not want to contemplate what those two got up to in private, and now he had yet another image that he would have liked to selectively Obliviate. On the other hand, it *was* rather reassuring to him to know that one of the most powerful wizards in history appeared to enjoy being tied up by his wife. It was *not* as reassuring to realise that that powerful wizard apparently also enjoyed dressing in his wife's robes. And that she let him.

"And that was?" Minerva prodded.

"Oh, yes, well, I don't know if you've heard yet, but I learned this evening that Lucius Malfoy was attacked in his home," Severus said, trying to redirect his mind away from thoughts of Dumbledore's garb and focus it on the business at hand. "That is, I don't know that it was Malfoy, just that there was an attack on a known Death Eater, but I believe it was he from the description and . . . and such."

Minerva put down her cup of peppermint tea. "Where did you hear this? Was it just a barroom rumour?"

Severus shook his head. "No. Auror Shakira Plummer sat at our table. She was at the scene in Leeds. And when she mentioned the wizard's wife and that she was unharmed, Plummer looked directly at me, as if she knew that the attack on them might have some . . . resonance for me."

"Yes, I can see that." She took in a breath. "I suppose the first thing to do is to confirm the identity of the victim. I will do that first thing in the morning. We won't let out any details that the Ministry doesn't want released...we don't want to put the Malfoys or anyone else in greater danger...but if it was Malfoy, then young Mal er, Mr Newman should be informed. Lucius is still his father, and he should know."

Severus nodded. "I agree, and he will no doubt wish to see his mother. They are very close, I understand. But beyond that, I think that it might be wise to increase the daytime perimeter wards, perhaps keep the same level of security as we have at night and during holidays. It might be awkward for legitimate visitors, but between Rath and Shunpike, no one should have to wait very long at the gates. I also think that we should raise higher wards. I dislike the thought that someone could so easily fly over the walls."

"I believe that would require a variance from the Ministry, unless Hogwarts is already exempt. I'll have to look at a few documents or ask Albus," Minerva said, "and we would have to have some kind of warning system. Few people may actually fly across the grounds, but everyone is used to the idea that it is possible. It wouldn't do to have people crashing their broomsticks on their way to Hogsmeade. There is also the problem of flying beasts. We can't simply ward against everything that flies, whether it's a mundane bird or a Thestral or Hippogriff. It would either have to be specific to broomsticks or to humans. I will need to consult with Albus about which is more difficult to tune for. I doubt that we'll have a problem getting a variance, if one is required, and then you and he can work on the wards together. I'll seal them and integrate them with the primary wards, but I'll leave the major work to you to."

"As for the other suggestion, that's fine. Before I go to bed tonight, I will change the ward structure so that the periphery wards don't reset in the morning." She sighed and shook her head. "I had hoped that after the war, we could relax a little, perhaps go back to some of the ways things were when I was a young girl, before Grindelwald, before Riddle . . ."

"I don't think we'll ever be able to go back to having people able to Apparate and Disapparate freely on the grounds," Severus said. "It might be possible someday to return to easier access on foot during the day, though. Just not yet."

Minerva nodded soberly. "There are too many potential targets here at the school...regardless of how innocent most of those targets may be. I will also alert Zabini without going into detail. He might wish to increase the security at his estate, as he is known to have taken in Slytherins regardless of their families' affiliations."

"A wise idea, although I have little doubt that he has not already taken such measures."

"There's also Hogsmeade weekends to consider," Minerva said, "but we will wait and discuss that at a Heads' meeting. I'll call one for Sunday afternoon."

"Could you make that early Sunday morning instead? Or sometime tomorrow?" Severus asked, suddenly remembering his date, such as it was, with Helena.

"Of course. You have plans?"

Severus nodded but did not elaborate.

"That brings me to a more sensitive subject," Minerva said slowly. "You. Have you considered your own safety, Severus?"

Severus shrugged. "I believe I am relatively safe, and I am quite capable of defending myself." He hesitated.

"Yes? What is it? Are you keeping something from me?"

"No, no, not precisely." He frowned. "It was probably nothing, but tonight on the high street on my way through Hogsmeade, I had the sudden sense that I was being watched . . . or followed. It was very late, the street was fairly deserted at that end...I was on the far side of the village, you see, not near the Three Broomsticks. There was no one whom I could see, but . . . It was probably nothing, but I Disapparated immediately, and no one followed me to the gates."

Minerva's brow furrowed. "I trust your senses more than you do, perhaps, Severus. I am glad you were cautious and Disapparated. I am not sure whether you should be leaving the grounds, at least not alone."

Severus stiffened. "I will not be made a prisoner here, or babysat, either. And I do finally have something of that social life you're always trying to encourage me to have."

"All right, as long as you're careful. I don't want to keep you in a gilded cage." She smiled. "So, you are getting out more! That's nice. I was glad to see that you went out with your colleagues tonight...and came back quite late, too!"

"Yes, well, it was not entirely agreeable, but after the Broomsticks, I spent a little time with someone else, and . . ." He shrugged.

"A romantic interest? Miss Granger, perhaps?" Minerva asked.

"Not a romantic interest, and not Miss Granger," Severus replied, keeping himself from snapping at her for her curiosity about his private life. He did, after all, want her opinion.

"Oh, well, that's still nice." Minerva was clearly curious still, bursting to ask him more about his evening, but restraining herself.

Severus quirked a smile. "You really are quite the feline sometimes, Minerva. All that curiosity trembling inside you."

"I can't help it...can you blame me?"

"No. Actually, if you want to know, I walked Helena Benetti home, and then we went for a bit of a night flight. It was fun. Just fun." He blushed. "Of course, she is quite something to watch when she flies."

"And even when she's not flying?"

"Of course, as any breathing heterosexual wizard over about the age of twelve has noticed, I'm sure," Severus said.

Minerva chuckled.

"I would like to believe I am not so superficial, however," Severus continued. "Although she is a very nice person and agreeable company. She has a pleasant accent, too."

"It sounds as though you might be interested in her."

Severus shook his head. "She is very attractive, and I had a nice time with her, but . . . she's a friend, I hope."

"You never know," Minerva said, a twinkle in her eye.

Severus shrugged and looked toward the bedroom door. "Can I speak to you about a personal matter, Minerva?" he asked softly.

"Of course!"

He looked at the bedroom door again. "It is rather . . . private."

"Ah. I don't believe that Albus can hear us or that he would eavesdrop, but I don't want you uncomfortable. Just a second." Minerva got up and crossed over to the bedroom, she leaned in, and Severus could hear her speaking. When she closed the door behind her, she waved her wand and cast an Imperturbable. Returning to her chair, she asked, "How's that?"

Severus nodded.

"What would you like to talk to me about?"

"I don't know if this is the best time . . ."

"It's fine. We can talk now and again tomorrow, if you like. You could come and have some tea with me, or we could meet after dinner."

Severus shrugged one shoulder. Now that he was there and had Minerva's attention, he had no idea what to say. "I don't know, Minerva. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea." He began to stand.

"Don't be silly, Severus. I'm happy to listen."

"Well, I . . . I'm confused," he confessed.

"About?"

Severus shifted in his chair. "Just about my social life, I suppose you could say."

"Your social life or your love life?" Minerva asked astutely.

Severus coloured. "The latter. I'm very confused."

"How so?"

"Well, I admit I am attracted to Helena. And if she were willing, it would be tempting to, um, have some kind of, well, just to get to know her better on a different level, but I realised that despite the temptation, I really didn't want to when it came down to it."

"That's not a surprise. We all of us...or most of us...find various people attractive at different times in our lives, but that doesn't mean that we want to have affairs with all of them," Minerva said. "And even if we might want an affair with one of them, it just might be that our desire for something else in our lives is greater than the temptation to engage in a relationship with the person we're attracted to...and this doesn't necessarily mean only when we already are in another relationship with someone else to whom we're committed. There are many factors that come into play. The desire for stability . . . contentment with our own lives as they already are . . . wanting not to complicate life by beginning a relationship that won't ultimately satisfy . . . many things. You can choose to be single, Severus. It might be a good thing just to enjoy your new friendships for a while."

Severus shook his head. "It wasn't any of that. Or if it was, none of that was as important as something else I suddenly realised on my way home. And that's why I'm confused."

"What did you realise?"

"I . . . I . . ." He couldn't say that he loved Poppy. He simply couldn't. "I have developed feelings for someone. But Hermione . . . I have no idea what I'm feeling half of the time, but I realised tonight that I have feelings for someone else, as well. It's all very confusing."

"For Poppy?" If Minerva was surprised, she didn't show it.

Severus nodded, avoiding Minerva's eyes.

"I understand that the two of you haven't been seeing as much of each other this week," Minerva said tactfully.

"She didn't want to, as you likely know already. We're still speaking, obviously, but she wanted to slow things down. Take a break, she said. So I abided by her wishes. I would have preferred something else, but I don't think she believed me."

"Try to see it from her point of view, Severus."

"Hmmp. I'm just a nasty bastard and she can't bear me any longer," Severus said, looking down at his half-empty teacup.

"I doubt that's it," Minerva said. "Really, Severus. Do try to think of her point-of-view."

"Did she tell you why?" Severus asked, looking back up at her.

Minerva sighed.

"Did she tell you why she didn't want to see me anymore?"

"I think you need to talk to her about it again. That might help. Unless you are confused about your desire to see her...perhaps you only want to see her because you can't."

Severus shook his head. "No, that's not it. I'm confused because I don't know how I can feel what I do for Poppy and still feel the way I think I do about Hermione." He let out a long sigh. "Not that things are right with Hermione, either. I hurt her feelings, so now she's just . . . she's not as warm as she used to be, or as . . . as open to me. And she's seeing someone else now. She had a date tonight."

"I'm sorry, Severus." Minerva took the last sip of her tea. "I don't know how to advise you, if it's advice you're seeking. Only you can determine how you feel about either of them. But if you want to see Poppy . . . are you interested in something more than a fling now? Is that what you want, or did you just want to maintain the status quo with Poppy? Because if you only want to . . . to satisfy your physical desire with her, I don't think..."

"No, it's not that. That's why I'm confused. Don't you see that, Minerva? I said I have feelings for her. It's not just the physical side of things," Severus said miserably. "I wish it were. It would be easier."

Minerva shrugged. "It still probably wouldn't be easy, Severus. Our feelings are very complicated, particularly once sex becomes involved." She reached over and patted his hand. "I am sorry you have been hurt by this. But perhaps it has been a good experience for you, particularly since you and Poppy are still on friendly terms. You didn't say or do anything that drove a wedge between you. Your first affair after the war could have been much worse."

"Poppy is a good woman," Severus said softly. "Kind and . . . good."

"That she is," Minerva agreed.

"I wish I hadn't ruined things."

"I don't think I would say you *ruined* them, Severus."

"I would. I behaved poorly toward her, entirely unjustly, and only the day after we had . . . we had gone out and had a good time, spent a lot of time together. It was so good. And I ruined it," he said morosely, remembering the intense sex they'd had that night after they'd returned from Delancie's. "She must have told you something about why she called an end to it. I'm just a bastard sometimes. Even to her." He sighed.

"But she cares about you, Severus," Minerva said gently. "That's something. She has cared about you for a long time. And how you are feeling now, perhaps it is just the recognition of that warmth between you. You can be good friends. Good friends are important in life."

Severus nodded, looking down, his hair hiding his face.

"Of course, if you would like to be more than friends . . ."

"I think I do. I know that I would if it weren't for the fact that I'm confused about what I feel for Hermione."

Minerva considered him a moment. "Well, I will give you this advice, confidentially and just between us. If you choose to share it, that's your decision, but I won't discuss our conversation with anyone else." Severus looked up at her and nodded. Minerva continued, "I think you should try to mend things with Poppy..."

"I already did. I apologised. I said I was very sorry. I said I was sorry and it didn't make any difference." Tears of anger and pain rose in his eyes. "It's because I am who I am, Minerva. Who I've always been. Even Poppy can't look past it."

"No, Severus. I'm sure that's not it. Poppy doesn't want either of you hurt. I am certain that she accepted your apology and forgave you. And as I said, you are still friends. You didn't do anything so egregious to drive her away completely. Now, do you want my advice, or would you prefer to mope and feel sorry for yourself and be more miserable?"

Severus scowled at her, but he knew she was being honest with him. "All right, what is it?"

"I think you should try to mend things with Poppy. If you are serious about wanting something more than just a physical relationship with her, if you want more than a fling, you need to go about it the right way. You two jumped into the physical side of things very quickly...and I'm not judging that...but you can certainly see that that influenced the way things developed and how they turned out. I will probably sound completely old-fashioned to you, but I believe my advice is sound: if you want to start seeing Poppy again, you should woo her."

"*Woo* her?" Severus nearly rolled his eyes. "I am not about to begin fawning over her and reciting poetry, behaving like the fool I was when the *Adfectus* struck."

"I'm not suggesting that, Severus. Think about it a minute before you reject my idea. Think about ways in which you could woo her that would be fitting your personality and hers. Do nice things for her, bring her small but thoughtful gifts, ask her on a *date*, for heaven's sake! And make sure she knows that it's a date and that you want to show her affection and a good time...a *nonsexual* but romantic good time," she added.

"I . . . I suppose," Severus said thoughtfully. "I did bring her out to Delancie's, you know. I wanted her to feel special and valued. She enjoyed that."

"Exactly. That's all you need to do: work to make her feel special, show her that you value her. And be patient. Don't forget that she might have doubts about herself, too, reasons for cooling off your relationship that go beyond whatever caused you to owe her an apology. If you wish to woo her, be persistent, be patient, and give her time. Take things slowly."

Severus nodded. "But how do I know whether I should? What about Hermione?"

Minerva shrugged. "I don't know. I know that you and Hermione have a very special relationship, and I have no doubt that you both love each other. That doesn't necessarily mean that you should be together as a couple. That might be a good thing, it might not be. I can't say. Before you begin wooing Poppy, however, I think you need to make a decision about Hermione, one that you can stick with. If you spend your time with Poppy thinking about Hermione, neither you nor Poppy will be happy, even if you never say anything to her about it. It would never feel right for either of you."

"So what should I do?"

"I really don't know. You say Hermione's started dating someone else. You could talk to her, find out how serious it is, you could discuss your feelings honestly with her...not that I'm recommending you tell her that you believe you may be developing feelings for someone else, but you should discuss your feelings about Hermione with Hermione and then listen and hear what she has to say. If you do think your feelings for her are romantic, you could try to date, but with both of you aware that you are testing the waters, so to speak. It would be direct, above-board, and honest. Not very Slytherin, superficially, but if you want to get somewhere with either of these witches, I think it is your best strategy."

Severus nodded. "I will consider all you have said." He pulled out his watch. "And as it is now almost two in the morning, I will leave you to your night's rest. Would you like me to send a notice to the staff and set the Head's meeting?" he asked as he stood. "I don't feel as though I can go to sleep right now, anyway."

Minerva nodded. "Tomorrow...Saturday...afternoon, late. Four-thirty."

"I'll take care of it, then, and I will consider your advice," Severus said as he stood. "Good night, Headmistress. Sleep well."

"You, too, Severus. Don't stay up too late!"

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-Two: For Old Times' Sake

Friday, 19 March 1999

Poppy and Quin have a night out, and then a nightcap after.

Characters: Poppy Pomfrey, Quin MacAirt

Chapter Sixty-Two: For Old Times' Sake

Chapter 63 of 118

Friday, 19 March 1999. Poppy and Quin have a night out, and then a nightcap after.



Chapter Sixty-Two: For Old Times' Sake

Friday, 19 March 1999

"Thanks very much, Quin. I had a lovely evening. I certainly hadn't expected to have dinner in Paris this evening!" Poppy looked up at Quin and smiled.

"I thought it might be to your likin'," Quin replied with a grin. "A simple, casual dinner, but a bit of a change from the usual."

"Still, it was very special," Poppy said, thinking that Quin looked particularly handsome that night, dressed in his casual, deep blue silk bomber jacket, jeans, and white polo shirt. She was glad he had advised her to dress Muggle that evening. She had chosen her prettiest Muggle spring dress, lilac with darker trim, and a matching collarless jacket, though he still outshone her, and the eyes that had followed them as they passed down the boulevard had been drawn to Quin, and not to her, she was certain.

"Something you deserve, love!"

"Will you come up?" Poppy asked, gesturing toward the castle whose lights were twinkling beyond the gates. "A nightcap?"

"I would love to."

Poppy opened the gates and beckoned to Quin, then took his arm as the gate clanged shut.

"So, are you cheered up?"

"I don't even remember needing cheering up anymore," Poppy said with a laugh. "Paris at night, the lights of the cafés, the Champs-Élysées, the Arc de Triomphe, what witch could fail to be cheered up after an unexpected evening out in Paris?"

"I enjoyed it, too. Nice to be able to Portkey and Apparate about again," Quin said. "I hardly made it to the Continent at all these last years. So takin' yourself out gave me a good excuse to treat me own self, too!"

Poppy smiled up at him. "You seem . . . not untouched, precisely, but . . . undamaged and so easy with it all. And I know that those years were very hard on you."

Quin shrugged. "They were what they were. I am a very blessed man." He patted her hand that rested on his arm. "Not all are blessed with the family and friends I have."

"I'm sorry I didn't visit you more frequently than I did," Poppy said softly. "I always asked after you, though, whenever Minerva saw you, or when I would run into Alroy."

"'Twas hard not to see you, but sadly, 'twas harder still to think of you or to have your company," Quin replied. "I was limited in who could safely visit. Albus tried only once, and, well, I don't rightly remember what happened, but apparently I passed out and went into a sort of coma. So last May was the first I'd seen of him since before."

"What was different about Minerva?" Poppy asked curiously.

"Difference was . . . I don't really know, but it was important to me to see her, and important to her, too, I think. She was persistent, writin' just about every day, visitin' me a few minutes at a time, but regularly, until finally we could sit together quietly, talk of Muggle books or Muggle news, or of me businesses, once I began bein' able to work again. She's the one who encouraged me to make more out o' GC Enterprises. 'Twasn't more than a single small amusement park and arcade outside Liverpool to start, and she helped me to see the potential in it. O'course, I had already bought that old estate in Devonshire and converted that to a luxury hotel with a lot of amenities, so it made sense to combine the two concepts. I thought of it as a cruise on dry land: no one had to leave the premises for entertainment or a meal if they didn't want to. I added onto it after me accident. Built up the park on the grounds of the estate, brought in rides and other games, and that was the first Golden Cup Park and Resort, then did the same in Liverpool, buyin' up more land, building a new hotel, keepin' the old arcade games and kiddie rides but adding more thrill rides, plus the theatres. That was all Minerva's idea, the basics, anyway."

Poppy smiled. "That's funny, since I never got the impression that Minerva likes to go to the Golden Cup Parks."

"She likes certain aspects of them, the resort and the shows, some of the games, though not the rides, to be sure," Quin said with a grin. "And those rides were the original foundation for the concept. But she knows me, and she's a canny witch. She might have done well in business, herself."

"Huh, you think so?" Poppy opened the front doors. "I suppose she might have, though I am glad that she didn't. We needed her here." The two began up the stairs. "She certainly was a good general, and I'd never thought of her as a military strategist until last spring."

"It couldn't have been easy for her, though. A lot of what she had to do cost lives. Makin' decisions that affect that sort of thing, even if more people live for it than would have otherwise died . . . it must weigh upon her."

"I know it does," Poppy replied quietly as she opened the door to her suite. "But she tries not to dwell on it. Personally, I think she should talk about it more."

"She has Albus, though," Quin pointed out as he slung his jacket over the back of a chair and flopped onto the couch. "They probably talk. And he understands that kind of responsibility."

"Yes, but Albus is a great 'fixer,'" Poppy said, removing her own jacket and then walking over to the sideboard to pour them each a glass of tawny port. "She does talk to him about everything, of course, but I think that sometimes she prefers to talk to Gertrude. Or to me."

"Mm, I can see that. But I didn't come up for a nightcap in order to discuss Minerva, as wonderful as we both may find her," Quin said. "I don't want to talk about anything but you."

"Oh, I'm a boring subject!"

Quin patted the couch beside him as she handed him his drink. "No such thing, Poppy!"

Poppy took a sip of her port then sat down next to him. "Well, we'll run out of things to talk about very quickly. Of course, there's always the weather!" She leaned over and set her drink on the coffee table.

Quin smiled mildly and grazed her cheek with his fingertips, gently turning her face toward him. "You are endlessly fascinating, Poppy, love. And you don't appreciate yourself enough." He took a sip of his drink as he contemplated her. "Or was it another who didn't appreciate you enough?" Quin asked. "You still haven't told me why you needed cheerin'!"

"And I told you a few minutes ago that I don't even remember needing cheering up," Poppy replied, leaning back, Quin's arm going around her shoulders.

Quin reached over and set down his drink. "Well, let's see that it stays that way," he said softly, raising his hand and touching her cheek again.

Poppy felt a tingle from his caress and the heat rising in her face. The heat didn't stop with her face, though. "You're very good company, Quin. I've had such a nice time tonight."

"So have I, squiring around such an attractive witch. Quite enjoyable."

Poppy leaned forward and picked up her glass. She took a sip, and Quin mirrored her actions. "Good tawny port," he remarked.

Poppy nodded. "Not something I drink often, but it's nice occasionally. A change."

"Mmm, change can be good. Variety. The spice o' life, they say," Quin replied, putting his arm back around her.

Poppy lay her head on his shoulder and turned the glass in her hand, contemplating its amber liquid. "On the other hand, sometimes something old, comfortable, and familiar is what's best."

"Are you callin' me old, Poppy Pomfrey?" Quin asked, a grin on his face and a sparkle in his eyes.

Poppy laughed. "I'm not young any longer, either," she replied. She took a swallow of her port.

Quin shook his head, looking at her with warmth. "You are in full bloom, love, a flower at its peak, and likely to remain so for some time to come." He put down his glass then took hers from her and placed it beside his.

He pulled Poppy closer, and she put her hand on his chest and leaned into him.

"It *is* comfortable here with you, though," she said.

"Very." He nuzzled her hair. "You always smell so nice." He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I needed this tonight, too," he said softly.

Poppy tilted her head back, turning her face toward his. For a long moment, they just gazed at each other, then Quin brought his hand up and cupped her jaw. His hand was warm and comforting against her skin, and his breath was soft on her lips. Feeling her own heat rising, Poppy swallowed. She took in a breath through her lips, breathing his breath into her own, then his lips came closer and brushed hers. With another intake of breath, Poppy closed her lips around Quin's lower lip, kissing him gently, sucking and releasing his lip.

Quin opened his mouth and drew Poppy closer, repeatedly kissing her lips. Their desire increased as Poppy deepened the kiss and lay back, bringing Quin to lie on top of her. His kisses grew hungrier, and Poppy began to tug on his shirt, pulling it from the waistband of his jeans. Her hands reached under his shirt and splayed across his skin, loving the sensation of his sturdy masculine back. They each shifted simultaneously, bringing Poppy to lie more fully on the sofa, one of Quin's feet on the floor, his other leg coming to stretch out beside hers.

Their kisses continued, Quin drawing Poppy's tongue into his mouth and suckling its tip. Poppy moaned and pressed her hips upward against him. Quin broke the kiss and pushed up on his hands, looking down at Poppy. His breathing was heavy, and his eyes seemed unfocused for a moment, but then they met hers, and she smiled.

"You are the best kisser I have ever known," Poppy said. "Or one of the two best."

"I have competition, do I? I'm out of the race for a few years...all right, a couple of decades...and you find someone else?" he asked in mock indignation.

Poppy laughed and brought her hands to his shoulders, rubbing them. "Not exactly." She averted her gaze from his face and began to unbutton the few buttons at the top of his polo shirt. "It's embarrassing, really. Well, it is now. I suppose it was then, too." She could feel her excited flush become a blush. "Minerva had this idea, you see..."

"You kissed Minerva?" Quin was flabbergasted. Minerva was a very good kisser, but he'd never imagined...

"No! Don't be absurd!" Poppy slapped his chest. "Of course not! Let me finish! Minerva had this idea, it's all too complicated to explain right now, but it was in the last year of the war. She needed to . . . to have a memory, a convincing memory, for Professor Snape to bring back to the creep, a memory of Robbie, um, cheating on her."

Quin started to laugh, and Poppy slapped his chest again, a little bit harder this time. "It *isn't* funny," she protested.

"Right, love. Continue, please." Quin was suppressing his grin very poorly.

"Well, she gave us a script to follow, and Robbie and I were supposed to be snogging on her sitting room sofa, getting all hot and heavy. Trouble was," Poppy said, blushing, "I'm not used to kissing for dramatic effect. It felt too real. I hadn't even found Robert attractive once in my life, not for a single moment, and suddenly he's kissing me, and I turn into a puddle of shivering female hormones. We tried it a few different ways, and I didn't tell Robbie why, but I had to explain that I wasn't comfortable with the kissing. It was especially bad because I thought that not only was he Minerva's lover, but that he was a married man. And, of course, I later learned that 'Robbie' was

Albus, and that made it all worse, much more embarrassing. So your competition isn't competition."

"So can I laugh now?" Quin asked, his eyes sparkling. "Good thing you never told Minerva!"

"Of course not. It was just too embarrassing, especially as I really don't think that it affected him much at all. He just would stop and look at me and ask if I thought it was convincing. He could have been doing the washing up after dinner for all it seemed to affect him. I think if I'd known it was Albus, I might have felt differently, even though I generally find Albus more attractive than I did Robbie. It might have been easier, since I've known him longer, and, well, he's married to Minerva, so it would be different if she asked me to playact with him, rather than with someone else's husband, who I presumed was having an illicit affair with Minerva. Anyway, we ended up doing something different, which turned out to be better for Severus's memory, and which wasn't at all . . . um, pleasurable. I'd almost managed to forget about it, until Minerva and her ridiculous Charmed mistletoe at the staff Christmas party."

Quin didn't suppress his grin. "You were kissin' every eligible and ineligible wizard under the Charmed sprig, then, were you?"

"No, not every one, but at one point, she had me and Albus trapped under it...for more than just a quick peck on the lips, mind you...and I think she thought it was very funny."

"Sure it was, too, especially if it gave you the rosy glow to your cheeks that you're sportin' at the moment! I have a feelin' your Headmistress may have had more than an inklin' of why you wouldn't be after kissing 'Robbie' in her little play."

"Hush, Quin! That's enough of that!"

"Well, I'll just have to reassert myself as the best kisser you ever knew, supplant all those titillatin' memories with some new ones. Even more pleasurable ones."

"They're just embarrassing, Quin, not titillating."

"Good, then me work is half done!" Quin said, wiping the exasperation from her face with a demonstration, kissing her strongly as he ran a hand over her left breast.

Poppy acquiesced readily, slipping her hands back under his shirt, massaging the muscles of his back. Quin pushed up and quickly pulled his shirt over his head. He began to lean over to kiss her again, but Poppy stopped him, her hands on his chest. She ran her hands appreciatively over his pectorals and down over his chest to his stomach, then back up again. Her fingers ran through the curly hair on his chest, then her thumbs found his nipples and flicked them. She wanted to tell him that he was still so very handsome and sexy, but she didn't. For some reason, he had never liked any reference to his good looks, and Poppy doubted that had changed.

"Getting some silver here, too," Poppy said softly, caressing his chest. "So we are getting older."

"If you say so, Poppy. All I can say is that you are as attractive as ever, and in the full bloom of womanhood."

"Then may I tell you," she whispered, "that you are still sexy, you are perhaps more attractive as time goes by." She rubbed his chest and played with his nipples. "Very, very attractive."

Quin lowered himself to kiss her again as her arms went around him. He put his hands behind her and struggled with the Muggle hook and zip. Poppy sat up slightly, and Quin cast a charm to unzip her dress. He ran a hand over Poppy's back and groaned.

"That did not sound like a groan of pleasure," Poppy said.

"You're wearing a bra."

"I went Muggle today, so I wore a bra instead of using a charm on my underclothes."

In the meantime, Quin had managed the hooks on the back of her bra. He pressed Poppy back down on the couch, pulling her bra and the top of her dress down and then freeing her arms. He kissed her passionately and lay on top of her, his bare chest against her breasts. His kisses began to move to her cheek, her jaw, and down her throat. Poppy arched her back as his mouth reached her chest, then his tongue met her right nipple and his hand caressed her left breast.

Poppy moved her outer leg out from under Quin and brought it up around him, pulling him even closer to her. His tongue continued stimulating her nipple and his right hand flicked and gently tweaked her other nipple. Poppy rolled her hips, feeling the weight of his firm torso against her crux. Her hands grasped at his shoulders and his hair. Her pleasure was his as he began to suckle her left nipple, sliding his now-free hand down her side to shove her dress even lower, down over her hips. He slipped his hand beneath the waistband of her knickers and squeezed her buttocks. He suckled and flicked, holding her and squeezing. One more flick of his tongue to her nipple, and he slid back up her body to kiss her mouth again.

Moaning into his mouth, Poppy brought her hands to his waist, running her fingers along the waistband of his jeans until she found his belt buckle. She tugged, pulling the end of the belt from the loop.

Quin pushed up, breaking their kiss. "You're sure?"

"Let's see where we can go, Quin," Poppy said. "It could be very good."

He kissed her lips gently and sensuously before looking down at her again. She unbuckled his belt.

"Maybe if we had done more of this . . . a long time ago," he whispered. "Maybe everything would have been different."

"Let's see where we can go now," Poppy said. She unbuttoned his jeans then tugged at the zip. "These are getting too snug on you," she said as she felt his erection straining against his tight jeans.

Quin closed his eyes and took in a sharp breath as her fingers met his erection through his pants. He shuddered as she stroked his length.

Letting out a long breath, he swallowed and held himself still as Poppy continued to caress him through the soft cotton of his briefs. He gritted his teeth briefly, then he groaned sharply.

"Ohhh . . . oh, Poppy." He tried to control his breathing, and he opened his eyes, looking down at her, taking in her face, her breasts, her bared abdomen. He shook his head as if trying to wake himself. "You need to know . . . oh, gods!" Her hand had slipped beneath his pants. "Oh, ah, you need to know that it has been a long time. A very, very long time. The way me life was...oh, gods...the way me life was, there hasn't been anyone, not since . . . a long time."

"All the more reason to be with someone comfortable, someone familiar, someone who cares about you, but someone who won't press you for more." Poppy withdrew her hand and caressed Quin's face. "I always have cared for you, you know, Quin. You helped me to get over Murdoch, and then when it was obvious he really was moving on, you were there, the best shoulder to cry on that any witch could want, and never making any demands, just being there for me, just a good friend."

"I was glad to be, Poppy, love."

"Then let's be here for each other now, Quin. Let's see where we can go tonight."

Quin lowered himself to lie on top of her, and he kissed her, his hands caressing her body as she worked to push down his jeans from around his hips. Quin lifted a hand and waved it, removing first one of his boots and then the other. He kissed and nipped at her throat before rising up on one knee and nodding.

He slipped from the couch and stood, pushing his jeans down and off, removing his socks at the same time. His eyes ran over Poppy's form, down the length of her body.

"You are beautiful, you do know that, don't you, Poppy? Such a beautiful figure." He reached down and ran one hand along her side, then he took hold of her dress with both hands, she raised her hips, and he pulled her dress off of her. "Charmed stockings with your Muggle outfit?" he asked.

"No, they're called 'thigh-highs' or some such thing. Supposed to stay up on their own. Not very comfortable, though," Poppy said.

"Allow me, then." Quin grinned as he Summoned his wand from his jacket and waved it. She had already kicked off her shoes, so Poppy's stockings obligingly rolled themselves down and off. Now she was wearing only her knickers.

"Going to rejoin me?" she asked, offering Quin her hand as he set his wand on her coffee table.

"As we are both getting older...and better!...might I suggest a more comfortable venue?" Quin said, pulling on Poppy's hand and helping her to sit up.

"Are you inviting yourself into my bed, Mr MacAirt?"

"Hopin' you'll do that yourself. I'm just after invitin' meself into your bedroom, so." He grinned.

Poppy laughed and stood. "All right, Mr MacAirt. We will proceed to the bedroom and then we shall see! But first, this." Poppy stepped back away from Quin and pulled down her underpants, tossing them on top of the rest of her clothing. "Much better, I think." She looked him up and down, admiring his broad shoulders, slim hips, long legs, and the very obvious bulge in his snug sea-blue briefs. "And this, too."

Poppy stepped up to him and slipped her hands into the waistband of his briefs, running her hands around to his buttocks and squeezing. "Mmmm. I do like this," she murmured, nuzzling his chest. She kissed and nuzzled his chest as she continued to squeeze his buttocks, slowly bending her knees and moving her head lower, teasing his sensitive stomach with tickling kisses. His skin jumped and twitched.

Quin brought his hands to her shoulders as she continued to move lower, now pulling down his pants and kneeling in front of him. Once his pants were around his ankles, Poppy didn't worry about them any longer, simply bringing her hands back up to his buttocks and her lips to the tip of his erect penis. She kissed him lightly several times, and Quin's grip grew tighter.

"Um, love, we might want to wait . . . ahhh, yes, waitin' would be good," Quin gasped as Poppy circled the head of his penis with her tongue. "Oh, sweet Jesus! Poppy, it's been so long, you shouldn't yet..."

She paused for a second, barely moving away from his cock. "Shhhh," she whispered, ending the whisper with a soft, warm breath blown across the head of his cock. His cock jumped and Quin moaned.

"This first," Poppy said softly, "then we can continue in the bedroom."

She flicked her tongue across his slit, then blew on it again, and was rewarded by another gasp from Quin. Her tongue circled the crown of his cock, then her lips closed over it. She continued to stimulate his cock with her tongue as she lowered her head, taking his entire length into her mouth. She pressed her tongue against his shaft as she drew back up, then sucked lightly at the head. Quin moaned.

"You don't want to keep this up, love, or little Quin will not hold up for the trip to the bedroom," Quin said.

"He's not so little," Poppy said, running her fingers up his shaft, then flicking her tongue across the soft, sensitive head of his penis. "Mmm, not at all little."

She lowered herself around him again, cupping his balls in one hand as she gripped the bottom of his shaft with the other.

"Really, Poppy," Quin began.

"Then we can start all over again," Poppy said, "when we get"...she licked him..."to"... another flick..."the bedroom."

Quin groaned and gave up. Poppy stroked him only a few more times, her hand on his shaft, her lips around the head of his cock, her tongue teasing him, when she felt his balls twitch. She lowered herself, taking him completely into her mouth, bringing the head of his cock into her throat, swallowing as he came. His legs trembled as he pulsed in her mouth, and he gripped her shoulders hard.

Poppy gently withdrew, kissing the tip of his penis before rocking back on her heels and looking up at him. Quin's eyes were still closed, and he was breathing hard through his mouth. He let out one strong breath through pursed lips, then opened his eyes and looked down at her.

"That was, um, that was . . ." Quin blinked.

Poppy chuckled. "Quin MacAirt, at a loss for words! Never thought I'd see such a thing!"

"Remind me again why we never did this before?" Quin asked.

"Oh, something about your honour, my getting over Murdoch, your feelings, my feelings, all that sort of thing," Poppy replied, standing easily. "And we were both a lot younger then."

"And then it wasn't long after that that I was cursed, and any opportunity was lost," Quin said softly.

"I know . . . and I kept feeling as though I should do something, that I owed you something, you'd been so good to me, but . . . there wasn't anything I could do."

"May I invite meself into your bedroom now, Poppy?" He reached down and drew her up to stand in front of him.

"Yes, and into my bed, now that the 'edge' is off and you've been very deservedly well-pleased." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his lips softly. "We can take our time now."

"There are charms for such things, you know, Poppy, to keep me from . . . from bein' too quick off the mark."

"Obviously, but sometimes, the natural way is the best way, and the most pleasurable way. This was one of those times!" She took hold of both his hands and stepped back, tugging him after her.

Quin laughed and followed.

It was after midnight when Poppy and Quin finally stumbled out to the sitting room and sifted through their clothes. They dressed slowly, Quin stepping into his jeans and buckling his belt, then zipping Poppy's dress before pulling on his shirt. When she sat on the sofa and reached for her shoes, Quin knelt and slipped them onto her feet for her. He rose up on his knees and took her hands in his.

"This has been a grand evening, Poppy. Truly grand."

She leaned forward and kissed him lightly. "It has been," she agreed.

"You feel better," he stated, running his hand over her arm. "Not as tense, not as . . . sad."

"I wasn't sad, not really," Poppy said.

"Ah, but you did need cheerin' up," Quin said. "I could feel that clearly, would've done even if neither you nor Minerva had mentioned it. You were sad, somewhere deep inside."

Poppy sighed. "Yes, but this did help. It really did. Just spending time with you helped, Quin. I enjoyed dinner and our outing to Paris."

Quin nodded. He cupped her face and rubbed his thumb over her cheek. "And after?" He smiled. "I think that was the height of the evening."

"It certainly was." Poppy returned his smile. "I told you more than twenty-five years ago that we could be good together."

"Mmm." Quin nodded. "But not for the long-term. I don't think we would have had a long-term future, in any case, and certainly we wouldn't have after I was attacked. It all worked out for the best, I think."

"You're probably right, but I still wonder if things wouldn't have been different, at least for you. Maybe you wouldn't have been where you were that night..."

"Ah, ah!" Quin placed a finger over her lips. "We won't even think about that. 'Tisn't wise to think 'what if,' to give in to that temptation, I know that," he said. "Now I am whole, you and I are still friends, and I'm about to become a grandfather, finally. I am very blessed. I hope you can say that your life is good now, too."

Poppy nodded.

"Don't be sad, poppet, love. You have so much in your life, to be sure. I'm certain that whatever it is that is botherin' you, it will get better. You already feel much better, don't you?"

"I do." She frowned slightly. "You said you wouldn't do a reading on me," she said. "You didn't, did you?"

"Sure I did not! You know that I never do readings on friends anymore unless they ask, and then they have to ask seriously, three times, really know what it is they're asking for. But I cannot entirely turn off my senses, Poppy."

Poppy nodded and smiled wryly. "I wouldn't ask you to do that, especially not after all the years you spent suppressing your magic and your awareness of it."

"Too true," Quin said. "Had to avoid even touchin' me own kin for a very long time." An expression of sadness flitted across his face, then was gone.

Poppy slipped onto the floor beside him and put her arms around him, holding him close, resting her head on his shoulder. That had to have been terrible for Quin, a man who was so very tactile, very physically affectionate with his family and friends. She could not imagine what he must have suffered . . . in terror of the magic flowing through himself and others, then the pain of separation from the magical world, the isolation he must have experienced when he could not embrace his child, sister, or friend, lest the embrace trigger some horror in him.

He turned his head and kissed her cheek. "Now you're feelin' sorry for me, love, and that's all past. You brought me joy tonight, great pleasure, great warmth. I am happy, Poppy, very happy." He cupped her face in his hand and looked into her eyes. "Thank you," he whispered.

"You're welcome."

"I have to find me socks and boots," Quin said, looking around.

Poppy stood and Summoned his socks from under a chair, depositing them in his lap. "You're sure you won't stay? You're welcome to. If not with me, then in one of the guest rooms."

"I am sure, thanks. I would, but I think this is best, especially since, as I mentioned earlier durin' dinner, I'm after takin' some nieces and nephews to that Golden Cup Park outside of Brighton tomorrow morning, my sisters' various grandchildren, they all are." He sat on the couch and pulled on his socks, then Summoned his boots. "Easter weekend, we're reopening the amusement park section after its being shut-up for the winter, but we've been running tests on everything, doin' maintenance, and the kiddies are going on some of the rides that are already finished and ready. Wouldn't do if I were late fetchin' them, have them thinkin' their Uncle Quin was lettin' 'em down."

"No, that wouldn't do at all," Poppy agreed with a smile.

"And it's sure you are that you won't come with us tomorrow?"

"Absolutely. It'll be a treat for them, the day with their uncle and the park to themselves. And I have things to do here." Poppy handed Quin his jacket. "Ready?"

"Ready."

They walked down to the ground floor in silence, Quin's arm around Poppy's shoulders, her arm around his waist. She waved her wand, unbarring the main doors, and they stepped out into the chilly night air. Quin looked up and pointed. Poppy barely saw the figures he had noticed, two flyers speeding through the sky on their way to Hogsmeade, one of them scarcely a blur in the starry night.

"They're havin' fun, I'm sure," Quin said as they began to walk down the drive toward the gates, hand-in-hand. "Night flying. Haven't done that in, well, close to thirty years, probably. Used to love it. You aren't much of a flyer, are you, Poppy?"

"Not if I can avoid it," Poppy admitted. "I'm perfectly competent on a broomstick, but I dislike heights, at least when I'm up on a broom. A flying carpet might be more my speed, if they were legal in Britain."

"Ah, now I have our next outing! I have a friend in Istanbul, in old wizarding Constantinople, he makes wonderful carpets. We'll have a nice meal, wander through the old city, then we'll take out one of his carpets for a test flight." Quin looked down at her and smiled. "I'll ask for a nice big one."

"You know how to control them?" Poppy asked dubiously.

"Easy as pie," he said. "And they have excellent Disillusionment and Unnoticeable Charms on them these days, so we could take it out in daylight and fly all over the entire city, wizarding and Muggle. Wizarding Constantinople is one of the largest wizarding districts in the world, you know. Makes Diagon Alley look like, well, like a little backwater. Even if we didn't take a carpet ride, you'd enjoy seeing Istanbul, I think. We could spend a weekend, really take in the sights."

"That sounds like it might be fun. But we'll have to wait and see."

"I'm not after making any plans yet, love, but think about it."

Poppy nodded. "I will."

At the gates, Poppy opened one side and stepped through with Quin. "Thanks, Quin. I had a great time. I really did."

Quin grinned. "I could tell." He bent over, put an arm around her, and whispered in her ear. "Something about the way you were moaning, 'yes, Quin, yes,' gave me a hint

you might be enjoyin' yourself."

"You did more than a little moaning yourself!"

"Oh, I did at that, Poppy. I certainly did." He kissed her lips gently. "If you're ever after needin' cheerin' up again, just call me, and I'll be there in a flash." He kissed her again, and Poppy put her arms around him and held on, letting him take all of her weight as he deepened the kiss and caused warming thrills to wash through her. He pushed her up against one of the great stone pillars to one side of the gate, and continued to kiss her as one of her legs came up and hooked around his waist. He pressed his hips into her crux, and she moaned into his mouth. His erection strained against his jeans as he rubbed against her.

Finally, they slowed their kisses and he gently released her as she regained her footing.

Poppy looked up at Quin, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. "I will remember your offer. We will have to see, though."

Quin nodded. "Indeed. Good night, Poppy. Take care...and stay in touch. Let me know how you're doing. I hope to hear you're feeling happy and well, but if you aren't, I will want to know that, too."

Poppy smiled. "You can owl me, too, you know. And we can just meet for lunch or dinner at the Broomsticks, we don't have to Portkey to Paris or Turkey or someplace else exotic just to have an excuse to get together."

"I will certainly remember that."

"Good night, Quin."

Quin smiled at her, then he Disapparated with a sharp crack. Closing the gate behind her, Poppy sighed and turned to walk slowly back up the drive to the castle.

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-Three: A Little White Lie

Saturday, 20 March 1999

Severus receives an invitation from Hermione; Poppy considers what she will tell Minerva.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Sixty-Three: A Little White Lie

Chapter 64 of 118

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Chapter Sixty-Three: A Little White Lie

Saturday, 20 March 1999

Severus ate his corn flakes with no appetite. He hadn't gone to bed until after three, and he felt ill. He was becoming soft, he thought. Time was when he could at least pretend to feel fine after only a few hours sleep. He drank more coffee, then turned the cup upside down and then right side up again, and it refilled itself. Without any of the usual courtesies...which scarcely mattered that morning, since only a handful of staff were at the table...Severus gestured and Summoned the cream, which he poured in liberally. He drank off half the cup, pushed aside the remains of his now-soggy cereal, and stared moodily out over the Great Hall. Poppy still wasn't at breakfast, and he had hoped to see her, put part of his plan into play. On the other hand, he also still wanted to talk to Hermione before he did anything definitive with Poppy, and he didn't know when he would be able to see her.

The morning Post Owls flew into the Great Hall, making a bit less of a ruckus than usual. A large Tawny deposited a *Daily Prophet* beside his place, and Gareth's handsome Horned Owl, Wol, landed on the back of his chair.

Severus took the letter first; the newspaper and reports of the attack on Malfoy could wait. He glanced at the handwriting. Not from Gareth; from Hermione. Hmph. He did want to see her, but he also was still stinging from their encounter the previous evening. Vector and Minerva weren't at breakfast yet, so Severus opened the letter.

Hermione wanted to see him later that day. She suggested that they meet for tea at four. Her letter was friendly enough, and she expressed regret that she had already made plans with Tarrant the evening before and hadn't been able to go out with him. It certainly seemed conciliatory.

Tea, of course, was out of the question, since he had the Heads' meeting at four-thirty, but they could meet later. He folded her letter and placed it in an inner pocket.

Severus was just considering another cup of coffee when Minerva came in, sans Albus. Severus smirked. It wasn't only the group from the Three Broomsticks that had overdone it the night before, apparently.

He waved his hand and pulled out her chair for her. "Good morning, Headmistress. Sleep well?"

"Very," she replied. "You?" She looked at him as she pulled her chair closer to the table. "You don't look as though you slept at all."

"A few hours. Enough," Severus replied tersely.

"I checked my early post before I came down. Thank you for scheduling the meeting, Severus."

Severus nodded and decided he did need another cup of coffee. And maybe a banger or two now that his stomach was a bit more awake.

"I sent a confidential owl to the Minister...I thought we should go directly to the top rather than waste time with people who would have to go through channels to tell us anything useful...and I hope to learn more about what happened yesterday," Minerva said. "When I hear anything, I will let you know. There was only a small, undetailed article in the *Prophet* this morning. Perhaps the later editions will have more information."

"Mm."

"The students will need to be informed about the changes in the wards, but I think I will simply have the Heads of House inform their prefects. Students shouldn't be coming and going, anyway. Could you meet with Hagrid, Rath, and Shunpike and let them know? Hagrid can handle any scheduling that needs to be done, but if any of them have questions..."

"Hagrid is away for the weekend," Severus said.

"Oh, yes, thank you for reminding me. Could you send him an owl so that he knows he'll need to use the password at the gates even if he returns during daylight hours? And inform Ms Benetti, as well. In person or by post, as you prefer," Minerva added with a mischievous smile.

"I am seeing her tomorrow, I believe, to assist her in some flight tests, but . . . if she needs to come up to help a Quidditch team with their practice later today, she might be puzzled if she can't just open the gates as usual. I shall owl her." It would also give her the opportunity to back out of their plans if she had changed her mind.

"Very good. I'll be around all day today, so if you have any questions or anyone has a problem with something, I'm available."

They chatted a bit longer over breakfast, Minerva curious about the staff's evening out and informing Severus in a discreet whisper that Hagrid and Wilhelmina's relationship wasn't as sudden as Pomona and many others believed it to be, since they had had a romantic relationship many years before and had simply rekindled it. Severus appreciated that bit of gossip, though he wouldn't pass it on himself.

Finally, Severus excused himself, saying he had correspondence to catch up on and business to attend to. Just as he was leaving the Great Hall, Poppy was coming down the stairs, looking cheerful and radiant in robes of robin's egg blue with a creamy butter-yellow under-robe, like a perfect spring morning. Severus smiled at the sight of her and inclined his head in greeting.

"Good morning, Madam Pomfrey," he said as the door to the Great Hall closed behind him. "May I take the liberty of saying that you look lovely this morning?" If he were going to decide to woo her, he could begin by making sincere compliments, he thought. And if he decided not to, well, it was not a bad thing to tell a friend she looked nice.

"Thank you." Poppy blushed. "Finished breakfast?"

Severus nodded. "There are few staff present this morning, only those on the schedule, I believe. I left the Headmistress sitting alone. I have no doubt that she would enjoy your company."

"I heard that some of the staff were going to go into Hogsmeade last night," Poppy replied. "They're probably sleeping in."

"Indeed. We went to the Three Broomsticks," Severus said. "There were some who were perhaps imbibing a little too freely."

"You went with them? Good," Poppy said. "That is, did you have a nice time?"

"It was better than remaining in the castle and reading essays. Why did you stay in?" He didn't remember seeing her at dinner, either.

"Well, actually, I didn't. I was out. I had a prior engagement, so I couldn't join you all."

Severus thought Poppy was blushing more than she had when he had complimented her. He didn't want to consider what that might mean. Minerva would have said something if Poppy were already seeing someone else. If she knew. But she had encouraged him to woo Poppy, and he didn't believe she would have done that if she didn't think he had a chance with her. And even if Poppy had been out with someone else, that meant nothing. It would have to be a very new relationship and a recent development. He would simply have to compete for her affections. He disliked that idea, but better than to abandon any hope of a relationship with her simply because he was jealous of a possibly meaningless relationship. And for all he knew, the "previous engagement" could have been family business or dinner with a friend like Madam Gamp or Healer Glyndwr, or even Rolanda Hooch, whom she visited at least once a fortnight.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," Severus said. "It is good to have time away from the school." Inane, but polite and inoffensive, he thought.

"Yes, I did, thanks." Her blush didn't fade. "Well, I'd best get in to breakfast." She paused at the door and looked back at him. "It is good to see you, Severus."

He nodded. "Likewise, Poppy," he replied softly, pleased to see her smile before she opened the door and entered the Great Hall.

"Did you have a good time yesterday, Poppy?" Minerva asked as Poppy spread jam on her toast. "You're looking quite cheerful."

"I had a wonderful time," Poppy replied, taking a moment to pour some milk in her tea. "Quin was . . . Quin, as usual. We went to Paris for dinner."

"Paris? My, I think I am jealous! Dinner here was the usual Friday night fare. They did do lemon sole for the staff instead of fried cod, though, and they served aubergine parmesan instead of the usual lasagna. Sarah's idea. I had the lemon sole, which was rather good, but it wasn't French food in France!"

"It was a casual supper. We just ate in a café, but the food was terrific, and somehow, the atmosphere in Paris makes everything taste better. But as nice as Paris was, we had an even better time when we got back," Poppy said, lowering her voice. "I invited him up for a nightcap."

"You did? That's nice."

Poppy blushed. "It was more than nice, Minerva. It was very nice. Nothing like an old friend to cheer you up."

"Really, well . . . are you two . . . do you have plans? I mean, to go out again?"

"Nothing specific, though he did mention Istanbul and wizarding Constantinople. I fell asleep thinking about the things you could do on a flying carpet," Poppy said with a smile.

"I see." Minerva didn't seem as pleased as Poppy had thought she would. "So are you two . . . dating, then?"

"Oh, no. It's quite likely that we won't be, um, having another nightcap again any time soon. We might, of course. But this was . . . for old times' sake, you could say."

"Old times' sake? I always thought that you two had never . . . had a nightcap together when you were dating."

Poppy chuckled. "We weren't complete teetotalers, Min, but we never had anything very strong."

"Ah. I see. And last night was Scotch, straight up?" Minerva blushed at her unintended double entendre, but Poppy laughed.

"It was more like Irish, straight up. A very stiff drink in a tall glass," Poppy said with a whisper and a blush.

Minerva pulled the teapot closer and poured herself another cup. She seemed pensive as she sipped her tea.

"So, other than yet another evening of Hogwarts cuisine, did you have a good evening yesterday?" Poppy asked.

Minerva smiled. "Yes. I had work to finish, but then Albus and I found some time to spend together. That was nice."

"I'm glad. You should try not to work on Friday nights, I think."

"It was either finish the work last night or have it waiting for me this morning. I'd rather have more free time over the weekend. Albus wants me to help him in his little garden this morning." Minerva grinned. "If he makes it out of bed before noon, that is."

Poppy laughed. "So you did have a good time last night, then. Wore him out?"

"We just played a few games," Minerva said innocently.

"I'm sure he enjoyed himself."

"I believe so." Minerva took another sip of tea. "Severus went out with some of the other staff last night."

"Yes, I saw him in the front hall just now, and he mentioned that. He's been going out a lot more this spring. That's a good thing."

"Yes," Minerva agreed. "Have you thought more about the two of you?" she asked softly.

Poppy took a bite of toast and chewed, looking thoughtfully out across the Hall. "I have," she said with a nod.

"And?"

"And . . . why don't we meet later today, after you and Albus have finished working in the garden? We can talk then."

"All right. I have a meeting at four-thirty. What about three, three-thirty?"

"Sounds good to me. Come by whenever. If I'm not in, I'll be in the infirmary, probably."

Poppy returned from lunch and decided on a nap after her late night. That morning she had taken care of a couple of Gryffindors who had decided to settle a dispute with some minor hexes, but other than that, it had been quiet. Although there would be another duelling demonstration the following Saturday, there wouldn't be another Quidditch game until after the Easter holiday, and with the arrival of spring, most of the wintertime ailments had left, yet allergy season hadn't yet begun, so Poppy anticipated that the next week would be just as quiet.

She quickly pulled off her clothes and laid them across the bench in front of her vanity, then she drew back the covers of her bed and lay down, wearing just her knickers and a light camisole with a Support Charm. She laughed softly as she remembered Quin's frustration with her bra the night before. For all that he loved the Muggle world and even dressed Muggle himself, in many ways, he was a very traditional wizard.

Poppy knew what she was going to tell Minerva that afternoon when they met. She was going to be sensible, not sensitive, and she was going to move on from Severus with a lesson learned. She was going to tell Minerva just that.

Spending time with Quin the night before had shown her that she could respond just as warmly to another man for whom she cared as she could to Severus. In some ways, the time with Quin was better than the time with Severus, in other ways, her time with Severus . . . was incomparable. But when she was with Quin, it was easier, more relaxed and comfortable.

She didn't want to be hurt, and she didn't want Severus to be confused any more than he already was. She simply would remember that. And that was what she would tell Minerva. She would not mention that she loved the mercurial Potions master. No, Minerva would misconstrue that. But she would tell Minerva that she wanted to be a good friend to him. She certainly didn't want to cut off all but professional contact with him. It was unnecessary. They could be friends. She simply would need to be . . . careful with him. She might want him, but she couldn't have him. It was a fact of life that she would just have to get used to. They could be good friends. And her feelings would gradually fade to the simple warmth of friendship . . . although that might take a while.

Poppy wondered how long it would take her to recover from her intense attraction to Severus. She did hope that that attraction would fade more quickly than her other feelings. It was disconcerting to feel imminent arousal simply because he spoke to her or said something personal to her. That morning when she had greeted Severus in the entry hall, she had already felt a warm glow from the night before with Quin. But then Severus had begun speaking to her, telling her that she looked lovely, and she could feel her pleasure in his appreciative words begin to tingle through her, then when they spoke of the evening before, suddenly, without her wishing it to, the vision flashed through her mind of Quin hovering over her the night before, and both her embarrassment and her arousal grew. It seemed as though almost simultaneously with that vision, she imagined for a split second what it would be like to have Severus in the same position, naked and ready to enter her. Quickly following on that vision was a sense of guilt, completely unreasonable guilt, as though she had cheated on Severus by sleeping with Quin. Her relationship with Quin long predated her relationship with Severus...such as it was...and she and Severus were not even together any longer. Even when they had been together, it had been a very brief, nonexclusive sexual affair, almost over before it began.

Poppy sighed and rolled over. She should just focus on other things. Work, her friendships, her family. Her niece's new baby was adorable. And there was the upcoming trip to the North Sea German wizarding resort with Pomona, Gertrude, Rolanda, former Divination teacher Hafrena NicAirt, and another old friend of Pomona's, Colleen Murphy, who was now the Associate Director for the wizarding division of the Royal Botanic Gardens. The holiday would be fun, and it would be very good for Gertrude, who had needed some persuading before she would agree to join them...which was the primary reason why Poppy had agreed to go, too, as it helped Gertrude to feel more comfortable. And as Pomona had pointed out to Gertrude, the Schiller Zauberstrandhotel was just a hop-skip-and-jump from London and they were quite easily reachable should Rosemary go into labour earlier than anticipated. Someone could send a message or a house-elf could even pop over in person to let her know if she were needed at home.

Early April was not the best time of year to go to Schiller's, but they were able to get their rooms at off-season rates, and although they wouldn't go swimming, they could take walks along the strand. There were also the wonderful meals to look forward to, and the saunas and massages. She would indulge herself, she thought, to a nice therapeutic massage after a sauna.

As her mind went to the relaxing pleasures of massage, Poppy's thoughts drifted to another sort of massage altogether. A wonderfully arousing erotic massage. Quin's talents in that area were considerable, she thought. The night before, the sensation of lips and fingertips massaging her body, treating every inch of skin as erotic, had heightened her arousal before he had even approached her crux. She had been trembling and breathless by the time a single fingertip had found her clitoris and begun a teasing massage, progressing to a firmer stroke, until two knuckles of his fingers began a rolling, rhythmic movement, as all the while his lips and his other hand caressed and titillated her breasts, stomach, thighs.

Poppy squeezed her legs together. Now she was aroused from the memory, how she had exploded with that pleasurable force that was both physical and nonphysical, completely oblivious to anything but the lightning coursing through her body, causing her to shudder and shout. And then as she recovered from her orgasm, Quin had held her and kissed her lips gently and repeatedly as he caressed her breast and side until she yearned for him to enter her with the long, thick cock that pressed against

her hip. Oh, and when he had entered her . . . filling her . . . oh, that had been heaven, and seeing Quin's arousal and the pleasure in his face, that had been deeply satisfying, as well. Touching and tweaking his nipples as he slowly stroked in her, then the way he thrust faster as their mutual passion grew . . . and the sensation of that mounting tension, until finally she clutched at him, climaxing, with Quin following quickly, ejaculating as her vagina pulsed around him.

Poppy tossed off the sheet that covered her, sat up, and pulled out the drawer of the bedside table. There it was, still Transfigured from the bath sponge it had been. She took the dildo out and closed her eyes, lying back and remembering when she had Transfigured it and how Severus had altered the Transfiguration until it was the same diameter as his own penis and a few inches longer.

Poppy quickly pulled off her camisole and wriggled out of her knickers, spreading her legs. Instead of thinking of the wizard who had made love to her the night before, the memory of whose touch had excited her, she remembered Severus and his passionate love-making. She licked her lips, then uttered the spell *Tremescere*, and she remembered Severus.

She remembered Severus. Severus, Severus kissing her, Severus pulling her robe from her, Severus lifting her, and Severus fucking her against the door, his cock hard and his desire inflamed. She gently touched the tip of the vibrating dildo to her clitoris and jumped at the sudden intensity of the sensation. Severus, naked with his dark head between her legs, Severus, his tongue playing with her clitoris. With the fingers of her left hand, Poppy stroked her inner labia and circled her opening, then she gently touched the vibrator to her clitoris again. Severus licking her, Severus sliding into her. Poppy fingered her opening as she rubbed the dildo against herself. Severus's dark eyes gazing into hers as he stroked inside of her, Severus coming and shouting her name. Poppy moved the vibrating dildo rhythmically against her clitoris. Severus beneath her, Severus licking her hard as she sucked him. She pulsed the vibrator harder against her clit and her left hand bunched the sheets. Severus bound to the staff table as she rode his cock, as she rode him and rode him until they both came. Severus crying out, Severus saying he loved her . . .

With a gasp, her hips and thighs rising convulsively off the bed, Poppy climaxed. She collapsed back onto the mattress and dropped the dildo by her side on the bed. Her heartbeat began to return to normal, and she opened her eyes.

Not as satisfying as the night before, nor at any time with Severus, but a good release, and now she could nap and put Severus out of her mind. And later that afternoon, she would drink tea with Minerva and . . . she would tell her friend a little white lie. She would say that she only wanted to be friends with Severus and that she was happy with the way things were now. That she didn't miss him at all. Poppy pulled up her sheet and closed her eyes. Besides, a witch needed something in a relationship besides sex, and no matter how good the sex was in the beginning, it couldn't sustain a relationship...although a good relationship could sustain good sex.

And she didn't miss Severus at all, didn't miss Severus at all, not at all, at all . . .

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-Four: The Goblin's Knee

Saturday, 20 March 1999

Severus meets Hermione at the Goblin's Knee in Diagon Alley. **End of Part Six**

Rated M.

Characters: Severus Snape, Hermione Granger

Chapter Sixty-Four: The Goblin's Knee

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Saturday, 20 March 1999. Severus meets Hermione at the Goblin's Knee in Diagon Alley. ***End of Part Six***



Chapter Sixty-Four: The Goblin's Knee

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Severus looked around, his eyes adjusting to the dim light of the small restaurant. When he had written and told her that he couldn't meet for tea, but that he was available in the evening and would like to meet and talk someplace quiet, Hermione had suggested the Goblin's Knee in Diagon Alley. He hadn't been there before, and to his eyes, it resembled a cave more than a restaurant. A pale hand waved at him, and Severus saw Hermione sitting at a small round table in a sunken area shaped like a flower, each petal containing one small table and two chairs. In the sunken flower's centre, a fountain bubbled away, coloured lights at the bottom of the pool lighting up the water.

Severus crossed the front section of the restaurant, then stepped down three dimly glowing stairs.

"Good evening, Hermione."

Hermione smiled. "Hi, Severus! I'm glad you could meet me here."

Severus pulled out his chair and sat down. He felt acutely uncomfortable. The Goblin's Knee had a reputation as a meeting spot for lovers, and if the lighting were any indication, it was romantic. The table was surrounded on three sides by glowing stones of various sizes and colours, and the tabletop was inset with similar stones. Personally, although Severus understood and appreciated mood lighting, he preferred sufficient illumination to see the food he was eating...and sufficient to notice anyone sneaking up, wand drawn. He had, after all, promised the Headmistress that he would be cautious.

"It was good to hear from you this morning," Severus said. "I was slightly surprised, however."

"I really was sorry I had already accepted a date with Tarrant yesterday," Hermione said. "And I didn't think our conversation in the pub went well."

Severus raised an eyebrow, though he wondered if some of his more subtle gestures weren't lost in the ambience of the grotto-like restaurant. "I found your insinuation . . . atypical of you."

Hermione was saved from having to answer when a wait-witch came up to take their drinks orders. Severus ordered sparkling water with lime and Hermione ordered Campari and soda with a twist.

"I was surprised when Ginny wrote and told me she was quitting Quidditch. I had always believed she loved it." Hermione sighed. "I reread her letter when I got home last night. She didn't actually say you advised her to quit. Just that she got the idea from talking with you. And she seemed happy with her decision."

"Good. She has been unhappy, as you have pointed out to me."

"She said you talked to her for a long time."

Severus shrugged. "A while. She talked. I allowed her to speak."

Hermione laughed. "That is so you, Severus. *I allowed her to speak*." She laughed again.

Severus smiled. "She needed to have someone listen to her. I know what that is like. I have learned that sometimes just being able to talk to someone can be good. My friends taught me that, Hermione, including you."

Their drinks arrived, and they ordered appetisers.

Hermione sipped her Campari soda. "I went to see Mr Weasley this morning."

"Really? I don't know as I would have advised that . . . did he let you in?"

"He didn't want to. We stood and talked outside the front door for more than a half an hour before he realised I wasn't going away." Hermione shook her head and shuddered. "I see what you meant about how he was doing. It was a shock to see the place. I immediately started in cleaning, and he kept objecting, then he sat down and . . ." Hermione blinked back tears. "It was very sad. I stayed for the day, made a dent in the mess. At least I'm no longer afraid Arthur will get food poisoning or something when he eats there. I fixed him a good meal before I left, and tomorrow, I plan to put up some meals he can reheat over the next few days. Just a few simple things, since I'm not much of a cook, but they should keep him going."

"I was going to speak with Bill about getting him help in, perhaps a free house-elf once a week or so."

"He clearly needs help taking care of himself, but I've got it in hand now. I'm going back tomorrow and bringing a Gamp house-elf. A little blue fellow named Brue. I Apparated to the Gamp estate as soon as I left there and spoke in confidence with Madam Gamp. She taught Arthur and has a soft spot for him, I think. Brue is looking forward to helping."

"Madam Gamp isn't home? In Hogsmeade, I mean."

"No. Since Rosemary's father is getting over pneumonia, Healer O'Donald can only pop over occasionally to see her, and Alroy's mother is dead, so Madam Gamp is helping Rosemary get ready for the baby. I also think it's good for her. She's been . . . a little depressed lately. More so than usual. Being at the Gamp estate, where she grew up, and helping to get ready for the birth of her great-great-nephew, is good for her. She seemed happier when I saw her today, I think."

Severus nodded. "Good." He looked away. It was his fault that she was the way she was, that she was depressed. He had done it to her.

Hermione reached across the table and took his hand. "She misses the island, Severus. And her husband, and so many things. It's not just what you did, if that's what you're thinking."

"I am certain that is the primary cause of her pain," Severus said. He sighed, but squeezed her hand. "Why doesn't she just visit the island for a while?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not allowed. Well, not strictly forbidden, of course, but . . . she said she can't go back to the island just yet, and Professor Dumbledore and the Headmistress have asked her not to visit without someone with her. I think they want to keep an eye on her if she does visit. I don't know exactly why, but Gareth said something . . . I don't know. I think that when she was isolated on the island, she developed . . . delusions or hallucinations or something. I may have got it wrong. But I think that they're afraid that if she returns, she might do something . . . Gareth said something about not wanting her to disappear." Hermione shrugged. "I don't know what it was. But it's probably to help her avoid the temptation to isolate herself again."

"I see. It was good of her to loan you a house-elf," Severus said, changing the subject.

"Well, she suggested Brue, and Brue was enthusiastic. He's somewhat younger than Gluffy and rather shy, but he loves domestic work and is looking forward to helping Mr Weasley."

"Going to try to pay him?" Severus asked with a smirk. "Or maybe just tempt him with a woolly hat?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I know that only Madam Gamp can free any of the Gamp elves, since she's the head of the family. And no, I did not even consider paying him, although I found out what his favourite sweet is, and I'll have that on hand for him, then I'm sending a case of butterbeer home with him to share with the other Gamp elves."

"I don't know why I should be curious, but what is his favourite sweet?"

"These sort of mocha-flavoured meringues." From under her chair, she picked up a box tied with string. "Madam Gamp told me where I could get them in Diagon Alley, so I picked them up on my way here. I tried one. They kind of melt in your mouth. I think I'd prefer a different flavour, but Brue likes mocha." She untied the box and handed Severus one of the confections before she put it back under her chair.

"I doubt the proprietors appreciate patrons bringing their own food with them," Severus said, but he took a bite. Not bad. Unlike soft meringue, which Severus found unpalatable, these sweets were baked hard, and Hermione was correct: they melted in your mouth. And he liked mocha. "Where did you get these?"

"The Café Orpheus," Hermione said. She giggled. "They promise 'poetry in pastry.'"

Severus smirked.

The appetisers they had ordered arrived, and Severus watched Hermione try a grilled stuffed mushroom.

"It's good. You should try one, Severus."

He had eaten at Hogwarts, but he speared one of the smaller mushrooms and popped it in his mouth. It seemed to burst with herbs and tangy cheese. He nodded. It was good.

"How have you been? It was nice to see you out last night. Did you have a good time?"

"Fine. Socialising with colleagues is of positive value," Severus acknowledged.

"It looked as though everyone was having a good time. Professor Flitwick seemed . . . happy."

"Oh, he was, very happy, especially once Rosmerta got the musicians to play," Severus said with a smirk. "Some friendly advice, Hermione: avoid the Fwooper's Song. I do not know what is in them, but they are powerful. Flitwick usually holds his liquor quite well, and these made him very . . . 'happy.'"

Hermione laughed. "I will remember that." She ate a small spear of white asparagus wrapped in smoky ham. "I ran into Helena Benetti when I was leaving with Tarrant. Did she meet up with you?"

"Not with me specifically," Severus said, beating back the blush in his cheeks, and glad now for the low lighting. "But she joined us for a few minutes." Deciding that stopping there would be tantamount to lying to Hermione, he added, "I walked her home."

"She has a cute little place...did you get to see it? She has some interesting things."

"You've been there?"

"She's agreed to supervise some of my Animagus exercises," Hermione explained. "Alroy can't always be there, and the only other Animagus nearby that I know of is Headmistress McGonagall. I don't think she'd have the time. So Alroy asked Helena. Now that his son's on the way, Alroy's time will be limited for a while. I'm lucky that Helena agreed to help."

Helena was only a few years older than Hermione. "She is very young," Severus began.

"She's been an Animagus for almost six years. And I'm not doing any of the more advanced exercises yet. She's like a tutor. Alroy's still in charge of my training."

"What about the Headmaster? Professor Dumbledore, I mean."

"Oh, well, yes, he's an Animagus. Harry told me how he saved him. But I think he'd be pretty busy, too, and I like Helena. She's already agreed. I can't change now."

"Have you decided what you are doing for the summer?"

"Yes, I'm continuing my Animagus training," Hermione sighed. "I'd like to do everything, but since I can't, it makes sense to finish my Animagus training then pick up some courses at university when I'm finished. I'll have plenty of time then, and be closer to finishing my apprenticeship, too. That's getting more difficult. I'll be glad for the Easter break."

"Are you going anywhere?"

"I'll be at my parents'. I may spend some time with Ginny and her dad, though. They're taking a trip, leaving this Thursday morning, but they'll be back by the weekend after Easter. Fred, George, Ron, and Charlie are going to be joining them at different points, and Arthur said that they'll all be together for dinner on Easter Sunday. They're doing Indian, in India."

"Good, I am glad that Weasley took my advice."

"Are you going to take a holiday, Severus?"

"I will be at Hogwarts," he replied.

"Maybe we could get together sometime during the week," Hermione suggested.

"I would enjoy that," Severus gestured toward Hermione's near-empty glass. "Would you care for another?" He looked around. "If not, perhaps we could go somewhere else. Take a walk. I wanted to talk to you about something."

"What would you like to talk about?"

"I would prefer somewhere more private," Severus said.

"More private than this?" Hermione asked. "Well, all right. No, I don't really want another drink."

Severus paid for them, and the two left the restaurant, climbing the stairs back up to street level.

"Where would you like to go? We could go back to Hogsmeade, to the house. Madam Gamp is at the estate and Gareth is out again. He said he wouldn't be back until late, maybe not until morning if he doesn't feel up to Apparating tonight. We'd have the place to ourselves."

"What about the house-elf?" Severus asked.

"He's always with Madam Gamp, although sometimes he goes to the Gamp estate without her. One of his sisters is sickly, I think. The house is empty tonight."

"All right," Severus agreed.

"Meet you at the gate," Hermione said.

The two Apparated back to the house, and Hermione used the passphrase and her key to open the door. The house wasn't completely dark. There was a faint light coming from the kitchen and another from the sitting room. Hermione flicked her wand, lighting the overhead lamp in the hall.

"We keep two small lamps lit downstairs. They're charmed to light when it begins to get dark," Hermione said. "It makes it more comfortable in the house."

Severus nodded. They had attacked Professor Gamp after dark. She had run down the dark staircase, then down the darkened hallway to the back door. She couldn't open it in time. Severus swallowed and shivered.

Hermione lit more lamps as they entered the sitting room. "May I take your cloak?"

Severus shook his head and draped his cloak over the back of a chair.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea, coffee, a beer? I'm sure Gareth wouldn't mind if we had some of his beer. There's plenty."

"All right," Severus said. "A beer." He sat down at one end of the couch.

Hermione left and returned a moment later, two glasses, one bottle of beer, and an Irn-bru. "Forgot to mention that I picked up Irn-bru the last time I was Muggle shopping. Madam Gamp enjoys it. Want one instead of the beer?"

Severus shook his head.

Hermione poured his beer into his glass, then poured her drink into her own and sat down at the other end of the sofa.

"What did you want to talk about?" Hermione asked.

"It's awkward," Severus said, "so I'll just begin by asking whether you and Tarrant are dating seriously."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "That's blunt."

"Yes. But I'd like to know, and thought asking the most expeditious way of finding out. If you believe it's none of my business..."

"We aren't serious. I'm not, and I don't think Tarrant's had time to become serious. It's just fun to have someone to go out and do things with, you know?"

"Of course." Severus cleared his mind and calmed his blush. "You see, I ask because . . . I care about you, Hermione. I want what's best for you. If you were in love with him..."

"No, I'm not in love with him, Severus. Naturally, I do like him, or I wouldn't go out with him."

Severus nodded, confused by the lack of relief he felt at her answer. "Because, you see, I think that I . . . I . . . I don't know exactly how to say this."

"Are you regretting not having our second date?" Hermione asked.

"Not precisely. No. I think we both needed time, you know . . . and that first date was a surprise to us, or at least to me, but I just want you to know that I wish I . . . I just wonder . . ."

"You aren't usually at a loss for words, Severus."

He took a breath, paused, and began again. "You know that I care about you. I do, very much. You are very special to me, Hermione." He took in another breath and let it out slowly, looking at Hermione and thinking how lovely she looked that night. She was wearing a short necklace of pearls, a soft, deep red blouse, and a pretty long grey skirt, a wide black belt at the middle, and her hair was pulled up in clips at the sides of her head. Her lips were rosy, and her skin seemed flawless. "And you know that you're attractive to me, as well, that I find you . . . very attractive."

Hermione blushed and looked down at her hands. When she glanced back up, her eyes met Severus's. He slid closer to her and reached out tentatively, gently touching the side of her face.

"You have been wonderful to me, Hermione," he whispered, and then, deciding that he could not find the right words to say, he bent and kissed her lips. He kissed her again, and she returned his kiss. Sliding closer, Severus put one arm around Hermione and his other hand on her knee. She brought one hand to his side and another to his head as he continued kissing her, sucking her lower lip, then opening his mouth and deepening the kiss. Hermione responded, and Severus pulled her toward him.

He slid his hand beneath her skirt and squeezed her thigh. Her bare skin was soft to his touch, and Severus pushed Hermione back against the arm of the sofa, bringing himself to rest against her. He began to fondle one of her breasts through her blouse as he reached further up her skirt, his fingertips just touching the edge of her knickers at the top of her thigh. She shivered at his touch.

"Oh, Hermione," he moaned as he kissed her throat and began to unbutton her blouse, wanting to get closer to her soft, sweet skin, to show her his desire and to bring her some pleasure. She was so lovely, so warm.

"Mm, wait, wait, wait...I said *wait*, Severus!" Hermione pushed up on one of his shoulders impatiently.

Severus sat up, cheeks flushed and breathing heavily. He blinked. "Hermione?"

"This is just...too much, too fast," Hermione said, sitting up straighter and pulling her skirt down. She rebuttoned the two buttons Severus had managed to unbutton. "I thought we were just going to talk."

"I wanted to show you how I feel," Severus began.

"Just tell me, Severus. A couple weeks ago, you said you couldn't date me. Has that changed?"

"I think . . . I think maybe we should try. See what happens. We could see how we feel about each other, what kind of relationship we could have."

"Severus . . . I care for you. I do. And . . ." Hermione let out a breath. "I've been very attracted to you. But you've gone from being a friend to wanting to date to not wanting to date to . . . to . . . I don't know. Wanting to jump into whatever you were jumping into just now."

"Don't you want to jump with me, Hermione?" Severus asked softly. "I don't want to hurt you, but perhaps we could see how things might be between us."

"Trial dating or something like that?"

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "Something like that."

"All dating is like a trial period in a way, Severus. At least at the beginning," Hermione said. She sighed. "And I would have liked to have been aware that you wanted to try dating again before, um, well, before you started groping me."

Severus blushed. *Groping* her? "I thought that . . . if I showed you how I felt . . ."

"Yes, and you certainly did show me that you're attracted to me," Hermione said.

"You said you were attracted to me, too."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean we have to jump into anything physical like that."

"You seemed to like it." Severus was beginning to feel like a dirty old masher. He'd just wanted to touch her, get closer, kiss her, caress her, bring her a little pleasure, show her how he felt about her, give their relationship a chance, not dive into a full physical relationship that very moment on Gertrude Gamp's sofa.

"Of course," Hermione said. "Kissing was very nice. And I like being close to you, but..."

"*But?* But what?" Severus was angry now. He did know enough to stop when asked, after all...even if that ~~had~~ been what he'd been after that evening, which it hadn't been. Whatever he was or ever had been, he didn't force himself on women. He may have been coercive at times when he was younger and had provided payment or potions in exchange for sex, but never had he forced himself on an unwilling woman, even ones who he had thought were no better than whores, and he certainly would never force himself upon Hermione. "It's not as though I was going to start fucking you right here and now."

Hermione winced at his words. "I didn't suggest you were," she said softly.

"Sorry." Severus didn't know why he was apologising. She was the one who had insulted him.

"I just mean that we should talk about this, or ease into things gradually. It's very confusing to have you ask me out...on a date with some ups and downs...but you seemed happy to have asked me out, you gave me a very sweet kiss, we set another date, and then after all that, you told me you can't date me, you just want to continue our

friendship. It hurt, but I agreed. I didn't understand, but I agreed. And now, tonight, you don't even bother with asking me on a date, you just start acting as though we're . . . we're already hot and heavy. Not a moment of . . . of romance."

"Well, what was the Goblin's Knee? That was your choice, Hermione. And it's romantic. That seemed a message to me. And then inviting me back here after I'd only suggested a walk." It was hardly as though they were strangers to each other, either, he thought. They didn't need to go through the entire getting-to-know-each-other phase that new acquaintances would.

"You said in your owl that you wanted to talk. The Goblin's Knee can be a good place to talk without being overheard, but then you said that you wanted someplace more private, so I brought you back here," she said. "I didn't mean any of it as an invitation to start feeling my breasts."

"I'm sorry I'm so offensive to you," Severus said, standing up, his jaw tight. "I'd thought you would enjoy that, too. But clearly my touch repulses you."

"You know that's not what I meant! I do find you attractive, Severus, but if we date, I can't rush into the physical side of things with you." Hermione's expression drew down sadly, her eyebrows pinched. "I think it would be a mistake. You could change your mind again about being with me, and then where would I be? Where would we be?"

Severus shook his head. He could see her point now, but he still felt as though she had behaved as though he were some kind of randy, out-of-control teenager. She could have indicated that she wanted him to slow down without acting as though she couldn't bear his touch. Helena had, and she had more right to protest than Hermione had...he and Helena scarcely knew each other, and he'd been grinding his erection against her.

"I see this was a bad idea...a truly bad idea," Severus said, turning away. He had wanted to give this relationship a chance before attempting anything more with Poppy. He had believed he owed it to Hermione to try, or at least to his idea of Hermione. "You have meant so much to me, Hermione, and your friendship's been so important to me. Given me hope . . . and I just . . ."

"I know, and I do know that you care about me, but can you see why I'm confused? And even if we were to begin seeing each other romantically, I think it would be a good idea to take things slowly. It would be a good idea regardless of who you were, but the way things are with you now . . . you don't know what you want...or you didn't...and now I'm not sure, myself. You needed time, you said. But it's only been a couple weeks. Either something didn't change that you thought would, or something did change, or something didn't work out, or your feelings are different, or something, but my own life didn't come to an end when we decided to remain friends...when *you* decided we should remain friends. That might be for the best."

"Mm." She didn't want to date him any longer. She didn't like him touching her. She clearly wasn't ready for a romantic relationship with him. He felt his throat growing tight and heat rising behind his eyes. He blinked. "I had better go now."

Hermione stood. "You don't need to."

"We have had our discussion," he said tightly, unable to turn and face her. "I'd rather leave now. . . . Owl me and tell me how the Weasleys are faring."

"I will. When I know what my parents' plans are, I'll let you know, too. I thought . . . maybe you might come around to the place in Cornwall over the holiday."

Severus gave a short laugh. *Come around to Cornwall*, she says, as if nothing had happened. He wanted her continued friendship, but he wasn't sure whether he could manage the house in Cornwall just yet. "We'll see."

"I'm sorry, Severus."

He shook his head and turned toward her. "Turnabout is fair play, they say. I'll show myself out. Good night, Hermione." He paused. "I had a nice time at the Goblin's Knee."

"So did I."

Hermione slumped back onto the couch as Severus quickly grabbed his cloak and left the room.

~ **End of Part Six** ~

~ **to be continued** ~

NEXT

PART SEVEN

Chapter Sixty-Five: Test Flight

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Severus meets Helena to test fly the new Nimbus Victory.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Pomona Sprout, Helena Benetti

Upcoming Chapters in Part Seven

Subject to change.

Chapter Sixty-Six: Broomstick Rodeo

Characters: Severus Snape, Helena Benetti, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Some Muggle Business

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall, Harry Potter

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Bad Timing

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Quin MacAir

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Moulting

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Fawkes

Chapter Seventy: To Persist and Pursue

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Poppy Pomfrey others

Chapter Seventy-One: Descent into Hades

Characters: Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy Newman, Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Black LeStrange, Peter Pettigrew, others

Chapter Seventy-Two: Home

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey

Chapter Seventy-Three: Renovation

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall, Hermione Granger, Gertrude Gamp

Chapter Seventy-Four: Glimpse of the Snape Family Past

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Seventy-Five: A Wizard Not to be Crossed

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Seventy-Six: Present Danger

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Alastor Moody, others

Chapter Sixty-Five: Test Flight

Chapter 66 of 118

Severus meets Helena to test fly the new Nimbus Victory. ***Beginning of Part Seven***



PART SEVEN

Chapter Sixty-Five: Test Flight

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Poppy looked up at Severus. He had entered the Great Hall for breakfast after she had, but had eaten quickly and was on his way out already. He paused by her chair, though, and now touched her shoulder lightly.

"Are you returning to the Hospital Wing after breakfast, Madam Pomfrey?"

"I was actually going to go to the library this morning," she replied. "I made arrangements to meet Laura there after breakfast. Did you need to see me?"

Severus hesitated. "It . . . it is not school business," he said softly, "but somewhat important."

Poppy nodded. "All right. If you like, we could meet at ten-thirty or eleven. Unless it's very important, then I could tell her I'll be late."

"No, no need. I cannot meet later this morning, however. I will be away from the castle until sometime in the afternoon."

"This afternoon, then? When you return to the castle, just come up and find me. I'll likely be either in my rooms or in the infirmary."

He nodded once, then was gone without another word.

"Something wrong?" Pomona asked after he had left.

"I doubt it. We are working on that project together," Poppy replied.

"He's really coming to life these last few months," Pomona observed. "I was very pleased he came to our party the other week. He always was reluctant to go to any social events that he wasn't required to attend. He even seemed to have a good time...you spent some time with him that evening, I remember. Didn't you think he had a good time?"

"Yes, it was a good party, though the drinks were a bit strong," Poppy said, avoiding any response about Severus. "A lot of folk were looking for Headache Potion the next day!"

"Severus came out to the Three Broomsticks with us the other night, too. He didn't seem very comfortable at first, but he relaxed after a bit, even got Rosmerta to get the Barghest's Howl to play for the crowd...for Filius, in particular. I think it's good for him to get out amongst others and not just hang about the dungeons. I tried to encourage him to socialise with Helena, and I hear that he left with her."

"Really. Yes, he mentioned he had gone to the Broomsticks with you all," Poppy replied. So, Severus might be moving on, or perhaps at least having another little fling. She ignored the pain that clenched her heart. She had had a date herself, after all. A wonderful evening with Quin, a wonderful, *intimate* evening with Quin. And she *had* wanted Severus to move on and have a relationship with a younger, more suitable witch.

"Filius, I am afraid, had a bit too much to drink," Pomona continued, "so we didn't stay as long as we might have."

"Filius? He can usually drink everyone else under the table," Poppy said, her brow furrowed. "Is everything okay? Is he troubled about anything? You two aren't having any problems, are you?"

"Oh, no, I think it was just the Fwooper's Song...that's a very powerful drink. He does seem . . . I don't know," Pomona said, shaking her head. "There may be something bothering him, but he claims not. I thought it might have to do with the holiday, but since he's coming for a couple days, too, at the end, I can't imagine why that would bother him."

"Perhaps he wanted a holiday on his own with you," Poppy suggested.

"But he is encouraging me to go with you all and to help Gertrude to have a good time."

"That doesn't mean that he doesn't wish he could have it both ways...have you have your witches' holiday with Gertrude and the rest of us, but also be able to get away somewhere alone with you. You didn't really have a holiday this summer, after all."

"We were on our own most of the time. It was hardly like it is during term," Pomona said. "It felt like a holiday."

Poppy shrugged one shoulder, distracted by thoughts of Severus out with another witch. Perhaps that was what he had wanted to tell her, that he had thought about what he wanted, and he had moved on. "Whatever it is will pass, I'm sure."

"Everything does," Pomona said philosophically.

"I'd better be going. I need to meet Laura," Poppy said.

On her way up to the library, Poppy considered her reaction to Pomona's news that Severus had left the pub with Helena Benetti. They were probably just both leaving at the same time. Perhaps he saw her home afterward. It would have been a civil gesture, nothing more. Suddenly she remembered the two riders whom she and Quin had seen in the sky that night as she was walking him down to the gates. Just coincidence . . . many people had broomsticks and rode them at night, returning home after visiting family or after a long day of work. And even if it had been Helena and Severus, that didn't mean anything. It certainly didn't imply that they were warming the sheets together. And if they were, well, that was a good thing for Severus, Poppy told herself. He should have more experience with witches...with nice ones, not like Bella, who had abused him when he was a young man just out of school. And he should be with younger witches, ones of appropriate age and temperament. It would be good for him.

Poppy sighed. Regardless of any other factors, she had to acknowledge that she was simply too old for Severus by a good fifteen or twenty years. She should be glad they had even had a fling, that he had thought to look at her twice, and to be so good to her, as well. He should find a nice young witch, and she should be happy for him.

There was no point in thinking about it. She had told him it was best if they took a break, and if that break meant that they returned permanently to their usual friendly collegiality, that was the way things should be, and she certainly shouldn't wish for anything else. It had been a sheer fluke that they had ever been intimate, in any case. She should simply pretend it had never happened, Poppy told herself firmly. She could continue seeing Quin casually. That would be nice.

No matter how nice the prospect might be, the thought of seeing Quin more frequently didn't cheer her. Not that she didn't want to see Quin again, but it was no trade for giving up Severus. Besides, she and Quin would always be friends, regardless of whether she was in a relationship with someone else or not. Not, of course, that she would have physical relations with Quin if she were seeing another wizard. That was something that Poppy simply would never do, no matter how attractive some other wizard was. If she wanted to have an intimate, sexual relationship with another man that much that she had to fight the temptation, then that meant that the relationship she was in either needed a great deal of work and attention or simply needed to come to an end. She had never been in such a position before, but she knew what she could live with and what she couldn't live with. Cheating was something she knew that she couldn't live with. Revulsion would overwhelm any temptation. That was a part of her Hufflepuff nature.

Loyalty and adherence to commitment were essential qualities in a Hufflepuff...not inviolable or perfect in all members of the House, of course, but very strong ones. Even Pomona, for all her occasional flightiness and indecision, had never cheated on Filius. Of course, it also was quite likely that she would never broadcast it if she had cheated, but Poppy didn't believe Pomona ever would have. That sense of commitment was likely one reason that Pomona had broken up with Filius that first time all those years ago, after they had only been together for a few months...she had become bored and wanted to see someone new. Pomona had mistaken the uncertainty and desperation in her previous relationships for excitement and passion. She hadn't been used to being treated as well as Filius treated her, either. Although Pomona had wanted devotion and loyalty from a wizard she was with, there was some part of her that had foolishly distrusted Filius's devotion, as it seemed so freely given and easily won.

The couple eventually overcame their initial problems, and Pomona learned that a relationship didn't have to be volatile or uncertain in order to be exciting, and now the two were nearly inseparable. Poppy sometimes wished that she and Murdoch had done the same all those years ago, that they had resolved their disagreements and she had married him. But that would have meant compromise on her part, not on his, and that compromise would have meant her leaving Hogwarts. Perhaps her life would have been wonderful if she had married Murdoch and gone to work in his apothecary or at St. Giles, but she loved the life she had made at Hogwarts, and she wouldn't indulge in any regrets about what was long past and beyond changing.

As she pushed open the door to the library, Poppy felt another twinge of regret, though, for a more recent loss. She shoved it aside forcefully. Telling Severus that they should take a break had been the right thing to do, she told herself once more. The very fact that he might be seeing another witch was testament to the truth of it. And the fact that she weren't seeing anyone else spoke loudly to the fact that it was better for her, too. She would have become too attached to him. Good to have nipped it in the bud.

Laura helped Poppy find the materials she was looking for on the effects of trauma on children and teenagers...all Muggle sources, since the wizarding materials on that were sparse and derivative from the Muggle work...and Poppy brought them over to a table next to one of the large windows. That first day of spring was sunny and bright, and Poppy was hopeful that boded well for a nice spring. Hard to believe that on that day two years before, Albus Dumbledore had been declared dead and they had been preparing for his funeral.

She gazed out the window, recalling the white tomb that had been erected around the Transfigured corpse, able to see it there on the lawn in her mind's eye. She had grieved Albus then, and still was grieving him on the day she learned that he hadn't died. That had been a shock, a trauma of sorts, though certainly good news.

Poppy's attention was caught by the sight of Severus walking across the grounds toward the gates. Of course, she remembered: he had said he would be gone from the castle that morning. Something seemed different about him, and it took her a moment to realise that it was his clothing. Poppy stepped closer to the window.

Severus wasn't wearing a long robe, a long cape, or even a long coat. Not only that, but he wasn't wearing one of the longer suit jackets that he affected during the school year, most of which were almost like an old-fashioned frockcoat in appearance. She couldn't tell precisely what he was wearing, but his black jacket was short, coming just to his waist, and below the jacket were close-fitting black trousers, possibly jeans. Poppy didn't think she'd ever seen Severus dressed that way, even when he was a student, although she presumed that when he was away from school, he dressed differently. She had seen him in a Muggle suit a few times, always a conservative black suit with a white shirt and a Slytherin House green and silver striped tie. He looked like an undertaker in it, she'd thought the first time she saw him in it. She'd even seen him in fancy dress on the rare occasion. But never casually dressed in Muggle-wear.

He looked quite fine, striding down the drive, filled with vitality and intensity, ignoring the stares of the students who had stopped tossing a Quaffle around to watch Severus Snape in Muggle casual dress, and they continued to watch as he approached the gates and raised his hand, opening them with a mere flick of his finger. A tingle passed through Poppy, all the way down to her crux. What power Severus had in that finger, and what pleasure he had brought her with it.

As he reached the now-open gate, Severus paused and looked over his shoulder, back up at the castle toward the window where she stood watching. Poppy stepped back

and turned away quickly. He couldn't see her in the daylight, she was certain; the leaded glass of the library windows gave too great a glare in the sunshine to allow someone outside to see in unless the person was much closer than she had been standing. Still, she had the feeling that he had known that she was there watching him.

She didn't know whether that was wishful thinking or not.

Poppy sat back down to her reading, and focussed on that for the next hour, making copies of information she found particularly helpful. Laura was increasing the size of the Muggle section of the library, beginning with the sciences and medicine, two of her own interests, but there still was relatively little available. Poppy thought that she might have to make a trip into either Edinburgh or London and go to a Muggle library. She disliked that idea, though. The Muggle world was becoming increasingly confusing to navigate, she found, with all the new apparatuses and computers. Trying to cope with it all made her feel like a child...and an unintelligent one, at that; half the time, she didn't even know how to formulate the proper questions to ask how to operate the machinery that the Muggles used so quickly and easily every day. Even using the Tube was more complicated than it had been when she was a young witch living in London in the early fifties, although she had managed to adapt to the changes to the transit system over the years. It would be easier, she thought, to simply go to one of the larger Muggle bookshops and purchase new books using the Hogwarts Muggle credit card. Gladys Glyndwr could probably give her copies of any Muggle journal articles she thought worth reading. No, no point in struggling with the Muggle world of library identity cards, copier machinery, and computerised indexes, she decided.

Poppy was just gathering together her parchments and the two books that she was going to borrow when a large Eagle Owl flew up to the window and began rapping on the glass. Owls were discouraged in the library, Poppy knew, but she opened the window, anyway. The impressive owl hopped from the window ledge to the sill and gave a screech, looking up at Poppy. For her, then.

"Sorry I haven't any treats, but if you go to the Owlery, you'll probably find some," she said, taking the letter from the bird.

Poppy smiled when she saw the seal, emerald green wax impressed with the image of a cup with cracks running through it. Quin. She closed the window and broke the seal. Her smile grew. Just what she needed. A night out with Quin.

Quickly, she sat back down, found a piece of fresh parchment, and scrawled her reply. She wished she hadn't sent the bird on its way, but she had, so she hastened to the Owlery, hoping to catch it or to find another fast bird to deliver her response.

The first day of spring was a mild one, and there were several groups of students out enjoying the fresh air that morning. Severus ignored their stares, but worked to avoid glancing at the spot where the white tomb had once stood, erected just a few days after Dumbledore had apparently succumbed to a lengthy illness. Severus was glad the tomb was gone, and the reason for it, but on this beautiful morning, it was unsettling to remember the terrible grief, guilt, and anger he had felt on that same day two years before. He was alive and Dumbledore was alive, and now he was very glad...and very relieved...that he had not survived the war to live in a world without the old wizard, as irritating as Dumbledore might sometimes be. Severus supposed that he could be irritating, himself. More than irritating.

He remembered Poppy and her hurt. He had hoped to make it up to her . . . perhaps he still could. She must be in the library at that moment, working. Reflexively, as he reached the gate, he looked back up at the castle toward the library, wondering whether Poppy could see him from the library windows, and whether he should have gone to the library before leaving the castle . . . but he prized punctuality, and he was due at Helena's flat in a few minutes. He stepped through the gate, exiting the grounds, and Disapparated for Bog End.

Severus knocked briskly on Helena's door. He hadn't brought his own broomstick with him, which he hoped was as she expected. His broom was a twelve-year old Comet, something that Albus had given him one Christmas. Perfectly serviceable, and quite a good broom when he first got it, but Severus thought that the worst broom in Helena's cupboard had to be better than the one he had. Besides, she was going to test the new Nimbus Victory, after which she was going to show him a few tricks on the Thunderbolt. He wouldn't need an additional broomstick.

The door opened, and Helena looked up at him with a bright smile on her face. "Good morning, Severus! You're punctual! I was just having a cup of coffee, would you like some?"

He nodded and stepped in. "Thank you, it smells good." He sat at her kitchen table as she poured his coffee. "It's a nice day, but a bit windy."

"That will help me test the Victory at high altitudes," she said. "I think that's one area where they're going to have to work on the stability charms if they really want this to be a first-class broomstick. Milk or cream?"

"Cream. Are these your notes on the earlier test flights you've made?" Severus asked, gesturing toward a disorderly pile of ruled paper at other the end of the table.

"Yes...and they're not the mess they may seem to be. I've just been going over them. I have to write this report up for the company, and that's going to be a job. I should have gotten an earlier start, but . . ." She shrugged. "It'll be done on time. I'm glad I haven't any duties up at the school for the next couple days, though!"

"I presume you received my owl about the new security precautions."

"Yes. Thanks. I won't be up to the castle until Tuesday evening, though, when I have dinner duty in the Great Hall." She hesitated. "Are you in charge of drawing up the schedules?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. He could sense a favour waiting to be asked of him. "Yes."

"Could I ask that, if possible, I not be given duty on Tuesday nights any longer, at least for a while? Or Thursdays? I've been doing a yoga course in Inverness on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I'm always late on Tuesday. I know it's not a high priority, but..."

"Of course. If you have conflicting plans, let me know in advance. I can't guarantee that I can always accommodate people, but I try. And I don't have duty this Tuesday evening, so if you wish, I will take yours, and you can take one of mine at some point. And I will make changes to the schedule for the upcoming weeks and redistribute them at next Wednesday's staff meeting."

Helena smiled her brilliant smile, her blue eyes lighting up. "Would you? Oh, thank you! I am really enjoying it, but I get dirty looks when I walk in late while everyone's doing the opening meditation."

"If they were in a truly meditative state, they would be able to ignore you, or not even notice you," Severus said.

"Yes, I suppose, but we're not very advanced," Helena said. "I can't blame them. It must be irritating."

"Hmph." Severus finished his coffee.

"Let me just get our brooms, and we can be off, then!" Helena said, swishing her wand to deposit their coffee cups in the sink. "If you'll grab that basket, it has our lunch in it."

The covered basket had a long, wide leather strap, and was slightly concave on one side. Severus slung it across his chest, then shifted it so the basket hung at his back.

When they stepped out the door, Helena looked him up and down. Black leather jacket, soft black woollen jersey, a starched white collar peeking out from beneath it, black jeans, and black dragonhide boots. "You're still in black, but this look suits you. And you carry it off better than most British wizards I've met...you look normal. What I mean is..."

"I am aware of what you mean. I do not know whether some wizards don't have eyes in their heads or whether some variety of brain fog overcomes their good sense when they dress Muggle, but some of them choose the most atrocious combinations. I was raised in a Muggle neighbourhood, however, and my father was a Muggle. I went to

Muggle school before I came to Hogwarts. I am well-acquainted with Muggle habits. In addition, it is usually older generations who have more trouble with Muggle dress. Perhaps changing styles over the decades confuses them."

"Oh, I see." She thought for a moment. "You're a half-blood, then. I thought that the Death Eaters were all about purity of blood."

"You must know that Riddle was a half-blood."

"Yes. I presumed that it was some form of self-hatred that led him to his extreme views about racial purity."

"Likely...and not only hatred for his Muggle ancestry. He hated purebloods, too. He never wanted to be one of them. He wanted to have the pureblood world at his feet. He believed himself better than them all, and he blamed them for the circumstances in which he grew up. He wasn't particularly logical in his beliefs, although they had a kind of peculiar internal order to them, as long as you didn't think too much about them."

Helena shivered visibly. "Sociopaths are like that, I guess. They have a psychopathic logic that doesn't make sense to the rest of us." She looked up at him, then quickly looked away. "Let's get the flight tests over."

Severus knew that look in her eyes; he had seen it many times before when people remembered that he had been a Death Eater. A killer in the Dark Lord's army, a volunteer in service to the Dark. Merciless and without empathy. And she would be right. He had been such a Death Eater at one time. It was an undeserved grace that he had received a second chance and an opportunity to reclaim his soul and to recover his long-buried conscience. And it was a grace born of guilt: guilt for Lily's death, for his betrayal of her. Always would his own redemption be inextricably bound up with his guilt.

He had heard that redemption washes away guilt, but it did not, not in his case, neither the responsibility for the guilty deed nor the debt incurred by it, and it certainly did not wash away the sense of having wronged someone nor the remorse that now accompanied that sense. Redemption was about the future, Severus suddenly realised, and about reaching beyond that moment of wrong-doing and having the opportunity to do something new, not being mired in past transgressions. Redemption gave him a new future and the possibility for change. Whatever had passed through Helena's mind when she had remembered that he had been a Death Eater, he would have to try to remember that he was not the psychopathic Death Eater she might imagine...his nightmares of his own evil deeds notwithstanding.

"Did you have any place in mind?" Severus asked as he mounted the Thunderbolt and hovered beside her.

"Just to the south of here, there's a valley that's nice. We could have our lunch there, too, if you like."

"That's the plan, then," Severus said with a nod.

They took off, Severus following Helena south a few miles. When they reached the valley, they landed and Helena handed Severus a small pad and a retractable pen.

"Would you mind taking notes for me? It will go faster. I'll let you know what to record."

"Of course."

"And I have a feeling that given the wind, it will be a bumpy test. I'm going to push the Victory to its limits, so don't be alarmed if the broom seems unstable. Unless I actually fall off or the broom loses all its charms and plummets toward the ground, just stand by...no need to do anything."

Severus nodded.

Helena was right: the broom didn't do well at high altitudes. Once she pushed it up beyond a gentle cruising speed, the tail would shimmy, and in sharp turns, it seemed to lose all its stability. Helena always quickly regained control, however, and at intervals, she would fly over to Severus and tell him what to write in her notepad. It was somewhat tedious after a while, but Severus amused himself by playing with the Thunderbolt, taking it up and down, spinning in place, flying in circles, once even attempting to fly backward...though he nearly stalled, and he didn't try it again...always, though, with one eye on Helena, just in case she did lose control of the new broomstick or was thrown off. He took a few notes of his own, as well, based upon his observations, but when she stopped and told him just one final speed test, then they'd be finished, Severus was glad.

Severus watched as Helena climbed higher on her test broom, higher than she'd flown before, and a few hundred feet higher than the top of the highest mountain. He shivered in sympathy for her; it had to be colder at that altitude, the air thinner, and the wind, sharper. He rose higher himself in order to monitor her better, but although the Victory began to shake as Helena reached the top speed, it didn't balk or stall. Nonetheless, Helena's knuckles were white when she drifted back down to him, and Severus didn't think it was merely from the cold.

"Definitely needs more work. If I hadn't retuned the stabilising charms myself, the broomstick would certainly have stalled."

"You were much higher than most people fly, though, and faster, too," Severus pointed out as they slowly flew lower, following a burn to the north end of the valley.

"It's supposed to be their new top-of-the-line model, though," Helena said. "My granddad has a thirty-year old Nimbus one thousand that I could push more than this one. Of course, he's taken good care of it over the years and tweaked its charms, but still, for the money they're asking and the amount of work they supposedly put into its design, the Victory will be a disaster for them if they don't make some changes. Very sloppy design. Not at all up to their usual standard."

"What are you recommending?" Severus asked. He knew next to nothing about how modern broomsticks were made. It was an art, though, and perhaps it was simply a matter of having different witches and wizards casting the charms.

"They need to change the way the charms are layered, I believe," Helena replied, "and they need to interlace the stabilising charms with the others by recasting them as they lay down each of the new ones."

"I see. Rather like layering wards and weaving your base ward through all the others," Severus said.

"Precisely." She nodded toward an open area to the right of the stream. "Picnic there?"

Severus indicated his agreement by banking and heading toward the spot.

Helena hopped lightly from the broom before it had even come to a full stop. "I'd like to take a minute to record my final notes while it's fresh in my mind," she said.

Severus handed her the notepad. "I'll set up the picnic."

"Good...there's a few kinds of sandwiches, including something called 'coronation chicken,' but which just looks like plain old chicken salad to me. Madam Puddifoot assured me it's something special, though. And there's a few different things to drink. I wasn't sure what you'd like, but I figured you wouldn't care for iced tea"...she laughed at Severus's expression..."so there's butterbeer, lemonade, and a big thermos of hot coffee."

As Helena sat on a rock and made notes, Severus took a lightweight blanket from the basket and spread it on the ground. Before he set out any of their lunch, he cast a warming charm over the blanket, then added an Impervius to keep any damp from seeping through the cloth. The sandwiches were wrapped in parchment, and each was marked to indicate what was in it. Severus presumed that "cc" was coronation chicken, "rb" was roast beef, and "egg" was obviously egg salad of some kind. As Severus finished setting out their lunch, including a box that likely contained their dessert, Helena put her notepad away in the pouch at her waist.

"Lovely," Helena said as she gracefully sat cross-legged on the blanket. "It was cold up there. It's nice to have a cozy warming charm." She rubbed her hands together briskly. "I had been going to make our lunch myself, but I found I didn't have the time to do it the way I would have liked. Hope you don't mind Puddifoot's."

"As long as I don't need to actually eat in the café itself, I can enjoy the food from there," Severus replied. "What kind of sandwich would you like?"

"I thought that to start, I'd try a half of this supposedly special chicken salad sandwich," Helena said.

Severus handed her a wrapped sandwich, and when she'd taken half, he said, "Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead, have the other half. I think there's another there if we want it."

Severus bit into the sandwich. It was on a soft potato bread that was a pleasant backdrop for the curried chicken salad. Not bad. It had nuts and halved grapes in it. He supposed that was what made Puddifoot claim it was special.

"It's all right," Helena said. "It could do with a bit more bite to it, though. D'you have the coffee over there? I could use a hot drink."

As they ate their picnic lunch, Severus finishing his chicken sandwich and moving on to the roast beef, he thought that it was a good and peaceful day, and he felt well, despite all that had gone wrong in his life lately, everything from the fiasco with Hermione the other evening, to still having moved no further with Poppy, to having had to inform Draco that his father had been the victim in the most recent attack on former Death Eaters. Draco had looked more stunned than Severus had anticipated, but once he had been reassured that his mother had been at work at the time, he had only wanted to know where she was and how he could reach her. He hadn't seemed to care that Lucius was a patient in St. Mungo's. The Headmistress had made arrangements for him to visit his mother over the weekend, and he wouldn't be back until Monday morning. Severus wondered if he would visit his father, as well.

As if she were reading his thoughts, Helena asked, "So, the Death Eater who was burned out the other day, was he a friend of yours?"

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"I just meant..."

"No. I knew him. I wish him no ill, but he was . . . No. He is not a friend."

"I didn't mean any offence. I was just curious. And if he had been a friend, I would have offered you my sympathy."

Severus sighed. "It is complicated. I have known him for a long time. At one point, I did believe he was a friend. But I have him to thank for making it so easy for me to join . . . to join Riddle's group."

"To blame, you mean."

Severus shook his head. "No. I'm the only one to blame for that. However easy he made it, with introductions, recommendations, making me feel valued, or however easy others made it for me by . . . by taking up against me, I only have myself to blame."

"Taking up against you?" Helena looked puzzled.

He shrugged. "That's the way it felt to me. I was never the golden-haired boy at school, you know. But L, the wizard in question is not a friend. An acquaintance of long-standing, yes. And he did do me a good turn occasionally, though I always paid double for it."

"The *Prophet* said you were young when you joined, just out of school," Helena said questioningly.

"Yes. The week after the Leaving Feast." The week after the Leaving Feast, he was at a party in his honour, surrounded by powerful wizards and witches who welcomed him into their ranks, and they topped off the party with some Muggle-baiting and some imaginative vandalism at Diagon Alley's owl shop and the Owl Post Office. He'd been sick the next day, and less from drink too much taken than from the memory of bits of owls scattered over the street and pavement. Most of the owls had escaped through the broken windows or the hole in the Post Office roof, but some had not. It had tempted him to drink more, but he had simply spent the day practising Occlusion exercises. By bedtime, the memory was distant, emotionless, and unreal. He became very good at Occluding, hiding his memories and his feelings even from himself.

Severus set down his mug of coffee and rolled over onto his back. He didn't Occlude, but he focussed on the strips of clouds grazing the hills and tried not to think at all.

"Sorry, Severus. You probably don't want to talk about it."

"No, I don't," he said, his voice a rough whisper. One of the clouds reminded him of Poppy's silhouette as she lay beside him in bed. Poppy . . . she had only the slightest inkling of what he was, what he had done. He swallowed.

"I am sorry," Helena's voice was soft, but closer. She had moved to sit beside his head. "I can imagine it's something you prefer not to think about. But sometimes . . . sometimes I feel as though it's the big purple elephant in the middle of the room, you know? Except that everyone else in the room has gotten used to it. They know how to step around it, through its legs, avoid its trunk, and they don't even really see it anymore. I'm the new girl. I still keep seeing it. Not all of the time; most of the time, I just see you, but sometimes I remember and I'm curious. The *Prophet* articles have only confused me and raised more questions than they answered."

"I'll give you the short version of the story, then. With a little more than the *Prophet* has been officially given by any of us, but if I find it in their next issue..."

"No, don't say anything, then. I wouldn't want you ever to think I'd told anyone. Best way to keep that from happening is for me not to know. I'm not a cat; I won't die of curiosity."

Severus shifted his gaze from the clouds to Helena's face. "You're certain."

"Yes. As far as I'm concerned, anyway, you're the friend who let me cry on his shoulder when I needed it. Anything else . . ." She shrugged. "It would be interesting to me, but not vital to me or to our friendship."

Severus nodded, looking up at her. She really was truly beautiful. It was not simply that her features were in near-perfect proportion, her blue eyes so very bright set against her darker skin, her straight black hair so glossy and lovely, but that she emanated warmth and life. He gave her a slight smile. "So if you're not a cat, what are you?"

"What?"

"Hermione Granger tells me that she's doing Animagus exercises with you. What animal are you?"

Helena laughed. "I see...can you guess? Probably not!"

"Hmm, something sharp and quick," Severus said. "A fox?"

Helena laughed again. "No, not a fox."

Severus tried to think of swift-moving North American animals. "A coyote?"

"Nope. Nothing canine."

"A squirrel?"

She shook her head.

"An eagle?"

"You're getting a bit warmer," she said.

"A flying creature of some kind, then," Severus said.

"Yes, and I really doubt you'll get it," Helena said. "I'll show you."

She rolled up onto her knees, and when she transformed, she seemed to curl into herself and almost disappear. Severus gaped. Then he blinked. Helena rose straight up, then flew forward with a great buzzing of wings. Had he not been so close, he might have thought her to be a large insect of some kind, but she was a bird. A hummingbird. A brilliantly coloured, swift-moving, utterly amazing hummingbird. He laughed, delighted. He'd never seen one before.

"That's marvellous!"

Helena flew around him as Severus sat up, newly energised by his wonder at her form. He watched her incredulously as she zipped about, up and down, circling his head, and then just hovering in front of him.

Severus laughed again. "I thought you were amazing on a broomstick, but that was nothing!"

Helena rose up, then with a pop, smoothly transformed back to her ordinary form. She grinned at him as she folded her legs under her. "Liked it, eh?"

"Very much."

"You're not an Animagus?"

Severus shook his head. "No. I doubt I have the aptitude, and even if I had, I never had the time for it. I certainly couldn't have found a form without training, and at the time in my life when I might have had interest in it, there was no one who could train me. It's not a common skill here."

"What's your Patronus? A person's Patronus is often an indicator of what their Animagus form might be, although they're not always identical."

Severus remembered Poppy smiling at him, her head resting beside his on his pillow, flushed and happy from making love with him. He drew his wand from his inner jacket pocket and quickly cast a Patronus. He surprised himself as it flew, almost fully material, from the end of his wand. He had never been able to cast a nonverbal Patronus before, and he had done it without even thinking about it.

"Oh, it's wonderful! A panther of some kind, yes?" Helena said, watching the large feline as Severus directed it around them, until finally, he let it fly away into the clouds and disappear.

"Indeed. It was not always that, however. I used to cast a deer. A doe, actually."

"Huh. That's interesting...did it change when you became an adult? Deer as a teen, panther when you grew up?"

"No, much later than that. I didn't learn to cast a Patronus until I was twenty-one."

"So it wasn't when you joined the Order of the Phoenix, either," Helena said thoughtfully.

"No. It was recent."

"After the war, then?"

"No, during the final year of it."

"Interesting . . . If you were an Animagus, then, you might be some kind of cat."

Severus nodded. "I suppose that's likely. There are worse forms, more inconvenient ones, certainly. I've always thought it would be particularly nasty to go to all the work of becoming an Animagus only to discover you were a fish. I wouldn't like that at all."

"Oh, it could be fun, but I see how it could be limiting. And dangerous." Helena opened the box and pulled out a biscuit. "Cookie, Severus?"

"Hmm? Yes, perhaps I'll have one." He waved his hand and warmed up his coffee. One good thing about the duelling practice with Filius: his wandless magic was becoming much more precise...when he wasn't distracted holding a naked witch in his arms, anyway, Severus thought, remembering Poppy's broken door. He helped himself to a chocolate biscuit with a rich, creamy vanilla filling. It was sweeter than he normally liked, but nice with the black coffee.

Helena licked some cream from her fingertips. "My Great-uncle Leon is what you might call a Multianimorphmagus in this country, or a shapeshifter. He has more than one form he can take."

"Really? I've heard of that, but I didn't know there was actually anyone alive who could do it."

"There aren't many. It's more of a natural talent than a learned skill, although he worked at it to expand the number of different creatures he can manifest. He can even change his human form, within limits, a bit like a Metamorphmagus."

"That could be convenient," Severus said, thinking of the situations he could have extricated himself from if he'd had such skills.

Helena shrugged. "It's kind of a parlour trick for him, you know? But as you say, it can be convenient."

"He could have been useful during the war," Severus said.

"Uncle Leon probably would have helped if he'd been asked, but it took your Ministry a very long time to recognise the danger, and we really didn't know anything about the Order of the Phoenix back home. Just as well; I think Aunt Evie, his wife, wouldn't have been very pleased."

"Just as well, as you say," Severus agreed.

"So, are you ready for your one-witch broomstick rodeo, or do you have to get back to Hogwarts?" Helena asked.

"I don't need to get back till later this afternoon. I'd enjoy seeing the Thunderbolt ridden by someone who really knows what she's doing," Severus said. She was good and she knew it, so there was no point in pretending that he didn't appreciate her skill.

Helena grinned. "Okay, then! I'll wait to have any more of these cookies...flying doesn't usually give me indigestion, but it's not as much fun doing backward loops on a full stomach!" She stood up and held out her hand; the Thunderbolt leapt into her grasp. "You might want to take the other broom and fly up over there somewhere to watch," she said, pointing to the hillside across from them. "I think you'd have a better view from there."

Severus nodded and Summoned the other broom.

"Don't let anyone know I let you ride the Victory," Helena said. "Technically, I'm the only one who's supposed to ride it during this testing phase."

"Right. My lips are sealed."

"Ready? I'll just warm up a bit now, then when I see you're settled, I'll do a few little tricks for you."

Helena shot almost straight up into the air, and Severus took off for the hillside at a more leisurely speed, looking for a spot from which he could watch his private broomstick rodeo show.

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-Six: Broomstick Rodeo

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Severus gets a one-woman broomstick rodeo show.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Helena Benetti, Gareth McGonagall

Chapter Sixty-Six: Broomstick Rodeo

Chapter 67 of 118

Sunday, 21 March 1999. Severus gets a one-woman broomstick rodeo show. He later meets Gareth in Hogsmeade.



Chapter Sixty-Six: Broomstick Rodeo

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Severus watched, impressed, as Helena flew past him, the broomstick spinning her as she flew forward. He had thought it was quite something when she took the Thunderbolt into a backwards double roll and then immediately brought it into a diving corkscrew, but this was almost beyond belief. He was surprised that she wasn't dizzy.

Helena took the broomstick out of its spin into a single roll, and then flew up and around, making one long loop. When she reached the apex of the second large loop, Severus's heart leapt into his throat as she went into a sloth position, something most riders wouldn't dare even when flying in a straight line. He assumed that the Thunderbolt's stirrup made it a slightly less risky manoeuvre than usual.

As the broom completed its circle, Helena remounted. This time, she brought the broom into a low, level path, and she stretched out along its curved length, her feet in the stirrups but her arms outstretched as though she was about to skim a lake. When she reached the end of the course she'd been flying, she sat up and turned, flying back towards him, but picking up both altitude and speed. By the time she passed Severus again, she seemed only a dark speck against the white clouds. Severus found himself digging his nails into his palms as Helena appeared to plummet toward the earth, and he actually drew his wand, but it was clear from her position on the broom that she was fully in control of it, and he held his breath as her dive became a Wronski feint, and she pulled up sharply just before she hit the ground. He had never seen a Wronski feint performed from such an altitude before.

Helena flew toward him, her face glowing from the exhilaration. "One more demonstration of the Thunderbolt's capabilities, then I need some more of those chocolate cookies," she said with a laugh. "A speed test."

Severus nodded and watched her fly a few hundred yards to his right. He watched as Helena cast a charm on the handle that would measure and record the broomstick's top speed, then she took off, accelerating more quickly than he'd ever seen before. She flew past him, almost a blur, still accelerating. She maintained her top speed for a few seconds, then slowed and stopped. Severus saw her pull her notepad from her pouch and make a few notes, then she turned and flew back toward him.

She grinned at him and waved. "My best speed on this thing yet," she called.

Helena set down beside him and let out a breath. "Whew, that was something. I reached one forty-nine at my top speed, four miles an hour better than I've managed before. Must be my day!"

"That was very impressive," Severus said. "I have to admit, though, I was a little nervous when you went into that dive. I was afraid I'd be scraping your remains from the rocks to send home in an envelope! Isn't it frightening to see the ground coming toward you that fast?"

"Nah, I've done that one a thousand times," Helena said breezily. "It's only scary the first nine hundred or so!"

Severus chuckled. "So, what about those 'cookies' you wanted?"

"I'd offer to race you down, but I think I'll give the Thunderbolt back to you and take the Victory," Helena replied, trading brooms with him. "I'm starving. That's one of the

few drawbacks of flying a cored broom at its full capacity...it draws a lot more on your own magic. You don't notice it when just cruising around, but race it or do highspeed twists, corkscrews, spirals, and stuff, and you really feel it."

The two flew back down to their picnic site, and Severus recast the warming charm on the blanket.

"Do you do that sort of thing often?" Severus asked as he unwrapped the egg and olive sandwich.

"Not very much anymore. I used to do the rodeos at home...from Whiteshell to Death Valley, and a number of places in between." Helena paused to take a bite of her biscuit and a swallow of coffee. "My favourite was always Area Fifty-One...Efronville, it used to be, but now they just call it like the Muggles do. It's one of the biggest wizarding communities in the U.S., and they have a week-long jamboree and rodeo every January. Grandpa Frank used to bring me and my cousins every year. I started riding in that one when I was twelve. I won the Thunderbolt that way. Not at the Area Fifty-One jamboree, though; at a competition in Little Boulder in Colorado. Best overall in the under-seventeens back in ninety-one."

"You've travelled a lot?"

"A fair amount, especially compared to many British witches and wizards I've met, but a lot of that was after I left school and was travelling with my team. But I've been to all of the wizarding towns in Canada and the U.S., and to a lot of the major wizarding districts in the larger Muggle cities, so I've seen quite a bit of North America, and when I joined Sweetwater, we did an exhibition tour of Central and South America, so I've been to Chile, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Mexico. I have to confess that because of the nature of the tour, I didn't get to see much of the countries, unfortunately, just the cities that hosted us. Then Viktor and I travelled around Eastern Europe. That was really interesting, too. Very different from home. What about you?"

"I haven't travelled much, myself. I've hardly even been out of the U.K., aside from a trip to Helsinki about a decade ago for a Potions conference Dumbledore sent me to. And a couple of trips to Poland . . . before I joined the Order. But those trips weren't pleasure jaunts by any stretch of the imagination."

"You were in China somewhere a couple years ago. It was in the papers. When Professor McGonagall was so sick."

"Oh, that." Severus flushed.

"That must have been interesting, even if it was just for a couple days. Mongolia, wasn't it?"

Severus took the final bite of his egg and olive sandwich and chewed, considering what he should tell her. He didn't want to lie to her. Too many years of lying to everyone. And she seemed to see him as a friend and hadn't pressed him for information about his time as a Death Eater. He swallowed his sandwich.

"I can't talk about it, but that wasn't me. It wasn't I who went to Mongolia. We had to make it appear that way."

"Oh! For the Order?"

"I can't talk about it, and you shouldn't say anything to anyone. I shouldn't have even told you that. Almost no one knows." He looked at her seriously, hoping he could trust her and that he hadn't made a colossal error in judgment.

"Right. So you found your time in Mongolia consumed with gathering potions ingredients, and you didn't really notice anything else, right?" She grinned at him.

Severus nodded. "That sounds good. Thanks for understanding."

"It must be hard, having so many secrets you can't share with anyone, keeping your cover stories straight."

Severus shrugged. "I am used to it. And as time goes on, I believe I will notice it less. Fewer people will ask any awkward questions. There will be other things to talk about."

"Yeah, I suppose. So, have you ever been to a wizarding rodeo?" she asked.

Severus shook his head. "My father brought me to a Muggle circus once. The trapeze artists were wonderful. I thought that was as magical as anything my mother and grandfather could do." He sighed and looked away. His grandfather hadn't been at all pleased to hear him say that. Not at all. He was only five, but he should have known better than to say that within his grandfather's earshot. As a result, however, his grandfather had bought him a broomstick for his sixth birthday, just a child's small toy broom, but it flew, and he could fly like a wizard, not a mere Muggle. That hadn't been bad, even if he had hardly anywhere to fly it. He'd spent a lot of time hovering in his bedroom the first week he had it. The novelty of that wore off quickly, though, and he still thought the Muggle acrobats were wonderful. "Watching the acrobats was one of the things that made me want to learn to fly."

"I used to watch the birds and imagine being one. It seemed so freeing . . ." Helena said.

Severus looked at her speculatively. "I'm not an Animagus, but I do have one skill you might enjoy seeing. If you can keep a secret."

"Of course! I promise! Cross my heart and hope to die!"

"No need for that...it's not a secret worth dying for, but it's not one for sharing casually, either."

"Now you have me very curious!"

"All right." Severus stood. "I usually like to be up higher when I start, but that's more for the thrill of it than for any necessity."

Severus drew his wand, held it above himself, pointing up, nodded at Helena, then looked skyward and took off. At first it appeared to be simply a very strong Self-Levitation charm, but then as Helena watched, Severus flew forward, crossing the small stream, touched his feet lightly to the hill on the other side, and then he flew back and settled beside her. She just stared up at him.

"Well?" Severus asked.

Helena opened her mouth, then closed it. She opened it again. "That's incredible. I almost didn't believe my eyes." She laughed and fell backward onto the blanket. "My god, Severus, that was better than being an Animagus!"

"Not really. It's not as though it's a skill I can exercise very often, for one thing." Severus sat down next to her. "People would notice if I started flying about Hogwarts without benefit of a broomstick. That wouldn't do at all, although it would certainly be more convenient than having to walk everywhere. It also takes a lot of energy to fly without a Charmed object other than your wand, particularly to go any distance. Apparition doesn't take as much energy, and flying by broomstick is easier and faster. It's nice in an emergency, though."

"Can anyone learn?"

"I understand that it's very difficult, even impossible, for most witches and wizards, which is why it is almost unknown in this part of the world...and in your part of the world, too, apparently. You might be able to learn, though, since you seem to be a creature of the air."

Helena sighed. "I suppose I should stick to brooms and my Animagus form. As you say, it is not a very convenient skill, anyway."

"I worry that if the Ministry became more aware of this kind of flight, they might try to outlaw it or regulate it. I'd prefer it to remain . . . esoteric and unregulated. I am sure

they know it's possible, despite the fact that everyone is always taught that it's impossible to fly without the aid of a Charmed object, such as a broomstick. But like a couple of Dumbledore's other tricks, it's not impossible, merely extremely difficult and very rare."

"I gather those tricks of Dumbledore's are secrets, too."

"Some of them are fairly open secrets, but they are not open for casual discussion. You can talk to him about them though, if you like. He'd probably enjoy showing off a bit for you."

"He and the Headmistress are quite a couple," Helena observed.

"Indeed. A very impressive pair," Severus agreed.

"Did you want more to eat or drink?"

"Thanks, no. I should be getting back soon. I need to stop in Hogsmeade before I return to the castle."

"Right, and as enjoyable as this is, it's not getting my report written," Helena said, standing and beginning to wave her wand to pack up the remains of their lunch. "Thanks for making the chore go faster. I had a good time."

"I did, as well," Severus replied. "Thank you for showing me the capabilities of the Thunderbolt."

"It was fun. I hadn't ridden the Thunderbolt in quite a while, so it was fun to show it off," Helena said with a grin.

"What's its core?" Severus asked as he flicked his wand to fold the blanket and shrink it for her to pack away.

"Granian feather," Helena said. "Most Thunderbolts have a feather from some winged horse, though some of the earlier models had hippogriff feathers. The Zephyrs used to use harpy feathers, but as they are even harder and more dangerous to obtain than hippogriff feathers, Zephyr now uses griffin feathers almost exclusively. They're more stable than the older models, and less finicky about who rides them. The ones with harpy feathers often wouldn't carry wizards at all. Much more marketable with the griffin feathers."

The two packed up, this time, Helena carrying the basket. Severus said good-bye to her at her door. To his surprise, she reached up and kissed his cheek. He presumed she would not begin doing that as a matter of course when they were at Hogwarts; she seemed to have some sense.

Striding down the Hogsmeade high street, Severus considered his next task and how he could manage it on a Sunday afternoon. He was interrupted by a shout from the other side of the street.

"Snape! Hey, Severus!"

Severus looked over to see Gareth McGonagall loping toward him.

"Nice to run into you," Gareth said with a grin. "I was beginning to think I'd have to have lunch all on my lonesome today."

"I am afraid you will still have to, McGonagall. I already had an early lunch."

Gareth put a pout on his face. "Aww, can't you come keep me company?"

"I have an errand . . ."

"Can't it wait? I'm just grabbing a quick bite in the Broomsticks. Join me. Have a drink."

Severus hesitated, then nodded.

"What are you doing in Hogsmeade on a Sunday?" Gareth asked as they walked toward the pub. "And casually dressed, too! Nice jacket."

"I had a date, well, not a date, really. But I met someone."

"Ah ha! Good for you! And if I may ask, who was the lucky witch?"

"It wasn't a date-date. I assisted Ms Benetti in some broomstick trials, then we had lunch."

Gareth grinned. "Lucky you, Snape! Are you going to see her again?"

"Quite likely, as she works at Hogwarts," Severus said drily.

"You know what I mean!"

"She may be a friend," Severus said softly as they passed a couple on the street. "But that's all."

"A pity."

"Not really."

Gareth pushed the pub door open. "I didn't feel like cooking today, with Mum and Gluffy at the estate and Hermione at Weasley's, so I thought I'd just grab a bite here. Glad I ran into you."

The pub was fairly crowded, but they found a small table in a dark corner.

After they'd ordered, Gareth asked, "So are you thinking of dating other witches? If not Helena, someone else?"

Severus shook his head. "No."

"What happened with Hermione last night? She didn't say anything to me this morning except that she was going to the Burrow and not to expect her home until late. She seemed in a funny mood, though."

Severus looked around. He doubted anyone was eavesdropping, but he still disliked discussing his personal life in a public place. Casting the *Muffliato* would only draw attention to them, however. An irritating buzzing tended to do that.

"We talked. It was not entirely satisfactory for either of us." It was an outright humiliation for him, but he wasn't going to admit that to Gareth, at least not in the middle of the pub.

Gareth's lunch arrived, chicken and dumplings, and a pot of tea for Severus.

"Sorry to hear that, mate," Gareth said after the wait-witch had left.

Severus shrugged. "It was odd," he said softly. "I was displeased at first . . . I felt . . . rejected, injured, but then I felt relieved, actually, and even more relieved when I thought about it this morning. It is peculiar."

"Not really," Gareth said. At Severus's raised eyebrow, Gareth explained, keeping his voice low, "You have been torn about dating Hermione since before you even had your first date. I have no doubt that you care for her, that you enjoy her company, that you're grateful to her, that you even love her in some way, but when you talked about Poppy . . . it was different. I don't think you would have talked about Poppy that way if you were really as in love with Hermione as you believed."

Severus scowled. "You don't know what you're talking about, McGonagall."

"Maybe not." Gareth shrugged. "But I think you were relieved at least partly because you no longer would have to choose between them. It could even be that Hermione sensed some reluctance or indecision on your part. And if you were the one who initiated things last night and it went poorly . . . well, it may be that you didn't persist because a part of you would actually have preferred to be with Poppy. And now you are free, in your own mind, to consider being with someone else...with Poppy."

"Perhaps, but things aren't right with Poppy, either. She . . . she broke things off on Monday...Tuesday morning, actually. Even before I saw Hermione and things didn't go well with her. Poppy doesn't want to see me again."

Gareth grimaced. "I am very sorry about that, Severus."

"I behaved like an ass. And right after we'd had a wonderful evening, too. Things could have been going so well by now . . ."

"I know that syndrome myself. I find that just when things are going particularly well, I can do something to sabotage the relationship. It becomes too scary, I think, the idea that the relationship might have gone somewhere. But I think I've managed to get over that . . . now, the relationships just don't seem to go anywhere on their own." He gave a wry grin.

Severus shook his head. "It wasn't like that for me. I don't think so, anyway. Maybe I did react the way I did because we had had such a good night and I felt so close to her, but it was because . . . because . . . I don't know." He sighed. He didn't want to go into with Gareth all of the ways he was fucked up, particularly not in public. "But I apologised, I tried to fix things, and that's actually when she broke things off. And it didn't matter that I'd apologised. She took it all as a sign we should break it off. She was kind about it, but the result was still not what I had wanted."

"Ah . . . so what are you going to do? You say you're just friends with Helena, but maybe that could work out, at least for a while. You two might hit it off. She seems sweet and fun, and she's very attractive."

"No. I am going to try to get Poppy to change her mind," Severus said quietly. "I want her to give me another chance."

Gareth set down his fork and reached for his beer. "I see. So, I presume that, being an exemplary Slytherin, you have a plan."

"Something of a plan, anyway. I really haven't much practice at this, only theoretical knowledge. I thought I'd start by asking her out to dinner tonight, someplace nice but not too extravagant, and bring her a little gift when I ask her."

"So that's your errand this afternoon. Getting a present."

Severus nodded. "On a Sunday, it's a challenge."

"There's Scrivenshaft's, I think they're open until four on Sundays these days, or there's Madam Puddifoot's. You could get her some little treat there. A nice sweet."

"That crossed my mind. Chocolates or something of the sort," Severus said. "I thought it might make her well-disposed toward me as well as demonstrate my intentions."

"You might have to be a little explicit with her, Snape. She's a bright witch, but she's no Slytherin. Don't be too oblique with her. And," Gareth said with a slightly harder look in his eyes, "don't trick her or use her. She's not the only one who would find that difficult to forgive."

"Lighten up, McGonagall," Severus said. "I care about her. I'm not about to . . . to abuse her trust. Not deliberately, anyway."

Gareth laughed. "Usually, I'm the one saying that to you. 'Lighten up, Snape!'" Gareth chuckled again. "All right. Want company, then? On your errand?"

"I would appreciate your perspective. You know her well. You might be able to suggest something she'd enjoy."

"Of course. Let's get going. I'll pay up...it's on me today, Snape."

Standing in Madam Puddifoot's, surrounded by a profusion of pink, Severus stared at the baked goods in the glass case in front of him. He had already selected a tin of specialty tea, avoiding the Earl Grey after Gareth informed him that Poppy wasn't fond of it, but he thought that some biscuits would go well with the tea and make it more of a gift. There were too many different kinds, though, and he couldn't decide.

"Why not a selection? Some of those small biscuits there," Gareth suggested, pointing at the pastel-coloured buttery shortbread biscuits on the bottom shelf. "And then you could add some others, something she might not ordinarily have at Hogwarts."

"Do you think she likes Florentines?" Severus asked, looking at the crispy wafers covered in dark chocolate.

"Who doesn't like Florentines? In fact, I think I'll buy some for myself. I'm going over to Melina and Brennan's tonight. We're going to watch some videos. A nice Muggle evening. I'll bring these with, and then maybe I can pick the first one," Gareth said with a grin. "Melina's big on romantic comedies, but I'm in the mood for something more lively today. The Florentines will soften her up!"

They stepped out of Puddifoot's with their purchases, and Gareth turned to Severus. "Want to come back to the house for a while? We could sample the Florentines."

"No. I want to get back to school."

"Just a cup of tea and a biscuit. Besides, I have something I want to discuss with you. A bit of Muggle business, you might say."

Severus shrugged. "All right, but I can't stay long."

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Some Muggle Business

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Gareth has some Muggle business to discuss with Severus. Harry shows up, and he's not a happy wizard.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Harry Potter, Gareth McGonagall

Author's Note: I'm in the process of revamping my WordPress blog, and the information on the various fics is now easier to find, I believe. I've created several new pages for the site, including one where you can find the tables of contents for *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, *Death's Dominion*, and *A Long Vernal Season*, and another with links leading to relevant information about the characters, spells, etc. I'm still tinkering with it, particularly with the look and feel, but I think it's going to be easier for people to navigate. (The link to the blog is [here](#) on my author's page.)

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Some Muggle Business

Chapter 68 of 118

Sunday, 21 March 1999. Gareth has some Muggle business to discuss with Severus. Harry shows up, and he's not a happy wizard.

Author's Note: Posting this a day earlier than I'd planned because I don't know if I'll have power or not once the winter storm hits my area...for the second time in less than a week. Hope you enjoy this instalment!



Chapter Sixty-Seven: Some Muggle Business

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Severus sipped his hot tea. It was the herbal tea that Gareth's mother made. It was a good blend, tangy and spicy, and he could understand why Gareth enjoyed it.

"Nice. Thank you," Severus said.

"Glad you like it." Gareth grinned. "I thought it might appeal to you once you gave it a chance."

Severus twitched a smile, remembering the first time Gareth had offered it to him and his own explosive reaction. "I was not as receptive earlier. Tell me, how does your mother continue to make it? Unless this is some left from when she lived on the island. Hermione told me that she doesn't visit the island."

Gareth shook his head. "She doesn't. Gluffy and I fetch what she needs, and some of the ingredients, we now buy. We dried a lot of berries last summer."

"I see." Severus took another swallow of tea. "And why doesn't she return to the island? Hermione wouldn't, or couldn't, say."

"She . . . it's . . . I don't know if you would understand."

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "Probably not. But I'm curious. Not that I understand why she'd want to return there, anyway. I'd think she'd be sick of it after all that time alone."

"She was never completely alone, not for very long periods, anyway. Gluffy lived with her. He would go to the estate and get supplies, visit his family, fetch any post for her, but he was never gone long. And it is a beautiful place." Gareth set down his cup and snapped one of the Florentines in half. "She was seeing things," he said softly. "Real things, maybe, but . . . it was a danger. To her."

"Seeing things?" Severus was puzzled. "You say they might be real, but you say it as though she was hallucinating."

"Not exactly." Gareth took a bite of his Florentine. When he had chewed and swallowed, he said, "There's a phenomenon there . . . you might find it difficult to believe. It's said that if you stand on a particular spot on the island and look west just as the sun sets, you can see the lost island of Avalon, Innis Ablach, but conditions have to be right for it. There are records of people who have seen it, going back for generations. Before Mum ever moved out there, Aunt Minerva had seen it several times, and Albus had seen it twice. Witches are more likely to be able to see it than wizards, according to the records."

"Have you seen it?"

"Once. Mum brought me up there every night for a couple of weeks when I was sixteen, trying to help me to see it. Finally, one night, I did. An island with three large hills. I thought I saw it, anyway, but maybe it was just the power of suggestion." He shrugged.

"But others have seen it. I don't see why it would worry you that she did. If it's not really an island, maybe it's some trick of the light on the clouds just as the sun sets, a reflection of the sea or the clouds into the atmosphere."

"It's not just that she could see it, and see it every evening at sunset, but that she saw *all of the time*, Severus. Whenever she looked for it, she could see it, not just at sunset."

"Still, living alone as she did, it's not surprising if she was able to . . . either to persuade herself that she could see it or to actually see it even when others couldn't," Severus said reasonably.

"She wanted to *go* there, Snape. She wanted to Apparate there. She said she could see fires, that there were people there. Gluffy would take her wand from her when she got into one of those moods. She . . . she later said that she didn't really believe the island was inhabited, but I think she said that more to calm us than because it was true." Gareth bit his lip and looked away. "I probably should have moved there myself after my NEWTs, or at least after my apprenticeship. But . . . I didn't object when she told me that she was happy there by herself and she wanted me to have a normal life, a life out amongst people."

"She was right. It wouldn't have been good for you," Severus said.

"She also said . . . she could see people."

"You mentioned that already."

"No, not on Avalon, on the island, on Eilean Tèarmunn. She said that . . . sometimes she saw the people who had lived there before...Tèarmunn used to have a small wizarding population of about seventy to eighty people, up through about the fifteenth century...and then it dwindled to just one or two families, but there've been witches and wizards living there for more than eight hundred years. But there have not been more than one or two people at a time in residence there for many decades now, more than one hundred years, I think. When Mum, Robert, Thea, the house-elves, and I were all there for that year, it was the most the island had seen in residence in a very long time, aside from brief holidays when Albus and Minerva might have guests. There are no other people there." Gareth sighed. "Anyway, Mum used to sometimes see people from long ago."

"Ghosts? That sounds quite plausible..." Severus began.

"Plausible if they *were* ghosts...and that is what she finally agreed they must be, but again, I believe that she said that only to assuage our fears for her mental health. But when she first spoke of them, she said that she saw them going about their daily lives, as though she was seeing into the past, into the past when they were alive and living there on that island. No one else has ever seen them, and Mum's never had any second sight or any talent at all for divination. She claimed to have stopped seeing them, though."

"But you didn't believe her."

Gareth shook his head. "It would have troubled me less if she had found any of this disturbing, herself...disturbing or at least peculiar...but she seemed so matter-of-fact about it."

"Why didn't you just remove her from the island? There must have been somewhere else...even in Amsterdam with Robert and Thea. She would have been unlikely to have become a target again if she were living there quietly, not drawing attention to herself."

"She wouldn't hear of it, and neither would Uncle Albus, once she'd talked to him about it. Aunt Minerva and I both tried to get her to move back with family, possibly with Robert...or even with Grandmother Siofre and Johannes. They would have had her, I'm sure, and Johannes has been a friend of hers for a long time. Mum wouldn't have had to go out amongst people, but she would have had company and been safe there. But after Uncle Albus sided with Mum, Aunt Minerva acquiesced, and Mum just stopped mentioning anything to me, though she obviously could still see Avalon all the time."

"Where is that island of yours, anyway?"

"It's not mine. It's Uncle Albus and Aunt Minerva's. Aunt Minerva has said it will be mine someday. I don't like to think about that day, though." Gareth drained the last of his tea from his cup. "As to where it is, it's in the Hebrides to the west of Muck."

"Muck?" Severus snorted a laugh.

"Yeah, it's an island."

"I know that. It's funny."

Gareth laughed. "It's nice to see you laughing about something, I guess!"

"Hmph. So what is this business you want to discuss?"

"You know that I have some stuff I keep at Melina's place...my computer and things like that. Muggle gear that wouldn't work here even if there were electricity in Hogsmeade."

Severus nodded, taking a bite of a Florentine and enjoying the intermingled orange and dark chocolate flavours as he chewed. Poppy would surely like her Florentines.

"Well, I appreciate being able to use their place, but even though I'm always welcome, I don't want to become a pest, you know? So I try not to come and go too often. It's also just not my own space. I feel very welcome by them, but constrained, anyway."

"Mm, I can see how that could be the case."

"Well, I was thinking...and it's just an idea that I'd like you to consider, to think about for a bit...but I was thinking that Spinner's End stands empty for most of the year. It's got electricity and plumbing. It occurred to me that it might be advantageous to us both if you were to rent me a room there."

"Rent you a room?"

"Well, if I paid some rent and the utilities and could use one of the bedrooms for my computer and things, and maybe have use of the rest of the house...not your room, of course. I thought that maybe I could help you fix it up. And when you were living there, well, we could work something out. I could move my computer back to Melina's during the summer."

"I don't know . . ." Someone living in his house. But a friend, not a rat. "What about your mother? And Hermione?"

"I wouldn't actually live there. I'd continue to live here. But it would give me a place for my computer, somewhere I could visit at any time, and, if you had no objections, I could also, well, have a bit of a private life there, too. Bring a date back there. I wouldn't feel comfortable bringing someone here, not unless I'd been seeing them for a while. For the sake of my mum, you know? It could be awkward."

"You want a place to bring your one-night stands." Severus said. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, himself.

"No. Not like that, Snape. It's more, you know, *forcasual* relationships, or for ones that aren't serious yet but might be in the future. People I know but where I'm not ready to make a big deal out of seeing them, introducing them to my mother, having her think we're serious or something. Or even for serious relationship, just for some private time."

"I see, I think. But your mother can't possibly think that you're some kind of celibate."

"I'm sure she doesn't, but having her aware in the abstract that I have a sex life is a different thing from my bringing home a date for some intimate time, even with an Imperturbable in place. It would also seem odd with Hermione here. In some ways, she's like a little sister or something, but she's still my apprentice. All of the bedrooms are on the same floor here...it's not as though I have her in some separate wing of a large house like I had when I apprenticed with Magister Flanders. Besides, sometimes you just want to spend time alone with someone, not necessarily in order to have sex, but just to have the time together."

Severus nodded. "But Spinner's End is not exactly somewhere I'd want to bring a date, myself." He certainly wouldn't want to bring Poppy there. On the other hand, if they were seeing each other during the summer, if he were that fortunate, he would want to be able to invite her to his home. "You said something about fixing the place up."

"I wouldn't do anything without checking with you, but I think it's just a matter of stripping old wallpaper and paint, slapping on some fresh coats of paint, cleaning and repairing the furniture, maybe bringing in a few new things. One or two of our house-elves would help make the work go faster."

"The kitchen is minimal. There's a cooker...an old gas stove...and a small refrigerator, and that's about it. No Charmed appliances at all. I always just use my wand for

everything. The kitchen cupboards are large but unattractive. Clean, though. You've seen the bathroom. The floors in both probably should be replaced."

"Not at all difficult with some house-elf help."

"I will think about it, but I am inclined to agree. And if you do redecorate, we could work out the expense and count that as rent. And when summer comes . . . we'll deal with that situation then." It might be nice to have some company occasionally, as long as it didn't come at inconvenient times. "In fact, why don't we plan to meet out there next weekend some time, or over the Easter holiday, and we can take a look at what you think needs to be done and talk about the details."

"So it's a yes?" Gareth asked hopefully.

"Tentatively. I need to become used to the idea. And the house has wards that would need to be changed if you wanted to have free access to it."

Gareth grinned. "Great! Do you have a telephone line? No? Well, that's easy enough to fix. Just get British Telecom out there. I'll need it for my Internet access."

Severus nodded. "If we do come to an agreement, you can take care of that."

The perimeter charm sounded.

"Hmm. Wonder who that could be. Mum would just Apparate directly into the house, and Hermione's not due back until after dinner sometime. I'll check the door. Pour yourself another cup of tea."

Severus duly poured his cup of tea, but listening as Gareth opened the door. He couldn't hear what was being said, but he recognised the other voice. Curiosity overcame reticence, and he got up and went into the hall.

"Do you know when she'll be back? I really need to talk to her."

"Sorry, Harry, I don't. Just that she'll be gone all day," Gareth said.

"Do you know where she is? How I can find her?" Harry asked.

"Why don't you leave a note, and I'll see she gets it as soon as she gets back," Gareth replied.

"I . . . okay," Harry agreed reluctantly. He stepped into the house as Gareth stepped back to let him in. His eyes widened. "Professor Snape!"

"Potter." Fool boy. Surprised to see him outside the dungeons, and unable to hide his astonishment.

"I didn't expect to see you today," Harry said, staring at Severus's jeans.

"The Headmistress does not keep me confined to the castle," Severus replied with a sneer.

"Of course not." Harry looked flustered.

"Come on into the kitchen and I'll fetch you a quill and some parchment," Gareth said.

Severus returned to his chair as Harry followed him into the kitchen, looking around himself curiously.

"Been here before, Potter?"

"Once. Just for a few minutes. I was meeting Hermione here, and she was late getting ready."

"It sounds as though you are eager to speak with her. You should have owled her first," Severus said.

"Yeah, I suppose. I just wasn't thinking very clearly, I guess."

"No surprise there," Severus muttered into his teacup.

"I actually went up to the castle first, but the gates were warded and I didn't want to bother Hagrid by ringing the bell."

"Why did you seek Miss Granger there?" Severus asked, puzzled.

"I didn't. I thought I might be able to, well, to sneak in and have a word with Ginny. Or," Harry added hastily, "see the Headmistress and get permission to talk to her"

"I see. You, too, are perturbed by her decision to quit Quidditch?"

"She's quitting Quidditch, too?" Harry asked in astonishment.

"So why did you wish to see her, Mr Potter, if it was not about Quidditch?"

"Nothing." Harry scowled and looked toward the door, clearly wondering where Gareth was with that parchment and quill.

"Come, come, Potter, you obviously have something on your mind."

"She's quitting Quidditch, you say?"

"That is what I understand. Miss Granger said she had received a letter from Miss Weasley in which she informed her of her decision."

"Yeah, well, I got an owl from her, too. This afternoon."

"And?"

"She's breaking up with me. She broke up with me by Owl Post."

"Not the most welcome news to receive in a letter, I am sure," Severus said.

"I don't understand it. I thought we were good. I was looking forward to having her finish school and our relationship getting even better."

"Followed by marriage and a new brood of Weasley-Potter offspring to brighten the dreary wizarding world," Severus said with a slight sneer.

Harry merely glowered at him.

Severus felt a slight twinge. He supposed he could have been more sensitive to the boy's distress. It was unpleasant to have someone break up with you, and probably even more so when it was done by post. "It might not be a lost cause, Potter, but don't push her. Be a friend. Miss Weasley's had a hard time, especially this last year. She needs her friends."

"What would you know about it? I've seen her; I've been supportive of her. If she's having a hard time, she needs me more now than ever. She doesn't know what she's doing, breaking up with me now."

"Don't ever tell a witch whom you're interested in that she doesn't know her own mind, Potter. I may not have a great deal of experience in that area, but I know witches well enough to be able to assure you that if you even imply that she doesn't know what she's doing, you'll just provoke her anger."

Gareth bounced into the kitchen at just that moment. "You're right about that, Snape. Never tell a witch she doesn't know what she's thinking, even if it's obvious to you that she's completely clueless. Besides, it's just as likely that you're the one who's confused! Here's your parchment and a fountain pen."

"Thanks."

"Snape, want to continue our discussion in the living room and leave Harry to write his note to Hermione?"

"That's okay, Gareth. I'll just write something really short." Harry sat down across from Severus and uncapped the pen.

Severus sipped from his teacup and discreetly looked over its rim and read Harry's note upside-down. Couldn't be too private if he hadn't wanted to be left alone, after all.

Hermione

What's up with Ginny? Have you talked to her recently? Prf Snape is here and he just told me that she quit Quidditch too. And now she's breaking up with me. Has something happened? Is she seeing someone else? She obviously needs our help. WE NEED TO TALK. Come to Grimmauld Place tonight when you get this. Something's going on with her and we need to fix it.

Harry

Severus barely kept himself from snorting his tea through his nose. Idiot boy. Only just now thinking that "something's going on with her." Unlikely that dating Potter was going to fix Ginny. It seemed to Severus that Ginny was trying to regain control of her life, and he thought that breaking free of her childhood crush on the hero of the wizarding world could be a step in the right direction, at least at that point. No doubt her guilt and unhappiness stemmed in part from the fact that if she hadn't chased after Potter, her older brother would still be alive. It likely hit her in the gut every time she saw him. She probably couldn't feel anything positive about Potter without simultaneously feeling guilty about Percy's death. He hoped that Hermione had more sense and insight than Potter seemed to. Severus nodded to himself. Despite Hermione's recent attitude toward him, he felt certain that Hermione would see things clearly when it came to Ginny. After all, she had admitted that on rereading Ginny's letter, she realised that the younger witch was happy with her decision and felt relieved after having made it. She had also seen Arthur Weasley's distress first hand and clearly had felt empathy for him. Yes, Hermione would set Potter straight.

After Potter had left, looking gloomy, Gareth rejoined Severus, pouring himself a cup of tea and helping himself to another Florentine.

"So, you plan to ask Poppy to dinner tonight," Gareth said.

"Yes. No sense in waiting. I do not wish any warm feelings she may have for me to cool any further."

Gareth nodded. "Good idea. You know . . ." Gareth hesitated. "You know, I don't think I've heard that Poppy has dated much in recent years."

"That does not mean that she might not wish to now," Severus said. "I believe it's possible she was on a date on Friday evening. All the more reason for me to strike now when the iron is hot and before some other wizard can distract her."

"That's what I was going to mention, actually, but I wasn't sure how to tell you. She *was* on a date on Friday."

Severus shrugged. "Nothing to be done about it. I will still try. You aren't trying to discourage me, are you?"

"No, far from it. Just wanted to warn you, that's all."

"It's not as though the wizard, whoever he is, could be much of a threat at this point. Only one date does not a romance make."

"True, but . . . yesterday evening after my date, I stopped by the estate to visit Mum. Whilst I was there, Quin dropped in. Apparently he and Poppy went out to dinner on Friday."

"Oh." Severus frowned, remembering the way that Poppy had looked at the older wizard when he'd entered the Great Hall for the Victory Feast, and recalling her tears when she had described the curse that afflicted him. In part, it had been Poppy's tears that had moved him to discover what curse had been cast on Quin all those years before. "She knows him well."

Gareth nodded. "They've known each other at least forty years, and they actually dated for a short while right after Poppy and Uncle Murdoch broke up that last time. I don't think it was anything serious...I wasn't very attune to those kinds of things at the time, though...but Quin was cursed not long after that and nothing came of their dating."

Severus felt a knot forming in his stomach. Was there any point in trying now? Quin was handsome, successful, rich, well-liked, amiable, and, according to Poppy, magically gifted, as well. He had nothing to offer in comparison with the Irish wizard.

"But it was just dinner. Old friends do have dinner together." He didn't sound convinced by his own statement. "It doesn't have to mean anything."

"True . . ."

"Do you know where they went? I don't want to bring her to the same place when I take her out," Severus said, wondering whether Poppy would even accept his invitation now.

Gareth hesitated perceptibly.

"Well?" Severus prodded.

"Um, I doubt you would bring her to the same restaurant, since it was in Paris," Gareth said, trying to sound light-hearted.

"Paris? He brought her to *Paris* for dinner?"

"Apparently. One bright side to this," Gareth said, noting his friend's dismay, "he said he'd taken her out because she needed cheering up."

"Oh, and I'm sure he did 'cheer her up,'" Severus said bitterly. How could he compete with a wizard who brought a witch to Paris for dinner? He probably spoke flawless French, too.

"But if she needed cheering up, maybe it was because she was depressed about breaking things off with you," Gareth said.

"Wonderful. I gave Poppy a good reason to begin dating a former lover," Severus said morosely.

"Anyway, I thought I should mention it. You don't want to miss your opportunity."

"I hardly see the point any longer. I should just wish her well. She'd be much better off with him than with me."

"Don't say that. Besides, you should leave it up to her to decide who she'd be happier going out with. And don't try to compete with Quin. Just be yourself and make your intentions and feelings clear to her."

Severus nodded, but his heart was already in his toes.

"Being myself was what made her break it off," he said bitterly. He would still bring Poppy her gift and ask her to dinner, but he would steel himself for rejection. He was used to it, after all. Suddenly his biscuits and tea seemed a paltry present. Paris.

"It's also what attracted her to you in the first place, I'm sure," Gareth replied. "She does know you, after all. You were hardly strangers, or even just casual acquaintances. And you never did say why she did break it off, just that you had behaved badly."

Severus looked down at his empty teacup. "We'd had a really good evening, as I said. She was wonderful. We went out to dinner after you left, we made love, we . . . we just talked. It was one of the best nights of my life. Maybe the very best." Severus sighed. "And the next day, I spoiled it. I knew that it was just a fling, and whether it was or not, I also knew that we had agreed that we would behave normally in public. But I'd wanted to talk to her all day. When she didn't talk to me when I sat next to her at lunch, and then when she could have sat next to me at dinner but sat at Minerva's left, instead, I . . . I read all kinds of things into it. Significance it didn't have. And I overheard something she talked about with Pomona and later with Minerva, and I . . . it doesn't matter. But she and I had a meeting in the evening, and I behaved like an ass. I was cold to her through the entire meeting, then as I was leaving, I said something unpleasant."

"And she broke everything off because of that? And you did apologise, you said..."

"It was too late for apologies. Poppy thought it was a sign that we'd seen too much of each other, I suppose. She said that she thought we should take a break. I hope she really meant that, just a break. Of course, she could have since decided that she wants the break to be permanent." Now that Quin had taken her out, that was quite likely, he thought.

Gareth was quiet for a moment, thinking. "She said that you should take a break? Not that you should break things off?" he asked.

Severus nodded. "But she was trying to be kind. She didn't want us to be at odds, either. She wants to maintain a positive collegial relationship. She said that we should take a break and each think about what we want."

"I think that you should take her at her word, then, Severus. Tell her that you have thought about what you want, and that you know what it is. Tell her how you feel."

Gareth looked at Severus seriously. "How *do* you feel about her? Do you know? Or do you just want what seems out of reach?"

Severus shook his head. "It's not that. I do know how I feel, but I can't tell her yet. Not in so many words, anyway."

"Are you in love with her?" Gareth asked frankly.

Severus shrugged one shoulder, but nodded slightly. "I think so," he said softly. "But I can't say that to her."

"First things first, then. Bring her the tea and biscuits, then ask her out to dinner. When she says 'yes,' make sure she knows you're pleased about it. No behaving as though it doesn't matter to you. Respond warmly, not aloofly, from your heart, not habit. Then when you're out, treat her well and, as I said before, be yourself. Just take it one step at a time and don't rush her."

"That's what Minerva said when I talked to her. To be patient. But I don't think she knew about MacAirt. That changes everything."

"Don't look at it like that, Snape. Look at it as an opportunity for you to shine. If you really do want her, of course, if you really think she's worth the effort."

"I do." There was no other witch in the world like Poppy, Severus was certain, and she was certainly worth the effort. "She's a remarkable witch, and I don't think she has any idea how truly wonderful she is. It's not just modesty, either. She's just lived in close quarters to flashy Gryffindors for too long to be able to appreciate her own qualities, I think. Yes, she is worth it."

"You're a Slytherin, Snape. Display some of that ambition! If you think she's what you want, then go after her. I agree with you: she's an amazing witch, and winning her heart, that would be something to strive for."

"You're right, McGonagall. I don't want to settle for some other witch. *I won't* settle. I will attempt it." He sighed. "I still think MacAirt has the better chance with her."

"He may not even want such a thing with her. Quin is a funny chap, in some ways. It took him years and years to get over his wife's death before he'd even look at another witch. So I don't know as he's looking for a romance right now. He's trying to get the rest of his life on track, after all, keeping up with his Muggle businesses whilst catching up with everything that Alroy's involved in in the wizarding world. He's in the midst of selling off his Internet cafes in Ireland, and that will take him some time. He's also spending a lot of time with Alroy and Rosemary at the estate, looking forward to his first grandchild. Quin's a busy wizard, and he's not there at Hogwarts. You are. You are right there with her every day. You have a very good shot, Severus."

"Perhaps." It was true: he was right there at Hogwarts with Poppy, every day, and every day could present a new opportunity to woo her, as Minerva had put it. "I have been so preoccupied with my own life, I never asked you about yours, McGonagall. You said you were on a date last night, and weren't you out on Friday, as well? Was it with the same person?"

The corner of Gareth's mouth turned up. "Yep. Two nights in a row with the same witch. What's the world coming to?" He laughed. "But I don't know where it's going. It's a bit complicated. And I haven't a clue what the witch is thinking. She's also a friend of Mum's, and that . . . well, I don't want Mum to know we're seeing each other unless there's actually something to know about, if you see what I mean."

"Yes. So . . . she's an older witch?"

"Older than I am, but not that old, really. Younger than some I've dated." Gareth seemed to blush, somewhat uncharacteristically, to Severus's mind. "A lot younger than Mum."

"I know her, don't I," Severus said with a smirk.

"Yes." Gareth's blush grew.

"Come on, McGonagall. All the witches you've told me about...and a couple wizards, too...I don't see what you have to be embarrassed about. Is it someone at Hogwarts?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?" It couldn't be Sharon Carter, since she was younger than Gareth, and he'd said it was a witch, so it wasn't Rath. It clearly wasn't Sprout, since not only was she in a long-standing relationship with Flitwick, but she had been with them all in the Three Broomsticks on Friday night. Perhaps it was Vector...she was an attractive older witch, younger than Madam Gamp, and they would have interests in common. A sudden thought occurred to him. "Please, Gareth, tell me it's not Sarah Duffy!"

"No. I barely know her. Silly thing, I always thought her. In school anyway."

"She hasn't changed. She's still silly," Severus said. "And how can this witch be 'sort of' at Hogwarts?"

"She taught me when I was a student there." Gareth didn't elaborate.

"Well, if you don't want to tell me, then you don't have to," Severus said, somewhat put out that after all he'd confided in Gareth, the younger wizard wouldn't spill about who he was seeing. He hoped it wasn't Trelawney. That witch had begun teaching there a few weeks before McGonagall had left to live with his brother in Amsterdam, so she could have taught him. If it *were* she, it would explain Gareth's embarrassment, however. She was worse than Duffy. And she drank like a fish.

"It's just that I'm not even sure that we're dating," Gareth said.

"How can that be?"

"I don't know how she sees me. And at first, I was just taking her out as an old friend, or as a friend of my mother's. She needed to get out."

"How long have you been seeing her?" Severus asked, trying to think of a witch besides Trelawney who had taught when he was at school but who wasn't at Hogwarts any longer. Perhaps one of the Defence instructors.

"On and off . . . about four weeks. On our own, that is. Before, I'd sometimes go with Mum when she went to visit her, but I saw it as kind of a chore, a good deed, you might say."

A light went off for Severus. "It's Hooch, isn't it?"

"Yeah. We're just friends, I guess, but I'd like to see more of her. I'd like to see *dot* more of her, actually," Gareth said, trying to sound more like his usual carefree self.

"I don't see why you're embarrassed," Severus said, puzzled. "She's a bright, attractive witch. She's older than you are, but still quite a bit younger than your mother...I think she was in school when my mother was, so that makes her a good deal younger even than Poppy. And Hooch led the broomstick squadron defending Hogwarts, so she's a hero. She *is* a Slytherin, but your mother's a Slytherin, and you don't seem to hold it against me that I am, either. "

"I've never dated one of my teachers before. Or one of Mum's friends. It's just a bit odd. And I think Rolanda thinks I'm just taking her out to brighten her day. She's been depressed because of her injuries. Her arm is better, and she has more mobility in her joints, but it will never be completely well. She's got some scars on her face, too, and she thinks they're ugly. She Glamours them every day. The one time I showed up unexpectedly and she hadn't cast her Glamour yet, you'd think she thought she looked like a troll or something. So she's insecure. It complicates things."

"I gather you haven't done anything physical yet, then."

Gareth shook his head. "I kissed her good-night on the cheek on Friday, and I don't think she could close the door behind her fast enough. Then yesterday evening, we only went out to dinner and she claimed she was tired, so she didn't even invite me in for a drink like she's been doing. She wouldn't make any definite plans to go out again, either. She said to owl her." Gareth sighed. "It could be that this is all it will ever be."

"Or else she thinks you are just being the kind son of a friend and she's afraid of developing feelings for you that she thinks you can't return. Especially if she's insecure about her appearance."

"That's what I'm hoping. We'll see. Whatever happens, whether anything works out or not, I don't want her to think it's just . . . that I'm just using her or feeling sorry for her or something like that."

"So, were you thinking of bringing her to Spinner's End once it's fixed up? Is that why you asked about it?"

"I'd been thinking about asking you, anyway, since I do want somewhere else to keep my computer, but I just thought that if I could bring Rolanda someplace that's not her own house and that's not here, which is my mum's home, she might relax a little. I could cook her dinner. A romantic dinner. And even if she and I don't end up seeing each other, I'm feeling . . ." Gareth shrugged. "I'd like to see if there's someone whom I'd like more than just a fling with, I suppose. I don't know if I'm ready to settle down yet, but now that I'm growing some roots here, it might be nice to have someone special in my life. And that person might be Rolanda. I'd like to explore that possibility."

"In the interests of furthering your social life and assisting a former colleague, I suppose I'll have to let you use Spinner's End, then," Severus said, smiling when he saw his friend's face light up.

"That's great! Thanks, Severus!"

"Hmph. We can meet there on Saturday morning...it will have to be early. There's a duel in the afternoon I'll have to be back for. Eight-thirty sharp. I'll have a key for you and we can set a password so you have access. Eventually, we can consider altering the wards so that you can Apparate in and out, but I need to think about the best way to do that."

"I'll take good care of the place for you, I promise, Snape. I'll get it fixed up so you'll be happy to invite your friends there, too."

"As long as you don't paint the place Puddifoot-pink or do something equally horrid, I am sure any redecoration will be an improvement."

"I'll go to one of those Muggle DIY shops and get some ideas this week, then we can talk about them when we meet on Saturday."

"Fine." Severus stood, picking up his shopping bag. "I'd better get up to the castle and initiate the first step in my plan." Operation Woo and Win Poppy Pomfrey, he thought to himself with a smirk.

"Good luck, Snape! And if you need a friendly ear or any advice, you know I'm here."

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Bad Timing

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Severus fights his jealousy and petulance when his timing is bad.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Quin MacAirt

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Bad Timing

Chapter 69 of 118

Sunday, 21 March 1999. Severus struggles against jealousy and petulance when his timing is bad.



Chapter Sixty-Eight: Bad Timing

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Severus headed straight for the Hospital Wing when he returned to the castle. If he was going to implement Stage One of Operation Woo and Win Poppy Pomfrey, there was no time like the present to take the first step.

He presented himself to Mrs Framingham, who had barely left her frame before Poppy opened the door to him.

"Severus, come in! I was about to make myself some tea, perhaps you'd join me?" she asked, stepping back to let him in.

"I would like that. Thank you. But first, I have something for you," he replied as she closed the door. It was a hopeful sign that she had invited him to have tea with her, he thought. They'd done nothing like that since their early morning conversation several days before. "I was in Hogsmeade today, and I was thinking of you."

Poppy took the bag that he held out to her. "What a nice surprise! Thank you!"

Casually taking a seat on the sofa, Severus nonetheless felt nervous as he watched Poppy put the bag down on the coffee table and look inside it. She saw the tea first and smiled as she took it from the bag.

"Jasmine! We'll have to have this tea right now. It's one of my favourites...did you know that?" she asked.

"I hoped it would be suitable," Severus replied. "And I thought the tin was appealing, as well."

"It is very pretty. Thank you!"

"There's more yet." Severus gestured toward the bag.

Poppy pulled out the pink and white box with the Madam Puddifoot's logo on it. "Mmm, anything from Madam Puddifoot's is bound to be delicious," she said. She set the box on the coffee table and untied the string. "Oh! Florentines! They are one of my secret vices, Severus. And the little biscuits look good, too. Thank you!"

Severus couldn't help his smile. He had chosen well, then, and she was pleased. His smile grew when she bent and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"You didn't need to get me anything," she said, "but these are wonderful and very thoughtful of you."

"I'm glad. As I said, I was thinking of you and I wanted to bring you something when I saw you this afternoon."

"I'll fix the tea now. Would you like the biscuits with it?"

"I am not hungry at the moment, but please have some yourself, if you would like."

Poppy quickly prepared the tea, and as it was steeping, she set out a Florentine and a couple of the small buttery biscuits on a plate for herself. She sat down in the chair at the end of the sofa.

"I'd been looking forward to seeing you this afternoon, actually, Severus," Poppy confessed.

"As was I. Looking forward to seeing you, that is."

"You could take off your jacket, if you like," Poppy said. "You look very nice today. Did you have special plans?"

Severus shrugged off the leather jacket and sent it to drape over another chair. "I assisted Ms Benetti with some trial flights of a broomstick she is testing for Nimbus." Lest Poppy believe it was a date, he added, "I saw her in the Three Broomsticks on Friday night and she showed the broomstick to me then. Well, after we left, she showed it to me. She had one more set of tests to run before she could write her report. Since I'd never seen a broomstick tested before, I thought that would be interesting, so she invited me to watch and I was able to help her record her results."

Poppy nodded, smiling.

"It was a pleasant day for it," Severus continued when Poppy didn't say anything. "A little windy, but she said that would be good for the high altitude tests. She said it went more quickly with my assistance."

Poppy nodded again. "I see. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

How should he indicate to Poppy that he wasn't interested in Helena, he wondered. "I ran into McGonagall after I left Ms Benetti. Hermione was gone for the day, and his mother is spending most of her time at the estate, so he was eating lunch at the Three Broomsticks. I joined him. I considered trying to set up McGonagall with Ms Benetti, but I think he's interested in someone else at the moment. Also, after having lost her fiancé so recently, I doubt that she would be interested in dating yet."

It seemed to Severus that Poppy's smile brightened, and she reached over to pour their tea. "They would make a stunning couple, though," she said.

"Indeed."

"So, who is Gareth interested in?"

Severus hesitated. "I believe he has not yet told the lady in question, so it would be better if I didn't say anything just yet."

"I understand. And it's a witch?" Poppy asked, adding a little milk to their tea.

"Yes." Poppy must know of McGonagall's eclectic sexual proclivities, Severus thought...either that or she was distinguishing a witch from a Muggle.

"You two seem to be becoming friends. It's nice that he feels he can confide in you about his relationships," Poppy said.

"Indeed. He has been a good friend to me, as well. That was unexpected."

"He is a good man," Poppy said. "Somehow a wonderful combination of his mother and his father. You would have liked his father, I believe, Severus."

"I have heard something about Malcolm McGonagall. Even at his age, Gareth seems to have quite a case of hero-worship for him."

"Malcolm was a great wizard, and it was a terrible loss," Poppy replied. "Minerva told me once that Albus had said that Malcolm possessed as much magical power and talent as he did, but he had much less interest in utilising it publicly than Albus did, less ambition. Minerva always said that Malcolm was too flighty, as well, and too, well, I suppose we'd call it 'hyperactive' nowadays. He was also rather unconventional...Malcolm disliked the Ministry more than almost any wizard I've met, and he wasn't very good at working within the establishment. 'The Wild McGonagall,' Gertrude would tease, and he'd tease back that she'd tamed him and he wasn't wild any longer. He was a true free spirit. Yet he never shirked his duty as he saw it! He was even somewhat at odds with Albus, though, over the approach that the Order of the Phoenix was taking toward Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Malcolm advocated a much more proactive approach, more aggressive, and very early on, he thought that we should have a spy in their midst. Albus didn't know how they could accomplish that without recruiting someone of dubious moral character and questionable loyalty to the Order, and yet having someone become a Death Eater who was already a member of the Order seemed nearly impossible, given that they were all well-known for their opposition to Voldemort. It was rather a stroke of good fortune that later you . . . that you became available." Poppy paused. "Terrible for you, of course, whether you had become a spy or not. But they were terrible times."

"They were. Speaking purely for myself, I wish I had not been such a fool and joined the Death Eaters. However, my life came to have some meaning even through that error, and I believed that my death in the war would have meaning, as well. It is not everyone who can say such a thing."

Poppy nodded thoughtfully. "And now?"

"And now . . . I believe that I might find some further redemption," Severus admitted softly. "And as for my life now and my future, I begin to have some hope." He raised his gaze to meet Poppy's eyes. He took a breath and found courage. "You've given me hope. One of the best nights of my life, if not perhaps the very best in my life, was spent with you, Poppy. I hope that there will be more of them."

"I hope there will be, as well, Severus," Poppy said. "You deserve many happy days, you know."

"Whether I deserve them or not, I hope to have them, and with you. In fact . . . I thought that perhaps we might go out to dinner this evening. Neither of us is scheduled for the Great Hall, and we don't have patrol duty, either, so..."

"I'm sorry, Severus," Poppy interrupted, "I can't. I already have plans for the evening."

"Oh . . . I see." Although he had immediately tried to mask it, Severus couldn't completely hide his disappointment from Poppy.

"But if I didn't already have plans," Poppy added, "I'd have liked to go have gone to dinner with you."

"Of course. It was just an idea." He stood, sighing. He had been too late. "I should go. You probably need to get ready for your date."

"I don't have to just yet," Poppy said. "You could stay a while longer."

"If you wish me to," Severus replied, unhappy that she hadn't denied it was a date.

"I do. I've missed you, Severus...I'm sorry," she said quickly with a shake of her head, "I shouldn't have said that."

"Why not? Is it not true?"

"Yes, it is, but it isn't fair. You . . . you need to go out and enjoy yourself with others."

Severus looked down at her. "You said that you believed we should simply take a break to think about what we want. Have you thought about what you want?"

Poppy stood and stepped away from her chair, thinking for a moment, then she turned to face him. "What I want . . . I want you to be happy, Severus. I want to do the right thing for you. I want to be a good friend to you."

Severus reached out tentatively, as if to caress her face, but he dropped his hand. "A good friend? Is that all that you want?"

"My friends are important to me. Friendship is a good and important thing, Severus."

"I recognise that . . . but . . . I've missed you, too, Poppy. I hoped we could begin to see each other again."

Poppy hesitated.

"If you wish me to keep my distance from you, to remain aloof, I shall, but that is not what I want," Severus said, trying to remain calm and sound reasonable, though he felt anything but reasonable at that moment. "I wish to be able to take you to dinner, to have tea with you in your rooms, and just spend time with you. I want to see you, Poppy, often, not just for Hogwarts business and not just as friends."

"We did just have tea in my rooms, Severus, and I would have accepted your invitation to dinner if I hadn't already had plans. I simply think it wouldn't be bad for you to go out with others, as well."

"As a friend, Poppy? I have been out with others. I went out with the staff to the Broomsticks on Friday. I spent time with Helena Benetti earlier today, and then I met up with Gareth after that. Spending time with them did not abate my desire to be with you."

"I won't ask whether you've had any . . . well, if you've been intimate with anyone..."

"I have not..." Severus began.

"I don't want to know, but it also hasn't been very long. Less than a week, really. I'd think you might want to date someone, or at least have a few casual relationships, whether they proceed to intimacy or not. You needn't rush. Take your time. You have time now."

"That isn't what I want, Poppy." He paused, thinking of Quin MacAirt. "Of course, if that is what you want for yourself, if you are trying to be . . . kind, if you have discovered that you want to be with someone else . . ."

"It's not that. It really isn't." She placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "I did go out with an old friend on Friday, as I mentioned to you yesterday. With Quin MacAirt. And he's taking me out again today. I just got an owl from him this morning."

"I see." He should have spoken to her sooner, Severus thought miserably. His timing was always abysmal. He would not allow himself to behave petulantly, though. He knew that Poppy didn't like that. He would wait until he was in his rooms to let his jealousy out. He wouldn't give up, though. Operation Woo and Win Poppy Pomfrey was not going to be scuttled before it began. For once in his life, he would try not to engage in any self-sabotage. He tried to smile. "I should let you get ready, then. You look

lovely as you are, but no doubt you wish to change clothes before Quin picks you up."

Poppy blushed. "I'm meeting him at the gates later. He's sending me a Patronus to let me know when he arrives. It was my suggestion," she said quickly when she saw Severus's raised eyebrow. "Especially with the new security measures, I thought it would be more convenient."

"Yes, more convenient, certainly." Not very gentlemanly, though, he thought.

Poppy rubbed his arm. "Nice jumper, Severus. It's very soft. Cashmere, isn't it? I've never seen you in it before."

"It was a gift from Minerva a couple years ago, the Christmas just before Dumbledore . . . didn't die, but we all thought he had. This is only the second time I've had occasion to wear it."

"You would probably object if I said that you look cuddly in it," Poppy said with a mischievous smile, still rubbing his sleeve.

"I might object if you were to express such a sentiment in public, or if anyone else were to say it, but at the moment," Severus said, raising his hand and touching her cheek tenderly, "I find I do not mind it at all."

"I suppose . . . it wouldn't be a good idea to ask for a cuddle, though," Poppy said.

Severus's smile grew. He was glad he had fought off his petulant, jealous feelings. "I might indulge you."

"It wouldn't be wise . . ." Even as Poppy said that, though, she stepped closer and put her arms around him.

Severus let out a long, slow breath as he put his arms around her and held her close. He bent and kissed the top of her head. "I am not an expert in these matters," he said softly, "but I believe that a proper cuddle might require us to sit on the sofa."

She squeezed him and looked up. "If you think so."

"I do." He sat, pulling her down to the sofa with him. He rested his head on hers and closed his eyes. "This is part of what I have missed. Holding you closely like this."

"It is nice, isn't it . . ." Poppy sighed.

"When we met about the staff training for the project on Thursday, it was all I could do to keep from taking you in my arms and holding you, or just reaching out and touching you, feeling your skin beneath my fingertips."

"We probably should exercise more restraint, though. It wouldn't be fair of me to . . . to tell you to see others but then to do this with you each time we are together. I do want you to find your happiness, Severus."

"And if my happiness is found with you in my arms?"

"You don't know that yet," Poppy said softly.

"I do not appreciate being told what I know or don't know, Poppy."

"I just meant that you shouldn't make up your mind too quickly, that's all."

Severus shook his head, but didn't say anything.

Poppy let out a sigh and rubbed Severus's chest briefly. "I suppose I ought to change now. I think Quin will be here soon."

"You dated him in the past, didn't you?" Severus asked softly.

"Yes, for a short time, many years ago. The summer before he was cursed."

"Are you . . . Is he interested in dating you now?" Severus asked, remembering both Minerva's advice to be direct and yet Hermione's reaction to a similar question. He held his breath.

"We haven't exactly talked about that," Poppy said. "I do hope to see much more of him, though, now that he's free to interact with the wizarding world again."

Severus was quiet. He didn't see how he could possibly compete with such a handsome, successful wizard, and he didn't like the idea of Poppy seeing more of him.

Poppy raised her head and looked up at Severus. "He's a good man and a good friend, Severus."

"I am sure he is," Severus said tonelessly.

"You would like him," Poppy said, pulling back a bit.

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "If you say so. There aren't many people I like. His son is acceptable, though," he said grudgingly.

"He is." Poppy grinned. "I remember when he was in school. He was always up to something...he and Caspar together. They were a pair, for sure, and little Porry...Pádraig Wode...who was in Hufflepuff, would run around with them, too. They'd never get up to anything truly bad, you understand, but they'd get ideas in their heads, things they'd have to try. They once tried charming an old sow in Hogsmeade, wanted to make it fly." Poppy laughed at the memory.

"What happened?" Severus asked curiously.

"It flew, but they didn't have any control of its flight, and the pig apparently didn't, either, and it took Filius and Minerva together to catch the poor beast, return her to her pen, and remove the charms!"

"Foolishness."

"Yes, but it was funny...though they did lose Hogsmeade privileges for the rest of the year, so it taught them not to charm other people's property, at least. Alroy claimed the pig agreed to it," she said with a laugh.

Severus snorted at that. "He seems to have become more sensible since then, thankfully."

"He still has a roguish, playful side to him, though I doubt that was evident last year. He was not here for pleasure, after all."

"Why was he here?" Severus asked. "I still haven't worked that out. I understand that having a relative of Robert Crouch's working at the school and seeming to interact with Albus as the genuine Crouch lent 'verisimilitude' to Albus's false identity, but it seemed an extreme thing for someone like MacAirt to agree to. He must not have been able to keep up with his business interests very well whilst he was here."

"It was because of Quin. I understand that, years ago, Quin made a pledge to Minerva to come to her aid, or to Albus's, whenever she might need it. Obviously, given his

condition, Quin was unable to do anything to help, but Minerva called on Alroy. He was more than happy to fulfil his father's pledge. Minerva had also been his Head of House and his Animagus instructor when he was a student. Minerva tried never to play favourites with the students in her House, but I think she always had a soft spot for Alroy, and not just because of his dad."

"His sister, was she a Gryffindor, too?"

Poppy shook her head. "Ravenclaw."

"So she could not have fulfilled the pledge."

"Not by becoming Head of Gryffindor, anyway. But I think that it was merely a convenience that Alroy could also become Head of Gryffindor for a year. We all did wonder why Minerva didn't make Vector the Head of House. In fact, I'm surprised that Vector didn't become Head of House after Alroy left."

"Probably didn't want it. Smart witch," Severus said. "But this pledge that Quin made, it's a bit . . . old-fashioned of Alroy to fulfil it, especially given the sacrifices he must have made in order to drop the rest of his life for a year and spend it here."

Poppy shrugged. "I think he was happy to do so. I am sure that Minerva wouldn't have forced it on him. The MacAirts have an old-fashioned sense of loyalty, though, and Quin is one of the most loyal souls you could encounter. It may sound dreadfully outmoded to you, but he is a righteous man in the very best sense of that word, and he passed his values on to his children."

"Hmpf. If he is loyal to Minerva, I suppose that speaks well of him," Severus said, trying to find something positive to say about this wizard who was going to be taking Poppy out that evening.

Poppy smiled. "Yes, it does."

Whatever else Poppy may have said regarding Quin, it was left unsaid as an enormous Patronus leapt through her wall. The Irish wolfhound happily circled Severus, and he felt a peculiar tickle of magic as the dog seemed to lick his cheek before it flew to Poppy, placed its paws on her shoulders, and then disappeared, a vanishing, spinning whirlpool of magic, entering her ear and delivering its message.

Poppy appeared alarmed.

"He's arrived?" Severus asked.

"He's not only arrived, but Hagrid let him in and he's on his way up...and I had wanted to change, or at least fix my hair and brush my teeth!"

"I'm sure you have time to do that," Severus said. "And I meant it when I said you look lovely as you are."

Poppy drew her wand. "I'll just let him know that I'm in and he should just come in and wait in my sitting room." She glanced at Severus. "Now, don't laugh at my Patronus, Severus! It's nowhere near as dramatic as Minerva reports that your giant panther is."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He found most Patronuses interesting, and Helena's Animagus form had caused him to laugh, but with delight. It might have been small, but her hummingbird was utterly suited to her.

"If I laugh, it will be in appreciation, I am sure," he said.

Poppy looked sceptical, but cast.

Severus's lips twitched. A duck waddled through the air, its wings flapping ineffectually, as though it was having difficulty taking off. It moved swiftly, nonetheless, and disappeared through Poppy's window, in search of its target.

"It's a duck," Severus said, trying not to laugh. "It doesn't fly?"

"It flies! Well, it *flies* as a *Patronus*, it just doesn't use its wings much. But it is *very* corporeal!" Poppy said defensively. "And it's quite effective; it moves as fast as it needs to."

"It was . . ." Severus looked down into Poppy's eyes, and he saw the apprehension in them. She valued his opinion, and something about her Patronus made her feel insecure. "It was utterly adorable," he said softly, "just like you are, Poppy." He brushed his lips over her cheek in a light kiss, but remembering that she was about to go on a date with another wizard, he didn't linger.

"Minerva laughed the first time she saw it," Poppy said. "Albus was pleased I had learned so quickly, and then Minerva laughed as soon as I showed her."

"Probably because she thought that it's a sweet Patronus, I'm sure."

"That's what she said."

"It is sweet, Poppy. And one of the most corporeal Patronuses I have encountered. Very clearly highly effective." Severus warmed to see Poppy's obvious pleasure at his words. His affirmation was important to her; that was certainly a positive sign for their relationship. He didn't want to be there when her date arrived, however, and he stood. "Enjoy your evening, Poppy." But not too much, he added to himself.

Poppy gave his arm a quick squeeze as she opened her door for him. "Thanks for the tea and biscuits, Severus. It was very thoughtful, and you brightened my day."

Severus nodded. He wished he were also brightening Poppy's evening, but it couldn't be helped. Not unless he were to hex the wizard now on his way up to see her. And that would hardly endear him to her.

He felt broody as he walked down the stairs to return to his quarters, his petulance and jealousy finally bubbling to the surface of his mood as he no longer felt the need to hold it in check in Poppy's presence, and he again remembered all of MacAirt's apparent multitude of virtues and all of his own miserable failings. As he turned on the landing between the first floor and the ground floor, Severus saw the object of his jealousy coming toward him, energetically taking the steps two at a time.

Quin grinned. "Professor Snape! Good t' see you! We've been meanin' to owl you, Alroy and I. Kieran's workin' out well. He's a bit rough around the edges still, but we'll make that an asset for the boy. Tutoring him meself in his wandless skills...quite a bit of talent there...and I think he'll go far once he settles down some."

"Hmpf. When I saw him at the Three Broomsticks, I thought O'Fallon might find a better use for his magic than end up squandering it in some menial job in Knockturn Alley," Severus replied, still not feeling well-disposed toward the older wizard, especially now, in person, when the wizard exuded vibrancy and charm, and so much damned good-will-toward-all. "He seemed to need a firm hand."

"That he does, firm but gentle, like a skittish colt," Quin agreed, mounting the last couple steps to meet him. He clapped Severus on the arm. A puzzled expression crossed his face, and Quin's hand lingered a bit longer than a simple friendly pat normally would call for.

Severus turned slightly as he stepped down past the wizard, effectively removing the other wizard's hand, but without shaking it off, as he would have preferred to do.

"Convey my greetings to your son," Severus said shortly. He paused on the next step and turned his head as Quin said his name.

"Professor Snape? Is there . . . is there aught the matter?" Quin still appeared to be puzzling over something.

"I must return to my rooms and change for dinner in the Great Hall," Severus replied. If it weren't for the other wizard, he'd be taking Poppy to dinner, instead, he thought. "I cannot stay and . . . *chat*." A sneer finally slipped out as Severus uttered that last word. "Good evening, Mr MacAirt."

