

A Fine Divide

by sweetflag

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Travels and Tribulations

Chapter 1 of 22

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Snape had fumed. Holiday! Was she mad? How would sending him away from his research and his work have made him feel any better? If she had meant just to get away from it all, then it would all still be waiting for him along with the backlog of things that he hadn't had the chance to complete! And if she had thought the whole experience would be relaxing, then she had obviously never travelled on a train for any amount of time.

He shuddered at the recollection of the torturous trip. But the Headmistress had ordered him under the cunning disguise of a request, and he had felt obliged to obey...he owed them all too much to dig his heels in and refuse.

In retrospect, he should have risked fatiguing himself and Disapparated; it could not have possibly surpassed the mental exhaustion from having to listen to an old woman prattle on about how she was looking forward to seeing her grandson, and how her legs hurt on long journeys, and how "er 'Enry'...may-he-rest-in-peace...would never abide the youth of today. He had been tempted to believe that the journey had been a subtle punishment and that McGonagall had orchestrated the whole thing.

The desire to silence her had been almost overwhelming...especially when she had dozed off...and he had felt veins pulse in his temples as she had blithely ignored his hints at seeking quiet... The book that he had tried to bury his nose in obviously hadn't been large enough to shield him from her ballistic banter. He had given up at one point and found himself listening in rapt fascination to her describe her various medical conditions; he hadn't been sure if he had been enthralled by what she was saying or just morbidly spellbound in discovering what she wouldn't have felt uncomfortable about disclosing.

It was with a surge of joy that the train had pulled into the station.

According to his ticket, he had had to change trains, but the thought of being cooped up in another carriage with the risk of conversation had encouraged him to use a more effective method of travel.

The taxi had pulled up outside the small hotel after an hour of travelling along narrow, twisting roads lancing their way through the foothills of Mount Snowdon. The driver had been wonderfully surly, and he had had the chance to finally close his eyes and let the silence smother him. After paying the driver, he had walked through the door and into a rather pleasant hallway: rich, mahogany wood panelling along the walls, black and white checked marble floor and gentle lighting.

The receptionist had taken his details and directed him to his room, and although still stubbornly clinging to some sense of petulance at being ordered on a holiday that he neither wanted nor needed, he had allowed himself to be rendered breathless by the beauty of the view from his window.

It was that view of the distant mountain which now kept him at his window, and while sipping tea, he watched the reds and ambers drain from the sky and the stars emerge from the growing gloom. It was beautiful, and he felt some grudging affection for the witch who had forced him to holiday, but he had made sure that she knew he would use the time to further his research; he wasn't quite ready to accept the generosity and warmth that his colleagues seemed so eager to dispense...couldn't they remember what he'd done and been?

He considered having his old job back to have been enough of a thank you for his years of service to the Order, and he had hoped that it would have all gone back to how it had been before Voldemort had returned...surly Potions master being avoided. But they hadn't seen it that way, and they'd tried to welcome him and bring him into the fold as it were, and he just wasn't... comfortable with that.

Closing his eyes against the terrible memories that his choices had spawned, Snape rested his temple against the window frame and wondered if returning to Hogwarts had been such a smart move. McGonagall had written to him after Slughorn had retired, offering him his old position, and given that his finances had not been that liquid, he had tentatively agreed. It had been almost a decade since he had nearly bled to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, and he had moved into the role with little fuss...the students certainly didn't seem to think that his name was of any consequence, and many of the teachers were new, so working with them didn't feel that awkward.

But those teachers who were still there and still remembered what he had done had made it uncomfortable; a barrier seemed to exist between them, constructed from their past experiences and recollections: a wall of embarrassed assumptions and past wounds. It wasn't all bad, though; McGonagall was a good companion, and without the threat of Voldemort, he found that he was more patient with the dunderheads and enjoyed looking for those moments of sudden realisation that would light up their faces... not that he'd admit it, of course.

It was getting chilly by the window, so he moved to sit on the small sofa that was placed close to the foot of the bed and aimed at the television against the wall. On a coffee table, there were some leaflets about the local area and various places of interest; he doubted that he'd have time to do much, given the research that he had outlined to McGonagall, but he looked anyway... Maybe, if there was time, he'd take in some sights. His tea was cold and his eyelids heavy by the time he finished rummaging through the leaflets. With one last look at the amazing star-studded and purple mountain vista, he prepared for bed and slipped under the covers. A potion, a regular bedfellow, helped sleep smother his senses and fickle mind.

~X~

To a Muggle, the frond would have looked nothing more than a patch of green coating the pale rocks, but to him, it shimmered like liquid silver, and from the hearts of those silver pools, delicate tendrils moved languidly in defiance of the stiff, bitter breeze. Using a broad knife, he cut under the lichen-like growth and then slid the blade across, carefully prising his future ingredient away from the rock. Before placing the sample in his bag, he smiled at the result of his perseverance and admired the delicate beauty of the Somnalium frond.

It was rather reminiscent of jellyfish. The Somnalium had a flat base that comprised the root, and from this circular mass, the body extended out in several long and very thin strands; the longest strand he'd seen thus far in his career was just over a foot, and generally, they ranged between six and ten inches. Argument had raged for centuries about its nature...was it a plant or an animal? But whatever it was, it was beautiful. It was like a living metal, glistening in the sunlight. He sighed gently as he watched it shimmer and then packed it away carefully before continuing fastidiously with his task.

It wasn't as if the frond was rare, but it was easily damaged, and he had suffered an increasing dissatisfaction that many of the samples he acquired through so-called reputable distributors were inferior. Not that the students noticed the difference, their potions would never have worked well enough anyway to observe a reduction of efficacy through the frond being damaged, but Snape made excellent potions, and he wanted a decent harvest of the frond this year.

The air was so clear here, and he paused in his task every now and again to admire the view; from his vantage point...half way up the mountain on the Snowdon Ranger path...he could see out across the Menai strait... the flat bed of water stretching out towards the sea and Anglesey. It had changed slightly since his last visit; a terrible fire had struck the previous bridge, and when he had been here last, only limestone pillars evidenced that something had existed there; now, there was another bridge in its stead, looking as though it had always been there.

So absorbed in task and the view was he that he failed to hear the crunch of scree under someone's boot, and it wasn't until a shadow fell across the rock he was leaning over that he realised his solitude had been disturbed. Frustrated, he looked back over his shoulder and up towards the silhouetted interloper. Whoever it was, they were tall and slender. Whoever it was also stumbled away as if in shock, their arms flailing as the momentum and the weight of their pack pulled them backwards until they overbalanced and fell in an ungainly heap next to a cairn.

Bemused and stifling a smirk, Snape stood and stepped over to the young man sprawled across the path, struggling to right himself, the large pack hindering his attempts. The look the young man gave him made him uneasy, and Snape stuttered to a halt a few feet away, his heart leaping in his chest and a cold sweat drenching him. There was something about the pale man's features that struck a chord, but nothing to hint at an identity, and Snape felt stirrings of panic in his gut, a sympathetic reaction to the stranger's distress.

"Do you need any help?" Snape managed to croak out. His throat had never quite healed after Nagini's bite, and he had to rely on magically amplifying his voice when teaching, but here, he had no such aid, and he felt as though he had to shout to get even his rasping whisper out.

The pale man blinked several times, and then, he shook his head before flipping onto his side and rising to his feet with a grace that seemed so incongruous compared to his earlier comic stumble. Brushing dust from his beige trousers, he grinned sheepishly at Snape and shook his head as if mocking himself.

"No, thanks," he said amiably. "Forgive me, but for a moment, I thought that you were...." He ground to a halt and then shrugged. "Never mind. I'm sorry if I disturbed you, sir."

"You didn't," Snape countered, rubbing at his sore throat and grimacing slightly; it felt as though his vocal cords were being squeezed and burnt at the same time.

The man's blue eyes darted to Snape's open bag resting at the base of a collection of rocks, and his shoulders slumped beneath his heavy-looking pack. "You've been collecting Somnalium," he said despondently, indicating with a wave of his hand the area where Snape had just been harvesting. Sighing, he seemed to gather himself together and flashed a grin across at Snape. "It was a good crop," he said generously. "I'm sure that you'll do well with it. Just be sure to check for Crix eggs; this whole area was infested with the fly not so long ago."

Hoisting the pack higher up his back, the pleasant stranger gave him another smile, bowed curtly, and then, he walked past, no doubt to gather the fronds from higher up the mountain. Snape frowned and thought about the samples he'd already collected, but to part with even a few of them would mean that he'd have to collect more, and he doubted that he had the energy left...these days, he was so quick to exhaustion: another legacy from Nagini. Wishing the young man luck and thanking him for the warning about the parasite's eggs, he lifted his bag onto his shoulder and walked back to the hotel.

~X~

Following the advice from the mystery wizard, Snape checked all his samples before casting a preservation charm on the fronds and arranging them in a specially designed carry-case. It took him the best part of the day to pack away his new supplies, and just after eight, hunger reared its head. Washing and dressing for dinner, he sauntered down the stairs into the foyer and made his way to the dining room. Given the time of year, he was surprised that the hotel was so quiet; he'd have expected it to be practically bursting with holiday-makers, but the place was happily almost empty. He doubted that the owners shared his view, but he relished the fact that after eating most of his meals with nearly six hundred people, he could eat in peace and quiet without having to keep an eye out for wayward curses and feisty teenagers.

He secured himself a table in the far corner near the fire exit and positioned so that he had a good view of the doors leading into the room without him being immediately obvious...old habits die hard. A waitress left him with the menu and a wine list, and he was debating on trying the brie tart or the stuffed mushrooms when he heard someone enter the room. Glancing up, he had the most ridiculous urge to hide behind his menu; it was the man from the mountain.

The waitress directed the man into the opposite corner which meant that Snape had a fairly good view of his profile. It did have something about it that made him think that he knew the face, but no matter how he dredged his memory, no name came to mind. It disconcerted him slightly, but Snape had learnt a long time ago to be sanguine about the possibility of meeting up with his past and a wronged individual seeking revenge. He decided on the brie tart.

The meal was rather good, and he enjoyed every mouthful; the slight discomfort on swallowing was well worth the flavours exciting his tongue. His gaze would dart across to the wizard sitting and eating his own meal, and with every surreptitious glance, it seemed that the young man became more melancholic. By dessert, Snape was more focused on the man than on his cheesecake. But he was naturally reclusive; it took a particular kind of person in possession of certain qualities to cultivate any kind of friendship with him...McGonagall possessed those qualities in spades: perseverance and thick skin...and as he had never felt right in initiating a relationship, he found it easier to merely smother his curiosity.

The coffee wasn't anywhere close to the wonderful elixir that the house-elves could brew, but it rounded off the meal well enough, and it was with some contentment that he made a move to return to his room.

Snape was considered many things, and he would agree to most of them, but he wasn't rude, so when the man lifted his head and nodded by way of greeting, Snape nodded back. Hesitating in the doorway, he was struck with a bizarre urge to say something.

"Thank you for the warning about the Crix fly."

The young man smiled and waved a hand dismissively. "It would have been a waste of your time if you'd collected the fronds only to have them ruined. Did you have any infestation problems?"

"No; the samples were all clean." Snape felt foolish and uneasy. Why was he so keen to talk with the man? Running a finger along his collar, Snape gave a tight smile which dissipated when the young man's silvery eyes widened at the scar that he had inadvertently exposed. Feeling vulnerable, something that he couldn't tolerate, Snape straightened and continued out of sheer perversity...he wouldn't let the boy disturb him. "Did you manage to harvest what you needed?"

"Yes, thank you."

"That's good," he responded weakly. "... that is..."

Snape snapped his mouth closed, and his lips pursed into a thin line; he felt his unease morph into bitterness as the young man smirked at his sudden lack of eloquence. The feeling intensified when the man eased back and had the audacity to grin up at him, and then, to make matters worse, he began to chortle. Snape felt the last of his good mood evaporate, and with a scowl and curt nod, he turned sharply and marched away.

"Please! Wait!"

What for? he groused to himself. *Wait to be ridiculed by someone young enough to be my son? Hardly!* Ignoring him, Snape stormed his way to his room. However, the man had followed him and, while Snape was half way up the stairs, said something that rendered him completely immobile...no Basilisk could have done better.

"Professor Snape, sir!"

~X~

"I thought that I recognised you on the mountain," he said with a smile.

"I got the impression that you thought you knew me," Snape countered with a sly smile as he sat on a leather sofa opposite the young man.

Laughing out and nodding with good humour, the young man shifted in his chair and looked up to thank the waitress, who had just placed a tea tray on the table.

"Everything seemed so familiar: your face and eyes. But..." he trailed off and studied the teacup held in his hand, "I wasn't sure." A sudden bark of a laugh broke his troubled silence. "How odd that after so many years, I should have doubted that it was you!"

Snape inhaled slowly and pondered his sanity; why had he agreed to the stranger's invitation for tea? But the boy obviously knew him and not in a good light by the sounds of it which suggested to him that he was drinking tea with a former student. Not that he had intended to solely foster bad relationships as a teacher, it was just more likely. Dredging his memory, Snape tried to place the man.

"Now that we know who I am, maybe you'll care to tell me who you are?"

"Neville, sir. Neville Longbottom."

Neville swallowed, and it suddenly hit home that he was drinking tea with Severus Snape: the man who had bullied and terrified him for six years of his life. His dinner no longer sat as smoothly in his stomach, and he wondered if he could just Obliviate himself. But Snape didn't sneer or laugh; instead, he looked quite ill.

Neville had heard through the grapevine that Snape had returned to Hogwarts, and that had been one of a few reasons why he hadn't accepted Professor Sprout's hints that he should apply for the job of Herbology professor when she retired in a year's time. He had listened with carefully veiled interest to Pomona's ideas and opinions regarding Snape, and through her concerns about him, he had discerned that Snape still suffered some long-lasting side-effects from Nagini's bite. With the man sitting so quiet and pale opposite him, he suddenly feared that a weakened heart was another one of his health problems.

"Sir, are you alright?"

Snape blinked, and the cup that had hovered before a mouth slackened by surprise was replaced on its saucer. It was obvious. The face was more tanned and more chiselled, no longer still holding baby fat; the body was less gangly and uncoordinated, and the eyes more focused and alert, projecting an aura of quiet confidence: he was Neville Longbottom.

The name summoned a wave of terrible recollections from his tenure as headmaster, and in that manic melange, he saw Neville's scratched and bruised face, and he saw the fire raging within him. Neville had shown his claws and teeth at that time, and Snape now felt ridiculous for not recognising the man sooner. It also made him uneasy that he had found the previous stranger so fascinating: what did it mean?

"I'm perfectly well," he snapped out.

"You don't look it, sir," Neville replied gently, but with the hint of unrelenting concern.

The cup and saucer descended hastily towards the table; Snape stared icily at the man, and he was partly gratified to see him flinch ever-so slightly. He could have felt strong again...those weaknesses that plagued him almost evaporating in the presence of a lingering, but false sense of superiority...had not the cup rattled against the saucer as his hand trembled.

"I assure you, Longbottom, that I am perfectly fine!"

Damn this throat! he thought bitterly as pain lanced out from it, radiating out towards his left shoulder and down into his chest. His vocal cords seemed to turn to razors, slashing at his throat as they vibrated, and he forced himself not to massage his throbbing neck.

Snape glared across at Neville; he suddenly felt so wrong-footed and vulnerable, as though a support had been stripped away, and he didn't like it. How long had it taken

for him to feel this level of comfort? And Neville had undermined it with nothing more than polite concern! When Snape had settled on the idea of his past catching up with him, he had resigned himself to the fact that some pained and dissatisfied wizard would seek revenge and try to kill him; it had never occurred to him that he could be so shocked and weakened by a former student seeking conversation.