NEXT

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Moulting

Sunday, 21 March 1999

Severus meets with Minerva and has a surprise or two awaiting him, including a proposal she has regarding Hogwarts' future. Minerva doesn't allow him to be moody, but she is nonetheless sympathetic to his situation when he tells her the reason for his bad mood. In turn, Severus learns a few things about Minerva herself that he hadn't known.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Fawkes

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Moulting

Chapter 70 of 118

Sunday, 21 March 1999. Severus meets with Minerva and has a surprise or two awaiting him, including a proposal she has regarding Hogwarts' future. Minerva is impatient with his moodiness, but she is nonetheless sympathetic to his situation when he tells her of it. In turn, Severus learns a few things about Minerva herself that he hadn't known.



Chapter Sixty-Nine: Moulting

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As he reached his rooms, Severus felt a slight twinge of regret for his curtness with MacAirt, but he dismissed that regret easily. The wizard might be perfectly amiable...and completely clueless as to why Severus had treated him rudely...but that hardly mattered: MacAirt was taking Poppy out for dinner, more than compensation enough for a little rudeness, Severus thought.

There was a note from Minerva waiting for him on the table in his sitting room.

Severus...

I hope you had a pleasant day. Please come see me when you get this. Fawkes is in my office today. If I am not there when you arrive, send him to fetch me. He's moulting, but I don't believe he will burn until later this evening. If he's in his infant state, or too tired to Apparate, just send me a Patronus instead. I'll be somewhere about.

...Minerva

21 Mar 1999

Severus hung up his leather jacket and pulled a teaching robe on over his casual attire. He doubted he'd have time to change before dinner, and he disliked appearing unprofessionally dressed in the Great Hall in front of the students.

When he stepped into the her office, the Headmistress wasn't there, but Fawkes was, sleeping perched on the back of her chair. Severus cleared his throat and the bird woke up and blinked at him.

"I am here to see the Headmistress."

Fawkes trilled lightly, then Disapparated with a smoky flash. Severus eased himself into one of the armchairs by the fireplace, feeling the effects of too much time spent on a broomstick after not having flown in quite a while. He tried not to think of Poppy on her way to some exotic dinner destination with a rich, handsome, charming wizard, whilst he sat there waiting to meet with the Headmistress before going to yet another dull meal in the Great Hall.

Fawkes returned in a burst of flame and song, seeming to shed soot as he landed and settled into a large copper bowl in the centre of the desk, but the Headmistress wasn't with him. Severus hoped that the bird had actually found Minerva and that Minerva had understood that he was waiting for her in her office. He wondered whether he should have simply cast a Patronus...though given his current mood, he doubted that it would be as corporeal as the one he had cast for Helena that morning. After several minutes, during which Severus brooded on the unfairness of life in general and his life in particular, the door to the office opened and Minerva stepped in, pink-cheeked and dressed in a long green woollen cloak which picked up the green in the tartan skirt of her over-robe. She sent her hat flying over to the rack at the back of the office as she removed her cloak.

"I'm glad you're here, Severus," Minerva said, sending her cloak to follow her hat. "I was unsure whether you would be back until after curfew, since you aren't on duty at all today."

"I hadn't wanted to be," Severus replied moodily.

"I'd like to ask that you not leave the grounds unaccompanied this week. I know that is..."

"Impossible. I have plans. I am not an indentured servant," Severus said. "And if that is a requirement of my job, then I quit."

"Severus! There is no call to take that attitude with me! And it was a request...*apolite* request...made out of concern for you, *not* a job requirement." Minerva sat down in the chair opposite him.

"Sorry." Severus looked away.

"Do as you like, then, Severus. But I am concerned about the attacks, and Alastor has requested that we three meet together before the duel on Saturday afternoon. He has concerns for your safety."

Severus snorted. "I wouldn't be surprised if he's the one behind all this...except he wouldn't be as sloppy about it, and he'd cause more damage."

"Whatever is wrong with you today? Alastor is working as a consultant to the Ministry with regard to these attacks, and the communication I received from him today indicated that he believes you might become a target."

"I find it hard to credit...that he is concerned, not that I might become a target." Severus hadn't forgotten the older wizard's apology, but he had also forgotten neither Moody's long-standing animosity nor the devastating curse he'd cast, which had led to the apology.

"Well, he is concerned. And whether you believe that or not, I am concerned. I would like to minimise your risk. There's no war on, Severus. You needn't place yourself in harm's way. You finally have your life back; you don't want to squander it now in some show of bravado."

"You make assumptions that this life I have is worth anything, to me or to anyone else, and you forget that I am not a Gryffindor: I do not make a 'show of bravado.'"

"Well, then, don't be a damned fool and take unnecessary risks," Minerva replied sharply. "And I thought you felt your life was going well, that you were becoming happier, that you had things to look forward to. Even just the other night, it seemed so."

Severus sighed. "I suppose I had. But I see my chance at happiness grow slimmer...to be taken away once again by someone who already has everything in the world, but who wants the one thing that I . . . Never mind, Minerva," he said with a shake of his head. "I will take care if I leave the grounds, but I won't be confined here. Unless that's the purpose of Moody's 'communication'...he believes that I'm involved in these attacks and he wants you to keep an eye on me."

"Don't be absurd, Severus. Alastor is truly concerned for your welfare. He is trying to make up for past transgressions. Don't you believe you should let him try? As others have allowed you?"

Severus just snorted softly and shook his head.

Minerva's jaw worked. She was growing impatient. "Severus, we have been friends for a long time. We have been through a lot together. I say this with all the love in the world: stop acting like a petulant child, sit up straight, and look me in the eye! If there is something wrong that you'd like to talk about, I'm here to listen, but you're behaving like a spoiled eight-year-old who didn't get what he wanted for his birthday. All of us have our troubles, you know, not just you. And as for your attitude toward Alastor, you do have a right to be suspicious and careful of him given your history with him, but he is, indeed, trying to make amends. Who do you think leaked to the *Prophet* the story of your saving Scrimgeour's granddaughter's family and rescuing her son from the fire?"

Severus looked at Minerva blankly. She hadn't scolded him like that in a long time. "I assumed that you had told Amanda Teller. It was in one of her articles . . . It was Moody?"

"Yes. There are very few people who know precisely the set of facts that appeared in the article, so I asked him about it, and he said he'd talked to her as an anonymous source. He told me that it wasn't fair that the newspapers were beginning to print speculation about you without some balancing facts to counter it."

"Oh. Hmmpf. Well, I suppose he thinks we're square now, all is well, and everything forgiven," Severus said sarcastically.

"All right, Severus, I see that we will get nothing accomplished this evening. When you decide to behave like an adult...and my Deputy Headmaster...we can discuss the other Hogwarts business I had in mind. I don't have the patience for this right now." Minerva stood. "If you were a student, you'd be writing lines by now." She turned to leave for her suite.

Severus sprang from his chair. "I'm sorry, Minerva. I'm sorry. I just . . . I'm sorry."

Minerva turned and looked up at him. "Will you meet with Alastor and me next Saturday before the duel and be able to remain civil?"

"Yes, Headmistress."

"Good. And do take care when you leave the grounds. You may annoy the living daylight out of me sometimes, Severus, but I don't want anything to happen to you. And if you wouldn't mind letting me know when you leave and approximately what time you expect to return, it would save me a good deal of worry."

Severus nodded. "I will send you a Patronus if I anticipate being late returning."

"Good." She paused a moment, still looking at him. "Do I have my Deputy Headmaster with me now?"

"Yes. I apologise for my earlier behaviour. I . . . I have no excuse."

Minerva nodded and returned to her chair. "You may have no excuse, but is there a reason? I presume that your ill mood did not simply blow in on a wind whilst you were out testing broomsticks."

"There is a reason for it, and it has nothing to do with broomsticks or the wind." Severus slumped into his chair. "I had a fine morning, actually. I merely regret it because . . . I had abysmal timing once again, as I so often do."

"How so?"

"I decided to take your advice and . . . well, woo Poppy. I bought her a small gift and I planned to ask her out to dinner. But I should have asked her earlier, before I left the castle. She has a date tonight. With Quin MacAirt. And he only owed her this morning. If I had asked earlier . . . but I'd wanted the moment to be perfect...private, for one, and not in the middle of the Great Hall at breakfast...and I'd thought it would be good to have a little present for her." He shook his head. Humiliations, rejections, injuries, and his own terrible judgment and miserable temperament, it all seemed never-ending. He shouldn't have been surprised that Hermione had found his touch repellent. That had been bad enough, but now Poppy, even with all her kindness and warmth, was choosing the company of another wizard over his.

"She and Quin have been friends for years..." Minerva began.

"I know that. And Gareth told me that he was the wizard she was out with on Friday night, when he took her to *Paris* for dinner, and that the two of them had dated before he was cursed. I haven't a chance," he said gloomily.

"Gareth was just a boy at the time," Minerva said. "Poppy did date Quin for a short while the summer after she and Murdoch finally called it quits for good. It wasn't serious, however. They're close friends, of course, I won't minimise that, but if Gareth gave you the impression that the two were dating seriously back then, he was mistaken. They'd stopped dating months before Quin was attacked. They did still see each other as friends, though. And you can't very well expect Poppy to give up her friends even if you two were to begin seeing each other."

"But it was a date. She said it was. Or she didn't say it wasn't. And she was concerned about her appearance. She wouldn't be if it weren't a date. He's not just any friend. I saw him on his way up to her. He's a rich, handsome, charming, successful international businessman...and never in league with any Dark Wizards, as I was. She'd be a fool to not want to be with him more than me." Severus gestured toward Minerva. "After all, look at the way I just behaved with you. I'm a miserable, unpleasant, ugly, unpopular schoolteacher who still has fits of irrational bad temper and can't even behave politely toward someone I love." Severus reddened. "I meant, of course, toward you."

"We all get into bad moods sometimes, Severus, and I truly doubt that the first words that spring to Poppy's mind when she thinks of you are 'miserable,' 'unpleasant,' 'ugly,' or 'unpopular.' And as for the way you behaved just now..." Minerva shrugged "...I was in my Headmistress mode when, perhaps, you needed me more as a friend. We are often freer with our emotions, including our bad tempers, with people to whom we are closest. You do have an unpleasant way about you when you get into a bad mood, though, Severus, and you should try not to take it out on the people around you, particularly when they had nothing to do with it and haven't a clue what's got you so riled."

Severus nodded. "I do try. But I am just not a very nice person and I know that I have a bad temper. It's the way I am."

"Then it's even more laudable when you do keep your temper under control. And you may have a bad temper by nature...and I'm not completely convinced that's true...but even if you do, you are a rational human being. You can develop strategies to cope with it."

Severus sighed and nodded. "I suppose I'll have to if I'm to have any chance of a relationship with Poppy at all."

"Not just with Poppy, Severus, and not just romantic relationships. Even if things don't work out with Poppy, you shouldn't decide that she was the only reason to work on your coping strategies. You really need to do it for *yourself*, so that you are happier with yourself and so that you can develop other relationships, too."

"I know you're right, but it doesn't feel that way to me." Severus shrugged. "At least I didn't storm out of here, indignant and angry with you that you dared dislike my behaviour, which is what I would have done a few years ago, I'm sure."

"That is something," Minerva acknowledged with a fond smile.

"You see why I shouldn't be involved in the counselling programme now, though? I have too many of my own problems to be able to help anyone with theirs."

"You've done well with Slytherins in the past."

"The ones whose problems weren't caused by their nearest and dearest being Death Eaters, perhaps. But their troubles were usually minor ones...homesickness, teenage crushes, poor revision habits...and I simply trotted out the little phrases and bromides that you and Albus instructed me to. They generally all boiled down to 'keep busy' and 'keep busy and make a revisions schedule.'"

"Nonetheless..."

"Nonetheless, you did say that there was some other Hogwarts business to attend to. If we still have time before dinner, we could discuss it now."

Minerva glanced at her grandfather clock. "No, I don't think we do. But it's nothing urgent. I hadn't planned to speak to you about it until we met before the Wednesday staff meeting, anyway. It simply seemed that this might have been a convenient time."

"After dinner, then. I have nothing better to do. It would take my mind off of . . . where Poppy might be and what she might be doing."

"All right, then. After dinner," Minerva agreed.

Back in the Headmistress's office an hour later, Severus almost dropped his coffee cup. He stared at Minerva. "You want to *dowhat*? I couldn't have heard you correctly. You want to eliminate the Sorting in the autumn? Whatever happened to, 'as long as I'm Headmistress, there will be four Houses at Hogwarts'?"

"I didn't say anything about eliminating the Houses, and I didn't say that I wish to eliminate the Sorting altogether. If I can wrangle the Governors properly, next year would be the first year of implementing my new plan, and the Sorting would begin again the following year, but with the second-years, not the first."

"You want to Sort the second-years? But what about the first-years? And the Welcome Feast?"

"We'd obviously still have a Welcome Feast to begin the new year, but there would be five tables in the Hall, not four." Minerva reached into her pocket and pulled out a small sheet of parchment. "Here. I have a diagram. We'd put a fifth, smaller table either here, just in front of the staff table, or," she said, turning the parchment over, "here, in the middle, between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff on this side and Ravenclaw and Slytherin on the other, but close to the staff table, since it would be somewhat shorter, with only between forty and fifty students."

"But . . . but they wouldn't have Houses." Severus couldn't seem to wrap his mind around the idea of there being Houseless Hogwarts students.

"No, not until their second year." Minerva said patiently, "when they would be Sorted after having already established relationships with others in their year without regard to House and after having had a year in which to become familiar with both Hogwarts and the House system."

"It won't work. And no one will support this. And where would they sleep? And they'd have no Head of House..."

"*Obviously* they would have somewhere to sleep, Severus! Do you think I'd just have them camp in the Great Hall all year?" Minerva rolled her eyes. "They would have their own dormitories and someone to look after them. I also have a plan for involving some of the older students, sixth-years, from the four Houses, but that is not a necessary part of the plan. It would simply be convenient and, I think, beneficial for the first-years and any student mentors from the other Houses."

"A fifth House? What would you call it? McGonagall House? Dumbledore House?"

"No, no, no! Severus, you haven't the proper attitude or understanding at all. Not a fifth House. Not a House, per se. Just a first-year dormitory. I thought either on the fourth floor, where the staff wing, the library, and the Hospital Wing now are, and where I plan them to be next year, or perhaps the sixth floor. There is a lot of unused space on six that could be converted to dormitories."

"If I were on staff and had my suite on the fourth floor, I do not think I would appreciate having a first-year dormitory right around the corner from me."

"Yes, I considered that, too. But it would be convenient to have them close to the library and the infirmary. Perhaps six would be better, though. I want to have sufficient details hammered out before I present the idea to the staff and then to the Board of Governors at their next meeting so that I feel secure in what I am presenting."

Severus shook his head. "No one will agree to it."

"Perhaps not. Or perhaps not for the coming year. But I will continue to present the idea until they do agree to it *Ceterum autem censeo, Carthaginem esse delendam*...and furthermore, I believe Carthage must be destroyed," she quoted with a glint in her eye. "They'll come around."

"And who would you have supervise the first-year dormitory?"

"I think we should hire someone specifically for that position, perhaps giving her...or him...a few other duties. I thought it would be quite advantageous if we had someone who could also tutor them in a few of the basic subjects and perhaps offer some remedial reading and writing classes for those who didn't attend school before coming to Hogwarts."

Severus's eyes lit up. "If you do that, all of them should have it, not just the ones who were schooled at home. It would be something I am sure the rest of the teaching staff would greatly appreciate. And perhaps a class in logical reasoning. No more poorly written essays, no more fallacious arguments...you'd have the staff on your side with that."

Minerva laughed. "I rather doubt that one year of a class in reading and writing...and classical logic...would eliminate poorly written essays or fallacious arguments, but it would help. Albus said the first- through third-years had Rhetoric required when he was in school. There were no OWLs in it, so few people took it beyond the third year, but he took it for five. He claims to have enjoyed it, but looking at the old schoolbooks he had for it, it's hard to understand how. Anyway, I thought something along the lines of the old Rhetoric course, but modernised, and only for the first-years. At least for the time being. I would like to introduce a Latin course, too, but not just yet."

"That would be very handy in advanced Charms, Transfiguration, and Defence, and even in Potions," Severus said. The students all received some basic instruction in Latin in their spells courses, but it was very haphazard and rudimentary. Anyone interested in it any further would either have to study on their own or wait until sixth-year Ancient Runes, when the NEWTs-level students would be introduced to spell-Latin as a part of the study of language, characters, sound, and the historical development of magical incantations. Few students took Ancient Runes to begin with, and fewer still took it beyond the OWLs. "I found knowledge of Latin useful when I began designing my own spells."

"I had all of that before coming to Hogwarts, but even as a child, I recognised that my home education was unusual. My father had hopes that I would become a linguist, like he was, and he tried to interest me in languages. I received quite a good classical education before I began at Hogwarts, although it took me a while to appreciate it. I certainly didn't appreciate it on days when the sky was blue and the cliffs were calling me, and I was in my father's cluttered study having to read and translate Cato or Plotinus," she said with a laugh.

"It sounds idyllic to me," Severus said softly.

"Someday perhaps you can do that with your own child," Minerva said with a wistful smile.

"My Latin isn't good enough, and I'm unlikely to have children," Severus said, taking her statement seriously. "Besides, I'd be a terrible parent." He looked at her a moment. "Did you ever want children? Of your own?"

"It would have been nice," Minerva replied, looking down at her parchment and turning it in her hands. "But it wasn't part of the scheme of things. And I had all of you, hundreds of children."

"But you wanted children of your own?"

Minerva twitched one shoulder. "It was a moot subject. But yes, I would have liked to have had a child or two. Dumbledore insisted that it was an impossibility . . . and there was no choice for me. It was his children or none at all, so none at all it was."

"Any children of his would have been targets of the Dark Lord...Riddle," Severus pointed out. "And if it were known that you and Dumbledore were married, you would have become an even greater target than you were. Riddle took great thrill in using people's families against them. I believe he resented the affections between parents and children, husbands and wives."

"I'd thought we could work something out, though, that it might have been possible . . . and Dumbledore had already made this decision before Riddle returned from abroad, before the toe-rag was an obvious threat. But that was one of his reasons," Minerva acknowledged, "he saw the danger approaching. There were other reasons, though, ones more . . . personal to him. And he wouldn't speak about it once I'd made it plain that I could live with it as long as I had him. I'd made my decision, after all. It became something of a forbidden topic between us. That was one of the most painful things about seeing Gareth move to Amsterdam . . . I could never have taken Gertrude's place, I knew that, but . . ." Minerva swallowed and blinked. "He was Malcolm's son and he needed me. It was almost as though fate had given me a chance to have a child, that one good thing had come out of our terrible losses, first my brother's murder and then Gertrude's injury and exile. During that year and a half that I was his guardian before you were hired, it seemed . . ." Minerva shook her head. "Time flies, though, and Gareth is well-grown and a good man, a fine wizard. Robert and Thea did well with him. But I had no children, none with Albus and not even a surrogate in Gareth."

"It's hardly surprising, though," Severus said, looking at the subject logically. "Dumbledore was already old when you married. He'd hardly want children in his old age."

"Any children we may have had would be grown now, and Dumbledore's still working, still vital," Minerva said sharply, answering his logic with her own. "And even if Albus had died during the war, his children would have had their father well into adulthood. *And* he has energy enough for the children of this school, there are house-elves, there's my extended family. He'd hardly have been overly taxed."

Severus shrugged. It had never really occurred to him before that Minerva might have wanted children of her own, but she had been fairly young when she and Dumbledore had come together, and Severus saw now that things might have once been difficult because of their age difference. Dumbledore had mentioned that to him, as well, saying the difficulties due to the age difference had diminished over the years, but that he was now seeing new ones, now that he was of an age where he might like to retire but Minerva was at the peak of her career. He had also said that Minerva had made personal and professional sacrifices for him, so he could make a few for her now. At least the wizard recognised that and didn't take her sacrifices for granted.

"Well, that's the long past," Minerva said briskly. "Let's just plan for the future now, eh?"

"You have other startling plans you're going to spring upon me tonight?" Severus asked, glad for the change of topic.

Minerva shrugged. "Not as much as that. But I have spoken to Ms Benetti about having additional Quidditch teams, ones not organized by House, and expanding the offering of sports beyond just Quidditch and first-year flying lessons. If she stays on next year, she's thinking of introducing lacrosse, both traditional and the broomstick version. I'm beginning to think that Albus's bowling alleys might have been a good idea. Our students can too easily become physically lazy. I am going to coax Caspar and Poppy into forming a Hillwalking Club, as it's something they both enjoy, and possibly get Rath involved in that, if I can. Also, Renwick Douglas has agreed to come in once a month next year and offer demonstrations and a kind of 'Introduction to Drawing, Painting, and the Charming Arts,' something beyond what Filius can offer in his regular Charms course. There are fewer and fewer students expressing interest in music, painting, and the other arts, and I'd like to see some student organisations formed around something other than Gobstones, Quidditch, exam preparation, and Defence Against the Dark Arts. Filius's plans for a duelling club next year are fine, I have no objections to it, but there is more to life than that."

"How is Dumbledore's Muggle book club going?" Severus asked.

"Quite well, I understand. Albus seems pleased, at any rate. There are about fifteen students who attend regularly, and a number of the staff, as well. That's another thing I'd like to see more of...activities in which older students are able to mingle with the staff or other adults. Being at school gives them a peculiar view of the world, as though there's teenagers and then the rest of the world."

"Teenagers will be that way regardless," Severus said.

"Perhaps, but I don't think it's natural. I'd like to see more intergenerational mingling. But then, I grew up surrounded by adults of widely spaced generations and very few children, so perhaps that was odd, as well." Minerva shrugged. "Still, it would be good for them to learn how to interact with adults as adults themselves, or as near to it as they can manage, before they head off for apprenticeships or work or what-have-you."

"Mmm." Severus thought that was something better left to the families during the school holidays. They had enough to be getting on with at Hogwarts, he thought, just trying to cram some knowledge into the students' heads. "I think one step at a time, though, Minerva. Don't try to bite off more than you can chew, as they say. And this is a school. I think the students' lessons should come first."

"Of course. I naturally recognise that, but their education needn't be as narrow as it's become. Even Dumbledore agrees with me completely on that point."

"Where is Albus tonight?" Severus asked. He hadn't seen him trundle through the office, and the other wizard hadn't been at dinner, either.

"He is out for the day. He has felt . . . peculiar the last few days, and although I have tried to distract him from his worries, it is difficult for him to forget this day and let it go completely unmarked when it is also the vernal equinox. This morning when he woke up, he said he felt restless. I told him to go to the island and have himself a good ramble and some time to himself."

"It was today two years ago when he . . . when you . . ."

"When I almost killed him...and did kill him to the rest of the world. Yes. I think he needed some time alone to think about things. Not just that, but all that led up to it."

"And you didn't?"

"No. Not today, anyway," Minerva said. "Anniversaries can sometimes hold . . . emotion for me. But this one, this year at least, doesn't, not as much as for Albus, at any rate. Perhaps one year it will. But I have processed it over and over again, I've had nightmares about it, and I have no desire to reawaken any of that at the moment by dwelling on it today when it feels like just another Sunday to me. The anniversary of my father's death in December was harder for me this last year than in years past. I don't know why that should have been, but I suddenly missed him terribly." She took in a long breath and let it out slowly.

Severus sat quietly for a moment. "Perhaps because this is the first year you've been able to think about it very much. He died only a few years ago, didn't he?"

Minerva nodded. "Just a few days after Christmas in ninety-five. He was working on an old Egyptian papyrus in the library. Mother went in to fetch him for lunch, and . . . well, he'd been dead for about an hour, she thought. He was happy, though, right at the end, doing something he enjoyed so much. Still, it was something of a shock. He was only one hundred twenty-six. I thought he had at least another decade or two." Minerva sighed and took off her glasses, rubbing her head. "Albus believed it might actually have something to do with the papyrus. Mother gave it to him and he locked it up, which annoyed Branwen. She got most of Dad's scholarly papers, research, manuscripts, and so on, since that's her field and she did one of her apprenticeships with him. She thought that the papyrus should have been included, particularly since it was something that Morgan, her father, had given him for Christmas. Albus does plan on checking it over for curses and so forth someday and giving it to her if it's safe, but he hasn't had the time."

"Is it even safe for Albus to do that? Perhaps it's not a curse on the papyrus itself, but something written on the papyrus, an incantation or such."

"Perhaps. I know that Albus has considered that possibility. I don't think it was the papyrus. I think it was just . . . Dad's heart, some overexcitement, perhaps. Mother made him take better care of himself than he otherwise might have been inclined to, but he was fairly sedentary. An active mind, but it was hard to pry him away from his books, you know."

Severus nodded. "When Albus tests the papyrus, someone should be with him. I take it your father was alone?"

Minerva nodded.

"I'll do it with him, then, and if I'm not at Hogwarts, you must send for me. I wouldn't want another incident like he had with the ring," Severus said. "Silly old sod."

Minerva twitched a smile. She heard the genuine concern behind Severus's dismissive epithet. She knew how hard Severus had worked to save Albus's life when he'd been struck by the ring's curse. "I'll be sure to tell him."

"Mmm. Would you like to play a game of chess whilst we, er, you wait?" Severus asked. "It's been an evening of rather grim topics."

Minerva hesitated.

"We don't need to . . . I can go to the library..."

"I'd like to play a game, actually." She looked at him speculatively. "Do you play Go, Severus?"

An hour and a half later, Severus glanced out the window. He wasn't doing very well, but he was new to the game, though it did intrigue him. It seemed a game of pure skill with little left to luck, which he appreciated. But he was also distracted by thoughts of Poppy, wondering where she was, whether she was in a passionate embrace with the handsome Irish wizard, or even if he was just making her smile and laugh. Oddly...to his mind...it bothered him more to think that MacAirt might be making her laugh than that he might be kissing her. Very peculiar . . .

"Dumbledore's coming up the drive," Severus said.

"How does he look?" Minerva asked as she placed a white stone on the grid.

"Fine, I suppose." The same as usual, Severus thought.

Minerva stood and turned toward the window. She nodded. "He looks better. Tired, but better."

"How can you tell at this distance?"

Minerva sat back down and watched Severus place one of his black stones. "His gait, I suppose. The attitude of his head, where he's looking as he walks. I've known him for a very long time. He looks better than when he left this morning."

"I'm glad for that," Severus said. "It must be peculiar for him. I know that my own near-death and then living when I hadn't believed it possible . . . that was difficult for me, but the circumstances for him were truly bizarre. Coming back to life...twice, essentially, and the first time masquerading as someone else. Not to mention that he had to trust you to stop his heart and then be able to restart it." Severus wouldn't wish to test his trust in someone that way.

"And to trust his . . . his life force to me, as well," Minerva said. She glanced at him over her glasses. "When he told you about the *Arrestocordis*, did he also tell you about the *Adsumo*?"

"The *Adsumo*? You can't mean . . ." Severus's brow furrowed. "The only spell I know by that name is the *Adsumo spiritus*, which is a very Dark spell, indeed."

"That's the one," Minerva said. She placed a white stone, closing a meandering circle and surrounding several of Severus's black ones, which she removed from the board.

Severus just stared at her, ignoring her coup.

"Your play, Severus."

"You performed that spell . . . the *Adsumo* . . . and in conjunction with . . . with killing him, essentially. I'd never have thought of you as one who would perform any Dark magic. Does the Ministry know? No, of course they wouldn't," he said in answer to his own question.

"It wasn't Dark. I didn't see it that way. And it worked perfectly, as you can see for yourself."

"That was a great gamble you took, that you could do it correctly in the first place and then release it properly. You could have become a kind of Horcrux for some remnant of his soul, or not succeeded in releasing it at all, or . . . so many things could have gone wrong. And that on top of just stopping his heart and restarting it, which in comparison now sounds like a child's colour-change charm. No wonder you have had nightmares about it."

"I know him well, and we are bound. He is bound to me, actually, through the *Celebrare* by which we cured his hand. So I think that helped me to perform the *Adsumo* easily and to achieve what I needed to by it. And almost no one knows we are bound like that, and only a very few know of the *Adsumo*, so I trust you won't say anything."

"I doubt that Dumbledore would appreciate me knowing."

"Somehow, I don't think he would mind. I wouldn't have told you if I believed it would disturb him to have you know. You and he may sometimes still be at odds, and there was a time when neither of you particularly liked each other, but he has come to love you. In fact, he views you almost as a son, you know."

Severus didn't respond to that, remembering the troubles and the tensions between them over the years, and how, as Albus began to forgive him and accept him, his own resentment, as unreasonable as it may have been, continued and even grew. How dare the old man care for him? How dare he, when he hadn't seemed to care all those years before? How dare he, when all that Severus wanted was to exact his revenge and escape his own guilt? How dare he forgive the unforgivable when even Severus, as he came both to feel his guilt and to find it inescapable, could not forgive himself . . . And how dare Albus find any pleasure, any joy, or any love in life when life itself was bleak, miserable, and overwhelmed with Darkness? The stain on Severus's own soul seemed to cast its shadow on everything around him. He grasped greedily at brief escapes...small, solitary escapes...from the bitterness of his life, but they were escapes only, and not life itself.

So much had changed . . . so much, and so much because of the witch there with him, Severus thought. And not only because of her, but because of others who had played a role not only in transforming his life, but in giving him a new one. Her forgiveness, Albus's, Gareth's . . .

"I never show it as . . . as clearly or as much as perhaps I should," Severus finally replied softly, "but I do love you, and him, as well. And if I could have a second father, I would choose no one other than Albus, as much as he still can annoy and frustrate me sometimes. But I know that I am safe in my anger with him. Years ago, it didn't seem credible that he could still care for me, still forgive me, if I pushed him away, if I grew angry with him, and yet now I rely on that very fact. If ever he were to stop caring, stop snooping and stop interfering . . . I cannot say what that would do to me."

"He won't stop caring. And if you ever need him, in any way, he will help you, you know," Minerva said. "It might not be a bad thing for you to talk to him about your confusion, about Poppy, about other things in your life. Just talk. It could be good for you both."

Severus twitched one shoulder. He didn't know how to discuss such things with Albus. It was difficult enough with Minerva or Gareth.

Minerva tilted her head. "I believe he is on his way up now, Severus." She smiled. "Yes, it is he."

"You can tell that it's him and not someone else?" Severus asked.

As Minerva nodded, there was a single sharp rap on the door and then it opened.

"Good evening, my dear." Albus smiled at the two. "I see you found some company for the evening. I'm glad of that."

"You had a good day?" Minerva asked as he crossed over to them.

Albus nodded. "Exactly what I needed. Just as you knew." His gaze was warm as it met Minerva's own, and Severus felt something pass between them, something almost tangible, and he experienced a sudden longing for that kind of contact with someone, with someone whom he loved and who loved him, their love and understanding only increasing over the years, not dimming with time and custom. He thought of Poppy, and with very clear vision, he saw the two of them together, years from that moment, grey-haired, sitting in matching armchairs and reading, a pot of tea on the table, a plate of Florentines, he and Poppy . . . comfortable, happy, loving . . .

"Teaching our boy Go, are you, Minerva?" Albus's question interrupted Severus's peaceful domestic vision.

"As you can see. And he's doing quite well."

"Don't prevaricate, Headmistress. I am losing abominably, Dumbledore. But I intend to persevere until I master the game."

Albus's smile grew at that. "Very good. And when you have mastered it, you must play Filius. He has become most predictable over the years. Perhaps a new opponent will enliven his game!"

Minerva chuckled. "I believe Filius has said the same of you, Albus, so you must also play against Severus. And I am certain that he will master the game quite well, if he takes the time."

"I will leave you to your game, then," Albus said. "I think I will change out of my walking robes and settle down with some hot chocolate and *Midnight's Children*."

"Shall I come up?" Minerva asked.

"No, no, you and Severus finish your game. Have another, if you like. A leisurely game of Go can be good for the spirit and conducive to easy conversation. Join me when you're ready, my dear." He kissed her cheek gently. He turned back toward Severus. "Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Albus. I won't keep Minerva long, as I am losing quite rapidly," he said with a glance at the white-dominated game board.

"Then you must demand an immediate rematch and improve your game," Albus said encouragingly.

One corner of Severus's mouth twitched upward in amusement. "Perhaps." He paused and looked up at Albus, meeting his eyes more seriously and adding softly, "I am glad to see you this evening, Albus. This day, especially. I am glad to see you well and whole."

"And I, dear boy, am very glad that you are here to see it." Albus reached out and placed his hand on Severus's shoulder and, in a rush of affection toward the older wizard, Severus responded by claspng his arm and holding it.

Fawkes let out a sudden long, low trill, and the three turned their heads toward where the phoenix lay in a large copper bowl on Minerva's desk. Fawkes raised his head weakly, trilled lightly once more, then burst into flame.

Albus slid his hand from Severus's shoulder to his elbow, urging him to stand. Minerva followed, and the three bent over the bowl of ashes and watched as Fawkes emerged from them, renewed and reborn, but a rather scrawny and unlovely chick in comparison to the magnificence of his mature form. Ugly, in fact, Severus thought. Amazing, but ugly.

Severus glanced up at Albus and saw tears gathered in his eyes.

"He's so beautiful," Albus whispered. "Faithful Fawkes . . . it is good to see you burned well this night. You needed it; it was long due for you. Now sleep, my sweet friend, and Minerva and I will give you some nice fruit puree in a few hours. We'll see whether your favourite is still gooseberry or if you've returned to preferring pomegranate. We've plenty of each."

After watching Fawkes fall asleep, his beak tucked clumsily under one awkward wing, the three withdrew quietly.

"I'll see you in a little while, my dear," Albus said softly. He patted Severus on the shoulder once more, then slowly took the stairs up to the suite above.

Chapter Seventy: To Persist and Pursue

Sunday, 21 March Monday, 22 March 1999

Severus determines to persist, but finds his determination undermined by his own negative thoughts.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, Poppy Pomfrey

Author's Note: For anyone who is unfamiliar with the Carthage reference, *Ceterum autem censeo, Carthaginem esse delendam*, Cato reputedly ended every speech with that, regardless of the topic of the speech, until Rome did, indeed, destroy Carthage. Minerva is therefore telling Severus that she will remind the Board of Governors of her proposal at every opportunity until it becomes reality.

Chapter Seventy: To Persist and Pursue

Chapter 71 of 118

Severus determines to persist. Poppy may not be so sure.



Chapter Seventy: To Persist and Pursue

Sunday, 21 March Monday, 22 March 1999

"He seemed tired," Severus remarked.

"He did, and no doubt he will insist on getting up every few hours to feed Fawkes. Wilsby used to help with Fawkes after he'd had his burning day, but she's getting on, and Albus doesn't like her to have to get up in the middle of the night any longer," Minerva said. "If he'd had that kind of time for a baby . . . but that's neither here nor there. He will not be getting enough sleep tonight, certainly, nor for at least the next few weeks. He worries about me, but he doesn't always take the best care of himself, either. Still, he's in better shape than he was a few years ago, and that's a good thing. I was worried that the healthful effects of the *Celebrare* wouldn't survive the *Arrestocordis* and the *Adsumo*, not to mention Albus having to Polyjuice himself for over a year. But they seem to have lingered, just as our bond did."

"Indeed. However, you should take care of yourself, as well, Headmistress. We can leave our game for another time."

"Nonsense! If you are to make any progress, you need to at least finish the game we have underway," Minerva said. "And it's not yet very late."

Severus nodded and resumed his seat. Poppy hadn't returned yet...at least, not that he had seen. He had chosen the chair he had because, if he stretched a bit, it had a view of the gates. Still, he could have missed her return. Nonetheless, he did think that concentrating on the game was better than thinking about Poppy and what she was doing out with Quin for the evening, and certainly better than staring unceasingly at the gates until her return. Not that he would do that. He'd just think about doing it.

They were playing on only part of the board whilst Severus learned the game, which made it go much faster, and it only took another ten minutes for Minerva to capture the last of Severus's stones.

"Another game?" Minerva asked.

Severus shrugged and stretched a bit, trying to look casual about it as he snuck a glance out the window again. This time, he could see two indistinct figures down just beyond the gates, only silhouettes flickering in the torchlight illuminating the path up to the castle. One was certainly Poppy, though. Her companion, a much taller wizard, seemed to tower over her. Quin MacAirt.

When Severus didn't respond to her invitation, Minerva turned to look out the window, standing to see what he was looking at. Severus dropped his pretence of disinterest and rose, as well. He stepped toward the window just as the taller figure bent toward the smaller one. For a moment, the shadows merged, then they slowly separated. Severus blinked and swallowed hard. Minerva touched his arm lightly and left her fingertips gently resting there. The two down by the gate seemed to speak for a moment more, then the taller figure bent once more swiftly before stepping back. Poppy opened the gate and stepped through. After she had closed the gate behind her, the other figure disappeared, and Poppy began to walk back up toward the castle.

"She didn't invite him back up to the castle with her," Minerva said, looking up at Severus as he watched Poppy through the window.

"Is that supposed to be encouraging?" Severus asked with a sigh. He turned away from the window, then looked back over at Minerva. "Do you mean that she did invite him up the other night?"

Minerva sat back down, tilting her head and twitching one shoulder noncommittally.

"Wonderful." Severus slouched morosely into his chair, thinking about what that might mean. "Their parting was . . . warm."

"Quin kisses me good-night, as well," Minerva said lightly. "It doesn't necessarily mean there's anything . . . serious going on there."

Severus remembered the bearhug the other wizard had given Minerva at the Hogwarts Victory Feast, and the enthusiastic kiss...which he had been surprised to see Dumbledore smiling at, but then the two wizards had also embraced. "Hmmp. It's not the same, though, is it? MacAirt knows you and Dumbledore are together, so it's just friendly with you, but with Poppy . . . it's different. And they've dated before."

"Of course. Although Quin and I, if things had been different between Albus and me, perhaps there might have been something there. If Poppy were with you...or someone else...Quin would respect that, I assure you, and yet he might still greet her warmly and give her a kiss good-bye. So don't read too much into what you just saw. And although they may have dated casually before, I'm not sure that either of them is looking at this as the beginning of a serious relationship."

"But you're not sure they aren't, either," Severus said.

"True. But I still think my advice the other night was sound. Be patient and be persistent."

"Even if she tells me she's not interested? Being persistent then . . . I don't want to become an unwelcome presence in her life."

"Has she *said* she's not interested?"

"Well . . ." Severus thought a moment. "I don't know . . . when we first . . . that first night . . . she said that it was just the one night, you know, and so did I. And then that it was just . . . just what it was. A fling. But since then, no, I don't think she's actually said she's not interested. But today she said she wanted us to be friends, that she wants to be a good friend to me. And if she were interested in more with me, why would she be going out with Quin? On dates? And don't try to tell me they aren't dates, Minerva. I don't care how Quin may kiss *you* good-night now, or whether you two might have once dated, or whether the two of them were or were not dating seriously in the past, or any of that. He kisses *her* good-night *now*, and they *are* dates."

"Very well, but that doesn't mean they're serious about each other, and they *are* old friends, after all. You still may have a chance with her, if you want to take it. Of course, you could just give up. Simply concede. It would certainly be easier than putting in the effort to woo her. And safer for you, too. No more risk of rejection if you take that path."

Severus frowned. "I know what you're trying to do, Minerva. Not very subtle."

"I wasn't trying to be subtle," Minerva said with a smirk. "I was trying to goad you."

"You shouldn't do that in the mood I've been in."

Minerva chuckled. "I know you, Severus! So what are you going to do?"

"I'm *not* going to play another game of Go with you tonight," Severus said, standing. "As to what *am* going to do . . . I don't know, precisely. But I'm not going to concede. Not yet. I just . . . I just . . ." He blinked, hot tears rising in his eyes as he suddenly felt a great sense of imminent loss. "The way I feel now . . . I don't know how I could cope if she chose him over me. Or if she simply chose . . . *anything* other than being with me," he added softly, his voice hitching.

Minerva rose and put her arms around him. "It will be all right, no matter what. Really."

Severus held her and turned his face into her hair, letting his tears finally leak out. "It's just all hard, too much . . ." he whispered, his voice rough.

"You're tired and you're overwhelmed. It has been a difficult year for you," Minerva said softly, patting his back. "There have been a lot of changes in your life, positive ones, for the most part, but it's still not easy. But you have friends, and we're here. I'm here."

"I know, and I'm sorry, Minerva. I shouldn't burden you with these foolish problems, and I'm sorry I was unpleasant earlier. And . . ." Severus took in a shuddering breath and let it out. "And I will meet with you and Moody. You were right. It was decent of him to talk to Teller about the fire and the boy."

"Good. We want to keep you safe, Severus, so that you can enjoy your future."

The two heard a movement on the stairs at the back of the office, and Severus let Minerva go, turning quickly away and wiping his face with one hand. Minerva looked back and saw Albus in his nightshirt and dressing gown.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I thought I'd just see how Fawkes is doing," Albus said softly. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's fine..."

"I was just leaving," Severus said, clearing his throat.

"Is everything all right?" Albus asked, coming all the way down the stairs.

"Yes," Severus said quickly as he turned toward him, his face blank. "I'm simply . . . tired."

"It's been a stressful week," Minerva added.

"Ah, the attacks, and the latest one on Lucius," Albus said with a nod. "It cannot be an easy thing, now that you have a new life, and thinking the dangers from your previous life were finally past, to discover that after all you've been through, you may become the target of some sadly deranged person. But someday this will all be past, as well, dear boy." Albus patted his arm. "I hope that you do not become discouraged by this new development."

Severus nodded. "Thank you, Albus. I shall try to remain . . . focussed on what I may do to shape my future rather than on those things over which I have little control."

"That's the spirit! And I have something for you to look forward to," Albus said with a smile. "I'm sending out invitations later this week, but I'll let you know now so you have something pleasurable to anticipate."

"Invitation?" Severus asked, not seeing Minerva shake her head slightly at Albus.

Ignoring Minerva, Albus continued, "Yes, I'm having a little dinner party...we are, that is...on the third. Just a few friends, family, a few of your colleagues. It will be a very pleasant diversion for you, I am sure!"

"Well, I, of course, I . . ."

"Good! It will be a convivial occasion, and you'll be able to forget your worries for a while in some enjoyable company."

"The third . . . Saturday," Severus said.

"Yes, two weeks from yesterday," Albus confirmed. "You haven't anything else planned for that evening, have you, my boy? Because if you have..."

"No, I haven't," Severus admitted. "I shall . . . anticipate it, then. Thank you, Albus."

"Excellent! A few friendly colleagues, some very lovely witches...you know most of them, I believe, Severus...and a few old friends."

"Witches..." Severus began, frowning, remembering Albus's previous attempts to match him up with someone.

"Just friends and family, Severus! Friends and family!" the older wizard said brightly. "I hope Gareth will be there as well, so it won't be all old folks like us, if you're concerned about that."

"Ah, well . . . Thank you again, Albus." Severus turned toward Minerva. "Good night, Minerva. Thank you for the lessons this evening."

"We'll do it again soon," Minerva said. "I enjoyed it."

As he was about to place his foot on the first step of the spiral staircase, he could hear Minerva saying something to Albus, but the heavy door prevented him from hearing what she was saying. He hoped she wouldn't tell him about his various disasters with women. No doubt that would provoke even further attempts on Albus's part to set him up with someone. Of course, he had once mentioned Poppy, so at least Albus recognised her finer attributes and had some sense about the sort of witch he might find acceptable. In fact, none of the witches Albus had suggested were completely unsuitable, with the possible exception of Rosmerta; that one still puzzled him. But he didn't want Albus trying to arrange his romantic life, no matter how well-intentioned he was or how good his taste in witches...even though he was doing very badly on his own.

Reaching the entrance hall, Severus heard familiar quick footsteps coming from the side corridor that led to the kitchens and to the Hufflepuff dormitories. He had assumed that Poppy would have been in her suite by this point. He hesitated slightly, then he made his decision.

He was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs when she appeared.

"Severus!"

"Poppy," Severus replied with a slight nod.

"I just got in a little while ago," Poppy said. "I had to stop by Pomona and let her know. She was keeping an eye on the infirmary for me."

"Indeed."

"Yes . . . so, on your way back down to the dungeons? Or doing rounds?" Poppy asked.

"I thought I might escort you to the Hospital Wing, if you would allow me the honour."

"You came up to do that? How did you know I had returned?"

Severus shook his head. "I happened to be returning to my own rooms when I heard you in the corridor. I thought I would wait for you." He hoped that wasn't too direct and didn't sound either overly sentimental or at all predatory.

Poppy smiled. "Thank you. In fact, I had wanted to speak with you. I thought it would have to wait until tomorrow evening."

Severus's eyebrows raised.

"Yes . . ." Poppy started up the stairs beside Severus. "I know you don't know Quin well..."

"I believe we had this discussion earlier. I am sure he is a fine wizard and a gentleman, just as you say," Severus interrupted, not wanting to discuss MacAirt's finer qualities with her, and hoping that she didn't want to tell him that she'd decided to embark upon an affair of some sort with him.

"It's not about that, although I'm glad to hear you say that," Poppy replied. "Quin has a sort of unusual ability...many in his family do, although Alroy isn't particularly gifted that way...but Quin has a kind of extra sense, a type of divinatory talent. Among other things, he's quite . . . empathic. If you're experiencing a strong emotion when he's nearby, he's likely to sense it even if you are concealing it from others, and if he touches you when you're . . . you're particularly affected by something, he can get a sense of that, too."

Severus remembered MacAirt's hand on his arm, his puzzlement, and his question. "The man touched me."

"Yes, and..."

"The man touched me. What business did he have doing such a thing?" Severus asked, stopping on the steps, outraged. "How would he like to have me perform Legilimency on him without his permission? Your assessment of his character leaves a lot to be desired, if that's the sort of wizard he is..."

"It isn't like Legilimency, Severus," Poppy said gently, touching his elbow and continuing up the stairs with him. "He just picked it up from you. It wasn't intentional on his part. You were feeling extreme hostility, he said, and he thought it was directed toward him. I wanted to tell you so that you are aware of his ability and can take care in the future."

"Hmph. He shouldn't touch people, then, particularly uninvited."

"He's very tactile, very affectionate. And normally, he wouldn't have sensed anything much at all, even if he'd touched you, but apparently you were . . . quite loud. He was very concerned that he'd done something to offend you."

"I cannot help that," Severus said gruffly, but aware that he had already started off on a bad note at a time when he should be trying to impress her, he added, "Naturally, had I been aware of his ability, I would have made an attempt to avoid having him place his hand upon me."

Poppy just chuckled at that. "That will do, I suppose. I explained to him that you were having a bad afternoon and that your feelings were likely not directed specifically toward him."

"Hmph. Did he believe you?" Severus asked, curious about the extent of wizard's ability.

"He may have. He didn't pursue the topic and neither did I."

"Did you have a good evening, then?" Severus doubted that the answer was 'no,' but he didn't want to be in the dark if he was going to be competing with this seemingly perfect specimen of wizardry.

"It was quite pleasant. We went to the Three Broomsticks for dinner, then he showed me his new place in London. It's all done up Muggle, with all the latest Muggle contraptions. They were quite something, Severus! You would think they were all charmed!"

He had brought her back to his place. No wonder she hadn't invited him up. They'd already had that part of their evening. Severus felt his heart sink, but he focussed on remaining expressionless.

"We watched a film," Poppy continued. "He has his . . . his *audio equipment*," she said carefully, "connected to the television. It's like going to the cinema. He has a really big telly, and there are speakers everywhere."

"Hmph. I prefer books to television. My father said television limits the imagination." Of course, he'd probably only said that because they didn't have one. His mother didn't want one in the house. Severus had originally believed it was simply because his grandfather disliked Muggle contraptions, but he later decided that his mother simply didn't want him exposed to so many Muggle ideas...sending him to school was bad enough, but at least that had the advantage of getting him out of the house and out from

under foot.

"Well, it was fun. You may have enjoyed this film...it wasn't anything deeply intellectual, far from it, but it was enjoyable. A spy movie*Tomorrow Never Dies*. The actor looks a lot like a younger Quin. Of course, Quin didn't see the resemblance at all. I couldn't really follow the plot, which I don't think was very realistic, but they had these magical effects they do using . . . gadgets and explosions and things. And there were all these different vehicles! Quin has a car almost like the one in the film, but it doesn't drive itself, he says."

"I am pleased you enjoyed the video," Severus said, suppressing a smile as he realised that if they were watching the film, they weren't in bed together. He supposed the two weren't actually mutually exclusive, but it seemed unlikely. And as Minerva had said, it wouldn't be appropriate for him to expect her to give up her friends. He certainly wouldn't like it if Poppy were to tell him that he could no longer be friends with someone. Not that he had many friends . . . but he hoped that he and Hermione would remain friends, and he couldn't imagine cutting Minerva from his life, or Gareth or Albus, for that matter. "It is good that he can now spend time with you and you can . . . reestablish your friendship."

Poppy smiled up at him. "I'm glad you understand, Severus. Especially after what Quin said about running into you..."

"I will admit I was displeased that he was taking you to dinner and not I, and . . . and that I do not wish to compete with him for your attention. But I also do not wish you to be deprived of your friendships, either."

Poppy's smile grew, and she reached out and touched his arm as if to take it before dropping her hand. "I certainly can't blame you for having feelings about such things...ones you had expected to remain private, after all...but I'm relieved we won't be at odds about it."

Severus nodded in acknowledgement. If he were successful and did continue to see Poppy, he thought he would have to enlist her help in keeping him from being an unreasonable bastard. In the meantime, he'd simply struggle with his jealousy on his own and work at controlling himself.

"Did you have a nice evening? Did you get out at all?" Poppy asked.

Severus shook his head. "I stayed in. However, I spent the evening with the Headmistress, and that was pleasant. She is teaching me to play Go."

Poppy chuckled. "Go? How did you find it?"

"A peculiar sort of game, but challenging. Do you play?"

Poppy shook her head. "I know how, but I don't play. That is to say, it was rather popular amongst some of the staff for a while, and I learned the game, but I never played it much. I think that Albus and Filius are the only ones who still play, although Minerva is fairly good at it, I believe. There are other games I enjoy more," she said as they reached the Hospital Wing and her quarters.

"I can think of a few right now," Severus said softly, a slight smile on his face.

"You are incorrigible, Severus," Poppy replied with a laugh, her hand on the doorknob. "We're still meeting tomorrow after dinner, aren't we?"

Severus nodded.

"I worked some on a pamphlet for the staff today, as we'd discussed. I want to have the final draft finished before I leave on holiday, since then after I return, there will only be a few days before we begin the staff training. I thought I could give you my draft tomorrow. If you could read it over for me by Friday and give me your comments, I'd have time to make revisions before I leave."

"Of course. I know almost nothing about the subject, however."

"That's actually better. You can tell me whether it makes sense and would be useful to someone who isn't a professional. I'm also going to have Gladys read it over for accuracy before we distribute it."

"Very well. Your office tomorrow at seven, then?"

"That would be fine, unless you'd prefer to meet in your office."

Severus shook his head. He'd still done nothing to improve the atmosphere of his office, and he wanted at least to move his specimen jars into a storage cupboard before he met with her there. "Your office."

"Good. Thank you for your company, Severus."

He nodded. "Good night, Poppy. Sleep well." He glanced quickly toward the empty corridor, then he reached out and caressed her cheek. "Sleep well . . ."

Severus bent and gently kissed her cheek, then her lips, lingering a moment, his hand cupping her cheek warmly. Slowly he drew back and looked down into her eyes. "Sleep well, and when you fall asleep, think of me . . . think of me dreaming of you." He kissed her once more lightly, then stepped back.

"Good night, Severus," Poppy whispered, watching as he turned and walked quickly away.

"Professor McGonagall!" Poppy called down the corridor to her friend, who stopped and turned at the head of the stairs and waited, the students streaming past her on their way down to dinner.

"Madam Pomfrey," Minerva said with a nod as the matron approached.

"I thought I'd sit with you during dinner," Poppy said when she caught up with her.

"So Professor Snape spoke with you," Minerva said as they began down the stairs together.

Poppy nodded. "We were supposed to have a meeting after dinner, but this morning, he told me those plans would have to be changed."

Minerva nodded slightly. "He told you why, I presume."

"Only very briefly. We haven't had a chance to speak. He just stopped me at breakfast and mentioned it then."

"I believe he does not plan to be away from the castle long," Minerva replied. More softly, she said, "I certainly hope he is not late and that he doesn't tarry anywhere."

Poppy looked up at Minerva questioningly. "He said it was school business, House business, and that he'd tell me more later."

"Mm, it is," Minerva said. A boy skidded to a stop, almost running into the matron as he careened around a turn on a landing, causing Poppy to jump aside.

"You there, hold up!" Minerva called out sharply as the boy darted past them. "Timothy Hutchins! Pay some heed to where you're going. And I believe you owe the matron an apology."

"Sorry, ma'am." Red-faced, the first-year Gryffindor turned to Poppy. "Sorry, Madam Pomfrey. Wasn't watching where I was going. Sorry, ma'am."

"Pay more attention in the future, Mr Hutchins," Minerva admonished. "And I do hope that you pay better attention to where you are going in life than you do when you are hurtling yourself down the stairs. Two points from Gryffindor for lack of attention to one's elders and one point from Gryffindor for running on the stairs...if they were to disappear suddenly, you'd be in a sorry state!...and two points to Gryffindor for a respectful apology."

Timothy thought for a moment, doing the math in his head. He smiled sheepishly. "I'll pay more attention, Headmistress."

"See that you do."

"You didn't need to take points, Minerva," Poppy said softly after Timothy had trotted down the stairs ahead of them...at a slightly less breakneck pace. "He didn't run into me."

"Mmm. But he is headstrong. More than that, he is generally heedless of the effect his actions might have on others. Not in a mean-spirited way, simply . . . clueless. Head in the clouds all the time."

"I see," Poppy replied. "But you were saying about Severus?"

Minerva shook her head slightly. "Let's wait until we are at dinner, hmm?"

A few minutes later, Poppy, sitting in Severus's usual seat, looked up at Minerva and asked again, "What were you saying about Severus? You sounded concerned."

"He is paying a visit to Mr Newman's mother, then after that, I believe he will likely see his father," Minerva said.

"Was he the one on Friday, then?" Poppy asked softly.

Minerva nodded. "And Mr Newman's mother asked that Severus pay them a visit. Her husband is still in St. Mungo's, I believe."

"Ah, I see. He shouldn't be too late, then. I hope he eats," Poppy said.

"Doubtful. But are you meeting when he gets back? You could have your house-elf bring sandwiches for him. He is partial to roast beef, I believe."

"Yes, I'd noticed. He should have a hot meal, though, especially after Apparating," Poppy replied. "You still haven't said why you sounded concerned. Are you . . . is he in some danger? Surely whoever is doing these attacks recognises that Severus is a war hero."

"Not necessarily. They could believe him merely clever and lucky. I am concerned." Minerva lowered her voice further. "The last target before Lucius was Sheldon Huffy."

"Sheldon? But . . . I've never heard of him being associated with Death Eaters," Poppy said, puzzled. "And wasn't he one of the guards who was injured that night at Azkaban last spring?"

"Apparently, the attacker combined his presence at Azkaban the night of the prison break with the fact that he is married to a Rosier whose brothers were both Death Eaters, and then came to the conclusion that Huffy was guilty by association." Minerva glanced over at Vector, who was speaking with Cahill about the use of retrodictive Arithmancy in the analysis of wizarding battles. "It's not been in the newspapers," she whispered, "but the attacker has been leaving notes at the scenes, and sometimes sending owls to victims just prior to an attack. The Ministry has also received owls from the person...they think it's just one person, possibly two people, though they identify themselves as a group...and the *Quibbler* has received one, too. They didn't publish it, at the request of the Ministry."

"Why not?" Poppy asked. "It could warn people that if they get strange letters, they might become the next target. They could take precautions."

"The Ministry doesn't want to fuel any sympathy some may have for this person's 'cause,'" Minerva replied. "Some of the language in the letter to the *Quibbler* was apparently very incendiary. There are a lot of people out there who suffered at the hands of Riddle and his crew. They also don't want the person who's doing it to feel justified or important."

"Has Severus received one of those letters?" Poppy asked with sudden alarm.

"Shhh. No. *He* hasn't," Minerva said. "But Moody . . . he said that he thinks that one of the references in the second letter to the Ministry is about Severus, although it didn't mention him specifically by name."

"Does Severus know? He shouldn't be going anywhere..."

"He is sufficiently aware, and we are meeting with Moody on Saturday. Alastor is going to do more investigation in the meantime. And you know Severus. He balks at the idea of being confined to the castle, even if it's for his own protection."

Poppy nodded, though her expression was worried. "Too many years of being in a metaphorical straightjacket. I understand that, but he still shouldn't be going anywhere, let alone visiting known Death Eaters. That could add fuel to the vigilante's twisted imaginings. And he certainly shouldn't be leaving the castle unaccompanied."

"Mr Newman was with him. His mother is in a secure location, so Newman has to bring him by Side-Along."

"Lovely. As if Severus weren't sufficiently a target without being seen in public with a Death Eater's son, no matter how innocent Draco may be."

"Don't you worry about him, too," Minerva said. "I'll do all the worrying that needs to be done, at least on that score. You just . . ." Minerva hesitated. "Give him his sandwiches when he returns. Don't fuss over him too much. And I don't think he would appreciate knowing that I discussed my concerns for his welfare with you. His reaction was bad enough when I asked him not to leave the castle for the time being. If you fussed over him, too, he's likely take it amiss, possibly rebel completely. He has agreed to let me know when he leaves and when he expects to return and to send a Patronus should he be delayed. That will have to suffice."

Poppy poked at her dinner. She didn't know why she'd taken any of the steak and kidney pie. She didn't like it on the best of days, and now that it sat there in its congealing gravy, it was even more unappetizing than usual.

"I think I'll wait and eat with Severus when he returns," she said, pushing her plate away. "I haven't much of an appetite at the moment."

"I'm sorry if I upset you. I am sure that Severus can take care of himself," Minerva said. "He's also forewarned, he survived as a spy for years, and he has his wand up his sleeve and knows how to use it. Besides, I don't think this person is really very clever. He has attacked most of the people at home, just as they were coming or going from work or some other regularly scheduled activity."

"Not Lucius, though, surely...how did he even find him? I don't even know where he lives. Draco's home address doesn't appear in any of my records this year. That sounds pretty clever to me, Minerva, finding him and being able to firebomb the house."

"It wasn't particularly effective, from what Moody tells me. And finding him wouldn't be difficult if the person knew who Narcissa was...and who *doesn't* know who she is, even if they haven't met her? She was working in Furculum Way, and she would usually walk all of the way home since she couldn't Apparate directly into the house because of Ministry wards and there wasn't any convenient hidden corner nearby to Apparate to without being seen by Muggles. Someone would only have to follow her from the shop on her way home one day. Not so clever as it may seem, Poppy. And Severus's home is Hogwarts, one of the most secure places you could find. Don't worry too much."

"But you are."

Minerva shrugged. "Of course I am. But we're doing what we can."

"Now I'm going to worry until I see him," Poppy said fretfully.

Minerva twitched a slight smile. "You're rather fond of him, I know. Listen, why don't we have dessert together up in your sitting room. I'll wait with you."

Poppy brightened. "I'd like that."

A half hour later, Poppy was serving Minerva Florentines and tea. "They're some that Severus brought me yesterday. They're from Puddifoot's."

"Mmm, I haven't had a Florentine in a long time. So . . . Severus is bringing you presents?" Minerva asked as she helped herself to a biscuit.

Poppy blushed. "It was sweet of him."

"Very." Minerva sipped her tea. "So do you have plans to see Quin again any time soon?"

Poppy shook her head. "Nothing definite. He's quite busy, and I . . . well, I just . . . I don't think that Quin has it in mind that we're dating, but I don't want him to begin thinking that way. I, um . . . I did tell him last night, well, not in so many words, you understand, but I indicated that I thought we oughtn't become . . . used to any intimacy between us."

"No more Irish, straight up?" Minerva asked with a naughty smirk.

"Well, no. It's not that it wasn't wonderful. And if things were different, if the timing were different, I doubt I would have said anything at all, just let things play out, you know? We've had a comfortable relationship. Pleasant. Warm. And he's an incredibly sensitive lover . . . not that you want to know that, I'm sure. But after I saw Severus yesterday evening, I just felt it would be best not to open up things with Quin. And he was fine with that. As I say, he's very busy these days, anyway. I don't think he had any expectations."

"So you're interested in seeing Severus again, then?"

Poppy shook her head and chewed her Florentine.

"What, then?" Minerva asked, puzzled.

"It's just that Severus was so clearly crushed that I was going out with Quin, that I might have a date with someone else, and I just don't want him hurt. It's not that I won't see Quin, of course. That would be silly. But until Severus has moved on, it's kinder not to begin dating someone else, I think. Easier on him. He's very sensitive."

"And this has nothing to do with wanting to date Severus yourself?" Minerva asked sceptically.

"I . . . I don't know if that's really what I want, or even if it's what Severus wants," Poppy replied. "It's for the best if Severus and I remain just friends."

"Why?"

"Aren't you the one who was so disapproving and cautionary when you learned that Severus and I had been together that first time?" Poppy asked. "It should be obvious."

"It's not," Minerva said bluntly. "You two enjoy each other's company, you're clearly . . . physically compatible, he's interested in more than just a brief fling. I wouldn't say that it's at all obvious why you two should remain only friends. Not to say that Severus hasn't got his share of problems, but you knew that before you went to him that first time."

"And if I had been thinking clearly, I wouldn't have," Poppy said. "I'm not saying that I regret it precisely, but for so many reasons, I see now that I shouldn't have."

"Then why did you? I know you don't normally hop into bed with any wizard who expresses interest, so why Severus?"

"We have had this discussion already, Minerva. I really don't want to rehash everything," Poppy said crossly. "I didn't set out for him to become . . . fixated on me. I am hardly an alluring seductress. And I do wish you wouldn't refer to it as 'hopping into bed.' It sounds so . . ."

"All right, all right. But I don't think you need to regret it. And I also wouldn't describe Severus as 'fixated.' There are more pleasant...and apt...terms for it."

"Obsessed' is hardly pleasant. And I don't think it's gone to that extreme yet," Poppy said, picking up her teacup.

"I would not have chosen that word, either. And I believe 'besotted' may be a bit too strong, but may I suggest . . . enamoured, perhaps?"

"How?" Poppy shook her head. "I can't allow myself to believe any such thing, Minerva. It'd be opening myself up to a world of trouble, I'm sure." She glanced up at her clock. "And where is he? I thought he'd be back by now."

"A world of trouble? Or worry? You're worried already, so I don't think that dating him would make that any worse. And you could keep him happy here at Hogwarts with no need to leave the castle..."

"Is that what you're after? For me to 'keep him happy'?"

"No, no, no, it's just something to consider." Minerva rolled her eyes. "For Merlin's sake, Poppy! I'm just trying to point out that you both enjoyed yourselves together, you *like* each other, you obviously care a lot about him, and he wants to see more of you! Why not go ahead? I know that he has his rough side, and he's got a few . . . character flaws that rather need work, but I'm sure you can handle it. He's trying very hard." Minerva held up her second Florentine. "And these are delicious! How can you turn down a wizard who brings you Florentines from Puddifoot's, I ask you!"

Poppy laughed slightly. "He was very sweet to bring them. He said he'd been thinking about me . . . but what happens when he stops bringing me Florentines, Minerva? When he stops thinking about me? When he wakes up, looks around him, and sees a world full of younger, more talented, more intelligent witches? Ones who aren't sentimental Hufflepuffs, to boot? No, I appreciate that he does care for me, and that it does seem to go beyond the, um, physical, but it just wouldn't be a good idea, for either of us."

"Look, you never know where something might lead, Poppy. Is it because it's Severus, then? Because of his past and . . . well, to put it kindly, some of his previous, more egregious character flaws? Because if that is the case, I do understand, and I think it could be difficult to overcome that. If you are hesitating because of that, I won't press any longer, I promise."

Poppy sighed. "I'd say 'yes' just to get you off my back, but I can't. It isn't that. Of course, that does loom in the background somewhere, but it isn't something I have given much thought. That Severus Snape seems a very distant person, and I don't think about it when we're together."

"But when you're apart?"

"No, not then, either. Probably foolish of me, ignoring an entire side of him, but . . . it's not as though I was closely acquainted with that younger man. I think I'd seen Severus on the street twice between his leaving Hogwarts and his joining the staff a couple years later. I presume he did some fairly nasty things as a Death Eater, and

back in his early years on staff, he wasn't a very nice person to be around. Well, for a while. But then as time went on, I suppose he became accustomed to us and we to him. Not that he became a very sociable colleague, but he seemed simply moody and bad-tempered, and not a, um, a Death Eater."

Minerva chuckled. "No, not particularly sociable. And he's still not the most amiable of men."

"He's perfectly all right, Minerva," Poppy said defensively. "He does have some quirks, of course, and his acidity is sometimes a bit much to take, but he's a lot better than he used to be. And he can be very sweet. And look how well he did with Ginny Weasley! Out of all of her teachers...and her own Head of House...Severus is the one who talked to her and got her to tell him about her nightmares and the things that were bothering her. He has some very positive qualities."

"I know that. I'm glad to see that you recognise them, too. So if it's not his past or his bad temper, what is it?"

"Hmm?"

"You say he's sweet to you. You clearly enjoy his company, you're intimately compatible...and to such a degree you found it hard to resist him even in the beginning...so why aren't you going to see him?"

"I can hardly *avoid* seeing him...all right, all right! I do know what you mean," Poppy said in response to Minerva's raised eyebrow. "But it's as I said before, and as you warned me in the beginning: I could be hurt. I don't want to be hurt. There it is. Not a proud admission, but true. I think Severus is just confused. Look at his life for the past several years. Hardly an easy one, and certainly not filled with friends, let alone lovers. It's . . . it's as though he's on the rebound, Minerva. And you know what they say about not getting involved with a wizard on the rebound."

"I don't think it's the same thing at all," Minerva replied. "But you have to do what you think best, of course. And if your feelings for him simply aren't strong enough to warrant taking a risk that he's not as confused as you think he is...at least, not where you're concerned...then I think cooling things off more is probably for the best. Better not to get his hopes up and then have him hurt even more later when you break things off again." She sighed and looked at the clock. "He should be back soon. He said he'd send a Patronus if he were going to be any later than eight-thirty, and it's almost that."

"I told him I'd be in my office," Poppy said, standing up. "I wouldn't want him to get back and think I'd forgotten, or that I didn't wait for him."

Minerva smiled. "Do reconsider, Poppy. I think you'll be glad to give him a chance, even if it doesn't work out in the long run."

"Don't even think about the long run," Poppy said. "There couldn't be one. But . . . perhaps you're right. Maybe spending a little more time with him wouldn't be a bad thing, at least for now. I'll see how things go. Perhaps I am simply over-thinking everything. It just scares me a little, that's all."

"So you do feel strongly for him?"

"I don't know as I'd say *strongly*, but yes, I haven't felt like this in years. If ever. But Severus and his unexpected vulnerability scare me, the thought of being hurt by him scares me, / even scare me, sometimes! I had thought all of the passion had gone out of my life. I was happy with my life . . . I am happy."

"Why did you go down to him that night, Poppy?" Minerva asked softly. "I've been thinking about that."

Poppy shook her head. "It's not what you think, Minerva. I didn't realise . . . I didn't know. I hadn't thought about him before, not in that way. There would have been no point in even daydreaming about him. I just . . . yes, all right, I did feel *something* for him before, but I was honest with you when I said I never thought anything about him that way. He was completely unreachable, an impossibility. I didn't realise that I could feel this way about him . . ."

"So you *are* in love with him, then."

"No. Just . . . possibly. A little. Please don't say anything to him. Please, Minerva."

"Shush, of course I won't! But don't deprive yourself, or him, of the possibility that this could be very good for you both, simply because you're afraid of what you feel."

"I'll consider it, Minerva. I'll just see how things go, as I told you. But I really don't want to talk about it any more." She glanced at the clock. "Especially not now. I have to be in my office to meet him. He should be here at any moment, if nothing's happened to him."

NEXT

Chapter Seventy-One: Descent into Hades

Severus pays a visit.

Characters: Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy Newman, Lucius Malfoy, and others

Author's Note: In case you missed it, I posted a new addition to the RamVerse last week, a one-shot called ["The Sunshine of Kindness."](#) It's here on TPP and on my website at WordPress. It's set in the summer of 1995 and has got Remus, Sirius, and Molly in it. You might enjoy it!

Thank you for your reviews!

Chapter Seventy-One: Descent into Hades

Chapter 72 of 118

Monday 22 March 1999. Severus pays a visit.

Author's Note: Rated for vulgar profanities at one point toward the end of the chapter.



Chapter Seventy-One: Descent into Hades

Monday 22 March 1999

There was a slump to Draco's shoulders as the heavy gates clanged shut behind them. "I hate seeing Mother in there," he said softly. "I should be out here, taking care of her, not at Hogwarts."

"She is not a prisoner," Severus replied, looking back at the converted Muggle manor house behind them. "However, I do appreciate your feelings on the matter. You must remember that she is there for her safety. And she does not seem . . . uncomfortable."

Narcissa had been given a small suite of sorts, and they had met with her in her sitting room. It was impersonally decorated, but it was pleasant enough, rather like a modest hotel room.

Draco gave a crooked grin. "She was happy to have her own bathroom. When I visited her over the weekend, they let me stay with her, and I slept in the sitting room. I think she was glad to have her bathroom to herself again when I left."

"I can imagine," Severus replied. "Now to St. Mungo's, if they will let us in to see your father."

"They will. He's in that new secure ward there . . . with, um, Aunt Bella. Not with her, of course, but in the same unit. But Mother spoke with them there at Mungo's, and the Ministry gave its approval, so you're expected." Draco caught his Head of House's expression. "That is, you are on a list of visitors who can be allowed in. Mother and I, well, Mother, really, we hoped you would agree."

"The last time that I agreed to a request of your mother's," Severus said drily, "I almost didn't live to regret it."

"I didn't know, I..."

"We should Apparate together so that we are not separated," Severus interrupted. "I shall bring you this time."

"Do you mind if we stop in Diagon Alley first?" Draco asked.

"You need to fetch something for your father?"

Draco shook his head. "No, for myself. We could just pick up something in Mungo's gift shop for him, if he needs anything."

"Afterwards, then, if we have the time. I want to get this visit over with."

Upon arriving at St. Mungo's and stepping through the window, Severus swept across the reception area without a glance at the welcome wizard. As he headed towards the stairs, however, he stopped when Draco touched his elbow lightly.

"He's not up . . ." Draco darted a glance to either side, then whispered, "He's down."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "The shop is on the fifth floor. Unless they have moved that."

"Oh. Yes, all right."

"You overwhelm me with your enthusiasm," Severus said, starting up the stairs.

"You want to bring him something, then?" Draco asked.

"Oh, yes, I thought a pretty little bunch of posies might brighten his room," Severus replied with a slight roll of his eyes. "Noyou are going to get him something. You may be at odds with him still, but he is your father. If something were to happen to him, you do not want to regret small things that are easily done."

"Just big ones?" Draco asked with a smirk.

"Do not be impertinent. And do not give your mother any more cause for grief than she already has."

"Sorry. Yes, I shall say that it's from Mother."

"As you wish."

In the shop, Draco immediately went to the magazines and newspapers and picked up a copy of *Wizarding World Weekly*, which featured a story about the changes in British wizarding import restrictions. On the cover was a photograph of an imposing Minister Shacklebolt standing with a rather dour-looking visiting Balkan business witch, who was holding what one presumed was a basket of currently restricted Balkan wares.

"That's what you're getting him?" Severus asked.

Draco plucked an *Evening Prophet* from the rack and looked over at Severus.

Severus shook his head, glanced over the various publications, and rapidly selected a half dozen. He shoved them at Draco.

"All of them?" Draco asked.

Severus took one of the magazines away. "You are right. It is better that I give him this one." He looked down at the provocatively posed witch on the cover of *Quidditch Illustrated*. The model was holding a broomstick and dressed in a Holyhead Harpies uniform, but Severus did not think that any genuine Holyhead Harpy would ever wear her uniform in quite that way. He supposed it was good for their ticket sales, though. "I doubt that Lucius would believe this was a gift from your mother."

Draco laughed. "I should get him something else, I suppose. But there are restrictions on the sorts of things that can be brought in."

"Are sweets acceptable?" Severus asked, nodding toward the display of chocolates and various boxed confections.

"I think so. Mother and I brought him a meal yesterday," Draco grinned. "He's developed a taste for Muggle take-away curry."

Severus did laugh at that. He doubted that Lucius Malfoy would have ever admitted to even trying such a thing in the past, let alone have admitted enjoying it.

Draco picked up a box of Ice Mice and another of Peppermint Imps, then he scrutinised the other offerings carefully.

"I did not realise you were such a connoisseur, Newman," Severus said impatiently.

"No buzzing humbugs," Draco said, "and their selection of chocolates is limited."

"Hmph. Tempus fugit. Let's get these things paid for."

Once back down on the ground floor, Draco led Severus to the back of the reception area, around behind the main stairs, through a bright lime green door, down a wide corridor lined with offices, most of their daily occupants now gone, and then to a more narrow hallway that led to a shiny black metal door. A bored-looking grey-haired watch wizard dressed in plum-coloured uniform robes sat at a small desk, fiddling with a wizarding wireless set. At the approach of the other two, the skinny wizard flicked his wand and turned off the wireless.

"May I help you?" He looked hopeful. "Or are you lost?"

"We're here to see Lucius Malfoy," Draco said.

"Most people are lost." The older wizard picked up a parchment and scanned it with a squint, stroking his heavy grey mustache with one finger. "Wouldn't know his number, by any chance, would you?"

"DBW sixty-one," Draco replied softly.

"DBW . . . DBW. Can't be many of them down there. Ah, yes, here he is. Sixty-one in room eighteen. Let's just see . . ." The wizard pulled another parchment from the desk drawer. "Restricted visiting, says here. Family, Aurors, and Ministry officials with permits, only."

"I'm family," Draco said. "And Professor Snape has special permission."

"Mm . . . all right. They don't tell me anything about that. But just warning you that they'll stop you down below if everything's not in order. In the meanwhile, I still need your wands. Can't go no further than this with your wands."

Severus furrowed his brow.

"Don't worry, Professor," the wizard said. "I take that part of my job very seriously. Nobody touches the wands." He swivelled in his chair and pointed to a bank of cubbyholes behind him. "You pick one, then I lock it for you and give you the key, see. Needs a combination of the charm and the key to unlock."

Draco already had his wand out, ready to deposit it. "The Auror who came with Mother and me had to deposit her wand, too, Professor."

Severus simply slid his wand from his sleeve and inserted it into one of the cubbyholes. The watch wizard closed it with a small plug, waved his wand, then pulled a tiny key from the plug.

"Don't lose the key. Had a wizard do that one time, and it took us three days to find someone who could break it open and get his wand out. Tricky job to do without destroying all the charms, I'll tell you."

Severus could sense that the watch wizard would launch into a story...or perhaps multiple stories...if given a chance, so he said, "I appreciate that some people would likely lose their heads if they weren't attached. I doubt I will have such trouble, thank you."

The watch wizard chuckled. "Would lose their heads . . . that's a good one, Professor. I'll remember that. Have to tell Marina that one when I get home tonight." He was still chuckling as he opened the door for them. "Professor Snape said . . . lose their heads if they weren't attached . . . must tell the wife . . ."

A narrow, curving, well-lit stairway led down. Severus couldn't see where it ended, and he thought that Minerva would hate having to take those stairs. He had taught with her for more than a decade before he realised that she was claustrophobic, and that long, narrow, enclosed stairways bothered her particularly. She never let that stop her, but given a choice, she told him she'd rather face an angry hippogriff than some of the most narrow stairways at Hogwarts.

Draco allowed Severus to go first, and about a hundred fifty steps down, the end still not in sight, Draco said, "We're almost halfway to the first landing, I think. They have a couple guards there, but they don't do anything."

"First landing?"

"Yes. There are four landings, with two guards at each. I think about twelve hundred steps, but I didn't count. Coming back up would be tough on someone not used to it."

"They don't need to have lists of approved visitors," Severus grumbled. "Just tell them they're about to descend into the depths of Hades, after which they have to climb back out. Or die trying."

"When Mother and I were here the first time, there was a really old witch visiting someone, and one of the watch wizards was bringing her down in some kind of automagical Charmed chair."

"They should just put in a lift," Severus said. Though he doubted that it would be any better for Minerva's claustrophobia, he would appreciate it.

"I think they have something like that for the St. Mungo's staff, but it's not open to the public."

"Of course not, can't have the hoi polloi pampered with something as exotic as a lift," Severus replied. Fortunately, living in the dungeons and climbing many stairs at Hogwarts every day, he was fit enough. He still didn't look forward to the tedious walk back up the stairs. "How did your mother fare?"

"We stopped on each landing on the way back up. But she didn't complain at all." Severus heard the young man's voice crack.

"She is admirable," Severus said.

"He doesn't deserve her," Draco said. "He has no idea . . ."

"I am sure he has some notion," Severus replied gently. "And he suffered, remember, after the Dar, after Riddle captured him in the raid on Azkaban."

"I know. But he brought it on himself."

"Perhaps, but much of his suffering was caused by the thought of what the Dark Lord had done to you and your mother. You know that he told your father that the two of you had been slowly tortured to death. He had no idea that you were safe and well."

"Yes, he said something about that when we first saw him after we returned from Sweden. Potter finally told him we were." Draco was silent for a few moments, then he whispered, "He cried when he saw us. But I was still angry with him."

"And now?"

"I'm still angry. I'm ashamed sometimes. And I feel . . . there are times when I don't even know what I feel. But you were right, what you said before. He is my father. And

as stupid and awful and ugly as everything was, he didn't mean for anything to happen to Mother or me."

"I am sure that knowing that his actions have caused you and Narcissa such pain is a daily torment for him." Severus listened to Draco's footsteps behind his, echoing in the stairwell. "Perhaps you might consider . . . forgiving him. Not forgetting it, but forgiving him."

"*Forgive* him?" Draco asked incredulously. "And how does forgiveness fix anything?"

"It might help you both. I'm no expert in the practice of forgiveness, but I have experienced receiving it. I am probably not the best person to be talking about it, let alone recommending someone else do it. I think it's a hard thing to learn. But you're young, Draco. Don't hold on to things that make you miserable for so long that they become a kind of . . . comfort to you."

Draco snorted. "Don't worry. No chance of that. I want to put it behind me." He paused, and his steps faltered for a moment. "Of course, I know that it won't be easy. Even as Newman."

The two subsided into silence as the landing and the guards came into sight. Severus thought that they probably should not have been speaking as freely as they had done, though they had said nothing that could be specifically used against them. As if Draco had the same thought, the two became quiet, nodding at the plum-clad guards as they reached and then passed them.

The pair of guards on that first landing were playing a dice game. From the long parchment on which they were keeping score, Severus guessed that it was something they had been doing for many nights. It really did feel like he was descending into the circles of hell, he thought, a bright, antiseptic hell, but a hell, nonetheless. He noticed that the guards' voices were somehow deadened, so that until they were practically on top of them, they could only hear a vague murmur from them, and he assumed that it was some charm placed upon the landings, since their footsteps were likewise muffled.

A dozen steps beyond the first landing, Severus felt a sudden sense of vertigo. He paused, reaching out and taking hold of the hand-railing. He could feel himself sway slightly, and it seemed that there was pressure on his magic.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Just . . . slight discomfort," Severus replied.

"Mother became quite dizzy right around here, and it was worse on the way back up. I didn't notice much, except I thought the magic seemed stronger here or something."

Severus nodded and began the descent again. "It is probably a particularly strong ward. Not as skilfully applied as one might expect on a project such as this. When did they construct this, do you know?" Severus asked Draco softly.

"They began it immediately after the war. As in, even before Shackbolt became Minister. Tiberius Ogden commissioned the plans and gave the initial requirements for it. I don't know when they started the actual construction of it, but it was sufficiently completed at the end of August that they could move the first few patients in then. Bella was one of them."

"Did your mother visit her here, then?"

"No. She saw her earlier, not long after we returned. But she hasn't seen her since. It upset her. Mother said that her sister had completely lost touch with reality. I think she also said some rather hateful things to Mother."

"She was never particularly sane. I am sure that her master's death was the final straw," Severus whispered.

"Apparently, she believes that the D, Riddle will be reborn in someone else. That he has been already and he's just biding his time, waiting to come for her," Draco whispered back.

Severus felt a chill go up his spine. "Not possible. He is really dead this time. Completely."

"I'm sure of that, but she thinks he somehow transferred himself to someone else. She told Mother that when he returned, we would all pay for our treachery and incompetence."

Severus shook his head. "As I say, she was never really normal. I am sorry, however, that it caused your mother pain."

The two continued on in silence, passing the wizards on the second landing, who were playing a game of chess with Muggle chessmen, then on down to pass a witch and wizard on the third landing. The witch was sketching and the wizard was reading. Severus really wasn't entirely sure what their jobs were, unless they were being punished themselves for some kind of incompetence. When they reached the two witches on the fourth landing, though, they were stopped.

"Names?" asked the tall blonde witch, whom Severus had taught several years before. Ingrid Fitzgerald.

Severus bit back a sarcastic response, though he longed to introduce himself as the Lone Ranger and Draco as his companion, Tonto. But he didn't. "Severus Snape, Ms Fitzgerald," he replied, pointing out that he clearly knew who she was.

The witch gave a quick smile. "We're required to ask. Me own mum could come down here, and I'd have to ask her her name."

"Hmph."

"Draco Newman."

The witch's eyebrows rose. "Newman, is it?"

"Indeed," Severus said smoothly. "Mr Newman is one of my students, and a seventh-year prefect at Hogwarts."

"Who will you be visiting, then?" Ingrid asked.

"My father, Lucius Malfoy," Draco replied.

The older witch of the two picked up a parchment. "He'd be sixty-two?"

"Sixty-one. DBW sixty-one," Draco corrected.

"Yes. Room eighteen," the witch said, finding his name. "Be prepared to have any gifts inspected and to empty your pockets. No body search for this one, though."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"For the more . . . vulnerable or . . . mentally fragile patients. The V, L, and U classes, mostly. For their protection and yours, there is someone on duty who does a body search. But sixty-one is only on the restricted visitors list, not on the body search list. You do have permission, Professor?" Ingrid asked. "If not..."

"I am told that I do. If I do not, I will not be a happy man," Severus replied, shooting Draco a glance. "And the wizard at the top of the stairs forewarned us."

"That'd be Kurt tonight," the older witch chimed in. "He's good about telling folks. We don't like having to send people straight back up the stairs, you know. But it's our job."

"Of course," Draco said, smiling charmingly. "We appreciate the care you are taking. Thank you."

Ingrid smiled back. "At the bottom of the stairs, there's a door. You need to ring the bell, and someone will come and open it to you!"

"You haven't much further to go," the older witch said helpfully. "It's only another twenty-four steps to the bottom, then a short corridor."

Draco thanked her, smiling again, and the two continued down the stairs.

When they reached the bottom, Severus nearly sighed with relief to see the door at the end of the corridor. His knees, which had been damaged by many months of repeated Cruciatus, were complaining loudly after the long descent. He did not look forward to the climb up, but he was glad he would be able to leave and return to Hogwarts. If things had gone differently, he might have been one of the permanent patients there, or locked in some prison, and likely not a congenial "minimum security" facility, either. But he would be returning that evening to Hogwarts and to Poppy. He hoped that she was looking forward to seeing him. He had hated to postpone their meeting and possibly lose an opportunity to press his cause with her once more.

Severus pulled the bell rope. They heard nothing, but a moment later, the door swung open to them.

For some unaccountable reason, Severus felt a sudden sense of unease. The irrational thought crossed his mind that they might decide to keep him there, buried deep in the earth, far from civilized humanity, and he would be lost forever, never to see a friendly face again or feel a warm, caring touch. He swallowed and stepped through the door into a small foyer.

"Good evening, sir. You are visiting a patient?" The guard cast a glance at Draco, who was still slightly behind Severus.

"Lucius Malfoy," Severus replied to the guard, this one also in plum robes, but with deeper purple and gold trim. "Number sixty-one."

"The DBW. Yes. Restricted visiting," the wizard said, not needing to consult his parchment, though he picked it up. "Family, Aurors, and Ministry officials with permits, only."

"I'm his son," Draco said, stepping forward. "Draco Newman." He pulled a small folded document from his pocket and handed it to the guard.

The guard nodded as he unfolded the document and saw Draco's picture, his full name, date of birth, and a Ministry seal. He opened a drawer in the cabinet beside him and extracted a slim folder, then he compared Draco's document to a list in the file and handed the identification back when he was finished.

"You may keep this with you. And you, sir?" the guard asked, turning to Severus.

"I have permission to see him. His wife requested that I visit. Severus Snape."

"Yes, I see that, sir." He glanced at a paper in the file. "And there is something in here for Severus Snape. But have you an identity document or a pass from the Ministry?"

"I . . . no. I do not carry an 'identity document,'" Severus replied, suppressing his annoyance. He had a Muggle passport somewhere, but he had only used it once. He wasn't even sure whether it was still valid. And he doubted it would fulfil the guard's expectations for an identity document.

"We were told the pass would be here waiting for him. You can see who he is," Draco said. "He's my Head of House. I've known him my entire life."

"Yes, I do recognise him, but I don't know him personally." The guard hesitated. "Just a moment." He stood and knocked on the wooden door behind him, then had a low conversation with the person behind it. An older witch came out.

"Professor Snape. If you would wait just a moment, please, Butterworth is going to fetch someone on staff who knows you personally. Then we can proceed. I apologise for the delay. Butterworth, be quick about it. These two gentlemen have had a long trek down."

"Yes, ma'am." The guard nodded and hurried around the corner into the ward.

"I am sure you understand our precautions, Professor," the stout witch said, taking the seat that Butterworth had vacated. "Particularly given the reason for Mr Malfoy's presence here."

"Hm. I do." It didn't decrease his annoyance, but he did understand it.

"Whilst we are waiting, we can get a few of the other formalities out of the way..." The witch stopped and looked over at a mediwitch who had just come around the corner. "Yes? What is it, Madam Macmillan?"

"I saw Henry rushing down the hall," the witch said, darting a glance at the two wizards, then averting her gaze again quickly. "I just wondered if everything was all right. Wanted to make sure that he hadn't left his post . . ."

"Can you imagine that Butterworth would ever leave his post unattended?" the older witch asked, clearly annoyed at being interrupted.

"No, Madam Framingham," the witch replied, subdued, but again glancing at the visitors.

"You were not sent down here to deal with security issues. I believe that your time would be best spent checking on DHU eleven's condition and keeping DXV twelve from screaming profanities at the top of her lungs. It is distressing to everyone. Make sure she sleeps through the night tonight, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I consulted with Healer Baton, and he's prescribed a potion that should reduce her agitation and help her sleep. I can't give it to her until just before shift-change, though."

"Well, go look in on silver boy, then, eh?" Madam Framingham shook her head in disgust, though the witch continued to hover just by the corridor entrance.

"Silver boy?" Severus asked. "Would that be..."

"Pettigrew. No worse. No better." She shrugged. "I think they only keep him down here to free up a bed upstairs, since he's certainly no trouble. Though I suppose someone could decide to make him even less trouble and extinguish his life completely. But on with what we were doing. If you would empty your pockets...you first, Professor. I simply need to inspect the contents and be sure there is nothing that is forbidden."

Severus carried little in his pockets, so it was quick work to pull out the stub of a pencil, which he found handy to carry, a clean, pressed white handkerchief, and his small leather purse containing a few Galleons and his lucky golden acorn, which his father had given him when he was five. He didn't remember why he'd decided it was lucky, and most of the "gold" had rubbed off of it years before...and certainly all of the luck...but he still carried it in the little leather pouch with his wizarding money, not even thinking about it. He felt through his other pockets, but found only a note that the Headmistress had written him reminding him that she needed the finalised expense reports before the Easter holiday, and a small piece of dried Screechsnap bark that he'd picked up from the floor before leaving his classroom that afternoon.

"What's that?" Madam Framingham asked, pointing at the piece of purple and red bark.

"Screechsnap bark. Harmless."

"I am sure you know better than I about that," the witch replied, "but since *don't* know about that, it will have to stay up here during your visit. Could you please empty your

purse into the basket?"

Severus complied, and the witch counted it out. "Three Galleon pieces, eighteen Sickles, and twenty-seven Knuts," she said, before making a note of it in a book. "You may return that to the purse. And what is that other thing?"

"It's a . . . an acorn. Just a little Muggle trinket," Severus said, controlling his embarrassment.

"Mm. I will need to test it and make sure it hasn't been charmed in someway. Can't have you try to Portkey out of here. Most messy consequences!"

"Why don't you test the money, too?" Draco asked curiously. "And his purse? Or his clothing and handkerchief?"

"I will test the handkerchief, young man," the witch replied. "As for the other things, it depends on the level of security. For those with the greatest security needs or the most delicate health conditions, everything would be left here...including your clothing...and you would be issued a robe and slippers." She raised an eyebrow. "Does that satisfy the budding young Auror in you?"

Draco blushed and laughed slightly. "I was just curious."

"It is good to be curious," Madam Framingham acknowledged. She turned back to Severus. "And your pocket watch, Professor."

"My watch?" Severus put his hand over the watch in his waistcoat pocket.

"Yes. And I will need to either test it for charms or you will have to leave it here during your visit."

Severus opened his mouth then closed it.

"Or you can turn around and head back up those stairs," Madam Framingham said patiently.

Severus took out his pocket watch, then he carefully drew out the chain and its fob. He brought it to the basket, but seemed reluctant to let it go.

"It's required. You can imagine why it needs to be examined."

"It is a Charmed alchemist's watch and was a gift from Headmaster Dumbledore. Given me shortly before Professor McGonagall became Headmistress," Severus said stiffly. "I believe it is quite valuable. I'd prefer not to have any charms cast on it."

"I am certain that its value as a gift outweighs its monetary value," the witch said with an understanding nod. "If you wish to leave it, I will keep it in my office for you. Don't worry about it. It will be safe."

Severus nodded. Just then, Butterworth came puffing around the corner, another mediwitch behind him.

"Found one!" he said. "They're all older on this shift, it seems!"

"Hi, Professor Snape," the witch said with a smile.

"Miss Clark," Severus acknowledged his former student.

"Rourke, now, Professor. Got married this summer to Gerald," she said, still smiling.

"Felicitations," Severus said with a curt nod.

"Yes, that's Professor Snape," she said to Madam Framingham. "I really need to get back to Hyatt Crabbe now, if I may."

"Back for his nuts again, is he?"

"Yes, they disappeared again yesterday and have started to grow back. It's most painful, I understand." Despite her words, Rourke couldn't quite conceal her amusement. "Right now, they're just itty-bitty things. You'd hardly think he could feel anything at all. But I need to go give him his potion."

"You go do that, thank you, dear," Madam Framingham said. "And bring that one with you." She indicated the other mediwitch standing in the corner.

"Yes, ma'am. Good to see you again, Professor!"

"Ms Rourke." Severus nodded.

"Now for your pockets, young man! And then we'll inspect the gifts, and you can go see your father." Madam Framingham turned to Butterworth. "Henry, why don't you grab yourself a quick cuppa in the break room. I'll take care of them for you. Good to be out of my office for a bit."

"Thank you, ma'am." Butterworth scurried away.

Draco's pockets disgorged a half-finished acid pop, carefully rewrapped, several Knuts and Sickles in loose change, a money bag with two Galleon pieces and five Sickles, a crumpled, but clean, handkerchief with his new monogram on it, a bright green Gobstone, a small address book, his identity card, two Chocolate Frog cards, one of the Headmistress and one of Molly Weasley, and a grey runestone displaying *iar*, the Futhorc symbol for "serpent," in bright red.

"Just keep it all up here," Draco said.

"I will give you a receipt."

As the witch was writing out the receipt, Severus asked, "Framingham, are you related to the Mrs Framingham who taught housewitchery?"

"She was my husband's great-grandmother," the witch replied, handing the receipt to Draco. "I'm surprised you have heard of her, even as Deputy Headmaster."

"Her portrait hangs in Hogwarts," Severus replied, thinking of Poppy in her suite at Hogwarts and wishing he were with her instead of there in that strange place.

"All right, then. We're set. As soon as Butterworth returns, I will check your gifts. In the meantime, you can each take one of these, and we'll be almost done." She reached into a drawer and pulled out a clear vial containing several large golden capsules. "He has a bottle of water and some cups here somewhere . . ." She opened a door in the cupboard.

"Take something? What is that?" Severus did not bother to hide his dismay.

"Polyjuice Potion antidote. Bloody well time one was developed, I'd say," the witch replied as she took a bottle of water and two paper cups from the cupboard. "We get it directly from the apothecary who invented it, so you should have no worries about its quality."

"I dislike taking unknown potions from unlabeled vials for dubious reasons."

"Well, I suppose you could wait here for Mr Newman whilst he visits his father, then."

Draco had already swallowed down his capsule, and, as expected, absolutely nothing happened.

"What if I were allergic to it?" Severus demanded.

"You're in St. Mungo's. I'm sure the staff on call could handle it if you broke out in hives or something. Are you allergic to it?"

"I don't know. I've never taken it. I do not make a practice of taking Polyjuice, either," Severus grumbled, but at that point, he simply wanted to get the visit over with. He no longer cared why Lucius wanted to see him, but he clearly wouldn't be allowed back into the ward without taking the antidote. He really had gone to Hades, he thought as he reluctantly put the large capsule into his mouth and swallowed it down with a gulp of warm water.

"Very good," Madam Framingham said. "Butterworth will be back shortly. What have you got for your father?"

Draco handed her the gift shop bag, and the witch looked through the magazines and newspapers, smirking when she saw the *Quidditch Illustrated*, then put the boxes of Ice Mice and Peppermint Imps on top of them.

"If it will make things go faster, keep the acorn and handkerchief with my pocket watch," Severus said. "And you can simply discard the Screechsnap bark. Don't know why I picked it up."

"Habit, I suppose. We all do that," the witch said. "Here's Butterworth now. I'll give you your chair back," she said, standing for the guard. She picked up the magazines and the baskets with the wizards' possessions and disappeared back into her office.

"Why doesn't she test them out here?" Draco asked.

"She has to use her wand," Butterworth replied, setting his mug of tea down on his desk. "She keeps that in her office, not out here. We just use a variety of Charmed objects whenever we can. Pretty much only the Healers and the boss even carry wands at all down here. The mediwitches all use Charmed devices to do their work, and the rest they do manually. Even changing the sheets on the beds. Some of 'em don't like it and don't last long, despite the pay, but some of 'em seem to enjoy it enough. Macmillan does. Seems to, anyway. Works overtime a lot. Really good with some of the more difficult inmates, er, patients, too."

Framingham reemerged from her office with the magazines, newspaper, and sweets. She grinned. "I was tempted to try the Ice Mice, just to be sure they were really all right...they used to be a real weakness of mine." She patted her middle. "Trying to get rid of some of this, though, and gave them up."

"You can go on down now," Henry said, handing them each a purple card with 'DBW 61' written on it. "No need for an escort, but don't stop to speak with any of the other patients. There's security on duty, and you'll have gone through all this for nothing, 'cause they'll kick you out fast if you do. Room eighteen is on the right, way down at the end. The quiet end. He's low security, so his door's not locked. Just knock if it's not open."

Most of the doors along the brightly lit, antiseptic-smelling corridor were closed, but each door had a window in it, through which a patient could be observed. Severus and Draco did not pause, however, and Severus only noticed that a few of the rooms seemed to be unoccupied. As they approached the end of the corridor, one of the doors opened as they passed it. Severus turned his head, and just beyond Macmillan, who had opened the door, he could see Peter Pettigrew reclining in a bed whose head had been raised. The wizard was motionless, however, his eyes closed. The right side of his face and neck reflected the light, glittering silver. Severus shuddered and turned his head away.

The door to room eighteen was ajar, and Draco knocked softly, then pushed it open. Lucius was sitting up, dressed in a simple long grey robe with another open robe of pale lavender draped around his shoulders. His face lit up at the sight of his son, and when he saw Severus behind him, he set his book and reading glasses aside on the table and pushed up on the armrests to stand.

"Good evening, Father," Draco said.

"Draco, it is good to see you again so soon," Lucius replied warmly. "And Severus. Thank you for coming."

Severus nodded. "You look well." And Lucius did look better than Severus had expected, though his eyes were bloodshot and he was still very thin. But he was not gaunt, as he had been in August, and although his hair was still trimmed short, much of it had grown back. He also seemed generally stronger.

"I'm not bad. I would probably be able to go home soon, in a day or two, if we had any idea where 'home' might be," Lucius replied, wheezing slightly.

"You're breathing better than you were yesterday," Draco observed.

Lucius nodded. "They gave me another treatment today, something different. They brought in a different witch to do this one. She seemed quite competent and experienced. Doesn't hurt as much when I breathe in now, and I can see to read longer before my eyes begin to burn."

"I'm glad to hear that," Draco said.

"Please, sit down." Lucius looked around. There were only two chairs, so he eased himself onto the bed, propping himself up with the pillows behind him.

"We brought you something," Draco said, handing him the magazines and sweets. "From Mother. The sweets are from me."

"And I picked up this for you," Severus said, handing him the *Quidditch Illustrated* before sinking gratefully into the chair Lucius had just vacated. He avoided thinking about the long trek back up to the ground floor.

Lucius smiled. "Thank you. And Peppermint Imps...very good, thank you, son. I'll enjoy these. They're better than the Radish or Pepper Imps, I think."

"I know you had wanted to speak with Professor Snape, so I'll wait outside for a few minutes," Draco said awkwardly. He gestured toward the empty chair. "You could sit there, if you wanted."

"No, thank you. You will come back in? You came all this way, after all..."

Draco nodded. "I just thought you'd like to speak with him alone for a few minutes first."

When Draco had stepped outside, saying something in greeting to the guard standing nearby, Lucius turned his attention to Severus.

"It is good to see you. I understand that it is a labourious trip to reach this ward."

"It must be over a thousand steps. I don't see quite the point," Severus replied.

"Security. In both directions. I feel well-guarded here," Lucius said, "though I nonetheless do wish that I could leave and be with Cissy. I have told her that she should do as the Ministry says and stay where they have her now, but she would like to go back to the house."

"She wants to go back there?" Severus asked incredulously.

"When it is cleaned and repaired," Lucius said. "She misses her work, too. Twilfitt and Tattings may not hold her position for her if she does not return. She was able to send word of what happened, but she hasn't spoken to anyone there. It seems that our life together and her work there are more agreeable to her than I had believed they could be."

Severus nodded. "But going back to the house seems ill-advised."

"I don't know. Perhaps if she had some kind of security . . . I don't think we could afford it, but perhaps the Ministry might be able to arrange something. It might be less expensive for them than keeping her wherever they have her now."

"But should you go back? And even with security, it seems that Narcissa might be vulnerable whether you are there or not."

Lucius shook his head. "I probably should not. And I don't know whether the Ministry would allow it. I am still . . . their ward. I live where they tell me I may live. But if Narcissa wishes to live there . . . I am too weak a man to tell her that we should live apart, though that might be best for her." He sighed.

"You wished to see me?"

"I am grateful you have come, Severus. And I did ask to see you. I have two favours to ask of you...favours only, and you needn't promise me anything, but . . . I trust you and there's no one else to whom I can turn."

Severus kept his expression neutral. "What are the favours?"

"The first is . . . the person failed this time. The house was somewhat damaged by the fire, but because of the wards on it, it didn't catch the way it might have. The damage from the poison smoke, both to me and to the house, was greater than that from the fire. But if I am attacked again, it will be in a different manner, I am sure, and it is clear that these people intended me to die in this attack. It was much more forceful than any of the earlier assaults. If they manage to attack me again, I might very well be killed."

"It is well that you are still here, then," Severus replied.

Lucius shook his head. "I doubt the Ministry will keep me here indefinitely. But that is not the point. If I am killed, or if I die sooner rather than later from some other cause, I'd like you to look after Narcissa and Draco. Draco in particular. He looks up to you, respects you. I have been grateful that he has taken you as a role model. It would ease my heart to know that you will continue to provide him with support and guidance if I die, even after he leaves Hogwarts. Stay in contact with him, Severus. Be . . . be like a father to him." Lucius blinked rapidly and cleared his throat. "Please. For his sake."

Severus let out a long, slow breath. "If Draco continues to . . . appreciate my presence in his life, of course. I wish to see him succeed in life. He is becoming a fine wizard, Lucius. You can be proud of him."

"I am. Narcissa told me he was made a prefect again this autumn. I am grateful to you for that."

Severus shook his head. "I suggested it, but it was the Headmistress's decision. And she has not had occasion to regret it."

"Thank her for me."

Severus nodded. He anticipated that the second favour would be one that he would be more loathe to grant. "And the other favour?"

"The wards saved the house from destruction, but they would not have saved me. I was unaware that the monitoring device, the Charmed anklet, not only would detect it if I were to leave the house, but that it would return me there as soon as I stepped more than a foot or two out the door. Whenever I had been brought to St. Mungo's or elsewhere for a scheduled appointment, I was accompanied by someone who removed the anklet and replaced it with a different one, but I was unaware why. I suppose that they thought that making the anklet a Portkey was a clever idea...and it was...but it did not foresee any circumstance in which I might leave the house under some duress."

"So how did you escape?" Severus asked, wondering what this had to do with Malfoy's favour.

"Twice, I stepped out the front door, and twice, I was returned to the sitting room. The smoke was thick and burning, my eyes felt like they were on fire, and my lungs felt as though they were turning to ash. I couldn't see or think clearly enough to find my way to the back door, though I might have been safe in the garden. I tried a third time to come through the front door, falling out of the house only to land back in the sitting room. I confess that I almost gave up then, Severus, but I thought of Cissy and all she had already suffered, and I crawled toward the door, hoping to at least be able to lay my head upon the threshold and breathe some clean air, if my lungs could even manage that." Lucius paused, seeming overcome by emotion, but after holding his breath a moment and letting it out slowly, he continued. "I had no doubt that I would die, but at least I would be found by the door and Cissy would know that I had not given up, you see. I was groping my way along the floor in that little entry hall when the door opened and a man burst in." This time, Lucius took in a shuddering breath and did not attempt to withhold the few tears now welling up in his eyes. "He grabbed me and held on . . . and held on to me. He pulled me through to the door, and I told him to leave me. He said that he didn't know what devilry was at work, but he was not going to let go of me, and if I was swept back into the house, then he was going with me." Lucius swallowed and a tear trickled down his cheek. "This Muggle had seen me come to the door three times and then disappear back into the house each time. He was not going to let me . . ." Lucius turned his head away, and Severus shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but remained quiet.

Lucius cleared his throat again and continued. "He was not going to let me die alone, Severus. This Muggle who didn't even know me, who didn't understand what he was seeing, he was going to save me or die with me. I never knew . . ."

"A brave man, indeed," Severus said.

Lucius sniffed and reached for a handkerchief, delicately wiping his tears from his cheeks. He nodded. "Very brave. But fortunately for us both, the Portkey was only set to activate for me alone. I don't know why that would be, except that presumably anyone who was accompanying me on an escape from the house would eventually let me go and I would be returned." Lucius shrugged. "At any rate, he held onto me, didn't let me go, and we made it outside. He kept his arms around me until the Aurors came. Someone disabled the Portkey, and then they Obliviated him. He saved my life, and they Obliviated him, Severus. I don't know how much, if anything, he remembers, and I don't know whether he ever received any treatment for his smoke inhalation. It was some kind of potion. I don't think that the Muggles would know how to treat something like that. He shouldn't suffer some permanent disability because he saved my life."

"So what do you want from me?" Severus asked.

"Find him for me. Find him, see that he is well. If he isn't, then find some way to get him treatment for his lungs and any other ailments he may suffer as a result of saving me. No one here can tell me anything about him, who he is, whether he was treated, nothing. I don't think they know anything, and they aren't motivated to find out, either."

"Did you ask the Healer who treated you today?" Severus asked.

"No. What would she know of it? Of course . . . if he were treated, perhaps she might have known about that even if she hadn't seen him herself. A Muggle treated for poison potion inhalation might be remarked upon. Perhaps I ought to have asked her."

"Who was the Healer? If she treated you, it is possible that she also treated the Muggle."

"Healer O'Donald. Scottish, though. In her late fifties or early sixties, I'd say."

"She is Minerva's niece. I know her fairly well. I will ask her if she knows anything. She is discreet and can be trusted. I don't know how I'm to find this Muggle, though, if he wasn't treated."

"His name was Jamie. Someone called him that. He was wearing a uniform of some sort, but not police or fire. Perhaps a bus driver or a railway worker. I could barely see anything at all, you understand." Lucius thought for a moment, gazing off as he tried to recollect what he could. "A big man. At least three or four inches taller than I, and

burly. I find it difficult to judge the age of a Muggle even when I can see properly, but he wasn't a young man. Still strong, though. Middle-aged, I'd guess. Strong local accent. Country, though, I think."

"All right, we're looking for a middle-aged Yorkshireman named 'Jamie' who likely works in Leeds in some kind of service job. Six foot two or three and strongly built. Not very much to go on."

"He must live or work nearby. He was passing by on foot, after all."

"He could have been visiting someone or had some other business in the area."

"Please, Severus. I owe this man my life, and I cannot do this myself. I would ask Draco, but aside from the fact that he is at school, I don't want him to . . . it's difficult to explain. And you are more experienced. You have contacts that he does not have."

"I will do what I can. You know, Lucius, whatever you may think about me and my status, there are some who may not view me kindly. I have been told that I might be in danger, myself. I ought not be making unnecessary excursions from the castle."

"Ah . . . I see . . ." Lucius sighed.

"As I say, I will do what I can. But I cannot promise you that I will find this man. Simply discovering his identity might prove difficult."

"If you do, in addition to ensuring that he has had appropriate treatment for the smoke damage, I would like you to give him something from me. He may not have any memory of me or what he did, but you can tell him it's from someone for whom he did a great favour."

"What do you want me to give him?"

"I have spoken with Narcissa about this, and she is agreed. In fact, this particular gift was her idea. Her grandmother left her some jewellery, a few pieces of which Cissy was able to save and bring with her to Sweden. There is an emerald brooch. Its inherent value is rather great, I believe. See Cissy and she will give it to you. You may use your judgment when you meet the man and learn something of his life and his . . . his abilities whether to give him the brooch or to sell it yourself and give him the money. I leave that decision up to you. And if he . . . if he is dead, see that his family receives the money."

"I will do what I can," Severus said.

"I did think about what you said at our last meeting, Severus. I felt sorry for myself, and I was not inclined to listen to you, but I have had a lot of time to reflect upon what you said, and on my life. I still never would have believed that a Muggle would have such bravery or such tenacity in the face of danger, particularly in the face of Dark Magic. He knew that what was happening was something beyond his experience, but he faced it to the point where he would have died rather than allow me to face it alone. In principle, I believe that Obliviating Muggles is the right thing to do when they encounter something from our world, but when I think of that man, Jamie, and what he did . . . it seems unjust to Obliviate from him the memory of such a noble act."

"They may have been selective about what they did, how much they removed from his memory. They may have simply altered it. He could be down in his local right now, telling stories about how he pulled some skinny blond bloke from a burning building the other day."

"Perhaps," Lucius said with a slight laugh. He glanced up at the door, where Draco was standing, chatting with one of the guards. "I do wish to see my son before you leave, however, and I am sure that you have things to do at Hogwarts."

"I do. In fact, I had to reschedule a very important meeting in order to come here this evening."

"I am sorry, Severus, but I am glad you came. Thank you. And thank you for your help."

"I'll see what I can do. I will inform you when there is something to inform you about...or if I have been unable to find out anything about the man."

Severus waited outside the door as Lucius and Draco spoke, giving them a little privacy, but was relieved when Draco was back just a few minutes later.

"Let's hurry. The climb out of this purgatory will take long enough as it is," Severus said softly as Draco stepped out into the hall.

Draco nodded and the two wizards strode down the hall. As they reached the end of the hall, one of the doors opened as a guard entered, and Severus reflexively looked into the room. Bellatrix. Wild, mad Bellatrix Black Lestrange.

"I don't fucking well care what that bloody cunt wants!" she was shouting at Madam Macmillan. "She will pay! She will serve us! The time will come! You, I might spare, you..." She caught sight of Severus and Draco and stopped mid-sentence, her mouth open. She screamed suddenly, a long, high-pitched screech, and Severus and Draco both took a quick step back.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" The scream continued, and the guard drew a ceramic object from his robes and held it up to her.

"Stop that now," he bellowed, "or I'll use this again, and you won't like it!"

"Severus! It is you! You! Oh, it must be you! You were to die, but you lived! You live! It is you! Please, please, don't forget me! Don't leave your Bella here when you come into your own! Have you returned for me? Please, please, Master!" Her arms were outstretched and her eyes, large and wild, were focussed on Severus.

Severus, in utter revulsion, stepped backwards, bumping into Madam Framingham, who had come around the corner.

"Macmillan, I told you to keep her quiet! Lake! Why didn't you use the Stunner? Just shut her up already!"

The guard jabbed the ceramic wedge towards Bella; a bright orange light emitted from it and she stumbled back, but it did not deter her from continued raving.

"Severus, Master, Lord, I am loyal! See what these rotting corpses are doing to me? They will rot! Rot, rot, rot! Make them bloat and rot and suffer for their crimes! Worms shall crawl through their eyes and their lungs shall stretch out upon their arms! They will scream in an agony of a thousand deaths and they shall pay!"

Severus and Draco, appalled, stepped back again, Severus grabbing Draco's arm and pulling him toward the small reception area. Up and down the hallway, several patients had come to their doors, looking out their windows or standing in their open doorways, trying to see what was happening. Severus recognised them all. More guards came to assist Lake.

"Don't leave me! I did not fail you!" She let out another loud scream as the guard thrust the Charmed Stunner toward her again, and this time, she nearly fell. Two other guards grabbed her arms, and though Bella struggled, they brought her down onto the bed. Severus and Draco did not linger to see what happened to her next. As they reached the front desk, they could still hear her screaming invectives at the guards until suddenly, all was quiet.

"DXV twelve at it again," Butterworth said, shaking his head. "She'd been too quiet all day. I knew she was ready for another blow-up. Didn't want to take her new potion, I imagine."

Severus, still stunned by the vision of Bella screaming at him, calling his name, couldn't respond except to nod his head slightly. This was not purgatory; this was hell.

It was only a short wait before Madam Framingham returned and fetched their belongings from her office. Severus barely glanced at his watch as he replaced it in its pocket and secured the chain. Bella was not only mad, she was dangerously mad. It would have been better if she had been killed. Whatever mercy Longbottom, Sprout,

and Gareth McGonagall had shown her, there was no mercy in her and no kindness in her captivity.

"I hope you had a good visit with your father," Madam Framingham said.

Draco nodded mutely.

"I apologise for the disruption. She gets like that."

Draco nodded again.

"She's a relative of yours, too, isn't she?" Madam Framingham asked.

"She . . . she was my aunt," Draco said softly.

"I am sorry."

The two began the climb back up in silence, and though the guards nodded in greeting at each landing, the two scarcely noticed.

When they got close to the last landing, Draco whispered, "She thinks it's you."

"Don't say that."

"If she gets out..."

"Out of here? She will only leave here when she's dead, Draco. And maybe not even then. I pity the inmates who must endure not only their own mental illness or physical injury, but also her ravings. As a ghost, they could not even stun her to shut her up."

"She..."

"We are almost out of here. Let's leave her behind," Severus said. "And I think we will need to pause on the landing. But only briefly." He took out his pocket watch. "It is later than I'd thought. We need to hurry."

"Diagon Alley..."

"Can't it wait?"

"I won't be able to get here again for a while. But if you can't . . ." Draco subsided.

At the top landing, the guards let them sit in their chairs for a few minutes, and Severus tried to rub his knees discreetly. His knees weren't the only parts that ached, either. His ankles, hips, and back were complaining, and he thought that he would carry the Dark Lord's marks on his body forever, even if his brand had vanished entirely.

They retrieved their wands from another guard, this one younger and less chatty than Kurt, which was fine with Severus, then they left Mungo's. Severus breathed in the London air with a sense of great relief, even glad of the automobile fumes and smells of fried fish coming from the chip shop down the street.

"Diagon Alley, then," Severus said. "But only one stop. Choose your destination carefully!"

"Honeydukes," Draco said.

Severus nodded, led Draco around the corner to an alley that smelled of vagrants and rotting vegetables, took his arm, and Disapparated as a lorry rumbled past.

Draco was quick in Honeydukes, selecting a large box of black-current-flavoured buzzing humbugs, a small box of mixed chocolate truffles, and four Acid Pops.

"Are you getting anything, Professor?"

"Hmm?" Severus looked around him, still bemused by their visit to the underground ward at St. Mungo's.

"Something for yourself?"

"Ah . . ." Poppy. He drew out his watch. Eight-twenty already. But he could bring her something. He looked at the box of chocolate truffles in Draco's hand. Too obviously not something he would purchase for himself. Some glazed almonds caught his eye. He asked the witch behind the counter for a quarter pound each of the four different kinds of glazed nuts, just mixing them in one box.

After they had paid, they stepped out onto the pavement. Diagon Alley was still alive with people even at that hour, and Severus took in a deep breath.

"Acid Pop, Professor?" Draco offered, holding one out. "I got an extra."

Severus shook his head and led him toward the Leaky Cauldron. "We have to get going. We're running late. I never took you to be one for sweets, Newman."

"Only the Acid Pops are for me. The buzzing humbugs are for Sefton. She still giggles when they buzz," he said with a grin.

"And the truffles? May I gather that you have a young lady in mind for those?"

"Sort of." Draco shrugged. "Someone who has helped me with my revision for the Defence NEWT."

"I wouldn't think you would require any assistance in Defence, even if you are taking the NEWT independently...have you sought permission already? I haven't seen anything about that."

"I submitted the form directly to Professor Dumbledore." He blushed. "Actually, I owed it to him. I haven't heard back yet. I hope he gives permission. Anyway, I needed the notes from the ethics lectures. I've read the books, but I heard that the lectures cover more than the texts do. I thought I would have to wing it, but someone offered her notes to me."

"And this 'someone' is?" Severus prodded.

"Weasley, actually. She was quite decent about it. I didn't even ask. She just offered. And we've talked about the stuff they've covered in class, so she was helpful. I thought I should thank her."

Severus nodded, and as they were entering the pub, he heard his name called. He turned his head. McGonagall. With Alroy and Quin MacAirt.

"Hey, Snape! Never would have expected to see you out tonight! We're just going for a drink. Want to come?" Gareth asked.

"No, thank you. We have to be getting back." He remembered his manners. "Draco Newman, this is Gareth McGonagall, Alroy MacAirt, and his father, Quin MacAirt."

Draco nodded. "Pleased to meet you." He glanced at the oldest MacAirt, but then he turned to Gareth. "I understand you assisted my father. My family is in your debt."

"No. Just doing what needed doing at the time," Gareth said. "I was glad to be able to help. Though if you could convince Professor Snape here to join us for a drink..."

"I cannot," Severus said. "Mr Newman and I are overdue back at Hogwarts, and as he is in my care, I could not simply join you."

"In your care!" Draco interrupted.

"In a manner of speaking," Severus said. "In any case, I have a meeting with the matron, and it is already late."

"Ah!" Gareth nodded. "Don't let us keep you, then."

"Good to meet you," Draco said as the other wizards said good-bye. "Um, Mr MacAirt, do you suppose . . . I was wondering if we might meet some time. Perhaps over lunch. I am exploring opportunities following my NEWTs."

Quin grinned at him. "Sure, be happy to meet with you. Both of us will, right, Alroy?"

Alroy smiled and nodded. "We can see, certainly."

"Come, we are late," Severus said impatiently. "I am sure that you can owl Mr MacAirt."

"We're Flooing?" Draco asked.

"Yes. We can Floo to the Three Broomsticks and Apparate from there. It has been a long day."

Draco nodded. "I could Apparate us..."

"We are here. We will Floo." He looked around. The usual somewhat mixed crowd. "You go first. Wait for me at the other end."

When they finally reached the Hogwarts gates and Severus opened them with his password, Draco asked, "Did they increase the security here because of me? Because I'm here?"

"No. Not for you specifically," Severus said curtly. He looked up at the castle and tried to pick up the pace. The lights were on in the infirmary. It was not yet eight forty-five, but he was late and he hadn't had an opportunity to send a Patronus. He could send one to Minerva now, he supposed, but he felt too enervated to draw his wand and cast. He saw movement behind the windows in the Hospital Wing. Poppy and another. Probably the Headmistress. Gods, how he wanted to get home; he wished he could simply Apparate straight into Poppy's arms.

"I will see you tomorrow, Mr Newman," Severus said as they reached the entry hall. "It was an interesting evening, but not one I would care to repeat."

"Thank you for coming, Professor. And I'm sorry about Bella."

"You are not responsible for the sanity or insanity of your relatives, thankfully. Let us not speak of it further."

Severus climbed the stairs to the fourth floor as quickly as he could, given his weariness and the pain in his joints. As he reached the Hospital Wing, the door opened and Minerva stepped out.

"We were beginning to worry, Severus."

"I had no opportunity to contact you. I am sorry. It was . . . it was an awkward evening."

Minerva nodded. "I'll just say good-night, then. We can speak later. I'm glad you're back."

Severus stepped into the infirmary, and he felt himself relax as he saw Poppy step out of her office and come towards him.

"Poppy, I'm sorry I am later than I had thought."

"I'm glad you're back. Oh, Severus, I am glad you are here." Poppy put her arms around him and held on, burying her face in his chest.

Severus relaxed further, resting his cheek against her head and breathing her in. Home. The scent of home.

NEXT

Chapter Seventy-Two: Home

Monday, 22 March 1999

Severus returns home.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Minerva McGonagall

Chapter Seventy-Two: Home

Chapter 73 of 118

Severus returns home.



Chapter Seventy-Two: Home

Monday, 22 March 1999

"Where can he be?" Poppy asked as the small clock on her office wall gave a low ding indicating the half-hour mark had been reached. "You said he'd contact you if he wouldn't be here by eight-thirty, didn't you?"

Minerva nodded. "But he could be on his way and not had a chance to send a Patronus." Poppy had been pacing nervously since they had moved over to her office ten minutes earlier.

"He told me he would meet me here at eight-thirty, as well," the matron said, pausing once more to look out her window at the Hogwarts gates. She wished that there were a few torches closer to the gates. The shadows were murky, and she could imagine assassins lying in wait for Severus and Draco as they returned, leaping upon them just as they were about to reach the safety of the school grounds. "They never should have left when they did. They should have waited and gone when they could return in the daylight, even if that meant cancelling a class or two."

"You know that Severus wouldn't agree to that. I also expect that Malfoy's request had some urgency to it," Minerva replied, forcing herself to remain more calm in the face of Poppy's agitation. "I am sure he is fine. The two of them together would prove a formidable target for anyone. I think the attacker is a coward. He's always attacked his targets when they've been alone and unaided. Malfoy can't even carry a wand."

"But the attacks are escalating, you said, and if the people...or person...is growing bolder or more desperate for success, they might attack despite the fact that there are two of them."

"Let's wait a while longer before we panic, eh?" Minerva said. "I doubt that it would please him to return, perfectly whole and well, to two hysterical witches."

Poppy nodded and tried to restrain herself from pacing. She didn't bother pretending to be calm, however, and stood by the window watching the gates, straining her eyes to see into the dark.

"Can we lower the lights a bit, Min? It's hard to see the grounds when it's so light in here. And maybe you could do that cat-thing you do to your eyes? You can probably see the gates better than I."

Minerva shook her head, but lowered the office lights and drew her wand to cast her charm on her eyes. "It's not very effective under these conditions," she said. "I really doubt that I'll see much more than you can."

Poppy shrugged. "I think you should put torches right at the gates, or even large lanterns. Yes, that would be better. Or perhaps great reflecting lamps like they have at..."

"I will have Rath and Shunpike see to the lighting tomorrow. You are right, it should be better lit down there. But I think that a couple of small lanterns will be sufficient. Thank you for pointing that out, however."

Poppy nodded. "Is that them?" she asked, seeing a shadow move. "Or someone else?"

"No, just a breeze through the trees," Minerva said. "I'll have them trimmed back a bit, as well."

Five minutes later, Severus and Draco appeared, just inches from the gates in a very precise Apparition, and Poppy breathed a sigh of relief as Severus reached out and opened the gate, allowing Draco to step through first. With the two safely behind the closed Hogwarts gates, Minerva raised the lights again.

"There. They were less than fifteen minutes later than Severus had expected. He was probably underway and it would have taken more time for him to find somewhere to cast his Patronus discreetly than he wished to take," Minerva said sensibly, though she was also clearly relieved by the wizards' safe arrival. "Not to mention that it could take several minutes for a Patronus to arrive. He might be back before the Patronus even got here."

"True. I don't suppose it would do for him to begin casting Patronuses out on the pavement outside Mungo's, either...or even in the middle of Diagon Alley, for that matter." Poppy watched the two walk up the drive toward the castle. "He looks very tired, though, and . . . stiff. I hope he is all right."

"Likely just a long day. And if Malfoy was in Mungo's secure ward, he would have had those stairs to navigate. I hear that they are quite a detriment to casual visitors and curious Lookie Lous," Minerva said.

"That's true," Poppy said with a nod.

"Now remember, Poppy, no fussing over him. He threatened to quit the last time that I suggested he not leave the castle for a while."

Poppy nodded. "I'll get ready for our meeting, then. Things are proceeding smoothly, and I think everything will be ready for the staff training. Gladys and Healer Brighthead have both volunteered to come in and work with the students individually or in groups, as well, on their own time."

"Brighthead? I didn't think much of him when I saw him a couple times myself back in June when Boneset insisted upon it, but . . ." Minerva shrugged. "Perhaps he'd be fine with the children. Kept wanting me to focus on some of the most ridiculous things, and nothing that was really the issue. He acted like I was some poor old dithering academic caught up in some . . . some nasty business. Like I was only a *victim* or something. Hardly. It was less what happened to me or what I'd seen that bothered me...then and now...than what I'd had to do, the decisions I'd had to make. But perhaps with children, that approach might work. Of course, I don't think he could get beyond thinking of me as his former Transfiguration teacher, either, and that probably didn't help matters. It was likely difficult for him to envision the teacher who had taught him how to Transfigure a snail into a snuffbox turning around a couple dozen years later and ordering people to their deaths, or instructing them to kill . . ." Minerva shook her head distractedly. "I'm sorry, Poppy. I don't know what that has to do with anything. Just look after Severus tonight, and don't fuss too much. Probably best if he doesn't know we were worried about him."

In her office, Poppy could hear Minerva speak briefly to Severus outside the door to the infirmary. Unable to pretend that she was merely concentrating on the training schedules, she got up and started into the infirmary. As soon as she saw Severus, his eyes seeming bleak and his face, pale, she hastened to him. Whatever had kept him, it hadn't been a pleasure jaunt, and she was relieved to see him back safe.

"Poppy, I'm sorry I am later than I'd thought," Severus said apologetically.

"I'm glad you're back. Oh, Severus, I am glad you are here!" She slipped her arms around under his cloak, held onto him, and felt him relax into her embrace and let out a long sigh. She gave him a squeeze, then raised her face to look up at him. "You seem tired. Did you eat? No? Then we'll have something now together."

"I don't know if I could," Severus said. "I don't think I have any appetite."

"Something light. A nice omelette. Then we can work on the project, if you like."

He shook his head. "I know we should, but could it wait? I don't think I can think about that this evening."

"Of course. There really isn't much left to discuss, anyway," Poppy said, taking his hand and stepping back to get a better look at him. She raised her other hand and caressed his face. "You do look tired."

He nodded. "It has been a long day, that's all. I'll be fine." He smiled slightly and returned her gesture, caressing her cheek lightly. "Don't worry about me, Poppy."

"I can't help it. Minerva told me you were seeing the Malfoys. I was worried about you. And when you were late, I kept imagining what awful things might be happening to you...I'm sorry, I shouldn't fuss," she said quickly. "You're here now, after all."

"She mentioned the vigilante to you, then? And her own concerns about me?" Severus asked. At Poppy's reluctant nod, Severus sighed and pulled her toward him, putting his arms around her. "I wish she hadn't. I don't want you to worry."

Poppy could feel him breathe in deeply, then let it out slowly before he kissed the top of her head.

"I can't help it," she said, "but I will try not to bother you about it, make a fuss."

"I knew we were running late, but it just didn't seem there was a good opportunity to send the Headmistress a Patronus, and all I wanted . . . all I wanted was to not delay any longer so I could get back here as soon as possible."

"Did you see Lucius, then?" She felt him nod. "Was that hard? Is he terribly injured from the attack?"

Severus shook his head and let her go. "No. He looks as though he will recover quite well. But it was a highly unpleasant excursion, nonetheless."

"Let's go to my rooms and get something to eat and you can rest. I think I could manage something, myself, now that I know you are safe and sound."

"You didn't eat?" Severus asked as Poppy drew her wand to turn out the lights and close her office door.

"It wasn't very good tonight," Poppy replied.

"Come here," Severus said, turning her to face him. "Did Minerva disturb you with her concerns during dinner? She oughtn't have said anything to you. You mustn't worry about me, Poppy, and neglect yourself!"

"I couldn't help it. The thought of some maniac attacking you . . . doing who-knew-what, it just put me off my food. And it really wasn't very good tonight," she said lightly. "I did have one of those delicious Florentines, though." She smiled up at him. "That put me in a better mood."

"That is insufficient, however," Severus said sternly. "You always tell me to eat properly. You should do the same."

Poppy laughed. "Then join me for some supper?"

Severus smiled and nodded.

In her suite, Poppy called Perlie and conferred with her quietly about their supper. When Perlie had popped away, she turned to Severus. "I thought I'd make some tea for us myself. I'd make the jasmine tea, but I don't think either of us needs the stimulation. Do you have any preference in herbal tea?"

Severus shook his head. "Whatever you would like. And let me help you."

"There's not much to do, but keep me company? I'd like that."

A few minutes later, both were sitting on her sofa, Severus pouring the herbal chai for them.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Poppy asked. "It sounds as though the visit was disturbing to you. Did he say something to you that was upsetting? Or did Narcissa?"

Severus shook his head and took a sip of tea. "No. He did ask a favour of me, but that was merely . . . somewhat irksome, I suppose. When I left here this afternoon after classes, I thought that the worst thing was having to postpone our meeting, when I had been looking forward to it. And I suppose, in a way, that still was the hardest thing." He twitched a slight smile at her. "But then we visited Narcissa, who is in some house that is being used by the Department of Mysteries for something highly mysterious, being kept a virtual prisoner, though in pleasant enough surroundings, I suppose. I think her greatest burden is boredom and separation from Lucius. When we arrived at St. Mungo's, we made a quick stop in the gift shop, and it began to feel like an ordinary sort of hospital visit. You know, sweets, reading material, well-wishes, then on our way . . ." Severus paused to finish his cup of tea.

"But then?"

"I had heard, of course, that there was some new secure ward to treat patients who were convicted Death Eaters, or for other dangerous offenders who need medical treatment, and I knew that there were a few long-term patients there, people who couldn't easily be housed in any of the Ministry's new prisons or who needed constant medical care. But I didn't know much about it. I suppose . . . perhaps I didn't want to know very much about it. Anyway, I didn't realise that it was underground. Not just in a lower level, either, but..."

"Yes, I know. It's a very secure facility. I've not seen it myself, but I've heard about it."

"Poppy, I thought that the worst part of having to go there to see Malfoy would be the climb down and then the climb back out. And that was bad enough, but . . ." Severus shook his head. "They really should have a lift."

"They do, for St. Mungo's personnel. And, I presume, for most of the other regular prison staff that run the place," Poppy replied, "but I think the stairs are there to provide as much a psychological barrier and distance from the outside world as to provide any kind of real security."

"Oh, it was a barrier. I'll not return there. Never." He looked over at her seriously. "Poppy, promise me something. Promise me that if anything happens to me, if I am ever injured, you won't let them put me there. Promise me. Even if they say it's for my safety."

"I..."

"Please, Poppy."

"Yes, I promise. I will do all in my power to make sure that never happens. I'll kidnap you myself, if I have to. But I hope that no such occasion ever arises!"

"As do I, but if it should . . ." He shook his head. "Going down those steps, those seemingly unending steps, I felt as though we were entering hell. Even the effect on my magic . . . there were wards that seemed to press against me as if to squeeze my breath from me, and it made me dizzy, though the sensation did pass."

"Probably not the wards," Poppy said.

"I could feel them..." Severus began.

"I'm sure you felt some very strong charms, but the effect you describe was probably from the spatial distortion."

"Spatial distortion?" Severus asked.

"I'm not even supposed to know this, so you shouldn't repeat it, but the unit is not as far down as it seems to be."

"What?"

"They brought in architects and gravitomancers from Switzerland to do a lot of the spellwork. There's a point a few hundred feet down where they've used spatial charms to create the sensation that you are going down. And I suppose you actually are going down, in a way, but in reality, the stairs are going sideways, and in a circle. Then just before you get to the final flight of stairs, the spatial distortion is removed, and you begin to go down again."

"What?" Severus repeated, staring at Poppy.

Poppy nodded at Severus's incredulous expression. "Have you ever been in any of those passages here at Hogwarts where it feels like you're walking in a level corridor but you're actually going up or down? It's the opposite of that effect. From what I understand, about two-thirds of the stairs go through a Charmed spatial distortion. It still requires the same amount of effort to climb the stairs as it would if they were actually going up and down, though. You must be exhausted."

Severus was still looking at her in disbelief. "You mean that it's not hundreds of feet underground?"

"It's still pretty far, but it's not as far as it seems."

He shook his head. "Well, if they wanted to make it a labourious and off-putting exercise, they certainly fulfilled their mission."

"It does make it harder to get in and out, I'm sure," Poppy said. "What's it like when you get down there?"

"Cold. Not literally. But very sterile, very light. Almost too clean feeling. Inhuman, somehow. But I didn't see any evidence that anyone was being mistreated, and the staff seems professional. The one in charge tonight, Madam Framingham, did her job without making it seem as though we were the criminals. They're careful about what's brought in, though, and who the visitors are."

"Alberta Framingham is working there? It would be a good position for her, I'd think. She's very smart, and competent at everything she does."

"I don't know her first name. She said that her husband is your Mrs Framingham's grandson."

Poppy nodded. "John. He was a Healer at St. Mungo's when I did my training. Alberta is a few years younger than I am. She trained as a mediwitch before she went to work for the Ministry with their Obliviators. She moved around a lot at the Ministry, and last I'd heard, she was working in the Department of Mysteries, but that was about a decade ago." Poppy quirked a smile. "I actually dated John when I was at Mungo's, but we fell out of touch."

"Is that why you have her portrait hanging on your door?" Severus asked. He wondered if she still carried a torch for the Healer after all those years.

"I thought it seemed amusing at the time, you know, the way things do."

Severus nodded. He didn't really see, but he thought that perhaps it was the sort of thing witches might understand better.

Perlie arrived just then, platters floating above her head.

"Thank you, Perlie. Just set it all over on the table."

Poppy and Severus stood and went over to the table on the other side of the room.

"I asked for a spinach and mushroom omelette with Gorgonzola cheese," she said as Severus held her chair for her. "I hope that tastes good to you tonight."

"It does sound good," Severus said.

In addition to the omelette, there was a long loaf of French bread, butter, a mixed green salad, and a carafe of cider.

"If you don't want cider, we could have more tea, or there's water..."

"The cider's fine, Poppy," Severus said, pouring them each a glass.

They ate in silence for a while, Poppy pleased to see that Severus's appetite had returned and that he was enjoying the omelette.

When he had finished and pushed his plate away, Poppy got up and went around the table to stand behind him. As she rubbed his shoulders, Severus let out a sigh and relaxed.

"Now, you were going to tell me more about your visit with Lucius, I believe," Poppy said, giving him one final squeeze.

"Yes. As I say, he had a favour to ask of me. Nothing particularly . . . unpleasant," Severus added as he stood from the table, "but probably difficult." As they sat together on the couch, he recounted Lucius's story of his rescue by the Muggle.

"I can't imagine that they would simply Oblivate him and not treat him for any injuries," Poppy said. "They don't like Muggles to be admitted to hospital with mysterious, inexplicable symptoms. It still happens, of course, but if they Oblivated him, I would think they'd do something to treat him, too. You can probably find out either from the MLE or from the Muggle Liaison Office who the man was."

"If they will tell me."

"Melina could probably find out for you. I'm sure she would. If you like, I could ask her. Pop around to Edinburgh tomorrow during the day, and we might have an answer for you by the time you're finished teaching in the afternoon. That way you wouldn't have to go out again, either."

"I can hardly avoid leaving the castle altogether," Severus said, "although you are correct. It would save me a trip. But Lucius asked the favour of me. I can't very well ask you to do this."

"You aren't asking. I'm offering. I'd like to see Melina, in any case, and depending on how much time I can be away, I might even be able to get in a little shopping and have lunch out. I'm overdue for a real day off, anyway." She grinned at him. "I'd feel like a genuine sleuth. I might even be able to find out where he lives for you. It could be fun."

Since Severus had not been looking forward to the task and Poppy seemed so eager to help, he nodded. "Very well. But don't speak of it with anyone you don't have to. I know you are discreet, but I'd just as soon not have people think I'm out . . . out Muggle-stalking or something."

"Oh, don't worry about that! If Melina doesn't know who the man is and can't find out easily, I can do a little digging around on my own, but I won't bring your name into it at all."

"All right. I'd appreciate that. Thank you. But do not be concerned if you are unable to discover anything. Malfoy may simply need to be disappointed."

"I'll give it a shot, though," Poppy said. "What about the rest of your visit?" She placed her hand on his arm. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Severus leaned his head back against the back of the sofa and looked at the ceiling. "It was a peculiar experience, in any case, seeing Malfoy there...and I caught a glimpse of Pettigrew, still in his coma...and knowing that most of the others there were convicted Death Eaters . . . it reminded me forcefully of what could have happened to me if I had survived and not been . . . not been exonerated."

"You didn't require exoneration," Poppy broke in. "Not this time around. We all knew what you were doing for us. Shackbolt knew. Even if everyone else at Hogwarts had died and somehow you had lived, no one would have let you go to prison after all you had done to help defeat Riddle."

Severus twitched a slight smile at her. "Perhaps. I do not share your bright view, but I must admit to finding it a comfort."

"I can understand, though, how it must have been very disconcerting for you. Probably even a bit frightening," Poppy said.

Severus nodded. "Yes, it was. And I did have a moment, more than a moment, of anxiety that I would not be allowed to leave there. ~~It~~^{It} was frightening," he admitted. "And as used to being underground as I am, living and working in the dungeons, which are much darker and superficially more unpleasant, that place had an oppressive feeling. It was as though I was in danger of being buried alive there in that sterile place . . ." He swallowed. "It was better than Azkaban, and there were no Dementors, but it felt remote from anything . . . anything good, warm, and human." He reached out and touched her cheek. "I feared never being able to see you or feel your touch again," he whispered.

Poppy slid closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder, putting one arm around him. "You're here with me now."

Severus nodded. "At the end," he said softly, "we were leaving, and I was eager to get out of that dreadful place, come home to you, and we were almost to the reception area . . ."

"Yes?" Poppy said when he didn't continue.

"Bellatrix Lestrange was there. Her door was open. A guard was going to help the mediwitch give her a potion she didn't want to take, I believe. I don't want to tell you the details. Her words were not fit for your ears. But she was mad, Poppy. Completely mad. She had never been right in the head, and her years in Azkaban had made her worse, but now . . . it was horrific. She was screaming, cursing those around her. She is convinced that the Dark Lord is still alive somewhere and that he will return for her . . ."

"That must have been very disturbing to witness," Poppy said.

"That would have been bad enough, but she saw me . . . Poppy, she . . ." Severus shook his head. "It doesn't bear repeating."

"Then don't, unless you want to. You can tell me anything, though, you know, Severus."

"Perhaps. But suffice it to say that the encounter, and what she said when she saw me, very nearly made me physically ill."

"Draco was with you?" When Severus nodded, Poppy said, "Poor boy! However he feels about her, to see his aunt like that...it must have been upsetting for him, as well."

"It was. But I was so . . . Poppy, you know the kinds of things I have seen and done in my life. There is little that shocks me, but this was so unexpected and so . . . personal. It sickened me, and I do not think that I was able to provide Draco with any support."

"I am sure that he understands that. You were probably both affected by it in different ways."

Severus nodded mutely, trying to expunge from his mind the image of Bella, crazed and calling his name, calling him "Master."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk more about it, Severus?" Poppy asked gently.

He shook his head. "I can't repeat what she said."

"Honestly, I have heard a good many things in my life that were very unpleasant. I'm sure that if it was shocking to you, what she said was truly horrifying, but hearing it second-hand won't be the same. And if it helps you..."

"She is delusional about the existence of the Dark of Riddle. She said some things about that, implying . . . implying . . ."

"What?"

Severus turned his head away. "She . . . she called me 'Master,'" he whispered.

"Oh. Oh, Severus . . ." Poppy held him more closely.

"In the midst of an insane rant, filled with invective and bile, she was calling to me . . ." Severus shuddered, his eyes closed.

"That must have been dreadful. I can scarcely imagine."

"It was horrid. And frightening." He licked his lips and shook his head. "There was a moment when I even feared that they would hear her and, ~~not~~^{not} believe her, but think that somehow . . . somehow I belonged there with her. That her identifying me like that would indict and convict me."

"What she said must have been very surprising to you, and terrible to hear, but if she is that mad, she must rant all of the time about things of that sort. I am certain that no one would take her seriously unless they were mad themselves."

"Still, that she would look at me like that and call out to me...it reminded me again of my past and of what I am trying to escape." He couldn't look at her. "Whatever you may have heard, I don't think that you have any true idea about the kinds of things I did, the kind of man I was, and what I was becoming. What I was allowing myself to become. Bella knows, though. She knows the evil in me. She sees it still when she looks at me. The evil in my heart."

"She is not sane, Severus," Poppy said firmly. "I do not see evil when I look at you...ah ah!" She held up her hand to stop his protest. "I am not so blind that I am unaware of what Death Eaters did, and I know you were one, and I am not so naive that I could ever convince myself that you had nothing to do with any of the dreadful things that were done during the time you were a Death Eater. But that was many years ago. Much has changed, and you have changed. The very fact that you flinch from such evil and from these reminders of your past proves to me that your heart is not evil and that you could not fall into such ways again." She placed her palm on his chest. "I do know you, Severus. I may not know everything about you, whether we are speaking of the past or of the present, but I do know you. I would never have made love to you if I saw evil in your heart. If I *felt* evil in you."

Severus simply shook his head.

"Here, now! We have to do something to get your mind off this before you go to sleep," Poppy said. "Tonight might be a good night for a dose of Dreamless Sleep."

"Perhaps," Severus said. "I certainly don't want to go to bed thinking about it all."

"Let's go for a walk. Not a long one...I'm sure you're tired after all those stairs...but just around to the gardens. It's a beautiful night. Or we could go up to the North Tower. I

think a little fresh air would do you good."

"Is that your professional opinion, Madam Pomfrey?" Severus asked with a slight smile at her enthusiasm.

"No, that's my opinion as a good friend and as a witch with a great deal of life behind her," Poppy said.

"Not so much, Poppy," Severus replied. "I do believe that though my years are fewer, perhaps I might have used up just as much living, or more."

"Ah, Sev, you might be surprised!" Poppy said with a grin. "You never know what lurks in a mediwitch's past, after all!"

"True, true, I had no idea that you and Healer Framingham were a hot item back in the day, after all," Severus said, trying to go along with Poppy's attempt to cheer him up. "What things you all might have got into at St. Mungo's, well, it probably doesn't bear repeating!"

Poppy stood and tugged his hand. "You're right! I'm sure the supply cupboards could tell quite a tale if they were able!" she said with a laugh.

"Supply cupboards? Oh, Poppy, you shouldn't be putting images like that into a poor tired wizard's head," Severus said with a smirk, but pushing to his feet. "You don't know what you might encourage him to. I don't know about a walk, though."

Poppy chuckled. "Come on, Sev, put your cloak back on. We'll go down to the gardens or up to the Tower, but I'll have you breathing some good fresh air tonight. Get all that sterile St. Mungo's air out of your system!"

Severus shrugged.

"Down to the gardens. Then we'll come back via the entrance at the base of the North Tower, and you can go straight to your rooms without climbing any more stairs today, hmm?"

Severus nodded and reached out a hand, Summoning his cloak. "If you don't mind being seen out with me . . . doing nothing but walking. It will hardly look like Hogwarts business to anyone who might see us."

Poppy rolled her eyes. "If you're concerned about that, then I'd rather not go, but it certainly doesn't bother me. Besides, this time of night, who's there to see?"

"All right, then," Severus agreed with a nod.

Once outside, the two walked slowly, Severus allowing Poppy to choose their path around the side of the castle, ambling past the Whomping Willow and into the gardens between the greenhouses and the Forbidden Forest to the east of the castle.

"Mmm," Poppy said, "you can smell spring in the air even now."

"That's Pomona's desiccated dragon dung fertiliser, I believe," Severus said seriously.

Poppy laughed. "Well, whatever it might be, it makes me think of spring. And don't you feel a difference in the breeze off the lake?"

Severus shrugged. "It is cool, but fresh, I suppose."

"Let's sit for a bit," Poppy said, leading him around behind Greenhouse Three to a bench set against the wall. She sat down and patted the bench beside her. They were out of sight of the castle, now, and she slid a little closer to him.

"Now, isn't this a good way to clear the head?" Poppy asked. "Better, I should think, than roaming the corridors till all hours, stalking errant students out after curfew."

Severus snorted. "I don't do that often any longer. And I probably should, at least occasionally. It wasn't only students I was stalking, though."

"What, then? Your own nightmares?"

"They were years of danger. You know that, Poppy. And if I couldn't sleep, it burned off excess energy and served a purpose, as well."

"Mmhm, true. But I still think this is better." She slipped her hand around his arm. "Particularly with some company."

"It is," Severus agreed.

The two were quiet, gazing out over the lake, and Poppy tilted her head to look up at Severus's face. Although it was dark, she thought that he seemed more relaxed than he had, but she could see that the events of the evening were still weighing on him. He should focus on something else, something he might look forward to.

"Have any plans for the weekend?" Poppy asked. "I'm going to visit my sister for a while on Sunday, but I'll be here on Saturday. There's the duel in the afternoon, but perhaps we can spend some time together in the morning."

Severus shook his head. "I have plans in the morning. But I will return for the duel in the afternoon, and I believe I will be here the remainder of the weekend."

"You are going somewhere?"

Severus nodded. "Meeting McGonagall. We have some business to attend to."

"Ah . . . well . . . I hope you have an enjoyable morning, even if it is business," Poppy said. "Where are you meeting him? His house? Perhaps he might come up here, instead."

"No," Severus said shortly.

When he didn't elaborate, Poppy said, "I just thought you might be able to avoid leaving the grounds if he were to come up here and see you."

"No." Severus paused. "We aren't meeting at his house. We are meeting at mine."

"Oh, I see . . ." Poppy said, though she didn't. She'd always had the impression that Severus spent as little time as possible at his home. He certainly never left the castle during school holidays, except during the summer. She hadn't thought he'd even do that if he didn't have to. "Is it necessary?"

"Yes."

"All right." Poppy leaned back and looked at the stars. He clearly didn't care to share his plans with her, and she wouldn't press him about it. Perhaps it was merely long-standing habit of not telling anyone anything that he didn't have to, or perhaps he was simply tired, but she still wished he would provide her with more than just one syllable responses. She supposed it was something positive that he'd even told her where they were meeting. She sighed.

"We are . . . discussing the house itself," Severus said after a long but comfortable silence. "It would not be an exercise we could do elsewhere."

"Ah."

Severus cleared his throat. "He wishes to have somewhere to use his Muggle gadgets."

"I thought he had everything at Melina's," Poppy said questioningly.

"He does, but he does not wish to incommode them," Severus replied. "He suggested that since the house at Spinner's End stands empty for most of the year, he might rent a room there."

"That's not a bad idea, actually," Poppy said. "And that way there'd be someone in and out of the house regularly to check on things."

"Indeed." One year, he'd arrived at Spinner's End to discover that the roof had developed a leak, likely some months before, which had caused some water damage. He had repaired what was necessary, but left the rest, including the water stains on the wallpaper. "He also has some ideas for refurbishment. I do not wish to give him carte blanche to do as he wishes with the house without having a clearer picture of what he has in mind."

"Sensible. It is your home, after all."

"Hardly a home, but I do make use of it," Severus said. "I also need to set a password so that he can have free access to the place."

"Is he planning on moving from Hogsmeade altogether?" Poppy asked.

"I do not believe so. Not at this time...and certainly not to my house. We are agreed that he may use it when I am not there. We have made no other plans. I believe that if he could simply use his computer and such in Hogsmeade, he would do that, but that's obviously impossible."

"I don't understand why he bothers," Poppy said frankly. "The Muggle gadgets are interesting, I suppose, and I know that Quin has become quite reliant upon them, since he couldn't live as a wizard for so long and he often used them when interacting with his Muggle businesses even before his injury, but why Gareth would want to visit his things is quite a puzzle to me."

Severus let out a low chuckle. "He does not 'visit' them, Poppy. He uses them. I have never used a computer, myself, but I understand that it is useful, and he apparently uses it to communicate with friends in distant places. Right now, he only uses it once or twice a week, but if he has a more private place to keep it, he could drop in every day, if he wanted to. He has stereo equipment, as well. That, too, requires electricity."

"But Charmed musical boxes nowadays are more economical than they used to be, it's easier to add charms to them than it once was, and they don't take up much room," Poppy pointed out.

Severus shrugged. "You enjoyed the video with MacAirt the other evening. That was Muggle."

"Yes, I suppose . . . And it depends what you're used to, as well."

Severus nodded.

They sat in silence for a while, feeling the chilly breeze come in off the lake, and finally Poppy squeezed his arm and said it might be time to go in.

"It's getting late, and it's quite cold here, too," she said.

"You should have said something. I could have cast a warming charm," Severus said.

"It didn't bother me. I could have cast one, as well," she replied, standing.

They started around toward the castle.

"Severus?"

"Mm."

"I don't want to sound . . . demanding . . ."

"Yes?"

"And I know that you can take care of yourself, and I wouldn't ask you to lock yourself away anywhere, but when you do go out . . . could you take extra care? I don't want anything to happen to you."

Severus paused and touched her arm. She turned and looked up at him. "I know I shouldn't make any demands on you," she began.

"Shh. I will take care. I do not want you to worry. And I do not plan on leaving the grounds any more frequently than I must."

"And if you could try to return before dark?" Poppy suggested.

He nodded. "When feasible, yes."

"Good. I know you aren't helpless, and you're very good with your wand, but the thought of someone jumping upon you at a vulnerable moment...it simply distresses me."

"I will attempt to avoid any 'vulnerable moments,'" he said wryly, beginning to walk again. "They are not something I would seek out, in any event."

Poppy let out a short laugh. "I know that. I suppose I'm just being silly."

"No, I appreciate it. And," Severus said thoughtfully, "although McGonagall and I must go to the house, there is no reason why we must arrive separately. I could ask him to meet me here at the gates and we could Apparate together, if that would set your mind at ease."

"It would, Severus. Thank you for humouring me."

"No, thank you for caring," Severus said softly. "And for not trying to keep me from doing things despite your worries."

Poppy nodded. "I was concerned tonight. I shouldn't have let myself become so worried, but after Minerva said what she did about the escalating attacks, and the letters to the Ministry, and that you might be one of the next targets, I just couldn't stop thinking about someone doing something terrible to you, and not being there with you . . ."

"She shouldn't have said anything. I doubt the danger is as great as Minerva implied to you. As you said yourself earlier, I haven't been a Death Eater for years. My role in Riddle's defeat has been widely publicised. I think you can rest easily, Poppy."

"I'll try not to worry when you're late returning back," Poppy said, "but I can't promise you that I won't worry at all. You are important to me, Severus."

"And you are important to me, which is why I will do what I can to minimise your worry," Severus replied. "I should have sent a Patronus as soon as Newman and I left Mungo's, but he wanted to make a brief stop in Diagon Alley first, and I simply wanted to get as far from that miserable place as possible. Then once we were in Diagon Alley, I simply didn't have an opportunity. We also ran into Gareth, Alroy, and Quin, which necessitated a little polite interaction."

"You weren't that late, really, either. I'm not usually easily thrown into a tizzy, Severus...I hope you don't think I'm silly. But it was entirely new information to me, and I hadn't had an opportunity to speak with you about it, either."

"No, I think you are generally quite calm and sensible. It probably is part of what makes you a good matron. And that is one reason why I wish to reassure you...because you are not prone to such fits of nerves."

Poppy laughed slightly. "I will try to maintain my calm a bit better, now."

"I completely forgot that when we were in Diagon Alley, I picked up something for you," Severus said, pulling a bag from his cloak pocket. He handed it to her.

"What is it?" Poppy asked.

"Nuts. Mixed glazed nuts. Newman wanted to get something for a couple of girls, so I took the opportunity to get you something. I hope you like nuts."

"I do...thank you! You needn't bring me something every time you come back to the castle, though. But I am pleased," she said, looking up at him and smiling as he opened the door to the North Tower entrance for them.

"If I limit my excursions from school, I will have fewer opportunities to do so," Severus said. "I wished to give you something when I was able."

"Thank you! I will look forward to them."

The two walked through the lower level of the castle till they reached stairs that would lead Severus almost directly down to his rooms, with the stairs leading up bringing Poppy to the end of the corridor that led past the staff room.

"I can walk you to your rooms," Poppy said.

Severus shook his head. "I should accompany you to yours, but I do not believe my legs would appreciate another five flights of stairs."

"Take some potion before you go to bed, Severus. Dreamless Sleep, at least, and a bit of analgesic, too."

Severus nodded. "Good night, Poppy."

"Night, Sev...I'll let you know at breakfast whether I can get out to see Melina or not tomorrow. If I can, we could meet after dinner to talk about whatever I've found out."

"I would like that." He glanced around them, then bent and kissed her cheek softly. "Sleep well."

NEXT

Chapter Seventy-Three: Renovation

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Spinner's End.

Rated T.

Characters: Gareth McGonagall, Hermione Granger, Gertrude Gamp, Severus Snape

Chapter Seventy-Three: Renovation

Chapter 74 of 118

Gareth and Severus meet at Spinner's End.

Author's Note: If Chapter 71, "Descent into Hades," cut off in a strange place when you read it, the chapter has been reposted. It should now be complete. Thank you to Norine for bringing this to my attention! (The chapter started off whole and somehow the last part of it was lost at some point after many people had already read it and a few had reviewed it.)



Chapter Seventy-Three: Renovation

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Gareth looked up from his *Daily Prophet*. "'Morning, Hermione. Gluffy did kippers this morning."

Hermione made a face and went over to the cool cupboard.

"I bought that muesli you like," Gareth said.

"Thanks," Hermione replied. She spooned some yoghurt into a tall beer glass, added strawberries, orange juice, half a banana, a dollop of dark honey, and some yellow

"mystery powder," as Gareth called it. She felt in her bathrobe pocket for her wand.

"Don't forget to cover it this time," Gareth said, going back to his newspaper and ignoring Hermione's eye-roll.

Hermione sat down at the table, reached for the muesli, poured a small amount in her cereal bowl, then added some milk. "You forgot the milk," she said.

"What's that in your hand?" Gareth said, indicating the pitcher.

"That's whole milk. I meant skimmed."

"Get some today when you're out," Gareth replied. "And don't forget that I need the cross-nine charts done before my meeting on Monday, and with sufficient time to make use of them."

"I won't forget. I don't forget that kind of thing," Hermione said.

"Mm, but you've been distracted lately, and you didn't give me the natal charts I needed until the last minute on Wednesday. You will need to set aside enough time for the cross-nines, too, and not stay up all night doing them."

"There aren't many. It won't take me long..." Hermione began.

"Don't use Platterkroyt's method this time. The last time you dove into the middle of the cross-nines using his method, I spent two hours redoing half of it."

"Platterkroyt's methods are well-respected," Hermione countered, "and his own results are known for their uncanny accuracy."

"Uncanny' is right," Gareth said. "Who's the master and who's the apprentice here, Hermione? I'll be able to tell if you use Platterkroyt's shortcuts. So don't."

A crack of Apparition came from the hallway, and Gareth's eyebrows rose. Hermione ignored it.

"I don't know why you introduced me to Platterkroyt if you don't want me using his methods," Hermione grumbled.

Gertrude came into the kitchen. "Did I hear 'Platterkroyt'?" she asked. "Don't tell me you're having her use Platterkroyt, Gareth."

"I'm not," Gareth replied. "It's her idea. I didn't know that you were out already. I thought you were still sleeping."

"Up and out for a ramble before breakfast," Gertrude said, accepting a cup of tea from her son. "Thank you. I plan to return to the estate later today. Give me the data you wanted me to work on, and I can owl it to you when I'm done...or send Gluffy with it."

"Owl is fine," Gareth said, fixing his mother a plate of kippers and toast. "Nothing too sensitive at this point. I haven't even accepted the commission yet, so they aren't giving me much to work with."

"We're doing an awful lot of work on a commission you're not sure you're accepting," Hermione observed.

"When dealing with the Ministry, it's probably wise," Gertrude said. "If they have some foregone conclusions they're hoping we will reach, or if they are trying to skew the results in any way, best to know it before your integrity as an Arithmancer becomes compromised."

"You weren't this careful with the Chudley Cannons commission," Hermione pointed out, "and it was clear what result they wanted even before we sat down and did the work."

"Mmhm. And the results we gave them were not precisely what they were looking for, either," Gareth said. "Not to mention that the strategies of a minor Quidditch team are hardly on the same order of importance as what the Ministry is examining. Such strategies might make a difference in the wider scheme of things, affect ticket sales and so forth, but it's not the same. Particularly when they're just as likely to go ahead and do what they wanted to do from the beginning, despite our recommendations."

"And the Ministry isn't?" Hermione asked. Gertrude smiled slightly at the question.

"They might," Gareth acknowledged. "They might not. They might do some third thing. But we can at least know that we did our best work for them, presented them with honest results."

"And hope that we don't have to say, 'I told you so,' at the end," Gertrude added.

A rattle at the window interrupted their discussion, and Hermione rose and opened the window for a tiny owl carrying a shrunken letter. Gertrude watched as Gareth took the letter and unshrunk it.

"Should I let the owl leave, or do you want to send a reply?" Hermione asked, still standing at the window.

"Give her some kipper first," Gareth said, reading over the short note. "Then let her go home."

"Business?" Gertrude asked, setting down her fork.

Gareth tilted his head. "Sort of."

"From Professor Snape, then," Gertrude said.

Gareth nodded.

"You're still meeting him this morning."

Gareth nodded again.

"I see . . ." Gertrude looked at her son as if she would say more, and his eyes met hers.

"I'm meeting him at the gates." He set down the note. "That's what the note is. Arrangements." He glanced up at the wall clock. "I should be leaving shortly, in fact."

Gertrude continued to look at him.

"We've had this discussion, Mum," Gareth said quietly, glancing briefly at Hermione.

"And Melina and Brennan?"

"You know I spoke with them already."

"Melina must not have been happy..."

"It's not as though you two are best chums right now, Mum. Sorry, shouldn't have said that," Gareth said quickly.

"I'll just go get dressed," Hermione said, picking up her smoothie. "See you later, Gareth. Safe Apparition, Madam Gamp." She ducked out of the kitchen, and they could hear her trotting up the stairs to her room.

"Melina has gone out of her way to make you feel at home. She redecorated the room for you, put in an additional telephone line for your computer."

"And I have appreciated it, but it isn't as convenient."

"How? You Apparate there; you would Apparate to Professor Snape's place."

Gareth sighed. "Mum . . ."

"I know that you are perfectly capable of arranging your own affairs, Gareth, and I am aware that you do enjoy using your Muggle apparatus, but you don't need to share a house with him. If you want your own Muggle place, why not share with Tarrant? You and he have been friends for years, and you get along. Or buy something of your own. Quin would help you, I'm sure. You could get a flat in London, perhaps. It would be convenient for you, too, if you wished to spend the night in town after going out in Diagon Alley."

"I already talked to Severus, Mum. He is not a man generally inclined to share his things, let alone his house, and I think it would hurt his feelings if I were to tell him now that the whole thing's off. Besides, I want to."

"Gareth . . . you aren't . . . you know I never interfere with your relationships..."

"You haven't been *around* to interfere with my relationships," Gareth pointed out, "so I don't know what you might decide to do in the future."

"I am simply concerned about you."

"I know. But there's nothing to be concerned about. You're the one who was always telling me I had to let go of my anger toward him."

"That was before you'd even met the man. And it hadn't to do with him; it was for your sake."

"And all that about allowing him a fresh start? Letting him go forward?" Gareth asked.

"It is still true. But a fresh start for him doesn't have to include your living with him."

"I'm not *living with him*, Mum! He's never there. That's what makes it ideal for us both."

"Then it wouldn't make any difference to either of you if you got a place of your own."

Gareth sighed. "I have to leave. He's expecting me at the gates in a few minutes, and I have to go upstairs and grab those samples I picked up."

Gertrude nodded. "I hope it works out for you, then."

"Thanks, Mum." He stood and bent to kiss her cheek.

"And have fun picking colours or whatever you're doing today," she added.

"Thanks. And if you see Melina, try to keep from sounding like a stiff old pureblood," Gareth said.

"What!?"

"It was beginning to sound like that the last argument I heard between the two of you," Gareth said. "Family tradition, Gamp estate, generations of Gamps, blah blah blah."

"I have tried to see things from her point-of-view, Gareth, but she was not as sympathetic to mine. I needed to be . . . clearer about my reasons for certain things. Besides, it may all become moot soon. And if it doesn't . . . well, I suppose that my presiding over the destruction of the estate would be preferable to having the family torn apart by some dispute over a few wards. Even if they are centuries old."

Gareth chuckled. "Give Quin and Alroy my best, and give Rosemary a kiss for me."

"I don't think Quin will be there this weekend, but I'll give Alroy and Rosemary your greetings."

"Bye, Mum. I'll leave the data on top of everything on my desk. Send me an owl tonight, let me know how things are."

"I will."

"And work things out with Melina! You know you won't be happy until you do!" Gareth said as he hurried out of the kitchen.

Five minutes later, he landed outside the Hogwarts gates with a sharp snap. He grinned. Not late: Severus was just walking down the drive to the gates.

"Hey, Snape!" Gareth said when the wizard reached the gate and opened it. "Did you have something you wanted to do before we get to Spinner's End?"

Severus shook his head. "Later." He shut the gate, rattling it slightly to check it, then he reached out and took hold of Gareth's elbow. "I will Apparate us."

A moment later, Gareth was catching himself after the sudden Apparition. "I'd appreciate a bit more warning next time, mate."

"Best not to dawdle about, don't you agree?" Severus said as he walked up the cracked walk to the front door. When he reached it, he stopped and looked around. Not even a bird in sight. He nodded and unlocked the door, muttering a password as he did so.

"I hope you're not in a mood, too," Gareth said, tossing his satchel on the sofa.

"No more than usual, McGonagall. If that disturbs you, we can do this some time more convenient for us both."

"You *are* in a bad mood. What gives? Trouble with the lovely Hogwarts matron?"

Severus snorted. "Not everything has to do with that, you know. And I'm not in a bad mood. I am simply . . . irked by the circumstances."

Gareth frowned. After having defended his decision to rent Spinner's End, he didn't like Severus's tone. "If you didn't want to do it, if you've changed your mind about renting me the place, you should have just told me. An owl would have been sufficient. Saved us both some trouble."

"No, it is not that." Severus shook his head and removed his cloak, draping it over a chair. "It is nothing to do with you. I . . . I apologise if I gave that impression."

"It's all right. So what's up? It's not your romantic life, it's not me . . ." Gareth shrugged.

"It's the attacks on former Death Eaters and Voldemort sympathisers," Severus said. "I find I must take precautions."

"Have you been threatened, Severus?" Gareth asked, suddenly going cold.

"Not directly. Not yet. But it is possible. The Headmistress warned me of it earlier this week after she received a communication from Moody. It had already occurred to me that I might become a target if the vigilantes ran out of better ones." He sighed and sat down on the couch. "Better me than one of the Death Eaters' children."

Gareth took in Severus's blank expression and empty eyes, and he knew that the other wizard was thinking that this was his just dessert, and was perhaps even feeling some resignation at the thought. "Better that it be none of you," he said softly. "They'll catch whoever is doing this."

"If they are motivated sufficiently," Severus said cynically.

"There's no benefit to having some group of vigilantes running around taking the law into their own hands," Gareth began.

"Wasn't that what the Order of the Phoenix was doing?" Severus asked.

"Not really...it may have been what my dad wanted them to do, but they didn't. They did operate outside of the Ministry and likely broke a number of laws, but they didn't just hunt people down and attack them. Well, Dad did hunt some of them down. But he placed them under arrest. It might have actually shortened the war if they had done that, though," Gareth said. "But there's no call for this now. The war is over, the British wizarding world is recovering, and the people who have been attacked, as far as has been reported in the papers, have either been innocents falsely targeted or been people who have been given sentences that this group doesn't agree with."

"Lucius Malfoy was the most recent one."

"I thought he might have been when I saw that the victim lived in Leeds in a Muggle neighbourhood," Gareth said. "So is that why we met at the gates and not here?"

Severus nodded. "I doubt that there's any danger to me, or at least, I doubt that my Apparating from Hogwarts to Spinner's End and back would open me to any danger, but Poppy was worried about me, so I told her that I would Apparate with you rather than on my own."

"Should have said something in your note, Snape," Gareth said. "I would have been more prepared."

"I'll give you more warning the next time we Disapparate."

"No, I meant that I could have my wand drawn. Wouldn't do any good to you if someone jumped out at us and I was unprepared for it."

Severus snorted.

"I mean it, Snape. Seriously. Aunt Minerva isn't an alarmist. If there are some maniacs out there hunting down Death Eaters and Aunt Minerva thinks you might be next, you do need to be careful. I think that when we return, I should go first. Get to the gates and wait for you, ready if anyone is there..."

"Fine, McGonagall. If you wish. Let's just get to the business we're here for."

Gareth nodded and sat down next to Severus, pulling his satchel over and opening it. Severus paid somewhat distracted attention to the various colour palettes and ideas for new upholstery for the sofa and chairs until Gareth pulled out a swatch of fabric.

"That's pink. No pink. Or pastel."

"It's not pink, and it's not pastel. It's called . . . 'Dusky Starlight,'" Gareth replied, consulting the label. "Don't think of it as pink. Think of it as a kind of . . . greyish rosy colour."

"No pink."

Gareth laughed. "Okay, Snape. What about the rest?" He was surprised that Severus wasn't more interested in the decorating, but he supposed that worry about the attacks would be distracting.

"Fine. As I said before, anything you do will likely be an improvement. As long as it's not pink. We can always do a permanent colour-change charm and make everything white or black if your choices turn out to be abominable. I need to show you the rest of the house. I have in mind which room you may use for your computer."

"The box room wouldn't..."

"I wouldn't put you in the box room," Severus said. "That's for rats and relics of the past. Come. You can see what you've bitten off, McGonagall, whilst you still have time to change your mind."

"That reminds me, Snape. We should have some kind of lease. Or contract."

"Don't trust me? Think I'll have you fix the place up and then kick you to the kerb?"

Gareth laughed loudly at that. "No, no, but you and I . . . our friendship has had its bumps. I don't want my having some use of your house to create any problems between us."

"You are correct. That had crossed my mind earlier in the week, but I haven't thought much about it since."

"I could draw something up . . ."

"If you wish," Severus said with a nod. "In the meantime, a handshake would suffice for me. I suggest that between now and the end of the school year, with the exception of my bedroom, you have free use of the entirety of the house, you pay the utilities from the first of April forward, and you keep track of your expenses in refurbishing the place. We will consider that rent, with credit toward the future. If I decide not to return to Hogwarts in the autumn, then I will reimburse you any credit you may still have."

"For a man who hasn't given it much thought, you seem to be fairly clear. How much rent are we talking?"

Severus shrugged. "I never use the place . . . I derive benefit from your presence when I am not here. Shall we say . . . four Galleons a month?"

"Four . . . ? But that's nothing!"

Severus shrugged again. "You will also be expending labour on the renovation, including house-elf labour. That will not be recompensed. If I do not return to Hogwarts in September and wish to have the house to myself, however, I am prepared to owe you for your expenses."

"But . . ."

"I think that we can discuss arrangements for the summer when we are closer to that point," Severus said, standing. "We will see if we can come to an agreement for those months. You did say that you could move your computer back to the O'Donalds' for the summer."

Gareth nodded. "Yes, I can do that. Thanks, Snape."

Severus shrugged. "Mutual benefit. And as you say, we are friends." Severus swallowed, and Gareth could see there was something else that he wished to say, but wasn't

comfortable mentioning.

"Yes, we are, and I'm glad of it." Gareth grinned. "You add some zest to life, Snape, whatever else I might say about you. Thanks."

Severus nodded, still seeming on the verge of saying something.

"Did you want to show me the rest of the house now?"

Severus nodded. "Thanks, Gareth," he mumbled as he led him toward the kitchen.

"What for? You're the one doing me the favour, as I see it."

Severus's shoulders twitched. "I have had few people in my life whom I could call friends," he said softly. "I am trying to appreciate that. Even if I am still a moody bastard."

Gareth laughed and clapped Severus on the shoulder. "Not just moody, Snape, *zesty*. You add zest!"

NEXT

Chapter Seventy-Four: Glimpse the Snape Family Past

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Gareth sees the house, and more.

Rated T.

Characters: Gareth McGonagall, Severus Snape

Author's Note: As I've rearranged material and moved things around, I have changed the chapter names and numbers going forward. The chapter after 74 is "A Wizard Not to be Crossed," and 76 is "Present Danger." I hope you're enjoying Part Seven of *A Long Vernal Season* and continue to enjoy seeing where Severus's journey leads him. Thank you for your reviews!

Chapter Seventy-Four: Glimpse the Snape Family Past

Chapter 75 of 118

Saturday, 27 March 1999. Gareth gets a look into the past when Severus shows him through the house at Spinner's End.



Chapter Seventy-Four: Glimpse the Snape Family Past

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Severus first brought Gareth into the dining room, the table of which was stacked with books, with more books stacked on the floor along one wall.

Gareth looked with interest at the pile closest to him. Muggle history, the first world war. The next stack over held biographies, both Muggle and wizarding. He stepped around a few neatly stacked piles of Maximilian Powers novels. It looked as though Snape had all of them. Gareth smirked.

"I intend to get more bookshelves," Severus said. "In the meantime, just move whatever you need to in order to work on the place. If you wish to use the dining room, you can move the books up to my bedroom. Try to keep them in order, however."

Severus led Gareth into the large but minimal kitchen. After pointing out the few appliances, he crossed the room to a door at the back of the kitchen. He opened it and pulled on a string overhead, seeming slightly surprised when the light bulb lit. It was a low watt bulb, though, and the area beyond, shadowy. A dank draft met Gareth's face.

"The basement hasn't much in it," Severus said. "I rarely go down there unless I have to do something to the furnace. But we can take a look today."

The two went down some narrow, creaking wooden stairs, the damp rising up to meet them. Severus drew his wand and cast a Lumos.

"Not much here, as you can see." Severus turned and took a few steps. He reached out and took hold of a doorknob, one that seemed much older than the house itself. The handle turned easily, but the door stuck slightly, warped by the damp, and it opened with a crack. Severus reached around the doorjamb, and Gareth blinked as a bare red bulb lit. The red bulb went out with a slight click, and Severus fumbled in the near-dark. Now another low-watt white bulb came on.

"My father's room," Severus said simply.

Gareth took a step forward. A scent of sharp chemicals met his nostrils, faint, but distinct.

"Caught the rat down here once." Severus's voice was hard. "I chased him out quick enough, then set a trap for him if he tried it again. It's off now, though. I disabled all the rat traps on the rooms this summer, including the ones up on the first floor, so you don't need to worry about that. He would have had his paws in everything if I hadn't set

traps."

Gareth stepped past Severus into the small room. Curled paper hung from a line strung from the ceiling. He reached up and touched one. Catching a glimpse of the other side of the white paper, he was intrigued and stepped around. He smoothed out one curled corner and looked at the black-and-white photograph. A very young boy, stringy and pale, but with a bright smile on his face, proudly held up an unidentifiable object. A little bumpy plate, perhaps an ashtray.

"That's you," Gareth said with a slightly awed breath. He looked at another of the papers. A photograph of Severus, perhaps four years old, stretched out prone across the top of the couch...the sofa that was still upstairs in the living room, but looking new...holding a small balsa wood aeroplane in one hand. Gareth could almost hear the burring hum the boy was making through his lips. The next photo was of Severus a few years later, looking more serious, standing at the kitchen table beside a seated young woman who Gareth presumed was Severus's mother. The two were looking at a large book together, the woman pointing out something to Severus.

Gareth looked around him. The room was small, long and narrow. Along one wall, there was a single long shelf with shallow rectangular pans and an apparatus fitted with different lenses. On the opposite wall were shelves containing jars of chemicals, or what remained of them, and several closed boxes, covered with dust. He looked back up at the pictures on the line.

"Photographs," Gareth said. "Of you."

"My father's hobby," Severus said shortly.

"Amazing . . ." Gareth reached out and touched the enlarger. "He developed film himself?"

Severus nodded. "Took photographs, then developed the film. I used to watch him, standing on that stool there. The timing was everything, he said, and I would watch as the pictures appeared. He would explain . . . he made decisions about how long to immerse the photographic paper in each chemical. It was an art . . . like potions. But it was many years ago. I don't remember . . ."

"He was good. Very good." Gareth looked again at the photograph of the woman and child, uncurling it more to get a better look. It was simple, but the composition was perfect, and the photographer had caught each of his subjects at a moment when they had almost identical expressions of intent interest. "He loved you. Both of you."

Severus made a movement, and Gareth immediately regretted his statement. "Sorry, Snape. Just popped out."

"Mmph."

"These boxes, they have more pictures in them?" Gareth asked.

"I believe so. And negatives. I have not looked in . . . in many years. Not since before my mother died," Severus replied.

"It's a treasure trove," Gareth said, reaching out a tentative finger to touch a picture of a river, taken just as ducks rose up off the water, dark shadows against a deliberately foggy background, the silhouette of a young boy just off to one side, crouched down watching them.

"Hardly. You can clear it all out. Just put it in the bin," Severus said, turning rapidly and stepping through the door.

"I can't do that," Gareth said. "You shouldn't just throw it all away."

"It's the past," Severus said. "No holding on to it." He switched off the light.

Gareth hurried to follow him. "You should go through it all first."

"If it concerns you that much, then just leave it all there. Another few decades of dust won't matter." Before Gareth could protest further, Severus led him over to a large furnace. "Furnace. Needs some upkeep, which I do irregularly, but it seems to function well. It probably could use servicing, however. I leave the thermostat set only high enough to keep the pipes from freezing when I am not here, so it has not been taxed particularly hard. If you only rely on warming charms when you are here, it might not need anything done to it. Over here is the fuse box. If your equipment overloads something, you will need to replace a fuse. There's a box of them here. I presume they are still functional."

After showing him a few other things in the basement, Severus brought Gareth back upstairs. "You've seen just about everything there is to see on the ground floor. There's a cupboard under the stairs, and there's this." Severus opened another door off the kitchen, revealing a small, dark, windowless empty room with bare floor and walls. "It was supposed to be a loo, but one was never put in. The plumbing's roughed in, though."

Gareth nodded. "And that's your back garden?" he asked, looking through the window of the back door.

"Obviously."

It was entirely overgrown with weeds and stringy saplings.

"I can have one of the elves clear that out for you, maybe plant some grass and a few flowers."

"If you like. But I don't care, so do it for yourself if you want."

They were about to leave the kitchen when a large Tawny Owl swooped down and banged on the window. Gareth started toward the window, but Severus stopped him.

"Can't open it. Charmed shut," he said curtly, going to the backdoor and unlocking it to let the bird in. "You can remove the charm, if you like. It's a simple one, not a ward."

Gareth nodded. The owl glided over to him, screeched, then landed on the kitchen table.

"For me, I guess," Gareth said, taking the letter from the bird. "Sorry we don't have anything for you."

The owl let out another screech and flew through the door. Severus closed and relocked it as Gareth opened his letter.

Gareth felt his heart sink and some of his enthusiasm for that morning's project drain out of him as he read. Nothing like the gentle let-down, he thought, to make you feel a fool.

"Bad news?" Severus asked.

Gareth shrugged. "No, not really. Just from Rolanda. She's busy this week . . . and then she says that after her holiday on the North Sea, she is going to go for some new treatment. No time for us to get together."

"Perhaps once her treatment has been completed," Severus began.

"She's going to America for it. Seeing some Medicus there who specialises in whatever it is. Staying with her cousin in San Francisco. Several months, she says." She was "grateful" for his company the last few weeks. Lovely.

"I see . . ."

"Ah, go ahead and read it," Gareth said, flipping the parchment onto the table and sitting down in one of the metal kitchen chairs. "Tell me if I'm only imagining that she doesn't want to see me again."

"It's your letter . . ." Severus picked it up and scanned it. "It does seem as though she is uninterested in making any time to see you before she leaves. But it is polite."

Gareth laughed. "Thanks, Snape. Nice effort to cheer me up."

"Sorry, McGonagall."

"Hmm, it was no great romance. I probably didn't ever really have a chance to make it one, either," Gareth said. "I have to say, though, that this is not the sort of news I wanted today."

"I wouldn't think it would be welcome at any time."

"I suppose not, but it didn't start out to be a spectacular day. That's one reason I took exception to your attitude this morning when we got here."

"I explained that..."

"Yes, I know, and by comparison with your troubles, mine are insignificant," Gareth replied, standing. "I have nothing to complain about."

"So what started your day off poorly?" Severus asked as they left the kitchen and headed upstairs.

"Nothing, really. Except that Hermione keeps trying to take short-cuts in her work, which would be fine if she were only doing it in the exercises I set her. Then she could learn from them and see for herself that the ones she's taking are unwise, but we're working on some commissions right now, and I can't afford the luxury of taking the time for her to redo her work. Or for me to redo it, either."

Severus frowned. "That doesn't sound like Hermione."

"She's trying to do too much, I think, and she's been over at Weasley's just about every evening this week, except for the two nights when she has class. She's also still doing her Animagus exercises, and she had a late date with Tarrant last night. So that's part of it. She also just doesn't have the experience to know which short-cuts work and will still give you the same outcome, or close enough to work with, and which ones are faulty. Sometimes, she's too clever for her own good. She needs to slow down and be a little less clever sometimes."

Severus smirked. "I learned that when I was about her age."

"That's right...boil cure potion ad nauseum!" Gareth said with a laugh.

"Exactly."

"Perhaps I could try something similar with her . . . I will think about it. Part of the problem is that as a Gryffindor, she has a tendency to want to just dive right into the middle of something, and it's sometimes better to approach a problem from the edges, examine it carefully from various perspectives, before setting down to work."

"And Ravenclaws never do that? Just dive right in?" Severus asked, opening a door at the end of the hall.

"True, true, some do...I guess it's just a hazard for people who are used to being able to grasp things quickly and conquer problems with just a little effort."

"This was my mother's bedroom," Severus said. "I thought that if you like, you might wish to use it. As a bedroom. If you decide to stay overnight or have a guest."

"You told me you've kept it shut up and that you don't use it."

"I do not." He switched on the bedside lamp then crossed over to the window and raised the blind. It jerked from his hand and sprang to the top. Severus shrugged and looked around himself. "Clear it out. Box up whatever you find. Her clothes and shoes are still in the wardrobe. You can throw them out. I doubt anyone would want them. Not more than twenty years on. Anything else, just put in the attic. I'll take care of it someday. Perhaps this summer. You can use the furniture, unless you'd prefer to bring in your own."

"Thanks, Snape. I'll label everything I box up."

"Mm." Severus led the way back out into the hall and opened another door. "I thought you could use this room for your computer. It was my mother's witch's room, where she kept all her things. Her small corner of the wizarding world. Dad and I never went in there...it was her space. After she died, I removed the books, most of them, but didn't do anything else with it. I think she kept some personal papers, diaries and such, in here, but I didn't find them. If you do . . . perhaps burning them without reading them would be best. She may have destroyed them before she . . . before she died, though."

"If I find anything of that nature, I'll give it to you and you can make that decision," Gareth replied. "I wouldn't feel comfortable burning someone else's private papers."

"Just box it up with everything else, then, and label it. I'll get to it someday," Severus said. He looked around him. "It's rather a mess. Other than removing the books, as I say, I never did anything with the room. It's where they found her."

"Who did? You never told me how it happened. I'd be interested to know. But only if you want to tell me," Gareth said.

"She took something. They never told me what it was, and at the time, I was too . . . surprised to be curious. I'd never thought she'd do something like that." He picked up a framed photograph from the desk, an ordinary black-and-white Muggle photo, likely taken by his father. His mother was holding him in her arms. He was probably only a few weeks old. He put it back, placing it face-down on the desk. "Her cousin Giles Black found her. My grandfather had had some idea that the two might marry after my father left us, but once Grandfather died, that idea did, too. But Giles still came around for dinner a couple times a month. If he hadn't . . . I don't know when she would have been found. Possibly not until I returned home for Easter. Though perhaps I wouldn't have come for Easter, if I hadn't heard from her, and just stayed at school . . . Anyway, she'd not been dead a day when he did find her. She must have planned it that way."

"I am sorry, Severus," Gareth said softly.

Severus shrugged. "We were not a happy family." He quirked a smile at Gareth. "So you see, I am simply carrying on a family tradition."

"Don't say that, Severus, don't." He reached out and placed his hand on the other wizard's arm. "You can be happy. You can."

"Possibly." Severus shrugged. "I'll show you where the box room is and how to get into the attic, then I think we're done here. Tell me, McGonagall," he said as he closed the door behind them, "what else started your day off badly? I'd think it would take more than a minor apprentice problem to disturb your inveterate cheerfulness."

"Don't say it like that, Snape, like it's a character flaw to be cheerful. Besides, I'm not always cheerful, and I'm hardly a Pollyanna."

"You are avoiding the subject," Severus said astutely. "It must have been particularly unpleasant."

"Not terribly. It's not like I have some vigilante group out to get me. I can't complain."

Severus opened the door between the one to his mother's bedroom and her witch's room. "The box room." He stepped in over a stack of old *Daily Prophets* and pulled a

string, lighting a bare bulb. "This should all go in the tip, or be burned," Severus said, nudging an old narrow mattress with one toe. He wrinkled his nose.

"It certainly needs airing out," Gareth agreed, not stepping into the windowless room.

Severus pointed to the ceiling. "That trap door opens and some steps fold out. The attic is up there. Only half of it has a floor, though, so take care where you step."

"Right."

"So we're done up here," Severus said, turning off the light and closing the door.

"Not quite, mate. I brought you a present. Not exactly a house-warming present, but I thought you might like to take the first step in the renovation of your home."

Severus furrowed his brow and watched as Gareth pulled something from his satchel. Gareth handed it to him with a grin.

"A light bulb?" Severus asked.

"Aye, for your hallway light. You said the light bulb had been burned out for a decade, so I thought it might be a good move toward the future if you replaced it today. Symbolic, sort of."

Severus snorted a laugh, but walked over to the overhead light and looked up at it.

"Have to take the globe off first," Gareth said.

"I can see that," Severus replied.

"And we should probably clean it before we replace it," Gareth added helpfully.

"Really, Gareth, I think this is a one-wizard job," Severus said as he raised his wand to remove the globe from the fixture.

Gareth laughed, and when he continued to laugh longer and harder than Severus thought warranted by the circumstances, he turned to him as he caught the heavy glass globe in one hand. "What is so bloody funny?"

"How... how..." Gareth leaned against the wall and tried to catch his breath. "How many wizards... hahaha! How many wizards does it take to change a light bulb?" He dissolved into laughter again, holding his sides.

"It is not that funny, McGonagall," Severus said, though he couldn't keep himself from smiling. He'd forgotten the existence of Muggle light bulb jokes. He was unsure why light bulb jokes were funny, but perhaps it was just incongruity of the simplicity of the task with the complexity of the joke combined with the absurdity of the method employed by the subjects of the joke. As Gareth regained control of himself, Severus finished replacing the light bulb, flicking his wand to clean years of grime from the glass before he screwed it back over the bulb.