"But I do have some work to continue with, so I'll bid you a goodnight, Mr Longbottom," he said as he stood.

Neville scrambled to his feet, and using a napkin to wipe his fingers, he extended his hand towards his former professor. "It was a pleasure talking with you, sir. Goodnight."

Snape stared at the hand as if it had a wand or dagger lodged against the palm, but he reached out and quickly shook his former student's hand before nodding curtly and making the escape that he wished he had managed earlier.

In his room, Snape frantically opened up his potions kit, extracting one of the seven phials that lined the inside of the case; the cool blue liquid glistened, and he savoured the beauty of the potion before gulping down the analgesic. Closing his eyes, he felt it coat his burning throat, and he sagged against the set of drawers as it relieved the pain. Replacing the empty phial, his dark eyes alighted upon an amber-coloured liquid, and he felt his heart sink; he would need that potion tonight, no doubt, to ward off the nightmares and other things.

The kit contained several potions he took from time to time to diminish the problems arising from his association with the Dark Lord and Nagini's parting gift. The Dark Mark had indeed been a life-long pledge to Voldemort, and many of the Death Eaters bearing it had started to waste after Voldemort's demise: withering day by day. He had been ensconced in St Mungo's, and the Healers had staved off the curse with various remedies in the belief that the venom within the bite had been the culprit, but when Death Eaters awaiting trial had started weakening and dying, they had realised that the Mark was in some way responsible.

The Ministry had devised a potion to prevent the Mark killing its host and had taken great pains to keep every aspect of it a secret; they now had a terrible tool over the few Death Eaters who had survived the Final Battle. In his warm and pleasant room, Snape shuddered; if he took the potion, he would have to apply for another dose...another day in the Ministry, answering questions, having his memories drawn out into a Pensieve, his recollections violated, and the mechanism behind the Mark elucidated by eager ministerial officials. It was all voluntary, of course, and for the betterment of all.

Snape sneered and closed the kit; he'd leave the potion until he had no choice but to swallow it... That sinking feeling intensified; it had been just under a month since he'd downed the last prescription: another was due. *Is it my curse to be forever tied and indebted to another? Will I ever be free?*

~X~

Neville had watched Snape sweep up the stairs, and he still felt a mix of relief and disappointment at the parting. Pomona's chats had not quite prepared him for the change in Snape; he hadn't expected the hair to be so streaked with silver and the general presence of the man to be so diminished. It had also taken him by surprise that until he had shared his name they had seemed to be getting along. And was that the cause of his disappointment?

Staring up at the dark ceiling, he reached out to switch on the bedside lamp; sleep eluded him again, and he knew better than to try to force it. Rubbing a hand over his face and rubbing at his sore eyes, he smothered the frustration at being denied yet again; he was getting tired of dismissing his insomnia as a way of getting more work done. He'd rather sleep and have to work harder the next day.

Slipping out from under the duvet, he made moves towards the sofa, but the chill made him dart back to collect and wrap the quilt around him. Shivering, he sat on the small sofa and pulled a black notebook closer, gently stroking the leather cover before opening up what was his life's work. Sadly, it wasn't much and showed so little progress in the ten years since he had started. His last entry was dated two days ago, and he reread his scrawled notes. It made little difference; he was still as stumped as ever! Allowing some of that frustration to seep out, he fell back against the sofa and scowled. Ten years! Ten years, and so far, he found seven ways that his plan couldn't work and evidence that it would never work. Closing his eyes and tilting his head back, he tried to keep that flame and passion alive...he would heal his parents!

Shifting beneath the duvet, and feeling bitter tears gather behind his sealed lids, he wondered if his efforts were a waste of time and whether Pomona's suggestion was a better use of his time. He could certainly do with the revenue as the monies bequeathed him following his Grandmother's death were rapidly being devoured by this project. The thought was quickly nipped; his meeting with Snape was enough to kill that idea. His fame from the Final Battle was enough that he was sure that any job he went for would be obtained, and there was an opening at Flora Jardin's...the Wizarding world's largest supplier of plants, herbs and flowers...that would suit him quite nicely.

But that desire to cure his parents of their vile condition still shadowed him; a haunting need that he knew would only be exorcised by absolute failure or joyful success. Sometimes, he feared his endeavour.

Sitting forward once more, he picked up his precious and pestering journal and cursed softly as a few pages fluttered free. Stretching, he gathered the evicted papers and casually studied them. They were rough notes scrawled on... a paper napkin and a business card... and were frantic ideas that had nabbed when he had been out and about. The ideas themselves had long been put down, and he reflected upon how easily it had been to destroy an idea so long in the making. Those gathering tears finally slipped down his cheeks... He felt the same curse as Tantalus, and he thought about the years ahead, suffering it.

Riverside Rescue

Chapter 2 of 22

Neville knows what he wants, and he follows Snape in the hopes of getting it. What he ends up with is not what he could have predicted.

Author's Notes: Thanks to Arabella Bloodgood.

The problem with welcoming sleep through a draught was the difficulty in getting rid of that once-welcomed guest...it nullified the prospect of an alert awakening. A mind that had once gone from sleep-fogged to crystal-clear in an instant was quite put out by the lingering tendrils of drowsiness. Not only did he feel un-rested, but his mouth and throat were usually painfully dry, so he invariably was denied that wonderful option to slither back under the covers for the luxury of another ten minutes. Perhaps not so surprisingly, his temper was at its shortest first thing in the morning.

Slipping out from under the duvet, he padded into the bathroom, hissing out a curse as the horribly bright light-bulb blinked into life. Squinting, he gathered up one of the plastic beakers and ran the tap until cold water numbed his fingertips. Swapping fingers for cup, he part-filled it and fought the urge to guzzle down the cool liquid...guzzling led to pain and headaches; he sipped it carefully.

Walking back into the main room, he settled himself on the sofa, his eyes drawn over the back towards the window. Sunlight painted slivers of the walls and ceiling... long

strokes of gold, hinting at a glorious autumn day beyond. Feeling the vestiges of frustration slip away, he watched the vague, criss-crossing shadows of branches moving beyond the curtain. Relishing the opportunity to indulge in laziness, Snape settled back against the arm of the settee.

In light of last night's conversation, he felt disinclined to trek to the mountain; the idea of bumping into Longbottom was quite disturbing. Instead, he recalled the leaflet's mentioning of the Aberglaslyn Pass, and as he had been enthralled by the photographs and descriptions of that beautiful gorge, he happily settled on harvesting there.

When the green segments on the clock flickered to eight, he felt some urgency stir him, and infused with enthusiasm, he prepared to start the day proper. Checking that all was in order, Snape left his room and headed for the reception. Hesitating at the dining room door, he convinced himself that buying something from a local bakery would be easier and strode out into the cold but dazzling day.

The local village was small and quaint. He had followed the river Glaslyn to the Gelert Memorial and read with some mild scepticism the story paying homage to that noble hound. He, too, had once felt the sting of a blade, but from two masters, and although he had survived both, he knew that neither would have mourned his passing.

Tourists stood to either side of him, photographing the monument and muttering about the beauty and the sadness of it all. Young children laughed and played some way off, kicking at piles of fallen leaves, and Snape felt that it was time to move on. Picking up his kit, he slipped the straps over his shoulder and made his way back along the river. By noon, he hoped to be on the Aberglaslyn Pass, so he made a detour to the local convenience store before leaving Beddgelert and heading south.

The leaflet had been eloquent but had failed to capture the beauty of the Pass. It was breathtaking! It was also delightfully lonely. Given the absolute glory of the place, Snape did not expect his lovely solitude to last, so he decided to settle upon a rounded boulder and just admire the view while he had the chance.

The shop had been quite well stocked, and Snape had purchased enough for a modest picnic of sorts. The thermos held some thick, chicken soup, and after a quick glance around, he heated the soup in the flask, enjoying the aroma wafting towards his nose. Dipping chunks of bread into the cup, he ate a sedate lunch. His mind, for all the distractions of the beauty spot, kept dallying over Neville, and he returned to his musings over what had troubled the young man. Neville had looked so dejected over his dessert.

It was known that Augusta Longbottom had died. The taciturn witch had drawn quite a crowd by all accounts, and despite her austere brusqueness, she had amassed a fair few mourners. The obituary had been as terse and unflinching as the woman herself, and he felt that she would have appreciated the severity and simplicity of it. But she was a proud woman, and the outpouring of grief and scale of the Wake would have secretly pleased her. He felt his lips curl up at the thought of her smug expression as she arranged her turkey-bedecked hat before going to give the gods a piece of her mind about the state of things.

It had been common knowledge that Neville had lived with his grandmother, and despite the early friction, after the Final Battle, they had been inseparable. Some hidden barrier had been broken down... Maybe Augusta had seen her son reborn in Neville; maybe she had accepted that her own son was lost to her and forgiven life for being so cruel. Her death had hit him hard, and Pomona had mentioned in the staffroom how she had worried about the now reclusive young man.

Snape idly massaged his sore throat as he recalled some of the overheard conversations she had had with Minerva and the others. Neville had withdrawn from everyone. Only his connection to Herbology had kept him tied to Pomona and a few other like-minded individuals. Whispered chats had revealed a man who was slipping away unnaturally, wallowing in some silent task that kept him too busy to answer the calls from friends and the invites for drinks and dinner. *But then why had Neville been so eager to seek conversation with me*, thought Snape with some bemusement.

Despite the chill in the air, the autumn sun warmed his face, and he felt a reluctance to start work. *Damn McGonagall*, he mused fondly as he settled against the rocks behind him, resting his head against his interwoven fingers rather than the cold rock. *The ingredients can wait.*

The breeze was enough to ghost over his exposed skin, and it carried with it the scent of heather and earth, the sound of the rushing water and tiny droplets to prickle his face; it carried the sounds of birds and whispering leaves. It brought him balms, and it lulled him into a doze.

~X~

Why was he doing this? Why?

The question fluttered in his head like a moth would batter at a lamp. Fighting nerves, excitement, confusion and urgency, he followed the distant, black form as it walked out of Beddgelert. He knew why, of course. He had spent all night pondering the idea; it had pestered him, keeping sleep away and promising all the things that he had crushed mercilessly to stop him going insane with the idea of accomplishing the impossible.

He had known the why of it when he had gathered up the black book and opened it with the idea to continue. He had known in that instant why he had called out to his former professor and asked him to join him for tea. It had just taken all night for him to realise and accept what it was that he had known: *Snape could help me.*

Neville hadn't known whether to laugh or cry at the idea. The man that had terrified and basically abused him during his school life was probably the only one with the knowledge and skill to help him with his self-imposed gargantuan task. The thought had made him nauseous and oddly ecstatic. So many had failed to help him in the past, building up his hopes only to leave him floundering in a worse position than when they had started. Could it be that the last person he'd think of to ask for help could be the only one to help him?

He really had no choice.

The task of following Snape, the master spy, had been incredibly hard. The man had spent his life looking over his shoulder for the one intent on stabbing him in the back, and here he was, the Herbology student whose only attempt at stealth was to sneak up on a vicious, tentacular plant to take one of its thorns. It was no idle stroll in the beautiful Welsh mountains for him, but a heart-in-mouth trek of sweat-inducing proportions. It was hellish. It didn't help that Snape seemed totally oblivious; he felt an ever-increasing certainty that he was being lulled into a false sense of security and a deadly trap. When Snape sat down to eat his dinner, Neville thought that he would have to scream out to disperse the inner terror.

Sitting on a small boulder on the opposite bank and hidden from view by a spinney, he watched Snape ease himself back on the large rock with what looked like contentment. Doubt flashed through Neville's mind; was that Snape or some cunning decoy? The tension was almost unbearable; how had Snape coped with this for years... no, decades!

Neville stiffened. *He's fallen asleep! I don't believe it!* he groused to himself, totally bewildered that the man could just fall asleep. Here he was, heart hammering, breath coming in rapid, strained puffs, and the man who should be in fear of his life had gone to sleep on a boulder. It beggared belief. Shifting his leg to ease the numbness and risk of pins-and-needles, Neville inhaled slowly and tried to relax. To distract himself, he studied the local flora, admiring the beauty and perfection of nature; nothing seemed as divine as the relationships inherent in nature, and it sometimes pained him that man...wizard and Muggle alike...were so keen to unbalance such a magnificent interplay. It was while admiring such interplay that he heard the unmistakable 'pops' of Apparating wizards.

Through the lattice of creaking branches, he saw four wizards approaching the slumbering and unaware wizard. He recognised the robes; they were Aurors. What would Aurors want with Snape after all this time? Snape had been cleared of all charges following the showing of Pensieve evidence, but the man had been held in Azkaban until the court dates had been arranged. If he recalled, the arrangements had dragged unnaturally. Easing forwards, he cast a charm to amplify what the Aurors were saying.

"Severus Snape!" barked out the Auror closest to the reclining man.

On jolting awake and seeing the wizards, Snape slowly lifted himself up into a sitting position, and Neville smirked at the impertinence that the man managed to express with his apparent lassitude in such a simple action.

"Yes?" queried Snape in that strained whisper of his.

"You were to report your location to the Ministry at all times, Snape," continued the closest of the wizards. The others spent their time studying Snape and the local environment.

Neville felt the hairs on the nape of his neck prickle to attention; something wasn't quite right.

"That is true," agreed Snape in a sibilant sigh. "But only when I was undertaking something... that wasn't part of school business."

"Sleeping on a rock in North Wales is part of school business, is it?"

The Potions master arched an eyebrow at the brusque inquisitor. "I am collecting ingredients and carrying out research... for the benefit of Hogwarts," he answered suavely. "Feel free to check with the Headmistress; Professor McGonagall not only sanctioned my excursion but ordered it. She posted the papers... to the Ministry the day before I left, as requested." He inhaled sharply and swallowed quickly. "The delivery owls that the Ministry have these days obviously need better encouragement, or maybe it's the Aurors who do?"

"You cocky shi..."

"Jenkins!" snapped out the Auror apparently in charge before turning back to Snape with a humourless grin. "Collecting ingredients? Research?"

"That's correct," Snape said with a smile. "The information-gathering skills of the Aurors are still top-notch, I see."

Neville couldn't help but grin even as two of the Aurors, who had been standing back, stepped closer to Snape.

"Very good, Snape," he chuckled generously. "Nice to see that you still have your sense of humour; many don't leave Azkaban with that intact, you know. Of course, it's not as bad in there now, what with that the Dementors still at large."

Neville was alarmed to see Snape pale and glance away. What had troubled him? The feeling that something was terribly wrong intensified, and he frantically thought of a way to help the suddenly stricken wizard.

"So, Snape," continued the Auror, "you do know that you were supposed to alert the Ministry to any little trips?"

"Yes," Snape admitted softly.

"And you didn't?" persisted the man maliciously while the others moved around to partially encircle Snape.

Neville's mind shut down and his legs took over. He stood, eased his way through the young trees and marched down the sharp incline towards the group. He had no idea what to do when he got down there, but he knew that he couldn't stay behind the spinney.

"You do know what that means, don't you?"

"It means that I have contravened the conditions of my release and am open to prosecution," Snape replied tonelessly.

"That's right, mate," said the Auror smarmily. "But we can dispense with that unpleasantness, can't we?"

Neville's footfall on the gravel caught their attention just as Snape started to sway ever so slightly.

"I say," Neville said with innocent brightness and cultivated naivety. "Is there a problem here, Aurors?" He walked past them and close to Snape, looking the stone-faced wizard directly in his depthless, black eyes. "My assistant and I were just about to gather some Pergatin spores for study." It was worth any amount of trouble to see the look on Snape's face. That look would keep him warm on cold nights when life was bearing down unfairly. The widening of the eyes at the use of 'assistant' was adorable, the sudden, underlying bitterness was expected, and the look of unveiled admiration at the mention of Pergatin spores was priceless; he'd enjoy it for years.