"There. Push the switch now, McGonagall."

"You should do the honours," Gareth replied. "It's your house."

"It's your symbolic start to the renovation," Severus grumbled, but he pressed the switch and the overhead light came on for the first time in fifteen years. Gareth clapped. Severus rolled his eyes and pushed the switch again.

NEXT

Chapter Seventy-Five: A Wizard Not to be Crossed

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Gareth and Severus finish their discussion of the house at Spinner's End. Gareth evades Severus's questions, but tells him some interesting stories.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall, with "guest appearances" by Quin MacAirt and Malcolm McGonagall

Chapter Seventy-Five: A Wizard Not to be Crossed

Chapter 76 of 118

Saturday, 27 March 1999. Gareth successfully evades Severus's questions about the reason for his bad morning and his mother's mood, but Severus nonetheless hears some interesting stories.



Chapter Seventy-Five: A Wizard Not to be Crossed

Saturday, 27 March 1999

"You never said what else happened this morning," Severus said as they started down the stairs.

"Oh, just . . . family, you know." Gareth shrugged. He wanted to avoid Severus guessing that Gertrude was not an enthusiastic supporter of his decision to rent Spinner's End, let alone what it appeared she presumed their relationship to be. "Mum is having a difficult time, and that is making her tense, so she's a bit hard to deal with at the moment."

"I see."

"Probably not," Gareth said. "Remember when you met Alroy, Quin, and me on Monday evening? We'd all just come from the Gamp place. The estate. We had to get out of there. Even Quin was having trouble dealing with the witches."

"How so?" Severus asked, leading the way into the kitchen.

"You know that Rosemary is expecting, right? The baby is due in a couple of weeks. Mum's been spending most of her time there, helping out, but she also is just enjoying being at the estate again. She loves the old place."

"So her presence has become unwelcome? Or she has decided she wants the house back?"

"No, no." Gareth pulled out a chair and sat down. "Even if she did want to move back there permanently, the house is more than big enough to accommodate them all with room to spare."

"Tea? I only have tea bags, and no milk. There might be sugar somewhere."

"Tea is fine. Just plain, thanks."

"So what is it?"

"Melina hadn't been able to spend a lot of time with Rosemary, since Brennan had pneumonia several weeks ago and has been recovering from that."

"How is he?"

"He's doing a lot better now. Anyway, Melina's begun spending more time at the estate the last week or so..."

"And she and your mother disagree in all matters of housekeeping and child-rearing?" Severus guessed, putting two mugs of water on the table and dropping a tea bag in each. He waved his wand to heat the water.

"No, they haven't had any opportunity to argue about that. Melina wants Mum to eliminate one of the wards on the Gamp estate."

"Eliminate a ward?" Severus asked.

"The Gamp wards are quite old, most of them. My dad added to them, mostly creature wards to keep out pests, Cornish pixies and so on, but the old ones are of the sort you don't see often any longer, and many of them can't be replicated these days. Even if you could find someone with the know-how, they're illegal now."

"Illegal?"

Gareth nodded, glad that he'd piqued Severus's interest. "There is at least one blood ward, for example, and they have wards that extend all the way around the property, and a couple that even extend beyond the property's legal boundaries. When the Ministry began regulating these kinds of things, the old wards were allowed to remain, 'grandfathered in,' Mum says."

"So what does Melina want changed, and why?"

"They have extremely powerful Muggle-repelling wards. Even the ones at Hogwarts aren't this strong, primarily because they never had to be. Of course, Melina argues that the ones around the Gamp estate don't need to be so strong, either. But in any case, Hogwarts and Hogsmeade are much more remote, and for the very few Muggle hill-walkers who might venture anywhere near them, the ones that frighten them off or bewilder them have proved more than sufficient. The ones at the Gamp estate don't merely frighten or confuse the Muggles, or conceal the estate, they actually repel them. To the point where it is impossible to bring a Muggle onto the grounds, even by Portkey or Floo. Once several years ago, Melina tried driving her car there, thinking that nonmagical means would be fine, and Brennan became so physically ill, she was frightened it might kill him. Could scarcely breathe, his heart went into an arrhythmia; basically, crossing over the perimeter ward almost gave him a heart attack. And Brennan can usually go anywhere in the wizarding world without a problem. They're extraordinarily strong wards."

"I see, and now his daughter's about to give birth to his first grandchild on this well-guarded estate."

"Correct. But once any of these wards is removed, they can't be replaced. Not legally, and probably not practically, either. I don't think it's the legality that bothers Mum so much...the new wards on our house in Hogsmeade cross the line of legality, certainly...but the fact that the wards are all so well-integrated that if that one is removed, the others might weaken, too. The entire place would have to be re-warded, and with wards that are of modern wizarding design."

"But surely they could be replicated sufficiently in purpose if not in form...and without causing Muggles injury."

"Probably. I think it's the whole family tradition idea," Gareth said. "In most ways, my mother really doesn't care about bloodlines or whatever, and she doesn't have any problem with the Muggle world, Muggle-borns, and so on. But she does care about family and history. There are some ancient ruins on the Gamp estate that have been well-protected for centuries by these wards, for example, and generations of our family have walked those grounds . . ." He shrugged.

"So she believes that a part of that heritage would be destroyed if the wards were dismantled."

Gareth nodded. "I think that if there were some stronger reason for the wards to come down, Mum would do it, but Brennan would be unlikely to visit often even if there were no wards, and let's face it, he's not getting any younger. He's eighty-two. In quite good shape for a Muggle of his age, but unlikely to be visiting the estate for more than a few more years. So centuries-old wards would be destroyed for the sake of one man being able to visit occasionally for only a few years. So she and Melina were going at it hammer and tongs on Monday evening, and even though Quin was able to calm them both, separately, and Rosemary told them that all the arguing in her presence wasn't good for the baby, we still just wanted to get out of there. So we left the witches to do whatever witches do when they need to make up, and we went for a drink."

"And this morning?" Severus asked.

"This morning, she was just touchy about things, in a mood, that's all," Gareth said evasively. He drained his mug. "How are things with you and Poppy, then? It sounds as though things might be progressing."

Severus shook his head. "I don't know. I've seen her a few times this week, and she did me a great favour earlier in the week, but it seems that every time we see each other, there's something that occupies our attention and I don't have an opportunity to interact with her as I would wish. To court her, for lack of a better term."

"What about this weekend?"

"I have a meeting, then there's the duel, and tomorrow she's visiting her sister for part of the day."

"There's tonight. Or tomorrow when she gets back to the school," Gareth said.

"I thought about inviting her out for dinner on Sunday, but she is nervous about me being away from the castle. I am trying to be considerate of that. I don't know whether she would make an exception for a date. And I don't know when she'll be getting back from her sister's, either."

"You mentioned something about that before...she's aware of the danger to you?"

"I don't think there's any definitive danger yet, but yes, she's aware. And distressed by it. I must admit to finding it encouraging that she is concerned for my welfare, but I believe she would be concerned about any of her friends who might be in danger. It doesn't necessarily signify anything. At least she hasn't had another date with MacAirt. I got back with the Florentines on Sunday to learn I'd missed my chance and she'd already made a date with him for that evening."

"I'm sorry about that, but I still think you should try to invite her for a date this weekend. Tomorrow evening...you wouldn't even have to go out. You could stay in, invite her to your suite, have some mood lighting, flowers, maybe some music. It could be quite romantic if you put some thought into it."

"Yes, and then have a Slytherin prefect interrupt the evening to tell us that Suzie Sefton has eaten herself sick on some new wizarding sweet. That would be very romantic," Severus grumbled.

"I know you're on edge, Severus, but try not to come up with worst-case-scenarios for every occasion!"

"Hmph."

Gareth picked up their mugs and brought them over to the sink, rinsed them, then cast a cleaning charm on them.

"By the way, McGonagall, you didn't warn me about MacAirt," Severus said.

"What do you mean?" Gareth said, sitting back down across from him.

"I mean that ability of his. Poppy told me, but only after the man had run into me and put his hand on me. I was not feeling well-disposed toward him, and despite my attempt at civility, he sensed it."

"Oh, that. I'd almost forgotten about that. You must have been screaming at him, metaphorically speaking, for him to have picked it up from a casual touch."

"Nonetheless, as a friend, you should have warned me. I could have taken precautions."

"Sorry about that. Aine's the one who's really sensitive, though. And more specific in what she senses. But I think she's also better at controlling it, and she can tune everyone out most of the time. She said that if she couldn't, she'd either go mad or become a hermit," Gareth said with a laugh.

"I will bear that in mind if I should meet her," Severus said.

"She's also more of a Seer in the traditional sense than Quin is, though he's no slouch there, if given the proper tools, I understand. Better than most of us, anyway."

"And Alroy? Was I teaching beside an empathic teacher for a year and no one told me? Poppy said he wasn't very talented that way."

"He isn't. Managed an Outstanding on his Divination NEWT, but hasn't got much of the Gift compared to the rest of his family. Now if you want to talk to a creature, on the other hand, he's your man for that."

"Talk to a creature?"

"He's best with magical creatures, particularly magical mammals and birds, but if it's a vertebrate, he can usually establish some kind of rapport with the creature."

"So that's what Poppy meant when she said the pig had given her permission to be charmed...she meant it literally."

"She told you that story? Dad used to tell me that one, too. The sow that flew over the house . . ." He sighed. "So what did Quin do after he touched you and felt your antipathy or whatever it was?"

"Nothing. Just looked a bit befuddled. It was odd, but I didn't think much of it."

"Mm, good. Haven't got on his bad side, then. Better to keep it that way," Gareth said.

Severus snorted with derision. "From what I hear about the wizard, he hasn't got a bad side. Mr Perfection himself."

"Oh, he does. If he gets angry with you about something, hope it will be short and hot. You don't want him carrying a smouldering grudge against you."

"He carries grudges?"

"Not grudges, perhaps. And he doesn't carry them; he acts on them. But you want the short fuse, not the long one. He forgives and forgets quite quickly and easily if you just get him hot under the collar about something, but if he takes a real exception to something you do"...Gareth shook his head and gave a low whistle..."watch your back, man, that's all I can say."

"He doesn't seem the type. Poppy seems to think he's the model of every wizarding virtue. So does Minerva, for that matter."

"And in a sense, they're right. He's a generous, charming, warm and caring wizard, very open-handed and open-minded. And truly empathetic. But if someone does something that in his mind is unforgivable, he won't wait for someone else to act. He might bide his time, but he takes care of his own problems with people...and he includes injury to his kith and kin as being unforgivable...and he does it in his own way. So don't get on his wrong side, Snape."

"You must exaggerate," Severus replied.

"Not by much," Gareth said. "Remember that I said I thought Francis Flint's name sounded familiar when you first mentioned him to me after Halloween?"

Severus nodded.

"Well, I imagine your own House ghost could tell a tale or two about Cormac Quinlivan MacAirt, and it might be different from what you'd hear from Poppy and Aunt Minerva. He's a wizard not to be crossed."

"So tell me. What do you know?"

"Flint worked for the Ministry, and he was making trouble for Quin, or trying to. Didn't like him having a foot in the Muggle world, making a lot of money from his Muggle businesses and injecting it into his wizarding ones. He was sure that Quin was using some kind of magical means to make an illicit profit in the Muggle world, breaking Ministry laws, contravening the various secrecy acts in place at the time...this was back in the early or mid-fifties, I think...and he kept hounding Quin. Quin says that he warned him to back off, gave him several warnings, but Flint had a kind of fixation on Quin. They knew each other vaguely through social circles, you see, and Flint and his crowd looked down on Quin...Irish, no proper schooling, Muggles and Muggle-borns mixed in his ancestry. He was practically a mudblood, as far as they were concerned. So Flint didn't back off. And I do believe that Quin would have given him more than one warning, too. He'd see that as only fair and proper, not to mention easier on

himself."

"But Flint didn't back off and something happened to him?"

"Nothing overt, nothing . . . exactly *happened* to him, you understand. He was the author of his own destruction, one could say. Quin began to set up little traps for him...not literal traps, but he'd have people in his Muggle and wizarding businesses say certain things that made Flint more suspicious. Nothing explicit, either, just suspicious."

"So the Muggles knew he was a wizard? That must have broken a half dozen laws right there," Severus pointed out.

"No. First, Quin always hired a lot of Squibs to work for him. If they weren't good at working in the Muggle world when he first hired them, didn't know a telephone from a gramophone, he'd see they were taught. As Squibs, they could move smoothly between worlds. It was good for them and good for him. Also, he would instruct any Muggle foremen or managers what to say if people came around asking odd questions." Gareth shrugged. "Anyway, Quin is meticulous about keeping the Muggle and wizarding businesses separate, at least to his own standards, and he is careful about staying current with all the wizarding legal changes so that he doesn't step over the line there, either. To make a long story short, Francis Flint spent a year's worth of his office's budget all in the pursuit of Quin MacAirt's nonexistent illicit activities, and he managed it in just a couple months. Flint was hauled out on the carpet, demoted, sent to push papers in the Department of Mysteries, and his star never rose again. He'd thought that catching Quin would be the step-stone to his success, and instead, it was his downfall."

"I'd say he deserved it," Severus said with a smirk. "And clever to have the man hang himself, too. MacAirt could be a Slytherin, himself."

"True . . . then there were the Flatirons. Did you ever know the Flatirons?" Gareth asked.

"I taught a Jenny Flatiron the first couple years I was at Hogwarts."

"That's the family. She was Sorted into Ravenclaw with me, actually. Her great-grandfather was Kyle Flatiron, owned the Three Broomsticks. It had been in the family for a few generations and the Flatirons were a long-established presence in Hogsmeade. Kyle retired from the business and let his grandson, Harold, take over the day-to-day running of the pub. Kyle had taken out a large loan from Quin, essentially making Quin a partner in the business. The conditions were very favourable toward the Flatirons, much better than any terms they could get from Gringotts, but Quin saw it as part of his responsibility toward the wizarding world to help maintain some of the traditional institutions. He does like a well-pulled pint, too," Gareth added with a grin.

"So what happened, the grandson stopped paying on the loan and Quin had his legs broken?"

Gareth laughed. "No, nothing so mild, mundane, or easily mended. And it wasn't that he defaulted on the loan, but he was . . . circumventing some of the conditions of it. You see, there was a nominal base payment every month, and then Quin was to receive a percentage of the profits up to a certain capped amount. He was like a part-owner, a silent partner. Well, business either was doing much worse under Harold than it had under his grandfather, or Harold was cheating him. Quin thought that perhaps it was just a matter of poor management, some kind of inadvertent wastage, whatever. Or maybe bad bookkeeping, but nothing intentional. Gave him the benefit of the doubt. He offered to help Harold, to get one of his managers from another business in to take a look and see if he could help him to maximise his profits, but as you may have already guessed, Harold refused."

"So he was cooking the books deliberately," Severus said.

"It was even worse than that, Snape. You know my dad was in business for himself, did magical pest control, curse-breaking, that sort of thing. He also did a little detective business when it came his way. Usually it was just finding some person who didn't really want to be found, but he'd manage to find him. He sometimes did other kinds of work, too, and Quin asked him to do some investigating. Dad used to love to tell this story," Gareth said with a sigh. "He could do it with a lot more drama and panache than I can manage."

"I can do without the panache. Just tell me what he found out."

"Not only was Flatiron keeping two sets of books, but he was buying goods that had 'fallen off the back of the lorry,' if you know what I mean. Buying stolen food, beer, whatever, at rock bottom prices. Sometimes, he'd claim that the goods he'd received from reputable suppliers were bad...spoiled fruit or whatever...and he'd not pay the bill. He'd send them back bad fruit that one of his cronies had got for him, say it was the bad merchandise. So he was cheating everyone, and encouraging employees of businesses he dealt with to lie and steal for him. He was a bad apple."

"So what happened to him? Quin turned him in to the MLE and he got sent to Azkaban over a bad debt and some rotten fruit?" Severus asked.

Gareth shook his head. "Quin's his own law when it comes to things like this. One night, he comes into the pub. Dad's with him, and he has old Kyle Flatiron there, too."

"I can see where this is going," Severus said.

Gareth shrugged one shoulder and continued. "It's not a busy night, and Quin takes a corner table with my dad and Mr Flatiron. Harold comes over to personally take their order, quite friendly and even obsequious. But Quin pulls out his golden cup, says he brought his own with him that night. He sets his old cup in the centre of the table, looks straight at Harold, and asks him if he's been cheating him. Harold, of course, says, 'Oh, no, Mr MacAirt, business has been bad, as I told you.' Quin asks if he's been cheating his suppliers. Harold's eyes grow bigger, and he denies this effusively, acting as though he's quite offended. Finally, Quin asks if he's an honest dealer, and Harold claims loudly that he is. With that third pronouncement, Quin's cup, which had been slowly developing cracks as Harold continued with his lies, lets out an explosive crack and splits into three pieces."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Old Kyle Flatiron is devastated by this evidence of his grandson's perfidy and buries his face in his hands, unable to look at either Quin or his grandson. Quin stands up slowly...and you know that Quin is a tall man, and he can make himself appear even larger. He stands up, a towering shadow over the miserable Harold Flatiron...that's the way my dad used to describe it...he stands up, a towering shadow over the miserable Harold Flatiron, and he says, very softly, 'I don't like it when someone breaks me cup. You're going to make it whole now. Tell me, Harold, are you a greedy son of a crup?'" Harold has gone pale. He isn't sure what's happening, but he knows that somehow he's been caught. 'Are you a greedy son of a crup, Harold?' Quin repeats when Harold just shakes his head. Kyle Flatiron looks up at his grandson, and tells him to tell the truth. Harold says he just wants to make a good profit for himself. Quin raises an eyebrow and tells him that's not a whole-making truth. Is he a greedy son of a crup? Harold nods. By now, the few patrons in the pub are all paying attention to this little show of Quin's, and Quin says, 'Say it out loud, Harold. Say it.' And so Harold whispers that he's a greedy son of a crup. 'Are you a liar, a thief, and a cheat?' Quin asks. Again, Kyle tells his grandson to tell the truth. Harold just says, yes, he is, he is a liar, thief, and cheat. The pieces of the cup begin to slide toward each other. 'And tell me, Harold, do you bring disgrace upon your grandfather and your family name?' Harold can't look at his grandfather or anyone else, and he nods. Quin says he has to make his cup whole, since he broke it, and he has to say it out loud. 'I am a disgrace,' Harold finally says, and the pieces of Quin's cup fly together, and the cup is now a seamless whole again."

"So that's it?" Severus asked.

"Oh, no, that's not the end of it. At that point, Quin invoked a clause in the magical contract that had been signed by Kyle Flatiron and assigned to Harold when he took over the pub. Flatiron lost full possession of the Broomsticks, and Quin told him he had twenty-four hours to vacate the premises, and he'd be watching what was taken away, so he'd better end his thievin' days that very minute."

"So he lost his home and his family business in one fell swoop?" Severus said.

"That's about the size of it, not that it ended with that, of course. Quin does not do things by halves."

"There's more?"

"Flatiron moves out with his pregnant wife...I think to her family, but I don't know where, exactly...and he starts looking for work. Well, whether it's the dishonest look in his eye, a jinx that Quin placed on him, or simply word-of-mouth about what happened in the pub that night, Harold can't find a job, not even in the smallest wizarding community in the meanest little pub. He searches for weeks. Every restaurant, pub, and shop slams its door in his face."

"So Quin fixed it so that he couldn't get work? Ever? That is extreme," Severus said.

"Ah, but he did get work in the end. He finally heard from someone that the Bugbear's Bannock was hiring, so he put on his best robes and his most confident smile, and he Flooed to Portree. I don't know if you're familiar with the Bugbear's Bannock, but it makes the Leaky Cauldron look like Delancie's, and I hear that back in those days, it was even worse. So Flatiron goes there, the wizard at the bar asks him a few questions, then he says he's hired. They need someone to sweep up, clean the tables, wash dishes, that sort of thing. Well, at this point, Flatiron's desperate, and he swallows his pride and accepts the job. The barman hands him an apron and a broom and tells him he can start immediately. There's Flatiron, in his best robes, sweeping up the previous night's dirt, and in walks Quin and my dad. 'So, this is me latest employee, eh, Bert,' Quin says to the barman...his name was Bert..."

"I gathered that," Severus said impatiently.

"'So this is me latest employee,' he says, looking Flatiron up and down. 'Watch him, Bert, I hear he has a tendency to break cups.' Quin winks at Flatiron and leaves the pub, and Flatiron ends up toiling away in that godforsaken dump for years."

"Quin owned the Bugbear's Bannock?" Severus asked.

"Bought it a few days before that. Just for Flatiron."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "That is extreme."

"I told you, Quin doesn't do things by halves."

"That must have been hard on old Flatiron, though, the grandfather. The family business taken over like that."

Gareth shook his head. "Quin has a very strict sense of fairness. And it was never about the money, you know. He continued to pay old Flatiron the bit of pension he'd allotted for himself when he gave his grandson the pub, so Flatiron wasn't financially hurt by it, and then Quin brought in a new young manager, Madam Rosmerta, and gave her the opportunity to earn back all of the debt that he was owed, and when that was paid off, she could buy the pub from him for one Galleon, one Sickle, and one Knut."

Severus shook his head, confused.

"Rosmerta only uses the one name, but she's a Flatiron. Her father was old Kyle Flatiron's cousin or nephew or something. Quin made sure that the pub stayed in the family. The MacAirts also made sure that Jenny Flatiron's school fees were paid without them having either to request Indigent Scholars' funds or go into debt. Alroy paid them himself; it was what Quin had planned to do before he was cursed. He didn't want the daughter's education to suffer because of her father's mistakes. Quin really is a decent chap. As long as you don't get him angry."

"What happened to Flatiron? Harold, I mean," Severus asked.

"He's still at the Bannock. He's the manager now. Took him about twenty-five years to work his way up to that position, though. It's one of the wizarding businesses that Alroy held onto when he took over after his father was cursed. Carrying on a family tradition," Gareth said with a smirk.

Severus shook his head. "I would not want to get on the man's bad side, you're right about that." He pulled out his pocket watch and snapped it open. "What are you doing for the rest of the day, McGonagall?"

"I thought that after I saw you back to Hogwarts, I'd return here and get a start on deciding which colours for which rooms, what furniture we might want to replace, that sort of thing. Maybe begin getting the bedroom ready to be boxed up. Probably grab a bite to eat somewhere."

"There's that duel at the castle this afternoon. You could stay for lunch and then watch the duel after, if you want. Our own duel will be in just a few weeks. You might want to see one before that."

"That's a great idea, Snape. I can come back here afterwards, then."

Severus nodded. "I still need to set your password, however." He drew a key from his pocket and handed it to Gareth. "This is for the front door. If you want a key to the backdoor, you'll need to see to that yourself. You can just copy the one that's here."

Gareth nodded, accepting the key.

"Do you have any preference for a password?" Severus asked.

"How about . . . Pythagoras?"

Severus nodded. "Pythagoras. Eventually, we can set the wards so that you can Apparate in and out freely, but that's more of a job than setting a password for you." He smirked. "My wards are not precisely Ministry-approved, either. For now, remember that you can Disapparate from inside the house, but not Apparate in, and you can't Disapparate with anyone in Side-Along, or you'll Splinch. And you can't Apparate into or Disapparate from my bedroom, but as I do not expect you to be spending any time in there, it should not pose a problem."

"That sounds fine, Snape. Thanks. Do you want me to show you what I've decided to do before I do it?"

"No. Just get on with it. Nothing extreme. And no pink."

Gareth laughed.

Author's Note: If you want to refresh your memory, or see some Quin and Francis Flint interaction for the first time, you might have fun reading Part Eight *Resolving a Misunderstanding*. That's chapters 39-54, from "A Startling Revelation" through "Breakfast al Fresco." Minerva is on her own, visiting the Gamp estate for a house party celebrating Orion and Walburga Black's pending marriage (they're Sirius's parents in canon), and she meets Quin at the end of [chapter 39](#). It's a fun section, with a lot of Gertrude and Quin, and has a lot of Gertrude's rather horrid pureblood relatives in it, too. You also get to see Alroy as a boy in a few of the chapters. The primary chapter with Quin and Francis in it is [chapter 44, "Horrid Relatives."](#)

There's a lot more Quin in other chapters of RaM, as well. If you're interested in *Resolving a Misunderstanding* universe fics and their characters, there's a lot of information available on my website at <http://mmadfan.wordpress.com>, including a detailed table of contents that includes the OCs in the character listings for each chapter. Just click on the "Compendium: Who, When, Where" tab at the top of the page for general information, and the "Tables of Contents" tab for the RaM ToC.

Chapter Seventy-Six: Present Danger

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Severus tries to find time to spend with Poppy, but other issues intervene. He learns more about the attacks and the possible danger to himself.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Poppy Pomfrey, Alastor Moody, Gareth McGonagall, others

Chapter Seventy-Six: Present Danger

Chapter 77 of 118

Severus meets with Moody and Minerva to discuss the attacks. ***End of Part Seven***



Chapter Seventy-Six: Present Danger

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Severus approached the Hospital Wing, his latest offering in hand. In a large bag, actually, but he didn't want to be seen walking through the castle carrying two dozen red carnations. Before they returned to Hogwarts, Gareth had Apparated with him into Edinburgh and brought him to a Muggle florist's shop that was just a few hundred yards from the Aphrodite's Apple entrance to McTavish Street. After consulting a card there that listed the various symbolic meanings of some of the flowers the shop sold, Severus had decided on red carnations. Gareth said that carnations were rather pedestrian flowers, but Severus thought these particular ones were fragrant. Just in case Poppy might also think that carnations were pedestrian, however, he picked up one of the cards and slipped it in amongst the flowers. He put another in his pocket for future reference. He did not show the card to Gareth, however, who was conveniently chatting up the shop assistant as Severus made his selection.

Severus could feel a blush creep into his cheeks when he thought about the meaning of the flowers. If Poppy thought it was foolish and not romantic, he could claim that the shop put the card into the bouquet without his knowledge. Minerva had told him to be romantic, he reminded himself. And giving flowers to a witch was more unambiguously romantic than bringing her biscuits or glazed almonds.

After arriving back at Hogwarts...Gareth Apparating to the gates ahead of him to keep watch...he'd arranged with the house-elves to set another place at the staff table for lunch, then he left Gareth with Flitwick. Gareth's former Head of House was going to have him help draw the markings out on the Quidditch pitch, and Gareth was pleased to spend time with his favourite Hogwarts teacher.

Severus pushed open the door to the infirmary and was happy to see that there were no students in any of the beds and Poppy was alone in her office, the door open. She looked up as the infirmary door closed behind him, and her face lit up when she saw him.

"Severus! I didn't expect you back until lunchtime...although I see that it's almost that, now," Poppy said, standing and coming around her desk to greet him. "I was rather engrossed in an article about the resurgence of slithering slimepox and lost track of time."

Severus's eyebrow rose. "Yes, fascinating, I'm sure."

Poppy laughed. "Did you have a good morning with Gareth?"

"Indeed. We accomplished what we wished to, I believe. After we were through, we had time for a short excursion into Muggle Edinburgh. I wished to bring you these." Severus reached into the bag and pulled out the bouquet of red carnations. "I placed a slight cushioning charm on them, so I hope they have not been crushed. Since they were a Muggle purchase, we may find it wise to cast a stay-fresh charm on them, as well."

"They're beautiful, Severus, thank you." Poppy held them to her face. "The aroma is lovely. Genuine red carnations, too, not those you find that have been charmed...or dyed...red. I will put them in water immediately."

"I hoped they were . . . appropriate."

"They will cheer up my office today, and then I will bring them to my suite this evening and enjoy them there."

Severus nodded, watching Poppy as she fetched a large vase, filled it with water, and arranged the carnations in it. He swallowed nervously as she found the card amidst the blossoms.

"What's this...ah, the language of flowers. Never can remember most of the meanings, and they seem to vary a lot." Her eyes scanned the list. "Red carnations . . . oh, that is sweet." She turned and looked up at Severus. "Thank you, Severus."

Severus blushed. "I saw the card . . . it assisted me in making an expeditious selection so that we could return to the castle in a timely manner."

Poppy chuckled. "Well, expediency can be a positive motivator, I suppose." She separated a few of the stems so that the flowers were arrayed more symmetrically.

"It also seemed . . . apt," Severus said, not wanting her to think that the choice had been a random one, or insincere.

Poppy looked up at him. "I hope your heart isn't aching too much," she said softly, touching his chest lightly with her fingertips.

"Can you feel it?" Severus whispered. "Can you, Poppy?"

The two stepped apart quickly as the door to the infirmary opened. Severus could have hexed both visitors, despite his general affection for each of them.

"I thought you two were marking the turf for the duel," Severus said.

"We were going to," Gareth replied, "but we ran into Aunt Minerva on the way up the drive. She was with Alastor Moody and an Auror. When she saw me, she surmised you had already returned. She wants to see you."

"Now?" Severus asked. Their meeting had been scheduled for immediately after lunch, just before the duel. "Lunch is in twenty minutes."

"She said she wanted a quick word with you before lunch," Filius said, "so we agreed to let you know. I thought young Gareth here might like to see the duelling hall at my old academy. There will be time to mark the pitch after lunch. The duel isn't until three o'clock, after all. Plenty of time!"

The two wizards soon departed for the Room of Requirement so that Filius could show Gareth a replica of the hall where he got his start in duelling, and Severus turned to Poppy with a sigh.

"I'm sorry. I had hoped we would have at least a few undisturbed moments to ourselves."

"That's all right. I'm sure that it must be important, or Minerva would have waited until your meeting this afternoon to speak with you." Poppy placed her palm on his chest. "And if you still have that ache later, perhaps you might wish to see me about it."

One corner of Severus's mouth turned up. "I believe my condition will not have abated so quickly."

"Go see Minerva now. We can talk later." Poppy reached up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek lightly.

"*Cailleach*." Severus waited as the gargoyle slid aside, somewhat more slowly than usual, he thought. The gargoyle yawned, then stuck his tongue out at Severus before winking at him.

Severus shook his head. If a stone gargoyle could have an attitude, that one certainly did.

When he reached Minerva's office, she was alone, except for Fawkes, who was sleeping in a basket on a small table near her desk.

"I'm glad they found you," Minerva said.

"You could have sent me a Patronus."

"I dislike doing that when I'm with others, you know that, even though Alastor was in the Order. There were also students about. It wasn't so urgent to require that measure."

"If it wasn't urgent, I wish you had waited until after lunch." Severus took a seat in the chair opposite her desk. "I was trying to have a word with Poppy when those two Ravensclaws burst in on us."

"I wanted to speak with you before we meet with Alastor and Auror Plummer," Minerva said.

"Plummer was the one with Moody, then? Gareth said there was someone with him. I'd thought we were only meeting with Moody today."

"We were. There have been developments. And some . . . additional questions. I just wanted to forewarn you that Auror Plummer will also be there. She has questions that Moody does not. Also...and it will be in the evening papers...Pettigrew's mother and grandmother were attacked this morning. The two women were just leaving for their weekly Saturday breakfast out. His grandmother, Clematis Vincent, was Stunned and then Petrified, and it appears it gave her a heart attack. She died." Minerva sighed. "I was in school with Clematis, five years behind her. She was Clematis Longbottom then, of course. We were distant cousins and in the same House, but I didn't know her well. Still, it is a shock. Her daughter fared better. She's in St. Mungo's now, but they'll probably release her later today. I presume they will give her some protection."

"But those two women . . ." Severus shook his head. "They were never Death Eaters. Mrs Pettigrew hadn't a clue about her son until very recently. I'm certain of it. And Pettigrew, as far as I know, never visited his mother or other family after the Dark Lord's return."

"The two were regular visitors to the secure ward at St. Mungo's, however. Every Saturday afternoon. They had certain things they did together every Saturday, and that included visiting Pettigrew for an hour every Saturday afternoon."

"Fulfilling some notion of maternal obligation, I'm sure," Severus said. "Two of them this time. But they must have been easy targets. I doubt they would have been at all prepared for an attack."

"Clematis was never a particularly bright or talented witch. At any rate, there will likely be some questions about where you were this morning. Don't take offence at it, Severus. They will also ask about my nephew, I believe. I understand this, although I think they are foolishly wasting time."

"They think that we might have done this?"

"I doubt they seriously believe that you would collude like that, or that either of you separately has any motive for it. And I have no doubt that both of you have alibis for most, if not all, of the other attacks. They are simply trying to eliminate the more unlikely scenarios first, Shakira said. Right now, she's interviewing Albus about former members of the Order of the Phoenix."

"I hope he tells her where to put her questions!"

"I doubt that he will say very much at all. If he believed that it was a member of the Order, I think he'd be the first one to look into it."

"She should talk to Weasley...not as a suspect, as a source."

"She already has, but before this attack. For both purposes, I believe. They're grasping at straws now, Severus. When you have two innocent and relatively helpless witches attacked on a sunny Saturday morning outside their own home, you have a grave problem on your hands. And Clematis and Virginia were well enough known that word will spread even if the *Prophet* never publishes their names. The British wizarding world is still recovering from the war, and people are optimistic about the future. That won't continue if we have people afraid to leave their own homes lest some innocent or accidental association links them with some Death Eater."

"I can't think of a single member of the Order who would attack those two," Severus said. "Even if the two women had somehow been complicit with Pettigrew in his activities, no one I know in the Order would ambush a couple of defenceless witches. Not unless the person had gone completely around the bend. Do you know anyone who has become completely unhinged like that?"

Minerva shook her head. "Badly affected, depressed, anxious, even hypervigilant, but not . . . not obsessed with revenge or some perverted sense of justice. I think they would be better off looking closer to home, looking at Ministry employees or relatives of Ministry employees who were killed in those final battles."

Severus smirked. "Can you see them questioning Madam Scrimgeour?"

Minerva gave a short chuckle. "No, she'd not be a likely candidate. But they must have sufficient clues that they could narrow the suspects more and not flail about questioning you." She looked up at her grandfather clock. "We are going to be late for lunch. As we have several guests today, that would be unfortunate."

"Gareth told you he was staying?" Severus asked as they stood.

"Yes, and in addition to Moody and Plummer, Remus Lupin will be joining us."

"Remus? I thought that Tonks..."

"I had been going to have him seated beside you, but since Gareth is here, you'll likely wish him in that place. As for Tonks, she will be arriving a bit later, before the duel begins, but Lupin needed to refresh his memory of classic old-style duelling rules, so he came up this morning and spent some time with Filius. Last I saw him, he was headed out to see Hagrid. He'd probably be pleased to sit beside him."

"But Tonks is duelling Moody."

"Was. Remus is now."

"Is Tonks pregnant again?"

"No, but the baby's been fussy and Tonks is exhausted. I think Remus is, too, for that matter. But he persuaded her to wait and do a demonstration duel next year, instead. From the way it sounds, I think she was too tired to protest."

Severus was pleased to see that Moody was seated nowhere near him at the staff table, but not as pleased to see that he was between Poppy and Sprout. He really didn't want the man anywhere near Poppy, though for no identifiable reason. Remus was sitting beside Hagrid, and Plummer was between Olivia Ouellette and Caspar Lloyd. Gareth and Flitwick hadn't yet arrived.

"My nephew's late again," Minerva said with a shake of her head. "I thought he'd outgrown that, but put him and Filius together, and who knows when their stomachs will remind them that it's dinner time. I'll give them five more minutes, then send Blampa to find them."

"I believe they are in the Room of Requirement," Severus said as they took their seats, leaving the one between them free for Gareth. Their meal immediately appeared before them.

"Worse and worse, as my brother Malcolm used to say."

"Gareth has always seemed quite prompt to me," Severus said.

"Mm, but he can become engrossed in something and time just passes by without him noticing it at all." She twitched a smile. "I was a bit like that when I was young, myself. My mother used to say that a rampaging dragon wouldn't disturb me unless it set my book on fire."

Minerva was on the verge of calling Blampa when the two errant wizards entered the Hall. Gareth was gesticulating broadly, and Filius was nodding and smiling.

"It appears they enjoyed themselves, anyway," Minerva said, smiling.

Filius took his usual seat, and Gareth proceeded down the table and took his place between Severus and his aunt, stopping and greeting Vector on his way.

After Gareth had exchanged a few words with Albus and started in on his lunch, Minerva leaned over and whispered something to him. His eyebrows rose. She whispered something more, and he put down his fork, finished chewing, swallowed, then said, softly but audibly, "The bloody hell they will."

"Shhh!" Minerva shook her head.

Gareth let out a huff and picked his fork back up. "An alibi . . ." he muttered.

Severus continued to eat, but he glanced down the table toward where Auror Plummer sat. She was engrossed in conversation with Ouellette and Lloyd about something, and it didn't appear that she had overheard Gareth's comments.

"Good thing we met early today," Gareth said softly, turning toward Severus. "Though how they could conceive it might be you baffles me."

"I doubt that is the case," Severus answered in a low voice. "The Headmistress explained it. I shall wait and reserve judgment."

"Hmph."

"You enjoyed your visit with Filius?" Severus asked.

"Yes, although now it looks as though I won't be able to help him out on the pitch, and I'd wanted to do that."

"It shouldn't take long. Or she could go out to you," Severus said.

"Yeah." Gareth reached for the pitcher of water. "Sorry about interrupting earlier, mate. But looks like it was good we found you."

"Just so," Severus replied. Now that he had time to get used to the notion of Auror Plummer asking him about the attacks, he wasn't offended any longer...particularly knowing that they had questioned Arthur Weasley, too. Minerva had been wise to tell him in advance and give him time to adjust to the idea. It would have been foolish for the Ministry not to eventually question him about the attacks...he might have some information that might be useful to them. He knew the players on both sides of the war, after all. If they hadn't questioned him soon, it would have been negligent of them. In fact, he wondered why they hadn't talked to him before then.

An hour later, Severus wondered why Plummer had bothered to question him at all.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Professor," she said, standing.

"I believe you will find Mr McGonagall down on the Quidditch pitch with Professor Flitwick," Severus said, standing as she did.

She nodded. "I have no doubt that he will corroborate your statement about when you departed the castle this morning, and as prior to that a few hundred people saw you at breakfast, it seemed unlikely in the extreme that you could have had anything directly to do with this morning's incident," she said. "In fact, the MLE simply needed to be able to eliminate you as a potential suspect. No one believed you to be even complicit in these attacks, but we needed to cross your name off the list for reasons better than our own instincts in the matter."

Severus inclined his head in acknowledgement. "If I may be of further use to you, you know where I am."

Auror Plummer smiled. "We do. Thank you again."

Severus waved his wand and opened the door to the Headmistress's office for her. Beyond ascertaining his whereabouts for a few of the attacks that had occurred outside the school day and asking him whether he had any ideas about any people on either side of the war who might be engaged in these attacks, she had questioned him very little. He had been with Poppy on two of the occasions, and on one, he'd left Poppy and immediately gone to see Gareth, who was waiting for him in the rain at Spinner's End. Plummer said that she would confirm the alibis with the matron and McGonagall. Severus had no doubt that Poppy would remember the occasions, as they had been having their fling at the time. Fortunately, neither of those attacks had been in the dead of night, in which case he would simply have said that he was asleep in his quarters and not brought Poppy's name into it.

Severus thought he might have been of more use if Plummer had told him more about the nature of the various attacks and who the victims were, but other than confirming what had been in the papers...that the attacks had all taken place when the victims were engaging in some routine arrival or departure from home, with the exception of Lucius, who was confined to his house, and that until that morning, all of the victims had been alone...she had told him almost nothing. She had asked him whether there had been anyone who had taken a sudden unusual interest in his activities as a Death Eater or questioned him about his former fellow compatriots in Riddle's army. His mind flew to Helena Benetti. But her interest was far from unusual, and she hadn't pressed him for any details; she had, in fact, declined to hear even what he had been willing to tell her.

As for Plummer's question about who else knew where Lucius lived, it was difficult for him to avoid mentioning Gareth McGonagall's name. If she learned that Gareth had accompanied him to Leeds when he visited Malfoy that August and he didn't mention it, it would seem more suspicious than admitting it. He had, after all, mentioned to both Lucius and Narcissa that he was meeting McGonagall after seeing them, and they were unlikely to have forgotten that. And McGonagall didn't know precisely where Malfoy lived, only that it was somewhere on Cooper Street within walking distance of Furculum Way.

After the door had closed, Moody, who had sat silently in one corner of Minerva's office during Plummer's interview, got up and crossed the room.

"Good job, Snape. I'll fetch the Headmistress."

Severus shook his head. "No need. I'll do it." He remembered Poppy smiling down into the carnations he'd given her, and with a quick stab of his wand, his panther sprang forth, fully corporeal, and disappeared through the ceiling. "Much more efficient, don't you agree?" Severus asked mildly before sitting back down, pleased to see that his casually cast nonverbal Patronus had clearly impressed the older wizard.

"Much," Moody said with a nod. "I thought you cast a deer. 'Swhat Dumbledore told me."

"That was my former Patronus. The Headmistress knew of the change, but she no doubt recognised that we would be unlikely to send or receive such messages from each other."

Moody nodded and sat back down, this time in a chair beside the fireplace beside the one that the Auror had vacated.

"Good job you have easily verified alibis," Moody said.

"She only asked for a few."

"Mm. The others were at times when you have duties that would make it difficult if not impossible to have actually been present for them."

Severus nodded. Meals in the Great Hall with hundreds of people certainly provided a solid alibi, as did his teaching schedule.

"Hope Pomfrey remembers," Moody said. "Were they scheduled meetings? Would she have a record of 'em?"

"I doubt she has a record of them." He certainly hoped she would remember them. He could not forget them. "She will remember, though."

"Good woman."

"Indeed."

"How did it go?" Minerva asked as she came down the stairs.

"Fine. I believe Plummer is on her way to confirm my alibis. Since they are with Madam Pomfrey and your nephew, I do not believe it will take her long."

"She'll be staying for the duel, in any event," Minerva replied. "I asked that she remain...an additional wand if there should be any problems with security."

"Who do you have on the gates?" Moody asked.

"Shunpike and Rath, as on the previous occasions. The Mannings and Cahill have volunteered to remain out on the grounds during the duel itself, and we have hired a few additional off-duty Aurors to patrol with them. It doesn't seem likely that these people...or this person...would attack anyone at an event like this, though. It would be a complete departure from any of the previous attacks."

"Unless he could lure his victim away from the crowd somehow, I think you're right," Moody said.

"You believe it is just one person, then?" Severus asked.

"Aye. At most, the person may have an accomplice who does not participate in the attacks, though I think even that is unlikely."

"Perhaps I should patrol..." Severus began.

"Severus, that is an idea that, were you to hear it from another in your position, you would agree was completely daft," Minerva said lightly.

"That would be a way to get him off by himself. Not a good idea," Moody added. "Look, Snape, Plummer couldn't be as frank with you as she might have liked." He pulled a sheaf of parchments from his capacious over-robe pocket, selected one of them, and handed it to Snape. "This is a full list of known victims, with two that I've added. The first two on the list. Think they were overlooked, but the MLE is treating them as separate incidents. I only had sketchy details on the one from this morning, but that one's there, too. See what you make of it, if anything jumps out at you."

Severus took the parchment and glanced over it quickly, then began to read it more carefully as Minerva stood and looked over his shoulder.

Friday, 21 August 1998 Lester Michaels aged 99 Wizard's Croft, Bournemouth

Found dead on his doorstep by a neighbour as she left for work approx. 08.00. Presumed dead of natural causes; was being treated at St. Mungo's for cardiac problems. Employed by Owl Post Office. Wife's nephew, Flavius Carlisle, convicted Death Eater, died in Azkaban, May 1983. No other known Death Eater connections. No indications of any criminal involvement.

Saturday, 3 October 1998 Virgil Rosier aged 139 St. Ives

Found by granddaughter collapsed in his back garden, his crup puppy beside him. Presumed died of natural causes whilst walking the puppy early that morning. Convicted Death Eater. Served time in Azkaban from June 1979 May 1998. Released from Ministry security facility on compassionate grounds, 12 July 1998, for reasons of age and infirmity.

Friday, 18 December 1998 Anthony Stearns aged 32 London

Attacked from behind, 18.15, as he returned home from work and was unlocking his front door. Stunned then hit with a concussive curse, possibly Massueilius, to the back. Suffered broken ribs, soft tissue injury; recovered fully. Works for Ministry Weights & Measures office. No known Death Eater activities. No known criminal ties. Great-great-nephew of Godfrey Stearns, known Death Eater now serving a life sentence in medium security facility.

Friday, 22 January 1999 Nancy Harrison aged 41 London

Attacked in the dark, 22.15, as she took her dog out before bed. Dog's peculiar behaviour put her on her guard, and she ducked a StunneMassuelius struck her in right hip. Victim recalls loud Disapparition just before she passed out. Daughter of Jonathan Carver, who abandoned his family in 1966, presumably at the time he became a Death Eater. Carver was killed in the Battle of Hogwarts.

Wednesday, 3 March 1999 Oscar Tally aged 58 Blackpool

Received threatening letter previous day. Attacked at 08.45 on his way back from the newsstand where he went every Wednesday and Saturday to purchase tobacco and sweets. Stunned from behind. Slightly bruised from fall. No further injury. Cleared of any knowing participation in Death Eater activities following inquiry, July August 1998; fined for receiving stolen goods and dealing in dangerously Charmed antiquities without a license. Under Ministry supervision, but only requiring one visit to his Ministry watcher per month.

Tuesday, 9 March 1999 Clarence Whittaker aged 53 London

Received "odd" letter three days prior. Attacked 19.30 whilst feeding the stray cats in the alley behind his back garden, as he did every evening at the same time. Struck with Massuelius and Petrified by unknown assailant who fled when neighbours reacted to Whittaker's scream of pain and stepped out onto a balcony. Loud Disapparition described by witnesses, but they were unable to see the relevant area of the alley because of the depth of the gardens combined with the height of the garden walls. Whittaker works for Eylops Owl Emporium taking care of the owls and sweeping up. No known personal Death Eater involvement. Blameless reputation in Diagon Alley. Sister's husband, Wilbur Pleasance, serving life sentence in facility for his participation in the Battle of Hogwarts and murder of three Hogwarts defenders. Whittaker had only very rare contact with his sister and her husband.

Friday, 12 March 1999 Sheldon Huffy aged 49 Dartmoor

Attacked as he arrived home from late shift at work, 23.20. Petrified and struck by concussive spell, likely Massuelius. Still recovering from attack, with poss. permanent disability. Received letter via Owl Post accusing him of complicity in escape of Azkaban prisoners, 10 March. Unblemished record with Ministry, first with MLE, then with Azkaban Security Services. Now supervisory guard at Ministry's Dartmoor security facility. Married to Carmella Rosier. CR's two half-brothers were Death Eaters; Jack, the oldest, died in Azkaban, February 1987; brother Maurice escaped an Auror raid in October 1980, remained a fugitive. MR arrested following Battle of Hogwarts; committed suicide, 2 June 1998.

Friday, 19 March 1999 Lucius Malfoy aged 44 Leeds

Convicted Death Eater. Previous Azkaban sentence commuted on compassionate grounds to victim compensation and supervised house arrest. Attacked with combination of spells and potion-based firebombs on the house itself, 16:40. Potion fumes potentially deadly.

Saturday, 27 March 1999 Clematis Vincent aged 79; Virginia Pettigrew aged 61 London

Mother and grandmother of Peter Pettigrew. Attacked 07.45 as they were leaving for breakfast before their Saturday activities. CV died after being Stunned and Petrified. VP Stunned, hit with Massuelius, glancing blow to left shoulder.

Severus looked up from the list. "The person might be a shift worker. Perhaps someone whose shift changes every few weeks or months. The switch from Fridays and Saturdays to Tuesday and Wednesday then back might indicate different days off. The timing of the attacks could be for the sake of the perpetrator's schedule as much as for the victims' schedules."

Moody nodded. "Makes sense. And the victims? Notice anything about them? Know any of 'em besides Malfoy?"

Severus shook his head thoughtfully. "Nancy Harrison . . . wasn't she Nancy Fletcher?" At Minerva's confirmation, Severus said, "I knew her slightly in school. I had no idea that she was Carver's daughter."

"Her mother had remarried," Minerva said. "Fletcher was her step-father's name."

"I met Virgil Rosier a few times, but didn't know him well. I taught Anthony Stearns, but never saw him after he left Hogwarts...other than a few times in Diagon Alley, but never to speak to. He certainly wasn't a Death Eater. I presumed that he was related to old Stearns, but I didn't know how. Whoever this is who's doing it knows more about their relationships than I do. Of the other relatives . . . Maurice Rosier was an active Death Eater, rejoined after Riddle's return. I knew him from the early days, as well. I didn't know he had a sister, though, let alone one with a husband who worked at Azkaban. I would not have thought that would be a recommended position for Huffy."

"Huffy deserved it on his own merits," Moody said gruffly. "He scarcely knew his wife's brothers. They were almost twenty years older than she; weren't even at their wedding. Can't avoid hiring anyone who has unsavoury relatives; that'd eliminate about half of the Ministry if they did that."

Severus glanced at the list again. "The person obviously acquaints himself with the habits of his targets, learns when they come and go, attacks them when they are alone...did these people live alone, too?"

"Some of them. Huffy's married, obviously. Michaels and Rosier lived alone. Rosier had a care worker, but she only came and checked on him midday, got him his lunch, made sure that he'd taken his potions, and then she'd leave. The granddaughter was a somewhat irregular visitor, two, three times a week, usually in the morning. Stearns has a girlfriend who sometimes spends the night, but she doesn't live with him. Harrison lives with her husband, but he travels a lot for his work and wasn't home at the time. Tally'd had a roommate, but he'd moved out a few weeks before. Whittaker's mother had lived with him until about six months ago, when she got married and moved in with her new husband. Whitaker's a bit, um . . ."

"He's slow, but very sweet," Minerva interrupted. "Never hurt a soul in his life. Only managed one OWL, in Care of Magical Creatures. He probably would have achieved an Outstanding in it if he could read and write better. But he's very talented with creatures of all sorts, and he's got a heart of gold. Anyone who knew him would know him to be an innocent, a true innocent."

"Probably someone who doesn't know him personally, then," Moody said.

"Probably," Severus agreed. "I'd say that whoever is doing this, he's also probably frustrated that there are so few good targets. Even so, it's strange . . ."

"What is?" Minerva asked, thinking that the entire business seemed strange.

"That he'd start with targets who were so . . . attenuated, so distant from the actual Death Eaters . . . even Rosier. Virgil Rosier was a Death Eater, true, but he'd not been involved in any of the most recent activities or the Battle of Hogwarts, since he had spent the last couple decades in Azkaban. He was also pretty old...his death does fit the pattern, but it could be that he really did die of natural causes. And the other early attacks . . . they're hardly people I would choose if I were going on a hunt for escapees from justice. But he's become . . . better at finding targets. It's as though he had to . . . had to exact revenge, was driven to it, and he took the best targets he could find. He didn't wait to find specific people. He took those he could find, vented his desire for revenge on them, and continued to look for better targets. Escalating both the violence and the frequency of the attacks to try to satisfy his urge to exact his notion of justice, all while looking for new and better targets. And now we have Vincent and Pettigrew this morning. They could be seen as prime targets, much better than the earlier victims. Those two, and Malfoy and Huffy, as well. Whatever we may know about the innocence of the two witches, they are not only more closely related to a Death Eater than the previous relatives were, but they showed some loyalty toward Pettigrew,

visiting him weekly."

"But how could they know that?" Minerva asked.

"The two did the same things every Saturday, week in, week out," Moody replied, "including visiting Pettigrew. Snape's right...the targets were chosen and then watched."

"I would say that whoever it was, he likely started by watching the targets' homes. Perhaps after that, following them and determining their other habits." Severus shook his head. "Someone first had to have discovered the identities of these people...probably knew the Death Eaters they were connected to, and moved from there...then he tracked down where they lived and watched them coming and going long enough to be able to know when to attack them. Might have been only a few times, or it might have been over the course of weeks. I doubt the person has that much patience, though, unless they had a good target, better than the early ones, one worth being patient for. A target like Malfoy. Learning where Narcissa worked, then following her, discovering where they lived . . . it's strange though, the timing of that one."

"Why?" Moody asked. "Malfoy was always at home. Timing wouldn't matter."

"No, but that's precisely it . . . he attacked the house. He could have killed two Malfoys. If he found Lucius through Narcissa, which I agree is likely, then he also knew Narcissa's schedule. This attack took place before she would arrive home. Either the person *had* to attack at that time for some other reason...work or family obligations...or he deliberately attacked at a time when Narcissa would not be at home. When I visited Malfoy in August, Narcissa arrived home from work, and it was a little after five, I think. Why didn't he kill her, too? He only would have had to wait a half hour. He hasn't cared about whether he's killed women before, or how closely implicated his victims were in their relatives' activities. And his last victims, those two older witches...that certainly shows that he won't hesitate to attack witches directly. He'd also attacked Nancy Harrison as she walked her dog. That he wouldn't attack Narcissa indirectly is puzzling."

"Could be as you said, the timing is driven as much by the perpetrator's schedule as by the victims'."

"But if that were so . . . certainly there would be *some* time when he could attack the house when both Malfoys were at home. If he'd attacked in the middle of the night, they'd have been asleep and likely would have been killed."

"Perhaps it's someone who does know Narcissa," Minerva said. "Someone who wants Malfoy dead, for whatever reason, but has some personal reason for not wanting to kill her?"

"That's possible," Moody said. "Though the person hasn't shown any sentimentality before. Killing a simple-minded fellow as he's feeding stray cats hardly shows any sentimentality."

"On the other hand . . ." Minerva took the list from Severus. "Is it possible that these attacks don't have anything to do with revenge against Death Eaters at all?"

The two wizards looked puzzled.

"There have been the letters, though," Severus said, "and all of the victims do have ties to Death Eaters, even if we would not consider them guilty associations."

"It's probably a silly idea," Minerva said, "but . . . have either of you ever read Agatha Christie?"

"When I was young," Moody said. "Foolish books. Locked rooms, suicides that weren't suicides, that sort of thing."

"Mmm . . . but she did have some ingenious ideas, not that the quality of her work is important. It's just that I'm put to mind of one of her books, the *ABC Murders*, I think it was called. Something like that. The point of the plot was that the murderer wanted to hide the real target and actual motive for his murder by murdering several seemingly unrelated people for no rational motive. Maybe there's only one true target here, and we're looking at it the wrong way. Perhaps the other attacks were . . . not a cover-up, like in the book, but practice?"

Severus shook his head. "I would agree with you if it weren't for the attack on Malfoy, which was so different from the others..."

"Any chance that was done by some other person and isn't related to the other attacks at all?" Minerva asked.

"That's possible," Moody said, "but it is a possibility that I don't like to contemplate...that there are two different people, or groups of people, out targeting presumed Death Eaters."

"Well, it was a thought," Minerva said.

"Have to look at all the possibilities," Moody said with a nod.

"It is possible that until he attacked Malfoy, none of the other attacks were meant to be fatal. It could be that he might have no compunction about injuring Narcissa Malfoy, but he didn't want to kill anyone but Lucius," Severus said. "It could very well be that Malfoy's the only one who was the victim of a murderous attack, despite the other deaths...and the first two might not have been attacks at all. But if they were, their age and medical conditions made them more fragile. The younger victims weren't cursed with anything that is necessarily fatal, although *Massuius* can be if aimed properly. Either the person has lousy aim or he didn't care about killing them, he only wanted to injure them. Send a message, to them or to the Ministry."

Minerva nodded. "That makes sense to me."

Moody nodded. "We do think that the other fatalities were unintentional, although when you go about casting curses, it's hardly a surprise if someone dies. I have one more thing for you to look at, Snape. More for your . . . personal edification than anything else." He pulled another parchment from his sheaf and handed it to Severus. "Copied out from the relevant sections of the letters to the Ministry. This is from the first one, the one we received last week. We got another one on Wednesday."

"The Ministry protects them. You are implicated in the murders of all the children, all the husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, all the children. And there is one who is amongst the worst, and you have made him a hero. A hero with a heart of evil. He fooled everyone and is still fooling everyone. He chose well and was saved to live on in evil. Evil lives on amongst our children, and evil will draw them closer, this 'heroic' evil. Heroic evil will create more evil. Protect him and allow this and it will all happen again, all the murder and all the pain. Bring him to justice, make him pay for the murders of our children. Do not ignore this warning! He is a clear and present danger to us all, and he must be stopped before he strikes."

Severus nodded. Minerva's outstretched hand snatched the parchment from him before he could give it back to Moody.

"And the second one?" Severus asked.

Moody hesitated, watching as a look of alarm crossed Minerva's face. "It's more of the same, really."

Severus held out his hand, and Moody put the next parchment into it.

"Take care, or you will find another Dark Lord rising. Evil draws evil whilst appearing innocent."

"You have blessed a wicked man. You have excused him, you have lauded him, and you have created a place for him amongst our children. He will bring ruin to everyone, he will destroy what you believe he saved. He tried to destroy it before. He drew evil into the school, he brought death to our children, our brothers, our sisters, and he will bring it again. He has committed murder upon murder. He fooled everyone, he fooled Voldemort, he fooled Dumbledore, he fooled McGonagall, and he fools you all still."

He never abandoned evil. He murdered and murdered, never leaving his evil behind him. Do you forget the dead so soon? Do you condone evil and death? This man lives still on death, on the deaths of others, he is a Death Eater. He feeds upon it, and he grows in evil, a devil in your midst. He looks the devil himself in the face and laughs. It is the worst evil, the evil blessed as innocence, as saviour. You don't understand that he did not save you. He killed our children. He lives on their deaths and on his lies. He lied and even the greatest wizards and witches don't recognise his lies. You see him and don't see his evil, but it lurks there behind his black eyes, the black eyes of Death! Bring him to justice! He must pay. He will pay. You must make him pay. The Darkness must not rise again."

Severus let out a slow breath. "I do think that the letter-writer is referring to me," he said softly.

Minerva took the parchment from his lax fingers. She took in a sharp breath as she read.

"The children . . ." Minerva whispered.

"I know it must disturb you, Minerva," Alastor began.

"It does, but it's not that. He repeats it. He mentions other people, too, but he repeats that."

"Which would make sense, since it appears he's talking about me," Severus said. "I work here, with children. The final battle was here at Hogwarts. Children died. I . . . I let the...I let Riddle onto the grounds. He told you that himself. Anyone who was here that day would know that, or be able to surmise it from what he said. The Death Eaters present knew that I dropped the wards before I Apparated to him." Severus turned his head and gazed with unseeing eyes out at the bright spring blue sky and the wispy clouds scudding across the top of the mountain opposite the castle. "It is all true, all of it . . . this person is writing about me."

"About his distorted view of you," Moody said. "When I read this piece of melodramatic claptrap, I knew that it was no one in the Order, but the MLE is still questioning them all as suspects. We all know you, Snape. We know what happened. This is only one small strand of the truth, not the entire picture. But," he added as he took the parchment from Minerva, "you need to be careful. You need to watch your back. Be suspicious of everyone, especially anyone who doesn't know you, or doesn't know you well, who suddenly expresses interest in you and your activities...now or when you were a spy."

Severus nodded and sighed, returning his gaze to meet Moody's for a moment. "Of course. I am accustomed to being . . . cautious."

"You don't want to take this lightly," Minerva said. "He tried to kill Lucius and almost succeeded. Clematis Vincent is dead."

"I will be wary, but I doubt that he could firebomb Hogwarts castle. He wasn't even particularly effective with Malfoy's house. If it weren't for that Portkey around his ankle, Malfoy would have escaped with very little injury. And of the others, the only ones who died were already in fragile health, or were older. I am more than a match for this wizard."

"He might be getting better, though, Severus," Minerva said. "And you're right, he might not have cared about whether he killed the others. He might have been simply sending a warning, or punishing them in proportion to their perceived crimes. He obviously has you marked out as something special. The one who is responsible for children's deaths and who is now a threat to more children. Don't underestimate the danger to you, please, Severus."

"I don't believe I am. I don't live alone in a house or flat somewhere, commuting to and from work daily, doing the sorts of things these people do regularly. I will take care when I do leave the grounds, but as that is irregular and unscheduled, and few people know about any of these outings in advance"...Severus shrugged..."under the current circumstances, I think that I am a difficult target for a wizard such as this. When summer comes, then we shall see. It may be that the person is captured or killed before then, with some luck."

"He'll make mistakes, Minerva. He'll be caught," Moody added. "Snape's right. He's safe here. Safer than he'd be anywhere else. Strangers stand out here. If anyone came in looking for him, someone would notice him before he could get very far. As long as Snape doesn't begin leaving the grounds regularly on a predictable schedule and watches his back when he is out, he will be a very difficult target to reach."

Minerva nodded. "I know you're right, but I do hope you don't leave the grounds unless you must, Severus, or go anywhere you might become an easy target."

"I have already determined that, Headmistress, as you are aware. And it is hardly as though I get away very often as it is. You needn't worry that I will suddenly begin taking unnecessary risks or walking about Diagon Alley with a big sign on my back saying, 'Curse me, please, I have the eyes of the devil.'" He smirked.

Moody snorted a laugh, but Minerva furrowed her brow and shook her head. "Your sense of humour is improving, Severus, but not very much...besides, I believe he said you had the eyes of death, not the devil." She grinned wryly.

Severus snickered and Moody laughed out loud.

"Time for us to go," Minerva said briskly as her grandfather clock chimed the half hour. "The duel starts in thirty minutes, and it wouldn't do for one of the participants to be late."

"I will meet you in the stadium, Headmistress," Severus said, standing. "I have a stop to make first." Poppy was waiting, Poppy . . . Thoughts of incompetent assassins fled as he hastened his way to her.

~ **End of Part Seven** ~

. . . **to be continued** . . .

Author's Note: The card that Severus found at the florist's shop indicates that red carnations signify "my heart aches for you." Depending on what source you look at, the same flowers can have different meanings in the "language of flowers."

NEXT

PART EIGHT

Chapter Seventy-Seven: Paying Court

Severus finds courting a challenge.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Poppy Pomfrey, Nymphadora Tonks Lupin, Remus Lupin, and others.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: Paying Court

Chapter 78 of 118

Saturday, 27 March 1999. Severus's attempts to court Poppy are stymied by everyday life at Hogwarts, including the duel that afternoon between Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody. ***Beginning of Part Eight***



PART EIGHT

Chapter Seventy-Seven: Paying Court

Saturday, 27 March 1999

Severus was not pleased to enter the infirmary and discover that Poppy was not alone. That she was, in fact, with three other people, if one could call the small thing wrapped in a yellow blanket a person. It seemed to him as though now that he had determined to court Poppy, circumstances were conspiring to prevent him from seeing her alone for more than a few minutes at a time.

After exchanging greetings with the four, one of whom gazed at him in open-mouthed wonder...the baby, not the father...Severus said, "Lupin, you had better be getting down to the stadium. The Headmistress and Moody are on their way there already."

"Yes, I should," Remus replied. He bent and kissed his baby's forehead, then kissed his wife's cheek. "See you later, Dora."

"Be careful...and don't hurt each other too much!" Tonks said.

"I am sure that Madam Pomfrey is quite capable of fixing up whatever injury they may do each other," Severus said. "But don't you wish to go with him?"

Lupin was already out the door, and Tonks shook her head. "No, it will just make him nervous, he said."

"I thought we could sit together," Poppy said, one finger in the baby's firm grasp and a smile on her face. She cooed at the littlest Lupin.

Severus sighed inwardly. Witches and babies. "Very well."

"I have something for you, actually, Severus," Tonks said. "I thought I'd find you after the duel and give it to you, but since you're here now...would you like to hold him for a minute?"

To Severus's horror, Tonks held the child out to him. "Oh, no, that's all right; I'm sure that Madam Pomfrey..."

"Already had a few minutes snuggling with him," Poppy said, "and I have to double-check my bag and make sure I have what I need with me." She waved her wand and Summoned her black potions bag from her office and set it on the bed next to them. "Go on," she encouraged when Severus blinked at the baby and made no move to take it.

"You won't die from his drool," Tonks said, putting her son into Severus's unwilling arms. "Really, Severus, you'd think you'd never held a baby before!" She rolled her eyes.

"I would not wish to . . . drop him," Severus said, holding the baby stiffly and wondering about baby drool on his black robes. He glanced over at Poppy and saw that she was smiling warmly at him. He relaxed slightly and held the baby a bit closer. It really wasn't too bad, for a baby and a Lupin, he supposed. The boy reached up with one tiny moist hand and grabbed at his chin, then managed to latch onto a long lock of hair. Fortunately, he was content to hold onto it and gaze, amazed, up at the strange new face above him. Severus was surprised the child wasn't crying already.

Tonks was rummaging through a handbag, and Severus wondered whether she ever cleaned it out or whether she simply kept adding to it and casting new expansion charms on it. One day, the charms would give out, or the bag would, and years' worth of handkerchiefs, sweets wrappers, baby rattles, chewed quills, scraps of parchment, and who-knew-what-else would burst out of it, burying everyone and everything in its vicinity. Severus smirked at the thought.

"Your mummy is quite the packrat, Teddy," he said, looking seriously down into the boy's face. "Don't take after her that way." Severus eased the baby's fist from its tightening grip on his hair.

The baby just squealed happily, little bubbles forming at the corners of his smiling, toothless mouth, and grabbed Severus's finger instead.

"He likes you," Poppy said, stepping closer and reaching out to touch the baby's soft cheek.

"He is too young to know any better," Severus said. He scowled slightly, looking down into the baby's face. There was something very peculiar about this baby. He knew that baby's eyes often changed from blue to some other colour as they got older, but he'd never before seen a baby whose eyes shifted from blue to grey to green to brown and then back again. As Tonks still searched her capacious bag for whatever it was she had to give him, Severus leaned closer to Poppy and said softly, "Is there something . . . wrong with the child? Perhaps you should take a look at it."

"Because he likes you?" Poppy asked with a laugh.

Severus darted a glance at Tonks. "There appears to be something wrong with the child's eyes."

"They don't focus very well at that age," Poppy began, then she looked at the baby's eyes as they faded from blue to grey. "Oh, you mean that. That's nothing to be concerned about."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He looked down at the child's face again. The eyes were still grey.

"He noticed his eyes?" Tonks asked, finally pulling a small grey box from the bottom of her purse.

"They are grey now. I believe they were not grey earlier," Severus said.

"My eyes used to do that," Tonks said. "He may be a Metamorphmagus. They'll settle down. Mum said mine did that until I was about six months old, so they should find one colour and stick to it in a few months."

"Ah." At least the child hadn't inherited some strange affliction from his werewolf father.

"I found it," Tonks said, setting the small box down on the bed and scooping up everything she'd taken from her bag and stuffing it back in randomly.

Severus shook his head and handed the baby to Poppy, who seemed pleased to hold him. She appeared to be sniffing the top of the child's nearly-bald head now. Witches and babies, he thought. A baby could turn even a sensible witch like Poppy into a most peculiar creature. The baby's head had smelled rather pleasant, however . . .

"Here you go, Severus," Tonks said, handing him the box.

Severus hoped it wasn't a memento of her child. He doubted he could feign delight at being presented with a photo of a baby.

"From my aunt," Tonks said softly.

"Your aunt." Severus looked at her blankly for a moment. "Your Aunt Narcissa."

Tonks nodded. "She's come to stay with us for a while. I'm unsure what they're doing with Malfoy. He's fine now, but he's still in St. Mungo's until they reach some decision. They don't want anything else to happen to him." She looked over at Poppy, who had placed the baby on the bed and was cleaning and replacing its diaper with a few swishes of her wand. Tonks grinned. "You certainly know what you're doing there, Poppy! I thought you were only good with older kids."

"Oh, I used to take care of my niece and nephew when they were small, and now they're both having babies themselves, so I've become quite expert at changing nappies! And what a good boy you are!" she cooed. "Yes, such a very good boy!" She Summoned some powder from a cupboard across the room and carried on talking to the infant in what Severus thought was a very silly voice, indeed, but the boy laughed and kicked happily. Severus suppressed a smile.

"Maybe we should do this"...Tonks looked around..."in Poppy's office."

"Madam Pomfrey is apprised of the situation with your aunt and her husband," Severus said smoothly. "Indeed, she is the one whom Narcissa and Lucius may thank for finding the delivery man who rescued Lucius from the house."

"Really?" Tonks looked over Poppy. "Are you going to change careers, Poppy? Join the MLE, or just set up in business for yourself? Poppy Pomfrey, P.I. Extraordinaire?" Tonks and Poppy both laughed.

"She did an admirable job," Severus said seriously.

Tonks looked up at him, an amused expression on her face. "It must have been *quite* admirable for Professor Snape to think so. Positively outstanding, in fact."

"Hmph. She discovered not only the Muggle's name and occupation, but she tracked him down, met him using a clever ruse, and determined his current state of health. All in a matter of hours. I would say that was outstanding."

"Oh, it wasn't that difficult," Poppy said, using a super-nappy-pinning charm to fasten up the diaper again. She lifted the baby in her arms and cradled him to her. "Melina treated him, so she knew his name...Leroy Jameson, known as 'Jamie'...and she'd noticed he was wearing a brown UPS delivery uniform, so from there, it was quite simple, really. Found his address in the telephone directory, called ahead to make sure I had the correct Jameson, the one who worked for UPS, then I picked up a few supplies from Marks and Sparks and stopped around his place early that evening."

"Muggle supplies?" Tonks asked curiously.

"She posed as a Muggle products survey taker, complete with clipboard and survey. She offered him a month's worth of free breakfast cereal if he would do a blindfolded taste test for her."

Poppy grinned. "No one can resist something free, right?"

Tonks laughed. "I'd say not!"

"He invited me in, let me blindfold him, and whilst he was tasting the three different breakfast cereals I'd brought with me...in those little one-serving boxes they sell...I cast a few diagnostic spells on him. He had a little bit of residual chest congestion, but Melina had told me what to do to treat that using only spells, and it was easily taken care of. He'll be fine."

Tonks laughed again. "And did he get his breakfast cereal?"

"Of course! I used slightly . . . unconventional means of delivery, but when he went to his door the next morning, he found an entire case of his favourite cereal waiting on the step for him." Poppy grinned.

"And what was his favourite?" Tonks asked.

"This stuff with raisins, dates, and something called 'nutty clusters.' Half sugar, it was, but he liked it." Poppy shrugged. "He's healthy as an ox now that he's got that bit of congestion cleared up. It probably would have passed on its own. Even eating that sugary stuff, he's likely to live a long life for a Muggle. Good constitution."

"Well, Narcissa will be pleased to hear that he hasn't suffered any ill effects," Tonks said. "Could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard her worry about the man...a mere Muggle, after all. But she seemed sincerely grateful that the man had saved Lucius. He certainly must have undergone a change, himself. He was among the worst of the Muggle-baiters. To go from torturing Muggles to this . . ."

"He suffered a good deal under Riddle," Poppy reminded her. "And not a one of his former friends came to his succour. He also knows that his pure blood would not have saved his wife and son from the fate that he had visited upon so many Muggles. It was no road to Damascus that led him to change his attitudes, I am sure, but a slower, longer path, with a great deal of his own suffering along the way."

"Well, I can't imagine that he's become a Muggle-lover," Tonks said with a shake of her head, "but it seems he is genuinely appreciative of this particular man. And when you see this, you'll certainly believe that both he and Narcissa are very grateful to him." She gestured toward the box. "I recommend you get it appraised and sold. I'd worry that Jamie would be cheated, or that he wouldn't realize what he had, and it'd be shoved in the back of a drawer somewhere."

Severus opened the box and let out an appreciative breath. It was a lovely emerald, one of the largest he'd ever seen. He took it out and held it up to the light. He knew almost nothing about gemstones, but this was beautiful and, to his eye, at least, flawless. The gold setting was beautiful, too, decorative but without drawing any attention away from the emerald and its beauty.

"That's beautiful," Poppy said. "May I?"

Severus handed it to her.

"It is really gorgeous. It must be worth a fortune," Poppy said.

"You might do better to sell it to Krebbin's in Diagon Alley and then convert the Galleons to pounds, despite the loss in the exchange. Its provenance might increase its value, since it's a Black family heirloom," Tonks said, "or actually, a Rosier heirloom, since it was my great-grandmother's, given her on her wedding day by her new mother-in-law."

"We can have it appraised by both Krebbin's and a Muggle jeweller, and then decide," Severus said, wondering how all these people kept their relations straight when they all intermarried as they did. Even Tonks, a half-blood, seemed to know her pureblood ancestry. He knew that his grandmother had been a Black, and Giles had been her brother's son, but beyond that, he hadn't a clue about his pureblood relatives, and didn't particularly care to. "There is no hurry, I presume."

Tonks shook her head. "I think they'd rather he have it sooner than later, but I don't think there's a rush."

"There is now, however," Poppy said, looking at the small watch pinned to her chest. "We will be late if we don't leave this very minute!"

Entering the Quidditch stadium, Severus looked around at the large crowd. The beautiful clear spring day had brought out even more visitors than the previous duels had attracted. Many in the crowd were recent students, but there were a good number from Hogsmeade and elsewhere, as well. It seemed that just about everyone from the Order was there, and he saw Arthur Weasley sitting between Hermione and his daughter. Tellingly, Harry was sitting on the other side of Hermione, and not beside Ginny. Bill and Fleur were sitting with them, as well, Fleur looking radiantly beautiful even at that distance, her baby in a sling held close to her breast. The twins weren't there, and neither was Ron, but Severus seemed to remember that the Cannons were on tour doing exhibition games on the Continent. The crowd was noisy and energized, as much as they might be for a big Quidditch match.

Moody and Lupin were very different wizards, and Severus hoped for a good show. He had heard that there was heavy betting on this particular duel, and some high feelings, as well. It would be interesting to see who won. In an out-and-out, no-hexes-barred magical fight, Severus had little doubt that Moody would come out on top, but he was less certain whether the old Auror could beat Lupin in a regulated duel. He doubted that Lupin would lose against Moody if they were duelling according to the indoor rules, which were much more restrictive, given the smaller available area and the proximity of the audience to the combatants, but in the stadium, Severus thought that Moody had a good chance. There were some who believed that Moody was past it and that the much younger Lupin was a sure thing. Given that Moody was only a few years younger than Minerva and that Minerva certainly wasn't "past it," Severus was not ready to write off Moody's chances. If it were the following week, just past the full moon, he'd even bet on Moody himself. Or perhaps not. But he would be unsurprised if Lupin's performance suffered after a full moon; as it was, just a couple days before the transformation, Lupin's magic would be unaffected. His reflexes might even be a bit quicker than usual.

Poppy waved enthusiastically at someone, and Severus looked across the pitch to see Quin MacAirt raising his hand and grinning. Worse, Gertrude Gamp was with him, though she was turned away, speaking with Flitwick and her son, and hadn't seen them enter the stadium.

"There's Quin and Gertrude," Poppy said. "Come on, let's go say hello."

"You go on," Severus replied. "I'll see if I can find the Headmistress."

"She's there, just behind Quin and Albus, don't you see? With Melina and Brennan," Poppy said. She touched his elbow lightly.

"I told Harry and Hermione I'd sit with them," Tonks said, "so I'll let you two go. I'm sure we'll see each other after the duel, though."

"Probably in the infirmary," Poppy said with a slight smile. "I don't entirely approve of these matches, but no one's been too badly injured so far."

"I . . ." Severus could not think of another excuse not to go with Poppy, and any further protest might make her believe that he was even more resentful of Quin than he was. He swallowed and tried to bring some saliva into his dry mouth as he crossed the Quidditch pitch with her.

"Good afternoon, love!" Quin said. "I'd hoped to see you here."

Poppy turned her cheek and accepted his kiss, giving him a quick, one-armed hug. "I hadn't known you were coming."

"Hadn't planned to. In fact, I was after looking at some horses this afternoon that me sister Siobhan's got in mind to purchase, but Gertrude and Melina persuaded me." He grinned. "Can't resist the charms of two witches, you know!"

"Ah, I've known you to resist quite well on occasion," Poppy replied with a chuckle.

"And how are you Professor?" Quin asked.

Severus nodded. "It is a fine day for the duel."

"Indeed it is," Quin agreed.

"Hey, Snape, shouldn't we find seats?" Gareth asked, turning to him. "Aunt Minerva said we could all sit up in the staff section of the stands."

"I believe I will remain here and assist Professor Flitwick," Severus replied, avoiding Gertrude's gaze as she stepped toward them. "He is still mastering his new recording Omnioculars."

"No need for that, Severus!" Flitwick said brightly. "Caroline is here today, and she said she'd help me work out the kinks."

"I believe I would find that most interesting," Severus said.

"The new charms are really quite amazing, aren't they!" Flitwick enthused. "Olivia was even impressed, and she generally doesn't appreciate anything that doesn't involve Transfiguration."

"That's not so, Professor," Olivia said, coming up behind him with an older witch, who Severus presumed was Caroline Mayfield. "It's simply that most charms aren't as artfully done as these are...no offense intended to you."

"None taken!" Filius replied. "We're getting a late start, but since there are still guests arriving, I suppose that's a good thing today!"

"Sure you won't join us, Snape?" Gareth asked.

"I think not," Severus said, not knowing himself which made him more uncomfortable: Gertrude's presence at her son's side or the way that MacAirt's hand had come to rest so easily at Poppy's waist.

"Come on, now that Mum and Melina have declared a truce, I think we should take advantage of the family harmony before something else comes up to disturb it!" Gareth said with a laugh.

Quin looked at Severus shrewdly. "I believe Professor Snape has his own reasons for wishing to assist Filius, Gareth. Don't harangue the man."

Gareth shook his head, smiling. "All right, when the mighty MacAirt speaks, I listen! See you after the duel, Snape."

Severus nodded, still avoiding meeting Professor Gamp's eyes, when she spoke up, "If you change your mind about observing Flitwick's new toy, Professor, I am sure Gareth will save you a seat."

Severus could not read Gertrude's expression, but her grey eyes held no hostility, nor any apprehension. He inclined his head in acknowledgement.

"You know, perhaps I should stay down here with them, as well," Poppy said. "I'll be closer if one of the duellers needs my attention."

"A wise idea," Severus said with a nod, hoping that she really meant that she wished to stay with him. "Neither of these men are skilled in the art of classic duelling, and

there might be a mishap."

Poppy smiled up at him, and Severus was glad to see MacAirt's hand drop from her waist, though he had felt no little twinge of pain that she hadn't stepped away from the other man and had allowed him to keep his hand on her like that.

The others went off, chattering amiably, only Albus staying behind, still talking with Caroline and Olivia about the new recording Omnioculars for which Mayfield Charmed Glassworks had provided the Charmed optics.

"Severus, have you met your fellow Slytherin, Caroline Mayfield?" Filius asked.

"I have not had occasion," Severus replied, wishing that he and Poppy could just find a place to sit quietly and watch the match without these other people around.

"Caroline! Come meet Professor Snape," Filius called.

Caroline stepped over. "Professor Snape, very pleased to meet you," she said, offering her hand.

Severus hated shaking hands, but he took hers briefly, and she gave him a firm, though not crushing, handshake. "Madam Mayfield."

"My cousin has constantly promised me that we would meet," Caroline continued, "but she has never followed through on that promise."

"But now you have met," Albus said brightly, "as I'm sure Minerva knew you would one day."

"You're a McGonagall?" Severus asked. They seemed to be everywhere, now that he was paying attention to them.

"No, no," she replied with a laugh. "I'm an Egidius. The less interesting side of the family."

"More respectable, you mean," Albus teased with a wink.

"Downright boring!" Caroline agreed.

"Your family started the apothecary," Severus said, remembering what Gareth had told him.

"And the clinic," Poppy chimed in. "The Egidius family is not boring at all, if you ask me. But I'm just a mediwitch, so what do I know!" She said it with a laugh, but Severus scowled.

"You are quite likely the best mediwitch in Britain," Severus said. "Do not dismiss yourself so lightly."

"I was just joking, Severus," Poppy said, blushing and making a gesture of caress toward his arm, but then dropping her hand quickly.

"You're staying down here with us?" Caroline asked Poppy. At the other witch's nod, she said, "Good! We can catch up." Caroline hooked her arm through Poppy's and led her to a bench at the sidelines.

Severus sighed, resigned to not having a moment alone with Poppy...likely not even being able to sit beside her, the way that glass-charmer was now monopolising her. But that was better than having Quin monopolise her, he decided, turning to Filius, who had just finished setting up the tripod for the recording Omnioculars.

"May I assist you, Professor?" Severus asked.

"Yes, thanks so much, Severus. If you could look through the Omnioculars and see whether you can take in the entire duelling area? Caroline set the charms so that the focus should automatically shift when necessary during the duel...that was my problem last time I tried to use the device...but I want to make sure it's aimed correctly."

Severus bent and peered through the Charmed binocular recorder. "It appears fine to me," he said. "Dumbledore, you want to take a look?"

Albus bent and looked at the pitch through the recorder's lenses. "I'd say it was fine. I might raise the tripod just a bit, though, Filius." While the Omnioculars were a good six inches above the top of little Charms teacher's head, they were still scarcely at chest height for the other wizards.

"I think another six inches would do, Professor," Severus added. "We should still be able to see their legs and feet."

Filius waved his wand, and the top of the tripod smoothly extended another six inches. Albus bent and looked through the Omnioculars once more. "Perfect," he pronounced.

"Good. I had thought to set it up in the box this time," Filius said, gesturing to the announcer's box high above the pitch, "but I wasn't certain we would be able to record the same level of detail. I think that once these are in production, I will purchase two of them...not on the school's budget," he added quickly, seeing Severus's slightly furrowed brow. "That way, I could have two views of the duel to review." He rubbed his hands together in happy anticipation of that day.

So far, there had been no dispute about any of the points or who had won any particular duel, even the betting parties being satisfied to rely on Flitwick's judgment when the result wasn't clear, but Filius thought that there might come a time when being able to review a duel would be convenient, and as he didn't have a Pensieve of his own, he thought the new Omnioculars were a fabulous innovation. They also had the advantage of being able to project the recording onto a screen, like a Muggle film, so that more than one person could view the recording at a time, although that feature had not yet been incorporated into the test model Filius was using. He would have to review the recording by looking through the Omnioculars, just like using the older version's replay feature.

"Severus, could you go over and ask Caroline if she could come check the Charms settings once more?" Filius said as he Levitated up to adjust the Omniocular's tilt. "I'm a bit anxious about them. If you would be so kind!"

Severus nodded. "Of course."

"I can take a look at them," Albus said helpfully.

"Why don't we wait and we can both see what Caroline thinks, eh?" Filius said, peering through the lenses and adjusting the zoom. "If you would conjure a platform for me, however, so that I can let go of my Levitation?"

Severus left the two and walked over to where Caroline and Poppy were sitting. "Professor Flitwick is desirous of your advice, Madam Mayfield."

Caroline sighed. "He really is quite capable of doing all the adjustments himself now. He just had a bit of a problem with the Autofocus Charm, but I showed him how it works on these new models. I thought he had it."

"He's probably just nervous because of the event," Poppy said. "You know how excited he gets about everything."

Caroline smiled. "Yes, I certainly do." She glanced over at Filius, and her smile grew. "Well, as long as I'm here . . ." She stood and smoothed the skirts of her robe. "Be sure to come to lunch during your Easter holiday, Poppy! I will be expecting your owl as soon as you return from that resort of yours."

"I think you should come, too, Caroline," Poppy said. "It's off-season, so I'm sure you could still get a room. We'd have a lot of fun."

"You know . . . perhaps I will. I need some time off, after all! Even the boss should get a break occasionally. I don't remember the last time I went anywhere on holiday." She waved over at Filius, who was beckoning her urgently. "We'll talk about it later."

As soon as she'd left, Severus sat down beside Poppy, resisting the urge to slide closer to her. He sighed. "I didn't think I'd ever have another moment alone with you," he said softly.

"It has been that kind of day, hasn't it?" Poppy agreed. "It was wonderful to see little T.J., though. He's growing fast."

"T.J.? I thought his name was 'Theodore.' Or 'Teddy,' I think I heard the Headmistress call him once."

"They have settled on T.J. Short for 'Theodore James.' They thought that with Ted Tonks such a frequent visitor to the house, it might be easier on the little guy if he had a name all to himself."

"I always think it's silly when people are called by their initials," Severus said stuffily.

Poppy chuckled. "Well, it certainly would be if you were to go by yours! S.S.S. Sssss," she said teasingly. "A proper Slytherin sound to it, though! Sssss!"

Severus couldn't help but smile at Poppy's teasing. "Well, with you, Poppy Pomfrey," he replied, emphasising the Ps in her name, "it would be even funnier, so you shouldn't speak!"

Poppy laughed at that, and Severus felt a grin emerging. This is what he missed so, and how he wished to court her. To make her smile, to hear her laugh . . . to take her in his arms . . . but not right there in the Quidditch stadium, of course.

"I don't know what my parents were thinking, giving me P.P.P. as initials," Poppy said, with a shake of her head. "You can imagine what it was like as a child. My sister is 'Violet Mary Pomfrey Bowen,' quite a nice, normal name."

"What's your middle name?" Severus asked curiously, not caring that the crowd was growing a bit unruly as they waited for the duel to begin. They were more alone at that moment in a stadium filled with people than they'd managed to be in days, it felt to him.

Poppy leaned toward him and whispered, "I'll share mine if you'll share yours!"

"I don't know, Poppy," Severus said, a glint of humour in his eye. "Are we ready to share such intimate secrets with each other?"

"Yours certainly is a secret! It isn't even in my records. I don't even have a middle*initial* for you, but you use one, so I'm *very* curious."

"All right, it's a deal, then. But . . . I think I would prefer to guess," Severus said. "And whoever guesses correctly first, gets to claim a prize from the other." He smirked. With a sister named "Violet Mary," and her own first name being "Poppy," her middle name couldn't be terribly outré, and so he had a very good chance of being the winner in this game, Severus thought...and he was certain that Poppy wouldn't guess his own name.

"Ah, you truly are a Slytherin, aren't you?" Poppy said, looking up at him appraisingly. "All right, Professor Snape, you're on...and no asking others! And no looking in that Hogwarts book for mine. That would be cheating. Other research would be acceptable, however. And we take it in turns to guess." She held out her hand for him to shake, and he took it with a grin.

"I'll be selective in my prize, Poppy," he said. "And as almost no one living knows my middle name, you would have a difficult time finding it out by asking people."

"Betting on the duel, are we?" Albus asked, coming up to them, wand in hand.

"No, on something else. Just a bit of fun," Poppy said.

Albus grinned. "May I know what it is?"

"First, you may not help either of us, presuming that you are able," Severus said seriously. "Or the entire thing will be ruined."

"Far be it from me to spoil your fun!" Albus exclaimed.

"He wished to know my middle name, since it is also alliterative with my first and last," Poppy said, "but as I don't know his, I thought it only fair he tell me his, too."

"Naturally," Albus agreed with a sage nod.

"I thought it more challenging if we were to guess, however," Severus said, suddenly feeling foolish now that he was telling Albus. This was a childish game . . .

"Sounds like fun! And you know . . . I don't believe I know Severus's middle name, after all," Albus said, his brow furrowing. "Of all the things I've learned about you over the years, my boy, that is one thing you've held out on me!"

Severus smirked.

"Well, don't tell him mine, Albus," Poppy warned.

Albus held up both hands. "Never! He will never hear your mellifluous middle name cross my lips!" Albus laughed.

Just at that moment, there was a loud explosion as Filius stepped out to the middle of the pitch, his wand raised. Severus jumped slightly, then realised it was merely Filius's attempt to quiet the crowd and gain their attention. Poppy patted the bench on her other side, and Albus took a seat beside her.

As Filius went over the rules of outdoor duelling for the crowd, enlivening his recitation with brief demonstrations, using Olivia Ouellette as his good-natured target, Severus allowed his eyes to wander over the crowd. Tonks had found Harry and the others, and now Hermione was holding Teddy...T.J....as Arthur wiped at the boy's face with a handkerchief, likely blotting up some of the unending drool the child seemed to produce. Luna had joined Ginny and her family, and the two girls were paying rapt attention to Filius's descriptions and demonstrations, though they had seen him do a similar spiel a half dozen times before. Ginny laughed when Filius sent a conjured lasso through the air to trap Olivia, who feigned helplessness as Filius flicked his wand and twirled her about, wrapping the end of the riata around her. Severus smiled slightly. It was good to see the girl laughing.

Tiberius Ogden was there, dressed in what could have been one of Dumbledore's gaudier cast-offs. The ancient wizard was seated with a number of Ministry officials, including Gawain Robards, who was not paying attention to the demonstration, but was scanning the crowd, a look of sharp-eyed intensity on his face. Severus noticed that the chief Auror seemed to nod at someone in the adjacent section of stands. Severus cast his eye over that section, and he recognised two Aurors sitting together, not dressed in Auror red, but still looking very professional and not as though they were there to be entertained. Looking around the stadium, Severus saw several other Aurors, also casually dressed, scattered throughout the crowd. It was possible that they were all there simply to watch the duel...after all, Moody was something of a legend amongst them, and had trained many of them...but Severus doubted that, particularly when he saw how well distributed they were.

He glanced over at Albus, who was chuckling at one of Filius's stunts. Poppy was listening, too, though she seemed distracted and not focussed on what she was seeing. Given that she was already concerned about his welfare and there was little point to pretending there wasn't a deranged would-be assassin tracking down perceived Death Eaters, Severus decided not to wait to speak to Dumbledore.

He leaned closer to Poppy, taking a moment's pleasure in feeling her arm and shoulder against his chest, and he caught Albus's attention. "Are there plainclothes Aurors

here by chance or by design?" he said softly.

"Ah, you noticed that, as well," Albus said. He shook his head. "Minerva did bring on a few off-duty Aurors and hit wizards to help patrol the grounds, but any who are here in the stadium are either here off their own bat or on the Ministry's orders. It would not surprise me if they wish to discourage any . . . lawlessness, given the size of the crowd here today."

Severus nodded and leaned back, missing the warmth of Poppy's body against his, but he could not very well take her in his arms right there . . . At that moment, he wished he were more like Quin, that he could casually and easily place his hand on Poppy's thigh or put his arm around her waist, and no one would notice or make comment. He remembered Quin's warm greeting and the almost-possessive hand he had placed on Poppy's waist, resting just above the curve of her hip, and Severus felt a knot grow in his stomach. He simply had to find more time to spend with Poppy before she left for her holiday. He wanted her to miss him whilst she was away, and to be eager to see him on her return. He certainly didn't want her thinking of Quin.

Filius had finished his demonstration, and now the two contestants were walking out onto the pitch, first shaking hands inside a small square area marked in red, and then taking their places at opposite sides of a larger yellow square marked on the turf.

The first six full volleys...six spells cast by each party, whether defensive or offensive...were required to be cast from within the yellow lines. Only a small set of hexes was permitted during this round, and the duellists' movements were restricted. Either combatant could step closer to the other, though not step inside the red square, but neither of them could step outside the yellow boundary, nor could they cross the white line that intersected the two boxes through the centre, dividing the entire field in half. The next round of volleys could then be cast anywhere within the large red ellipse that spanned almost the full length of the field, but with neither duellist crossing the intersecting white line, and any regulation-compliant spells could be cast.

The final round, if the duel reached that point, allowed the two to move freely anywhere within the large red oval, with additional points being scored if one combatant could force the other to step within the small red square and then hit the other with an offensive spell whilst he or she was there. There was some debate in the duelling manuals about whether a spell hit would count for extra points if the target was within the area defined by the red square but not actually touching the ground...leaping over it in order to dodge a spell, or jumping in place, for example. Filius was of the opinion that the markings were merely a two-dimensional indicator of the three-dimensional space to be occupied by the duellists, and therefore, it was irrelevant whether the target was actually touching the ground at the time that he or she was struck by the spell.

Severus glanced around the crowd at the various Aurors and other Ministry personnel present. He was glad that this was apparently some plan of theirs...provided they maintained a low profile unless some violence broke out...and not a plan of Minerva's to which he had not been privy. As Deputy Headmaster, the security of the school was one of his priorities, and he would not like being kept in the dark about provisions that the Headmistress made without consulting him. But she did keep him apprised of what she was doing, as well as asking his opinion about the various options she was considering. He had had to chuckle when Minerva told him that Poppy thought they should have huge reflecting lamps down at the front gates. It was very sweet that Poppy had been so worried about him.

Severus looked at Poppy out of the corner of his eye. Now that the duel was underway...and proceeding rather dully, in his opinion, with merely an exchange of very standard hexes and blocks...she was paying more attention, though he could see that she was still distracted. He hoped that perhaps she was distracted by thoughts of him and wishing to be alone with him, but it was just as likely that she was distracted by worries about the vigilante. She flinched when one of Moody's spells hit Lupin before the other wizard could block, but Remus simply stumbled back a bit and cast a simple Jelly Legs jinx as he tried to catch his balance again.

"He'll probably just have a little bruise," Severus whispered to her. "Don't worry."

"I don't see the sport in...ooo!" She flinched again, this time because one of Lupin's curses had raised boils on Moody's face. "I don't see the sport in deliberately hitting someone with something that causes pain or injury."

"Filius has only selected participants who he knew were capable of controlling their spells well enough not to cause any severe damage, even if the spell itself could be cast that hard. You saw how Auror Marjorie Clifton cast the *Massuilius* at Professor Ouellette and barely raised a welt on her arm, but I'm sure she could cast that to break bones or burst organs if she needed to."

Poppy shuddered and grimaced. "And if one of them slips, we could have a terrible tragedy on our hands."

"That's why Filius and Ouellette are monitoring them. There have been no fatal duelling accidents in Britain in over seventy years," Severus said, "not in a well-regulated duel such as this. And Filius would stop the duel if he thought either of the duellists was becoming too fatigued to control their magic properly."

"Hmph."

Moody had managed to rid himself of the boils, and now the two were dancing about in their respective halves of the oval, Lupin making use of his greater physical mobility, but Moody, well-used to his unmatched legs, didn't seem disadvantaged at all. In fact, with his magical eye rolling in its socket, he even cast off to the side without turning his head.

At Filius's signal, the two men lowered their wands and bowed shortly to each other. Time for the break. Only five minutes, but time enough for the two wizards to catch their breath and recover their magic, and sufficient time for the crowd to begin arguing about who was winning.

"What do you think, Dumbledore?" Severus asked. "I thought Lupin was doing passably."

Albus nodded. "I think he got a bit more through than Alastor did, but some of the casting on Alastor's part was quite good...he's very quick off the mark still, and very flexible."

"Yes, I've noticed that he can switch amongst the different kinds of spells with greater ease than I think Lupin can. Is that training, experience, or just innate ability?"

"A little of each," Albus replied. "But I think that even with more training and experience, Remus would never have quite the same kind of breadth and . . . elasticity to his casting that Alastor has. It's one of the traits Alastor had even as a very young man. He was one of my students, you know."

"He was just a year ahead of me," Poppy interjected. "He used to help me with my Transfiguration lessons after Minerva left, and I'd help him in Potions, but Defence was always his favourite subject. He always talked about how he had to get the highest marks possible so that he could enter the Auror training programme. He was a hard worker. It used to be a struggle to get him to go into the village on Hogsmeade weekends during his seventh year. We'd be sitting in Puddfoot's and he'd have a book out, on his lap under the table. Always revising for his NEWTs." Poppy chuckled at the memory.

"There certainly was a good turn-out for this match," Albus observed, looking around at the boisterous crowd.

"There was!" Poppy agreed. "And if either of them is too badly injured, I see an entire St. Mungo's contingent here who can help me out." She pointed. "I should try to introduce you to Gladys, Severus...Healer Glyndwr. She's the one with the bright yellow cloak and the blue shawl."

Severus looked up into the stands. He recognised several of the people near the woman in the bright yellow cape, including Healer Smethwyck, who he thought was a complete dunce. He couldn't understand how the wizard had become Healer-in-Charge of the Dai Llewellyn ward, unless it was by political favour. The Smethwycks were an old pureblood family, and that likely had helped. It did indeed seem like a St. Mungo's staff outing, he thought, observing the others in that section of the stands. He recognised Cynthia Clark...Rourke now, he reminded himself...the mediwitch who had confirmed his identity for Madam Framingham, and a few other former students who had gone on to work at St. Mungo's in one capacity or another, as well as a number of older mediwitches and mediwizards whom he had seen on various visits to the hospital. There had to be at least a dozen Healers and medical staff in attendance that afternoon.

Flitwick gave the signal that the duel was about to recommence...not as loudly this time...and the crowd turned its attention back to the pitch.

So far, the spells had been relatively standard ones, with the exception of the boil hex. And one normally didn't see a Jelly Legs Jinx used in a formal duel, either, but it was an easy spell to cast that took little energy or concentration, so a good one when a dueller was recovering from a hit. Severus hoped that the two would show a little more imagination in the final round. Though the action had been fast, and Lupin's physicality had been entertaining to watch, neither of the parties had been particularly aggressive or creative.

Severus got his wish when Alastor cast a spell that caused a miniature dust storm, following it immediately with a swarm of locusts that blanketed Lupin's entire body, hampering his movement and blinding him. As Lupin attempted to rid himself of the locusts, to no avail, Alastor cast a quick punching hex to Lupin's gut, causing the other wizard to double over. Just as Moody was preparing to cast another hex...probably some kind of cudgel curse, given his posture...Lupin managed to raise his wand and cast a spell. A downpour of rain drenched both combatants, and the locusts began to dissipate. That was enough for Lupin to cast another spell to banish the rest of them. He leapt out of the way just as Moody, still soaking wet, cast a *Dolo*. Lupin returned the old Auror's cudgel hex with one of his own, then conjured a large blob above Moody's head, which immediately fell and coated the wizard with a bluish-green goo. There were sounds of disgust from the audience, but Moody hardly seemed perturbed, and sent a lightly cast *Frangere* aimed at Lupin's right leg. Remus jumped aside, but not quite quickly enough, and he grimaced and fell to the ground.

Lupin pushed up so that he was on his knees...most of his weight on his left leg...before Flitwick could declare him down and give the match to Moody. He shook himself like a wet puppy...and he was still quite wet from the rainstorm he'd conjured...raised his wand, and cast vigorously. Moody had taken advantage of Lupin's fall to cast a scouring spell and rid himself of the goo, and he saw too late that Remus was casting again. Alastor raised a shield, but not in time, and Lupin's hex caught him square in the centre of his body.

The blow sent the Auror flying backwards with a clearly audible "oof" of exhalation, bent over as though pulled violently by an unseen string around his middle. He landed first on his rear, hard, then ended on his right side, still doubled over and gasping for breath, hugging his stomach. He tried to roll over and sit up, struggling to get up enough to cast another spell, but as soon as he managed to raise up enough to cast a feather-light *Percido* in Lupin's general direction, Remus cast a quick *Stupefy* and stood, stepping out of the way of the punch headed toward him. The Stunner hit Moody directly, and the old Auror was out stone cold. Lupin swayed, lowering his wand, and looked over at Flitwick, who nodded at him and started out onto the pitch to declare the winner. Poppy was faster, though, and she was at Moody's side, potions bag beside her, casting *Renervate*, followed by a number of diagnostics, and then a few more spells, none of which Severus recognised, though one seemed similar to an *Anapnea*. With a quick, well-practised gesture from her wand, Poppy popped the cork from a small vial and poured the contents into Moody's mouth, and an expression of disgust crossed the Moody's face.

Minerva and Melina were coming down from the stands, Severus saw, but the rest of the McGonagall clan, including MacAirt, did not.

"Need any help, Poppy?" Melina asked. "You seem to have it all in hand."

"You could take a quick look at Remus for me. He had a couple nasty hits. I think Alastor just needs some rest now." Poppy looked around. "Professor Snape, could you assist me? I would appreciate it if you could help me get him back up to the castle."

"No, no, no!" Moody protested, trying to sit up but being pushed back down by Poppy. "I'm fine. Just need to get up and walk around a bit."

"Not yet. You were unconscious, and whatever he hit you with last completely knocked the breath out of you." She cast another diagnostic spell. "Besides, you still have blue-green goo dripping out of your ears." She made a face. "And from your clothes. You'll need to change and get cleaned up."

Moody grumbled, but gave in, and Severus smirked as he cast a *Mobilicorpus*. He might be attempting to forgive the old Auror, but he still found it amusing to anticipate Levitating him across the grounds. *Mobilicorpus* was not a pleasant experience when one was conscious, Severus had found. He would, however, attempt to keep the man level.

"What about Lupin?" Severus asked.

"I've repaired his leg and Healed his ribs, but he should probably have Poppy give him a once over and have a small dose of Boneset Draught. I think he can walk up on his own, though." Melina looked up into the stands and waved at Brennan. "I'd like to get back to Bren and the others. Could you walk with Remus, Aunt Min?"

"I'll do that," Albus said. "You stay here and do your Headmistress announcements for the crowd before they leave. And remind them to pick up their copies of *Halloween at Hogwarts* and support the Worthy Scholars' Fund!"

Severus groaned inwardly. He had only paged through the book briefly, but his picture had appeared several times, and in a few of them, he had been caught dancing. He couldn't bear to look at them. Minerva had ordered an extra printing of the books, since they had proven popular, and she took every opportunity to flog them, including at each duel.

Together, the group proceeded out of the stadium and up to the castle, and Severus glanced over at Poppy. Again, he would have to share her company with others. He let out a slight sigh. Courtship was turning out to be almost as difficult as spying had been, he thought. Severus flicked his wand and raised Alastor's head slightly. He would just have to be more conniving and create the correct opportunity and occasion for them to be alone. He glanced at Poppy out of the corner of his eye. She had her hand on Moody's shoulder, and he suppressed his jealousy. Yes, he would create his opportunity and make it perfect.

NEXT

Chapter Seventy-Eight: Sifting the Past

Sunday, 28 March 1999

Spinner's End yields up old moments from Snape's past, almost lost and forgotten. Severus sets to work to create his opportunity.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Gareth McGonagall, Filius Flitwick, others.

Author's Note: If Caroline Mayfair seems familiar, but you can't quite place her, she appeared in the battle chapter of *Death's Dominion* (Chapter 29: "They shall rise again"), and first appeared in the one-shot, "Now is Perfect," as a romantic interest of Flitwick's.

Chapter Seventy-Eight: Sifting the Past

Sunday, 28 March 1999. Gareth begins work at Spinner's End. Severus has his own plans for the day, and for his evening with Poppy.



Chapter Seventy-Eight: Sifting the Past

Sunday, 28 March 1999

Gareth looked up when there was an unusually loud thump from above, but then shrugged and returned his attention to the photographs arranged in front of him on the kitchen table at Spinner's End. He had Levitated the boxes up from the basement and set them out in order. The first several were carefully labelled, and the photographs were filed chronologically and then in categories by year. The smaller hard plastic boxes of negatives were likewise labelled and stacked in order; Gareth had left those on their shelf in the basement.

The last few boxes weren't as carefully organized, and they seemed to include photographs that had been taken in nineteen sixty-eight and sixty-nine, which Gareth thought were the last years that the elder Snape had lived with his family at Spinner's End. They also contained some photographs that Tobias had taken in previous years and had made copies of, then just tossed in the closest box at hand rather than filing them between sheets of archival paper as he had done so carefully for so long. Gareth had set those later boxes aside and had started with the first of the boxes labelled 1955.

The pictures in that box were the first photographs that teenaged Tobias Snape had developed himself, and interleaved with the photographs were notes on exposure times, aperture settings, and shutter speed, and the different methods he had used in developing the pictures. Many of the photographs had been taken in city parks, Gareth thought, but scattered throughout were some of his parents in what he presumed was the Snape home. There were also three of an older, white-haired gentleman that were labelled "S. Morgenstern, 1879 1957," all taken in September of fifty-six, one which seemed an attempt at a professional-style portrait. Morgenstern was a thin man, not very tall, with a head of thick, wavy white hair, and he looked as though he had likely been quite wiry in his youth. There were four other photographs from that month in which Morgenstern was one of the people listed as one of those in the photograph, along with Tobias Snape's parents, Esther and Botoiph Snape.

Esther Snape reminded Gareth of Severus, though she was petite where he was tall, but she had his dark, deep-set eyes and sharp, angular features. Botoiph Snape was quite a bit older than his wife, but in each of the pictures, he was either close to her or smiling at her, whether her gaze was on him or not. Gareth had a sense that he felt warmly protective of his wife. Severus didn't take after his grandfather as much; Botoiph's head was rounder, his build, heavier, but he was a tall man, and perhaps some of Severus's height came from that side of his family.

As Gareth looked through the photographs from the late fifties, he carefully refiled each of them. When he reached the summer of nineteen fifty-eight, he began to see pictures of Eileen Prince. In the first few, she seemed unaware of the photographer. In one, she was tossing bits of bread to some of the ducks in one of the parks where Tobias had taken many of his earlier photographs. In another, she was standing beside the pond, holding her hat in one hand as her long dark cloak billowed out behind her; some of her dark hair, freed from its bun by the wind, swept across her face. Tobias must have used a very fast shutter speed to capture the image, since the water of the pond stood in small, sharp, hard waves, and the tree limbs, though bent and swayed, were sharp and clearly defined. Eileen seemed utterly still in the midst of the turbulent wind, standing there looking out across the choppy water.

Subsequent photographs of Eileen were more personal: she was clearly aware of the camera and the photographer, and by November, there was a photograph of Eileen with his parents. They were having tea in the Snape living room. Eileen Prince looked stiff and uncomfortable in the Muggle setting, not as natural and at ease as she had in the park photographs. Esther Snape looked as though she'd just bit a lemon and was trying to hide the fact. Botoiph Snape, usually jovial looking, had an artificial smile on his face, and his posture was tight and closed. Gareth wondered what kind of conversation the elder Snapes had had with their son after that social visit.

Gareth leafed through more photographs, but found only one more that showed all three of them together, this one with Tobias in it, too, a black control in his hand that allowed him to slip into the group and trigger the shutter after having set the aperture, speed, and focus. It was the first photograph of the young man himself in any of the pictures, and Gareth scrutinised it, trying to see the man he'd heard about from Severus. All he saw was a tall, slim, broad-shouldered, dark-haired young man who appeared to be the only person in the photograph who was genuinely happy. He was standing next to the sofa arm, just beside Eileen, who was seated beside her future mother-in-law, with Botoiph at the other end, next to his wife. Tobias had on a dark, narrow tie and a knitted argyle-patterned sweater. His hair was short, except his fringe, which was pushed carelessly back from his face. His smile was broad, and his free hand rested on Eileen's shoulder. Eileen's brow looked heavier than usual as she stared into the camera lens, and if she had held a sign in front of her to announce it, it could not have been clearer that she was unhappy to be there.

The next photos were of Eileen alone, or of Eileen and Tobias, and she looked happier in those, and by early nineteen fifty-nine, it was clear that they were a married couple, and there were several pictures of the two on holiday together in early spring, possibly a honeymoon trip. By autumn, she was obviously pregnant. The final photographs from that year showed the living room of Spinner's End, sparsely furnished, but with a small Christmas tree, and Eileen smiling and happy, holding up little baby clothes, Christmas wrapping paper scattered about.

As Gareth expected, the next box, holding the first photos from nineteen-sixty, was almost fully devoted to photographs of the new little Snape. A few of them had "Sammy" written on the back of them, and the date; the rest were labelled "Severus Snape." Gareth had to chuckle when he saw one of a scowling baby that reflected the scowl that the adult Severus sometimes wore. The one surprise, though, was that there were very few photographs of Severus's grandmother Esther holding her new grandson, and the ones that Gareth did find all seemed to have been taken on only a few separate occasions. There were none of Botoiph, but Gareth seemed to remember Severus saying that his Muggle grandfather had died before he was born.

Gareth flipped more quickly through the first years of Severus's life at Spinner's End. There was a single photo, taken on Severus's fourth birthday, that finally showed Drusus Prince, Eileen's father. Gareth looked closely at the man. He was a hard man with sharp eyes and an unpleasant expression, and Tobias was a good enough photographer at that point to have captured the cruelty in the lines of the wizard's face, and the possessiveness of the hand on young Severus's shoulder. Severus looked serious, far too serious for a small boy celebrating his birthday. Esther Snape was not present at the celebration.

Gareth found a few more pictures of Esther from the early sixties, but they were all taken in her flat, not at the house in Spinner's End, and Severus was only in a few of them. In one, he was about five years old and was sitting in his grandmother's lap, one of her arms around him as she held a violin up in front of him, explaining something to him as he reverently reached out and touched the satiny wood of the instrument. Gareth smiled. The woman's face was animated, and Severus, entranced, either by whatever his grandmother was telling him or by the violin in front of him.

Gareth sighed and stretched. He was unsure why he felt compelled to go through these photographs, except that there was a part of him that still sought to understand how a boy could grow up to become a man who could cut off another boy's mother's arm. So far, he'd seen nothing to explain it. Many people grew up in families torn by dissension over unsuitable marriages or with one or two unpleasant relatives. Childhood was idealised as a golden time, filled with happiness, familial love, and friendships, but Gareth knew that many, if not most, perfectly normal adults had childhoods that were far from that ideal. Life was always a mix of happiness and unhappiness, kindness and cruelty, pleasure and pain, whether one was a child or an adult; some people seemed to get more than their share of pain in life, but nothing from the photographs gave Gareth any clue as to how the solemn, skinny little boy had grown up to become a Death Eater.

He shook his head. The factors that went into creating the young man that Severus became were likely ones that were subtle, many, and varied, and nothing that would have been captured by one of his father's photographs, Gareth knew that. There were clues there, though, about Severus's childhood and family life. It seemed that Tobias Snape had himself had a fairly close relationship with his own parents, but that after his marriage to Eileen and his father's death some months later, he saw little of his mother, and his mother saw even less of her grandson. Tobias had likely fallen in love with Eileen, quickly smitten by the young woman whom he met in the park, and had proposed marriage just as quickly. He seemed happy in those early photographs, proud of his girlfriend...later, his wife...and apparently unaffected by his parents' less-than-warm feelings about her.

Eileen often seemed distracted in the photographs, although in those taken shortly after their marriage when the two were on holiday together, she seemed happy and smiling. In those photos, she dressed in modest Muggle dresses, slightly unfashionably long, coming mid-calf rather than closer to the knee, and in dark colours, making her seem older than her years, or stepped from an earlier decade.

Tobias apparently enjoyed photographing his new wife at any time or place, and had developed them all. Some photographs, particularly those showing her in quiet contemplation or curled in the corner of the sofa, reading, he had developed several times, using different techniques and cropping them in different ways until he found the "perfect" picture of her.

Eileen was by no means a beautiful woman, but in many of the photographs, she was striking: Tobias would use light and shadow to emphasise the contours and angles of her face and create a compelling portrait of his wife, making the viewer appreciate her attractive qualities. There had been many photographs of her pregnant and then of her holding her new baby, and if the pictures did not lie, she had been happy at the prospect of motherhood and happy with her son. Gareth had smiled when he came across a photograph of a smiling, bright-eyed Eileen bathing her small son in a little rubber tub, her delighted gaze focussed on her little boy.

The photographs of Severus in those first months were almost always ones of mother and child, and as he became a toddler, there were more of just little Severus alone, or with his mother in the background, and the father seemed to take joy in watching his son and documenting his growth. By the time that Severus was four or five, there were many pictures that seemed to have been taken on father-son outings, often in the same park where Tobias had begun photographing Eileen several years before. In those photos, Severus reminded Gareth strongly of Eoghan Tyree at the same age.

Gareth presumed that the lack of pictures of Eileen's father did not indicate that the old wizard was never there, but that either Drusus Prince was averse to having his Muggle son-in-law take his picture or Tobias had no desire to photograph the man. Likely, it was a combination of the two.

He went back to the earliest photographs and found a copy of the portrait picture of Shmuel Morgenstern, then he plucked out the photograph of Severus's parents and Muggle grandparents. Gareth considered that one a moment, but then nodded to himself. Perhaps Tobias was the only clearly happy one in the picture, but it was the only one of the four of them together. Gareth then selected one of the early, more candid pictures that showed Eileen and Tobias together on holiday. He quickly rifled through some of the later boxes that he hadn't examined yet, until he found the photograph of Severus and his mother together at the kitchen table, the curled copy of which he had seen on his tour of the house the previous day.

He put those photographs aside to take with him when he left that day, then Levitated the boxes off the kitchen table. He paused. Where to keep them . . . back in their old home in the basement, he thought. With the redecorating in progress, there was no better place. At some point, he would go through more of the photographs and see if he could find one of Severus and his father together, but for that day, at least, he had had enough of sifting through someone else's family pictures. Time now to see what the house-elves had accomplished upstairs.

Severus sighed as he watched Poppy leave the Great Hall after breakfast. She was leaving for her sister's immediately and would be gone all day. At least he had caught her that morning before she had left her rooms, and had spoken with her, hoping to strike before she could make other plans for the evening. He had asked her to come to his rooms when she returned to the castle, and she'd agreed. Since she had seemed to think it might be a matter of Hogwarts business, he had considered allowing her to retain that impression, but decided against that approach.

"It is," he said, "a date, then. If you wish to accept a date with me this evening, I would enjoy spending the evening with you, Poppy. And perhaps we can pursue our competition and I can win our bet."

She laughed. "All right. Yes, I'd like that."

"Do you know when you'll be back?"

"It depends on when our date is," Poppy replied with a smile.

"Eight o'clock," Severus said, trying to make it sound like a definite time and to keep any uncertainty from his voice.

"Good. I'll be sure to be back before that, then." She smiled up at him. "Should I prepare for anything in particular?" she asked.

"Pardon?" Severus could feel a tingle in his groin at her question, though he was certain that she had meant the question only in a general way.

"Are we doing something specific that I should dress for?"

"I thought we would stay in, if that suits you. You have expressed concern about my leaving the grounds after dark, and you'll have been out all day..."

"That would be fine. As you've remarked yourself, we haven't had much time to ourselves recently."

"I thought . . . something nice, though." Severus felt on the verge of a stutter, which was absurd. He had never stuttered in his life. Except for a very brief period when he was nine. He got over it by avoiding speaking for four months. He swallowed his nervousness.

"I am sure that spending the evening with you will be quite nice," Poppy said. "Although when I win our bet, it may be nicer for me."

Severus smiled. "You will not win this bet, Poppy . . . Penelope Pomfrey?" he guessed.

Poppy laughed. "So we're starting already, are we? All right, I'll let you go first. But you've eliminated one. Not a Penelope."

"Ah, well, it was just a wild guess, although I do believe you to be as faithful as Penelope," Severus said. "But I have to give you a chance to guess at least once, after all."

Poppy smirked. "Of course."

"So did you have a good time yesterday?" Severus asked. There had been an impromptu party in the Headmistress's suite that evening, but he had declined to attend, and Minerva hadn't pressed him, for which he was grateful. He did wonder, though, if he had made a mistake not to join everyone, since Poppy had been there, as had Quin.

"Yes. You should have come with us last night, Sev. We had a really nice evening. The baby slept through most of it, the little angel, and Remus and Tonks were able to stay until almost ten. Quin was in good form, and I think Gertrude had a good time, too. She stayed longer than I thought she would. She and Albus had quite a good time reminiscing and telling stories about some of their early days teaching at Hogwarts. Mostly to each other, but it was good to see her smiling so readily. Even Alastor seemed relaxed...as relaxed as I've seen him in years, anyway. And Gareth and Remus really hit it off. I don't think they'd really known each other well before that."

Severus nodded, and a peculiar new jealousy rose in him. He did not like the idea of Lupin becoming friends with Gareth. The friend of his early adversaries, best friend of James and Sirius, now a friend of Gareth's . . . Severus gritted his teeth. He forced himself to dismiss his thought that it seemed that he could never have anything without someone else taking it away, and tried not to contemplate Gareth becoming better friends with Lupin than he was with him. It was childish, he told himself, and his relationship with Gareth had nothing to do with Remus.

"Is there anything else? I told Violet I'd be there by nine," Poppy said, interrupting his thoughts.

"No, nothing. I hope you have a good day."

"I'm sure to." She grinned suddenly. "I also will be checking on a bit of a surprise for you . . . looking into its progress, one might say."

"A surprise? For me?" Severus felt cheered.

"Yes, for you, and it will remain a surprise, but it's actually something that I've had planned for you for several weeks now. I'm becoming a bit impatient, myself. I shouldn't even have said anything about it."

"Several weeks? Since before . . ."

Poppy nodded. "Yes, since at least a few weeks before you had your bout of unexpected flirting with me, actually."

"You were planning a surprise for me all that time ago?" Severus asked, puzzled, but pleased. "Why?"

"Because, as I have said to you many times, although I still think you may not completely believe me, we are friends, Sev. Whatever else we may have been or may become, we're friends. And I think that . . . well, I hope you'll like the surprise. It's . . . no, I *won't* say anything else!" She shook her head firmly. "I will not let myself spoil the surprise for either of us."

Severus smiled. "I might be able to wheedle it out of you."

"No, you won't. Not unless you win our bet and you decide that's your prize. And it would disappoint me terribly to tell you ahead of time. I wish I hadn't mentioned it at all, in fact."

"I'm glad you did. I will look forward to it," Severus said. Perhaps this meant that she wouldn't be thinking about Quin over her holiday, but would be looking forward to the surprise for him. Although, of course, she had planned it before they had become lovers. Still, she was excited about it. Surely that was a good thing. "Have you other plans for the day?" he asked.

"I'm not sure what Violet has in mind. We may drop by to see Ivy and her family...they live just around the corner...and Violet said something about possibly visiting friends for tea. Or friends visiting her." Poppy frowned. "I don't remember precisely. But since I'm going to be going to Geoffrey and Margaret's for Easter dinner next Sunday and everyone will be there for that, I don't think we'll be doing much calling around today."

"And what about Quin?" Severus asked.

Poppy looked puzzled. "What about Quin?"

"I just wondered if you have plans to see him. Not today, necessarily . . . but on Easter or over the holiday."

"I may see him over the holiday. I will likely visit Rosemary and Alroy and see the new baby when he arrives, and no doubt Quin will also be there. So I will probably see him then. We have made no definite plans, though."

"Oh." Severus wished he could come out and ask her whether she would accept another date from the Irish wizard, but not only could he not think of a way to ask it that didn't sound foolish, he wasn't sure whether he really wanted the answer.

Poppy Summoned her cloak from its hook and a small bag from her bedroom. "You know, we all should get together sometime," she said.

"Who?"

"Oh, you, me, Quin, some of the others. Maybe Gareth...you two are quite good friends, I've seen. A smaller group than last night, though. I know you aren't fond of parties. But perhaps we could all go out for a drink over the Easter holiday."

Severus shrugged and opened the door for Poppy. "If you wish. I would not want to . . . impose my company upon you." He sighed.

Poppy snorted a laugh. "That is a peculiar thing for you to say, Severus, just after asking me for a date this evening...and my accepting it."

"Shh." They were stepping into the hall, and he didn't want their conversation overheard. "I meant, if you are going out with Quin," he added softly.

Poppy touched his elbow gently, stopping him. She looked up at him and shook her head. "My thought was that you and I would go out with some others, Severus. I think you'd enjoy it. I would hope you would. And it would be nice if Quin were able to come along and you two became better acquainted. I think you'd find him interesting company. That's all I meant."

One corner of Severus's mouth turned up. "Ah. Indeed. That might be acceptable." He was unsure about whether he wanted to get to know the elder MacAirt, but it seemed to him that Poppy was telling him that she was not dating Quin. Or perhaps she was even saying that she saw the two of them as a couple. And she had just accepted the date with him for that evening, he reminded himself.

"Good. We can talk more this evening, hmm?" Poppy said.

Severus nodded once. He wished he could talk to her right there and then, but they were walking down to the Great Hall and soon would be within earshot of half of the school also on its way to breakfast.

"You have plans for the day, don't you?" Poppy asked. "Yesterday, I heard you say something to Filius about meeting him this morning."

"Yes. We will be practising again. He has been most helpful."

"I wouldn't think that you would need any help in that area, Severus, although I am glad that you will be well prepared."

"Duelling is an art as much as it is a competition," Severus replied. "My previous experience has all been much more practically oriented toward actual combat. Preparing with Professor Flitwick has been valuable. It has provided me an opportunity to practise a variety of new spells and to hone my skills." Despite the progress he had made, Severus still had made no decision about whether he would engage in a wandless duel with Dumbledore, and Flitwick had agreed that Severus could hold off on the decision until a week or two before the duel, and that he would wait to make any announcement about it. Dumbledore had said he would be prepared to duel in either form, so the decision was entirely Severus's.

"You seem to be having a good time," Poppy observed.

Severus nodded. "It has been an enjoyable experience, and conversation with Professor Flitwick can be as invigorating and challenging as the duelling exercises. It has been good to become better acquainted with him."

Poppy smiled up at him wistfully. "I wish you had had these opportunities long ago."

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "It was what it was, as it had to be. I am fortunate for the opportunities I have today, ones I never expected to have." His expression

softened as he looked down into her face. "For the opportunity of this evening, most especially."

Poppy nodded, but she averted her eyes. "And have you any other plans for the afternoon?"

He was going to try to set a romantic atmosphere in his sitting room, but he didn't want to tell her that. "Nothing in particular. I may go out for a while, myself." He had to see about flowers, and after having had to smooth things over with Pomona when she discovered her rosebush completely denuded of blooms, he considered it best not to seek any in the greenhouses again just yet. He thought he might meet McGonagall in Edinburgh and see if the florist shop was open on Sundays.

"Ah." Poppy glanced back up at him again and added softly, "Take care, then, if you do."

"I have no definite plans. If I do not know my own plans, neither can anyone else," Severus said with a smirk. "Perhaps this . . . *experience* will teach me to bring more spontaneity to my life. In fact, Professor Flitwick was recently discussing the importance of balancing spontaneity with strategy, or incorporating it into strategy."

It was Poppy's turn to smirk. "Seems to me that you already began practising that spontaneity a few weeks ago."

Severus waved a hand, opening the door to the Great Hall for them. "I could perhaps do well with some encouragement," he said, straight-faced. "Perhaps some . . . coaching. If I knew someone who had sufficient fortitude to take on such a daunting task. And personal experience in the practice of spontaneity, of course."

"One of your colleagues may meet your requirements."

"I believe that I shall have to conduct interviews," Severus said, looking down at Poppy, his eyes smiling. "I shall conduct my first one this evening. If the candidate is promising, I may not need look any further. She seems ideally suited."

"And if the candidate, any candidate, is unsure about the position?" Poppy asked softly, meeting his eyes more seriously.

"I will have to vet any candidates carefully. And if my prime candidate is unsure . . . I can be persuasive," Severus said lightly, though a sense of unease flowed through him. Poppy had just accepted a date with him. Was she having second thoughts, was she unsure about seeing him as something beyond a friend and colleague? She had told him before that she thought their friendship was important, that he should date others, that she wasn't right for him, and they hadn't had an opportunity to discuss their relationship since then, though he thought that she seemed more open to seeing him than she had . . . did she view this date differently from the way he did, did she see it as just . . . an extension of their fling, as nothing serious? He cursed the crowded Hall. He would get no answers to any of his questions until that evening.

"I am sure that with the proper persuasion, the right candidate will be happy to meet your challenge. It is important to find the right one, though, Severus. Don't take the first one to come along who seems . . . spontaneous."

Albus had moved again, this time, sitting between Filius and Helena, who was on the Great Hall schedule for that day. His own seat was still free, but Laura Manning was sitting in the chair to its right normally reserved for Vector. It looked as though he wouldn't be able to sit beside Poppy that morning.

"I believe I am sufficiently discriminating to be able to eliminate inappropriate candidates," Severus said, "and that the right one will be obvious, and so far superior to any others, a lengthy search would be neither necessary nor desirable."

"We can talk more later, Professor," Poppy said as she stopped at the first free seat, just on the other side of Pomona from where she normally sat.

Severus nodded once, bowing shortly to the two witches, then proceeded down to his own seat. Minerva and Caspar Lloyd were engaged in an intense conversation about ancient Welsh poetry. Lloyd was not only a Gryffindor, his first year at Hogwarts coinciding with Minerva's own first year as Head of House, but he had done his second apprenticeship with her father, one of only a handful of masters who had apprenticed with Merwyn McGonagall. Severus bit back a sigh. The two were likely to continue their discussion throughout breakfast; he resigned himself to discussing modern wizarding library science with Laura Walker Manning, which is precisely what he did until David came by and the couple left the Hall together, off for the day to visit their daughter. And now he was watching Poppy leave for her sister's.

Minerva and Caspar were now discussing the subjunctive mood. In no mood to enter into a conversation about translating verbal inflections...let alone from a language with which he was only familiar from unpronounceable road signs...Severus looked down the table. Albus had left, but Flitwick was still there, speaking with Helena. They might be discussing something of greater interest to him, and something he actually knew something about. Severus picked up his cup of coffee and moved down to sit on Helena's other side.

"Good morning, Severus," Flitwick greeted brightly.

"Hi, Severus."

"Professor Flitwick, Ms Benetti." Severus nodded. "The Headmistress and Professor Lloyd are discussing the subjunctive mood. I trust that you are not?" He quirked a brief smile, raising an eyebrow.

Helena laughed. "No, far from it."

"We were just discussing the magical currents that flow around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade," Filius said.

"Filius was just explaining how the Four Founders chose the location for Hogwarts based on the flow of the magical air currents at the time, and how they've shifted over the centuries."

"We don't know precisely how much the change in their paths has affected owl correspondence, but one estimate put it at as much as a twenty minute increase in the time that it takes to send an owl from London to Hogsmeade. Personally, I think that the change in the currents' paths has been offset by the increase in the strength of the primary current. In fact, it may even take less time than it did, depending upon how quick-witted the owl and how keen its ability to find and stay with the current."

"Have you ridden the currents around here, Severus?" Helena asked.

"Picked up one or two on occasion," Severus replied.

"I was thinking about trying to follow one all the way out...well, not *all* the way, of course. I don't want to end up in . . . in Bermuda or Greenland or someplace!" she said with a laugh. "But I thought I'd take a ride and see how long I can stay with the currents. Just over land, though. I'd Disillusion myself and the broomstick, just in case it passes over a highly populated Muggle area, and wear my chameleon cloak, as well, so I could do it during the day and really see the scenery."

"That sounds enjoyable," Severus said.

"Would you like to come along? I was thinking of doing it Easter Sunday, actually."

"Easter Sunday . . . I am not sure." The idea appealed to him, but he had planned to be at the castle that day, since there would be so many other staff members away visiting family for the holiday. He also didn't want anyone...particularly Poppy...to believe that he was romantically interested in the Flying instructor. A day long outing with Helena might give the wrong impression to the true object of his affections.

"Well, let me know if you can. I'm on schedule for breakfast that morning, but I thought I'd leave right after that. And if you think of anyone else who might be up for the jaunt, invite them. It doesn't have to be Sunday, either. We could do it on the following Monday, if that's better."

Severus nodded. For a few more minutes, the three talked about broomstick flight, magical currents, and the intercontinental broomstick race coming up in July, then Filius

set down his napkin and pushed his breakfast plate away. "Ready, Severus?"

"When you are."

"I thought we should practise indoors today. The weather looks a bit threatening," Filius said, gesturing toward the Charmed ceiling and its overcast sky.

"Fine. In the come and go room again?"

"What about somewhere in the dungeons?" Filius suggested, hopping down from his chair. "I remember a large room on the northern end of the lowest dungeon. I believe it's still there."

Severus nodded, remembering the room. "It hasn't moved in about ten years. It's not far from where it was when I was a student. That would be fine. Shall we go directly there?"

Filius patted his wand pocket. "I have all I need! We can stop by your rooms on the way down if you'd like to fetch anything yourself."

"I have some notes in my office that I want to go over with you. We can stop there first," Severus replied. He stood. "It was good to see you, Helena. I will let you know about next Sunday."

"Good!" She grinned. "I think we'd have fun."

"Indeed. Have a pleasant day."

With her responding good wishes for his day, Severus left the table and accompanied Flitwick down and out of the Great Hall, on his way to try out some of his new wandless spells.

NEXT

Chapter Seventy-Nine: Atmosphere *Title subject to change*

Severus proceeds with his plans for the day, and both Filius and Gareth lend a hand.

Rated T.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Gareth McGonagall, Siofre Tyree, Johannes Birnbaum, Eoghan Bertrand Tyree

Chapter Seventy-Nine: Atmosphere

Chapter 80 of 118

Sunday, 28 March 1999. Severus prepares for a duel, then he prepares for a date, and Filius and Gareth each lend him a hand. Which will pose the greater challenge?



Chapter Seventy-Nine: Atmosphere

Sunday, 28 March 1999

"You're sure you're all right, Severus?" Filius asked, looking down with concern into the younger wizard's face.

"Mmm. Yes. I'll be fine." Once he was able to get up off the cold, hard stone floor, he'd be fine. He had managed to sit up after Filius cast *Rejuvenate*, but his chest still ached, and his head hurt where it had hit the stone wall when he'd flown backward after being hit in the chest by Flitwick's battering hex.

"You were doing so much better with your blocks," Filius said fretfully, "I was sure you'd be able to deflect that one, or side-step it."

"I did both. Obviously, I was ineffective." Severus leaned his weight on his left arm and reached back with his right hand and gingerly felt the growing lump on the back of his head. His hair was sticky. He winced slightly.

"I'm so sorry, Severus! I wouldn't have cast the *Mulcare* so forcefully if I'd realised your block wouldn't even weaken the blow."

"Mmph." Severus bent his knees, trying to push up and get to his feet. He sat down again with a thump. "I just need to catch my breath for a minute more."

"We should see to your head, too," Filius said, peering around to see the back of Severus's head. "I think you're bleeding. I don't like to cast Healing charms on people's heads. How's your chest?" The little wizard placed his hand on the left side of Severus's chest and pressed lightly where the hex had hit.

"Sore." Severus took in a deep breath and immediately regretted it.

"Do you think you broke anything?"

Severus shrugged his left shoulder. "I don't think so. I think it's just a bruise. A little potion will fix it up quickly." He reached back and touched his head again. "I think that

this might need more than just a potion, though."

"Poppy's gone for the day...should we put a call through to St. Mungo's? Or perhaps Mother Wayland could come up from Hogsmeade..."

"I will *not* have that woman touch me," Severus snapped. "And Mungo's . . . by the time they sent someone, I'd probably be either recovered or dead."

"Oh, dear! We should get you to a Healer!" Filius wrung his hands in anxiety.

"It was a joke, Filius," Severus said gently. "I'm fine. We'll go see the Headmistress if we have to. She's not bad at this sort of thing. And if she can't help . . . I suppose we could disturb Healer O'Donald on a Sunday morning."

"Or we *could* contact Poppy. She's just visiting her sister in Wales. I'm sure she would come back to help, especially for you."

"I don't want to disturb the matron on her day off," Severus replied.

He took another deep breath. It wasn't as uncomfortable. He didn't want to interrupt Poppy's day, but he also didn't want to have her alarmed by any message about an injury to him, and he wanted her to think of him as her lover, not as her colleague, let alone as her patient. She would break off her visit to come back and treat any of her colleagues, Severus knew that, or to treat any of the students, but until he was on firmer footing with her personally, he didn't want Poppy to be the Hogwarts matron with him, just his friend and, he hoped, his lover. He loved her, and he loved her more with each day. He wanted to be her lover, her true lover, he wanted to learn to be her lover, and he wanted her to know his love for her. He wanted her care, and her love, but he didn't want her to return to him as his caregiver.

Severus let out a slow, even breath. "I'm sure it won't be necessary to contact her. I'll be fine."

"Can you stand? Here, hold onto my shoulder and push up...I'm quite sturdy!"

With some reluctance, Severus put his right hand on Flitwick's shoulder, his left hand on the wall beside him, and he scrambled to his feet. He took another deep breath; this one was easier.

"All right, Severus?" Filius squeaked.

Severus nodded. "Good. Better, in fact." He touched the back of his head. "Just a bit of a headache. I think some potion and an ice pack should do it. And I'd trust you to cast a *Detumescens* on it, Professor. I am sure you are quite competent."

"Well . . . we'll see. Let's get you back to your rooms first, then we can see what it looks like in good light." Filius looked up at Severus and asked hesitantly, "Do *you* have a good, bright lamp in your rooms?"

Severus snorted a quick laugh. "Yes. I have a good lamp by my desk."

"Then we'll go there, if you feel well enough to walk."

Severus forbore to point out that during the war, he'd had to do far harder activities with far worse injuries and far less attractive goals. This was just a bump on the head, and only a few hundred yards and a couple dozen stairs, with his own quarters awaiting him at the end of it.

Back in Severus's sitting room, Filius had Severus sit in his desk chair as he trained the light from his reading lamp on the back of his head. He Levitated himself up to the desk and sat on the edge to peer at the lump.

"It's hard to tell, but it looks as though it's stopped bleeding," Filius observed. "May I cast a cleansing charm and clean up the blood?"

Severus nodded his assent and felt the light whisper of magic pass over the back of his head, then he felt Filius's fingers part the hair around the bump.

"It looks better. Is it sore?" he asked as Severus flinched mildly.

"Somewhat."

"We should call Poppy back to the school," Filius said. "Or bring you to St Mungo's."

"I do think just a few generic Healing charms would be fine, Professor."

"I don't know . . ."

"Pretend it's my knee and not my head, if that helps," Severus said impatiently. "But if you don't want to do it, we can find the Headmistress."

"Poppy..."

"No."

Filius shrugged. "*Detumescens* first, or *Consuere*?"

"*Detumescens*, I should think," Severus said. "And wouldn't *Sutura* be better than *Consuere*?"

"I've always used the *Consutus* for little cuts," Filius replied. "*Sutura* I think is better for bigger wounds."

"As you wish." He felt Filius cast the first Healing spell, reducing the swelling, and he let out a sigh.

"Better, Severus?" Filius asked.

"Indeed."

"It's begun to bleed again now, though."

"Use *Coagulare*, then," Severus said, trying to rein in his impatience with the little Charms master's tentativeness.

Filius quickly cast the *Coagulare* and followed it with the *Consutus*. "You might want to have Poppy check it when she returns this evening."

"Perhaps. It feels quite well now, though. I just think a potion or two, and I'll be fine."

"Your new spells are very effective," Filius said, changing the subject. "I think you'll be able to give Albus a challenge."

"I have a few other ideas, if I have the time to work on them," Severus said.

"You still need to work on your blocks, though. Their strength isn't in question . . . I think the problem is with your timing and the speed of the spell. It's been a bit erratic."

They discussed ways in which Severus might be able to improve his blocks, then Filius pulled out his watch and shook his head. "This has been most engrossing, but I'm late meeting Pomona. We were going to give a tune-up to the microclimates in the far gardens before lunch. She wants to add some tropical flowers to those beds this spring, so the microclimates need some tweaking."

"And I need to send an owl, myself," Severus said, thinking of his own floral pursuits and his plans to try to create a romantic atmosphere for Poppy that evening. "Say, Flitwick . . . you wouldn't happen to have a musical box I could borrow for the evening, would you?"

"I believe so." The little wizard smiled brightly at the younger wizard. "Have a date tonight, Severus? Perhaps with the lovely Hogwarts matron?"

Severus raised his eyebrows. "Why would you ask that?"

"Oh, I happened to have noticed a few things . . . perhaps I'm imagining it, but it seems to me that the two of you have rather hit it off lately, or that you could, if you both wanted to give it a whirl."

Severus opened his mouth, then closed it. Filius chuckled. "I am right, then!"

"It's that obvious?" Severus asked, blushing and wondering how much Filius had noticed and whether others had.

"Let me put it this way: the Severus Snape I have come to know would never have sipped a drink from anyone's straw a year ago. And I do believe that he would still be quite fastidious about such a thing. Yet Poppy readily offered you a sip from her drink, and you didn't decline it. That was my first little clue that perhaps you may have a bit of a soft spot for her. Then yesterday in the infirmary, all those red carnations, which presumably came from the large bag you had been carrying when you arrived on the grounds. And when you two talk, when you're just together, there's just an indefinable spark between you. I don't think it's obvious, though. I simply happened to be looking at the right moments, and I'd been thinking just recently how it would be nice if you found someone special, so I happened to see things. I don't think anyone else has necessarily noticed, though." Filius saw Severus's stricken expression and added, "I really doubt it at all, Severus. Although I do hope that the lady in question has noticed, since she seems taken with you, too."

Severus blinked. Flitwick was the only one at Hogwarts who had deduced that Robbie was really Dumbledore; Filius was a very perceptive wizard, and he wasn't a Ravenclaw for nothing. It could very well be that he was the only one who had noticed. But Severus hadn't thought he'd been obvious about it at all.

"So, do you two have a date this evening?" Filius asked again.

"Er, yes."

Filius smiled broadly. "Wonderful, Severus! And you will be entertaining her here?" he asked, looking around.

"Yes, when she returns from her sister's. Eight."

"Are you, um, planning something special?" Filius asked, looking around the room again.

"I have asked Twiskett to have a light meal prepared...some of the things from your party, in fact. She liked the spanakopita. And I thought I'd get out my wizarding wireless if you didn't have a Charmed box I could borrow."

Filius nodded. "I see . . . and atmosphere?"

"Atmosphere . . . the music . . ." Severus said weakly, looking around his sitting room and seeing it as someone else might. "And I thought candles. And I'm fetching flowers this afternoon, if I can find an open shop."

"Oh, that sounds fine, Severus! Quite fine! A witch likes to see that you've gone to a bit of effort for her, just for her. It doesn't even need to be much, really, just clearly aimed at making her more comfortable, relaxed, and romanced. Set a nice atmosphere for her. A little effort will go a long way. Consistent effort, though," Filius added with a nod.

"Of course," Severus said uncomfortably.

"Well, I'd better get going if we're to finish charming the microclimates before lunch," Filius said. "I'll bring the musical box by after dinner, all right, Severus? I have one with some very nice selections on it that she's sure to enjoy."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Don't forget to do something about your chest, or you're sure to have quite a bruise that will need more than just a little potion." Filius smiled brightly. "But then you could have Poppy take a look at it! You should have her check your head wound, in any case."

"Mm. I will take care of it." He could hardly neglect to take care of it, he thought, as his left pectoral muscle was still quite sore from the impact of the blow. He probably already had a bruise.

After Filius left, Severus went to his cupboard and pulled out two potions, one a green salve meant for bruises and sore muscles, and the other a mild analgesic. He considered the brown bottle for a moment, then put it back. It would likely make him sleepy, and it was considered unsafe to Apparate within a few hours of taking. Headache Potion would do. If he had any, which he didn't. He would have to get some from somewhere before lunch. Twiskett could fetch him some, or he could stop by the infirmary and get some from the main school supply.

He took the salve with him into the bathroom and took off his jacket, waistcoat, and shirt. He examined the large blackish-purple bruise on his upper chest, looking in the mirror to see the entire thing. It looked nasty; no wonder he was sore. It took two applications of the salve and several minutes for the bruise to begin to fade and for the underlying muscle to ease its aching. He probably should have had Flitwick apply the salve, Severus thought, or gone to the Headmistress to have her do it, since such potions were always more effective when applied by another person. He'd have to apply it again later, certainly, but his chest felt better than it had, and he could make it through the day without it distracting him too much.

He really would have to work on his blocks. Practising with Flitwick was useful, but he thought that he needed additional practice. As much as it might be helpful to practise with Albus, it also would give away too many of his newly invented spells and reveal too many of his weaknesses. Perhaps Ouellette would practise with him. His fellow Slytherin had become more involved in the duels than she'd originally planned to, Flitwick's enthusiasm had been so contagious, and Severus had admired her performance in her own duel several weeks before. She might be a useful practice partner.

Severus touched the back of his head. Still mildly sore, but a Headache Potion would fix it up. He would stop and get some from Minerva after he'd sent his owl to McGonagall. He hadn't precisely promised Poppy that he would not go anywhere unaccompanied, but he knew it would please and reassure her if she knew that he was taking her wishes seriously. That could not hurt in his execution of Operation Woo and Win Poppy Pomfrey. Hmm . . . Poppy . . . Posy Pomfrey? No, that sounded silly. But he would put that one on his list. He smiled to himself. He would win their bet and then, with a bit more effort, he would win her.

Gareth was just washing his hands at the kitchen sink, having gone to supervise the house-elves as they moved Eileen Snape's bedroom furniture up into the dusty attic, when there was a banging at the window. He shook the water from his hands and strode quickly over to the door, making a mental note to remove the sticking charm from the kitchen windows before he left that day, and let in the owl.

He gave the owl a few treats from his sporran and broke the seal on the parchment. A note from Severus. He wanted to meet in McTavish Street at one. Gareth glanced at

his wrist, which was bare, and pulled his watch from his sporran and strapped it back on his left arm. It was already eleven-thirty. He had wanted to work longer, but if they were going to be meeting at one...and Severus had said nothing about lunch...he'd have to find something to eat before then. Gareth grinned. He'd stop by Melina and Brennan's. Although the two usually had a late Sunday brunch and a large meal in the midafternoon rather than lunch, Gareth was sure that they'd be happy to provide him with a bite to tide him over. If he were in luck, Brennan had made potato cakes and there'd be some leftovers. Drenched in melty butter, he'd find the potato cakes a fine meal with no additions, but Melina was, like their Aunt Minerva, partial to haggis in the morning, or at least some kind of nice sausages, so Gareth knew he certainly wouldn't starve. Being a McGonagall witch, Melina would likely insist on introducing some fruit into the meal somewhere, but Gareth would have no objections to that. It would be better than the peculiar fruit smoothies that Hermione had taken to making for every breakfast, always adding that yellow mystery powder to them. Gareth had thought it was simply some Muggle protein powder, or bee pollen, perhaps, but Hermione said that Mother Wayland had suggested it, and it was one of the old witch's nostrums. Hermione didn't seem any the worse for drinking the peculiar concoctions, but Gareth couldn't be persuaded to try it.

He gathered up the photographs and a few other things, stuffed them into his satchel, and Disapparated for the O'Donalds'. Unsticking the kitchen windows could wait; Gareth was hungry.

Severus looked at the closed door and the darkened shop behind its window panes. "Your shop is closed, McGonagall."

"It's not *my* shop, Snape." Gareth shook his head and looked heavenward. "There's a flower stand near the station. I think there's someone there every day."

A pout crossed Severus's face, and Gareth didn't suppress his snicker. He looked just like two-year old Severus in one of the photos he'd seen that morning.

"I do not want to get some wilted flowers from a bucket on the street," Severus said, his brows drawn together in a frown. He fingered the card in his pocket. He had thought perhaps daisies or jonquils, or both. He ran his finger along the edge of the card. Globe amaranth had been a possibility, too, though perhaps it was a bit too soon for amaranth. He sighed.

"Well, why don't we walk a bit and see if we see anything else that's open," Gareth suggested.

"I wanted flowers. My sitting room is dismal. Flowers and candles," Severus replied. "I want to create a romantic atmosphere."

"There's a nice gift shop along here that sells candles. Scented ones. I know it's open on Sundays," Gareth said. "You could get some that are floral scented."

"I don't want Muggle scented candles. I want flowers. We have candles enough at . . . at the school."

"You have flowers at the school, too," Gareth pointed out.

"Professor Sprout was somewhat perturbed when she found one of her rosebushes had lost its blooms overnight a couple weeks ago. As I was the one who had . . . harvested them, and I confessed to it...don't ask me what possessed me to confess at the time, perhaps it was sleep deprivation...she has forgiven me, but I do not believe it prudent to go about gathering flowers in the Hogwarts greenhouses just yet."

"Ah, I see. Well . . . do they have to be from a shop?" Gareth asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Rosemary has a greenhouse, though I don't think she's spent much time with it in a couple of years with everything else that was going on...especially not in the last few months. I know she wouldn't mind us popping by for some flowers and helping ourselves, but as I say, I don't know whether we'd find much there at the moment. But Grandmother Siofre has some wonderful gardens, two large greenhouses, a conservatory, and a wide range of flowers and other decorative plants at their peak at any time of year...different ones depending on their cycle, but Uncle Honnie probably has more variety than you'd find in any shop, though not necessarily any you have in mind. A lot of useful plants, too. He sells to a lot of apothecaries. You'd find it interesting...unless you've been there before?"

Severus shook his head. "No, no, I haven't."

"Great! You can meet more of the family then, and I bet we can get our tea there, too, if you don't have to hurry back. Don't let Grandmother Siofre intimidate you...she's a bit brusque with everyone. Uncle Honnie's a sweetheart, though. Hey, you'll probably meet Eoghan, too!" Gareth's grin changed, as though he suddenly realised something. "Yes, yes, it's about time you met Eoghan, I think . . ."

"Eoghan? You make less and less sense with each passing day, McGonagall." Severus shook his head, then he stopped cold and grabbed Gareth's arm. "Wait, he's the boy you told me about, the one whose parents were killed," he said in a low voice.

"Aye, he's the lad," Gareth said.

"You haven't . . . you don't think . . . they can't believe . . ." Severus looked around them; there was no one within earshot. "I had ~~nothing~~ to do with that raid. I am certain of it. If it was in McTavish Street in nineteen ninety-five, *I wasn't there*," he whispered urgently.

Gareth raised his hands, palms toward Severus, and said, "Wait, wait, my friend. No one said anything like that. It has never even been suggested. It's just that...eh, you'll find out soon enough, Severus. And it's probably nothing that will matter to you, anyway, from what you've said in the past. I'll enjoy the moment, though. Besides, you'll be teaching Eoghan in the autumn. Might as well meet him now!"

"You are truly infuriating, McGonagall."

"Sorry! I think it's congenital! Let's walk and find somewhere to leave from."

"All right," Severus said grudgingly. He needed flowers. He'd put up with McGonagall and his relatives for Poppy's sake. Poppy . . . Pearl Pomfrey. Poppy was a pearl, but it was not a euphonious combination, so he hoped that guess was not correct.

"Good," Gareth continued. "Have you met Johannes? You must have."

"No."

"Oh, thought you might have met him. He and Mum are great friends, and of course, Aunt Minerva and Uncle Albus are, too. I think that Professor Sprout consults with him occasionally."

"Is this Johannes Birnbaum?" Severus asked, finally putting the various pieces of Gareth's ramblings together. "The old Herbology teacher?"

"That's the one."

"*He's* your Uncle Honnie?"

"Well, he's not literally my uncle, obviously, but that's what I called him when I was a boy."

"You have a very strange family," Severus said.

"We have a few things in common, then!" Gareth replied cheekily.

"Mm." He rolled his shoulders and winced. "Let's just go. My headache's coming back."

"You also seem a little stiff. We could stop and see Melina first. She and Brennan were just playing Scrabble when I left. I'm sure she wouldn't mind taking a look at you."

"No. I'm fine. Just a little sore. It was the trip that brought the headache back."

"Right. Grandmother Siofre can give you some Headache Potion."

"I don't even like the idea of asking them for flowers. The more I think about it, the less I like it, but I don't have a lot of choice."

"You could buy some scented candles," Gareth said, an innocent expression on his face.

Severus rolled his eyes. "I said I want to create a romantic atmosphere, McGonagall, not a toxic one. Here. We can Disapparate from here," he said, stepping into a narrow alley out of view of anyone.

A few moments later, he was looking around himself, trying to become oriented after being Side-Alonged to an unfamiliar location. He could be almost anywhere in the Highlands, he thought, though he could feel some strong wards just inches away.

"That's the Tyree place," Gareth said unnecessarily, gesturing toward the large stone house ahead of them.

Severus nodded. The landscaping was impressive. For late March, there were a surprising number of flowering plants blooming on the slopes leading up to large house. Birnbaum must have created some very strong microclimate charms to bring on such a profusion of flowers so early.

"The greenhouses are around back. I'm sure he'll have something suitable for you," Gareth said, waving as the front door opened. "Hey, Brantin!"

A pale house-elf wrapped in a heavy linen towel waved cheerily.

"Are Grandmother Siofre and Uncle Honnie around?"

"Where else would we be?" Siofre asked, appearing behind Brantin. She looked over at Severus, then back at her great-grandson.

"Grandmother Siofre, may I present Severus Snape. Professor Snape, my father's grandmother, Madam Siofre Tyree."

Severus inclined his head respectfully.

"How do you do, Professor." She nodded briskly, then turned to Gareth. "So, you don't pay a call on us for weeks, and now you show up with this fellow. You must be wanting something."

Gareth smiled. "We're after some flowers, Grandmother. I thought that Johannes might have some he could bear to part with."

"Hmph. No doubt he does. Come in," Siofre said, stepping back from the door to allow the two wizards entrance. "He's in the grove; I'll send Kilbeena for him."

"I also thought Eoghan might like to meet Severus," Gareth said.

Siofre nodded and raised her eyebrow, looking again at Severus, this time, a slight smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. "Go through to the sitting room. Eoghan is in his library. I will fetch him to meet his cousin."

Author's Note: The little florist shop card with the "Language of Flowers" that Severus is carrying with him says that daisies signify patience and jonquils mean "return my affections." Globe amaranth is undying love.

I've begun posting a new short RaMverse fic to the Petulant Poetess, [Charming the Scottish Garden](#). There's a bit of a tie-in to the current chapters of *A Long Vernal Season*, and I think you might enjoy it. Siofre Tyree is one of the primary characters.

I also posted "A Spree with Albus" to my blog, which features the duel between Albus and Malcolm McGonagall. It's an out-take from *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, and it is relevant to an upcoming chapter of *Long Vernal Season*; you can find it by going to my WordPress blog (the link is [on my author's page here](#)), and either clicking on "Read a Little Fanfic Now," or finding it in the sidebar. I didn't post it here because it's part of [Resolving a Misunderstanding](#) "Chapter CXXXV: A Spree," which is here on TPP. I edited it down to make it a little stand-alone ficlet for folks unfamiliar with RaM or ones who would like to refresh their memory without hunting for the relevant portion of the chapter.

NEXT:

Chapter Eighty: In Pursuit of Flowers (*Title subject to change*)

Sunday, 28 March 1999

Severus meets one of his distant relatives, and he continues his attempt to create a romantic atmosphere in his pursuit of Poppy.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Poppy Pomfrey, Gareth McGonagall, Siofre Tyree, Eoghan Tyree, Johannes Birnbaum, others.

Chapter Eighty: Finding Flowers and Family

Chapter 81 of 118

Sunday, 28 March 1999. Severus accompanies Gareth to the Tyree home, where he finds more than just flowers.



Chapter Eighty: Finding Flowers and Family

Sunday, 28 March 1999

"Penny for your thoughts," Violet said, putting aside the letter she'd been writing.

"Hmm?" Poppy looked up at her sister and blinked.

"I said, penny for your thoughts. You've been looking at that crossword puzzle for ten minutes and haven't filled in anything new."

"It's a tough one," Poppy said, setting down her pen.

"Not that hard," Violet replied, pulling the newspaper toward her. "Quoit."

"Quoit?"

"The word down from the 'q' in 'Quidditch.'"

"Ah."

"So, what has you preoccupied?"

"I was thinking about a date I have this evening," Poppy replied.

"With a certain delectable Irishman?" Violet asked, eyes gleaming. "Tall, dark, and wealthy?"

Poppy shook her head. She pulled the newspaper toward her and filled in "quoit."

"Then . . . tall, dark, and moody?" Violet asked.

Poppy looked up. "What?"

"Professor Snape? No, of course not, silly of me," she amended quickly. "Who is the wizard, then?"

"Professor Snape," Poppy said.

"I know, foolish of me to suggest it. So who is your date?"

"Professor Snape," Poppy said. "My date is with Severus."

"Oh!" Violet blinked. "Sorry."

"Why? And why would you have guessed I might have a date with him?"

"Rapid deduction, simple process of elimination. Most of your male colleagues are taken, and I assumed it was someone on staff. And . . . you've spoken rather fondly of him over the last couple years, more than I would expect, considering what I know of the man's character and disposition, and then there's that little grey fellow you picked out for him. But I still wasn't entirely serious when I suggested your date was with him. I'm surprised and not surprised," Violet said. "So is this a first date?"

"No. Yes. No. Not really."

"Why does this ambiguity not surprise me," Violet said with a sigh. "You've been seeing him for a while, then?"

Poppy hesitated. "We were seeing each other for a short time, but it was just a bit of a fling."

"And this bit of a fling has led to more?"

Poppy shrugged "We'll see. I don't know. But we have a date tonight."

"You're looking forward to it? Or not?"

"Both. I don't know what his expectations are."

"And your own?"

"I'm not sure . . . I broke things off with him a couple weeks ago. Things were too confusing, too intense. I thought that once I did that, he'd lose interest."

"But he didn't, it seems. And are things less confusing?" Violet asked.

Poppy shook her head. "No, they aren't. At least not from my perspective."

"And from Professor Snape's?"

"He said he's interested in something more than the fling we had. He has been very sweet, very persistent. He seems to know what he wants."

"But?"

"But I don't know if he really does know, and when he changes his mind . . . I think this could be a big mistake for us both."

"Then why did you accept a date with him for tonight?"

"Because it might not be a mistake, and if I didn't accept, then maybe I would be cheating us both of something special in our lives. I owe it to us both to give this a chance, I think."

"You've had a soft spot for Snape for a while," Violet said. "Are you sure you're not just . . . I hate to put it this way, but are you sure you're not just feeling sorry for him? The kind of life he's led, you've said he's been terribly isolated. Are you just trying to save him?"

"Don't be absurd! Of course, I want to bring some happiness into his life if I can, and obviously, the fact that he's been lonely and isolated...even alienated...touches my heart, but I'd hardly begin a romantic relationship with him because of that. What sort of basis would that be for a future? No . . . In fact, one reason I am leery of pursuing anything with him is that I'm afraid of being hurt myself. That would hardly be a factor if I were just trying to save him. It goes far beyond that. We enjoy being together. We have a connection. There's something there between us."

"You're in love with him?"

"I may be falling," Poppy admitted softly. "I do love him. I feel . . . I feel as though I would do almost anything . . . almost *anything* to keep him safe, to feel more than safe, to have him feel loved. To be the one who brings him that love, who gives him a sense of security in life, that would make me happy."

"What about *your* happiness, *your* needs? Do you think that this is a man who *can* love? I hate to play devil's advocate, Poppy, but from what I know of him, Snape isn't . . . well, he's not exactly normal. He was a Death Eater, and anyone who could become a Death Eater can't have started out normally, but I haven't heard that he's become a warm and caring wizard filled with the milk of human kindness since then...rather the opposite, in fact. I'm not surprised you're afraid of being hurt. I'm surprised you two ever became involved at all."

"You know *of* him, Vi, but you don't know him, so I understand why you say what you do, but if you knew him, I think you'd have a different impression of him. Well, not *different*, but you'd see that that's not a complete picture of who he is. He *can* be warm and caring. Being with him can be really good. I enjoy his company and look forward to seeing him. He can be very, very sweet, quite funny and smart. If he weren't, I wouldn't have been involved with him at all, and we certainly never would have had a fling. I wouldn't have even responded to his advances."

"I suppose you wouldn't have, but I still don't understand why you're going on a date with him tonight. You had your fling with him. You gave him something already, and it sounds as though you had some fun, too. You don't *owe* him a date, Poppy. You told me that you had a really good time with Quin. I had hopes that you two would finally get together and I'd finally see my little sister happy in love. You two are so well suited."

"I did have a wonderful time with Quin, and you know that I love him, he's very dear to me, but . . . it's not like it is with Severus. It never would be. Quin is comfortable. With Severus, it feels so different, so much more intense."

"Infatuation is like that, Poppy, which I'm sure you know. And with Snape, it's probably enhanced by his dark and dangerous side, that side of him that isn't so warm and cuddly. It probably makes it all very thrilling. I think you should gently extricate yourself from this budding relationship before your fears come true and you are hurt. Whether you decide to pursue anything with Quin or not, I think you should think very, very carefully before you go anywhere with Snape."

"Violet . . ." Poppy closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "I have thought about it. Believe me. I have thought about it. And if I were twenty, then your argument about infatuation and his . . . his dangerous side, well, then it might have some merit, but I'm not a girl, Violet. I'm not infatuated with Severus, and I'm not blind to his less positive qualities, nor do I find them exciting or appealing...although his intensity can admittedly be quite attractive. Actually, what causes me the most apprehension is his relative youth combined with the fact that he is only now being able to enjoy his life. I am afraid that I am just a phase for him, that he honestly doesn't realise it and that when he does, when he looks around himself and sees what else is out there, when other witches realise he is a wizard worth their time, when he sees they're there, available and attractive . . ." Poppy shook her head.

"He cheats, then you walk away," Violet said. "It will hurt, but if you don't want to break things off with him now, you'll have to prepare yourself..."

"Severus wouldn't do that. I don't think he would. I think . . . I think he'd break up with me first, either nicely or not-so-nicely. Or, quite possibly, he would feel obligated to stay with me, and he'd become more and more miserable, and make me miserable, too, though not in any deliberate way. He is a man to stay the course. He could view our relationship that way. And then I'd be the one making him miserable instead of happy, and it could break my heart."

"Well, I don't know how to advise you, then."

"I didn't ask for your advice, and I really don't need it."

"When did that ever stop me?" Violet asked with a smile. "All I can say is that if you're afraid of being hurt, you should do your best to keep it light for as long as you can, try not to become too invested in the relationship. And if you can't do that . . . then maybe you should throw yourself into it as fully as your feelings dictate. Don't equivocate, don't be ambivalent. Just go with your heart."

"I don't know as either option is exactly right. Perhaps I *should* keep it light, but I don't want to lead him on, either. I think I need to be honest and tell him that we should both keep it casual for a while. I don't know if Severus can do 'casual,' though." She sighed. She didn't know if she could do casual, either, not when it came to Severus and her heart.

"So, until I stuck in my oar, what were you thinking about the date?" Violet asked.

"I was thinking . . . about not having high expectations, I suppose. And reminding myself that if we're going to have a relationship of any kind, it's best not to step back into, well, into a pattern that was emerging when we were seeing each other before. Physically."

"Really?" Violet's eyebrows rose. "Snape looks like he's stiff...and *not* in a good way. It's hard to imagine him being . . . physical. I can't even picture him embracing someone, let alone anything more. Every time I've seen him, he's looked off-putting, to put it kindly."

"You can't judge a book by its cover," Poppy said, "and besides, for years, Severus had to hold everyone at arms' length. He's led a difficult life. Add to that a natural . . . diffidence, and he'd hardly strike anyone as a warm and cuddly Samuel Pickwick. Oh, Samuel!" She pulled a scrap of parchment from her pocket and jotted that down.

"He strikes me more as the Uriah Heep type, but with black hair," Violet said, "though from what you say, maybe he's a Scrooge." She smirked at the thought.

Poppy laughed. "Oh, no, he'd never be a Scrooge! Aside from the fact that Severus wouldn't become the kind of character Scrooge did after his redemption, spirits would hardly frighten him into reform, nor would visions of his past or of a possible painful future...he's well aware of his past without any spirits bringing it to his attention. I also don't think he's particularly materialistic. No, Severus might be a bit more like a Scrooge than a Pickwick or a Uriah Heep...which was a rather cruel comparison on your part, Vi...but Severus changed because of his own very real painful experiences and because of the support of real flesh-and-blood people. Besides, he never thought he would have a future; he had no reason to change, only a reason to . . . to do what he did in the war. Now that Severus does have a future and a reason to change, he is finding his footing, figuring out who he is and what he wants."

"And right now, he wants *you*," Violet said, a sparkle in her eyes and a poorly suppressed smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Poppy shrugged one shoulder and smiled wryly. "I suppose you could say that."

"And you're sure . . ." Violet hesitated.

"Sure about what?"

"Sure he's not just . . . well, to be blunt, not just using you? Getting a few nasty kicks?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Poppy said. "I've known him for a long time, remember."

"Mm. I remember." Violet raised her hands in the air in a gesture of submission. "All right, that was the last of the sisterly warnings. I hope you have a good time tonight."

Do you know where you're going?"

"We're staying in. I don't know precisely what Severus has planned, but with the recent attacks, he's been advised to minimise his public exposure, so we're meeting in his rooms. I asked him myself to try to avoid returning to the castle after dark."

"He's a target of those nutters? The ones who killed Clematis?"

"It's not certain, but Minerva thinks he is, and so does Alastor Moody."

"Then I'm glad you're not going out with him. Don't go anywhere with him, Poppy." Violet suddenly shivered. "Don't go out in public with him. And don't let anyone know that you harbour warm feelings for him. If those crackpots would kill someone like Clematis Vincent, whose biggest crimes were being Pettigrew's grandmother and being a bit silly, they'd certainly think you were fair game, or at least not care whether you were accidental collateral damage."

"That's a stretch. But we're not likely to be having a lot of public dates. And if we do, we'll be in crowds of people. They don't attack anyone unless they're alone. Don't worry about me!"

"All right, if you say so. So, you say he's been sweet and persistent! Do tell me how the sombre wizard in black has been romancing you! We have twenty minutes before Dylan gets back from the pub...I mean, 'gets back from walking Sully,'" Violet said with a wink.

Poppy laughed.

Severus sat in an armchair and stared expressionlessly at Gareth, who had settled on the couch.

His cousin. He should have expected something like that from McGonagall. McGonagall and his sense of humour. He would find it amusing to introduce him to an unknown relative.

Eoghan Tyree, a cousin. A very distant cousin, certainly. Hardly a real relative. As Gareth had said before, all the families intermarried. He'd never cared about it before. His pureblood relatives had never been interested in him. His Grandfather Drusus had such a miserable disposition, his own family had little to do with him outside of his business, and then his mother had married a Muggle, which practically ostracised her; they certainly wouldn't have cared about her half-blood offspring.

Severus had the impression that his mother had thought of marriage as a way to escape both her father and the pressures of pureblood society, where she hadn't fit in. Marrying a Muggle hadn't helped her, but had only increased her alienation, and she had never been at home in the Muggle world...nor had she ever really wanted to be a part of it, from what Severus had seen. After his father had left home, his mother's cousin Giles Black had become a more frequent visitor, but Giles was only marginally less unpleasant than Drusus. From what Severus knew of the Blacks, there were few in that family who might be worth knowing, and those few had never showed any interest in him. T.J. Lupin would never be calling him "cousin." And he wouldn't want him to.

No, he wanted nothing to do with anyone who considered themselves a relative of his. This boy could scarcely be any more closely related to him than a random stranger passing him on the pavement in Diagon Alley, anyway. But if the boy was related through the Princes, Severus was prepared for him to be as odious as his grandfather had been.

"This boy, Eoghan, when did you learn he was related to me?" Severus demanded.

"I thought he might be, but I wasn't sure, so I asked Aunt Minerva a few weeks ago, after you and I had talked about your relatives. She told me that his Grandma Lydia was a Prince before she married Grandmother Siofre's brother."

"Minerva's known this all this time?"

"Well, of course. But you weren't ever interested in your relatives, and I guess you and Lydia would have been pretty distantly related, anyway, so it didn't occur to her to mention it. Um, you don't look very happy," Gareth added, "so before you begin to think we're deliberately keeping you in the dark or something, I suppose I ought to tell you that you and I are related, and not just through the Blacks on my mother's side as I'd mentioned before, but also somehow through the Longbottoms on Dad's side, Minerva said. I think that Eoghan is related to Longbottoms, too, but I don't know how."

"I am not related to the Longbottoms. I refuse to believe that," Severus said. He shuddered.

Gareth shrugged. "Facts are stubborn things. They merrily go on existing whether we believe them or not. Besides, I thought Neville seemed quite a decent young man, and he certainly performed well in the battle."

"Hmph."

"*And* he's a member of the Severus Snape Fan Club!" Gareth said with a grin.

Severus's eyes widened. "Please tell me there is no such thing!"

Gareth laughed. "No, not literally...unless you count Snape's Slytherins...but Neville made quite the speech about you at the awards dinner."

Severus relaxed. He looked toward the sitting room door. "What's keeping them?"

"How should I know? Eoghan's library is in the west turret, so if Siofre fetched him herself, she had a bit of a walk."

"The boy has his own library?"

"Mhm. He outgrew the nursery a few years ago. It's connected to his schoolroom, where he does most of his lessons, usually with Branwen and Renwick's kids. It's a big house."

"I noticed," Severus said drily. "More of a castle than a house."

"You think this looks like a castle, you should see Quin's place."

"I thought he had a flat in London."

"He always keeps a flat in London, or did when he wasn't sick, but his place in Ireland, that's simply indescribable. Not just big, but ancient, and absolutely reeking of magic, much, much more than the Gamp estate, and maybe as much as Hogwarts. It's definitely older."

"But the man lived like a Muggle for twenty-five years," Severus said, puzzled. "How was that possible?"

"He lived with Aine, his daughter. That's an old house, too, but only a few hundred years, nothing like the main family home."

"I thought he'd lived where he'd grown up? I remember Poppy told me that."

"He may have grown up in that house...I think it might have been his mother's family's originally?" Gareth said, puzzling and trying to remember. "Anyway, whenever he has to give Muggles an address in Ireland, that's the one he always gives. Aine's house is on land just adjacent to Quin's place. Alroy and the rest of the family kept up the

place, but that's one of the things that's keeping Quin busy, getting the place in shape, taking care of the grounds."

The door opened, and the tall, sandy-haired wizard whom Severus had seen at the Merlin awards stepped in. Severus automatically began to rise, but the wizard waved his hand. "Please, sit, be comfortable."

"Johannes, I'd like you to meet Severus Snape," Gareth said.

Despite the older wizard's words, Severus stood. "It's good to meet you, Professor."

"It is good to meet you, as well. Although I do not visit Hogwarts as often as I once did, I am nonetheless surprised that we haven't met before."

"Indeed."

"Please, sit. Have you had refreshment?" Johannes asked, looking over at Gareth.

"No, Grandmother Siofre is fetching Eoghan to join us," Gareth said.

"Ah." Johannes sat down in one of the armchairs, arranging his deep green robes as he sat. "Have you had lunch? Would you care for a drink? Professor Snape? A drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Maybe later," Gareth said. "We're actually here because I told Severus about your greenhouses. He's looking for some very special flowers for a very special witch for this evening, and I said you might have some that would fill the bill. I thought you might not mind showing us around and perhaps helping him out."

Johannes smiled. "I would enjoy that very much, and I would be very pleased to help you find appropriate flowers for this special witch!"

Severus shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I had a few specific flowers in mind, but whatever you may have will be fine I am sure . . . You may send your bill to me at Hogwarts."

Johannes waved his hand dismissively. "Consider this one on us, Professor. What did you have in mind?"

"Some decorative arrangements for my sitting room and a bouquet for her. Something that she can, um, something to give her," Severus said.

"We can certainly find some flowers that I think you will be pleased with," Johannes said. "I will also show you our medicinal gardens, if you have the time, and a few of my new hybrids."

Severus nodded. "I would be interested in those."

The door to the sitting room opened again and Siofre stepped in, leaving the door open behind her. "Eoghan will be down in a few minutes."

"He had finished his essay?" Johannes asked.

Siofre gave a slight shake to her head, but said, "He said he had, but it was too short. I have told him to finish it this evening after dinner. He's aye playing at his own fancy and not the lesson of the moment."

"He was unhappy?"

"I told him that if he wants to join Wren, Colm, and Long on holiday next week, he will be happy to do it properly," Siofre said.

"Aye, and I will, Grandmother," Eoghan said, coming through the door. His eyes went to Severus. "I was occupied."

Johannes stood and ruffled the boy's dark hair. "What occupied you this time, since it was not your lesson?"

Eoghan shrugged. "Things." He stepped toward Severus.

Gareth spoke up. "Severus, this is Eoghan Tyree. Eoghan, meet your cousin."

Now that the boy was standing there, face to face with him, Severus remembered the sense of recognition he'd had when he'd seen Eoghan at the Merlin awards dinner. Now he knew where it came from. No matter how distantly related he and Eoghan were, no one would ever see the two together and doubt that they were relatives. The boy gazing back at him looked much as he had when he was eleven. Not a mirror image, precisely, not a twin, but an echo. Black hair, black eyes, shrewd expression, thin, angular face, fair skin. A cousin.

At a loss for what to say to this new-found relative, who was looking at him with serious dark eyes, Severus asked, "You were writing an essay for your grandmother?"

Eoghan nodded. "My Sunday lesson," he said with a sigh, as though that explained everything and the question itself was not only boring but also slightly simple-minded.

"Ah." Severus presumed the boy must write an essay each day. Perhaps he would not be a complete dunderhead, though he sounded undisciplined.

Gareth leaned forward and swatted Eoghan lightly on the arm. "Were you playing with my dad's obsidian seer's glass again instead of doing your lessons? I told Mum you weren't old enough for it yet. Should I take it back with me? Give it to you when you come of age?"

Eoghan looked at Gareth, scrutinizing him for a moment, seeming to assess whether he meant it or not, then he replied seriously, "I don't *play* with the glass, Gareth. And I wasn't doing any gazing. I was reading my new book and trying out some charms from it when casting my runestones."

Severus smirked. The boy was interested in divination. Definitely *adistant* relative, regardless of any physical resemblance between them.

"You need to learn to finish your lessons before you play," Gareth said. "In September, you'll have to do that on your own. And there will be consequences to pay if you don't do your work. Isn't that right, Severus?"

"Indeed," Severus agreed with a nod.

"I *did* the essay. But it was hard." Eoghan shot Siofre a quick glance. "Harder than usual."

"What was it about?" Gareth asked.

"The moneychangers in the Temple," the boy replied with a deep sigh.

"I don't remember that story, so why don't you and I go upstairs, you tell me the story, and maybe when you're explaining it to me, you'll think of more to say about it, hmm?" Gareth suggested.

"But..." Eoghan's whine of protest was cut off before he could complete it.

"You know what I have told you about answering an adult beginning with the word 'but!'" Siofre admonished. "No backtalk!"

Eoghan swallowed and looked embarrassed. "I thought we were having tea, that's all." He looked at Severus. "I only just met my cousin."

"You will have other opportunities to speak with the cousin," Siofre said briskly. "If Gareth would like to help you with your essay, that's fine...and if you finish it 'fore dinner, I'll bring you, Colm, Wren, and Long all to Tíree Beag for your lessons tomorrow." She smiled when Eoghan's eyes brightened. "And perhaps Professor Snape will be able to stay for tea, or come for a longer visit some other time soon."

Eoghan reached out and tugged Gareth's sleeve. "Come on! When we're done, I'll show you this new casting charm I got to work on my runestones." The boy was now all eagerness to write his essay.

"Is that all right with you, Snape?" Gareth asked.

"Fine. Professor Birnbaum and I can take care of our business."

An animated Eoghan chattered away to Gareth as he practically dragged him out of the sitting room into the front hall. Johannes chuckled.

"Come with me, Professor," Johannes said, gesturing toward the still open door. "We will find you your flowers. Will you come with us, Siofre?"

"No, you two boys enjoy yourselves. I still have some correspondence waiting for me. Professor Snape, will you stay for tea?"

Severus hesitated. "I cannot stay late. I need to be back before five."

Siofre nodded. "Good. Kilbeena baked some gusty biscuits and cakes this afternoon. We will have them as soon as you're finished in the greenhouse. Just let her know when you return, Honnie, and have Brantin fetch Eoghan and Gareth."

"I will." Johannes smiled down at her and touched her cheek lightly with his fingertips.

"Get on with you," Siofre said briskly, though her eyes sparkled up at Johannes. "Professor Snape cannot dawdle."

The two wizards left through the main doors, and Johannes led Severus around the house.

"You said you had certain flowers in mind?" Johannes asked.

Severus nodded. "I thought . . ." He cleared his throat. "I thought perhaps some daisies. Or jonquils. Or both. And some decorative arrangements for my sitting room. One or two. Nothing too ostentatious, but elegant."

"I have a few very nice birds-of-paradise that are almost at their peak. They are showy, a bit ostentatious, but they are special. Perhaps you might like a pair of those? Daisies and jonquils . . . The daisies are in the herb gardens, and they won't bloom for a few more weeks. I have some potted jonquils, but they aren't quite ready yet. I do have some daffodils that are ready, though...you could give her a pot of those, and she would have them for a while. They are much like jonquils."

Severus nodded and fingered the card in his pocket. He couldn't remember what the meaning of daffodils was. "I am not sure whether they would be appropriate." He glanced over at the tall wizard beside him. He didn't know the man at all. Explaining why he wanted jonquils seemed impossible, yet necessary. "Do you supply florists?"

"Only to the one in the Clypeum, Glasgow's wizarding district. I grow the flowers for their beauty and for my Siofre," Johannes replied. "They are a hobby, one might say. I like to surround the house with beautiful plants of all kinds for her pleasure...and mine. However, most of the plants we grow for harvest or sale have some practical value. My customers are generally either other Herbologists or apothecaries. I also occasionally provide some to Pomona Sprout for the Hogwarts greenhouses. I did sometimes supply Professor Slughorn with potions ingredients when he was still there, too. We taught together, you know."

Severus nodded. He pulled out the card from his pocket and tried to glance down the list surreptitiously. Daffodils supposedly meant unrequited love. He didn't want to imply that his love was unrequited...or that hers was, if she should harbour such warm feelings for him. He certainly didn't want to sound hopeless at the beginning of their courtship.

"I do not believe daffodils would be appropriate for this evening," Severus said.

"What do you have there?" Johannes asked, looking over at the card. "Ah! The language of flowers. Very romantic. May I see it?"

Severus handed him the card.

"A handy guide, but not . . . full. Not exhaustive. Daffodils can also mean 'chivalrous regard,' I believe, if it is important to you that her flowers bear a positive meaning."

"It is the meaning on this card that is relevant," Severus explained, "as she also has a copy of it."

"I see. Then it is like a common code key between you, and you must have the right flowers to present to her. If you don't mind that the jonquils are not yet quite ready, you may have some potted jonquils. They will look beautiful in just a day or two. Or I could cast some charms and bring them on faster, if you wish. I never feel as though that is quite as satisfying. Or perhaps we could find something else equally acceptable."

"I had preferred a bouquet, too," Severus said, hoping not to sound ungrateful, "rather than potted plants. Those are nice, and they do last longer, but . . ."

"There is something romantic about a bouquet," Johannes agreed.

"Could the jonquils be brought on faster and put into a bouquet?"

"They could . . . but let us see what other flowers are on this list that might be suitable. I do not wish to pry, but would red roses be appropriate?" Johannes asked, handing Severus the card.

Severus hesitated.

"You wish to wait to give her roses," Johannes said with a nod, understanding. "Then would red tulips be out of the question?"

Severus did not need to consult the card. He remembered that one. "No, they would not be out of the question, but I planned to give those to her . . . on a different occasion. Not yet."

"I see . . . then perhaps lilacs? Purple lilacs? I have some in a lovely environmentally Charmed garden. With a freshness charm, they will last quite a while after cutting, and their aroma is delightful."

Severus looked at the card. *Purple Lilacs: The First Emotions of Love.* He nodded. That wasn't perfect, but he liked lilacs. They were springlike and delicate, and yet they had a robust quality, very much like Poppy. "Lilacs would be fine," he replied.

"Presentation is important. I do not normally supply vases, as I sell directly to the shop. Perhaps I could find something, though..."

"No, that won't be necessary. I'm sure I can find one."

"Come, I will show you the greenhouses and some of the gardens on the way around to my special spring garden," Johannes said. "If you see other flowers you would like, we will make note of it. Or if you would like to gather some potions ingredients while here, we can do that, as well."

As Johannes gave him a brief tour of the greenhouses and the gardens, Severus was impressed, and as they strolled further from the house and along a path lined with yew hedges, he expressed his admiration.

"Thank you," Johannes said. "Much of the layout is based on the original garden plans, although greatly expanded, and we have much more variety, since microclimate charms have become much more sophisticated since the first gardens were planted. These hedges on our left are part of a labyrinth; there was once a hedge maze here, but we decided on a labyrinth, instead. I also try to provide appropriate environments for local birds, animals, insects . . ." He paused and pointed. "Branwen and Renwick live on the other side of that ridge in the old lodge, and Morgan and Fiona are just another half mile beyond that down in the valley. It has been good for Eoghan to have them so close. He is a solitary boy by nature, but his cousins have been good company for him, brought him out of himself. This was important especially after Lydia died. He had already lost his parents the year before. He needed them as much as he needed us."

"If you don't mind my asking, why is he with you and not with them?" Siofre had to be almost as old as Albus, and Johannes was not young, either. It would have made sense for the boy to live with the Douglasses, whose children were all around the same age as Eoghan.

"His parents, Liam and Judith, were very close to Lydia, and, by extension, to Siofre and to me. Not a month went by when they didn't visit for at least one weekend, and often they stayed longer. Eoghan was comfortable here, and his parents' wills stipulated that she was to be his guardian if anything happened to them. When Lydia died, there was no question about whether he would stay with us. He is happy here. We love him. We would not uproot him or cause him more confusion by sending him away."

"And if you should, not to pry, or to be morbid, but if you and Siofre should die?" Severus asked.

Johannes chuckled. "Do not be concerned. You will not be saddled with raising a Tyree."

"That hadn't occurred to me," Severus said honestly, though now that he did think about it, he was relieved. "I was merely curious."

"This house, and all of this, will be his then, and if he is not of age, then Connor and Elisabeth, Eoghan's Tyree grandparents, will likely move into the house when he is here...or if not them, then Morgan and Fiona, or some other relatives. Perhaps even young Gareth might do so. But the family will take care of him and help him with the house until he is grown, and then even after, I am sure. But I think we will not die until after he is of age...unless we do not survive his adolescence!" Johannes added with a laugh.

"You have other children?" Severus asked.

Johannes's smile subsided, and he shook his head. "I had a daughter. Clara. She died, my entire family died, killed by Grindelwald in nineteen forty-one. My wife, my baby daughter, my parents, my brother . . . all gone in one day."

"And you survived?"

"Only because I was travelling. I returned that night to find that they were all dead. I was Grindelwald's target, and it was my family who was killed." Johannes swallowed and looked away. He cleared his throat. "It was long ago, but it is still . . . I prefer not to speak of it, you understand."

Severus nodded. "And you and Siofre had no children?"

"Eoghan is our son, as much as he may be. Siofre, as you know, is Minerva's grandmother...Merwyn was her son by her first husband, Collum McGonagall, who died when Merwyn was a baby. She and her second husband, Herbert McKenna, had a daughter, Maisie. He died in nineteen fifty-seven. So Siofre and I had no children together. But we adopted Eoghan as our own."

"Do you know how I'm related to Eoghan?" Severus asked. "I was unaware of him as a relative until today. McGonagall...Gareth, that is...thought it amusing to surprise me with him."

Johannes smiled. "Gareth is much like his father in that way, and like Siofre; he would find it entertaining. Lydia married Siofre's brother Murdoch. Lydia's brother was Bertrand Prince...an old schoolfriend of Albus's, I believe...and Bertrand is related to you. A direct ancestor, although I am not sure how many generations separate you."

"Gareth mentioned the Longbottoms, too," Severus said, making a mental note to speak with Albus about Bertrand Prince, and growing more curious about his mother's family than he'd been in years.

"Ah, yes. Bertrand Tyree, Lydia and Murdoch's son...not to be confused with Bertrand Prince, who was his uncle and namesake...married Sally Longbottom, and his Prince cousin, his Uncle Bertrand's son, married her sister. I know this only, but I was not personally acquainted with the Princes. Siofre might know how many generations there are between Bertrand Prince and you. Bertrand and Sally were Connor Tyree's grandparents, which makes Lydia Eoghan's great-great-grandmother."

So it appeared that he really was related to the Longbottoms...if, indeed, this Bertrand Prince and his son were his direct ancestors...and that he was related to young Eoghan in more than one way. Eoghan, who was like him and yet so unlike him, growing up in a huge house, his own library, private lessons in his own schoolroom, surrounded by a large extended family, many of whom would apparently be willing to take in the boy and love him if he needed them . . . Severus experienced an odd sense of wistfulness.

"What was Lydia like?"

"Bubbly. Sweet. Imaginative. A little . . . absentminded. But very bright. Remembered everything she read. She often seemed a bit silly on the surface, but it was her way of enjoying life. She liked getting a rise out of Siofre, and Siofre enjoyed baiting her. She was a very good friend." Johannes smiled slightly, remembering. "We miss her."

A Prince who was bubbly? And sweet? At least she was also bright.

"Here," Johannes said, gesturing toward an area surrounded by shrubbery and trees. "The lilacs are in this garden. It's full spring in here now. The bushes and trees help with the microclimate charms, and I have a few special Charmed lamps set up to provide longer daylight. We like to come out here and sit . . . Lydia would bring one of her novels and read and snack, sometimes even forgetting to come in for meals. I always think of her when I'm out here working. I sometimes can almost feel her here . . ."

Severus followed Johannes through an opening in the hedge, and he smiled. It was a beautiful garden with a profusion of colour, the scents of various flowers carried on a light breeze and a white gazebo at the other end of the main winding path of small blue and white stones. As accustomed to magic as Severus was, he felt that this garden was magical in a way that he'd never experienced before. He could understand why Lydia had spent so much time here.

Johannes smiled at Severus's reaction. "I chose the flowers, their scents, and their layout very carefully to create a relaxing effect. It is strongest at this time of year, although there are flowers in bloom throughout the summer and into the autumn."

The lilac bushes were clustered on either side of the gazebo, with some flowering fruit trees behind it.

"Will these do for your lady?" Johannes asked, pulling a cluster of blossoms toward himself and breathing in their scent.

Severus nodded. "Indeed. They would be fine."

"Good. And I will do some arrangements for your sitting room...and you would like the birds-of-paradise, as well?"

"My rooms haven't much light. Cut flowers would best. Perhaps some of that lavender?" There were beautiful mounds of lavender interspersed amongst other beds of flowering plants.

"Lavender is an excellent choice. I will add some other flowers from the greenhouse to create full and pleasing bouquets. I can have a couple house-elves deliver them. Where would you like them sent? Do you wish to meet the elves at the gates? Or in the Great Hall or the entry hall?"

Severus hesitated. He did not want the entire castle to know his business. "Can the house-elves bring them to the kitchens?"

"They can."

"Good. I'll tell my elf, Twiskett, to expect them. He will accept delivery. Have your elves ask for Twiskett."

On the walk back up to the house, they stopped in one of the greenhouses so that Johannes could show Severus a few of his latest hybrids.

"And this one," Johannes said, pointing out a bed of a spiny purplish plants covered with tiny star-shaped orange flowers, "is a hybrid that I developed for Murdoch. At this time, I am the only grower and he is the only apothecary whom I supply. It is a key ingredient in the Polyjuice Potion antidote, but he has also created a new muscle relaxant potion that uses it, and he's working on an improved variation of the usual Calming Draught."

Severus fingered one of the spiny purple leaves and looked over at Johannes.

"Go ahead," Johannes said with a nod.

Severus plucked the short, narrow leaf and rolled it between his fingers. It was bright purple, almost magenta, but Severus could now see that it had fine silvery-green stripes running its length. Some gel-like sap oozed from the broken end, feeling cool on Severus's fingertips. He crushed the spiny leaf a bit more and held it to his nose. The fragrance was bright and pungent, a bit like the scent of the Memory Plant, but with a slightly more citric edge to it. He exhaled through his nose then inhaled the scent again. He could detect an underlying fennel-like fragrance. It was pleasantly invigorating.

"Did you hybridize a Memory Plant with some others?" Severus asked. Memory Plants were dark green, although their leaves were spiky, but flatter than these.

"Yes. I call it *Commemoratum tyrensis*. This plant is the result of more than a decade of careful Charmed breeding of different species, bringing them to the point where I could bring them together and create this new specimen. Its flowers and leaves are both potent sources of certain magical essences, the leaves containing the most after the plant flowers and the leaves have turned from green to purple, as they are now. The timing was fortuitous," Johannes said, "as Murdoch required it to assist Albus and Minerva during that year in which Albus lay as dead in that sarcophagus."

"You knew of that plan?" Severus asked, surprised.

Johannes shook his head. "But Siofre and I suspected that not all was as it seemed, and we were almost unsurprised when Dumbledore appeared with his prisoners on that fateful day when the Dark Wizard was defeated." He took a deep breath, recalling that time, and looked off toward a stand of Brazilian Flurrynut trees, whose tufty tops almost scraped the top of the greenhouse. "Murdoch impressed upon me the urgency of his need, that he required this plant sooner than we had planned . . . I brought all of my energy and magic to the task, and in a few months from his request, I was able to present him with some fully mature specimens. And in the weeks after that, he developed the Polyjuice antidote. I did not know that at the time, of course, although we had spoken of that as one of the possible Potions uses, based on the magical attributes of the earlier specimens. He had already begun working on the antidote, but without this plant, his efforts were of limited success. And then a year later, Dumbledore arrived with a half dozen Death Eaters in tow, and we did our small part by holding them for him."

Clearly, he would need to pay more attention to Herbology publications, Severus thought as he surveyed the purple hybrids. He glanced at his host. Or simply pay more attention to specific Herbologists. No wonder Sprout consulted him, even now after being at Hogwarts for more than four decades herself.

"Would you like one of these, Professor?" Johannes asked.

"One of these? Yes, but Murdoch . . ."

"Speak with Murdoch. Work on some application other than what he is using them for. Or perhaps you might like to collaborate with him. I will send a few clippings with your flowers. And if Murdoch agrees...and I believe he will...I will send a plant or two down to Pomona for you, and you will have a steady supply to work with. I will emphasise to Pomona that they are for your use only."

"Thank you." This was a very generous offer, and Severus had the sense that the Ravenclaw expected nothing in return. He had rarely had time to work on experimental potions, but he had more time now than he had had in many years. Perhaps he might do some new work. The thought was invigorating. He would speak to Murdoch as soon as possible...perhaps the other Potions master would be willing to discuss the magical properties of the plant. It was something to look forward to.

The two wizards began to walk back up to the house.

"You spoke of the prisoners you held here," Severus said. "I had occasion to visit the St. Mungo's secure ward recently, and Hyatt Crabbe is still suffering from the effects of Madam Tyree's curses. He was back for treatment."

Johannes smirked. "He was a nasty one. I cannot feel much pity for the man. I think that if he hadn't hurt Duster, one of our elves, Siofre might have simply disabled him temporarily. But he angered her, and it is unsurprising if the curse is still affecting him."

"Apparently, his testicles disappear at intervals and then regrow. It is most painful, I understand," Severus replied with a smirk of his own. "And knowing what I know of the man, it is his just desserts. Perhaps less than what he deserved, if such a thing can be measured."

"I will have to tell Siofre; she will be interested. The MLE and St. Mungo's tried to get her to reverse the curse, but she said that it could only be reversed by the victim himself, from the inside-out, that he had brought it on himself and only his own intent could cure him." Johannes shrugged. "I do not know how literally to interpret her words, but she would not assist them. She was adamant, and I believe that they were afraid to insist."

Severus chuckled. "I do believe that I will avoid any confrontation with her, myself." He looked over at Johannes speculatively. "You are a brave wizard, to marry such a witch."

"A very, very lucky wizard," Johannes corrected as they approached a set of French doors leading into a conservatory. "And as for brave . . . persistent might be a better adjective. Will you stay for tea and biscuits, Professor?"

Severus withdrew his watch from his pocket and opened it. It was only a little after three. No doubt McGonagall would want to stay, but he could Apparate back to Hogwarts by himself. "I wouldn't wish to impose."

"If Siofre did not wish you to stay for tea, she would not have suggested it. I am sure that Eoghan would enjoy it. He has wanted to meet his famous cousin for some time. He is quite intrigued by you, and he also knows very few relatives from his Grandma Lydia's side of the family. It would be nice for him."

"Very well. I'd like that." He hesitated, then added, "Would you have any Headache Potion? I had a . . . a minor duelling incident this morning. Apparating this afternoon brought the headache back."

Johannes smiled broadly and opened the French doors for them. "We will serve Headache Potion with the cakes. And if Gareth plonks away on the piano with Eoghan, I may help myself to some, as well! Come through, Professor, and make yourself at home."

"I didn't know that Gareth could play the piano."

"He cannot," Johannes replied with a grin, "but do not try to tell him that!"

Severus returned the other wizard's smile and followed him into the house.

NEXT

Chapter Eighty-One: Lighting

Sunday, 28 March 1999

Severus tries to create a romantic atmosphere for his date with Poppy.

Characters: Severus Snape, Filius Flitwick, Poppy Pomfrey, others.

Note: If Siofre and Eoghan's names are causing your eyes to cross and your mental tongue to get tied in knots, the S in Siofre is pronounced like an "sh" (think of other names like "Sean" and "Siobhan"). When you see Eoghan, think Yew-an or Yo-an, and you'll be in good shape. It's a form of "Ewan." And, of course, the J in Johannes is pronounced like the y in "yo-yo."

I've been posting a new fic, [Charming the Scottish Garden](#), which focuses on Siofre and Johannes. Malcolm, Gertrude, Lydia, and others appear, as well.

Chapter Eighty-One: Lighting

Chapter 82 of 118

Severus tries to prepare a romantic evening for his date.



Chapter Eighty-One: Lighting

Sunday, 28 March 1999

Gareth and Severus took their leave of the Tyree family, and then walked a short way down the path to the main drive.

"You can Disapparate on your own from here," Gareth said, "but let me go first...*we* are heading back to Hogwarts, aren't we?"

"I am returning to Hogwarts, yes," Severus said. He bit back a sigh and thought of Poppy and her concerns. It probably was prudent to have Gareth accompany him. "Your company is welcome, if you would like to come with me."

"Directly to the gates?"

Severus shook his head. As long as they were being cautious, they might as well take additional measures. "To . . . where the Shrieking Shack used to be. Then we can walk up from there."

"Good idea. Give me a minute or two, then follow." Gareth took out his wand, winked at Severus, and Disapparated.

Severus stood there, feeling awkward and conspicuous as he waited to Disapparate. It had been a very pleasant afternoon, far better than he'd anticipated. He had accompanied Johannes up to Eoghan's rooms to fetch Gareth and the boy for tea, and Eoghan had showed him his library, his schoolroom, and his nursery, which looked less like a playroom and more like a repository for found objects...driftwood, shells, birds' nests, unusually shaped stones, feathers, snake skins, animal bones, potsherds, anything a rambling, inquisitive boy might collect and bring home with him.

Eoghan clearly wanted to show his new-found cousin more, but Johannes said that tea was ready and Siofre was waiting for them in the family dining room.

"Can he come up after?" Eoghan asked as they started down the stairs. "I want to show him my Charmed Obsidian Seer's Glass."

"I do not believe that Professor Snape has the time today, but we shall see," Johannes replied. "Did you finish your essay for your grandmother?"

"Aye, Gareth said it was good, too." He pulled a parchment from his pocket.

"As far as I could tell," Gareth amended. "I'm not a complete heathen, but I'm not very well-versed in these kinds of things, Bible stories and ethics and such. It seemed good to me."

"Would you read it, Professor?" Eoghan asked, holding the parchment out to Severus.

"I know nothing about the Bible. It would be pointless for you to seek my opinion," Severus said. He knew the story of David and Goliath and a few other iconic stories from the Bible...including, of course, the Christmas story...but he'd never actually read any of it himself, and they meant no more to him than any of the other myths and legends he'd heard as a child. Severus saw Eoghan's face fall, and then he saw how the boy immediately masked his disappointment with a neutral expression, and Severus felt a sudden stab of empathy for him. "However, it would be educational for me. I would like to read it, if I may. And I can judge whether it is well written, up to Hogwarts standards."

Eoghan's face lit up and he handed Severus his essay.

"I cannot, however, read it here on the stairs," Severus said, accepting the parchment. "I will read it later, before I leave."

Eoghan nodded in agreement.

"Run along ahead and tell your grandmother that we're on our way," Johannes said.

The boy was off like a shot, clattering down the stairs to the next landing, then mounting the broad bannister and sliding down to the next level. They could hear him jumping down the next set of stairs, full of energy.

"That was good of you, Professor," Johannes said softly. "He misses Lydia. She would always read everything for him before he gave it to Siofre. He also sees you as a connection to her, I think, since you are a Prince, too. His grandmother didn't have contact with many of her Prince relatives, and the few that she did have contact with all predeceased her. She was something of a . . . a nonconformist when she was young, you see."

Severus nodded. A nonconformist would not fit in well with a traditional pureblood family, even if they didn't blast her off the family tree as the Blacks did with any of their family embarrassments.

The tea was excellent, and although Severus confined himself to the sandwiches, he thought that the various cakes and biscuits looked very good. Gareth declared himself famished and ate enough for an army. Severus didn't know where the wizard put it all.

After reading Eoghan's essay and telling him that it was more than acceptable and quite edifying, Severus had thanked Siofre and Johannes for their hospitality and for the flowers. Johannes confirmed that a couple house-elves would deliver the flowers to Twiskett in the Hogwarts kitchens, then Severus and Gareth left to Disapparate from the grounds, since only family could Disapparate from inside the house.

After waiting as long as he could manage, feeling like a conspicuous fool the entire time, Severus Disapparated, following Gareth to the Shrieking Shack.

"Coast seems clear," Gareth said when Severus arrived. His wand was out, and he scanned the line of trees across the road. "I'll walk you up to the gates."

Severus nodded. "Thank you. That is, thank you for introducing me to your grandmother and Professor Birnbaum."

"And Eoghan."

"Of course."

"He seemed happy to meet you."

"He is a boy," Severus said dismissively.

Gareth shrugged, used to Severus by now.

"I do see, however, where you got your attraction to older witches," Severus said.

"Hm?"

"Your grandmother must be at least a few decades older than Birnbaum."

"I'm not related to him."

"He gave you a role model, not a direct inheritance," Severus said.

Gareth twitched one shoulder. "I didn't spend as much time with them as I would have liked. I doubt that their relationship had much to do with forming any of my own preferences. I suppose it made it more . . . normal and acceptable to me."

"That is what I meant. They are an odd couple," Severus said. People would no doubt look at him and at Poppy and think the same thing. "It must have been strange when they married, as I understand that was quite some time ago and Johannes was much younger then."

"I don't know whether it was strange or not," Gareth replied. "I wasn't even born at the time. And besides, Uncle Albus is even older than Aunt Minerva. Uncle Honnie's older than my dad was, and Grandmother Siofre is younger than Dumbledore."

"Yes, and that's a bit strange, too," Severus admitted, "but it's more normal for an older man to find a younger woman attractive than the other way around."

"What about Poppy?"

"She's a lot younger than Madam Tyree."

"Grandmother was younger once, too, and Poppy will age," Gareth pointed out.

"It's not the same. And the age difference isn't as great, anyway." True or not, Severus was still uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. He'd meant to speak only of Gareth's apparent preference for older witches.

To Severus's relief, Gareth didn't pursue the topic further, and the two continued their walk up to the gates.

"We might have been able to take the tunnel," Severus said, "if I knew where the entrance was on that side, and if it's not blocked."

"It's well-blocked by debris, and the fire collapsed part of the tunnel, as well," Gareth said. "I think they've closed up or warded almost all of the tunnels. That would have been during the summer, when you were recuperating."

"Minerva mentioned something about that." That had been in August, however, and he had not been well at the time. He couldn't remember which tunnels had been filled and which ones had simply been warded. He would have to ask her.

"So, this injury of yours, practising for our duel next month?"

Severus shook his head. "For the one with Albus."

"What's the difference?" Gareth asked, looking puzzled.

Severus stopped and looked around. "A big difference," he said softly.

"What, I'm a powderpuff and he's not so easy to beat?" Gareth asked, still confused.

"No. Look, McGonagall . . . it's not definite yet, and we're not saying anything to anyone, but Flitwick had the idea that Dumbledore and I could have a different sort of duel."

Gareth waited. "And?"

"We may not do it, but I'm preparing for a wandless duel. That's why Flitwick's *Mulcare* hit me so hard. I'm trying new wandless spells. My wandless blocks aren't always as effective as they should be."

"A wandless duel? I don't know whether that would be the most boring sight in the world or the most exciting," Gareth said. "With the two of you, I'm leaning toward 'exciting.'"

Severus shrugged and began walking again. "I still haven't decided. It's up to me. I don't want to make a fool of myself."

"Unlikely. So that's why you and Flitwick are doing so much duelling. I didn't think it was just so that you could thoroughly humiliate me in front of my friends and family," Gareth said with a grin.

Severus glanced over at Gareth. "I wouldn't humiliate you. Not intentionally."

"I know, bad joke. I wasn't suggesting you actually would. So . . . after our duel, want to practise with me? Or even before."

"It might put me at an advantage during our scheduled duel if we were to practise together before," Severus pointed out.

"That's fine...and it might not, actually. It's not as though I'd cast the same spells that I would if you had a wand."

"I shall consider your offer."

"Excited about tonight, then? Big date with Poppy and all?"

"I am looking forward to it, although I have some slight concerns. I want it to go well."

"I hope it does. It sounds as though Johannes is doing some nice flowers for you."

Severus nodded. "It was generous of him. I feel I should pay him, but he would not accept, though I offered more than once."

"Do something nice for them, then. I know: take Eoghan up on his invitation and go for a visit after they get back from their Easter holiday. If you feel awkward about it, we could both go. He's a good lad, just a bit different."

"Accepting their hospitality a second time would put me in their debt again," Severus said.

"No, no. Don't look at it like that. Eoghan would like to get to know you, that was clear. Uncle Honnie and Grandmother Siofre would be happy to have Eoghan get to know you better. You'd be doing them a favour."

"Hmph. I doubt that, but I will consider it."

"Good. So . . . see you sometime this week for a drink?"

"I don't know . . . next week, perhaps, after Easter."

"Right. Or on Saturday. If you're going to Uncle Albus's dinner party. He said you were invited."

Severus nodded. He had almost forgotten, though Dumbledore would no doubt remind him of it. "Yes. I have said I will be there."

"Good. See you then, if not before. Have a good time tonight, and say 'hi' to Poppy for me!"

Gareth waited to Disapparate until Severus had opened the gate, stepped through, and closed it behind him again with a clank.

Severus hurried up the drive. He wanted to see Twiskett before dinner in the Great Hall. Not only would Twiskett have to be told about the flowers being delivered, but Severus wanted to go over the menu with the house-elf once more. It was simple, but Severus didn't want there to be any problems with the food. He also needed to check that Twiskett had delivered the candles as he'd requested. It was an unnecessary exercise, Severus recognised, since Twiskett could hardly have failed to have performed such an elementary task, but he also wanted to begin setting them up around the room.

An hour later, a grumpy Severus stalked into the Great Hall. Twiskett had not shirked his duties, and in addition, three beautiful flower arrangements and two bird-of-paradise plants had arrived, but Severus was still grumpy. The room just didn't look right. He had even had Twiskett bring table linens and lay the table in hopes that that would help. It hadn't.

He picked at his dinner. He wasn't particularly hungry after having had sandwiches so late in the afternoon, but he also wanted to be able to eat with Poppy when she arrived. Severus scowled. When she arrived to his gloomy sitting room. Perhaps the solution would be to use some lamps in addition to the candles, but he'd always thought that candles were supposed to be romantic. In his rooms, however, they seemed something other than romantic, and he didn't know why.

"Not hungry this evening, Severus?" Minerva asked.

"No."

"Did you have a bad day?"

"No."

"You were out."

"Mm."

Minerva shrugged and ate some of her stew, used to Severus's moods.

"I met your grandmother today," Severus said, feeling slightly guilty about his curtness, even though Minerva hadn't seemed offended by it.

"Really? How was that?" Minerva asked.

"I met Gareth in Edinburgh. He brought me with him." Severus took a swallow of water. "I also met . . . Eoghan." He didn't want to call the boy his cousin. The relationship was too distant...and too new...for him to think of him that way.

"Did Gareth tell you that your great-great-grandfather and Eoghan's great-great-grandmother were brother and sister?"

"He told me we were cousins of some sort, and Professor Birnbaum told me that Eoghan was Lydia Prince's great-great-grandson. He said we're also related through the Longbottoms." Severus tried to keep from grimacing at the thought that there was any Longbottom blood flowing through his veins.

"Oh yes, you are. Lydia's and Bertrand's sons married Longbottom sisters...Bertrand was Lydia's brother. Sally Longbottom was Eoghan's great-grandmother, and . . . what was her name . . ." Minerva thought a moment as she chewed a chunk of potato. "Louisa, I think. Yes, Louisa Longbottom was your great-grandmother, your grandfather's mother."

"I didn't know that she was a Longbottom."

"Yes, and then your grandfather, as you know, married Mabelle Black, who was Phineas Nigellus Black's granddaughter. Her father was Phineas Black, whom some Blacks did not approve of. I believe that his name was actually blasted from the family tree, as though that could have erased his existence," Minerva said, smiling wryly.

"Though my mother had mentioned them, I had never even met the Black sisters before I came to school."

"That's probably one reason why...although I believe that Mabelle was seen as having married the proper sort of wizard."

Severus snorted. "My grandfather was a mean son-of-a-Crup, if that's 'proper,'" he replied.

"I didn't say that he was popular or well-liked, just that he had the right background and held the right kinds of beliefs to be accepted amongst the pureblood racists. Of course, then his daughter does the unthinkable and marries a Muggle."

"My grandfather hated my father." Severus paused, thinking. "I don't think that he even liked my mother."

"I didn't know your mother well, but I had the impression that she didn't care much about the opinions of others. Or if she did care, she'd decided . . ."

"Yes? Decided what?"

"Decided she'd never fit in, so she stopped trying to. I actually had heard, though, that she was engaged to be married to some older cousin. It was a surprise to learn she'd married someone else."

"Did you ever meet my father?"

Minerva shook her head. "I don't know anyone who did. I'm sorry I can't tell you anything about him."

"I know all I need to know," Severus replied. He looked down the table and saw Flitwick leaving his seat. Flitwick had said he'd deliver the Charmed musical box after dinner. "Thank you for clarifying the way in which I am related to Eoghan. Have a good evening, Headmistress." He pushed back from the table.

"You, too, Severus...and when Poppy returns to the castle, you should have her check you over. Filius told me about your injuries."

"I am fine, but thank you for your concern." Severus nodded at Minerva, then turned and quickly strode from the table.

As soon as he entered his sitting room, Severus flicked a finger to light the floor lamp next to his favourite armchair. After lighting the candles he'd set out around the room and on the table, he waved his hand and extinguished the lamp. It was no better than it had seemed before he'd left for dinner, even with the birds-of-paradise set on either side of the fireplace and the bouquets on the table. He frowned. Perhaps it was . . . his aura. His ugly personality leached from him and into the shadows around the room. He smirked humourlessly.

There was a rap on the door. Flitwick, no doubt. He opened the door with a crook of his index finger.

"Good evening, Severus!" Filius's cheerful voice came from behind the large rosewood box that Levitated in front of him. It was massive, much larger than Severus had expected, anyway, almost as tall as Flitwick and equally wide as it was tall, though it was only about two feet deep. "Where would you like it?"

"Er . . . beside the sofa," Severus said, carefully moving one of the small end tables so that its candles didn't tip over. He set the table down beside the bedroom door. The candles cast even more strange shadows in their new location.

Filius directed the musical box to settle to the left of the sofa. "There! Now, I created a few sub-libraries for you so that you can easily select several musical pieces at once. I'll show you how to do that yourself...it's not terribly difficult, magically, but the process has several steps. I wrote them down for you." He pulled out some parchments from his robe pocket. "Here's a list of all the music on the box, and one with the individual play lists. I left on the ones I'd made for myself, years ago, and then did three others with some selections I thought you might enjoy. The first one I created for you has music that I know Poppy would like...that's the fifth list on that parchment."

Severus took the parchments and looked at them. Creating play lists looked complicated but not difficult.

"How do you add new music?" Severus asked.

"Well, this is an old musical box, as I mentioned." Filius caressed the inlaid surface of the box. "It's quite a good one and can create a very nice symphonic sound, but it is difficult to add new pieces to it, not like with the newer models. You can purchase specially Charmed discs to add to it, but that takes more space, and there's not a lot of space left in this one. The other method requires having a master Music Charmer place new charms on the existing discs. You could add hundreds more pieces that way."

Severus nodded, looking at the parchment with the lists of music. There was a lot of Baroque and Classical music, and a lot of music by Romantic composers, but there was quite a bit of music from the twentieth century, too. There was very little popular music, though, and none from any point after the late sixties. The play lists that Filius had created for him were acceptable, and Severus thought that it was appropriate for his date with Poppy.

"Thank you for loaning me the box, Professor."

"Well, I have a few . . . I do like this one, although it's a bit old-fashioned now. But I always liked the box itself."

"It is lovely wood," Severus said appreciatively.

"If you would like it, I would like to give it to you...I don't use it anymore," Filius said, cutting off Severus's protest, "not as a music box, just as a pretty piece of furniture, actually, but it does have very nice sound, and you don't have one. It was one of the better models back in the day . . . I got it in . . . my, in ninety-nine! One hundred years ago." He sighed. "It's hard to believe it's been that long. I bought it in Hannover whilst I was at the Steinhof Akademie. I would like you to enjoy it."

"Thank you, I am sure I will. It is beautiful."

Filius twitched his wand and the room filled with the sound of Ravel. Severus smiled. Filius twitched his wand again, and the music changed to Debussy; another twitch, and the music faded away.

"You have good acoustics," Filius remarked. He looked around him.

"Then that's about all that's good about this room," Severus said, slumping onto the couch. He gestured to the room. "I wanted to create a . . . a pleasant atmosphere. I wanted romantic, but this . . . it's not romantic, it's, it's..."

"Just a little creepy?" Filius suggested.

Severus frowned. "Yeah. Creepy. A funeral home would be a more romantic setting," he said with a moan.

Filius giggled at the apt description. "It's easy to fix, though, Severus." He looked around. "All the candles are white. Which could be good, but here, it just doesn't help with the basic atmosphere of . . . creepiness. And they're almost all on the same level, most of them very low...even for me. They're all evenly spaced, too. It gives the feeling of a mausoleum, and the resulting shadows all are . . . creepy."

"Thanks," Severus said morosely. He'd wanted romantic and had created creepy instead. Even a sweet little wizard like Flitwick recognised how ghastly the room looked. He couldn't manage anything good.

"May I help?"

Severus shrugged one shoulder. He'd wanted to do something special for Poppy. He'd spent the entire day, it seemed, finding flowers and preparing for his date. "I suppose."

Filius waved his wand, and all the candles turned different colours, deep burgundy, forest green, china blue, pale bronze, sage green . . . subtle colours, not the bright, Flitwickian, rainbow colours that Severus might have expected. Filius rearranged the candles so that they were on different levels, some at Severus's head level, then the Charms master waved his wand so that some of the simple candlesticks were now candelabra; one more wave of his wand, and one of the lavender bouquets settled on the coffee table and another floated over and landed on one of the end tables, leaving only the lilacs on the large table.

Filius smiled happily at Severus's expression of surprised pleasure. "I suggest you also get a chandelier. I would just Transfigure one, but I think that your house-elf could find a nice one somewhere and hang it over your table for you. Something that you could put some long white candles in."

"This is much better . . . thank you. I didn't know why it looked so utterly dismal. I thought I might just have to turn on the lamps and get rid of the shadows. I thought . . . I thought . . . maybe it was me. My darkness. My darkness in the shadows," Severus said, ending with a whisper.

"No, Severus." Filius stepped over to him and put his hand on his knee and patted it. "You have a lot of brightness in you, a lot of light. You just don't always let it out."

Severus barely nodded.

"Now, I'm sure you want to finish getting ready for your date," Filius said cheerfully. "Change clothes, that sort of thing."

Severus looked at Filius. Change clothes. He'd thought he might shave, but he hadn't considered changing clothes. "Yes, of course. Thank you for your help. I'll have Twiskett install a chandelier over the table as you suggest."

"Don't forget to have Poppy check your head wound! And your chest!" Filius said as he left.

Twenty minutes later, and Severus had showered, shaved, and put more salve on the yellowing bruise on his chest, and he was now standing in front of his dresser debating his tie. He looked at the narrow black bow tie in his left hand and at the slightly wider silvery grey bow tie in his right. He frowned slightly, then opened the shallow top drawer of the dresser. The green cloth caught his eye immediately, and he drew out the silk cravat that Minerva had given him before Christmas.

He did his best to recreate the tie that Twiskett had done for him the previous December, tucking the long ends into his silver-grey waistcoat. It took a few attempts before Severus was pleased, but when the cravat looked sophisticated to him, and not like a child's bib, he took out the garnet stick pin that Dumbledore had given him for his birthday, and he stuck it through the centre of the cravat.

As Severus shrugged on his jacket...a relatively traditional black suit jacket, but his newest one...he heard noises coming from the sitting room. He opened the door and saw Twiskett standing beside the table wiggling his fingers at the ceiling, installing a simple wrought-iron chandelier over the table. It had six slender arms, each ending in a flower-shaped candle holder.

It wasn't glittering gold and crystal, but it was appropriate for a stone sitting room in the dungeons. At some point, he'd have to think about other changes he could make to his rooms. He didn't want anything as lavish as Slughorn had had, but just a little redecorating might go a long way. Thinking about redecorating reminded him of Gareth. He hadn't even asked the other wizard what progress he'd made in the house at Spinner's End. Couldn't have got very far, though. He'd had less than a day...although he had mentioned house-elves. A couple house-elves could do a lot in very little time. McGonagall might be moving his computer in in just a few days. There was the matter of the telephone line, though. He didn't know how long it would take McGonagall to sort that out. There hadn't been a phone in the house since his father had left them.

After inspecting the various platters of food that Twiskett had Apparated in, Summoning it with house-elf magic, Severus thanked Twiskett, who nodded and smiled before Disapparating.

It was five minutes before eight. Severus could feel his heart beating faster. Although he didn't wish for the return of the days of the Dark Lord, it seemed to him that he had been less nervous before a meeting with him than he was now. The Dark Lord could only torture and murder him; Poppy . . . Poppy could break his heart. He shook his head. He wouldn't think about these things. Poppy cared about him; he had to believe that he had a chance with her, whether he deserved it or not.

He opened the bottle of wine, a cabernet from the Hogwarts cellars. It was nothing particularly special, but none of the wines in the school cellars were bad. If he had planned further ahead, he could have purchased something special, but this would do.

A moment later, there was a muted knock on his door. He set down the bottle, licked his lips, took a deep breath, and crossed over to the door. He opened the door to see Poppy waiting, smiling up at him.

His own smile froze on its way to his lips. Poppy was in her pinny, a grey robe, and carried her potions basket. It looked as though she was visiting him in her capacity as matron. He blinked, then stepped back to let her in.

"Hi, Severus! You look very nice!" She looked around her as she set her basket on the floor. "Oh, this is lovely!"

"Thank you . . . did Flitwick or the Headmistress say something to you?" he asked, looking at the potions basket.

"Hm? No, should they have?" She reached behind her and unbuttoned her pinny, then pulled it off over her head. Severus could now see that the grey robe was just a very loose, lightweight over-robe, and under it, she was wearing the lilac-coloured robes he liked so well. She saw his glance at her basket. "I thought that would be convenient for bringing your little present...not your surprise, that still has to wait. Go ahead, take a look." She shrugged off the robe and looked around for a place to put it, but Severus took the robe and pinny and sent them to hang on the hooks by the door.

Poppy bent over and opened the basket. "Wine . . . I don't know if we'll want it tonight, but my brother-in-law's cousin has a vineyard in Cornwall, and so Dylan and Violet always have some nice wines on hand. I filched a couple for you," she said with a wink. She handed him the two bottles.

"Thank you. I opened a bottle, but we could have one of these instead."

"No, let's wait. We can always open one of these later." She looked around her, smiling. "The room looks very nice. And so do you." She reached up and stroked his cheek, then ran her hand down his chest. "Very handsome."

"You are lovely...and I have something for you." Severus took her hand and brought her over to the table. "These are for you. Lilacs . . . and they match your robes."

Poppy's smile grew. "So they do!" She leaned in and inhaled deeply. "Oh, beautiful. They smell gorgeous."

"I saw them and thought they were perfect for you." He gazed into her eyes. "They are delicate and sweet, and yet strong. I also thought they were suitable in other respects. As the carnations were."

"Lilacs . . . I remember lilacs," she said softly, blushing slightly. *The first emotions of love.* She turned her head and looked at the flowers again. "Thank you. It looks as though there are a lot of lovely things to eat, too!"

"I hope you are hungry. I chose things you seemed to have enjoyed at Flitwick's party, and a few other things that I thought would go well. Spanakopita, stuffed vine leaves, falafel, a yoghurt sauce, and there's some individual moussakas, too."

"A nice salad, too, I see. Mm, it all does look delicious. I didn't have any dinner, either, so I'll certainly enjoy this."

"Then we will eat," Severus said. Remembering Filius's gift, he asked, "Would you like some music?"

"That would be nice."

Severus glanced at the parchment he'd placed on the sideboard, refreshing his memory on how to start the box playing the first play list. Poppy walked around to the musical box and ran her hand over the top.

"Isn't this Filius's?" Poppy asked.

"It was a gift. He gave it to me today, actually. I asked if he had one I could borrow, but I did not anticipate that he would give one to me." Severus drew his wand and waved it in a delicate gesture, imitating Filius's slight flick of his wand. When nothing happened, he tried again, this time making the gesture just a bit broader, and the music began with a bright piece by Vivaldi, perfect music for dining.

"What a lovely gift," Poppy said.

Severus nodded. "Would you like to eat now?"

"I would, but first, you asked me if Filius or Minerva had spoken to me. They didn't, but I did return to the infirmary to find a report of an injury to the Head of Slytherin. I'd like to take a minute to check you over before we eat."

"That's not necessary..."

"I will not be able to enjoy the evening if I'm thinking about it," Poppy said firmly. "So unless you've seen a Healer or something like that whilst you were out today, I'm going to check your injuries now. Flitwick's report mentioned your head and your chest."

Severus sighed and nodded. "I hit my head against a stone wall. The hex hit me here," he said, indicating the upper portion of the left side of his chest. "I've used a potion on it twice, though, and it feels better."

"Sit down here on the sofa and let me look at your head." Poppy moved her hand over his head, not touching it, but then her fingers gently tapped one spot. "Here?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt when I touch it?" She pressed the spot lightly.

"No, not really . . . I feel it, but it's only slightly sore."

"Mm." She waved her wand. "It looks as though it should be fine. Let me just . . ." She waved her wand once more, and Severus felt a cooling sensation on the healing wound. Poppy pressed the spot again. "How's that?"

He shook his head. "Doesn't hurt at all now."

"Good. And your chest?"

"I just put more potion on it about a half hour ago. It's fine."

Poppy still pointed her wand at his chest and flicked, causing a purple glow followed by a stream of silver symbols. She flinched. "Ooo, that must have hurt! It is healing well, although I could give you another treatment and speed things up more."

"My head hurt more, so I didn't really notice. I really think we should eat now," Severus said. "May I pour you a glass of wine?" He stood up and went over to the table.

"I'd like that, thanks." She accepted the glass and waited for Severus to pour his own.

He raised his glass to her. "To you, Poppy." He touched his glass to hers.

"Thank you, Severus. You went to so much effort tonight...it's wonderful. It really is."

Severus set down his glass. "You are hungry, though." He pulled out her chair for her. "I am glad you like it. I was . . . I admit I was nervous"

"It all looks wonderful."

"If you had been here an hour ago, you would have met quite a different sight," Severus said candidly.

"Really?" Poppy bit into one of the dolmades. "Mm, this is delicious. So what would I have seen?"

Severus gave her a crooked smile. "It was creepy, to quote Flitwick."

"Creepy?" Poppy looked around her. "How? Did you have . . . spiders or something?"

Severus shook his head and swallowed some tomato and feta cheese. "I was trying to . . . I wanted to make this evening special for you. But these rooms . . . they are not naturally romantic. And I had a difficult time making it romantic, I'm afraid. I tried, but . . . my efforts had a peculiar effect. It looked like a mausoleum. Also according to Professor Flitwick."

Poppy had trouble swallowing her wine as she struggled to keep from laughing. Finally, she was able to let out a laugh. "A creepy mausoleum? Is that really what Filius said?"

Severus smiled. "I don't believe that he used the two words in the same sentence, but yes, he said that it was creepy...which I already knew...and that it looked like a mausoleum. It was partly all of the white candles." He choked out a laugh. "And they were all casting strange shadows. I was in despair!"

Poppy laughed again. "Well, it looks lovely now! And I appreciate it all even more knowing how hard you worked at it." She reached over and took Severus's free hand. "You are so very sweet. I am glad we have this time together."

"So am I. Thank you for accepting my invitation."

"I was happy to have a date with Severus S. Snape. Would that be Severus Salazar Snape?" Poppy asked.

Severus barked a laugh. "No."

Poppy shrugged. "I had to try the obvious one first. So now it's your turn."

"Poppy Pearl Pomfrey."

"No. Shall I guess again, or should we wait?" Poppy asked.

"If you have a guess, then guess," Severus said.

"Severus Silenus Snape."

Severus shook his head. "Poppy . . . Primrose Pomfrey."

Poppy tried to keep a straight face. "No. Let's see . . . Severus Septimus Snape?"

"No...how many is that?"

"Four, I think. At what point do we give up?"

"We don't...unless you want to quit."

"No, no. Want to try another? If you have another?"

Severus smirked. "Poppy Posy Pomfrey?"

Poppy couldn't help her giggle. "No, even my parents wouldn't pick that one. I'll go one more, and if I'm right, I win and get to pick my prize."

"All right...but if you're not, then we continue the competition later."

"Severus Silvester Snape," Poppy said firmly.

"And that's another 'no,'" Severus said. "Neither of us is doing very well."

"I'm not ready to win yet, anyway," Poppy replied. "I haven't completely settled on what my prize should be."

"I have . . . and I believe you would enjoy losing," Severus said in a low voice.

"I do prefer winning."

"I don't believe you would remember that you lost."

"Hmm . . . you intrigue me, Sev, but I still want to win."

Severus looked at Poppy's plate. "There's dessert, if you'd like some."

"Perhaps later."

"Would you like to dance? I think this is a waltz."

"I would love to." She stood as he gave her his hand.

Severus looked down into her eyes. "Do you remember when we danced at Halloween? I enjoyed it. Dancing with you. I didn't appreciate it as much as I should have, but I did enjoy it. And I remember thinking how lovely you were . . ." He gave a quick grin. "Apart from your costume, that is. You were the only witch there whom Minerva didn't have to coerce me to dance with, you know."

Poppy laughed. "I suppose that does say something! But I doubt that it was a burden to dance with Helena Benetti, at least."

"She is very kind."

"And beautiful."

"Yes. But I would prefer to look at you, to dance with you, to . . . hold you in my arms," Severus whispered.

"I was very glad when you asked me to dance, though it seemed to me that you weren't as glad."

Severus stroked her cheek. "I wish I hadn't been so blind for so long. I wish that I had asked you to dance again, had brought you to dinner sooner, had begun much earlier to show you the attention you deserve." He kissed her forehead and then her temple, his lips moving gently over her skin. "I wish that when you gave me my birthday present, I had asked you to come to lunch with me. I wish that we had already had many dates, and that I had truly appreciated you before I . . . before I flirted with you. Or that I had flirted sooner."

His lips met Poppy's, and he brought both arms around her, pulling her close. He held her and continued to kiss her, pleased with her warm response, the way her hands massaged his back and her lips moved against his. He remembered his resolve to demonstrate to her that he wanted more from their relationship than just a sexual fling. Gently and somewhat reluctantly, he broke their kiss and nuzzled her hair.

"Dessert?" he asked softly.

Poppy nodded.

"I thought I'd call for coffee...or tea if you would prefer."

"I don't want to be awake all night," Poppy said, sitting down on the couch.

"Decaffeinated coffee, then? Twiskett can have it ready in just a few minutes."

"All right."

Severus called Twiskett, and the house-elf nodded silently when Severus asked for the coffee, and then Disapparated with a short crack.

"Did you have a good day, Sev? Apart from the duelling practice?" Poppy asked as he sat down next to her.

"The duelling practice was fine, actually. Instructional. Later, I met McGonagall...he sends his greetings...and we went to the Tyree estate." He gestured toward the flowers. "That is where I obtained your flowers."

Poppy smiled. "How is Johannes? I haven't seen him in months...not since summer, at least. And Siofre?"

"They both seemed well. I had not met them before today, so I have no basis to compare, but they did seem well."

"Did you meet Eoghan, too?"

Severus nodded.

"You know, I think that he's related to you in some way, though I'm not sure how. He even looks a little bit like you did at his age."

"I made his acquaintance, yes, and he is a cousin. I do not know how to judge the degree of our relationship, since we are cousins two ways, but obviously we are not first cousins." He nodded grudgingly. "I do think there is a little family resemblance. It is superficial."

"Resemblances are that way. Did you have a good time?"

"It was fine. The grounds are impressive, as are the greenhouses. What about you? How was your visit to your sister's?"

"Oh, I enjoyed it. We didn't do very much, but we talked a lot, you know."

A tray with coffee, cream, sugar, and two coffee cups and saucers appeared on the low table in front of them.

"I'll fetch the dessert," Severus said.

Poppy poured their coffee. "What is it?"

"Baklava. Very sweet, but I thought you might like it." He set down two plates in front of them, each with a small square of the honey-laden pastry.

"It's lovely in small amounts, but it is rich. This has been a wonderful meal. Thank you, Severus."

"I want you to know how much I want to spend time with you, how much I enjoy it and appreciate it."

"I enjoy it, too. Very much," Poppy said softly. She reached over, caressed him, and ran her fingers through his hair, then she pulled him down into a gentle kiss. "Very much."

His arms went around her, and they both forgot the baklava.

Author's Note: It's been a little while since I updated this fic, but in the meantime, I posted a few new chapters of [Charming the Scottish Garden](#), and I posted a new one-shot to the ["Cheering Charms"](#) set of flashfics, called, ["It's not the heat."](#)

Chapter Eighty-Two: An End to a Perfect Evening

Chapter 83 of 118

Severus and Poppy's date comes to an end.



Chapter Eighty-Two: An End to a Perfect Evening

Sunday, 28 March 1999

"Mm, that was good," Poppy said, putting down her fork. "I can't remember the last time I had baklava."

Severus swallowed his sip of coffee and nodded. "I am glad you enjoyed it. Would you like the rest of mine?"

"No, no. I'm sure it will keep. You can enjoy it tomorrow. Or if you don't want it, maybe Twiskett would."

"I could have it with some coffee tomorrow afternoon before my second-year class. The sugar might help me through the double session," Severus said with a wry smile.

Poppy laughed. "Be careful about relying on sweets, though, Sev, or you'll begin carrying peppermint pillows and lemon sherbets in your pockets just to make it through the day!"

Severus made a face of mock horror and shuddered. "Perhaps I should give it to Twiskett then, if there's a slippery slope to such a fate!"

"I think you could avoid it," Poppy said. "And if you find yourself tempted, stop by the Hospital Wing, and I'll distract you from it."

"I think I'd like that." Severus leaned toward her and kissed her lips lightly. "Mm, sweet." He kissed her again, then his tongue met hers, and he put his arms around her, pressing her to him.

Poppy returned his kiss, but then she gently pulled away, kissing his cheek softly before sitting back and resting her head on his shoulder.

"This has been a perfect evening. I really enjoyed it. Thank you, Severus."

"I'm glad." Severus nuzzled her hair.

"This morning, I said that we could talk more tonight..."

"If you don't want to talk right now, that's fine. It can wait." Severus said. He didn't want this pleasant moment to end, even if it meant more days of wondering where he stood with her.

Poppy tilted her head and kissed him softly. "I wanted to tell you something, Severus, very clearly so that there would be no misunderstanding about it."

Severus swallowed and braced himself for the blow that was sure to come, delivered gently, but still...

"The last time that Quin and I were out..."

"Please, Poppy, I don't want to hear this. It's not necessary." Severus pulled away and waved his hand to move their dessert plates back over to the larger table. He did not want to know that Poppy was having a fling with Quin...he knew that much already, and he didn't want to hear about their sex life, if they had one. He didn't want that confirmed. It was hard enough to avoid imagining what kind of lover Quin must be, his hands and mouth all over Poppy's body . . .

Poppy sighed. "I need to tell you this for your own peace of mind, Sev." She waited until he was looking at her again before she continued. "I told him that I didn't want to date him at this time. We might still see each other, of course, but we're just friends." When Severus didn't say anything or react in anyway, Poppy said, "I mean to let you know that we won't be engaging in any physical intimacy, either."

Several thoughts seemed to enter Severus's mind at the same time, but one thought overrode the others: this confirmed that Quin and Poppy must have had a sexual relationship. He tried to concentrate on his relief that Poppy had told Quin that she didn't want to date him, but he couldn't get the image from his mind of the two of them together. He looked away.

"Severus?" Poppy reached out and touched his cheek, trying to encourage him to look at her. "I thought . . . you seemed unsure about whether Quin and I were dating. You seemed . . . as though you might be a little jealous. I thought you should know that we're not dating . . . or anything like that."

Severus nodded. "Thank you."

"Well, this is more awkward than I'd envisioned it," Poppy said.

"I did wonder," Severus admitted. He looked at Poppy and tried to smile. It couldn't have been easy for her to have brought up that subject. "So . . . this, for us, what does this mean to you?"

"It means that when we're together, you won't be wondering whether I'm going to be seeing some other wizard after leaving you," Poppy said.

Severus's expression brightened.

"Now, I'm not saying that we should be serious about each other, Sev. Well, we should be *serious*, in the sense that I do take you seriously, you know, and our relationship, too. But . . . how to put this . . ."

"That you would like to move more slowly?" Severus suggested.

Poppy nodded. "I need to be careful. We need to be careful. But more than that, I want to really enjoy our time together and have our relationship have time to grow. We know each other well in some ways...very well, in fact...and have known each other for a long time, but being together, together like this, it's different."

Severus nodded. He wanted the time, too. He wanted to be able to take the time to court her, to show her how much she meant to him, to show her that he wanted her beyond a mere fling or sexual affair. He remembered his vision of the two of them grown old together, quietly happy with each other.

"I want us to take time, too," Severus said. "The time I spend with you . . . it makes me happy, Poppy. I feel . . . I feel good."

Poppy smiled happily. "That is what I want. And it makes me happy, too." She leaned up and kissed him. "I'm not saying that I expect you to be . . . sexually exclusive with me, Sev. I'm not demanding that of you...although if you do begin seeing someone else, dating someone or even just having a sexual affair, well, I'd rather that you told me and we stopped seeing each other. I don't want to be demanding of you, but if we're going to do this, see each other, I don't, I can't, that is..."

"Sh, Poppy, sh." Severus caressed her cheek. "I won't be dating anyone else or having any kind of sexual fling with another witch as long as I'm with you. I don't even want to have sex with anyone else, even once. You are my focus, Poppy. You are the witch I want to be with. So do not worry about my . . . my having affairs. I wouldn't hurt you like that. I hope you know that." He might be a little clueless when it came to romance and serious relationships, but he wasn't so blind not to see that Poppy was worried about being hurt, and he wasn't so self-involved or amoral that he thought that it was acceptable for a wizard to have flings with others whilst telling a witch that they were dating seriously.

"I didn't think you would, but I thought it best to be clear," Poppy replied.

"I don't want us to have any misunderstandings about that, either." He smiled slowly. She had told Quin that she didn't want to date him. Quin, the great, handsome, sensitive, wealthy Quin MacAirt. She wanted to date him, instead, and not Quin. Poppy was probably a little crazy to pass up the paragon of all wizarding and masculine virtues in favour of a scarred former Death Eater and spy, but he would be good to her. He would do his utmost to make sure that she had no regrets about dating him. "You are too special to me," he whispered. "Very special."

Poppy kissed him once softly, then she put her arm around his neck and pulled him toward her, kissing him again.

She was so warm, so beautiful, so soft, so sexy . . . Severus caressed her and returned her kisses, pulling her onto his lap and holding her close. Finally, Poppy broke away breathlessly and pressed her forehead into his shoulder as she caught her breath.

"I think it's getting late," Severus said softly. "I'd suggest you stay, but, well . . ."

Poppy nodded into his shoulder and turned her face to look up at him. "It is late."

"Why don't you use the Floo back to the Hospital Wing," he suggested, "and avoid all those stairs? Bring your flowers with you." He kissed her flushed cheek.

"That's a good idea," Poppy said, moving off his lap to sit beside him. She glanced over at the table where the lilacs still stood in their large crystal vase. "The flowers are beautiful. And perfect. This entire evening has been perfect."

Severus kissed her once more lightly, and he had a sudden moment of complete clarity. He now understood precisely why he wanted to go more slowly. It wasn't simply to show to Poppy that he wanted more with her than just a hot sexual affair: it was because he could appreciate all of these other moments, all of these wonderful moments with her, and experience their perfection. He could savour all the nuances of his emotions for her, and without having his sexual passion for her overwhelming them. He could even enjoy his physical arousal without giving in to the urge to increase it and satisfy his desire.

He smiled at Poppy. If he were to tell her that he was glad she was leaving, she would surely misunderstand. Instead, he said, "This evening ~~was~~ perfect. I hope we can spend another one like it soon."

"So do I, but before I go, I want to take a look at your chest...not for my personal pleasure, you understand," Poppy said with a wink. "Some other time for that."

"You don't need to, I've been using potion..."

"Yes, and you know as well as I do that topical potions work better when they're applied by someone else," Poppy said. "Besides, what kind of friend would I be if I left you when I could help? Hmm?" She reached for his tie. "I like this cravat. The pin is nice, too."

"Albus gave me the pin for my birthday. Here, let me."

Severus carefully removed the pin from his tie and sent it to rest on the coffee table, then he loosened the tie and removed it. He let her help him off with his jacket, and as she draped it over the back of a chair, he unbuttoned his waistcoat.

"Oh, I like these!" She ran a finger down one of his braces and laughed. "They're cute! Surely you didn't buy these for yourself."

Severus shook his head. "No, but I do like them. Minerva gave them to me. It is rather amusing to know that I have little snakes slithering along them, but no one else can see."

Poppy chuckled again. "I can see that I shall have to purchase you an article of clothing! Stickpin from Albus, cravat and braces from Minerva. I'll have to find something to compete, I think!"

"If you don't want me to wear them..."

"I'm teasing you, Sev. Just teasing. I do like them. The little snakes, especially," she said. "But it gives me a good excuse to buy something for you if I see anything that strikes my fancy that I think you'd like."

Severus nodded. "I would wear it."

"You don't even know what I might choose for you," Poppy said. "If you think it's atrocious, don't wear it just for me. Otherwise, I'll think you liked it and keep buying you the same kind of thing!"

"All right. I'll let you know if I don't like something," Severus said.

"Good. You probably ought to take your shirt off, all the way, actually. I don't want to get potion on it...it's a very nice shirt." She fingered its fabric.

Severus smiled. He was glad he'd decided to shower and change. This was his best shirt, and his newest, one he'd bought just a couple months before.

"Where's the potion?" Poppy asked.

"In the bathroom...on the sink, I think." Severus stood and started taking off his shirt as Poppy fetched the potion from the bathroom.

When she returned, he was folding his shirt over his jacket and waistcoat on the back of the chair.

"That does look very sore. It must have been quite some hex that Filius cast," Poppy said, removing the lid from the tin of salve. "Sit down so that I can reach it more easily."

Severus sat back down on the sofa and let out an appreciative sigh as Poppy began to smooth some of the potion into the large yellow bruise on his chest, her magic tingling through her fingertips, combining her healing intent with the potion.

"Does it feel better?"

"Mmm. Yes." He gave a crooked smile. "I'm glad you insisted."

"So am I." Poppy watched as the remaining bruise faded under her fingertips until it finally disappeared.

"That feels very nice. I like the way you do that . . . your magic . . . I love the way your magic feels." Severus let out a contented sigh.

"You told me once you'd help me with my wandless magic," Poppy said. "Do you remember that?"

"That seems so long ago . . . but if you'd like, I'll help you with it. You do have very good control over the flow of your magic and the sort of intent you put into it, even now without your wand. I think you'd be quite adept."

"Hm, like this?" Poppy moved her fingertips gently over his pectoral muscle, and Severus could feel her magic subtly change. He took in a sharp breath.

"Yes, that's rather . . . rather nice. In a different way."

"My intent is a bit different at the moment," Poppy whispered. She passed her fingertips over his left nipple, making him shiver.

"I think that we will begin your wandless exercises with this . . . whatever it is you're doing now." His breath shuddered and he closed his eyes. "Mmm . . . this is so..." Her fingers moved to his right nipple, and he gasped. "Oh, Merlin . . . that's good . . ."

Poppy leaned toward him and kissed his healed chest, then she let her hand rest against him, pressing her palm flat against his skin. "I should go."

Severus took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, opening his eyes. "Yes, probably a wise idea. But we can continue this some other time."

"Soon. I'd like that," Poppy said. She kissed his jaw. "And we can skip the Healing session next time, I hope."

Severus nodded and smiled gently. "We can..." He was interrupted by a sharp knocking on his door. "Who could that be at this time? It's after curfew. So help me, if the Slytherins are up to something..."

"Just see who it is before you get worked up," Poppy said mildly. She Summoned the lid for the potion tin, and Severus stood and walked over to the door.

"Sev! Shirt!" She Levitated his shirt to him. "It's a gorgeous view without it, but I'd rather have it to myself."

Severus shrugged on the shirt, its French cuffs dangling loosely, and buttoned a few of the buttons. The knocking became more insistent. He jerked the door open, ready to snarl.

Author's Note: Up next, we find out who's on the other side of the door and what has interrupted Severus and Poppy's perfect evening.

Since the last update to *A Long Vernal Season*, I posted a new little flashfic, ["The Cornish Pixie Prank."](#) and a few more chapters of ["Charming the Scottish Garden."](#)

Chapter Eighty-Three: Attack in a Blur

Chapter 84 of 118

There's been another attack; is the perpetrator any closer to being caught?



Chapter Eighty-Three: Attack in a Blur

Sunday, 28 March Monday, 29 March 1999

Severus stopped in mid-snarl when he saw who stood on the other side of the door. "Minerva? What's wrong?"

Minerva looked at his half-buttoned shirt, lack of cufflinks, and heard the music drifting from the room. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Severus."

"Come in." Severus opened the door more widely for her and saw that she was wearing a teaching robe over her nightgown, though she had put on shoes. Clearly, it wasn't only his evening that had been disturbed.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Minerva repeated as she entered to the opening strains of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

"I just applied some salve to Severus's chest," Poppy said.

Minerva nodded distractedly. "I thought you might have a date this evening, that's why I came down myself. Severus, there's been another attack."

"Oh, lord," Poppy said, sitting back down on the sofa.

"Who?" Severus asked.

"Moody is here. He has the details. It would be better to hear it all from him...especially as I don't know precisely what happened. I came straight down; he's waiting in my office with Albus. But it was Millicent Bulstrode, and she survived."

"Bulstrode?" Poppy and Severus said at the same time.

"Aye. Outside her home, I believe."

"Isn't she a Beater for the Pride of Portree or something?" Poppy asked.

"Puddlemere, actually," Severus said. "But aren't they playing in Luxembourg now?"

Minerva shrugged. "That sounds right. They must be back. I don't follow Quidditch much. Moody wants to see you." She looked at the empty coffee cups and Severus's jacket and waistcoat folded over a chair. "I do apologise."

"I was about to leave, anyway," Poppy said.

Minerva raised a sceptical eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

"You should take your flowers," Severus said as he finished buttoning his shirt and tucked it in. He looked around for his cufflinks, then Summoned them from the coffee table, and pulled his braces up. He didn't bother with the tie. Poppy handed him his waistcoat and then held his jacket for him.

"Why don't you come up, too, Poppy," Minerva suggested. "It might be helpful."

Severus shot Minerva a sharp glance. "No, don't," he said to Poppy. "I'm sure it's not necessary. And I don't see how she could help."

"Severus, I..." Poppy began.

Severus turned to her and took one of her hands in his. He raised it briefly to his heart. "Please. I don't want you worrying about all this," he said softly.

Poppy shook her head. "I will worry more if I don't know as much as possible. I've spent too long not knowing what's going on...you know what it feels like to be kept in the dark whilst knowing there's something going on, Sev," she said. "Unless Moody kicks me out, I'm coming with you."

Severus looked at her for a moment, then nodded once. "I'll have Twiskett bring your flowers to your sitting room, then."

"I suggest we Floo," Minerva said, crossing over to the fireplace.

"I'll be along in just a tick," Poppy said. She Summoned her grey robe and pinny.

"You go on ahead, Severus," Minerva said. "I'll follow, and then Poppy can take her time."

Severus showed his agreement by pointing his wand at the fireplace, which flared up brightly, then tossing in a dusting of Floo Powder. "Headmistress's Office."

After Severus had departed, Minerva reached into the jar of Floo Powder and took out a pinch.

"I really was just about to leave, Minerva," Poppy said. "I'd wanted to take care of his chest injury before I left for the night." She had put on her grey robe and was now pulling on her starched white pinny.

"If you say so." Minerva smirked.

"Minerva! Wait...don't go yet! We are taking things more slowly. And it feels really . . . *right*. So please don't say anything that might make Severus uncomfortable."

"I wouldn't." Minerva paused. "But I'll be careful how I say things. It does seem as though things must be going well...the way he took your hand, that spoke volumes, I think. Especially since I was standing right here."

"I know. You'd better go. I'll be right behind you." Poppy bent and picked up her potions basket. "I'll take care of the candles before I leave."

Minerva tossed her Floo Powder into the fireplace and stepped in. A moment later, after extinguishing all the candles but those in the chandelier, Poppy followed.

"...his Pensieve," Moody was saying as Poppy landed in the Headmistress's Office. "As I told Dumbledore, there's not much to see, but more than in any of the others." Moody's magical eye swivelled toward Poppy, and he turned to her and nodded. "Snape said he was with you this evening. You corroborate that?"

"Of course!" Poppy said, somewhat taken aback by the sudden question.

"From what time?"

"Eight o'clock, and I just came from his suite, as Minerva can tell you. I was away from the castle today. Professor Snape had an injury earlier this morning. I was checking on him and treating his injury."

"For almost four hours?" Moody asked, looking at Minerva's grandfather clock, which showed that it was ten minutes till midnight.

"We also talked for a while and had something to eat. I hadn't had any dinner, since I didn't return to the school until after seven. So yes, we were together the entire time."

"And who were you with before you returned to Hogwarts?"

"Moody..."

"It's all right, Severus," Poppy said. "I was in Wales at my sister's. You know Violet. I was with her and the family all day. When I got back, I checked the infirmary for messages, changed my clothes, spoke with Strilpa...that's one of the infirmary house-elves...and then I went down to see Professor Snape."

"And you went straight from Wales to here? No other stops...shorter Apparitions?"

Poppy laughed. "No, I have no trouble Apparating from Wales to Hogsmeade in one hop. And I made no clandestine side trips to Durham today."

"Durham?" Moody immediately straightened and looked at her with both eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"Minerva told us it was Millicent Bulstrode. She plays for Puddlemere. I just guessed that she lived somewhere nearby, that's all! Bad joke. Sorry."

"Don't joke during criminal investigations," Alastor said gruffly. "You're not a suspect, but you could make yourself one if y'aren't careful!"

As Poppy nodded, trying to look chastised, but shooting Severus an amused look, Albus came down the stairs in his dressing gown and slippers, his Pensieve floating in front of him.

"Good. You have it," Moody said. "The desk would be fine."

Poppy looked puzzled by the arrival of the Pensieve, but Severus nodded.

Moody turned back to Severus. "You were telling me what you did today after you left the grounds."

"As I said, I met Gareth McGonagall in McTavish Street at one. We took a walk in Muggle Edinburgh...the Muggle shop we visited was closed, so we walked for a while. I don't know exactly where we walked since I'm unfamiliar with the area...McGonagall might know, if it's important. After that, we went to the Tyree estate. I was with someone the entire time. Professor Birnbaum gave me a tour of the grounds, then we went up to Eoghan Tyree's library. We spent several minutes there, then we all had tea with Madam Tyree. When we...McGonagall and I...left, he Disapparated first. To be cautious, we Apparated to where the Shrieking Shack used to be rather than Apparating directly to the gates. We walked back up together, and he left after I entered the grounds. That was between four-thirty and quarter to five. I went to my quarters, spoke with Twiskett, went to dinner at about six, and then afterward met with Flitwick in my quarters. He left at . . . seven-fifteen, I think, and then about forty-five minutes later, Madam Pomfrey arrived."

"You spend a lot of time with McGonagall and Pomfrey," Moody observed with a frown. "They were your alibis last time, too."

"A person naturally spends a lot of time with one's friends and colleagues," Minerva said. "I imagine that my alibis would usually involve the same few people repeatedly."

"Fair enough," Moody said.

"Now, you were saying something about the Pensieve when Poppy arrived," Minerva said.

"Yes, as I already explained to Dumbledore...and was in the midst of telling Snape...we finally have a memory to observe. We have attempted this with survivors of the earlier attacks, but either the trauma of the injury affected the formation of the memory, or there was simply nothing there to see. The attacker hides very well. We now believe that he...or she...also uses a Disillusionment Charm."

"So you want us to view the memory and see whether we know the person?" Albus asked. "It's no one Miss Bulstrode recognised?"

Moody shook his head. "You'll see why when you enter the memory. Consciously, she only had a vague impression...which I will repeat to you only after you have seen the memory...and could not give a description."

"You said 'he or she' this time," Minerva said. "Do you think it might be a witch?"

"We don't know whether it's a wizard or a witch, although the Ministry is beginning to come around to my way of thinking...that it's only one person who's committing the attacks. The person may have accomplices, but we are all agreed that it's very likely there's only one attacker. Come on, no more gabbling!" He pulled out a vial. "I brought a copy of the memory..."

"A copy?" Severus broke in. "It's hard enough to see detail in most Pensieve memories, copies are next to worthless..."

"It's not a memory of the memory...it's some hush-hush method the Department of Mysteries has. Twisted an arm or two to get them to make me a copy when they made one for the MLE...they returned the original to Bulstrode. Healers insisted on it." He rolled both eyes. "Some codswallop about easing her 'psychological trauma.'"

Poppy was restrained from her retort by Minerva's hand on her arm. This was typical Moody, and it would be pointless to try to change his views and priorities then and there.

"Any road, as I was saying, we've tried viewing other victims' memories in a Pensieve, but there's been nothing to see in any of them until now. Even this one...eh! I'll just let you see it. Don't pay any attention to Bulstrode or anything else. Just focus on the wall at the end of the walk; you'll see it when we enter the memory. Look right at the

corner and don't even blink, or you may miss it. You'll probably miss it, anyway."

"You dragged me up here at midnight to view something that we're likely not even be able to see?" Severus asked. "You couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"The attack was already several hours ago..." Moody began.

"And so why did you need to know where I was this evening?" Severus demanded.

"Continuity, cover-up, that sort of thing. Don't think you're involved, though, or I wouldn't show you this." Moody looked at Severus carefully. "Mind you, it still could be you. It isn't, but it could be."

"You're barking, Moody. Bloody barking, you know that?" Severus glared at him.

"It's late, we're all tired, so let's stop squabbling, look at the memory, and then maybe we can all go to bed before dawn," Minerva said, adding with a sigh, "~~dr~~ack to bed."

"All right," Moody said. He poured the silvery contents of the vial into the Pensieve. "How many people can use this Pensieve at once?"

"Comfortably, three. But if you don't mind being chummy," Albus said, "we could all squeeze around it."

"No, it's very short. Less than a minute. I'll take you and Minerva in first, then Poppy and Snape."

As Minerva, Albus, and Moody stood around the Pensieve and dipped into it, Poppy moved to stand beside Severus.

"This is good, isn't it?" Poppy whispered. "They might be able to catch him now, if they can identify him."

Severus twitched one shoulder. "Perhaps. It does not sound promising to me. Presumably, Moody and the investigating Aurors have already viewed the memory several times and have not been able to identify the person."

"But Albus is older than any of them, and he's been at Hogwarts for decades, too. He probably knows more people in the wizarding world than all those Aurors combined."

"The British wizarding world is relatively small; someone would recognise the person...if there's anything recognisable in the memory," Severus said slowly. "You know, perhaps it's not a British witch or wizard. It could be a foreigner."

"But wouldn't a foreign wizard...or witch...stand out? I don't know . . . It's been a long day. I don't know whether it would be harder or easier for a foreign wizard to commit the attacks. But it could also explain the odd targets if the wizard was foreign. He might not know the British wizarding world very well."

"It was just an idea. It could also be someone very young." Severus stopped speaking as the other three emerged from the Pensieve.

Minerva and Albus looked at each other, but Severus couldn't read their expressions.

"Now you two," Moody said.

Severus and Poppy stepped over to the desk, and at Alastor's signal, the three entered the memory.

"Look there," Moody said, pointing toward a wall.

Poppy and Severus directed their attention to the spot Alastor indicated. Poppy reminded herself not to watch Millicent as she walked up the pavement toward the row house where she apparently lived, but out of the corner of her eye, she could see Millicent pause and look around, then shrug and shake herself slightly. Suddenly, Millicent turned quickly, drawing her wand, and as she did so, just for a moment Poppy could see a blurry figure come around the wall. There was a flash and Millicent cried out in pain, then there was a loud crack as the figure vanished in a noisy Disapparition. The memory ended.

When they emerged from the memory, Severus asked, "Has anyone walked around the wall in the memory to get a better view?"

"The view I showed you was the best there is. Even going further back in Bulstrode's memory, there's nothing to be seen on the other side of the wall but deep shadows from the surrounding trees and shrubbery," Moody replied. "The person was too well hidden."

"Can you see more with your eye?" Poppy asked.

Moody shook his head. "If I'd actually been there, I could, but not in a memory. It has to be perceptible to the person whose memory it is...perceptible even if not consciously perceived."

"I'd like to see it once more," Severus said.

Moody nodded shortly. "Anyone else?"

Albus joined Severus in the Pensieve this time. "Shh, listen," Severus said, holding up his hand.

They heard Millicent's footsteps coming up the walk, a breeze rustling the leaves, a few birds calling, and some distant traffic sounds. Severus cocked his head and nodded silently. Again, they saw the indistinct figure slip around the shadowy wall and cast the curse. This time, Severus followed the curse's path and watched as Millicent was hit just as she finished drawing her wand. The hex hit her in the right shoulder as she turned toward her assailant, and it knocked her back. The last thing Severus saw was blood blossoming on Millicent's shoulder and upper chest as she fell, and the memory ended.

As soon as they had backed out of the memory, Moody said, "Poppy and Minerva have already written down their impressions of what they saw. I don't want to share them until you've recorded yours." He gestured toward some parchment and quills on a side table, then took his wand and extracted the memory from the Pensieve and returned it to the vial.

Severus picked up a peacock feather quill and a piece of parchment. There was no ink, so he presumed the quills were charmed to be self-inking. He sat down at a small table next to Poppy and began to write.

The attack appeared to be in late afternoon or early evening. The MLE should check the shadows on the other side of the wall before and after the attack to see whether there is a shadow that the perpetrator cast. By measuring that shadow, if there is one, and the lengths of the other objects casting shadows, they may be able to estimate the height of the attacker. They should also be able to pinpoint the time of day by measuring the shadows. Without that information, I estimate that the attacker was approximately 5' 8" to 5' 10" tall. The person appeared fairly slim, certainly not fat or heavily muscled.

It appeared that the attacker used other charms in addition to the Disillusionment Charm. One was likely the Nonanimadversus or some other notice-me-not charm. It also looked as though the person was wearing a Chameleon Cloak with the Disillusionment Charm layered over it. (Note the movement in the figure that corresponded with the movement of the nearby leaves in the breeze...it may have been ordinary cloth, but the way the blur presented was reminiscent of a Chameleon Cloak.) There was also likely a localised Imperturbable cast...but a poor one.

The perpetrator was wearing rubber or crepe soles, not leather. Both Bulstrode and the attacker were stepping on the same surface, but the sound from Bulstrode's

leather-soled boots was distinctly different from the step of the attacker. I only heard two steps from the perpetrator, so I cannot identify the shoe material any further. However, the steps were light and reinforced the visual impression that the attacker was not very heavy, and possibly a woman.

The contour of the facial area, unless it was masked in some way, indicates a beardless person, either a witch or a clean-shaven wizard. The movement of the person would indicate they are likely not aged or infirm in any way, but there were insufficient clues to give any closer estimation of age.

Whoever made the attack may not be magically powerful or even particularly adept, but he or she has likely had practice in casting multiple charms to achieve a single goal, although the layering and integration of the charms here was sloppy. It is unlikely to be a person with significant experience with the sort of skills a curse-breaker, Auror, or hit wizard would have, since the integration was as sloppy as it was, and yet it was likely the best charms work the attacker could perform, since escaping detection is most important to the attacker, more important than success in the attack itself.

Severus put his quill down and glanced over what he had written. He thought that if he could view the memory a few more times, he might observe more, and he doubted that he'd added anything to what Moody already knew, but the man had asked for their impressions. There might be something there in his report that hadn't already been noticed. He shoved the parchment toward Moody. As he looked up, he saw Poppy's face. Severus couldn't name the expression she wore, but it wasn't one of distress, which he might have expected from her after having to view the bloody attack. She appeared almost . . . pleased. She was relaxed and there was a slight smile around her eyes.

Moody had already read the other parchments, and Severus could see now that they were much shorter.

"You aren't being graded by the inch, Snape," Moody grumbled, but as he began to read, his scowl disappeared. "Hmmpf."

Moody handed the parchment to Albus, who read it and nodded.

"Good idea of mine, bringing the memory here tonight," Moody said.

"Excellent insights, Severus," Albus said approvingly. "You noticed more than I did."

"On the second visit, I knew what I needed to pay attention to," Severus said. He saw Poppy smile. She was pleased and proud of him. He felt happiness well up in his chest. Perhaps it had not been a mistake to have her come with them. He had worried that it would upset her unnecessarily, but perhaps it would have been worse for her to imagine what they were discussing. He wouldn't keep her in the dark; he would trust her. "I also spent years . . . doing similar things. Remaining unseen, undetected, and making sure I wasn't being followed by someone else who was likewise trying to remain unnoticed." He gestured toward the Pensieve. "This person is a novice. A clever novice. And he, or she, may have a teacher. She might be an acolyte to a master. Or she may simply be learning through her own trial and error as she goes."

"You've said 'she,'" Moody said. "You think it could be a woman?" He looked at all four of them.

They each nodded.

"But I wouldn't swear to it," Poppy said. "It could have been a woman, or it could have been a young man. I would be surprised, though, if it were an older man, one over . . . fifty or so, anyway. Something about the movement."

Moody nodded. "Bulstrode said that was her impression. She repeatedly used the feminine pronoun when speaking of her attacker, but not consistently." Moody looked at Severus's notes. "You think she's wearing a Chameleon Cloak? Not just using a good Disillusionment Charm?"

Severus twitched one shoulder. "She could be. It was an impression. It didn't look like an ordinary Disillusionment Charm. I think the person doesn't possess much talent, but is clever enough to use a charm over a Chameleon Cloak...which, although rare and expensive, is not as difficult to obtain as an Invisibility Cloak."

"I've known a few people over the years who have owned Chameleon Cloaks," Albus said wearily. "I doubt that any of them would be involved in something like this, but they may have given, sold, or loaned their Cloak to someone. I'll send you a list tomorrow."

"My nephew David has a Chameleon Cloak," Minerva said, "but he uses it in his work all of the time. He wouldn't give it to anyone. He works for the wizarding forestry service in the Pertwee Project."

"I'll have to check him out, since he's related to so many of the primary participants in the Death Eater conflict," Moody said.

"He doesn't leave the reserve very often. He'll be easy to find."

"If I ever knew anyone who owned a Chameleon Cloak, I never knew about it," Poppy said. "I don't think I've even seen one since my fifth-year Defence Against the Dark Arts class with Professor Merrythought."

"Snape? Know anyone with a Chameleon Cloak?"

"There were a few Death Eaters who had one. Old Stearns did. He's incarcerated somewhere. Hyatt Crabbe did. I know there were one or two others, but I don't know who owned them." Severus hesitated. "Also . . . the reason it came to mind that there might be a charm layered over a Chameleon Cloak is that I have seen a Chameleon Cloak recently. Helena Benetti owns one. She wears it sometimes when she's flying. But she's much, much shorter than the person in this memory appeared to be, and she's not only athletic, but she's a talented witch. You might check with her and see whether she still has her Cloak, or had it stolen or something, but she isn't the one in the memory."

"Can't be positive about something like that," Moody said. "The impression of height may be deceptive. We'll check her out, too. If you can remember any other Death Eaters who owned Chameleon Cloaks, report it to me or to Auror Plummer. I know a few wizards at the Ministry who have Cloaks, and I'll be checking them out, too."

"Um, in the interests of full disclosure," Minerva said, "my nephew isn't the only member of my family who has a Chameleon Cloak. There are two at the Tyree estate, too. They're old ones, and they don't belong to anyone in particular...I suppose they belong to my grandmother, in that everything at the estate is under her control...but they're kept in a cloakroom near the kitchen. They're for general use."

Moody sighed. "And everyone at the estate has access to the cloakroom, I assume, not just the residents of the main house."

Minerva nodded. "I've used one occasionally when I've been there."

"It's Professor Birnbaum, Madam Tyree, and Eoghan at the main house, right?" Moody asked. "Eoghan's out...too small, and not skilled enough at his age. Your grandmother is petite, and if she did it . . . we wouldn't see anything at all, I'm sure. In fact, knowing her, we probably wouldn't even know a crime had been committed..."

"Are you implying that my grandmother is a criminal? Just too clever to be caught?" Minerva asked indignantly.

Moody barked a laugh and didn't deny it. "You know your grandmother better than I do, Minerva. But this wouldn't have been her. Not her style, I'd say. I wouldn't dare say she's too old, but she's probably too short. And Birnbaum is too tall...too broad-shouldered, as well, I think. He also would have to have completely gone off his noggin to do something like this. I don't think the man swats flies. Still, we'll see whether the Cloaks are both there. If one is missing, we can see if we can trace visitors to the house."

"Was there a note left at the scene?" Severus suddenly asked. "Or a letter sent? I didn't see any note in the memory."

"No note at the scene this time," Moody replied. "Bulstrode said she receives some strange post now that she's off the reserves and playing as a regular Beater. She said she usually doesn't read beyond the first line or two if it's from a 'nutter,' as she put it. Plummer was going to the house tonight to look through the correspondence there, but the girl may already have tossed it out."

"It's late," Albus said. "Do you want to ask us anything more now? We can let you know if we think of anything else, but if you haven't got any other questions, I think we should retire for the night. I know I have a busy day ahead of me tomorrow, and I think everyone else here does, too."

"No, this has been helpful," Moody said. "I will pass this information on to Plummer in the morning."

"How is Millicent?" Poppy asked as everyone stood and prepared to leave. "Her injury looked terrible."

"It was a *Conruptus*, they think. It caused a good deal of damage, but it could have been worse if she had been hit someplace more vital. I don't know if she'll be wielding a Bludger bat for a while, though...if at all. It may have destroyed her career. But she'll live."

"That's the same curse that lamed Ron Weasley," Minerva said. "Could there be a connection? They both play Quidditch. Weasley's with the Chudley Cannons now...his injury didn't keep him from a Quidditch career . . ." Minerva sighed. "I don't know where I'm going with this. I'm tired."

"It could be that the attacker sees it as some kind of symmetrical retribution," Severus said. "If the person is deluded into thinking that she, or he, is an instrument of justice, she may see cursing Millicent Bulstrode, a Quidditch player who was in Weasley's year, as a way of obtaining justice."

Albus nodded. "And Mr Weasley fought in the Battle of Hogwarts whilst Miss Bulstrode had been locked up with other members of her House. Although Miss Bulstrode was not one of the students who participated in the . . . the incident with Nott and Goyle, she could be seen as guilty by association. Nothing ever happened to her; the Ministry cleared her, so she was never punished for anything. It seems she would be an ideal target."

"For someone with a twisted mind," Minerva said. "It was Stearns who cast the *Conruptus* on Weasley, wasn't it? And he's in prison for that and for everything else he did. And wherever Bulstrode's sympathies may have lain during the war, she never did anything to deserve something like that."

"No, no, she didn't," Moody agreed with a shake of his head. "It was a nasty looking injury, even when I saw her after the Healers had already started their work on her. She lay outside there on the ground for a while before one of her flatmates found her. The damage kept expanding, rotting her flesh away. Healer Caldwell said that they might be able to pinpoint the time of the attack from the progress of the curse. In fact, they'd called your niece in, Minerva. She's supposed to have a report to Plummer in the morning. That will narrow it down. That and measuring those shadows of yours, Snape."

"I'll walk you down and open the gates for you," Minerva said. She turned to Albus. "You go on back upstairs. I won't be long."

Albus nodded. "I'll call Blampa for some warm milk for us both."

"I think I'd rather have a warmed Scotch, actually," Minerva said, "the way Dad used to fix it."

Albus smiled. "I think we can arrange that!"

Minerva led Alastor out of her office to the moving staircase.

"Do you two want to use the Floo, then?" Albus asked.

Severus glanced quickly at Poppy.

"I'd just as soon walk down," Poppy said.

"I will accompany you," Severus said. "Good night, Albus. I hope you are able to get back to sleep." He thought the older wizard looked tired.

"I hope you sleep well, both of you. This was not a pleasant topic to discuss just before bed," Albus replied. "Good night, Poppy dear. It was good of you to come up, too."

"Good night, Albus." Impulsively, she kissed the old wizard's cheek. "Sleep well."

As Albus began up the stairs, leaving the large Pensieve on Minerva's desk, Severus opened the door for Poppy. They stepped onto the moving stairs, Severus behind Poppy. She leaned back, and he put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. They rode down in silence, and when they reached the bottom, Poppy sighed.

"That was unpleasant for you to see," Severus said. "I am sorry."

The gargoyle opened the door for them, and they stepped into the second floor corridor.

"I've seen worse injuries, you know. And I witnessed the battle, stood at my windows and watched them fight . . . unable to do anything. So this was sad and disturbing, but not new. Even though we only had a brief glance at the spell and the wound, I thought it might have been the *Conruptus*. I was the first one at the Burrow after that raid on Malfoy manor."

"Yes, that's right . . . that was not even a year ago now. It seems sometimes as though it was a hundred years ago, and other times . . ."

"As though it was ten minutes ago. I know." Poppy wrapped her arm around his, then paused and looked up at him.

Severus pulled her slightly closer and nodded. "If there are any students out after curfew, I think an *Obliviate* would be quite justified," he said with a slight smile. They reached the main staircase. "Let me walk you up to the Hospital Wing."

"It's late; you don't have to," Poppy said.

"I want to. I would feel deprived, in fact, if I could not." He leaned closer to her. "I believe I would sleep better after a good-night kiss from you."

Poppy smiled. "I would, too."

They started up the stairs together, and Severus put his arm around her.

"So do you think that Moody asks all those questions because he thinks he has to, out of habit, or because he's just plain nosy?" Poppy asked.

Severus gave a coughed laugh. "A little of each, I'd think. Although I'm an unlikely suspect and have alibis for the other attacks, I suppose there are people who would not want to think that I was being put above suspicion out of some favouritism, so he probably thinks he has to get my alibi for the record. And after so many years of asking those sorts of questions, he probably can't help himself. He probably interrogates the milkman like that when he delivers his milk. *Which cow did this come from? Where was she pastured? Poison anyone's yoghurt this morning? What's your grandmother's maiden name?*"

"And he's nosy," Poppy added, laughing.

"Yes, that, too," Severus said. He mimicked gruffly, *"You spend a lot of time with McGonagall and Pomfrey.* As if he's surprised or suspicious about it."

"Oh, you're probably subverting us both," Poppy said with a chuckle. "Doing it so cleverly, we don't notice."

"Hmpf. I don't know if I even want to joke about that," Severus said. He was getting better at dealing with teasing in general, and he didn't mind when Poppy specifically teased him, but this particular direction for teasing...he didn't know whether he would ever be very comfortable with joking about his Dark past. Any of his own jokes about it were still filled with so much self-loathing, that sometimes seemed the only reaction they could evoke in him.

"I'm sorry. I'm just tired. That was a bad joke."

"It's all right. It's just . . . so much of what I was . . . it was..."

"Not now, Sev," Poppy said softly. "Not now. Any time you want to talk about it, any of it, no matter how bleak or how dark, I'll listen. But this isn't a good time for a real talk, you know?"

Severus gave a crooked smile. "Yes, I know. Not the best time, nor is the fourth floor corridor the best place for it. But you also don't know what you're offering."

"If I couldn't offer it, if I couldn't listen, then I don't deserve you," Poppy said firmly. "You are worth it. I believe that, and you need to, as well."

They stopped at Poppy's door. Severus dropped his left arm from around her, but took her hand and reached up with his right hand to caress her cheek softly. "You know, when you believe in me, when you say that, I almost can believe it, too."

"Do believe it, Severus." Her grey-blue eyes met his dark ones. "Believe in yourself, in your worth*Really* believe."

"Poppy . . ." His breath met hers before their lips touched, and it seemed to him that he could feel her magic and her warmth, her bright spirit, in her breath. His kiss lingered, and her arms went around him.

He held her for a moment, then finally, as a distant bell chimed the hour, Severus let her go.

"I'm sorry this evening didn't have a better ending," he said softly. "I'd wanted it to be perfect."

"It was still perfect. It was a perfect date, just with a bit of a distraction before we could quite finish it."

"Do you want to spend time together tomorrow evening? I have some work, but after that, perhaps."

"Yes, I would like that. Just come by when you can. I'll be here. And if it's essays or school budgets or something of the sort, you could just . . . well, I wouldn't mind being company for you, if you'd like to bring it along. Then we can have a drink after you're done."

"I have some things I need to do in the classroom and in my office, but I'll come up as soon as I can. It feels as though the Easter holiday will be here too soon, and you'll be gone," he said, caressing her face.

Poppy smiled. "It will be here soon, but I'll only be gone a few days, you know. We'll still have a lot of time after that."

"Yes, of course." Severus nodded. "Good night, Poppy. I'll see you tomorrow. I'll have Twiskett get your lilacs to you."

"Good night, Severus." Poppy reached up and kissed his cheek. "This was wonderful. Thank you."

She gave her password, *plentitude*, passed through the door, and it closed behind her with a click. Severus stood there a moment, breathing in the space she had just occupied, then he turned and walked slowly back down to his dungeon rooms.

Author's Note: I hope you enjoyed this installment. I hope to have another chapter posted in a week or so for you. Thank you for your reviews! I really appreciate them.

Chapter Eighty-Four: Suspicion

Chapter 85 of 118

Someone falls under the suspicion of the investigating Aurors and is brought to the Ministry for questioning.



Chapter Eighty-Four: Suspicion

Monday, 29 March 1999

Poppy woke up and decided against going to breakfast that morning. Instead, she reset her alarm and rolled over and slept for another half hour. When the Charmed clock rang again, she still felt it was too early to get up, but she sat up, reached for her wand, and called Perlie.

The elf was there promptly, arriving before Poppy had shoved her feet into her slippers.

"Morning, Perlie. I'm going to take a shower. Please bring me tea, eggs, and toast when I'm out."

As she showered, waking up as the water streamed over her, Poppy reflected on the night before. Severus had been wonderful, and he had gone to so much trouble for their date; he had clearly stepped well outside his usual comfort zone in order to make their date special for her. They had even danced for quite a while, and he had told

her before that he didn't like dancing. That had clearly changed...at least for the previous evening. He'd been warm and witty, and yet still showed the shy vulnerability that always touched her heart so.

She dressed in a set of pale blue robes and went out to her sitting room, where Perlie was setting out her breakfast. The large bouquet of lilacs was sitting in the centre of the table.

"Twiskett sends these from Professor Snape," Perlie said, smiling. "They be's very pretty."

"Yes, they are very pretty," Poppy agreed. There was an envelope sitting among the flowers that she hadn't seen the night before. She plucked it out and sat down. Her name was on the front of the envelope in Severus's handwriting.

Holding the envelope and smiling, Poppy barely nodded at Perlie as the house-elf asked if she wanted her tea poured. She pulled the parchment from the envelope and unfolded it.

Monday, 29 March 1999

Dear Poppy,

If I could write all that I wish to tell you, and tell you all you mean to me, there would not be enough parchment in the castle, even if I could find the words to express myself.

Please see these flowers and think of me. I kept one small sprig for myself. It will remind me of you and the happiness you have brought me.

I am looking forward to seeing you this evening. I hope you are, too.

Yours,

Severus

PS My turn: Poppy Prunella Pomfrey. (Please tell me I'm wrong!)

Poppy smiled. Yes, she could tell him he was wrong, at least about her middle name. She was looking forward to seeing him that evening, though.

She finished her breakfast quickly, then put on her matron's white pinny and hat. Before she left, she bent over the bouquet of lilacs and breathed in their scent. Severus had said to look at the flowers and think of him. *Lilacs, the first emotions of love.* He was falling in love with her, it seemed. Poppy could not deny to herself that she had already fallen in love with him, and the evening before had simply brought her more deeply in love.

She broke off a small stem of lilac, charmed it to stay fresh, and pinned it to her pinny just above her watch. She could catch its scent wafting up gently, and she took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. Although she didn't know when she would be able to tell Severus that she loved him, she would enjoy these feelings. She had believed that she was long past feeling the rapturous love that was welling up in her, but it was there. When she looked at the flowers and remembered Severus's gentle kisses, she felt it even more strongly.

Her worry would be a thing of the past, she decided. She could still be hurt, Poppy acknowledged to herself, or the relationship could make either of them miserable, but those dangers would exist whether she worried about them or not...and dwelling on them might actually make them more likely to come about. She still wanted to step back and keep the pace as it had been the previous evening, though. It would be too easy to have their sexual passion become the overriding feature of their relationship, and she wanted a full, meaningful relationship with him.

In the infirmary, Poppy was surprised to see that yet more flowers awaited her: the two potted birds-of-paradise that had flanked Severus's fireplace the evening before. There was another note.

29 March 1999

Dear Poppy,

My rooms have no light during the day, and although I could set up special lighting for these two plants, I thought that you might enjoy having them in your office.

I hope you have a pleasant morning.

Yours.

Severus

Poppy had just finished arranging the plants in the corner of her office by the window when she saw a gaggle of fifth-year students limping toward the castle, followed by Hagrid, who was carrying two more. Letting out a tut of annoyance and wondering what beast Hagrid had been showing them that day, she picked up her potions basket and left the infirmary to go down to meet them. It didn't look as though it would be a quiet morning.

Severus was slightly disappointed not to see Poppy at breakfast, but if she were able to get a few minutes extra sleep, he was glad. His own sleep had been disturbed, and he felt unfocussed and distracted. Although he had felt quite content when he'd returned to his quarters after leaving Poppy, he'd had a hard time falling asleep, then woke several times during the night. Seeing Bulstrode's memory had made the attacks feel much closer to home, even more so than the attack on Malfoy had. When he did sleep, his dreams had been vague and peculiar; he couldn't remember them on waking, but they left him feeling unsettled.

As he taught his morning classes, Severus focussed on the students and their brewing, but every now and then, he would put his hand into the pocket of his robe where he had put the sprig of lilac he had taken from Poppy's bouquet. He had charmed it to stay fresh and to retain its blossoms so that it would last the day in his pocket. Touching the woody stem of lilac, he thought of Poppy. He hoped that she was having a quiet morning. After their late night, she deserved to have a peaceful morning.

His own morning was punctuated by dunderheads who could not follow simple instructions and who, as a result, produced inert sludge...when they weren't melting their cauldrons or creating toxic fumes. After smothering the third explosion of the morning, Severus was ready to cancel classes for the day.

"Did they serve stupid juice with your breakfasts this morning? What part of 'grind to a fine powder' was difficult to understand?" Severus demanded.

"I thought it was fine enough," Norbert Twiffle mumbled.

Severus lifted the mortar that still contained some of the ground Chimaera hoof. He turned it upside down on the table. "It's like gravel. Look at it, Twiffle. What is 'fine' about it?"

"I was in a hurry, I guess," the Hufflepuff said.

"In a hurry to blow yourself up, Twiffle? Don't answer that," Severus said in disgust. "Clean up this waste of expensive potions ingredients. You'll brew this again tonight...no, tomorrow. Seven o'clock. Be here." He looked around the room at the rest of the potions. "In fact, everyone be here but Brett, Harper, and Gleason. Tomorrow

evening, seven sharp. And I suggest that between now and then, you all read the formula and instructions until you can repeat them by rote. Hopefully, with some understanding."

He dismissed the class, telling them to go to the library and reread the potions formula, and then he Vanished all the potions. Brett, Harper, and Gleason hadn't finished brewing theirs, but they had been the only ones whose potions were at the correct stage and whose ingredients were all properly prepared.

Thinking that he could go up to the infirmary and spend a half hour with Poppy before lunch, Severus started up from the dungeons. As he came down the hallway past the staff room, he was surprised to hear the great door open and then see Gareth step into the entry hall. The younger wizard was as white as a sheet and clearly upset.

"McGonagall? What's wrong?"

"Severus! I have to find Uncle Albus and Aunt Minerva right away."

"Dumbledore's teaching and Minerva's in London. What's wrong? What happened?"

"It's Mum."

A few students came down the stairs, and Severus took Gareth's elbow and pulled him toward the staff room. "In here," he said. "Tell me what is going on."

Gareth took a shaky breath and began to pace as Severus closed the staff room door.

"They've taken Mum to the Ministry. They're questioning her about the attacks. They're treating her like a suspect."

"What? That's ludicrous..."

"I know, I know. And it's my fault."

"Sit down and tell me what happened."

Gareth took a deep breath and let it out, taking a seat in the armchair by the fire. "A couple Aurors came by this morning, Auror Plummer and a younger Auror named Appleton. It was just me and Hermione there today. They asked us both some questions about where we were yesterday. Hermione was at Weasley's, and they confirmed that you were with me at Grandmother Siofre's yesterday afternoon. I thought they were finished, but then Plummer asked me whether I owned a Chameleon Cloak or knew anyone who did. I told her that there are a couple at the Tyree place, which they seemed to already know, and then I mentioned that my Dad used to have one. They wanted to know where it was and who had it now. I told them that last I knew, Mum had it on the island. She never used it much, but I'm pretty sure she had it there, and that it's still there."

"A lot of people have Chameleon Cloaks...perhaps not a great many people do, but your mother's not the only one. Why did they bring her to the Ministry?" Severus asked.

"The two of them whispered together for a while, then they asked me where my mother was, since she was obviously not at home. I said that she's been staying at the estate recently. They wanted to question her right away, so they went to the Three Broomsticks to Floo through...the estate's still on the Floo Network even though our Hogsmeade house isn't. I Apparated ahead of them, and when they called through the Floo, Mum let them come through.

"They asked her about where she was yesterday afternoon and evening, and there was a significant portion of time when she was in the library alone, reading, and then she went out for a hike before dinner and didn't get back until seven. She wasn't seen by anyone. So she doesn't have an alibi. She also doesn't have an alibi for the previous two attacks, not one that the Aurors liked, anyway...when the two witches were attacked, she was still at the house in Hogsmeade, but she'd gone out for a walk before breakfast and she said she didn't remember seeing anyone who might have also seen her. Then when Malfoy was attacked, she was here in Hogsmeade, but she was in her study and neither I nor Hermione had seen her all afternoon. The attack before that, she was in Hogsmeade, as well, but she'd already gone to bed for the night, and clearly she has no witnesses that she was tucked up in bed when Huffy was being cursed. For the others, she doesn't even remember where she was, though most of the time, she must have been at the house in Hogsmeade. But she didn't know that she'd need an alibi, so she didn't make note of anyone she might have seen. They're questioning her as a suspect, Severus. Mum may seem strong, but this could be too much for her."

Severus shook his head. "Hopefully, they will treat her with respect. Auror Plummer must have been one of her students. Did anyone go with her?"

Gareth shook his head. "Quin and Alroy are working...in their Muggle offices in the City...and Rosemary isn't supposed to Floo or Apparate anywhere at this point in her pregnancy. I wanted to go, but then I thought I should let someone else know. Besides, Plummer said I couldn't stay with Mum even if I did go with them. I sent Gluffy to Grandmother Siofre, and I came here."

"I don't know what your grandmother can do for her, but Minerva and Albus might be able to help," Severus said. "Blampa!" He paused and was about to call Minerva's house-elf again when she popped into the room.

"Blampa, find the Headmistress. I believe she is still at St. Mungo's...visiting Bulstrode," Severus added to McGonagall. "Tell her . . . here, I'll write a note to give her."

Severus went over to a small secretary and pulled open its middle drawer, found some parchment, and took a quill from its holder on the desk.

29 Mar 1999

Minerva...

Go directly to the Ministry when you get this. Auror Plummer has taken Prof Gamp to the Ministry for questioning. Gareth is here now. We'll inform Dumbledore.

...S. Snape

Gareth took the note and the quill, and added a postscript saying that Siofre should be on her way there herself.

"Grandmother Siofre's an advocate," Gareth explained, handing the parchment to Blampa. "She doesn't go before the Wizengamot any longer, but she's a canny witch. She'll put them in their place if they try to get Mum to take *Veritaserum* or something. Mum has her rights."

Blampa Apparated away to find Minerva, and Severus shook his head and sat down. "It can't be your mother..."

"Of course it can't!" Gareth interrupted.

"I mean that even if it *could* be her, it isn't. There's something . . ." He shook his head again. "There's something very wrong with her even being a suspect, and I can't put my finger on it."

"It's because it's stupid. Completely lame-brained," Gareth said, becoming upset again. "How they think it could be Mum..."

"Listen, Gareth, she'll be fine. I'm sure of that. Minerva will go straight there. But there is something I know, but I can't think . . . Go find Dumbledore. You know where his classroom is. Tell him what has happened, but have him come down here to see me. I need a moment of quiet to think."

"Yeah, Snape, you have your moment of quiet, whilst Mum could be in chains somewhere..."

"Gareth! Stop. Think. Take a breath, then go get Dumbledore."

"Sorry, Severus. It's just, she's already gone through more than anyone should."

"I know that. But if you give me a moment of quiet, I might be able to help. Go fetch your uncle."

After Gareth had left, Severus closed his eyes. There was something dancing at the fringes of his consciousness, but he couldn't catch it. If he'd had more sleep, perhaps he'd already have it. Or else it was just an illusion . . .

Five minutes later, Severus still didn't know where this conviction came from, and Albus and Gareth stepped into the room.

"Gareth told me that you sent Blampa for Minerva," Albus said without any preamble.

Severus nodded. "She was already in London. She's probably with Professor Gamp already, or will be shortly. Faster than we could get there."

"What other questions did they ask your mother?" Albus asked.

"They wanted to know where Dad's old Chameleon Cloak was, they wanted her to show it to them, but she said that she doesn't have it. She left it in the house on the island. They didn't like that answer."

"I should have remembered that Cloak last night and dispelled any concerns about it then. One of us can go to the island and look for it, if that becomes necessary," Albus said gently. "What else?"

"They were interested in her alibis, but as I already told both of you, she doesn't really have any alibis. She didn't know she'd be needing them, did she, and Plummer wasn't happy about that, either. Then they were interested in her shoes, of all things. Wanted to know what kind of shoes she wears when she goes walking or hiking."

Severus shot Albus a glance, then asked, "What did your mother tell them?"

"She has a few different pairs of walking shoes and hiking boots. They're all these Muggle shoes she likes. They have good treads, she says. Don't even need a traction charm most of the time."

Albus sighed. "And they're rubber-soled?"

"Yeah, of course they are." Gareth looked at the two of them. "What do her shoes have to do with anything? Did they find footprints or something? They could test her shoes then, and they'd see they weren't the ones, right? So that's a good thing."

"The perpetrator appears to wear rubber-soled shoes, or possibly crepe," Severus said, feeling uncomfortable that he had been the one to point that out to Moody the night before. Moody had obviously already passed on his observations to the Auror Department. "I don't know whether they've found footprints."

"Great," Gareth said with a sigh. "Did you remember whatever it was that you needed your moment of quiet for?"

Severus shook his head. "I think there's something in that memory that we viewed last night, Albus, but I can't put my finger on what it is. But there's something . . . I just don't think that figure could be Professor Gamp. It seems to be the right height and general build...if there's no charm distorting the appearance of height, but . . . I need to see the memory again. Can you get Moody back here with his copy of the memory? Or can you remember more than I do? You've known Gamp for years, did it look like her to you?"

"I don't know . . . I think that if it had been Gertrude, I would have recognised her..."

"It couldn't be Mum!" Gareth said indignantly. "You're speaking as though it could be!"

"I don't believe she'd ever do anything like this, Gareth," Albus said soothingly. "I am merely speaking hypothetically. We need to think clearly in order to help her."

"I know, I know," Gareth said, slouching down in his chair. "I just . . . I couldn't do anything to help her. And she *would* insist on being truthful and not making anything up."

"Of course, and that's always better. Lies exposed have a way of making a person look very guilty," Albus replied. "But back to your question, Severus. I think that if it had been Gertrude, I would have recognised her even with the Disillusionment and Chameleon Cloak, and I didn't, though she does resemble the general build of the person in the memory."

"We'll need to see the memory again," Severus said. "Or I will. Gareth, you should go to the Ministry and see what you can find out. They might let you be with your mother if Minerva and Madam Tyree insist on it. They may even have let her go home already. Dumbledore will find Moody, and after we've reviewed the memory again, I think we'll be able help more." He hoped that they could exonerate Gamp completely, but he wouldn't promise that to McGonagall.

Gareth and Albus both left, and as the door to the staff room opened, Severus could hear the students chattering as they went to the Great Hall for lunch. Hoping that whatever was niggling at the edges of his consciousness might become apparent as he ate, Severus went to the Great Hall, too. With Minerva gone, and Albus, as well, it was best if he were there.

Just as it had that morning at breakfast, the conversation at the staff table revolved around the most recent attack, this one on a witch who had been a student only the year before.

"Is Minerva still at St. Mungo's visiting Bulstrode?" Vector asked on his right.

Severus looked at her distractedly. "I believe she is still in London," he replied, "as she is not here."

"Where's Dumbledore?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't know." True enough; he had no idea where Dumbledore would begin looking for Mad-Eye.

Sensing that Severus wasn't in the mood to talk, Vector didn't pursue the conversation.

Poppy came into the Great Hall, and as she approached the table, she caught his eye and smiled. He nodded. He hoped nothing would interfere with his seeing her that evening, but if the business with Gamp didn't get cleared up, he should probably spend the evening with Gareth. It was partly his fault that McGonagall's mother was being questioned by the Ministry. If it weren't for the business with the Chameleon Cloak and the shoes, they probably wouldn't even have asked her for an alibi...although she was a witch with reason to harbour a grudge against Death Eaters. Not only had her husband been killed by them, but she'd been attacked, too. By him.

Severus sighed and looked down at his plate, which still held most of his lunch. Suddenly, he realised what it was in the memory that he needed to see once more. He felt slightly sick, and he pushed away from the table. He couldn't eat anything more. He would await Albus and Moody in the staff room, and if they hadn't returned before his first afternoon class . . . he would call Twiskett and have him post an announcement cancelling it. He had to see the memory again.

Although Severus doubted that the Aurors would treat Professor Gamp as they had treated him when he'd been arrested all those years before, the less time that she remained a suspect, the better. And it was the least he could do for Gareth and his mother after having been the direct cause of so much pain in their lives for so long.

On his way out, he stopped at Poppy's chair and bent close to her.

"Can I see you for a moment, Madam Pomfrey?" he asked softly. "I see that you haven't finished your lunch, but it's somewhat urgent."

Without hesitation, Poppy got up and followed him out.

"What is it, Severus?"

Severus held up one hand, then led her to the staff room. Only after he had closed the door did he answer her question.

"I thought you should know that Professor Gamp has been taken to the Ministry for questioning about the attacks. I don't believe she's under arrest," Severus said in response to Poppy's expression of alarm, "but Gareth was here earlier, and he said that she's become a suspect. She doesn't have adequate alibis for the last few attacks, she owns a Chameleon Cloak...which she could not produce...and she wears rubber-soled shoes. And she's a witch of about the right height and build."

"But that's absurd!" Poppy exclaimed. "It couldn't be Gertrude. She wouldn't do things like that. She certainly wouldn't hex people like Clematis and Virginia, but I can't see her ambushing *anyone* and attacking them from behind."

"I know. And I think that I know something that will help her, but I want to view the memory from last night one more time. Dumbledore is fetching Moody, if he can find him."

"The memory?"

"I'm not certain, but I *think* I'm right about something. I just need to confirm it."

"What? Something in the memory . . . Of course!" Poppy exclaimed. "The curse...it seemed to come from the attacker's right-hand side. Is that it?"

Severus nodded, smiling slightly at the speed with which Poppy had realised what had taken him longer to remember, despite being so personally familiar with Gamp's injury. "I think it did. But there was so much distortion from the Cloak and the charm, I want to view it once more. I am unsure."

"I'm certain of it," Poppy said firmly. "And there was even a movement when the spell was cast. I couldn't make out the wand very well...it looked like it was a dark one, but that could have been the Disillusionment Charm...but I was pretty sure I saw the arm reach out with the wand. And it was on the right. The attacker's right, I mean, not ours. I didn't even think it was significant last night."

Severus shrugged. "If I had viewed it when I was fresher, perhaps I might have made note of it, since it would eliminate at least some suspects, but perhaps not. It wasn't obvious, and we're also all so used to seeing someone use a wand with their right hand, it only seems remarkable when they don't, if you know what I mean."

Poppy nodded. "I never thought that Gertrude would find it lucky to be missing her right arm, but in this case, I think that she is...although that's probably what they see as her motive. That and Malcolm's death and Quin's affliction. Those would be motive enough for some person, I'm sure."

Severus nodded, controlling his expression and the feeling of self-disgust that rose in him. Poppy could have no idea how the thought of Professor Gamp's injury affected him...and he didn't want her to know.

"I am going to wait for Dumbledore," Severus said. "I will tell him what we have remembered, and we can view the memory once more and make sure of what he and Moody can tell the Ministry."

"I could do that for you if they're not back before your next class," Poppy offered. "Why don't we wait up in my office? We have a good view of the gates from there. I also have a few students in the infirmary who I should check on again shortly."

Severus nodded. "All right."

Up in the infirmary, Poppy fixed them both tea, and they sat in her office and waited.

"Thank you for the plants, and for your lovely notes. They really made my morning, Severus," Poppy said. "I can also reassure you that my parents did not name me Prunella!"

Severus smiled. "That is reassuring."

"I've devised a new strategy for guessing your name," Poppy said, taking a sip of tea.

"I didn't realise you had any strategy before," Severus said with a smirk.

"Ha ha," Poppy said. "As if you've done better."

"So what's your new grand strategy?"

"You're so clever; you figure it out," Poppy said.

"Getting tough, hmm?"

"I want to win."

"So what's your next guess?"

"Severus Stephen Snape."

Severus snorted a laugh.

"Wrong? Oh, well."

"Now you're going from the outlandish to the pedestrian; that's your new strategy?"

"As if 'Prunella' weren't outlandish," Poppy said.

"Not as outlandish as 'Septimius' or 'Salazar.' Then . . . Poppy Patience Pomfrey?"

"Patience? Do I *look* like a Patience to you?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "In that cap of yours, you look like a lot of things. A Pilgrim, perhaps." He laughed.

Poppy raised one eyebrow. "Okay, now you're going for the low blow...though I certainly *do* have to have a lot of patience to deal with you. But I won't be thrown off, Severus . . . *Sextus* Snape."

Severus smirked and shook his head. "I'm going to win, Poppy. And you'll be glad about it."

"I'm not giving up yet," Poppy said with a smile.

"Neither am I. However, I *am* going to have to leave," he said with a glance out the window. "I hope that Dumbledore finds Moody soon. McGonagall was upset. I've never seen him quite like that. Even when he's angry, he's . . . he's in control, somehow, if you know what I mean. Coldly rational beneath his anger. He was very emotional this morning."

Poppy nodded. "He would be. Gertrude's his mother, after all, and she's already had enough trouble in her life without having people suspecting her of being a mad vigilante."

"Hopefully, his concern has already been allayed, but if not, Dumbledore and Moody can help. Thank you, Poppy. I appreciate your help." He reached out and caressed her arm. "And your company."

"I wish we'd had more privacy, but Hagrid will insist on introducing his students to 'lively creatures.' It was a Mackled Malaclaw this time. Fifth-year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students. I'd be careful what you assigned them. Their luck's going to be bad for at least a week. You're liable to have more melted cauldrons than usual." She looked out the window just as Severus started toward the door. "Wait, Severus...Rath's letting Miss Granger onto the grounds. Does she know what's going on?"

"I don't know...she was with McGonagall when the Aurors came to question him, but then he went to the Gamp estate alone, I think. I'll go down and talk to her. She may not have a clue what's happened, why Gareth never came back to the house. She'd be concerned."

"Good idea. I'll call Strilpa and have her put a sign on your classroom door telling your students to wait for you in an orderly fashion."

"They should know that already...but this is the second-year Gryffindor-Slytherin class. They are undisciplined. Thank you." He paused at the door. "I'll see you this evening."

Poppy nodded. "Events allowing."

"Events allowing . . ."

Severus left to meet Hermione.

Chapter Eighty-Five: Jumping at Shadows

Chapter 86 of 118

Severus reassures Hermione; Poppy meets with Dumbledore and Moody while Minerva is still in London.



Chapter Eighty-Five: Jumping at Shadows

Monday, 29 March 1999

Poppy watched Hermione walking up the drive with Rath, the tall, thin wizard nodding his head as she said something to him, but then shaking his head and responding. They paused a moment, talking, then Rath nodded to her and headed off across the grounds to go around the castle, and Hermione continued up the drive by herself. A moment later, Poppy saw Severus walking down the drive from the castle. Hermione picked up her pace when she saw him, coming to a trot. Even from a distance, Poppy could see the expression of concern on the young witch's face. It must have been very alarming for Hermione to have Gareth Apparate to the estate after the Aurors' visit, and then not return.

Raising his hands, Severus gestured to Hermione to remain calm, then he placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Poppy saw him say something, then he turned, and they moved toward the castle together, his hand still on her shoulder. He seemed to be speaking quietly to her, and Poppy could almost sense the way that his steadiness calmed Hermione. As the two approached the stairs to the castle, Poppy lost sight of them.

"Strilpa!"

When the house-elf appeared, Poppy gave her a sign to put on the Potions classroom door requesting that the class wait quietly in the hallway outside the classroom until Professor Snape arrived. Half an eye still on the windows, and the gates to the grounds, Poppy then went and checked on the few students who'd had the worst of the Mackled Malaclaw bites. They seemed fine, but given how bad their luck was bound to be that week, she decided to keep them in the infirmary until the next morning. Some of the bad luck would have dissipated by then, hopefully.

There was a potion that could mitigate some of the misfortune damage, but it wasn't in the regular stock of most apothecaries. Perhaps St. Mungo's had some. If she had been aware that Hagrid was going to have Mackled Malaclaws in his classes that day, she would have had some on hand. Poppy was very fond of Hagrid, but there were limits, and as matron, she could hardly let this pass. She would have to speak with Minerva and Severus about it.

Severus was good about supplying a list of all the potions that each class was going to brew, and if there were changes in his plans, he sent her a memo. He had done so since his first year teaching, in fact...after the first Potions class accident when she'd had difficulty treating students who had inhaled fumes. She'd looked at the lesson plan and had assumed they'd been brewing Scintillating Solution, when in reality, it had been a Confundus Draught gone badly wrong. Her treatment had made them worse, not better. Severus had promised then that he would make sure that she would always have up-to-date lists of potions his classes were brewing, and that if he varied them on the spur-of-the-moment and there was an accident, he would make sure she knew what the new potion was.

Although Severus had been a rather unpleasant colleague for those first few years he taught, he had always been relatively responsible, if occasionally too harsh on the students. Hagrid was pleasant, cheerful, and likeable, but he really needed to become more responsible about certain things he called "formalities." He didn't seem to understand that the formalities were there for a good reason.

Poppy was just returning to her office when she caught a glimpse of Albus and Moody coming up the drive. She drew her wand and cast her Patronus; her duck waddled quickly through the window and sped its awkward way to the two wizards. Poppy saw Albus catch her duck and receive its message. He looked up toward the infirmary windows and nodded and waved. They would come up to her.

When the two wizards arrived in her office, Dumbledore took a seat in one of her guest chairs without Transfiguring it. Poppy thought that was a certain sign of fatigue.

Before either wizard could do anything more than greet her, Poppy had called for Strilpa and ordered a chicken sandwich, a cup of cream of leek soup, and a pitcher of apple juice for Albus. Moody accepted her offer of a sandwich, too.

"Thank you, my dear," Albus said. "Lunch will be very welcome. Your message said that Severus had told you he remembered what it was he noticed in the memory?"

"Yes, and I'm sure he's right, but Professor Snape said that you should view the memory again to confirm it. The spell was cast from the figure's right side. Her...or his...*right-hand* side."

Strilpa reappeared with the wizards' lunches.

"I think you're right," Moody said, reaching for his chicken sandwich. "It's not clear, but it does appear that way. It could be that the person is standing at an angle, though, their back to us and their left hand leading, a kind of duelling stance. That would give the same impression. But I think it's more likely that Dumbledore here did it than Professor Gamp, so we'll go tell them that it's most likely a right-handed witch or wizard." He took a big bite of his sandwich.

Albus, who had almost finished his cup of soup already, nodded. "I agree. I don't think we can entirely discount that the attacker's left-handed, but it's far more likely to be someone who uses their right hand. We should view the memory once more, though, as Severus says."

"Mm-hm," Moody agreed as he swallowed a bite of his sandwich. "Won't take long. Then we can pop down to the Ministry and clear this up."

"I hope they're feeding Gertrude," Poppy said as she watched Moody shove the last of his chicken sandwich in his mouth.

"I'm sure that if they didn't, Madam Tyree and Minerva would have something to say about it," Moody said. "Though hunger can be a motivator for someone who has a difficult time telling the truth."

"If Plummer stayed with her and participated in the questioning, I'm sure she's had her lunch and hasn't been mistreated," Albus said. "They probably hope to . . . to jog her memory a bit for some of the earlier attacks so that they can eliminate her as a suspect."

"Mmph. There's ways of joggin' the memory and *ways* of joggin' the memory, though, if you take my meaning," Alastor replied. "I should know. I've used a lot of 'em myself."

Poppy blanched.

"But that was with Death Eaters," Moody added quickly. "Definite Death Eaters. Nasty ones."

Albus reached out and patted Poppy's arm. "Don't worry, my dear. They know that Gertrude has friends who are looking out for her and who wouldn't be pleased if she were harmed. The repercussions would be quite unpleasant for them if they were to do anything to her. As it is, I am displeased that she was not simply questioned further in her own home."

"They're gettin' desperate to catch the person," Moody said. "It's only a matter of time before someone else dies. They can't afford to overlook any potential suspects."

"Would *you* have suspected Gertrude if you'd been there, Alastor?" Poppy asked.

Alastor shrugged lightly. "Can't say. Maybe I would have, maybe not. Depends. The witch does have cause to hate a Death Eater, I'm sure. Can't blame her for that. So maybe, yeah, if her answers weren't satisfactory, or if she got under my skin. But Plummer's a careful Auror, one of the best, and she's heading the investigation now. If she thought that it would help the investigation to bring in Gamp, she'd do it, and not out of any personal animosity, either. And even clearing Gamp would help the investigation, y'know."

"I suppose." She saw that both wizards had finished their lunches; she waved her wand and banished the plates. "You two go look at the memory and then get to the Ministry. I have some students in the infirmary, so I can't go with you. But would you tell Gertie that . . . that I hope things have gone well and she's home soon? I will worry until someone tells me she's back home."

"We'll get you word as soon as possible, although we might be able to tell you in person," Albus said. "We'll be as quick as we can."

"Then don't stand dawdling about my infirmary," Poppy said briskly. "Do what you need to do!"

"Severus! There were Aurors at the house this morning, then Gareth left for the estate, and he hasn't come back. I went around and Rosemary said that they both left, that the Aurors took Madam Gamp away! And that..."

"Hush, Hermione, I know all about it." He put his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "The Headmistress was already in London, visiting Miss Bulstrode at St. Mungo's, so McGonagall and I sent her a message. She went straight to the Ministry, I'm sure. McGonagall is down there now, too."

"Someone should tell Rosemary what's happening. She was very upset...and she couldn't contact Alroy and his father because they're in their Muggle offices. She said she might send an owl anyway."

"Come in and I'll tell you what we know, then you can go back and speak with Rosemary."

Severus brought Hermione into the staff room, where he quickly told her what he had learned from Gareth and what he had remembered seeing in the Pensieve the night before.

"Professor Dumbledore is looking for Moody now. When they return to Hogwarts, Madam Pomfrey will tell them about the figure seeming to be right-handed. I am sure that Professor Gamp will be home before teatime."

"I hope so! Madam Gamp would never do anything like this. She's been very distressed by the attacks. When the *Prophet* published the names of some of the other victims last week, she was very upset. She said that Clarence Whittaker was a sweet wizard who'd never done anyone any harm."

"You go back and tell Madam MacAirt that Professor McGonagall has it all in hand and not to worry. Now I have to teach...if they have to wait more than ten minutes, they're sure to get up to no good." He put his hand on the door handle.

"Wait, Severus...I want to apologise to you."

Severus turned and raised an eyebrow.

"That is . . . I talked to Fleur this weekend. We talked about a lot of things . . . she helped me to see that I, that I over-reacted. That I hurt your feelings."

"You spoke with Fleur Weasley about me? About . . . us? Hermione . . ." Severus closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Not really. Well, I did. But I've just been confused about a lot of things lately, and I needed someone to talk to. I just needed another witch to talk to."

"Hermione, I have to get to class."

"I wanted to let you know that I'm sorry. I can see now that I . . . well, I sort of led you on. I didn't mean to. Not exactly. I didn't know what I was getting into. I shouldn't have said or done some of the things I did. So I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

Severus nodded. "Thank you. It was unpleasant, and unexpected. But for the best, in the end."

"For the best," Hermione echoed softly.

"Yes. For the best. Now I need to go teach." He hesitated at the door. "You are one of my friends, Hermione. Your friendship was very important to me last year...and it still is. You saved my life. I don't even mean what you did in the Shrieking Shack, but everything else you did before that. You were like a life preserver, Hermione, or like a lighthouse. You brought me moments of light in a very dark time. I was remembering that light that night when I kissed you, when I believed . . . when I believed that you wanted more from me than my friendship. And so I offered it, and in the way which I thought you would respond to. Your reaction did hurt, but it was for the best. I hope we are always friends, Hermione, and that someday, we will be able to talk about this better. But I can't today. Even if I didn't have to teach, which I must."

"And I have to go see Rosemary," Hermione said. "I am sorry, Severus."

"For just that evening?"

"What?"

"To put it succinctly, among other things, you have also recently implied that I would exploit Miss Weasley's distress merely in order to advance the chances of the Slytherin Quidditch team."

"Oh, that. I did apologise already. But yes, I'm sorry for that, too."

Severus nodded. "And I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"Thanks for helping with Madam Gamp."

"Of course."

"See you."

Severus nodded.

Hearing the door to the infirmary open, Poppy looked up from reading the report she had written about the Mackled Malaclaw injuries. She immediately stood and came around her desk and out of her office.

"Minerva! How is Gertrude?"

"Back at the estate," Minerva replied.

"Thank goodness! Come in, have a cup of tea. Have you had your lunch?"

"I had some biscuits at the Ministry, though that hardly counts as lunch," Minerva said. "They did feed Gertrude, and I have to say, it didn't look as though their food has improved in the forty years since I stopped working there. Fish paste sandwiches and watery vegetable soup. I felt like I'd stepped back in time, smelling that soup."

"Well, sit down here and Strilpa will bring you some lunch. You'll have to tell me all about what happened."

"Just a small sandwich and some tea," Minerva said. "And I'll tell you everything."

Poppy duly requested a sandwich and pot of tea from Strilpa, then turned back to Minerva after Strilpa Disappeared.

"Is Albus back, too?"

Minerva nodded. "He'll be able to teach his last classes of the day, anyway. Gareth brought his mother home to the estate."

"That's good. It must be a relief to Rosemary, as well."

"Aye, I'm sure of that. Grandmother Siofre is braving Muggle London to find Quin or Alroy and let them know what has happened. Gareth said Rosemary spoke of sending them an owl regardless of their Muggle business obligations today, and we don't want them to get a belated message and go storming off to the Ministry."

"I'm sure that Quin would be in high dudgeon if he thought they were holding her," Poppy said, "so it's best if they hear the most current news directly from your grandmother."

"No doubt."

The tea arrived, and with it, Minerva's sandwich. Poppy poured them each a cup of tea.

"So tell me what happened."

"I arrived at the Ministry and it took a few minutes for me to find out where they'd taken Gertrude. They had her in a meeting room on Level One near the Minister's office, rather than bringing her to the MLE...or down to Level Ten...for questioning. Grandmother Siofre was already there with her. She'd arrived not long after they did, in fact."

"Oh, that is a relief."

"They were trying to get Gertrude to remember where she was at the times of some of the previous attacks. They had been going to use a potion to help her recall her whereabouts, but Siofre put a stop to that."

"A good thing, too! Those potions can be quite variable and have unexpected side effects, especially if they're not administered with care."

"Aye, well, Grandmother Siofre told them that the only way that they would use a potion on Gertrude was in St. Mungo's under the supervision of a Healer ~~of~~ choice, not theirs, and only when *she* judged it necessary to clear up *their* confusion."

"Good for her!"

"After I got there, they moved on to questions about the victims, which ones Gertrude knew, when she'd last seen them, and that sort of thing."

"She must have known most of them; after all, she taught at Hogwarts for almost forty years."

Minerva nodded as she took a sip of tea. "She did. She hadn't taught Clematis, but she knew her vaguely, along with most of the Longbottom family. But she'd taught several of the others. She'd never met Millicent Bulstrode and only knew her as a Beater for Puddlemere United from reading the *Prophet*. Of course, it could very well be that whoever is doing these attacks is unacquainted with most of the victims...doesn't know any of them personally. Anyway, Gertrude didn't have a close relationship...or any relationship at all, really...with any of them. She hadn't seen any of them in years. She hasn't got out much since she returned from the island, and she lived there for close to two decades."

"So what happened? Why did they let her go? Was it the Pensieve memory?"

"I think they would have let her go home, anyway, since they couldn't come up with a good reason to hold her and they weren't getting any new information from her, but after Albus and Moody showed up with their statement about the attacker likely being right-handed, they were happy to send her home with Gareth and with no restrictions on her movements."

"Oh, that's a relief! Our holiday is coming up next week, and one of the main reasons I'm going at all is because Gertrude's going. And she needs to have a good holiday with old friends. It will be good for her...especially after this. It must have been an upsetting experience."

"It was. She was stoic, as always, but she was disturbed by it. But unless they lose their minds entirely, I think the MLE will let Gertrude alone now. Besides, I think that if she has the time to reflect on it in peace, she probably will be able to remember where she was for at least one of the early attacks, and hopefully also have some witnesses for it...provided that they can remember the occasion, too."

"I doubt that I can remember where I was for most of them, myself," Poppy said, "Although during term, I'm usually here, and if I have patients or appointments, I have records of them, and if ever I'm not at the castle, it's remarkable enough that I would remember it."

"You were also Severus's alibi for a few of the attacks, so that gives you an alibi, too, if they were ever daft enough to think you'd do something like this."

"Now that a professional Quidditch player's been injured, I think people will be even more afraid," Poppy said. "Jumping at shadows."

"I hope this doesn't turn into a . . . a witch-hunt, to use an apt Muggle term." Minerva shook her head. "People turning in their neighbours and colleagues for any mildly suspicious behaviour."

"Like in the worst days of the Riddle wars."

"Let's pray that it doesn't go that far." Minerva sighed. "I am going to ask that none of the staff leave the grounds alone...they either have to go with other staff members or meet someone right outside the gates. Obviously, I can't force anyone to do this, but I hope they'll see that it's in their own best interest."

"Probably not a bad idea," Poppy said. "And Severus won't feel quite as singled-out. He's trying not to moan about it, just as I'm trying not to fuss, but I know that he finds it difficult to have to make so many adjustments. Good thing, though, since he's had good alibis whenever he's been away from the school."

"Albus and I will set examples. I will make sure that neither of us leaves the grounds alone."

"I'm on board. I'm sure that I can have someone come for me on Easter morning. Dylan or Geoff."

"I was going to pay a couple of off-duty Hit-Wizards to take the train with the students on Thursday and again when they return, but I'm going to make a formal request for some Aurors from the Ministry, as well. It's short notice, but given that it's our children they'd be protecting, I think they could find a few Aurors happy to take the duty."

"I don't think it's likely that the train would be a target," Poppy said. "All the victims have been alone, and if Moody's right and it's just one lone attacker, they'd never try to attack an entire train. Not to mention that from what you and Severus have both said, the person has an obsession with the children who were injured and killed in the war. I can't see them attacking the Hogwarts Express."

"I don't think they would, but I want everyone to know that we're taking the danger seriously. I think we'll even have someone at the ~~Prophet~~ mention it in the paper."

"That sound like a good idea. How was Millicent?"

"That visit this morning seems a long time ago now. She was well. Her mother was there when I arrived. They both seemed pleased that I came to visit. The Healers are working on nerve and muscle regeneration, but Millicent doesn't think she'll be able to play Beater again. You need two strong arms to do that."

"There are some new techniques I've read about for regenerating nerves, all kinds of tissue. There's a Healer who's even regenerated injured organs with these techniques, but I haven't heard of any Healers in Britain who are using these new methods yet. Maybe she could go abroad for treatment."

"Perhaps, if the Quidditch team will pay for it. I don't believe the Bulstrodes can afford such a thing." Minerva stood. "I have other work to do that doesn't have anything to do with mad vigilantes, as odd as that may sound to us both."

"Speaking of other work, here's a copy of my report on the injuries in Hagrid's fifth-year class today," Poppy said, handing Minerva the report. "Could you or Severus please speak with him about giving me updated lists of the creatures he's having his classes observe or handle? I didn't have the appropriate remedy on hand today because I didn't know what creature they'd be handling."

"What was the creature?"

"Several Mackled Malaclaws," Poppy replied.

"Mackled Malaclaws . . . don't injuries from those lead to consistent bad luck in their victims?"

Poppy nodded. "For up to a week. So make a wide berth when you see any fifth-year Ravensclaws or Hufflepuffs coming!"

"I'll remember that...and I will speak with Hagrid about it myself, then have Severus follow up and get the updated lists from him."

"Thank you, Minerva."

"Of course. By the way," Minerva said, stopping in the door, "are you coming to dinner on Saturday? Albus asked me this morning."

"Oh, yes. It was a busy weekend, then I'd been going to tell him at breakfast, but I didn't go to breakfast, then lunch was, well . . . you know. So yes, you can tell Albus that I will be very glad to come to dinner on Saturday...do I hear that you are less than enthusiastic about it?"

"I'm happy enough about our all having dinner together, but I'm somewhat concerned that Albus is seeing himself as an aged Cupid, trying to play matchmaker. For Severus in particular. So you might want to be prepared for that...I don't know who he has in mind for him, but he's also invited Helena and Aine, amongst other people. I think the evening could either be a lot of fun or one horror after another. Either way, I don't think you'll be bored!"

"As long as there's some good wine, and maybe something a bit stronger later in the evening, I'm sure I'll survive," Poppy said with a laugh.

"Gertrude will likely be there, too."

"Oh, very good."

"And Quin."

"I'd assumed so, since you mentioned Aine."

"You aren't uncomfortable with that?"

"Quin? Have *you* ever been uncomfortable with Quin?" Poppy asked.

"I choose not to answer that," Minerva said drily.

Poppy laughed. "No, it's fine. Severus told me last night that he was coming. I don't believe he knows that Quin will be there, but he'll survive, I'm sure. It will be good for him."

"Mm. Probably. I'll see you at dinner this evening," Minerva replied, looking at the clock on Poppy's bookshelf, "which is not very far off now."

Chapter Eighty-Six: Remedying Magical Misfortune

Chapter 87 of 118

Monday, 29 March 1999. Severus decides to brew a potion and asks Poppy to help.



Chapter Eighty-Six: Remedying Magical Misfortune

Monday, 29 March 1999

"Madam Pomfrey, may I speak with you at your earliest convenience?" Severus asked, catching up to her in the Great Hall on the way up to the staff table.

"Of course," Poppy replied. She looked up at him. He was looking straight ahead, focussed on the staff table. "Professor Vector's not here yet, so why don't I just take her place this evening."

Severus hesitated. "It is not that urgent. It is a matter of school business. The fifth-year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw class. However, if it would be convenient for you . . . yes. We can speak over dinner."

Poppy smiled and nodded.

At that moment, there was a loud crashing and clattering. Poppy and Severus both looked over at the Hufflepuff table. Poppy couldn't imagine how Gwendolyn Cheever had ended up head first in the shepherd's pie, but there she was, her legs kicking as she tried to extricate her head from the casserole dish, but she simply slid forward to hang off the other side of the table. The casserole dish shattered as it finally fell off her head. Poppy saw Severus twitch his finger, and the girl's skirt and robe rearranged themselves to cover her pink knickers. One of her classmates reached out to try to help Gwendolyn, and he slipped on the shepherd's pie and landed hard on his back.

"This is what we need to talk about," Severus said as a few other Hufflepuffs came to the rescue of the unlucky ones. Severus was glad to see that they were not in the fifth-year. "Fifth-year Potions was a disaster. It's a miracle you didn't see more students in your infirmary this afternoon. Fortunately, it was not a double session."

"Probably not a miracle," Poppy replied with a shake of her head. "More likely an alert and talented teacher."

"I hadn't wanted to have to be that alert this afternoon," Severus grumbled.

"I could keep them all in the infirmary . . . it might insulate them from anything that could go wrong...although one of the students did fall out of bed this afternoon, and another one choked on a biscuit. I'm having both Perlie and Strilpa watch them to make sure they don't have any serious mishaps."

"Mm. But they have to leave on Thursday. They're likely to continue having such bad luck for several more days. I can see the Hogwarts Express derailing from a rock slide or some such thing just because a few students are having miserable luck and are all riding the same train," Severus said, holding Poppy's chair for her before sitting himself.

"True. I did what I could, but I didn't know they'd be handling Mackled Malaclaws today...or any day, in fact. They aren't on the list of creatures ~~for~~ any of Hagrid's classes this year. I double-checked, thinking that perhaps it was my oversight and I should have had the right antidote in stock, but they weren't listed."

"I read your memo. I will be sure that Hagrid gets you current lists, or he'll be back to having all his classes breeding Flobberworms and Horklumps. I don't think we can take much more of this," Severus said, watching a Ravenclaw trip over nothing, reflexively try to catch himself by grabbing the back of another student's school robe, but only managing to tear the robe off the other wizard and then fall against Celia Jackson, who landed on young Abdul Khalil, knocking him to the floor. "The rest of us are in danger from their mishaps."

"I did tell them not to play any games of chance and to be extra careful. You're right, though. It doesn't seem that advising them to be careful was very helpful."

Minerva, overhearing the conversation, said, "I have told Hagrid I want to speak with him this evening. I'll stress that he needs to give you current lists. Was he bitten?"

Poppy shook her head. "Fortunately not, but nine of the students were, three of them rather badly. I kept those three in the infirmary."

"Directly after dinner, before I do anything else," Severus said to Poppy, "I am going to brew a potion for you that should help. If you would care to assist me, the work would go faster, or seem to."

"Yes, I'll help you. I do need to check on the students in the infirmary first and ask Filius and Pomona to send the other students to the Hospital Wing to spend the night. They should probably accompany them, in fact." Poppy looked over at the Hufflepuff table just as one of the afflicted students coughed and spat pumpkin juice all over her dinner. At least it was her own dinner, and not someone else's.

"I'll be in my lab...you remember where that is?"

Poppy nodded. It had been several years since she'd been down there, and the last time she had gone down to see him in his lab, he had stood in the half-open door and not let her in. She'd stood in the hallway for their entire ten minute conversation. Minerva told her that Severus's little potions lab was his private sanctum, even more private than his rooms. He wouldn't let anyone in, apparently, so she had dismissed any offended feelings and hadn't gone down there again. Now, though, she felt quite pleased. She doubted that he really needed any help brewing the potion; he just wanted her company...in his private potions laboratory.

"Which potion are you brewing?" Poppy asked.

"The fastest to brew is the Calamity Refuge Draught, but the Clades Refragor Syrup takes only a little longer and is supposed to be more effective, so I thought we'd brew that one."

"All right. I'll have all nine students wait in the infirmary for the time being. Did you know that Gertrude was sent home?" Poppy asked.

Severus nodded. "I ran into Dumbledore. He informed me of their success."

"I hope that Gertrude is comfortably settled at home and having her dinner."

"I received an owl from Quin," Minerva said. "He said she's fine, but he's taking tomorrow off to stay at the estate with her and take her mind off things."

"How is Rosemary, did he say?" Poppy asked.

"She's well. It was frustrating for her to be stuck at the estate and unable to contact anyone," Minerva said. "After Gertrude changes the wards on the estate, Quin's hoping that they'll be able to use their mobile telephones there."

"But what about electricity?" Severus said. "And are there cellular towers near the estate?"

"I don't know what kinds of towers are there, but at Quin's estate in Ireland, he put in an electricity generator. It runs on the sun somehow, he said. Maybe he uses magic for that. He could probably do the same thing for the Gamp estate."

"And electrical devices work at Quin's estate?" Severus asked, not addressing Minerva's ignorance of solar power and mobile telephone towers.

"I don't think he would have a generator if it didn't work," Minerva said drily. "He doesn't have many gadgets there or any electric lighting, but he does have to have his telephone. He has an office at Aine's where he has something called a facsimile machine that he uses a lot...though I don't know why he doesn't have a real machine and not just a facsimile of one...and other Muggle equipment. He just jumps over there if he has to do something . . . technical."

"McGonagall said the MacAirt place was highly magical," Severus said.

"It is. But it's different from the magic at Hogwarts. Doesn't have the same kinds of wards at all, and the castle...the MacAirt castle, that is...isn't designed and held together by magic the way that Hogwarts is. It does have a very deep, very old geomancy that pervades the place...you can feel it around you if you're at all sensitive to that sort of thing...but Quin's mobile telephone does work."

"It's beautiful, Severus. One of the most beautiful places I've ever seen," Poppy said. "I hope you can visit it one day."

"How did Mr Bain just set himself on fire?" Severus asked mildly, taking a sip of his water.

Poppy and Minerva both looked with alarm over at the Ravenclaw table. Lawrence Bain was standing up, beating at his still-smoking, now soaking, robe. Toni Blackwell was standing next to him, holding an empty pitcher. Poppy stood, ready to go down and check Bain, but Toni used her wand to dry him off, and he sat back down to continue his meal.

Poppy shrugged. "I'll look him over when he comes up to the infirmary with the others."

"Thank you for brewing the potion, Severus," Minerva said. "It will be a relief for everyone, I'm sure."

"It is not a complete cure, but it should render them merely mildly unlucky, not disastrously so," Severus replied. "Although . . ."

Minerva and Poppy both looked at him, waiting for him to continue his thought, but he merely gazed out across the room, thinking.

"Although what?" Minerva finally asked.

"Headmistress," Severus said, pushing away from the table. "I am about to leave the grounds. I will depart from the Forbidden Forest and return the same way. I don't believe I'll be long. Less than an hour, I hope."

"What? You can't...that is, I'd rather you didn't leave alone."

"I am going to the Tyree residence. Unless one of them is the assassin, I believe that I shall be quite safe and that I will have an alibi for the time I am away from the school."

"Dumbledore will go with you," Minerva said firmly. "And you will allow him to finish his dinner first...and finish your own. It will also be less awkward for you than appearing unannounced on their doorstep alone."

Severus looked at Minerva for a moment, then he nodded once and pulled up to the table.

"Why are you going to the Tyree estate?" Poppy asked. "Potions ingredients?"

Severus nodded. "I could harvest a few leaves from Professor Sprout's memory plant...which is why I considered brewing the Clades Refragor Syrup...but yesterday, Professor Birnbaum showed me a new hybrid he has created from the memory plant. I wish to consult him about its properties and request a sample. It is quite possible it will create a more effective potion. We can brew two batches simultaneously...quite an easy thing to do...one the standard and one with the new hybrid. And perhaps with a few other . . . tweaks."

"It sounds like something Dumbledore would find intriguing," Poppy said.

"Yes, but my lab is small, and your help will be sufficient. I will present him with our results."

"He's tired today, too. Last night's interruption didn't give us much sleep, then he did a lot of Apparating to find Moody, and he wouldn't let me give him a Side-Along home from London today. So don't let him talk you into staying at my grandmother's for a drink."

"I have a potion to brew, and if you're serious about this 'buddy system' of yours," Severus said with a look of distaste, "then neither of us should Apparate back here alone."

"Thank you."

Severus glanced down the table where Albus was sitting between Pomona and Vector. "He has finished his dinner."

Minerva put a hand on his arm. "But not his dessert. Ten minutes will not make a difference."

"As long as the afflicted students avoid doing anything more dangerous than breathing, perhaps," Severus said.

"I am going to go tell Filius and Pomona to bring their students up to the infirmary," Poppy said. "Do you have an idea when the potion will be ready?"

"It will take four hours to brew. So . . . between one and two a.m., depending on when we can begin. Perhaps earlier if we don't take long with Professor Birnbaum."

Poppy nodded. "All right. I'm going to give them all a Calming Draught in the meantime...not a very effective treatment, but at least it might induce them all to stay still." She stood. "I'll come down at around seven-thirty, if that would suit you."

"Yes. I should be back by then. Stop at my office first. If I am not there, I shall be in my lab," Severus replied.

"When you speak to Pomona," Minerva said, catching Poppy's arm as she went by, "let Albus know to come down here to us when he has finished his meal."

"Shall I bring us?" Albus asked as he and Severus headed through the Forbidden Forest to reach the edge of the Anti-Apparition wards.

"I was there yesterday with McGonagall," Severus replied. He looked over at Albus, who seemed cheery and energetic enough, but he remembered Minerva's concern that the older wizard was over-exerting himself. "I can give you a Side-Along."

"No, no, my boy! Thank you, but I do prefer Apparating myself."

A minute later, they were approaching the edge of the Hogwarts Anti-Apparition wards, and Albus said, "You visited the estate for the first time yesterday? How very convenient."

"Indeed. I would have been unaware of Professor Birnbaum's hybrid had McGonagall not wished to bring me there for a visit...he thought it would be amusing for me to meet Eoghan Tyree."

"Was it amusing?"

Severus shrugged. "Gareth enjoyed himself. It was an interesting way to pass some time, and Eoghan seems to be a bright enough child."

"Minerva seems to think so."

"You don't know him?"

"Of course I have met him, but I've generally only seen him at large family gatherings. He's a quiet boy, too. Introspective, perhaps, and a bit shy. But I know Colm and Wren Caoimhe a bit better...his cousins, Branwen and Renwick's children. Long is another quiet one, their youngest. All four of them are entering Hogwarts next year, Caoimhe, Colm, Long, and Eoghan."

"Branwen and Renwick had triplets?"

"No. Colm and Caoimhe are twins. Long is almost a year younger, but they were born in September and he was born in August."

"At least they aren't identical twins," Severus said with a sigh. "I have not looked at the Hogwarts book for next year yet to see how many letters we will be sending . . . I have made no plans at all for next year."

Albus was quiet for a moment, then he asked, "Are you still considering leaving at the end of this year's contract?"

"I have no plans at all, as I said."

"I would understand it if you were to leave. Conditions have changed. I know it was not your own choice to apply for a job at Hogwarts in the beginning, and certainly not your choice to take it under the circumstances at the time . . . but I would be very happy if you were to stay on. I know that Minerva relies on you and truly appreciates your work and your presence in the castle."

"Hm." Severus thought of Poppy. If things worked out well with her, he could picture staying at least another year; if they did not, he was unsure whether he could bear to be in the castle with her. "I know I must decide, but I fortunately do not need to decide tonight."

"No, of course not, my boy. But if you ever wish to discuss it...pros and cons, alternate plans...I am here."

"Thank you. I believe we are past the wards."

"Yes. I shall meet you there...on the front drive?"

Severus nodded. "Yes."

As soon as both wizards arrived, lamps lit along the drive and the front door opened.

Albus waved at the pale grey house-elf who stepped out. "Good evening! It's Professors Dumbledore and Snape...Bandon, is it?"

"Brantin," the house-elf said. "Please come in, Professors. I will tell my mistress who it is." He bowed slightly and, as soon as the two wizards had entered the spacious front hall, Disapparated.

"This is an immense house," Severus said, looking around him. "A castle, I would call it."

"Indeed. It is. And the grounds are among the most extensive privately held wizarding lands in Britain and Ireland combined. They are an old family. They've been here...and I mean on this land...for many, many centuries, much longer than the Malfoys, or even the Blacks, have been English. And they were on the wizarding isle of Tirodh Beag...Little Tíree...for even longer. Well over a thousand years."

"But we only meddle selectively in the affairs of others, especially English," Siofre's dry observation came from above them.

"Ah, Siofre! Just giving Severus a bit of history," Albus said, walking toward the stairs and taking her hand as she came down the last steps. He bent and kissed her cheek.

"Are you here on a social call? Or is it about the business today? Gertrude hasn't been taken in again, has she?"

"No, entirely different business tonight. Dear Gertrude is being well-cosseted by Quin and the rest of her family, I am sure. We are actually here to see Johannes."

"He was very disturbed by the entire affair," Siofre replied. "He is out sitting in my moonlight garden, I believe. He wants to add a new feature to it...dinna ask me what. He would not tell me. Johannes is aye after surprising me. Contemplating that, he says, relaxes him."

There was a clattering from above, and Eoghan came racing down the stairs, taking the final set by bannister. He landed lightly on his toes.

"Run on your own stairs, laddie, an' no thumping down mine," Siofre scolded mildly.

"Brantlin told me my cousin...Professor Snape...was here!" Eoghan said breathlessly. "And Uncle Albus," he added.

"Aye, and they are here to see Johannes."

"I can run and get him for you!" Eoghan volunteered. "I saw him walking around the pond in your garden."

"No more running this time of night or you'll never get to sleep tonight," Siofre said. "But you may bring the gentlemen out to the garden, if they consent."

Albus saw that Eoghan's hopeful look was directed at his new-found "cousin," so he said, "You know, it's been a long day for me. I would be most grateful for a tisane or a cup of cocoa in the parlour with your grandmother. I just tagged along; it's actually Professor Snape's business. He can tell you all about it on your way out to the gardens."

Severus nodded. He would be just as glad not to have Albus there; he had an additional request to make, and he had resigned himself to having to do so by letter rather than be overheard. He was not at all used to the notion of courting anyone, and he still felt more than slightly embarrassed about it. It didn't seem . . . like him. He'd developed such a hard persona over the years, even with himself, it was difficult to admit to enjoying being a bit . . . softer. Being in love.

He followed the boy through the house, this time not going through the conservatory, as he had when returning to the house with Johannes.

"Hope you don't mind going by way of the kitchen, sir," Eoghan said as they passed through what appeared to be a small breakfast room. "I want to tell Multry and Kilbeena that Uncle Honnie will be coming back to the house soon. He didn't have his supper tonight, and no tea, neither. He'll be wanting something soon."

"Did you have your lessons on the island today?" Severus asked the boy after they had stopped briefly in the kitchen and then stepped out into the chilly night air.

"Nay. We were all just 'bout to leave when Aunt Gertrude's house-elf came for Grandmother Siofre." He sighed. "She said we'd go later this week, instead. Thursday, probably."

"Did you have any lessons?"

"Music and German in the morning, and Latin and Muggle history after lunch. Then Uncle Honnie had us work in the smaller greenhouse until teatime."

"You have well-organised lessons, then."

"Aye, and I like my music and language lessons, but it's more fun on the island. There's a lot of kids...cousins...and we do more proper magic."

"I see. What sort of 'proper magic'?"

"Just some charms, mainly. They don't let us do very much real Transfiguration yet...I'm old enough, and so are Caoimhe and Colm, but Long isn't. He doesn't even have a wand of his own yet. He has to use a borried one on the island. We'll all be going to Hogwarts together, so we all have to wait until we get to Hogwarts, Bridie says."

"Who is Bridie?"

"Bridie Tyree. She's in charge. She finds different people to take the kids different weeks for different subjects, like Charms and History and Cooking. All kinds of things. We learned thatching charms last time. When we go to the island...Colm, Caoimhe, Long, and me, er, I...we just go wherever everyone else is, and Grandmother Siofre stays and takes some of the older kids for the day, and they do advanced lessons."

"Sounds . . . haphazard."

Eoghan shrugged. "I dinna know. We all like it. Well, Colm doesn't. But he doesn't like most of our lessons, anyway. Except boating and fishing. And the thatching charms. We all liked that."

"You have lessons every day?"

"Not every day, and not all day, unless we're on the island. But four or five days, and I have my Sunday lesson every week, too."

"I see."

Eoghan pointed. "Down there, that's Grandmother Siofre's moon garden. Uncle Honnie was there when I saw him from my window."

Severus stopped. "Thank you. You may return to the house now."

"Oh . . . I could bring you all the way, sir. The path can be hard to see in this light."

Severus drew his wand. "*Lumos*. You know that one?"

Eoghan looked up at Severus very seriously and drew his own wand. He held it in front of himself and concentrated. The tip of his wand lit up. He looked back up at Severus.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Very good."

Eoghan smiled. "Grandmother Siofre said that casting silently is a good skill to have."

"Indeed." Severus looked down at the little person beside him. "It may be dull for you if you come down to the garden with me. We shall be discussing business."

Eoghan shrugged. "I can always think about other things."

Severus started walking again and said nothing when Eoghan continued with him.

"Uncle Albus said you could tell me what your business is."

"Do you know of the Mackled Malaclaw?" Severus asked.

"Aye. I caught one once down on Tiree Beag. But I was careful not to be bitten," the boy said.

"And why is it important not to be bitten?"

"Because the bite from the Mackled Malaclaw can bring its unfortunate victim bad luck for a week or more, and the worse the bite, the worse the misfortunes suffered by its victim," Eoghan recited in a sing-song voice.

"Mm. Nine students in Care of Magical Creatures were bitten by Mackled Malaclaws this morning. They are, as you say, suffering misfortunes."

"More than one Mackled Malaclaw?" At Severus's nod, the young wizard let out a low whistle. "Uncle Jacob says that if you're bit by more than one Mackled Malaclaw, your bad luck will be even worse and last longer."

"Indeed." Severus hadn't heard such a thing before; he wondered whether there was any foundation for that bit of folk wisdom.

"So you need to brew a potion for them and you need ingredients?"

"Precisely."

"I wish I could help."

"You brew potions in your lessons?"

"Not for lessons. I help Grandmother Siofre with the potions she brews, though, and Uncle Honnie brews potions for the plants, and sometimes he lets me help prepare the ingredients."

"Which potions?" Severus asked curiously.

"Headache Potion, burn salve, Doxie deterrent . . . fertilising potions for the greenhouse. Uncle Honnie doesn't let me help with any of the insect repellants, though."

Eoghan led Severus into the garden, which was ringed by hedges. In the light of the nearly full moon, the garden itself seemed to glow. The garden was filled with plants with white blossoms of different shapes and sizes, and others with leaves striped or speckled with white and silver. The garden seemed almost to undulate in the moonlight, the breeze moving through plants of various heights and shapes. Johannes approached them, a looming silhouette in his dark robes.

"Professor Snape, I thought I recognised your voice! Is everything well?"

"Some students were bitten by Mackled Malaclaws, Uncle Honnie, and Professor Snape needs some ingredients for a potion for them," Eoghan said.

"Nothing with Gertrude, then?" When Severus shook his head, Johannes sighed audibly. "That is good. I am seeing her in the morning, but I worry about her. I understand from Siofre that you were instrumental in having her questioning cut short."

"No, not really. Several of us had seen a memory of the most recent attack, and we all realised that it could not have been she." Severus looked down at Eoghan. "That is highly confidential. Do not speak of it."

"Aye, sir. Never a word," Eoghan replied seriously.

"It is good that you all saw that memory, then." Johannes shook his head. "When I heard that Gertrude had been taken by Aurors from her home, which should be sacred, I was very worried. I remembered those who had been taken away during the conflicts with the Death Eaters, taken, sent to Azkaban, and never tried, never released, simply . . . lost. And after all that she has suffered, and her long isolation, Gertrude should have to bear no more. I do not know whether she could."

Eoghan, in what Severus thought a surprising gesture from a boy his age, slipped his small hand into Johannes's large one. Johannes looked down at Eoghan and smiled.

He looked back up at Severus. "So how can we help you with the Mackled Malaclaw potions, Professor?"

"I was going to brew Clades Refragor Syrup, which requires leaves from the memory plant. Pomona has one which is just coming mature, but I thought of your hybrid. I would like to try an experimental potion using the hybrid, if you believe it might have appropriate properties."

Johannes nodded. "I believe it would. It is worth trying. I am sorry I did not include clippings with your flowers yesterday. I did not think you would have any use for them so quickly, and I wanted to send an entire plant or two, but only after speaking with Murdoch." He shrugged. "But I believe he would find this acceptable. I do ask that you share your results with him, however, whether the brewing is successful or not."

"Of course."

"It will need to be kept in a greenhouse...Greenhouse Two would likely be suitable for it. I'll send Pomona an owl in the morning. I can stress the . . . confidential, proprietary nature of the plant, as well as describe its appropriate care."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome." Johannes gestured toward the opening in the hedge.

"The bill for this may be sent to me or to the Headmistress," Severus said as the three wizards left the moon garden and headed up the path back towards the house.

Johannes shook his head. "Simply share the information with Murdoch, whatever he requests, and keep me informed, as well. If there is ever any profit you make...or Hogwarts...then we can speak of money."

"Very well. However . . . I have another request." He looked over at Eoghan. "We can discuss it later."

"Eoghan...be a good lad and run up to the greenhouse and pick out a few nice specimens of *Commemoratum tyrensis* for Professor Snape to choose from."

With no more than a quick nod, the slim boy let go of Johannes's hand and sprinted up the path ahead of them.

"How old is he?" Severus asked. Eoghan was quite small, and he was more openly affectionate with his Uncle Honnie than Severus would have expected, but he also seemed acute and more adept with his wand than usual.

"Eleven."

"He did a nonverbal *Lumos* earlier."

Johannes nodded. "He got his wand for his birthday in October. We allow him to carry it as long as he's on the estate or the island, but he only has a few spells he's allowed to perform unsupervised with his wand. *Lumos* is one of them, so he has much practice with it. But you had a request. A personal one? More flowers, perhaps?"

"Yes. I wished to write you a note of thanks, but other events intervened before I could. They were quite . . . they were good. Perfect. Yesterday when I was here, you mentioned red tulips. Because of the attacks, my ability to come and go freely is somewhat constricted. The Headmistress does not want us to go anywhere on our own, any of us, lest we become either targets or suspects. It is difficult to . . . to do any discreet shopping, if you know what I mean."

"Of course. You would like red tulips tonight?"

Severus shook his head. "Professor Dumbledore has accompanied me."

"I see. It might be awkward. Would you like the flowers delivered to the kitchens again, then?"

"Yes, that would be useful. The house-elf may ask for Twiskett again."

"Very well...tonight?"

"No, I would not impose in that way, and tonight would not be convenient at my end, either. But if the tulips could arrive tomorrow morning, I believe that might be a good time."

"Do you mind if I ask their ultimate destination? The witch? If I know her...although it is very impertinent of me to ask."

Severus shook his head. "It is . . . that is . . . we aren't . . ."

Johannes held up his hand. "Say nothing more. I should not have asked."

"I hope that they will find a place in the Hospital Wing," Severus said after a slight hesitation.

Johannes glanced over at him. "Poppy? Ah, she is a lovely witch. A truly good person. I taught her my first few years here, and then she was my colleague. I came to know her well. She is dear to you, then?"

"She is," Severus replied.

"And she liked the flowers last night? They were appropriate?"

Severus nodded.

"I'm glad."

"I must pay you this time, though. I treat you as a personal florist, and I am aware you are not that." He wouldn't like it if someone came to him, a serious Potions master, and made repeated requests for frivolous potions for personal reasons, particularly not when the person was a virtual stranger.

"All right. But I would prefer to take payment in kind, if you would agree. I have a few potions I was going to ask Murdoch to brew for the estate, but if you have the time, you could brew them instead. They are not standard potions. I can send you the formulas and most of the ingredients, all but the few that are not plant- or mineral-based. What do you say to that? I will provide you with flowers for your lady when you need them, and you brew these potions for us. Over the Easter holiday, if you can."

"That is acceptable to me," Severus said with a nod. He doubted Birnbaum would ask him to brew anything illegal...or at least, nothing Dark...particularly not if it was a potion Murdoch would normally brew. Of course, Murdoch had brewed some rather dubious concoctions during the war . . . but he himself had done far worse during the war, particular before he became a spy. Suddenly, his mind's eye jumped to the vision of Gertrude, crouched on the floor, bleeding, her severed arm beside her. He blinked the vision away and ignored the slight nausea rising in him.

"That would be fine," Severus reiterated.

"And you will tell me when you need your red roses...or any other flowers...and I will provide them" Johannes said as they reached the elaborate greenhouses.

"I will."

The section of the greenhouse they were approaching was well-lit, and they could see Eoghan bent over the low-growing memory plants, but even before they saw him, they could hear him. The boy was singing to the plants, singing in a lovely, light soprano. Johannes put his hand on Severus's arm, and the two wizards stopped for a moment, waiting. As soon as Eoghan became aware of them, he straightened and stopped singing.

"I found three good ones, Uncle," he said. "I could find more if you want."

"What do you think, Professor?" Johannes asked, gesturing toward the three plants that Eoghan had picked out and already repotted.

"They seem fine. Good specimens. Many blossoms."

"Would you like all three, then? You can rotate among them and let me know if you need another, particularly if you collaborate with Murdoch."

Severus nodded. "Thank you."

Eoghan put the three plants in a small open crate. "I can carry it up for you," he said. "I hope your students get better."

"So do we all...they have been having accidents all over the castle, including in Potions class." Severus quirked a quick grin. "One boy even lit himself on fire at dinner...and as there were no candles or any other flames near him, it was quite puzzling how he achieved that."

"Did he hurt himself?" Eoghan asked, following the older wizards out of the greenhouse.

"It did not appear so. Someone threw a pitcher of juice on him. All of the afflicted students were going to go to the infirmary after dinner. I am sure the matron will treat him if he requires it."

"That's good." A moment later, he asked, "Uncle Honnie, could I have some hot chocolate when we get to the house?"

"You know that Siofre does not think that hot chocolate is good for you before bed. You will have to ask her."

Eoghan sighed. "She'll say no. Uncle Albus drinks hot chocolate at night."

"He is an adult."

"Is it bad for him, too?"

"Ah . . . I do not know. It is probably not good for anyone too close to their bedtime," Johannes said. "I will make you Horlicks before bed, yes?"

Eoghan nodded and smiled. "Thanks."

They reentered the house through the French doors to the conservatory, then Severus followed the other two through the ground floor. Johannes stuck his head into the sitting room where Severus and Gareth had waited the day before, but Albus and Siofre weren't there.

"Uncle Albus mentioned the parlour," Eoghan said helpfully.

"If they are not there, I will send Brantin to find them, Professor," Johannes said. "I know you need to return to Hogwarts to brew the potion and do not wish to waste time."

Fortunately, Albus and Siofre were in a large parlour on the ground floor on the other side of the house.

"I have the plants, Professor," Severus said to Albus, accepting the small crate from Eoghan.

"Ah, yes, and I am sure that the students will be glad to have the potion brewed sooner rather than later," Albus said, standing. "It has been lovely to have this time to chat, Siofre...and good to see you, too, young man," he said to Eoghan. "I hear that you are becoming quite adept with the Charmed Obsidian Seer's Glass that your Aunt Gertrude gave you."

Eoghan went pink. "A little."

"Haffie said she'd come and give the boy a few lessons when she returns from Vancouver next month," Siofre said, standing and putting one arm around Eoghan's shoulders. "Say good-night now, laddie, and I'll be up in a bit."

Eoghan nodded. "Good night, Uncle Albus; good night, Professor Snape. Thank you for letting me choose the plants for you. I hope you can come for a longer visit soon."

Severus nodded.

"Perhaps over the Easter holiday," Johannes suggested. "We will talk about it. Off upstairs, now, and I'll bring you your Horlicks."

As soon as Eoghan had left the room, Severus nodded at Siofre. "Thank you again, Madam Tyree. I apologise for imposing upon you a second time in as many days."

"Certainly not. Apology unnecessary," Siofre said briskly, leading them out to the main entry hall. "Take care getting home tonight."

"Ah, one moment," Johannes interrupted. "Just a quick word with you, Professor."

Albus nodded at Severus. "I'll wait for you outside on the drive."

Albus and Siofre stepped out the large front door, and Johannes turned to Severus. "I forgot to ask," he said softly, "if you would like a card of some type sent with the tulips. I do not do this often, so I did not think of it before."

"I don't do this often, either," Severus said with a quick, crooked grin. "Just . . ." He swallowed, trying to think of something not very embarrassing that he could tell Johannes to put on a card for him.

"What about . . . 'My declaration to you,' and then your name? With her name on the outside?" Johannes suggested. "Or something similar?"

Severus thought quickly: red tulips, which he had chosen specifically, meant *Declaration of Love*, according to the card. "I am not sure . . . and could you deliver them . . . Thursday morning, instead?" The students would be on their way to London on Thursday. They could spend time together that day, and he could work up to the "red tulip stage" in the meantime.

"Yes, of course."

"The holiday begins on Thursday," Severus explained. "Just put my initials on the card. Nothing else. S.S.S. Three esses. And her name on the outside. If I think of something different, I'll owl you." The flowers were expressive enough, he thought. A message might detract from the impact, particularly when he told her the actual words . . . whenever that might be.

"Good. I will also send you the formulas and the potions ingredients with a house-elf. Next week...Tuesday?"

"Monday would be fine, if you wish to send them sooner." Poppy would be on holiday; he would have to keep busy whilst she was away. "I will let you know when the potions are ready. Thank you again for the hybrids. Good night, Professor."

"Good night. Now I'm off to heat some milk and make some Horlicks. Not potions, but effective at calming small boys, I have found!"

Severus headed out of the house toward where Albus and Siofre waited. Albus waved good-bye. The last thing that Severus saw before he Disapparated was Johannes standing in the doorway, hand raised in farewell.

Chapter Eighty-Seven: Brewing with the Master

Chapter 88 of 118

Monday, 29 March 1999. Severus and Poppy brew together.



Chapter Eighty-Seven: Brewing with the Master

Monday, 29 March 1999

Severus hurried across the grounds. Dumbledore had stopped to chat with Hagrid, who was working in his strawberry patch, but Severus hadn't paused. Poppy had said that she would meet him at seven-thirty, and it was already seven fifty-five. By the time he got to his lab, it would be after eight. He didn't think she'd be worried this time...after all, he'd only gone to the Tyrees, and Dumbledore had been with him. But other than a gloomy corridor, there was nowhere for her to wait outside his lab, which was in one of the deepest, most deserted parts of the dungeons, and he didn't want her having to hang about outside his office like a student hoping to catch a word with

him.

As Severus entered the castle, he looked up to see Poppy coming down the stairs towards him.

She smiled. "Good evening, Professor Snape! Did you have success at obtaining the potions ingredient from Professor Birnbaum, then?"

Severus took in a deep breath. "Yes, I did." He held up the small crate. "He gave me a few specimens, in fact."

Poppy nodded and held up her potions basket. "Whilst you were gone, I thought I could begin helping by gathering some of the other ingredients, so I looked up the potion formula. After Professor Sprout brought her students up to the infirmary, we went down to the greenhouses and I gathered some of the needles from her Memory Plant, as well as some fresh Alihotsy leaves, marshmallow root, and beebalm, and I fetched some fresh garlic, too."

Severus smiled. "Very good. Thank you." That would certainly save them some time.

"I thought that I could take care of gathering the fresh ingredients, at least, and make myself useful."

"I'm sorry I was later than I'd anticipated," Severus said as they started down the hall past the staff room to the stairs that led to the dungeons.

"That's fine. When you weren't in your office or your lab when I went down at about twenty past seven...that was when I had all the ingredients together, so I was a bit early...I just went up to my office to wait. I was glad you came in through the front doors, though. If you'd come in by a back way, I'd not have seen you. But I was planning on coming down again at eight, anyway."

"Thank you."

A group of first- and second-year Slytherins were coming up the stairs towards them, chattering and paying no attention to anything else. Severus glared at them. The students immediately moved to one side, single file, to allow Severus and Poppy to pass.

"I sometimes think their parents teach them no manners at all," Severus grumbled.

"They're children. They live in their own world," Poppy said. "We just move through it, from their perspective."

"And then they become teenagers and it gets worse," Severus said, a scowl still on his face.

Poppy chuckled. "Yes, it does, but thankfully, it's a phase that passes for us all...or for most of us, anyway. And some of the students really are delightful, under the right circumstances. Most of them, in fact."

"Hmph." Severus shook his head. He supposed he just never saw them in the right circumstances. His miserable luck. Perhaps he should take some of the potion he was brewing, he thought with a smirk. It might cure it. "You are probably right."

"Those are nice looking plants," Poppy remarked. "They're an unusual colour."

Severus nodded. "According to Birnbaum, the leaves start out dark green, and then before the plant flowers, they turn purple. Presumably, this is a cyclic event."

"What are they?"

"*Commemoratum tyrensis*," Severus said. "A Memory Plant hybrid. Murdoch McGonagall has been the sole Potions master brewing with it up until now."

"That must be exciting for you, being one of the first to experiment with it," Poppy said.

Severus nodded. "Indeed. I find myself more genuinely interested in experimenting than I have in a long time. My experiments in recent years were not ones of my own choosing, nor ones I would have chosen at all, for the most part."

"It was good of Johannes to give you three plants," Poppy said. "He is so sweet. In addition to being a brilliant Herbologist, he's a very warm and generous man."

"He spoke highly of you, as well," Severus replied. "He said that you were one of his students and later, a colleague."

"Yes. He taught me the last few years I was a student, after Professor Beery, and then he left Hogwarts in around fifty-eight, I think. I came to Hogwarts as matron in fifty-four. Not to sound morbid or unkind, but I could scarcely wait for Madam Valentius to either retire or kick-the-cauldron."

"She was the mediwitch here before you?"

"Yes. She was perfectly competent, and quite a jolly sort of person...and she was quite helpful to me when I applied to St. Mungo's for mediwitch training...but she wasn't always very current in her practices. Besides, I just wanted this job rather madly."

Severus thought of how he would never have applied for a job at Hogwarts if the Dark Lord hadn't commanded it. And then even after the Dark Lord had been defeated the first time, he'd had to stay on as a spy...and to be kept an eye on. Severus knew that one of the reasons Dumbledore had been able to keep him from going to Azkaban wasn't just his assurance to the Wizengamot that he'd been the Order's spy, but the fact that Dumbledore had also told them that he would be teaching at Hogwarts under his supervision. It had coincided with his own wish for vengeance on the Dark Lord and to escape punishment for his own misdeeds, so he had never considered any other option...even if there had been another for him.

"What was Hogwarts like then, when you first started working here?" Severus asked, moving from thoughts of his own dark past to ones of Poppy and her enthusiasm for her job.

"Much the same, really, but those first years I was matron, there were no obvious threats to the wizarding world. No Dark Wizards out to tyrannise us all, or try to. It was well after Grindelwald and before Voldemort, before there were even whispers of a powerful new Dark Wizard, so by contrast, it felt pretty carefree. And unlike after the Riddle Wars, the Grindelwald war only indirectly affected us at Hogwarts. It had been a frightening time, of course, and some British wizards and witches were killed, but most of them not on British soil, and certainly not at Hogwarts itself, so the aftereffects were different than they were after Voldemort. It felt like a good and hopeful time, filled with promise for the future. Dippet was Headmaster, and he was a bit more of a traditionalist than Dumbledore was. Wore his ceremonial Headmaster's robes to dinner several times a week, and always on Sunday, and at other times, too, especially if there were visitors. He was very serious about rank and seniority and all that sort of thing, but he didn't have a lot of backbone. Gave the Board of Governors whatever they wanted, usually."

"I have to stop in my office for a moment," Severus said as they reached it. He would have to speak with Twiskett about getting some house-elves to help him clear it out and make it less gruesome. It had never bothered him before, but now as he unlocked the door and gave his nonverbal password, he felt embarrassed to have Poppy come in and see his macabre collection. He suddenly felt it was infantile to have the various desiccated or floating preserved specimens on display. They belonged in a cupboard, not on open shelves...those that shouldn't just be chucked in the bin. It was a puerile method of making students uncomfortable and emphasising his Dark nature. The first shouldn't be necessary...he could make them uncomfortable enough without relying on props to do it...and the second was something he now preferred to minimise, not emphasise.

"Anyway, Hogwarts wasn't that different back then, really," Poppy said. "Just a little more relaxed in some ways and a little less relaxed in others. A lot more Slytherins on staff, though. Around half, I think."

"Mm. Interesting." He stood against the door to his office with his hand resting on the handle. "I only need to get the potions text. You go on and I'll be right behind you," Severus said.

"No, that's okay. I'll wait," Poppy replied. She noted Severus's slight grimace, there and gone again. "Unless there's some specific reason you don't want me to...did you leave your *Playwizard* magazines out or something?"

Severus twitched a slight smile. "No...and I don't have any to leave out, if you wish to know."

"I was just joking," Poppy said, standing in the doorway as Severus entered his office and picked up the book from his desk. "But you did seem oddly uncomfortable."

Severus shrugged one shoulder and muttered, "*Parakeet*." He opened his right-hand drawer.

"Parakeet?" Poppy asked.

"Password. Which I'll now have to change, since you repeated it so loudly. With the door open."

"I didn't think you wanted me in here, for whatever reason," Poppy replied, stepping in and closing the door behind her. She watched him with a teasing grin. "If it's not *Playwizard*, perhaps *Playwitch*?"

"You also made *that* suggestion far too loudly," Severus grumbled. He pulled out a leather-bound book. "If a student had heard..."

"They might think that I had a strange sense of humour or maybe even that we're actually full adult human beings with interests that go beyond..."

"Making their lives miserable?" Severus asked, closing the drawer and warding it again.

Poppy laughed. "There was no one around, anyway."

"I know." Severus looked at her. He sighed and smiled wryly, then gestured at his shelves. *Playwizard* would preferable to these."

Poppy looked around. "These are pretty disgusting." She stepped closer to one shelf. "Is that a..."

"Yes," Severus interrupted.

Poppy made a face. "I don't want to know where you got it or what you intend to do with it."

"Nothing. That is, it is just for . . . display."

Poppy shuddered. "I prefer it when you decorate with candles and flowers."

"I'm going to clear it out. When you return from your holiday, I hope to have the office a place where you can come without having to avoid looking at anything too closely."

"I *have* been here before, remember. It's not as though I don't know not to examine any of your specimens too closely," Poppy said. "You didn't need to be embarrassed about it."

"It wasn't just that," Severus replied. "I also . . . I don't want you to associate me with anything disgusting, like the, um, specimen."

"I do think of your collection when I think of your office," Poppy said as Severus let them out of the office, then closed and warded the door behind them, "but I don't automatically think of it when I think of you."

"How were the students when you left them?" Severus asked, changing the subject.

"Fine...as fine as could be expected. At least their physical injuries were easily mended," Poppy replied. "Pomona and Filius said that they would take turns watching them in the infirmary until we have the potion ready to administer. The ones who were bitten by more than one of the creatures are worse off, of course, poor dears, but as long as they lie still and don't try to do anything, they're fine. Have you brewed this potion before?"

Severus shook his head. "No, but it appears fairly straightforward. I consulted three different texts, and there don't appear to be any very tricky stages, though there are many ingredients. Have you brewed it?"

"I don't think so, but it's been a while since I brewed much more than Headache Potion, my version of an anti-indigestion remedy, and a couple other personal potions. I don't know whether I'd remember brewing it...or helping with it, since I doubt I'd brew it on my own. It didn't look familiar, though."

"After the initial steps, there is a brewing phase of one hour and thirty minutes during which it needs to be stirred only twice until the final ingredients are added and the next steps are taken."

"Yes, I noticed that when I was looking at the formula. I thought it would be good for you to have some company whilst you waited," Poppy said, smiling up at him.

Severus waved a hand to light the torches in the narrow stairway ahead of them and looked down and returned her smile. "That was my thought, as well. And rather yours than anyone else's," he added softly.

Poppy seemed to glow with pleasure. "I also thought that with my help preparing the ingredients, the brewing might go a bit faster."

Severus nodded. "How are you at pulverising?"

She laughed. "Fine, I guess. Haven't really considered it. Better at grinding than macerating, I suppose." She let out a short chuckle. "Did that sound as suggestive to you as it did to me?"

Severus didn't hide his amusement. "Grinding . . . yes, I would say you might be talented at that." He lowered his voice. "You do the grinding . . . and I will do the macerating."

Poppy chuckled. "It sounds even more suggestive when you say it," she whispered.

Severus raised an eyebrow and looked down at her, a glint in his eye. "If you find *that* suggestive, I can think of a few other things I might say, then, once we begin . . . *brewing*."

Severus's voice gave Poppy shivers, and she shook her head with a smile. "You can do that, Severus...although you may find that we become too distracted to do any brewing."

Severus smirked. "There is brewing, and there is *brewing*."

Laughing, Poppy said, "You're the Potions master, and this is your domain. I'll be happy to learn more about such distinctions from you."

They stopped at an old, scarred oak door, and Severus drew his wand. After a pass of his wand, which caused the door to glow, he turned a large key in the lock. Finally, he grasped the door handle and used his nonverbal password charm before pressing down and pulling the door open.

"Shall I set out the ingredients I brought?" Poppy asked as she stepped into the long, narrow room.

"Yes, there to the left," Severus said, setting his books and the crate down on a low bench, then crossing the room to a cabinet and opening it.

"What's the other book?" Poppy asked as she took each of the ingredients from her basket and placed them on the left side of the tall workbench.

"Journal. It's a new one I haven't used much. McGonagall gave it to me; I've used it when I've done any brewing. Fresh start. My old one I keep locked up down here." He quickly removed three jars and Levitated them over to the tall workbench. He bent over and looked at the lower shelves, then swore softly under his breath.

"That word was more than just suggestive," Poppy said, raising an eyebrow, "but it didn't sound like a happy suggestion. What's wrong?"

Severus straightened and shook his head. "I forgot to restock the Fwooper eggshells. I used the last of them . . . just before Christmas, I think. I haven't needed them since. I haven't done very much brewing the last few months."

"Oh, dear . . . it's after eight, but we could Apparate to Edinburgh. I'm sure we could get some from Murdoch. He'd open his shop for us."

Severus shook his head. "Not necessary. I have some in the potions cupboard near the classroom. If I had remembered, we wouldn't be wasting time going back up for it."

"I can start preparing the ingredients whilst you fetch it," Poppy offered. When he hesitated, she said, "Or I could go up and get the Fwooper eggshells for us."

"That would be best. The password is *absurdity*."

Poppy nodded. "All right. I'll be quick about it." She paused at the door. "Where are the shells in the cupboard?"

"The Fwooper shells are in the back, to the left, second shelf from the bottom. You may have to move a few things aside that may have got in front of them."

"Okay. And it wouldn't be easier for you to find them?"

"I . . . I prefer to prepare the ingredients. Choose the Memory Plant hybrid leaves, measure out the other ingredients, review the formula, begin chopping, and so on."

Poppy put her hand on the door handle. "I wondered why you'd hesitated. But that makes sense."

"Poppy...it's not a matter of trust. But I have my methods. I am sure you could prepare the ingredients adequately, but it will be more efficient if I begin it. There are many ingredients in this particular potion . . . laying them out..."

"Really, it's *fine*, Severus. One of us has to get the eggshells, and it is perfectly sensible for me to do it. This is a small lab with a small workbench. I'm sure you have a method worked out for organising everything, and you could do it faster." She smiled. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Poppy had no trouble finding the Fwooper eggshells, although she did have to move aside a brown jar labelled "Chirzpurfle fangs." As she hurried back to the stairs leading down to the level where Severus's lab was located, she heard someone in hard-soled boots walking quickly behind her.

"Poppy!"

She turned. "Gareth? What are you doing here? No more trouble for your mother, I hope."

"No, I'm looking for Severus. I went to his rooms and checked his office, but he didn't seem to be in."

"Come with me. He's in his lab. We had an incident with some Mackled Malaclaws today, so we're brewing a potion. I was just fetching one of the ingredients."

"Fwooper eggshells...you're brewing Clades Refragor Syrup? That one takes a few hours. It's rather a bore to brew unless you're brewing other things at the same time. Have to stay there and watch it and stir at intervals," Gareth said.

"You've brewed it before?"

"The last year that I lived with Robert, there was a bad problem with Mackled Malaclaw bites. More than usual. We brewed that potion and a couple others. I'd have a few batches going at the same time, staggered, so that I kept busier."

"How is your mother?"

"I just came from the estate. She seems well enough, I suppose. She ate a good dinner and didn't lock herself away in her room after, and usually when she's upset, she doesn't eat much, so I thought that was a good sign. She was shaken, though."

"Understandably. You know, if they brought in every witch or wizard who had reason to harbour ill feelings toward Death Eaters, they'd have to bring in more than half the population, I'm sure."

"We won. What's the point of this? Yeah, I'll never add Lucius Malfoy to my Christmas card list, but it sure seems a waste of energy to be going after people like that. And some of the victims...I just pity Pettigrew's family. Thinking all those years that he'd been a hero murdered by Sirius Black, only to discover that he was right at the centre of it all. And whatever Pettigrew may have said to Harry and Lupin about how scared he was of the Dark Lord, that's no excuse for everything else he did after the Potters were murdered. And the little rat was actually out there looking for that scumbag of a master. Who knows how long it would have taken Riddle to gain corporeal strength and a new body if it weren't for Pettigrew. But at this point, to go after these alleged Death Eaters and collaborators, it just doesn't make any sense to me."

"I agree, but pain and loss can affect different people differently," Poppy said. "Have you seen Miss Granger?"

"Yeah, she had dinner with us. She went to her parents' for the night. They live not very far from the Gamp estate, funnily enough. I should have thought to send her a message this afternoon. I guess she was worried."

"Severus told her what was going on."

"I know. She told me."

Poppy knocked on the door to Severus's lab, and it opened to them.

"Severus, I brought someone with me," she said as she stepped in. Severus looked up from his scales, his expression blank, and Poppy presumed he was hiding annoyance. "Gareth was looking for you," she added quickly.

Gareth stepped in behind Poppy. "Hi, Snape."

Severus looked from McGonagall to Poppy and back again. "McGonagall. This is unexpected. I trust there are no further crises?"

Gareth stepped further into the room. "I wanted to thank you for your help today, and to apologise if I was rude or said anything that was out-of-line."

Severus twitched one shoulder. "It was understandable. You were emotional."

"I still am. I'm grateful to you. Moody said you were the one who realised the aspect that cleared Mum."

Severus turned to face them fully, crossing his arms. "I am uncomfortable with this conversation, McGonagall. Moody shouldn't have said anything."

"It meant a lot to me, anyway," Gareth said, stepping closer. "Thanks, Severus. Really. Thank you." He threw one arm around Severus and pulled him into an embrace. "Thanks."

Grimacing, Severus easily but gently pushed Gareth back and stepped away. "I am glad that your mother was sent home, Gareth. And that I could help you today. We need to brew this potion, though, and you need to go home. Go home and have a drink. Get some sleep. I'll see you later this week."

Gareth nodded. "Right. Right." He looked over at Poppy, who was standing just inside the room, then looked back at Severus. "Yeah, you two have fun brewing the Refragor Syrup. I'll see you later this week, right, Snape?"

Severus nodded. He gave Gareth a quick pat on the upper arm. "Owl me."

Gareth turned to leave. He gave Poppy a squeeze and a kiss on the cheek, then he paused outside the door. "You're making Clades Refragor, right? You may already know this trick, Snape, but when Robert had me brewing it, he had me pulverise the Fwooper eggshells and the powdered moonstone together. It seems to make the potion take effect faster...and it's even a little faster to prepare it that way."

Severus nodded. "Thanks."

"See you, Poppy."

Poppy nodded and squeezed his arm. "Good night, Gareth."

After he'd left and Poppy had closed the door, she said, "That was nice of him to come up and thank you, Severus."

"Mm. I suppose." Severus gestured toward the potions ingredients. "I've made a start here. Could you shave the marshmallow root into this, and then I'll measure it and macerate it with the garlic and the armadillo bile."

Poppy nodded. "And then I can grind the Fwooper eggshells. The text I looked at said to a fine powder. Is that what you'd like?"

"Yes, a fine powder. And McGonagall's right, it probably would be good to grind the eggshells and the powdered moonstone together, so I'll do that."

"I could..."

"There's a technique for grinding such things together, Poppy."

"I am aware of that...you and I had the same Potions teacher, and I also used to help Murdoch in the apothecary, remember."

Severus hesitated. "We're making two batches of the potion, anyway. I'll prepare it for the hybrid potion, and you prepare it for the standard. Just watch what I do before you begin."

"That sounds like a good idea," Poppy agreed.

They worked quietly together for a while, occasionally handing each other a knife or different sized pestle, or passing ingredients back and forth.

"This is nice," Poppy said.

Severus nodded. "It is." He looked over at Poppy and smiled down at her. "I do appreciate the help. The company and the help. I am not the easiest person in the lab."

Poppy chuckled. "You aren't the easiest person in many places, Sev, but I'm quite happy with you."

He leaned over and gave her a swift kiss on the temple. "Thanks. I know there's room for improvement."

"If I can be honest with you, though . . ."

"Yes?"

"I thought you were a little cool with Gareth just now. I think it was very sweet of him to come up to the castle and apologise and tell you how much he appreciated your help today."

Severus shook his head slightly. "It was. You are right. But his timing was poor. And . . . I did not wish to be thanked. I wish Moody hadn't said anything about me at all."

"Why not? I think it shows that Moody's come around and wants to give you your due. I know you two have had a lot of problems in the past...and more than just a few small differences between you. Last spring, I overheard Minerva and Robbie talking. I know that Moody was the one who hexed you in the back that time. I think it's very noble of you to have forgiven him. I'm not sure I have yet, actually. That was a terrible thing."

Severus snorted. "I haven't forgiven him. I've just . . . just let it go. Moody apologised. He came to see me this autumn. He said he'd been wrong. I think . . . I think that if I held onto my resentment, anger, and bitterness, I'd never be able to let go of who I was then, either, and that is more important to me than retribution." He looked over at Poppy. "You're most important to me, Poppy, more important than anything else in my life. If I held onto my hatred toward Moody, I'm afraid that there wouldn't be room for . . . for . . . for my feelings for you, and that I wouldn't be anyone whom you'd want to spend two minutes with."

"You're important to me, too, Severus. More than just *important*, you know."

"I hope so." He looked down at the beebalm leaves he was mashing. "We can begin the first phase of brewing in a few minutes. Would you like to do one of them? Then the one I begin, I'll continue with, using the *Commemoratum* leaves at the next stage."

"Yes, I'd like to." Poppy gave a crooked grin. "Do you remember when you were sick your second year of teaching? During the outbreak of Brocket's fever?"

"Yes."

"And Albus had me take your classes?"

Severus sighed. "I remember."

"You made such a fit, he taught them himself instead. He came in during the middle of second-year double Potions with Gryffindor and Slytherin and he sent me back up to the infirmary. He was discreet about it, but it was still embarrassing."

"I'm sorry. I just . . . I didn't really know you back then. And I was unhappy having anyone taking my classes. I just thought . . ."

"You thought I was a silly, barely competent school matron who couldn't make it as a mediwitch at St. Mungo's, so she came up here to look after dunderheads who fall off their broomsticks and eat too many sweets, I believe you said."

"I'm sorry. I was sick. I was in a bad mood." He gave a snort. "I *was* always in a bad mood. But I paid for it. Albus had my classes brewing absurd concoctions of no practical use and with no application to their examination preparation. You had been following the lesson plan, much to my surprise. I learned a little something there."

"But Albus never had me take your classes again," Poppy said as she set out a silver number three-sized cauldron and Summoned a glass stirring rod from the rack on the wall above the workbench.

"My eternal punishment for having once dismissed your assistance," Severus said with a dramatic sigh. "Poetic justice, or something."

Poppy laughed loudly at that. "That's all right. I would only be able to do it on a very short-term basis, anyway...aside from the fact that I have my own duties, it was a lot of work to prepare. That was what ticked me off, actually. I'd stayed up until two in the morning preparing for the day's classes and starting preparations for the next day. I'd wanted to do a good job, and I didn't even get through three classes. It turned out to have been a complete waste of my time."

"I will inform Minerva that if I am ever indisposed for a short period, then you may take my classes, if you are available."

"You don't have to do that. Besides, I think that this autumn when Albus took your classes, he actually taught from the lesson plan."

"He probably was told to by the Headmistress," Severus said with a smile. "She has really taken the reins...of the school, I mean. Not his."

Poppy chuckled. "Between you and me, I wouldn't be surprised if she actually takes *his* reins sometimes, if you know what I mean."

Severus smirked. "She's told you that?"

"Well . . . she's not one to talk about details, but . . ." Poppy shrugged, still grinning as she finished mashing her beebalm.

"I once walked in on them...they weren't in the middle of anything, understand...but Dumbledore had this strap thing tied around his wrist, and he was wearing one of her robes. I had a hard time getting that image out of my head. Still can't," he said.

"Oh, so you just had to share it with me?" Poppy asked with a laugh. "Thanks very much for that! But I know that Minerva has said they enjoy livening things up. I presume they do some kind of role-playing or something. That's perfectly normal and can be a lot of fun, but it is an odd thing to think about one's friends in that way."

"Especially Dumbledore...though I don't know why. It just . . . makes me uncomfortable."

"Like thinking about your parents together, probably...not that Minerva is like that for you, but maybe Albus is," Poppy suggested. "And with your feelings for Minerva, that might make it more uncomfortable."

"I suppose that Albus has become something of a father-figure for me. I'm not sure whether our relationship . . . whether it's always been particularly positive, but I think that even when it wasn't, he was . . . a paternal figure to me. But Minerva..." He shook his head. "Perhaps that contributes to my discomfort in thinking about them that way, but I really don't feel for her the same as I did under the *Adfectus*, you know."

"The *Adfectus* exaggerates and heightens the feelings you have for someone, increases the sexual component, but you have to love the person, love them truly, or it doesn't take effect," Poppy replied.

Severus shrugged. He didn't want to talk about his feelings for Minerva, with Poppy or with anyone else.

"Is this right?" Poppy asked as she began stirring anticlockwise as she added the macerated ingredients to the cauldron.

Severus looked over and nodded. "Yes. Add that mixture very gradually, then finish by stirring in the crushed Alihotsy leaves. You can add another teaspoon of aloe sap after the Alihotsy leaves, but don't stir it in."

"That wasn't in the text I looked at. The extra aloe, I mean."

"It is a bit of a trick," Severus said. "It works well with a number of multistage potions, and not just with aloe, but with other ingredients of similar consistency."

"That's not bad," Poppy said with a nod. "I'll remember that."

"Just don't try it with an animal-based ingredient or mineral oils. Vegetable derivatives, though," Severus said, "they generally work well this way."

Simultaneously, the two reached for their crushed Alihotsy leaves.

"The two potions should be finished at the same time," Poppy said.

"Mm. That was the point. Now here, just a half dozen clockwise stirs...the texts usually give some imprecise instruction at this point, and you'd likely stir it too much if you tried following the text."

Poppy nodded and carefully stirred in the crushed leaves using only a half dozen clockwise stirs. "Now the aloe sap?"

"Yes. Just let it float on top. It will incorporate itself slowly before we even do the next stirring," Severus said.

They both set their glass stirring rods down on their trays.

"We stir again in twenty-two minutes?" Poppy asked, turning to look at the open textbook.

"Yes," Severus said. He was casting a charm on an hourglass. "I set this for twenty-one minutes. It will chime then, and we'll have a minute to get to the cauldrons and begin stirring."

Poppy sat down on the low wooden bench. "So you have about twenty minutes to teach me more about the distinctions between brewing and *brewing*."

Severus smiled, his eyes gleaming. "First, brewing requires a firm workbench. *Brewing* does not. Stand." When Poppy stood, Severus swished his wand through the air in a wide arc. The low backless bench became a well-cushioned love seat with emerald green upholstery.

Poppy blinked. "Very impressive."

"I've been watching Dumbledore do it for a couple decades," Severus replied with a shrug. "Now for the *brewing*."