The Aurors reacted predictably and looked around nervously; Neville thought that he actually heard them hold their breath.

"Pergatin... here?" asked one of the Aurors nervously.

"Oh yes," confirmed Neville as he pulled off his rucksack and removed two masks that were a constant part of his Herbology field kit. He offered one to Snape, who smiled and accepted it as if he had been lying there merely waiting for Neville's return. "Professor Sprout has been concerned that the rise in growth in this area could seriously affect those wizards living close by," said Neville as though nothing worse than a class lecture was going on. The four Aurors grouped together and kept glancing around. "Oh, I wouldn't worry too much," soothed Neville. "I stimulated the mushrooms only a few minutes ago; I doubt that the spores will be this close just yet."

To highlight the lack of immediate threat, Snape and Neville quickly donned their masks and backed away towards the river.

"I guess," continued Neville with sympathy, his voice muffled and his grin hidden, "that you don't have the proper safety equipment to deal with this?" He pulled down the mask and walked over to the worried group. "Look, the mushrooms will open up and release the spores in a matter of seconds; why don't you go and check with the Ministry about that letter of authorisation, and if it is that my assistant has left without the proper documentation, then you can come back." He smiled and patted the nearest Auror on the shoulder, who promptly let out a shriek and started to cast all manner of Cleansing charms on himself. "We'll be here for the next few hours at least, collecting samples."

Neville grinned at them, feigned a look of worry as he seemed to notice something behind the huddled wizards and quickly repositioned his mask before backing away, making shooing gestures with his hands...at which time the Aurors cringed and Disapparated.

The 'pops' were as the tolling of bells, and Neville had that heart-stopping, chilling realisation that he was alone with a quite possibly very angry Professor Snape. He swallowed and wondered whether he should just Disapparate: forget his foolish notion and leave. Tugging the mask from his face, he bowed his head; he couldn't give up this chance. He'd never forgive himself. But he didn't dare to turn around.

A curious, wheezing sound caught his attention, and his first instinct was that Snape was choking. Turning on his heel, he saw Snape bent over, clutching at his throat, yanking off the mask and stumbling towards the rock that had been his impromptu bed. Concern overrode every other consideration, and he rushed forwards.

The second his hand clamped down on Snape's shoulder, the seemingly struggling wizard spun round and pushed him back against the rock. Momentarily dazzled by the man's startling reactions, Neville felt his senses realign uncomfortably. Snape was looming over him, his black eyes blazing, his lips pulled back and twitching, and more worryingly, the man had his cold fingers wrapped around his throat and his wand digging into the soft flesh under his jaw. Not to mention that the boulder was cold and dug painfully into his back as Snape used his weight to trap him against it.

Daring not to swallow, Neville kept still as Snape's eyes bored into his and his rapid breaths brushed over his face. Snape shifted his stance, and the wand tip dug in deeper, making him gasp out as the pain radiated out. He also realised that he had grabbed hold of Snape's arm and waist to support himself as he had fallen backwards; he now didn't know whether to let go or keep hold.

"Assistant?"

Neville blinked and licked his lips nervously. "It was all I could think of," he croaked out as Snape's eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry."

"Colleague? Co-worker? Associate?" Snape countered in a tight whisper. "Not one of those terms popped into your head as you rushed to save me?"

"Erm, no," he admitted, but some anger began to stir in his gut, dispelling the unease and mild fear. "And to be honest, I doubt that they would have responded well to me calling you anything other than assistant... *sir!*" he added pointedly. "And you're welcome."

"Welcome for what?" Snape asked softly while staring expressionlessly down at him.

"For me rushing to save you," quipped Neville.

Those dark eyes widened again, and Neville wished that he could fathom what was going on behind those onyx shards. The recent event had stirred up so many potent questions. What had those Aurors been here for; what had they been referring to? And why had the wizard who had had the guts to stand against Voldemort been terrified by the prospect of going with them?

"Pergatin spores?" queried Snape after an uncomfortable pause.

Neville was about to protest about his creativity being questioned again when he saw the corner of his interrogator's mouth twitch; as it blossomed into a smirk, Neville felt a wave of relief rush up and the pressure around his throat lessen.

Snape still held him with that indecipherable gaze of his, and somehow, it held him more securely than the fingers and wand tip had. The power of it was enough to keep Neville in place even though Snape had moved away. After a few more seconds, Neville pushed himself away from the unforgiving rock and took a step towards the unforgiving man.

"I thought that the idea of a spore capable of rendering a wizard both impotent and a Squib would have made them think twice about lingering," Neville said quietly, inwardly cringing at the questioning hint in his voice: as if he needed Snape's approval!

Snape nodded and replaced his wand in his inner breast pocket. "It was a remarkably effective and imaginative tactic, Mr Longbottom. Thank you for the rescue and the fond memory," he whispered.

A sudden thought wormed its way into Neville's thinking, and his stomach churned unpleasantly. "The Ministry does have the correct paperwork, doesn't it? The letter that the Headmistress sent?"

Snape looked back at him, his eyebrow arched delicately. "Following Ministerial dictates to the letter has become a hobby of mine, Mr Longbottom," he said bitterly. "The Ministry has the relevant letter seeking authorisation for me to be at large. Your act of heroism will not go down in the annals of foolhardiness."

Neville inhaled to argue that that wasn't exactly what he had meant, but before his words formed on his tongue, he caught sight of Snape's smirk. *Snape just teased me?* he pondered incredulously. *And thanked me!* Despite his best efforts, he felt himself flush.

"Care to tell me what you were doing?" Snape questioned.

"The Somnium on the mountain was..."

"Please, Mr Longbottom," Snape interrupted, some of the old anger that Neville remembered from lessons flaring in that struggling voice. "I may not be all that I was, but my intelligence has not suffered; do not insult it!"

"I followed you," Neville admitted sanguinely. If the hammer was to fall, then he would like to know when and why. Besides, Gran had always said that there were times when it was daft not to be honest.

Snape blinked. It was unnerving to think that he had been followed by someone like Longbottom without noticing. Were his skills slipping? Would the killing blow be as swift and unseen? Suddenly, he felt incredibly foolish and vulnerable.

"To what end, Longbottom?" he snapped out, instantly regretting it as his throat tightened painfully.

Good question! thought Neville.

"Out with it, boy!" Snape hissed.

All doubts and all hesitation fled. The insult cut deep. Stepping forwards, Neville looked down upon Snape, who was a good few inches shorter and sneered. It was so odd that he was still afraid of Snape. He had stood before the Dark Lord and beheaded Nagini and yet, only his anger gave him the strength to be this close to Snape and not tremble.

"Boy?" he replied softly. "I haven't been a boy since you let the likes of the Carrows into the school, *Headmaster!*" he spat out, deriving some comfort from the way that Snape paled and flinched. The rest of him was caught between fury and fear. Fury just because; it had no real reason to exist anymore, and fear because his fury was charging and battering at what control he had.

He knew that it was stupid to stay. His anger had always been something to hide and keep under control; he'd never let it get so out of control before, but with Snape standing in front of him, it thought that it had found a viable target, and it gnashed at its muzzle. Neville inhaled slowly and closed his eyes, trying to shove the beast back into its kennel. It had emerged after the Final Battle, growing more discontent as time wore on, until it thrashed around on a daily basis; his grandmother had seen it, and she had tried to banish it. She had been successful to a point, but the anger lurked, always waiting for its moment to leap.

Snape had been exonerated; he knew that, and as more information had come to light, the surviving members of the Order had grown to realise just how crucial Snape had been and how much the man had suffered. But his wrath didn't care! It saw the Death Eater bastard who had walked past him and sneered when Madam Pomfrey had shown him the wounds inflicted by Alecto Carrow. It saw the man who had ignored the fact that the school had lived in fear. It saw the wizard that had allowed children to be treated as prisoners.