Severus embraced Poppy, kissed her, and pulled her with him down onto the love seat. Pulling her closer, he broke the kiss and whispered in her ear. "And there is macerating and *macerating*. I would like to do a little *macerating* with you. Your lips are perfect . . . perfect."

He demonstrated his appreciation for the perfection of her lips by kissing them slowly and sensually, only briefly and teasingly touching the tip of her tongue with his. Poppy could feel herself growing warmer; her tingling grew and her desire increased. His hands only held her, though, gently moving over her back and side, and did not stray to the centre of her warmth. His kisses continued their sensual teasing, until finally with a moan, Poppy swung her left leg over Severus's and slid onto his lap, straddling him and pressing herself against his thigh.

Severus slid her closer, and she could feel his growing erection pressed into her crux. She gasped and pulled her head back.

"You were going to demonstrate your *grinding* technique for me, I believe," Severus said in a low voice. "This is a very nice start, Madam Pomfrey. Oh, yes, *a*very nice start." He cupped her buttocks with one hand and jerked her toward him, then he leaned forward and began kissing and sucking the tender skin of her throat.

"Severus, you are . . . oh, gods! You are a tease, you know that, don't you?" Poppy moaned and began to rock, rocking and sliding against him.

"Oh, you *are* very good at grinding, Poppy, oh, yes, so good," Severus murmured, licking her earlobe. "Can you come? I think you can come. I want to see you come, my love, come against me. Don't stop." His breath was hot in her ear.

Poppy's pace quickened, and she could feel the increasing pressure of her impending orgasm. "Oh, Severus, you are so bad. We weren't going to . . ."

"We aren't," Severus rasped. "Just keep going. You feel good. Don't stop. You're so good." He sucked her earlobe then nipped her neck.

Just as Poppy thought she could take no more and was about come, there was a sharp rap on the door. She froze. The knock was repeated.

"Damn! Who could that be?" Poppy asked, placing her forehead against Severus's shoulder as she tried to catch her breath.

"I don't know...Albus, Minerva, Gareth...don't stop," he whispered. "They'll go away. Don't stop."

The knocking began again.

"They aren't leaving," Poppy said, moving very reluctantly off Severus's lap.

"Don't stop," Severus said, trying to pull her back onto his lap.

"Severus?" Minerva's voice came faintly through the heavy oak door.

Poppy sighed. "You'd better get it."

"I have an erection the size of Ben Nevis."

Minerva's voice came again.

"I doubt she'll be looking at your crotch." Poppy straightened her robe and pinny.

Severus rolled his eyes, but stood and crossed over to the door. When he opened it, Minerva was beginning to walk away.

"Headmistress."

"Severus, I thought you were back. Have you seen Albus? Did he return with you?"

"Of course he did. I wouldn't just leave him there after telling you I'd make sure he came back with me."

"I haven't seen him yet."

"Did you check his office?"

Minerva nodded. "And his playroom and his classroom. I also stuck my head through to Filius, and he's not with him, either."

Severus blinked, clearing his head and thinking. "He stopped to talk to Hagrid. They were in his strawberry patch."

Poppy stepped around Severus. "He's probably just still down with Hagrid and lost track of time, Minerva."

"Probably," Minerva said, though she still looked concerned.

"We didn't get back to the grounds until almost eight, either," Severus said. "It just feels longer to you."

"Would you like me to go with you out to Hagrid's and check, Min?" Poppy asked. "Then if he's not there, we can both look for him."

"He wouldn't have left the grounds alone," Severus said. "I think everyone's agreed to abide by your new rule."

Minerva's mouth was a tight line. "He does not always include himself among 'everyone,' though, you know that."

"I'll go with you," Poppy said, putting a hand on Minerva's arm. "I don't think he'd leave the grounds alone without telling you. He probably just became involved in a conversation and lost track of time."

"You're right. But you stay here. I know you two were brewing the potion tonight."

"Severus can stir both cauldrons, and I can come back to help him finish them," Poppy said.

The chime sounded.

"I need to stir the potions," Severus said. "You do as you think best, Poppy."

Poppy stood in the doorway, torn. "I'll be back as quickly as I can. I'm sure Albus will be easy to find."

"Good night, Minerva." Severus turned to the workbench and picked up the two glass stirring rods.

"Sev...I'll be back."

Severus nodded. "And I'll see you when you return, then."

The door closed behind the two witches. Severus bit his lip, then took in a deep breath and let it out. "Bloody fucking Merlin's saggy balls! Albus-fucking-Dumbledore, you screwed up yet another one of my evenings!"

Severus swore a few more times, took one more deep breath, let it out, felt better, and began to stir the two cauldrons. He took a little comfort in noting that there was no discernible difference between the two potions, and that Poppy's was identical in colour, consistency, and fragrance to his potion.

Poppy was a good witch. A good witch, good with potions, and a good friend. Severus just wished that, for just that one evening, she wasn't quite as good a friend to Minerva . . . and was a slightly better friend to him. Albus was probably just off playing tiddly-winks or Gobstones or something . . . bloody childish old wizard. He could have let his wife know that he was back on the grounds so she wouldn't worry. Minerva shouldn't have to put up with that.

Severus sighed and stirred. When Poppy returned, he'd have to tell her that in his expert opinion, she rated an Outstanding in her grinding skills. And potions-making, too. In the meantime, he'd stir the potions and wait for her.

Chapter Eighty-Eight: Back to Brewing

Chapter 89 of 118

Monday, 29 March 1999. Poppy returns to Severus's lab. ***End of Part Eight***



Chapter Eighty-Eight: Back to Brewing

Monday, 29 March 1999

Severus was stirring the two cauldrons for the second time when there was a knock at the door.

"One moment," he called. With both hands engaged in stirring the cauldrons...charming the stirring rod was not an option for this potion...he couldn't leave the bench or even wave a hand to open the door.

There was another knock about thirty seconds later.

"Stirring the potion," Severus said loudly. "Just a moment." He hoped it was Poppy back alone with news of Albus. If Albus were actually missing...which Severus doubted...he'd leave the potion and just begin again the next day, although that would be a waste of good ingredients.

Severus gave each potion one final anticlockwise stir, set down the stirring rods, and stepped over to the door. When he opened it, he found Poppy leaning against the wall opposite the lab. She was alone.

"Sorry my timing wasn't good," Poppy said. "I'd hurried and tried to get back before the potion needed its second stirring, but I guess I didn't manage."

"I was in the midst of stirring when you arrived," Severus replied, stepping back to let Poppy into the room. "Where did you find Dumbledore?"

"We didn't exactly *find* him," Poppy said. "But we learned where he is."

"Yes?" Severus asked, sitting down on the low wooden bench.

Poppy sat down beside him. "Apparently, Hagrid had wanted to go into the village for a drink this evening, but he couldn't find anyone who wanted to go with him. Because of Minerva's request that no one leave the grounds alone, he didn't go. When he told Albus, Albus said he'd go down to the Hog's Head with him for a quick pint."

"And Dumbledore couldn't leave word with the Headmistress?" Severus asked irritably.

"I think he believed he had. He told Rath that he and Hagrid were going to the Hog's Head together and that Minerva had expected him back by around eight, but they were going to be gone longer. Rath told Shunpike, but Shunpike didn't understand that it was a message to be passed on to the Headmistress. He thought he was just supposed to be on the look-out for them to come back, or something. Anyway, Albus may even have returned by now."

"Hmph. Rath should have told the Headmistress himself. Shunpike isn't the brightest light, and his time in Azkaban didn't sharpen his wits at all."

"As you say, Shunpike's easily confused, and in Rath's defence, I don't believe that Albus was very clear when he spoke to him. But Minerva was glad she hadn't sent a Patronus to try to find him, since if it did find Albus and he was in the Hog's Head, it would not be very discreet."

Severus shook his head. "I understand that Minerva was concerned about Albus, but I think that her dragging you off to see whether he was still with Hagrid was extreme. She could have had his old house-elf look for him. She could probably find him within seconds if he were on the grounds somewhere, and even though he went to Hogsmeade, she could still find him almost as quickly."

"True, but Minerva didn't drag me. I offered."

Severus was quiet for a moment, then he said, "I noticed." He hesitated. "I know that you are a good friend, Poppy. I appreciate that about you. And I know that you have been friends with Minerva for longer than . . . than we've known each other, but . . . I . . . I felt I . . . I don't want to be possessive, I am trying very hard not to be, but I felt that I came in a very distant second tonight. I know that this wasn't the most romantic date, and it wasn't what we'd planned to do this evening, but it was important to me. If Albus had really been missing, I'd have been the first out the door to look for him. If you had returned and told me that you and Minerva hadn't found him, I would have abandoned the potion and done what I could to help. But you left so readily, and it wasn't even a real emergency. It felt as though . . . as though you didn't really care about our relationship."

"Of course I do! But we each have our obligations..."

"And if there were a sick or injured student, I would have understood that you had to leave then, too." Severus shook his head. "Never mind. Just . . . forget it." He stood and walked over to the workbench. He looked down into one of the cauldrons and shook his head again. He swallowed hard.

Poppy got up and came over to stand next to him. "I'm sorry, Severus."

"There's not a lot more to be done to the potions for a while, and then I can finish them. You go up to the Hospital Wing. I'll deliver the potions when they're finished."

"I'd like to stay."

Severus shrugged. "It's up to you."

"I'm staying. And you're right. I should have stayed here earlier and not gone off. It's a habit for me, I suppose, that when Minerva needs someone...or looks as though she does...I help her. It's not her fault, though. She didn't realise we were doing anything other than brewing the potion. I wish you'd said something at the time."

"As I said, I'm trying very hard not to be possessive or jealous. I know I can be. And I didn't want to make a scene or make Minerva feel uncomfortable."

"I'm glad you told me how you felt now, though, Severus," Poppy said, placing her hand on his arm. "That's really important to me. And you are right about tonight. I should have told Minerva to send word down to us if she couldn't find Albus...especially since we'd been in the middle of our date and we weren't just brewing a potion."

Severus nodded. "We need to bruise the Memory Plant leaves now. I'll do the hybrid leaves, and you can do the ones from the regular plant."

"All right. How bruised?" Poppy asked, reaching for a fresh mortar.

"Not to the point of crushing," Severus said.

"I'll watch you first, then," Poppy said, "and make sure I know how they need to be."

"I do them in small quantities to ensure consistency. In this instance, three or four at a time."

Poppy nodded. "It could be easy to bruise some too much and others not enough if they were all done at once."

"Precisely. I already weighed out the leaves for your potion, but weigh them again after you bruise them and see whether you need one more small leaf, or part of one."

"Right." Poppy watched as Severus bruised the first few of his *Commemoratum* leaves, then she took a few of her own, put them in the mortar, and pressed them with her pestle. She held up the mortar for Severus's inspection. "Is this all right?"

"Just a bit more, and they'll be perfect," Severus replied.

Poppy nodded. She finished bruising her Memory Plant leaves, then weighed them carefully. "How much longer until we add them?"

"We add those in about fifteen minutes," Severus said, looking at the clock above the bench. "And then after stirring for ten minutes, we add the beeswax, stir, then we wait a half hour before removing the heat."

"How long does it need to cool before we can administer it?"

"At the temperature of my lab, it will complete brewing a half hour after we remove it from the heat, but it will be a more palatable flavour and consistency after it's set for a while...at least another half hour, or so."

"Gareth said that one year when he lived with Robert, he brewed the Refragor Syrup and he'd have different batches going at different stages so he wouldn't become bored."

"There must have been an unusual amount of Malaclaw activity, then. I don't believe that apothecaries normally stock the Refragor. Its shelf-life is only about eight months and Malaclaw bites aren't very common. It's more economical to brew it as it's needed and keep the Calamity Refuge Draught in stock instead. The Draught is faster to brew and it keeps indefinitely. The ingredients are also more common."

"But it's not as effective, you said." Poppy took a seat on the bench and watched as Severus took the leftover Memory Plant leaves and set them out on a sheet of brown paper to dry.

"No, it's not as effective, but it will mitigate the victim's bad luck," Severus said as he put the paper on one corner of the workbench and then cast a charm to keep the humidity level low in just that part of the lab. "For a mild nip, it's probably sufficient...as long as the person's not a professional gambler or something. Then all bets are off," Severus said, glancing over at Poppy to see if she smiled.

She did smile, groaning slightly in appreciation. "That was a bad one, Severus. But funny." She patted the bench beside her. "Come sit with me?"

Severus smiled and nodded. When he sat down, Poppy slid closer and rested her head against him. He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

Poppy took in a deep breath and let out a contented sigh. "I *am* sorry about earlier," she said softly. "I wish I'd stayed here with you. And I'm sorry I hurt your feelings." She felt Severus shrug, then he turned his head and kissed her hair.

He nuzzled her for a moment, then he whispered, "As long as we have many evenings together . . . I could spend every evening with you for the rest of my life, and I would be a happy man. But I will try not to be selfish." He kissed the top of her head again.

Poppy tilted her face toward him, then she reached up and put one hand behind his head. She kissed his lips softly. "I hope we do spend many evenings together, and I hope I do not take you for granted."

"I don't believe I could ever take you for granted," Severus said. "I know how very lucky I am, and how little I deserve you."

"Don't say that, Sev." She kissed him. "I am not a prize or payment to be earned or deserved, not that way, anyway. I do like the things you've been doing for me, though. I loved our date last night, and every time I look at the flowers you've given me, I think of you and I'm happy. I put the carnations you gave me in my bedroom. I can look at them first thing on waking in the morning."

"I'm glad." He caressed her face, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "By the way, I must tell you that I give you an Outstanding for this potion, and for your earlier *grinding*," he said in a whisper.

"I do believe that it was incomplete, however," Poppy said. "We were interrupted. Will I have the opportunity to complete it at some other time?"

"I hope so," Severus replied. "In fact, I must insist on it."

"So I'm forgiven for leaving earlier and inadvertently hurting your feelings?" Poppy asked.

"Of course." He smiled and cupped her cheek with his free hand. "I am grateful, too, that you believe that I have feelings to be hurt. Odd, but true."

"Not so odd. Of course you have feelings that could be hurt. I'm glad you weren't angry with me about it...and that you didn't just cut me off without telling me why, like you did before, although this time, I could have guessed the reason pretty easily."

"I was angry, to be honest. Not at you, precisely. More at the situation. It seemed one more piece of my usual bad fortune. I was annoyed with Albus, actually," Severus admitted, "even though it wasn't exactly his fault you decided to leave with Minerva."

"I can understand that."

"I felt less angry when I admitted to myself that I was upset that you seemed to care more about Minerva than about me and our time together."

"I hope you'll give me the opportunity to make up for my rash decision to go with Minerva," Poppy said, reaching up and kissing his cheek. "I think that could be quite enjoyable for both of us."

Severus smiled. "Yes, I would like that. But now it is almost time to add the leaves." He stood, and Poppy followed suit.

"You know, I've begun using the rose-scented lotion you made for me," Poppy said. "It really is lovely. It feels nice going on and it smells heavenly. Did you make it in this lab?"

"Yes, I did. I'm glad you like it."

"I actually only opened it a few days ago because before, every time I looked at it, I felt sad."

Severus looked at her. "Sad? I don't understand."

"It made me miss you. I wondered whether . . . well, I just wondered whether that was the last gift you'd ever give me, and if we'd already had all of a relationship we were going to have. But now I'm glad that we did take a break."

Severus shook his head. "I just begin to think that I understand what you're saying, and then you confuse me again. Why are you glad?"

"Because you still wanted to see me. I thought you would...or that you *might*...simply lose all interest in me after you had some time to think about it and had become busy with other things."

"That couldn't have happened," Severus said. "I was confused about things, but I kept thinking about you. Even when I was most confused, I thought about you, and then I had a moment of sudden clarity when I realised that I . . ." Severus covered his near-admission of love by Summoning a fresh glass stirring rod. "Use a clean stirring rod for this stage, and drop in the leaves as you're stirring. Don't let them clump together."

Poppy nodded and Summoned another stirring rod for herself. "What did you realise?" she asked.

"That I wanted us to have a full relationship," Severus replied, not looking at her. "That you were too important to my life to let you go without trying to have more."

"That's similar to something I said to my sister," Poppy said matter-of-factly, recognising Severus's embarrassment and discomfort in discussing his feelings.

"You spoke to your sister about us?" Severus asked, glancing over at her.

"Yes. I told her that I had a date with you yesterday, and I said that we'd had a bit of a fling and now we were going to see whether there could be more. I told her that if I didn't try, I'd always wonder whether I'd cheated us both out of something very special."

Severus was quiet as he stirred the *Commemoratum tyrensis* leaves into his potion. "What was her reaction? What did she think when you told her that you had a date with me?"

"She was a little surprised, but she actually had guessed it might be with you. She said . . ."

"What? What did she say?" Severus asked nervously. He could easily imagine that Violet thought that her sister should stay well clear of him.

"She said that a part of her wasn't surprised because she knew that I'm fond of you," Poppy said.

Severus's pleasure at hearing that Violet had already noticed that Poppy was fond of him was mitigated by his concern over her reaction and whether it would influence Poppy. "And she didn't warn you away from a former Death Eater?" Severus asked.

"She did tell me to be careful, and she worried about my being hurt, but she'd say that no matter who I was dating. She's my big sister, and it doesn't matter how old I get, she still feels like my big sister. She was half-way my mother when we were growing up, too, so it's understandable," Poppy said.

"How so?"

"My parents died when I was five. Violet is almost six years older than I am, and she was five years ahead of me in school. They died in nineteen thirty-two."

"I'm sorry to hear that. How did they die, if I may ask?"

"They were in Africa working. Almost every year, they would spend a few months working in this particular village that was almost entirely wizarding...think Hogsmeade, but about twenty times the size...and that year, there was a bad outbreak of Tobenga's Syndrome. It's actually why they didn't leave the village when they had planned to. They stayed to help treat the sick. I don't know if you're familiar with Tobenga's Syndrome."

"Isn't that the magical disease that's sometimes carried with the malaria parasite?"

Poppy nodded. "The wizarding population wasn't usually directly affected by malaria, except as a fairly mild, easily treated illness, but whenever malaria became a problem, there was the possibility of an outbreak of Tobenga's Syndrome, too. There'd been no cases of Tobenga's Syndrome in that area in more than a decade, and I suppose people were becoming lax. My mother was a Healer and my father was a Potions master, and as I said, they would visit this big village, Ndoto Village, every year. They'd do research, study plants, trade knowledge with the local Healers, and they'd help by brewing potions and lending a hand to the local Healers if they needed it. Anyway, that year, Tobenga's Syndrome broke out alongside malaria, and apparently it was very bad. They both died of it. My mother first, and my father a couple days later. One of the local Healers died, too, at about the same time."

"But I thought there are potions that can cure Tobenga's Syndrome," Severus said, his brow furrowed. "Hadden't they been invented by then?"

"They had been, but the pace of infection outstripped the Healers' ability to brew the potions and treat the patients. They brewed potion for almost everyone in the community but themselves. Perhaps that's a slight exaggeration, but all of the Healers agreed that the children should be treated first, since children are more severely affected by it. At the same time they were doing that, they were trying to treat the Muggle villagers who had malaria. There were just too many sick people and only a handful of Healers. A number of adults died, but only one child. Our parents did a lot of good."

"Violet and I went to visit the village the summer after my NEWTs, just before I began training at St. Mungo's. It was very touching to meet all of the people who had been children treated by our parents and who had lived to grow up, some already with children of their own. I think it was especially good for Violet that we went. Mummy and Dad had been so far away when they died, and Africa...well, that's another continent, and so different from here. It was hard for either of us to comprehend it, but it was harder in some ways for Violet. Going there and seeing that our parents hadn't been forgotten, and that their work there had helped so many people, it was . . . I don't know how to describe it. But we felt good about it."

"What happened to you after they died?"

"We lived with my grandmother and grandfather in Leeds, whom we always stayed with when our parents were away. My mother's parents. They were Muggles. My father's parents were still alive, but let's just say that they weren't very well suited to parenting. We visited them pretty often, but only for a few days at a time. They enjoyed it when we visited, but it wouldn't have worked for us to live with them all of the time. Of course, Violet started at Hogwarts the year after our parents died, so she was away except during holidays."

"Weren't your Muggle grandparents pretty old by then? Even for Muggles?"

Poppy shrugged. "I suppose. They're both dead now, and my paternal grandmother is still alive. But my grandfather was still working, and he didn't retire until after I started at Hogwarts...he was an engineer and he worked for the railway. He generally worked in an office, but sometimes he'd bring me into work with him and he'd bring me to see the engines and things. I remember that they had a spanner as big as I was. Bigger, even."

Severus snorted a laugh.

"They did! It was huge! I thought they might have giants working for them. I remember that all the men laughed when I asked that. Of course, Grampa knew why I asked that as seriously as I did, but he thought it was funny, too." She grinned. "Visiting Grampa at work was fun. The men would always give me sweets and things."

"You must have been a very cute little girl," Severus said, trying to suppress his smile. "A little coquette?"

Poppy shook her head and laughed. "I don't know about that, but I do know that I enjoyed the attention. Grampa would carry me on his shoulders so I could see everything. I remember that the men called him 'sir' and 'Mr Wright,' but they all joked with him and seemed to like him."

"It sounds as though you had a happy childhood...apart from your parents dying, I mean," Severus added hastily.

"I did. Of course, then there was the war. Grampa was too old to be called up by then, but we saw friends and neighbours go off to war. I remember that they took down all the directional signs on the roads near where my great-aunt lived, in case of invasion, and there was rationing, which seemed to go on forever. For a long time, whenever I thought of Muggles, I thought of rationing."

"Were they bombed?" Severus asked curiously.

"No, not where we lived, but we all had gas masks and things. It was scary for a kid. I was always glad to return to Hogwarts at the end of the summer. There was Grindelwald, of course, but that seemed less real to me than the Muggle war did, for some reason. I think Minerva's perceptions were the exact opposite of mine, but she's older than I am, and she didn't come from a Muggle family."

Severus handed Poppy a small bowl with two pieces of honeycomb in it. "I weighed it out whilst you were gone. Drop it in in pieces. This part isn't very fussy. Just break it up and drop it in as you stir."

Poppy tried to break the beeswax with her fingers, and frowned as it bent but didn't break.

"You can use an implement if it's easier for you," Severus said, demonstrating by taking a long, narrow knife, passing his right hand over it, and then using it to slice through the honeycomb. "Warming the blade first helps."

"You did that wandlessly?"

Severus nodded, and before Poppy could Summon a knife, he handed her his and got another for himself, which he also warmed...this time showing off and doing it with his left hand. He could tell that the blade got a little too hot, but he waited a moment before slicing into his beeswax.

"So, when do you start giving me lessons in wandless magic?" Poppy asked as she cut her honeycomb into several chunks.

"I can help you practise, but I can't teach you. You already do wandless magic. You just need to expand the range of things you can do with it."

"I've been trying to do more simple mechanical things wandlessly...Summoning things, opening and closing doors, and that sort of thing."

"Those are best to start with," Severus said. "They're all really variations on the same thing. We learn them as separate spells with different incantations, but they're not as different as we're taught they are."

"I think it's almost instinctive, like grabbing things when we're babies."

Severus nodded. "But what you were doing last night, that was something very different from an *Accio* or a *Levicorpus*," he said.

Poppy smiled slyly. "Yes, that *is* something different, and *not* something for babies."

"I think we should have you practise that again soon," Severus said.

"You liked that, did you?"

"Mmmhm. Very much."

"I think you could learn how to do it. We could practise together . . . take turns. I might like to use your wand, though. Your *big* wand," Poppy said with a naughty grin.

"We would have to take turns. I don't think I could concentrate at all when you were taking your turn, especially if you moved on to other areas from the ones last night . . . like to my *wand*." Severus's eyes gleamed. "I do like that idea."

"We will have to find some time when we won't be interrupted by ex-Aurors and mislaid former Headmasters, though," Poppy said. "You *will* need to concentrate. I will require it of you!"

"I am sure I won't mind." Severus dropped in his last piece of beeswax just as Poppy finished hers. "Is it anything like warming the knife?"

Poppy laughed. "No, though if you do it well, I will get very, very warm, I assure you. But the intent is quite different. It's more like forming intent in Healing, but it's different even from that."

Severus turned Poppy toward him and pulled her into his arms. "And what were you thinking about last night? What was your intent?" he asked, his voice low. His right hand trailed down to her buttocks and squeezed, then he pressed her up against the door.

"Oh, it's more than just intent . . ." She gasped as Severus kissed and licked her neck, his hands wandering over her body. "It's . . . desire, desire and . . . affection. My feelings for you, how I'd like you to feel, my memories of being with you . . . But my intent, mmm, my intent was to give you pleasure. Mmm, that feels nice."

"You like this? I'm glad, because it's my intent right now to give you pleasure." His hand moved from her crux, where he had been rubbing her through her robes, up to her breasts. "I wish . . . mmm, I wish that we had more time now. This pinny of yours . . . it's not designed for easy access, and I think the house-elves use too much starch. I want to feel how soft you are." He kissed her again.

Poppy pushed him away. "You are wrong, Sev. They use*just* the right amount of starch, and as for access . . ." She unbuttoned the buttons at her shoulders, and the front of her pinny dropped down.

Severus wasted no time. As he kissed her mouth, one of his hands slipped beneath her robe, and his fingers found the edge of her chemise. He pushed it down and caressed her breast, finding her nipple and playing with it with the tips of his fingers.

He moved his mouth to her ear. "When we're together next, in private, with time, with no Headmistress knocking on the door, do you know what I'm going to do? What I dream of doing?"

"Tell me . . ."

"It's naughty, Poppy, do you mind hearing something naughty?"

Her hand moved to his cock, and she began to stroke him through his trousers. "Tell me."

"I'm going to play with your clitoris the way I'm playing with your tit now, and I'm going to nibble and suck your breasts, give them each a good sucking, and then . . . then I'm going to move down here," he said, touching her crux through her robes, "and I'm going to use my tongue on you until you come and you beg me to fuck you. And then I'm going to pull you down on top of me, pull you down onto my cock...oh, gods, Poppy, that is good, but too much..."

"We have a few more minutes. You've done more in less time before . . . and you said the potion's better after it's set for a while."

Severus paused, placing his hands against the door on either side of her, kissing the side of her neck, and then resting his forehead on the warm wood of the door. Poppy could hear his ragged breathing in her ear, and she gave him a squeeze and a rub.

"I don't want you to think this is all I want from you, Poppy. And doing it here..." He turned and leaned back against the door next to her. He put one arm around her and pulled her closer. "It's not romantic."

"Not everything has to be romantic," Poppy said. "And we've done it in other unusual places, like that night in the staff room. That was very exciting. But I do know what you mean, and I appreciate it." She leaned her head against his chest. "I actually thought we should slow down the physical aspect of things, myself. But you have this way of . . . when you touch me, I forget what I thought I wanted."

"I love sex with you. I never knew that sex could be anything like it is with you, Poppy, but there's also so much more to what I feel for you than just that. I'm trying to really experience those feelings, all of them."

"Then let's plan a real date and do our best not to be interrupted," Poppy replied. She adjusted her robes and rebuttoned her pinny. "And we can take our time, go slowly, enjoy each other...and then do some of those things you were whispering in my ear."

"Thursday after the students leave," Severus suggested. He took her hand and led her over to the bench. "I'd like to see you sooner, of course, and we could, but on Thursday, we might be able to actually manage to take our time and not be interrupted."

"We have the staff meeting, remember?" Poppy asked, settling down next to him.

"It's in the morning." He gave Poppy a crooked grin. "And I am in charge of the schedule. I think I will move it to a little earlier. I am sure no one will object. Those staff who are leaving for the holiday will be able to leave sooner, after all. We can have the rest of the day to ourselves."

"We might still be hunted down and interrupted," Poppy said. "People seem to have absolutely atrocious timing."

"You don't have a house or a flat of your own, do you . . . Spinner's End...my house...is apparently torn apart, and McGonagall and his house-elves are working on it."

"It might be better if we didn't leave the grounds, anyway . . . I have an idea, but I don't know if you'd like it. You might actually be very uncomfortable with it, and if you are, that's fine. Just tell me."

Severus shook his head, puzzled. "What is it?"

"Dumbledore's old rooms, the ones he had when he was Deputy. Where you and Minerva..."

"I don't think so," Severus said. "But it wasn't a bad idea. At least we couldn't be easily found there."

Poppy nodded. "We'll manage. You know . . . we could use one of the guest suites. I don't know if you have access, but my password will work on any of them. We could have one of the house-elves provide us with lunch and just hide away together for the day, not even let anyone know where we were going...just tell Minerva to send a house-elf for us if there's a real emergency. The Ravenclaw guest suite is the nicest, I think, and it has a beautiful view. Do you think Flitwick will be using it over the holiday?"

"I doubt it, at least not before the weekend. Staff tell me when they're having guests, and he hasn't said anything. And if we use that guest suite . . . I suppose we could tell Flitwick. He wouldn't tell anyone, and I'm sure he wouldn't disturb us."

"So it's a date? Thursday, after the staff meeting?"

Severus nodded. "I'll speak with Flitwick. He's discreet. We'll have our private date." Severus smiled, realising something else. Flitwick was a friend. He laughed.

"What is it?"

Severus leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm a dunderhead sometimes, you know that?" he asked with a smile. He kissed her again. "Time to remove the potion from the heat, or the heat from the potion, however you want to look at it." He got up and went over to the potions. "Hmm, they do look different now. Come take a look."

Poppy peered down into the cauldrons. "Yours has a kind of iridescence to it, and it's not as dark as mine. Is there something wrong with mine?"

"No, yours is perfect...just like you. It's because of the difference in the leaves we used."

"How do you think we should distribute the potions?" Poppy asked. She had considered this problem earlier, but didn't know what Severus had in mind.

"That is up to you. You are the mediwitch. When we are in the infirmary, you are the master," he said with a bow.

Poppy slapped him playfully as he straightened. "I appreciate the sentiment, but not the gender designation. All right . . . you are certain that there is nothing about your version of the potion that could be harmful?"

Severus shook his head. "Anything is possible. But I'll take some in order to test it. I haven't been bitten by a Mackled Malaclaw, but the original potion wouldn't have any negative effects, so I presume that this won't either...provided I haven't created a new poison, of course."

"I should slap you again...you're positively lighthearted tonight, you know that? Don't be so flippant about poisoning yourself, all right?" Poppy took hold of his lapels and gave them a light tug before smoothing them down, then leaving her palms resting on his chest. "We could both take it," she suggested.

"Think for a minute why that's not a bright idea," Severus said with a smirk.

"Yes, flippant, that's the word for you tonight. Okay, fine," Poppy agreed with a nod, "you take some just so that I know that I'm not going to give them some other problem on top of the one they already have...and I'll be available to help you if you make yourself sick. Then if everything goes well and you don't keel over...see, I can be flippant, too...I'll give your new potion to two of the most afflicted students and two of the less afflicted students, and give my potion to the other five. That way, we can compare results."

"That sounds like a perfect plan," Severus replied. "Though it doesn't reach the heights of your plan for Thursday."

"*Our* plan for Thursday," Poppy corrected. "I am looking forward to that far more, too, although I'll be really glad to have given the students their treatment so I can get some sleep. This day has been too long."

"It has been, but I've enjoyed spending this time with you. Thank you, Poppy."

Poppy put her arms around him and leaned against him. "Thank *you*, Severus."

"And the students can thank us both for staying up and labouring over potions to save their luckless arses, and Hagrid, well, Hagrid will just have to find some way to make up for first, getting the students injured, second, not telling you about the creatures, and third, taking Albus into Hogsmeade for a drink instead of staying in for the evening. You know, come to think of it, this is all Hagrid's doing."

"Then we owe Hagrid some thanks," Poppy said, "because I'm very glad we've had this time together, even if I am a bit sleepy now."

"You are just too good sometimes, Poppy, you know that? But I'm not going to quibble right now. I'm just going to do this." He cupped her chin, tilted her face, and kissed her lips.

~End of Part Eight~

~To Be Continued in Part Nine~

Author's Note: As with many places in the HP universe and in my fanfic version of it, there's no such place as Ndoto Village. Or I'd be surprised if there were!

Chapter Eighty-Nine: A Cryptic Missive

Chapter 90 of 118

Severus receives a letter that annoys and perplexes him. ***Beginning of Part Nine***



PART NINE

Chapter Eighty-Nine: A Cryptic Missive

Tuesday, 30 March 1999

Severus picked up his coffee cup with his left hand as he used his quill in his right to make a large red X in the margin of a student's essay. He made a few comments in what he believed was a restrained fashion, then he set down his quill and picked up the second half of his turkey, bacon, and tomato sandwich. He was trying to catch up on the work he had planned to do the previous evening. He wanted to return these essays to the students before the Easter holiday, with some very small hope that perhaps if they read his comments on these essays, their holiday assignments would be less replete with error.

He had saved Jamie Brett's essay for last. It might leaven his bad mood if he read a competently written essay before stepping into the classroom again. He turned to Jamie's essay, picked up his sandwich with both hands, and was chewing and reading when there was a knock on the door. Still chewing, enjoying the contrasting flavours and textures of his sandwich, Severus waved his hand and opened the door.

"Professor Snape, can we talk for a minute?"

Severus nodded. "I have twenty minutes before class, Mr Newman, as do you."

Draco nodded and took a seat.

"I see that Auror Lupin returned you safely to the grounds," Severus said. Tonks had shown up during breakfast, spoken to him and the Headmistress, then taken Draco away with her.

"Yeah," Draco nodded and looked down, his long blond fringe falling to cover his face. "I don't know when I'll see them again, either of them. I don't even know where they're going."

"Your parents are being moved?"

"Somewhere they'll both be safe. Mother said that if they're still away when I leave Hogwarts, I can join them, but she said that I'd be better off starting my life without them."

"She is correct."

"I may never see them again."

"I am sorry." Severus did not know what more to say. "I am certain that you will find many avenues open to you upon leaving school. Have you considered an apprenticeship?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't know. I had a few ideas, but I didn't come here to talk about that. My father gave me this for you." He pulled an envelope from his school robe pocket and handed it to Severus.

"He said that he wished he could speak with you, but they're leaving today. Wherever it is they're going . . ."

"You will no longer need to worry about them now," Severus said.

"I suppose . . . Did you know that they questioned my mother about the attacks? For hours. They thought she might be a collaborator, and they even thought she might have attacked my father."

"But they let her go."

Draco nodded. "They didn't like her alibis. They weren't 'solid,' Mother said. But they still decided to let her go. Once there's another attack and she's in hiding, they'll know how wrong they were to suspect her. I don't know why they thought she could do it in the first place."

Severus shrugged. He couldn't repeat the details he knew about the attacks and the attacker. Without good alibis for the times of the attacks, he supposed that Narcissa might be a plausible suspect, though he doubted that she had committed them.

Draco stood. "I have to get my books for class."

"I will see you in class. Good afternoon, Mr Newman."

Draco stopped at the door. "By the way, Professor, Mother wanted me to remind you about that Muggle and his reward."

"We have not forgotten. When the moment is propitious, we will take care of it."

"Right. Just passing on the message."

When Draco had left, Severus sighed and looked down at the envelope from Malfoy. He didn't have time to read it just then...or at least, not to read it and digest it...so he put it in his pocket and picked up Brett's essay and read that until the chimes sounded announcing that the first afternoon class would begin in two minutes.

Finally, after a long afternoon, the last of the students left the Potions classroom, and Severus prepared to close up. As he stepped out the door, he heard light footsteps pattering down the stairs near the classroom. Suzie Sefton leapt into the corridor.

"Professor! Professor Snape!" She waved as she ran toward him.

"Miss Sefton. Do not run."

Suzie slowed to a trot and stopped in front of him, catching her breath.

"What requires such haste, Miss Sefton?"

Still panting, Suzie said, "You're having some sixth-years brewing tonight?"

Severus nodded, envisioning the sixth-years all brewing in a giant cauldron, bobbing about in a bubbling potion. He suppressed his smirk.

"Can I come, too?"

"You wish to join detention, Miss Sefton? What are your misdeeds?"

"Oh, is it a detention? I just want to try to brew the Forgetfulness Potion again. I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"Miss Sefton, you have already brewed it twice."

"Four times," Suzie corrected. "I tried it twice on my own...Lettie was with me in case it blew up or something. But she didn't know what I'd done wrong, either."

"Four times was sufficient."

"But it wasn't *right*. You always say that with Potions, there's no 'almost right,'" Suzie said.

Severus shook his head. "Not tonight. I must supervise the sixth-year class. I will not have time for you." He suppressed a sigh. "Tomorrow. Immediately after dinner. I will be here at six-thirty. If you are not here then, I will leave."

"Thanks, Professor!" Suzie said brightly. "It's really frustrating..."

"Express your frustrations to some other person, Miss Sefton. I haven't the time for them. If you have a specific question about the potion, I will be in my office until dinner."

"Thanks, Professor!" Suzie called after him, undeterred in her enthusiasm.

"Good evening, Miss Sefton," Severus said as he walked down the corridor to his office.

Once in his office, Severus took Malfoy's letter from his pocket and quickly slit it open.

29 March 1999

Dear Severus,

Thank you for your assistance finding the Muggle who helped me escape the house. Narcissa and I both appreciate it.

Draco has probably told you that we will be going away for a while. I hope that we will be able to return soon, even if I also return to the Ministry's confinement, but if we cannot, I trust that you will continue to watch over Draco in our absence.

I have something that is weighing on my conscience, not something I did, but something I know, something someone else did. After the Dark Lord's first disappearance, I thought of it and dismissed its importance. Perhaps it is partially a result of our conversation last summer, but I have found that my conscience is becoming more sensitive,

and now I think that I was wrong not to tell you this years ago. Now I find that I must leave and I may never have the opportunity to tell you what I know. If I should die, my son's solicitor has a letter that she will see delivered to you. If my absence from the wizarding world continues for more than two years, she will also deliver it to you. I hope, though, that I will be able to tell you in person. If I cannot, I hope that you will understand why I did not tell you back then. Times were different. We were different men.

I tell you this now to prepare you, and so that if you hear of my death, or if I never return, and you do not receive a letter, you will know to go to Madam Candace Terwilliger-Jones to retrieve your letter.

Live well, Severus.

Lucius A. Malfoy

Severus's brow furrowed as he read, and his frown of perplexity turned to a scowl by the time he reached the end of the letter. He cursed lightly under his breath. He did not appreciate Malfoy's cryptic letter. If the man had something to tell him, he should have just spit it out. If he preferred to tell him in person, he should simply have waited, and then left a letter with the solicitor if he felt he had to, but not written this annoyingly cryptic letter to him.

Whatever it was that Malfoy knew or thought he knew, it couldn't possibly have any bearing on his life, Severus was certain. He had gone through his life without knowing whatever it was; it certainly couldn't change anything, not something some unknown person had done more than seventeen years before.

Severus almost crumpled and banished the letter, but instead, he folded it and put it back in the envelope. He would show it to Poppy and get her impression of it. He hoped that he could see her later that evening, though they had made no specific plans. The sixth-year detention wouldn't go beyond half past eight if the students weren't even more incompetent than he anticipated. There should be time afterward to drop by the Hospital Wing and see Poppy.

Severus smiled. Their date may not have been what he'd planned, but it had turned out better than he had expected. The time that they had spent together after Poppy had returned was wonderful. He felt even closer to her after that evening, despite Minerva's interruption.

As they waited for the potion to cool, Severus had Transfigured the bench into a love seat again, and he had held her close as they talked. It had given him a warm, comfortable feeling when Poppy had even dozed off for a while, resting against his chest. He could certainly become used to spending his evenings with Poppy like that.

He was particularly glad now that he'd asked Johannes to send the red tulips on Thursday morning, when he and Poppy would have their private date. They seemed an appropriate way to start the day. He hoped that Poppy liked the flowers and their implication. If she didn't say anything about them, he would know that the sentiment was too much too soon. He hoped that it wouldn't scare her off, though.

He still had to speak to Flitwick about the guest suite, but he would do that after the sixth-years' detention. He had already distributed the memo setting the staff meeting to ten o'clock rather than eleven. When Minerva had asked about it, he had just said that it seemed to make sense to have it as soon as he, Hagrid, and Rath had returned from escorting the students to the train. Laura and David Manning had agreed to take the train with the students, and there would be eight Aurors and Hit-Wizards on the train and another four waiting in London, checking the platform before the students arrived. He didn't think he had to worry about any plans for Thursday, either personal or professional. Poppy had insisted on seeing to lunch, since he had hosted dinner on Sunday.

Severus didn't allow himself to feel too sanguine about their plans. He knew too well the vicissitudes of fate. The best, most carefully laid plans could fall apart or go sour with the introduction of one random element. Nonetheless, he allowed himself to look forward to Thursday. He and Poppy would meet at the guest room after the staff meeting, they would talk, have lunch, and then have the afternoon together. He smiled . . . a nice, long, undisturbed afternoon with Poppy, and it seemed that she agreed that avoiding the physical side of their relationship wasn't necessary and that she understood that that wasn't all he wanted from her.

The Great Hall seemed even noisier than usual that evening, the cavernous room echoing with the students' excitement about the impending holiday. Severus was certain that over the next two days, he'd have even less of their attention than usual. He hoped that they didn't blow up the classroom in their inattention.

Poppy entered the Hall after he had already taken his seat, and rather than going directly to her own chair, she continued up to see him.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," she said with a bright smile.

"Good evening, Madam Pomfrey."

"I wanted to tell you that I just finished examining each of the students who suffered the Mackled Malacław bites, and it does appear that your new potion was even more efficacious than the standard, so I administered a half dose to the other student who had been bitten multiple times and was more severely affected, and a quarter dose to the others. They seem fine now. In fact, I would almost dare say that the students with the more minor injuries have been completely cured."

"Thank you for informing me, Madam Pomfrey. I have begun a memo to Murdoch McGonagall describing the potion and its effects. I would appreciate it if you could give me more specific details of the students' conditions before and after administering the potion so that I may include them in my report."

Poppy nodded. "I can bring them down to you this evening...you're giving a detention after dinner?" At Severus's nod, she said, "I'll bring them down to you in your classroom, then, perhaps toward the end of their detention...eight?"

"I anticipate there will be at least a few students there until almost half past," Severus replied.

"Okay, I will come down a bit before that, then."

"I look forward to speaking with you about it. I also have something I wish your opinion on, if you have time to read it."

Poppy smiled. "Of course."

After Poppy had gone down to her own place at the table, Albus leaned over and said, "It was nice that Poppy could help you with the potion yesterday."

"She provided competent assistance," Severus replied neutrally, adding more butter to his mashed potatoes.

Albus grinned. "Did she? That is good to hear...perhaps her competence has improved over the years?"

Severus grunted, but then, wishing to give Poppy her due, he added, "My evaluation of her competence has improved."

"I hope that you told her that, my boy. I believe she was somewhat put out when she first learned your opinion of her skills."

Severus scowled and didn't reply.

"Did you have a good time, then?" Albus asked, a smile on his face.

"Brewing potions for nitwits who've got themselves bitten by Mackled Malacław is not my definition of a good time, Dumbledore. However," he added, "it was not as onerous as it might have been."

"Pomona told me that she received an owl from Johannes this morning with instructions on the proper care of the new hybrids," Minerva said, breaking in. "Did you give her the plants?"

Severus nodded, his mouth full. After he swallowed, he said, "Just before lunch. She mentioned she got the letter."

"You and Johannes seemed to be getting along quite well last night," Albus said. "And Minerva, you should have seen Eoghan with him! I think that the boy has developed quite a liking for Severus. A bit of hero worship, I'd say."

Severus rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything.

"That's nice," Minerva replied. "I'd actually like to see the two of you together, myself, Severus, since I've often thought Eoghan resembles you more than one might expect, given the degree of your relationship. It would be interesting to see how much he takes after you."

"Poor boy," Severus said. "He does seem to have acceptable manners, however, and he does not appear to be a dunderhead. Your grandmother and Johannes have done well with him."

"It's good you think so, Severus," Albus said teasingly, "since he will be starting at Hogwarts in the autumn."

"He'll be corrupted, then," Severus grumped. "He'll be unrecognisable by Christmas."

"Albus, do quit teasing Severus. Severus, don't be so prickly. You are like two little children yourselves sometimes, and I haven't the humour for it this evening," Minerva said softly. In a more normal tone, she said, "I would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience, Severus, to go over the agenda for the Thursday staff meeting. I have an item to add."

"What is it?" Severus asked.

"The matter that we discussed last week. I plan to present my proposal to the Board of Governors meeting next week, and I wish to discuss it with the entire staff first."

"You mean..." Severus looked around and lowered his voice. "You mean the proposal with the additional dormitory?"

Minerva nodded. "I want to go over it with you in detail before the staff meeting. When would you be available?"

"Ah . . . tomorrow evening I am tutoring a student who requires additional brewing time, but perhaps after that."

"Tutoring or detention?" Minerva asked with a smirk. "Or is 'tutoring' your new euphemism for detention?"

Severus snorted. "More the other way around. No, Sefton has been unable to brew the Forgetfulness Potion satisfactorily, and she requested another opportunity to do so before the holiday. I told her I would meet her at half six, though, and I do not anticipate requiring more than an hour for that, and likely somewhat less."

"Shall we say eight o'clock, then?" Minerva suggested.

Severus nodded. "It might actually be a good idea to include the other Heads of House in the meeting. Better than to have this come out of the blue at them," Severus said. "It is somewhat radical, after all."

Vector on his other side looked over at Minerva. "Do I understand that this week's staff meeting will be less routine than usual?"

"Perhaps," Minerva replied, "but do not mention it to anyone else beforehand."

Vector nodded before she stood and pushed in her chair. "I have my own detention to supervise now...there is apparently a new novel out recently by Maximilian Powers, and I had to confiscate it from one of my fifth-years who was reading it during class." She frowned. "I actually think that fifth-years are too young to be reading books like that."

"It's one of the Nero Newcastle novels," Albus chimed in. "They're not as . . . adult as the Trajan Tyne novels."

"Hmph. I haven't read them," Vector said, "only the first Trajan Tyne novel years ago, so I'll trust your judgment on that, Albus."

"He's read them *all*," Minerva said, rolling her eyes. "Though he claims to have no interest in them, of course."

Severus smirked and Vector laughed.

"Perhaps I can borrow some of them, then," Vector said. "They might be good reading over the holiday."

Albus nodded. "I'll put together the first few in each series for you. I think you'll enjoy them."

"All signed by the author, I expect?" Vector asked.

"Naturally!" Albus said. "Knowing both the author and the publisher does have a few perks that go with it!"

So that was how McGonagall had got him an advance copy of the Nero Newcastle novel that had been released before Christmas, Severus thought...Gareth probably knew the publisher through his uncle. After two years with no new Maximilian Powers books out, it seemed the author was making up for lost time, since there was another due out in May. Severus supposed that perhaps Powers had still been writing them, but just hadn't published them until now. He would have to stop at a bookshop and pick up a copy of the new one when it came out. Or order it, since he doubted he'd be in a bookshop for a while.

Detention with the sixth-years actually went fairly smoothly, to Severus's surprise, with most of the students brewing acceptable potions. Severus supposed that it really was more like a tutoring session than a detention, but since it was mandatory and he was certain that the students would all prefer to be elsewhere...and it was their own fault that they were there, since they didn't seem to read directions...calling it a detention was more apt. Perhaps in the future, they would be better prepared and more careful in class.

He was just overseeing the students cleaning the classroom after the brewing when Poppy arrived.

"Madam Pomfrey," Severus said with a nod. "I shall be free in a few minutes."

Poppy nodded and walked up to stand beside him. "I wrote up a separate set of notes for you, Professor, taking out all the students' names, but adding details I thought would be of interest to a Potions master."

"Very good. We can review them shortly."

A minute later, Severus was shoos the students out of the classroom. He closed the door and warded it behind them, then he turned and smiled at Poppy.

Author's Note: I've started posting a new little story, [Draco's Heart](#), to the Petulant Poetess. It's a short fic with short chapters, and it's a companion fic to A Long Vernal Season. It opens in spring 1999, not many weeks after this one here.

Chapter Ninety: A Happy Decision

Chapter 91 of 118

Tuesday, 30 March. Severus and Poppy catch some time together.



Chapter Ninety: A Happy Decision

Tuesday, 30 March 1999

Poppy shook her head and handed the letter back to Severus. "I can see why you found it cryptic. It seems he wrote that to make himself feel better, not to inform you about anything."

"Exactly. Malfoy always was a self-serving prick...sorry, but he really can be. Even when he's trying to turn over a new leaf, or whatever it is he thinks he's doing, he can't help it."

"Can you think of anything that happened back then that had anything to do with you?"

"There was the business with the Potters, but it sounds as though he's talking about something that happened before that." Severus sighed. He didn't think that Poppy knew of his role in the Potters' deaths, but he should tell her at some point. "And aside from the fact that it sounds like he's referring to an earlier event, there were only a very few people involved in that. The Dark Lord, Pettigrew, and only one other, as far as I know. I think Riddle even kept Bella in the dark about most of the details. Malfoy wasn't involved and wouldn't be likely to have known anything about it. He must be referring to some earlier event, but I can't think of any event that stands out as more significant than any other."

"My advice is to put it out of your mind, then. Keep the letter somewhere safe in case you ever do need to retrieve the other letter from Candace, but until that time, just don't think about it. I don't think it would be profitable."

"You're right . . . I could probably end up obsessing about everything that happened in the few years leading up to the Potters' deaths, and . . . I think it's important to focus on the future and on you."

"Exactly," Poppy said with a nod.

"I knew you'd have good advice," Severus said. He bent and kissed her lips, his kiss becoming warmer and more sensual as her arms went around him.

Poppy kissed him once more lightly on the lips before she pulled back, smiled up at him, and then leaned against him, resting her head on his chest. Severus slowly rubbed her back, relishing the sensation of holding her in his arms. He kissed the top of her head, smelling her hair, which reminded him of flowers on a spring morning after a rain shower.

"Would you like to join me for a drink?" Severus asked softly.

Poppy nodded against him, then let him go and took his hand in one of hers. "Not too late tonight, though. I think we both need an early night tonight."

"Agreed. An early night, and you can use the Floo back to the Hospital Wing so that the walk doesn't wake you up too much."

"It is quite a long hike, especially when you're tired."

"Let's go now, then. I'm finished here for the night, and I think my sitting room would be far more comfortable than the classroom, especially to do . . . this." He leaned toward her, kissing her lips and caressing one of her breasts. He straightened, the corners of his mouth twitching upward when he saw that Poppy was flushed. "And to get that pinny off. I still say it's an obstruction."

Poppy laughed softly. "I don't ever want it to be an obstruction to you, Sev." Her hand rested on his face, slowly caressing his cheek. "I don't want anything to come between us."

Severus resisted the impulse to kiss her again, and he waved his wand to open the door for them.

They were walking at a respectably collegial distance from one another, at a respectably sedate pace, when Severus was particularly glad for that fact. Behind him, he heard the quick pace of a wizard whose step he recognised easily. He glanced over at Poppy just as she glanced up at him.

For a moment, they each seemed to contemplate picking up their pace and then simultaneously realise the futility of that course. Instead, they both slowed together and turned as one, just in time to see Albus come around a curve in the corridor.

Poppy smiled and greeted him cheerfully. Severus greeted him.

"Albus, is all well?" Severus asked.

"Yes, all is well, within this castle, anyway!" Albus said brightly. "I was coming down to see you, Severus." He looked over at Poppy. "You are looking lovely this evening, Poppy!"

Poppy looked down at her plain navy blue robe and her white pinny and shrugged. "Thank you, Albus."

"But she always does look lovely, wouldn't you agree, Severus, my boy?"

Severus, stone-faced, nodded. "As you say."

"We were just going to go over our notes about the new version of the Clages Refragor Syrup," Poppy said. "We need to combine our reports. We were hoping to make a

relatively early night of it tonight."

"Yes, we have had a few late ones recently, haven't we?" Albus said. "Mine was not as late as yours last night, though, I'm sure."

"Was there a specific reason for your visit?" Severus asked, turning and starting back down the corridor again.

"I thought we might have a drink, but primarily, I wished to apologise if I caused you any difficulty with Minerva yesterday evening," Albus said, falling into step beside him.

"No. She asked if you had returned with me. She did not blame me for not escorting you directly your suite and holding your hand the entire way," Severus said.

"Ah, very good. I understand that Carleton and Stan were given something of a dressing-down, but I did explain to Minerva that it was entirely my fault," Albus replied. "I ought to have been clearer with Carleton about delivering a message for me."

They reached Severus's suite, and he placed his hand on the stone wall beside the door and cast his nonverbal password charm. When the door glowed and opened to them, Severus waved the others in.

Resigned to having his quiet, intimate drink with Poppy become a drink with Poppy and Albus, Severus crossed over to his cabinet and took out an open bottle of cognac and one of firewhisky and three short glasses. He set them out on the coffee table.

"Help yourselves to whatever you like. Call Twiskett if you'd prefer something different," Severus said. "I will only be a moment."

Severus went into the loo and cast an Imperturbable. He didn't swear, however, as he had thought he might; he simply leaned forward against the door, both hands pressed against it, and banged his head against it lightly a few times. Feeling a bit better, he decided to use the facilities since he was there.

He didn't know whether there was some unseen conspiracy keeping him from having an uninterrupted evening with Poppy, even that evening when they had only a little time to be together, or whether it was just his usual luck. On the other hand, perhaps this was typical of normal life and he was merely inexperienced . . .

When he stepped back out into the sitting room, he saw that Albus had Transfigured two of his glasses into proper brandy snifters and poured some cognac for himself and Poppy. Since he found that firewhisky seemed to burn a hole in his stomach, especially if he hadn't eaten recently, Severus drew his wand, Transfigured the third glass into a snifter, and poured himself a glass of cognac, as well, then sat in his favourite well-worn wingback chair.

"We were just discussing the upcoming holiday, my boy," Albus said. "I understand that you have no plans to go anywhere."

"Nothing specific," Severus said. "I believe I may go to the Tyree estate one day, and no doubt McGonagall will wish to do something together with me. It will be a busy holiday, however, since the staff training for the counselling programme begins during the second week."

"I am very glad that you two have worked so well together on that project," Albus replied enthusiastically. "It's been a wonderful opportunity for you both, I think."

Severus glanced at Poppy, who was taking a sip of brandy.

"It has had some points of compensation," Severus said. "We hope that the programme will be a success for the students. That is the primary consideration."

"Of course, my boy. And very good of you to think of it, too," Albus said. "We should have done something of this sort long ago."

"I think it will be well-received," Poppy said. "It seems as though most of the staff are interested in assisting, and they are all participating in some way."

"I hope that you have discussed it with Stan," Albus said.

"I have," Poppy replied. "He won't be actively assisting in the programme, but I have arranged a few private sessions with Gladys for him. I hope that he will continue beyond that. His experience had to have been very traumatic."

"Scrimgeour would have a lot to answer for if he were still alive," Severus said flatly. "Shunpike is not the only wholly innocent person to have been tossed into Azkaban during that time."

"After what happened with Sirius Black, you would think that the Ministry would have learned better than to throw people into prison indefinitely without even a hearing, let alone a trial," Poppy said. "It's frightening. They did it so easily, too, with so little opposition from anyone. I can understand why so many people don't have any faith in the Ministry and distrust the Aurors. It's hardly a wonder that Gareth was frightened for his mother."

"There have been overhauls since Kingsley became Minister," Albus said.

"Justice and rule of law should not depend upon the whims of individuals," Severus interrupted. "And I do not believe that if Shackbolt found it expedient, he would not do something similar. Until British wizarding society refuses to tolerate such actions and puts in mechanisms to prevent abuses, it will continue to happen...and even with any preventive measures put in place, I'm not convinced that a wily and self-serving Minister with his own people in positions of power could not do whatever he wished and pretend that he was doing it in the interests of security for everyone. It's hardly any better than what the Dark...what Riddle wanted."

Poppy sighed. "This is not a cheerful conversation."

"Indeed not," Albus said. "Severus, I was intrigued to hear you may be visiting the Tyree estate over the holiday."

"You were right there when Professor Birnbaum suggested it," Severus said slightly irritably.

"Ah, yes, young Eoghan is keen to have you visit, I noticed. You have made quite a positive impression on the boy."

Severus snorted. "I have had little contact with him. Once he gets to Hogwarts, he will learn better."

"Don't say that!" Poppy exclaimed. "I think it's quite fine if he looks up to you, and I don't think that getting to know you better would diminish his regard...quite to the contrary!"

Albus smiled broadly. "Poppy, dear, you are exactly right!"

"If I am here in the autumn. Otherwise, he will learn it by my reputation."

"I am sure that I am not alone when I say that I would miss you, and I hope you do stay on at Hogwarts," Albus said. "Don't you think so, Poppy?"

Poppy nodded and took a sip of cognac. "I would certainly miss you, Severus. But, Albus, we must let him do what he thinks best for himself." She glanced over at Severus. "I would definitely miss you if you were to leave, though."

"And I think you could be a good influence on the next generation of children to come through Hogwarts," Albus added. "You have so much more scope to act as you see fit now, too. Besides, I believe that Eoghan is an astute judge of character. If he didn't like you, he wouldn't waste any time with you, I'm sure."

"Hmph. He seems to be a bright boy," Severus admitted. "A bit small for his age, though, I thought."

"The Tyrees are often a bit short, although his father, Connor, was almost my height. His mother was a petite witch, though," Albus said. "She was in school with you, just a year behind you, I believe, Severus. Do you remember Judith Gold? She was one of the Ravenclaw prefects for her year. Petite, dark hair, brown eyes . . . very slight build."

"I do recall her," Severus acknowledged. "She was top of her class, I believe, wasn't she?"

"She was," Albus said. "A very bright girl."

Poppy looked over at Albus's empty glass after he took a final swallow of cognac, and saw him eying the bottle as if considering another glass.

"You know, Albus, Severus and I need to go over my portion of the report on the potion, and I am going to become quite sleepy after the cognac . . ."

"Of course, my dear!" Albus said, standing. He bent and kissed her cheek. "I won't keep you two from your work any longer. Good night, Severus."

Severus was already at the door. "Good night, Albus. Thank you for your visit." Ill-timed though the visit was, there was a part of Severus that appreciated the gesture.

"Of course. We will have to make some time to get together over the holiday...though you are coming to my dinner party, aren't you? Both of you?"

"I am," Severus said.

"Yes, of course, Albus," Poppy said. "I'm looking forward to it!"

"Good night!" Albus said one more time before he stepped out the door.

Severus closed his eyes and sighed as he shut the door. "I know it was not a long visit, but I could not wait for him to leave," he said.

Poppy chuckled. "I love Albus, but I would have liked it if he had paid a visit to you some other time." She stood and held out her arms to Severus, and he stepped into her embrace.

"I don't think we need to discuss your report now," Severus said.

Poppy shook her head and looked up at him. "No. If you have questions, let me know." She kissed him and pulled him back towards the couch with her.

Before she could pull him down onto the couch, however, Severus stopped her. "This pinny must go."

Poppy smirked as he unbuttoned the buttons at her shoulders, and she loosened the waist. Rather than pull it off over her head, Severus just pushed it down, and Poppy stepped out of it.

"Better," Severus said, his voice low and filled with desire.

Poppy took one more step back and pulled Severus down on top of her on the couch, running her hands under his jacket and rubbing his back. Severus kissed her deeply and held her closely. He moaned as one of Poppy's hands began to massage his buttocks and she parted her legs to pull him even closer to her.

"Mmm," Poppy moaned as Severus's lips moved on to tease her throat. "You have the most wonderful kisses . . . I swear I could almost live on those kisses. They are . . . mmm . . . practically orgasmic."

Severus's lips whispered their way back up to her cheek and then her lips. He kissed her sensually, eliciting another appreciative moan, then drew back to smile down at her, his dark eyes shining. "I know where I could kiss you that would make them truly orgasmic," he said. He moved his body against her, shifting his weight to press into her crux. "I promise you some of those special kisses on Thursday, if you would like . . ." He leaned forward and tickled her ear with the tip of his tongue, his breath warm in her ear.

"Oh, gods, Severus, you are such a tease!" Poppy protested.

"I am glad I'm appreciated," he murmured, still kissing and licking her ear as he moved against her, one of his hands gently caressing her breast through her robe.

"Mmm, very much," Poppy said, massaging his back and buttocks.

Severus continued to kiss and tease Poppy until finally, they just lay together, nuzzling each other and exchanging light kisses.

"I'm so happy, Severus," Poppy said, snuggling against him. "So happy . . ."

"You know, I am, too . . ." He kissed her temple and gave her a squeeze.

"Are you really still thinking of leaving Hogwarts?" Poppy asked tentatively.

"I don't know . . . I have not decided not to," Severus said. "I know that . . . I know that I don't want to leave you. It's hard enough to manage to see you when we are living and working in the same place. If I were to leave, it might be almost impossible."

"If you want to leave and pursue some other opportunity, please don't let me hold you back," Poppy said, "but I will be honest with you: I would miss you terribly." She was unsure whether she would want to be at Hogwarts any longer if he weren't. If he left, he might not want her to go with him, though . . . but if he would have her, she would rather do that than stay at Hogwarts, a Hogwarts empty of his presence. "It may be the wrong time to say this, a bit . . . premature in our relationship, but I want to be with you, Sev. The thought of you leaving Hogwarts without me leaves me feeling very sad."

"Don't be, Poppy. I haven't even thought very much about it lately." He kissed her and considered what she had said. "I think it would be hard for me to stay here if things didn't go well between us, though, if you broke up with me. It hurts just thinking about it."

"I'm going to cherish every minute with you," Poppy said resolutely, shifting to sit up slightly. "I think you should do the same. Let's not talk about this all right now."

"I suppose I should let Minerva know my decision soon, however, so that she may plan . . . and perhaps it might be interesting to spend another year or two here, see how Eoghan fares. Hope for our future together, too." He shrugged as though it wasn't a very big decision.

Poppy sat up straighter and looked down into his face, a hopeful expression in her eyes. "You think you'll stay?" When he nodded, a slight smile on his lips, happy to see Poppy's reaction, she said, "I'm so glad! I didn't want to influence you about it if you really wanted to leave, but ever since you mentioned it to me a few weeks ago, it's been pricking at me, and I've been rather desperately hoping that you would decide to stay." She leaned forward and kissed him enthusiastically. She hugged him tightly.

He returned her embrace. "If I had known how important this was to you, I would have made this decision sooner. It matters to me what you want, Poppy."

"But I didn't want you to stay if there were something else you would prefer doing...especially since for most of your life, you didn't have much choice about things like that."

Severus caressed her face and drew her down into a kiss. "I will admit that it makes me happy to know that you want me here as much as you do." He kissed her again.

Poppy rested against him for a while, then sighed and said, "It's later than I'd hoped to get to bed tonight."

"If Albus hadn't come down to socialise, we would have had more time," Severus said grumpily.

"Well, to be entirely fair to him, he did think he was only interrupting our work...after hours, too. He probably thought he was giving us a well-deserved break from our hard work," Poppy said generously.

"Hmph. I don't think that's all he was thinking," Severus grumbled.

"What do you mean?"

"He's been trying on and off this semester to set me up with someone, or at least encourage me to ask someone on a date, and in general to be more social with my colleagues. He did hear us say we were meeting at eight-thirty. I have a feeling that this visit was part of his campaign to make me a more sociable person."

Poppy giggled. "If he only knew how well you and I socialise, Severus!" She laughed again, and Severus smirked. "Whom was he trying to encourage you to go out with?" she asked curiously.

"He tried to persuade me that Duffy wasn't as bad as I think, he extolled the virtues of Sharon Carter's blonde good-looks, and he suggested Professor Vector, since he has noticed that we tolerate each other well. He even mentioned you at one point...after you had decided we should take a break, so I am afraid that I didn't respond well to that particular suggestion. He also mentioned your friend Gladys, and a few others, too. I was not receptive."

Poppy laughed again. "You could be easy on him and let him know about us."

"Then he'll be even more insufferable," Severus said, "and I really want us to have some time to ourselves with only a few people knowing . . . for us to have a chance to work out our relationship without the eyes of all our acquaintances on us. Do you understand that?"

"Yes...you don't mind that I told Violet about us, do you?"

"No, of course not. I don't want you to lie about us to your family...I'd be upset if I thought you were ashamed of our relationship..."

"I'm not, not at all," Poppy broke in, "but I do agree about our having some privacy for a while, as much as possible. And you did tell Filius."

"Because he'd guessed already. It was clear that I was preparing for a date, I suppose, and he'd noticed that we seemed . . . closer. Apparently, my drinking from your straw at his party was a big tip-off," he said with a smirk.

"All right...so unless it's someone with no business knowing our business, if someone asks about us or is curious about it, I won't deny it."

"I don't know if you realise this," Severus said hesitantly, "but Gareth knows, too."

"He does? I suppose I'm not surprised," Poppy said. "You two seem to have become close friends. But no, I didn't know."

Severus nodded. There was so much that she didn't know and that he couldn't explain, at least not at that moment. And not just about Gareth.

"I guess I should say good-night now."

"I would invite you to stay, but I'm looking forward to Thursday...and I admit that I could probably fall asleep right here right now."

"Mhm, me too," Poppy agreed, sitting on the edge of the sofa and stretching before she stood.

Severus stood and walked over to the fireplace. He lit a small fire, then reached up and took the pot of Floo Powder down from the mantel for Poppy, who took a pinch. Severus bent and kissed her softly.

"Good night, my darling Poppy . . . Piety Pomfrey."

Poppy's kiss was interrupted by her laughter. "No, not 'Piety,' Severus . . . Scribonius Snape."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, not Scribonius."

"Still love all," Poppy said with a smile. "Zero score for us both."

"I don't think I mind the score when you put it that way . . . love," Severus said, a smile in his eyes.

He kissed her again, then Poppy tossed in her Floo Powder, stepped into the fireplace, only ducking slightly, and said, "Hospital Wing." Then she was gone.

Chapter Ninety-One: A Proposal

Chapter 92 of 118

Wednesday, 31 March 1999. Minerva has a proposal and Severus is persuasive.



Chapter Ninety-One: A Proposal

Wednesday, 31 March 1999

Severus saw Suzie Sefton bolting her dinner, and he sighed. She had not forgotten and she was not going to be late.

"Something wrong, Severus?" Vector asked.

"No. I did agree to meet a student and watch her brew a potion she is having difficulty with, however. It was foolish of me." He watched Suzie pick up her heavy book bag, swing it over her shoulder, and hurry from the Great Hall, slightly bent from the weight of her satchel.

"The student is brewing the potion voluntarily?" Vector asked. When Severus nodded, she said, "Then be grateful you have someone interested in her work."

"Mm. She has brewed it four times without success."

"Industrious and determined," Vector said.

"Yes." Severus stood. "And I complain when they're lazy dunderheads," he said with a sigh.

Vector chuckled.

When Severus reached the Potions classroom, Suzie was already there waiting for him.

"Miss Sefton, you are punctual."

She smiled up at him. "I didn't want you to waste a minute, Professor!"

Severus's eyebrow twitched. He opened the classroom and waved his wand to light the torches and candles. He should replace the torches with lamps, he thought. A few well-placed Charmed lamps would provide better light than ten torches.

Severus leaned back against his desk as Suzie set out her ingredients on the student desk in front of him. She carefully lined them up in the order she was going to prepare them, setting the asphodel root out last, then she took out her knife, her mortar and pestle, her cauldron, and her stirring rod. She looked up at him with a grin.

"I always get this far just fine," she said brightly, laughing slightly at her own joke.

Severus nodded. "Prepare all of the ingredients before you begin."

"But the book says that the asphodel..."

"In this instance, it will not matter. It is only a few minutes before you add it. If you wait to prepare it until just before you add it, you could extend the first part of the brewing slightly too long, which will do more harm than having the grated asphodel exposed to the air for a few extra minutes," Severus said. "If you were working with a partner and could time it well, then grating the root immediately before adding it would be slightly beneficial, or later, when you are more experienced and able to work more efficiently, you could prepare it separately. For now, working on your own, do it this way."

Suzie nodded. She was meticulous in her preparation, and concentrated, seeming unperturbed by Severus's scrutiny. It did take her a while, though, particularly grating the asphodel root, and Severus nodded to himself. That was likely the first point where her potion had begun to go wrong. It took her too long to prepare the asphodel and the potion brewed too long before she added it.

As she sliced the reconstituted desiccated Leaping Toadstool into small matchstick-sized pieces, Suzy said, "My Great-aunt Sadie always says that starting with good ingredients is important when brewing. Well, she doesn't say 'brewing,' of course, but she always says to know your ingredients, make sure they're good quality, and treat them properly, or your potion won't be any good. Of course, except when she's joking, she doesn't call them potions. Aunt Sadie makes all kinds of tonics and tinctures and things like that. She says it's her true vocation. She would *love* Potions! I wish I could tell her all about it..."

"Pay attention to what you're doing," Severus said. "Look at that piece of toadstool you just sliced."

"Oops!" Suzie looked at it, couldn't decide what to do with the irregularly shaped piece of grey fungus, so she set it aside. "Sorry . . ."

Severus stared at Suzie . . . Great-aunt Sadie . . . simples, tonics, tinctures . . . a vocation.

"Your Great-aunt Sadie . . . is she a short older woman with curly grey hair who drives a Landrover, wears a crushed hat and striped braces, and lives in Cornwall?"

Suzie looked up at him wide-eyed. "Wow!" She blinked. "Really! Just . . . wow! I didn't know you did Divination!"

Severus smirked and snorted a laugh. "Divination. Hardly. No, I believe I have met your great-aunt. What is her full name?"

"Sadie Pengaree. She lives outside of Port Isaac."

Severus shook his head. "It is an interesting coincidence, but I have actually ridden in your great-aunt's Landrover."

"I hope you held on tight!" Suzie said with a giggle.

"It was a temptation. But I did wear my safety belt."

"She won't go anywhere until everyone's buckled up," Suzie said. "How did you meet her?"

"I was in Cornwall last summer. I could not get a taxicab. Your great-aunt was there and offered me a ride. It is interesting that I should meet her...she has also met Hermione Granger's family."

"Oh, they're the same Grangers as Hermione?! I've read all about her!" Suzie squealed. "Mr Granger took care of my tooth when I fell and chipped it when I was visiting Aunt Sadie last summer." She gave Severus an exaggerated grin and pointed at the tooth in question. "It was all loose, too, and my gums were bleeding, so Aunt Sadie drove me over to their house 'cause they're dentists, and he fixed it for me right in their kitchen. Mr Granger said I should have knocked out all my front teeth, but I seemed to be as tough as his daughter is! And that's Hermione Granger!"

"Indeed, it would seem so. An unusual coincidence."

"Not for Aunt Sadie," Suzie said, shaking her head. "She always says there's no such thing as coincidences, and they happen to her all the time. She calls it . . . synchro . . . synchrosomething."

"Synchronicity," Severus said. He thought for a moment. "Is your great-aunt a woman of discretion?"

"You mean, can she keep secrets?" Suzie asked. She nodded. "Yeah, she's got lots of discretion. And she's really, really smart, and she knows *everything*, and almost nothing surprises her. Mum says that's because she's too full of surprises herself." She giggled.

Severus, hoping that Suzie would outgrow her giggling, said, "I shall speak with the Headmistress, but I believe that you may tell your great-aunt about Hogwarts. You spend a lot of time with her?"

"At least two weeks every summer at her house, and she always comes for Christmas and Easter holidays. She's Mum's favourite aunt. And she's my godmother."

"I believe she is close enough family that you may tell her you are a witch and are attending Hogwarts. You and your parents together, of course. But you ~~may~~^{not} mention Hermione Granger, not unless she independently learns that the Grangers' daughter is a witch."

"Independently?" Suzie asked, puzzled.

"She may learn it from another source, but Ms Granger is a Muggle-born with a Muggle family. You may not . . . 'out' her, for want of a better term. However, if, for example, your great-aunt accompanies you to Diagon Alley and sees Ms Granger there . . . she has learned it independently. Or if Ms Granger learns that you are Sadie Pengaree's great-niece and therefore tells her herself."

"Oh! Okay!" She thought for a moment. "What about you?"

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Can I tell her you're my Potions teacher? Or is that a secret?"

"It is not a secret." Severus twitched a slight smile. "You may tell your great-aunt of another instance of synchronicity in her life."

"Cool! Synchronicity is wild!" She looked at her ingredients. "I'm ready to begin!"

Severus watched as Suzie brewed the potion, stopping her only once. "Alternate clockwise and anticlockwise stirs here, two clockwise, two counterclockwise, and so on."

"The book just says 'stir.'"

"I am aware of that. I am also aware that you follow the directions word for word, and whenever it says to 'stir,' you stir clockwise. You are putting too much of your own magical energy into the potion."

Suzie's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"Why would I lie to you about this?"

"I just meant . . . I thought we were supposed to follow the directions to the letter, and I didn't know that I was putting too much magic into a potion, and, well, I didn't even know I *could* put too much magic into the potion."

"As you proceed further in the study of Potions, you will learn more about that aspect of the art, and if you have some talent, you will be able to control the flow of your magic into the potion and influence the potency of the potion by doing that."

"Huh. That makes sense," Suzie said.

"I am so pleased," Severus said sarcastically.

Suzie giggled. "So, how can I put too much magic into it?"

Severus considered the best way to explain it to her. "What happens when you overcharge a car battery?"

"It blows up?" Suzie asked, unsure.

"Hmmm . . ." Not a good analogy, then. Over-winding a watch? No . . . Her parents owned a restaurant. "Does your mother bake bread?"

"The best!"

"What would happen if she put too much yeast in her bread batter?" Severus asked.

"It's 'dough,' not 'batter,' Professor. It would rise and collapse. Whoosh! And it would taste pretty nasty even if it didn't collapse. And it would get all goeey and icky if it were kneaded too much, especially if it sat around for a long time, too. But then you can rescue it by taking a little and using it for a poolish."

"A what?" Severus asked. "Never mind." He didn't really care about what a poolish was. "It's similar. Your potion can only take so much of your magical energy before it . . . collapses, so to speak."

Suzie added the final ingredient, stirred it in, then let out a squeal of delight as the potion changed colour. "Look, Professor! Look! It's perfect!"

Severus looked down into the cauldron. "It is Forgetfulness Potion." He looked at Suzie's exhilarated expression, and he smiled slightly. "Congratulations, Miss Sefton."

"You're going to banish it, aren't you," Suzie said sadly. He had banished all of the ones brewed in class.

Severus Summoned a flask and a cork from a cabinet behind him. "No, not this one. I will keep this one in stock. Decant it carefully. If you get any on your hands, wash them immediately."

Suzie grinned. "I sure don't want to forget this!"

"Indeed."

When she had decanted the potion, Severus took it from her, sealed the flask and cork with a spell, then inscribed the flask, *Forgetfulness Potion, S. Sefton, 31 March 1999.*

"I shall record this as an Outstanding potion, Miss Sefton."

"Thanks!" She beamed.

"It was your effort," Severus grunted. Sometimes Sefton's enthusiasm was hard to take. He was still amazed she hadn't ended up in Hufflepuff.

Suzie began to clean up.

"Clean your own things and pack them up. Leave the rest," Severus said, wanting to get out of the classroom as quickly as possible.

At ten before eight, Severus was walking up to the second-floor for the meeting with the Headmistress. Pomona Sprout was also on her way up.

"Hello, Professor Snape," she said, huffing up beside him. "Is this a meeting about tomorrow's agenda?"

"Yes. About one particular item," Severus said.

"Ah . . . number seven, 'New Proposal,'" Pomona said, "but no detail."

"New proposals often have no detail on the agenda. It leaves room for additional proposals," Severus said.

"Do you know what it is?"

"The Headmistress will be discussing it."

"Obviously."

"The meeting is in less than ten minutes." Severus looked down at Sprout. "And it would be both difficult and indiscreet to speak of it on the stairs."

"My, my! It must be some proposal!" Pomona said enthusiastically. "I can hardly wait to hear it!"

Severus shook his head.

When they got to the Headmistress's Office, Sharon Carter was already there. Minerva had two pots of tea on the table...by the aroma, one was peppermint...and a plate of ginger newts and shortbread biscuits, and both she and Sharon were sipping a cup of tea.

Severus turned to Professor Sprout. "Would you care for a cup of tea?"

"Thanks, Severus. Peppermint, please."

Severus poured each of them a cup of tea and picked up a shortbread. He took a surreptitious glance at the grandfather clock. Three minutes until Flitwick would be late. Severus was just thinking that Flitwick was never late when the fireplace flared green and the little wizard popped through the Floo into the Headmistress's Office. The small talk among the three witches stopped immediately, and Minerva handed around a set of parchments. Severus smirked. It would be interesting to see what the other Heads of House would think of the Headmistress's proposal.

He paged through the three parchments. The first was the simple proposal to delay Sorting Students until the beginning of their second year, house them in their own dormitory, seat them at their own table in the Great Hall, and hire a new staff member who would be in charge of their supervision and care as well as provide them with special classes in writing and literacy. The second parchment had diagrams showing the possible layouts in the Great Hall and an example first-year dormitory. The third parchment contained a detailed argument in favour of the proposal, with points countering possible objections.

Severus looked up and glanced around at the other Heads of House. His cheek twitched with amusement. Each of them wore expressions of varying degrees of astonishment and perplexity...Sharon Carter seemed the least amazed, and Pomona seemed the most taken aback. Filius had quickly scanned the first page, glanced at the second, and was now reading the third page intently.

"No Sorting next year?" Pomona said, sounding anguished. "It won't be the same!"

"Sorting would resume the following year," Minerva said patiently.

"But . . . having all the first-years together, with no Houses . . . they would miss out on so many essential Hogwarts experiences!" Pomona cried.

"Which they would have beginning in their second year," Minerva replied. "And they would have many new and enriching experiences in their place."

"Couldn't you Sort them and still have a separate first-year dormitory?" Sharon Carter asked.

"Of course, but that would defeat one of the primary purposes: to have the students get to know each other as fellow Hogwarts students first, without regard to House...and to have them get to know Hogwarts and themselves more before the Sorting Hat makes a lifetime decision for them. You all know as well as I do that House affiliations continue to play a strong role in many people's lives long after they leave school. They are eleven years old, still children. They should be allowed at least one more year to develop before they are Sorted."

"This flies in the face of everything the Founders intended, though!" Pomona said.

"Not necessarily," Filius said thoughtfully. "They had originally intended one large, unified school, and it was only after conflicts began over who would be admitted...or invited to attend...that the House system was created. We no longer have the same concerns over who should be educated or not. And in point of fact, even with the House system, Hogwarts will invite any witch or wizard born in the British isles and, as a practical matter, will accept any witch or wizard from anywhere in the world, as long as they speak English well enough to begin their education with the rest of the students. The House system is almost vestigial."

"Vestigial? Why do you say that?" Sharon asked.

"The system was moot almost as soon as it was created," Flitwick explained. "Slytherin left Hogwarts because Muggle-borns would still be admitted to the school and educated alongside purebloods, even if they were segregated by House, and although there are obviously some people who believe that Muggle-borns...or even any who aren't 'pureblood'...should not be educated, that is a minority view and one that has never prevailed, not even under threat of violence. I don't think that any of *us* believes that a student who is a member of a House other than the one we head should be denied a Hogwarts education. And, if I may be so bold, Sorting on the basis of the supposed characteristics valued by each of the Four Founders is not the only possible way of dividing the students into different dormitories, even if the divisions were to last throughout their school career.

"They could be Sorted on the basis of which particular magical talents they possess," Filius continued, "alphabetically, by birth date, by favourite colour, or even completely randomly on the basis of no shared characteristics at all, even those which are themselves random...such as their names or birth dates. I believe that Whiteshell Academy has a first-year dormitory and a second-year dormitory. After that, there are several separate lodges with a mix of years, and these lodges are chosen by the students at the end of their second year. They each submit a first and second choice, and then their ultimate home is assigned...by lottery, I believe...on the basis of those choices. Any students who remain in school beyond the seventh year for the optional eighth year stay in a special dormitory building just for them, regardless of what lodge they were in before that."

"I know," Pomona said, "but this isn't Whiteshell. We aren't in Canada or anywhere else in the world. We have our traditions, dating back centuries, and the Founders and the Houses have played a vital role in our history."

"Is that any reason to maintain a practice that is outmoded and serves no useful purpose?" Sharon asked. "Not to mention that the Houses won't be eliminated, and presumably, the Sorting Hat will still Sort the students at the beginning of the second year, and it won't be simply random...or by favourite colour!"

"How will classes be divided?" Pomona asked. "I do not relish the prospect of trying to teach a group of forty students or more, even if it did cut down on the number of classes I taught."

"We could determine that together...we could simply divide them randomly," Minerva said. "And I think that having them all mix is good, so I think that they should not take all of their classes with the same other twenty students."

"I agree," Filius said. "I admit that I also like the idea of them having these special revision sessions and the extra class in writing and literacy. I think that would be good for them all."

"I, too, find that appealing," Severus said.

"Some older students would bully the first-years," Pomona said.

"They do that now," Severus replied. "I am sure that mechanisms can be put in place to minimise it and to deal with it when it occurs."

"That is one reason for my optional proposal that we assign eight sixth-year students, two from each House, as . . . I do not know what we might call them. Dormitory buddies, for lack of a better term for now. They would live with and take most of their meals with the first-years...perhaps taking lunch and dinner in turns so that they could still have at least one meal a day at their own House tables...and be there to provide support and counsel to the students. They would also provide something of a buffer for the students, and they and the House prefects could help deal with any bullying by older students in their own Houses."

"I so look forward to the fresh new first-years every year," Pomona said sadly. "But I suppose . . . it does seem as though this plan might be in the students' interest."

"That was what I had in mind, the students' best interests, and the best interests of Hogwarts. The future of the school is important to me, and the future of each individual student, too," Minerva said.

"Many people will oppose this proposal simply on the grounds of tradition...and a tradition that has worked well enough for generations, regardless of the merits of providing the first-years with a different experience," Filius pointed out. "They will say that what was good enough for them and their grandparents should be good enough for future generations."

"Under that logic, we should bring back hanging the students upside down by their ankles for breaking curfew and flogging them for disrespecting their elders," Minerva said, frowning for the first time.

"I don't know as I approve of this, Minerva," Pomona said, "but I will think about it tonight. You know that if the Board of Governors approves the plan, I will support you completely, though, regardless of my personal feelings."

"I think it's a good idea," Sharon said. "The needs of the first-years are different, too, especially the first few months of school. Having someone dedicated to taking care of them and orienting them would be very helpful. I won't miss having first-years Sorted into Gryffindor House. Moving the Sorting to the second year makes sense to me."

"I think that it is a fine, logical plan," Filius said. "I have some reservations about how the details will be worked out, and I think that many students who have been looking forward to the Sorting for most of their young lives will be disappointed, but I am in favour of it. At least in theory."

Minerva looked at Severus.

"You have my support, Headmistress," Severus said. "Basing the continued Sorting of first-year students into Houses simply upon tradition is not rational if there is an alternative that would benefit both Hogwarts and the individual students. I believe that as the year proceeds, students will find themselves drawn to a particular House, perhaps not always the one they had first thought they should be in, and the Sorting Hat will sense that and take it into account." He thought that if he had been Sorted in his second year, he might have been put into Ravenclaw, and perhaps he would have made different kinds of friends. Correction: perhaps he would have made real friends. He would even have come to know Gareth sooner, he was sure.

"Thank you all for your candid views," Minerva said. "Pomona, if there is anything that could be added to the proposal to make it more comfortable for you, please let me know. I am sure this was a surprise for you."

Pomona nodded. "I will think about it." She looked down at the diagram of the hypothetical first-year dormitory with its cozy common room, its open areas, and its quiet revisions hall. "Maybe after sleeping on it, I will have some ideas, and perhaps I will get over my shock."

"As you know, I plan to present this to the rest of the staff tomorrow. I don't plan to take a vote on it, but I do hope for their general support, at least from a majority."

"This will require the approval of the Board of Governors, though, won't it?" Pomona asked. "I know you have some latitude, but this . . ."

"Yes, it will. The next meeting of the Board of Governors is two weeks from today. I hope to have the plan polished and ready to submit by then, so if any of you have suggestions on how to make the proposal its most appealing, let me know. Severus, you will be attending that meeting, I presume?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Severus said. "And I will offer my support, naturally, but I will make sure that they understand that I am genuinely in favour of the idea and not merely agreeing because I am your Deputy."

"Thank you," Minerva said. "Well, if there isn't anything else?" She looked around.

"Are plans all set for the students' departure tomorrow?" Pomona asked. "Is there anything more that I can help with?"

"They will all take Thestral-drawn carriages to the station, as usual," Severus said. "Hagrid, Rath, Dumbledore, and I will accompany them, as well as two Aurors. The Mannings will also be going and will take the Hogwarts Express with the students. There will be several Aurors on board the train, as well, and several waiting at King's Cross. We have no reason to believe that the train would be attacked, and I doubt that students, at least younger ones, would be targets of the vigilantes; nonetheless, it seemed better to act out of an excess of caution than later to regret half-measures."

"Good, that is reassuring," Pomona said. "Would you like me to ride down to the station with you all?"

"If you wish," Severus replied. "It would not hurt, certainly."

"I will, then."

Minerva looked around. "Well, then, let us adjourn. I will see you all in the morning."

Severus left with Pomona and Sharon, riding down the spiral staircase. Flitwick had used the Floo again, presumably to avoid having to walk up five long flights of stairs to his quarters.

"You're really in favour of this, Severus?" Pomona asked.

Severus nodded. "When the Headmistress first told me about it, I found it . . . unsettling. However, after having time to consider the idea, it seems beneficial to the students and the school."

"And the Houses? You don't think it will weaken the Houses?" Pomona asked.

"I think it has the potential to improve relationships among those of different Houses and for students to develop an understanding of the Houses that is less tainted by the prejudices of those in their own House. But I see that as a benefit. I don't believe that any House will be weakened. The Sorting will still be performed by the Sorting Hat, after all."

"How many first-years will there be next year?" Sharon asked.

"If all the children respond to their invitations and there are no foreign students admitted, there will be fifty-one. We generally don't have more than one foreign student a decade...at least not in the last fifty years...so I don't think that will be a factor. Of the children who receive letters, three are unlikely to attend, however, as they are from families with a tradition of educating their children at home or in some other manner, according to the Headmistress. That would give us forty-eight eleven-year-olds...if they all take their places."

"That is a large number," Pomona said.

"I looked at the book for the year two-thousand, as well, and the numbers are similar," Severus said. "However, typically there are at least a few Muggle-borns whose families decline to send them to a wizarding school. It is likely that there will be only forty-three or forty-four entering in the autumn."

"Still, that is more than we have had for many years...since before you were in school, in fact, Severus," Pomona said.

"There were only thirty-eight in my class," Sharon said. "I entered in nineteen eighty-two."

"There have typically been between thirty-nine and forty-one students Sorted each year for the past twenty-five years," Severus said, "with the least being Sorted in nineteen ninety-seven, when only thirty-six students chose to attend. As you are aware, several half-blood students declined their places last year."

"But most of them started this school year, instead," Pomona said.

"Indeed."

"Isn't the term 'half-blood' offensive?" Sharon asked.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps, depending on who was saying it, how they said it, who they said it to, and in what context. I am half-blood. I will not use some unwieldy circumlocution in order to appease hypersensitive critics."

"But using the term 'half-blood' implies that the pureblood ideology has merit," Sharon said.

Severus snorted. "Hardly. It only indicates that a wizard has one Muggle or Muggle-born parent. As for 'pureblood,' there's hardly such a thing, really, just varying degrees of removal from a Muggle ancestor."

Sharon shrugged.

"It really only matters if someone thinks there's something wrong with having a Muggle or Muggle-born parent," Pomona said, "and I think that having Muggles in the family can actually be an advantage, especially these days."

"You see, Carter, it is a matter of perspective. The terms 'half-blood' and 'Muggle-born' could actually be seen as denigrating to those who are not so advantaged to have a Muggle or Muggle-born parent," Severus said.

She laughed. "I suppose you're right. I guess it's just a matter of learning to appreciate the different things that different people can bring to the community, including people without Muggles and Muggle-borns in their backgrounds. I suppose that it could become pretty samey and boring if we all came from the same sorts of families." She stopped at the stairs. "Good night. I'll see you both tomorrow...Severus, do you want me to come with the Thestral carriages, too?"

Severus shook his head. "I believe we now have more than sufficient numbers. Thank you, however, for your offer. Perhaps you might be able to accompany the students on the return trip to the castle after the holiday."

"Sure thing! Just let me know the details," Sharon said.

"Good night, Sharon," Pomona said.

As Severus and Pomona walked down the stairs to the ground floor, Pomona was quiet. When they reached the hallway where their ways were to part, she said, "If you are in favour of Minerva's plan, then I shall give her my public support tomorrow. I still have my reservations, but they are, perhaps, more out of sentimentality than reason. I appreciate your giving me your thoughts on the matter."

"Of course," Severus said. "Good night, Professor Sprout."

"Good night."

Pomona headed toward her suite in Hufflepuff, and Severus continued down to the Slytherin dungeons. As he entered his quarters, he smiled to himself. When he woke up in the morning, it would be only a few hours until his special date with Poppy. Good reason to get to bed early that night, so the morning might come swifter.

Author's Note: The next chapter, "Promising Start to a Holiday," which features Severus and Poppy's private time incommunicado, will be up within the next couple weeks, but I'm having a bit of a holiday myself, and will be on vacation for about ten days. If you don't see a chapter up during that time, don't panic!

A new chapter of [Draco's Heart](#) is up, however, so you can amuse yourself with that for a bit. Chronologically, this story opens after the Easter holiday, but at this point, there are no spoilers for coming chapters of *A Long Vernal Season*, although there is some crossover that you will recognize.

Thanks for reading! And I do love reviews, so thank you to those who are reviewing!

Chapter Ninety-Two: Promising Start to a Holiday

Chapter 93 of 118

1 April 1999. Severus and Poppy's holiday begins well.



Chapter Ninety-Two: Promising Start to a Holiday

Thursday, 1 April 1999

"And you actually met this woman last summer?" Minerva asked, taking a bite of her buttered toast.

"Yes. She struck me at the time as an unusual person. I suppose I even liked her, in a way," Severus said grudgingly. "But that is beside the point. She is Sefton's godmother, Sefton spends time living with her every summer, and they are close. I think that she might provide Suzie with some support as she grows up, but that would be difficult if she can't know that her great-niece is a witch."

Minerva nodded. "I don't think there's a problem with Miss Sefton telling her great-aunt. I think I should give her one of those Ministry brochures about dealing with Muggles."

Severus snorted. "Those are useless, and I'm sure that Suzie's active little brain would find a thousand questions to ask me about it if you were to give one to her. I've already given her the basic talk, but I'll schedule an appointment with her when she gets back. The important thing she and her parents must impress upon Ms Pengaree is that she cannot tell any other relatives or friends about the magic world. I don't believe that will be a problem. The woman didn't seem to be a fool."

Minerva nodded. "Very well. We can speak to Miss Sefton before she gets in the carriage this morning."

Severus nodded. "By the way, if you would care to prepare a contract for me over the holiday, this might be a good time to do it. I thought simply the same one I signed in August, but with the dates changed."

Minerva turned and smiled at him. "I have been wondering about that! I'm glad you decided to stay on. Should we change it to a five-year contract? Or ten?"

Severus's eyebrows came together and his brow furrowed. He shook his head. "No. I still have made no long-term plans."

Minerva nodded, still smiling. "That's fine. I'll have it ready for you tomorrow, then. Are you free this afternoon, though? I have something I'd like you to do for me, perhaps after lunch..."

"No. I have plans for the afternoon."

"Teatime?"

Severus shook his head. "After dinner, perhaps."

"Oh. Oh!" Minerva reflexively looked down the table toward Poppy, but then picked up her teacup. "I see. That's fine. I suppose this is the first day of holiday, after all, once the staff meeting has adjourned."

"That is the idea," Severus said drily. "So shall I come up to your office after dinner?"

Minerva shook her head. "No, that would be too late, I believe."

"Tomorrow..."

"I think Tuesday. I'll let you know," Minerva said.

"Tuesday?"

"It is the Easter holiday, as you point out," Minerva replied. "And there's someone I'd like you to talk to . . . we'll see."

"Oh, no, not that Healer Glyndwr," Severus said with a groan. "Poppy's already spoken to me about it..."

"No, but I think that's a splendid idea."

"No, it isn't . . . but I'll participate in the activities with the rest of the staff during training. I could hardly not, considering I helped to design the programme." Severus sighed.

"I'm actually looking forward to it," Minerva said. "I think it will be good for all of us."

"As long as we don't have to reveal too much," Severus said softly. "Some things are best left . . . private."

Minerva nodded. "I understand. I feel the same way, myself. But," she replied quietly, "you could talk to me or to Albus about them. Or to Poppy."

Severus twitched a shoulder. "I suppose." He saw Suzie stand and get ready to leave breakfast. "Let us speak with Miss Sefton now...unless you are not finished eating."

"No, I've had too much already. I do enjoy kippers for breakfast. I wish the elves made them more frequently."

"You *are* the Headmistress, you know," Severus said, standing. "They'd serve us all rice gruel every morning if that's what you asked for."

Minerva laughed. "I never think of it except when they're served, and then I forget again. More pressing matters on my mind than fish, I suppose!"

They caught up with Suzie in the entry hall.

"Miss Sefton, I understand that you have a great-aunt of whom you are exceptionally fond," Minerva said.

Suzie blinked, then looked up at her Head of House. She looked back over at the Headmistress and nodded. "Aunt Sadie."

"Professor Snape said that he has cautioned you about what you may and may not reveal."

"Yes, Headmistress."

"I will add your great-aunt's name to the list of those in your immediate family, then," Minerva said briskly.

Suzie looked over at Severus questioningly.

"You and your parents may speak with your great-aunt over the holiday, if you wish, and tell her about Hogwarts," Severus said.

Suzie grinned. "Great! Can I show her my Potions textbook?"

Minerva smiled and the corner of Severus's mouth twitched up.

"Yes, Miss Sefton," Severus said. "You may show her any of your textbooks."

"Wow . . . totally cool! Dad's bringing me to Diagon Alley next week to get me an owl; can Aunt Sadie come with us?"

Severus nodded once. "If she wishes to accompany you, yes."

"I wish I could show her how my wand works," Suzie said with a sigh.

"Whilst you are in Diagon Alley," Minerva said, "stop by Ollivander's. You may use your wand there and demonstrate it to your aunt. Do not overtax Mr Ollivander's time and patience, however, and if he has customers, he will not have time for you."

"I love Mr Ollivander! Both Mr Ollivanders!" Suzie said excitedly. "They didn't even get mad when I made a hole through the ceiling and all the way up through the roof!"

"A hole in the roof?" Minerva asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Yeah. I accidentally sent an ebony wand flying straight up through the ceiling and it just kept going! Mr Ollivander, younger Mr Ollivander, had never seen anything like it before. He thought they'd find the wand, though. I wonder if he ever did. I'll have to ask him!"

"Enjoy your holiday, Miss Sefton," Severus said. "And . . . give your great-aunt my regards."

Suzie grinned. "I will!"

"Run along, now," Minerva said. "You do not wish to miss the carriages! Thirty minutes, Miss Sefton!"

At quarter past eleven, after what felt like a very long staff meeting, Severus hurried down to his quarters to change. He quickly stripped, put on fresh black Y-fronts, and found his long, lightweight silk robe. Black, as all of his robes were, it had silvery grey piping at the collar, which stood up in a band around his neck; the slightly heavier black over-robe that went with it had black braid down the front.

He'd only worn this set of robes a few times since he'd bought them a decade before. Severus never felt fully dressed when wearing only robes and no trousers, although as a student, he had spent the first several years at Hogwarts wearing robes almost exclusively every day. Sixth year, however, he had begun his practice of wearing trousers, shirt, and jacket under his school robe, and even after he left Hogwarts, that had not changed. He had even added a layer, beginning to wear waistcoats regularly, and he often had five layers of clothing on...vest, shirt, waistcoat, jacket, and teaching robe...six if he wore a cloak or overcoat.

Poppy had mentioned once that she liked a man in robes, and Gareth had also said something about the comparative ease of access of robes compared with trousers. As this was also something of a special date, Severus thought that dressing up for the occasion was warranted. He examined himself in the mirror above his dresser. Not bad, actually, he thought. And the over-robe did have a very nice swirl to it when he moved. It fit closely around the torso, but the back had a long pleat from the waist, and it billowed out behind him quite satisfyingly when he walked.

In the bathroom, Severus combed his hair, thought again about Gareth's suggestion that he update the style, then he felt his jaw. Still smooth from his morning shave. He opened the cupboard in the bathroom and hunted around until he found a dark maroon potions bottle with a glass stopper. He put some of the thin potion on his left hand and applied it to his face. It had a slight, pleasantly spicy smell, but it would slow his beard growth and keep his skin feeling freshly shaved for several hours, which was why he was using it. He probably wouldn't even have to shave the next morning.

Severus stepped back into his bedroom and went over to his bedside stand. Opening its drawer, he took out his double-snake ring and put it on. He was about to close the drawer again when he saw the cases with his Orders of Merlin medals in them. He withdrew the larger, royal purple case and snapped it open.

Theurgus Absque Pari. Mage without peer. He shook his head slightly as one finger felt the raised surface of the platinum medal, tracing the image of the great stone throne on its hill, the rays of the setting sun behind it. To safeguard the wizarding world, to protect Muggles from wizarding domination, Merlin's own destiny in life . . . that had been his task for so long, working against Voldemort to protect the wizarding world...and, by extension, the Muggle world. Now Severus did not want to think of the things he had had to do in order to carry out his task. Protecting the wizarding world and defeating Voldemort had not come without cost. At least his contributions had been recognised and valued.

Severus flipped the medal over in its case and looked again at the golden apples on their bough . . . the isle of Avalon, Apple Island, the island that Gareth said he had seen once, and which had once tempted Gertrude. Severus turned the medal back over, closed the case, and put it back into the drawer. Poppy was waiting for him, and that was more than reward enough for Severus on that morning.

Poppy turned the vase slightly. She smiled, admiring the two dozen red tulips that had arrived in her suite that morning just as she was about to leave for breakfast. Perlie had popped in with them and said they'd just been delivered.

The card had only said, *To Poppy Pomfrey, from S.S.S.*, but the flowers themselves spoke volumes. She had double-checked the little card with the list of flower meanings, and there it was: *Red Tulips, Declaration of Love*. She was certain that he had chosen them precisely for their meaning, just as he had the other flowers he had given her. Just in case he hadn't, though, she wouldn't mention anything about them but to express appreciation for their beauty. She felt herself grow warm, though, at the thought that he might have meant it, that these flowers were a declaration of love. Touching one of the petals and admiring the dark, velvety-looking stamens, Poppy nodded to herself. She would accept his declaration in flowers, and she would accept it in words, if he said them. If he ever said them . . . said them again, and not just in a rush of passion . . . though she would not object to them then, either. She smiled to herself and adjusted a bloom.

She had brought the flowers up to the Ravenclaw guest suite with her after breakfast. She had spread a pale blue tablecloth on the table, then put the flowers right in the centre. The deep red flowers, dark green leaves, and cobalt blue vase looked pretty against the paler blue tablecloth, Poppy thought.

From the high windows of the Ravenclaw suite, she had watched the children clamber onto the Thestral-drawn carriages, Severus overseeing them like a stern father, and Albus looking on, a somewhat bemused and slightly distracted expression on his face. Pomona had shooed stray children like chickens, until finally, all were aboard. After the staff had all climbed into the carriages...Severus last after he had checked each carriage...Poppy had turned away from the window and finished preparing the room for their afternoon date before she left for the staff meeting.

The staff meeting, though not really long, had felt perpetual, and she was relieved when finally Minerva had pushed back from the table, wished everyone a good holiday, and adjourned the meeting. Poppy had rushed up to the Ravenclaw suite to make sure that everything was perfect and to quickly change out of her plain grey robes and white pinny and put on the lilac-coloured robes that Severus seemed to like. She had already ordered lunch from the kitchen elves, and Strilpa would deliver it discreetly at one o'clock, popping it into the room without being seen herself. Now it was just a matter of double-checking the details and waiting for Severus. When she'd left the staff room, Severus was bent over the staff table, examining the proposal with Verity.

It hadn't surprised her that there were a few objections to Minerva's proposal, and more expressions of complete shock, but *it had* surprised her to hear Pomona say that she was in support of the proposal as long as there were a trial period after which they could return to the current scheme if the innovation was worse than the traditional Sorting. Poppy had been certain that if any Head of House opposed it, it would be Pomona. She was very attached to her Hufflepuffs and loved having the new first-years every year. Poppy had believed that to Pomona, the thought of there being un-Sorted students walking around Hogwarts would be as distressing as seeing abandoned orphaned babies wandering lost in the Forbidden Forest.

Verity had some logical objections, and Cahill had waffled on about history, tradition, and imbuing values in the next generation whilst they were young and receptive. A tear had dribbled down Hagrid's cheek as Cahill described the hundreds of years of entering students all in a line, Sorted into their respective Houses in venerable tradition, but the half-giant hadn't voiced any objections.

Poppy thought that the only people in the room who had heard the proposal before were Albus, Severus and the other Heads of House, and herself...Minerva had talked to

her about it over Christmas when it was just a nascent idea, a little notion niggling at the back of her mind, just the thought that the words, "we might sort too young," might actually be more than a wistful speculation, but a truth that deserved some action. Poppy thought that their discussion that night in her suite in the Hospital Wing had been when that niggling idea had begun to grow into a plan.

Albus had said little, only being generally supportive of the plan and making some positive comments about individual components of it. He said just enough for people to recognise that he was in favour of the plan without them thinking that it was his idea. Poppy believed that he had more reservations about it than he voiced, despite agreeing with the general principle that the Sorting might be better made when the students were older.

The newer...and younger...staff members seemed most flexible and willing to give the plan their support if Minerva presented it to the Governors and they approved it, and none of them had objections strong enough that they opposed it. Cahill had continued to huff on about venerable traditions even as he left the room, but no one seemed to pay him any attention, and most people seemed pleased to be beginning the holiday even before noon.

After the meeting, Poppy had stopped to speak to no one, although Pomona had looked at her as though she was thinking of snagging her for a chat, and she had rushed to beat her out the door. But now that she had made sure that everything was right, including the large, fluffy towels in the bathroom and masses of extra pillows on the bed, and she had changed into her pretty lilac-coloured robes, Poppy was at a loss for what to do. It seemed silly to just sit on the sofa doing nothing but wait for Severus, but she had brought no work with her.

She went into the bedroom and looked in the small bookcase there, which held books intended to entertain the guests...or help put them to sleep, she thought, looking at a few of the titles. Poppy plucked a copy of *Halloween at Hogwarts* from the lower shelf and brought it back out to the small sitting room. She leafed through it, smiling at the photos. Just as she came across one of Severus dancing with her, she heard a click at the door as a password was accepted. She looked up and smiled happily at Severus.

"Wonderful timing, Sev," she said, standing and crossing over to him. "Mmm, my, and don't you look . . . wonderful." She gave him a hug and a kiss, then she pulled back, holding him at arm's length and looking him up and down. "You look luscious. Absolutely delicious."

"Luscious? Will you feast on me, then, and forego your lunch?" Severus asked with a dark smile. "I may have no objections to that, myself." He leaned forward and pulled her towards him, and gave her a hard kiss, tasting her tongue with the tip of his. "Mmm, or I . . . may . . . feast . . . on . . . you," he said, kissing her repeatedly.

As his hands roamed her body, Poppy wished that he were closer, that his hands were touching her bare skin, that she were pressed naked against him. She embraced him more strongly, massaging his buttocks through his robes. When he moaned into her mouth, she smiled inwardly. They really did have some time before lunch. An hour, at least.

She began to work at the clasps of his over-robe with one hand as she continued massage his buttocks with the other, and stepped forward, forcing Severus back and steering him toward the bedroom.

"Mmm . . . where are you taking me, woman?" Severus asked, stopping and becoming an immovable object.

"We have some time, we're alone . . . I'd like to get you out of these robes, as delicious as you look in them."

"So you can eat me alive?" Severus growled. "I think not./ shall feast on *you*, Madam Pomfrey. I promised you those orgasmic kisses, and I intend to give *and* to receive."

Poppy gasped as he gripped her tightly and kissed her throat, sucking on it and biting gently.

"Mmm, you do taste good, Poppy." His lips moved to the other side of her throat, where he repeated his gentle nip before kissing and licking his way up to her earlobe.

Poppy didn't resist when Severus pushed her toward the bedroom and then pulled her down onto the bed with him. He made quick work of her hooks and buttons, continuing to kiss and caress her as he undressed her. He toed off his own short boots, using a whispered charm to encourage them off, then he climbed all the way onto the bed with Poppy, his hands kneading her buttocks and legs as his mouth found her breasts and began to tease her nipples with his tongue, going back and forth between her breasts, licking, tickling, and sucking.

Poppy's fingers carded through Severus's hair, and one hand moved to his shoulder and down his back, stroking and massaging him through his robes, frustrated in her attempts to reach the front of the robes and finish unfastening them. She could feel his heavy erection pressed against her leg.

"Gods, Severus! Aren't you going to take these robes off?"

Severus shook his head as he teased a nipple with the tip of his tongue. One of his hands moved up from her thigh to her centre, and she opened her legs to him. "Mmm, not yet. Oh, you are wet there!" He looked up at her face and grinned wickedly. "Time for my appetiser!"

Severus pushed up and kissed Poppy's lips, the sensual, slow kisses that she had so appreciated a few nights before, the tip of his tongue only occasionally brushing hers. His hand continued to stroke and rub her, and when she moved against his hand, raising and lowering her hips, he began to kiss his way down her body, pausing to kiss her belly between her navel and his destination several times. She shivered and moaned, and he smiled and looked up at her.

"You are quite wanton this morning, aren't you? Did you spend the entire staff meeting thinking about this?"

"Not at all," Poppy protested. "I admit that my mind did occasionally stray, particularly when Cahill was droning on and on about 'venerable traditions' and 'our most esteemed Founders,' but I did attempt to maintain my attention otherwise. Of course, you weren't so deliciously dressed at the time. And I wasn't sitting close enough to you to notice how good you smell today. Otherwise, I might not have restrained myself at all."

"Mm, very good, then, that we were seated apart...and that I waited to put on these robes. I also splashed a bit of shaving potion on my face before I came up. You like it?" He'd always thought that scented shaving potions were a bit poncy, but if Poppy liked it, he might use it occasionally.

"Yes, I do. That's a nice one. It isn't too strong, and it's very masculine." She stroked his cheek and jaw.

Severus caught one of her fingers in his mouth and sucked it as he began to stroke her clitoris again. Her moan encouraged him, and he stroked harder before releasing her finger. Poppy raised her hips to meet him as his head moved between her legs. Despite the heavy stimulation he had been giving her, she still gasped as his tongue touched her clit.

"Oh, gods, Sev, that's . . . that's . . . oh, yes . . ." She didn't restrain her gasps and moans as his lips and tongue began their erotic kisses. It even excited her to see his dark head there, moving as he licked, pressed, sucked, and kissed her most private areas.

His tongue flicked faster and harder as Poppy's gasps grew louder. Finally, the pressure mounted, and Poppy let out a shout as she came, wriggling and rocking against him, Severus continuing to lick until she gasped and collapsed back onto the bed. He discreetly wiped his face, then he kissed his way back up her body until he reached her lips.

He looked down at her flushed face and grinned. "So, did that satisfy my wanton, hungry witch?"

"Mmhm," Poppy murmured, stretching then putting her arms around him. "For now . . . but I do want to get you out of these robes, as heavenly as you look in them . . . and feel, too," she added as her hand found his erection and stroked it once through his robes, then pressed her palm against him.

Severus used a free hand to grab some pillows and put them behind him. "Were you planning a massive pillow fight?" he asked as one of the pillows tumbled off the bed.

"No, I just thought that there might be some rather enjoyable ways of getting comfortable with them," Poppy said with a smile. "So, the robes are staying on?"

"Only for now. You don't want to exhaust me too early, woman!"

"Haha! I think that would be impossible with you," Poppy replied. "But it is lovely that we have the whole afternoon stretching out in front of us."

Severus nodded. "Minerva wanted to meet with me this afternoon. I told her to go swim with the Squid...not literally, of course."

"I told her that I was going to be incommunicado this afternoon unless there was an emergency," Poppy replied, "but I didn't mention you."

"That's all right. Couldn't have been anything important. She put it off till Tuesday. I mentioned to Flitwick that we were using the suite today, and he just asked if we needed anything. I told him I thought you had it all in hand."

"Mmm . . . *this* is what I'd like to have in my hand at the moment, though," Poppy said, her hand slipping beneath the partially open over-robe to caress his penis through the thinner under-robe. "You're wearing pants under this, aren't you?"

Severus nodded. "But only underpants. No trousers."

"And this robe doesn't button all the way down," she observed.

"No. Just to the waist." There was a hidden Charmed slit in an appropriate spot, but he thought he would keep that fact to himself for the time being.

Poppy's hand groped upward and found the bottom button of his under-robe. She started to unbutton it, but Severus took her hand.

"Ah-ah! Not yet!" He took her hand and moved it back to his penis. "I am finding this rather erotic, having you naked next to me whilst I'm fully clothed." He kissed her forehead softly as her fingers stroked him.

"There is something stimulating about it," Poppy said. "Sometime, we must do it the other way 'round."

"Mmm. I might like that, too." He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of Poppy's fingers massaging his cock. "You are quite a cock-tease, Madam Pomfrey. In this case, that is a *very* good thing."

Poppy began to kiss him, his lips feeling warm, sensual, and responsive. His hands took pleasure in caressing her breasts and arse as Poppy continued kissing and caressing him, stroking him increasingly vigorously, until he finally took her hand in his and held it to his chest.

"If you continue, these robes will need a cleaning charm," he said hoarsely. He lay back against his pillows, his eyes closed.

Poppy propped herself up on one elbow and smiled down into his face. She gently caressed his jaw. "I wouldn't mind, but I can think of other things that might be more satisfying for you, if you will ever take your robes off."

Severus cracked one eyelid open. "Don't worry. I plan to ravish you mightily after lunch, and to do that will require our complete nudity."

"I like that. But I might like to do some ravishing of my own, you know."

He quirked a sideways grin. "To be ravished by Poppy Pomfrey in the afternoon, that is something I cannot resist...unless you'd like me to." His grin widened.

"I might not mind a little resistance as long as I prevail in the end," Poppy said with an answering grin.

"The other night, Tuesday, I think, I had a nice little dream about you," Severus said.

"Really? What was it?"

"I don't remember all the details or how it started, but I was in the infirmary, and you were going to examine me for some reason I don't remember, and instead of just examining me, you undressed, climbed up on top of me, and we had sex right there in the infirmary. I woke up with a massive hard-on."

Poppy laughed. "Did you take care of it?"

"I am not saying, but it was difficult to get it out of my mind when I went in to teach the dunderheads."

"That could be exciting, sex in the infirmary," Poppy said. "A bit dangerous, of course. People do come in, and even with the ward charm activated, staff sometimes let themselves in to fetch a potion or something when I'm not there. We could be caught."

"Even more titillating," Severus said with a smirk. "But I'm sure we could take a few precautions to make that unlikely. Use one of the little private rooms, place a ward on that door . . . but not too strong."

"I think we might be able to arrange that . . . perhaps this holiday. Before the rest of the staff returns for the training."

"I wouldn't mind that," Severus said, a glint in his eye. "Have you ever done it in the infirmary before?" He assumed that she had, given the number of years she'd been at Hogwarts, but Poppy shook her head. "Never?" he asked, astonished.

"The closest I've come to having sex in the infirmary is when you were with me in my office that time. I suppose, come to think of it, that we were having sex, in a way. I was, anyway." She grinned. "You were *very* naughty, Severus! And really wonderful...very sexy, but also very sweet and thoughtful. It's one of the things that . . . well, that I liked about that time."

"You were going to say something else."

Poppy shrugged and settled against him again. "Was I? It was very memorable. In fact, each time we made love was wonderful. Very bonding."

Severus smirked. "Speaking of bonding . . . the time in the staff room was special for me."

Poppy smirked in return. "I'm glad to hear that, Sev." She wasn't going to let on yet, but she had a bit of a surprise planned for him for later, if he was interested in a similar experience.

"When is lunch?" Severus asked as his stomach gurgled.

"One. I could call for it earlier."

"No, it's almost one already."

"I really like the flowers, by the way," Poppy said, thinking of the table. "They are beautiful. It was a wonderful way to start my day."

Severus kissed her. "I'm glad. I had hoped you would like them." He kissed her again.

"You know, as titillating as you might find it to watch me eat lunch in the nude whilst you're still fully clothed, I think I'd be more comfortable with something on," Poppy said, sitting up slightly.

"Very well." Severus ran an appreciative eye down her body, then followed it with a long caress. "If you must, you must. But you are beautiful like this, you know. Beautiful and sexy."

Poppy leaned forward and kissed him. She hoped he always found her so, but she felt a sudden sense of insecurity. He was so much younger than she, and although she believed what he said now, she feared that as she aged, he would find her less and less attractive. She put an arm around him and rested against him, snuggling up closer as he put his arms all the way around her. She loved him, and she wanted him, and she wanted him to want her and to love her.

Author's Note: I've been away for a while, and also RL has interfered with my ability to write, so I apologize for the delay in updating. I have, however, been updating [Draco's Heart](#) regularly, and have posted through chapter seven. (That story has an almost completed first draft, so I was able to polish up a few chapters for posting over the last couple weeks.)

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. We get more of Poppy and Severus's date in the next one!

Chapter Ninety-Three: Whetting the Appetite

Chapter 94 of 118

Poppy whets Severus's appetite and counsels patience.



Chapter Ninety-Three: Whetting the Appetite

Thursday, 1 April 1999

Severus pushed his bowl away.

"I thought you would scrape the finish from the china," Poppy teased as he let out a contented sigh.

"The rhubarb compote was the best part of the meal," Severus said, eying her and appreciating the way her patterned pale blue, mauve, and lavender silk dressing gown fell open as she leaned forward to reach for her coffee cup.

Poppy grinned. "I'd noticed you enjoy rhubarb. It's one of Minerva's favourites, too, so there's always an abundance of rhubarb at Hogwarts."

Poppy had designed the meal to be light, but energizing. She wanted to spend the afternoon in bed with Severus, but not sleeping because of a heavy meal. A little nap might be nice, though. Severus seemed to enjoy cuddling, even if he didn't like to admit it. Probably too little of it in his life to that point, Poppy thought. Her heart ached, thinking of the isolation and loneliness he had endured for so long.

"Before you arrived, I was looking at *Halloween at Hogwarts*," Poppy said. She picked up a final strawberry and sucked the tip of the sweet fruit as she bit it off. It was one of Hagrid's super-sized strawberries, at least three times the size of a normal large strawberry, and juicier, too. She licked strawberry juice from her chin before taking another bite.

Severus watched, thinking what that tongue could be doing to him. Distracted by thoughts of Poppy nibbling at him, he asked, "Were you?"

"Mhm." Poppy nodded as she ate the last of the strawberry and discarded the stem end. "There are a number of very good pictures of you in it, you know."

"Hmph. Good because I did not look like myself, I am sure," Severus said, thinking of the costume and the Glamour.

Poppy shook her head. "You were not so changed. You were looking quite especially attractive that night, though. I thought so at the time. I'm sure many of the witches did."

"And the thought probably horrified most of them," Severus said with a smirk, "if what you say is true."

Poppy laughed. "Perhaps, perhaps not." She stood and stepped toward the small couch. "Come, sit with me, Severus. I'd just found one of the two of us dancing."

"I believe there are three of us together, two in which we are dancing," Severus said, placing his napkin beside his plate and coming over to join her on the couch.

It was Poppy's turn to smirk. "So *you have* looked at the book."

Severus shrugged, sitting down beside her. "Hermione gave me a copy for my birthday. I glanced through it then . . . and again a week or two ago," he confessed. At her amused smile, he said, "I was moving it. It fell open."

"I see." Poppy grinned. "I think there's at least one of you dancing with just about every witch on staff...although I couldn't find one of you and Sarah together."

"There are some small blessings in life. Dumbledore danced with her."

"I hope you showed him your appreciation," Poppy said, amused.

"I do not recall."

"When I got my copy for Christmas, I was glad to see the pictures of you, actually," Poppy said.

"You were?"

"Yes. I had worried that you'd had a miserable time, but the photos of you showed that it wasn't completely gruelling for you."

Severus twitched a slight smile. "No. As I told Minerva that evening, I had been to worse parties. But by the end . . . I don't know. I felt tired. Enervated and . . . empty, I suppose. It was actually nice to sit with you quietly at the end and have some of that cake or pie, whatever it was we ate."

"Chocolate cheesecake. One of Pomona's favourites, so Filius made sure they served it."

Severus nodded. It helped explain the Hufflepuff's generous curves if she ate chocolate cheesecake often.

Poppy leafed through the book. "Here you are with Helena. She seems to be having a good time, and I think you may even be smiling." Helena, dressed in her Jane Goodall costume, was laughing as she looked up at Severus, who indeed did appear to have a wry smile on his face.

"It is the Glamour," Severus said.

Poppy laughed. "I don't know about that, Sev. I think most men would be smiling if they had a laughing Helena Benetti in their arms. She is quite stunning, even there in that costume of hers."

Severus shrugged. He never knew what witches expected a man to say when they praised another witch's good looks. If he agreed, he was afraid that Poppy would be jealous or think that he was comparing the two witches, but if he disagreed, it could be seen as cravenly disingenuous.

"I'm glad she'll be staying on next year," Poppy continued.

"Is she?" Severus frowned. "I had not heard that."

"I don't think she's made a formal decision. She'll probably be informing you and Minerva soon, though. A few of us were having a drink last week, and she mentioned it."

"Ah. I told the Headmistress this morning to prepare a new contract for me. For next year." Severus smiled when Poppy squeezed his arm and let out a delighted laugh.

"I'm so glad, Sev! I would have missed you." She embraced him, letting the book fall closed on her lap.

Severus kissed her forehead. "I did not want to leave you. It was that which decided it for me."

Poppy looked up into his face. "I want you to be happy, though."

"I would not have been happy if I had left Hogwarts and left you behind," Severus said, leaning forward and kissing her lips. He hoped that he wouldn't be more miserable at Hogwarts if she broke up with him.

Poppy leaned against him and opened the book again. She smiled. "Hagrid looked well as Little John."

Severus nodded. "It was one of the more appropriate costumes."

Poppy laughed and pointed to a picture of Helena dancing with Hagrid. "She looks positively miniature next to him!"

"Indeed. She is a petite witch."

"But quite beautiful," Poppy said, turning the page, where there was another, larger picture of her, this time, dancing with Caspar Lloyd, who, at about five-eight, did not dwarf her.

Severus wished that Poppy did not keep mentioning Helena's looks. "She is also intelligent and talented," he said, trying to avoid saying anything about the vivacious Seeker's attractiveness.

Poppy nodded. "A terrible pity about Viktor Krum. But I hope she finds another wizard someday."

"That would be good." Severus remembered Helena's invitation to go for a long broomstick ride over the holiday, an invitation she had reminded him of again that morning. He had been noncommittal about it. He knew that she didn't see it as a date, not a romantic one, anyway, but he didn't want Poppy to learn of it and think that the young witch was interested in him...or that he might be encouraging that interest. "She wants to try to find the magical air currents that flow by Hogsmeade and ride them over the holiday. Monday. She invited me to come with her."

"Really? That sounds as though it could be fun. There wouldn't be many owls to avoid then, either, since the Owl Post Office is closed on Easter Monday. Are you going?"

Severus shrugged. "I have not given it much thought."

"Well . . . if you think it would be safe for you...and I don't know why it wouldn't be, since it doesn't sound like the sort of circumstance the vigilante could attack you under...then I think you should go. If you would enjoy it. You should keep busy and enjoy yourself whilst I'm away."

"I kissed her." Severus stopped, mouth open. He had no idea why he'd said that. He hadn't intended to. "That is, I did, but that was all. And she's not, I'm not, that is . . . we weren't . . . it was just a, just a thing that happened. And then was over."

Poppy blinked up at him. "You kissed her? When?"

"A while ago. After you, when you and I, when we weren't seeing each other. But that's all it was. And I didn't want to do it again."

"When you went on that picnic with her?" Poppy asked.

"How did you know...no, no," Severus said, shaking his head. "Before that. The picnic was just a picnic. We're just acquaintances."

"I hope you're more than acquaintances, Severus, if you kissed her," Poppy said. She looked up at him thoughtfully and touched his face, stroking the smooth line of his jaw. "Still, if you want to go on that ride with her, do go. If you want to and you don't feel awkward about it. It's nothing I would enjoy doing, myself, since I don't enjoy riding a broom, and it's nice for you to be able to do things like that with others. So if you want to fly with Helena, you should."

"There's nothing between us. Except we may be friends. She needed someone to talk to that night. She talked about Viktor and the battle."

Poppy nodded.

"Aren't you upset?" Severus asked.

"Well, if you had kissed her this morning, I would be...presuming this was more than a friendly little peck."

Severus reddened, remembering his arousal as he'd kissed Helena, her legs wrapped around him. "I wouldn't have this morning. And wouldn't again at all."

"So, no . . . I'm not upset. I suppose once I'm over whatever it is I am feeling...this surprise or bewilderment...I should feel flattered. She is much younger and more attractive than I am."

"No, she isn't," Severus said with a vehement shake of his head. "That is, she is younger, and maybe there are things about her that are . . . I don't know, wizards do find her attractive, but you are more beautiful to me, more attractive." Severus hesitated only a moment before adding, "And kissing her only made me realise how very much I wished it had been you, how I didn't want to give up on you. That night, I became determined that I would try again with you, the right way this time."

"It wasn't exactly wrong before," Poppy said, "but I do know what you mean."

"I'm sorry, Poppy."

"For what?"

Severus shook his head.

"I don't think you have anything to be sorry for, at least not as far as this goes."

"I shouldn't have said anything."

Poppy shrugged one shoulder. "Well, you didn't *have* to tell me, but it's not as though I'll be telling anyone else, and it's sweet that you thought you needed to say something."

"I didn't want you to think that if I went somewhere with Helena, that it was a date, or that I was, you know, embarking on an affair . . ."

"You told me that you wouldn't have an affair with anyone else whilst we're together, and I believe you. I have never found you to be dishonest, Severus. Never. I trust that in you."

Severus snorted.

"You know what I mean, Sev. You may have lived a double life for a long time, but . . . as far as you could be, you were honest. And you've always been honest with me. I don't believe that you would tell me that if you didn't mean it. And I doubt you would have told me that you had been kissing Helena if you were planning on some kind of affair with her."

"I could have been putting you off your guard," Severus replied. "I have often used the truth to manipulate others to suit my own needs."

Poppy sat back a bit and looked at him carefully. "I don't believe you are doing that now. If I am wrong, if I am being naive . . ." She shook her head. "I won't be the one with the conscience to live with."

"But I could hurt you."

"Oh, indeed, you could, Severus. You could hurt me. But I don't think you will. Or at least, I don't think that you will do it intentionally, or that you would if you could avoid it."

"I hope this didn't hurt you, and that I didn't ruin our afternoon."

"If you want to ruin our afternoon, you'll have to work harder at it than that," Poppy said with a smile and squeezing his leg, "and believe me, I've been looking forward to this far too much to let you have an easy time of it!"

Severus nodded and pulled her slightly closer again. He thought a moment, then asked, "Did I hurt you? You didn't say."

"No, Severus. Now, if you had made mad, passionate love with her that night and then proceeded to tell me every detail of it, that might hurt...or, as I said before, if you had been kissing her recently, since we started seeing each other again, and told me about it. But don't worry," she said, giving him a light kiss on the cheek, "you didn't hurt me. It was a surprise, though, completely out of the blue!"

"It just came out. I was surprised, too," Severus said, attempting to smile. "And I have only ever made mad, passionate love with you, Poppy; you're the only one, and all that I want."

"And you're what I want, Severus."

He kissed her lips, then she leaned against him and closed her eyes. He stroked her back lightly and rested his head on hers. "I love this," she said after a while. "Just being together like this."

"So do I," Severus said. "And we haven't been interrupted once, either. It gives me hope. Probably false hope, but nonetheless, it is a pleasant sensation."

Poppy chuckled. "Do you want to see my favourite picture of you in this book?" she asked. "I'd actually like to see if Filius could get a copy for me, one that I could frame for my rooms."

"Which one?"

Poppy flipped through the pages, occasionally stopping to point out an amusing picture of students or other staff.

"Oh, here's a nice one of you and Minerva dancing together, Sev."

"You want to frame a photograph of me dancing with Minerva?"

Poppy laughed. "No! I just think it's nice. She's laughing, and you have that twinkle you get sometimes when you're tweaking someone."

"I do *not* twinkle," Severus said with an exaggerated shudder.

"Well, you get this, this *gleam* in your eyes, then, like you're being just a little bit naughty, but hoping that the person you're with might appreciate it. Like Minerva is there...do you remember what you were saying to her?"

"No. I only remember depressing her with a mention of the Dark Lord's parties." He looked at the photo again. "We might have been talking about my fallen arches."

"Fallen arches? You don't have fallen arches!"

Severus gave a crooked grin. "I did when Suzie Sefton asked me to dance."

Poppy laughed, then she laughed harder. "Oh, my, Severus, that is just too sweet!"

"It wasn't. It was highly awkward to have an eleven-year-old Spicy Girl ask me to dance. To have any student ask me to dance would have been bad enough, let alone

Suzie."

"No, I mean you, Severus. *You* were very sweet." She reached up and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Fallen arches!" She chuckled again and turned the page. "There's Caspar dancing with Verity. You know, they might make a good couple."

"Do you think so?" Severus asked. "I don't know Lloyd particularly well, and whilst he is no fool, Vector is extremely intellectual, very intelligent. Not the sort I would see with someone like him."

"What sort do you see her with?" Poppy asked curiously.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Someone intelligent, obviously. Maybe a bit more . . . sedentary than Lloyd appears to be."

"By 'sedentary,' do you mean less sexy?"

Severus raised his eyebrows. "I didn't, but I suppose that, too. Do you think Lloyd is sexy?"

"I think most witches do. He's got that energy and athleticism, you know."

"You never said this before."

"It's not something that comes up in conversation."

"You're attracted to him?" Severus asked, a bit of nascent jealousy welling in his chest.

"Oh, mildly so. But only because he's an attractive man, not because I would actually want to do anything with him."

"Oh." Severus thought about that a moment and shrugged. "Still, I wouldn't have thought of him and Vector together."

"Who would you put Verity with? Someone like Cahill?"

"I wouldn't wish Cahill on anyone."

"He's married, you know."

Severus shook his head. "I didn't. Where's his wife?"

"Left him about twenty years ago. After their only child finished her education. She just walked out. Lived with her sister and brother-in-law for a while. I think she has a flat near Diagon Alley now. She's my age. She was in Ravenclaw."

"But they never divorced?"

Poppy shook her head. "I guess that Ezra always holds out hope that she might return to him. Not that he'd have any motivation to agree to a divorce, anyway, since I doubt there's another witch who's looked at him twice since then."

"But after twenty years of separation, surely she could get a divorce whether he agreed or not, couldn't she?" Severus wasn't very familiar with wizarding divorce laws, but he was fairly sure on that point.

"She could, but I suppose she doesn't see any benefit to it. Maybe if she wanted to remarry, then she'd go to the bother, but she told me once that her one experience of marriage was sufficient."

Severus, much as he found Cahill a grand bore, found himself feeling sorry for the man. Forever holding out hope that his wife would return to him someday, when it was apparently clear to everyone else that she wouldn't. It was pathetic.

"Poor sod," Severus said.

"He's always been socially maladroit, and no better one-on-one than he is in groups. It is rather sad, I suppose," Poppy replied. "I certainly doubt that Verity would find him attractive."

"She doesn't," Severus said.

"How do you know?" Poppy asked curiously.

"She told me."

"You discussed Cahill's attractiveness with Verity?" Poppy asked, obviously surprised.

Severus shrugged. "Not exactly. It was at the Christmas party. She said that Minerva had been caught beneath the mistletoe with Cahill, and that was why she didn't believe that Minerva was controlling it...that no witch would willingly kiss Cahill."

Poppy laughed. "It was Minerva's mistletoe, too. I think Minerva was being kind to Ezra."

"No doubt. I did not inform Vector of that, however. It was rather amusing to hear her theories."

"You knew the mistletoe was Minerva's?"

Severus nodded. "She caught me under it first, before the party when we were decorating. I asked her not to use it on me, but then during the party, that seemed more peculiar than being caught under it."

"There I was at the party, rattling on to you about the mistletoe and how it had to be Minerva doing it, and you didn't say a thing!"

"It was Minerva's amusement. You are friends. You would no doubt find out. I didn't tell anyone."

"Hmph. It certainly *was* her amusement."

"No one really seemed to mind. Except I hear that Flitwick was embarrassed when Dumbledore kissed him."

Poppy laughed. "He was...Pomona and Dumbledore moved at just the wrong moment, and there was Filius, stuck under the mistletoe with Albus!"

"You see, it was amusing to you, too. You are laughing."

Poppy snorted and shook her head. "I'm glad there are no photos of that party, that's all I can say."

Severus looked at her and smirked. "It was the kiss with Dumbledore that irked you most, I believe."

"I don't remember," Poppy said.

"What is a little white lie between friends," Severus said with a snort of amusement.

"All right, so it did. But I suppose Minerva had no reason to know it would bother me to have more than a little peck from Albus."

Severus looked at her, a smile growing on his face. "You didn't like it because you *did* like it...*that's* what embarrassed you about it!" He laughed. "I'd wondered why your little skit with Robbie went from canoodling on the couch to ravishing on the floor, complete with that bite mark of yours."

Poppy frowned up at him. "It isn't funny."

"No?"

"No. I just don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine." Severus smirked again.

"I never found Robert Crouch attractive."

"I can understand that."

"Not that he's a troll or anything. He simply never did anything for me. And I disapproved of Minerva seeing him...after all, how was I supposed to know it was really Albus?...but I figured that if she needed him, it wasn't my place to say anything about it."

"I understand. She would not have greeted that well, either. I tried once, and she was vehement that it was none of my business. It almost derailed the thaw in our relationship...or I thought so at the time. Now I know . . . I know that Minerva was playing a role with me then."

"That hurt you, didn't it?" Poppy asked, caressing his cheek.

Severus shrugged. "I suppose. She'd been a friend. And you know how I feel about her. So her coldness . . . I was alone. Yes, it hurt."

"And when you found out that she had been exaggerating her antipathy toward you, that must have hurt, too."

"Oddly, no. It was a relief, actually. And when she told me that, I fully expected to die. I was in no mental or emotional state to feel hurt by it then. I was more grateful for her friendship at that point, I suppose. Finding out that Robbie was Dumbledore, though, that was a shock."

"I remember. It was for me, too."

"But it must have explained why you enjoyed kissing him on the couch," Severus said with a smirk, trying to lighten the mood.

Poppy chuckled. "I suppose, though I'd never thought about kissing Albus like that, either. For obvious reasons."

"A good kisser, is he?" Severus asked.

"Why don't you have Minerva catch the two of you under the mistletoe next Christmas, and then you can tell me," Poppy said with a smirk. "I'm sure a little snogging between the two of you could be the highlight of the party!"

Severus made a face. "No, thank you! I'll simply take it on faith that he's more than adequate."

Poppy laughed. "Kiss me, Sev, now, and put thoughts of kissing Albus out of your mind...and mine!"

Severus obliged. As he kissed her, his hand wandered beneath her dressing gown and found her breast. He massaged it, then began to play with her nipple, flicking his thumb over it and rolling it between his fingertips.

"Mmmm. That's . . ." Poppy's words were cut off by another kiss, but she broke away and took hold of Severus's playful hand. "That's wonderful, and I don't even remember what we were discussing before, but we're saving that for later."

"Our interruption is overdue, though," Severus said. "Later might be too late."

Poppy shook her head. "I have greater faith than you that we won't be interrupted this afternoon. Everyone's busy with their own plans today, there are almost no students remaining in the castle, and Minerva knows not to bother us, as does Filius. They'll make sure we're undisturbed, I think."

"I suppose I will trust your instinct on this," Severus said, "but I'd rather not wait, anyway."

Poppy laughed. "You won't be waiting long! But I get to play with you this afternoon, remember. It was your turn before, and now it's mine. And a little . *frustration* can go a long way in whetting the appetite, I find!"

"You have a sadistic streak, Poppy," Severus grumped, pretending to pout.

"Oh, no, not sadistic. Merely teasing. But you will find out exactly what sort of streak *do* have! I think you'll find it worth waiting for, Sev."

"And you're sure your middle name isn't 'Patience'?" Severus asked. "You do seem to appreciate that quality."

Poppy laughed. "I already told you it's not, so that guess doesn't count. You want another?"

"Poppy Prudence Pomfrey?"

Poppy made a perplexed expression and shook her head. "No, not Prudence."

"Do you have a guess for me, or have you given up yet?"

"Not at all. Severus Sebastian Snape."

"Neither of us is doing well," Severus said.

"So, not Sebastian."

"Not Sebastian, Poppy Peony Pomfrey."

Poppy laughed. "No, not Peony."

"Poppy Piety Pomfrey?"

"No fair, you took an extra turn!"

"All right, you guess again," Severus said, now hopeful that he was finally right, and certain that Poppy wouldn't guess his own middle name.

"Severus . . . let me think . . . Severus Spurius Snape."

"No! That's an terrible guess," Severus said. "What kind of awful name is 'Spurius'?"

"You keep trying to peg me with these pious-sounding names," Poppy pointed out.

"Peg!" Severus said.

"If that's a guess, it doesn't count, because you already guessed Piety, which is incorrect, so it's my turn. And I guess . . . Solomon."

"No, not Solomon," Severus said. "Peg?"

"No. I'm surprised you haven't guessed it already, to be honest," Poppy said.

"I haven't given up."

"Here, I wanted to find that picture of you that I like so well," Poppy said, putting the name game aside for the moment.

Severus nodded, but, his arm around her, he began to gently caress Poppy's side through the thin silk dressing gown. Poppy didn't object, but opened the book, which had fallen shut, and began to rapidly page through the photos.

"Here. Here's the picture, Severus...the one I'd like a copy of," Poppy said, pointing to a large photograph of the two of them dancing.

Severus looked and nodded slightly. He remembered seeing the photo the last time he'd looked through the book and noting to himself how lovely Poppy looked, despite her dowdy costume. The camera had caught them just as he had pulled her closer and looked down into her face, which lit up in a smile as he did. He gazed, mesmerised, as he watched Poppy's expression repeatedly go from one of disappointment to one of happiness as she looked up at him.

"Severus?"

"Hm? Yes, that is a good photo of you."

"And of you," Poppy said.

Severus shifted his attention from Poppy's face to his own. He'd thought he had looked the same as ever in it, except for the tan and blue eyes. Now, however, he saw that as he drew Poppy closer and looked down into her face, his own expression softened, though he couldn't be said to be smiling, precisely.

"I remember that moment," Severus said.

"You do?"

"Yes . . . I had asked Albus if I could cut in, and then I had rudely paid attention to him cutting in with Cahill to dance with Minerva, rather than paying attention to you. I remember pulling you closer and thinking you were very pretty."

Poppy laughed. "No, I wasn't. That costume made me look like I was dressed in a sack, and it was a terrible colour on me, too."

"I was thinking that if one ignored the costume, you were pretty," Severus said. "And you are. Very. Now, if instead of *that* one, you'd been wearing the costume that Vector had chosen, I would have also known that you are very sexy, too, and not just a pretty face and a warm heart. Especially the way she was first wearing it."

Poppy smirked. "I would hope that I'd have noticed the costume was transparent before stepping into the Great Hall, though. You know, I think Verity actually likes you."

"We have always got along all right," Severus replied.

"No, I mean that I think she likes you more than that. You might be more her type, at least now that you're not a spy any longer."

"I doubt it."

Poppy shrugged. "Well, I wouldn't be surprised, anyway."

"I would be. You're just biassed, Poppy. Not that I mind." He pushed the book off their laps and kissed her.

Poppy returned the kiss and began undoing the clasps on his over-robe. Once she had it undone, she began to push it off of him, Severus cooperating in pulling his arms from the sleeves. She unbuttoned the first few small black buttons of his under-robe, then stopped. She pushed away from Severus and blinked up at him.

"Out of that robe, Severus. Now. That and anything else you're wearing. Except your pants. You can leave those on for the time being."

Severus smirked down at her. "Full of demands today, are we?"

"My turn, Sev!"

Severus nodded, deciding to play along. She obviously had something in mind. He began to finish unbuttoning his robe.

"Stand up so I can have a good view of you," Poppy said.

Not about to stand there in just his socks and undershorts, which he thought would look more than a little ridiculous, Severus first bent and removed his thin, calf-length black socks before standing to remove his robe. He undid the buttons at his wrists, then finished unbuttoning the robe to just above the hip. He pushed it from his shoulders, and it fell to the floor, pooling at his feet. He stepped out of it. Poppy crooked her finger at him, beckoning him closer.

She untied the sash at her waist, allowing her dressing gown to fall open so that Severus had a good view of her body, then she put her hands on his thighs and drew him closer. She kissed his partially erect penis through his underpants, then stroked it with one hand as the other massaged his buttocks. She was rewarded when his cock rapidly grew and stiffened. She began to massage his arse with both hands as she gently nipped at his cock through the cotton of his pants, and Severus gasped. Poppy glanced up, and reassured that it was a gasp of pleasure, she continued teasing him with her lips and teeth.

Finally, she insinuated her hands beneath his shorts, still massaging his buttocks, and then worked them down and off. His cock sprang pleasingly forth from its confinement in Severus's black underpants, and Poppy played with the head of his cock with her tongue, spending time flicking the tip of her tongue across his slit, making him grasp her shoulders and squeeze. She closed her lips around the crown of his penis and sucked rhythmically for a moment, grasping his shaft with her right hand and squeezing. Severus moaned, and Poppy licked a circle around the head of his cock before letting go and looking up at him.

"I just wanted to get you prepared," she said with a smile and a gleam in her eyes.

"Oh, I am prepared!" Severus said. "You needn't stop now."

"We shall see. Go into the bedroom, pull down the sheets, and lie down on the bed...don't you dare cover yourself, either, or I may have to punish you!" she added with a wink.

Severus smirked.

"I'll be in in just a moment," Poppy continued. "You just settle in and wait for me."

Severus made a mock bow. "As you wish, my lady!"

"Now that's the attitude!" Poppy said with a laugh. "Keep it up, and you may be rewarded!"

As Severus drew down the bedcovers and rearranged the pillows, he heard Poppy in the bathroom, moving about, then running the water briefly. He lay down, propped himself on the pillows, and waited, wondering if he looked silly lying there naked on the white sheets, his erection prominent. He looked down at his cock and gave it a pull to stiffen it up a bit more. He thought of Poppy in the next room, and imagined her sinking down on his cock, riding him, and he gave it another pull. He closed his eyes and stroked his penis.

"Playing with yourself? So impatient that you couldn't wait for me?" Poppy asked, stepping into the bedroom from the bathroom. "At least you didn't cover yourself."

Severus smirked. "I thought being punished by you sounded intriguing, but then you mentioned rewards, and I thought I might try those first." He was somewhat disappointed that Poppy was still in her dressing gown, though she hadn't closed it back up, and it hung loosely about her, giving him an excellent view of her body.

Poppy, aware of his gaze, raised an eyebrow. "See anything you might like?"

"That snatch of yours, it's very, very tempting to a man with a hard-on."

"And your hard-on is very tempting to me," Poppy said as she approached the bed. "You will have to exercise some patience, however. And cooperate. Or there will be no rewards for you!"

The corners of Severus's mouth turned up. "I want those rewards...I am somewhat acquainted with your charms, Madam Pomfrey, and anticipate those rewards with great pleasure."

"Hmm . . ." Poppy's eyes travelled over his body as he reclined against the pillows. "Not a bad position, I suppose." She reached into her dressing gown pocket and pulled out a number of long, colourful silk scarves. "Not bad use of the pillows, either, though I can think of others." She lay the long scarves down along one side of the bed, keeping only a turquoise blue one in her hand. She took a step toward the head of the bed.

"What are you doing with that?" Severus asked.

"You shall see...or *not* see," Poppy replied, letting the tip of the scarf trail along his body from his balls up his cock and then over his abdomen and chest. She bent toward him and kissed his cheek. Her lips grazed his ear, and she whispered, "If you want me to stop, at any time, just say the word."

"What word?"

"What about . . . just 'word'?" She pulled back and looked down at him.

"Word?" He nodded. "All right. Unless I use it in a sentence."

Poppy smirked. "I'm trying to imagine such a circumstance whilst we're doing what we'll be doing."

With that, she brought the turquoise scarf up and swiftly covered his eyes and tied it behind his head. Severus felt her tie another scarf around one of his wrists, then the other. They pulled, and his arms were drawn up so that his arms rested against the pillows on either side of his head, bent at the elbows.. An experimental tug showed him that he had very little slack, but enough to reposition his arms slightly if they became stiff. He twitched as he felt another narrow, silky scarf tied around his erection at the base of his penis. It tightened slightly, and he gasped.

"Too much?"

Severus shook his head. He felt extremely vulnerable and incredibly aroused. He had no idea where Poppy would touch him next, but he felt her weight on the bed as she sat by his feet, then there was a warm, creamy potion on his left foot, then his right, and he felt her hands massaging his toes, the balls of his feet, his arches. Despite the fact that he didn't normally find his feet to be centres of arousal, the slow massage, alternating between firm pressure and light strokes, was beginning to feel erotic, but then her hands, and the warm potion, moved up to his calves.

As Poppy spread his legs more and began to massage his thighs, Severus anticipated the move to his groin, but then he felt her pick up the long, trailing ends of the scarf around his penis, and the scarf tightened a bit more before she let the ends flutter down onto his stomach. Her fingertips caressed his thighs and his hips, then made feather-light passes over his abdomen, nearing but never touching his deeply engorged penis, which seemed to Severus almost ready to split, he was so aroused. Then the scarf was lifted again and the ends given another tug, and he moaned.

"Oh, Merlin!" He felt the ends flutter back down onto his skin, then Poppy's fingertips began to tease his balls, and a frisson of magic shot through them, tickling them and arousing him even more. He moaned again, and then he bucked up as he felt Poppy's tongue join her fingers, teasing his sack, then wandering its way up his shaft.

When he rose up again, trying to get closer to Poppy's tantalizing tongue, she drew back, and her touch was gone.

"Ah-ah!" she said. "You must cooperate, Severus! The rewards will be all the greater."

Severus nodded. "Yes, yes, all right." He tried to relax down onto the bed, but his cock was driving him mad with desire.

"Now, what is that spell you use?"

"Which spell?"

"You know the one," Poppy said. "The one that has you coming, and coming, and coming." Severus could hear the smile in her voice.

"Well, it's a difficult one, Poppy."

She slapped his penis lightly with the end of a scarf, only arousing him further. "Tell me, Severus...unless, well . . . do you not want to?"

Severus heard the note of uncertainty in her voice. "It's not that . . . it took me a few tries to get it right. That's all."

"A few tries?" Poppy asked, intrigued. The end of a scarf trailed up the shaft of his cock and over the head of his penis. "I wish I'd been there for that."

"I didn't want to disappoint you," Severus said.

"Mmm," Poppy murmured, tickling the head of his cock with the scarf, "you couldn't disappoint me, Sev. It could have been fun, watching you getting it right, giving you a hand with it. So . . . what is the spell? Or is it just something for wizards?"

"Obviously it's for wizards, but I think that anyone could cast it." Severus hesitated only a moment, then he said, "It's *Cacumen apsterrere emicatus*."

"*Cacumen apsterrere emicatus*," Poppy repeated. "And it inhibits ejaculation but allows orgasm."

"Yes. But if it doesn't work..."

"We'll have fun trying again," Poppy said brightly. "Now, no more talking!" She slapped his cock with the scarf again, then followed it with a flick of her tongue before removing the scarf from the base of his penis and grasping the shaft firmly. "*Cacumen apsterrere emicatus*."

Author's Note: I hope you aren't getting out your pitchforks and torches! Rest assured that the next chapter will pick up precisely where this one left off.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter Ninety-Four: The Rewards of Patience

Chapter 95 of 118

Poppy and Severus both reap the rewards of patience.



Chapter Ninety-Four: The Rewards of Patience

1 April 1999

As Poppy cast the spell, Severus felt her magic rush through his penis into his balls and deep into his groin. He gasped, then let out a hoarse moan, and his penis jerked and pulsed.

"Oh, gods, Poppy! I am *never* casting this spell again...you're doing it from now on," Severus said breathlessly. "That was spectacular."

"If, of course, it was successful," Poppy said.

"I'd say it was successful," Severus replied. "I've never come before when it was being cast."

"You orgasmed? Maybe it's like in Healing...a Healing spell is more effective when cast by someone else than by oneself."

Severus shook his head. "I don't think that was it. But you're now enlisted to cast it...see the perils in wanting to learn new spells?"

Poppy laughed. "Well, I did it verbally this time, since I'd never cast it before. When I do it nonverbally, it may not be as spectacular."

"Somehow, I don't think so..." Severus gasped as he felt Poppy licking the shaft of his penis, then begin flicking a silk scarf over the head of his cock. Whatever he'd been about to say about the spell was driven from his mind.

Severus felt Poppy wrap the head of his cock in silk, and she giggled softly. As she lightly tied the narrow scarf in a bow just beneath the crown of his cock, he wondered how absurd he looked. She kissed the tip of his penis through the silk, then she kissed his sternum as her fingertips began to caress his abdomen very lightly. Severus tried to keep from hyperventilating as Poppy began to pass her tickling, arousing magic through her fingertips. His skin jumped under her caresses and his cock twitched, seeming to become impossibly stiffer.

Poppy's lips continued their sensuous path up his chest, and her hands followed. When her fingertips reached his nipples, Severus tried to control his breathing, but to no avail. Soon he was panting and gasping, bucking his hips, lust infusing his body and filling his cock, but Poppy didn't turn her attention back to his erection. He bit his lower lip to keep himself from begging her to suck him off, to wank him, to ride him, anything to alleviate the pressure of the impending orgasm and bring him over the peak, but she seemed to know just how much to stimulate him, just where to send her magic teasing through him, to keep him at the brink but not over it...and unlike when Bella would cast her spell maintaining his erection but not permitting him to come until she finally allowed him an agonising ejaculation, there was nothing painful about this heightened arousal. All his nerve endings seemed to quiver with pleasure, with pleasure and desire. He knew that his release in orgasm would bring him into ecstasy, not agony, and then Poppy would do it all again.

Poppy's lips and teeth teased one of his nipples whilst her right hand continued playing with his other, now sending short, fast pulses of sensual magic through her fingertips and into his nipple to course through his entire body. Her left hand strayed downward, brushing over his taut abdomen, and for a moment, Severus thought she was going to finally turn her attention to his cock, but she stopped before she reached it. Instead, she began to run her fingers lightly over the skin near his pubic bones, but always carefully avoiding contact with his erection. Severus, unable to see, felt that his cock had to be the size of his thigh, it felt so large and heavily engorged. He could feel his pulse thrumming through his erection and tingling traces of Poppy's magic pulsing with it.

Poppy kissed and nipped her way down his body, sucking and licking his skin, and she began to use her right hand with its light, whispery magic to caress his balls. She paused for a moment, and Severus could feel her moving, though she didn't shift from her position on the bed, then he felt a Levitating Charm raise his butt up off the bed, and a pillow slid beneath him before Poppy let him sink back down into it. She again kissed and licked his lower abdomen, and her right hand cupped his balls. There was

a whispered *Lavare* charm, then Severus felt the warm, creamy potion at his anus, and Poppy began to massage his anus and perineum with the potion, which warmed more as she rubbed it in.

Severus groaned in pleasure as one of Poppy's fingers slipped easily into him. She found his wonder spot and massaged it, but only briefly, despite his appreciative moans, and he whimpered with desire as she withdrew her finger. Her lips began to tease his shaft as her fingers caressed his balls, and then Severus inhaled sharply as he again felt the warm, wet potion at his anus, and this time, a lubricated phallic object pressing into him.

Poppy pushed the dildo into his anus slowly, pausing several times, and still kissing and licking the shaft of his cock. She added *at/Inguo* charm to ease penetration even more, and then pressed the dildo in farther.

"Oh, gods, Poppy, please! You're going to drive me mad!" Severus moaned.

Poppy laughed lightly, then swirled his balls with her tongue as she pushed the dildo in all of the way. With one word, she charmed the dildo to vibrate, then she grasped his shaft and began to stroke him rapidly.

"Ah! Ah ah ah! Yes! Oh gods!" Severus jerked upward, rising off the pillow as he came, his cock twitching and pulsing, Poppy squeezing it once more.

As he dropped back down onto the pillow, Poppy ended the vibrating charm and released her hold on his cock. She lay down on top of him and kissed his lips softly. Her naked breasts were soft against his chest, and her nipples, hardened.

"All right, Sev?" Poppy whispered.

He nodded and sighed. "Wonderful. Perfect."

"So perfect that it was sufficient for the day?" Poppy teased.

"Absolutely not. Your spell was highly successful, and I'm still ready for more...and I hope you are, too. I'd say it was time for you to take some pleasure, too."

He could hear Poppy's smile as she replied, "Oh, I will, I will. But without neglecting you. And believe me when I say that this was quite stimulating for me, too...if, perhaps, not as satisfying as it was for you."

Severus shifted his hips.

"Uncomfortable?" Poppy asked. "I can remove the dildo..."

"No, not at all...it's still feeling very good where it is," Severus said.

"It's a new one. I worked on its Transfiguration and charms yesterday. I hoped it would be . . . adequate. It also has another feature that I might like to try later today, or some other time soon."

"I liked the potion, too," Severus said.

"I brewed it last night," Poppy said. "I thought it might provide a bit more lubrication than the spell alone, which I found . . . not as lubricating as I would have preferred when we used it last time. For me, anyway."

"I like the *Unguo* spell alone, myself, but the potion adds something...that warming was a very nice touch."

"I'm glad you liked it. I hadn't brewed it in about twenty years, at least, but it's fairly simple."

"This blindfold, is it still necessary?" Severus asked, wanting to see what he could now only feel, Poppy's naked body lying against his.

"It is! But don't worry, it will come off at the right moment," Poppy replied. She kissed his lips, drawing them between her own and sucking lightly, then she straddled him, and Severus could feel her moving up.

There was a slight pause, then Severus felt the tip of one of her taut nipples at his lips. He parted his lips and flicked his tongue over her nipple; he could feel her quiver, and he began to suck, using lips and teeth and tongue, wishing that he could move more than just his head. He strained against the silken bonds, which brought him a peculiar pleasure in itself, as if he were reaching, reaching, reaching for Poppy, straining to touch her and capture her, but she remained tantalizingly out of reach. He moaned as Poppy sat back and her nipple popped from his mouth. A moment later, though, her other nipple brushed his lips, and as if she had read his thoughts, it disappeared before he could catch it between his lips. Then it was back again, and, deciding that turn-about was fair play, Severus closed his mouth and turned his head away.

"Ah-ah, Severus! There's a treat in store for you . . . a little one, and then a bigger one, if only you cooperate!"

He turned his head back and parted his lips, waiting for Poppy's breast. He took a flick at her nipple, then he smiled and flicked again. He closed his lips around her nipple and sucked, licking and sucking. She had used some potion on her nipple, and she tasted of mocha and cream, sometimes more of chocolate, sometimes more of coffee, sometimes more of cream, always delicious. Poppy rubbed her crux against his body as Severus licked and sucked until not a trace of the intense potion remained.

When his tongue slowed its circuit of her nipple, Poppy slowly drew back, then bent to kiss his lips. Her tongue met his, and she sucked it, causing his cock to twitch.

"Mmm, mocha," Poppy said.

"That was a surprise," Severus said. "A pleasant one...not that your tits need any added attractions..."

"I thought it might be interesting for you," Poppy replied. She reached behind his head and removed the scarf blindfolding him.

Severus blinked, then smiled up at Poppy. He waited for her to untie the other scarves, but she didn't. Instead, she moved off of him. As she did, Severus saw his cock, joyfully erect and peculiarly adorned with a fluorescent pink scarf wrapped around its head. A small spot of the silk was damp with droplets of precum.

"Oh, Poppy...that scarf..." He grimaced.

"Pretty in pink," Poppy said with a laugh.

Severus groaned. Poppy bent forward and kissed the tip of his penis through the bright scarf, pausing a moment to nuzzle it.

"Is there a point to the scarf, beyond providing you with perverse amusement?" Severus asked, enjoying the view of Poppy's rounded buttocks.

"Oh . . . another little treat for you . . . the scarf *is* quite charming. And a bit amusing, that's true. Little Pink Riding Hood," she said with a smile, stroking his shaft. "And I am looking forward to the riding."

"Mmm, I never thought you'd get to that," Severus replied, thinking that she was about to untie the bow encircling his penis and mount him, but she didn't.

Poppy's strokes became lighter, but she added her arousing magic, suddenly sending it through his cock and deep into his groin. Severus inhaled sharply, and Poppy looked back at him and grinned.

"Nice?" she asked.

"Oh, hell, yes." He gasped again. "Oh, gods, very naughty, Poppy." He moaned when she bent over and began to lick his balls as she continued to caress his shaft.

Her mouth moved from his balls to his penis, and she closed her mouth around the head of his cock. The scarf became warm and damp as she sucked rapidly, and Severus squirmed and thrust up, trying to bring more of his cock into Poppy's mouth, but she kept her lips closed around his cock just beneath the crown. She did increase her tingling caresses of his shaft, however, then she bit him lightly through the fabric of the scarf.

"Nng," Severus groaned. Poppy paused, but when no protest followed, she continued teasing his cock with her lips and teeth, running her fingertips up and down his erect shaft.

A moment later, her right hand tugged at one end of the bow, loosening the fluorescent pink scarf. Poppy raised her head, and another tug pulled the scarf off of his erection as she blew a cool breath across his newly naked glans. Severus groaned. The sensation was exquisite.

As Poppy moved to straddle his head, she took his penis in her mouth, moving up and down. She hovered over Severus's face, her vulva tantalisingly moist but just out of reach of his tongue.

"Down, witch!" Severus demanded.

She required not another word, but, still sucking his cock, lowered herself down to meet his mouth.

It was Severus's turn to make Poppy moan. He wished his hands were free to draw her closer...she seemed unreasonably afraid of smothering him or something. But he kept his tongue moving, licking and pressing, despite the distracting attention she was paying to his cock. Before she could come, though, Poppy drove him over the edge once more, swallowing around him, taking almost his full length into her mouth and the back of her throat. Severus saw stars and, for a moment, could only gasp and pant as he bucked into her.

Severus relaxed back down onto the pillow, going limp, and Poppy moved off of him. He opened his eyes.

"I wasn't finished there...just taking a bit of a pause," he said.

"You warmed me up sufficiently," Poppy said, smiling down at him. She kissed his lips, her kiss growing more passionate as she came to lie on top of him again, her hands massaging his shoulders and sides and her breasts brushing his chest.

"Untie me," Severus said when her lips moved down to his throat. He felt her shake her head. "I want to hold you," he explained.

"Later," Poppy said, moving further down his body to kiss his chest and tease his nipples. She raised her head and looked at him. "Unless you're uncomfortable...just say the word."

Severus shook his head. He had been able to shift his arms sufficiently so that he was not uncomfortable. He would play along. He did like it when Poppy tended to his every need, after all . . . he just wished he could direct it a bit more. Some other time, perhaps. And he really didn't mind being completely at her mercy. He thought that with a little wandless magic, he could probably even untie the brilliant yellow and green scarves himself...or Vanish them.

Closing his eyes to concentrate on the sensations, Severus suffered her to continue to play with him and kiss him, then he felt her reach between his legs. He opened his eyes in time to see her touch the flared end of the dildo and cause it to begin vibrating again, this time only lightly. Sitting up, she took his erection in one hand, then slowly lowered herself over him, letting out a soft, low moan of pleasure.

Poppy sat there for a moment, her eyes closed, then she began to move on him, squeezing his cock inside of her as she rode him. Up and down, back and forth, sometimes bouncing lightly, other times sliding her crux across his pelvis. He could feel her clitoris and vulva slip over his pubis, dampening his sparse hairs there with her juices. Her vagina was warm, soft, and wet around him, and she continued to squeeze him inside of her as she picked up speed, now only sliding over him, her breathing becoming increasingly rapid as his cock slid in and out of her and her clitoris rubbed against him.

Sweat rolled down Poppy's breasts, and her mouth was open as she panted and gasped, and Severus could tell she was approaching her climax.

"That's it, Poppy! Fuck me!" Severus encouraged. "Fuck my cock with your cunt and come! Such a wonderfully hot cunt you have, keep it up, fuck me, fuck me, Poppy! You love it, don't you, Poppy...you love having your cunt around me, fucking me. Yes, yes, that's it! That's it! Come, yes, come!"

Poppy's gasps became hoarse moans, and Severus could feel her vagina clenching spasmodically around his cock, and for the fourth time, he came hard, but still with no ejaculation.

Poppy collapsed on top of him, and he could feel the remnants of her orgasm as her vagina still twitched slightly around his erection.

After catching his own breath, Severus said, "Untie me now?"

Poppy nodded against him, then slowly raised herself up, blinking down at him. She looked at each of his wrists blankly, then she Summoned her wand, which wobbled its way up to her from where it lay at the foot of the bed. She took in a deep breath to clear her head, then flicked her wand twice, untying each of his wrists, but leaving the ends tied to the bedposts. She then set down her wand and lay back down on him. Severus put his arms around her.

After a few minutes, Severus said, "You do realise that you didn't lift the spell, don't you?"

Poppy nodded. "Mmmhm. I can feel you. 'T's very nice." As if to demonstrate, she wriggled slightly, pushing him farther in. "Besides, you didn't tell me how to release the spell."

Careful not to invoke the counter spell by saying the words aloud, Severus said, "*Finite apsterrere*."

"Kay. I'll remember that." She raised her head and looked down into his face, smiling. "Perhaps for this time, you'd like to do that...and at an appropriate moment." She shifted closer to his head and kissed his lips.

"I do think you need more attention," Severus said. "And as it seems you've quite exhausted yourself..."

"Not completely!" Poppy insisted.

"No, I hope not completely, or you won't enjoy this as much as I want you to." Severus rolled, suddenly flipping Poppy over onto her back. He waved his hand and the dildo slid out of him and floated over to the bedside table. "You deserve a good, hard fucking after that, Madam Pomfrey."

"Is that a threat or a promise, Professor?" Poppy asked with a teasing smile.

"Both. I *never* make empty threats!" Severus growled. He bent and nipped at her throat, then sucked as he began to leisurely stroke in and out of Poppy as she rocked to meet his strokes. He was pleased when she whimpered. "You do have a hungry cunt today, don't you, Poppy? Can I satisfy it?"

"Yes, Severus, you can, I'm...ah, ah, ah! Yes, I'm sure!" She moaned loudly as his thrusts increased their pace and intensity.

"So hot, Poppy, so hot . . ." Severus's words faded into gasps of pleasure as he continued to pull out and plunge back in, hard and fast.

When Poppy's hips ceased rocking and she rose up, practically resting all of her weight on her shoulders, Severus knew she was close. He shifted his own angle and began thrusting with short, quick thrusts, and he felt her come again. She gasped his name hoarsely, and Severus cast the *Finite* nonverbally. He felt his orgasm burst upon him, and his ejaculation came stronger and harder for having been restrained.

Poppy opened her eyes to see Severus's head thrown back, the tendons and veins of his neck prominent as he came with a wordless cry, thrusting in a few more times until he had emptied himself into her dark warmth. Together, they collapsed back down onto the bed, going utterly limp. After a few gasping breaths, Severus turned slightly so that not all of his weight rested on Poppy, and his relaxing cock slipped from her vagina.

Poppy turned her head to kiss him, and she kissed the first spot her lips met, the top of his shoulder.

"Lovely, Sev."

"Mm. Very." He opened his eyes and with a contented sigh, looked into her face. "You are bloody brilliant, Poppy. Absolutely."

She smiled sleepily. "I hoped you might enjoy that."

"I did. I don't know why, but being tied up by you...it's incredibly arousing. And the things you do to me . . ." He kissed her lips, then the tip of her nose. "You're wonderful."

"You're not bad, yourself, Sev."

He smirked. "I know."

Poppy laughed and slapped him lightly on the arm. "No vanity in your family, I can see! You got the full share!"

He shook his head, still smiling. "No, it's you. I give the credit to you. You bring out the best of me in every way, even in bed."

"I like that."

"Except . . ."

"Except what?" Poppy asked.

"Except . . . I still feel jealous sometimes. I know that my jealousy could, well, it could become a problem. I don't want it to, Poppy. And that has nothing to do with you, except that you are so wonderful and I don't want to lose you . . . Could you help me, Poppy? If I begin becoming too jealous? I don't want it to cause problems for us, and I think it could."

Poppy nodded. "I suppose that telling you that you have no reason to be jealous doesn't help."

Severus shook his head. "There's always a part of me that knows that, even when I'm feeling my most jealous."

"I want to help, but I don't know how."

"Tell me. Tell me if I begin behaving irrationally jealous. Remind me that I don't want to. I don't know if it would help my feelings, but perhaps it might at least keep me from behaving like a fool and upsetting you."

"I can do that," Poppy agreed.

"Or if I start . . ." Severus stared at the ceiling.

"Start? Start what?"

"You know that my grandfather was an angry, bitter man. He had a strong violent streak, and not a little cruelty with it. My father . . . he wasn't a cruel man, but he did . . . when he drank, he had a temper. I know that I have the capacity for violence, cold, cruel, calculated violence, and for hot, angry, passionate violence. I never, *never* want to have you see that side of me. Especially . . . I can't imagine directing it toward you, not ever, but if I did, if I were to . . ."

"I don't believe you would, either, but we would deal with it."

Severus shook his head vehemently. "No. No. If I ever became violent toward you, even once. If I struck you or hexed you in anger, you must leave me. Leave me and . . . and take any measures necessary to keep me from you."

"Severus, I don't think..."

"Promise me, Poppy. I don't want to be that man in your life. Once would be too much. If it happened again . . . Poppy, I am strong, very strong. I don't want you to suffer irreparable harm from a hex or a blow. I would rather die."

"I don't believe you'd do that. Ever. Not to me. But if it makes you feel better, then, yes, I agree. Once would be too much."

"Good." Severus let out a long, slow breath.

"But if you have anger issues when we're together, we'll work on them together, and if you have problems with your anger becoming out of control, you'll see someone. You'll never raise your hand or wand against me, though, Severus. I know you won't."

"I don't think I would, either, Poppy. I can't even imagine it. But just in case . . . it makes me feel better to know you'll help me, and that you wouldn't tolerate it if I became . . . Dark and cruel again."

"Let's not talk about this now. In fact, I'd like a nice little nap with you," Poppy said, kissing his cheek.

"I like that idea." He gazed into her eyes and caressed her face. "You are wonderful, Poppy, more than I could ever hope to deserve, and I treasure you and hope you'll never regret being with me." He kissed her lips gently and drew up the sheet and comforter to cover them.

Severus was holding Poppy, still kissing her, her arms around him, when there was a tapping sound. The tapping continued, and they broke their kiss.

"An owl," Poppy said. "At the window."

"I told you that an afternoon wholly without interruption was unlikely," Severus said, but he waved his hand and opened the window to the owl.

"That's Wol," Poppy said. "From Gareth or Hermione, I expect. Unless Gertrude's back in Hogsmeade for the rest of the week."

Gareth's owl flew over to the head of the bed and settled on the headboard as Severus took the rolled up parchment from him.

"There's some nice cold chicken left in the sitting room, Wol," Poppy said, picking up her wand and opening the bedroom door. "Help yourself!" She turned to Severus. "For you or for me?"

"Me. From McGonagall," Severus said.

"Well, are you going to read it?"

"I don't particularly feel like it right now."

"You may need to respond, though," Poppy said practically. "Best to do that whilst Wol is still here so you needn't make a trip to the Owlery."

Severus rolled his eyes, but showed his agreement by breaking the seal on the parchment and unrolling the letter.

Chapter Ninety-Five: Afternoon Games

Chapter 96 of 118

Severus answers Gareth's owl, and he and Poppy continue their game.



Chapter Ninety-Five: Afternoon Games

Thursday, 1 April 1999

Severus began to read the letter as Poppy snuggled back down under the covers, one hand resting on his bare chest.

1 April 1999

Snape,

You mentioned that we might get together this week. Or maybe I did. One of us came up with this brilliant idea, anyway. The Hogwarts holiday has started, and I sent Hermione off to her parents' this afternoon after lunch, so what do you say we start the holiday tonight with a drink or three?

I have to go to the Ministry later this afternoon, but I'll be back this evening. Meet me at the gates? 7:00? I have a couple things to talk to you about...about the house at Spinner's End and a couple other things. If you don't want to come to my place, I could just come up there and we could have a drink in your rooms.

I have to leave at four-thirty, but if you send Wol with your letter, he should reach me before I go. If I don't hear from you, I'll just show up! If you're busy, I can have a drink with Hagrid or something.

Gareth

"What does he want?"

"For me to go down to the house for drinks this evening."

"That sounds like it could be fun. And safe...not out in a public place. Gareth's house would be a highly unlikely target. Presumably no one other than the three of us knows, either."

"Hmph. I will not be confined to the castle over the holiday, in any case...although I will take reasonable precautions," Severus said.

"There were parchment and quills and such in the small desk in the sitting room," Poppy said helpfully.

"Would you like to join us?" Severus asked as he Summoned parchment and quill.

"No, but thanks. He'd probably like a lads' night out with you...or something...and I was going to get together with Pomona and Sharon this evening. I told them I might, anyway."

Severus looked around, then Summoned a book from the shelves across the room. He set one on his lap and scratched out a quick message.

1-4-99

McGonagall

19.00 at the castle gates. If you're not there, I'll Apparate to your house.

Snape

Severus whistled sharply, and Wol flapped in from the sitting room.

"Here, bring this to Gareth. Don't let anyone else have it. If you can't give it to him, bring it back," Severus said. As the large bird left through the window, Severus turned to Poppy. "You see, a reasonable precaution."

Poppy waved her right hand and closed the window, though she had a bit of trouble turning the long, curved handle to latch it.

"Very good," Severus said. "You will become more adept."

"Closing windows wandlessly has never been hard for me. I've never latched them, though, so that takes a bit more concentration."

"I do think your wandless skills are very impressive in other areas, however," Severus said, unceremoniously pushing the parchment, quill, and book to the floor and sliding down into bed beside Poppy. "I cannot tell you what you do to me with that magic. It is indescribable."

Poppy grinned and snuggled close to him, and he put his arm around her and pulled her even closer.

"I'm glad you enjoyed that. I do, too. Concentrating on my feelings for you, on increasing your arousal, and on channelling my own desire for you through my magic, it's actually quite satisfying. It does work up an appetite, though, I find," Poppy replied.

"There are biscuits still...would you like a biscuit?" Severus asked, pushing up on one elbow.

"Mmm, I don't know. Crumbs in the bed."

"A flick of your wand would take care of those, I'm sure."

"I think I'd actually like a sandwich from some of that leftover chicken...provided that Wol didn't walk all over it."

Severus laughed. "I think we'll leave the leftovers for the owls. We can call a house-elf. I'll put on some clothes and go call one." He began to sit up and swing his legs out of bed.

"No need for that, Sev! I can just call Perlie and have her bring us something." She noted the frozen expression on Severus's face as he sat with one foot on the floor. "Unless you have some objection to a house-elf seeing us together. I am sure they do know we're a couple...ours do, anyway."

"No . . ."

"No, but?" Poppy prodded.

"Your house-elves are female."

Poppy raised an eyebrow. "Well, call Twiskett, then."

"I can't do that."

"Surely he's seen you in the buff before," Poppy said.

"Undoubtedly. But not you."

Poppy laughed. "He's a house-elf! Over the years, I've had male house-elves serve me. Granted, I don't call them whilst I'm having a soak in the bath, but lying in bed like this...it's not as though he'll see anything."

"I shall call him from the sitting room, nonetheless," Severus said, standing. "I do not feel comfortable having Twiskett see us in bed together." He supposed that he might become more used to the notion over time, but at the moment, it was simply too much for him to be comfortable with.

"You needn't dress. I brought you a robe," Poppy said. She raised her hand and Summoned it from where it had lain folded on a bench on the other side of the room.

"It's not hot pink," Severus observed drily, reaching out and catching the robe as it flew toward Poppy.

Poppy laughed. "No, I thought this fabric was a bit more subtle...for everyday wearing," she explained with a grin. "I think shocking pink should be saved for special occasions."

Severus quirked a smile and slipped his arms into the grey silk dressing gown. It had a small chevron pattern of three shades of grey woven through it, and the shawl collar was edged in black piping.

"I know you like that green one that Albus and Minerva gave you several years ago, and this one was similar," Poppy said.

"How did you get it? You haven't been out recently, have you?" Severus asked, puzzled.

"I owled Madam Malkin telling her the sort of thing I wanted. She sent me fabric samples on Tuesday afternoon, and I chose this one. It arrived yesterday. It's just off-the-rack, but I thought it was nice."

"It is nice; I like it. You have been busy," Severus said.

"I wanted this afternoon to be perfect. You put a lot of effort into our date on Sunday, after all. I wanted to show you that I appreciate it."

Severus bent and kissed her. "And I appreciate you." He kissed her lightly once more, then straightened. "Anything other than a sandwich?"

"Just some tea, I think, or cider."

"And you want chicken?"

"Surprise me, Sev."

His cheek twitched as one corner of his mouth turned up briefly. "One Flobberworm sandwich coming right up!"

"Oh, Severus! That's disgusting!" Poppy made a face and threw a pillow at him.

Severus laughed as the pillow bounced off him, and he stepped into the sitting room. Poppy could hear him call for Twiskett and then the almost instantaneous crack of the house-elf's responding Apparition.

Severus returned a moment later. "Our snack will be delivered shortly. I had him take away the rest of the food, everything but the biscuits. I hope that was all right."

"Fine . . . Severus Simon Snape."

"Not Simon...remember Simon Chesterton?" Severus asked, taking off his robe and tossing it over a bent-wood rocking chair.

"Yes, that pale bony boy. A freckly red-haired Hufflepuff, your year," Poppy said.

"He was a perfect twat," Severus said, flipping back the comforter and climbing in next to Poppy.

"He wasn't very pleasant. He works down in London now, at the *Quibbler*. Adverts or something."

"He's probably still a twat." Severus moved closer to her, hooking one of his legs around hers.

Poppy shrugged. "He probably hasn't changed much."

"I'm glad I'm not a Simon, if only because it's his name," Severus said, "Poppy Perdita Pomfrey."

Poppy laughed loudly. "No, not Perdita! Where on earth did you get that one?"

Severus smiled. "You didn't like the pious names!"

Poppy snorted. "All right . . . Severus . . . mmmm . . ." She snuggled closer to him and rested her head on his chest. "Severus Saturnus Snape."

"Nope, nein, nyet, non, and wrong again!" Severus said. "Wait, I heard the sandwiches. Be right back."

Severus hopped out of bed and padded quickly out to the sitting room. Poppy whistled at his retreating form. He returned a moment later, a black wooden tray of sandwiches and cider floating in front of him.

"Mm, you or the sandwiches. The sandwiches, or you. A very hard choice," Poppy said, looking him up and down.

"You don't need to choose. You can have both." Severus bent and kissed her forehead.

"That's good, or I might have to go hungry," Poppy replied, smiling.

"We couldn't have that, Poppy Pomona Pomfrey."

"No, not Pomona, either." Poppy picked up a sandwich.

"Oh, well, thought it worth a try." Severus slid into bed and picked up a sandwich.

"Oh, this is delicious!" Poppy said.

"Fresh mozzarella, tomato, spinach, and pesto on herbed Italian bread."

"It's perfect. Thanks, Sev."

"Eh! I decided I wasn't in the mood for Flobberworm sandwiches."

"You think you can put me off my food, but you can't, Severus Samuel Snape."

Severus stopped with his sandwich halfway to his mouth, then he took a bite. He chewed, swallowed, shook his head, and said, "No, not Samuel."

"Your turn," Poppy said, drinking off half her cider.

"Um, I don't know . . . Peggy?"

"You guessed Peg already. No, not Peggy. I'll tell you, you haven't guessed any that could be a version of my name, or a nickname for it."

"You shouldn't have given that away," Severus said.

"I don't want this game to go on forever, as much fun as it is," Poppy said.

"If I did guess one that was a variation on your name, would you tell me?" Severus asked, rearranging the filling in his sandwich.

Poppy shook her head. "No. But I thought I'd just mention it now. If you ever do . . . well, at some point, I might mention that you once came close, but I wouldn't give it away immediately."

Severus took a large bite of his sandwich and nodded in agreement. He suppressed his smile as he chewed. He certainly felt better now about being impeccably honest and telling her that "Samuel" was not his name. Just because his father had called him "Sammy" and his primary school teachers all thought his middle name was "Samuel," it didn't make it his legal name. Besides, she'd probably never heard of the name before, or even if she had, it was uncommon enough so she wouldn't think of it. He was going to win. He was going to win. The game and her.

"So, do you have another guess?" Severus asked.

"Severus Sumner Snape."

"That's an interesting name," Severus said, "but it's not mine."

"I have a cousin named Sumner," Poppy said. "I always liked him." She popped the last bite of her sandwich into her mouth.

"All right . . . Petunia?" he asked tentatively. He hoped her name wasn't Petunia. Lily's sister had been an obnoxious brat.

Poppy shook her head as she finished chewing. "Nope. How about . . . Severus Servatius Snape?"

"Wrong again," Severus said. "Hmm, Poppy Paula Pomfrey?" She had to be named after a saint or a flower or something similar, Severus thought. And if she weren't, there were few enough other names he could think of that began with P.

"No, not Paula. Doesn't go very well with Poppy Pomfrey, either, does it?"

"I thought Poppy Piety Pomfrey sounded nice," Severus said.

"I suppose, but it's not a name I'd want to go through life with, either," Poppy said.

"Is your own name really that bad?"

"What? No, it's just . . . I never use it. And it's a bit odd to some people. I've never used it." Poppy was not going to tell him that it was Muggles who found it most unusual.

"Even when you were a little girl?" Severus asked, fishing for hints.

"Nope. And no more clues, Severus Silas Snape."

"I don't know who you're talking to. There's no Severus Silas Snape here!" Severus drank some cider, thinking. "Peculiar?"

Poppy looked at him. "Was that a guess?"

Severus nodded, reaching for another sandwich.

"What kind of parents do you think I had, anyway?"

"Well, you said your middle name was odd, so I thought . . . odd, peculiar." Severus shrugged and wiped some pesto from his chin. "Twiskett was right. The pesto's good."

"I'm not even going to count that as a guess," Poppy said with a shake of her head. "That was just awful." She laughed. *Peculiar?*

"All right, how about . . . Pleasance?"

Poppy shook her head. "No. Let's see . . ." Poppy closed her eyes, trying to remember the list of names she had made.

"Have you run out of guesses?" Severus asked. "I have more!"

"Shh! Severus Spiros Snape," Poppy guessed.

Severus laughed, snorting cider through his nose.

"What was so funny about Spiros?" Poppy asked, picking up a napkin and wiping some cider from her right arm.

"I don't know," Severus said, coughing and blinking. "It just was. That stung." He blinked a few more times, then waved his hand to clean the cider from the covers and the tray. He looked at her arm. "I think your arm needs more than just a swipe of a napkin."

Poppy turned her head to look for her wand when she felt Severus's lips on her shoulder. The tray floated gently to the floor, and Severus's lips continued their meandering path down her arm as he pushed the covers down to her hips. The tip of his tongue licked at the spot where some of the cider had dribbled, and his hand rested warmly on her stomach.

Poppy slid further down into the bed beside him and raised his head to kiss him. She put her arms around him, and his hand moved to her buttocks, pulling her close against him. Legs intertwined, they embraced, body to body, skin to skin. Their kisses continued, soft and sensual, growing more heated and passionate, and their caresses grew more intimate. Severus's hand slipped between them, and he found Poppy's feminine thatch. His fingers searched and quickly found her swollen nub between her wet folds. He pressed and rubbed until Poppy was shuddering and moaning into his mouth. She threw her head back, gasping.

"Oh, Sev, more. I need all of you." She shifted to press against his cock, and Severus needed no more encouragement.

His hand moved from her clit to his cock, and he guided himself easily into her. He pushed her left leg down from its embrace of his hips and wrapped his own right leg around hers. Moving slowly at first, he rocked his hips, his cock only thrusting shallowly, but she felt tight, closed around him as she was, and soon, he increased his pace, rolling her over onto her back, his right leg still hooked around her left one.

Poppy pushed one of the pillows from behind her head as she wrapped her right leg around his hips. Severus raised himself on his hands, looking down into her face.

"You want me, Poppy," he rasped.

"Oh, yes, Sev, I want you, I want you." She drew her right leg up beside her torso, bent at the knee. "Deep, Severus, please. Deep and hard, harder, harder!"

Severus reached out with his left hand and grabbed one of the pillows, then shoved it beneath her buttocks, thrusting his cock deeper into her and pulling her right leg up so her ankle was over his shoulder. He continued to pump, grinding against her with each thrust, his cock burying itself deep in her over and over again, Poppy moaning and gasping in time with his thrusts as her fingernails raked his back.

"I want you, Poppy, I want you forever," Severus gasped. "Gods, so sexy, so hot, so very sexy. Want to fuck you forever. Want to have you, have you forever. Forever. Forever, Poppy, forever." His thrusts grew faster, and he hit her clitoris harder and harder as he pumped, continuing to talk until finally, he could only pant and moan.

Poppy lifted her hips higher, her left leg bent at the knee and her left heel pressing into the mattress, raising her up, as she let out a sudden shout. Her vagina pulsing around his cock, Severus let go with a groan, ejaculating hard and deep as he pumped four more times, the last time, pushing in and straining to push in even deeper, impossibly deeper, his cock already completely surrounded by Poppy's orgasming vagina.

Severus collapsed on top of her, trying to take some of his weight on his arms as Poppy's ankle slipped from his shoulder. He shifted slightly to his right so that she could stretch out her leg again, but trying not to let his softening cock slip out of her.

Poppy embraced him, one hand on his buttocks, and closed her legs, as if she were also reluctant to lose their union too soon.

"Should have used the spell," Severus said hoarsely.

"Mm-mm. This was perfect. Perfect," she replied with a whispered sigh.

"I'm sweating all over you."

"Mm-hmm. Perfect." She squeezed him.

Severus felt Poppy move her right hand, then felt a rush of her magic, and the down comforter settled over him.

"Don't want you to become chilled," Poppy said, running the fingers of her right hand up and down his spine.

Severus felt moved to tell her that he loved her, but he didn't want her to think it was simple a post-coital sentiment, so instead, he said, "You are wonderful, Poppy. No matter what your middle name is. Even if it's . . . Pustule." He smiled as Poppy slapped his bottom.

"Pustule?" she asked, trying to restrain her laughter.

"Well, you said your parents were medical people. Who knows what name might appeal to them!"

Poppy began to laugh, and Severus chuckled, too, even though their laughter caused his penis to slide out.

"You really are dreadful sometimes, Severus! Truly!"

Severus pushed up on his hands and looked down into her face. He gently caressed some of her sweaty hair back from her forehead and cheek. "As long as I'm so dreadful that I can make you smile and laugh, Poppy. I love to hear you laugh."

"And I love to see that smile on your face," Poppy said, tracing his lips with her finger. "You just light up, and your eyes shine . . ." She paused as if about to say something else, but she wound her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck and pulled him down into a kiss.

A half hour later, Severus woke up, not even having realised that he was falling asleep. Poppy was gently rolling away from him.

"I'm sorry, Sev," she said softly. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He reached out and placed his hand on her arm. "Where are you going?"

"I have been lying here for fifteen minutes desperate for a visit to the loo," she said.

"Oh, well, that's all right, then," Severus said, giving her a pat.

"Well, thank you very much for your permission!" Poppy replied with a laugh.

"I think I need one, as well."

"Me first," Poppy said, sprinting naked across the bedroom to the bathroom door.

"Leave the door open," Severus said as she was about to close it.

Poppy stopped and held the door.