Neville, however, saw Severus Snape.

~X~

Snape waited for fifteen minutes before deciding that Neville wasn't coming back. It hadn't taken a Legilimens to see that something had been awakened in the young man. It hadn't taken a Legilimens to see that the thing was dangerous. The anger and hate had twisted Neville's face into something almost demonic: mad and vicious. The battle to rein it in had taken a toll on the man; Snape knew how anger could eat away and devour all the joy and passion of life, leaving a cold and bitter shell. It seemed horrific that such a thing should happen to Longbottom.

It was as he repacked his rucksack that a flash of light caught his attention, and he looked over his shoulder to see a silver hare sit on its haunches and cock its head towards him.

"It seems that the paperwork is in order, Snape," snapped out the hare in the bitter voice of the Auror that had menaced him earlier. "Next time, make sure that you get a reply before taking a jaunt... so as not to inconvenience your superior."

Snape sneered at the Patronus and ignored the sniggering. Not waiting to see if the hare had gone, he put on his pack and left.

The walk back wasn't as sedate as the one in; his mind was in a whirl over his encounter with Neville. What was bothering the young wizard? What had compelled him to

follow Snape? The emotions surging within Neville had surprised Snape; he hadn't thought that Neville had had such feelings within. Snape would admit...to himself and no one else...that the Neville from his teaching days had had reserves of strength and character that had earned a kind of admiration from Snape, and to think that Neville was struggling in controlling his emotions now was quite alarming. What was going on inside the young man's head? It didn't settle his nerves that he could very well find out in a few hours... They shared the same hotel, after all.

Portents and Potions

Chapter 3 of 22

Fate continues to push Neville and Snape together.

Sitting huddled on the sofa with the duvet wrapped around him, cocooning him, Neville studied his little, black book splayed open upon the coffee table. Thin pages fluttered in a draught, and his eyes were drawn to the shifting figures and diagrams painstakingly drawn over many years. His neat handwriting mocked him, highlighting the futility of his fastidious efforts.

It was typical that after the anger, there was the numbness. The senses seemed to wither, and the mind became sluggish and unfocused. It was almost like floating in a warm river, moving with the flow from one place to another without thought or care. In contrast to his mood, a strong wind battered at the window as it whistled and howled past. The room was sympathetically cold; the old radiator tried to rise to the challenge, plinking and groaning as it struggled.

While his temper terrified him, this emotional and mental languor was by far the most destructive. In the past, he had had to crawl and claw his way out on hands and knees as he struggled to free himself of his insidious stupor. The effort had drained him; everything seemed less than what it had been when he'd emerged back into the light. It was almost as though he had had to reawaken each sense and aspect of himself before he was back to... what? Normal?

A bitter chuckle rumbled in his chest, and he closed his eyes on the pages flapping as innocently and as emotively as the feathers on a dead bird. The book may as well be a decaying carcass of his plans, dreams, aspirations and his needs. His heavy head lolled and struck the back of the sofa; the slight sting was welcome in this emotionally barren place, and he latched onto the throbbing heat on his scalp. Swallowing, he knew where that could lead, so he lifted his head and opened his eyes. Ignoring the book, he stood and shuffled over to the bed. Maybe a nap would help?

Lying on the cool mattress, sleep was just as difficult to grasp as any sense of normality, and he resorted to studying the cracks on the ceiling. Three of the fine lines worked together to look like a jagged profile. Once he realised that, no matter how he tried, he could see nothing other than Snape's hooked nose and high forehead.

Snape!

Groaning out at his monumental stupidity, Neville curled up onto his side and buried his face in the duvet's folds. *How could I have been so stupid as to think that he'd help me!* he thought bitterly. Perhaps a bout of desperation had dulled his wits when he had considered asking Snape for help? It was a reasonable explanation. Months of searching had yielded nothing, and he had been despairingly contemplating ending his task. Seeing Snape had seemed like a beacon in the dark!

Neville laughed out harshly. *I must have been bloody desperate!*

The former Headmaster had been an icon of fear throughout the school; even the Death Eaters assigned to the school had seemed wary of the black-clad wizard. First-years had cried themselves to sleep... So had a few seventh-year students. How Snape had been hated! Neville would admit that after the Dark Lord, he'd have killed Snape next... then the Carrows. It was horrific to think that his years in school had given him the edge needed to make a killing strike. It had mortified him further to realise that if he had carried out his dreadful intentions, then he would have killed a man undeserving of such a fate.

Pummeling the duvet, he smoothed the material away from his face and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was five thirty in the afternoon; Snape would be almost back if he had started walking as soon as Neville had left. His stomach churned unpleasantly at the thought: What had Snape thought? *Oh Merlin!* What would Snape do?

~X~

Snape was in no position to do anything about anything. Wheezing and pressing a hand against the burning pain in his left forearm, he lumbered up the stairs to his room. Thankfully, no one was at the reception or loitering around to see him struggle. Lurching along the corridor, Snape kept his eyes on his goal: the door to his room. He was sure that the room hadn't been this far from the stairs last night!

Fumbling in his pocket, he withdrew the key, and with a trembling hand, slid it into the lock. It took two attempts to unlock the door before he could stumble into the room, gratefully slamming the door shut behind him. Gasping for breath and leaning against the door frame, he glanced over to his potions kit resting on the dresser. He thought about rejecting his need, but pain lanced out to recede in aching waves before surging forwards again. His vision was already blurred, and sweat ran in rivulets down his back. Snape fancied that black tendrils were burrowing beneath his skin, erupting from the Dark Mark and aiming for his heart and brain.

Bile rushed up at the thought of taking the Ministry's potion, but he knew that he had little choice. He needed the draught. Every muscle now ached, his left arm felt weighted and useless. He could hear his frantic breaths in his ringing ears, and his chest felt that his heart was trying to burst through his sternum. It was only a matter of steps towards the dresser, but each step would be a pain-filled challenge.

The sharp agony of his hip crashing against the wood was an ironic reward for his efforts. Wincing and groaning, Snape grabbed hold of the dresser to stop himself from falling to the floor. One shaking hand reached out, and stiff fingers lifted the latch on the kit. The lid popped open, and his hand darted inside. He knew exactly where that potion rested. Yanking his hand free, Snape slid to the floor. Unstopping the phial, he downed the lot.

He had to admit that whoever had devised and brewed the potion had known what they were doing, and he had to admire their skill, even if it was with a degree of acrimony. Slowly, the pain in his forearm diminished, and he found that without its sharp claws gripping him, he could breathe all the easier. The shivering that had robbed him of fine movement also abated, and he felt more in control of himself. Blinking away sweat, he was gratified to see that his eyesight had improved. The waves of nausea ebbed away, and all that remained was the ever-present fatigue and the pain in his throat; the murderous desires of the Dark Mark had been curbed, but Nagini's parting gifts were non-refundable.

Out of morbid curiosity, he pulled back his cuff and looked at the constant scar that marked him for death. Despite the agony and the threat it posed, the Mark still looked as pale as it had when the Dark Lord had seemingly died at the hands of a baby nearly twenty years earlier. Twitching, spittle-flecked lips stretched back in a sneer, and he harshly tugged his sleeve back down. He had been promised freedom many times. And he had almost had it on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

Damn Potter for once again stealing something from me.

~X~

Somehow, he'd managed to get into bed shortly after drinking the potion. The clock cast its eerie, green glow along with the time: eight thirty. His mouth felt awful, and his throat was typically dry and sore. Wincing, he swallowed carefully as he lifted himself up and swung his legs off the bed. The bathroom seemed a long way away, but he craved some water, so, sighing, he sauntered off to get a drink. With his head aching from the events of the day, he was reluctant to turn on the light and relied instead upon his sense of touch to appease his thirst.

Looking up, he was a dark shape in the mirror, an almost indistinguishable shadow in the gloom. Something about that anonymity and lack of identity both appealed and repulsed him, and he had to turn away and leave the bathroom to ease his disconcertion. Cradling the plastic cup against his chest, he wandered over to the window. The curtains were still open, and through the cold glass, he could just make out the outline of the mountains against the starry sky. Other than that, he could see nothing, save for the ghostly reflection that disturbed him.

Closing the curtains, he padded over to the sofa and sat down heavily, feeling remarkably weary. The cup seemed cold and fragile in his hands, and he longed for a hearty cup of tea, but that meant going down to the reception to ask for a restock of his in-room supplies. He had a phone, but his voice would not carry, and the spell to enhance his volume would be rendered moot through the Muggle technology. Would the benefits of a cuppa outweigh the risks of bumping into Longbottom? His stomach settled the debate by rumbling loudly; he needed food.

~X~

Hunger had gnawed at him, his first feeling since the emptiness, but as he chased a chip round the plate with his fork, he no longer felt the same appetite. The gravy oozed to fill the void left by the harassed chip, and he was mesmerised by its smooth and sedate movement. If only everything could return to normal as easily and swiftly. Suddenly disgusted by the sight, he dropped the fork with a clatter and sat back in his chair.

It had been a mistake to come here, he thought to himself as he watched the tealight's small flame flicker in the frosted glass bowl. *What was I thinking? I should have just given up... It would have been better in the long run.*

The realisation slashed through him, and he felt tears sting his eyes. Admitting defeat was half the battle, but if it was, then he feared the rest...admitting it had *hurt!* It was all he had left, though. The dreams that he had harboured, all those precious hopes that he'd protected... they were all dead now. The woman that he had...no!...*still* loved was engaged to another, and the job that he had wanted since his second-year was as far from his grasp as the moon. The desire to heal his mum and dad was the very last and the most precious to him; to crush it, crushed him.

It was as his last dream fluttered in reality's crucible that he saw Snape talking to the receptionist. As inspiring visions went, it would be hard work to consider the lean frame and hooked nose of Snape as descriptors of a harbinger of good fortune, but Neville felt his insides churn when his gaze landed upon the wizard. Snape was his *only* chance! Perhaps coming here wasn't such a mistake after all! Perhaps, just maybe, fate had thrown him a lifeline.

~X~

The Fates were punishing him. It was the only explanation. As soon as he thought that he had been spared from trial, he would turn to find it staring him in the face. His stomach dropped, and his chest tightened at the sight of Longbottom standing a mere two feet from him. If it wasn't for the lingering fatigue and Muggle presence, Snape may have felt obliged to hex the young man for being so... light-footed and sneaky!

"Professor Snape," Neville began, only to fade in the face of Snape's cool stare. He coughed and inhaled deeply. "I want to apologise for rushing off and..."

"Don't concern yourself," Snape cut in sharply. "I was quite able to take care of myself."

Neville felt himself flush, and he fidgeted with the flap of material over his jacket pocket. *Fidgeting! How can I be so... pathetic!* he thought angrily, thrusting his hands into the pockets. "Of course," he amended, "I wasn't suggesting that you couldn't." *Why do you have to be so prickly?*

He was losing it, he could tell. With every passing moment, Snape's expression was becoming stonier. What was he doing? Snape would never help him. Hadn't he figured *that* out after seven years of being taught? It was all going wrong! Nothing made sense any more. He had nothing, and the things he wanted were beyond him... What was the point?

It was unnerving! No one, other than Aurors, vengeance-driven wizards and an indefatigable Headmistress, actively sought him out; it was quite disconcerting; and to cap it all, it was Neville Longbottom doing the seeking. If he recalled correctly, he had made the lad's life incredibly difficult. All he could think was that some purpose beyond mere manners and pride was haunting and compelling the youth.

Watching the man almost squirming before him was generating mixed feelings. Snape was rather selfishly enjoying the sight of his presence having some effect while another part sympathised with the man's need to do something that opposed sensibility. And there was something that forced Neville to bury all those terrible years and his fear. Snape knew what it was like to have to be something that he despised and do things that revolted him.

"Tea?" he snapped out, surprising himself as much as Neville. "Stop gaping like a trout," Snape said without rancour. "Would you care for some tea?"

The pale man swallowed and nodded slowly. "Erm, yes. Thank you."

Snape turned to the bemused receptionist and muttered something to her before indicating that Neville should follow him upstairs.

The receptionist chuckled and hummed a merry tune as she corrected the note that she had written following the enigmatic man's final request. Her colleague left the small office behind the counter and sauntered over, drawn by the apparent amusement of his friend.

"What's perked you up? You were as miserable as sin when your shift started."

She folded her note and grinned up at him. "Just feeling slightly superior at the moment."

He gave a short laugh and folded his arms across his chest as he leant against the counter. "Oh?"

Her grin became positively impish as she thought about the items to be sent to Mr Snape's room. "At least, I know when I'm interested in someone."

Puzzled, the man glanced up at the two men ascending the stairs. "Them?" he asked, his tone indicating that he was far from convinced.

"Hmm mm," she confirmed.

"They hate each other!" he argued.

She shrugged her shoulders and grinned up knowingly. "Can you remember what the younger man had for dinner last night?"

The man snorted derisively and waved his hand dismissively. "Can you remember what I had to eat when we went out for dinner the other night?" he countered.

"You had the steak and ale pie with chips and peas, followed by treacle toffee pudding," she retorted without hesitation before blushing and finding the note suddenly

fascinating.

Oblivious, the man grumbled under his breath. "You just have a good memory and a food obsession," he griped. "I still fail to grasp the point, and no; I can't remember what he had for dinner."

"Well, the other fellow did," she stated firmly, prodding him playfully in the chest. "Mr Snape ordered for him and asked for a tuna melt baguette."

"All that proves is that Mr Snape saw him eat some tuna and knows that it's a good choice to make."

She sighed and folded her arms across her chest. "No wonder you're still single," she said despairingly.

"Trust me," he said simply, ignoring her comment. "They hate each other."

A frown marred her features, and then, she sighed resignedly. "Maybe," she conceded generously. "But it's a fine divide."

~X~

It hadn't been this terrifying standing outside Snape's office while at Hogwarts, and Neville felt his head spin as the door to Snape's room opened up. He felt that the hinges should have creaked ominously or a cold, musty blast should have erupted from the darkened depths. Only the susurrus of the door over carpet and the subtle smell of pot-pourri greeted him.

"Well! Don't dawdle!"

Neville jumped and followed the older man into the room. It was the same as his room, save for the luggage and the colour of the duvet: it brought a smirk to his lips. His quilt was green and Snape's was a deep red. But despite that ironic observation momentarily stifling his unease, he couldn't help but realise that he was in Snape's room: *Oh Merlin! Snape's room.*

"I took the liberty of ordering some food for you," Snape said swiftly. "You look pale, and I doubt that you ate when you returned earlier."

"Thank you," Neville replied calmly, trying to suppress the almost manic surprise at Snape's generosity and consideration.

Snape harrumphed and directed his guest to sit. "I hardly wanted you to pass out in my room from lack of food," he said dismissively. "Given my current status in the Wizarding world, I could do with minimising scandal."

There was that sudden bout of disorientation again...that recurrent, horrible indecision regarding Snape's intention. Had the man been humorous or just provided a wry observation of his life? It was so disconcerting, and to feel so wrong-footed was adding unbearably to his unease. Neville almost rejected Snape's offer to sit.

Braving the situation, Neville sat but regretted it as Snape loomed over him, those black eyes studying him intently. The unease intensified into dread, then panic... Then, he was struggling to breathe, and his heart was hammering.

Oh Merlin! I can't breathe! No air! Get away from me... Don't let me go, Mummy.

Something screamed in his ears, and Snape's dark outline filled his diminishing field of vision; as his panic became fully-fledged fear, he felt hands on him and then... nothing.

Oh bugger! Snape thought as Neville slumped across the sofa. *It had been going so well as well!* In spite of his dark humour, he felt his own panic begin to stir. An unconscious wizard was sprawled on his settee in his room; a wizard who would be the last to be called a friend. In fact, it would be more likely that the youth had come to settle some score. If this got out...of course, it'd get out! Ear-piercing screams had this annoying habit of getting out.