"Unless you don't want to," Severus added quickly. "I just thought . . . we could talk. I wouldn't feel abandoned here in bed alone. In sweaty sheets."

Poppy let go of the door, leaving it open and disappearing around the corner to use the toilet.

"I think we both need a shower," she called.

"We do. Will you wash my back?" Severus asked, sitting up and swinging his legs around the side of the bed.

"I will. I wouldn't mind the same."

"It would be my pleasure." Severus smiled. He had never taken a shower with anyone before. He had climbed into the bath with Poppy that time, and that had been wonderful. He doubted that they would be having sex in the shower right now, though...even he felt a bit spent, which he hadn't thought could be a possibility with Poppy...but the idea of showering with her, sharing such an intimate activity, that made him feel happy.

Poppy's head popped around the door. "I'm done. Just need to wash my hands."

Severus stood and stretched, listening as Poppy washed her hands. He closed his eyes for a moment, imagining that he and Poppy were married, long married, and sharing a bedroom all of the time, completely comfortable with each other, completely open, loving each other forever.

"Everything okay, Sev?" Poppy was standing in the bedroom, drying her hands on a fluffy towel.

Severus looked at her, slightly startled. "Yes, yes...I was just thinking . . . how happy I am."

"I am, too." Poppy walked over and stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Very happy."

Chapter Ninety-Six: An Unexpected Encounter

Chapter 97 of 118

Severus goes into Hogsmeade to meet Gareth and has an unexpected encounter.



Chapter Ninety-Six: An Unexpected Encounter

Thursday, 1 April 1999

Severus strode down the drive to the gates. As he walked, he fastened two more of the hooks on his heavy black cloak. The evening was chilly, and the breeze off the lake made it feel even cooler, and his legs felt the draft.

With the very few staff and students remaining in the castle, dinner in the Great Hall had been served at one large oblong table. By the time that he and Poppy had finished taking their shower and having another cuddle in bed, it was almost time for dinner, so he hadn't changed clothes. Naturally, some members of staff felt compelled to comment on his atypical attire. Never mind that half the wizards on staff regularly wore only robes and not trousers, nor that they all knew that he disliked comments on his appearance, they all still felt some peculiar compulsion to remark on his robes. At least Minerva had only said that she liked the drape of his over-robe, rather than express surprise at his choice of attire. Actually, the comments he had received were all positive, but they were foolish, nonetheless. Vector had told him that robes became him and he should wear them more frequently, Pomona had practically swooned over the contrasting braid and piping and had insisted on fingering it before he could manage to back out of the way, and Sharon had said that those layers were much more attractive than the ones he usually wore. Fortunately, although Sarah Duffy had looked at him with large round eyes when he stepped into the Great Hall, unable to tear her gaze from him, she had been wise enough not to say anything.

One saving grace of the meal was that he had been able to sit beside Poppy, since they had come in together and there were several free seats when they arrived, and

Filius was on his other side. They had had quite an agreeable meal with pleasant conversation. He hoped that he would be that lucky for the next two weeks. The worst of the holiday meals were those when whether by happenstance or coercion, he had to sit between two students, especially ones not in Slytherin...Albus had occasionally insisted on seating charts when he was Headmaster, and would find it amusing to seat him between a Hufflepuff and a Gryffindor. Severus didn't know whether Albus intended to torture him or the students, but none of them were ever comfortable, and the students would invariably gobble down their meals in great haste and leave before pudding. He was just as glad not to have to attempt conversation with them, but there was also something about those occasions that had always left him with a peculiar empty feeling...which he would quickly overcome by taking points from someone or, when that wasn't convenient, going outdoors and blasting some plants or rocks. This holiday might prove to be a bit less unpleasant than others...especially if he were able to sit beside Poppy at most meals.

There were only a little over a dozen students staying over the Easter holiday that year, fewer than usual, and most of them were staying to take advantage of the time to revise for their NEWTs. Other than Draco, only four members of Slytherin House were staying at the castle, three other seventh-years and one sixth-year. Although there was still the possibility that any of them might get up to something they shouldn't, Severus felt comfortable leaving for the evening without asking Ouellette to check on them. Of course, if they did step out of line at all, they would all rue it.

Before he left the Great Hall, Severus had stopped and told Minerva that he would be out of the castle that evening and was unsure of when he would return. When she gave him a questioning look, he told her that he was meeting her nephew. She had nodded, and Severus could see that she was restraining herself from admonishing him to take care, which he appreciated...both the sentiment and the restraint. He supposed that she couldn't help but worry. He had already promised Poppy that he would not return to the castle alone, on the very off chance that someone might be lurking by the gates waiting for him, and that if it got too late and he couldn't Apparate, he would stay the night and return in the morning. Given that he didn't want to embarrass himself by Splinching, that was an easy assurance to give her. He doubted, though, that it would be necessary to wait until morning...unless, of course, Gareth had too much to drink to be able to accompany him to the gates. In that case, he might be able to borrow a broom and bypass the gates that way, but he had promised Poppy he wouldn't return alone, and he would keep that promise.

Rath waved to him from across the grounds, and Severus acknowledged him with a nod. He was displeased to see Rath walk toward the drive to meet him on the way down to the gates. It was fine that Hagrid's assistant took his responsibilities seriously, but he disliked checking out with anyone but the Headmistress. Even that was galling, if he thought about it too long.

"Good evening, Professor Snape."

"Rath."

"Out for the evening?"

Severus nodded. "I have informed the Headmistress."

"Okay. Just, after Monday, if I see someone, I ask. Professor McGonagall wasn't happy with me."

"So I gathered."

They reached the gates. Gareth wasn't there. Severus resisted the urge to check his watch.

"Meetin' someone?"

"I Apparate at seven," Severus replied. "Have you seen anyone waiting at the gates?"

"No. I keep an eye out. Just in case. Haven't seen anyone. But I've only been out about fifteen minutes."

Severus nodded. He reached inside his cloak, looking for the watch pocket inside his over-robe. Waistcoats were much more convenient for watches, he thought as he found the watch and drew it out. He frowned, trying to make out the watch face in the dying sunlight and the light from the lanterns outside the gates. Minerva had had new lanterns installed on either side of the gates, and there were now Charmed light globes edging the drive, but they weren't meant for reading by. Rath pulled out his wand and cast a *Lumos*, providing enough light for Severus to see that it was two minutes to seven. He snapped the watch shut.

"You are remaining at the castle for the entire holiday?" Severus asked, trying to pass the time.

"Hagrid's visiting his lady-friend on the weekend, so I'll be here then, but I'll be taking a few days to visit a cousin in Cork next week."

Severus nodded.

"What about you, Professor?"

"I anticipate a quiet holiday here," Severus said.

"We can hope it will be a quiet one," Rath said. "Those vigilantes, they better know to stay away from Hogwarts."

"Indeed." Severus placed his hand on the gate. It appeared that Gareth expected him to Apparate to the house. "I may be back this evening, but I might return in the morning."

Rath nodded. "Good night."

Severus breathed the password and the gate opened to him. He noted that Rath still stood watchfully, his wand out. Severus gave a curt nod as he shut the gate. He drew his own wand and Disapparated with a snap.

He arrived a few feet from the McGonagall house front gate. Taking a quick step back, he looked around. No one within view. There were lights on in the house, and the lamp beside the door was lit already. Severus slid his wand into his pocket, opened the short gate, and walked up to the front door. Before he could knock, however, the door opened. He froze, hand still raised.

"Professor Snape. My son said you would be arriving at seven. You are prompt." She opened the door further and stepped back.

"Professor Gamp." Severus swallowed and nodded, but he didn't take a step forward.

"My son has been unavoidably delayed, but he should not be very much longer."

Severus tried to draw some saliva into his dry mouth. "I can wait here. Or go to the Broomsticks," he said, taking a step back. "He can meet me there. Or I can return. Or I should go back to Hogwarts..."

"His dinner is waiting for him in the kitchen," Gertrude said. "He is expecting you here."

Severus shook his head slightly.

"These are not safe times for you to be wandering about Hogsmeade in the dark, Professor," Gertrude said.

She let go of the door and took another step back, then nodded at him and turned around, casually, deliberately, and walked away down the hall. Severus stepped across the threshold, and as he did, he noted that Professor Gamp paused for a moment, just a slight hesitation, then she continued into the sitting room. Severus closed the door

behind him, uncertain what to do next.

He'd stood there a minute or two when Gertrude reemerged from the sitting room. "You may hang your cloak on the hall tree there, if you wish, Professor."

Severus's fingers felt stiff and cold as he fumbled with the cloak's hooks and with the silver clasp at the throat. He went to put the cloak over one of the curved wooden arms of the tree, but it slipped off and fell in a heap on the floor. He bent and picked it up, this time successfully hooking the back of his cloak over the hooked arm. He looked over his shoulder, but Professor Gamp had disappeared again.

No more comfortable than he had been standing there with his cloak on, Severus sat gingerly on the broad walnut bench beside the hall tree. He almost jumped out of his skin when Gertrude spoke again.

"Join me in the sitting room, Professor."

Severus just caught a glimpse of the grey-haired witch as she vanished back into the sitting room. His feet were leaden as he walked down the hall, which felt interminably long until he reached the open doorway, when it seemed far too short.

Gertrude was sitting in a high-backed armchair next to a lit floor lamp with a stained-glass lampshade, a book and a short glass on a small table to her left, her wand resting beside them. Severus took a tentative step into the room.

"Sit." The single word was issued softly, more an invitation than a command.

Taking a full breath...perhaps the first full breath since he had walked up the path to the house...Severus stepped over to the sofa and sat down on the end farthest from Professor Gamp.

"You have eaten, Professor?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you care for a drink? Scotch? Brandy? Whiskey? Irn-Bru? Pumpkin juice?"

"No, thank you." His voice cracked like a boy's. He swallowed.

Gertrude picked up her own glass and took the last swallow of her drink, then she set down the glass, twitched a finger, and a green bottle sailed across the room. It settled on the table, and she flicked her finger again to uncork the bottle. She picked it up and poured a half glass of whiskey, then recorked the bottle manually.

"Gareth apologised for his tardiness," Gertrude said. "His appointment at the Ministry was late, and they were . . . there were more details to discuss than he had anticipated."

Severus straightened more. "He is not in any trouble, is he?"

Gertrude quirked a small grin. "No. Not any that will last." When Severus continued to look at her, she added, "He had a commission from them. He refused it in a rather colourful and decisive manner. His refusal and his attitude gave them concern. It was a somewhat sensitive project...in their view."

"I see." Severus didn't see, but at least it didn't seem that Gareth was being detained in any connection with the vigilante attacks.

"You're sure you won't have a drink, Professor?" Gertrude asked.

Severus shook his head slightly.

"Twenty-year-old Irish whiskey," Gertrude said in reply to his ambiguous response, Summoning a glass for him. She poured a few ounces into the glass, then sent it drifting smoothly over to him. It hovered a moment before he reached out and took it.

"Thank you."

Gertrude nodded. "You and my son have become close friends."

As smooth as the whiskey was, Severus had trouble swallowing it, but he succeeded in suppressing his cough. He nodded. "He is a good man."

"Indeed. Yet . . . this . . . friendship surprises me."

Severus nodded again. "It surprised me."

"I remember a time when I was persuading him that your second chance was not another injury to our family," Gertrude said.

Severus averted his eyes. "I am sure it felt so," he said softly.

"Even as I persuaded my son, I was persuading myself of it."

Severus swallowed and tried to return Gertrude's unblinking gaze, but failed, lowering his eyes to look at his glass, which he turned in his hands.

"There are few acts of that time in my life that I . . . that I . . . that pain me more than that one," Severus said, his voice low.

"Indeed?"

Severus lifted the glass to his lips, but didn't drink. He slowly lowered it again and raised his head. "I do not deserve your forgiveness, Professor," he said softly, gathering courage, "and I do not seek it, but . . ." He swallowed and blinked. "But if I could give my arm, both arms, all my limbs, to restore to you all . . . all that I took from you and your family when I . . . when I entered your home that day and raised my wand against you . . . if I could do that, I would." Severus looked at her, not daring to blink, or even to move his head, lest the tears threatening to rise in his eyes overflowed, and he knew it was her right to weep, not his, and that his tears could be misread or be coercive, if not be humiliating to him...though at that moment, he believed that any humiliation he felt could only be cleansing, though not redemptive, and would certainly be no recompense to the witch who sat across from him.

"I would not demand even a finger of you," Gertrude said, "no matter what amount of restoration such a thing might achieve."

"I would undo it, if I could."

Gertrude shook her head and took a swallow of whiskey. "No, if you could do that now, I would not permit it. Oh, twenty years ago, I would have been happy enough to have my body whole, to remain here in Hogsmeade, to have my boy to raise in this home, to have at least a part of the life I had hoped for. But I see now," she said with a shake of her head, "that it is too late, too late now, and too much has changed, and I would not alter the present."

"I . . . I am sorry." He lowered his head, closing his eyes.

"You have done great good," Gertrude said.

"There are no scales weighing good and evil," Severus said. "Whatever good I may have done, the other, it still remains. You know that. You live with it."

"You say you don't seek my forgiveness," Gertrude began.

Severus shook his head. "I don't. I wouldn't dare to," he whispered.

"Dare it or not, you do have it. Come, Severus, look at me now." She waited as he raised his head, his face pale but for his flushed cheeks and his black eyes. "Severus, do you hear me? You have it. Not just your fresh start, but forgiveness. Mine, whatever measure of forgiveness is mine to give you, you have it."

Severus stared at her, uncomprehending.

"You have had my forgiveness for longer . . . for longer than you may imagine," Gertrude said, draining her glass and setting it on the table beside her.

Severus closed his eyes and shook his head.

"*Comfort* with you, that is another question entirely," Gertrude continued drily, "but my forgiveness, you have, and I know that in any matter involving Hogwarts or its Headmistress, you may be trusted. You have done well, Slytherin magus. My son..." Her words were interrupted by a crack of Apparition in the hallway. "Ah, well, there he is now." She stood and pocketed her wand. "Perhaps we may continue our conversation at another time."

Severus looked up at her. "Professor . . ."

"I will not stay. Have a good evening, Professor."

"Thank you." Severus blinked and stood. "Thank you."

Gareth stepped into the sitting room. "Hi! Sorry I was so late, Mum." He kissed her cheek. "Got a few knickers in a twist, I'm afraid. Didn't really want to calm them down at all, but I remembered what you said, and so I smoothed over a few ruffled feathers...but I didn't back down or compromise my own position."

"Good lad," Gertrude said with a gentle smile. "I need to gather a few things from my study, but then Gluffy and I will be off for the estate again...unless you would like me to stay."

"No, that's fine. Say 'hi' to Rosemary and Alroy...and Quin, too, if he's there. I'll try to stop by tomorrow afternoon."

"Your supper's in the kitchen," Gertrude said as she stepped into the hall.

"Great! I'm starving!" Gareth turned to Severus. "I am sorry I wasn't at the gates, Severus, and I'm glad you came anyway. I hope . . . I hope everything was all right."

Severus nodded. "Fine." He picked up his glass of whiskey and drank it off.

"If I'd any idea I'd be this late, I'd not have said seven," Gareth said, leading Severus across to the kitchen. "I thought I would have already been home and had my supper long before this."

"It was . . . unfortunate. I wish you had contacted me directly. I would have stayed at Hogwarts and waited...or we could have put this off to another day."

"No way to do that, mate," Gareth said, opening the oven and Levitating a casserole dish out and onto the counter.

"You managed with your mother well enough...and I know you're not on the Floo-Network," Severus said irritably.

"We have another way to communicate." Gareth pulled a bottle of white wine from a low cupboard.

"You could have sent me a Patronus," Severus complained.

"That would hardly be discreet in the middle of the Ministry, now, would it? Especially with all those suspicious Department of Mysteries folk around. It was an unpleasant meeting, Snape, and I have apologised for being late...I'm trying to shake off the mood it put me in. I'd appreciate it if you would be kind enough to give me a pass on this one. I don't make a habit of standing you up, after all...and I do remember waiting for you in a very cold rain outside of your house one night, myself."

"Yes, yes, of course." Severus nodded. What kind of man was he, he wondered, to receive forgiveness for a grave injury, for terror, pain, and irreparable harm, and moments later, be churlish in the face of an apology for a minor...and inadvertent...quotidian slight. "I am sorry your visit to the Ministry was so unpleasant."

"I expected it to be that, just not for it to go on so long," Gareth said, pouring two glasses of wine. "You at all hungry? You want some? It's a kind of vegetarian moussaka stuff that Gluffy makes Mum. It's really good, and there's plenty."

Severus sat down at the table. "You're mother's vegetarian?"

"Not really...she does eat fish. Comes from living on the island for so many years, I guess. Gluffy would go to the estate to fetch supplies, but not very frequently, and I guess he didn't usually get meat, or if he did, he'd just get what could stay fresh between visits. Eventually, he stopped bringing meat back to the island at all. Mum did keep a few goats for their milk, some that Aberforth gave her, but she could never bear to eat them, not even after they stopped giving milk."

"What about the kids?" Severus asked.

"Aberforth took some of them sometimes, I guess. They used charms, though, so the nannies would always give milk without having to have kids every spring, so they didn't have many of them anyway."

"Hmm."

"So, want some?" Gareth sat down and dished out some of the casserole.

"No, thank you, though it does look good. I have probably had more to eat than I needed today," Severus said.

Gertrude stepped into the kitchen. "I'm off. Enjoy your evening."

"Good night, Mum. Sorry I wasn't here for supper with you."

"We'll have time next week after I'm back," Gertrude said. "Good night, Professor Snape. Come safely home tonight."

Severus stood and nodded. "Thank you. Please give my regards to Alroy, and to his wife."

Gertrude nodded. She put her hand into her pocket, grasping her wand, and then she was gone with a crack. A moment later, a second crack came from the hallway as her house-elf followed her.

Chapter Ninety-Seven: Another Splash of Whiskey

Chapter 98 of 118

Severus and Gareth spend the evening together, and Severus relaxes after his earlier encounter with Madam Gamp.
Thursday, 1 April 1999.



Chapter Ninety-Seven: Another Splash of Whiskey

Thursday, 1 April 1999

"So what was this commission you refused?" Severus asked, taking a sip of the wine Gareth had poured him.

Gareth, his mouth full, shook his head. He swallowed, then said, "I can't tell you exactly what it was, oaths and all that, but after doing a little preliminary work on it...more than a little, actually, once I'd started...I decided it wasn't the sort of thing I want to be doing. They wouldn't tell me everything about the project until I agreed to take the commission, but they gave me enough preliminary information for me to know it wasn't for me."

"Why not? It would have paid well, I'd think, and be more interesting than some of the things that Hermione's said you've worked on."

"Aside from the fact that those Aurors dragged Mum from her own home into the Ministry on the flimsiest of pretexts earlier this week, which got my ire up with them all, I didn't approve of the project. It was antithetical to my principles," Gareth said, picking up his wine glass, "not to mention the fact that they would have their own Arithmancers reading over my work and making me do it over if they felt I wasn't using their data in the way they wanted."

"Why didn't they just have their own Arithmancers doing it, then?"

Gareth shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe to convince themselves that they were being impartial and weren't interested in skewing things...which they obviously were. Aside from that, none of their Arithmancers are as good as I am, and Mum is leagues ahead of any them." Gareth took in Severus's expression. "What? Am I supposed to be modest here or something? I *am* better, and they know it, and they knew that if they got me, they'd get Mum, as well, and she's the best Arithmancer in a couple centuries. But even if the Ministry hadn't wanted to play with the data they were giving me . . ." Gareth shook his head. "I wish I could tell you more, mate, but when I realised what the commission would really be aimed at doing, and that they wanted to use Arithmetical charms, as well, to influence certain things . . . I just don't think the Ministry should be messing with it, particularly when, well, I can't say."

"Sounds like typical Ministry business, then. Nothing's changed with the war and with Shackbolt as Minister."

"I don't know as I'd go that far, but this was unwise, even if what they wanted to do was possible. So anyway, how was your first day of the holiday?"

Severus smiled. "Very good. Poppy and I had a date during which we managed to remain uninterrupted...other than by your owl, anyway. We spent the entire afternoon together. I think things are going well for us."

"I hadn't thought you'd dressed up just for me," Gareth said with a grin. "That's great to hear. You have plans with her for over the holiday? Going anywhere with her?"

"Nothing very specific. She's going on that witches' holiday to the North Sea. I'm not happy about her being gone, but I hope she has a good time."

"I think that Mum is finally beginning to look forward to it," Gareth said, dishing more vegetable moussaka onto his plate. "I hope that she enjoys it. They have magnificent food, musical performances, saunas, magical mud baths, mild recreational potions...though I don't know as that would be anything Mum would do at any time...and all kinds of massages. They even show Muggle films in the evenings, and they have live performances, too."

"Recreational potions?"

"Very mild ones. They have a special dispensary for draughts, combustibles, and lotions of various sorts. Nothing strong or addictive. Just mild euphoria elixirs, pleasure enhancers, and aphrodisiacs, things like that."

"Hmph. I am surprised that Poppy would go to such a place."

"Aunt Minerva used to go, too. It's not as though everyone walks around stoned all the time or something, Snape. I somehow can't imagine Poppy taking any of the recreational potions, anyway...or Aunt Minerva, for that matter."

"Neither can I," Severus said, frowning. "What about these massages? What are they?" He remembered his paranoid fantasy of handsome young wizards feeding Poppy grapes and massaging her toes.

"Oh, they have all sorts. There's an entire pamphlet describing them. Everything from just your basic, twenty-minute back massage to ones using special oils or mineral scrubs and such. And there are ones using Charmed implements of various sorts, as well as different kinds of Healing massages by specialists, which are aimed at specific ailments. Those might be good for Mum and for Rolanda, especially. They even do sensual and erotic massages, and even couples' massages."

"Sensual and erotic massages?"

"Yeah, they're the most expensive, aside from the specialised Healing massages. The sensual massages are, well, sensual, but they don't proceed to any genital massage, and the erotic ones, you can imagine what those involve, I'm sure."

"They have prostitutes there?" Severus was clearly appalled.

"No, well, I suppose they might, but the erotic massage is just massage...it may bring a person to climax, but they only use their hands and arms, and there's no penetration of any sort. If you want anything more than that, it's not part of the resort's services."

"And you approve of your mother going to a place like that?"

"Sure. Why not? I doubt very much that she'd, you know, get one of the more intimate massages. It just doesn't seem like her, but it's none of my business, is it? It's certainly nothing I want to think about. Mum needs a good holiday, some entertainment, some rest and relaxation, and some time with her friends. This will be good for her."

"Poppy is going."

"Yeah, we've established that." Gareth held up the wine bottle. "More?"

Severus shook his head. "I'll have another splash of that whiskey your mother gave me, though."

"You know, it's not some debauched house of ill-repute they're going to," Gareth said, Summoning the whiskey bottle from the sitting room. "It's perfectly respectable. It just offers a very wide range of services, refreshment, and entertainment. No one has to indulge in all of them...or in any of them."

"But Poppy could decide she wanted a massage," Severus said.

"Yeah, she could, and it would be good for her...and if you're worried about what sort of massage she might request, remember who you're talking about. How comfortable do you think that Poppy would be with a stranger massaging her in that way? I wish I'd never mentioned the erotic massages...I should have known how you'd react." Gareth poured Severus a glass of whiskey and pushed it across the table to him.

"It's not *your* lover who's going off to that resort," Severus retorted.

"No, but Aunt Minerva's gone without Uncle Albus, and he's never had a problem with it. He knows what the place is like, too, because they've both been there."

"That's different. They're married. Besides, I can't imagine Minerva getting a massage from a stranger unless it was for health purposes. She certainly wouldn't want one of those erotic ones."

"Mum used to go before Dad died. In fact, I think this may be the first time she's gone since that year."

"Again, different. They were married, too."

"Just don't think about it anymore, Severus. I think you're creating a problem where there isn't one and giving yourself heartburn for nothing."

"Hmph. You don't understand at all."

"I do. You have a talent for focussing on things that will make you miserable," Gareth said. "Think about her having a drink by the pool with the other witches, or taking a walk on the beach with them, watching a Muggle film, going to a chamber concert, eating crêpes flambé, things like that. That's all much more likely. Besides, if you two have a great relationship, nothing else she could do at the resort matters. And if the physical side of things is good between you, even if she were to get some kind of massage, it wouldn't be anything compared to what you have together. It'd just be a pathetic substitute even if it were one of the sensual ones. No, she'll just miss you and be glad to see you when she gets back, I'm sure."

"I suppose you're right," Severus said grudgingly, taking a sip of whiskey.

"I am," Gareth said, putting another forkful of moussaka in his mouth.

"Besides, we didn't agree that we'd be sexually exclusive, just that we wouldn't have affairs...and a massage, even an erotic one, isn't even really sex, I suppose," he said, turning his whiskey glass in his hands. "And Poppy did say that she wouldn't have sex with anyone else whilst we're together."

"Which was it, you wouldn't be sexually exclusive or you would be?" Gareth asked, puzzled.

"She said she didn't expect it of me...though she doesn't want me to have an affair...but that she didn't think she would have sex with someone else."

"Sounds like she wants sexual exclusivity, but she doesn't want to demand it of you in case you can't manage that, and so she doesn't want to know if you do have sex with someone else."

"Obviously she wouldn't want to hear about it, but I wouldn't do it, anyway."

"Does she know that?"

"I've told her, but . . . it's odd: sometimes I think she thinks I should have sex with other witches just for the experience or something. As though I should just work my way through all the witches of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade or whatever."

"She may just be a bit insecure about your feelings for her. She may think it's safer for her heart if she tells you that she doesn't expect you to be sexually exclusive. She may also think that you want to sow your wild oats now since you didn't have much of that sort of thing when you were younger, and she doesn't want to drive you away by demanding more of you."

"I don't want to sow any oats, and I think it's a slippery slope from having a single tryst to having an affair, and it wouldn't be fair to her. Besides, I'm happy with Poppy. Why would I want to have sex with someone else? It actually bothers me that she says she doesn't expect me to be sexually exclusive."

"It does sound as though you're serious about her."

"I am. Very. Very serious."

"That's good. Do you know how she feels?"

"I'm not completely certain. I know that she's fairly serious about seeing whether we can have a relationship, and she says that she's happy with me. We had a wonderful afternoon. And I feel that I can be more open with her than I've ever been with anyone else, and I like that. I trust her in a way I've never trusted anyone before."

Gareth chuckled. "Then don't you think that your jealousy about some possible massage from a stranger is silly?"

Severus shrugged and gave a crooked grin. "I suppose."

"Want to go into the sitting room?"

"Sure. You had something specific you wanted to talk about, didn't you?"

Gareth picked up the bottle of whiskey. "Yeah. We need to have some kind of lease. I want to get the new telephone lines installed, and there are a couple other Muggle things that need doing. Anyway, I think it's best we have something in writing so that if I have to sign something Muggle, I can do it with some authority."

"I wouldn't care...it's up to you what you need." Severus followed Gareth into the sitting room.

"Yeah, well, the other thing is, you don't need a telephone...or at least, you've not wanted one. I was thinking that I should bear the cost of it. It's for my computer, after all."

"But it will remain even if you and your computer don't. We can split the cost," Severus said.

"Okay, if you want. They'll have to run a new line. Your old phone line just went to the kitchen...do you want a phone in the kitchen, too?"

Severus shrugged. "I can't imagine who I'd ring up, but sure. My mother had it taken out a few months after my father left. We never missed it."

"The other thing is that I had someone come over and look at the wiring. I thought that I might need a separate, I don't know, electrical whatchamacallit for my computer. Anyway, Quin referred me to an electrician who does work in one of his amusement parks, Carl Barnes. He's a Squib, so I didn't have to go around hiding things or keep the house-elves out of sight. Carl's going to do a new electric whasit for the computer, and he said that most of the wiring isn't bad, but we should have the fuse box replaced with circuit breakers, and the outlets in the bathroom should all be replaced."

"Do what needs to be done."

"Okay. We've done a lot of decorating downstairs. I hope you don't mind, but we got rid of some of the ugly bookshelves you had in your sitting room..."

"As long as you replaced them with something else to hold my books, and you kept the books in order, I don't care."

"I think you'll like what we did. The new bookcases are on tracks so you can slide them back and forth in front of each other, and we put a couple new ones in the dining room, as you had mentioned you wanted, and there's a sort of free-standing revolving bookcase in the living room, as well. Now you have more wall space in the living room for pictures and such. I thought we might even put in a fireplace on the outer wall and you could connect to the Floo-Network, if you wanted. That would be easy work for the house-elves."

"You'd still need Muggle permits and inspections."

"Nah, there's ways around that," Gareth said with a wink. "They won't notice a thing."

"A fireplace might be nice. Don't put it on the Floo-Network, though. I need to think about that."

"Right. We also took out that hideous chandelier...sorry, mate, but it really was...you had in the living room. We can replace it if you want. When Carl does the electric work, we could wire one in."

"I used that when I had visitors...pureblood visitors...and then when Pettigrew lived there, we only used candles."

"That explains some of the burn marks, soot, and wax drippings the elves cleaned up all over the house." Gareth shook his head. "I'm sorry you had to live like that."

Severus shrugged. "I didn't care. I had one Charmed lamp that I kept in my bedroom, so I could read comfortably at night. The rest of my life was fairly uniformly miserable, particularly when Pettigrew was there. Whether I used candles, torches, Charmed lamps, or electric lights...that made no difference to me."

"No wonder you say you hate the place, man. I would, too. You'll like it after I'm finished with it."

"I might like it so much, I might just eject you," Severus said with a smirk.

"I'm prepared for that. You warned me of that from the beginning. Have you decided whether you're staying on at Hogwarts next year?"

Severus nodded and took a swallow of whiskey. "I am. I told Minerva this morning."

"Well, maybe you won't kick me out just yet, then...unless you want the space to yourself during the summer, of course."

"Was there anything else?"

"I thought I might make it a surprise, but I think too many surprises might not be healthy for you yet," Gareth said with a smile. "I'm having the downstairs loo completed. The house-elves can do that, too."

"All this is still sounding expensive, even with house-elves doing a lot of it."

"I don't mind. I'll tell you how much I spend...and if there's anything I do that you don't like and didn't approve to begin with, I'll pay for it myself. Like the lavatory. Consider it a gift."

"No . . . we can split the cost of the loo, I suppose. It would be nice to have it. Besides, it's not real money to me, anyway. It's just rent you're not paying, and since that's income I never anticipated, I am the real beneficiary of all this work you're doing. But you'll have the house at least for next year, except perhaps over the summer."

"Good. I want to get a lot of work done over the holiday. After we get more done, you should come by and take a look at it."

"I will," Severus said with a nod. "It's actually good to know this is all being done. I'd never have done it myself. I would have just gone on hating the house."

Gareth laughed. "I'm glad, then. It will be good for you...I hope it will, anyway."

"What does your mother think about all this? All the money you're spending?"

"It's my money to spend." Gareth twitched a shoulder. "I think she was a little dismayed at first that I wanted someplace Muggle other than the bedroom at Melina's, but I explained how this would be convenient for both of us, with you at Hogwarts most of the year and everything."

Severus nodded. He'd had the feeling when he'd spoken with Professor Gamp that she had been going to say something to him about Gareth, but he didn't know what. She had said that she'd forgiven him...which he was still trying to understand...but she had implied that she still wasn't entirely comfortable with him, and he could understand that quite easily. It would have been unnatural if she were completely at ease with him after the terror and injury he had inflicted on her, no matter how long ago it was.

"Does it bother her that it's my house?" Severus asked.

"She thought that something in London would be more convenient for me, maybe something near Diagon Alley, but I explained why this made sense for me." Gareth reached for the whiskey bottle. "Another?"

Severus hesitated, then nodded. Gareth splashed a good amount into Severus's glass, then poured out more for himself.

"How'd your potion turn out the other night?"

"We brewed two, one with a new hybrid Memory Plant that Professor Birnbaum supplied. They were both effective, the new one particularly so. I sent details to him and to your uncle."

"That's good. I'm sure they'll both be interested in the results. What are you doing next week?" Gareth asked.

Severus shook his head. "I don't know. I plan to spend time with Poppy, as much as possible before the staff returns for the counselling training. She's away until Thursday, though."

"Well, remember my cousin Morgana? She'll be in the country for a few weeks. She's arriving Monday morning. She's going to be busy at the Ministry much of the time, but she'll be staying here for the first few days...she's dividing her time amongst various relatives...and I was wondering if you'd like to go out with us one evening. Maybe Tuesday. I think you'd find each other interesting."

"I don't know . . ."

"Come on, Snape. It won't be a late night. Morgana will still be adjusting from the time difference. If you're worried about the vigilante, we'll go somewhere Muggle, though I think we'd be safe enough in the Three Broomsticks, as long as you don't go wandering off alone."

"I don't like going out and being . . . being trapped into staying out because I can't return on my own."

"You just say the word, Snape, and I'll accompany you back to the gates. I'll try to stay Apparition-capable that night. Or we might be able to get some Portkeys made for us, since we're planning in advance. I thought I'd invite Gwen Burns, too, so we wouldn't be leaving Morgana on her own while I was with you watching your back."

"Gwen Burns?"

"Yeah. I ran into her a couple weeks ago in the Clypeum in Glasgow. We had a sort of thing back when I was an apprentice, eons ago. We had lunch last week, and then I met her for a drink last night, and we may rekindle something." Gareth smiled. "We had a rather nice good-night kiss last night."

"I remember her. She was in seventh-year NEWT-level Potions the first year I taught. She was one of the better Potions students in her year. Showed some respect, too. Ravenclaw. Rather pretty, but not entirely silly."

"I'd hope not," Gareth said with a laugh. "I don't know if there's anything between us, but there were a few sparks, I thought. She broke up with her husband a few years ago, so it's been long enough so that she's not still on the rebound, but I don't know if she's interested in anything more than some casual dating."

"Does she have kids?"

Gareth shook his head. "One reason they broke up, I guess. She wanted them, but he didn't or couldn't or something, and, to paraphrase her, she'd rather be on her own than stay with him if she wasn't at least going to get a family out of it. I guess her husband was an ass. She doesn't have anything nice to say about him."

"Who'd she marry?"

"Polyphemus Melliflua."

"Why on earth would any woman marry him?" Severus asked, an expression of disgust on his face.

"I think that Gwen felt that time was passing, and he asked her, so she married him." Gareth shrugged.

"She is not as intelligent as I had believed, then," Severus said with a snort, remembering the Slytherin who had been two years behind him at Hogwarts. "Polyphemus had a squint, a fat stomach, spindly arms and legs, a bulbous nose, went bald on top at nineteen but kept a long, stringy ponytail, and he wiped his nose on his sleeve. Constantly. And those are the kindest things I can think to say about him."

"Was he a Death Eater?" Gareth asked.

"No, but like all the Mellifluas, he supported pureblood supremacy...as if he were a shining example of it." Severus shook his head and took a swig of whiskey.

Gareth frowned. "I hope that Gwen doesn't share those beliefs."

"Not likely...even if she was fool enough to marry a Melliflua, at least she got rid of him."

"So, will you come out with us Tuesday?"

"All right. As long as you're clear with Morgana that you're not setting her up on a date with me," Severus said.

"She'll think there's something odd if I put it that way, Snape, as if there's something wrong with you. But I'll mention that you're seeing someone. Besides, I really doubt that she's interested in striking up a new relationship here when she's returning to Australia in a few weeks."

"She might want a fling."

"It takes two to 'fling,'" Gareth said, "so if you don't do any flinging, she won't, either. Not only that, but you're presuming that you'll find each other attractive, and you might very well not. I do think you two might have some interests in common, though, and I really want her to meet my friends here. I think we could have a nice evening together."

"I should still check with Poppy, see if it's all right..."

"She's not your Mum, Severus...and even if she were, you're too old to need permission to go out with friends. I'd understand it if she were going to be here and you wanted to make sure that she hadn't already made plans for the two of you...or if you wanted to invite her along, which would be great...but otherwise, it's just . . . weird, mate. I don't think she's the sort of witch who wants to approve your social schedule, and if she were, I think that would get very wearing very quickly."

"I don't want her to think I'm dating when her back is turned."

"She won't, not unless you give her reason to. Besides, she knows Morgana, she knows me, she probably remembers Gwen. I don't think she'll have any worries about it. Unless, of course, you don't trust yourself," Gareth said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Maybe your feelings for Poppy aren't as strong as you're telling yourself they are, and you think you might be tempted to have, um, trysts with other witches. So by asking Poppy's permission, you're protecting yourself from that temptation in some way."

Severus rolled his eyes. "No. That's not it. Not that I might not be tempted," he admitted, "but I never would act on it."

"Then I think you're projecting your own jealousy and your own needs onto Poppy, and believe me, Snape, if Poppy thinks she has to get your permission every time she gets together with some friends who might include an attractive wizard or two, she's not going to put up with it for very long."

"I don't know . . ."

"There's a difference between keeping her informed and asking her permission, you know. Obviously, you want to respect her, but you don't need to go overboard."

"I know, but you're right: I would like to be able to tell her who she can spend time with. I know it's wrong and that she'd hate it, but I wish I could . . . could keep her on a

tether or something." Severus took the last swallow of whiskey and poured himself another. "Not that I think I'd like her as well if she let me do that, but I don't want her seeing Quin again. Even though she told him she's not interested in dating or sex and all that. I still wish I could tell her she can't see him alone. Or with him and other people when I'm not there."

"That would not go over well, Severus. They've been friends for longer than we've been alive. That would be just the thing to drive her away from you, if that's what you wanna do."

"I know. It makes me miserable no matter how I look at it." He drank off his whiskey. "Typical."

"You've had too much to drink, mate."

"Yeah." Severus put his empty glass on the table and blinked at it. "Might as well have another, then."

Gareth poured him one more small splash. "After this one, we'd better get you to bed."

"Not with you."

"No, not with me, Snape. We have a guest room. It's close to the loo, too, in case you're not feeling well in the night."

"I should get back to Hogwarts." Severus drained his glass and set it down with a clunk.

"I'm not letting you Splinch yourself, and I know I can't Apparate, and I'm not walking all the way up to the castle and back, either. Not tonight."

"Poppy will worry."

"Can you manage a Patronus?"

"I think so." Severus felt around in his robes, looking for his watch. "What time is it?"

"I dunno...not late." He yawned. "Maybe eleven, if that. But I'm knackered."

"I'll use the loo, then send a message to her."

"I'll make you a cup of coffee first. A nice strong cup. Help you focus."

Severus smiled. "I'll just think of Poppy. I can always focus on her."

"Still, a cup of coffee will help." Gareth pushed to his feet. "Meet me in the kitchen."

"Okay." Severus stood. He swayed a moment. "Gareth?"

Gareth paused in the doorway. "Yeah?"

"Would you want to share a bed with me?"

"Hypothetically, maybe. But that's not happening. Not tonight. And the time for more than just sharing a bed is past, my friend. Missed my window of opportunity, as they say."

"Good. You oughtn't try to seduce me. Poppy wouldn't like it."

Gareth laughed. "You need a cup of coffee, definitely. And tomorrow I'll pretend that you didn't say that." Still chuckling, Gareth left for the kitchen.

Author's Note: I hope you enjoyed this update, the last one for 2010. I thought it might be a nice little present for anyone who's been hankering for an update. I still haven't had any time to do any writing, life's been that hectic and my muse that distant, but perhaps in the New Year, I'll find some inspiration and some time and energy, and all at the same moment!

Chapter Ninety-Eight: Confidences and Promises

Chapter 99 of 118

The first Saturday of the holiday starts off with duelling practice. Severus has a bruised ego, so he drops by to see Poppy for a little TLC.



Chapter Ninety-Eight: Confidences and Promises

Saturday, 3 April 1999

"Professor Snape, if you've a moment," Minerva said as Severus stood, finished with breakfast and ready to leave the Great Hall.

"Of course, Headmistress," he acknowledged with a nod. He waited as she said something softly to Albus on her left.

Minerva made small talk as they crossed the Great Hall together.

"...and Professor Vector has been invited to present a paper to the European Conference of Arithmancers at their annual meeting in May," Minerva said as they crossed the entry hall and headed toward the staff room. "We will need someone to take her classes for a few days that week. I thought perhaps Miss Granger might take the third- and fourth-year classes, under Gareth's supervision, and that Gareth and Gertrude could take the others." Minerva opened the door to the staff room. "What would you think of that?"

"Professor Gamp and your nephew are eminently qualified," Severus replied, stepping into the staff room and over to the large fireplace. "I do not know whether Miss Granger has yet attained the necessary level of expertise to teach Arithmancy, but if it is for a few days and only the third- and fourth-years, and if McGonagall...Gareth...approves, I have no objections."

"Good . . . " Minerva closed the staff room door. "And you have no . . . no qualms about having Professor Gamp taking classes?"

Severus shook his head. "No, Headmistress. And such staffing matters are within your purview."

"Of course, but . . . I would not want you to be . . . hmm, how to put this . . . I would not wish you to be unduly discomfited by her presence."

"I understand that. However, the decision is yours and Professor Gamp's. If she has the time and desire to assist Hogwarts in this...and if your nephew does, as well...then that is sufficient for me," Severus said with a curt nod.

"Good. It may be that only Gertrude or Gareth will teach. I haven't spoken with either of them about it yet. I wished to speak with you first."

"Was that all, then? I have a potion brewing. It will require checking soon."

"Are you still coming to Albus's little party this evening?" Minerva asked, catching hold of his arm before he took another step toward the door.

"Yes."

"I actually wanted to warn you about it . . ."

"What? He has some Muggle party games planned?" Severus asked, an expression of distaste on his face. "I believe I could survive them."

"No, that is, yes, he has, but I thought you ought to know that Gertrude will be there this evening, as well."

Severus's eyes betrayed nothing. "Ah."

"I didn't want it to come as a surprise. Albus thought it might be good for you, I think, and that if Gertrude could attend dinner knowing you were going to be there, the reverse should be possible for you."

Severus nodded. "I appreciate the forewarning, Minerva. Dumbledore's assumptions are not always correct. However, I cannot very well excuse myself now."

"You could. If you require an excuse, I will find one for you."

Severus shook his head. "I have already told both Gareth and Poppy that I would attend. My absence would raise questions. I presume that Gareth thought that I knew the guest list when I told him I was attending, but I'm sure that he would understand if I changed my mind upon learning of it. Poppy, on the other hand, would not understand. She would require an explanation, and not merely a pretext invented by you. She would see through that. I have no explanation for her."

"You can simply tell her that you have no patience for Albus's games tonight. She will easily believe that."

Severus shook his head. "I cannot tell her the truth, but I will not tell her a lie. As tedious as Albus's idea of entertainment may be, she will not see it as a good reason to back out of an invitation at the last minute. She would try to dissuade me. Besides," he said, stepping back toward the door, "it is one evening. Only one evening. And perhaps Dumbledore's assumption was correct: if Professor Gamp can attend, knowing that I will be there, I certainly can. I appreciate the forewarning, Minerva, but I do not require anything more than that. I will see you this evening."

"Quin MacAirt will also be there," Minerva said as Severus's hand grasped the door handle.

"Will he?" Severus did not look at Minerva, but only shook his head slightly. "Thank you, Minerva."

"Severus!"

Severus turned.

"You will be all right?" Minerva asked. "I know that you've had difficulties with your memories of that time."

Severus stared at her for a moment. "I have. And I must learn to live with them without creeping into a hole somewhere whenever there are reminders of it. And if Professor Gamp . . . she lives with greater reminders than I, and if she can be gracious, then I can attempt to follow her example, in that and in other things. Have a good morning, Minerva."

"Aye, and you, Severus," Minerva said, watching as he left, slight puzzlement on her face.

Taking the stairs at a good clip, Severus rapidly made his way down to his dungeon laboratory. Dumbledore and his ideas, he huffed to himself. It was highly presumptuous of him to invite him and not mention that a woman whom he had permanently maimed and driven into exile would be there, as well. Had he learned of it a few days previously, he would have found some excuse to bow out of the party, despite any awkward questions that Poppy might ask. After his conversation with Professor Gamp, however, he believed he could find the wherewithal to attend. At least he knew where he stood with her now, and her forgiveness had eased some of his own discomfort, even if it hadn't completely banished his feelings of guilt.

Quin, on the other hand . . . there was no way that Albus could know how he felt about MacAirt. He likely thought the two should get to know each other better. MacAirt evidently felt gratitude toward him for his role in lifting the curse that had afflicted him for a quarter of a century. The Irish wizard probably wanted to get to know him a little...and hadn't a clue that the reverse was far from true.

Still, Gareth was right: Quin and Poppy had been friends for many years. It would be impossible to expect Poppy to drop his friendship now. And Poppy had always spoken highly of Quin, and Minerva liked him. Severus could certainly respect the loyalty that the other wizard had toward Minerva, and toward Gertrude and her family. He would try to avert any feelings of jealousy that might arise in him that evening.

Severus's potion seemed fine to him, though he would not know how effective it was until after it had completed brewing at the end of the day. Minerva was allergic to the standard Blood-Replenishing Potion, and the complex variant that her brother Murdoch had developed for her required a few rather esoteric ingredients and was rather fussy to brew. On and off over the years, Severus had played with Murdoch's formula, trying to come up with something simpler that didn't require such rare ingredients, but only on paper as an interesting intellectual exercise. While cleaning out his desk the previous afternoon, he had found some notes he had made a few years before, and he thought it might be a good project for the holiday, so he was working on a new variation of Blood-Replenishing Potion.

After checking his potion, Severus left for his duelling session with Flitwick. They were meeting in the Quidditch stadium since there were few people at the school and the morning a fine one, if a bit cool and breezy. It had rained hard the day before...Severus had had a wet walk up from the gates the previous morning when he'd returned

from Gareth's...but the skies had cleared overnight, and it was a pleasant day to spend outdoors practising spells.

By ten o'clock, Severus was revising his opinion of outdoor duelling practice after a soaking rain. His robe and trousers were covered in mud, his boots were caked with it, and even his vest was sticking to his back, the damp having seeped through his multiple layers of clothing after he had been thrown on his back a few times. In addition to being muddy, wet, and tired, Severus was deeply discouraged. His offensive spells were becoming increasingly effective, and he had refined and expanded his repertoire of them, but his wandless *Protego* was worse than a first-year's.

As Filius waved his wand, cleaning the mud from Severus's clothes and drying him out, he said, "Don't give up, Severus! Your offensive spells are truly excellent, and very imaginative! You need to think about your defence in an equally imaginative way."

"All it will take is one spell of Dumbledore's, and I'll be out," Severus said, "or looking like a fool. It will have to be a regular duel, Flitwick. I can't do this." He waved his wand and returned Flitwick's favour, cleaning his knees and the hems of his robes.

"You can, Severus! You have more than a month yet...almost two. You need to think about your defensive magic differently. You're still thinking of it as *Brotego*, I can tell."

"You saw what happened when I attempted to use the *Parlakkalkan*," Severus replied in disgust.

Filius giggled, remembering the psychedelic bubbles that had formed when his *Rictusempra* had hit Snape's shield charm. That was when Severus had landed on his back in the mud for the first time, doubled up in laughter. "Yes, that was not very effective," the Charms teacher agreed, trying to suppress his grin. They began walking across the pitch toward the exit.

Severus snorted. "*Not very effective*," he mocked. "It was more embarrassing than if I'd just let your spell hit me."

"Oh, now! Don't feel that way, Severus! We had fun this morning...you raised some very nice warts on my face!"

Severus smirked. "I suppose. If warts are nice."

"And that one you call the hotfoot, that really was very good...highly uncomfortable, but very good," Filius said encouragingly.

"Hope I didn't burn your soles," Severus said, his brow furrowing.

"No, no, they're fine now, just a bit tingly, not toasty," Filius replied. "Your conjured slime is becoming much more . . . more slimy, too! Very slippery and disgusting."

"None of that does me any good if I'm rolling around on the ground laughing like a crazed hyena," Severus grumped.

"Your spells are also getting through my *Protego* better...and that's with me using my wand! That's really something!"

"I suppose."

"You know . . . do you remember the duel I mentioned to you, the one between Albus and Malcolm McGonagall?"

"I remember you said something about it being exciting. And you mentioned a dragon."

"After lunch, come up to Ravenclaw Tower. I'll borrow Albus's Pensieve, we'll have a nice cup of tea together, and I'll let you see my memory of the duel. You'll enjoy that...and you might learn something about Albus's duelling style."

"That was a long time ago," Severus said. "His style's probably changed."

"But his basic personality hasn't," Filius said. "You can see how he reacts, what kinds of spells he prefers, how he moves...though he does move a little bit more slowly these days, I suppose."

"He was also using his wand, I presume."

"Yes, of course. As did Malcolm."

"I suppose it might be interesting to watch," Severus said with a sigh, "and possibly instructive."

"That's the spirit!" Filius said as excitedly as if Severus had leapt upon the idea with enthusiasm.

"You're sure your soles are all right?" Severus asked as they reached the front doors.

"Oh, yes! A little soak in some Epsom salts, and I'll be dancing again!" Filius said cheerily.

"Perhaps a potion..."

"Really, they're fine. Thank you, though!" Filius started up the main staircase, then stopped and turned, calling after Severus. "You might want to have Madam Pomfrey take a look at your back before you return to your rooms, however, Professor."

Severus looked up at Filius for a moment, then a smile flickered across his face. He nodded, and he joined Filius on the stairs. A visit to Poppy would be just the thing, even if it was his ego that needed soothing, and not his back.

"Thanks, Poppy," Severus said, rolling over onto his back. He smiled up at her as she sent the bottle of massage oil sailing over to her dresser. "Join me?"

"Well . . ." Poppy didn't hesitate long. She toed off her shoes and lay down on the bed beside him, then rolled onto her side, one arm around him. She kissed his bare shoulder.

Severus slipped his arm under her and pulled her closer, nuzzling her hair. "You always smell nice," he said, kissing her forehead lightly.

"It's probably the massage oil," Poppy said.

"No, it's you," Severus replied, putting his other arm around her. He kissed her again. "And it's not your soap, or your lotion, or your shampoo, either."

Poppy laughed. "All right." She gave him a squeeze. "I will have to speak with Filius, though. I still think he's being too rough with you."

Severus shook his head. "No, I told you, I'm trying some new defensive spells, that's all. He's just giving me a good work-out. Believe me, if I wanted, I could do far more damage to him than he's done to me...and I'm sure that if he hit me with a real hex, he'd have done more than just bruise my back a bit, or my ego."

"Real hex? What did he hit you with, if not a hex?"

Severus felt a blush creep over his cheeks. He cleared his throat slightly. *Rictusempra*," he muttered.

"What was that?"

"*Rictusempra*."

Poppy raised herself up on one elbow and looked down at him, bemusement on her face. "He tickled you?"

"It was a very strong *Rictusempra*. I fell over." Severus twitched a one-sided smile. "Into the mud. But I got him with my new gloop jinx, so we were even."

"Gloop?"

"Goosey slime. My dad used to call slimy stuff gloop. He'd clean it from the drains. I'd hold the bucket for him. I was about four."

Poppy grinned as she lay back down beside him. "So you named a spell for your dad."

"Mm."

"You never talk about your family."

"They're dead," Severus said. "No news from the dead."

"What was he like, your dad?"

Severus thought a moment, his eyes closed. "When I was small, I thought he was a tall man, but he wasn't very. Maybe five-ten or -eleven. Very strong, though. Slim, dark-haired, dark-eyed...not as dark-eyed as my mother, though. He loved music. He had a stereo . . . must be in the attic somewhere. Mum put his things away after he left us. He was a photographer. An amateur photographer. I used to watch him develop the photos in his darkroom. It was his magic, I thought, and . . ." Severus shrugged.

"You were close to your dad?"

"When I was very young, I suppose so, the way boys are. Looking up to their old man. But things between him and my mother weren't good. My grandfather probably played a role in that, though I was too young to know what it was. They always would fight after one of my grandfather's visits. Other times, too. The last year was the worst, the last year Dad was there, even though they didn't even fight as much. They barely spoke. It was as though . . . as though my dad was hiding inside himself. He began vanishing from our lives even before he left us."

"I'm sorry, Sev," Poppy said softly.

Severus shrugged. "It's a bit cool in here." He looked over at her and stroked her arm. "I could put my shirt on, or you could get out of this dress and crawl into bed with me."

Poppy responded by kissing his lips as her hands made their way to the front of his trousers. Her fingers made quick work of his buttons, and Severus lifted his hips for her to push his trousers down. She sat up, then stood and quickly took off her robe, leaving her only in her knickers and a light camisole. Severus removed his trousers and tossed them toward the dressing table bench, where his other garments were neatly folded, then he reached for Poppy and pulled her down into a kiss.

Still kissing and caressing each other, they crawled under the covers, pushing them down then drawing them back up.

"Mmm, Poppy . . ." Severus rolled them over together, and he came to rest on top of her. He kissed her once more, then raised his head to look down into her eyes. "I was wondering . . ."

"Yes?"

"I was thinking the other day . . . you're going on that holiday . . . you may not want to do very much else after that, but . . . I was thinking that we might do something, just the two of us. Go somewhere. For just a day or two."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea, Severus." Poppy gave him a squeeze. "Did you have anything in mind?"

"No . . . McGonagall's still working on the house at Spinner's End, so that's not an option, but I'd also thought you might like a real holiday somewhere. I don't know what you might enjoy, but something away from Hogwarts."

"There is that little problem of the madman running around attacking people," Poppy said. "I don't know as we should go anywhere where you might be an easy target, but perhaps something Muggle? Or somewhere that's a bit isolated and out-of-the-way?"

Severus nodded, rolling off of her but still keeping his arms around her. "I'd prefer that, anyway. And we wouldn't have to go far...just somewhere other than the school."

"You deserve a break from the place, too," Poppy agreed. "We should see if we can find some little Muggle hotel or inn, or whatever. A bed and breakfast, perhaps."

"Is there anywhere you'd like to go? London? There are things to do in London." He didn't particularly want to do any of them, but he didn't want Poppy bored and thinking that he was no fun to be with.

She shrugged. "I think something a bit more out-of-the-way would be more our cup of tea, don't you?"

"It would be more relaxing," Severus said, happy she wasn't set on a Muggle sight-seeing trip to London.

"Do you enjoy hillwalking?" Poppy asked tentatively.

"I haven't really done any, but I think I'd enjoy it with you," Severus said, remembering that Minerva had mentioned that Poppy was fond of hillwalking. "I'd still like to get away from the castle, though."

"Of course," Poppy said with a nod. "That goes without saying. You know . . . I have an idea of a place we might stay, but I need to check on it. If that doesn't pan out, we can look for something else, like a B and B, but somewhere away from school where we can have a real holiday, even if it's just for a few days."

Severus felt himself smiling, and he let out a contented sigh.

"When were you thinking of?" Poppy asked.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead." He hadn't wanted to get his hopes up and then have them dashed if Poppy hadn't wanted to go anywhere with him. "Sometime before the training, clearly."

"Next weekend? I'll be back on Thursday. We could take a long weekend, leave Friday, come back Sunday night or Monday morning? I can just get the same locum to be on-call for me from St. Giles, I think."

Severus's smile grew. "Yes. I will inform the Headmistress of our mutual absence from the castle."

"I can do that," Poppy said. "I need to speak with her, anyway...or whichever of us sees her first can tell her."

"I'd just as soon Dumbledore didn't know, though," Severus said.

"I'll avoid mentioning it if he's present. He is bound to notice we're both gone, though, and short of our sneaking away under cover of Disillusionment, some people might notice when we leave together. Of course, if you'd rather do that and not have anyone know we left together, we could probably make some kind of arrangements to leave separately."

"We can talk about it later," Severus said. He stretched slightly, then relaxed and rolled toward Poppy. "Thanks again for the massage, Poppy. I didn't really need it...not from the duel, anyway...but it felt wonderful."

"You're welcome." She caressed his face and ran her fingertips over his jawline. "I'm always happy to give you a massage, whether for Healing purposes or just for pleasure, you know that. I'm glad, though, when they're just for pleasure."

"I am, too . . . you know . . . I think that one of the first moments I had when I realised that you were really someone special to me...or could have realised it if I'd not been so preoccupied by so many other things...was when you gave me that massage last spring. After the business with Azkaban and the raid on the Malfoy manor. That massage, and then your offer to be *Obliviated*, it meant a lot to me, even then."

"I was very worried about you. I tried not to let it show, but it hurt even then to see you in such pain, both your physical pain and mental anguish. I just wanted to do whatever I could to ease it for you, at least a little."

"You did. You gave me one more good thing to hold on to, and I felt . . . I really felt that you were a friend. That . . . that you cared about me. And that it was more than just because you're the school matron and you were paid to care." Severus blushed and looked away. "Of course, you were just treating me, I suppose now. But it meant something to me at the time."

"Of course I was treating you, Sev. But you're right: it wasn't simply because I am a mediwitch whose professional obligation it is to take care of those who are sick, injured, or in pain. As I just said, it hurt me to see you in pain like that, and I did care about you not just as the school matron, but also as a friend. I was glad that you accepted the massage and that you allowed yourself to . . . to relax and let go as much as you did. I thought it was healthy for you to let some of that stress out of your body the way that you did."

"You mean when I bawled like a baby?" Severus asked with a slight snort. "I could hardly help it. But . . . I did feel safe with you, even then, and you were perfect, completely perfect." He touched her cheek tenderly. "I am glad I lived to be here with you, to realise how wonderful you are, how wonderful you always have been." He kissed her lips softly.

"I don't know as I was perfect, then or ever," Poppy whispered, "but I know that my heart was in my fingers then, and I wanted you to feel safe and cared for, genuinely safe, genuinely cared for. I hoped it would bring you just some little measure of relief."

"It did. I know it strengthened me. I felt the better for it." He caressed her from her cheek down her arm, his hand coming to rest at her hip. "I haven't much practice at massage, but if you'd like one, now or some other time, I'd enjoy giving you a massage, as well."

"I would like that," Poppy said. She grinned. "On our holiday. I'll give you a lot of practice."

Severus sobered slightly, remembering her other holiday and the massages available at the resort. "Are you going to have a massage over your holiday?"

"I don't know...I thought I might." Poppy shrugged. "I'm sure I will still be very happy to provide you with some practice, though. Very, very happy."

Severus swallowed, trying to will away the nasty, confused feelings rising in him. He had just been feeling well and happy. He closed his eyes. Poppy's lips touched his, then withdrew.

"Is something the matter, Sev?"

He struggled with how to respond. She'd said it was important to be open with her when something bothered him, but he didn't want her to see how very petty, possessive, and jealous he could be. He opened his eyes and saw Poppy's blue-grey ones looking back at him. He smiled slightly.

"Not really. I was just hoping that you weren't going to have one of those massages that they have at the resort which Gareth was describing to me the other day. They sounded rather intimate..."

Poppy smiled and gave a little laugh. "That would be more his sort of thing, I'd think, although I really don't know. You're the only one who I want to have touch me that intimately." She leaned forward again and kissed him. "They do have some very good, well-trained massage therapists at the resort, though, and I was thinking that a nice deep-tissue massage with some heat, perhaps with some vibrating Charmed crystals, would be welcome."

"I'm sure it would be." He shook his head. "I have to admit that I'm still jealous of the time you'll be spending away, enjoying yourself without me, but at the same time, I do want you to have a good time. I know it's strange. I'm sorry."

Poppy shook her head. "I am glad you'll miss me, at least a little. I'd not want to think you wouldn't even notice I'm gone, after all. ~~Its~~ unfortunate timing...I even feel that it is...that I'll be away just as we're . . . we're getting to know each other like this, and before we get to go away together, too. But I'm going to look forward to our holiday alone together even more for our being apart beforehand. I hope you'll find some things to do while I'm away, and have a good time, yourself."

"About that . . . I've made some plans to get together with McGonagall...Gareth...sometime early next week. His cousin Morgana's coming to visit and he thought we might all go out."

"Oh, Morgana? I haven't seen her in years. Will she be here long?"

"I think McGonagall said a month, consulting at the Ministry. She's spending time at various relatives' while she's here."

"Please give her my best," Poppy said. "Tell her I hope to be able to see her. Perhaps she could drop by the castle at some point, catch up with all of us."

"You don't mind?"

"Mind what? You mean your seeing Gareth and his cousin? Of course not."

Severus nodded. "Gareth may have a date for the evening."

"That's good...the witch you mentioned before?"

Severus shook his head. "That didn't work out. Gwen Burns, if she accepts his invitation."

"Ah."

"Ah?"

Poppy shrugged.

"You don't like her?"

"Oh, I do."

"What, then?"

"Did Gareth say anything about her?"

"That they'd dated once, but that she'd married Polyphemus Melliflua and was now divorced from him."

Poppy was quiet for a moment. "He didn't say anything more?" When Severus furrowed his brow and shook his head, she said, "Well, I hope you have a good time with them."

"You have to tell me what you think Gareth should have said about her," Severus said. "Is there something wrong with her?"

"No, of course there isn't. I don't like to gossip . . . I'm just surprised that Gwen would see him again, that's all, although it has been a while. I suppose I'm not surprised that Gareth didn't say anything more. He has a Ravenclaw's memory: sharp, but easily abstracted from the personal aspects of events, as sensitive to others as he generally is."

Severus raised up on one elbow and rested his head in his hand. "Okay, spill, Poppy. What 'personal aspects of events'?"

"As I say, I'm surprised to hear she's seeing him again. I understand that Gwen was quite serious about him, and he wasn't at all serious about her, just wanted to date her casually, and she found out about it by discovering that he was, er, seeing, um, someone else in addition to her. I always thought she'd married Melliflua in response to their break-up. She was pretty devastated."

"McGonagall was seeing two people at the same time?" Severus asked. "That doesn't sound like him. He's said to me that you can't date someone, date them seriously, and see other people. He's flirtatious and so forth, but I can't see him cheating on someone. He doesn't seem the type."

"He isn't, and this was a long time ago, relatively speaking. They were both quite young, though she is older than he. I don't think that Gareth had any idea that she was more serious about him than he was about her. He was surprised, I think, when she broke up with him over it. I doubt he was happy about it, or that he didn't care that he hurt her, but he was young...it was during his apprenticeship, I think...and he wasn't thinking of anything serious. She apparently had fallen for him harder than he'd realised."

"It sounds like a mistake for him to try to date her again," Severus said, a frown on his face.

Poppy shrugged. "They're both adults. Gwen's a Ravenclaw, as well...she's likely put the entire incident into some kind of perspective that tidies it up nicely for her. Probably sees it as a lesson from her youth or something."

"Who was he seeing?" Severus asked.

Poppy hesitated. "You should probably speak to Gareth about it if you're curious . . ."

Severus shrugged. "I'm sure he'd say, but I am curious."

"I don't know how well you know Gareth . . . that is, I know that you're friends, and I've been very glad to see the two of you get on so well together, but you haven't known him long."

"I would say he is one of the best friends I've ever had," Severus said simply. "I was surprised by that, but it's so. I think I know him relatively well. I wouldn't let him live in my house if I weren't comfortable with him."

"Men can be funny about things sometimes," Poppy said slowly. "I just wouldn't want to say something that would cause you to feel differently about him."

"If there's something that could cause me to feel differently about him, then I should know it," Severus said. "And I doubt that the object of his affair over a decade ago would be anything that could come between us. After all, it wasn't you, and that's all I care about."

"He was seeing Devlin Tyree."

"A cousin?"

"Distant cousin. There are a lot of Tyrees," Poppy said.

"I don't know him," Severus said, shaking his head.

"He's an island Tyree, so he didn't attend Hogwarts," Poppy replied. Taking in Severus's reaction, she asked, "You're not surprised?"

"I don't know the wizard, so I'm not sure why I should be surprised. Is he ugly or miserable?"

"No, not at all. I just wasn't sure whether you knew...or would mind...that Gareth isn't averse to affairs with other wizards."

"I was surprised when I first learned of it," Severus said, "since I'd seen him flirting with witches, but it's who he is. He's mentioned a few of his lovers...wizards, I mean...but never Devlin Tyree."

"When I first heard about it...this particular incident...I thought that perhaps he was gay and just discovering it or coming out of the closet or whatever," Poppy said, "but he seems to have had affairs with both wizards and witches since then."

"He does. I think he's more interested in having relationships with women, though," Severus shrugged. "I can't say I understand it completely, but he's a very . . . physical man. Sensual."

Poppy nodded in agreement. "His father always came across that way, too. He was very athletic, very attractive. I'm glad that you and Gareth have become such good friends and can be open with each other like that."

Severus was quiet for a moment, then he said, "You remember that I mentioned that he knows that you and I are seeing each other."

"Yes, of course."

"I actually . . . the spell I use, the *Apsterrere*, it's something I got from him. I'd asked him if he knew any good spells. He, um, shared that one with me."

"That was . . . good of him. Generous," Poppy said slowly. "It's quite an esoteric spell."

"And difficult to learn," Severus said. "Not for you, since you're a mediwitch, I suppose. But even for me, it wasn't easy." Severus swallowed. He trusted Poppy, he

reminded himself, and he didn't want to have to hide something like this from her. If he didn't tell her about it now, he would always feel as though he had placed a lie between them. "And that was even though McGonagall had already demonstrated it for me." He watched her face.

"Demonstrated it? As in..."

"As in, taught it to me. Personally." Severus cleared his throat. "Performed it on me." He felt his cheeks warming.

Poppy blinked. Her lips parted, as if she were about to say something, but nothing came out.

Severus waited a few moments. "Would you say something? Anything, just . . . I thought I should tell you. Is it something I should have kept to myself?" he asked miserably. He was terrible at relationships.

"No, no, not at all, not from me. Um, I'm just, I'm just, I'm trying to have it sink in. I assume you mean that you and he, the two of you, that you were intimate, not just that he, um, cast it on you and that was all."

"Yes." Severus swallowed. "But it wasn't just . . . It was only . . . It wasn't the first time we'd been together that way, but . . . we didn't have an affair or anything of the sort. We're just friends. And that was the last time we were, you know, together in any, um, physically intimate way." Severus thought this conversation was the worst one he'd ever had in his life. Whatever had possessed him to inform Poppy that he and Gareth had had sex, he couldn't remember it with the buzzing embarrassment in his brain blocking out all other thought.

"I have to admit that I'm very surprised," Poppy said, finding her voice. "I wouldn't have thought you would ever want to be with a wizard sexually, particularly with what you've told me about your disturbing sexual experiences when you were a young man. And you seem very . . . very heterosexual to me. The way you are with me in bed, I mean."

"I am. Completely. I'm not even attracted to McGonagall. He's the only wizard I'd ever been with that way, and the only one I ever would be."

"You aren't attracted to him? Then why . . . He didn't . . . I mean, I know that he's well-intentioned, and a good man, very caring and affectionate, and you, um, . . . you are an adult, and a very capable wizard, but were you, that is, I assume you fully consented?"

"Of course!" Severus felt his heart pounding in his chest. "I asked *him*."

"I'm afraid I really don't understand, Sev. But if you were with him that way, that's fine, and I'm glad that you felt you could tell me about it." She looked distracted, though, even as she tried to reassure him.

"You're concerned, though, I see that," Severus said. "It wasn't anything sordid. It didn't feel that way, though it wasn't what I'd expected . . ." He sighed. "I wish I could explain more, but I'm afraid of what you might think. I don't know how I expected you to react. This was an ill-considered conversation." He rolled over onto his back.

"You can explain as much or as little as you like, Severus," Poppy said, putting her arm all the way across him. "But if I can ask one question . . ."

"Of course."

"You said that the last time you were together was when he was teaching you that spell."

Severus nodded.

"Have you wanted to be with him since? Since we've been together again?"

"I only want to be with you, Poppy, and as I said, I wasn't really physically attracted to him in the first place. Gareth knows that, too, that I am serious about you, that it's not just a fling for me." Severus looked at her and twitched a smile. "I think he knew that before I even did. But he had already said, even before you and I became more serious, that if I were to begin a relationship with someone, whoever it was, he couldn't be having sex with me, even though we were just . . . just casual. It wasn't as though we were having an affair. McGonagall and I, I mean. And when I stayed over at his place the other night, I was in the guest room. Alone."

"When did it start?" Poppy asked.

Severus let out a chuff of frustration. "It didn't 'start,' Poppy. Not the way that sounds, anyway. It was something that just happened a few times. The first time was a couple days before I flirted with you. He made me feel . . . I felt more secure. I felt that I wasn't completely unattractive. I never would have had the nerve to have flirted with you otherwise. We actually did something sexual together only a handful of times, and had real relations even fewer than that."

"I see . . . so while you and I were . . . having our fling, you were having one with him . . ."

"I didn't see it that way at all. It didn't feel the same." Oh, gods, was he going to lose Poppy over this? "It wasn't even a fling. It was just . . . what it was."

"He made you feel good about yourself?" Poppy asked.

Severus nodded. "Not the way you do, but . . . yes."

"That's good." Poppy looked as though she wanted to ask more, but either didn't know what to ask or didn't want to make him uncomfortable.

"Gareth didn't set out to seduce me or something. But he wanted me to . . . to be more receptive to others, to let myself feel more." Severus swallowed, remembering Gareth's tender massage. "He said he wanted to open me up. But that first day, the first time he touched me intimately, it wasn't about sex. He was just . . . physical and affectionate, but not sexual. Not very, anyway. It was after that that I asked him for more. I just . . . I felt needy, Poppy, and as far as I knew then, he might be the only one ever to want to touch me that way. And McGonagall was willing...not that he was *only* willing. He really does care about me, as incredible as that still seems to me sometimes. We're friends. I don't know if I even really comprehended that we were friends until that day. I don't want to try to tell you that what happened between us was meaningless or that it was nothing, because he was very generous to me, and his friendship is important, so I don't want to minimise that, but it was only . . . it was a kind of phase in our friendship."

Poppy nodded. "I can see that." She gave him a hug and rested her head on his chest. "I'm glad you have friends who love you, and that you let them love you, Sev." She paused a moment. "Not that I want you to let them love you *too* much, if you know what I mean. You're not the only one who can become jealous, after all."

"You're jealous?"

"No. I'm still a little confused, and . . . I suppose I'm disappointed that he had sex with you before I did, but I'm not jealous exactly. On the other hand, if you were to have sex with others now...as I've said before, I don't expect you to be sexually exclusive with me, not at this point in our relationship...but if you aren't, I don't want to know about it, and if you decide you want to . . . to have an affair of some sort with someone else, I . . . I don't *want* you to break up with me, but if you are going to have a relationship with someone else, it has to be after we aren't together. Not that I could stop you from doing whatever you wish, but I'd hope..."

"Shh, shh," Severus whispered, placing a finger over Poppy's mouth. "I have said it repeatedly, and I'll say it again, very clearly, so please remember this and believe me: I do not want to have sex with anyone else. I will not have sex with anyone else while we're together. And I certainly wouldn't have an affair like that. I promise you."

Poppy raised her head and looked down into his face. "I'm glad. I just . . . I still have some confused feelings about us, and I worry, and I'm a little afraid...afraid of being hurt. But not so much that I don't think it's not worth seeing what we have together, and our relationship has become very important to me. I'm glad it is to you, too." She

glanced across the room and saw the clock. "We're missing lunch. I hadn't realised it was this late."

"Ohhh," Severus groaned. "I told Flitwick I'd join him in his rooms after lunch. He's borrowing Dumbledore's Pensieve and is going to show me his memory of Dumbledore and Malcolm McGonagall's duel."

"Well, then, we had better get going, and we can talk more later, if you like," Poppy said, sitting up and Summoning her robe. "You also need to eat after all that exercise this morning...and you definitely don't want to miss seeing the duel. It was quite hair-raising at the time, but exciting in retrospect. Malcolm had a grand time, and Albus, too. They were like two little boys together, Minerva and Gertrude used to say. In fact, one day you'll have to ask Gertrude or Minerva about the time they put the two wizards in detention," Poppy said with a grin. "But don't do it within Albus's hearing!"

Severus had pulled on his trousers and was slipping his arms into his shirtsleeves. "Detention?" He smiled. "I will definitely ask about that."

"Those were some grand days back then, Sev...and there are more ahead for us!"

Severus, tucking his shirttails in, came around the bed and hugged her. "I hope so." He kissed her hair and held her tightly.

"I know so," Poppy replied firmly. "I am looking forward to our holiday next weekend! And all the other time we'll have together."

As they crossed the sitting room to leave for lunch, Severus reached out and took hold of Poppy's arm. "Poppy."

She stopped and looked up at him.

"What I told you about McGonagall, is everything all right? Between you and me?"

"Of course." When Severus hesitated, Poppy added, "It really is, Sev. Completely. I understand that things like that can sometimes happen between friends. It was just a surprise to me that it happened between you and Gareth. What's more important to me is what you and I have together."

"He thinks you're attractive, you know," Severus said as they reached the door.

Poppy's eyebrows rose. "Does he?"

"Mhm. And, of course, he appreciates your intelligence and personality, as well. He thinks I'm a very lucky wizard." Severus stopped her and turned her toward him. "And he's right. When I am with you, I am the luckiest wizard in the world." He leaned forward and kissed her. "I wish we could hide away again today the way we did on Thursday, not go to lunch, skip Dumbledore's party, just stay here together." He sighed.

"That would be nice," Poppy agreed. "But just remember our own holiday. We'll have time to ourselves then."

"Promise me?"

"It's a promise," Poppy said, sealing her promise with a kiss.

Author's Note: You may enjoy the next chapter more if you have read (or re-read) the duel scene between Albus and Malcolm. I have reproduced it over on my WordPress blog (there's a link to my blog fics on my [TPP Author's Page](#)) as a one-shot story, "A Spree with Albus," or if you prefer, you may read it here in its original form as Chapter CXXXV: A Spree of [Resolving a Misunderstanding](#). The stories on my blog can be found listed in the sidebar of any of my blog pages.

Chapter Ninety-Nine: Memory Lane

Chapter 100 of 118

Severus spends part of the afternoon with Poppy and Filius, taking a trip down memory lane and discussing duelling and dragons.



Chapter Ninety-Nine: Memory Lane

Saturday, 3 April 1999

"You'll enjoy this, Severus," Poppy said as she, Severus, and Filius started up the last flight of stairs leading to the Ravenclaw's suite. She had sat with the two during lunch, and Filius had suggested that she join them for the dip into the past. "I'm looking forward to viewing it again, too. And knowing the outcome, I'll enjoy it more than I did back then, too!"

Filius laughed, and Severus frowned.

"Is not a great part of the enjoyment of such an event to be derived from its suspense?" Severus asked.

"Indeed," Filius said, "but you also have a slight advantage, Severus, in knowing that we both wish to see the duel again. So even some of your own suspense is probably mitigated by that knowledge."

Severus glanced at Poppy, remembering her aversion to duelling. "Well, I do know that both wizards survived and also, I presume, that neither was badly injured, or I doubt that Madam Pomfrey would have any desire to view it again."

Filius chuckled again. "You shall see, Severus!"

They reached the Head of Ravenclaw's door portrait. "Good afternoon, Professor!"

"Good afternoon, Paris," Filius responded. Addressing his companions, he added, "We're reviewing classical Greek heroes and villains, gods, goddesses, and mortals, this week. You're welcome to play, if you wish!"

"Ah . . ." Severus shook his head. He couldn't see the attraction in having to respond to a quiz question every time one wished to enter one's own quarters...particularly not late at night after an arduous meeting with the Dark Lord. Severus wondered what Filius did on any occasions when he might arrive back after having one Fwooper's Song too many. Did he stand there and tax his memory on trivia until he finally answered a question correctly, or did he and the portrait have some other understanding for those occasions?

"Fire away!" Poppy said gamely.

The slim, dark-haired youth laughed. "Two questions only, then! Unless the redoubtable Head of Slytherin decides he's up to a challenge!"

"Three questions," Severus said, scowling. He would not be taunted by a mere portrait.

Filius turned and looked up at him. "Of course, that's three to start with. If any of us gets one wrong, we start over and there's a new one for each of us!"

"I thought we wanted to view this memory sometime this afternoon," Severus muttered. Poppy snickered.

"First question for the lovely lady, mistress of the Hospital Wing," Paris said with a bow. "Her mother soothed the pains of all who suffered, and her father, cut from his mother's womb, preeminent student of Chiron, held the serpent of healing. She and her sisters followed in their parents' Art, but only she cured all. Who is she?"

Poppy laughed. "Panacea!"

Paris smiled and nodded. Severus raised an eyebrow. Panacea. Another name to add to his list...Poppy's parents were, after all, both involved in the Healing Arts themselves. And it was a bit peculiar, as Poppy had said her middle name was.

"And now, for the Slytherin Mage without Peer," Paris said, a roguish glimmer in his eyes. "His father was ineffably great. His cures were mysterious and occult. He killed in order to heal, and his pity brought him understanding. As he slept, two snakes tickled his ears with their tongues, and he awoke with new comprehension. Who is he?"

Severus was completely lost until Paris's final clue. He restrained a sigh of relief. He had not wanted to be embarrassed in front of Poppy. "Melampus, of course." A powerful wizard in actuality, not merely the somewhat mutable figure in Muggle myths, and, justly or not, Salazar Slytherin had claimed Melampus as an ancient ancestor, as every Slytherin was taught.

"Very good, Severus!" Filius said enthusiastically. He turned to the portrait, bright expectation on his face.

"From his hands came all giving," Paris said. "Who is he?"

"Only one clue?" Poppy asked.

Filius held up one finger as he thought a moment. "Wait . . . all giving . . . Pandora . . . it was Hephaestus," Flitwick replied. Paris bowed to them, and the door clicked open. Filius waved his wand and the door opened wider. "I have been revising, after all. He does sometimes give me more clues for the harder ones, or if I'm stumped."

"Are you ever stumped?" Poppy asked as they stepped into his bright sitting room.

"Oh, yes! Why, just last week, it took four clues for me to arrive at Scamander," Filius said. "And very obscure clues they were, too! Paris has time to do nothing but read in that library of his, though." He gestured at the table where Dumbledore's Pensieve sat. "Here we are. Would either of you like coffee or tea and a bit of dessert before we hop in, or would you prefer that after? After? Very well!"

"I know that you said you wanted to show him the dragon, as well," Poppy said, "but what about the rest of it?"

"Well . . . the cursed box may have been something of a challenge for Malcolm, but it wasn't particularly fascinating to watch...although perhaps Severus might be more interested in it, since he does have an aptitude for such things, himself." Filius looked up at Severus. "Would you like to watch him break the curses that Dumbledore put on a box? Malcolm did a lot of wand-waving...and a bit of, of . . . sniffing, too, if I remember rightly."

"Sniffing?" Sounded like the wizard was a bit barmy. Severus twitched one shoulder. "As you say, there is likely little to see, since he was successful."

"What about the Apparition-by-Broom, then?" Poppy asked. "I've only witnessed that a few times, and that was the first time. It was quite something."

"What about it, Severus? Apparition-by-Broom? Ever seen it?" Filius asked.

"I have not." He understood that several riders had performed Apparition-by-Broom during the Battle of Hogwarts, after which Minerva had raised the Anti-Apparition wards over the entire grounds again, but he had not seen that part of the battle in the memories the Headmistress had shown him that autumns.

"We can make it shorter, can't we?" Poppy asked. "I remember that waiting for them to return was a bit dull."

"Of course, of course...in fact, I think your memory of the event might be preferable to mine," Filius said, clambering into a chair, "as I was down at the gates rather than with the other spectators. My view was fine for a witness, and handy if Malcolm had Splinched himself, but your perspective might be better for this. Just draw out the memory in two bits, if you can."

Poppy hesitated. "I've not much practice with this. Not with my own memories. And it was so long ago. I'll try, though."

"Just focus! It will come...you just need a single bit of memory to catch hold of, and the rest will follow. And if there's a little extra there, that's fine. You can do it!" Filius said encouragingly as Poppy drew her wand and held it to her temple.

She drew out a small stream of silver. Blinking, she deposited it in the Pensieve, then she withdrew another slim thread of silver and let it flow into the Pensieve with the first memory.

Poppy let out a little laugh. "I hope I didn't say or do anything silly that I don't remember now!"

"We all had fun that day, didn't we?"

"We did...well, other than for a few moments of sheer terror, anyway!" Poppy agreed with a chuckle.

"But those were the most exciting moments," Filius said. "Come! Shall we take a dip?" He gestured toward the table and the silvery whirlpool in the Pensieve.

Severus nodded. He felt more enthusiasm for the afternoon's Pensieve outing now that Poppy was there...now that he was sharing the memories with her, her own memories, in fact. It seemed somehow to be something that could bring them closer; even if he hadn't been there to share that experience with her when it happened, they were together now.

Good Lord! Whatever had she agreed to, Poppy thought with dismay. Severus would catch a glimpse of her younger self regardless of the event they chose to view, and he might even get a couple good looks at her, but during the duel at least there would be something else to capture his attention. If they'd used Flitwick's memory for the Apparition-by-Broom, it would be unlikely Severus would even see her. Murdoch had conjured them a bench from which to view the Apparition, and they'd been sitting toward the back of the crowd, not at all visible from the gates, she thought. Now, not only might she have said or done something that, while nothing truly embarrassing at the time, would be embarrassing in the present, but Severus would also see how different she was now from then. Not that she'd aged poorly...in fact, she was usually fairly proud of how well she'd come through the years, even for a witch rather than a Muggle...but she was nonetheless changed. Severus would see that he had met her when she was past her prime...or at least, that she would be soon past it, much sooner than he. And never mind the fact that all this took place even before he was born, when his mother was still a student, before Eileen had ever even met his father . . .

Poppy looked up at Severus as he touched her elbow lightly and looked down at her, a slight smile at the corners of his eyes. She tried to smile brightly, as though she were as enthusiastic as she'd been when Filius had first invited her along, and before she had realised that Severus would see the young Poppy right beside the older, more worn version. When Severus's smile grew in response to her own, though, her dismay gave way to warmth, and she relaxed. Whatever he saw in the Pensieve, he was there with her now. She took his hand, and together, they entered her memory.

Looking around herself, Poppy was struck by the differences the years had brought the Hogwarts grounds, some of which she had forgotten, and others that she'd not really noticed before, they'd been so gradual. Of course, no dragons flanked the steps up to the great entry doors, which here in memory were still the ancient, age-darkened oak doors, and there was no plinth on the lawn marking where Harry Potter had defeated Tom Riddle, but there were other, more subtle differences, as well. Poppy had almost forgotten what the grounds had looked like without the immense Whomping Willow between the castle and the forest. Even the drive leading up to the castle was quite different in 1957 to what it had become by 1999: grey pea stones were scattered thinly over a somewhat dusty and rutted track, and set at irregular points along its edges, a few tall iron posts held unlit torches. Gone...or, more correctly, not yet conceived...were the multicoloured pea stones that now paved the smooth drive; missing were the low-set Charmed light globes set at pleasingly regular intervals along the path, and missing were the even newer, larger lanterns flanking the gates where now, in memory, the ancient winged boars still hung.

There were more benches set out on the Hogwarts lawns in this earlier time, however...and not merely those conjured by the guests from which to view Malcolm's Apparition-by-Broom...benches of all sorts, wooden, wrought iron, stone, some with backs and some without, and even a few with small stone tables beside them, and many with a pleasant flowering tree or two, planted at a convenient distance to provide shade at different times of day. Even the Quidditch stadium looked different: many colourful House pennants waved in the wind from the topmost tiers of the stands, but the exterior of the stadium was clad in a kind of pale shingling that Poppy remembered had been shorn off by a terrific windstorm back in September of 1961. The stadium had looked simply skeletal for several weeks until it was repaired. The entire grounds had been a mess for a while after that storm, there'd been so much damage, and most of the shade trees and benches had never been replaced or repaired.

Forty years had wrought their changes on the grounds, but also on herself, Poppy thought as she glanced over at her younger self, who was just taking a seat on the bench that Murdoch had conjured for the two of them. She looked so fresh and glowing on that early summer morning, and her smile so bright as she thanked Murdoch, that Poppy scarcely felt that she was looking at herself. Even her hair seemed shinier and fuller on her younger self, though she hadn't a single grey hair in her head yet. Perhaps she should think about using a rinse on it, she pondered. Nothing extreme, just something to liven her hair up a bit. Perhaps a simple potion of chamomile and lemon, with just a touch of mandrake if she could get some . . .

Severus looked around, blinking at the sudden sunlight, which seemed quite bright considering both that he wasn't really *seeing* anything with his actual eyes and that this was a memory a few decades old. The Pensieve, in his experience, tended to dim or even de-colour a memory, particularly older ones. He smiled to see the nearby Quidditch stadium looking somewhat quaint with its old-fashioned shingling. As for the rest of the grounds, he thought that in some respects, they were better tended now than they had been in the fifties, particularly the long unpaved drive that curved up from the gates; the benches and shade trees dotting the lawns were quite nice here, though. Hogwarts hadn't had those even when he'd been a student...probably just as well.

There was a good-sized crowd gathered in front of the castle, and Severus recognised many faces, including that of Cornelius Fudge, who was standing with Slughorn and two witches, one a slim, lively blonde who Severus thought resembled the former Minister's rather plump wife, and one a tall, buxom woman with artificially brilliant red hair, wearing a tiara, of all things. Further ahead, in front of the crowd, Severus could see Minerva standing with Gertrude, the two women speaking with Johannes Birnbaum and a few others, including Albus. Gertrude gestured with her right hand, and Severus swallowed.

He turned his attention to Murdoch and Poppy, watching as Poppy gracefully smoothed her blue skirts under her as she sat down on a freshly conjured bench. Murdoch sat down beside her and put an arm around her, giving her a slight squeeze as she thanked him for the bench.

"Be sure to mention the bench to Minerva," Murdoch said jokingly. "She's forever claiming I've forgotten how to use my wand for anything other than Summoning my stirring rod!"

Poppy laughed. "I'm sure she just enjoys needling you a bit!"

Severus stepped slightly closer to the couple. Poppy had been a pretty young witch, no doubt about it, and the sun glinted nicely from her honey-brown hair, but this wasn't *his* Poppy. Lovely, happy, attractive...quite attractive, he thought, glancing over at the slightly misty mental version of his Poppy, as attractive as she was now, in a way...but she wasn't his Poppy. There was nothing *wrong* with this young Poppy, Severus thought with a frown, but she seemed . . . unfinished somehow. He smiled slightly to himself. A work-in-progress. Yes, the younger Poppy had been a work-in-progress. He glanced over at his Poppy again and his smile grew. He was the lucky beneficiary of that work in progress, he thought, seeing her perfection beside him, even in its virtual projection. He'd never forget how lucky he was, Severus was certain of it; if he ever did, he didn't deserve her.

Poppy shook her head and turned to Filius. "Does it seem very changed to you?"

"Marvelous!" Filius said, nodding in agreement. "We forget sometimes all the little changes...I do miss the Butcher's Broom there," he added, pointing to the tall, flower-covered bushes to the right of the steps. "It was always such a colourful welcome. Perhaps I'll mention them to Pomona."

"There are some *Ruscus aculeatus* in the Potions gardens behind Greenhouse Four," Severus said. "It would be a simple job for her to transplant some near here." And quite convenient for him, he thought.

"I'm afraid I started the memory a bit too soon," Poppy began apologetically.

"Nonsense! Very good to get the sense of atmosphere," Filius said.

"Indeed. It can be disorienting to land in the midst of a memory. A moment or two to take in the atmosphere is a good thing," Severus said reassuringly.

At that moment, however, Albus, dressed in what Severus thought were particularly garish gold robes, turned from his conversation with Johannes Birnbaum and began speaking with another wizard, and Poppy motioned toward him. "There, that's Malcolm there, with Albus," she said, pointing out a wizard in a tartan kilt, a plaid over his shoulder.

Severus nodded. The tall, auburn-haired wizard was unmistakably related to both Minerva and Gareth, though he was slimmer and lither looking than his son. He seemed in very good spirits. Severus could now see that Siofre was with them there at the front of the crowd, though he hadn't noticed the petite witch beside the others at first.

Albus stepped back from Malcolm and turned to address the crowd. "Malcolm is first going to display Apparition-by-Broom. In order to verify the Disapparition and the corresponding Apparition, I shall proceed to the Apparition point and Professor Filius Flitwick will observe from his position at the gates. You may watch from here, or, if you like, you may walk down toward the gates."

There was a little more conferring, Siofre started walking down the drive toward the gates, and Albus mounted a broom and flew off to speak once more with Flitwick. When Malcolm began to ascend straight up on his broom, rising only slowly, Severus leaned toward Filius. "Is that a Comet? Standard issue Comet Two-Ten?"

"No, it's a Cleansweep, I think. A Cleansweep Four, if I remember correctly. Probably tweaked its charms a bit."

Severus nodded. With those older brooms, it was very difficult for most flyers to rise straight up without also drifting forward. Even if McGonagall had tweaked the charms, it was still something of a feat to rise up vertically like that. The three watched as Malcolm hovered for a moment, only about fifty feet above the ground, then sped off toward the gates, picking up speed as he went. Seconds after he had crossed over the gates, there was a boom as he Disappeared.

Just as some of the crowd began to cheer, the memory shifted.

"I thought this would be a good spot to pick up at," Poppy said.

Siofre Tyree stood in front of the group of onlookers. "Professor Dumbledore will make an official announcement when he returns, but I witnessed Malcolm's safe arrival at the Apparition point. They are conferring about the next stage of events at the moment." She nodded, then turned and approached her granddaughter.

Severus was about to ask Poppy whether the dragon was the next stage when there were two almost simultaneous cracks of Apparition and both Albus and Malcolm reappeared on their brooms, racing toward the Hogwarts grounds. There was more cheering, and the two wizards set down on the drive. Hagrid began calling out, asking for the crowd to move to the Quidditch stadium, and the memory ended abruptly.

The three emerged from the memory, and Filius grinned up at Poppy. "That was fun! I'm surprised that Albus doesn't use the Pensieve more just for entertainment purposes!"

"After having used it for such serious business for so long, I doubt that he would particularly wish to use it for entertainment. Besides, he said to me once that dwelling on the past and pining for what once was is as bad as wishing for what could never be and neglecting the here-and-now," Severus said.

"Surely it's not so black-and-white as that," Filius said with a shake of his head. "But that was fun. I do think that perhaps too many visits to the past might not be a good thing...after all, we do need to create new memories!...but the occasional meander down memory lane can certainly be enjoyable."

"So . . . what did you think, Severus?" Poppy asked, not sounding as tentative as she felt.

"It was an impressive display of magic," Severus admitted. "Or, at least, of Apparition-by-Broom. I'm uncertain whether I would wish to attempt it, but I have spent little time on a broom in recent years."

"You weren't much of a flyer as a student, either, were you," Filius asked rhetorically.

"I had other things to occupy my time," Severus said stiffly. He'd tried out for the Quidditch team three years running before giving up. He wasn't a natural on a broom, like some...though he wasn't inept, either...but with neither excessive natural aptitude nor family connections, it hadn't mattered that he was better than either Crosby or Flint, and they'd both made the team.

"Of course!" Filius said. "You were certainly a prodigy in Potions, and top of your class in Charms and Defence, as well, I remember. You probably had little time for broomstick sport."

"Hmpf."

"That reminds me," Poppy said, "have you thought any more about that broom ride with Helena?"

Severus shook his head. "I think I will decline, although it might be enjoyable. I believe I will do some brewing on Monday, and I'm looking forward to having the entire day to devote to it." He gestured toward the memories swirling about the Pensieve. "That was interesting to see. I don't want to imagine what would happen if a flyer weren't as adept, though, and Splinched."

"It's quite messy," Poppy said. "When I was training at St. Mungo's, we had a patient come in who had Splinched while attempting to Apparate-by-Broom. They found bits of him scattered between Barnstable and Bodmin. They never did find his kneecaps. It took him a couple months to recover."

Filius shuddered, eyes wide. "You're joking, aren't you? About the kneecaps?"

Poppy shook her head as she drew her wand to retrieve her memories. "They replaced them with Charmed ones of glass. He made a sort of peculiar creaking sound when he walked, but he claimed they were quite comfortable."

"Is the dragon next?" Severus asked, not wanting to think any further about Splinching accidents.

"Indeed it is," Filius replied. "Shall we use your memory of this, as well?" he asked, turning to Poppy.

Poppy shrugged. "If you wish. Murdoch and I were down by the Slytherin changing rooms, close to the pitch in case of emergency." She paused a moment. No, other than exchanging a few kisses with Murdoch in the changing room before they went out to the pitch, she was fairly sure that there were no personal moments that she wouldn't want the two wizards to see. After all, she had been there in her professional capacity...and been more than a little nervous at the prospect of being just yards from an unhappy dragon. She nodded. "Yes, all right."

"That would be better, I think," Filius said. "I was up in the box with Albus and a few others, and although we had a very good view from there, it would probably be less distracting with fewer people around."

Poppy thought a moment, focussing on her memory of standing beside Murdoch and looking at the large white marquee that had been erected on the Quidditch pitch. She raised her wand to her head and drew out the memory of the duel in one long silvery strand, then let it flow into the Pensieve. She blinked.

"That one felt odd to draw out," Poppy said. "A bit . . . lumpy."

"Lumpy?" Filius asked, eyebrows raised.

Severus smirked, but he nodded. "I know what you mean. Some memories are like that, as though they are so intertwined in other memories, they have a bit of drag to them at points."

Poppy nodded. "Yes, it felt something like that." She shook herself. "Shall we take a look?"

Severus looked around himself. He, Filius, and Poppy were standing a few feet from Murdoch and Poppy of memory, just outside the Slytherin changing rooms. Although the outside of the stadium was different from anything that he remembered, the pitch and stands were essentially unchanged, although there was a much smaller crowd than the hundreds who would usually attend a Quidditch match, no more than eighty people, Severus estimated, and none of the usual House banners being waved by team supporters. There was also a large white marquee set up at one end of the pitch. He presumed that that was where the dragon was, but Malcolm wasn't yet there, and the spectators were still finding their seats.

He turned and smiled at Poppy, then looked past her at her memory-self. Ever the efficient matron, she was double-checking her black potions satchel. Murdoch told her

that she had already checked it twice, and if she were missing anything, it was too late to fetch it now.

"No," Poppy said firmly. "If need be, I'll have them wait whilst Theckles fetches what I require. But you are right: I do have everything. At least, I can't think of anything else I should have added. I hope I am right."

"Of course you have it all. You even have three different burn potions."

"Four. I added Vulcan's Paste, as well. With a dragon involved, you can't be too prepared, I'd say."

"Eh, my brother won't let himself get singed," Murdoch said, "let alone roasted. To hear him tell it, he rode the mightiest dragoness of the Mountains of the Moon, and she carried him all the way to Egypt and the Crystal Mountain. Of course, he may have just been along for the ride and not had much say in it once she was in the air, and I understand that he had some pretty angry wizards chasing him across Ethiopia at the time, so he was desperate for any mode of transport out of there, but still, he escaped on dragonback and lived to tell the tale."

"I haven't heard that story of his before."

Murdoch chuckled, a rich, deep, warm sound. "I am sure he'll be happy to tell it to you sometime...but if he does, I'll be wanting a full bottle of whisky in my hand. Or a half bottle, the other half already imbibed!"

"A long story? One of his fabulous tales?"

Murdoch, still smiling, drew Poppy down to sit beside him on the cushioned bench set against the stadium wall. "Aye, long and fabulous, but true, I think, at least in the main. But I've heard it already, more than a few times. It's a good one, and even has a couple of star-crossed lovers in it...whom he helped to reunite, of course. He'd already lost his Chameleon Cloak, his broomstick, and his wand by the time he came upon the dragon. So it's quite some tale...and it usually includes how he got his new wand of olive wood and Jobberknoll feather. A good story for a long winter's evening by the fire. But here comes Mr Hagrid," Murdoch said with a nod.

Severus found the conversation about Malcolm as intriguing as any upcoming feat of skill, and had paid no attention to Filius and Poppy's conversation and their reminiscences. It seemed that Gareth's tales about his father...and his unabashed hero-worship of him...were perhaps even more founded in reality than Severus had come to believe.

He also found himself envying the other wizard's relaxed manner with Poppy, the ease with which he touched her and pulled her down to sit beside him. Severus didn't know whether he would ever feel such ease with her...or she with him. He tried to imagine pulling her down to sit beside him at some school assembly or down at the Three Broomsticks during a staff night out, casually putting his arm around her, leaning into her to speak, having her rest her head against him or place her hand on his arm, and his imagination failed him. He felt a sudden sense of bleakness. He could never be for Poppy what she would want and need from a wizard, and he'd be a source of embarrassment to her even if he overcame his own reticence in public.

Poppy laughed as she and Filius reminisced together about his early days as the Hogwarts Charms master, but she noticed that Severus was far more interested in eavesdropping on her conversation with Murdoch. She was fairly sure that they'd not spoken of anything particularly personal, and she *had*, after all, brought Severus into the memory: she couldn't very well ask him not to pay any attention to her younger self and Murdoch. Still, when he appeared not to notice when Hagrid came out and requested quiet, she waved her virtual hand in front of him.

"Severus? Severus!" Poppy waved her hand in his face. "Malcolm's about to come out...you don't want to miss this."

Severus blinked and turned toward her, nodding. "Of course."

The three turned their attention to the pitch just as the great marquee vanished to reveal a young Welsh Green...an agitated young Welsh Green. Severus watched with fascination as Malcolm McGonagall approached the creature and succeeded in mounting her, but as the beast became increasingly irritated, Severus found himself distracted again. Memory-Poppy jumped as the dragon hopped its way across the pitch in their direction, and Murdoch reached out and put his arms around her, pulling her back protectively. Severus saw how young Poppy leaned back against the tall, brawny wizard, and how she allowed him to hold her and reassure her even as the crowd gasped and a few onlookers even let out sharp cries of alarm.

"It's quite nerve-racking even now," Filius observed, "having that great creature so close! You would have been safer in the stands!"

"Albus suggested I sit with them up in the stands," Poppy replied, flinching a bit as the dragon let out one more fiery blast before it leapt into the air, Malcolm astride the beast's neck, "but I thought it best to be down on the pitch. He did offer to have the dragon keeper stay with me, as well, but I didn't think it the best use of his talents, and Murdoch was with me, too...and he was certain that his brother was equal to the task."

The three watched Malcolm's flight, three dragon-handlers on broomstick flying nearby, until finally Fawkes arrived, and after some prodding from the phoenix, Malcolm finally abandoned his mount, taking hold of the bird's tail feathers. The memory continued just a bit longer before the three popped out.

"What about a bit of dessert before the duel?" Filius asked. "I'd not mind a snack right now."

"All right, thank you," Poppy replied. She looked up at Severus, wondering what he was thinking now that he had seen her, so young and fresh, in the memory.

"Indeed. Tea would be welcome after that," Severus agreed. "Although the dragon was not really there, I almost imagined that I felt the sensation of heat from its fire. Could you feel it at the time, Poppy? The dragon seemed to come very close to you and Murdoch."

"It did. We had deliberately set up down at the Slytherin changing rooms because it was farthest from the marquee, but the dragon still came very close, and we could feel the heat from its jets of flame before it finally took off. I'd never seen anything like it before or since until Charlie and Wilhelmina rode that Hebridean Black during the battle last year."

Filius called his house-elf for some tea and biscuits, and the three moved to the other end of the sitting room near the fireplace. Filius sat in a wingback chair that was well-proportioned to his height, and Poppy took a seat on the sofa, patting the cushion beside her. Severus sat down, trying not to sit overly close to Poppy, since Filius was there.

"That was an interesting bit of wandless magic Malcolm did there in the beginning," Severus said. "You hadn't mentioned that he was adept at that."

"Oh, yes, quite. I suppose I'd forgotten, or that I'm so used to remembering Malcolm's varied talents, that that particular one hadn't stood out."

"Does he do any wandless magic in the duel?" Severus asked curiously.

Filius thought for a moment, shaking his head slowly.

"I thought he had," Poppy said, her brow furrowed. "We'll just have to see, I suppose. I think that...well, I won't say, since I don't want to spoil it for Severus, but I think there was at least one particular thing that he performed wandlessly."

Filius nodded. "I think we should wait and see. I've been meaning for the last few weeks to look over my notes from the duel, but I never found the time. It was a complex match, though, certainly!" Filius waved his wand and poured out tea for his visitors. "Biscuit, anyone?"

Ten minutes later, Poppy excused herself for a moment, and Filius turned to Severus. "I gather she doesn't know you're practising for a wandless duel with Albus?"

Severus shook his head. "And I'm not going to tell her until I'm certain. I . . . wish it to remain confidential."

Filius nodded understandingly. "I won't say a word, then. I understand that you could feel pressured to carry through with the wandless duel whether you wanted to or not if too many people knew."

"It's not just that...though of course, that is part of it...but if Poppy knew, I would feel a particular kind of pressure to decide in that direction, and greater concern, as well, about embarrassing myself if I did it and weren't ready."

"Don't worry about that aspect, Severus. You'll be ready. You may not be as comfortable with the idea of a wandless duel as opposed to a standard duel, but I believe you'll be ready. And I don't think that Albus would want to embarrass you, either."

"Whether he wanted it or not, it's still possible, even likely, that I'd be embarrassed," Severus replied with a shake of his head. "My blocks . . . I don't understand why they're not improving."

"But they are! I am casting much harder than I had been...and harder than I would in most practice duels. I have to cast forcefully and time my casts perfectly in order to get past your blocks. You simply need to improve your timing. I also think it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to develop new blocks, ones of your own devising, as you have with your offensive spells."

Severus sighed and nodded. "There is much less scope, though, when it comes to purely defensive spells."

"I think you need to think about them differently..."

"Think about what differently?" Poppy asked, returning to the room and sitting down beside Severus again.

"We were discussing some duelling strategies," Filius said. "Duelling is far different from traditional combat, particularly if one is attempting to avoid any real damage to one's opponent."

"It doesn't seem that those attempts are succeeding very well in these series of duels," Poppy said, "if the multiple injuries I've treated after each one is any indication!"

"Oh, they were minor sporting injuries," Filius said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "and you dealt with them all quickly and left no one with any lasting damage. Nothing like some of the more serious duels I've seen, or ones in which I participated in my youth."

"A very good thing, too! We've all seen enough trauma, thank you very much!" Poppy said. "I didn't approve of these duels when Minerva announced you were organising them, but it was too late for me to make any meaningful objection. After the battle last spring, the last thing the children needed was to see grown witches and wizards casting hexes, curses, and jinxes on each other and calling it 'fun!'"

"I didn't realise you felt that strongly," Filius said.

"I did speak privately with Minerva, and she assured me that the participants would be well-chosen by you and that it would be good for the students to see duelling in a different light. I have tried not to be a wet blanket about it."

"I hope that you have been persuaded," Filius said.

"Hmpf. I would rather not be treating duelling injuries at all," Poppy said. "I don't know how we can tell children that it is forbidden to hex each other or to call each other out, but then turn around and present these duels in which we officially sanction people casting curses at one another."

"There is a difference between a sporting duel and a grudge fight or fracas in the corridors," Filius said, "and I'm sure that the students can recognise that."

"Some. Some might not, or might just use whatever excuse they can to pounce on another student," Poppy said. "But I'll learn to live with it."

"It's an extension of what the students learn in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Poppy," Severus said. "Try thinking of it that way. You wouldn't want them to eliminate that course, would you?"

"Of course not. I'm no Umbridge who thinks it's better to leave the students helpless and have them grow up to rely only on the occasionally dubious protections of the Ministry, and I do live in the real world. I'll try to view it that way, then, Sev erus," Poppy said, catching herself as she almost addressed him by his nickname, "as an extension of their Defence lessons, though I do wish that my services weren't always required!"

"Shall we view the duel between Albus and Malcolm now, then?" Filius asked, clearly glad to have avoided engaging Poppy in any serious argument about the merits of duelling.

Poppy nodded. "After that, I have to be going, I'm afraid. I have more packing to finish before Albus's dinner this evening. I'm leaving first thing in the morning tomorrow to spend Easter day with my family, and I won't be back until late, and then our Portkey to the Zaubersstrandhotel is scheduled for very early Monday morning, so I have to be sure I'm ready to leave."

"Pomona's quite looking forward to the trip," Filius said as the three headed back over to the table and the Pensieve. "It's been years since she's had a witches' holiday like this. Of course, I'll be joining you all on Thursday morning, which will be very nice."

"Have any plans for while she's away?" Poppy asked as she drew her wand, assuming that her memory would be used again for the duel.

"Severus and I are doing a bit of duelling practice, and I'm going to hop down to my cottage and check on it, make sure that it's in order and all my charms have held. I'm having dinner with my great-niece and her family on Wednesday, as well."

"I'm glad you won't be at loose ends!" Poppy said.

"I have too many interests to be at loose ends long," Filius said with a smile. "Never enough time to do everything!"

"Shall I draw out the memory?" Poppy asked.

"No, I think that this time, the vantage point from the stands would be best," Filius said. "You remained down on the pitch, didn't you?"

Poppy nodded, pocketing her wand. "I was quite close, but I don't suppose that I had the perspective on the duel that you did...although we could walk up closer to them in the memory."

Filius thought about that a moment. "Perhaps another time you might share that perspective with Severus, but this one will give him the larger view of the duel, especially the, um, the thing at the end," Filius said.

Poppy smiled. "Yes, that probably would be more effective as seen from above, though believe me, I was quite as . . . as affected as anyone in the stands!"

Filius chuckled at Severus's puzzled expression, then he raised his wand to his head and gradually drew out a long silver thread of memory and deposited it in the Pensieve. Together, the three entered the longest memory yet.

The three popped back out of the memory, and Severus took a long, deep breath.

Filius chuckled at Severus's expression. "So, what did you think?"

"I think that you should have had the memory extend beyond that point," Severus said, blinking. The last thing they had witnessed was Poppy racing toward the two wizards, her potions bag clutched in her hand, the long white veil of her matron's cap floating out behind her. "I presume that was the end of the duel, but . . . were either of them badly injured?"

Poppy shook her head. "Malcolm was coming round when I got to him, and Albus only had a few bruises and that one long gash on his head, despite appearances that the contrary should be the case."

Severus looked over at Flitwick, a hard expression in his eyes. "Dumbledore knocked him over with two fingers. Stunned him. Wandlessly. Just . . . like . . . that." Severus flicked his fingers.

"But he took Malcolm completely unawares, Severus," Filius said. "You saw that. And before that, Malcolm held his own pretty well."

Severus nodded. Yes, the oldest McGonagall brother had held his own quite well, although he was certainly out-matched in skill, age, and experience. "He was, indeed, quite inventive. Very impressive control, as well. And there were some nice wandless and two-handed spells, too, which are rare to see." He shook his head thoughtfully, reflecting on the duel. "I have witnessed a great many exercises of magic, but some of this really was genuinely unique. More so on McGonagall's part than on Dumbledore's, actually, I believe...although the younger wizard did need to compensate for his lesser experience and skill, and that probably accounts for much of his inventiveness."

"Indeed!" Filius agreed. "In fact, there are a few things he did then that, although they may seem standard to you now, were actually original at the time. His field of sunflowers has been imitated many times...though never to such a splendid effect, I must say...and now one often sees tall plants of one sort or another springing up in a duel, so much so, we forget that it was once a new technique for obscuring your opponent's line of sight. Malcolm was quite something. Still, as you say, it was an uneven match at the time. Malcolm did become more adept over the years, and if he were still alive, who knows . . ."

"Dumbledore, though . . . well, I know enough now to see that I shouldn't use any fire magic with the old trickster, that's for certain."

Filius chuckled. "That stopped a few hearts, I'll tell you!"

"It did mine!" Poppy said. "I was completely shocked, and then shocked a second time to see him standing there behind Malcolm, whole as could be!"

"Didn't he do something like that in the war, though?" Severus asked with a frown. "I seem to have heard something once . . . about how he defeated Grindelwald. Vanished in flames and then reappeared in another part of the room."

"Yes, although I don't know the details," Filius said, nodding. "Albus actually had thought that trick wouldn't be a new one to Malcolm, though it was, and it was quite effective!"

"Poor Malcolm, though!" Poppy said. "You should have seen his face! He thought he'd just exploded the Hogwarts Headmaster!"

"I could see his face from my vantage point," Severus said. "Gareth is much like his father, I think. Malcolm appeared brash for so much of these events, but then there in that moment, you saw how he so frantically tried to stop his own hex, and then afterward, when he went over to where Dumbledore had vanished, you could see how stricken he was. I do not know whether such feeling is a strength or a weakness in life, but . . . it is admirable."

"Of course he would be disturbed to believe he'd just killed someone in a sporting duel," Filius said. "Anyone would be, even aside from the possible legal and social repercussions."

"I think that Severus is referring to the underlying compassion that both Gareth and his father have," Poppy said, "and to the fact that even before Albus was hit, when Malcolm would reasonably have believed that his curse would only injure Albus, but not kill him, Malcolm nonetheless tried to stop the curse from doing even that much."

"True," Filius said. "He was a true gentleman, and an honourable wizard, as is his son."

"Of course," Severus said, "I would not have been taken in by Dumbledore that way, and I wouldn't have tried to block my own spell. I know Dumbledore too well. If he's standing there looking that pleased to have a spell flying at him, then there's no cause to try to avert it." Severus paused. "But I likely would not have anticipated anything other than some kind of clever block or parry. And even though I now recall something about Dumbledore's trick during his fight with Grindelwald, I doubt that in the heat of the moment...no pun intended...I would have remembered that. So his apparent demise would certainly have been a shock."

"Malcolm thought it was a very funny trick, actually, once he was over the shock of it," Poppy said, shaking her head. "I suppose that looking back at this distance, it was somewhat amusing, but I must admit that I didn't see the humour in it at all that day. And Minerva, I believe, was rather irate with Albus about it."

Severus smirked. "I can imagine...seeing him vanish in an exploding fireball like that! She wouldn't have been happy at all."

"She also didn't approve of the dragon," Poppy said, "but I think that was partly because she really didn't have as much faith in Malcolm's abilities as she should have."

"Malcolm said to me once that Minerva . . . dismissed his talents. I don't know as that was the exact phrase that he used, but he said that she had long underestimated him. I think it was a source of some unhappiness for him," Filius said.

"But that did change," Poppy reminded him.

"Yes, working here together for that year was very good for them both, I think." Filius turned to Severus. "There was such an age difference between them, you see, that they hadn't grown up together; so Minerva hadn't known him very well when she was a child, and she hadn't had much opportunity to come to know him better as an adult, either."

"I think she also . . . well, she's Minerva, and I love her," Poppy said, "but she's got rather set ideas about certain things, and even more so when she was younger, I think, and she had a very different notion of fun than Malcolm had...or she claimed to, at any rate. She also has always been one for the books, you know, and possesses a great deal of self-discipline. I remember that when we were students, she'd sit revising in the library all day on the first warm, sunny Saturday of spring when no one else would manage more than an hour or two before they'd break free and go outdoors. Malcolm was much less studious, though no less intelligent."

"And he had read a great deal," Filius chimed in, not wanting Severus to think that his old friend had been an illiterate dullard.

Poppy chuckled. "He also read faster than she did...with comprehension...which I think rather put her out when she realised it. She thought that he couldn't possibly be reading the books she was giving him for his Animagus training, and she set him a little oral examination. She was a bit embarrassed, and he was more than a little angry, after he gave her details even she hadn't remembered. I don't think he spoke to her for a week after that."

"No, it was only a few days," Filius said. "After all, he did want to complete his Animagus training, but Albus refused to take over, saying he wasn't going to be stuck in the middle of a sibling squabble, so Malcolm had to go back to her and accept her apology...and she had to admit she'd been wrong."

"It seemed longer at the time," Poppy said. She looked over at Severus and said, "It's not a comfortable thing to have the Transfiguration mistress and the Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor at odds, but when they're brother and sister and they aren't speaking to each other, that's very uncomfortable, indeed! Especially since everyone liked them both."

"Gertrude just ignored the entire thing, though, if I remember correctly," Filius said. "Unflappable, that witch. Just treated them both as usual...though I do imagine that she had a few words to say to Malcolm in private!"

"Probably, but probably only once, and she likely ended it with, 'and now you'll have to go talk to Minerva about it,'" Poppy said with a laugh. "But now I need to go finish my packing...did you know that Gertrude's coming this evening?" she added to Filius.

"Yes! It's good that she's getting out more! I'm looking forward to seeing her," Filius replied.

Poppy rose, and the two wizards stood. On her way to the door, she turned and looked up at Severus. "Come by and pick me up this evening? We could go together."

Severus hesitated. He hesitated a moment too long.

"Never mind! Come to think of it, I think I'd rather Floo from the Hospital Wing to the Headmistress's Office, and it is out of your way to come up to the fourth floor, anyway." Poppy smiled brightly. "I'll see you both later, then!"

Author's Note: I know this update has been a long time coming, but I hope that you enjoy it despite the delay! (RL has been burdensome and inspiration, scarce!) I'd like to thank everyone who sent me little messages and notes of encouragement over the last couple of months. I've really appreciated it!

If you feel like reading about the events that Severus visited in this chapter, they are from Chapter 135, "A Spree," in [Resolving a Misunderstanding](#), and I also posted it as the one-shot, "A Spree with Albus," over on my WordPress blog, edited for continuity and to eliminate extraneous material that is in the beginning of the original chapter. You can find the link to my blog and my blog fics on [my TPP author's page](#).

Although I haven't written or posted much in a few months, I did manage to post a new one-shot to TPP, "[Minerva's Mistletoe](#)," which is another take on the staff holiday party [here](#) in *A Long Vernal Season*.

Chapter One Hundred: Some Truth

Chapter 101 of 118

Severus tells Poppy some truths; she reacts.
End of Part Nine



Chapter One Hundred: Some Truth

Saturday, 3 April 1999

Severus took the stairs down from Filius's seventh floor suite, which was adjacent to Ravenclaw Tower, and paused when he reached the fourth floor landing. He didn't hesitate long, but headed toward the Hospital Wing rather than continuing down to the dungeons.

At Poppy's door, Mrs Framingham asked him to wait a moment, and she disappeared from her frame. A moment later, Poppy, dressed in her blue, mauve, and lavender dressing gown, opened the door to him.

"Hi, Severus! I wasn't expecting you. I was just doing some last minute packing." She opened the door wider. "Come in!"

Severus stepped in. "I came to see if you would like to go up to the Headmaster's, that is, Dumbledore's, dinner together. I am not planning to be at dinner in the Great Hall this evening, as I have a potion that needs tending, but I could come by a few minutes before seven. If you like, that is. Unless you would prefer to Floo on your own."

"If you wish," Poppy said, closing the door behind him. "I thought that perhaps you might consider it more discreet if we arrived separately."

Severus shrugged. "We are both going, and we are both in the castle, invited for the same time. How and when we arrive will likely go unremarked. I would appreciate attending with you." Having her company might save him some awkwardness if he arrived before any of the other Hogwarts guests did, and only people like Quin and Professor Gamp were there.

"Yes, all right. We can walk down to the gargoyles together, then. I'll probably be in the infirmary, though. I want to go over everything one more time before I leave on holiday, and I'll be away all of tomorrow."

"What's there to go over?"

"Instructions for my locum, if she is called in for whatever reason; notes for the infirmary house-elves; double-checking that the supply cupboards are all in order, easy for a stranger to use without wasting a lot of time looking for things. Madam Fuller was here last week, and I showed her around, so there shouldn't be any problem, but I don't want her carrying stories back to St. Giles saying how slovenly the infirmary is."

"She couldn't, Poppy. The last thing you could possibly be accused of is slovenliness. Unless it were unkindness or unprofessionalism."

Poppy smiled. "Thank you, Severus. Nonetheless, best to make sure everything's ship-shape and Bristol fashion before I go!"

"I doubt there will be any cause for her to even render any services while you're gone. I'm sure that the Headmistress and the staff can adequately handle any minor ills that might arise over those few days, and any others can be brought down to St. Mungo's."

"True, but better to be prepared for her if she should have to Portkey here in an emergency."

"What's she like, this Fuller?"

"She's a competent woman, an experienced mediwitch, about eight or ten years younger than I am, married, two daughters...you were in school about the same time as they were, and you even taught her grandchildren, in fact."

Severus snorted. "Lovely. The woman probably hates me already before ever laying eyes on me."

"I doubt that, Sev. Did you and Filius have a nice conversation after I left?"

"Yes. We viewed the end of the duel again so that I could watch Albus's disappearing act more closely. I think he actually vanished just before the fireball exploded, though it was difficult to tell. We also discussed some of the techniques that Malcolm used." Severus shook his head. "I have rarely seen anyone cast with both hands before, or perform two-handed spells. That was rather something. And his blocks . . . some of them were most instructive. Many of them were not traditional *Protegos*, nor were they *Cantamen repello*, although they were more like that than a *Protego*. And he seemed to use a version of the *Parlakkalkan*, as well."

"That's the one that explodes with colour, right?" Poppy asked. "I've seen it, but never learned it. It is quite spectacular to view, though."

Severus nodded. "It is. I learned it from Albus several years ago. I believe I was the only Death Eater who knew it...although the Dark Tom Riddle likely did."

"How did Riddle block spells?" Poppy asked curiously. "Sometimes he seemed to use traditional blocking spells, but other times . . . it was as though some spells simply bounced off of him. Was it a charm of some sort?"

"I don't know. I think it had something to do with the changes he put his body through, or even some potions he took, and perhaps also with some protective magic that he . . . that he absorbed when he and Pettigrew performed the ritual that recreated his body."

"It was frightening to see how he could be attacked again and again and barely notice even when a spell hit him." Poppy shuddered. "It was awful. Simply awful, standing there, watching through the windows, helpless to do anything. Helpless to fight, helpless to Heal." She blinked back tears.

Severus put his arms around her and pulled her into a warm embrace. "I am glad you weren't on the battlefield. You were needed after the battle, whole and unhurt. And I needed you. It was good to wake up and have your voice be the first one I heard."

Poppy gave a shaky laugh. "I'm sure there were others you would have preferred to have heard at that moment. Minerva's. Or Hermione's."

Severus shook his head and drew her down onto the couch with him. "Not preferable, no. In fact, it was particularly reassuring that it was you, and that I had the sense that I was in the Hogwarts infirmary. I knew that the Dark Lord would never allow you to take care of me, even if he allowed me to live."

"But still . . . I sometimes wonder . . . whether I am suited to you. If I'm the sort of witch you really want. Or whether you should be with someone who is more like Minerva or . . . or Hermione. A Gryffindor. Or even a Ravenclaw, one who could match your wit."

"You do. And you . . . I don't know what to say to this. Why would you not be suited to me? I could see if you were to have doubts about my suitability; I hardly have a sterling past. But you . . . any wizard would be lucky to have a witch like you."

Poppy leaned back against the sofa. "It was Minerva you went to see after you were struck by the *Adfectus*. She was not only the one whom you . . . who triggered the spell, but she was the one whom you sought out. Not me. And you wouldn't have. And if you had seen me on your trip up to Gryffindor Tower to find Minerva, I know that you cannot truthfully say that the spell would have been triggered by the sight of me."

"We . . . you and I . . . we didn't know each other quite as well then. I didn't dislike you, you know. I never have. And you were never disagreeable company, even when I was in a foul mood. Some staff I couldn't bear to have nearby when I was in one of my blackest moods. Even as a student, I trusted you."

"But not as you did Minerva," Poppy pointed out.

"No . . . but that was different. She . . . Oh, Poppy, I don't want to talk about Minerva! I certainly don't want to talk about the *Adfectus*. I didn't come here for that. I just wanted to spend a little time with you, and I wanted to ask you to go up to the Headmistress's suite this evening with me."

"I told you this morning that I still have my fears and insecurities, Sev. You're not the only one, you know."

"All right. I see that, but I don't understand why you do."

"You could wake up one day and see me, see this Hufflepuff matron, and wonder what ever could have drawn you to her. I don't think I'm your type, I guess."

"I don't think I had a 'type' before I was with you. And now you're it," Severus said with a smile.

Poppy snorted a laugh. "I don't know about that, Severus. You seemed to be rather interested in Lily Evans when she was in school...you were friends with her, anyway. And then there was Minerva, another Gryffindor with a lot of intelligence and a strong independent streak to her."

"Irrelevant," Severus said, uncomfortable with the mention of Lily and not wanting to discuss how disastrous his friendship with her had been...and how he had unknowingly betrayed her and was the indirect cause of her death.

"And what about Hermione Granger?" Poppy asked.

"What about her? She is a friend, but that's hardly surprising. We worked closely together that last year."

"I thought you were interested in her. In dating her," Poppy said bluntly, finally giving voice to the small, niggling fear that had fed so many of her others.

"What made you think that?"

"Weren't you? You do see a lot of each other...or you had been. And Hermione seems . . ." Poppy shrugged. "Some people may have thought that she was interested in you and her feelings were reciprocated."

"Some people . . . you mean Minerva, don't you?"

Poppy shrugged one shoulder. "She did mention her once. About a month ago. But she did say that you weren't dating. If she hadn't, I never would have continued our liaisons."

"It was none of her business to say anything," Severus said, hard anger in his voice.

"I know. I wasn't thrilled, either. But she didn't mean badly, and it's not as though she goes about telling everyone that."

"How do I know that?" Severus demanded.

"Because she's Minerva and she wouldn't. It was just something she told me out of . . . some concern, I suppose, for both of us."

"Hmpf."

"But you haven't answered my question. Or I suppose you have. You were, or are, interested in Hermione."

"No. That is, I'm not. I'm only interested in you, as I told you this morning."

"But you were?"

Severus twitched one shoulder. "As you noticed, she and I became friends. Yes, I considered it. In fact, we had had a date, just one, but it wasn't a real date. I hadn't meant it to be one, but she asked if it was, so I agreed. And then I started seeing you, and even though we were saying at the time that it was just a fling and we wouldn't continue, I still felt that something wasn't right . . . that if I were interested in a fling with you or anyone else, then I oughtn't date Hermione."

"And you told her that?"

Severus nodded. "I didn't say why, exactly. I never mentioned you. I just told her that my life was too complicated at the moment or something of the sort."

"And that's not true now? Is your life any less complicated?"

"It doesn't apply to us, Poppy. You were part of the complication, if I may phrase it that way. It was seeing you that made me realise that I couldn't in good conscience date Hermione. I'd thought that it was appropriate, but then I saw that my feelings for her weren't what I'd thought they were...not that I understood that immediately. But if I had really wanted to date her, I wouldn't have preferred to be seeing you instead."

"I see . . ."

"Besides, after you told me that you wanted to take a break so we could think about what we wanted, I saw her again. I thought I . . . I owed it to her, you see, to offer once more. But it didn't work out. She was already dating someone else, and her interest in me had cooled, I suppose."

"So you went back to her and offered to try again, and when that didn't work out, when she rejected your offer, you came back to me," Poppy said, pulling away from him.

"Well, I wouldn't have put it that way..."

"How would you put it, Severus? What was I? Second prize? Runner-up? Where does Helena fit in? Before or after Hermione turned you down? Before or after you decided to start bringing me flowers and asking me out?" Poppy stood, her face red and her hands trembling.

"It was before, just before, but Poppy..."

"Look, Severus, I think you ought to go now. And get to the dinner party on your own." Poppy turned away.

"You don't understand," Severus began.

"I think I understand quite well." Poppy's voice shook.

"No, you don't." Severus stood and placed his hands on her shoulders, though she stepped away again. "It wasn't *you* who was the prize. As misguided and completely bone-headed as it may have been, I thought I had an obligation to . . . to be the prize for Hermione, if you want to put it that way...though I'm certainly not much of a prize...to thank her for all her care and for her expectations of me, which I had dashed. Even as I was with her, offering to try to date again, it didn't feel natural, and then when she turned me away, I felt relieved because I could begin seeing you again. And kissing Helena, that was when I realised that nothing would feel right to me but you."

"You kept saying, and you sometimes still imply, that I should find other lovers, but those two encounters, as ill-considered as they may have been, were what brought home to me that I have no desire to take other lovers, that it's *you* whom I want, Poppy. I want *you*." He stepped forward again and put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. Her cheeks were bright pink spots and her eyes glistened with tears. He stroked her cheek and pulled her toward him. To his relief, Poppy put her arms around him.

"I know I'm not very polished in this," he said. "I haven't the practice to be the smooth and perfect suitor, and I don't always have the knack of saying the right things in the right way at the right time, not without putting on the cloak of insincerity I so often wore as a spy, but believe me when I say that what I feel for you is honest, Poppy, and if anything, I feel you are far too good for me. If I could win your heart, I would be the most fortunate wizard alive, I am sure. I just wish I were better at this, that I could say all the things a witch wants to hear, and only make you happy with my words and draw you closer."

Poppy shook her head against him, and he could feel her taking a deep breath and swallowing. "I don't want a cloak of insincerity. I want the truth from you, Severus, even if it isn't polished and pretty, packaged up to be more palatable."

"I hope that this truth is palatable, though: I want only you. I would not feel relief if you turned me away...quite the opposite...and I do wish to win your heart."

Poppy nodded. "It just felt for a minute . . . it felt as though some of my fears were true." She looked up at him, her eyes clearer, though her colour still heightened.

Severus sighed and caressed her face, cupping her cheek in his palm. "Today has not been the smoothest one. I have certainly uttered more ineptly expressed truths than usual. I'm sorry I have hurt you again."

"You assuaged my feelings, though." She turned her head and kissed his palm.

"I am glad I could do that. I am still sorry that I hurt you yet again."

"It was my own insecurities, Sev. Better to have them out in the open, I suppose. I feel better now. I think I'll be able to enjoy this evening."

"Shall I come by just before seven, then? We can go together?"

Poppy nodded, taking his hand and sitting back down on the sofa, Severus joining her. "I am still deciding between my pastel blue robes with the cherry blossom pink under-robe, or a set of muted turquoise blue robes that I haven't worn yet this year. I can't finish packing until I decide which to pack and which to wear."

"I think I remember the turquoise robes . . . they have a nice style to them and are quite flattering on you...not that the others aren't flattering!" Severus added hastily, hoping he had not said yet one more inept thing that day.

Poppy smirked, though, and said, "The turquoise ones are a bit more form-fitting, I suppose, and the neckline is lower."

"You will be lovely no matter what you decide to wear, I am certain."

"What are you wearing?"

"I hadn't thought I'd change." He looked down at his everyday suit and loose black teaching robe. "Of course, even after Filius's charms and then your own, I suppose these clothes could use laundering. I probably should change." And Quin would likely be there wearing something that enhanced his already handsome appearance. Likely something that cost a couple hundred Galleons.

"Why not wear what you wore on your birthday?" Poppy suggested. "The silver tie and the grey trousers? And that nice waistcoat."

"You noticed what I wore on my birthday?"

Poppy nodded. "I was glad to see you celebrating it a bit, even if in a small way."

Severus twitched a smile. "Most people think all my clothes look alike."

Poppy shrugged. "I've known you for years, Severus. You have a few favourite teaching robes, plus a couple others which you rarely wear, and you have several different suits. Your trousers are all fairly much the same, but your jackets and waistcoats are each a bit different. I'm sure others have noticed, too. Your manner of dress might use some enlivening, but you do have a particular style, and it suited you for a long time."

"But not any longer?"

"I don't recommend going to Madam Malkin's and ordering a wardrobe of clothes to rival Albus's, but you might expand it a bit, try out a few new additions to your wardrobe."

"I was considering getting my hair cut. McGonagall says I'm stuck in the past with it. What do you think?"

Poppy raised her hand to his hair. "I don't know. It would depend on how you got it cut, and whether it suited your face. I don't think it would look good if it were closely cropped, as Murdoch usually wears his, but some change might be good. You could always use hair growth potion if you don't like it, and a Glamour in the meantime until it grows out again. You do have nice hair, though. I must be honest and admit that I didn't often think so, but you seem to be keeping it better these days, or your stress level has dropped and so your hair is in better condition or something."

"I used to use Shed-Stop Potion on it every day," Severus admitted. "It's not a perfect potion, but it did keep me from losing too much hair during the day when I was out and about."

Poppy looked puzzled for a moment, then said, "Ah, Polyjuice fears. I can certainly understand that in the position you were in. You would hardly want someone to impersonate you in Albus's presence...or anywhere else, of course. But it could have been dangerous."

"Indeed."

"I really must finish packing now, Sev, and change. I was going to shower, but I am planning on being at dinner in the Great Hall this evening, though I won't eat much, so I'm not sure I'll have time for a shower now, and I'll have to hurry as it is."

Severus stood and nodded. "I have to check on my Blood Replenishing Potion, as well. I'll see you later, then."

Poppy nodded and walked him to the door. Severus leaned forward and kissed her lips gently, then kissed her again. He placed his hand on the doorhandle and pressed down on it, preparing to leave, but then he bent close to her again, this time, his lips caressing her cheek before they strayed to her ear.

"I want you to know this now and to remember it while you are on holiday, Poppy: I love you. I love you."

He kissed her once more quickly, then even more rapidly opened the door and closed it again behind him. Poppy just stared at the closed door, reaching toward it as though trying to catch the wizard on its other side, trying to catch him and hear his words again.

Severus felt a warm smile edge its way to the corners of his mouth. He had said it. He had said it when he wasn't in the throes of passion. He had said it when Poppy couldn't believe that he'd said it because he'd wanted something from her in that moment, like sex. He had said it and he had meant it. And she would know it before she saw the impeccable Quin MacAirt at dinner that night and before she went on holiday.

He thought it was good, too, that he hadn't given her time to say anything in return. It would leave her thinking about it, his last whispered words to her on his way out the door, and that way, too, if she didn't love him yet, or if she didn't yet feel comfortable saying it, there hadn't be any awkward moment in which she'd felt she had to say something in return.

He hadn't said those three words to many people in his life, even with those rare people whom he did love. He'd tried once with Lily when he'd tried to apologise to her for calling her a Mudblood, but the words hadn't come out right, and she wouldn't have accepted them, anyway. When he was a small boy, he'd tell his dad he loved him, and his father would either give him a hug or ruffle his hair and tell him he loved him too, or some other words to the same effect.

He thought his mother had told him she loved him, though Severus couldn't remember her ever doing so. One time when he was about four or five, standing in the kitchen beside her as she stirred a pot of stew, he'd held onto her skirt and said he loved her, and she'd patted his head and told him dinner would be in a half hour. For some reason, it was a very clear memory. The smell of the stew cooking, his mother looking distracted and unhappy, and him thinking that she might feel better if he told her he loved her.

More recently, he'd told Minerva he loved her. After the *Adfectus* incident, it was easier to be free with those words with her...freer than he would ordinarily be comfortable with, anyway. He had said those words to Gareth, too, in a sudden rush of gratitude and affection for him, and he'd immediately regretted it. And he felt love for Albus, but he'd never said exactly that to the older wizard, though he had certainly told him in other words.

He did love Hermione in some way, though he'd never said it to her, and it was clear to him now that the deep affection and regard he had for her was not of the sort he felt for Poppy...or even for Minerva...though Hermione could count on his friendship and his help if ever she needed it. He owed her a debt, but regardless of any debt, he would come to her aid if she asked.

So saying those three words was not something he did often or lightly, and yet it felt perfectly right to have said them to Poppy. *I love you*. Severus didn't even know entirely what it meant, *I love you*, and it seemed that he discovered more and more about his love for Poppy as time went on, but he did know that it was true, and he hoped that someday, someday soon, she would say those words to him. But he did not want her to feel pressure to say them, to say them simply in automatic response to his declaration of love. Yes, it was best that he had said them when he had and then left.

Severus smiled again as he opened the door to his private dungeon Potions lab. Perhaps this day was going well, after all. He could even entertain a small hope that Albus's dinner party would be an enjoyable occasion. He snorted to himself. Perhaps he was becoming an optimist after all, he thought with a smirk. If not that, then at least Poppy was imparting a sense of belonging and comfort to his life, something he had believed infinitely impossible just one year ago. Severus Snape had found a life, he thought to himself, not just an existence that had lost any purpose with the defeat of the Dark Lord. Severus Snape was in love.

On returning to his rooms to change clothes before Albus's dinner party, Severus found a note waiting for him on the large table in his sitting room. He recognised the handwriting on the folded parchment immediately. It was from Poppy.

He stared at his name for a moment, just "Severus" written in bright blue ink, then with nervous fingers, he unfolded the note, his heart beating faster.

3 April 1999

Dear Severus,

Can you come up a little earlier than planned? Between 6:30 and 6:45? I have something to discuss with you.

Love,

Poppy

She'd signed it "Love, Poppy," and he couldn't remember any of her other notes or letters closing with those words, but the mention of "something to discuss" gave him a knot in his stomach. Was she now put off the relationship? Between his confession about the physical intimacy he'd experienced with Gareth, his inadvertently insulting her by making it sound as though she were merely a second-rate consolation prize when that was quite the opposite of the truth, and his abrupt declaration of love, perhaps she had reconsidered going on holiday with him. Or even reconsidered their entire relationship.

He drew out his watch. It hadn't been very long since they had parted. Poppy seemed to be fairly deliberate in her decisions. Would she have made such a drastic decision in just the last couple of hours? Severus shook his head; he felt on solid ground with her despite the bumpiness in their recent conversations.

Poppy had wanted truth from him, and he was giving her as much truth as he could. Minerva had said once that not all truths need disclosing, nor require disclosing to all people, and that there was a time and a place for such disclosure, as well. She had been speaking about certain things that they had had to do in the covert war, including their involvement with the Azkaban prison break, some of the damages done to businesses and people in the wizarding districts in order to close shops and minimise targets for Voldemort's blitz attacks, not to mention the finer details of Albus's "death" and "resurrection," or his own salvation from Nagini's attack...or even why Nagini was important to destroy. They did not want the existence of, the possibility of, Horcruxes to become common knowledge. There were rumours, of course, about how Riddle had managed to survive death on that Halloween night all those years ago, but the Ministry was not going to approve dissemination of the details, and Hogwarts Wizarding History classes would not cover that aspect of Riddle's Dark magic, at least not for another generation or two.

But Severus thought that in a relationship between two people, a close, trusting, honest relationship, there should be as much truth as possible, and certainly no lies that could later be revealed and be interpreted as deceptions. Important, relationship-breaking deceptions.

Severus shook his head. He did not want to lie to Poppy. Whomever else he might continue to lie to, either for ease or for a greater purpose, he did not want to lie to Poppy. There were, however, certain truths about his life and his deeds that he thought it best to protect her from, to protect their relationship from, lest those truths taint the relationship.

As he had told Minerva just that morning, he could not tell Poppy the truth about Gertrude: the truth that he felt uncomfortable around the Arithmancer, beyond uncomfortable, and that this discomfort had been somewhat mitigated by her forgiveness, but still remained despite that. And the greater truth was that he had been the Death Eater who had terrorized Gertrude Gamp in her own home, toyed with her, and sliced off her wand arm, thinking it was funny. That was a truth that he could not tell Poppy, and yet he was afraid that she would learn it somehow. Minerva and Dumbledore would be unlikely to tell her, and Severus trusted Gareth not to say anything, but others might know or guess...Melina, perhaps, or Quin, if he ever learned of it. If Quin found out, Severus had no expectation that he would keep the knowledge to himself, and he would not be at all surprised to find himself on the wrong side of Quin's famous temper and pay for his crime for years to come.

Perhaps he should tell Poppy himself, Severus thought. But not right away. Not until after she'd absorbed the things that she'd heard today. Not until she'd been on holiday and missed him. Not until after their own holiday, if they were still going to go together.

He passed the tips of his fingers over the words, *Love, Poppy*, again. He nodded slightly, set down the letter, and went into his bedroom to prepare for the party.

At six-thirty sharp, Severus presented himself to the portrait of Mrs Framingham. She left her frame, and almost immediately the door opened, revealing a smiling and lovely Poppy. In addition to wearing the turquoise robes he had recommended, she was wearing silver jewellery: a necklace, a pair of delicate dangly earrings, and a single heavy silver cuff on her left wrist. All were engraved with an intricate pattern of stylized flowers and leaves. He thought she had used make-up charms that evening, as well, though they were subtle.

"Good evening, Severus."

"Good evening, Poppy. You look lovely. The jewellery is quite nice. It goes well with your robes."

She smiled up at him and invited him in, thanking him. "You look more than presentable as well." She smiled as she caught sight of his ring. "Wearing your Snape's Slytherin ring, I see, the 'big daddy of rings,' I believe Blaise called it. One of a kind. Looks nice. You should wear it more frequently."

Severus shook his head. "It is ostentatious for me. Perhaps once all of Snape's Slytherins have left school, I might wear it more frequently, but I am trying to de-emphasise differences within our House. Unity for unity's sake isn't a great ideal, but disunity over something foolish is needlessly destructive. Nonetheless, I do wish Snape's Slytherins to wear their rings with pride and serve as an example for others in our House."

Poppy nodded. "I see. Perhaps you might care to wear it on our holiday?"

"Have you made plans already?"

"I have. You've been to the Tyree estate. There are a number of houses on the grounds, not just the castle and the lodge. There are a few that aren't inhabited. They're kept for guests or for other special purposes. I talked to Minerva about getting one of those for a few days. She was sure that would be fine with Siofre, but she had a better suggestion. She suggested her cottage."

"Her cottage?"

"Yes, she has a cottage in an out-of-the-way spot on the Tyree estate grounds...quite a ways away from the main house or any others, so it's very private. I've been before, and it's well-furnished and well kept up. We'd likely even have a house-elf to attend to our few needs. I thought it sounded perfect, so I accepted...with the caveat that it had to meet your approval, too. But I thought it sounded perfect. We'll be in private; we won't have to worry about using magic or hiding it from Muggles, because it's on the Tyree estate; if we discover we need something, they probably have it at the main house; and it's a perfect point from which to do some hillwalking. Plus, you apparently did tell young Eoghan that you would spend time with him over the holiday. This would offer you the opportunity to do that. What do you say?"

"I feel uncomfortable taking the Headmistress's house. Won't she want to use it?"

Poppy shook her head. "She and Albus have plans to go there for a couple days at the beginning of this week. Think about it; it's a great place and very private. No one would know we were there but Minerva and the folks who live at the estate."

Severus nodded. "All right. It does sound like an acceptable proposal. I will think about it this evening and let you know."

Poppy gave him a swift hug. "Good! I'm looking forward to our holiday!"

Chapter One-Hundred One: Simply Severus

Chapter 102 of 118

Albus has prepared meticulously for the dinner party; Minerva finds herself in a quandary, but makes a few gentle suggestions and a few decisive changes. Severus and Poppy meet to go up to the Headmistress's Tower together.

Beginning of Part Ten



PART TEN

Chapter One-Hundred One: Simply Severus

Saturday, 3 April 1999

"What do you think, my dear?" Albus asked, gesturing toward the long, somewhat ovoid table that now occupied half of the large sitting room.

"It looks lovely, Albus; it really does." Minerva nodded.

It did all look lovely and warmly welcoming. Crystal sparkled, silver gleamed, and even the gold-rimmed china seemed to shine. Albus had relocated the chandelier from the centre of the room to just above the table, and its many candles all glowed warmly, adding to the light of the low candlesticks on the dining table and the long tapers set in sconces along the walls. Two low bowls of delicate blossoms decorated the table without blocking views or interfering with conversation.

On the other side of the room near the fireplace, Albus had rearranged the furniture so that it was more open, rather than closely grouped together, and on various tables, he had set out wine, spirits, and a number of nonalcoholic drinks. House-elves would pop in the appetisers when the guests began to arrive, and from what Minerva had gathered, they could practically make a meal from the many tasty treats Albus had arranged for, and the dinner itself would be equally delectable.

Minerva approached the table, ready to compliment the place settings more effusively, since she knew that Albus had put in a good deal of effort, but then she saw the place cards. Her smile grew frozen as she walked around the table and saw where Albus planned to have everyone sit.

Albus noticed her sudden stiffness and her attempt to continue to look pleased, and he knew her well enough to recognise that she thought that there was something wrong but did not want to say anything to hurt his feelings.

"What is it, Minerva?" Albus asked, puzzled. He could see nothing wrong with the table, the candles, the flowers, the place settings . . . He approached the table himself. Had the house-elves misplaced the silver? Were the glasses on the wrong side of the plates? Even if they were, that wasn't anything that Minerva would fuss about for a dinner with close friends and family...or she would simply wave her wand and rearrange things so that everything was in its proper place.

"It is a lovely table, Albus. And I'm sure that the guests will be as delighted with it as they are with the meal itself...although the meal could be served off of wooden trenchers, and I think it would still taste wonderful. But . . ."

"But?"

"The place cards..."

"I thought it an excellent idea to help the flow of conversation and to help people come to know one another if they've not met before or don't know each other well," Albus said. "It's also easier than having everyone standing about wondering whether there's some . . . pecking order and where they should sit, or whether they should wait to see which chairs the more senior guests claim. I thought you would approve...you do like to have some order, after all."

"Yes, of course, and I think place cards are an excellent idea. Very good, indeed." Minerva went over and picked up Quin's place card and shook her head.

"What is it?"

"Why do you have Quin seated beside Poppy? And . . ." She plucked another card from the table. "Helena beside Severus? Aine across from Severus? And Pomona on Severus's other side?" She shook her head again.

"I also placed Gertrude beside Quin and on my right," Albus said, "and put Severus down closer to your end of the table. I did think it best not to have Gertrude sitting very close to Severus...I took your thoughts on that to heart, my dear, although I do think you are worrying about nothing. Gertrude said she would be fine, and Severus is a grown man, and however much he may grumble about things, he got through the last couple decades teaching children whose parents he'd opposed and whom he'd even attacked. He's also become friends with Gareth. Severus will be fine with Gertrude here once he's used to it. It will be good for him. I also thought he might appreciate some female company, as would Gareth. It is quite usual to seat wizards and witches in this way when one is able to, after all, even if we haven't an even number of each. Hardly a recent innovation or some barmy idea of mine!"

"You know that I like place cards. They're quite orderly. But this order is questionable." Minerva picked up another place card. "Gareth next to Colleen Murphy and Hafrena on his other side? He may like older witches, but really, Albus! Hafrena? She's older than my mother!"

"I'm not expecting the boy to date her, just amuse her, and this way, I could put Calum next to you, since you always say you don't see enough of him, and seat Colleen across from Filius, who I'm sure would enjoy her conversation."

"Yes, that's fine; Colleen's an old friend of both his and Pomona's," Minerva replied, putting down the place card for Pomona's former fellow apprentice. "I'm not sure about seating Poppy beside Quin, though . . ."

"I noticed that she and Quin have begun seeing each other again. Although it didn't work out between them before, perhaps it will this time. They do seem quite fond of one another. I had originally planned to seat Pomona beside Quin, and Severus between Aine and Poppy...two lovely witches whose company I'm sure he could appreciate, particularly as he so enjoys the Maximilian Powers books...but then after I saw that Poppy and Quin are dating again, I changed those plans and moved Poppy over next to Quin, and since Severus and Helena have had a date or two recently, I thought I might encourage young love and seat her beside him!" Albus smiled, looking quite pleased with himself.

"Albus . . ." Minerva sighed. She couldn't break the confidences of either Poppy or Severus, but this would be disastrous if Severus had to watch Poppy sitting and talking with Quin all evening, with Gertrude just on Quin's other side. "I've spoken with Severus, and he actually thinks that Helena and Gareth might be well-suited, though

Helena isn't yet interested in dating, I understand. The poor witch only just lost her fiancé less than a year ago, after all. And you know that Pomona can sometimes get on Severus's nerves. If you want Severus to actually relax and have a good time tonight, I suggest seating Pomona next to Quin as you'd originally planned...she'd love sitting next to him, I'm sure...and moving Poppy over next to Severus. He's always got along with her much better than he does Pomona, and they have been working together quite a bit lately, so I think he'd be comfortable with her. Besides, Poppy told me confidentially that she doesn't think that now is the right time to date Quin, if there ever were to be a 'right time.' I'm sure she won't mind sitting beside Severus and not Quin."

"Then Colleen, Calum, Marjorie, Caspar, and Filius . . ." Albus's brow furrowed as he looked at the cards remaining on the table after Minerva had removed most of them.

"Do you mind if I interfere with just this one little aspect of your party, Albus? May I rearrange the place cards? Everyone will have a good time, I'm sure, and I'll make certain that Severus has plenty of opportunity to talk with all of the eligible witches whom you invited tonight, everyone from Helena to Hafrena." When Albus hesitated slightly, Minerva added, "There are also the party games after...you can have fun forming the teams for those!"

Albus grinned. "Of course, my dear." He watched as she flicked her wand and replaced Pomona's place card with Poppy's. "And *had* rather hoped that Poppy and Severus might hit it off, since they seemed rather friendly at Filius's party, though it looks as though I'm to be disappointed and they're both all Hogwarts business. Still, it's a good thing that they've become friendly colleagues. I believe that Severus is quite coming out of his shell...he's sending out feelers, anyway!"

"He is making an effort," Minerva agreed as she flicked her wand several times and rearranged most of the place cards, keeping Gertrude on Albus's right and to Quin's left but moving Caspar to sit across from her, then moving the others around so that Severus was still between Poppy and Aine, but now across from Hafrena. She kept Hafrena on one side of Gareth, but moved Helena to sit on his other side. One more flick, and the remaining place cards settled gently on the table. "It's still difficult for him, though. He doesn't like to show you, but it can be hard."

"I know. I am certain that these new restrictions on his movements and being treated as 'one that got away' must be very wearing on him, not to mention that in addition to being a possible target, he's even been treated as a suspect. The poor lad must feel as though it will never be over."

"You should talk to him, Albus," Minerva said. "You could offer him so much advice, or not even advice . . . but you could speak to him of your experiences. You could offer him some sympathy and understanding, and I think that if you spoke to him some of your youth and then of your difficulties adjusting to life after defeating Grindelwald, you might give him some hope for his future. And if he's having any personal troubles, it might be nice for him to have a friend to go to...a wizard...someone to talk things over with who can relate to his situation and feelings."

"We have spoken in the past . . . but I suppose I have not always been very forthcoming with him," Albus said thoughtfully. "Our conversations on those subjects have tended toward . . . the technical and impersonal. He has not seemed to welcome overtures toward personal conversations, though."

"And you likely never persisted," Minerva replied. "I imagine, too, that many of those conversations were in connection with unpleasant business, and any early in his career here . . . well, I doubt they were comfortable or even particularly voluntary."

Albus nodded. "I do believe that the tenor of our early conversations put an even greater strain on our relationship in those years."

"Conversations...they were more like interrogations, I imagine."

"To a degree. Not wholly. But it isn't as though Severus would have shared all he needed to without being questioned closely. It's not as though I bullied the boy. Although . . . perhaps I could have done a few things differently, but it was a difficult situation, and he was a very difficult wizard."

Minerva shrugged. "I don't know about the past, Albus. As you always say, there's no point in dwelling on it or in it, but I think that in the here and now, you have an opportunity with him. He cares about you, and I think he'd be glad to be closer to you. But he's never going to be the one to make the initiative. You know that. You always say he's become like a son to you; if you want to be fatherly toward him, you have that chance now, one you didn't have before."

"You never seemed to think that my fatherly conversations with Gareth went particularly well," Albus pointed out.

"I don't know as I'd put it that way, but you weren't always very fatherly toward him in those conversations...yes, I know you tried, and I don't want to rehash the past, Albus, but you sometimes did too much preaching and too little listening, particularly when he was living with us."

"I suppose . . . and he wasn't very inclined to listen to me, either, particularly not after overhearing me say that he would be better off living with Melina and Brennan, though I only meant it for his own good." Albus sighed, remembering the story-faced teenager who was trying to pretend not to cry and not to care, but whose tears shone in his eyes, eyes that were so like Minerva's.

"And then you hired Severus and he was sent even further away. Gareth loves you, and he always has, but I think it took him a while to get over that, but he did. You and he are much closer now."

"Well, I've toned down my 'preaching,' as you put it, and I've tried to remember that he's a full-grown wizard, too!" Albus smiled. "I do still sometimes see him as he was as a boy, you know. He was so very bright, but headstrong, and so very self-contained. I worried about him after Malcolm died and he was having such a difficult time, not speaking at all, trying to take care of his mother but shutting everyone else out . . . but I didn't know what to do for him. He was always closer to you."

"You brought him kilt shopping with Dad, remember? It was your idea," Minerva said with a smile.

Albus laughed. "He would refuse to wear his trousers, after all, and he only had the one kilt that was the right length; all his others were too short, he'd grown so fast. If the boy was going to wear nothing but the kilt, then he had to have a few, at least. And proper shirts and shoes, too, I remember. We bought him a dress sporran and an everyday one, as well, but he never used them. Only his father's."

"He had a good time with you that day, I remember," Minerva said. "It meant a lot to Gertrude, too."

"And we've had fun at the Golden Cups Parks," Albus said with a grin.

Minerva rolled her eyes and laughed. "You two! Getting me on that ride, both of you wheedling and pleading, saying how fun it would be, and then he vomited all over my one decent casual Muggle dress, and I couldn't even whip out my wand and clean it up!"

Albus laughed. "Well, Gareth and I had fun together."

"He never threw up on *you*," Minerva said, smiling, "so of course you'd think it was fun...I was happy to leave you two to the thrill rides after that trip, though!"

"We missed you!"

"Oh, you did not! You were both having too much fun to miss me," Minerva said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "You know, you were always at your best with Gareth when you weren't trying too hard, when you were just being yourself."

"I suppose I'd been a headmaster so long, it was sometimes difficult for me to step out of that role with him."

"Well, remember that when you're with Severus, then, if it helps," Minerva said.

"I said something like that to Severus, actually. That we could have a fresh start, that I wasn't his boss or the Headmaster any longer, and that we could learn to relate to each other in a new way."

"I think you are already doing well with that," Minerva replied with a nod. "He's much more at ease with you than he was after he learned you were alive...in some ways, I think he may even be more at ease with you than he's ever been."

"I think . . . I think that the time we spent together in the Forest that time, when I showed him where we incinerated the remains, I think that was good for us. For us both. We didn't even speak much. But I believe we both felt closer after that. Perhaps not closer, but as you say, more at ease with each other."

"You put a chapter behind you, and I think it helped Severus immensely that you apologised and explained what had been going through your mind."

"I think it may also have been the first time I ever felt that he truly accepted an apology from me," Albus said. "It was a relief for me, actually. It is hard to apologise repeatedly to someone for various things over the course of so many years, things large and small, even fairly insignificant misunderstandings, and feel that your apology is never accepted."

"So you now have a good basis for a closer friendship with him. It is good you persisted in that regard. I really believe that he's at a point in his life when he needs you, when your friendship could be very important to him. This year is a great transition for him, filled with all kinds of changes; talking to you could help him immensely."

"He talks to you, though."

"I know, but I think that having another wizard to talk to would be good...and one who's also seen his share of sorrow and trouble in life, too."

"Gareth..."

"Has become a wonderful friend for Severus, I'm sure, and I can't tell you how pleased I am that Severus has been able to make friends with someone who's a peer...who's close to his age, who's also bright and inquisitive, and who knows some of Severus's less than sterling qualities but still can see past that...but I think that you can offer him a different sort of relationship than he has with Gareth."

Albus laughed. "You mean one with a barmy old codger?"

Minerva chuckled. "Yes, my dear barmy old codger, one with you!" She walked around the table and kissed her barmy old codger. "Mmm, I do love you so, Albus!" she said, embracing him and leaning against him as his arms went around her.

"And I, my dear, love you!"

~*~*~*~*~

"I just have to slip on a pair of shoes, and we can go," Poppy said. "I couldn't decide between these dark blue ones and the pale grey ones. I think the blue ones would need charming to go with these robes." She held up one in each hand to show Severus.

"My advice: do not wear one of each," Severus joked.

Poppy laughed. "I'd be limping along beside you, since the heels are quite different." She examined the shoes again. "The grey might go better."

"Wear whichever pair is more comfortable," Severus said. Looking at the shoes, he thought that the grey pair looked uncomfortable, though they were dressier, sexier, with a narrow high heel.

Poppy quickly charmed the blue shoes a shade to complement her greenish-blue turquoise robes and then slipped them on. She picked up what appeared to be a bottle of wine, brightly wrapped in a paisley fabric with a bow tied around its neck.

"You have a gift for them?" Severus asked. He had nothing with him.

"Just a bottle of wine from Dylan's cousin's," Poppy replied. "Nothing very grand."

"Do you think that everyone will bring a gift?"

Poppy shook her head. "Oh, I doubt it, and even if they do, you needn't worry about it...I'm sure no one will notice, and Albus will just be very pleased to see you there."

Severus furrowed his brow. "I ought to have thought of that . . . brought something."

Poppy set the bottle of wine down. "You know, I think I'll give this to them some other time. It's nothing that won't keep. I brought it back with me last time I visited Violet, and I hadn't had any specific plans for it. I just thought it would be nice to bring tonight."

"If I had only thought, I could have brought Minerva some of the potion I brewed today. Although Blood-Replenishing Potion would be an odd gift, I suppose."

Poppy laughed. "Yes, just a tad on the outré side, I'd say. So you brewed some nonstandard potion for Minerva?"

Severus nodded. "It is an alternative to the one that Murdoch brews. I have not yet tested its efficacy, however. I thought I would do that sometime this week."

"You will have to tell me how that works out. Murdoch used to talk about trying to simplify the potion, but I don't know as he ever spent any time on it." Poppy opened the door.

"You ought to bring the wine..."

"No, some other time would be fine," Poppy reassured him. "And this way, no one else might wonder if they ought to have brought something, too, if they hadn't."

"Quin probably did," Severus muttered.

Poppy shrugged. "Perhaps. But don't think that will matter to Albus and Minerva. I think they're just glad to be able to have a dinner like this."

Severus sighed and followed her out the door.

Poppy hoped that Severus would not spend the entire evening obsessed about Quin's presence or constantly comparing himself to the other wizard. She wanted to enjoy herself that evening, and she didn't think she could if Severus were being quietly miserable.

"Sev?" she said softly.

"Mm."

"You know, I think you could enjoy this evening if you let yourself."

"It's not a matter of 'letting myself,'" Severus replied, resignation in his voice, "not tonight, anyway. But I will endure it."

Poppy stopped and put her hand on his arm. "I'm sure that it means a lot to Albus and Minerva that you're coming tonight, but they didn't invite you in order to make you miserable. They want you...and their other guests...to have a good time. If you really didn't want to come, you should have just told them. No doubt they would have been disappointed, Albus especially, and I would have been, too, since I was looking forward to a social occasion with you, even if it's not a date, but better than for you to

attend and look for reasons to be glum and unhappy."

"So you're saying that I shouldn't go..."

"No. I'm saying that you should go and look at it as a challenge. Don't focus on things that irk you or depress you or make you feel awkward. Try to find things that you can enjoy about the evening, or things that interest you . . . or, if I'm not being too vain here, look at it as an opportunity to spend a little more time with me."

Severus sighed. "I will try. Though I wish it *were* a date, just the two of us."

"We'll have time alone together later in the holiday. But I won't enjoy myself very much if I'm worried that you're being quietly miserable."

Severus smirked. "Rather I be loudly miserable?"

Poppy laughed. "That would be hardly much better."

"I will endeavour to avoid being miserable, then, and I will look for things to enjoy," Severus said with a slight smile. "I will even participate in Albus's party games...though I cannot promise not to be competitive!"

"I would never expect that!" Poppy said with a laugh, squeezing his arm. "Good, then! Let's get to the party...I'm looking forward to seeing everyone. Albus has invited a few people whom I rarely see these days...Hafrena MacAirt, or NicAirt, as she prefers now that she's away from Hogwarts. She taught Divination for years. And Calum, that's Melina's son. I think you'd find him interesting, and he's about your age. He's a Muggle chemist, though he's not a Muggle, of course, and Murdoch thinks he may have a lot to contribute to Potions research...quite a far cry from his reaction when the boy announced he was continuing in Muggle school with his friends and didn't want to go to Hogwarts."

"I am surprised that Melina allowed that," Severus said.

Poppy shrugged. "Calum always got good grades, he was active in sport and clubs, and he had a lot of Muggle friends. I suppose that Melina assumed that he had some chance for a successful life in the Muggle world. He still did OWLs and NEWTs, though I think he only did Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions for his NEWTs, since he devoted most of his time to his Muggle NEWTs."

Severus snorted. "A levels, I think they're called. Not NEWTs, anyway."

"Whatever they are...the Muggle qualifying exams. He did well, went to university, has all sorts of Muggle degrees which Melina tells me are very impressive, and now he has a successful career."

"And he's thinking of chucking it all and trying to fit into the wizarding world now?" Severus asked. "Seems late days to be changing his life that drastically."

"I don't know. I think he may be dating a witch now and is fairly serious about her, so that may have played a role in his decision, but I think he also enjoyed the work he did with Murdoch and Robert on the different potions last year," Poppy said.

"I can understand how a relationship could change his perspective on his life," Severus said, looking down at Poppy, a soft expression on his face.

Poppy looked up at him and smiled. "Yes, so do I." She remembered her thought that she'd rather leave Hogwarts to be with Severus than to stay there without him, and her smile grew. It was partly her age and her experience...including some regret that she and Murdoch had not compromised and made a life together...but it was also simply Severus. She knew that things might not work out between them, that things might end disastrously, in fact, but her feelings for him had grown so steadily and so strongly, she would even take a leap into the unknown and leave Hogwarts with him if he asked, rather than lose him by staying at the school. She would risk her heart and more for Severus.

Chapter One-Hundred Two: Meeting Max

Chapter 103 of 118

After Poppy provides him some fortification, Severus accompanies her up to Albus's dinner party. Severus hopes he won't have to sit beside someone atrocious, but promises to try to enjoy himself.



Chapter One-Hundred Two: Meeting Max

Saturday, 3 April 1999

At the gargoyles, Severus drew out his watch. "We are a little early."

Poppy tugged his arm and gave a naughty smirk. "Can't have that." She led him around the corner into a narrow side hallway, then she gave her matron's password and pulled him into a small, dusty, unused office. Severus didn't resist when she pulled him down into a kiss.

His arms went around her, and his hands strayed over her back. One of them crept to her arse and gave it a gentle squeeze. Her fingers wound through his hair as her kisses grew more passionate. Finally, Poppy gave him one more kiss, gently sucking his bottom lip between her own, then with a gasp and a sigh, she leaned into him, resting against his chest as her arms draped around him.

They stood there in silence for a few minutes, Severus holding her closely and occasionally nuzzling her hair, Poppy content to feel his warmth as she leaned against him.

She sighed and gave him a squeeze. "We will be late now if we don't leave."

"I'd rather stay here," Severus said, but he loosened his arms and pulled back slightly. "This was a nice diversion on the way to the dinner, though."

Poppy nodded and smiled, letting go of him. "I thought that it might be a while before I have another kiss from you, so I thought I'd take the opportunity now."

"You leave early tomorrow?"

"Dylan's coming for me at half past seven," Poppy said. "They always do a big Easter breakfast for the children, and I wanted to be there for that."

Severus nodded. It sounded horrid to him, but he supposed that if it were one's own family, a person might feel differently about it.

"Perhaps . . ."

"Yes?" Severus asked, hopeful that she was rethinking her plans for Easter, as unlikely as that seemed, and might stay at the castle for the day after all.

"Well, I don't suppose you'd want to come tomorrow, but perhaps one time when I visit my family for a holiday, you might like to come along?" Poppy said hesitantly.

Severus blinked. He felt unaccountably happy that she wished to include him in a holiday visit to her family, while at the same time, thinking that the actual visit sounded worse than an evening of Muggle party games with Albus. Still, he found himself smiling. "I might. We'd have to discuss it. If your family were agreeable . . . I mean to say, I am sure that your family is agreeable. But if they were in agreement, then perhaps . . . for a brief visit."

"Or even just dinner," Poppy said. "You wouldn't have to stay for an entire holiday, of course, or even for a whole day."

"That might be possible."

"Later in the term, we can go to Violet and Dylan's for Sunday dinner. I'd like them to get to know you a little...and I think you'd find them agreeable," Poppy said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Yes, all right," Severus replied.

"Good. That's set then!" She stood on tiptoe and gave him a kiss. "Fortified and ready for the party now?" she asked, reaching past him for the door handle.

"I suppose . . ." At Poppy's raised eyebrow, he added, "Yes, I'm ready. Quite fortified." He gave her a crooked grin. "Of course, a bit more fortification, and we could be fashionably late."

Poppy laughed and opened the door. "I think you're well fortified, love. And if you feel your fortification slipping, just remember our holiday next week!"

Severus made a show of sighing and giving in, but then suddenly, he closed the door, wrenching the handle from Poppy's grasp. He grabbed her and gathered her in his arms, kissing her and stroking his tongue in her mouth, holding her tightly, lifting her off the floor, his kiss growing in passion and ferocity. One of her shoes slipped off, and she broke the kiss, gasping. Severus slowly relaxed his hold, easing her gently to her feet.

"Hmmp. Perhaps I am sufficiently fortified now."

Poppy took in a deep breath and let it out, shaking her head. "You are incorrigible, Sev. Utterly."

Severus smirked. "In all the ways you secretly love, may I remain so." He knelt swiftly and picked up her shoe. Kissing the top of her foot, he slipped Poppy's shoe back on, then looked up at her. He paused, suddenly struck by the softness in her expression, the gentle smile around her eyes, her kiss-plumped lips, and he felt a tightness in his chest, an exquisite sensation of pain, pleasure, and desire.

"I adore you, Poppy," he said softly.

She reached out with feather-light touch and caressed his face, combing back a few stray strands of hair from his temple. "Do you?"

Severus inclined his head, a barely perceptible nod, lips slightly parted, expressing the ineffable.

It seemed to Poppy an impossibly long moment as he looked up at her, his dark eyes intense, then he took her hand and kissed it before standing.

"Dumbledore will wonder what's keeping us, nosy old sod," Severus said in a light tone, pretending to grumble. "Better get up there and join the throng."

"A dozen or so guests is hardly a throng, Sev," Poppy said, shaking off the moment of intoxicating emotion. "But you're right, best not to give him cause to wonder, if you do still wish to be discreet about our relationship."

"I explained that," Severus began.

"I know, and I do agree. The last thing we need is the entire staff watching us and interfering, however well-meaning any of them may be."

"Or not," Severus grunted. "I'm sure that there are still some who would be happier if I left, and who would not be happy to see you with me."

Poppy smirked. "I suppose that Sarah might be a bit jealous, and perhaps another witch or two, but other than that . . . I think you are too harsh on your colleagues. I don't know of any of them who would wish you ill."

"They'd hardly tell you," Severus said. "They know you're friendly with me, and even aside from that, you're too kind-hearted to listen to mean-spirited gossip. And as for any who might be jealous, that's hardly likely. Except in the case of Duffy. Soft in the head. Not any witches who know me."

"And what about me?" Poppy asked, putting her hand on his, keeping him from opening the door. "Am I soft in the head?"

"Of course not! That's not what I meant at all," Severus said hastily.

"I know you didn't, but that would be the logical conclusion from what you said. Honestly, Severus! Is it really so difficult for you to believe there might be other witches who would find you attractive?"

"None have in the past," Severus said. "Or few enough. And I know myself, Poppy, and I know what people think of former Death Eaters...and correctly so."

Poppy shook her head. "I am sure that people see you for who you are, not just as a former Death Eater. People who know you, anyway. You're more than that."

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "I'd like to believe you. I suppose you may be right. At least partially."

"I am. Now let's go enjoy ourselves," Poppy said, hoping that he wouldn't obsess about his reputation all night.

"Right."

"You did say you'd try."

"And I will...don't worry."

"Good. I won't worry about you, then...*this* evening." She let go of his hand, and he opened the door.

Stepping into the hallway, Severus said, "I hope that Dumbledore hasn't seated me next to someone atrocious."

"I don't think that any of the guests could *beatrocious*, Severus. Though you might find some of them more enjoyable company than others, I suppose."

"Hmph. Minerva told me that Quin will be there."

"You consider him atrocious?" Poppy asked with a slight laugh of disbelief.

"No. But . . ." He shrugged.

Poppy just shook her head, imagining that he'd probably rather sit beside Quin himself than see her with the other wizard. "I hope you get to know him better this evening. Aine's going to be here, as well. I know you'll like her...though she is rather different from her brother. Quieter and . . . more cynical, I suppose you might say."

"Living for years in virtual confinement as a result of her father's curse condition could do that," Severus said.

"I wouldn't say that she was in confinement, though certainly her life was much different than she'd planned or hoped."

"Minerva was to change the password today," Severus said, frowning as they stood before the gargoyle, "but I don't remember what the next one was to be."

"Angus Óg," Poppy said. The gargoyle winked at her and swung out smoothly, revealing the spiral stairs. "Minerva reminded me earlier this morning."

"After you," Severus said, with a slight bow.

Poppy laughed. "Chicken?"

"Not at all. Merely exercising one of the few polite manners I possess."

Poppy stepped onto the bottom step, and the stairs began to rotate upward as Severus took the step that emerged beneath hers.

"I never thought that you possessed few or no manners, Sev."

"No? Never? Is this what they call a white lie?"

Poppy shook her head and smiled at him. "I did not say that I believe that you *always exercise* your manners! Although in fact, I've sometimes observed you being punctiliously courteous, but somehow still managing to be snide. With Umbridge, for example."

"She was an abomination."

"You won't get an argument from me on that...nor from most people, I'm sure. Did you hear that they're considering charging her with some sorts of crimes for her actions here that year?"

Severus snorted. "That will never happen. The Ministry protects the Ministry, no matter who's in charge, and if they try to punish her for what she did under the Ministry's authority, then the same could be done to any of them at some later date when the political winds change."

"Minerva said the same thing when she told me about it. I don't know, though. Surely they could find some things that she did that weren't part of what was permitted under her Ministry brief."

"Possibly. That she lost her position at the Ministry after Shackbolt took over was sufficient for most people."

"Do you think that she was a Death Eater? Maybe not branded, but still a follower?"

Severus shook his head. "No. Just cruel, untalented, and dim-witted. Her sort make it easier for the truly Dark wizards, though."

Poppy stepped up onto the landing, Severus right behind her.

"She was not a good advertisement for Slytherin House, certainly," Poppy said.

"Mmph. Do not remind me." Severus reached for the knocker.

"I'm sure they're expecting us," Poppy said, opening the door to the Headmistress's office. She could hear voices coming from above. "Some guests have arrived already."

Severus nodded.

As the two began up the brass staircase to the Headmistress's suite, Poppy looked over her shoulder at Severus. "You wouldn't remember this, but when Dumbledore first became Headmaster, he had these stairs charmed as a slide to dump any unexpected guests onto the floor. Minerva and Gertrude between them managed to convince him that it was not one of his more brilliant ideas."

"That would be highly inconvenient, to say the least," Severus said with a snort.

The door at the top of the stairs was open, and the small landscape hanging there had no portrait in it, just a few sheep grazing placidly on a rocky hillside. Poppy smiled as she stepped into the large sitting room. Minerva had redecorated over the summer, and the room was bright, warm, and cheerful, but that evening, it was particularly lovely with the well-set dining table on one side of the room, and the welcoming arrangement of chairs and other furniture on the other side. She could see that various hors d'oeuvres were set out on small tables, and a longer, narrow table held an array of drinks. Her smile, however, was for the witch and wizard who stood speaking with Minerva.

Gertrude and Gareth had both looked over as she and Severus had come through the door, and Gareth's smile was immediate. Gertrude met Poppy's eyes and nodded, smiling slightly.

Albus bustled over to them. "I'd offer to take your cloaks, but that would be superfluous!" he said with a twinkle. "Do come in! I was just showing Filius a new Charmed fountain pen that my friend Michel sent me from Paris. He's just in Minerva's study, playing with it. It's quite clever, and...well, I'll just show you later. You might like one, Severus, if they come in black."

Severus nodded, his expression unchanging.

"I'd enjoy seeing it sometime, Albus," Poppy said. She hoped that Severus would not be uncommunicative all evening.

"Of course, my dear!" Albus replied, leading her further into the room. "Would you like a little nibble of something? And a glass of wine, perhaps? Or a sherry?"

"Vermouth, I think."

"And you, Severus?" Albus asked.

"Tonic."

"No ice, correct?" Albus asked, Levitating Poppy's small vermouth to her and reaching for the bottle of tonic.

Severus nodded. "Yes."

Gareth came up to Poppy and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Good to see you again so soon!"

"You, too! And Gertrude," Poppy said, turning to her old friend. "I must say I am especially happy to see you after that business earlier this week." She reached out and patted Gertrude's side lightly. "You're all right now, then?"

Gertrude nodded. "No harm done."

"I wouldn't say that," Gareth interjected.

"As I am sure you did, loudly and at length, when you refused the Ministry's commission," Gertrude said softly, "but I think that they were a more appropriate audience for your thoughts on that subject than we are this evening."

"As you say, Mum," Gareth replied, though he didn't look happy.

"All ready for the resort?" Poppy asked Gertrude.

"I am. I'll be taking the Portkey directly from the estate, so I will see you there," Gertrude said.

"Pomona and I are meeting Caroline at the gates, so we'll all be arriving together." Poppy watched as Severus moved off to sit in one of the furthest armchairs, but she was happy to see that Gareth immediately followed. She did hope that he would actually manage to enjoy himself that evening. It was all well and good for the two of them to enjoy each other's company on their own, but if their relationship continued, she did want to be able to go out and do things together as a couple, including going to parties or going out with a few other friends. She didn't want to always wonder whether Severus was just going to sit in a corner and mope. It appeared, however, that he and Gareth were having a comfortable conversation, so Poppy turned her attention back to Gertrude.

"I understand that Rolanda and Colleen will be meeting to travel together, as well," Gertrude said.

"I am glad that Rolanda's coming. I didn't know whether she would or not."

"I can understand her initial reluctance," Gertrude said.

"I can, as well," Minerva said. "But she'll enjoy herself, I'm sure."

"Did you hear that she's going to the States to have a new treatment?" Poppy asked. "She's very hopeful that she'll have more use of her arm."

"I thought she was going for some sort of cosmetic procedure," Albus said, frowning.

"She is, but they're also going to try some new nerve and muscle regeneration spells," Poppy explained. "That was the primary purpose for her going there...she could have the cosmetic spells done just as well here, I think, although with spell damage scars, you never know how successful they'll be. But there's a Medicus in Berkeley who's worked with Medicus Morgenstern on his new tissue regeneration magic."

"Ah, Nate Morgenstern! I met him several years ago. Seemed a bright young man," Albus said with a nod.

"Anyway, this Medicus in Berkeley is one of only a few Healers in the world who's doing these new spells," Poppy continued. "Morgenstern's even had some luck repairing major organ curse damage that is too severe for ordinary potions and spell treatment, from what I read."

"Melina was talking about that the last time we all had dinner with Mother at the cliffs," Minerva said. "Remember, Albus? She said that when she can make some time in her schedule, she is going to go to Ithaca to observe Morgenstern at work. It sounds as though they're very complicated rituals."

"I wish there were Healers here in Britain who could do it," Poppy said fretfully.

Albus patted her shoulder. "It will be good for Rolanda to go away for a while, I'm sure, and it will be good for her to be with her family there, as well."

"I wasn't thinking of Ro," Poppy said. "Poor Millicent. She had a brighter future ahead of her, playing Quidditch. I don't know what she'll do now."

"She will find something to do, no doubt," Albus said. "She's young."

"But it's not as though she has many other things going for her," Poppy said, her brow knit. "And with half her family in prison, she might find that taints her own reputation."

"I believe she will find a way to receive the treatment she needs," Gertrude said softly.

"Going in for Divination as well as Arithmancy now?" Poppy asked with a chuckle.

Gertrude looked at her, a slight smile crinkling around her eyes. "Something like that." She glanced at the others. "Would you excuse me a moment?"

Poppy watched as Gertrude stepped over to where Flitwick and her son were sitting with Severus.

"More arrivals, I believe, my dear!" Albus said brightly. He patted Minerva's arm and walked to the door to greet the new guests when they arrived.

"He still does that," Poppy said.

"Does what?" Minerva asked.

"You know...he knows when someone's coming up to the office, just as you do."

Minerva grinned. "Aye, he does."

"And you're not going to tell me how he knows, are you?"

Minerva's grin broadened. "Maybe someday. Or you might work it out on your own. Or you might wheedle it out of Severus."

"So Severus knows?"

Minerva shrugged one shoulder, her smile fading slightly as she watched Severus stand and follow Gertrude over to the window in the far corner of the room.

Poppy followed Minerva's gaze. "I told Severus he'd have a good time tonight," she said. "With all the Slytherins Albus has invited, hopefully he'll feel at home."

Minerva looked at her a moment, her expression blank. "Perhaps. I hadn't considered it that way."

"Well, with Gertrude, Hafrena, and Colleen all here, he is not the lone Slytherin in the group."

"True...I'd almost forgotten that Colleen was in Slytherin," Minerva said, watching as the new guests, including Colleen, were all greeted by Albus, who was taking their cloaks and Levitating them into the small cloakroom beside the guest bedroom.

"Maybe Severus will realise that Pomona doesn't *really* dislike Slytherins, even if she occasionally makes inappropriate jokes about them, when he sees what good friends she and Colleen are."

"Hmm. What's that? Oh, aye, he might, at that." Minerva's eye had wandered back over to where Gertrude and Severus stood, dark silhouettes in the window, Severus slightly hunched over, both turned away from the room.

"By the way," Poppy asked, taking a sip of vermouth, "where's Pomona. I thought that since Filius was here, she would be here already, too."

"First-year, Orla Mitchell. She will be here until next week...her uncle's in Asia somewhere, and he'll come fetch her when he returns, but until then, she's feeling homesick and lonely. Pomona's . . . dealing with it."

"Oh, poor girl!" Poppy exclaimed sympathetically. "There aren't many staying behind in Hufflepuff over the break, either."

Minerva shook her head. "She's the only first-year. The few others who are staying are all in the upper years, too, staying to revise for NEWTs and OWLs."

"You know . . . there will be a lot of children at Geoff and Margaret's tomorrow...we're doing Easter there this year. Perhaps it might be nice for her to come just for the day? She wouldn't know anyone, but it would be better than staying here alone. I know she'd be very welcome."

Minerva looked at Poppy, turning her attention away from her apparent observation of Gertrude and Severus, a smile softening her face. "That is lovely of you to offer. See what Pomona says. She may have it all in hand."

"I will. Daisy, Ivy's oldest girl, just turned eleven. Madoc, Geoff's son, is ten, and I think Candace and Elliot will probably be there, and Zara is almost eleven, too. Orla would have a little company her own age, and it would distract her at least for the day."

"When she comes up, speak to Pomona about it. It does sound like a fine idea, though, if the child would be comfortable with it."

"I've seen Orla a few times for some minor classroom accidents, so she knows me a little. I think she could feel right at home with all the children there...and it's not as though I'm one of her teachers. She'd probably feel odd if one of them invited her home, and it would be rather . . . awkward, too. But I don't think there'd be any concern about favouritism or any such thing with me."

Minerva nodded distractedly, watching Gertrude step away from the window and walk over to join Colleen, Helena, Caspar, and Albus. Caspar offered Gertrude his left hand, which she shook.

"I am glad that Gertrude seems so well," Poppy said. She lowered her voice. "Are you worried about her at all? You seem preoccupied."

"No, no. She's fine, I believe. Coping well...doing better than just coping most of the time, from what Gareth and Quin have said," Minerva replied softly.

Poppy glanced over at Severus, who hadn't moved from the window, but stood there still, looking out at the grounds. She tamped down her urge to go over and speak to him, draw him into the room and into the party. He could take care of himself, and beyond that, she supposed that in the interests of discretion, it would be best not to seem overly concerned about him.

"You said Calum was coming."

"Yes, but he'll be a little later, though in time to sit down to eat, he said. We invited Janet, too, but she couldn't come."

"I thought that Calum and Severus might hit it off. Or at least, find something in common to talk about," Poppy said, looking back over at Severus. She was just wondering whether she should change her mind and go speak to him when she saw Gareth stand and go over to him, clapping him on the shoulder. She relaxed as Severus turned toward Gareth.

"There are more guests on their way up," Minerva said. "I think I'll go help Albus welcome them."

Poppy wandered over to where Caspar and Gertrude were standing with drinks in their hands. Gertrude also had a plate of small hors d'oeuvres hovering in front of her. Poppy wondered how she could handle all that...she found it difficult enough with two hands...but then Gertrude flicked one of her fingers, and a small vol-au-vent drifted sedately up and to her mouth as neatly as if it had been served on a fork. More neatly, in fact.

"Clever trick, that," Caspar said with a nod. "I couldn't manage it."

"You could. If you were sufficiently motivated," Gertrude said. "And had the time to practise."

Caspar smiled awkwardly and took a sip of his drink.

"I don't know, Gertrude," Poppy said. "I think that even if I had a lot of time and motivation, I don't know as I have the coordination to Levitate the plate *and* serve myself food, both wandlessly."

Gertrude gave a crooked grin. "I charmed the plate, so I don't need to maintain a Levitation. It's rather less impressive than it appears. It's also of limited practicality, since everything needs to be bite-sized to begin with. Of course, that's only in polite company!"

Poppy laughed. "I haven't tried any of the appetisers yet, but they look quite nice...and all very conveniently bite-sized."

"May I get you anything?" Caspar asked Poppy. He looked at Gertrude and added, "Either of you?"

Poppy shook her head. "I was on the schedule for dinner in the Great Hall this evening. I didn't eat much, but I think I'll save my appetite for the main meal. Although a few olives might be nice to nibble on."

"I thought I noticed Helena had some appealing-looking sushi," Gertrude said. "Albus kindly put together this plate for me, but it's all these little pastries and a few stuffed mushroom caps, and no sushi."

"A few olives for you, Poppy, and some sushi for Professor Gamp," Caspar said with a smile. "If I can identify the sushi!"

Poppy and Gertrude sat down on the sofa, and Poppy set down her glass. "How is Rosemary?"

"Fine. Impatient for the baby to arrive, but it will likely be at least a few more days, probably a week, Melina said. She and Brennan arrived this morning. They'll be

spending the week at the estate, possibly longer."

"How's Brennan managing?"

"Fine. Chipper, one of our house-elves, is assigned to assist him when he needs it, but we've put candles and oil lamps in most of the rooms he might use, so if one of us isn't around, he can light them. He also has a few electric torches with him and an electric lantern. The batteries operate with no problem, so that is fortunate."

"You dismantled your wards, then?"

Gertrude shrugged and set down her glass. "Unravelling them. We have some temporary measures in place to hide the estate from Muggles, but in a week or so, we'll be rewarding everything from the ground up, so to speak. I hope that we can keep some of the wards intact, but we shall see."

Caspar returned with two plates, one with a selection of olives on it, the other with various sorts of sushi. "May I take your other plate?"

Gertrude nodded, and Caspar plucked the plate from the air. "I didn't know if you wanted any fish, so I only got one of those. The others are all rice and . . . rice. I don't know what they are. Helena said they were all good. There's a little cup of sauce she said you should dip it in. I thought I might go ask her which ones I should try."

Poppy smiled up at him. "You go on, then. We have witches' talk, anyway! Go chat up Helena."

Caspar blushed, but vanished quickly in the direction of Helena, Gareth, and Severus.

"He's still as he was as a boy," Gertrude said, gazing after him fondly. "It sometimes seems another lifetime, and other times . . ."

"I know. Like yesterday. So much has changed, though."

"As it should. No change is death," Gertrude said. "Or limbo, at least. But fortunately, there is always change, even if sometimes we don't perceive it immediately. On the island, I thought . . . there was a time, not long after I arrived, but when I was finally alone, everyone gone except for Gluffy, and it seemed to me that each day was the same. No difference, day after day. But then I began to see all the small changes around me, and larger ones, too, as days passed and seasons began to change. I wonder sometimes . . ."

"Yes?"

Gertrude shook her head. "Nothing. Just . . . perhaps we're mistaken about death. Perhaps it's more like life than we think. If we are still perceiving . . . then mustn't there be change? And we must simply be attuned to it . . ."

"I suppose we will find out...or not," Poppy said. "I presume we will, though." She shivered. "I don't think I'd like to be a ghost."

"I think that ghosts are likely the deadest of the dead," Gertrude said.

"This doesn't sound like a cheery conversation, love!"

Poppy and Gertrude both looked up to see Quin standing behind the sofa, and both witches smiled immediately.

"Quin! What took you so long?" Gertrude asked. "When I left the house, you said you'd be just another ten minutes."

"Aine was late, sorry," Quin replied, coming around the sofa and bending to give Gertrude a kiss, then giving Poppy a quick peck on the lips. He sat down on the end of the sofa beside Gertrude and draped his arm around her shoulders. "Mind if I have a nibble?" Without waiting for a reply, he picked out a piece of inarizushi and bit into it.

"Good?" Poppy asked, seeing his expression.

"Exquisite. Especially as I'm famished," Quin replied. "The rice is perfect."

"Try one," Gertrude said, flicking a finger and moving her plate closer to Poppy. "That was inarizushi. Just rice inside a nice pocket of fried tofu. Try it."

"It had a bit of umeboshi plum in it, as well, I think," Quin said. He picked up a nori roll.

Poppy took the inarizushi and bit into it. "It's nice," she said after chewing and swallowing. "In fact, I like it. I always thought sushi had fish in it. Raw fish."

"Not always, and the fish isn't always raw," Quin said. "This, though, is sashimi, and that's usually raw fish, and it doesn't have the rice and all that with it...do you want this, Gertrude?" he asked, pointing to the one item on the plate that was obviously fish, a large piece of reddish salmon.

"No, you have it."

"Should have chopsticks, but . . ." Quin used his fingers to pick up the fish, dip it in the sauce, and quickly bring it to his mouth.

Poppy took the moment to glance in Severus's direction. As she had guessed, he was standing stiffly, trying to watch her without appearing to be watching her. He likely had seen Quin's friendly greeting. Nothing she could do about that, though.

Minerva came over, carrying a glass of beer.

"Since when did you begin drinking beer, Minerva?" Poppy asked.

"Since never...almost never...but this is for Quin." Putting her hand on the wizard's shoulder, Minerva bent and gave him a kiss. "Aine said you were thirsty and getting crotchety, so I thought this might help!"

"Ah, your kiss already wiped away any of me cares, Minerva," Quin said, taking the glass of deep gold beer from her, "but I'll not say no to the beer! I do object to the term 'crotchety,' however. I've never been crotchety in me life, and may I not live so long!"

Minerva laughed. "She was joking, of course. She did apologise for the both of you, though. She said that she was late meeting you at the estate."

Poppy looked over at Severus as Minerva drew up a chair and the other three talked. Severus was now turned slightly away from her, but he looked more relaxed than he had a few minutes before. As well as she often could read Severus, sometimes Poppy felt she couldn't read him at all. At least it appeared that Severus was trying to enjoy himself, and hopefully he wasn't still thinking about the fact that she was sitting with Quin, having been greeted with a kiss. But she wasn't going to start pushing away any friend who wanted to give her a kiss, not to mention that Quin didn't even know that she was seeing anyone. But his kiss had been just a quick, friendly peck, anyway, the same sort of kiss that Minerva had given him a moment ago.

Poppy nodded in response to Quin's question about whether she was spending Easter day with her family, then she looked at Minerva and smiled. She wouldn't be at all surprised if Minerva had been quietly observing Severus and seen his reaction when Quin had kissed her, and so came over to them more to give Quin a kiss than to give him a beer. Her kiss might help Severus put things in perspective a little, anyway, whether Minerva had planned it or not.

She looked back over at Severus, Helena, and Caspar...Gareth had gone over to speak with his cousin. There was no reason she couldn't join a few of her colleagues, Poppy thought.

"Excuse me," she said, nodding at the other three, who were discussing something to do with the Gamp estate.

"So it looks like Johnny Crumb will be flying, after all," Helena was saying as Poppy approached the little group.

"I still think that Penhurst would have been a better choice for the tour," Caspar said. "She may be very young, but she's fast and flashy, much more fun to watch."

"She will have other opportunities," Helena said, "and I think the organisers wanted to have at least one player from the Cannons on the tour. Crumb has earned the place. He's an excellent Chaser."

"Do you follow Quidditch, Madam Pomfrey?" Severus asked.

"Not really. I glance at the articles in the *Daily Prophet* most days, but I can't say I really remember much about what I read even ten minutes later," Poppy replied with a laugh. "It is fun, though, to see what former students are doing, and I enjoy going to the occasional game."

"We were talking about the All-Star Britain and Ireland exhibition tour this summer," Caspar said. "I have a mate who's actually going to follow it, go to all the matches. He says it's a compromise with his fiancée, who wanted to go on holiday in France again this year...they always go to the same place, and he's bored to tears with it, apparently...so they're doing sightseeing in each country and going to all of the matches."

"That sounds exhausting to me," Poppy said, "although it would be fun to go to one of the games somewhere exotic...or more exotic, anyway, than a British moor somewhere."

"If you think you would like to go to one of the matches, I am sure I could get a few tickets for you," Helena said. "Let me know, any of you!"

"Are you going to any of them?" Caspar asked.

"I haven't given it much thought," Helena said.

"Perhaps we might go to one of them...that is, if you go to any, it might be nice if we went to the same one," Caspar said. Poppy thought he was turning a bit pink.

"That could be fun," Helena said. "Maybe we could get a group together...now there's a thought! Maybe we could do a Hogwarts staff trip? If people are interested, anyway, we could choose a city, I could get us all tickets, and a bunch of us could go together."

"That does sound fun," Poppy agreed.

"I've always wanted to visit Spain," Helena said, "and they've scheduled three matches in the Sierra Nevada in July. We could do that. We could visit some of the sites before or after the matches, get Portkeys to some of the big cities. It wouldn't have to be Spain, of course, but somewhere not too far. More people might want to go if it were somewhere closer to home than, say, South Africa or Japan."

Poppy looked up at Severus. "What do you think, Severus? Do you think people might be interested?"

"Perhaps. It would likely depend on a number of factors, including what other plans they might have at that time. Cost, as well. And there may be staff who prefer to avoid anything related to Hogwarts during their holidays, and who would prefer the company of other friends or family. However, no doubt there would be at least a few who would enjoy such a trip, and certainly there would be those who would enjoy seeing an all-star match of that sort."

"Would you?" Poppy asked.

"I might," Severus replied.

"Well, you can count me in," Caspar said to Helena, "no matter where you decide on. I think it's a grand idea."

"What's a grand idea?" Gareth asked, coming up to them with Aine.

"A bunch of us getting together and going to one of the British All-Star Quidditch exhibition matches together," Caspar said.

"It's not '*British*,' Lloyd," Aine corrected him. "British and Irish."

"You would remind me!" Caspar said jokingly, giving her a quick one-armed squeeze. "How've you been?"

"Fine, busier than ever," Aine said. "I'll be moving to Dublin in a couple weeks, in fact. Dad's not thrilled about it, but I need a change."

"Good for you," Caspar said. "Seeing anyone these days?"

Aine looked at him and shook her head. "Hardly the time."

"I have something for you, Snape," Gareth said, holding out his hand to Aine, who reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a hardcover book. Gareth handed it to Severus with a grin. "Signed by the author and all!"

"*Potions with No Retort is No Refuge*" Severus read. "The new Nero Newcastle novel. This isn't supposed to be out for a few weeks. I have one on order."

"Well, cancel the order, mate," Gareth replied. "Go on, open it."

Poppy watched in amusement as Severus opened the book and looked at the inscription on the flyleaf. He raised an eyebrow.

"Meet Maximilian Powers!" Gareth said with a flourish, gesturing toward his cousin.

Severus looked from Gareth to Aine, back at Gareth again, then again at Aine. *You're* Maximilian Powers?"

Aine gave a small smile. "It passes the time. I'm also Paulette Fitzpatrick and Cornelia Caraway," she said, naming two other authors, one of witches' romance novels and one of children's mystery stories.

"And don't leave out Erin Sheridan...she's written a couple Muggle children's books under that name," Gareth added with a grin.

Severus looked down at the inscription in his book again and blinked.

"May I see?" Poppy asked.

Severus handed her the book.

To Severus Snape, the Potions master who could teach Nero Newcastle a thing or two and who could best Trajan Tyne in any duel. ~ 'Max Powers'

Poppy smiled. "Very nice."

"I thought you were a wizard," Severus said.

"Don't tell her she writes like a man," Caspar warned him.

"I would not. But the books are . . . the name. Maximilian Powers," Severus said. "I presumed it was a pen name, but they seemed like the sort of thing a wizard would write."

Aine smirked. "The pen name does help promote that impression. More of my readers are wizards, but many witches seem to enjoy the Newcastle books, too."

"They are creative," Severus said, and Poppy could hear the appreciation in his voice, though it may have seemed faint praise to others.

"He owns all of them," Gareth said.

"And the Trajan Tyne books," Severus added.

"Gods, I wish I'd never invented that man!" Aine said with disgust. "I've tried to kill him off in the last two novels, but my publisher, *your* uncle," she added to Gareth, "won't let me. I can't abide him any longer. I am writing one more Tyne book, and then dead or not, that's it for him."

"I rather enjoyed those," Severus said.

"Writing him makes her quite cross," Caspar said. "Have to steer clear of her when she's in the middle of one."

"He's just so . . . *male*," Aine said. "Pardon to you. But when I first wrote him, I thought it would be quite amusing to have a protagonist who was basically an ill-mannered pig of a man who treated women like disposable commodities, and it was funny for a while, but he's such a caricature now, I would feel sorry for him if he were a real person. As it is, he's just become annoying to write. Whenever I try to add some depth to the man, though, Morgan tells me that readers won't like it. I prefer writing Nero."

"He is a fuller character," Severus said with a nod. "I find myself..." Severus looked at the others, and Poppy thought he was slightly embarrassed. He cleared his throat. "He is engaging."

"I hope you'll enjoy this one, then," Aine said. "It carries on a few of the themes from the previous two."

Severus nodded, looking as though he wanted to ask something, but he didn't.

"Are you writing anything now?" Poppy asked.

"I've gone back to work on the play I've been writing, and I'm also writing my fourth Fitzpatrick novel. I'm almost finished with the first draft. They're short and they go quickly once I've mapped out the storyline."

"How long does it take you to write a Max Powers book?" Poppy asked.

"Several months. The Nero Newcastle ones generally take longer and undergo more revisions before I'm satisfied with them. The last one took me almost two years, and that was almost all I worked on."

"Your effort is evident. They are well-written, that one particularly," Severus said. "There was a line . . . something near the beginning of the last book . . . about injuries and innocence. I don't recall it now, but it struck me when I read it."

"*We injure each other through painful innocence, an innocence whence evil grew*" Caspar quoted.

"Yes, that's it. It was when Tamara was narrating the story," Severus said. He hesitated, clearly torn about saying more and revealing any of his own feelings or thoughts on the book. "I thought that was well-done, alternating perspectives like that, seeing Nero from her point-of-view, but . . . it was . . . it was sad."

Aine nodded. "It was one of the more . . . energy-consuming books I've written."

"You're writing a play?" Poppy asked.

"I am. I've rewritten it several times. I may actually finish it this time," Aine said. "If it's produced, it will be the first thing I put out there under my own name."

"That must be exciting for you," Poppy said.

"I'm scared as hell," Aine admitted. "Not only is it under my name, but a play is something quite different from a novel. With a novel, it's you and the reader. With a play, there's the mediating presence of the actors, the set, the director, and dozens of other people, it seems. Even maintaining some creative control over its first production, I won't have that same kind of relationship with the audience as I do with the novels. But it may open the door for me to write some other novels under my own name, as well."

"Why are you writing a play at all, then?" Severus asked. "Couldn't you turn the play into a novel?"

"The script is actually based on a portion of a novel I started about twenty years ago. I may finish that once the play's done. But a play seemed the perfect vehicle at the time I began writing it. I could see it in my mind's eye . . . perhaps it was even a vision, but perhaps not. I cannot tell easily when it comes to my own life. But I could see it being staged, could hear the actors speaking the lines, the audience applause at the end . . . it all seemed to come together perfectly. But then I put it aside for a long time, both the novel and the play. I may tear the novel apart and begin it again now that I have more to say, more life behind me."

There was a clear chiming, and everyone looked for its source. Albus had his wand raised. He smiled at all of them. "Dinner will be served shortly, so you may all find your seats!"

Severus nodded at Aine. "Thank you for the book, and for the inscription. If your play is staged, I shall certainly be in the audience."

"It may not be to your taste, but I'm glad you will come to see it...I am sure that Gareth will be able to tell you when and where," Aine replied. She held out her hand. "It's been good to meet you, too, Professor."

Severus hesitated slightly, no doubt remembering that Quin had been able to sense his emotions when he'd touched him, but he accepted her handshake, though he did let go as quickly as courtesy would permit.

"Shall we find our seats?" Poppy asked, touching Severus lightly on the elbow.

"Indeed." Severus nodded.

He quirked a slight smile at her, and Poppy returned his smile with a warm one of her own. It seemed that Severus was succeeding in enjoying the evening. Poppy's smile grew.

Chapter One Hundred-Three: Of Lilacs, of Love, and of Danger

Chapter 104 of 118

Severus attempts not to be miserable, but even the most ordinary conversation seems to turn to the war. At least he's not seated beside anyone "atrocious"! He comes to know Calum and Aine a bit better.

Author's Note: If you want to see the seating plan for this dinner, it's available on my blog at mmadfan.com. It's in the entry announcing this chapter, dated 28 July 2011.



Chapter One Hundred-Three: Of Lilacs, of Love, and of Danger

Saturday, 3 April 1999

Severus held Aine's chair for her as she took her seat. She looked up at him with an amused expression in her eyes, but she thanked him.

He carefully slid his new book beneath his chair and considered waiting for Poppy before he sat down, but most other guests were already taking their seats, and he did not wish to be conspicuous. She was having a whispered conversation with Pomona about something, and Severus did not know how long she'd be, although since dinner would be served shortly, he doubted it would be long.

"Severus, I don't believe you've met my nephew, Calum O'Donald...Melina's son," Minerva said as he sat down. Calum nodded to him from his place beside Minerva. With his thick brown hair, grey-blue eyes, high, flat cheekbones, and sharp nose, he resembled his father more than his mother, Severus thought.

"Madam Pomfrey has spoken of you," Severus said.

"So you know I'm the black sheep of the family, then?" Calum asked with a grin.

Severus twitched a brief, crooked smile, thinking the man didn't know what a true black sheep was. "Your family all seem rather unconventional."

"They should have expected it of me, then, I guess!" Calum replied. "I'm thinking of becoming more conventionally unconventional, though. Grandad's hopeful I'll join him in the apothecary, and it's beginning to look more and more appealing."

"Have you any training in Potions beyond your NEWTs?" Severus asked.

"Nothing like an apprenticeship, but I've dabbled, and of course, I'd always spent a lot of time in the apothecary as a kid. Not that I think that's a substitute, but . . . I'm not a complete neophyte, either." Calum shrugged. "I also have a Master's in biochemistry, and a Master's and PhD in pharmacognosy, so I think that with a bit of application, I might just manage to learn a bit more about Potions."

"What is pharmacognosy?" Severus asked, ignoring the other wizard's slight self-deprecating sarcasm.

"It's a bit like what Estelle does in Potions...looking to the plant world for new pharmaceuticals. I've worked with an ethnobotanist on finding some promising plants that are used for medicinal purposes by various native populations around the world. In fact, one of our most promising new drugs came out of just such research. We're in the final phase now of getting a new cancer treatment approved, one I've worked on . . ." Calum shook his head as he thought of the time he'd invested. "It seems like forever. But I've been on the project for twelve years, and I have headed it for the last four. Once that's approved . . . there are other projects that I'm heavily involved in, but they could be shifted to others. It may be time for me to make a change. Move on to something different."

"You wouldn't hear that from me when I told you two and a half years ago that your life was moving into a transitional phase, and that you ought to be ready for that," Hafrena said archly.

Calum laughed. "We're always in transition, Professor, aren't we? Besides, my life was quite stable at the time you said that. Almost boringly so. It was hard to credit."

"Hmph. And you claim that going to Muggle schools didn't hurt your education," Hafrena replied, her eyes twinkling. "You'd have known better if you'd taken Divination with me, rather than just had a bit of tutoring from your future sister-in-law!"

"Well . . . I also couldn't imagine what Aunt Minerva would want with me, and you said she'd bring the change into my life," Calum said.

"You worked on the potions for the Headmistress's plan," Severus said.

Calum nodded. "It intrigued me right from the start, the problems she posed."

"Best to leave such conversation for some other time and place," Minerva interrupted, "although I think you and Severus could have a fascinating discussion at some point on your own."

"That's right, Aunt Minerva," Gareth said. "I can't speak for anyone else here, but I would just as soon not talk about the war this evening."

Severus nodded in agreement. That suited him fine...besides, there were questions he would like to ask about the potions and Minerva's plan that were probably best not discussed in such an open forum.

Severus rose slightly in his chair as Poppy came over and took her place beside him to Minerva's right.

She smiled brightly at everyone. "It's so good to see so many old friends all here this evening! How are you, Hafrena?"

"Very well, thank you. Still recovering from the time difference between here and Vancouver...it never feels like the right time for a meal, and I didn't sleep properly last night despite being overtired. I stayed up all day today, though, with no nap, and I'm hoping I'll be exhausted enough tonight to actually sleep soundly."

"When did you get back?" Gareth asked.

"Thursday night. I Portkeyed from Vancouver after lunch, and arrived home at bedtime. I should be used to it by now, but I think it gets worse each year."

"I had terrible jet-lag last time I flew to Brazil," Calum said. "I think jet-lag's even worse than travel by Portkey because the travel itself is tiring and disorienting. It was easier coming back, though. By the time we landed in Heathrow, I was tired, but managed to stay awake until just after dinner. I went to bed, woke up the next day a little earlier than usual, but I was back on schedule in just a day or two. Nothing to it, flying in this direction."

Hafrena chuckled. "You're about a century younger than I am. Wait until you're my age, then try it... jebr Portkey...and you'll be singing a different song."

"Eoghan's been looking forward to seeing you," Gareth said. "The last time I saw him, he said you'd been in Vancouver~~forever~~." His voice took on the slightly petulant whine of an impatient eleven-year-old.

Hafrena chuckled. "I'll be visiting them there next weekend. By then, my senses will have realigned themselves, I hope. As it is, I don't know whether I'm catching messages, dreaming whilst awake, or even picking up Muggle radio programmes!"

Aine laughed. "Give me a few minutes after dinner, and I'll see if I can help you with that. Background noise can be very annoying...you'll sleep better tonight if you are well-cleared out, too."

Severus never knew how much of the talk that seers and other diviners had amongst themselves was just show...or self-delusion...and how much was real. But the talk of "background noise" and picking up messages made him distinctly uncomfortable. He'd rather discuss the war.

Glasses of wine and water had arrived on the table while he and Calum had been talking, and now that everyone was seated, bowls of green soup appeared before each guest. Fortunately, conversation moved on, first to remarks praising the tangy sorrel soup...which Severus agreed was quite tasty, despite Minerva's declaration that it was vegetarian...and then to a discussion of the recently eased restrictions on wizarding imports. He had little to say on the matter, since potions ingredients were not among the new goods being allowed in, and it seemed that Calum didn't have any opinions on the matter, either, as he ate his soup silently, listening and nodding.

"How is Janet?" Minerva asked in a slight lull in the conversation. "We were disappointed that she wasn't able to come."

"She's fine," Calum replied, "but both Peter and Zoe are off for the Easter holiday, and Janet had promised to bring them to Curt's parents for the weekend. It will be good for the kids."

Minerva nodded. "I see. How are the children? Peter, especially?"

Calum shrugged. "I think Peter still isn't . . . thrilled I'm around, but Zoe's great, and Janet's had me doing things with the kids on our own sometimes. That's been good."

"Peter will be coming to Hogwarts in the autumn?" Minerva asked.

"If he gets his letter, he will! That's one thing he disapproves of, actually. That I didn't go to Hogwarts. He said to me once that his mum deserved a proper wizard. Then I made the mistake of telling him that that was the kind of talk the people who killed his dad liked. He wouldn't speak to me for weeks after. Couldn't blame him, though. It was a thoughtless thing to have said."

"But true," Poppy said, "and I'm sure that's why it bothered him."

"There are too many children who have lost parents these last few years," Hafrena said with a soft sigh and shake of her head.

"I thought we weren't going to talk about the war," Gareth said.

"Hard to avoid, though, isn't it?" Calum asked rhetorically. "Reminders are everywhere."

Severus had the uncomfortable feeling that the other wizard had glanced at him as he said that, and he knew that he was a reminder for everyone at that table. He didn't know why Albus had invited him. He had enough difficulty socialising with colleagues; this was painful, and not just for him, but for the other guests. He shot a quick glance down the table at Gertrude, who was smiling and nodding at Caspar. There was a witch with good cause to hate him, Severus thought, even if, incredibly, she didn't. And Albus had believed it a good idea to invite them both to a dinner party. There was a fine line between genius and madness, Severus had heard, and he doubted this was genius.

Soup plates were exchanged for empty plates and clean silverware, and three large platters of various kinds of seafood and green garnishes appeared on the table. Each platter seemed to contain the same assortment, and Minerva gestured toward the platter closest to her, and it hovered in front of Poppy.

"We're being informal this evening, Poppy," Minerva said. "Help yourself to whatever you'd like. We thought that rather than serving everyone the same fish, a nice selection would be better."

"And Colleen's averse to shellfish," Hafrena said, eying some lobster tail. "Can't understand that, myself."

"Is she allergic?" Poppy asked with a frown. "That's very rare in witches and wizards, though you do see it occasionally."

Calum deferred taking the platter, instead indicating that his great-aunt should help herself first. "Porry was, remember?" he asked. "Seemed if he sniffed a scallop, he'd lose his lunch."

"Yes, that's right," Poppy said, nodding.

"It is good that scallops are never on the menu at Hogwarts, then," Severus said, "or I am certain that Miss Sefton would try one 'just to see what they were like' and then discover she can't eat them and they make her violently ill."

"We had to take prawns off the menu when Pádraig was a student," Poppy said, "rather as we did with Droobleberries for Suzie. We never had prawns often, anyway."

"Colleen simply finds them unappetising, I believe," Minerva said.

"I do!" Colleen said, having overheard the conversation. "Have you looked at a lobster's funny little eyes? Or seen how slimy clams are? And shrimp! They look like something spawned on another planet, or from the mind of a madman!" She gave a mock shudder. "The way they scurry along!"

"There's some nice fish there, as well," Filius said. "And you may have mine, if you wish!"

Colleen laughed.

"So you and Janet are still pretty serious, then?" Gareth asked as he served Hafrena some of the fish and gave her two lobster tails, not taking one for himself.

Calum nodded, smiling widely. "We are. In fact," he said, turning to Minerva, "she said that even though she's not here, I could tell you our news...we already told Mum and Dad last night, and, well, the rest of the family, everyone who was at the estate last night for dinner."

"I missed news? Why didn't you tell me? I would have come, too!" Gareth said.

Minerva's eyes sparkled. "If this is the news I hope it might be, perhaps you should tell everyone!" Calum nodded, and Minerva chimed her water glass with a quick wave of her wand. "Calum has some news for us!"

As everyone turned toward him, Calum seemed to become slightly nervous, but his smile didn't diminish. "Janet and I will be married this summer."

"Congrats, man!" Gareth said with a broad grin. Others joined in with their own congratulations and well wishes.

Calum accepted the congratulations and told them that all would be invited to the wedding.

"So, when's the event?" Gareth asked. "Going to go the full route and have a binding, too?"

"Hush, lad! Not a thing to be discussed casually like that!" Hafrena said, scolding mildly.

Calum laughed. "It's okay, Professor. I don't mind. It will be some time in late July or early August...before school starts again for either of the kids so that we can all take a trip together. And since Janet had a binding with Curt when they married...sorry, Professor, but it's pertinent...we won't have one. Maybe someday. I don't want to press her about it, and I am trying to respect her feelings and be sensitive about it all. It's been almost four years since he died, but I know that she does still . . . miss him. The kids do, too."

"How did Curt die?" Helena asked.

"Killed on duty," Marjorie Clifton said. "The Death Eater attack on the Tokes. I was there. We lost two Aurors that night."

Severus continued eating, bringing a bite of swordfish in peppery sauce to his mouth, but he hardly tasted it. He had been there, too. The summer after the Dark Lord had regained a body. He hadn't killed anyone that night, but there were two murders he couldn't have prevented, though none of the Tokes had been killed. He ate another piece of fish.

"I am sorry," Helena said.

"Thankfully," Hafrena said, "things are getting better. We can be grateful for that."

"For the time being . . .and for some people," Aine said with a shrug. She glanced down at her father, who smiled as she caught his eye. "And for us," she added, smiling.

"For us, too," Gareth said. "I wasn't sure Mum would ever be able to leave the island, let alone come back to Hogsmeade. It's been a good year for us."

"Indeed, it has been," Minerva added, "although until the vigilante is stopped, there will be a shadow over us all."

"A couple Aurors came by my place this week and asked me a lot of questions," Helena said. "It was weird and a little frightening, actually, when I realised that one reason they were asking them was they thought I might be involved!"

"They didn't!" Gareth said with some indignation.

"Oh, they did, even though they just kept saying it was 'routine' and they were just checking everyone out. They were polite enough, I guess, but the longer they were there, the more nervous I got," Helena replied. "They asked to see my Chameleon Cloak, and I thought they were going to confiscate it or something, but they gave it back."

"They questioned Mum, too," Gareth said, "and wanted to see her cloak, but she hasn't got it here. It was outrageous, if you ask me."

"But in their view, questioning her was a reasonable precaution," Aine said. "If they haven't any real clues about the person's identity, they will naturally question people with reason to hold a grudge against Death Eaters. I would likely be questioned, as well, if I spent very much time at all over here."

"It was a little scary, though," Helena said. "I was worried about alibis. I mean, I live alone, and a lot of those attacks were in the evening when I might have been at home alone."

"I'm sure it was very unsettling for you!" Filius exclaimed. "And you really oughtn't be home alone with this madman running about! You never know whom he might get it into his head to attack next!"

"You know, Helena, you might consider staying at the castle for a while," Minerva said. "It might be safer for you."

"And you'd have alibis," Gareth added.

"I'll think about it," Helena said.

"They should ask you for help, Aine," Calum said. "You could have it sorted, then the rest of us could get on with things without looking over our shoulders every time we go to enter our own houses."

Aine huffed a quick, sceptical laugh. "They'd hardly come to me. You know the sort they like at the Ministry. I don't fit their notion of a seer."

"Casandra Vablatsky, talented as she was, didn't do any of us a service," Hafrena agreed with a smile.

"How's that?" Gareth asked.

"Oh, she was truly talented, you must realise that," Hafrena said. "One of the most gifted seers in many generations. But she was also dramatic. She had a certain flair for dress, and she knew how to charm and bewilder her audiences...she was always performing, wherever she found herself. She also had a great deal of . . . sex appeal, I suppose one might call it, and that gave her an added allure. Now, for the rest of us mere witches, we're compared to her and considered untalented if we don't exhibit any of those traits that so many associated with her."

"And what about the wizards?" Calum asked. "Aine's father's hardly a Knockturn Alley two-Knut fortune-teller, after all."

Aine and Hafrena exchanged glances...Severus thought they seemed amused as they might be of a naive five-year-old's question.

"Yes, of course, dear," Hafrena said, "he's quite talented, too, in his own way. But as you would know if you had paid attention during your Divination tutoring, the strongest seers are almost always women, though there are wizards who have certain aptitudes, and who, especially with the aid of a few tools, can really be fairly . . . perceptive. And there have been a few wizards over the millennia who have been truly extraordinarily gifted, as I'm sure you *are* aware."

"I'm sure he has a good collection of Chocolate Frog cards," Aine said with a smirk. Calum laughed.

"Do you actually believe you could do something to aid in catching this person?" Severus asked Aine, not caring about the history of divination or whether female seers were innately more gifted than males. "Could you see who it was?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. I could . . . given my particular abilities, I could tell you who *it wasn't* if I were presented with a suspect. And if given the proper stimuli, yes," Aine

said, nodding thoughtfully, "yes, I could say something about the person who committed the crimes. I might even be able to come up with a name, an actual identity...I certainly could if the person committing the attacks is someone I know."

"Proper stimuli?" Poppy asked.

"Brought to the location of the attack, one of the victims present . . . perhaps at the same time of day," Aine said.

"You wouldn't need to be there at the same time of day," Hafrena said. "It would be easier to do it at the full of the moon, in the depths of the night."

Aine shook her head. "Perhaps for you, but for me . . . if the victim were present, having similar conditions to those at the time of the attack would help me to focus on all that was around them; their own focus on that time would be heightened."

"True, you do work well with an individual's resonance," Hafrena said. She smiled. "The student surpasses her teacher."

"Not at all, Hafrena," Aine said.

"So you could say, for example," Poppy continued, "that none of us here at this table were the perpetrator?"

Aine gave a quick, nervous laugh. "You aren't suggesting that you suspect someone here, I am sure."

"No, it was simply an example," Poppy said.

"I could," Aine replied with a decisive nod. "No doubt."

"How would you do that?" Severus asked. He had the sense that whatever divination Aine and Hafrena practised, it was not the sort that was tested on the OWLs and NEWTs.

"There are many ways to See, as you know," Aine gestured at her glass of water. "Here, in this water. Or here, in this sound." She touched the tip of her fork gently to the rim of the glass and it rang softly. "There is meaning everywhere. But to See beyond that, to perceive the detail, the depth, the *texture* of being, of past and future . . . for me, that requires both more . . . and less."

"More and less?" Poppy asked.

Aine twitched a crooked smile, then she shot Severus a quick look. "Your permission, Professor?"

Severus drew back slightly, unconsciously recoiling. "Permission."

"To look. Just a glimpse. And then to reveal...if I judge it appropriate."

Severus suppressed a snort. More parlour-trick divination...and he had almost become persuaded by the two witches. Then he suppressed a shudder. Perhaps she really could see. He couldn't tolerate that. But Poppy was looking at him expectantly.

"I don't know," he began.

"Perhaps this isn't an appropriate moment," Minerva said, interrupting.

Severus knew she was being protective of him, and suddenly, he chafed at being protected...at being perceived as *needing* protection. He was sick of being a spy, of living a hidden life. He was a spy no longer, and even if there were certain things he would prefer to keep private, Aine would hardly see those few things in a quick glimpse. And if she did . . . she would know he could be dangerous, and she would not say anything, not then, not in company.

"Or perhaps Gareth or Filius might..." Poppy began, sensing his discomfort.

"No," Severus said. "She knows Gareth. You're cousins. And Professor Flitwick is speaking with Madam Murphy."

"Hmm?" Filius turned his head, having heard his name.

"We were just talking about Divination," Gareth said.

"Ah! A quaint art," Filius said with a nod. "But not very precise." He turned back to his discussion with Colleen and Pomona about their holiday trip to the spa.

"You may look," Severus said, smiling slightly as he looked down into the Irish witch's face, almost smirking. "But beware yourself!"

Hafrena raised an eyebrow and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"Perhaps later..." Poppy began, putting her fingertips lightly on Severus's arm.

"No," Severus said. Whatever Hafrena was shaking her head about, whatever she might think imprudent about it, he was not going to be a coward. Poppy had said that Aine possessed discretion, that the MacAirts had an old-fashioned sense of honour; and although he didn't know the witch personally, he felt nonetheless that, after having read so many of her books, he knew something of her character. And she had shown loyalty and personal sacrifice when she gave up her life as a witch to care for her father. He would show Poppy that he did not need to hide any longer. "Proceed," he said to Aine with a nod. "Look as you will."

She did not touch him, as her father had done that time on the stairs, and despite her reference to hydromancy, she did not use the water glass, either. Instead, she looked at him, through him, her gaze seeming unfocused, not even gazing at his face, and yet Severus could feel light tickles of magic, wispy tendrils just brushing by him. Aine's lips parted, and her cheeks flushed in the candlelight; she seemed to sway slightly in her chair, an almost imperceptible oscillation, forward and back. The table had gone quiet, everyone drawn from their conversations and their food, attending only to the slight red-haired witch's divination. No one noticed when the plates and platters vanished and were replaced by the next course. All was still as Aine's own stillness grew, her gaze unblinking as she looked into the beyond where Severus's past and future lay.

Suddenly, Aine straightened, blinking, and looked up at Severus, a peculiar expression, half frown, half smile, on her face. "You have much violence about you, Professor, and much death, though that would not be news to any here, but you are not the vigilante."

Severus snorted. "Hardly divination to say that."

"What would you have me say here, then, at this table?" Aine asked softly. More softly, she said, "There is . . . ahead . . . what you would not wish to know. A complex of paths, myriad possible outcomes. Do not step backward, Professor. Do not return to your past. Stepping on that path may lead you into a maze from which you will not emerge."

Severus scowled. He would hardly turn back into the past: all he wanted was to escape it, or at least live a life free of it.

"Beyond that . . . you are much-loved," Aine continued, still softly. "You have around you great love, Professor, and even from some here present. And your love . . . do not let your own love move you to violence. It is there that your path becomes fraught with danger. Do not despair in your anger and jettison your future, jettisoning all that you

value and hold dear. Do not lose your way."

Severus snorted.

"And you still wish more?" Aine said, cocking her head. "You know the person who is committing these attacks, and you will learn her identity."

"It is a witch, then?" Minerva asked quietly.

Aine blinked, turning her head toward Minerva, slight surprise on her face. "It is. A witch. A witch in pain."

"What else do you see?" Severus asked. "Who is she?"

Aine shook her head. "I can say no more, only that you will . . . discover her."

"How? What should I do?" Severus asked.

Aine shook her head again. "You cannot do anything yet. You must wait. Events will follow in their own time."

Severus sneered. "You say nothing that is new, and nothing that is useful. You could be a Muggle fortune-teller reading tea leaves."

"Then I will tell you this: lilacs are for springtime, for the birth of new love, and for your own true love, the love you found that was there before you, the love that drives you forward, that gives you hope, and that may tempt you to despair. Your love is your springtime, and your love will be your life . . ."

Severus grew pink as Aine spoke. "Still, nothing," he said dismissively, embarrassed now by the gazes of those around the table.

"In the past, a dark witch held you in thrall," Aine continued. "This dark witch of black heart . . . she wishes to reach out to you, even now; in madness she lives, and in her madness . . . another is ensnared."

Severus's jaw grew tight. "Enough."

"'Twas but a glimpse, Professor, a mere glance. Little depth, little texture, little detail." Aine smiled. "One more thing...be careful this week. You will cause an accident, but do not worry. Simply act quickly, and all will be fine!"

Severus restrained himself from rolling his eyes as the others returned to their meals and their conversations. Trelawney could have done as well, he thought. Though the bit about the lilacs . . . He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Poppy, who was asking Minerva about the aubergine dish they'd just been served. He *had* given her lilacs, and she certainly was his love, his true love. He mechanically chewed a mouthful of the spicy aubergine, looking from Minerva to Poppy and back. He loved Minerva, but Poppy . . . Gods, Poppy, what she could do to him! And how good it felt to be with her. He loved her in a way he had never experienced before. Any other emotion he'd had in his life seemed pale and insubstantial in compare.

Across from him, Gareth was smiling, eyes shining as he and Helena discussed flying in the mountains.*real* mountains. He had flown in the Alps, and she in the Rockies. Her face was animated as she nodded in agreement, speaking of the wonders of sheer cliff faces, pure white snow, and icy air. They seemed to speak almost on top of one another, not interrupting, but in tune somehow, their words skipping and dancing between them. Severus smiled slightly to himself. Perhaps Gareth and Helena would hit it off, after all.

There was another whom he loved, Severus thought, looking at Gareth, who seemed even more handsome in his animation. A wizard who should hate him, but who did not. It was hard for Severus to believe, remembering the pain and isolation of the previous years, which had grown only worse as Potter arrived at the school and then the Dark Lord returned; it was almost incredible to him that not only was he loved, but that he had any capacity at all for love himself. He swallowed his aubergine and averted his gaze from his contemplation of Gareth, returning to concentrate on his meal.

There was a light touch on his right elbow. He looked over at Aine.

"I am sorry if I embarrassed you, Professor," she said softly.

"Mm." He shook his head.

"I do wish to say one other thing to you, but not, not here and now," she said, her voice dropping further. "After dinner."

Severus twitched a shoulder, feigning boredom. "If there is a moment."

Aine nodded. "You know, what I wrote in your book, it is truer than I imagined. You could best Trajan Tyne in any duel. You could best almost anyone...if you had your wand at hand." She quirked a smile and winked at him, whispering, "But perhaps not Dumbledore, regardless of whether you had your wand or not."

Suddenly, Severus smiled and shook his head, laughing lightly. "You do save the best for last, don't you? Or the most convincing."

"You didn't want that given away...I believe only two here know of it, other than you and I, of course. Or am I wrong?"

"No, not wrong." Severus cut through an aubergine slice and a tomato. "All right. After dinner. We will speak then."

Aine nodded. "We will."

"You knew that, of course," Severus said, a smirk crossing his face.

She grinned. "Of course."

Chapter One Hundred-Four: Party Games

Chapter 105 of 118

Severus meets with Aine in Minerva's study as Poppy accompanies Pomona down to Hufflepuff. Then the party continues with one of Albus's favorite party games!



Chapter One Hundred-Four: Party Games

3 April 1999

Severus nodded as Aine asked him if he'd care to join her in Minerva's study for a few minutes. Poppy had left with Pomona on some errand to do with Hufflepuff House, and although they had finished the meal with fruit and soft cheese, Albus had reassured everyone that a marvellous dessert was to follow, but after their dinner had time to settle. Others were drinking a cognac that Quin had brought with him that evening, and a few were drinking an apple brandy from Minerva's grandmother's estate. Gareth had tried to persuade Severus to have a glass of it...it was from one of the barrels put up when Lydia had still lived and overseen its production...but Severus had declined. He might have a drink later, but he had abstained even from the wine with dinner, though with each course, a new glass of wine had appeared at his place. Too many strangers there, or scarce acquaintances, to be comfortable drinking.

"I'll come with you," Hafrena said. "You can give me an alignment."

Aine hesitated only a moment, then smiled and nodded.

In the small study, Hafrena sat in the swivelling desk chair, but Aine didn't sit in either of the other two straight-backed chairs, so Severus remained standing, now somewhat uncomfortable under the red-haired witch's scrutiny. He didn't feel her magic reaching out to him this time, though, so he simply stood there and waited for her to speak.

"You're the wizard who helped Melina find a cure for my father," Aine said after a moment.

Severus twitched one shoulder. "I did little. I only discovered the nature of the curse."

The corner of Aine's mouth twitched up. "I thought it had to be you, but Dad wouldn't say."

Severus waited for the uncomfortable moment when she would thank him, but she looked away and shook her head.

"You saw more than that, didn't you," Hafrena said.

Aine looked at her cousin. "Didn't see it . . . couldn't really feel it . . . it slipped from me, and I didn't pursue it. I promised only a glance, after all."

"Your aunt," Hafrena said softly. "Was it her presence?"

Aine's eyes moved back to Severus. "I felt that there was something you were hiding, something that you hide very completely from almost everyone. I could feel it, see it like a dark shadow in a corner behind you. I was about to look away when I suddenly knew that Aunt Gertrude was somewhere in that shadow." She swallowed. "I didn't look further, but . . . one event springs to my mind. That black shadow began in your past, fairly deeply past."

"Are you asking the boy a question?" Hafrena asked.

"I don't know." Aine looked down.

Hafrena looked up at Severus, who had taken a step back. "Gertrude and I are old friends, Professor Snape, and Aine is my . . . was my student. I believe that you should tell Aine what she is not asking."

Severus looked at Hafrena, trying not to shift his feet, trying to remain calm, his mind quiet and Occluded. What could she know of it?

"I *do* know," Hafrena said. "I was with Gertrude mere hours later."

Aine shook her head, looking back at Hafrena. "It's all right. I have my answer. He was there."

"Don't look at a Death Eater's soul if you wish to see a life of beauty and good works, Madam MacAirt," Severus said stiffly, stepping back. He tried to push all thoughts and emotions from his mind, but he was out of practice, and he could feel panic rise in him, his heart beating harder. She would tell. Poppy would know. She would hate him. He would lose her and be alone again. He relaxed his jaw just as he was about to clench his teeth, trying to avoid the thought that he should do something about this woman, this small witch who'd led the life of a Muggle for so long, snap her, break her . . . the impulsive thought filled him with revulsion, and he drove it completely from his mind.

"I did not expect to see only beauty, Professor," Aine said softly, "and I did not wish to gaze much at your time as . . . at those times, knowing that it would be unpleasant, and something, too, that you would not wish me to see. But this secret...if you were not holding this secret so close now, in the present, I would not have seen it at all."

"Party games," Severus said, his voice devoid of emotion. "Minerva told me some were planned. Very delightful."

Aine let out a breath, and as Severus took a step back, ready to leave the room, Aine raised her hand. "Does my father know?"

Severus shook his head.

"He was ill already," Hafrena said, "and he could not have been told, even if Gertrude had wanted to share it with him."

"He should know. But . . . he has to understand it." Aine looked up at Severus. "You cannot keep this secret much longer, Professor. It will come to loom over all you do."

"Right," Severus said briskly. "I'll take out a full page advert in the *Prophet* on Monday, then. Would you care for me to include anything else in the announcement? Any other mayhem from my youth?"

Aine frowned at him, her eyebrows drawing together. "I am trying to help you. And obviously I don't mean to confess to the world. Keep it private, but not secret. You are too close to people who would be hurt by that secret."

Severus snorted. "So the answer to that is to tell . . . to tell whom? I do not believe you know what you're talking about, Madam."

"Dad should know. He might find out somehow," Aine said, turning to her cousin.

"I agree, I suppose." Hafrena sighed. "I wish it were all behind us. But that is what we must convey to him," she said more briskly, "that ~~it's~~ behind us, that Gertrude has put it behind her. We will tell him together, with her, if she agrees."

"And whether I agree to this is irrelevant?" Severus asked stonily.

Hafrena looked up at him and nodded. "Not entirely. But if Gertrude agrees, then we will tell him."

Severus remembered what Gareth had said about Quin's ability for revenge...or for justice on his own terms. His body felt numb, except for the painful pounding of his heart. His revenge would only begin with telling everyone, Poppy, all his colleagues . . .

Aine stepped toward him and placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Do not become so alarmed. We will handle it well. Better this than him stumbling across it on his own, either with you or with Aunt Gertrude. With so much time spent together, he could simply happen upon it one time when Aunt Gertrude's guard was down. And I do think that you should tell others . . . Gareth, your lilac lady of spring, those closest to you and to Gertrude, but I won't interfere there. But this is my da, Professor, and my aunt."

"Gareth knows," Hafrena said.

Aine looked surprised. "He does?"

Hafrena nodded. "For years."

Aine laughed lightly. "That is a relief!" She looked up at Severus. "He was one of my great concerns, and Po, one other, as well. I presumed that Minerva and Albus have always known, or have known at least since you began teaching here."

Severus nodded curtly.

"You would be well-advised to do something about this secret between you and Poppy," Hafrena said bluntly. At Severus's look of surprise, she added, "Sometimes, especially when I am greatly fatigued, I simply See, and I know what I See before I can avert my gaze, if you can understand that. But don't worry, your 'lilac lady of spring,' as Aine so poetically named her, will hear nothing from me. You and she have great potential as a couple, Severus, though I didn't look deeply enough to see much more than that. Don't let a secret of this magnitude overshadow the ties between you."

"Professor, Aunt Gertrude is Gareth's mother," Aine said. "If he is your friend now, and he very clearly has strong, warm feelings towards you, then surely you must see that the knowledge that you were there in that attack will not destroy your relationship with someone who cares about you already. If it's a secret, however, and the secret comes out in some way not under your control . . . it will be a shock, regardless, but you can see how easily a secret could seem a lie."

"Thank you for your advice," Severus said stiffly. The witch was echoing his own fears, and he did not like hearing them from another. "I will bear it in mind."

Hafrena nodded. "Very well."

Severus began to turn to leave, reaching for the door handle, but Aine stopped him.

"That was only the half of what I wished to say to you, Professor."

Severus stopped cold. "And you believe I should wish to listen?"

"I am sorry you are uncomfortable with the way I approached you, but put yourself in my shoes for a minute," Aine said. "Aunt Gertrude never spoke to me about what happened that night. All I learned was from Minerva, who told me only that Aunt Gertrude had been attacked by Death Eaters in her home and that . . . she was injured as she was. I meet you, and there you *are*. You know what happened because you were there. If I had wished, I could have woven my way through your past and seen what had happened so that I could witness it myself. You may be an Occlumens, Professor, but Divination and Legilimency are nothing alike. I see the past as it happened to you, not simply what is in your mind. And in the present, I saw that you were hiding it because you *are* hiding it, not because it is hidden in your mind, do you see?"

Severus glanced away. His eyes caught sight of a photo high up on a shelf. Albus, Minerva, Quin, a few others, including Malcolm and Gertrude. Minerva holding a baby. Gareth, perhaps. The good old days. "Your father . . ."

"He is very grateful to you for restoring his magic to him," Aine said. "As am I. Very grateful."

Severus shook his head. She had mistaken his meaning. "He's also . . . a seer."

Aine nodded. "Of sorts. His strongest gift lies in his empathy, though. It's harder for him to see the past or the future without some aid. He could still pick this up from Aunt Gertrude, though, perhaps not in detail, not seeing the past, but seeing her relationship to her injury now, in the present."

"But perhaps not."

Aine acknowledged that. "Perhaps not."

"Then why tell him?"

"It's up to Gertrude," Hafrena said. "It is her relationship with Quin that would make this something that he should know. She may already be planning to tell him at some time. There is much to share between them after such a long separation. Or she may think it is best not to tell him any details."

Severus thought back on his conversation with Gertrude a few days before, and then the curious one they had had earlier that evening. Whether Gertrude told Quin or not . . . it was her decision, and her right, Severus acknowledged to himself. And she had forgiven him.

"What else did you wish to say to me?" he asked.

"'Tisn't much," Aine said, "just something I thought you might like to know, but which you would not want spoken at the dinner table."

Severus snorted. As if he had wanted her to talk about him being "surrounded by love" right there in front of everyone.

"Well, if you aren't interested . . ."

"What is it?"

"Just that I saw your father leaving. He didn't leave willingly. Not happily."

"It seemed that way to me," Severus said. "You wouldn't know anything of it."

Aine shrugged. "He loved you. He wrote you a letter and said good-bye. Your mother came into your room and she took it. She never gave it to you. But she believed it was better for you. Your parents both tried to do what was best for you. They both felt . . . pain. It was difficult for them both."

"My father was a drunk. My mother was a depressive. Her father was abusive. That's the truth," Severus said. "My father was glad to be leaving us, and my mother was glad to be rid of him. You may have *seen* something accurately with regard to Professor Gamp, but the only accurate statement here is that my father left us. If he ever wrote a letter...no, I would have known. He barely spoke to me those last weeks he was with us."

"I wanted to tell you because you will read that letter soon. I thought you would like to know and be prepared."

Severus shook his head.

"I see you reading it in a room filled with books. Not a library, though. Brightly lit. And there is someone with you. Someone . . ." Her eyes grew unfocussed, and she unconsciously reached toward him, a whisper of magic at her fingertips, but Severus took a step back. "Sorry, Professor," she said, blinking and shaking her head quickly as if to clear it, dropping her hand to her side. "But it's very close, and won't be averted . . . at least, it's extremely likely that this event will happen, and soon. Something could intervene in the meantime, but I think that anything that intervenes would only delay the event, not prevent it."

"Hmm. Yes, if I receive a letter from the dead, I will inform you, Madam MacAirt," Severus said drily.

"From the *dead*?" Aine asked, puzzled. "Your father . . . he's dead?"

"Many years. Now if you will excuse me, I believe I will find some dessert. Perhaps Albus is ready for his games...they might prove more amusing than this one has." He sighed.

"Professor...I hope that you enjoy the book."

Severus turned and looked at Aine again. Her blue eyes seemed anxious to him, and she was offering her hand and a crooked smile. He breathed out and relaxed.

Just as Aine was dropping her hand, he reached out and shook it. "I am sure I will enjoy it. The author has not let me down yet." He was pleased to see Aine's smile warm at his words.

"We'll see you shortly, Severus," Hafrena said. "I'll see what my young cousin can do for my magic channels and my nerves!"

"Don't let them start any games without us!" Aine added.

Severus twitched a smile. "Never. I would not deprive you of the pleasure."

Aine laughed, and even Hafrena chuckled at that.

Severus rejoined the party to see that perhaps he would have been better off staying with the two NicAirt witches and watching Hafrena's channels get realigned. Poppy and Pomona hadn't yet returned, and Calum O'Donald had a small black and silver camera out, and he was taking photographs. At the moment, he was photographing Minerva, Albus, Gertrude, and Quin, Quin on Gertrude's right with his arm around her, Albus on her other side, and Minerva next to Albus, their arms around each other. Gertrude was smiling faintly, then Quin bent and whispered something in her ear and she brightened momentarily, giving a short, sharp laugh. Calum snapped another picture, his flash going off with a loud pop.

"Severus!" Albus called. "Come, my boy, come have your picture taken with us!"

Severus shook his head, a frown darting across his face.

"Come, Severus," Minerva said, beckoning him. "Indulge us! I would like to have one photograph with the two of us in it together where you're not scowling!"

Others laughed, and Severus gritted his teeth.

"How about one of Mum, me, and Quin together?" Gareth suggested, stepping around.

Calum, quite agreeable, adjusted his stance to focus on Quin and Gertrude as Albus stepped away and Gareth took his place beside his mother. Calum took the photograph, then Gareth said, "Another, one more...Helena, join us in this one?"

Helena smiled but shook her head. Filius gave her a little shove, and she shrugged and stepped up beside Gareth, who grinned and placed his hand on her shoulder. She seemed tiny beside him. As soon as the photograph was taken, she shook her head again and said something that Severus couldn't hear. Gareth just chuckled, patted her shoulder, and returned her to her conversation with Caspar and Flitwick.

"Okay, now your turn, Snape," Gareth called. "Come on over here...you, too, Aunt Minerva, Uncle Albus!"

Severus shook his head again and stepped back, bumping a small table containing nuts and a diversity of chocolates.

Minerva came over and picked up one of the chocolates. "Let's, Severus." She put an arm through his, then popped the chocolate into her mouth.

Severus let out a slow sigh. "Very well." Minerva squeezed his arm and dragged him over to Gareth.

Severus stood still for the photo, feeling wedged between Minerva and Albus, Gareth on Minerva's other side. Fortunately, though Albus stood close to him, he didn't put his arm around him, as Minerva did, and Quin and Gertrude had moved off to sit together on the sofa.

Poppy stepped into the room just as Calum's flashbulb was popping again, and Severus could feel his heart lighten. Pomona was just behind her, saying something, and Poppy was slightly turned back toward her, nodding, and Severus was struck by what a lovely profile Poppy had, and how pretty her dark honey-coloured hair was in the candlelight. She turned toward the room, saw him, and smiled. He felt the corners of his mouth tug upward.

"That's it, Professor, smile a bit," Calum said. "Aunt Minerva wants a good photograph with you!"

Severus looked down at Minerva as she gave him a squeeze, and he twitched an amused smile. He bent toward her and whispered in her ear. "You warned me about Albus's party games, but not about your camera-mad nephew."

Minerva laughed, and Albus, not hearing what Severus had said, but hearing Minerva's responding laughter, grinned and patted Severus on the back. The camera flashed again.

Severus nodded and stepped away. He had indulged Minerva and Gareth sufficiently for the time being.

Now that Pomona and Poppy had returned, Albus seemed eager to introduce his party games. They would form teams, he announced, and play charades. Severus didn't groan or frown at that, though standing in front of a group of colleagues and strangers and pantomiming like a fool was far from his idea of an enjoyable game; Poppy had come around beside him and was standing close, so close that the sleeves of her robe brushed his. He felt warmth flow through him, and a pleasant tightness in his groin. He wished he could get her alone.

Albus was just puzzling out loud about how to divide up the guests into teams, when Severus remembered Aine's words.

"Professor, Madam MacAirt and Professor MacAirt are still in the study. They wished to participate."

"I'll go peek in on them," Quin offered. "Let them know we're ready when they are."

"In the meantime, dessert, anyone?" Albus asked. He twitched his wand, and the dining table was now a buffet of various desserts.

Severus heard Pomona's ooo, and he presumed there was some chocolate cheesecake among the various treats. That reminded him of the Halloween party, when Poppy had so kindly taken his hand and led him from the dance floor to a quiet corner where they had each eaten a slice of chocolate cheesecake. He looked down at her with a

smile. "Care for some dessert, Madam Pomfrey? Perhaps they have chocolate cheesecake. I remember that you enjoyed that at the Halloween party."

"You have a good memory, Severus," Poppy said. "If there is some, I wouldn't mind a piece."

"Please, sit. I will bring it to you."

"Thanks, Sev erus!" Her bright smile lightened his heart even more, and he didn't even mind that she almost slipped and called him her pet name in public.

He returned to her side a few minutes later, carrying two plates and two forks. She had taken a seat on what might be termed a very large chair, or perhaps a very small loveseat. Too large for just one person, but very cozy for two. He bowed his head briefly to her, then held out the two plates.

"There is one piece with strawberries over it, and one with cherries. I was unsure which you would prefer."

"Which would you like, Severus? They both sound good, and I'll have whichever one you don't...if you wouldn't mind letting me have a taste of the other, that would be nice." She patted the cushion beside her as he handed her the slice with the cherries. "Have a seat. It's a bit small, but you could expand it, if you wish."

"I would not wish to pick up Dumbledore's habit of altering every chair I happen upon," Severus said with a slight snort, but he didn't sit.

Albus, who had come up behind him, chuckled. "Dear boy, if that's the worst of my bad habits you were to acquire, you would be fortunate!"

Poppy laughed. "I wouldn't call it a bad habit, Albus. Just a funny little quirk you have. It can be amusing to see what chairs you Transfigure or conjure up!"

"You are kind, Poppy! But Severus, do take a seat...I am sure it is most awkward for Poppy to have to look up at you so. I'm just going to go see where the MacAirt contingent is! Then we can begin!"

As Albus bustled off to Minerva's study, Poppy patted the chair again. "I saved the seat for you, Severus. I thought we could sit together for a bit and . . . catch up with each other."

Severus smirked. *Catch up*, as if they hadn't spent hours together that day already. He tried to make a display of reluctance, but it was difficult, as he was quite pleased to sit thigh-to-thigh with Poppy.

"Good," Poppy said as Severus slid back into the chair. "The cheesecake, I mean. Would you like a taste of my cherry?" she asked, straight-faced, but making Severus almost choke on the first bite of his own cheesecake. "I think you might like it."

Severus looked down at her plate, which she was raising, and then looked up and met her eyes. "Perhaps a small taste."

To his surprise, she offered him her own fork. He didn't know what to do. It was so . . . intimate. And there were people there. They might see . . . he could feel the heat begin to rise in his face. Not only eating from her fork, accepting it, but her . . . her cherry. There was a large red cherry, whole, in its sugar juice, resting in a bed of dark chocolate cheesecake. He swallowed.

"Here, try some. Then I can take a taste of yours," she said evenly, calmly, as if this were something quite usual between colleagues, on the order of borrowing a quill to jot a note during a staff meeting.

The fork approached his mouth, and he opened, then closed his mouth around the cherry, first tasting the sweet juice, then the dark chocolate, and then the cherry as she slid the fork from his mouth. He remembered to chew.

"Good?"

Severus nodded, swallowing. "Quite. Thank you."

"May I have a taste of the strawberry?" Her fork was poised.

"Wha Oh, yes, certainly." Severus held out his plate to her, letting her take the tip of the slice and a halved strawberry with it.

"So, did I miss anything?" Poppy asked. She put her fork in her mouth, apparently savouring the strawberry.

Severus blinked. Miss anything . . . "While you were out with Professor Sprout, you mean?" At Poppy's nod, he shrugged. "I do not know. I spoke with Madam MacAirt in the Headmistress's study. O'Donald was taking photographs, though...and has not ceased, apparently," he added as a flashbulb went off across the room. This time, Calum was taking a picture of Gertrude, Quin, and Minerva sitting together on the couch, Quin with his arms around both witches' shoulders, and again, sitting on Gertrude's right. You almost couldn't tell that Gertrude was missing her arm . . . He stabbed his fork into his cheesecake.

"Calum was always a shutterbug," Poppy said, slicing her cheesecake with the edge of her fork. "Muggle and wizarding."

"You concluded your business with Professor Sprout satisfactorily?" Severus asked, looking away from Gertrude and trying not to think about what Aine had said regarding a secret becoming a lie, and his own fears of the same.

Poppy nodded, chewing and swallowing. "Orla Mitchell is on her own in Hufflepuff, the only first-year. Her uncle will be coming for her in a few days, but in the meantime, she's feeling very lonely and homesick. She's going to come spend Easter Sunday with my family. There will be a number of children about her age there, and I think she'll have fun."

"I see. It is good of you to offer," Severus said.

"She's a sweet girl. I'm happy to bring her along."

Albus emerged from Minerva's study, went over to Quin, and whispered something in his ear. Quin smiled and nodded. A moment later, Aine and Hafrena came out, Hafrena looking rosy-cheeked and quite well. It seemed to Severus that at the very least, Aine had given the old witch a bit of pep.

"Everyone ready for some games?" Albus asked, getting everyone's attention. He rubbed his hands together, his eyes sparkling in anticipation. "Shall we pick teams?"

Severus didn't hide his frown. He hated picking teams. He would be picked last, he was sure of it, and for good reason, as he would no doubt be abominable at charades. He didn't even want to play. He felt Poppy's arm move warmly against his side, and he tried to relax, remembering his promise to try to enjoy himself.

"Let's do it by Houses," Caspar suggested.

"Excellent idea!" Flitwick agreed.

"I think the Towers versus the dungeons," Caspar continued, "Ravenclaw and Gryffindor against Slytherin and Hufflepuff."

"Hufflepuff is not in the dungeons!" Pomona protested indignantly.

"It's below ground," Caspar said, smirking a bit. "And this is a castle, so . . ."

"Hmmpf." Pomona shifted in her chair, appeased only slightly by the pat on the knee that Filius gave her from his perch on the ottoman in front of her. When he leaned back against her legs and made himself comfortable, she smiled and forgot her little fit of pique.

"That's fine for some, but a few of us here don't have a House," Calum pointed out.

"We can fix that!" Albus said cheerfully, "Can't we my dear?" He turned to Minerva.

Minerva shrugged one shoulder, smiling, but then she nodded. "Yes, all right, if you like!" She grinned. "We'll get them Sorted."

"I've wondered what House I might be in!" Helena said with a laugh as Albus Summoned the Sorting Hat.

"Don't mean to be a wet blanket, Albus," Quin said, "but I'd just as soon do without the Sorting, meself. Just put me where I'm needed to even things out."

"As you wish," Albus said as the Sorting Hat flew into his hand. He looked around to find Severus seated beside Poppy. "Severus, would you like to do the honours?"

"You may have the pleasure, Professor," Severus said, not wanting to rise from his place beside Poppy, and glad that if he had to suffer through a game of charades, at least he would be on the same team as she. That was all right. He surreptitiously shifted so that his thigh was pressed more closely against Poppy's. He could put up with almost anything if Poppy were beside him. He hoped that Calum and Helena weren't both Sorted into Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. That would make the teams uneven, and Albus would probably put Gryffindor and Hufflepuff together, splitting him up from Poppy. He wished he could influence the Hat. Severus felt a scowl coming on. Instead, he poked his fork into Poppy's last cherry and stole it from her. She looked up at him and grinned.

Albus conjured a stool just like the one used at the Sorting every September, and he placed the Hat on it. "Helena Benetti."

Grinning, Helena approached the stool.

"You'll be in Gryffindor," Caspar said confidently.

"Shh," Minerva hushed him.

Helena looked uncertainly at the Sorting Hat. She'd attended only one Sorting, and Severus had held the Hat and placed it on each student's head.

"Just pick me up and put me on," the Sorting Hat said with a creaky chuckle.

Helena laughed and did as the Hat instructed. She sat there for quite some time, and Severus pulled out his pocket watch and tried to glance at it. Poppy reached out and clicked it shut before he could. He frowned at her, but she winked, and his frown vanished.

Finally, after almost five minutes, the Sorting Hat declared, "Ravenclaw!"

The four Ravenclaws in the room clapped, and Filius jumped down from his ottoman to shake her hand to welcome her to her honorary House. Gareth got up from his chair beside Pomona and offered it to Helena, and she took it with a smile.

"Calum Michael O'Donald," Albus announced.

Calum pretended to bound up to the Sorting Hat like an excited first-year, but Severus could see that he was actually shaking slightly as he picked up the Hat. This time, the Hat took no more than a half a minute to determine that Calum was a Hufflepuff. Severus suppressed a smile. Now, Dumbledore would put Quin with the dungeon contingent, and they'd be even teams.

"Are you sure you don't want to try the Hat, Quin?" Albus asked. "Aren't you even a little bit curious?"

"Come on, Da," Aine said. "Don't be shy!"

"Shy? When have I ever been shy?" Quin asked. Then he sighed. "All right, let that thing Sort me. But I'll not be believin' anythin' it says, anyway."

Gertrude laughed and Summoned the Hat. She stood from beside him and said, "Cormac Quinlivan MacAirt," then placed the Hat on Quin's head.

Minutes ticked by. Quin sat, looking alternately bemused and slightly bored. Severus wondered what the Hat was saying to the wizard. His hand crept back to his watch, and this time, Poppy let him open it, and she peeked at it herself. Five minutes later, a few guests were beginning to mill about quietly and help themselves to more drinks or desserts, though Gertrude, Aine, Albus, and Minerva maintained their attention.

Severus leaned over and whispered in Poppy's ear. "If this continues, there won't be any time for party games. We may be in luck!"

Poppy elbowed him, but he could feel her chuckle.

Gareth wandered over to them. "So, how about some of that apple brandy now, Snape?"

"You wish me to be inebriated so that you may gain an advantage in the games," Severus said.

"At this rate, I don't think it matters. What about you Poppy? Some of Aunt Lydia's apple brandy?"

"Sure! I haven't had that in a while," she replied. "You should try a little, Severus. It's quite good."

"All right," Severus said with a nod.

Gareth returned with their drinks and took a seat on the broad arm of the chair, just beside Poppy. "What do you think is taking so long? Think Quin's being difficult on purpose?"

Poppy shrugged. "I don't think that would make a difference to the Sorting Hat."

"How long did it take you to be Sorted?" Gareth asked.

"It took less than a minute for me," Poppy said. "It was a very long minute, though!"

"What about you, Snape?"

Severus shrugged. "I don't know. A few minutes. Not very long." He had just been grateful to have been Sorted into Slytherin, a true wizarding House. Now, he wished he had agreed with the Hat's suggestion that he might do well in Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. Even being stuck in Hufflepuff might have kept him from making the mistakes he'd made. Gryffindor would have been a disaster for him, with Potter and his crowd right there. And Black. Still, Ravenclaw might have been better for him.

"This is getting ridiculous," Gareth said, taking a swallow of apple brandy. "It's not even a real Sorting. It's for a party game!"

"What is the longest Sorting you've seen?" Severus asked Poppy.

"I've seen a few that took twenty or twenty-five minutes," the matron said, "but I think the longest one was probably Aurora Sinistra's. We were famished by the time the Hat

finished with her. It was at least a half hour, I'd say."

"Sinistra might not have been in Slytherin House," Severus said, a peculiar feeling passing over him.

"The same could be said for any of us, I'm sure, mate," Gareth said.

"Yours was fast enough," Poppy said.

Gareth nodded. "It didn't even really consider any other House for me," he said with a shrug. "I'd sort of wanted to be in Gryffindor, because of Dad, you know, but it really didn't take much time to even look. Said something about my brain, and that was that. I heard that it holds long conversations with some kids."

Albus was now bending down and saying something to Gertrude, who had sat back down next to Quin. She shook her head. Albus looked out at his party, a look of consternation on his face.

Minerva stepped up behind Quin and said, "Excuse me, Hat, but a word with you, please." She plucked the Hat from Quin's head, causing the drowsy wizard to open his eyes, startled, and she placed the Hat on her own head. Whatever the Hat said, she smiled at it, then she shook her head. "Just get on with it!" she said loudly.

The Hat seemed to frown, but Minerva lifted it from her head and replaced it on Quin. About fifteen seconds later, it shouted, "Hogwarts!"

Albus laughed in disbelief. "What?"

Quin took the Hat off and handed it to Gertrude. "Blasted old Charmed bit of felt must be losing its edge, Albus. Kept going round and round, dithering on. It was very dull. Told you I didn't want to be Sorted into a House, but you all were so eager." He shrugged.

"But . . . there's only been one person in the history of the school who was Sorted that way," Albus said, "and he ended up being put in Ravenclaw as a compromise, since he needed to have a House for practical reasons."

"Well, put me in Slytherin, then, with Gertie here, and I'll be happy enough for the evenin'," Quin said. "The Hat probably would have put me in some House eventually, but we haven't time for it, and I don't fancy wearing the thing to bed tonight while it makes up its Charmed mind."

"All right, Slytherin it is!" Albus said.

"It's what Albus should have done in the first place," Poppy whispered.

Albus quickly gathered everyone's attention again, and instructed them to divide up, Slytherin and Hufflepuff on one side, and Ravenclaw and Gryffindor on the other. Severus was pleased that he and Poppy were already sitting on the proper side of the room, so they didn't have to get up and move. He supposed he should feel uncomfortable sitting so close to Poppy in the presence of everyone else, but no one seemed to notice or pay any attention. When Poppy's arm came to rest on his leg, however, he did feel less comfortable, but again, no one seemed to care. He supposed that as long as they weren't embracing, it didn't matter how closely they sat together. It was a party, after all.

"Think we'll beat the kids?" Quin asked as he settled the sofa kitty-corner to Severus and Poppy's over-sized chair.

"Our two Ravensclaws are very clever," Gertrude replied, sitting down at one end of the sofa, the one nearest Severus.

"But they haven't our experience of life," Hafrena said, sitting down on the other side of Quin, who had again taken up his position beside Gertrude, though this time on her left.

Colleen and Pomona each pulled up an armchair, Pomona on the other side of Poppy, and Colleen, beside Hafrena.

"I don't know as that matters in charades," Gertrude said. "But with four Slytherins...five, with our honorary member...we might be able to perform well."

"And what of Poppy and me?" Pomona sputtered.

"Or your honorary Hufflepuff," Calum said with a grin, squeezing in at the end of the sofa next to Hafrena.

Gertrude quirked a smile. "You're correct, of course. Hufflepuff might have a natural advantage in a game such as this."

"How so?" Hafrena asked.

"Fewer inhibitions," Gertrude said with a short laugh. When the others had ceased their chuckling or protests, she added, "It's not exactly a game of strategy, now, is it? If it were, then I have no doubt we would be quite formidable."

"They are a younger team, too," Hafrena observed. "Though perhaps Albus's presence does raise the average age."

"But he's probably got a more flexible mind...and fewer inhibitions...than most of us," Quin replied.

Everyone went quiet again as Albus stood and explained the rudiments of the game, that each team would have no more than three minutes to guess before the other team received a chance for a single guess, and he displayed the box of cards with both Muggle and magic world prompts on them.

"There are ninety-eight, and approximately half are the titles of books, plays, and poems from either the Muggle or the wizarding world," Albus said. "The others are common phrases and folk sayings."

"Objection," Severus said. "They are your cards, and yet you are on the Gryffindor team. I would never suggest that a Gryffindor would cheat..." Severus paused for a moment as people on both teams chuckled at that "...but you must remember many of the cards. You will have an advantage."

"No, no. I've not looked at them. A friend of mine put these together for me. Paul removed all of the ones that referred to Muggle films and television programmes, however. He thought it unlikely that many of us would be familiar with any but the most classic of Muggle films."

Calum moaned. "Not fair! There may be some of us who would be quite good at that...better than with some wizarding dramas!"

Albus chuckled. "Nonetheless, I thought it wise, as well. Now, do the Dungeons have a team captain?"

"Severus," Poppy blurted out. She looked at her teammates for affirmation.

"No..." Severus began.

"Professor Snape," Quin agreed with a nod.

"Yes, Professor Snape," Gertrude said. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

"Good!" Albus smiled brightly. "I believe the Towers have already chosen Minerva, though she, too, attempted to decline!"

"What does the captain do?" Severus asked, hoping it would be nothing ridiculous.

"Choose, in whatever manner you see fit, which member is up for the next charade, and if a team fails to guess its charade within the allotted time, the team captain from the opposing side is allowed one guess, in consultation with his or her team."

Severus nodded.

"Any other questions about this evening's rules?" Albus asked, looking around at both teams.

"Are we allowed to make any sounds?" Caspar asked.

"No, no vocalisations," Albus said. "Not even if they're not words. No whistling, either. You may clap, however, or strike an object, snap your fingers, that sort of thing. You can also point to any object in the room."

Caspar frowned slightly, but nodded.

"Who will time each charade?" Helena asked.

"The team captains will each time for the other team...I believe you might trust Minerva with that task, Severus?" Albus asked with a grin.

Severus smirked and nodded.

"Which team goes first?" Minerva asked.

Albus pulled a Galleon from his pocket. "Heads, the Towers, tails, the Dungeons," he said. When there was no objection, he flipped the coin high into the air, caught it neatly, then slapped it onto the back of his left hand. "And it is tails! The Dungeons team goes first!"

"What's our strategy?" Colleen asked after Albus had returned to his team. She looked at Severus expectantly.

"Who has played charades before?" Severus asked. Every hand went up. He turned to Poppy. "Are you better at guessing or acting?"

"It depends . . . guessing, I suppose."

His eyes ran over the others. "MacAirt. You will be first. You seem to have some of the requisite skills."

Quin grinned. "Don't know as that's a compliment or not, but I'll give it a shot!"

As he got up and went to pick a card, Pomona leaned across Poppy and asked, "Who will go next?"

Severus looked at her. "I presume you enjoy charades?" At Pomona's eager nod, he said, "Very well. You will be next." He glanced at the others. "Anyone who wishes to be sure to have a turn, tell me. I will attempt to arrange it."

Gertrude shifted on the sofa. "I'd just as soon not," she said softly, "though if I am needed..."

"I am sure there will be sufficient enthusiastic actors that you will not be required to participate in that fashion," Severus said. If he had to, he would get up there himself, though the thought was not a happy one.

Quin plucked a card from the box, read it with a smile and raised eyebrow, then he looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. At Minerva's prompting, he put the card face down on the little table beside the box, and began. According to Minerva's watch, it took one minute and fifty-five seconds for a frustrated Quin to mime "make hay while the sun shines," which Poppy finally guessed.

Gryffindor/Ravenclaw made better time with Helena pantomiming "kick the cauldron," needing only thirty seconds before Caspar guessed it. Severus restrained his grumbling, and sent Pomona up for the next turn. He was not sanguine about their chances of getting this one, either, when he saw the puzzled look on her face. Fortunately, with all of them guessing, they were able to get far enough that at the fifty-second mark, Quin blurted out, "lie down with dogs, get up with fleas," and so they did respectably enough there.

As Caspar picked a card from the box, Severus settled back with his watch. He supposed that this wasn't the worst way to spend an evening. Caspar nodded, and he marked the time. He glanced at Gertrude out of the corner of his eye. Tomorrow evening, however, might be different . . .

Chapter One Hundred-Five: An Assignment

Chapter 106 of 118

Severus prepares for a secret meeting.



Chapter One Hundred-Five: An Assignment

Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999

Sitting at the small desk in the back corner of his dimly lit sitting room, Severus flipped through the book one more time, finding and re-reading the pages yet again. He had almost committed them to memory since borrowing the small leather-bound book from the Headmistress's Library the night before, slipping in and out unnoticed after the party. Reading the text again served to strengthen his commitment and ready his mind.

He closed the book, feeling the soft, worn binding, the letters impressed on its cover. *Vita furtiva, vindicta occulta, nex abdita*. It was filled with all manner of charms and potions, both simple and complex, and all of them Dark or easily bent to Dark purposes. Severus saw young Terence Higgs's face again, bruised and swollen, the terror in his eyes, his silent plea . . . Severus closed his eyes, holding his breath for a moment, then letting it out slowly as the image faded. He pocketed the book.

As the game of charades had continued the previous evening, Severus's mind was repeatedly drawn to the Slytherin witch beside him and to their recent conversations. While her son was miming what turned out to be *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he glanced at her. Gertrude was smiling slightly, enjoying her son's performance, but Severus believed he could still detect a strain about her, a tension, some sense of unease despite the presence of so many of her friends and family. He could not undo what he had done all those years ago, and Gertrude had said that now, too much had happened, and she would not change the past. And yet, perhaps there was something he could change.

Severus remembered the conversation he had had with Gareth the first day he met the younger wizard, and his words to him then. Perhaps he had been wrong; perhaps they had both been wrong. He touched the small book through the fabric of his robe. Intent mattered, he thought, both in spells and in potions. Dumbledore would say that intent mattered in all we do, Severus was sure, but then the old wizard would go on to complicate even that notion . . .

Intent mattered. Making reparations was a positive act. The complex magic in those few pages might be Dark, but use would change it. He would offer it to her, and be prepared for sacrifice. Then, perhaps, he could unshroud the secret that Aine had glimpsed.

He looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers, then he reached for a quill, pulling a sheet of parchment toward himself with his other hand. He quickly scratched out a note, reread it, added a line, then signed it. After folding it in careful thirds, he passed his hand over it, sealing it with a light Sticking Charm, then he wrote, *Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress*, on the other side.

"Twiskett!"

As always, Severus did not have to wait long before his faithful elf appeared before him.

"Here is a message for the Headmistress. I will be leaving the grounds shortly. Please deliver it after I have left, but not immediately afterwards. Wait a few minutes, but no longer."

Twiskett bobbed his head and took the parchment. He waited a moment, and when Severus merely nodded at him, he Disapparated with a snap.

Severus opened his watch. Three-thirty. He would leave in twenty minutes. He replaced the watch in the watch pocket of his waistcoat, then got up and went into the bedroom. There, he opened the drawer to his night stand. He pulled out the double-snake ring he had placed there the night before, and put it on, then he felt around in the drawer until he found his flick-knife.

It sat solidly and comfortably in his left hand, and Severus flicked it open. Perhaps this knife had helped to save his life. If Nagini had struck his neck, all of Hermione and Dumbledore's ministrations may have been futile, but the large snake had bitten his arm and shoulder. Two bites, but perhaps not as dangerous as one solid strike to the throat, her favoured target. In a sense, Gareth had been there with him in the Shrieking Shack, in the form of this knife.

Severus didn't flinch or twitch as he experimentally drew the blade across the palm of his right hand. Blood welled up immediately, and Severus set down the knife and replaced it with his wand. One whispered charm, and the cut was healed. Another charm, and the blade was clean. He picked up the knife with his right hand, pressed a hidden button, and flipped it closed before replacing it in the drawer. It was not necessary that day.

His hand strayed to the box with his unique Order of Merlin in it, with its design of the throne of stone, the setting sun, and the golden apples. Theurgus Absque Pari. Mage Without Peer. Severus closed the drawer gently, looked around the room once, patting his pocket again to feel the small book settled there, then left, extinguishing the lights behind him. He paused briefly in his sitting room, but only long enough to touch his Charmed apothecary jar, the one Poppy had given him for his birthday, and to straighten it slightly on its shelf above his desk.

His cloak jumped into his outstretched hand as he passed it, and he left his rooms. One more stop at his personal potions cupboard, a few more items to add to his pockets, and then he would leave. It was a blustery day, with few staff and students in residence. He doubted he would be noticed, and if he were . . . well, he was under no formal restrictions, and Albus had left the grounds for the afternoon unaccompanied...visiting Potter in London and bringing him out for dinner, from what Severus gathered. Dumbledore had invited him along, stopping him just as he was leaving the party the night before. Potter wasn't doing very well, the old man thought, and he could do with some encouragement. Severus had managed to suppress his laugh of derision, and had politely declined. He doubted that his presence would cheer Potter, though perhaps it might goad him out of his apathy, or whatever it was that had seemed to have overtaken him in recent months.

Severus carefully placed the few necessary ingredients in small envelopes and Charmed vials. There were other ingredients besides these, but they would need to be fresh . . .

~*~*~*~

Minerva felt a slight shift in the wards, almost imperceptible, and she paused in her reading, raising her head as if listening intently. She sensed no other ripples in the castle's magic, none but those that ordinarily pulsed through it, and which she noticed no more than she did her own pulse. Perhaps one of the staff who had left for the day was returning early. She adjusted her glasses, which had slipped slightly down her nose, and continued to read.

Several minutes later, she heard a crack of Apparition from her office below.

"Andrew, would you pop down to the office and ask the house-elf to come up here to me if they have business with me?"

The Silent Knight bowed. "I will, my lady."

A few minutes later, he returned to his frame. "'Tis a wee grey thing more silent than I, my lady, but he will ascend your stairs. He carries with him a message."

"Probably Twiskett," Minerva said with a nod. She put her book down on the table beside her and stood, opening the door with a flick of her wand as she crossed the room. Twiskett was just reaching the top stair. "Come in, Twiskett! You have a message from Professor Snape?"

Twiskett nodded and held out the folded parchment. Minerva took it from him and used her wand to unseal its charm.

4 April 1999

Dear Minerva,

I write to inform you that I am leaving the grounds this afternoon. I do not know when I will return, but I will take care when I do.

I will not be alone, as I shall immediately be meeting an old acquaintance at the gates.

I may not be returned for dinner this evening. Do not be concerned. I will return, no doubt, in due course. I hope to repay a debt today.

Regards,

Severus

Minerva's brow furrowed. She hoped that this person, whoever he or she was, was reliable. Odd that Severus did not name him. She wasn't pleased that he left without telling her in advance, or saying whom he would be with or where he would be going...no doubt that was why he did not tell her in advance. He could avoid any questions from her. The slight shift in the wards must have been Severus at the gates, leaving the grounds, not entering them.

Minerva looked up from the letter. "Has Professor Snape left already?"

Twiskett nodded.

"When did he leave?"

"Four o'clock," Twiskett said.

"Why did you not deliver this message immediately when he gave it to you?"

"Professor Snape says deliver it when he is gone."

Minerva nodded. "Thank you, Twiskett. Is there more? Did he say anything?"

Twiskett shook his head. "Just that he leaves the grounds, and deliver the message to you when he is gone."

"Very well. Please inform me when he returns...and do not delay, even if he gives you orders to the contrary," Minerva said.

Twiskett hesitated almost imperceptibly, but then nodded. "Twiskett will come to the Headmistress when Professor Snape returns."

"Good. And I give you leave to come to me regardless of where I am...although if I am in the toilet, please wait outside the door!" she added, knowing that house-elves could sometimes be very literal.

"Yes, Headmistress."

"Go now; your master is away, and I believe your mother would enjoy your company. It is a holiday. Spend some time with her."

Twiskett nodded, then Disapparated with a high-pitched crack, causing Minerva to wince slightly.

Minerva thought a moment, then looked up at the Silent Knight. "Andrew, go through the Portrait Network. See if anyone has seen Professor Snape today...outside of breakfast and lunch. Bring me word of what anyone has witnessed." She looked back down at the brief letter and shook her head. "I am worried about him still, and very uneasy about this assignation."

The Silent Knight bowed and left the frame. Minerva sat back down in her chair, pushed her glasses up her nose, and picked up her book, but she did not read. She gazed across the room at the small fire in the grate, and wondered where Severus could have gone, and with whom.

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He didn't know why they were meeting outside the gates. She had simply suggested that their conversation had been interrupted, that it would be good to continue it somewhere private. She suggested the next day, Easter Sunday, late in the afternoon, and he had agreed. Whatever she wished to say to him, he would listen, and then he would show her the ritual in the pages of that Dark book. He could return to her something of what he had taken from her: if not those years, if not her comfort, then at least something for the future.

Gertrude had also intimated that it would be best if the meeting, and whom he was meeting with, remain private, as well. That accorded with his own wishes, and he merely said that he would leave word with Minerva that he was leaving the castle so that she would not become alarmed if she sought him and could not find him.

The wind was sharp and cold as he crossed the grounds, whipping his cloak about his legs, and he pulled his collar up high around his neck. Rath wasn't out on the grounds that day, and Severus saw no one as he strode quickly toward the gates. He didn't even look back at the castle after passing through the gates and shutting them behind him.

He walked a few yards, looking around for the witch he was meeting, any anxiety or nervousness he may have had, suppressed by his sense of purpose. Wishing to remain unseen from the castle, he stepped off the road to stand beside some bushes. Only seconds later, however, Gertrude was beside him, and he started at her unexpected appearance as she slipped from behind a tree.

"We shall speak, then, somewhere private," Gertrude said.

Severus nodded. "As you wish."

"Did you tell anyone you were meeting me?"

"I did not. I left a message for the Headmistress. She will receive it shortly. I said only that I was leaving the grounds and was unsure when I would return."

Gertrude nodded. "Then step closer and take hold of me, Professor, and I will Apparate us...if you will come with me."

Severus responded by grasping the witch's arm, acutely aware that she had only one.

"Closer, Professor, and put an arm around me. It is a tricky Side-Along, this, and I would not wish you to Splinch."

Severus swallowed and did as she advised, stepping behind her, putting his right arm around her waist and holding on to her left shoulder. Gertrude's wand was already out, and with no further warning, Severus felt the sickening, squeezing sensation of Side-Along Apparition, and as he felt something stronger than the wind tear over him, he was very glad he was holding on more tightly.

Author's Note: If you wish to refresh your memory of Gareth's first encounters with Severus, they are in [Chapter Thirteen: "And the west moon," of *Death's Dominion*](#). The specific memory he considers here is in the last part of the chapter.

The small book, *Vita furtiva, vindicta occulta, nex abdita*, also is first seen in later chapters of [Death's Dominion](#).

Chapter One Hundred-Six: Refuge

Chapter 107 of 118

Severus and Gertrude arrive at their destination.



Chapter One Hundred-Six: Refuge

Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999

Reeling from the Side-Along, feeling nauseous and dizzy, Severus reflexively held on more tightly to Gertrude, slumping against the old witch and gasping. She turned in his arms and looked up at him, scrutinising his face. Severus, aware suddenly that he was in an almost intimate embrace with Professor Gamp, let go and stepped back. He swayed, and Gertrude reached out and steadied him.

Severus closed his eyes, then opened them again, trying to stand up straighter and regain his balance. He looked around himself, and he recognised nothing.

"You have a bit of petechia, but that is easily reversed," Gertrude said. "All your parts there? No Splinching or Spliking?"

Severus stepped back again. "I believe I am intact," he replied, "with no injuries." He took a deep breath and let it out, then he felt of himself. No Spliking...no bits of trees or rocks or walls had found their way into his body. "Yes, I appear to be fine."

Gertrude nodded. As Severus began to take another step back, however, she grabbed him once more. "Take care, Professor. Do not step off the edge."

Severus looked around again. There were no buildings that he could see, nor any trees, and what few bushes he could see were several yards off. Little danger of Spliking in a barren place such as this. He was standing on a large rock, and now as he turned around, he saw that he was only feet from the edge of a rocky cliff. Below was the ocean. All he could see was water, white-capped waves stirred up by the wind.

To his left, a winding path led down a rocky slope, and to his right, the path narrowed and led uphill. He could see now that there were a few scrubby trees on the side of the mountain, and they seemed to lead to a denser, dark wood, but here, and along the path leading up, there was nothing but stone and a very few tough, defiant plants.

He had thought it was still, except for the crash of the waves against unseen rocks below and the wind whistling over the stone, but now he heard harsh bird calls high above, and other sweeter songs from somewhere behind them.

Perhaps it was Cornwall, where Severus knew the Gamp estate to be, but it didn't feel like it. "Where are we?" he asked, though he thought he already knew the answer.

"Eilean Tèarmunn."

"The island where you lived."

Perhaps she nodded in reply, but she said nothing, and Severus turned again to face her. "I thought you were not to come here," he said questioningly.

"I promised I would not come alone." She looked at him a moment. "Unless you choose to leave before I do, then I am not alone."

Severus nodded.

"You may leave whenever you wish," Gertrude continued, though she began to walk uphill. "The wards will keep you from returning, unless you are ever joined to them, but they do not prevent you from Disapparating to wherever you choose."

Severus began to follow Gertrude up the rocky slope. It was steep in places, and smaller stones slid underfoot and bounced away down the hill or skittered over the edge to the rocks below.

"Where are we going?" Severus finally asked, but Gertrude made no response but to gesture to him to continue following her, beckoning him onward.

Around a bend, she seemed to vanish, but then Severus saw that the path forked, and there was a narrow way leading between two large stones, too tall, straight, and regular to be entirely natural formations, and he followed her through them. The rocky path became a primitive stair now, with long, broad steps, each step a few feet from the next, making walking irregular and the pace uncomfortable, but Gertrude continued steadily upward.

"Professor Snape," she said softly.

"Yes?"

"Professor Snape, do not hurt my son."

Severus blinked, he walked forward a few feet, then stepped up. "I would not hurt him."

Another long step, another step up. "Professor Snape, do not hurt my son."

Severus shook his head. "I will not hurt him." Perhaps he ought to cancel duelling practice with Gareth, he thought, and tell Flitwick to cancel their duel, as well.

One long step, up another foot. "Professor Snape, do not hurt my son."

"I will not hurt him. I will be careful."

Gertrude glanced back at him. "Severus. Do not hurt my son," she said softly.

Severus paused, looking up at her, and now he understood. She wasn't concerned about the duel. "I will not hurt him, and I will try to never bring him into danger. If he is in danger, I will protect him, and I promise that I will do all that I can for him if he ever needs my help. I will not hurt him."

Gertrude nodded, then turned and continued up the path. She beckoned to him to walk beside her now as the path grew broader and less steep.

"My son is fond of you, Professor."

"He is a friend," Severus said.

Gertrude looked up at him, a crooked grin crossing her face. "A friend? You may be honest with me, Severus. I am old, and I may have lived an isolated life for much of these last years, but I am rather beyond being shocked by life."

Severus, had he the energy, would have blushed at her implication, but he just shook his head. "We are just friends, Madam Gamp."

"And he knows this? That you are 'just friends'? I do not want him hurt."

Severus nodded. "We are good friends, but that is all, if you are asking what I believe you are asking."

"You are letting him move into your house."

"It is practical. I am never there, apart from a couple months in the summer. It is convenient for us both...and we have not determined what he will do during the summer holiday. I value my privacy...though perhaps with a schedule, he could still use his computer there even during the holiday."

Gertrude nodded. "I see." She let out a short laugh. "Gareth preferred to leave me wondering. Therefore, I drew my own conclusions." She looked up at him. "You do not seem a man to be involved with another man in that way. I worried that he would become too attached . . . that you were . . . enjoying yourself, but that you might . . ." She shrugged.

"No."

"Good."

"Why are we here?" Severus asked as they appeared to be reaching the peak of the mountain. They could have discussed his relationship with Gareth elsewhere.

"I wish to show you something. And then I thought we could gather a few things from my from the house."

Now that they were at the top of the mountain, Severus could see that they had been climbing one of three mountains on this hilly island. Looking south, he saw two others, each one smaller than the one they were now on. In the far distance, he saw black shapes that he thought were buildings, perhaps the cottage and work shed that Albus and Minerva had each referred to from time to time. Closer, near the peak of the second mountain, the one closest to them, he could see a network of paths, a low stone wall, and what looked like the roof of a building rising just high enough on the other side of the mountain to be seen from where they were standing.

"That was my home," Gertrude said. "There is a house, sheds, a chicken house, a barn for my for some goats. I had gardens, too. You can't see them from here. Overgrown now, I am sure. Nature reclaims its own very quickly."

"What happened to your goats and chickens?"

"Aberforth came for them. He and Gluffy brought the chickens to the Gamp estate, but I gave Abbie the goats. They came from his stock, after all."

"You miss it."

Gertrude nodded. "Not all of it. But the house, the gardens, the work . . . the rhythm of life. That I do miss."

"And . . . the isolation?" Severus asked.

"I miss it and I don't miss it. I do not desire it again, and yet . . ." She looked out across the water. "I am not a very sociable person by nature, Professor, and yet I have loved my family and friends, I enjoyed my work at Hogwarts with the students, and I was accustomed to a life of freedom to come and go...not only to travel about freely, but to come and go amongst people. And here, I became accustomed to solitude and to silence. Often weeks would go by when I would speak scarcely a word. Gluffy was with me, but . . . one may love a house-elf and find him companionable, and yet still have few words pass between you. Then suddenly there would be a visitor, and I would find myself almost shocked by the presence of another human being here. Abbie would come by, check on me, see the goats, stay perhaps a few hours or one day, or two, then leave. He was a quiet one, though, and easy company. Albus or Minerva or both would visit when they could. Sometimes Johannes would come, occasionally bringing Hafrena with him, if it were just for an afternoon, although other visits would be longer, and he would stay for a few days or a week, and Siofre would visit for a while then, too. It would be jarring to have others here when I was so used to solitude and had my own well-set routines. Yet I would enjoy their company while they were here. In the summer, more would come. Albus and Minerva would stay on the island for a week, two weeks, three, sometimes, when things were peaceful in your world, and they would bring family to visit for a few days now and again. Gareth would always join me for a few weeks every summer. When Gareth was a boy and living with Robert and Thea, they would arrive with Madelif to fetch him. They would all stay a few days before taking Gareth back to Amsterdam with them. And then it would be September again, once one of the busiest months of the year for me, and the month that once heralded the influx of new students, of relationships with colleagues . . ." Gertrude shook her head.

"I am sorry..." Severus began.

"Hush...I brought you here to look, Professor, and you will look, and I will help you to see." She took his arm and led him to a long, broad, flat rock. "Sit. Sit here, and look."

Severus saw nothing but the sea, which looked hard and grey, and the sky, still light to the west, and yet dimming quickly to a deep blue above.

"Watch, Professor." Gertrude half-knelt, half-sat behind him on the broad rock, and he could feel her looking over his shoulder. "You shall see it soon."

Severus remembered what Gareth had told him about Avalon, Innis Ablach, and his mother's contention that she could see it all of the time...this vision of an island that might be mere mirage, perhaps a Fata Morgana, though illusion only, and not the work of magic.

Severus felt Gertrude's hand gently on the side of his jaw, directing his gaze. Then suddenly, he could see it. It was no mirage, and if it was a Fata Morgana, then the veil of magic had been completely lifted for a moment, for the island was clearly there: three mountains, mirroring this island, then hills gently rolling to the south. On the highest of the mountains, there was a stone building of some sort, and to the west of the building, another shape, carved in stone. Had he not seen it on his Order of Merlin, he would not have recognised the heavy stone throne. He stared, committing the vision to memory. The light would fade soon, light that was glinting off of something shiny, a bright metal, on the second mountain. And there was a boat dragged up upon the stony beach . . . he strained his eyes, but the island faded, then vanished, though he could still see the light of the sun at the horizon, but now there was nothing in between but waves of the sea.

"You saw it."

Severus nodded. "It's gone now." He felt a sudden sense of loss. He wanted to see it again. There had been a boat, he was sure of it, not just a rock in the shape of a boat.

"There was a boat. I saw a boat."

Gertrude slid around to sit beside him. She nodded. "Yes, sometimes there is a boat there, or two."

"People then. There must be people there. Or is it all just an illusion?"

"I don't know. I believe we see something real, but whether what we are seeing is there now, I do not know. It could be that what hides the island from . . . from us also has somehow shifted it out of time. Perhaps we are seeing the island as it once was, or a memory of it, or perhaps we are seeing the island now, and for a moment, the past and the present merge there...Ablach is truly there, but brought out of the past to visit us in vision only."

"What do you believe?"

Gertrude was quiet for a moment. "I believe that *whenever* it is that the island that we see exists, it is there in actuality when we see it, and that with the right means, we could reach it, though perhaps never to be able to return to this world again."

"You still see it, don't you?" Severus asked, noting her gaze at a point on the horizon.

She nodded. "I thought perhaps . . . I have been away for almost a year. I feared I might have lost the island . . . but yes, I do still see it, though it is always easiest to see just at dusk. And now that it is becoming dark, I see torches and fires, one great fire on the peak of the highest mountain. It is not always such a large fire . . . perhaps . . ."

Severus waited. "Perhaps what?"

Gertrude twitched her left shoulder and quirked a sideways grin. "Perhaps they saw me arrive with you and lit a larger fire for me to see . . ." She laughed. "But that is truly fantastical thinking. Come," she said, standing, "we also came here for more practical reasons. I have things I wish to fetch from the house. This is the first I've been back since the battle, and there are a few small things that I left behind. Gareth and Gluffy helped Thea and Robbie pack up my things, what they believed I would want and need, but there are a few items they didn't think of."

Severus stood. It was now quite dark, and Gertrude seemed a grey shadow. He did not relish the prospect of clambering about on the rocks in the dark. "We could return another day."

"If you wish to leave, you may," Gertrude said. "But I will stay. I brought some food. I thought we could have a light meal. Bread and cheese." She touched the bag that hung crossways around her from her left shoulder.

Severus remembered his own mission for the day, and also Gareth's fears that his mother might one day try to Apparate to Innis Ablach and vanish from their lives forever. "I will not leave you here alone."

"Good. I will Apparate us...here on the island, it will not be as uncomfortable as it was to arrive, Professor," Gertrude promised him. "And if you ever return with Albus, Minerva, or Gareth, you will find it an easier trip, as they are joined to the wards in a different way than I am."

Trusting her, Severus took Gertrude's arm, but he closed his eyes and clenched his teeth against the sensation of Side-Along Apparition. There was a crack, and when he opened his eyes and released her arm, he breathed a sigh of relief. It had been as smooth a Side-Along as any he'd ever had, though they had not hopped far. He saw Gertrude wave her wand, and a few torches on poles flared to life; another swish of her wand, and the paths were lined with glowing stones; one more flick, and a lamp lit in the cottage in front of them.

He took a moment to look around. There was a long, low barn to his right, which probably had been home to Gertrude's goats, and it appeared there was an area behind it enclosed with low stone walls. To his left, there was a good-sized shed, and then another slightly larger building, which he presumed was the chicken coop, though it seemed to have windows; there was a relatively bare fenced-in area in front of it, though there were weeds now taking it over. All of the buildings were of the same black stone, and all were thatched but the cottage, which had a slate roof.

"The gardens are behind us, and there's an herb garden on the other side of the house, off the kitchen," Gertrude said.

As they walked up the path toward the cottage, Severus thought how very odd this entire experience was, and how incongruous it felt to be on this isolated island with this woman whom he had so gravely injured all those years ago. Gertrude had fallen silent again, and her mood seemed dampened with their arrival at her former home.

They approached the house, and Gertrude flicked her wand again. A lamp lit beside the door, which was painted dark green.

"What happened to it?" she suddenly asked softly.

"Pardon?"

"I always wondered . . ." Her left arm went around her, hugging herself. "Albus went back for it. It was gone. I could only imagine . . ."

Severus swallowed. "I took it with me."

"And then?" she asked, stopped in front of the door.

"I . . . I brought it to him. To show him that I . . . that I had done as he had asked." There had never been any death notice in the paper, but after the first undetailed report of the attack on the house, there was also no report on the fate of its occupant, much to Severus's relief. The Dark Lord had believed her dead. He had believed it likely, himself.

"What happened to it?"

Severus turned his head away, closing his eyes, though he could not close his eyes to the memory of the Dark Lord's delight, and the contortions he had put the witch's arm through, dancing on its fingertips, waving at everyone in the room, gesturing rudely . . . The Dark Lord had been going to keep it, use it for some foul purpose, but Severus had bowed to him, kneeling before him, and had begged to be allowed to have it for himself, as a souvenir and to experiment with. The Dark Lord had laughed and had given him the dead arm. Severus had not kept it.

"I incinerated it. With a spell."

"Truthfully?"

Severus nodded. "He wished to have it . . . but I asked him for it, and he was pleased with me, so I was allowed to keep it. I incinerated it just before dawn."

Gertrude let out a long breath. "Thank you."

Severus shuddered. She thanked him for it . . . What world had he stepped into? He touched his pocket, remembering his resolve as he felt the small book still there. He would find the words and he would offer reparation, what measure of reparation he could make. He flexed the fingers of his right hand and stood straighter.

Gertrude reached out and opened the door to warm lamplight. No complicated pass-phrase here, no wards needed, not on this island sanctuary.

"Come, Severus, we will have our supper, I will fetch my few things, and then we can return to Hogwarts. We can take care of that bit of petechia, too. You will be back before curfew, safe and sound. We do not wish to worry Minerva unduly."

Severus stepped across the threshold, following her into the cottage.

Chapter One Hundred-Seven: Reparation

Chapter 108 of 118

Gertrude and Severus have a bite to eat, and she has a request of him. Severus offers reparation.



Chapter One Hundred-Seven: Reparation

Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999

Gertrude sent her long grey cloak over to a cloak rack across the room, and indicated that Severus should do the same with his. Severus noticed for the first time that Gertrude was wearing trousers of dark green wool, with a pink blouse and a heavy, cream-coloured jumper.

The cottage was larger than Severus had imagined it, always having envisioned Gertrude in a tiny, rustic cottage, barely larger than Hagrid's hut, but he realised now that for all the years that Gertrude had lived there, never knowing when she would return to the world, if ever, and with the family and friends who had visited her at times, a two- or three-room hut would hardly have suited her for long. It was well furnished, too, and comfortable, with a sitting room filled with bookshelves, presumably once filled with books, though now only a few dusty paperbacks lay stacked in one corner shelf.

The walls were plastered and painted pale yellow. A dark wooden staircase led up from the living room, presumably to bedrooms, one of which would have been Gareth's as a boy...and where the younger wizard would have stayed during that year on the island leading up to the war. Gareth had said that it was the most time he'd spent with his mother since he had been a teenager, and he was glad of it. There were two closed doors, one to the cupboard under the stair, and one on the back wall. Odd to think of a woman living alone in a house for almost twenty years, isolated from society, and yet having doors to close off rooms, each room having a separate function . . .

Gertrude led him through the sitting room into a plain dining room, its plaster left white, containing one long table, a few chairs around it, a sideboard, and little else. To the left, there was an open door which seemed to lead to the room behind the living room. It was dark, but Severus had the impression of a study. Through the dining room, at the back of the house, lay the kitchen.

"There's a loo through there, Professor, if you'd care to freshen up." She began to unpack her bag: two small loaves of bread, a packet wrapped in brown paper, jars of dark mustard and mixed pickle, and a small flask.

Rather than stand there awkwardly as Gertrude prepared their supper, Severus opened the door she had indicated. A lamp came on, and he saw a small, utilitarian room with a wash basin and a toilet, one very small mirror set just above the sink. He had to bend slightly to look in the mirror, and he saw that his cheeks and nose were spider-webbed with broken blood vessels and his eyes were bloodshot. Petechia, indeed. He looked like he'd been on a week-long bender. Tearing through Thousand-Year Wards did not improve his appearance any.

He emerged from the toilet to find the table set and Gertrude using her wand to pour boiling water from a kettle into a teapot.

"Have a seat, Professor. Help yourself to some of the bread and cheese."

Gertrude Summoned a basket from a high shelf, then stepped out the backdoor, and a lamp lit just outside it. Severus looked at the bread, cheese, butter, and condiments, but didn't touch them. Despite his resolve, apprehension had settled in his stomach, and it seemed that every nerve of his body was vibrating.

"You aren't hungry?" Gertrude's voice startled him.

"I thought I would wait for you."

She nodded. "I found some nice young cress, if you would like it. It is too early for much else, and the garden hasn't been tended."

"Thank you."

"Pour our tea," Gertrude said as she flicked a finger at a large bread knife, then held down a loaf with her hand as the knife obediently cut thick slices from it.

Severus poured them each a mug of tea. He recognised the scent: mint, berries, balm . . . That tea which Gertrude made here on the island.

"There is milk in the flask, if you would like it. I prefer it without, myself."

Severus nodded. He left the flask where it was.

Gertrude sat down, taking a few slices of the bread, then cutting off some cheese from the large, pale block that lay on its brown wrapper. Severus, self-conscious, took one slice of bread and a bit of cheese.

"The cress is quite a peppery one, if you enjoy that sort of thing," Gertrude said as she spread brown mustard on half of one slice of bread, placed some cress on the other side, and then folded it around some cheese.

Severus did as Gertrude had. He forced himself to take a bite, chew, and swallow. As he did, he felt his appetite return, and he took another, larger bite.

Gertrude finished her first sandwich and made another, this time with pickle rather than cress. As she folded the bread around the cheese, she said, "I have a favour to ask of you, Professor, in your role as Head of Slytherin House."

"Of course," Severus said, though feeling more than slightly puzzled.

"I understand that there is a particular new treatment that might allow Millicent Bulstrode to play Quidditch again."

"I was unaware of that."

"It is available only in the United States. I made a few inquiries. I would like to enable Miss Bulstrode to receive the treatment from the American Healer who developed it. Medicus Nathan Morgenstern. However, I do not want to involve myself directly."

"You want to . . . do what? Raise funds..."

Gertrude shook her head, swallowing a bite of her sandwich. "No, no need for that. I will provide whatever is needed to cover the costs for her treatment, and to allow her to travel there with her mother. Whatever incidental expenses there may be, as well...lodging and so forth. You will simply find a way to make it happen. Tell them there's a special Slytherin fund for . . . injured Quidditch players who have recently left school, something of that sort. They can make the arrangements with you, I give you the money, and you see that their expenses are taken care of."

A generous offer. "And what would you like in return?"

Gertrude stared at him blankly for a moment. "I would like to see Miss Bulstrode play Quidditch again. Not literally, of course. I have little interest in attending such events."

"Of course."

"So, will you do it?"

Severus nodded. It was hardly a favour he could refuse. "Healer O'Donald might be able to arrange it."

"She could."

"I will speak to her, then," Severus said.

"And do not mention my name."

"You could speak to her yourself..."

Gertrude shook her head. "If you had been unable to act as intermediary, I may have done so. But I would rather this remain between us."

"As you wish."

Gertrude finished her sandwich, then buttered one more thick slice of bread. Summoning a small crock from a cupboard, she smiled slightly. "I worried they had completely cleared out all the kitchen cupboards, but they did leave a few things. Glad this is still here. I apologise for the lack of any proper dessert, Professor, but I find this is nice, myself." She sprinkled cinnamon-sugar thickly over the buttered bread. "Would you like some?"

Severus spread butter on a slice of bread then sprinkled it with the cinnamon-sugar.

"Goes well with the tea, I always think," Gertrude said, picking up her mug.

Severus nodded, trying to think of how to broach the subject foremost in his mind. Before he could find the right words, however, Gertrude was standing and putting away the remains of the food. "We can have another cup of tea before we leave," she said, "but at the moment, I want to find the things I came for, and we also need to take care of your face." She squinted at him. "Doesn't look good. Does it hurt?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't feel it at all, actually."

She nodded. "Come with me. I have something that might help...a kind of heal-all potion, likely not what you'd choose, as a Potions master, but I think it will do."

Severus followed her back out to the living room and up the stairs. She flicked her wand and a ceiling lamp lit the upstairs corridor.

"Four bedrooms up here, but three of them fairly small," she said, opening a door, "and the bathroom is here. Now, I hope . . . yes," she said, nodding as she opened a cabinet above the toilet. "Here it is." She handed him a small jar. "Hold that."

Severus held it as she opened it, then dipped her fingers in the ointment and spread it over the affected areas on his face.

"Don't know what to do about your eyes. Haven't anything here for that. A Glamour will do, though, until you can find something for them. There, that's better."

"Did you brew this?" Severus asked as he replaced the cap on the jar.

"Oh, no, this is one of Albus's. I did do a little brewing while I was here. Just a few very simple things. Potions was never my forte, though the few potions I did brew, I became quite good at."

Severus waited awkwardly in the hall as Gertrude went into her old bedroom and gathered a few things, including the bedspread. She folded it neatly with a quick flick of her wand.

"Professor, if you wouldn't mind carrying this, or Levitating it, if you prefer," she called to him. "And the carpet bag, as well."

Severus dutifully gathered up the folded bedspread in one arm and hefted the half-empty carpet bag in his other hand, then followed her back down the stairs.

"And then this . . ." Gertrude opened the door to the cupboard under the stairs, pushed aside a couple of heavy woolen cloaks, then drew out a shimmery garment, seemingly woven of ever-shifting greys, blues, browns, and mossy greens, the fabric almost liquid in appearance. It was the finest Chameleon Cloak Severus had ever seen.

Gertrude noticed his appreciative look. "When its charms are activated, it's quite effective. It was a gift from my husband, Gareth's father."

"I have never seen one quite like it."

Gertrude felt around in the back of the cupboard and pulled out a pair of high shearling boots, then felt around a bit more. She pulled back out of the cupboard and shook her head. "I thought there was another large carpet bag in here somewhere, but they took it. Probably at the estate somewhere, or in the attic at the Kilderkin Lane house. We can just shrink the blanket and put it into that bag, the boots, too."

When they were through packing the bag, Gertrude looked over at the clock on the mantelpiece. "We have time for one more visit tonight. Something that you might appreciate, and which I would like to see again. Get your cloak. I'll wear this one, I think." She tossed the Chameleon Cloak around her shoulders.

A moment later, Gertrude had taken his arm and Disapparated with him. Severus looked around. The moon wasn't up yet, but the sky was clear, and the stars plentiful. They were in a valley, ghostly shapes rising up around them. Standing stones, Severus realised, a neolithic henge surrounded by a circle of stones. They had Apparated

beside a cove, a rectangular arrangement of shorter, slightly rounder stones set in the centre of the circle.

Gertrude released his arm and beckoned to him, and Severus followed her across the circle to an avenue set with paired stones on either side. There was a slight depression just inside the circle, perhaps what was once a ditch.

"There's another avenue just like this, which leads west," Gertrude said. "This one leads in the direction of the tumulus, where the early dead of the island lie."

Severus could just make out the shape of the burial mound in the distance. He shivered involuntarily. Gertrude seemed to take no notice.

"The house is above us," she said gesturing to the mountain to the north. "But the way the henge is set in the valley, it's not easily visible from there. If we were to walk out to the tumulus, there's a path that leads up the hillside to the remains of some houses where earlier wizarding families lived, though they were not the ones who raised the henge or created the tumulus. They have their own small cemetery not far from where their houses stood."

Gertrude, her cloak shimmering in the dark, walked the path between the lines of menhirs, and Severus followed. She did not activate the cloak's charms, but in the dark, they were hardly necessary, and she was scarcely a shadow ahead of him. The tumulus seemed to rise as they approached, but Gertrude stopped before they reached it. They had passed beyond the stone-lined avenue, though there were still menhirs scattered in the valley. One, tipped on its side, lay half-buried in the earth. Gertrude placed her palm upon it, then she startled Severus by swinging herself up to sit upon it. She patted the stone beside her, and Severus used both arms to hoist himself up.

"Those who lie now beneath the tumulus lived not far from here, further along the valley and down by the sea," Gertrude said, gesturing, "they and their descendants, who later chose to be buried elsewhere. And then . . . there were attacks. Danes, perhaps, Vikings . . . perhaps others from nearby islands or from Ireland or Scotland." Gertrude shrugged her left shoulder. "There was little to hold the invaders here, though, and they left as swiftly as they arrived, leaving carnage behind them. And the few who were left buried their dead and they carried on living, but they created protections for themselves, making this island more difficult to reach by any invaders. Still, their numbers slowly dropped, and other newcomers arrived, seeking a sanctuary from a violent age, bringing different magic with them . . . more time passed, and the community, even as it was then, dwindled. But still, some few stayed on, all of them with the gift of magic, and now they lived with their small clan up on the hillside, not in the valley, and they travelled often beyond the bounds of the island's shores. But times are rarely easy, and even a peaceful people can find that violence comes to them. So they strengthened their wards and hid the island well, much as their neighbours on Innis Ablach had hidden themselves. More and more, though, the young people left and did not return. They found wives or husbands and new homes. Finally, one very old man, living in a small cottage at the southern tip of the island, found that he could no longer care for himself alone here, and his children came and took him to their home in Inverness, and he sold the island to a younger wizard. Thus Aberforth came here to be at peace with his goats, out of reach of the Ministry's meddling . . . And after Aberforth took his brother's cottage and acreage in the Dales, Albus came into possession of this island, and he and Minerva together strengthened the island's protections, creating wards that will last a thousand years. And here I lived, with the dead and with their echoes, until I felt near to an echo, myself," she ended softly.

"Professor . . ." Severus took in a deep breath. "Madam Gamp . . . I do not deserve the forgiveness you have given me..."

"We have spoken enough of that, Severus. You have it. Do not dwell upon it."

"But..."

"What more is there to say?" She shook her head and looked toward the standing stones of the henge. "Do you not see? Look, Severus. The past, the present, the future . . ." She sighed. "What occurred, what you did, the choices you made, shaped both our lives, and the path of the entire wizarding world. But you were part of the currents of the times we lived in, and you still are. Look to your future; remember that it does rest on your past, but do not let your gaze constantly turn backward rather than ahead."

"I cannot give you the future you would have had if I had not attacked you as I did...or that you would have had if the Dark if Riddle had not targeted you. But I can return to you one thing that I took, and I can make reparation for some of my part in that attack."

"What are you talking about?"

Severus drew his wand for the first time on the island, and he quickly whispered, *Lumos*, lest his wand be seen as the weapon it had once been. He reached into his pocket and drew out the small book.

"In here, there is the key to my reparation to you," he said. "I can restore to you what I took." His fingers found the pages easily. "Here. I brought what we require. It is a matter of minutes only, and your arm will be restored to you."

Gertrude gazed at him blankly. "My arm . . . you incinerated it, you said."

Severus nodded. "But you can have a new one, one just as good. Here, here, look, read this, and you will see."

Gertrude took the book, but did not look at it. She was still for a moment, gazing at him, and then she turned her head away.

"It is a simple ritual," Severus said. "It will restore your arm to you."

"If it were possible, the Healers would have done so when I lost it," Gertrude said, her voice low.

"It is . . . an old magic."

"And not anything the Healers would approve of, I am sure," Gertrude said.

"Read it."

Gertrude shook her head.

"You must," Severus insisted. "It is you who . . . you must perform the ritual. I cannot do it for you, or I would. I would simply do it here and now. Read it."

Slowly, Gertrude looked down at the book in her hand, then she shook her head. "Hold it for me. I cannot read it like this." She conjured a small ball of light that hovered over the pages. Her gaze seemed unwavering as she read the first pages then turned to the next. Suddenly she straightened, shoving the book away from her. "Take it away," she said hoarsely.

"I have all you need here," Severus repeated. He held out his right hand to her, spreading his fingers. "Here, and in my pockets. Everything is ready. I am prepared."

"Take it away from me," she repeated. She slid from the stone. "We will fetch my things and leave, and we will not speak of this again."

"It is quick," Severus insisted, standing beside her. "Before we leave, you would have your arm back..."

"It would not *be* my arm, Professor. It would be . . . it would be a cursed thing. However much you may wish to give this to me, it would be taking what is not mine. It would be forever foreign, at the very least, and at the worst . . . no, I cannot think it. Do not tempt me! I did not bring you here to tempt me with this."

"Dumbledore always says that intent matters," Severus argued. "It would not be a cursed arm..."

"It is Dark magic. The pain required for you to endure in the severing, the words I would have to utter in taking your hand from you..." She shuddered, closing her eyes and turning from him.

"I would give you more than my hand if I could restore your arm to you," Severus said softly, "and this . . . you could accomplish this with less than my full hand. I would still have a thumb..."

"Hush! No more!" She stepped away from him, toward the tumulus. "No more."

"What better place than here at the henge?" Severus persisted. "At the centre, in the cove, the magic would be strong; we could use a fallen stone there."

Gertrude turned to face him. "If you wish to cut off your hand, Professor, if that would make you feel better, if you believe that your soul would feel more whole for doing so, then be free to do so, and I will bind your wounds afterwards. But I will not take your hand, not even your little finger. I do not need to take from you in order to make myself whole. I have no arm, but if I were to create a new one in this fashion, I would be less than I am now."

Severus bowed his head, anguish and relief wrestling in his chest. Gertrude stepped toward him and placed her hand on his arm.

"Severus, I do appreciate this. And in making the offer, you have already performed your reparation. No more is needed." She touched his cheek gently and raised his face. She nodded. "I have shed tears here, too, lad, and they helped heal me." She took the small book from his hand and slipped it into the pocket of his cloak. "Let's go have that tea and then get you home, hmm?"

Severus nodded, swallowing.

"We don't want to cause anyone any worry about you, after all," Gertrude said lightly, "and Minervawill worry if you aren't returned before curfew. She does that. I promised you I would get you back safe and sound. I want to keep that promise."

Chapter One Hundred-Eight: The Greatest Slytherin

Chapter 109 of 118

Minerva does some investigation, and she worries. Severus learns something new.



Chapter One Hundred-Eight: The Greatest Slytherin

Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999

Minerva looked up as the Silent Knight stepped back into his painting.

"Any news?"

Andrew removed his helmet, his long silvery blond hair cascading over his shoulders. "Indeed. Some news, my lady, though it is puzzling and mysterious. Perhaps you can make sense of it."

"Perhaps." Minerva settled back in her armchair.

"You asked for news of this day, but I gathered that news which I could, and it begins with Madam Dilys. She assured me of her observations and believes perhaps they may be relevant to your inquiry, despite their timing."

Minerva nodded. Dilys Derwent was one of the more awake portraits, as she herself described her state, and Minerva sometimes wondered whether the portrait had attained some kind of life, some true sentience that had developed in her many years of watching, listening, and advising. She certainly seemed more inventive and independent than most portraits, even those of other former headmistresses and headmasters.

"Last night," Andrew continued, "Madam Dilys observed your deputy descend the stairs alone. 'Twas after most other guests had left, and he was alone in your office. He glanced about himself, though she said he seemed not furtive, merely deliberate in his actions. He entered your library, Headmistress, and as he was leaving, but scant moments later, he was tucking something into his pocket. Madam Dilys said that she did not wish to disturb him, as he appeared contemplative and desirous only of his own company after the hours in the company of others, and so she did not hail him as he passed below her frame. Before he opened the door to your stair, the master of the dungeons glanced upward once, toward the stairs to your chambers, as it seemed the door at the top was once more opening to allow guests to part. Your deputy then quickly and soundlessly opened the door and stepped through it, closing it with equal alacrity and without even a click to the latch."

"Did Dilys see what Severus pocketed?"

"No, my lady, though she had the impression of a small book; however, Madam Dilys reminded me that she may have seen a book merely because she expected one, as the master was departing a library."

"What of the other portraits? And what of today?"

"Professor Snape spent the morning from breakfast until lunch in his Potions office. Aurora was in her portrait the entire morning, and she said that he had only one visitor, and he himself did not leave."

"Did she mention the visitor?"

"Professor Flitwick of Ravenclaw, my lady. He was there but little time, and when he left, he was laughing. The master of the dungeons was in his shirtsleeves, only his waistcoat over his shirt, and he saw the master of Ravenclaw out."

"I will speak with Filius, then. Any other word?"

"Very little, I fear. He left for lunch, and Aurora saw him only briefly late in the afternoon, as he passed her portrait wearing his heavy cloak. I believe we may assume that was directly before he left the castle. From other portraits, the few whose homes are between the Great Hall and the dungeons, I learned very little. There was much movement in the Portrait Network today, as it was a holiday. I could glean only that he did likely return to his own rooms after lunch; he was not seen anywhere else in the castle."

"Thank you, Andrew."

"As your beloved is not yet returned, would you care for a game of chess?"

Minerva shook her head. "Not at the moment. Dinner is soon ... perhaps later."

"You worry about the young master of the dungeons," the Silent Knight said.

"Aye, that I do." She nodded. "That I do, and ever will, I fear."

Minerva took off her glasses and set them on the side table with her book, then she stood and crossed over to the fireplace. She lifted the lid from the ornate ceramic urn on the mantel, took a pinch of Floo-Powder, replaced the lid, then bent and tossed the Powder into the fire. As it flared green, she stuck her head into the fire and called out, "Professor Flitwick! Filius!"

A moment later, she saw Flitwick scurry in front of the fireplace in his sitting room.

"Minerva! What may I do for you?"

"Have you seen Severus today?"

"Yes, I visited him in his office this morning. He was also at breakfast and lunch, but I'm sure you know that."

"I'll open my Floo to you. Could you come through?" Minerva asked. Without waiting for an answer, she withdrew her head from the fireplace and stood. A very quick flick of her wand, and the Floo was open for Flitwick to pop through.

The Charms master Flooed through about a minute later.

"Sorry about the delay, Minerva, but Pomona was with me. I told her you'd called to see me."

"They leave in the morning, don't they," Minerva said, gesturing for him to take a seat on a low, plush armchair.

"Yes," Filius said with a sigh and a nod. "They do. Bright and early."

"You could always tell her that you want to go with her now and not wait until Thursday," Minerva suggested, sitting back down in her own chair.

"No, no." Filius shook his head. "And not just on her account. The witches are looking forward to their holiday, and although I am sure that none of the ladies would grumble if I came along, I know it wouldn't be as they'd planned. I can wait a few days. Besides, I told you I would look after the castle whilst you and Albus are up at the Tyree estate, especially as Sharon won't return until Tuesday and I don't want to leave Severus alone with it all. I also promised Severus we would duel on Tuesday, and perhaps on Wednesday, as well. I will be quite busy!"

"Still, I think that if Pomona knew why..."

"If Pomona knew, then that would spoil the surprise for her, wouldn't it?" Flitwick asked, his face brightening as he thought of surprising Pomona.

"Albus said you finally found a ring you liked."

Filius nodded vigorously. "I added a few charms, of course, since it's Muggle, and they don't have self-sizing rings. At least ... perhaps they do! I don't know! I didn't ask. But this one wasn't self-sizing. And I added another ... personal charm, as well," he said, blushing. "I hope she likes it."

"I'm sure she will," Minerva said.

"But you haven't seen it ... I understand that witches expect a diamond, but Albus assured me that if it was beautiful and personally chosen, Pomona would prefer it to any diamond." Filius looked worried.

"I think he's right about that," Minerva said. Her brow furrowed. "When was the last time you asked her?"

"Nineteen sixty-four," Filius said. "The day after your wedding."

"Ah ... I remember." Minerva wished now she hadn't brought it up. Pomona had broken up with him that very day, then disappeared until the day before the annual ward renewal. Minerva had been surprised at the time that Filius had taken Pomona back at all after that...indeed, he had actually been coolly collegial to her for months and refused all her invitations to lunch, tea, shopping, anything. It looked as though they would never be reconciled. It must have been a strain for him, as well, but he held his distance until he finally told her that he loved her, but if they ever broke up again, it would break his heart entirely, and there would never be another chance for them after that.

"I'm sure it will be different this time, though," Filius said, though the hopeful note in his voice sounded a bit strained.

"I am sure it will," Minerva agreed. After all, the two had been together forever. Well, ever since they got back together the spring after Pomona had panicked and broken up with him when he'd asked her to marry him.

"Is that what you wanted to ask me about?" Filius asked.

"No, actually. You said you saw Severus today."

Filius chuckled. "I went down to his office to ask about our plans...we'd not set any times yet, you see...and you won't believe what he was doing!"

"What?" Minerva asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Cleaning! Chucking out all those ghastly jars of things. Well, not throwing all of them away, but getting rid of some of them and locking the others all away in a cupboard. He had two house-elves in there helping him...Twiskett and the one called ... Laoosha. Cute little pink thing, Drooly's granddaughter, I believe."

"Aye, Blampa said something about Twiskett having a crush on her," Minerva said. "But what of Severus?"

Filius shrugged. "He is housecleaning. The elves were getting rid of all the layers of grunge in the dark corners and there were scrub brushes scouring all the newly emptied shelves. Apparently, he's going to have them whitewash all the walls, too, and put in new lamps."

"But did he say anything of his plans for the day?"

Filius shook his head. "Just that he was spending the morning cleaning his office and that he hoped to have it done today, with the help of the house-elves."

"Did he say anything about meeting someone? Perhaps just not mentioning that it would be today?"

"No. Well, that isn't quite so. He did say that he was planning to do some brewing for Johannes over the next few days, and that he might be delivering the potions to him on Wednesday, so he didn't want to set a time yet for us to practice on Wednesday. But it was definitely not today."

"Oh." Minerva sagged slightly in her chair, her brow furrowed.

"What is it, Minerva?"

"He left the grounds, but he didn't say where he was going, who he would be with, or when he would return, just that he would be back. He wrote me a note...to avoid speaking with me directly, I believe. I am concerned about him."

Filius nodded. "I understand. Especially with the vigilante running about committing mayhem!"

"I also worry ... I don't know. It's just a vague worry." She looked over at him. "How do you think he's seemed lately?"

"Well, I think. Yes, quite well. And optimistic. Optimistic for Severus, anyway," Filius said. "He seems to be enjoying more aspects of life."

"And he seemed well this morning when you saw him?"

"He seemed himself. You should just speak to him when he returns, Minerva, or, if you like, I could have a word with him. Just to see how he's feeling, if you're concerned about him. I would be discreet."

"I'll speak to him when he returns," Minerva said with a nod, "but if you could keep an eye on him whilst Albus and I are up *á tainne an Fhithich* this week, I would appreciate it. Not to keep him out of trouble, you understand, just ..."

"I understand, Minerva. I will keep a fatherly eye on the boy! And if he has any worries, well, if he'll talk to anyone, he'll talk to Papa Filius!"

Minerva chuckled at that. "Good. Thank you. And I am sure that Pomona will like the ring and be very happy."

"I hope so," Filius said. "At least she's not likely to throw up and then run away this time!" He laughed, but Minerva thought she also heard a touch of unease in his laughter.

"Well, this time, it will be a surprise," she said reassuringly, "but not so much of a shock. And she's much more settled now, and I have no doubt at all that she's utterly devoted to you."

Filius nodded. "It is true, and I am very lucky. Poor Pomona!"

"Poor Pomona?"

"Indeed, that it should have been so hard for so long for her to accept that she might ... that she might do better than she had done, that she might deserve better. And then to put up with me waiting so many years before asking her again."

"That's her own doing, after all."

"Perhaps." He looked up at the chime. "Dinner in ten. I better get back to Pomona. See you in the Great Hall, Minerva!"

Minerva called Blampa and told her that she might be a little late to dinner, and it should be served promptly regardless of whether she were there or not. As soon as the house-elf had Disappeared, Minerva went down to her office and then into the Headmistress's library. A wave of her wand lit all of the lamps, and she looked around herself. It had to have been a small book. Perhaps he had written down which one he had borrowed.

She looked at the large open book set on the table beside the door, but the last entry was one by Albus from two months before. Severus never had made a habit of borrowing any of the books, preferring to work in the library itself, and if he were being ... discreet, even secretive, about his actions, he would not have recorded the fact that he had borrowed this one. Whichever one it was. She looked around at the library's many shelves.

Small enough to fit in his pocket, Dilys had said. Severus hadn't been wearing a robe the evening before, but one of his finer black jackets and a rather nice waistcoat. Not much of a pocket to have slipped a book into, and he'd been carrying his new Nero Newcastle book. Perhaps he had simply shrunk that one. But then why enter the library? Suddenly Minerva froze, remembering a particular small volume, one they had used, and one that Severus had spent some significant time with the previous spring. He had found one of Albus's old notes in it ...

Aine's warning to Severus seemed to ring in Minerva's ears: *Do not step backward ... Do not return to your past ... Do not lose your way* ..As little as Minerva might profess to believe in divination, she did appreciate Aine's talents, and the Irish witch's warnings to Severus the evening before had unsettled her. She could not believe that Severus would ever return to the Dark Arts or to his previous way of living, not even to the way that he had lived as a spy. Surely he was growing happier, even Filius had seen that.

Filled with trepidation, Minerva stepped around the library's one long table and bent. She immediately could see what she could not see. The book was missing. But she bent further and looked at all of the books on that shelf, then she looked at those on the shelf above it, any that were about the right size. The book was not there. *Vita furtiva, vindicta occulta, nex abdita*. Secret life, hidden vengeance, concealed death.

Minerva swallowed. Was Severus set on some path of vengeance? Did he believe he knew who the vigilante was? Perhaps he was even now engaged in some Dark ritual ... No, she could not believe it. He had struggled too long and come too far. And he was certainly in love with Poppy, a witch who was as light and bright as they come. He would not pull away from *that* light, whatever ambivalence he might feel for a path of Light in general. No, if he had the book ... Minerva almost moaned aloud. If he had the book, what could he possibly be thinking?

Dilys had said he had not seemed furtive, merely deliberate. It could very well be that his interest in the book and his reason for leaving the castle were entirely unrelated. In fact, that was most likely. After all, what man would spend a morning clearing his office of gruesome specimens and whitewashing its walls and then turn around that evening and commit an offense against his soul by practising the Dark Arts?

She would simply have a little chat with him when he returned, hope that he would confide in her, and if he didn't ... she would have to trust that he could look after himself. And Filius would keep an eye on him. Papa Filius. Minerva smiled at that as she extinguished the lamps and left the library. Severus would be all right.

~*~*~*~

Back in Gertrude's warm, brightly lit kitchen, Gertrude heated water for a fresh pot of her herbal tea. Severus visited the loo, washing his face and hands. He looked at his right hand again, turning it palm up. He let out a sigh. He had believed that Gertrude would accept his offer...jump at it, in fact...even if she found some aspects of the ritual distasteful, and that he would find relief from his guilt; yet he was not disappointed to still see his own hand whole, and not to have suffered the pain required by the ritual.

He flexed his fingers and turned off the water.

"More bread and cheese, Severus?" Gertrude asked as he came out of the loo.

Suddenly, he felt ravenous. He nodded and sat down in the same chair he'd sat in before.

Gertrude took the bread and cheese out of her bag, then sliced the second loaf into several thick pieces.

Severus cleared his throat. "I am sorry if ... if I made things more difficult for you ... what I offered ..."

Gertrude shook her head as she unwrapped the cheese. "It was a moment's temptation only, and never a true possibility. Nothing has changed for me. Although," she said, looking at him seriously, "I do appreciate your offer. I am sure it took courage to make it, and genuine regret."

Severus accepted the bread and cheese, then slathered his sandwich with the spicy mustard. "I felt ... it came to the point where I could not choose to do otherwise."

"I understand."

Gertrude sipped her tea, watching him devour his sandwich, and passed him two more slices of bread.

Severus fixed himself bread and butter this time, sprinkling it with cinnamon sugar. "I had a conversation with Madam MacAirt yesterday."

"Aine. *NicAirt*," Gertrude corrected mildly. "I noticed."

Severus chewed and swallowed, thinking. "She said she would speak to you, she and Hafrena."

"Hafrena celebrated the holiday with her brother's family in Trim," Gertrude said, "and although I spoke with Aine today, she did not mention you except in passing." Gertrude quirked a smile. "I believe she rather liked you, Severus, and she doesn't take to many people very quickly."

Severus gave a short huff. "Perhaps. Though I would be unsurprised if the opposite were true."

Gertrude sipped her tea and waited.

"When she did her divination at the table yesterday evening, she saw something, just a glimpse, she said," Severus finally continued. "She didn't see any detail, but she drew a certain conclusion, and Hafrena confirmed it for her."

"About the Death Eater attack on me in which you played a role," Gertrude said.

Severus nodded. "I would not have lied to her if she had asked straight out, but she did not. And she only knows that I was present. I did not elaborate on the incident nor my culpability, and neither did Professor MacAirt. I don't know whether she told her anything more about it later or not."

"I will clarify the situation to Aine, Professor. Tell her whatever she wishes to know, and I will also ensure that she understands ... there is no grudge to be held. If there were one, it would be mine to deal with, and no one else's."

Severus nodded. "But there is one other issue, one that concerns me far more."

Gertrude waited again.

"She wants to tell her father," Severus said. He swallowed. "She wants to have the three of you...you, her, and Professor MacAirt...all tell him together. Inform him of my role."

Gertrude snorted. "That is like Aine. But it isn't her place to decide such a thing."

"Professor MacAirt did say that they would speak with you and that it would be up to you. Aine agreed with that."

"Kind of them not to treat me as though I've completely lost all my wits," Gertrude said drily.

"It may be cowardly of me, but I do not want him to know. I fear ... he may tell others. He may want revenge. Gareth tells me that Quin takes revenge on those who hurt his kin."

"Quin would call it justice," Gertrude said. "And he would be more correct in calling it that."

"I do not fear his justice ... not as such. But I have begun to build a new life," Severus swallowed hard, thinking of Poppy. "I do not deserve your assistance in this, and perhaps I do not deserve this new life, but I want it. And I am trying to ... to ..."

"To become deserving," Gertrude finished for him. "And if Quin were to act rashly and were to advertise this particular misdeed, your new life might be imperiled, as would your opportunity to continue in your quest for redemption and to truly become the greatest Slytherin since Slytherin, greater than he."

Severus felt himself flush at this accurate assessment of his secret desires.

Gertrude nodded. "I have told you there is no need for you to make any personal reparation to me. Any reparation you may have owed, it is discharged. I, too, would not be happy to see your emergent new life, fragile as its roots may now be, assailed in any way."

"Thank you."

"I will make this clear to Aine. As for Quin ... there may be some merit in explaining how I came to live the life I did for so many years, here on this island, and to explain your role in it all, your full role, not only in the attack." Gertrude poured herself more tea and refilled Severus's mug. "And in the telling of it, I will lead him to understand it, your deed and your role. He will have compassion for you, not hatred."

"I do not see how, but as long as he does not ... as long as it does not become common knowledge, and my colleagues are not informed of it ..." Severus sighed. "Thank you, Professor."

"It is in both our interests," Gertrude said.

"What did you mean, though, about my role beyond the deed?" Severus asked.

Gertrude sipped her tea, then set her mug down and gazed at it a moment, tracing its heavy blue rim with her index finger. "Why do you imagine I remained on this island for so many years? Why I did not even make one visit to my home, even when my mother died? Not even to visit Amsterdam and my sons? Why I waited until the battle at Hogwarts to emerge and to fight?"

Severus shook his head slowly. There must be more than he had considered, or she would not ask the question. He still had only one answer for her. "Fear. If not fear of me, then fear of the Dark of Tom Riddle and what he might do to you, and perhaps to your family."

"Naturally, there was some fear, particularly fear of what might happen to Gareth. It was one of the reasons I sent him to live with Robert and would not allow him to stay at Hogwarts."

"And I was the reason you would not let him return after Riddle's first defeat," Severus said.

Gertrude nodded. "That is true. And it was for the best, I believe. He is a bright wizard. He soon suspected that you were there that night...that you were a Death Eater and were one who was there. He is intuitive, as well, and he guessed that it was you who had amputated my arm. He confronted Robert about it, and Robert ... well, I would not have wished Robert to tell him, but Robert did give him the truth. Perhaps that was best. To be kept in the dark is one thing, to be lied to, something else entirely."

"Gareth resented it."

"Yes, he did. And oddly, he never blamed me, and it was my decision to keep him in Amsterdam, as it was also my decision to abide here until the right moment came for me to return. He blamed Albus, and he blamed Robert...he was rather beastly to Robert for quite a long time, but Robert's temperament is such that he accepted it and never let it affect him. Although sometimes ... there were some decisions that Robert made that I know Malcolm and I would not have. It is hard to see someone else raise your son through his adolescence, even when it is your other son, and he is doing his best."

"But he and Gareth get along ..." Severus stopped, realizing that he had never actually seen Gareth and Robert together, only Gareth and "Robbie."

"Oh, yes," Gertrude said, however, "yes, they get along now. And they are close. But ... well, that is not the issue here. You do not understand why I stayed here."

Severus twitched his shoulders. He supposed he did not understand. She could have moved away with Gareth, perhaps moving to Amsterdam where her other son and his family lived. He had presumed that she had feared first, the Dark Lord, and then when he was gone, that she had feared him, despite his having changed sides. Or even that she simply had vague fears and phobias after the terror she had experienced in her own home. That he had traumatised her so thoroughly, she could not bear to be among people any longer. He could understand that.

"I stayed because you had become a spy, Professor. Your position was precarious. There had been no news of my death in the papers, but there had also been no news of my survival, nor of anyone having seen me after the attack. You had succeeded, Riddle believed. And it was best that he continue to believe that. Albus was certain Voldemort was not dead, that he would return someday, and that your services would be required. If I were seen, if I were known to be alive, that you had spared my life that night ... doubts might arise about your loyalty. He might look at you and wonder, even if you played your role convincingly. And even if you were to be unable or unwilling to spy on him, I believed Albus when he said that you would not ever become a genuine Death Eater again, and in that case, you would be doubly damned if I were known to have survived, and your life would be in jeopardy. I stayed, Professor, not out of fear for myself, but to remain dead to the world, and thus to remain dead to that evil, repellant murderer. I thought it best for the Order's cause and for you, yourself, if only a bare handful of people knew I had survived. Safer for us all, really."

Severus shook his head. Almost twenty years in exile, a very isolated exile, in order to help him to maintain his position.

"We all do what we can, Professor," Gertrude said. "It was my way of fighting. Until I could finally fight him myself. Albus would not have kept me here if I had wished to leave; once I explained my reasoning to him, he was relieved, however."

"But when I allowed you to Disapparate, I was not a spy then. It took another several months...a year, even...before I turned to Dumbledore."

Gertrude shrugged her left shoulder. "It wouldn't have mattered to Riddle. He would have seen it as a weakness, at best, as betrayal, at worst. And I saw your eyes that night, Severus. I saw them before you sliced off my arm, and I saw them after. I saw ... you were horrified at yourself, at what you had become. Perhaps you never would have turned to Dumbledore if certain other things hadn't occurred, if you had never heard the prophecy, if Riddle hadn't targeted your childhood sweetheart. Perhaps you would have simply continued to block off more and more of your soul, killing your sense of right and wrong, killing your ability to feel any of the higher, more grace-filled human emotions, but you did feel utter disgust at yourself that night, and some fear, too, at what you had done. There was something in you that could still be saved. And Riddle may have detected that...detected it as a dangerous weakness in you...and killed you. If I could give you a chance, and at the same time, could also give the wizarding world a better chance at defeating a Dark tyranny, then I would do that."

Severus sat in silence, trying to absorb all she had told him. He had wondered sometimes how she was a Slytherin, this Muggle-loving friend of Dumbledore's, and now, he saw some of those qualities. She had great patience for a long term plan to unfold; to remain waiting, biding her time until the right moment; to keep her motives to herself, not discussing them with anyone lest her purpose become diluted or she, dissuaded from her course; to allow others to believe whatever they wished about her, knowing that the truth was quite different; and then, following this long period of quasi-dormancy, to find the flexibility within herself to reenter society and live a new life, at her age and after her many trials and her years of solitude, and never to complain with bitterness about her lot, but to move ahead and to nurture others. He remembered Gareth's off-hand comment about his mother's moods, how she would sometimes close herself into her study and not emerge until her mood had passed. She struggled. Severus was sure that in those times, she struggled.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. "There is one goal I shall never attain. I shall never become the greatest Slytherin. I believe the greatest Slytherin may truly never be recognised as such. But if anyone asks who in our House they may take as a role model, I will point to you and tell them, see, see this witch. This witch before us: She is the avatar of the true Slytherin spirit, of all that is best in our House. The greatest Slytherin."

Chapter One Hundred-Nine: Vita Furtiva

Chapter 110 of 118

Severus is home. Twiskett gives him forewarning, he has a visitor, and he pays a visit. Minerva is troubled.



Chapter One Hundred-Nine: *Vita Furtiva*

Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999

Severus shut the gate behind him and nodded to the witch on the other side. Gertrude gave a slight answering nod, then Disapparated. He stood there a moment, gazing at the space where the witch had been, then he turned and walked up the drive to the castle. It wasn't yet nine-thirty; Gertrude had brought him home well before curfew, safe and sound, as she had promised. Quite sound, more sound than he had expected. Severus flexed the fingers of his right hand, then made a tight fist before relaxing his hand again. He let out a long, slow sigh of relief. He had been certain that he would be returning that night with his hand severed at the palm, the metacarpals sawn through with the ritual's *Serratus* spell, one bone at a time, divided before even the skin and muscle had been sliced through with the *Sectus*, his flesh and bone to be transformed into a new arm for Professor Gamp.

Severus straightened his back and picked up his pace, though it was an effort. He felt drained. All he wanted now was to return to his rooms and find his bed. He ought to check on Slytherin first, he supposed, though there were only a few students staying over the holiday, and all of them older. Nonetheless, best to remind them that they were still at Hogwarts and subject to the rules, even if curfew was relaxed to weekend hours for the entire holiday.

He glanced up at the infirmary windows as he approached the castle. Only a very dim light on. Very likely no one there. Poppy may have returned, however. Perhaps he could see her once more before she left for her witches' holiday. He hadn't seen her since she had left the party the previous evening in the company of Aine, Gertrude, and Quin, seeing the three of them down to the gates, where they Portkeyed back to the Gamp estate. Gareth had decided to stay in Hogsmeade for the night and join his family at the estate in the morning, so he had borrowed a broom from Minerva, gone up to the tower battlements, and flown back to the Kilderkin Lane house from there...accompanying Helena to her door first, seeing her safely home. Severus smiled slightly to himself. He thought that Gareth had liked Helena more than he'd thought he would. Of course, likely nothing would come of it, since he was beginning to date his old girlfriend again, but one never knew.

Reaching his rooms, he took the small book from his cloak pocket, then hung up his cloak. He would put away the unnecessary potions ingredients in the morning. Just as he was setting the book on his desk, Twiskett Apparated into the sitting room. Severus looked at the house-elf, startled.

"The Headmistress asks to know when you return. I goes now and tells her," Twiskett said softly. "But I tells you first."

Severus sighed and sat in his chair. "Thank you, Twiskett."

Of course, Minerva would want to know when he returned after his unexpected absence...and perhaps she had other questions for him as well. He didn't know how he would answer any of them. She could arrive at any moment. He quickly tucked the *Vita furtiva* in amongst the pile of books at the back of his desk, hoping that she would not notice it there. He should have a little cubby in his suite for such things, as Professor Gamp had in her study on the island. He did have a few places to hide things...a false bottom in his wardrobe had once hidden his Death Eater robes and still held his extra wand and his will; his cufflink box with its secret compartment was suitable for small items or bits of paper, and was portable. Near his private potions lab, in a very old, primitive, unused loo, he had another compartment, a larger one, secret, hidden, and warded. Even Albus, as far as Severus was aware, did not know of it...it was the "special hidey-place" that he had been going to show Robbie the previous spring. In it, there were still a few potions, including a fast-acting lethal poison, one that had been a comfort for him to keep, though he had rarely carried it with him, and also his old potions diaries. At some point, he would copy out some of the notes from them that weren't of a Dark nature and put them in his new journal. He couldn't quite bring himself to destroy them, though. Perhaps after the old notes were safely transcribed ... He shrugged to himself. That was all behind him, anyway. It hardly mattered.

At the moment, though, no better hiding place for the small Dark text than plain sight; that would do. He would return it to the Headmistress's library in the morning after Minerva and Albus had left for her cottage. No point in even putting it in his wardrobe. She probably wouldn't notice either its absence or its return.

It would be convenient to have a hidden cupboard somewhere in his sitting room, he thought. Now that his life was more normal ... He had been surprised that Professor Gamp had one in her study on the island. She had lived alone for so many years, and the few visitors that she had were all trusted family and friends. But she had said it was habit; a pureblood witch was raised with the notion that she should have her own secret drawer or cupboard someplace close by, and keeping something in it didn't necessarily even mean that it was itself a secret, merely that it was special to the witch. Her mother had kept her old love letters in hers, Gertrude told him, those and her favourite pieces of jewellery.

Before they left the island, Gertrude had gone into her study off the dining room, and Severus had watched as she passed her hand over a blank spot on one of the walls, whispering an incantation as she did so. The wall had shimmered, she touched it, and a small door swung open, appearing only as it did so. Gertrude retrieved a thick manuscript tied with black ribbon and two smaller leather-bound books that appeared to be journals. She added those to the carpet bag with the other items she had wanted to have from the cottage. Severus had the impression that she was going to go straight to the Hogsmeade house from Hogwarts and leave everything there before going back to the Gamp estate for the night. He didn't think that she wanted anyone in her family to ask any questions about what she had fetched from the island, or even to know that she had visited. He would remain discreet about it, as well, though she hadn't specifically repeated her request not to tell anyone.

He was in the loo washing his face when he heard the knock at his door. Feeling slightly enlivened, he hoped it was Poppy, though he thought it more likely to be Minerva.

He opened the door by hand. He did not let out a sigh of disappointment.

"Good evening, Minerva."

"Severus. You are back safely."

He nodded. "Would you care to come in? I wish to check on Slytherin before curfew, but I have a few minutes." He opened the door wider and stepped back.

"Did you have a good evening?"

"It was fine. How was yours? Has Dumbledore returned yet?"

Minerva shook her head. "No."

"You are still leaving in the morning?" He sat down in his chair and gestured to her to take a seat on the sofa.

"That is our plan, as you know." Minerva walked around the couch before taking a seat on it. She looked around. "I understand that you were housecleaning this morning."

"My office, not my suite," Severus said. She must have spoken to Flitwick.

"Ah. And these rooms are next?" she asked.

"I hadn't given it much thought."

"So, where were you off to today so suddenly?"

"It wasn't sudden. It was planned. I had some business to attend to. Personal business."

"On a Sunday? A holiday?"

"It was a convenient time for it," Severus said.

"You mentioned that you were meeting someone."

Severus nodded.

"An old friend, then?"

"In a manner of speaking, I suppose," Severus replied. "Have you any instructions for your absence? Anything I need to know? You still plan to return on Wednesday morning, I presume."

"Aye, we do. If that changes, I will let you know. Filius said he plans to be here and be available to help you in anyway you require."

"Have you spoken with Hagrid again yet about Gryffindor?"

"He won't be returning until late Tuesday. Caspar has agreed to look after Gryffindor until Sharon returns next Friday."

"She is taking too much time away from the castle for a Head of House," Severus said with a frown.

"It is a holiday, Severus, and as long as each House has appropriate coverage and there are sufficient staff in residence, I am happy to be able to allow everyone a bit more freedom. Of course, if you really believe we should go back to the old way of scheduling holidays, Poppy would have to cut short her time away, as well. No long weekend with you following her return from the spa."

Severus snorted. Minerva's point had struck its target. "Very well. As you say, there will be sufficient staff in residence."

"Have you arranged coverage for Slytherin yet?"

Severus shook his head. "Ouellette will return to the castle on Wednesday. I will ask her then. If not ..." There were no other Slytherins on staff. "If not, perhaps you or Albus might consider checking on them at intervals?"

Minerva nodded. "You're looking forward to your holiday with Poppy, I presume."

"Naturally. Though I would prefer it to remain a private holiday."

"In other words, Albus should not know that you are with Poppy."

"Precisely. He may believe whatever he wishes about my time away and your willingness to allow me to leave the grounds, but I would prefer he not know that she and I will both be at your cottage."

"I haven't mentioned it, and I will be sure not to. And I'll forewarn Siofre and Johannes, as well, since they know you will both be coming, so they don't inadvertently say anything. Though I really think you could share this with Albus. I think he would be quite happy for you."

"Hmph."

"Albus was saying this morning how pleased he was that you came to the party and enjoyed yourself, and he remarked that you and Poppy seemed to be quite friendly. Be prepared for him to continue to try to fix you up with her, since he thinks you would be well suited to one another. You might find it easier simply to tell him."

"We shall see." He wanted to have Poppy all to himself, and it seemed that the more people who knew they were going on holiday together, the less private it would be. It would be like having to share her, as ridiculous as that sounded even to him. "Perhaps sometime after the holiday."

"Preparing for it?"

"I am unsure what there is to prepare. I suppose I might purchase new boots, as Poppy will introduce me to hillwalking, and I should have appropriate footwear."

"I thought perhaps that was the purpose of your outing this evening...not to shop, of course, but some other preparations ..."

"No."

"Well, you wanted to check on Slytherin," Minerva said, rising.

"Yes, I intend to. I thought I might also see whether Poppy had returned yet."

"She got back a couple hours ago," Minerva replied. "Miss Mitchell had a good time with Poppy's family, I understand."

"Ah." Perhaps his visit to the Slytherin dormitories could wait.

As Minerva got to the door, she turned and looked up at him. "You know, Severus, I'm very curious about where you went and who you were with today. I hadn't known that you had planned to leave at all this weekend, and when you did, your note ... it was very uninformative."

"I promised you that I would always inform you when I would be gone from the castle, Minerva, and when I would return, if I could predict that in advance. I did that today, and I returned, quite safe, as you can see."

"Would you at least tell me why the secrecy?" Minerva asked.

Severus hesitated. "It was a favour to a friend, so to speak. And it is the friend who requested discretion. I honour that desire. If it were vital that you know, then I would tell you. Let it suffice that I have returned, perfectly well, and I did not encounter the vigilante." He quirked a brief, crooked smile. "You needn't worry about me so much, Minerva."

"I would be quite happy not to," Minerva said.

"I am not planning to leave the grounds again until at least Tuesday evening, when I will be out with Gareth and his cousin Morgana, then on Wednesday, possibly Thursday, I may deliver the potions to Professor Birnbaum. But if I must leave for any other reason, I will leave word with Professor Flitwick."

"Tell him where you will be, too, if you can, Severus. If anything had happened to you today, we wouldn't have known where to begin searching for you."

Severus let out a short, huffed laugh. "Very well, if I can."

"At least you will be safe whilst you are taking your holiday with Poppy," Minerva said. "Fàinne an Fhithich is, I think, perfect for you to be able to get away from Hogwarts without exposing yourself to danger."

"That's the name of your place, Fanya an Eee" He stopped, unsure of the second word.

"Fàinne an Fhithich. Spelt f-h-i-t-h, but both the fh and th are silent. Aye, but it is the name of the entire estate, the home of the Highland Tyrees. My cottage is there, to the southwest of the main house."

"What does it mean? Fàinne an Fhithich?" he asked, pronouncing it carefully.

"Raven's Ring," Minerva said. She put her hand on the door handle. "Say, Severus, have you seen that little book we used last year, what was it called *Vita furtiva, vindicta abdita*?" she asked, using the classical 'w' pronunciation for the 'v.'

"*Vita furtiva, vindicta occulta, nex abdita*," Severus said. "Yes."

"I was looking for it today and couldn't find it. I wanted to check something."

"I have it here," Severus said. "I was doing some research. I am finished with it now, if you would like to return it to the library."

"Thank you, I would."

Severus Summoned the book wandlessly and nonverbally.

As it sailed across the room, Minerva asked, "What were you researching?"

"A reconstitution ritual," Severus said, handing her the book. "It was not of any assistance, however. Please give my regards to Dumbledore when he returns. And I hope that his day was ... a success."

"Good night, Severus," Minerva said, apparently resigned to not receiving any further information from him.

"Good night, Headmistress."

As soon as Minerva had left, Severus went to the fireplace and tossed in some Floo-Powder. He stepped in and called out, "Infirmary."

A minute later, he was standing outside Poppy's door. Mrs Framingham immediately smiled and, saying she would let Poppy know he was there, left her frame.

Waiting felt like torture to Severus, though it was only a few moments before the door opened and Poppy was there, dressed in a pale blue nightgown and her blue, mauve, and lavender silk dressing gown, smiling up at him.

"Severus! I hadn't expected to see you tonight! Minerva told me you'd left the castle, and she didn't know when you were returning." She stepped back and let him in.

"I returned a little while ago. I would have come up sooner, but Minerva came down to see me."

"Yes, I think she was a little annoyed with you...she didn't say so, but she did ask me if I knew where you'd gone. I had to tell her I hadn't known you were going out, but that wasn't a surprise, since I had left so early in the morning."

Severus stepped toward her and put his arms around her. He didn't want to talk about his unscheduled trip from the castle. It was becoming tiresome. And he didn't want to lie to Poppy.

"Mmm, I am glad I'm back now," he said, holding her closer. "I've missed you."

"I was very busy today, but I kept wishing you were with me. It would have been more enjoyable with you there."

"Sometime, we'll go to one of your family celebrations together."

"I hope more than one, Severus. But we'll begin with having you get to know Violet and Dylan. Sunday dinner, one day soon."

"I would like that."

Poppy pulled him down onto the couch beside her. "So, where did you go today? It all seemed ... mysterious, if you don't mind me saying."

Severus twitched a shoulder. "I ought not say anything. I met ... I met someone who asked for my discretion."

"Well, I can appreciate that." She smiled. "It wasn't a date, and obviously you are back safe and sound."

"No, it wasn't a date, if you were worried about that." He hesitated. "If I tell you, please, do not tell anyone else. Not Minerva or anyone."

"Perhaps, if it is that important, you oughtn't tell me," Poppy said.

He shook his head. "Telling you ... I think it's all right that you know. And I know I can trust you, but it is important that it be as though I never told you, if you know what I mean."

"You needn't tell me, Sev. I trust you, too. I was only teasing about it not being a date."

"I would like to be able to share everything with you, though, Poppy, share it with you as though ... as though you were my second self. I can't yet, but I want to. And I ... if you will not tell anyone ..."

"Well, unless you've been planning insurrection or something, you can trust I wouldn't tell anyone...and if you were, well, I'd just talk you out of it!" she added with a laugh.

"Professor Gamp wished to retrieve some things from the island. Her family has asked that she not return...they have concerns about her...and she did promise that she would not return alone. I went with her. She fetched her things, gave me some supper, and showed me some of the island. It was important to her." He flushed, knowing that he had left out some crucial details, but he could not share those yet, if ever. Had he returned sans hand, then he would have told her, told her at least that he had restored Gertrude's arm. And likely, why, since otherwise, she might find it heroic and self-sacrificing, when it would only have been repayment for the damage he had done her so many years ago.

"Ah. Well, I understand that her family was worried about her. I think she's better than they believe, though," Poppy said. "She may not behave or say what they might expect or think she should, but I think that's her way. She is quite a canny witch. I would trust her with anything, and I do believe that she would never do anything terribly precipitate or rash. If she ever did do anything that astounded her family, it would only be after careful deliberation, I'm sure. And I'm also certain that she's in no way mad, although I know that Gareth isn't so sure of that."

"He told me once that she saw people on the island, people who had lived there before."

Poppy nodded. "I haven't spoken with her about it myself, not since the family became so worried about it, but if she says she saw them, as she told me, and she believes they were real, then I think that she really did."

"You have been to the island," Severus said, remembering their conversation the previous year. "You visited her."

"Occasionally. When Minerva or Albus would bring me. Robert brought me once, and it made me so sick, I couldn't go with anyone but Minerva and Albus. They have odd wards there...did you feel them?" she asked, looking up at his face. "Minerva says they're Thousand Year Wards."

He nodded. "I did feel them. It was like what I imagine being in a desert sandstorm would feel like...that was my experience of them, anyway. Professor Gamp had a salve that took care of the slight irritation from it."

"Your eyes are bloodshot," Poppy said, sitting back and pulling out of his embrace. "I can fix that in a trice."

Severus gave a crooked smile. "Faster, I'm sure!"

"Close your eyes!"

"Are you sure of your technique?" Severus asked, pretending scepticism.

"Unless you want to use a potion, yes...and potions aren't the best for everything, you know!"

"Where's your wand?"

"Hush! Close your eyes!"

Severus closed his eyes, then he felt her touch first one eye, then the other, with two fingers of her right hand, just a bit of magic tickling through his lids.

"Open!" Poppy nodded in satisfaction. "I think you will agree that there are times when a potion is less efficient!"

"I don't know. I will need to inspect your work!" He stood, and Poppy slapped his bottom lightly. He laughed and went into her small loo. He emerged a moment later. "Most impressive."

"I can be quite handy to have around if you ever go on a bender," Poppy said with a grin. "I developed that skill a long time ago. It made me popular in the St. Mungo's dormitory after weekend parties."

Severus smirked and sat back down beside her. "I can imagine. I told you that you were very good at wandless magic."

"I never thought of this as really counting, you know," Poppy said with a shrug.

"Why did you become a mediwitch?" Severus asked curiously.

"Because I like it. I like taking care of people, seeing them feel better. I find Potions and Healing Charms very interesting, and the different wizarding ailments, diseases, accidents, and so on, fascinating. I was always reading about odd Charms accidents or outbreaks of contagious magical diseases even when I was a girl."

"But why not a Healer?" Severus asked. "I'm sure you could have become a Healer."

Poppy shook her head. "Not talented enough," she said. "And besides, I like the kind of patient contact I have."

"I think you're very talented," Severus said.

"You are sweet, but I would never have been the sort of Healer I would have wanted to be...I'd never have been brilliant at it, never so innovative like Melina is, for example. Besides, as I say, I really do enjoy the kind of relationship I have with patients as a mediwitch, and I like being here at Hogwarts. That had always been my dream, to be the Hogwarts mediwitch. It may not be quite as exciting as working at Mungo's, and maybe you were right years ago with what you said about the Quidditch injuries and Charms accidents, but here, the Hospital Wing is my domain. Even when we have visiting Healers or mediwitches and wizards, it is mine, and what I say, goes. It would never be that way at St. Mungo's, not unless I became some kind of administrator, and I wouldn't have liked that. Even if you run a ward, there's always someone else looking over your shoulder."

"I think you would be brilliant at whatever you did, Poppy," Severus said, completely seriously, "and I think that if you had wanted to be a Healer of O'Donald's quality, you could have been."

Poppy chuckled softly. "I'm glad you think so, Sev, but I do know my own talents and skills."

Severus nodded. Perhaps she hadn't had quite the grades to have been accepted into St. Mungo's Healer programme. He still believed she was bright enough. "As you say, you enjoy your work here, and I am very grateful for it, and for your exceptional talents as a mediwitch. I'd rather have you take care of me than most Healers."

"Well, in a crisis where you would need a specialist, as you did in September, you'd be better off with one, but I won't display any false modesty and claim that you're wrong otherwise," Poppy said with a laugh. "But I also think ... if you were ever very ill again ... I would certainly take care of you, and I wouldn't leave your side, but I think it would be good to have another mediwitch available, too, and certainly a Healer."

"Why?"

"I have grown very attached to you, Severus. If you needed care, I would give it, and obviously if you came down with some little ailment and needed a bit of TLC and someone to look after your potions and take your temperature, I wouldn't let anyone else do that, and I'll be happy to keep an eye on your general health. But I think that if you were severely injured or desperately sick, I might be too upset to be able to take care of you as I might if it were someone else on staff...though I wouldn't wish to leave your side, either, and I'd watch everything anyone did to treat you. If there were an emergency and you required some urgent Healing spells or potions, I am certain that my training would carry me through and I could do what was necessary, but ... if you were requiring some kind of, I don't know, more than that ... well, that situation won't arise, I'm sure. Those times are past for you." She put her arms around him and squeezed, leaning against him. "I plan to make sure you stay well and never need anything like that again."

"I certainly hope those days are behind us," Severus said. "But I'm glad you explained why you would want a Healer there...and that you wouldn't leave me alone, either. And I may not be a Healer, but I want to take care of you in whatever way I can, Poppy. All of the time." He bent toward her and kissed her. "I love you." He kissed her again, his lips moving gently over hers.

"Mmm, I will miss you," Poppy said a few minutes later.

"You'll be busy enjoying yourself," Severus said. "I hope you will look forward to coming back, though, and to our holiday."

"Very much." She reached up and kissed him again. "I don't want to kick you out, but I do have to get up early in the morning for the Portkey. Pomona's coming by at seven for me, and we'll have a cup of tea and then leave directly after that. They have a breakfast buffet there ... it used to be fabulous. I hope it still is!"

"I wish you could stay with me tonight," Severus said with a sigh.

"When I get back, I will then," Poppy said with a nod. "And we will have our holiday. Of course ... you could stay here tonight. I would like that. I know you don't like to be away from Slytherin, and you'd have to be out early, before Pomona came by, if we're continuing to be discreet, but you're welcome to stay. I do need to get to sleep soon, though."

Severus kissed her forehead, thinking, then he nodded. "I would like that. I won't need to begin missing you until tomorrow, then. I do need to check on Slytherin first. And I'll call Twiskett and have him stay in my rooms. He can fetch me if someone comes knocking in the middle of the night. I'll try not to be long."

"Just let yourself in when you're through. The password is 'lilacs.'"

"Lilacs?" Severus asked with a smile. "And why would you choose that particular word?"

"Oh, perhaps because someone special to me gave me some very beautiful ones." She kissed him. "They're in my bedroom now, and still beautiful. The charms on them were very good."

"Your charms are better," Severus said, kissing her nose.

Poppy giggled. "Now you're just being silly, Sev. You go on and check your House. Join me when you're through."

"Very well, Poppy Priscilla Pomfrey!"

"No," Poppy said, laughing, "not Priscilla!"

"I am beginning to think that your parents named you something completely nonsensical," Severus said.

Poppy shrugged. "I don't know, did your parents name you Severus Strange Snape?"

Severus stood and shook his head, letting out a snort of laughter. "Indeed not, Poppy Pandora Pomfrey!"

Poppy laughed again. "I'll not be able to sleep at all if you keep me laughing like this! No, my middle name is not Pandora."

"Flitwick's portrait questions the other day brought that to mind," Severus said.

"Can you imagine having to answer a riddle or some kind of quiz every time you just wanted to get into your rooms?" Poppy asked with a laugh.

"I wonder what he does when he's had a bit too much to drink," Severus said.

"Perhaps they have some system so that Paris takes pity on him on those occasions...or when Filius needs to use the loo badly!" Poppy said, standing.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. If you're asleep, I'll try not to wake you."

"Don't worry about that. I'll be glad to feel you beside me."

"All right," Severus said with a nod. "Thank you for letting me stay."

"As I said, I'll be glad to have you here, too ... Severus Seth Snape."

Severus shook his head, "No, not Seth, either."

"Go on, now," Poppy said, opening the door for him. "Take care of your Slytherins. I'll be waiting for you."

Severus bent and kissed her once more lightly on her lips, then he was gone.

~*~*~*~

Up in her small study, Minerva stood and stared, unblinking, at the page to which the little book of Dark Arts had opened. She closed her eyes, shook her head, then opened her eyes again and turned back a page. The beginning of the ritual was no better. Worse, in fact.

Regretting her curiosity and wishing she had never used the *Pagina Proxima* spell, she closed the book, then rifled through it to a random page before closing it again.

Whatever Severus had been thinking...and Minerva had a very good idea of what he had been thinking and who he had been with...the "reconstitution spell," as he had euphemistically called it, was a horror, but she was sure from what she had seen of Severus that evening that he had not made use of it, for whatever reason.

She remembered now her apprehension when she had seen Gertrude draw Severus aside, at the time, more concerned for Severus's immediate discomfort than anything else. But she should have worried more about his overall state of mind. She could only imagine what daily torture he felt if he believed that the ritual and its consequences for him would be preferable.

Whatever he had done with the spell and the book, whether he had flinched at the last minute and been unable to propose the ritual or had presented it and had it rejected, Minerva was troubled by the mere thought that Severus had considered using that Dark magic to "repay a debt," as he had told her in his note.

Minerva shook her head. She wished that Severus would speak to her about it, but he would not be pushed. Perhaps one day, he would speak to Poppy about it. She closed her eyes again and sat down, putting her head in her hands and rubbing her left temple. He wouldn't speak to Poppy. Minerva was certain that he had not told Poppy that it had been he there on that dark night in May, he who had cut off Gertrude's arm, he who had set into motion such a train of events that led to Gertrude's long isolation from friends and family.

Poppy had always been fond of Gertrude. She had even taken Arithmancy through her NEWTs in part because she had liked the teacher, and by the time that Minerva came to teach at Hogwarts, Poppy had developed a deep affection and respect for the older witch. But despite that, or perhaps because of it, Poppy had never been told who had done the evil deed that night. She should learn of it, and sooner rather than later, Minerva thought.

But she would not be the one to tell her. And she would not interfere. Not in this. Too many depths, and no good could come from meddling. Still, Minerva hoped that Severus would speak to her about it, then she might be able to find out more what he was thinking and give him some advice, or at least a bit of courage to face it, whatever he decided.

Minerva opened the second drawer of her desk, tapped it twice with her index finger, revealing a hidden compartment with a few papers and a small purple crystal in it. She added the *Vita furtiva* to it, then closed the drawer, the compartment disappearing as she did.

Now time to find some Headache Potion and rest her eyes. Albus would be home soon. She could forget the Dark for a while and sleep in his comforting embrace.

Chapter One Hundred-Ten: Journey to Dun Torc

Chapter 111 of 118

Severus brews some potions, then tries to find time to finish with his office and read his new book. Gareth drops by, and Filius extends an invitation.



Chapter One Hundred-Ten: Journey to Dun Torc

Monday, 5 April 1999

Severus finished decanting the last of the deep amber potion into a flask, then corked and sealed it as he had the four other flasks. In addition to the amber potion, there were three medium-sized bottles of a muddy green fertilizing potion and one tall one of a beautiful peacock blue potion. It had been a good day's brewing, he thought with satisfaction. All three potions were new to him, and one was entirely different from anything he had brewed before, so that had been quite enjoyable, although none were particularly difficult. Still, they had required concentration, and likely more skill than an amateur would possess, as well. Only one potion remained, and he could do that one in the morning.

The unique potion that Johannes had asked him to brew, the viscous one of peacock blue, was apparently something that he and Murdoch had developed together and was used as a stimulant when creating Charmed hybrids. Severus thought that he should pay a visit to the Egidius Apothecary one day soon and ask Murdoch more about the potion. He sighed. He supposed that if he were to do that, he would have to bring someone with him. Poppy, perhaps. He brightened at that thought. Poppy might even be interested in the potion, herself. And it wouldn't raise any eyebrows if they were to leave the castle on such an errand, either. They could do it in a completely collegial manner, and no one would think twice about it. And while they were out, if they happened to have lunch together, browse in a bookshop, or anything else, it would simply be sensible to combine their errands. An excellent excuse to spend an afternoon away with Poppy.

Severus had been relieved that Minerva hadn't spoken to him that morning about his outing the previous day...and he had the impression that she hadn't even mentioned it to Dumbledore. Hopefully, once she had seen that he had returned unharmed, she had dismissed both his trip and her worry about him from her mind. Then she and Dumbledore had left for Raven's Ring immediately after breakfast, and he had been left to brew Birnbaum's potions in peace.

Not entirely in peace, since Flitwick had cornered him after lunch to ask him whether he wanted to squeeze in an extra duelling practice that afternoon, and if not, then would he care for a game of Go up in Ravenclaw Tower? Severus had agreed to a game of Go sometime over the holiday, but stressed that he really needed to finish the brewing he'd begun that morning or else the potions he'd started would be entirely ruined. Filius agreed to that, then said that in that case, he'd take the opportunity to Apparate down to his cottage in Berkshire to check on it.

Severus restrained himself from reminding the little wizard that the Headmistress preferred the staff not to leave on their own. He couldn't imagine even the most crazed lunatic vigilante trying to attack Filius Flitwick...and Flitwick would be a formidable target, unlike the vigilante's preferred victims, who were generally defenceless. Another reason he wouldn't worry about his own safety too much, Severus thought, although it would be unfortunate to be caught in a situation of that sort and be required to defend himself. He smirked to himself. He was certain that if he ever were attacked, the attacker would come out much the worse for it, and she would rue the day as she languished in one of the Ministry's new super-secure facilities. He'd heard there was a new prison up in the Orkneys that was almost as desolate as Azkaban had been, just smaller and more modern. Home to some of the survivors of the Dark Lord's former inner circle. The vigilante would love the company, Severus thought with amusement.

Filius was back for dinner, and he again asked Severus about a game of Go. Severus had planned to finish reorganising his office and then finally settle down with his new Nero Newcastle novel, *Potions with No Retort is No Refuge*. A bit of a silly title, but Aine had said that Morgan chose the titles most of the time, and it was one of his. Still a clever play on words, he supposed.

"I wished to leave Hogwarts for 'Dun Torc' for the evening and read the new Max Powers book that Gareth gave me on Saturday," Severus explained as he declined the invitation.

"Then bring your book up with you," Filius chirped. "We could have a nice evening by the fire in my sitting room. I've got a new book going, myself, a biography of Galen Gamp. It's quite fascinating. He did so much more than just enumerate those exceptions to the laws of elemental Transfiguration that we all learn...and in fact, as he often stated himself, those laws were already well-known facts, he simply set them down clearly and succinctly; in their full form, his list includes not only the five exceptions, but the principles behind them."

"He taught at Hogwarts, didn't he?" Severus asked.

"Indeed he did! He taught more subjects than any other single Hogwarts teacher in history. He was hired to teach Ancient Runes, but then he moved on to Charms, which he taught for four years before becoming the Transfiguration teacher for about a decade. He actually came up with the elemental laws and their five exceptions whilst teaching. He hadn't thought it was anything special, but soon, everyone was referring to Gamp's Exceptions. By the time he was an old man, I guess he was rather irked that all of his other accomplishments and scholarly contributions had been eclipsed by what he saw as an elementary lesson in basic Transfiguration. He also taught Arithmancy for a while, and then Potions for his final few years here."

"He's the one who also said that no love potion and no love spell truly exists, that love cannot be created by magic, only magnified or concentrated. A love potion can only create a facsimile of love, and no spell can do more than compel a fixation that may mimic love in some superficial ways," Severus said, remembering specifically some texts he had read when he had been afflicted by the *Adfectus*.

"Yes, love was once included on the list of exceptions, according to this book, but he eliminated it in favour of 'lasting emotion.' Personally, I don't think such a spell is ever a Transfigurative spell, in any case, but something more like a charm...although Professor McGonagall and I have had many a lively debate on that topic!...and perhaps that's why it's on the list. I have argued that although one can't Transfigure a person's emotions, one can still use a charm to temporarily influence them."

"As with a Cheering Charm," Severus said with a nod. That was one he had mastered as a third-year. He had been the first in his class to cast it properly, and he still remembered Flitwick's praise...and Potter and Black's later snickers about it. They'd just been jealous because they hadn't mastered it first.

"Yes, and that is a benign example, of course. There are also quite effective rage charms, lust charms, envy charms, and even despair charms. They don't actually create a lasting emotion, but they can still be effective long enough for the subject to act on the emotion, much to their later chagrin or dismay. And that doesn't even take into account the kinds of ensnarement spells one can use to inveigle a person to believe he or she is in love. But such spells never create any real love or attachment. If the spell is broken, the phantasm of love vanishes like leprechaun gold in the sun, and it's usually replaced by quite genuine loathing and resentment."

Severus snorted. "I can certainly imagine that." According to Dumbledore, that had been the doom of Merope Gaunt and Tom Riddle, Voldemort's unfortunate parents.

"So you will join me this evening?"

Severus bit back a sigh. Flitwick was probably lonely, missing Sprout. "Yes, all right. I'll be up later. I do want to work in my office first, however."

"Fine, fine! I look forward to seeing you! Around eight? Eight-thirty?" Filius asked hopefully.

"Yes, sometime around then," Severus agreed.

Severus was placing his Potions texts in order on one of his newly emptied, newly refinished oak shelves when there was a knock on the partially open door.

"Come!" He turned to see Gareth standing in the doorway, gazing about at the well-lit, freshly whitewashed room.

"Is this the Potions master's office?" Gareth asked, blinking. "I believe I took a wrong turn somewhere!"

"Your humour is lacking again, McGonagall."

"This looks ... great, Snape. Honestly," Gareth said, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. "The shelves are a bit bare, though."

Severus grunted in acknowledgement. "That will change."

"Still keeping some macabre stuff around, though, I see." Gareth turned around the skull that sat on the edge of Snape's desk. "Or is this an old friend of yours you can't bear to be parted from?"

"Leave it be," Severus said, turning the skull to face him once more.

"A *memento mori*?"

"Something like that. A reminder, anyway."

Gareth nodded. "Time flies, and we must make the most of it."

Severus snorted. "That is one way of looking at it."

"How would you see it, then?" Gareth asked, taking a seat in one of the hard, narrow, straight-backed chairs. "Or are you just trying to stave off fear of death through familiarity?"

"*Vanitas vanitatum*," Severus said.

Gareth barked a quick laugh. "Naturally. Should have known it! No *carpe diem* from you!"

"One may seize the day and still recognise that all is vanity; in fact, it can provide motivation for said seizing," Severus replied tonelessly. "But I'm sure you didn't come here to discuss the fleeting nature of life with me."

"Just wanted to confirm plans for tomorrow evening," Gareth said.

"Could have done that by owl."

Gareth shrugged. "I was in the neighbourhood...I convinced Helena to stay at the castle for a while, so I accompanied her back here after our ride."

"Did you have an enjoyable flight?"

"Aye. It was grand. You should have been with us, Snape. We made it to Cardiff in just over an hour. I've flown from Hogsmeade to the Gamp estate before, and it's never taken me less than three hours, which I thought was fast. Helena's something at picking up those magical currents," he said, shaking his head in amazement. "We considered trying to pick up some of the other currents, but Helena was worried about getting out over Iceland or something and not being able to snag a suitable current to bring us back. That wouldn't be a pleasant return journey, I think, not without being prepared for it, anyway. We did take a more leisurely route home, though, after I showed her the sights in Cardiff and we had lunch, and that's why we're only back now."

"I had things to do here," Severus said. "It is good you enjoyed yourselves."

"So, we're still on for tomorrow?"

"I have not changed my plans."

"Good. Eight o'clock, then? I can meet you at the gates."

"That is agreeable. Where are we going? And what about your date?"

"Gwen will meet us at the Three Broomsticks. She's coming from Glasgow, so that's convenient for her."

"And your cousin?"

"She's up at her parents' now...she arrived early this morning. But she'll meet us, too, then stay with me tomorrow night."

"Fine. Was that all?" Severus asked, picking up a few books from a stack on his desk and hefting them.

"I suppose. You don't seem very enthusiastic."

Severus turned and placed the books on the shelf behind him. "I wish to finish shelving my books, and I have to meet Flitwick soon."

"Duelling practice?"

"No. He simply wished to have some company tonight. There are few other staff in the castle." Severus shrugged. "I suppose he thought my company was preferable to none at all."

"I'd offer to stick around and join you, but I'm knackered."

Severus nodded and picked up a few more books, placing them next to the others on the shelf.

"We never made plans for duelling practice, Snape. If you're still up for it. Maybe later in the week?"

"I will be on holiday later this week. Perhaps next week," Severus replied. He twitched a smile. "Poppy and I will be going away together for a few days."

Gareth grinned. "That's great! I hope you two have fun."

"No doubt we will," Severus said.

"Where are you going? Or is it top secret?"

"It is confidential, but your aunt is loaning us her cottage on your great-grandmother's estate."

"Oh, so just a little romantic get-away by yourselves! That will be good for you...hopefully it will cement your relationship. Or show you it's a huge mistake! But probably not a mistake," Gareth added hastily.

"I do not wish to 'cement' our relationship. That has a static and ... uncomfortable sound to it. However, I would be pleased if her attachment to me were to grow." As to whether it might be a mistake, Severus did not want to even entertain that idea.

"Well, the cottage will be a perfect setting for that, I think."

"Poppy seemed to think it was ideal," Severus replied. "However, we are being discreet. Other than you, only Minerva knows we will be on holiday together, and I would strongly prefer that Dumbledore not find out. Of course, Madam Tyree and Professor Birnbaum will also be aware of it, but Minerva promised to tell them not to mention it to Dumbledore. Or to anyone else."

"Right. I won't breathe a word." Gareth stood. "So I'll see you tomorrow, eight o'clock, by the gates."

"Yes." Severus nodded. "I will look forward to it."

"Good! I was beginning to worry that you were just coming along out of obligation or something."

"No. I appreciate your invitation. It will be good to get away from the castle for the evening, as well."

"All right, well, give my regards to Flitwick." Gareth paused in the doorway and looked around the room again. "It really does look great, Severus. But don't be surprised if you get a comment from every person who pays you a visit. It's quite a one hundred-and-eighty degree change from what it was."

Severus snorted. "I will attempt patience with imbecilic remarks, then."

"Appreciative ones, too, Snape, I'm sure! Good night!"

After Gareth was gone, Severus finished shelving his books. He could have accomplished it more quickly using his wand, but he loved the feel of the books in his hand, the different textures of their bindings and their satisfying heft. He could almost recognise them all by feel, and his order for them was aesthetic almost as much as it was practical. Pleasing proportions, pleasing blends of colours and materials. He could run a finger along them, then stop and draw out one at his whim or his will.

Although he had downplayed the changes to Gareth, Severus was pleased with them, and seeing his books in neat rows on his refinished oaken shelves, the clean, bright, whitewashed walls, and the new simple-but-pleasing pewter wall sconces whose lamps gave a warm light, Severus felt almost as though he had an entirely new office and, along with it, a fresh start. Of course, he'd had a new start the previous autumn, but this felt different. It was spring cleaning and the revitalization that springtime brought with it, he supposed, but more than that, Poppy's presence in his life seemed to spark in him a desire for the springtime and a new start. Of course, he'd still have to grade the same tired old essays as always, but perhaps it would be less unenjoyable in his new office.

Gareth was right, though: the shelves seemed fairly bare now that he no longer had his collection of peculiar specimens lining them. He would just have to find new specimens. Ones that were interesting, perhaps even a bit bizarre, but without being gruesome. He had considered bringing his apothecary jar and the framed illuminated manuscript to his office now that it was refurbished, but had decided against it. He enjoyed having them both in his sitting room, the apothecary jar sitting on a small, narrow shelf just above his desk, the Headache Potion manuscript hanging beside it. He sometimes would touch the apothecary jar as he rose from his desk, a funny little habit, but it would make him feel more grounded, settled somehow. It was a habit he'd developed soon after his birthday in January, after he had created a little home for the jar, before he could have dreamed he might fall in love with the woman who had given it to him.

Time to go up and keep Flitwick company, Severus thought, picking up his Nero Newcastle novel. It was rather nice, actually, that Flitwick wanted his company. Although there weren't many staff left in the castle, there were a few others whom he could have asked instead. It was also a rather pleasant feeling to have agreed. A few years ago, he would have tried putting Flitwick off...fairly politely, since he'd always rather liked the little Ravenclaw...and he would have been happy if he had succeeded. Or told himself he was happy.

As he climbed the stairs to Ravenclaw Tower and Flitwick's rooms, Severus realised what he'd always known and simply hadn't reflected upon very much until recently: He had believed that once his colleagues came to know him better, they would naturally dislike him. He preferred to be disliked because he put people off deliberately.

Severus had also been convinced that if he allowed himself to live a normal life whilst awaiting the Dark Lord's return, he wouldn't be an effective spy, that he would become soft and weak, and the Dark Lord would sense that weakness in him. And so he continued to isolate himself during the years leading up to Potter's arrival at Hogwarts.

Nonetheless, they hadn't been entirely bad years, and there had been some peace in them, some structure and order. After Potter arrived, though, it was all downhill from there. And he had believed that it would be downhill to his death, misery following misery until he was finally dead at the end of it all. Potter was only the saviour of the wizarding world, not his. His salvation, Severus believed, lay only in his death and his final release from servitude.

As it turned out, his salvation was far more complicated than he'd thought it would be when he had believed it would require his death. There had been times over the summer, and even into the autumn, when he'd almost wished he hadn't survived, when he'd believed that it wasn't really possible to live a normal life...a good, healthy, full life, one with friends and ordinary pleasures, one in which every day wasn't filled with bitterness or aching guilt. But now he saw that while there might always be some bitterness in him, he didn't need to be its servant. And while he would always bear the guilt and responsibility for the crimes of his youth, it did not need to dominate his life and determine his future. He could work at being deserving in the here-and-now for the good things in his life. Poppy. Poppy was the best thing in his new life, and his bitterness and his past crimes didn't have to bleed into their relationship.

Being in love was wonderful. He used to scoff at the entire concept of "being in love," mainly because his only youthful experience with it had been such an unmitigated disaster. Not only did he lose the girl and alienate her entirely, but he ended up causing her death. He'd scoffed at others in love not only because he had come to believe there really wasn't any such thing, but also because he was convinced it would never be something he would have. If he ever were to attempt it, he had known with certainty that he could only bring doom to whomever he tried to love. No more. No, he loved Poppy, and he would come to be deserving of her love, too, and in his new life, in his reformed life, he would not bring her disaster. He would love her and take care of her and work to make her proud of him.

He was glad that she accepted his confession of love. She never withdrew from him when he said it, or told him that it was too soon to speak of such things, or said that he couldn't possibly know how he felt. Poppy didn't love him yet...or hadn't said she did, anyway...but for some reason that he wasn't sure of, that didn't bother him. It was enough that she accepted his declaration of love, accepting it with kisses, and that she wanted to be with him and not with anyone else.

Just before he had Flooed from her sitting room to the staff room that morning, he had told her again that he loved her and would miss her, and Poppy had answered him with a warmly passionate kiss. That was enough. Enough for now, anyway.

It had been good to wake from the beginnings of a disturbing dream to find Poppy, reassuringly warm, lying beside him in the dark. It had calmed his rising panic, which had overtaken his heart and gut before he had realised that he was asleep and dreaming, and then had managed to wake himself from the nightmare. He fell back to sleep with far greater ease than usual, his hand resting on Poppy's hip. He'd found it a pity that they hadn't been able to spend more time together that morning before he had to leave, but he hadn't complained about that. He hoped he had remembered to thank her for letting him stay. He couldn't remember that he had, so he had likely forgotten.

He would certainly remedy that oversight. First thing in the morning, without fail, he would send her an owl. An owl and flowers. Though he didn't know how he would manage the flowers. He would have to think about that.

He reached the Ravenclaw's portrait, and Paris gave him a quick nod and a smile and vanished from the frame before Severus could say anything. A moment later, the door was open to him. Filius was sitting in his little armchair, his feet up on his upholstered ottoman, a large book open on his lap.

"Come in! Come in, Severus!" Filius sprang up from his chair and gestured toward the sofa. "Please, make yourself comfortable! Would you like a drink? I have a nice elderberry cordial my niece sent me. She makes it herself!"

"Perhaps a small glass. I do not know whether I would enjoy it," Severus said frankly as he sat down on the sofa, "but I'm willing to try it. No point in wasting it, though, if I don't."

Filius chuckled and Summoned a pair of small glasses of cut crystal from a baroque sideboard. "A small glass it is, then." He poured them each some of the deep purple cordial, giving Severus only half a glass.

"Here you go! Cheers!" Filius raised his glass to him. Severus nodded and held his glass up for a moment before sniffing the drink.

"It has a distinctive aroma," Severus said. "Not unpleasant." He sipped from the glass. He paused, then took a larger sip. "It is ... agreeable." Nothing he would seek out, but he could finish what he was given, he thought.

"Excellent!" Filius sat back down in his chair. "Have you had a good day, Severus? Finish up in your office as you had wished?"

"Indeed. It is essentially finished. There are a few small things yet to do, but other than that, it is complete."

"I'll stop by sometime soon and pay you a visit, then," Filius said.

Severus nodded. He put his hand on his book. Time to enter the world of Dun Torc and its redoubtable Potions master, Nero Newcastle.

"And the rest of the day? Satisfactory? You mentioned you were brewing."

"I brewed three of the four potions I am brewing for Professor Birnbaum. The other one I will brew tomorrow. It should take no more than an hour, though it is a more challenging one than the three today. If the timing is not precise at several stages of the brewing, the potion is ruined." He picked up his book.

"I see. How is Johannes, by the way? I haven't seen him since ... well, it's been more than two years now, come to think of it. When he and Madam Tyree arrived to give their condolences to Minerva after ... well, after the Headmaster died. Now I know why Minerva seemed so awkward at the time, though she did seem genuinely bereaved when they were there."

"They weren't at the funeral," Severus said, though he had a questioning note in his voice. He couldn't remember seeing them, though since the funeral had been well attended and he had only recently met them, he might not have noticed them.

Filius shook his head. "Minerva told them not to come. Well, she didn't come right out and tell them not to, but she indicated that the occasion would be ... a public one, and that in any event, she had many of her own duties to attend to with regard to it. She gave the distinct impression that it would be easier on her if they didn't come."

"They're long-standing friends of Dumbledore's, though."

"Oh yes, yes, indeed, they are. Madam Tyree was at school with Aberforth, and her first husband, Collum, was one of Aberforth's best mates in Gryffindor, from what I understand. So they've known each other for many years. As for Johannes, Dumbledore spirited him out of Germany in the early forties when he was in hiding from Grindelwald, so Johannes naturally holds Albus in very high regard."

"Rather cold of Minerva to have shut them out of the funeral," Severus said with a frown.

Filius shrugged. "I have no doubt that they mourned him in their own way. They respected Minerva's wishes and her feelings in the matter. And it was better, I suppose, for Minerva's plans if she were not distracted by family. Although Albus was not dead, as we all believed he was, it was still no doubt an emotionally difficult time for her, and it was vital that she become Headmistress. And remember, very few people knew of their marriage at that time, and only a handful more than that knew that they were a couple at all. It was likely easier for her to maintain the various pretenses required of her if she weren't confronted by her grieving relatives at the funeral. Gareth was the only one of them to come. He and Alroy arrived and left together."

"And *they* both knew that it was a sham," Severus said. He shook his head. "An odd business, all of it."

Filius nodded. "I wonder what history will make of it all, what they will say about us a hundred years hence. You'll likely be around to see it, and you can think of us here this evening, pondering it."

Severus snorted. "Unlikely. Possible, but ..."

"You're a young man yet, Severus..."

"Then if I become an old one, I shall remember you all and set them straight about one thing, certainly, if nothing else."

"What's that?"

"There was a Ravenclaw clever enough, astute enough, to see through the well-woven fabrications of the Headmistress and Dumbledore," Severus said, "and also shrewd enough to keep his mouth shut about it for months."

Filius chuckled. "Yes, well, I always have liked a good mystery!"

"It didn't remain one for you, though."

"Solving it is the fun of it. Speaking of mysteries, I understand you took a little trip from the grounds yesterday." Filius Summoned the decanter of cordial. "Off trying your hand at a bit of detective work yourself, Severus?"

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"More cordial?" Filius asked, gesturing with the decanter.

"No, thank you."

"So, did Aine's divination the other evening pique your curiosity?" Filius sent the decanter back to the sideboard.

Severus nodded. "It did. Rather annoyingly so. She is truly as cryptic as any Seer I've met, just more plainly spoken. But I gleaned nothing from her that I couldn't have hypothesised myself."

Filius chuckled. "I presume you were not out vigilante hunting, then."

"No, I had a rather different errand." Severus twitched one shoulder. "A favour to someone to whom I ... whom I will never refuse a favour if I can do otherwise."

"Ah. Well, that's a good thing, then. I must say, Severus, I've been very pleased to see how well you've been lately. We were all quite worried about you this autumn, you know...and not simply because of the business with those toxins swarming your magic."

"That is in the past...although I do remain grateful for the assistance you gave at that time."

"And the greatest assistance was from Poppy." Filius took a sip of cordial. "Are you aware that she volunteered to be the sympathetic for you, insisted upon it, in fact?"

"When I asked her about it the next day, she did mention it. Though she did not say that she insisted upon it."

"Rather vehemently, as I remember," Filius said. "She is a very good woman, your Poppy, and I do believe ... I do believe that the two of you make a very fine couple. Perhaps not what most folk would envision as the ideal, but somehow, for the two of you ..." Filius nodded. "Yes, you are a fortunate wizard, Severus."

Severus nodded. He would never deny that, if he could keep her affection and her company, he was a lucky man, nor would he ever deny Poppy's many virtues.

"I think, in fact, that the quality of her sympathy for you was quite revealing," Filius continued.

"I do not believe that the Healing ritual had anything to do with our subsequent relationship," Severus interrupted. "Other than, of course, exemplifying what a fine witch Poppy is, and giving me another reason for gratitude toward her, and, perhaps, drawing my attention to the fact that even then, she was a good friend to me."

"Oh, I did not mean to imply that the sympathetic magic wrought anything between you, not in terms of any lasting magical bond, at any rate. But it did show a strong compatibility between the two of you. In fact, Melina had said at the time that Poppy's magic was quite resonant with your own, more so than any of the rest of us. Now, in itself, magical resonance between individuals may not say very much, but combined with your long acquaintance, your mutual regard, Poppy's own open and affectionate nature, and your common interests, I would say that the resonance between you bodes well for your long-term compatibility, a compatibility that should extend into the, um, physical. Beyond that, her sympathy for you demonstrates a deep and, I believe, strongly rooted affection and loyalty toward you."

Severus frowned. This was one reason why he preferred to keep his relationship with Poppy private for the time being. As much as he liked Flitwick, he did not enjoy having his relationship with her parsed like a problem in Arithmancy. The gossip and advice of others who were less circumspect and less kind than Flitwick would surely be unbearable.

"As you say, Poppy has many fine qualities," Severus replied. "How is your book? Still enjoying it?"

Filius laughed. "I see you do not wish to discuss your relationship or your very fine lady-friend this evening, but if you ever do, I'm here!"

"Hmpf. Yes."

"And if anything ever troubles you at all, I'm at your disposal!"

"Kind of you," Severus said.

"How is *your* book, Severus? I must confess I haven't read one of the Maximilian Powers books in ... oh, eight or ten years, I think."

"I haven't been able to start it yet. I thought I might last night, but I returned rather late."

Filius nodded. "I noticed you weren't at dinner yesterday. There were only about a half dozen of us. Well, back to Galen Gamp! I'm into his years as Hogwarts Charms master at the moment. Quite an interesting book. Do let me know if you'd like anything...tea, cocoa, another glass of cordial, anything at all."

Severus nodded and picked up his book. Finally: time to get lost in the fictional world of Dun Torc, a school much like Hogwarts, but nonetheless subtly different. The perfect place to spend an evening.

Author's Note: For the genealogically curious among you, you may wish to know how Gertrude is related to Galen Gamp (b. 1739, d. 1862). In the RaMverse, he is her paternal grandfather's great-uncle, making him her great-great-great-uncle. In canon (DH), there was a Gamp who came up with five exceptions to elemental Transfiguration, the only one of which we learn is food, but his first name is never mentioned, and we have no details about his life.

If you remember another Gamp scholar from *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, that was Gertrude's grandfather, Agyfen Gamp (b. 1817, d. 1924). He's mentioned as having helped Merwyn McGonagall earlier in the latter's career, and Quin says that although Gertrude's father, Gropius, was never academically inclined, Agyfen had been a famed Arithmancer in his day.

Another Gamp, Hesper Gamp, appears on JKR's Black Family Tree. She was Sirius Black's great-grandmother. In the RaMverse, she is Gertrude's paternal aunt, and in *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, she was at the Gamp estate when Minerva attended the engagement party for Sirius's parents, Walburga and Orion Black.

Chapter One Hundred-Eleven: An Accident Foretold

Chapter 112 of 118

Severus has occasion to remember one of Aine NicAirt's prophecies.



Chapter One Hundred-Eleven: An Accident Foretold

Tuesday, 6 April 1999

"Excellent, Severus!" Filius exclaimed, cheerfully picking himself up from the floor and dusting himself off. Severus's wandless block had not only stopped Filius's *Percido*, but it rebounded the spell, knocking Filius to his arse. "Much better."

One corner of Severus's mouth turned up. This was his fourth successful block of the morning. Only one of Filius's attacks had made it through, raising a welt across Severus's cheek. He barely felt its sting now, though. It seemed he had finally overcome whatever it was that had kept him from effectively blocking, and now that he had

done it, he knew he could continue to, and that he could begin to increase the power behind his blocks.

The two wizards exchanged several more volleys of spells, attacks, blocks, and counterattacks, until Filius's *Flagrante* set Severus's jacket sleeve afire.

"Bugger!" It hadn't been his favourite jacket, but it was one of his better ones. Severus beat at the flickering blue flames that danced up his arm.

A jet of icy water from the end of Filius's wand left Severus's jacket sodden but still well scorched. Severus grimaced at the odour of wet burnt wool.

"I'm sorry about that, Severus, truly I am," Filius said, coming closer and peering at the jacket. "Perhaps a *Reparo*?"

"Hmph," Severus grunted. He pulled off the spell-damaged jacket and shook his head. "You may try, but I think it's beyond hope."

The *Reparo* was ineffective, as was the *Texare* that Filius tried next. "Perhaps your house-elf could do something with it," Filius said, looking downcast. "Or a Transfiguration might work..."

"Never mind," Severus said shortly, shivering slightly in the chilly dungeon. He tossed the jacket onto a stool that sat in the corner of the otherwise bare dungeon chamber, then he drew his wand and cast a drying spell over his shirt and waistcoat. He was glad he hadn't worn one of his teaching robes that morning.

"Would you like to take a break for a bit? Perhaps go to your suite for a jacket, have something warm to drink?"

Severus shook his head. "No. I wish to continue." He was on a roll, he felt, and it would be a mistake to stop just then.

"All right." Filius nodded and crossed back over to his side of the room. "I am sorry about your jacket."

Severus shrugged. The flames hadn't done any damage to himself. "I shall have to work on defences against fire curses."

"It would be wise," Filius agreed. "Albus is quite talented with fire magic. His wandless control of flame spells and fireballs is very impressive."

"I may have a few tricks up my sleeve," Severus said.

"Yes, you did say you had a few new offensive spells you wished to try."

"A few, but one in particular ... I'm unsure how well it will work in practice and whether a simpler version might not be better." His new spell was a clever one, Severus thought, and had been inspired by his recent trip to the secure ward at St. Mungo's and his talk with Poppy afterwards. It did, however, take a certain finesse and concentration, not to mention magical power, and it might not be practical in a duel unless it was used early on during the first exchange of spells. If it worked then, though, it could rack up a lot of points even if it didn't end the duel. He would try the simpler novel spells first.

After warming up with a few of his wandless variations of standard spells...a Stinging hex, an ankle-binding curse similar to *Locomotor Mortis*, and a light *Depalmare* slap across Filius's face, which startled him when it got through...that was an opportune moment, Severus thought, to try one of his new jinxes. He called it "One Thousand Spiders" because it should...theoretically...cause the victim to feel as though one thousand spiders were crawling all over his skin.

Severus cast quickly, flicking all ten fingers, and Filius was slow to respond.

"Aaaa!" Filius twitched and shook. He dropped his wand and batted at his limbs and torso. "Eeerrrr! Oooo! Severus...make it stop!" he shouted, combing one hand through his hair, trying to rid himself of nonexistent spiders.

Severus gave a laugh, pulled out his wand, and cast a *Finite*. Filius shuddered again.

"That was awful! What was it? I felt as though there were thousands of tiny things all over me. Brrr!"

"My thousand-spiders jinx," Severus said. "Harmless, but effective, I'd say."

"Very." Filius gave another shudder. "It did feel exactly as though thousands of tiny spider legs were tickling my skin all over my body. Dreadful! No one, not even Albus, could concentrate through that!"

"If it hits him and he doesn't block it," Severus pointed out.

"That's where our work with strategy will help. Now that your blocks are so vastly improved, we can begin to work on that, perhaps after you return from your holiday."

Severus nodded.

"Shall we continue? You cast, I block. We'll see whether there are any of these spells that can get through a normal *Protego*, and then we'll try them against the *Parlakkalkan*. That's one of Albus's favourite defensive spells, and it's stronger than a *Protego*."

Severus cast a few more light jinxes, and each of them bounced off of Filius's *Protego*. Determined to hit Filius with one more spell, Severus cast faster. He could feel the sweat trickle down the centre of his back from the exertion. Finally, a sudden colour-change charm made it through, and Filius's hair turned electric blue. Not precisely a damaging spell, and not one that would slow an opponent, but worth a point or two in a competitive duel.

Filius gave no sign of wanting to stop and fix his hair, so Severus continued to cast, wondering whether Filius would switch to the *Parlakkalkan* without notice. Best to try his experimental spell against a *Protego* before trying it against the stronger *Parlakkalkan*.

The first cast was blocked with a booming explosion, leaving Filius looking puzzled about the unfamiliar spell. One more *Depalmere*, which was a simple and fast spell to cast and which Filius blocked easily, and then Severus tried his new spell again, slipping it in before Filius could adjust to cast a new *Protego*.

This time, Severus breathed the spell, only the slightest whisper, as he cast, trying to put greater focus, more intensity, behind it. *Agravitas!*

With a yelp of pain, Filius was lifted into the air with a suddenness that astounded even Severus, shooting toward the ceiling and hitting it with a loud thump. More alarming than that, pinpricks of blood oozed from a web of broken blood vessels covering his rigid face, and his mouth was open in a ghastly silent scream.

"*Finite! Finite!*" Severus rushed forward and caught the little wizard as he fell back toward the floor. "Filius? Filius!" The Charms master was unresponsive, his eyes closed, and Severus felt for his pulse. It was there, rapid, rushing and palpitating beneath his fingers, but the wizard didn't seem to be breathing. Severus took a quick breath himself, then said, "*Renervate!*"

Filius's eyes didn't even flutter, though Severus thought he now detected a soft breath of air coming from the wizard's slack mouth. Severus knelt and groped for his wand while still supporting Filius with his left arm. "*Renervate!*" Not a twitch came from the unconscious wizard.

"Oh, gods, Filius! I didn't mean to..." Had he killed him? Poppy was gone. Almost no one was in the castle. Even Albus and Minerva, who might have been able to help, were away for the Easter holiday.

Severus stood and ran. He ran from the chamber, down the low, dark corridor, Filius held close to his chest. He'd never make it for help. He had killed Filius with a stupid wandless spell. A clever spell, he'd thought it, create a bubble of zero gravity around his opponent. Flip him around a bit, he'd imagined, remembering seeing films as a boy of Apollo astronauts happily floating in their capsules. He hadn't considered the force of sudden complete lack of gravity, the impact on an unprepared human body, one with no pressurised spacesuit. The impact with the ceiling alone had been enough to knock even the hardiest wizard senseless.

Severus's heart pounded in his chest and panic began to fill him as he reached the first staircase. This wouldn't work, running through the castle. Stop. Think.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then he looked down into Filius's face and felt again for his pulse. The wizard was still alive, still breathing *Dum spiro, spero*.

"Twiskett!"

His emotion must have placed a note of urgency into his summons, for Twiskett was there in the blink of an eye, before Severus even had a moment to think what to ask of him.

"Twiskett, get another elf...no, two...to bring us to the infirmary, then go immediately to St. Giles or St. Mungo's and fetch Madam..." Bloody hell! What was that blasted witch's name? "Madam Fuller! And Melina, if she's there. If not, find her. Send Fuller on ahead with her Portkey. Tell her it's an extreme emergency."

Twiskett nodded, eyes large. "Twiskett goes now." And he did with a hollow pop.

Severus sat heavily on the steps, holding Flitwick in his arms. "Filius! Filius! Wake up, old friend." But Filius didn't move, a dead weight in Severus's arms. Severus felt for his pulse again; this time it felt stronger and more regular. He shook his head. Was this the accident that Aine had predicted a few days before? She had said that all would be well, but Flitwick looked to be at death's door.

A moment later, two house-elves appeared with two almost simultaneous cracks of Apparition, an old grizzled elf and a younger, rather large elf with rusty tufts of hair and snowy white skin, a brilliant blue bit of cloth wrapped about his waist and cast up over one shoulder. The older elf, Tchampon, whom Severus now recognised as Twiskett's grandfather, immediately reached out and took Flitwick from Severus's arms. He held the wizard in his hands as lightly as if he'd been a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. A combination of magic and raw strength, Severus thought.

Before Severus could give the wizened house-elf any instructions, he had snapped away.

"I be Blessen," the younger elf said in a lilting voice. "Twiskett's brother."

Severus didn't even wonder at the fact that he'd never seen this elf before, who was now grasping his wrist with one hand and snapping the fingers of his other hand.

Severus landed with a thump on the floor of the infirmary. Flitwick was lying on a nearby bed, and Tchampon was hovering beside him, an unreadable expression on his wrinkled face. Severus scrambled to his feet and turned to the ivory-coloured elf.

"Fetch . . ." Who was in the castle? Carter wasn't due back until that afternoon. The Mannings had returned. "David and Laura Manning. Have them Floo directly here."

Blessen's golden eyes blinked, then he shook his head. "I know them not."

"I go," Tchampon said, vanishing a moment later with a thundering crack. Filius didn't stir.

Blessen looked up at Snape apologetically. "I be a St. Bridget's house-elf."

Severus hadn't the faintest idea what the elf meant by that, and he didn't care. He stepped up to the bed where Flitwick lay. One more try, he thought, drawing his wand. Putting all of his will into the spell and enunciating it as clearly and powerfully as he could, Severus pointed his wand at the little wizard and cast. "*Renervate!*"

Still nothing. Severus gripped his wand tightly in frustration, the fingernails of both hands biting into his palms. Raging would do no good, but he wanted to blast something into oblivion. He tried to remember Aine's reassurance that all would be well if he acted quickly. He hoped he had.

There was a noise behind him as if something had fallen over in Poppy's office, and he turned to see the office door open and a mediwitch in St. Giles' robes and a starched white, winged cap step through.

"What's happened?" she asked, wasting no time on introductions, but immediately stepping up to Flitwick's bed and taking hold of his wrist as she drew her wand.

"We were practising duelling. He's a duelling master. One of my spells slipped through. I ... it hit him hard. I have tried what I could, but I can't rouse him. He seems..."

"In the name of Apollo, what did you do to him?" the mediwitch exclaimed as she cast a diagnostic.

"It was a ... a weightlessness spell," Severus said. "He hit the ceiling hard."

"It's more than that. Flitwick has the bends...bubbles in his blood...but that's the least of his problems. I don't know...I've never seen anything like this."

Severus felt his heart seize up. The idiot woman wouldn't be able to help. Flitwick would die. Why was Poppy not here?

"No stroke," the witch continued. "We're fortunate there. But his blood ... all out of kilter. His lungs are affected. If he were awake, he'd be in pain. Just as well he's unconscious...was he unconscious before or after he hit the ceiling?" she asked, turning to Severus.

"I don't know. He yelled, but he rose so fast. I don't know." Severus felt helpless, and he didn't like the disapproval in the witch's eyes.

"I'll try this." The mediwitch cast, waving her wand to the right, then slowly making a gentle circle before thrusting her wand forward. A pale flash emitted from the tip of her wand, and Filius was surrounded by a glittering bubble. "And now ..." Another complicated wand movement and the bubble appeared to expand slightly.

"That elf you sent said he was going for Healer O'Donald. When she's here, she can do more. This will have to do for now."

What the hell kind of mediwitch was this woman, anyway? *This will have to do for now?* She was here; she had to do more. Poppy would have done more. "There must be more you can do," Severus insisted. "Potions, other spells..."

"I could if I wished to risk more damage. There's no point to it when Healer O'Donald will be here shortly."

"But if she's not..."

"There is one other adjustment I can make to speed things along." The witch focussed on Flitwick, his still little form seeming even tinier inside his bubble, then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly, opening her eyes, muttering spells, and passing her wand over the bubble.

Flitwick seemed to relax, and Severus thought his colour was better, though his skin was still mottled, and his hair was still bright blue from the earlier jinx.

"Can't you do anything about his skin, the broken blood vessels?"

"Indeed. I am sure that Poppy has a potion on hand that would treat it, but it is minor, and I don't wish to disrupt his oxygen field to apply it." She turned toward him and

added coolly, "Unless, of course, in your opinion, his current superficial appearance is more important than whether he recovers fully."

"Of course not," Severus snapped.

Before he could say anything further or Madam Fuller could respond, the fireplace at the far end of the ward flared green, and Laura Walker Manning stepped out.

"Filius!" The witch ran across the room to the other side of Flitwick's bed. "What happened?" she asked, looking from the mediwitch to Severus.

"A duelling accident," Severus said.

"A carelessly cast spell," Fuller said.

"Oh dear! He'll be all right, won't he?" Laura looked down at her godfather. "Should I contact Pomona and have her come home?"

"Wait," Fuller advised. "Wait until you have more to tell her."

"He looks dreadful." Unable to reach through the bubble to touch Filius, Laura laid her hand on the edge of the bed.

Severus grimaced. "It was unanticipated."

"Obviously!" Laura cried. "You would never have done this on purpose."

Severus shot Fuller a glance, wondering if she were going to say anything snide, but the mediwitch was casting a diagnostic spell. At least Walker Manning knew he wouldn't have cast the spell had he known what it could do. It was just the sort of thing he should have learned long ago never to do, though. He could have simply cast a wandless *Levicorpus*, but he'd had to be clever with an untested new spell. This one should never have been used in a friendly duel. The memory of the astronauts swimming about in their capsule flashed through his mind again. It would be funny, if he weren't afraid that Filius might be in serious danger.

A moment later, Twiskett popped in. Severus turned to him questioningly.

"Healer O'Donald comes. She arrives at the gate soon."

"I fetch her," said Blessen, and with a snap of his fingers, the white elf Disapparated.

"Thank you, Twiskett."

Twiskett nodded. "May Twiskett serve?"

"Fetch Perlle and Stanga," Laura directed, asking for the infirmary house-elves. "They should be here to help."

After Twiskett left, Severus said, "I called Twiskett out of habit."

"Naturally, that was sensible, and he's a fine and loyal elf. Everyone knows Twiskett. Who was the funny-looking red-haired elf who just went to fetch Melina?"

"Twiskett's brother, Blessen."

"Ah."

Perlle and Stanga arrived, followed shortly thereafter by Blessen with Melina in tow.

Madam Fuller told Melina what treatments she had provided so far, and Melina nodded in approval. She cast a spell, bouncing it off the bubble.

"We can improve on this. I'm going to increase the oxygen content in the bubble, bring it up to one hundred percent, and slowly bring up the atmospheric pressure, as well. Then we need to do something about his injuries from hitting the ceiling."

Severus and Laura went across the long ward to a pair of chairs and sat down, watching Healer O'Donald at work. At one point, Perlle fetched her some potions from the potions cupboard. It didn't look to Severus as though Madam Fuller was doing much, but now that Melina was there, he didn't feel as antagonistic toward the other witch.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Laura said.

Severus nodded.

"He's been enjoying his duelling practice with you. He spoke of it just last week."

"I don't think we'll be carrying on with it after this."

"Why not? Accidents happen in duelling; you're both aware of that. I'm sure he'll want to continue."

"People will talk," Severus said.

"I don't know about that. People might talk if you suddenly dropped out of the duelling matches, though. And besides, as I said, accidents happen." She looked him up and down, taking in his shirtsleeves and waistcoat, which were wrinkled and damp. His left sleeve had some light flecks of blood on it. "You look like you could use a change of clothes. Why don't you go do that and I'll send one of the house-elves for you if Filius wakes up before you get back."

"I'd rather stay and speak with Healer O'Donald when she's finished."

They subsided into silence. Melina cast a few spells to undress Flitwick within his hyperbaric bubble. Melina left the little wizard in his underpants, however, and pulled a sheet up over his short but muscular legs. Severus watched with interest as Melina used a spell to transfer some potion from its jar to Flitwick's skin, spreading the creamy yellow concoction over his face, shoulders, and torso with a few quick flicks of her wand. One more pass of her wand, and the potion seemed to vanish, leaving the little wizard's skin fresh and unmarked. A quick succession of flicks, and his hair was returned to its usual white.

Severus relaxed, somehow reassured by Flitwick's now near-normal appearance.

"Where is Professor Manning?"

"He went into Hogsmeade earlier. He'll be back for lunch."

Severus nodded.

"Thank you for calling me, Professor. I appreciate it."

There had been few staff members on hand to call, Severus thought. However, she was probably referring to her relationship with Flitwick, which he hadn't thought of until that moment. "I thought you might wish to be here."

Melina walked over to them, smiling and followed by Madam Fuller. Severus stood and nodded in greeting.

"So, you and Professor Flitwick have been having some fun, I see," Melina said as she reached them. Behind her, Madam Fuller frowned.

"We were trying some new spells. The one I used had unintended effects," Severus said, very relieved by the Healer's smile.

"Well, it looked worse than it was, I'm sure, though it is good that you called for Madam Fuller as quickly as you did. He would have recovered even without any attention, but it would have been a long...and rather painful...recovery. Flitwick is quite resilient. He doesn't remember exactly what happened though, and I'm sure that he'll want to hear all about your new spell when he's up and about."

"He's awake?" Laura exclaimed, standing.

"Yes, but he's drowsy. I've lowered the bubble air to eighty-two percent oxygen, but before I leave, he'll be breathing normal room air again," Melina replied. "He'll be fine."

"May I see him?" the librarian asked.

"Of course," Melina said with a smile.

Laura quickly crossed over to where Filius lay dozing beneath his iridescent bubble.

"He really will be all right?" Severus asked in a low voice.

"Oh, yes," Melina said. "He'll be up and about in time for lunch, though I'd advise him to rest today. And he really would have been all right even if you'd just put him to bed, though I wouldn't have recommended that. Now, if you'd cast this on someone less robust, and without Flitwick's somewhat peculiar constitution, treatment would have been absolutely necessary, I've no doubt about that, so you did the right thing calling for help. And he will have a quick, pain-free recovery with this treatment."

"Thank Merlin," Severus said softly, gazing across the room to where Laura was bent over Filius, saying something to him.

"Hmph. Merlin had nothing to do with it," Madam Fuller said. "I will need the name of this spell for the report, what its intended effects were, why you chose to use it in *friendly* duelling practice, and I will need to perform the *Prior Incantato* on your wand to verify your account."

"That won't be necessary, Madam Fuller," Melina said gently. "I will complete the report. I think that simply noting a minor Charms accident will be sufficient."

"I was first here, and I'm locum for Hogwarts whilst Madam Pomfrey is on holiday," Madam Fuller protested.

"Indeed you are, and if Madam Pomfrey were here, there would be no report at all. She would merely make a notation in Professor Flitwick's chart."

"But..."

"You did an excellent job with his treatment before I got here, Madam Fuller, and I will be sure to let the Headmistress and Madam Pomfrey know how efficient and efficacious your treatment was," Melina said, "but there is no need to create a lengthy record of the incident."

Madam Fuller frowned and opened her mouth, then closed it, aware that she would not make any headway with Healer O'Donald, who vastly outranked her at St. Giles.

"Why don't you go see how Professor Flitwick is doing, whether he needs anything," Melina suggested.

The mediwitch nodded and turned. Before she'd taken more than two steps, Melina had drawn her wand.

"*Obliviate!*"

Severus stared in astonishment as Melina cast the spell, stopping Fuller in her tracks. The mediwitch had a dazed, blank look on her face.

Melina pointed her wand at the dazed witch. "You Portkeyed to Hogwarts when Professor Snape summoned you after he discovered that Professor Flitwick had suffered a Charms accident. I followed and approved your treatment. Professor Flitwick will be fine. He has no memory of what he was doing when he had his accident. We don't know what caused it, but he took a tumble. You did a fine job." Melina swiped her wand through the air.

The mediwitch blinked and turned to them with a smile on her face. "Do you think Professor Flitwick would like something to drink?"

"I am sure he would," Melina replied. "I think that Stanga or Perlie would be happy to fetch something for him...you could ask them to get us all some tea, in fact. Set it up over in Madam Pomfrey's office for us, won't you?"

"Of course!" The mediwitch bustled over to Stanga and Perlie, who had been watching the proceedings with interest from the far corner of the large ward.

"I can't believe you did that," Severus whispered.

"Shh. Later. She's quite a good mediwitch, but also a bit rigid about protocol," Melina replied quietly.

"Still..."

"Why don't you go over and see how Professor Flitwick is feeling," Melina suggested.

"The last person you suggested that to ..." Severus smirked.

Melina laughed and nodded, turning and heading over to Flitwick's bed herself, Severus following.

Chapter One Hundred-Twelve: Association

Chapter 113 of 118

Severus goes out for the evening and sees the power of association. The next morning produces some unexpected visitors.



Chapter One Hundred-Twelve: Association

Tuesday, 6 April Wednesday, 7 April 1999

Severus clicked his watch shut, then fiddled with his watch chain. Gareth's owl had said he would be at the gates at quarter to eight. They would meet the witches at the Three Broomsticks at eight. There was no such thing as a reservation at the Broomsticks, and even though it was a Tuesday night in the middle of the Easter holiday, the pub might still be busy. Severus didn't want them to land an undesirable table. He'd prefer one where he could see but not be easily seen.

The wind was harsh that evening after a damp day, and his ears were beginning to feel like icicles. A few more minutes of it, and he'd cast a warming charm. Minerva had given him a knit cap with ear flaps one Christmas. He couldn't believe that she actually thought he would wear such a thing, even in black, but other than the few seconds he had tried it on for her, he'd never worn it. Perhaps when he was old and grey, he'd pull it out of its drawer and don it, but until then, warming charms would suit him fine.

There was a snick of Apparition, and Gareth was on the other side of the gates, wand drawn. The younger wizard looked around himself, then approached the gate.

"Cooo-eeee!" he cried.

Severus shuddered. "Don't start with all that 'Down Under' nonsense, or I'm not coming."

Gareth laughed. "Just getting your attention, that's all!"

"Next time I'm lost in the Forbidden Forest, you have permission to shout that," Severus said grumpily, opening the gate and stepping through, "but at no other time."

"You could get lost in the Forest?" Gareth asked sceptically.

"Probably not."

"Didn't think so."

The two began walking toward the village, and Gareth pulled the collar of his jacket up against the damp wind.

"I did some work on the house today. It's coming along. We've moved most of your mother's things up into the attic. Tomorrow I'm getting to work on her witch's room. Feels funny taking it over. Unlucky or something."

"I didn't know you were superstitious," Severus replied. "You can always keep your computer in the bedroom instead, if you prefer. But I assure you, I have not seen her ghost, and any suicidal inclinations I may have felt while at Spinner's End had nothing to do with her fate."

"Don't feel like that now, do you, mate?" At Severus's brief shake of his head, Gareth said, "That's good. You had a lot of people working to keep you alive, and you have a lot of future ahead of you, a lot of people who need you. No offing yourself!"

"This is not a topic for discussion," Severus said icily.

"Right. Well, I'm not superstitious because of your mum's death. It just seems funny...peculiar, like...to take over a witch's room. I grew up believing they were sacrosanct."

"My mother has no more use for it, obviously, and I haven't used it since her death. It's just wasted space."

"You're certain you don't want it for a study yourself?"

Severus shook his head. "If I did, I would have taken it years ago. I treat the living room as one large study. Such as it is. Or was."

"You'll like it now, Snape. The rolling bookcases have turned out brilliantly...we were even able to fit some of the books from the dining room in the new ones, and we filled up the two bookcases we put in the dining room itself. The books that wouldn't fit, we put up in your bedroom as you instructed. The windows are clean and have curtains in front of them instead of furniture, and Mum loaned me Dinstin, an elf from the estate who's something of an expert in brickwork, and you have a new chimney and fireplace...completely camouflaged from Muggles on the outside, of course. When we get to the bathroom and the downstairs loo, Dinstin is going to lay the tile."

"Don't connect the fireplace to the Floo Network yet. I need to consider that," Severus said.

"I know; you told me that before. British Telecom are supposed to be out next week to put in the phone line, so I wanted to get the study ready for it, and I'll have them put a phone in the kitchen, too, on the wall where the old one used to be, though I don't know if they can use the existing wiring or not. Speaking of wiring, Carl is coming by this week to work on the electrics. He hopes he'll be finished with it by Saturday. That's going to be the biggest job, since so much is outdated and needs to be replaced. Carl says your bathroom isn't regulation and it's a wonder you haven't been electrified in the bath." Gareth laughed. "But I thought that as soon as you're back from your holiday with Poppy, you could come by and see it. Enough will be done so that you will be able to get a real feel for the place. Right now, it's a bit of a mess still."

"Sounds like you have everything well orchestrated," Severus said.

"Having the house-elves help has moved things along very quickly. How have you been? You were going to do some more brewing, right?"

Snape nodded. "I finished that up this afternoon. I plan to owl Professor Birnbaum tomorrow to arrange delivery."

"And did you get in any duelling practice?"

Severus grunted. "Too much."

"Feeling achey again? A couple of pints will ease your pain."

Severus shook his head. "I cast a new spell on Flitwick. It had unexpected effects. I had to Summon that Madam Fuller from St. Giles or Mungo's or wherever she was today. It was not pleasant. Your cousin came and fixed him up, though."

"Flitwick's all right, then?" Gareth asked with concern.

"Melina gave him the appropriate treatments. Fuller ... I suppose she stabilised him, but she didn't do much to treat him, and then she was quite officious, wanting to make reports and so on. Melina, er, Melina convinced her that a simple notation in Flitwick's records was sufficient." Severus twitched a smile as he remembered the Healer's unexpected *Obliviate*. That certainly had saved him from some awkward questions. "Flitwick was at dinner and he says he feels fine now."

"That must be the accident that Aine saw," Gareth said with a nod. "She was right about it."

"Mm."

"Got that out of the way, then," Gareth went on. "Now there's only that vigilante for you to identify."

"Shh. Don't say anything about that." Severus looked around. They were just entering the village and there was no one near. "It was probably just so much nonsense, anyway. Besides, I've met almost everyone in the wizarding world between the ages of twelve and forty...at least everyone who's attended Hogwarts...and a good portion of those over forty, so it's quite likely that I've at least met the person. Just about anyone who's taught at Hogwarts for a long time has just as good a chance as I do of knowing the person...better, in fact, since they're all older than I am. If the person is British or Irish and attended Hogwarts, Dumbledore certainly knows her."

"Yes, but Aine emphasised you, Snape, that *you* will discover who she is. Whoever she is, there must be many people who know her, but who have no idea what she's doing. At least, I hope no one knows. It would be terrible if others were involved, or if someone knew what she's doing and isn't stopping her."

"I hope you have other topics of conversation planned for the evening," Severus said. "I don't think that Morgana and Gwen would appreciate this one. Neither do I."

"Right."

The two wizards reached the pub and Severus pulled open the door. Despite his fears, the pub was quiet that evening, half the tables still empty and only one old wizard sitting at the bar.

"There she is," Gareth said, gesturing toward a table in the corner by the front window.

Severus recognised Morgana immediately, although her wavy black hair was now cropped short, framing her face becomingly, rather than long as she had worn it when he had known her. She smiled and raised her hand in greeting as he and Gareth approached.

"Morgana, you remember Severus."

"Of course. It's been a long time," she said, offering Severus her hand.

Severus shook her hand. "Indeed."

Gareth pulled out a chair next to the window and sat down across from his cousin. "Gwen's not here yet?"

Morgana picked up her beer and shook her head. "I haven't seen her, but I doubt I'd recognise her, either."

Gareth looked around the half-empty pub. "She'll be along shortly, I'm sure. What will you have, Severus? I'll buy this round."

"Tonic water with lime."

As Gareth got up and went to get their drinks, Morgana asked, "Teetotaller, Severus?"

"No. I may have a drink later," he said shortly, not wanting to get into questions of Apparition and being a target of the vigilante.

Morgana nodded. "Hogwarts is in the Easter holiday now, isn't it?"

"Yes." Severus hoped that Gareth would be back with their drinks soon. "You are here on business, Gareth tells me."

"Consulting with the Ministry. Shackbolt is interested in reorganising and modernising the way the Ministry does things. They would like an Australian perspective. Our ministry is organised rather differently. Because of my position with the Department of Information Sorcery and my ties to Britain, I was chosen to come over for a few months."

Gareth returned with a beer for himself and a large glass of tonic water for Severus, who immediately began removing the ice cubes with flicks of his wand, sending them over to a dying potted plant behind Morgana's chair. The witch looked on in amusement.

"Sorry. Forgot you don't like ice," Gareth said, sitting down.

"It can be remedied."

"Is that Gwen?" Morgana asked.

Severus and Gareth both twisted in their chairs and looked towards the pub door. A petite, curly-haired witch had come in by herself and was looking around. Gareth stood, and Gwen saw him and started toward them. She paused for a moment, then continued.

Before Gareth could say anything or introduce her to Morgana, Gwen said, "I thought it was only your cousin we were having drinks with."

"Want to sit next to me?" Gareth asked. "I'm sure Snape will be glad to move chairs..."

Gwen was stony faced. "Is this the kind of company you're keeping these days, Gareth?"

Gareth's eyebrows rose, and Severus felt himself go cold. He turned back to his tonic water and stared at the wedge of lime floating in it.

"Severus is a friend."

"Is he." Her voice was hard. "Well, I've had enough of his sort. I got rid of Polyphemus and one of the best things about that was I got rid of his friends, too. Your cousin's one thing, but I'm not about to sit down at a table with another Slytherin..."

"Look, Gwen, Severus is a friend and a good man. If you don't want his company, then you are free to leave."

"I just may." She turned and walked away.

"Wait, Gwen. You must misunderstand." Gareth followed her over to the door.

"Well, that was awkward," Morgana said, watching Gareth and Gwen's heated whispers by the door. Gwen was gesticulating and stabbing a finger toward their table.

"I should leave."

"I have no objections to your company, Severus. Gareth would be unhappy if you left, I'm sure. Besides, the witch is going now."

A blast of cold air came in through the open door as Gwen disappeared through it.

Gareth took his seat next to Severus again. "Sorry about that, Severus. I guess she's embittered or something."

"I could have left."

Gareth snorted. "I would have left with you, then."

"So you won't be seeing that witch again, I presume," Morgana said, a smirk on her face.

"Hardly. I understand that she hates her ex-husband and his friends, but she's as bigoted as the people she professes to dislike. Wouldn't even give Severus a chance. That's not the sort of woman I want to have a relationship with."

"Good on ya," Morgana said with an approving nod.

"Sorry," Severus said. He felt acutely uncomfortable.

"Better I find out now," Gareth said, "than after spending more time with her. And it's not your fault, Snape."

Severus's pulse was racing, but he felt frozen in his chair. It had been a mistake for Gareth to invite him out with friends. He hadn't even wanted to come. Not that he cared what a bitch like Gwen Burns thought of him. His cheeks still burned.

"You used to date her, didn't you?" Morgana asked.

"Sure. Back during my apprenticeship, before I spent that year with you. When I returned, she had married Melliflua." Gareth shrugged. "We'd broken up a few months before I left, anyway."

"I wonder why she married Polyphemus," Morgana said. "Unless he improved as he grew up, he was an ugly little kid from an ugly family, and I don't mean just their looks."

Gareth shrugged. "I don't know. She must have seen something in him. You had trouble with the Mellifluas, didn't you, back at the Ministry?"

Morgana made a face. "Not happy times to remember."

"So have you met with the Ministry yet?" Gareth asked.

"No." Morgana shook her head. "Everyone's still on holiday, or just getting back. I timed it so I'd have a few days just to catch up with family. My first official meeting isn't until Friday morning."

"Meeting with anyone unofficially before then?"

Morgana gave a crooked grin, her dark blue eyes sparkling. "You know me, Gare...gotta get the lay of the land before I walk into something. I'm having lunch with an old friend tomorrow; she'll give me the good oil. I won't be going in blind. I was going to talk with Uncle Albus, too, but Mum said he doesn't do much with the Ministry these days."

"He'll still know what's going on behind the scenes, I'm sure," Gareth said. "He's got a lot of old friends at the Ministry and all."

"What about you, Severus?" Morgana asked. "Do you have any insight into the players at the Ministry and who wants what out of this reorg?"

Severus shook his head. "I know some of the people there, but I don't know anything about what's being considered. You could talk to Arthur Weasley, though. He's on holiday with his family this week, but I think they'll be returning this weekend." Severus hesitated, then said, "The name McGonagall will get you a long way with Arthur, but if you like, you may mention my name." He shook his head slightly. "I doubt he'll react the way Burns did," he muttered.

"Good idea, Snape!" Gareth said, ignoring Snape's final remark. "Arthur's moving up in the Ministry now, but he's been there for ages and knows everyone. He's cleverer than a lot of people give him credit for, but he always put principle above ambition, so he didn't get very far in the Ministry until recently."

Morgana nodded. "I remember him. Redhead. Smiles a lot. Ready to like everyone he meets. He was one of the leaders in the Riddle War, wasn't he? Lost his wife."

"His wife and one son," Gareth said. "The whole family was there at the end. The Weasleys are a good bunch. Principled and loyal."

"I'll be sure to look him up, then."

Severus set his glass aside and pushed back from the table. "I think I'll be going. You two have a lot to talk about." He began to stand.

"You just got here, Snape," Gareth said. "Stay. We'll get something to eat. Get you a beer, or a glass of wine, whatever you like."

"Gareth was looking forward to having me spend time with his friends, you in particular," Morgana said. "I would like it if you would stay."

Severus shook his head. He was not at all in the mood now, not that he'd been enthusiastic about the idea of going out with Gareth and his cousin in the first place, but Gwen Burns' hasty departure had left a sick feeling in his stomach.

"Then we could go back to the house," Gareth suggested.

"I brought some nice cab sav with me," Morgana said. "We could open a bottle of that. Good cushioning charms protected it from the Portkey effects."

"No, that's all right. I'll stay a while longer," Severus said, pulling back up to the table.

"Good man," Morgana said with a nod. "But I'd like another beer...you still buying, Gareth?"

"Sure." Gareth quickly drained his glass then stood. "Anything else for you, Snape?"

Severus shook his head. His tonic water was still fizzing in front of him.

When Gareth had left, promising to bring back a plate of chips for them all, Morgana said, "Were you friends with Polyphemus or any of the Mellifluas?"

"No. I knew some. Associated with them. Necessary under the previous circumstances."

"I can't understand Gwen's attitude," Morgana said with a frown. "Back home, you've become quite a heroic figure of the war. Your picture is even on the cover of Derrick Kingston's book on the rise and fall of the Death Eaters and why Britain's pureblood culture provided a fertile ground for someone like Riddle to thrive. You're painted as one of the key figures in Riddle's defeat. The book is a few months old and it's still in every bookshop window. You're an icon."

"Kingston ... I got a letter last summer from a Kingston. Wanted to send me interview questions by post. I thought he was some kind of crackpot. I got some strange post back then...still do...and I thought he was just another nutter."

Morgana shook her head. "He's a well-respected journalist with the WRA...Wizards Radio Australia...and he's written a few books on various subjects. Up till now, I think they've all been about Australian wizarding history, though. Biographies of important leaders, that sort of thing."

"I'd never heard of him. Hmph."

"I thought he was selling the book here, too, but I may be wrong about that."

"There've been a lot of books out since the war, some of them coming out so fast, you'd think they had to have been written before the war was even over. But I haven't heard of this one. What was the title?"

"*Purity, Wizardry, Isolationism, and the Rise and Fall of Evil Genius in Britain* Quite a mouthful."

Severus shook his head. "Haven't noticed it. But I tend to avoid those books." It would be hard not to notice a book with a picture of yourself on the cover, though. He would have to look for it the next time he was in a bookshop.

Gareth came back with three drinks and a platter of chips floating in front of him. "I know you said you didn't want anything, Snape, but I brought you a cognac. Thought you might enjoy that."

"Thanks."

"I could demolish that plate of chips," Morgana said. "I wasn't hungry at dinnertime, and now I'm ravenous."

"Well, dig in. We can get more if we want them."

Morgana poured brown sauce over half the chips and "dug in" as suggested. Severus took a sip of his cognac. It was warm and smooth. He took another sip and relaxed. Morgana seemed okay. He'd stay a little longer. Besides, he wasn't supposed to be roaming about on his own. He had promised Poppy he would be careful. Two more days before she returned. He could scarcely wait.

~*~*~*~

Severus had just got out of the shower and was drying himself off when his door charm amplified someone's knock. He pulled on his dressing gown...the one that Poppy had given him of silvery grey silk. He was crossing the living room when the knocking began again, persistently this time.

Severus waved his hand and opened the door. Flitwick was there, dressed in his nightshirt, dressing gown, slippers, and sleeping cap. The little wizard waved a newspaper almost as big as himself, his hands trembling.

"It's happened again, Severus! It's happened again!"

"What ... an attack?"

"A terrible attack. Last night. Here, here, read it for yourself." Filius shoved the newspaper toward Severus.

Severus took the *Daily Prophet* and looked at the front page headlines:

MANIACS ATTACK AGAIN!

Father Dying, Mother Injured, Children Miraculously Unhurt

Ministry Asks Witnesses to Come Forward

"Come in and sit down, Filius." Severus waved his hand and removed several books from the sofa and sent them flying back to his desk. "Twiskett! Twiskett!"

"Dear, dear!" Filius said, wringing his hands. "What is this world coming to? I thought we had fought...and lost so many good witches and wizards...to stop this kind of thing!"

Twiskett popped into the room. He was wearing a green-and-white checked tea towel like a poncho, a grey curtain cord as a belt. Severus thought the house-elf had been asleep.

"Bring me coffee, please, Twiskett, and a pot of strong tea for Professor Flitwick. Milk, sugar, cream...and some toast."

Twiskett nodded and Disapparated.

"Who was it this time?" Severus asked, sitting down and looking at the paper again.

"Simon Melliflua and his family," Filius said. "He married Charlotte Demornay; you may remember them."

Severus nodded. "I taught them both my first years here."

"Their poor little children! They are only two and four years old! Their uncle found them clinging to their parents late last night." Filius sniffed and blinked back tears.

"What an odd coincidence," Severus muttered, scanning the article.

Filius sniffed again. "Coincidence?"

Severus shook his head slightly. "Just that the name Melliflua came up in conversation last night, and they are not persons whom I generally discuss. And the uncle who found them ... was Polyphemus."

"Yes, you were in school with him, weren't you? He was a bit behind you. Never stood out much for anything. Except his unfortunate squint."

"Let me read this."

Last night, another shocking horror came to light when the Melliflua family, Simon, Charlotte and their children Race and Kimberly, were found cruelly attacked and abandoned just outside their home in Devises. The crime was discovered by Polyphemus Melliflua, Simon's older brother, just after eleven o'clock, although it is believed that the attack occurred a few hours earlier.

The rest of the article went on to describe the crying children and Polyphemus's efforts to revive his brother and sister-in-law, speculated about the couple's prognosis, and finally gave a brief interview with the Mellifluas' neighbours, an elderly wizarding couple who lived across the street from them.

"He knocked us up, oh, must have been coming up on eleven-thirty," Lucy Cantwell said. "We answered the door with our wands drawn, didn't we, Howard, we were that worried about the mad vigilantes. Never know when they'll strike, do you? Or who!"

Howard, a spry 120-year-old with only a touch of rheumatism in his knees, agreed with his wife. "We went to bed after listening to the Wizarding Wireless weather report at nine-thirty. We both dropped off quick. We'd had holidays with our great-great grandchildren, and we were that tired. We didn't hear a thing until poor Mr Melliflua came pounding on our door, the two little tykes in tow. Naturally, we brought the children in and we used our Floo to call the Ministry whilst Mr Melliflua went back to his brother and his wife."

"No, we didn't know the Mellifluas well," Lucy responded in answer to a reporter's question. "They kept themselves to themselves, like, but they have two very well-behaved children. We would say hello in passing, you know how it is, but what does a young couple like them have in common with a couple old folks like us? Nice enough, though. Polite, weren't they, Howard?"

When asked whether they had seen any suspicious characters hanging about in the vicinity recently, the elderly couple said there were always funny Muggles about, but they hadn't noticed anyone who looked suspicious. "We'd have hopped into the Floo straightaway, wouldn't we, Lucy? Off to the Ministry to report it and stay out of harm's way ourselves. No one's even safe in their own homes anymore, and that's the truth of it."

If the Ministry doesn't make an arrest soon, more and more respectable wizards and witches will be voicing the same sentiment. No one at the Ministry was available for comment, but Gawain Robards released a statement offering his sympathy to the victims and their family and promising that the Ministry was exhausting all avenues of inquiry. He urges any witch or wizard with any information related to these attacks to please contact the Aurors' Office in the Magical Law Enforcement Department. All information will be treated confidentially. Former Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge has offered a reward of five hundred Galleons from his own money for information leading to the capture of the person or persons responsible for these attacks, and he urges others to contribute to the reward fund he has established, which is being held in a Gringotts vault.

"I have a new suspect," Severus said with a short laugh.

"You do? Who?"

"Fudge. That reward of his is very suspicious."

"Don't joke, Severus. This is terrible. It could be the beginning of terrible times again."

"I know. I just found his concern...and that he's putting his money where his mouth is...atypical, that's all."

"The last few years were quite a shock to him. He wasn't really a bad man, you know."

"Hmph."

Twiskett had delivered the coffee tray while Severus was reading the newspaper, and Severus poured Filius a cup of tea, putting in a spoonful of sugar and a good deal of milk.

"Thanks, Severus. I hadn't had a bite before I saw the headlines and I had to come down and see you."

Severus poured himself a cup of coffee, adding a dollop of cream, then he sat down and read the article again. "Very uninformative, isn't it? They did give the victims' names this time, though, which is out of step with the *Prophet's* previous practices. And if I were that old couple, I'd take a long holiday somewhere far from Devises for a while, though I doubt the vigilante will be foolish enough to return to the same scene. You never know, though."

"You were out in Hogsmeade last night, Severus! What if she had followed you? Attacked you on your way home? Oh, dear! I don't think you should go anywhere for a while."

"I will be delivering Professor Birnbaum's potion sometime in the next day or two. I will be careful. I am certain I will be quite safe there, and I can Disapparate from the Forbidden Forest. The vigilante won't be looking for me there."

"You should bring someone with you. I'll go. Laura and David are back, and other staff are returning, too. I can leave the castle in their hands."

"We'll see."

"What if the vigilante had been lurking in Hogsmeade and followed you back to the castle? You could be lying somewhere now, dead." Filius sniffed.

"Gareth and his cousin Morgana both accompanied me to the gates last night. They're both quite skilled. We would not have been taken by surprise."

Filius pulled the paper toward him. "It doesn't say here; was Simon a Death Eater?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't think so. He had relatives who were, of course. The Melliflua family were very big supporters of the Dark Lord...Riddle...in the old days, and those who were still around from then joined up when he returned. I don't know whether Simon wasn't recruited or how he managed to stay out of it...possibly gave lip service and maybe some money...but he wasn't a Death Eater. He may have been a sympathiser, but he didn't get directly involved in anything."

"At least the children were unhurt," Filius said.

"I wonder how long that will last," Severus said.

"What?"

"If this person really does believe in guilt by association, and that the association contaminates her victims with this ... this evil that she sees, then I don't know if the children will remain safe. Of course, she might be squeamish about killing such young children even if she does think they're contaminated by evil."

"How dreadful!"

Severus nodded sombrely. "I may sound as though I make light of these attacks, and I certainly don't care for the Mellifluas, but you're right: this could be the beginning of terrible times. After surviving what I did, I don't want to see that, either. And no matter what their parents may have done, or what the vigilante may think they are guilty of, those children are innocent. Too many innocents were killed by Death Eaters; more innocents dying or suffering will not erase that. I've seen too much of it. Did too much of it, myself," he ended softly, setting down his coffee cup and not looking at Filius.

"It must bring back dreadful memories for you. You must suffer in ways the rest of us don't."

Severus shook his head. "I am sure that the reverse is true, as well. And my own suffering, as you put it, that was of my own doing. Most of it, anyway. But yes, these attacks are constant painful reminders to me, of things I witnessed, and of things I did, whether willingly or not. A reminder of who I was, and of who I almost became. Sometimes I feel I will never escape that past. Perhaps I shouldn't."

"You need to live in the present and look forward to the future, Severus. Didn't Aine say something to you the other night about not stepping back into the past? Don't do that. We need you in the here-and-now. I'm sorry I brought this down to you."

"I would have learned of it soon, anyway. And I may be contacted by the Ministry about it again, or by Moody. I need to at least know what everyone else does, in that

case."

The two wizards ate their toast and drank their tea and coffee, and Filius asked about Morgana and about Severus's evening out with the two McGonagalls. Severus thought of mentioning Gwen Burns to Filius and seeing what his reaction was...Burns had been in Ravenclaw, and Flitwick must have known her fairly well...but then decided against it. Filius was a tender-hearted soul and Severus didn't want to cause him any more distress. Besides, the incident was embarrassing to him, and another indication that there were people who still viewed him with distrust, ordinary people, not just a crazed vigilante.

Filius left to dress and attend breakfast in the Great Hall with the staff and students who were still at the castle, and Severus finished dressing. He wound his pocket watch and put it in his waistcoat pocket, then he opened the drawer to his night stand and took out his ring. It was ostentatious, but its weight might serve as a reminder. He slipped it on and looked at it, then shook his head and took it off. It wasn't time yet to begin wearing it, if there ever would be such a time. He pulled out the end of his watch chain and held the ring beside it in his palm, then he drew his wand and cast a spell joining the chain and ring. He'd carry it with him, feel its weight hidden in his waistcoat pocket if he needed grounding.

There was a rapid knocking on his door. Another visitor...maybe someone from the Ministry come already to question him or to ask his help. The knocking paused, then resumed again without stopping.

Severus pulled open the door, ready to berate the person for their impatience.

"Poppy?"

"Oh, Severus, I returned after reading the paper this morning. Did you hear?" She took his hands in hers.

Severus nodded. "But you had another two days of holiday remaining," he said, puzzled.

"I know, but I missed you, and when I saw the paper, I was worried about you. I used a *Sofortport*...Instaport...to get to the only approved Instaport arrival point in Britain, and then I Apparated straight here from Diagon Alley. I don't know what I would have done if the hotel didn't have one of those new Instaport booths. Bribed someone to make me a Portkey, I expect, or tried to Apparate across the water to England."

"Don't ever do that, Poppy. Don't try to Apparate farther than you're comfortable. I'm fine. But I'm very glad you're here." He smiled and put his arms around her. "Very, very glad."

End of Part Ten

Chapter One Hundred-Thirteen: The Past Follows

Chapter 114 of 118

Severus makes Poppy an offer, which she accepts. Alastor Moody returns to Hogwarts with information and questions.

Beginning of Part Eleven



PART ELEVEN

Chapter One Hundred-Thirteen: The Past Follows

Wednesday, 7 April 1999

"You ate, then?" Severus asked, Levitating Poppy's bags into the room and setting them down beside the sofa.

"Yes. I was having breakfast when I read the paper, and I did finish before I left."

"What did you tell the others?"

"Ah, well, that was a bit awkward," Poppy said. "My excuse was flimsy, especially as we'd had plans for the day, and Pomona was annoyed with me, kept after me to stay at least until tonight. I finally took Gertrude aside and told her that I was seeing someone now, that I missed him, and also that he had been involved in the war and these attacks might be upsetting to him." She blushed. "I think she knows about you now. I didn't say, and she didn't say, either, but her expression ..."

"I see." Severus sat heavily into his chair. Lovely. As happy as he was to have Poppy back, she certainly did need to learn a few lessons in discretion. Hufflepuffs simply weren't good at that sort of thing. They could be *discreet* enough, he supposed, but they weren't skilled at subterfuge. And Gamp was a canny witch. Severus swallowed.

"It's all right, though," Poppy continued. "After we talked, Gertrude ran interference for me and wouldn't let the others try to persuade me to stay."

"She was appalled, though, no doubt."

"I don't know. Frozen, I'd say. I couldn't read her very well, but she was certainly surprised when she realised who I was talking about. But it is okay, Sev. I'm sure she wouldn't tell anyone. I've never known anyone, anyone at all, who's better at keeping secrets or respecting the confidences of others. I would have told her outright, you know, but we did say we weren't telling anyone, so ..."

"Right. Nothing to be done about it." He leaned forward and reached for her hand, taking it briefly. "It is all right. I have no doubt that you are correct about Professor

Gamp's discretion."

"I am. We were very close when she taught here. It was hard when she had to go away and I couldn't visit her easily. She was, well, I wouldn't exactly say that she was like a mother to me, but she was a good friend, an older witch, and I always knew I could go to her about anything. There's no one I was closer to, except perhaps Minerva. Which made it awkward when Minerva was, well, before Minerva got to know her and like her."

"But Minerva's brother married her."

"She and Minerva were friends before that, naturally; the three of us were. But Gertrude was Dumbledore's deputy, and I guess there was a bit of rivalry...only on Minerva's side, not Gertrude's, of course. Minerva was younger then than you are now. She wasn't as secure in her position here at Hogwarts." Poppy shrugged. "But Gertrude's a good friend, Severus, and she can keep a secret. She won't say anything to anyone."

"Still, it must have raised questions for your other companions. Not that I wish you were with them rather than with me, but it must have been very odd for you just to get up from breakfast and say you're leaving."

"We'd had a nice time as it was, and I did enjoy it, but I said I was ready to get home, that I was no longer in the mood for a holiday when there was a murderer attacking people whom I know. I couldn't make any pretence that I was close to the Mellifluas, but I did know both Simon and Charlotte. Ro was a brick about it. She said I had to do what was comfortable for me, and she knew I'm a sensitive soul." Poppy chuckled shortly. "She made me sound a bit daft, actually, but she was trying to be kind. I could have jinxed Pomona's mouth shut, though. Heavens! She's a friend and all, but she just doesn't know when to let go, when someone does not want to discuss something."

"Can't be helped, now that you're here, and I am glad you're here." Severus got up and moved over to sit beside Poppy on the couch. "I was missing you especially last night." He put an arm around her and kissed her hair.

"Weren't you going to go out with Gareth and Morgana last night?"

Severus nodded. "And I did. It was enjoyable. Except for a few moments early in the evening."

"Why? What happened?"

"Gwen Burns."

"Gareth's date?"

"She took exception to my company. She didn't stay."

"Oh, Severus! I'm sorry. That must have been very painful for you."

Severus twitched one shoulder. "It wasn't pleasant, certainly, but Gareth ... I wouldn't have expected anything different from him, but he was good. Basically told her that if she didn't like my company, she could leave, which she did."

"Why was she like that? You two scarcely know each other...did you even teach her?"

"For one year. Her last was my first teaching. She was competent enough, and no trouble back then. Apparently, her marriage to Polyphemus has soured her on all Slytherins. And, I gather, on all former supporters of the Dar of Riddle. In a way, I can't blame her for her feelings, but it was one more occasion that reminded me of who I am, who it is that other people see when they look at me."

Poppy shook her head and gave him a squeeze. "Not everyone, Severus. Not me. Not Gareth. None of your friends, and not your colleagues, either."

"You know, if you and I ... I hope that we continue to see each other, that we do more than just see each other, but if we begin to go out in public, this is what you will encounter. It is one reason I did not wish to bring you to Diagon Alley for dinner that time. While we were greeted impeccably that evening, with nothing but courtesy by Delancie and his staff, I have had other less pleasant experiences in London, and not just in London. I wouldn't say they are frequent, and they are less frequent here in Hogsmeade, where people have become used to me, or in McTavish Street, where people simply ... carry on with their own business. But there may come an occasion where someone says...or does...something about me, about my past, about my character, and you are there. It could be uncomfortable for you."

Poppy set her jaw. "And whatever they say, they had better be careful in my hearing! I can see why you can't react without justifying their opinion of you or making an uncomfortable situation worse, but I would have no such compunctions."

Severus shook his head. "I don't want you to defend me, Poppy...not that I don't appreciate your affection and your desire to support me, but I don't think it would help. And I don't want to ... it would be embarrassing for me." He didn't want to be hiding behind a witch's skirts, but he couldn't very well say that to Poppy.

"Well, if it's anyone I know, I am not going to calmly listen to someone say something nasty about you or attack your character, Severus. I just couldn't. It wouldn't be about defending you, it would be defending the truth, and defending my own honour, because if you're attacked, then I am, too, and I'll not ever stand by as if it doesn't matter to me. Don't worry, I won't go doolally on them. I would try not to increase the embarrassment of the situation...although I wouldn't mind redirecting it on whoever deserved it."

"People have their reasons for their feelings, and I am not just some innocent scapegoat, Poppy. I try not to dwell on the past, but it does still follow me. The past doesn't just disappear; people still remember. I did things, both before I joined the Order of the Phoenix and after, that an honest witch or wizard could justly hold against me. And even if it wasn't specifically I who harmed them, many people still look at me and they see other injuries they suffered because of people like me. I don't like it, but it's the way things are."

"That doesn't mean that you don't have a right to live your life without being accosted on the street or insulted in a pub. You have a right to leave the past in the past."

"Well, just be prepared for some of your friends and acquaintances not to like me," Severus said, wanting to end the conversation, "or for them not to like your being with me. I value your opinion of me, and your feelings for me, but I think you're a little naive about what it may be like to be associated with me, and not just as a friend."

"I've seen a lot in life, Severus. I don't think I'm naive. I'm just hopeful for the best in people. I hope you don't think that if someone disapproved of you, I'd just ... drop you, or something."

Severus kissed her cheek. "I don't believe you would drop me over someone's disapproval, no. That's not Poppy Pomfrey." If she dropped him, it would be because of who he was, not because of someone else's opinion of him.

"So did you have a good time yourself the last couple of days?"

"It wasn't bad. I did quite a bit of brewing. Got all of Professor Birnbaum's potions brewed for him."

"That was very good of you."

"Well ... I have a confession to make, Poppy."

Poppy looked up at him expectantly.

"Professor Birnbaum has become my personal florist." He grinned as she laughed at that. "I was having trouble getting flowers for you one day, and so Gareth and I

popped up to the Tyree place. He gave me the first ones, but I felt awkward not paying for any others, so we agreed to a trade."

"I wondered where you had got so many beautiful flowers!"

"But now that you've returned early, you've ruined my surprise for your return."

"I can still be surprised. I love surprises."

"I'll just change its timing, that's all," Severus said. "Your unpredictability will not be my undoing, woman. I will simply adjust my plans."

"You have a lot of plans and schemes regarding me, then?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, I'm scheming right now to get you out of your clothes and into a bed."

"Not alone, I hope!"

"Definitely not alone." Severus kissed her lips gently, then took her in his arms and kissed her more passionately, holding her warm body to his.

"Mmm, I did miss that," Poppy said a few minutes later, cuddling up against him.

"What did you do to distract yourself from missing me while you were gone?" Severus asked, smirking.

"Oh, my, so many things. It was actually a bit tiring. We saw two plays, one was a dinner theatre performance our first evening there. Gertrude and I went for a long walk along the beach...which we had almost to ourselves. We ate a lot. Too much. But it was all delicious. Oh! And there was a Muggle magic show! That was very funny, but really quite good. A French Squib who actually is a Muggle magician did all of these tricks, and it was very hard to say how he did any of them without magic. We talked to him after the show...he was a sweet young man, though his English was almost nonexistent, so Gertrude did most of the talking for us, since her French is still quite good. This was only the second time he'd ever performed for a wizarding audience. I guess he was embarrassed about it, but Herr Schiller had persuaded him that his act would be entertaining, so he was giving a few performances just to see how they went. We all enjoyed it."

"That certainly sounds novel."

"And I did have a sauna and a massage after it. We all did that yesterday afternoon. Gertrude hadn't wanted a massage, but I told her that in my professional opinion, it would do her good. She had a very sweet little Japanese witch give her a therapeutic massage, and she did admit that it had been relaxing."

"And your massage ... it was by a tall, young, blond, well-muscled Swedish wizard dressed in nothing but a loincloth?"

Poppy laughed. "Hardly! It was a wizard, but he was slim...rather bony, in fact...and older than I by about twenty years. And he was fully clothed in a long tunic and sleeveless robe. I think he was Czech. I'm not sure. He didn't speak much English. He spoke German very well, though, according to Gertrude. We should go sometime, Severus. I'd get you into a mud bath! We'd have a good time."

"We'll see," Severus said, snorting at the thought of a mud bath.

"I ought to get up to the Hospital Wing and put my things away and check the infirmary, I suppose," Poppy said. "I am sorry I didn't get you anything, Severus. I was planning to, and I'd been looking at things, but I was going to shop today, and obviously, I left before I could."

Severus shook his head. "Do not concern yourself. I certainly did not expect anything. However, while I was brewing yesterday, I brewed something for you. It's not here, though; it's still in my lab. Would you mind waiting while I fetch it?"

"Why don't we meet up in my sitting room? That way I can take care of my luggage and so on."

"All right. I won't be long."

"The password's the same as it was. Just let yourself in."

Twenty minutes later, Severus presented himself to Mrs Framingham and let himself into Poppy's suite. He could hear her humming something familiar in another room.

"Poppy?" He took a step toward the bedroom, but she emerged and smiled at him.

"That was fast."

He held out the large blue pottery crock he was carrying. "You can change the pot, if you like, but I thought this one would go with your sitting room colours."

Poppy took the crock and set it down on the coffee table, bright anticipation on her face. She lifted the lid and looked in. Slightly puzzled, she took a pinch of the substance in the pot and rubbed it between her fingers.

"This is only half of your present. And actually, if you don't want the other half...I hope you will, but since you arrived back early and Minerva's not back till this evening, it's not really ready, anyway."

"This is Floo Powder?" Poppy asked, confused.

"Yes. My specially Charmed soot-free blend. No matter the state of the Floo Network you travel through, you will stay soot-free."

"Thank you, Severus." Poppy put the lid back on the pot.

"And I've not been clear why I'm giving you Floo Powder, which probably seems almost as odd a gift to you as Blood-Replenishing Potion. I thought that, if you like, we could have Minerva open the Floo between our suites. Then whenever you wanted, you could visit me. Naturally, I would not presume the reverse. But it could be convenient for you, and when you Floo back to the Hospital Wing, you could return directly to your own rooms rather than to the infirmary."

Poppy grinned. "I'd love that, Severus. If you're sure you don't mind. I know you value your privacy."

"This was my idea; of course I don't mind."

"Well, I'll always call through first if you aren't expecting me."

Severus smiled. "Good. That's settled then."

"But you must feel free to use the connection, as well, Sev. I think it would be convenient for us both."

Severus hadn't believed it possible to be as happy as he felt at that moment. Poppy was in his life and he was a part of hers. He loved this witch. He suddenly understood what it meant to be overflowing with happiness. He did the only thing he could do at that moment: he stepped up to Poppy, took her in his arms, and kissed her, wishing he never had to let her go.

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"Melina *Obliviated* her?" Poppy asked with a disbelieving laugh. She and Severus were in her office, and she had just found, but not yet read, the two separate...and very different...reports from Madam Fuller and Healer O'Donald.

"I could scarcely believe it, myself, but she did save me some awkward questions."

"I hope she doesn't go about doing that on a regular basis!" Poppy said, though she was grinning. "I'm glad that Filius is all right. So, what was the spell you used on him that had such nearly disastrous effects?"

"*Agravitas*. I got the idea from our discussion of Gravitomancy. And it did work, just not the way I'd envisioned it. I could probably tweak it, practise casting it to achieve exactly what I want...I think I cast it with too much force, for one...but I don't think it's a practical spell for duelling. And outdoors...let's just say I was glad that we were duelling in the dungeons and Filius hit the ceiling and didn't end up lost in outer space." Severus shuddered. He had thought of that only hours after the duel, and although he was fairly sure that he could have reversed the spell quickly enough, he was still glad that they hadn't been practising in the Quidditch stadium.

"I ought to stop by and see him, check and make sure he has no lingering side-effects," Poppy said. "I am very relieved, for both your sakes, that it turned out to be a relatively minor accident. It must be the one that Aine foresaw."

"I hope it was," Severus replied. "I wouldn't want another one on this scale or worse, certainly. I was about ready to give up duelling after seeing Filius lying there, not breathing, his skin all mottled, his hair blue..."

"Your antigravity charm turned his hair blue?" Poppy asked in astonishment.

"No, that was from a mild jinx I had cast earlier. Just a simple colour-change charm, actually. But it didn't help him look any healthier." Severus shrugged one shoulder. "He says I should continue, though, and so did Laura Manning, and she saw him when he wasn't looking very good. I'll just be less experimental with my offensive spells, at least for a while."

Poppy sighed. "You do know how I feel about duelling, but I know it's important to you, and so I'll just ask that you be careful. I would hate to see you badly injured in a duel."

"I am sure that neither Gareth nor Albus will cast anything that will do me any lasting harm."

"How are those new blocks coming that you were practising with Filius?"

"Better," Severus said with a nod. He was becoming more confident with the idea of a wandless duel against Dumbledore now, but until he had made a definite decision, he would wait to mention it to Poppy. Besides, it would only give her one more thing to worry about, and she worried about him enough as it was.

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"Severus?" Minerva's head appeared in Poppy's sitting room fireplace. "Ah, good, you're there. I looked for you in your rooms and your office. I thought I'd check here before calling Twiskett to look for you."

"You and Dumbledore are back already?" Poppy asked.

"I could ask the same of you," Minerva said. "Mind if I pop through?"

"Of course," Poppy said, and a moment later, Minerva was standing on Poppy's hearth rug, dusting herself off.

"We were going to return this evening, but Albus received an owl from Moody after lunch. Since Moody wants to meet with him...and is on his way now, in fact...I thought we might as well return this afternoon. I had no desire to bring him to Fàinne an Fhithich. What brought you back early, Poppy? Did everyone return early from Schiller's?"

"No, only me. I read the paper this morning and I just preferred being home at a time like this. I know I can't do anything about what's happening, and Severus is perfectly fine, but I knew I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself for thinking about it."

Minerva nodded. "I wanted to let you know I was back, Severus, as well as talk to you about arrangements for your holiday. It's actually good you're here, too, Poppy. Eoghan almost let the cat out of the bag with Albus, but as far as Albus knows, Severus will be making a separate trip to visit Eoghan and his family and deliver some potions to Johannes, and Poppy will be using Primrose Cottage on her own later in the week. I don't think he's associated the two, although he may. There's not much to be done if he figures it out on his own. I made arrangements with Kilbeena to stock the kitchen for you. She'll also provide any meals you would like, although you'll need to let her know in advance."

"I'll pay you back, Min," Poppy said.

"We will pay you back," Severus said.

Minerva waved her hand dismissively. "We'll discuss that when you return from your holiday. Or you can discuss it directly with Siofre. It's all from their stores. I'd just be turning the money over to her."

"We'll take care of it directly with her, then," Poppy said, "and not bother you with it. Thanks for loaning us your cottage."

"Indeed. It will be welcome to leave Hogwarts and not have Poppy worry about the vigilante while we are there," Severus said.

"I asked Kilbeena to prepare the rose guest room for you...do not worry, Severus; it is not pink...and everything should be ready whenever you decide to arrive. I thought it wouldn't be until Friday, since you were to be on holiday until tomorrow evening, Poppy, but I'm sure that if you would like to leave early, Kilbeena will not be inconvenienced. I'll just send Siofre an owl if you decide to leave tomorrow...or even today."

Severus and Poppy looked at each other.

"I think we need to discuss this first, Minerva, but if we do leave today, we wouldn't expect everything to be perfect," Poppy said.

"I had made arrangements with McGonagall for us to do a little ... a little practice duelling this evening and we were going to have a drink afterwards. However, it was not going to be a serious practice. I will need to think about this."

Minerva nodded. "Whatever you two decide, then. Now, the school. I know that Filius is here and will be here until Thursday morning, but who else is currently in residence? Have any other schedules changed?"

"Ms Benetti moved into the castle yesterday, as you had suggested. As she is now in Ravenclaw, Flitwick took it as his responsibility to get her settled into a new suite. She has rooms near Ravenclaw Tower now, but not the guest rooms. He called them the Rowena Suite."

Minerva nodded. "They have been used by various Ravenclaw faculty in the past, usually married ones, as they are particularly large. I hope he checked their state before installing her there; I don't think anyone's used them in about twenty years."

"I'm sure he did. He was quite excited about it," Severus said, his expression indicating that he was glad that Flitwick had taken care of it, since it was nothing he could become excited about.

"Other than Ms Benetti?" Minerva prompted.

"Laura and David Manning returned yesterday. Sharon Carter, as well, though she informed me she will be leaving again early tomorrow morning. She and some gentleman are going to Monaco. She will be returning to the castle on Sunday night. Rath is still away, but he is scheduled to return today. Hagrid is back, but he said he may be going away again this weekend, again to that Welsh dragon preserve. Vector returned this morning. She didn't mention her plans, but I presume they are unchanged and she will be here for the remainder of the holiday. Cahill is still here. I don't think he's going anywhere. Ouellette arrived at lunchtime ... anyone else here that you remember, Poppy?"

She shook her head. "Caspar would be here if he knew that Helena had moved in, though, I'm sure!"

Minerva laughed. "He does like a pretty witch, doesn't he?"

"I saw him before he left on Monday morning. He said something about helping Aine MacAirt move. He didn't say when he would be back."

"*NicAirt*," Minerva corrected. "Did he, indeed?"

"Fortunately, Gryffindor has been quiet and Flitwick monitored the House until Vector returned this morning. With all the Gryffindor staff away, we had to make do."

"Don't sound so cross about it, Severus, or I may insist you stay and look after Slytherin," Minerva said.

"So Caspar's helping Aine this week?" Poppy asked.

Severus shrugged. "So he said."

Poppy looked over at Minerva. "Wonder if she knew or if he just showed up."

"Probably the latter," Minerva replied. "She would have discouraged him otherwise, I think."

"They certainly seemed cordial the other night," Poppy countered.

"They always are whenever they happen to meet," Minerva said. "But I don't think that Aine ... I believe that she would have declined his help."

"I'm missing something here," Severus said, looking at the two witches.

"Caspar and Aine were seeing each other years ago. Caspar was in Alroy's House, same year, so they got to know each other well in school. Aine was just a year behind the boys. After Quin was cursed, things changed. Aine had to live the life of a Muggle. Caspar couldn't. He agonised about it, but he simply ... it would have been a lot to ask of him. And Aine wouldn't ask it of him, and she let him go."

"Everyone had been sure they would marry," Poppy added.

"They'd talked about it," Minerva agreed with a nod. "He'd even looked at rings just the week before Quin was attacked. Dad went with him, that's how I know...Caspar apprenticed under my father," she explained to Severus.

"Aine didn't ever seem to hold it against him, though," Poppy said.

"I don't think she did, but understanding it, even reconciling yourself to it, doesn't necessarily erase the pain of losing him along with the rest of the future that she'd thought she'd make with him in the wizarding world."

"But she didn't have to stay with her father," Severus said. The two witches looked at him. "No one forced her to, did they? Couldn't they have hired someone to look after him?"

"She couldn't have done that," Poppy said. "How could she desert her father? And it wasn't as though their life was miserable or as though he was a complete invalid, physically...or mentally. He just had certain ... certain incapacities. She wasn't there to take care of him the way you would someone who was ill...not after the first few months, anyway. She was there to be family for him, to keep him connected with whatever part of his old life that she could. You can't just leave a family member to languish like that, not if you have a choice, anyway. It wasn't his fault he was cursed as he was."

"Alroy could have done it, then. Or they could have taken turns," Severus said.

"Alroy did a lot," Minerva said. "He spent eighteen-hour days at the business, divesting them of many of the wizarding businesses and keeping the Muggle ones afloat. He'd had his own dreams, too, and they didn't involve working for more than another few years in his dad's company. Not a week went by when he didn't visit them, and he'd spend days at a time there when he could. He also kept the MacAirt estate ticking over, which was no small feat, even with help from his aunts and uncles. Alroy's dreams had to change, too."

"If Caspar had been more patient," Poppy said, "something may have eventually worked out for them, but he broke it off with her."

"No, she broke it off with him," Minerva corrected. "She didn't want him to feel obligated, and it was obvious that he found the entire situation difficult to deal with."

"I wouldn't do that," Severus blurted.

"What?" Minerva asked.

"He should have stayed," Severus said, blushing. "It would have made her life better, too. I wouldn't have left."

Poppy reached over and took his hand and squeezed it briefly. "Thankfully, that isn't the kind of choice that people often face."

"He never married," Minerva pointed out. "And although he's a bit of a ... what they used to call a skirt-chaser, he's never very persistent."

"So they were both alone for no reason," Severus said.

"No. They each had their own lives to lead," Minerva said. "Who's to say it wasn't for the best? But if he's planning to try to rekindle things with Aine, he would be well advised to move carefully. Time marches on and things change, people change. Aine is a different witch from the one he fell in love with over thirty years ago."

"She's very successful," Severus said. "Her achievements are admirable."

Minerva looked over at Poppy's clock. "I'd better get back up to the office soon. Moody will be here, and I want to hear what he has to say. Would you like to come up, Severus?"

Severus shook his head. "But if he wants to speak with me, I will. I don't think I can help at all. I hadn't seen either Simon or Charlotte since they left school."

"So he wasn't a Death Eater," Minerva said.

"No. It's possible that he gave money to Riddle through one of his uncles, but he somehow escaped recruitment."

"The Demornays weren't involved with You-Know with Riddle, were they?" Poppy asked.

"They were certainly pureblood supremacists, but they hadn't been involved years ago, and none were recruited on his return," Severus said.

"But Charlotte's mother's mother was a Muggle-born," Poppy exclaimed. "I was in school with her."

"And my father was a Muggle. Not that I ever preached pureblood supremacy, but I joined Riddle." Severus gave a short laugh. "But I recognised quite early what none of the purebloods did: Riddle hated the purebloods just as much as he did Muggle-borns. He relished his power over them. The only supremacy he believed in was his own. In an odd way, it ..." Severus shrugged.

"Yes? What?" Poppy asked. This was as open as Severus had ever been about his time with Riddle, and she was curious what he had been about to say.

"It says nothing positive about me, but in a strange way, it gave me a certain kind of standing with Riddle. He thought that ... that I was more like him than the purebloods were. It was one of his reasons for planning to elevate me when he conquered."

"Do you think he really intended to do that?" Minerva asked.

Severus nodded. "I do. As long as I served him and was useful to him, and as long as I provided him with an example of a perfect follower. Of course, that made my ultimate betrayal of him even worse, in his view. He could expect such a thing from someone like Malfoy or one of the Blacks, but not from me. He also, obviously, believed himself so powerful and insightful that no one could possibly betray him in the way I did, in such a thorough-going manner. I think that even after commanding my death and having Nagini bite me, he still didn't really believe that I had betrayed him as completely as I had. I think he thought it was just some momentary weakness, some aberration, on my part, brought about by my association with you."

"I think you're right," Minerva said. "When he Apparated onto the grounds, he still seemed to believe that in dropping the wards, you had betrayed Hogwarts to him, even if you hadn't killed me as he had commanded."

Poppy shuddered. "I am glad all of that is behind us, and I am very glad that you were on our side and that you lived!" She reached over and took Severus's hand, and this time, she didn't let go. Severus found that he didn't mind.

~*~*~*~

"The one thing missing in your new office," Poppy said, "is a comfortable chair. Otherwise, it's lovely. Really good job, Severus. Bright, efficient, well-organised. I think you'll find this a good environment to work in. And I don't miss any of your old decorations at all!"

Severus gave her a crooked grin. "If you ever do, some of them are in that cupboard behind you. I did chuck most of them, though."

"Even the..."

"No, I kept that. But it's in the back of the cupboard. It was too rare to simply incinerate or discard."

"Good thing Firenze never visited you in your office," Poppy said. "I can't imagine that any centaur would take very well to someone having something like that in a jar."

"It is fortunate that navigating stairs was difficult for him," Severus agreed, but not losing his smirk. "As for comfortable chairs..." Severus waved his wand, and one of the hard straight-backed chairs was transformed into a comfortable upholstered armchair with yellow fabric scattered with bright red poppies. "I shall have to work at refining the design," he said with a frown.

"I like it!" Poppy sat down. "Very comfortable, too. So, when do you want to leave for Raven's Ring?"

"Tomorrow morning?" Severus asked. "If that would suit you. I could bring Professor Birnbaum's potion with me. It would give us both time to get ready. Of course, I wouldn't be averse to spending the night with you."

"Now that Minerva's opened the Floo between our suites, that will be easier to do," Poppy said. "And tomorrow morning sounds fine. But you'd said that you needed boots or walking shoes. Did you shop while I was gone?"

Severus shook his head. "I will simply Transfigure some that I already have. Or, as you are more conversant with the sort of footwear that is appropriate, you might do that."

"All right, then..."

There was a sharp rapping on the office door. Severus flicked a finger at the door, opening it.

"You two together again," Moody said, his eye swivelling in its socket, taking in first Severus and then Poppy.

"Very observant, Moody," Severus said drily. "The Headmistress said you might be by. Have a seat." He nodded at the other straight-backed chair, and it scooted toward the retired Auror. He suppressed a smirk at the other wizard's expression, and was pleased, as well, that Poppy was smiling and looking impressed.

"And you changed your office around. Wasn't like this when I was here last." His magical eye took in the rest of the office while his natural one settled on Severus. He nodded at the other wizard. "Settling into your new life. Puttin' the past in the past. Good." He sat down in the chair that Severus had offered him.

"What did you want?" Severus asked.

"Thought you'd like to be brought up to date, is all. If you have any new insights, I'll listen to 'em. We've followed up on some of your suggestions from our last meeting. No fruit yet, but I think we're closer to the right track."

"When I made my observations, I had not anticipated that a pair of Aurors would accost Professor Gamp in her home and haul her off for interrogation," Severus said.

"She might've been questioned at some point, anyway. But I wouldn't have recommended that, either, as you well know, Snape. I was glad to get her questioning cut short. Still, in a case like this, you have to follow every lead. There's going to be more deaths before this is over if the witch isn't caught soon."

"Shouldn't you be spending time following leads that are *likely* instead of ones that are so improbable as to be laughable?" Severus asked. "Not a very good use of resources, I'd say."

Poppy, wanting to cut off and divert the conversation before it became acrimonious...or more acrimonious...said, "What is the latest news, then? How are the Mellifluas?"

"He's dead. Died an hour or so after reaching St. Mungo's. Poor sod didn't have a chance. It was another *Conruptus*, but this one hit his abdomen, practically dead centre. The damage was extensive. Even if he'd been found right away, the Healers say his chances of surviving such a bad hit were close to nil. Looks like his wife has a good chance of pulling through. She was hit second, and she'd turned to shield her children. The youngest was in her arms." Moody's cheek twitched, and his natural eye blinked. He swallowed and shifted in his chair, his claw-foot scraping against the stone floor. "Anyway, she was hit in the side, in the rib cage. She lost part of one of her

lungs, though they say they should be able to regrow it if they managed to completely excise all of the tissue that was affected by the curse. Even so, she'll live. The kids are both okay, though they're ... well, seeing that happen scared them both witless. Even as young as they are, it was horrifying for them. They're staying with their uncle until their mother recovers."

"Polyphemus," Severus said.

"Aye, that's the one. You know him?"

"Slightly. He was a couple years behind me in Slytherin. A rather foul person, but he wasn't a Death Eater, and Simon certainly wasn't. The only Mellifluas whom I'm aware of who were Death Eaters are all dead, except one who was captured at the Battle of Hogwarts. I presume that he's in prison."

"He is. They're going to question him tomorrow, find out if there's any specific person who holds a grudge against him and would take it out on his family. I'll be there for it, though I don't think we'll learn anything. Still, he may know something he doesn't know he knows, and it could come out some way."

"What does Polyphemus say?" Severus asked.

"Not very much. Very uncommunicative, given that his younger brother and his sister-in-law were struck down in front of their own front door. But he says he knows no one who would do this, that the two were completely inoffensive, and he has no enemies, either."

Severus snorted.

"You know something to the contrary?" Moody asked.

"No, but I'm sure that there are plenty of people who don't like him, and I doubt that Simon was so inoffensive, either. The Mellifluas couldn't help but be offensive. Even in school, most people who called Polyphemus a friend didn't really like him. His own ex-wife hates him."

"Polyphemus's ex-wife?"

"But Gwen wouldn't do anything like this," Poppy said quickly, giving Severus a sharp look.

"No, I never said she would," Severus said, "and whatever else I may think of the witch, I don't believe she'd attack her former in-laws, particularly with their children right there with them. However, you might get more truth from her than from Polyphemus, who clearly doesn't want to implicate any of his associates, current or former. I'm sure that Burns, on the other hand, would be happy to, what's the saying? 'Dish the dirt'? She'd tell you about Polyphemus's friends and enemies, and if she knows anything about his brother and his associates, she'd tell you about them, too. She has an axe to grind, but I'm sure you can distinguish between what's merely her invective and what's substantive."

"Gwen Burns. I think she's on our list of people to question, anyway. I'll move her up. In fact, I'll question her next, on my own. Know where she lives?"

"No. I think that Gareth McGonagall knows, though. It may be somewhere in Glasgow, since he mentioned having seen her in the Clypeum."

"Never mind, I can find out easily enough," Moody said, jotting something down on a bit of parchment he took from his pocket. "And you're sure she wouldn't be a suspect? If she has an axe to grind ..."

"A lot of divorced people have an axe to grind," Poppy said, "and a lot of divorced couples hate each other. That doesn't turn any of them into serial killers!"

"Course not," Moody said, "but I won't dismiss the idea entirely until I've questioned her."

"Do you know any more about the perpetrator after this attack?" Severus asked.

"It's definitely a witch. We will all be surprised if it isn't, anyhow. Mrs Melliflua clearly heard the first spell being cast, and she is certain that it was a woman's voice. She also said that she had the 'sense' that it was a woman, and that the woman was alone. I presume there were other things that she noticed that indicated the attacker was female, and she just can't identify what they were. In any case, we're looking for a witch, one who's not fat or old, since Melliflua indicated that the voice was that of an adult witch, but it didn't sound like an older one...not one over seventy or so, anyway. But that was a presumption we had already made based on the memories pulled from Bulstrode after she was attacked. A relatively slim witch, at least medium height or taller, probably young or middle-aged. Still not much to go on."

"Had there been any letters?" Poppy asked.

Moody nodded. "One. Polyphemus said that was one reason he was stopping by when he did. His brother had asked him to come read it and give him advice about what to do about it. It had only arrived that afternoon. The Aurors were able to find it in the house. Don't have a copy of it with me, but I read it."

"What did it say?" Severus asked.

"Pretty much the same kind of thing as has been in the others. Accused them of collaboration, of contributing to the deaths of hundreds of innocents, said that the innocent were still suffering, that sort of thing. The only way to fix wizarding society was to get rid of 'em, excise them like diseased flesh."

"That was an exact quote?" Severus asked.

"Which?"

"Diseased flesh."

Moody nodded. "It stuck with me."

"And she seems to favour the *Conruptus*, which creates rotted, diseased flesh," Severus pointed out.

"And which is very painful," Poppy said, her face anguished. "A dreadful way to die."

"Listen, Moody, if there's nothing else," Severus said, "we were discussing the infirmary's potions needs for the spring term." He didn't want Poppy any more upset than she already was about the vigilante attacks, and remembering treating Ronald Weasley's *Conruptus* injury and Angelina Johnson's lingering death from the *Massueilius* hex was unlikely to calm her.

"No, nothing else." Moody heaved himself to his feet. "Glad to see you're making a good new start to it." He glanced over at Poppy with both eyes before returning his gaze to Severus. "Glad to see you have some good folk around you, too."

Severus twitched his finger and opened the door for Moody. "Oh, one thing, Moody. Don't mention my name to Burns."

Moody stopped. "No?"

"No. She would likely not speak to you."

"Doesn't like you, eh?" Moody shrugged. "Wouldn't mention you, anyway. As Polyphemus's ex-wife, she's a natural person to question."

"Thanks for keeping us informed, Alastor," Poppy said.

"I'll let you know if we make any progress." The old Auror closed the door behind himself.

Chapter One Hundred-Fourteen: Arithmantic Charms

Chapter 115 of 118

Gareth makes a shocking discovery and worries about its implications for Severus.



Chapter One Hundred-Fourteen: Arithmantic Charms

Wednesday, 7 April 1999

"You're early," Severus said. Another interruption, albeit this one from a friend, not a one-time enemy.

"So is she," Gareth said, leaning on the doorjamb. "What are you doing back, Poppy?"

"I am going to become very tired of answering that question, I can see that now," Poppy said with a sigh.

Gareth laughed. "Well, never mind, then." He turned to Severus. "So are we still on for this evening? I'll understand if you want to cancel."

Severus looked at Poppy.

"You two made plans," Poppy said. "You carry on. I have things I can do...or I could watch you. I'd be on hand if one of you had an accident."

"That's all right," Severus said. "We'll send for you if we need you, though I doubt that will be necessary. We won't be doing anything strenuous."

"Sounds good to me," Gareth said, sitting in the chair that Moody had vacated fifteen minutes before. "I thought I'd have dinner here, which is why I'm early. Also, Snape, we need to talk. Actually ... can you come by the house tomorrow?"

Severus shook his head. "We will be leaving on holiday tomorrow. Unless it's an emergency, I am not changing those plans."

Gareth hesitated for a moment, looking torn. "No, no emergency. Nothing that can't wait a few more days."

"Is the house all right? Did the new fireplace explode? Or the new electrics?" Severus asked.

"No, no, nothing like that. Just something ... you can see it next week. That will be soon enough. There's nothing urgent about it, honestly. Just, you know, the, um, decorating and so on."

"As long as you haven't blown the place up," Severus said.

"How is Monday, then?"

"I have a meeting here in the late morning, then after lunch, I have to go to St. Mungo's to see Melina. I should have time in the late afternoon, unless you'd rather do it in the morning right after breakfast."

"You aren't planning to do that on your own, are you?" Poppy asked, trying not to sound hectoring. "I mean, I hope you have arranged for someone to go with you to St. Mungo's."

"I thought you might like to accompany me," Severus said.

"I'm sorry, I can't. I have a meeting with Gladys and Brighthead here on Monday afternoon."

"I can, Snape," Gareth said.

Snape nodded. "That would be convenient."

"Then we can go directly to the house from Mungo's."

Poppy looked as though she wanted to say something, but she just took a breath and nodded, then said, "If you need me, Severus, I can try to change my meeting."

"Thanks, but there's no need. I know you have to make the final arrangements for the staff training next week, and this way, McGonagall here can bring me to the house to show me whatever ghastly surprise he has waiting for me." Severus smirked.

Gareth chuckled shortly. "I'll come up to the castle, then...lunchtime?"

"You do like your free meals," Severus said with a snort.

"The company's not bad, either. It can be boring eating every meal on one's own. Mum's going to be returning to the estate when she comes back from the Zauberstrand, Hermione's still on holiday, Tarrant's busy bonding with his new girlfriend..."

"He's not seeing Hermione anymore?" Severus asked.

Gareth shook his head. "He liked her more than she liked him, I think, and he also wants, um, something more, um ... more serious than she seemed to." He shrugged. "Anyway, apparently it wasn't a very good match, or the timing was bad, or something. It didn't help that almost every time he's asked her out recently, she's been too busy to see him."

"She is taking on a lot," Poppy said. "You're her master. Can't you get her to cut back? She's going to miss out on a lot if she schedules herself too much to do. She needs to have fun, too."

"According to her, all of this *is* fun. But she won't be doing summer classes, and I think that once she made that decision, she felt relieved. Lately, though, she's been spending a lot of time over at Weasley's, getting him in order or something." He grinned. "She does like to take charge, that girl. Anyway, with Alroy preoccupied with the coming baby, the term holiday at the university, and Arthur being away in India with his family, she should have a nice relaxing holiday. Of course, I did give her some work to do over it, but not too much."

"Aren't you going to have a holiday?" Poppy asked.

"I am having a holiday. A quiet one. I've done a lot of travelling in the last dozen years or so. I am enjoying being in one place, and no war going on, no desperate work, just everyday stuff. Besides, I'm working on a paper I'm presenting at the European Conference of Arithmancers. I'm also leading a workshop for it, and I've not even started organising that."

"You're going to the conference?" Severus asked.

Gareth nodded. "Yeah, and I know that Aunt Minerva wanted me to take Vector's classes, some of them, anyway, but I'll be at the conference for the whole time, and so will Hermione. Mum is only coming for a few hours, giving a presentation, and returning immediately afterward, so she said she'd do it."

"Gertrude mentioned her presentation," Poppy said. "She is spending time working on it this week, much to Pomona's dismay. But she wouldn't say what the topic was. Not that it would mean much to me. I haven't done any Arithmancy in years, but I was still interested."

"She's not telling anyone. The programme for the conference just announces 'a presentation by Professor Gertrude Gamp,' and that's it."

"Do you know what it's about?" Severus asked.

Gareth shrugged. "I have an idea. She's been working on something for years, and I think that her paper is an extract from that, but ... well, I shouldn't say anything, but it's not as though you'll tell anyone, right? It's a new theory of space-time malleability in Arithmantic charms. It's very technical, nothing you'd be interested in, but from the little I've read through for her, it should be ground-breaking."

"When you say, 'nothing you'd be interested in,' you mean, 'nothing you'd understand,' don't you?" Poppy asked with a grin.

Gareth laughed. "Pretty much. People are going to be chewing it over for weeks after, I'm sure...provided they understand it enough to realise how important it is."

"We never even really covered Arithmantic charms," Severus said with a frown. "I did a NEWT in Arithmancy, and it was only mentioned in one of the theoretical sections the final year."

"We keep it from the hoi-polloi," Gareth said with a grin. "No, actually...although in a sense that's true...it's just very advanced Arithmancy. Hermione's only beginning to work with Arithmantic charms at all. Most Arithmancy masters don't even use them much. They used to be used much more commonly than they are nowadays, although the common ones were simple charms, not particularly complex ones. A lot of what used to be done with Arithmantic charms is now done with simpler, ordinary charms designed from the Arithmantic ones, or it can even be accomplished with potions. Because of that, Arithmantic charms fell out of favour as a topic to be covered in regular schooling. The simple ones weren't viewed as being particularly useful, since ordinary charms are easier for most people, and the complex ones are just too advanced even for most NEWTs level students. At Beauxbatons, they don't even teach the theory of Arithmantic charms. I understand from Robert that, at least when he was in school, Durmstrang taught some of the rudiments of Arithmantic charms to students in their final year, but that was ages ago, and I don't know if that's still the case."

"When did they fall out of favour?" Poppy asked curiously.

"Oh ... it was a gradual process, but the simplest Arithmantic charms were still fairly common in the fifteenth century, ones for warding or for crop maintenance, for instance, but by the late seventeenth century, they were rarely used, and by the eighteenth century, they were used only by eccentrics. I fancy that, outside of those who actually practice Arithmancy and are Arithmancy masters, there are now probably only a handful of witches and wizards who are acquainted enough with them to be able to use them at all. Uncle Albus, of course, is quite proficient at even fairly complex Arithmantic spells, but Grandmother Siofre is, as well. It surprised me when I realised during my apprenticeship that some of the magic I'd seen her doing when I was a kid was actually Arithmantic spellwork. Melina uses Arithmantic charms in some of her experimental Healing, but from what I understand, after she's done with the design, she then converts the process to eliminate the Arithmancy."

Poppy turned to Severus. "You see now why I say I'd never have been a Healer of Melina's calibre?"

Severus shook his head. "I'm sure that Arithmantic expertise is not required to become an artful and powerful Healer."

Poppy sighed. No point in arguing with him. It was good of him to have such a high opinion of her abilities, though.

"You know the apothecary jar that Poppy gave you for your birthday?" Gareth asked rhetorically. "You can still feel the charms on them after more than five hundred years, and that's because they are Arithmantic...the symbols on the jar are part of the Arithmantic spell."

"What are they?" Severus asked curiously.

Gareth shook his head. "I couldn't interpret them without a reference book. I only recognised a few of the symbols. They're derived from an ancient Arabic notational system. Most apothecaries and potioners in Spain at that time were trained in an Arabic tradition. They were the most advanced apothecaries of the time, which you obviously must know."

"I had wondered about that," Poppy said, "why the charms on it were still so detectable after so long. I have my great-grandfather's broomstick, and the charms are basically dead on it, and that is only a little over a hundred years old."

"Well, listen, I'm sure you two have things to discuss," Gareth said, standing. "I'll see you at dinner, then we can spar after, Snape."

Severus nodded.

"See you later, Poppy." Gareth bent and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

She smiled up at him. "We could have a drink together, the three of us, after you're finished practising...unless you want a lad's night."

"No, that sounds good to me," Gareth said, looking toward Snape and seeing his nod of approval. "We might even invite another staff member or two."

"That would be nice," Poppy said, though a frown flitted across Severus' face.

"Maybe Flitwick and ... Helena's still here in the castle, isn't she?"

"Indeed," Severus replied. "I understand that she will be here through the end of June, unless the vigilante is caught before then."

"I'll just pop around and ask her if she'd like to join us, then," Gareth said. "Don't want to have her feel left out, rattling around in the castle on her own."

Snape smirked. "I'm sure she can take care of herself, McGonagall. But if you do 'pop around,' she's got new rooms. They're up near Ravenclaw Tower. She has a portrait of a rather wild-looking warrior woman on her door."

"I know the one," Gareth said.

After Gareth had left, Severus gave a short laugh. "I think he is becoming quite a fan of our Canadian Seeker."

Poppy grinned and nodded. "He and Helena seemed to get along very well at Albus's party the other night."

"I noticed that, too. He claimed to have no interest in her when I mentioned her a couple weeks ago, but he'd never really talked to her, either," Snape said.

"Wouldn't it be nice if they started dating!"

"I will not begin match-making," Severus said stiffly, then paused. "However, if they were to ... date, I believe it would be a positive thing for them both."

"Their children would be gorgeous," Poppy said with a happy sigh.

"They have not even had a single date, and you already have them procreating," Severus said, amusement in his voice. "I also would prefer not to speak of other people's procreation, just ours."

"Procreation?" Poppy asked. "Ours?"

Severus went pink. "I meant, of course, the activities leading up to such an event." He cleared his throat and looked down. "However, it is not an entirely unpleasant thought." He glanced over at Poppy. "Is it?"

"Ah, well, um, no, not entirely," Poppy said, clearly at a loss for words. "Of course not. But, um, hmm. How long do you think your duelling practice will last?"

Glad to have Poppy change the subject, though more than a little ambivalent about Poppy's noncommittal response, Severus replied, "Probably only a half hour or so. Yesterday was a work-out for me, and only want to get a feel for McGonagall's level tonight. I promised him a longer practice next week."

"When are the two of you duelling?"

"The twenty-fourth," Severus said.

Poppy nodded. "Just when we're trying to help the students...and staff...recover from the violence of the last years, we will have a duel to entertain them." She sighed.

"Gareth and I won't be very violent with each other," Severus reassured her. "I had considered cancelling the duel with him, but he seems to be looking forward to it, and I don't know whether Flitwick could find someone else to match him with at such short notice."

"Because of what happened with Filius yesterday?"

Severus shook his head. "No. I wouldn't have used that type of spell on McGonagall, anyway." He shrugged. "I thought, out of deference to Professor Gamp. She may not be very comfortable with him duelling, particularly someone ... someone with my particular background. However, I do not believe that is an issue, and Gareth has insisted that it is not."

"What do you want to do until dinner?" Poppy asked.

Severus gave a wicked grin. "I have a few ideas."

Poppy laughed and stood. "Back to your suite, then?"

"Immediately, before we have more visitors," Severus replied, waving his wand and returning Poppy's comfy chair to its usual hard, unwelcoming, straight-backed state.

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Gareth took the stairs from the dungeons at a good clip. He would stop by Helena's new suite and accompany her to dinner if she was there, and ask her to join him, Severus, and Poppy for a drink later in the evening, but first, he needed to see his aunt.

He wondered whether he had done the right thing, letting Severus go off on his holiday before coming by Spinner's End, but he and Poppy needed a nice holiday. No point in having Severus in some kind of mood before they even left. No, it had waited all these years. It could wait a few more days.

He was less certain whether he should have done what he'd done at all. Once he'd found Eileen Prince Snape's witch's cupboard...not really a cupboard, but a concealed area beneath the floor under her desk...he couldn't resist trying to open it. He justified it to himself by remembering what Severus had said about just burning whatever private papers he found of his mother's, that he didn't care to see them. He had told Severus at the time that he would put them aside for him, pack them up with the rest of his mother's things, if he found them. Naturally, though, once he'd opened the hidden compartment, he had to see what papers were there.

He had found the cubby entirely by accident. The room was finally empty and bare. He was standing in the middle of the small room thinking about colour schemes when he took a step toward the window. He had been in and out of the room many times over the last week and a half, but this time, as he began to cross the spot where Eileen's desk had been, he felt the distinctive tingle of a charm.

On his knees, he began to feel the floorboards, passing his hand over them until he found the specific spot from which the charm originated. After trying a few different standard revealing and opening spells, Gareth decided that the charms were not simply concealment spells, but protective wards. His own work with wards was fairly meagre, but he did have a few tricks up his sleeves. He knelt there, considering the invisible compartment for several minutes before coming to a decision. He could open it, and he would. He'd need something organic to hold his spell. He preferred grain, but if there were no oats, barley, or flour in the kitchen, he was sure he could find something else to substitute. He wouldn't use blood, though. He wouldn't need anything that strong, and he had an aversion to blood use in spellwork, even if it was animal blood. Besides, most blood use was banned by the Ministry...not that that ever stopped his great-grandmother from using blood in magic when she thought it was necessary, but he wasn't Grandmother Siofre, and even she would likely agree that using blood would be overkill in this instance.

Down in the kitchen, Gareth began to think that he'd either have to go home and get a bag of grain or flour or else make a trip to a Muggle market, but then he saw a half a bag of sugar on a shelf. The sugar was hard from having sat in the cupboard for who-knew-how-long, but it would work.

He brought the bag upstairs and used his wand to granulate the sugar again, then he began, strewing it along the outline of the invisible warded compartment. He put a thinner layer of sugar inside of that outline. He sat on the floor and thought for a while before doing anything more, composing the spells in his head, calculating and reducing, until he was sure of the Arithmancy.

Standing, he drew his wand and began to cast. Symbols began to appear, some raised in the sugar, others drawn in it, baring the floor beneath. Eyes closed, Gareth concentrated on the spell, then opened his eyes and cast once more, and the many symbols began to dance and shift until in a swirl of white, there were only three symbols remaining, and one word beneath them. Gareth nodded and spoke the word. "*Astrum*."

A glow now outlined the perimeter of the compartment, showing its edges, and then suddenly, startling Gareth, though he was prepared for it, the square of floor flew off and clattered against an empty bookcase on the other side of the room. Gareth forced himself to be methodical. First he used a sweeping spell to sweep up the sugar, which he then dumped in a bin bag in the hallway. Then he picked up the section of flooring that served as the door to the compartment and examined it. It was unremarkable, though it had slightly bevelled edges where it fit neatly against the edges of the hole, which were also bevelled. Only then did he sit down cross-legged on the floor and begin taking out the contents of the compartment, one thing at a time.

On top was a journal. Gareth flipped through it, but it was gibberish, probably password protected. That could be broken if Severus wanted to read it. Gareth set the journal aside and pulled out a sheaf of parchment. Records of some kind. Another bundle of papers, carefully tied with a ribbon, looked like correspondence. There were two more similar bundles of letters, followed by four old, completely filled journals, also gibberish except for the dates, then at the very bottom of the compartment, there was a single envelope.

Gareth looked at the front of the envelope. Severus's name was on it. Just "Severus." The envelope was unsealed. Gareth warred with himself, then he finally replaced everything in the compartment but the letter...no better place to keep it, after all...and cast a quick password charm, but not replicating any of the wards that he had broken.

He went down to the kitchen and fixed himself a cup of tea, then sat at the table and contemplated the envelope. He would just take a quick look at it. Severus hadn't even wanted to see any of Eileen's old papers and things, after all. Although this was addressed to Severus. Perhaps a suicide note? Severus had said that none had ever been found. But the handwriting didn't look like that in the journal. More like a man's writing, Gareth would say, and besides, why would someone write a suicide note and then conceal it where it might never be found?

Gareth carefully untucked the flap of the envelope and pulled out the letter. As soon as he unfolded it, he folded it up again and set it on the table.

"Bloody hell ..."

He sat and drank his tea and contemplated the letter. He was Severus's friend...he'd like to think he was his best friend, aside from Poppy, of course. The little he had seen when he had unfolded the letter made him think that Severus might need a supportive friend. Besides, he couldn't give it to him without knowing what was in it. Snape had already been through a lot. If this was shocking or upsetting in some way, he should know that before presenting him with it as though it were nothing more than an old grocery list. Besides, he was curious. Curiosity alone wouldn't allow him to read the letter not meant for him, but he didn't think it was a good idea to give it to Snape without knowing its contents.

Gareth unfolded the letter and began to read. When he was finished, he read it again, folded it, replaced it in the envelope, then went back upstairs.

"*Prince*." The outline of the compartment appeared again, and this time, Gareth used his *sgian dubh* to pry off the lid. He made a cursory examination of the bundles of letters, looking at the return addresses and postmarks, then pulling out letters at random and glancing at them, occasionally taking a minute to read a paragraph or two that caught his eye. He'd have to come back and scan them properly later that evening or in the morning, but he already had a thousand questions, and he was sure that Snape, when he saw these, would have even more. Or perhaps just one.

Time to hop over to Hogwarts and get Snape to come by the house. He needed to see these letters. Gareth couldn't imagine what Snape would think. It seemed all too bizarre ...

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Gareth reached the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmistress's Tower. "*Angus Óg*."

The gargoyle stuck out his tongue, but grated aside to reveal the stairs up to his aunt's office. The door at the top of the stairs opened to him when he arrived.

"Gareth? I wasn't expecting you," Minerva said. She got up and came around her desk and gave her nephew a quick hug. "This is a nice surprise."

Gareth kissed his aunt's cheek. "So, Aunt Minerva, what do you know about Snape's dad?"

Author's Note: I hope to continue to be able to update *A Long Vernal Season* at least twice a month now, although there may only be one update in October, as I will be travelling. I do apologize for the long hiatus! I don't plan to abandon any of my fics, I promise.

Chapter One Hundred-Fifteen: Dead ... or Alive?

Chapter 116 of 118

Gareth discusses a mystery with his aunt. Severus and Poppy spend some time alone together before dinner. Severus wonders if he's moving too fast or expecting too much.



Chapter One Hundred-Fifteen: Dead ... or Alive?

Wednesday, 7 April 1999

"What do I know about Severus's father?" Minerva asked, eyebrows raised in surprise.

Gareth nodded. "I found some stuff at the house...at Spinner's End...while I was cleaning up. It raised a lot of questions in my mind."

"What questions?"

Gareth hesitated. "I can't really say, not specifically. I haven't talked to Snape about it yet...he's going off on that holiday of his and I wouldn't want to have him obsessing about it or upset just before that. It's waited all these years; I reckon that it will wait a few more days."

"All right, well ..." Minerva gestured toward the chairs near the fireplace and took a seat in one of them. "I don't know very much, really. I never met him. He met Eileen just after she left Hogwarts, though I don't know where or how."

"I know that...he met her in a park. He would photograph her, then he finally talked to her and asked her out."

"You may know as much or more than I do, then," Minerva said. "But I'll tell you what I know. He worked at one of the local mills, a supervisor of some sort. I think he had a technical education for it. When he and Eileen first married, they lived in a small flat, but then they came into a little money...I am fairly sure it was from his side of the family...and they moved into the house at Spinner's End. I think they bought it outright, but I'm not sure. I do know that Severus owns it now, so they did purchase it at some point."

"Anything else?" Gareth asked, disappointed by how little his aunt was telling him, and how irrelevant it seemed. "What about ... when he left the family?"

"It was before Severus came to school, so I don't know very much about that. I think it would have been in about ..." Minerva calculated in her head. "In about nineteen sixty-nine, maybe sixty-eight. I don't know anything about what happened to him after that, except that he died in the autumn of Severus's second year."

"Hmm, did he ..." Gareth said, rubbing his beard as he thought about that. "Did Severus leave for the funeral?"

Minerva shook her head. "No. Eileen wrote us a letter after the fact, asked us to break it to Severus. It was a highly unpleasant task, as you may imagine. Horace and I broke it to him together. Horace hated doing that sort of thing, so I agreed to be there, too. Severus was quite stoic about it, but ... he skived off classes for a couple of weeks. Not all of them, obviously. We could turn a blind eye to his missing some classes, but not all of them. I discovered that he spent most of his time down with Hagrid, working with him in his gardens or going into the Forbidden Forest with him. Dumbledore and I weren't entirely happy about that...going into the Forest...but I thought, on balance, that it was good for him, and he wouldn't come into any trouble with Hagrid. But we never had to speak with Severus about his classes. He eventually began going to them all again on his own."

"D'you think Hagrid would know something about Snape's dad, then?"

Minerva shrugged. "He might. But what is it you want to know?"

"I'm just curious about it, especially his death. Do you know if Snape ever visited the grave?"

"I have absolutely no idea. Eileen may not have even done so. After all, it had been a few years since he'd left the family. I understand that they had a strained relationship before that."

"It wasn't always that way," Gareth said softly. "There are a lot of photos of Eileen early in their marriage, and then of Eileen and little Severus. You can tell he loved her, and that he doted on his son, at least in the early years. I think things were a lot more complicated than just a strained relationship, and a whole lot more complicated than Snape knows."

"How so?"

"You're certain that it was in Snape's second year that his father died?" Gareth asked.

"Positive. It wasn't his first year, and it couldn't have been his third year because he wasn't taking any of the elective classes yet."

Gareth shook his head. "That would have made it ... nineteen seventy-two?"

Minerva nodded. "Aye, that sounds right."

Gareth was quiet, distracted.

"You know who might know more: Grandmother Siofre," Minerva said. "She had some dealings with Drusus Prince at about the time of Eileen's marriage. I don't believe she ever met Tobias Snape, but she knew of him. It's a pity that Aunt Lydia isn't still alive. I think she actually visited Eileen and Tobias shortly after they were married. Or maybe it was after Severus was born. I don't remember. It wasn't anything that I had any interest in at the time. But if you want to know more and you don't want to ask Severus, you might ask Grandmother Siofre."

"All right, thanks. I may do that, or I may just wait. Asking Severus himself would be pretty pointless, since ... well, I think there is a lot he didn't know."

"What did you find?" Minerva asked curiously. "I understand wanting to wait and show Severus whatever it is, but if I knew what it was, I might be more help. What is it that you really want to know?"

"Aunt Minerva ... can a dead man write letters?"

"What?"

"I found a lot of correspondence, most of it Eileen's, but one letter addressed to Snape..."

"From his father after he died?"

"No, no." Gareth shook his head. "It was a letter that he had apparently written to him just before he left home. I shouldn't have read it, but I did. And then I had to look through the rest of the letters. Almost all of them were from Snape's dad, and some of them were written *after* he was supposed to be dead. The last ones were dated nineteen seventy-five. That's three years after you say he died. Something is wrong. And I think ... I think that it's possible that the man might even still be alive now."

Minerva looked at him in astonishment. "I'm certain as I can be of the facts. I can double-check, but I can't believe that I would remember the man dying during Severus's second year when it was actually during his fourth or fifth."

"I didn't read all of the letters. Just bits of some of them. But I think that Snape's dad was staying away from the family because Eileen had him convinced that, as a Muggle, he would be a danger to Severus from extremist purebloods. She thought Severus might have a better chance, I suppose, if he didn't bear the stigma of having a Muggle father, but I also think that she was under pressure from her father..."

"Her father was dead before Tobias died...or before she reported his death to us."

"I know that, but he was still alive when Tobias left the family," Gareth replied, "and there were other pressures on Eileen. That cousin Giles, for one. There were a few letters from him. I only glanced at them, but I didn't like him at all from the little I saw."

"I can't believe that a mother would tell her child that his father was dead when he wasn't, even Eileen."

"Maybe she thought it would be easier for Severus if he never expected his father to come back, and that he would be more likely to identify solely with his pureblood mother and her family."

"And then she killed herself...you knew that, I hope...without leaving Severus any indication that his father was still alive." Minerva shook her head. "It's hard to fathom."

"And Eileen, she's definitely dead?" Gareth asked.

"Most certainly," Minerva replied. "Why? Do you have any evidence to the contrary?"

Gareth shook his head. "None. I just wondered whether she might've left Snape and gone off with Tobias."

"No. I suppose it all could have been faked, of course...we have plenty of personal experience with that, don't we?" Minerva asked with a slight smile. "But I don't think so. Severus went to her funeral, had to take care of various items of business after her death...the property and so on...and there was an inquest by the local gamot because of the circumstances. Severus was of age, but Slughorn helped him with some of it, I believe. He attended the funeral with him...Eileen had been a Slytherin, too, but I think he went with Severus for his sake, so he wouldn't be on his own there."

"How would I get a look at the inquest records?" Gareth asked.

"The regional gamot would keep them...I think it was the Manchester gamot...but they are also always filed with the Ministry. If you visited the Wizengamot's offices, they could give them to you unless they've been sealed for some reason. That's unlikely, though."

Gareth nodded. "I doubt her death has any bearing on the other matter, but ..." He shook his head. "No, even if there were some useful clue in those records, it's not for me to go hunting around unless Severus wants me to. I've already poked in where I've no business."

"I know that Severus resented his father leaving, and now, if after all these years, he learns that he might be alive ... I don't know what he will think."

"Or he might be dead. He might not have died when Eileen claimed he did, but the last indication that he was alive was almost twenty-five years ago. I could be opening a tin of Glumbumbles for nothing. Maybe I should just give him the letter from his father to him and then burn the others."

"No, don't do that. He has a right to know at least that there were some peculiar circumstances surrounding his father's reported death. And if he is alive, Severus deserves to have the chance to try to find him. If he isn't ..." Minerva shrugged. "It will be sad, but not as though he could have known, could have sought him out sooner, before he died. Not the way it was for Albus. I am sure that Albus would advise you to tell Severus and to encourage him to find out what really happened to him."

"Yeah, that's right, Albus's father went missing, didn't he?"

"Aye, and it was only years later that he learned what had happened to him, and that he'd been alive for decades after he'd gone missing. Albus never quite forgave himself for not searching for him."

Gareth nodded. "All right, I'll show Severus everything I found. And if he asks my advice, or even if he doesn't, I'll suggest that he should try to find out what happened to his dad." Gareth stood, and Minerva followed suit. "You know, I think he was pretty close to his father when he was little, at least up until the last year or so before he left the family. I don't know how he'll react to this, but he should know at least that his father thought he was doing what was best for him."

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Severus lay on his back, his eyes closed, one arm behind his head, the other around Poppy. Her head was resting on his bare chest, and she had one arm around him. He was sleepy after their lovemaking, and when she spoke, he didn't catch what she said at first.

"What was that, Poppy? What about St. Mungo's?"

"I was wondering about your appointment with Melina. I didn't know you had one. Are you feeling well? You haven't had any peculiar symptoms returning that you haven't told me about, have you? Because I'll check you out, if you want. I know what I said about getting another Healer, but that doesn't mean that I..."

"Sh, sh, it's all right, Poppy. It's not that kind of appointment. I feel fine. No, it's about something else entirely."

"May I ask what?"

"A wealthy Slytherin is making funds available for Millicent Bulstrode to go to America with her mother so that she can receive that specialised treatment, hopefully repair her tissue and nerve damage, if it's not too late. I need to make arrangements with O'Donald to see that that happens, and as soon as possible, since apparently the closer to the time of the injury the patient receives the treatment, the greater the chance of complete success, although I understand that even old injuries can be helped by it. If she wants to play Quidditch again, though, time is of the essence."

"Oh, that's wonderful news!" Poppy said. "I was worried about the poor girl. She's not very bright, not particularly attractive, and more than half her family is in prison, so the only thing she really had going for her was her Quidditch. I thought it was terribly sad that that should be taken away from her."

"Well, with some luck, she'll play again."

"Let me guess: the wealthy Slytherin is Gertrude."

Severus gave her a sharp look. "And why would you guess that?"

"She said at the party that she thought that Millicent would find a way to be treated, and then the two of you had that secret meeting a few days ago." Poppy shrugged the shoulder that Severus was caressing. "Seems logical. Tell me I'm wrong."

"No. I do not wish to lie to you," Severus said. "But Professor Gamp wants it to remain anonymous. You can't tell anyone else...or even hint that you know."

"Of course," Poppy said. "I am relieved you're all right." She gave him a squeeze. "I would hate anything to happen to you."

Severus kissed the top of her head. "I am quite well. I don't think I've felt better in years. Or maybe ever."

Poppy raised up on one elbow and looked down into his face, smiling. "I'm glad, Sev. Very glad." She kissed him.

"It is your presence in my life, Poppy," Severus said softly. "I was drifting along before. I was ... lost. But now I've found a safe harbour, and happiness. A reason to approach every morning with hope, and to find meaning and happiness in what I do. Everything seems different now. And I love you, just ... love you," he said, kissing her.

Poppy returned his kisses, then finally, with a sigh, she rested on top of him again. "I hope you feel that way for a long time, Severus."

"Forever, Poppy. I know it."

She turned her head and kissed his chest. "That may change..."

"If you are going to start going on about the things you were saying before, being a Hufflepuff, being older, whatever, please don't."

"No, I was going to say that may change when you learn my middle name!" She laughed as Severus gave a groan.

"Well, it's not 'Pustule,' so how bad could it be? What about ... Panacea? That's not a bad one. I promise I'll still love you if your name is Panacea!"

Poppy shook her head, smiling. "No, although I do like that guess. I wouldn't want to be named Panacea, but it's an interesting one."

"Your turn now."

"Can I ask whether I've ever guessed a name close to it? A version of your name?"

"Hmph. Well, you did tell me...though the response was negative, and so not very helpful. Yes. One time. One somewhat close."

"I should have kept better track of my guesses! I'll have to look at my list," Poppy said. "I may guess that it's not Sharky, then."

Severus choked with laughter. "Where did you get that?"

"It was the name of a character in one of the plays we saw." She sighed. "I will figure it out. But not just now. I think we need to get dressed and get up to the Great Hall for dinner."

"Must we?"

Poppy sat up and swung her legs off the bed. "Gareth is expecting you. And if you don't want people to notice our frequent combined absences, it probably would be best."

"What are you going to tell Dumbledore about why you're back?" Severus asked.

"Nothing. Hopefully, he won't ask." Poppy began to sort through her clothes and get dressed.

"If he does?"

"I'll lower my voice and tell him it's a female thing." She grinned. "That will make him blush, and he won't ask again."

Severus snorted. "Do you wish you were still on holiday with your friends?"

"No. I do regret missing two days, and I was enjoying their company...especially Gertrude and Rolanda, whom I don't see often enough...but I don't wish I were back there and not here."

Severus sat on the edge of the bed and sighed.

"I really mean it, Sev. I am glad I'm here with you."

"I know. I'm just wishing we could eat here and not go upstairs."

"We'll start our holiday tomorrow...and we're spending the night together tonight...so try to bear it till then," Poppy said, a slight teasing note in her voice.

He nodded, distracted.

"Do you want to cancel your practice and drinks with Gareth?" she asked more seriously.

Severus shook his head and stood. "As you say, we have our holiday ahead of us."

"You know, I don't think I thanked you properly for the Floo Powder and having your Floo open to me. I really appreciate it, you know. It feels special, more than just a convenience."

Severus quirked a brief smile. "I'm glad. It was meant to be special. I hoped you would understand that."

He dressed quickly and was ready before Poppy, who had disappeared into the bathroom to freshen up before putting on her robes. He waited for her in the sitting room. He hoped that Poppy was really looking forward to their holiday as much as he was. It was heartening that she had dashed back to Hogwarts as she had, but he felt that "Operation Woo and Win Poppy Pomfrey" was going to be in the "wooing" stage for longer than he had hoped.

On the other hand, perhaps he should never stop wooing her, even once he won her. He would never truly deserve her, but he could try to make sure she was never sorry she was with him. He hadn't done well with relationships in the past, but he had learned from them, he hoped. He had managed to push away or alienate everyone from his father to Lily to Dumbledore. He didn't want to do that with Poppy. He loved Poppy too much to let her go. He wondered why she hadn't said that she loved him...she had said encouraging things, of course, and she seemed to welcome his feelings for her, but she hadn't said anything of her own feelings.

Severus decided not to brood about it. It was enough that she had come home early to him, that she wanted his love to last, that she wanted to be with him then, at that moment. Perhaps that demonstrated her love for him. He would be patient. But perhaps the red roses to greet her at the cottage weren't a good idea, perhaps they would be too much ... No, he had already determined that he would ask Birnbaum to have a large bunch of red roses waiting for them in the cottage...he'd been going to have them in her rooms for her on her return from her witches' holiday, but with her early return, that plan had to be changed. And it had been changed as much as it would be. He couldn't allow her to think that his ardour for her was cooling. Operation Woo and Win Poppy Pomfrey would march on, complete with roses.

On arriving in the Great Hall, they learned that Albus could not wonder about Poppy's unexpectedly early return, nor notice that the two of them arrived together. His chair at the staff table was empty.

"He's visiting Potter again," Minerva said. "He's worried about the boy, and I suggested that rather than worry about him, he should drop by and see him."

"He said something to me about that on Saturday. Suggested I might come with him on Sunday." Severus snorted. "That would be more likely to disturb Potter, and it certainly wouldn't have made my day brighter."

"Why is he worried?" Poppy asked.

"Potter's still working at that Muggle job, lifting boxes and whatnot. And that would be fine if he seemed well and happy, but Albus said that he is dishevelled and he seems to have lost interest in everything. Miss Weasley broke up with him recently, and I don't think that helped matters."

Severus wanted to make a snide retort, but with Poppy sitting next to him, he restrained himself. He should just be glad that Dumbledore was gone for the evening. With any luck, they wouldn't run into him before they left in the morning, either, avoiding awkward questions.

"I hope that Albus can help," Poppy said.

"He's asked Moody to approach him about helping him with his investigations. Potter would make a fine Auror. Working with Moody for a while might be what Potter needs to awaken his interest in it...or at least, awaken his interest in being engaged in life again."

Working with Moody would put Severus off any career with the Aurors, Severus thought. But Potter was his father's son. He'd probably enjoy the feeling of being a hero...that was likely what was missing from his life. Or, Severus thought, looking over at Poppy and remembering his resolution to try not to be bitter, it could be that Potter just missed having a purpose in life. If he himself had not come back to Hogwarts, he likely would have done less than Potter. He would have just sat at Spinner's End and rotted. At least Potter was working, even if it was in a Muggle shop.

"He needs a purpose," Severus said, adding grudgingly, "If working with Moody helps him to feel he has one, then he should be fine."

"I just hope that Alastor sets him a good example," Poppy said, glancing at Severus, clearly remembering the incident in which Moody had hexed Severus in the back the previous year. "He has not always engaged in exemplary behaviour in the past."

"I think having Potter around would give Moody something to live up to," Minerva said. "And Moody never used Unforgiveables, even when Crouch had sanctioned their use against Death Eaters back during the first Riddle war."

Gareth and Helena came in together, both apologising for being late. Gareth sat in Dumbledore's usual place next to his aunt and Helena sat beside him.

"We got to talking and lost track of time," Gareth said as his aunt handed him the bowl of asparagus.

"Easy to do," Poppy said. "Are we still on for that drink?"

"Yeah, if Snape doesn't land me in the infirmary!" Gareth said with a grin. "But then you could all just congregate around my bed and drink to my health."

Severus scowled. "I will not injure you, McGonagall."

"I know that," Gareth said. He looked around. "Where's Filius? I thought he might like to join us."

"He's having dinner with his niece and her family," Minerva said. "In fact, this gives me a good opportunity to ask Ms Benetti a favour."

"Of course, Professor," Helena said, looking over at her curiously.

"I was wondering if you'd like to help out with Ravenclaw whilst Filius is on holiday. Laura and David Manning have said they'd look in on the House and be available, but I'm sure they'd appreciate some help, particularly if they'd both like to go out for the day, and I thought it might be ... perhaps not *fun*, but something new and different for you."

"Oh, I would like that, actually," Helena said. "I'd like to feel useful, and it would be nice to get to know some of the students better."

Minerva smiled. "Very well! You can speak with them about scheduling, then," she said, gesturing toward the couple where they sat at the other end of the staff table.

"Would you like to join us, then, Aunt Minerva?"

"Drinks, you said?"

"In my rooms," Poppy chimed in. "They're coming up after they practise."

Minerva nodded. "For a little while, that would be nice."

"Why don't you and Helena drop by at around eight, then," Poppy said, "and then Severus and Gareth can join us when they're ready."

"And if I'm not incapacitated," Gareth said.

Severus restrained himself from rolling his eyes. "If you are that concerned, McGonagall, we do not have to practise. Or duel at all, for that matter."

"No, no! I'm looking forward to it. Just don't overestimate my ability. You've been working with Filius, and he's got decades of duelling experience and I have none at all. I'm no pushover in a rammie, but this isn't a pub brawl...not that I've been in many of those, either!" he added when his aunt gave him a strange and disapproving look.

"Do not be concerned," Severus said dismissively. He hoped that Gareth was better than he was making himself out to be, or he'd have words with Flitwick for involving him in the duels at all. On the other hand, he'd seen Minerva's Pensieve memory of Gareth casting an earthquake spell before the Hogwarts battle, and that had been no mean feat. The other wizard had also apparently killed a number of Death Eaters during the battle itself. No, Severus would not worry too much about McGonagall. He could take care of himself.

Author's Note: There are several references in this chapter to events that occurred in other stories. Siofre's "dealings with Drusus" take place in *Charming the Scottish Garden* (in a number of chapters). Dumbledore discusses his father's mysterious disappearance in Chapter 101 of *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, though the circumstances under which he learned of his father's fate were to be in the RaM sequel, which I never wrote. The incident in which Moody hexed Severus took place in *Death's Dominion*, chapters sixteen and seventeen, "Twisting on Racks" and "When Sinews Give Way."

Chapter One Hundred-Sixteen: The Tyree Estate

Chapter 117 of 118

Severus and Poppy leave for their holiday in the Highlands at the Tyree estate.



Chapter One Hundred-Sixteen: The Tyree Estate

Thursday, 8 April 1999

Severus woke to the sound of the shower and Poppy singing a cheerful tune. It seemed vaguely familiar, he thought as he rolled over and drifted back to sleep, pulling Poppy's still-warm pillow to his chest.

He woke again to a kiss on his cheek, Poppy sitting beside him on the edge of the bed. She was wearing the mauve- and lilac-coloured robes that she had worn on their "holiday" in the Ravenclaw guest rooms.

"I hated to wake you, you were sleeping so peacefully," Poppy said, caressing his face and brushing back a lock of hair. "You must have been having a nice dream."

"I don't remember. I don't think I was completely asleep," Severus said. He took her hand and kissed her palm. "You were singing in the shower."

Poppy laughed. "I'm sorry. I should have been quieter and let you sleep."

Severus shook his head. "It was a good way to wake up." Not quite as nice as waking up to her making love to him, he thought, but a close second.

"If you'd like to sleep longer, I could go up to breakfast..."

"No. I want our holiday to start as soon as possible," Severus said, sitting up and letting the feather comforter fall back, exposing his chest to the chilly air of his dungeon bedroom.

"I thought it had a pretty nice start last night," Poppy said with a wink. After Minerva, Gareth, and Helena had left her rooms the evening before, Severus had made love to her on her sofa, then they had Flooed to his rooms and made love again in his sitting room before falling into bed.

Severus gave a crooked grin. "It was. Sorry I fell asleep so fast. I hope it was all right for you."

"More than 'all right,'" Poppy replied, grinning in return.

"Good. I guess the sparring the last few days tired me more than I'd realised."

"It does take a lot out of you, all that magic. And I'm sure that casting the anti-gravity charm on Filius took a lot of energy."

Severus groaned. "Don't remind me!"

"Well, Filius doesn't seem bothered about it, and he's back to his usual self, so I wouldn't worry if I were you."

"I'm not worried," Severus said. "Not worried, simply embarrassed. I don't know what I was thinking."

"That it was clever, no doubt," Poppy said, standing and letting Severus swing his legs out of the bed. "That's something you Slytherins have in common with Ravenclaws...you can become enamoured with the cleverness of something without always thinking through all the practical implications."

"Hmph. I suppose." Severus Summoned his dressing gown. "Did you want breakfast in the Great Hall?"

"Whatever you'd prefer."

"You're all packed, right? I only have a few things I need to put in my bag, and I need to fetch the potions for Johannes. I suggest that we call Twiskett for tea and toast and leave immediately. Unless, of course, you're quite hungry and would prefer a full breakfast."

Poppy shook her head. "No, that sounds good to me, too. We can always have a second breakfast at the cottage, or an early lunch."

"I need a shower."

"I'll fetch my bags from my rooms, then, whilst you shower, and meet you back here."

~*~*~*~

Fifteen minutes later, the two were sitting down to their light breakfast in Severus's sitting room when the fireplace flared green and Minerva's head appeared.

"Good, I caught you two before you left. Albus has offered to Apparate with you to Raven's Ring, Severus. What shall I tell him?"

Severus sighed. "Tell him whatever you like. I suppose I can live with his winks and grins. If, of course, that's all right with you, Poppy."

"It's fine. Tell him as much or as little as you like, Min," Poppy said, taking a bite of toast.

Minerva nodded. "I'll tell him that as you're both going to the estate, you're Apparating together. And I don't see any point in trying to cover that you will both be taking your holidays there at the same time. I won't get into your, um, individual accommodations unless he asks, however."

"That's fine," Severus said. Dumbledore knew that he'd been planning to visit Eoghan over the holiday, anyway, though the implication had always been that he'd pop by the Tyree place for tea, not for an extended stay. If the old wizard thought that he and Poppy were spending more time together while they were there, that would at least keep the awkwardness to a minimum when he did learn that they were together...and it would be easier on Minerva. It was getting to the point where she was moving from being discreet about the relationship to being secretive, and Severus didn't want to put her in an uncomfortable position. Besides, if Operation Woo and Win Poppy Pomfrey was successful, eventually everyone would learn of their relationship, and preferably sooner rather than later. That thought both excited and frightened him, and he pushed it aside.

"Have a good time," Minerva said. "I'll see you in a few days, then!"

"Bye, Minerva! Fuller is still locum, if there are any illnesses or accidents."

Minerva's head disappeared from the fire, and Severus smiled. "You didn't tell her to call you if she needed you."

"I'm sure that if there's a very good reason for her to call me back early, she will, but barring that, I'm on holiday with you, and I don't want to sacrifice one minute away from you. Duty calls enough on both of us when we're here; we don't need to be thinking about that whilst we're away, too."

"I did imply to Eoghan that I would come to tea over the Easter holiday," Severus began.

"Oh, yes, I know that, and that's fine. I think it would be nice, too, if you two spent some time on your own together. I just don't want either of us to be drawn back to Hogwarts unnecessarily before our holiday is over."

"We shall see. At least we can both go to tea with the Tyrees. Perhaps it won't be as onerous if you are with me."

Poppy laughed. "I thought you enjoyed the time you spent there with Gareth."

"I suppose I did," Severus admitted, "and Eoghan seems acceptable, for a boy and a Prince relation."

"He's a Tyree, too, and his grandmother is a Muggle-born. He adored Lydia Prince Tyree, but she was his great-great-grandmother. So try to see him as a person in his own right, not just as a Prince relation."

"Hmph. Minerva says we're also related through, um ..."

"Yes?" Poppy prompted, picking up her teacup.

"Apparently we're both related to, er ..."

"To whom?"

"A pair of sisters." Severus bit into his wholemeal toast.

"Sisters?" Poppy shook her head, confused.

Severus chewed slowly and swallowed. Well, this wasn't the most embarrassing fact of his existence, after all. "Longbottoms."

"Ohhh! I do remember that Bertrand is married to a Longbottom, now that I think of it. Sally. I didn't know you were related to the Longbottoms."

"Neither did I. And I'm still not sure whether I believe it," he replied. "Minerva could be having me on."

Poppy laughed. "I doubt that, Sev. Besides, I think the Longbottoms are related to everyone. Minerva's got some Longbottoms in her family tree on her mother's side. In fact, my father's mother's mother was a Longbottom. A cousin of some sort to Minerva's great-grandmother. We figured it out once back in school."

"So you and I are related?" Severus said, eyebrows raised.

"Very distantly. But unless someone's a Muggle-born, they're bound to be related in some way to most of the rest of wizarding Britain."

"Good thing there are Muggle-borns, then," Severus said.

"It does inject some new blood into the population," Poppy agreed. "Of course, Gertrude has a theory ..."

"What's that?"

"She thinks that all Muggle-borns, or most of them, anyway, must have a Squib or two in their family trees, and that eventually the magic re-emerges in their descendants."

"That does make sense. Of course, pureblood supremacists would hate that. If it were proven true, it could lead to anti-Squib feeling...greater anti-Squib feeling than there already is. They already disapprove of witches and wizards marrying Muggles and would like to outlaw that; they'd likely be quite vociferous in their opposition to Squibs marrying Muggles, too...they'd see Squibs entering Muggle society as a threat to blood purity, certainly."

"Fortunately, the people who think that way have been defeated. I think it will be a long time before we see views like that gain any headway again, at least officially."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Prejudice dies hard, and it provides a sense of security for some people."

"I can hope, anyway. And I think that Hogwarts can be a force for changing some of those old attitudes, particularly with you as Head of Slytherin."

Severus simply nodded. He believed that Poppy was naive, and he didn't want to remind her that he had been Head of Slytherin during some of the worst, most prejudiced years in recent wizarding history. It was not a positive way to begin their holiday together.

The two met no one on their walk down to the gates, though they saw Stan Shunpike tossing bits of something into the lake for the Giant Squib to catch. Poppy, wand drawn, insisted on going through the gates first and checking the bushes on either side of the road. When she cast a *Revelare* to see whether anyone were hidden by magic, Severus bit his tongue. He doubted that anyone would be waiting beside the Hogwarts gates on the off-chance that he might be coming through them, but it was good of Poppy to be concerned and careful. Besides, it did seem that the vigilante watched her victims for some time before attacking them; he supposed that it wasn't completely unreasonable for Poppy to think the witch might be hiding in the bushes outside of Hogwarts. He just hoped no one was watching from the castle windows as he stood there like a Milquetoast and let the Hogwarts matron check for danger for him.

When Poppy waved him through the gates and they had clanked shut behind him, she told him to Disapparate first and she would follow on immediately after. Poppy arrived on the drive only seconds after Severus, the crack of his Apparition still reverberating off the surrounding mountains and the old, grey stone castle the Tyrees called home.

"I should have brought my broomstick," Severus said, looking around him. The sky was an intense blue, with only a few gauzy white clouds scudding across the sky toward the higher mountains to the northeast of them. The breeze was chilly, but fresh, and Severus thought he could smell the sea.

"I'm sure there's one you could borrow if you like. You and Eoghan could go flying one afternoon. That's something he'd be sure to enjoy with you."

"Wouldn't you want to come?" Severus asked as the two walked up the drive, their luggage following behind them at his wandless command.

"I really don't enjoy flying very much, Sev, but if it's important to you, I could come along for a bit."

He nodded. "We shall see."

"I hope you enjoy hill-walking."

"I am sure that here, and in your company, I will," he said, looking toward her, a slight smile on his face.

The front door to the large house opened, and Severus recognised the house-elf who had greeted him the previous occasions he had visited with Gareth and then with Dumbledore.

"Hello, Brantin!" Poppy called, waving.

The house-elf nodded at her, smiling. As they drew closer, he said, "Madam Siofre expects you. She asks if you would join her in the morning room."

"Thanks, Brantin," Poppy said. "We can find it."

Brantin wiggled his fingers at their luggage, taking it from Severus's Levitation and setting it all down in the corner of the front hall. "You like the luggage sent to Primrose Cottage now?"

"Yes, that would be fine, wouldn't it, Severus?"

"All but the brown box," Severus said, nodding, and with his assent, Brantin snapped his fingers. He and the bags vanished with a resounding crack.

"It's through here, Sev, if you haven't seen the room before," Poppy said, starting down the broad, wood-panelled hallway.

"Eoghan brought me this way, I believe," Severus said, looking around at the various paintings and artifacts that decorated the house.

Siofre set aside the newspaper she was reading as the two entered. Breakfast was laid out on a sideboard, and two empty places were laid at the table.

"Good morning, Poppy, Professor Snape. Would you care for some breakfast, or have you already eaten?"

Severus found himself famished as the aroma of sausages and coffee wafted past. The tea and toast had only served to whet his appetite, it seemed, but he wasn't sure whether they should accept or not. Apparently Poppy had no such question in her mind, and Severus was glad to hear her agree to breakfast.

"We just had something light before we left," Poppy explained as she helped herself to kippers. "We wanted to get a start on our holiday."

"Quite sensible," Siofre said with a nod. She poured herself a cup of tea. "I thought you might like a bite, in any case, before settling in at the cottage."

"So where are the others? Johannes and Eoghan?" Poppy asked, sitting down across from Siofre and accepting a cup of tea from her. "Don't tell me that Johannes is still in bed."

"Nay, that would be a rare occurrence," Siofre said with a sharp smile. "He was up before dawn and out working in the garden before breakfast, then he ate with me a while ago and went back out. The weather can be somewhat variable here, particularly this time of year, and he wants to work outdoors while it's clear."

"And Eoghan?" Poppy passed Severus a small pitcher of cream for his coffee. "I thought we would see him this week."

"Aye, an' you will." Siofre smiled at Severus. "The lad has taken to you, Professor. I hope you do not disappoint his hope that you will come to tea whilst you are here, you and Poppy both, of course."

"Indeed. We had spoken of that ourselves," Severus said.

"Eoghan is down with his grandparents now, but he will be returning this evening. Perhaps you would care to come to tea tomorrow afternoon, or Saturday?"

Severus nodded, chewing his sausage.

"Saturday afternoon would suit us well, I think," Poppy said. She thought that Severus would appreciate having two days more-or-less to themselves with no outside obligations. She looked over at him questioningly.

"Yes, thank you, Madam Tyree. Saturday afternoon," Severus said. "We look forward to it."

"Severus was saying that he wished he'd brought a broomstick with him. Would you happen to have one he could borrow?"

"Aye. There's the broomshed near the greenhouses, over on the other side, away from the house. You remember it? Take whichever ones you like. Eoghan has his in his bedroom, so you may feel free to use any of the others. I fly seldom now, though Honnie likes to have an aerial view of the gardens and fields, and he flies fairly regularly, and others on the estate sometimes use them, as well, so the brooms are all in good order and well maintained."

"Speaking of others on the estate," Poppy said, "are Bertrand and Sally around at all?"

"They are. They braved a Highland winter with us this year...though they did spend a few weeks in January down in Bournemouth with friends."

"I was just mentioning Sally to Severus this morning. We think they may be related in some way," Poppy said.

"Aye," Siofre said with a nod. "Sally's sister, Louisa, was your grandfather's mother."

"I can barely remember her." Severus had a vague recollection of a silent, staring old woman whom he had seen at his grandfather's house a few times, but he had always been sent off while the adults talked...his mother, grandfather, and great-grandmother. She hadn't expressed any interest in him.

"She and Sally weren't on good terms for a long time before she died. Sally wasn't even told of Louisa's funeral until after it was held," Siofre said. "I think Louisa was an unhappy woman."

"My entire family was unhappy," Severus said. "It would surprise me if she were an exception."

Siofre gazed at him over her teacup, considering him with her sharp hazel eyes. "I will borrow you for an hour or two this week, an your lady permits," she said with a nod toward Poppy, though her eyes remained on Severus.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"You mention the unhappiness of your family." Siofre set down her teacup. "We may speak of that. I am an old witch, Professor, with a long memory."

Severus, still mystified, inclined his head. "As you wish."

"And we will invite Sally and Bertrand to tea on Saturday, as well, shall we?" Siofre asked rhetorically.

"Of course," Severus said. "It would be ... interesting to meet them." They were both blood relatives, he realised. Bertrand as Lydia's son, therefore his great-grandfather's cousin, and Sally as his great-great-aunt. He had mixed feelings about meeting more "family," but if they had been estranged from his grandfather and his grandfather's parents, they might be acceptable. On the other hand, Bertrand and Sally might not be inclined to meet him, if they disliked his side of the family.

"I hope that Eoghan won't feel ignored," Poppy said.

"We will see that he has time to speak with his cousin," Siofre replied.

Severus turned to Poppy. "I will not forget the boy, Poppy. Do not worry."

"Now, however, you begin your holiday and settle into the cottage." Siofre rose. "If you have eaten your fill?"

"It was delicious, Siofre, thank you," Poppy said.

"It was most welcome," Severus agreed, standing. "Thank you."

"Then come with me. I have something for you that will make your stay here easier and more pleasant...or which shall when complete."

Poppy and Severus followed Siofre as she led them through to the conservatory, then the music room, and into the sitting room. They waited, curious, as the old witch opened a drawer in a cabinet at one side of the sitting room and drew out two objects hanging from soft dark cords. One was a small, pinkish-orange spiral shell; the other looked like a bit of colourful petrified wood.

"I prepared these for you," Siofre began. "After I have performed the final charms, you may wear them to bypass the Anti-Apparition wards and Apparate freely about the grounds."

"Thank you, Siofre," Poppy said. "That will be very convenient."

"Aye, well, there are few enough open Apparition points, and if you are hill-walking, you may find it useful to be able to Apparate." She held up the polished petrified wood, dangling from its dark green cord. "This one is for you, Professor. Eoghan gave it to me from his collection especially for you when he heard I was creating them." The

corner of her mouth twitched up. "He was enthusiastic to provide it to you."

Severus nodded. "Thank you both, then."

"I assume you have no terror of a wee blood spell?" Siofre asked.

Severus hesitated, lips parted. He was not opposed to blood magic, per se, nor was he concerned that they might be violating some British wizarding law. But blood magic ... that was powerful, risky, and potentially dangerous. He barely knew this witch, even if he wished to be able to trust her.

"I am curious about it," Poppy broke in. She had seen the hesitancy on Severus's face and knew that he was likely loathe to question Siofre, but uneasy about the blood magic, nonetheless.

Siofre turned to her. "Here, we shall finish yours first. Just a drop of blood from a finger is all we need. With that, I will create a charm that will allow you to Apparate freely over the Tyree lands, just as if you were family admitted to the wards and had the freedom of the estate. Because it is created with your blood, none other can use it, and there's no danger to the estate if it be lost or steal't." Siofre glanced up at Severus. "'Tis not lightly given. But you are in a manner of kin, through young Eoghan, and Minerva's trusted man at Hogwarts."

"We appreciate it," Poppy said. "Is there anything I need to do to prepare?"

"Nay, gi' your hand t' me, an you're ready."

Poppy held out her right hand. Siofre set both pendants on a small table beside the sofa and drew her wand.

"T'will not hurt beyond a slight prick." Siofre picked up the shell by its deep blue cord, flicked her wand slightly at Poppy's outstretched hand, then held the shell to the tiny bead of blood at the tip of Poppy's index finger. With the shell resting in the palm of her left hand, and holding her wandtip just above it, Siofre whispered a few words. The slight smear of blood vanished, the shell glowed for an instant, and Siofre closed her hand around it. She nodded.

"It is complete. The charm will last twenty or thirty years. Longer than I will live to see, no doubt. But you may use them if you return for other visits."

"We will leave them with you before we go," Poppy said, taking the charm and slipping the cord around her neck, tucking it into her robe.

"Leave them at the cottage. A house-elf will retrieve them. We will keep them in the North Tower relic gallery for you."

"Are there restrictions on the charms we should be aware of? Places they won't work...and may we Side-Along with them?" Poppy asked as Siofre cast a quick healing charm on the pinprick on her finger.

"Aye, you may Side-Along...and if the Professor does not wish his own charm, you may provide him with Side-Along Apparition. There are no restrictions on them other than good manners."

"Where are the open Apparition points?" Severus asked.

"The drive here, where you have arrived on your visits to us, and a few other spots near estate residences: the walk and garden outside the lodge; the lawn at the well down by Morgan and Fiona's house; the flagstone by the sundial at the gatehouse...Bertrand and Sally reside there when they are on the estate...and there is a large open green up near the cottages on the sea, where a few other clan families live, and where they may direct their visitors to arrive an they Apparate. Both the gatehouse and the green have wards, however, that sound a bell when any arrive there. We can hear the gatehouse bell here at the house, and if anyone visits when Bertrand and Sally are away, a house-elf pops over.

"Minerva is here too seldom for an open point to be secure...or necessary...at Primrose Cottage, and there is none there. You may easily walk in fine weather as we have today, though...or borrow a broom...even an ye have the two charms. 'Tis a pleasant walk, not two miles from the lower gardens beyond the greenhouse to the orchards near the cottage. We walk it oft, Honnie and I, as we view the grounds. And anyone may Disapparate from anywhere on the grounds, and from a few of the outbuildings, such as the greenhouses, but only to leave the grounds entirely...and they may not Side-Along someone, nor may they Disapparate from within any of the residences without Splinching, not without a charm such as these or admission to the family wards."

Severus glanced at Poppy, let out a slow breath, and held out his left hand, palm up, but fingers curled. "These amulets will be secured when we leave?"

"Aye, lad. The North Tower treasure room is secure enough. An you prefer it, we can destroy the amulet afore ye both leave, but if you come again, you might want it." Siofre gave Severus a slight grin. "We have no need of your blood for aught else, and if it may ease any doubt you have, Professor, Albus had one of these for a number of years, and it still rests above, untouched."

"He doesn't use it any longer?" Severus asked.

"We admitted him to the family wards some time back," Siofre said briskly, "so he doesn't need it." She raised her wand and looked at him for confirmation. When he extended his fingers and held his hand steady, she twitched her wand, raising a droplet of blood at the tip of his index finger. She picked up the piece of petrified wood and repeated with Severus's blood the spell she had performed on Poppy's shell.

"Wear this in good health, Professor," Siofre said, handing the charm to Severus.

The petrified wood was quite warm, whether from Siofre's spell or her touch, Severus was unsure. He followed Poppy's example and slipped the dark green cord around his neck and inside his shirt.

"Thank you, Madam Tyree." Now that the spell was cast and his blood used, he realised what a privilege she had given him, and what trust she had shown. There may be some in the wizarding world who did not want to sit at the same table with him, but a witch of discretion and power had just given him the freedom of her estate. Siofre Tyree's trust meant more than the petty snub of some prejudiced young witch in the Three Broomsticks.

"You may leave through the conservatory, if you like, and walk from there, or stop by the broomshed and select a couple brooms," Siofre said. "You remember how to reach the cottage from here, Poppy?"

"Yes, thanks! We may walk, or maybe I'll give Severus a Side-Along," Poppy replied.

"It is a nice day for a walk or a flight," Siofre said.

"I left some potions in the front hall," Severus said. "They were some that I brewed for Professor Birnbaum."

Siofre nodded. "I will tell him when he comes in. Now, one last thing. If you need anything at all whilst you are here, Duster will be listening for your call. If he is occupied, it may take him a few minutes to arrive, but he is a good elf, and he often serves Minerva when she is here. Let me introduce you before you go. Duster!"

The three waited only a few moments before there was a crack and a house-elf appeared beside Siofre. His skin was a pale tan, but he had a large blue scar on one side of his face, running down his neck and disappearing beneath the multiple tartan tea towels he was wearing, wrapped and draped around his body and across his shoulders. One ear had a few short tufts of fine brown hair emerging from it; the other ear was scarred blue and hairless.

"Duster, this is Professor Severus Snape. You know Madam Pomfrey."

"Aye." Duster bobbed his head at Severus, then smiled crookedly up at Poppy. "You look like a spring bouquet, Madam Poppy!"

Poppy laughed. "Thank you, Duster. You are as poetic as ever."

Duster's crooked grin broadened. "Mister Morgan prints another book of my poetry next month. *Napping on orchids*. Mammie doesn't like this one, she says, but she doesn't like napping."

"I am sure you never nap when you should work," Poppy said.

Duster laughed. "It isn't really about napping, anyway. It's about ... about how it feels to dream while working, that feeling of working in the soil with Master Professor and forgetting that I and the orchids and the earth are not one. That feeling. It is a feeling all house-elves know when they are happy in work, but it is hard to describe. Every poem in the book is about that feeling."

"I think that humans get that feeling sometimes, too," Poppy said.

"That's what Master Professor says, and Mister Morgan."

"All right, now," Siofre said briskly. "Enough talk of poetry. Honnie will wonder where you've got to, and I know he needs your help. But when either Professor Snape or Poppy call you whilst they are here, you will serve them."

"Right, Madam Siofre!" Duster looked expectantly up at Severus.

"Say something, Sev," Poppy whispered. "He needs to hear your voice."

Severus cleared his throat. He had thought that silent little Twiskett was strange, and Blessen, his alabaster-skinned brother with the tufts of red hair, but he'd never met a house-elf who wrote poetry before. "Er, congratulations." Severus nodded at the creature.

Duster nodded back, then with a snap of his fingers, he Disapparated.

"Shall we pick up a pair of broomsticks, Sev?" Poppy asked as they stepped out of the conservatory onto a well-tended path of pea stones that led down into the gardens.

"Yes. We can fly to the cottage."

"Wouldn't you rather walk? It is a beautiful walk, and you could get a feel of the place."

"We will have a good view of the grounds if we fly," Severus said, "and we will be there more quickly."

"I'd enjoy the walk with you, myself." Poppy looked up at him and took his hand, smiling. "Can't hold hands on broomstick. Or if you're in a hurry, I could Apparate us."

Severus squeezed her hand. It was nice to be able to hold hands like this, with no worry about who might see. He smiled down at her, then swiftly bent and kissed her forehead. Another thing he could do here that he couldn't do at Hogwarts. "I love you, Poppy, and I hope that we have other walks together, but I'd like to get to the cottage sooner and unpack, get settled, and so on. And if we fly, I will have a better sense of the grounds. Dumbledore said that they are among the most extensive privately held wizarding lands in all of Britain." He also wanted to get to the cottage and see whether Birnbaum had received his note about the roses, and the card that he had enclosed to be put with them. He hoped so; he had been anticipating seeing Poppy see the roses and open his card for days.

"All right, then," Poppy said. "Broomstick it is!"

Poppy led them down past the greenhouses, around a hedge, and to a small cluster of outbuildings, one a large stone barn-like structure, a second medium-sized stone shed, and the other two, smaller wooden sheds.

"It's this one, I think," Poppy said, pulling open the door on the smallest shed. "Yes, this is it."

The rafters glowed with a spell as the two entered the shed. There were several brooms there, resting on hooks on the far wall, as well as a carpet rolled up on a shelf, two long toboggans leaning next to the door, and several sets of skis and ski poles.

"Pick one out for me, Sev? It doesn't need to be fast, just steady."

Severus examined the brooms, quickly choosing for himself a German Drachenfeuer, which he'd read good things about but never seen in person. It was black with gold flame-like stripes down the handle, a black moulded handgrip, and dark red and black polished twigs at the other end.

"Do you think Professor Birnbaum would mind if I borrowed this one?" Severus asked, holding it out for Poppy to see.

Poppy shrugged. "I don't know why not."

"It's German. I thought it might be his personal broom."

"I don't think he'd keep it in this shed if he cared who used it. He may have another, anyway."

Severus nodded, looking over the other brooms. "How about this one? It's a Cleansweep Seven. Good solid model, excellent stability charms, comfortable cushioning charms. Fast enough, and very responsive, but not a real racing broom."

"Okay. That sounds fine," Poppy agreed, reaching for it.

They stepped outside, and as soon as Poppy closed the door, Severus mounted his broom. He was pleased with the way that it responded. Nothing like the Thunderbolt that Helena had let him use, but quite good, at least as good as the Firebolt, he thought, but a bit more comfortable. He rose straight up, but then immediately floated back down to Poppy.

"Coming?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. Let me just get settled." She grinned at him nervously, then released her hold on the Cleansweep, letting it float beside her, and mounted. She seemed to let out a sigh of relief, then rose up a few feet to hover beside Severus. "I'll lead the way, obviously, since I know where the cottage is, but feel free to fly higher, or to circle about as we go."

"All right. Don't fly much?"

"No. Very rarely. I don't enjoy it much, and I don't completely trust broomsticks," she said, lowering her voice as if the broom she was riding might hear her and take offense.

"If you really want to walk..." Severus began.

"I don't dislike it that much. I don't have a phobia about it. We'll fly. You'll enjoy it." Poppy smiled gamely and started forward, rising gradually, Severus following her, until they were about fifty feet in the air.

"All right?" Severus asked, pulling up beside her.

"Just fine," Poppy said, gingerly taking one hand from its grip on the handle and patting it before grabbing on again. "You picked a good one. Now the cottage is to the southwest over there." She raised a hand and gestured, tottering slightly, then regaining her balance. "You can't see it from here. That long house there, you see it? That's the lodge, where Branwen and Renwick and their kids live."

Severus nodded. "Someone pointed that out to me when I was here before."

"That house beyond the rise over there is Morgan and Fiona's place, and the larger building next to it is where they have their presses and offices. They built the small house after the kids all grew up...they used to live in the lodge...but the press building has been there for ages. Siofre and Johannes put it up for them a year or two after they moved to the estate back when the quads were babies."

"They believe in having many children in that family," Severus remarked.

"Morgan and Fiona stopped at four...though that was enough, especially all at once! Malcolm only ever had Gareth, and Melina is Murdoch's only child. And, of course, Minerva and Albus ... they never had children. But you're right...Morgan and Fiona, and then Branwen and Renwick with their three, have helped populate the estate!"

"Where is the gatehouse?" Severus asked, looking around.

"Back the other way. If we followed the drive from the front of the main house, we'd come to it."

"I didn't realise that so many people live on the estate. I thought it was just Siofre, Birnbaum, and Eoghan."

"They do rattle around in the main house a bit, but they often have company. And even sometimes when Minerva comes here, she stays there rather than at the cottage if it's just a quick visit for a night or two. Liam and Judith, Eoghan's parents, used to stay here a lot, from what Minerva says. It was like a second home for them, and they practically raised Eoghan on the estate. I guess that's one reason why Eoghan came here to live with Lydia rather than going to Connor and Elisabeth, his grandparents. They also simply have plenty of room for him here."

"I got the impression from Birnbaum that Eoghan will inherit the estate."

"Will he? Well, I suppose that would make sense ... although I'm surprised it wouldn't be one of Bran's kids, actually, since they're Siofre's descendants, and the place has belonged to Siofre since her grandparents died when she was young."

"I suppose it's because she and Birnbaum adopted him as their son," Severus said.

"Probably. And I doubt that Wren Caoimhe and the others will be left out in the cold."

"And they're all coming to Hogwarts in the autumn, according to Dumbledore, all four of them."

"It's going to be a large class, I think."

"Indeed. Almost as many as this year."

"And here we are. Those are the apple orchards there, and there's the house," Poppy said.

Severus circled the cottage and gardens. "Very nice."

Poppy set down in front of the house, where Scottish primrose were already beginning to bud. She didn't stumble, but she took a moment to steady herself and regain her feet before she dismounted her broom. Severus set down more lightly, dismounting as his right foot touched the ground. After riding with Helena recently, he had polished up some of his old skills.

"There's no password," Poppy said, adding with a laugh, "though there is a lock, but Minerva says they never use it when they're away, just when they're here and they want to deter casual callers from wandering in for a visit."

"Really."

"Yes. I guess that when she and Albus first began coming here, guests would drop by and when they didn't rush to answer the door immediately, some of them would just wander in and call out. Very friendly, you know, but not very comfortable if you're, um, *relaxing*, if you know what I mean."

"I do," Severus said. "And I think that we should be sure the door is well latched. I do not wish to provide either education or entertainment to any of the estate's curious residents!"

Poppy laughed. "Minerva said that when they were about eight or nine, Aiden and David once wandered in whilst she and Albus were in the middle of, um, you-know-what, and they had to scramble to cover up, since they weren't dressed. That's when they started locking the doors."

"I doubt we will have such visitors," Severus said as they walked up the front path. "This is a larger house than I thought it would be."

"I think that Siofre believed Minerva would like to raise a family here." Poppy shrugged and opened the door. "I wonder where Brantin put our luggage."

"I'm sure we'll find it." Severus also wondered where the roses were, if Johannes had even received his message. "Give me a tour of the place?"

"Of course."

Severus followed Poppy into the living room.

"The living room, obviously," Poppy said. "There's a dining room through here. Then down this hall, here we have the kitchen. Minerva said that she'd had it stocked for us. We can explore later. Through this door, Minerva has made a reading room. It used to be an artist's atelier years ago...some ancestor of Siofre's, I think...and Minerva liked the light from all the windows. And the downstairs loo is in here, too...just behind this door by the kitchen."

Severus nodded. So far, no flowers except a dried arrangement in the dining room. "This is a nice room," he said, stepping into the reading room. There were a number of green potted plants there, but no bouquet of roses.

"It's nice when it's raining, too. The rain beats down on the slate roof and against the windows, but it's warm and cheery in here, and right next to the kitchen if you want a snack. A nice place to curl up with a book."

"You've been here often?"

"Fairly often, usually with Minerva, but a few times on my own when I needed a break, you know. I love Violet and the rest of the family, but sometimes it's nice to get away for a bit during the summer, and Minerva and Albus spend time out on the island, too, so they aren't here the entire summer."

Severus hesitated. "Were you here with Murdoch?"

"No." Poppy shook her head. "That is, I visited the estate with Murdoch, but we stayed at the main house, and we did visit Minerva and Albus here a few times, but Murdoch and I never stayed here."

Severus nodded, and Poppy looked up at him. "I haven't stayed here with anyone else, either," she said.

"It's all right."

"Just making sure."

"I was just curious," Severus said. "I'm not always jealous."

"Of course not. Okay, on with the tour."

Upstairs, Poppy showed him briefly through the first floor, where Minerva and Albus's bedroom was, then led him up to the second floor.

"There's a library up here, of sorts, and the rose bedroom that Minerva suggested we use. It's actually pale yellow, but there are roses carved in the bedstead, and it overlooks the primrose garden in front. There's also a bathroom and loo here, so no need to go downstairs."

Poppy opened the door to the bedroom, and Severus smiled. Birnbaum hadn't let him down. There was a huge bouquet of deep red roses on the low dresser between the bedroom's two front windows, three dozen flowers, at least, and every blossom perfect.

"Oh, my," Poppy said, stopping and staring at the roses.

"There's a card," Severus said softly.

Poppy found the card set between two of the roses. "They're from you?" she asked, seeing his handwriting on the outside.

Severus nodded.

She opened it.

Poppy You alone have my love forever. Severus

She set down the card and turned to Severus. She swallowed. "They're beautiful. And your card, too."

"I mean it, Poppy. I love you. I do." His heart pounded. She seemed so still. Had the flowers and the message been too much? He raised his hand to caress her face.

Poppy closed her eyes as he touched her, then she stepped toward him and put her arms around him, leaning into him. "I love you, too, Severus," she whispered. She held him more tightly. "I love you, too, so much."

□

Author's Note: I apologize to my readers for the long delay in updating *A Long Vernal Season*. I haven't lost interest in it...or in any of my WIPs...but last year was not a good year for writing. The autumn and early winter, in particular, threw a lot at me, and I had little energy left for writing. I hope that I'll be able to update on a somewhat regular basis now, even if not as frequently as I might like.

Thanks for sticking with Severus, Poppy, and this story...and with me!

Chapter One Hundred-Seventeen: From the Primrose Cottage to the Shell Folly

Chapter 118 of 118

Poppy and Severus head off for a picnic by the shore.



Chapter One Hundred-Seventeen: From the Primrose Cottage to the Shell Folly

Thursday, 8 April 1999

Severus returned Poppy's embrace, nuzzling her hair. When he was with her, he was grateful for his life, his second life.

Poppy lifted her face to look at him. "That was what you'd planned, then. The roses."

Severus nodded slightly. "They were to greet you in your rooms when you returned from your holiday. A surprise."

"They were a surprise still, Sev," Poppy said softly. "Though perhaps not the feeling behind them."

"I'm in love with you, Poppy." He caressed her face. "And I want you to know it and to trust it ... even if you can't quite trust me yet."

"I do, though." She laughed slightly. "It's me I don't really trust, I suppose. Or us, or ... I don't know. Sometimes, it seems perfectly natural. Almost as if we've been together

forever. Other times, I ... I suppose I freeze. I can't quite believe ..." Poppy shrugged. "I don't know. But I do love you, Severus. Whatever happens. I love you."

Severus kissed her lips gently. "I've never wanted to believe in anything as much as I do now. I want to believe..." his breath caught and he swallowed "...I want to believe in us. That we will be together. Forever."

Poppy leaned into him, resting her head on his chest, listening to his swift heartbeat and feeling the deep thrum of his magic. "We can have forever in each moment we're together. Right now."

He wasn't sure what she meant by that, but it wasn't a rejection of his sentiment. And she loved him. Poppy loved him.

She gave him a squeeze then stepped away and turned back to the roses. "They are beautiful. I will have to save one of them." She picked up the card and reread it, a smile settling on her face. "And this, of course. A memento."

"I will tell you every day that I love you, and show you, too. But," he added, "I am glad you will keep the card."

"There's another note." Poppy indicated an envelope propped against the lamp on one of the bedside stands.

"From Minerva," Severus said, recognising the handwriting even from across the room. He went over and picked it up. "Addressed to us both. Would you like to open it?"

"You go ahead; you can read it to me whilst I begin unpacking our things...if you don't mind my unpacking for you."

Severus shook his head and slit the envelope open with a nonverbal spell. There were a few pages of parchment in it, the first, a letter.

Dear Poppy and Severus,

I hope you enjoy your few days at the cottage. Feel free to use anything you need and borrow any books you would like ...

Severus snorted. "I doubt we will be spending much time reading."

"We may, Sev! At least some. Just think, cuddled up together in the reading room, a roaring fire in the fireplace, a couple glasses of wine ..." She smiled. "I'm looking forward to it already."

"All right, you have a point," Severus said. He supposed they couldn't spend all of their time at the cottage making love. He continued reading aloud:

... and borrow any books you would like. You can return them to me at Hogwarts if you don't finish them there.

I've enclosed a couple maps of the estate. One of them has some of our favourite walks marked on it...it's the map that Malcolm made, Poppy. I've charmed them different colours to help you choose where you might like to walk. The routes that I've charmed red you should avoid entirely. The snow and ice in that area of the estate makes them rather treacherous until later in the year. The ones marked in blue are probably still somewhat snowy and icy, at least in spots, but not as dangerous...but do be careful on them, nonetheless, if you choose to walk them, as they have difficult sections. Those walks that I've marked in green are good trails that are usually fairly clear even this early in the year, as well as being not too taxing with very little scrabbling. They're comfortable walks but still enjoyable, and there are a few very good views from them, and some good spots for picnics.

There are skis in the cupboard under the stair if you enjoy cross-country skiing. There are still many acres under snow there. Johannes is an avid skier, and he can tell you where he enjoys going. You might want him to join you for a while, if he has the time.

Be careful, in any event, whenever you are out. If the weather changes suddenly, you should head back...or even Disapparate for Hogwarts, if you have to. I've arranged to have the Prophet delivered to the kitchen every morning. One of the house-elves will pop it over for you. Check the weather forecast before you go out. The weather around the cottage can be deceptive, since it is in a protected spot and Johannes has enhanced its natural microclimate with charms.

If you are stuck indoors, there are board games in the reading room...you know the cupboard, Poppy...and there's both a wizarding wireless and a Muggle radio there, as well.

Be sure to let Siofre know if you need anything at all, or tell one of the house-elves.

Enjoy yourselves!

~ Minerva

"Better than a Muggle B and B, hmm, Severus?"

"Indeed. Although ..."

"Yes?"

"It just feels a bit odd to be using someone else's home." He shrugged slightly.

"She wouldn't loan it to just anyone, you know, Sev," Poppy said, closing the wardrobe door. "I don't think she lets anyone outside the family stay here on their own...well, I have, obviously, and there may be one or two other people...but I think that you should feel comfortable here. It shows that Minerva feels close to you, that you're like family to her."

"She probably did it for you, then," Severus said.

"Oh, I suppose that was part of it," Poppy admitted, "but if she had wanted, she could have just arranged for us to use one of the vacant cottages up the coast. There are a few that are kept for guests, visiting Tyrees from abroad or friends of the family."

"You've been to their island...the one Professor Gamp brought me to on Sunday...what's the house there like?" Severus imagined it must be somewhat like Madam Gamp's cosy home, though perhaps larger.

"It's quite small. Just a few rooms. Rather ... primitive, I suppose you might say, although they do have a normal, if basic, kitchen, and an indoor bathroom. And there's Albus's work shed where he plays with his potions and alchemy and so on. At least, that's what it's there for. Minerva says he hasn't had time for it much in recent years. It's not like Gertrude's house, other than being built of the same island stone, but then she lived there for quite a long time and needed something a bit more comfortable."

"Minerva told me that Aberforth had lived on the island for years before he gave it to Albus."

"Yes, he had, but he's a very simple fellow with simple needs. He probably spent as much time with his goats as he did in his house."

"He's a strange one."

"I like him," Poppy said. "And he took good care of you...well, he helped Egeria and Hermione, but he did offer the pub as a haven for you, and he walked up to the castle with you when ..." Poppy stopped and turned away, pretending to straighten the bedspread, which didn't need straightening. She swallowed hard.

Severus put his arms around her from behind and nuzzled the top of her head. "Thank you, Poppy, for taking such good care of me while I recovered," he said softly. "I know I was not an easy patient."

"You were fine, Severus. Easier than Minerva was in some ways, actually, and when you were in a mood, it was quite understandable."

"You mean after the visit from the newly unmasked Dumbledore."

Poppy nodded. "I understood why Minerva wanted you to know as soon as possible...it had been kept from you for so long, and everyone else knew, and anyone could have slipped up at any moment, but ... I wish you'd been able to recover more before you'd had to deal with that shock."

Severus snorted lightly. "It was a shock. But I'm glad that Minerva didn't wait any longer. I was becoming paranoid. I knew something was being kept from me, but didn't know what. And after a period of adjustment ..." He shrugged. "I am glad the old bugger's still with us."

Poppy turned and put her arms around him. "I'm glad you both are. We lost so many ... and I was so worried that Minerva would be one of them. For a while, she seemed worse off than you did, Severus. We were afraid that even if she lived, she'd be an invalid, her brain damaged. But Healer Baton was wonderful. Melina called him and he came immediately; didn't leave the castle until he was certain that she would recover completely. Of course, Minerva had taught him, too ... I think it was her first full year teaching. He was very fond of her."

"She still gets those headaches," Severus said.

Poppy nodded. "She does. But she's doing what she needs to to take care of them."

"And Albus looks after her, I'm sure."

"When she lets him. They're a stubborn pair, those two!" Poppy said with a laugh.

"I wonder if people will say that about us," Severus said. "Of course, if we're lucky, they won't be saying other kinds of things. Or leaving pubs just because you're with me."

Poppy shook her head. "Don't worry about any of that. If anything of the sort happens, we'll deal with it at the time. Right now, we only have to decide what to do for the day."

Severus looked pointedly at the bed.

Poppy smirked. "I suppose we could try out the bed at some point," she said, "but I'd like to get out whilst the weather is still fine."

Severus nodded. After all, he had agreed to a hillwalking holiday. He let go of her and Summoned the map of the estate. "You should choose the walk today, since I don't know any of them."

Poppy spread the map out on the bed. "This is a nice one," she said, pointing to a long green line near the southern edge of the estate. We couldn't do it all in one day, but we could start it. Or we could do it in stages and even Apparate for some of the sections. Malcolm would do that sometimes."

"All right. We'll do that one...or start it, anyway."

"Or we could just take a nice ramble from here down to the shore today. There's a little shell house where we could bring a picnic. Then tomorrow we could begin the hillwalking in earnest." She looked up at him, a smile and expectancy on her face. "What do you think?"

Severus cupped her cheek and kissed her. "Anything you plan will be fine, Poppy, as long as we are together and in peace."

"Very good! We can call Duster about putting together a lunch for us...I don't know what's in the kitchen, and I don't want to take the time to investigate everything and then make the lunch, but I will do that for us tomorrow."

"Speaking of Duster ..." Where to begin?

"Yes?"

"What's that mark on his face? It looks like a curse scar, or is it a birthmark?"

"It is a curse scar."

"The Tyrees do not appear ... that is to say, it does not seem a common accidental injury." He was certain that neither Siofre nor Johannes were the sort to use curses to discipline their house-elves, and Duster had seemed friendly and not at all obsequious. Hardly behaved like a normal house-elf at all, full of chatter about his poetry and the joys of house-elf work.

"Your old friend Crabbe cast some kind of wandless hex. Nearly killed the poor little fellow, but he recovered well, much to Johannes and Siofre's relief."

"Crabbe was not my friend," Severus said stiffly.

"Oh, I didn't mean it like he really was. More like saying, 'that bloke you used to know and hang about with and wasn't he really a pathetic sod' sort of 'old friend,'" Poppy said.

"Hmpf." He stuffed his sensitivity down his gut, hoping it would disappear. Of course Poppy wouldn't believe he was actually friends with that troglodyte. Then he remembered something. "He's the Death Eater that Madam Tyree cursed, isn't he? The one with the, um, testicular difficulty."

Poppy grinned in a way that Severus had never seen from her before...there was more than just a shade of malice in her smile. "Yes, he's the one. And given his character, he'll never be rid of the curse. Not unless he surprises us all and develops a conscience."

"And she cursed him because he hexed Duster while trying to escape."

"Yeah, that's it. He shouldn't have messed with a Tyree." Poppy grinned again, and this time, there was more humour and less schadenfreude in her smile. "Must be where Minerva gets a lot of her backbone, not to mention her temper."

Severus frowned slightly. "Minerva seems fairly even-tempered to me. Aside from times when she is extremely provoked, and even then ..."

"When she was a girl, she had a terrible temper, Sev, and while I wouldn't say she had a hair-trigger, she was much more easily provoked. Of course, we were teenagers at the time, and teenagers are always more moody, but Minerva worked hard to control and channel her temper. So I suppose you're right, she's developed a more even temperament over time."

"I shall use her as inspiration, then, in my attempts to control my own temper." Severus paused, thinking. "Actually, she did tell me that she once cursed the Dar... Tom Riddle when they were both in school."

Poppy shuddered. "Oh, he was a terror in school. Cruel, nasty, controlling...a miniature version of what he became. He never was expelled though...just the opposite, in fact. He ingratiated himself with your Head of House and became a prefect. Didn't manage Head Boy, though, thank every mercy! But I remember when Minerva did that. We didn't know each other well at the time, but the story made the rounds in Hufflepuff. Everyone was pleased that Riddle got jinxed, but we were all in awe of Minerva for doing it...and half of us were afraid of her after that!" Poppy said with a laugh. "Minerva was one of the few who ever got the better of Riddle, and, as far as I remember, the only one who seemed to get away with it."

"Seemed to get away with it?"

"Well, Dumbledore didn't punish her, did he? And as far as I know, Dippet didn't put his oar in...didn't like doing that if he wasn't pressed to...and Riddle never retaliated."

"There was probably some strategic reason he didn't retaliate."

"Probably."

"Would you like to call that house-elf, then? Arrange for our picnic?" Severus asked.

"Yes, but what would you like, Sev? I appreciate that you want everything to please me, but remember that I want you pleased, as well!"

Severus shrugged. He hadn't arranged many picnics. None, really, though naturally he'd been on many. He and his dad used to go to the park, bring stale bread to feed the ducks ... "Malteasers."

"Hm? You want Malteasers? I'm not sure..."

"No, just that when my father and I would go to the park, he'd always buy me Malteasers after our lunch. I was just remembering ..."

"Oh, good...I doubt that Siofre keeps Malteasers at the house, though she might. What else did you have on your picnics with your dad?"

"Cheese and mixed pickle sandwiches. We'd open the sandwiches and compare the pickle in them. Dad always pretended not to like the red bits so I could have the one with more peppers in it." Severus smirked.

"My gran had the best recipe for mixed pickle. I'm sure Violet still has it. I could make you some."

"You can buy mixed pickle, Poppy," Severus pointed out.

"Still, I'd like to make it for you. It always tastes better home-made." She tugged at his lapels and gave him a light peck on the lips. *And it takes a year before it's ready.*"

Severus smiled. "I would like that, then."

"So, cheese and pickle sandwiches?"

"We don't have to have them. I was just thinking of what one normally eats on a picnic."

"Well, I'm sure they have cheese and mixed pickle, so we can ask for a couple of those and for a couple others that Duster can easily get together for us. Biscuits?"

Severus shrugged. "If you'd like. Anything is fine, really. Hot coffee, though. The coffee at the house was good."

"Duster!"

Duster popped into the room a minute or two after Poppy called him. He seemed quite pleased to put together their picnic lunch, grinning and assuring Poppy of the availability of both cheese and mixed pickle sandwiches and the shell house.

"And we'd like a carafe of coffee, too, please," Poppy added, "and any other little snacks that you might have on hand that would be good for our picnic."

"Very good, Madam Poppy! I will prepare the shell house for your lunch!" He bowed with great flourish, then Disappeared with a crack.

"Does he really write poetry?" Severus asked. "And does Morgan actually publish it?"

"Yes, Duster writes poetry ... poetry of a sort, anyway. And Morgan doesn't precisely *publish* it. He prints up a limited run of books and Duster gives them away."

"It doesn't seem financially prudent," Severus replied.

Poppy laughed. "I'm sure it doesn't cost Morgan much. He does little projects like that for family on occasion. He'd probably be happy to sell them if there were a market for them...and if Duster's mother would allow it...but house-elf poetry occupies a very tiny niche, I'd say!"

Severus chuckled. "A niche of one, most likely."

"I bet that Minerva has his books here. We'll have to look at them. I've only seen one of them before, and it was rather amusing...although I didn't say that to Duster; I don't think it was meant to be."

"It's peculiar, certainly; even before having laid eyes on it, I can say that."

"Now, I think we should change for our walk...I want to, anyway, and you might be more comfortable in a pair of those jeans you packed."

"You were going to Transfigure my shoes so they were more suitable," Severus said as he took a pair of faded denim jeans from the wardrobe.

"You have your trainers, and I think they are all you need today. Tomorrow I'll fix you a pair of hiking shoes, though."

"I brought my desert boots. I thought you could Transfigure them."

Poppy grinned. "I wish you'd brought the rest of your Lawrence of Arabia outfit. Mmm, you were delicious in that."

Severus smirked. "We could have our own private fancy dress party."

"But I don't think I'd wear that Madame Curie costume."

"No. Not unless I could rip it off you immediately."

"I could wear a Mata Hari costume beneath it."

Severus's black eyes shone. "I believe that would be appropriate. You are quite the seductress."

Poppy laughed. "Hardly."

"Oh, yes. Yes, you are. I just look at you, and I am seduced." He reached out and pulled her to him. "Perpetually seduced."

Poppy, her fingers entangled in his hair, drew him down into a kiss.

Despite being distracted by temptation, Poppy and Severus made it out of the cottage and had a pleasant walk down to the sea. The breeze was cold but refreshing, and Poppy was glad of her heavy tweed skirt and jacket beneath her cloak.

"It's even more beautiful later in the spring," Poppy said. "This entire area becomes just a carpet of flowers and delicate greenery."

Severus bent to look at the emerging leaves. "These are a variety of orchid, I believe."

Poppy nodded. "Yes, I think so. I wouldn't know, but Malcolm ... when we would hillwalk with him, he was full of information." The corners of her mouth turned up slightly. "And full of stories. Sometimes it seemed that everything reminded him of a story, and that anything could be made into one. A story, or a song."

"Gareth told me a story of his once, though he said he couldn't tell it like his father did."

"Oh, which one?"

"About Quin. I believe he meant it as a cautionary tale."

Poppy shook her head uncomprehendingly.

"About Quin's revenge upon Flatiron, the publican at the Three Broomsticks."

"Ooohh. Yes. Caused quite a stir at the time. But Flatiron is doing well enough now. And, well, he did cheat a lot of people, not just Quin, from what I remember."

"I'm surprised that Quin wasn't Sorted into Slytherin. He managed to sabotage the man's life thoroughly with no repercussions to himself."

Poppy just shrugged. "We're almost there, but I'm starving. If we walk up to that ridge there, we can see the folly, then Apparate to it."

"Very well."

A few minutes later they were looking down on a rocky cove, and Poppy pointed to the shell house. From their vantage point, the small building blended in with its surroundings. If he hadn't known it was there, Severus might not have noticed it.

"Ready, Sev?"

"Of course." The prospect of relying upon Madam Tyree's charm to allow him to Apparate within the Tyree grounds did give him pause, but he was not going to let on to Poppy. Rationally, he knew that there was no reason Madam Tyree would have deliberately given him a faulty amulet, and she seemed to be a competent witch. She'd made such charms before. Dumbledore, who was as independent as he when it came to Apparition, had relied upon one in the past. To trust the amulet was logical. It still felt wrong.

Poppy put her hand in her pocket to touch her wand, then she disappeared with a crack. A moment later, Severus followed with a slight, hollow pop.

Poppy turned to him with a smile. "What do you think?"

Severus nodded. It was an excellent example of a shell house. From where he stood, he could see that the folly had three rounded sections, presumably different rooms, and with the exception of the roof, the entire edifice was studded with shells of all sizes, colours, and shapes. Deep blue shutters were open, and a few of the small leaded-glass windows had been cranked open to the fresh air. Severus presumed the house-elf had done it in preparation for their arrival. Three round chimneys emerged from the roof, and white smoke curled out of the central one.

"It is pleasingly made," he replied. He turned to her, his gaze softening. "An excellent location for our picnic."

"If it were warmer, we could eat out here," Poppy said, walking up to the cottage and pushing the blue door open. "We still could, with a few charms, if you prefer."

Coming up behind Poppy, Severus shook his head. "No, this is quite acceptable. And I believe you would be more comfortable in out of the wind."

Insisting that Severus sit down, Poppy bustled about, finding their lunch stowed in one of the cupboards. Severus examined the designs in the table, floor, walls, and hearth. The shells had not simply been placed in mortar willy-nilly, but had been used to create mosaics, all depicting scenes set at sea or shore. It must have been a very lengthy and labourious work, even with magic.

"Coffee, tea, sandwiches, dessert, and a lot of little nibbles," Poppy said, setting everything out on one of the tables with a wave of her wand. "More than we can eat, I think! Duster laid on quite a feast."

"Coffee or tea?" Severus asked as he set two large mugs next to each other.

"Coffee, thanks," Poppy said. "Want to eat in front of the fire? There are cushions and blankets in some of the cupboards. I think we'd be quite comfortable."

Severus agreed. It was, after all, a picnic, and one often sat on the ground while eating a picnic lunch. He remembered his picnic with Helena. He caught one of the pillows that Poppy Summoned from a cupboard, then snagged a blanket as it flew past him.

"Did you get the impression last night that Gareth and Helena will be seeing more of each other?" he asked as he helped Poppy arrange their picnic in front of the fireplace.

"I actually did. I thought that they already felt like a couple, to be honest, though I don't know whether either of them is thinking in that direction yet. But it wouldn't surprise me."

Severus nodded. He hoped that Gareth wasn't simply rebounding from one Quidditch player to another. Helena was still in a fragile state after losing Viktor and might be easily hurt.

"What's the frown for?" Poppy asked, handing him a bowl of potato salad.

"I was unaware I was frowning."

"Not much, but you seemed displeased with something. Isn't this all right?"

"It's perfect, especially the company," Severus said, reaching over and catching her hand before she could pick up the plate of sandwiches. "No. Just thinking of Gareth and Helena."

"Oh." Poppy looked subdued as she picked out a sandwich then handed him the plate.

"It's none of my business," Severus said, hoping to reassure Poppy that she need not be jealous of Helena, "but I hope that if they do enter a relationship, it is for the right reasons. Ms Benetti has suffered a recent loss. It might not be a good time for her."

"You're right about that. Hopefully, if they are heading in that direction, they'll take the time to get to know each other."

"And not just jump into bed before their first date, like one couple we know?" Severus asked with a smirk.

Poppy chuckled. "Well, we have known each other for a long time, Sev, and we were friends of a sort already."

Severus smiled. "We were. I don't know if I realised it then, but we were."

"I may confess that I did have ... not romantic feelings for you, not exactly, but ... sometimes I would look at you and find you rather attractive, and sometimes I wished we were better friends." A vision of Severus sitting by himself in the corner at the Christmas party flitted into Poppy's head; just as she was considering joining him and trying to cheer him up, Vector had gone over and sat down on the arm of his chair.

"We're better friends now," Severus said. He couldn't help it: he broke into a broad grin. "I think we're even better than friends."

"I love you, Sev," Poppy whispered. *I love you and it terrifies me* she thought.

The sound of the surf had been growing louder, and now the shutters rattled against the shell cottage with a sudden strong gust of wind. Two of their candles, charmed though they were, went out in the sudden draught.

Poppy stood and looked out one of the open windows. "I think it's about to storm." Clouds that had been just a thin grey line on the horizon when they'd begun their walk were now a dark, threatening mass over the water.

"Let's get the windows shut," Severus replied, Summoning his wand from his coat pocket. The roar of the wind grew louder, and there was a distant boom of thunder.

"Lightning," Poppy said, shutting her window by hand, cranking it tightly closed. "I just saw lightning out at sea."

"It's good the house-elf provisioned us well," Severus said, examining the stack of wood by the fireplace. Particularly using magic to extend the fire's life, they could easily spend the night if they had to.

"Hopefully, it will blow over quickly," Poppy said. "But storms here can be quite fierce."

"Perhaps we should close the shutters." Severus stepped over to the door and opened it. The wind almost tugged it from his hand. It wasn't raining yet, but the air was wet with sea spray. He waved his wand, and one by one, the shutters closed and hooked themselves shut.

Severus slammed the door against the weather just as icy rain began to lash the shore. He turned to see the little room seemingly transformed into an enchanted, candle-lit grotto. Poppy stepped toward him. He gathered her in his arms and she snuggled against his soft black sweater.

The storm raged around them. There was nowhere he would rather be.