Removing his wand, Snape levitated the insensate wizard over to the bed and dropped him onto the red duvet...*how fitting!* he groused. Dragging his hand over his face, he cast several charms; the first was a soporific to help Neville sleep for a while...Legilimency had highlighted a few issues...and then, he cast spells to determine what was happening beyond the room. Life-detecting charms showed that the rooms immediately around his were empty, and nothing seemed to suggest frantic actions to report a deadly crime. Satisfied that the scream had actually passed unnoticed, he twisted the sofa round so that it faced the foot of the bed. Sitting down, he studied the slumbering, troubled man.

The spells, as few as they had been, had exhausted him, and he wanted nothing more than to settle off to sleep himself, but he felt in some way responsible for Neville's distress, and it pestered his mind into dark musings. The inspired thoughts pained him... So much about his past pained him. Grimacing, he glared at Neville...*Why did you have to show up and ruin it? Couldn't you have left me alone or killed me quietly? This is a nightmare for me! What do you want from me?*

Jolting at the knock on the door, he leapt from his seat and rushed to open the door. The smiling face of the receptionist greeted him, and he remembered the food and drinks that he had ordered. Schooling his features, he smiled and opened the door wider, noting with some distaste that her eyes lingered on the sleeping form in his bed as she strode in. Dropping the tray on the table, she withdrew the receipt for him to sign. Hastily scrawling his name, he thrust it back to her, ignoring her smirk.

"Would you care for anything else, sir," she asked, her curving lips adding volumes to the question...the content becoming clearer as he followed her gaze from wine bottle... to bed... and back to wine.

Oh, good grief! he thought incredulously. "No," he replied curtly, opening the door for her.

"Goodnight then, sir," she said to the closing door.

Foolish chit!

Still hungry, he walked over to the tray and lifted up one of the plates, admiring the thick steak sandwich. Caramelised onions slipped from the bread, and the tang of mustard warmed his nose. The slices of slightly pink steak looked juicy and tender, and the baguette was nicely toasted. The table came with two high-backed wooden chairs, and while his gaze was latched appreciatively on his dinner, he lowered himself onto the chair's cushioned seat. Quickly casting a preservation charm on Neville's sandwich, he took a bite. He was determined to enjoy it as much as possible before the inevitable, depressing reminder from the Ministry.

Somehow, the sandwich didn't quite satisfy him as much as he'd hoped. He found himself pausing to watch Neville in between bites. The notion that the receptionist had planted was ridiculous, but just as doxies were annoying hard to shift, so was the thought as it buzzed around in his skull. Is that what Neville wanted? It couldn't be. It didn't seem sane let alone plausible. The chaotic thoughts in the youth's head had indicated some desperate desire, some potent need, but the thought that it was Snape whom he craved was laughable, but Snape was sure that Neville needed him for something. The only logical and sane notion was that Neville needed his Potions knowledge.

The steak sandwich no longer rested as snugly in his stomach. What would Neville do and feel when he had to tell the boy that he was forbidden to offer such aid to him... to anyone?

As if in synch with his sudden depression, an owl tapped on the glass. If only he could ignore it. Feeling sick to his stomach, Snape walked over and opened the small window. The bird slipped in and glided silently across the room to perch on the back of Snape's vacated seat. The owl extended its leg and flexed its talons. *They must train these birds to be as obnoxious as the rest of the Ministry's employees,* he grumbled as he walked back to where he had just been.

Without approval, the owl scooped up some slivers of steak from his plate as payment for delivering something that he didn't want. Frustrated, Snape snatched the scroll from the beast's leg and swiped at it, making use of the unwanted letter. With a screech, the bird launched itself from the chair in a flurry of flapping wings and swooped out of the window. Sneering, he spelled the window shut and cleaned the chair... noting with chagrin that the sandwich was beyond saving. His hand trembled minutely as he unrolled the missive, knowing what would be written on it, he swallowed the waves of nausea.

Patient S.S. one-six-nine,

It has been noted that potion lot two-two-seven-five has been used. For the next dose, you will be required to report to the Ministry on the twenty-second of this month at nine-thirty. Failure to comply will result in severe health consequences. Be advised to attend. A letter seeking your absence from Hogwarts for the day has been sent to Headmistress McGonagall.

Have a nice day,

Healer Barret

Clenching his fist, he crushed the letter; they couldn't even be bothered to write up-to-date demands. It was the same format with only the lot number and date changing. He was sure that should he die and the potion be spilt in his absence, then an owl would arrive to tap futilely on his headstone.

He despised the powerlessness of being in need. He had to obey the every whim of the accursed Ministry, and it left him feeling more used than he had ever felt before. As his mind descended into recollections of just what a day at the Ministry entailed, his head dropped into his trembling hands, and he curbed the sob threatening to escape. He would not be weak now, not after everything that he'd had to endure, but it was so hard.

The sound of Neville shifting in his sleep disturbed him, and he glanced up. As sources of inspiration and motivation went, it would be surprising that Snape saw Neville as a source of hope, but as the young man muttered and curled up on the red duvet, Snape had a rebellious idea. Maybe helping Neville would restore some sense of power. His lips curved up in a grim smile. It would be fun to defy the Ministry; all the talents and skills that he'd honed as a matter of survival would be used again... This time, to help him survive this empty life.

Dreams and Discussions

Chapter 4 of 22

Snape and Neville settle on a plan. Of course, making plans is the easy part.

Images pestered his slumbering mind, and it seemed that no amount of wishing or straining allowed him to wake; he was trapped with his nightmares and felt utterly helpless. It was doubly frustrating that he couldn't quite determine what terrorised him. Strange silhouettes and freakish flashes skittered through his skull. He thought at one point that he heard voices...some desperate demand, and a serene voice with such clarity and power that it momentarily rendered the dread impotent. But despite those dulcet tones, he felt chilled and terrified.

The nightmare was one that had haunted him as a young child, and one that had seemingly fled during his time at Hogwarts, resurfacing when he returned home for holidays and more prevalently after he had graduated. Years of suffering the same horrible dream should have given him the chance to elucidate its meaning and source, but it remained frustratingly elusive. He had as little information about it now as he had when he had first dreamt it.

He did, however, know what was coming.

The wail jolted Snape awake, and he twisted in his seat to catch sight of Neville thrashing on the bed as though fighting off a Dementor. Hastening to the man's side, Snape cast the counter charm to the earlier soporific in a bid to ease the man's awakening. Pursing his lips, Snape straightened...the spell had had no effect; Neville was in a natural sleep...and opted to cast a spell that would muffle any sounds leaving the room. It was unwise to wake someone from a bad dream... Especially a wizard. Being mistaken for the source of a dreamer's terror could lead to the receiving of any number of nasty curses. Certainly, it was much wiser to let them come out of it naturally.

After the initial flurry of activity and Neville calming slightly, Snape noticed that the Ministry's damned letter was still clutched in his hand, and he sneered as he strolled back to deposit the burden on the table. Oh, how he'd love to incinerate the thing! But he'd done that with the first one and had received a fine and a stern, very public, admonishment from the Ministry...a Howler over breakfast and before eight hundred or so students and various members of staff is not a pleasant experience. It had been the more private letter received later with its dire warning that had, of course, battered at his petulance... The threat of Azkaban.

It was true that with the vast majority of Dementors on the loose Azkaban was no longer quite the terrible place that it had once been. But in their place, the Ministry had appointed gaolers and Wardens, and they had their own tactics for keeping the prisoners down. In some ways, Snape would have preferred to have faced the Dementors; at least they could take little from him as they made him relive the very worst moments of his life.

He craved light! The cold, the darkness seeping into the room, and Neville, whimpering like the inmates that he'd left, collided to smother and stifle him. Hastily, Snape flicked on the light switch, squinting as the artificial light flooded the room, and he rubbed at his tender throat.

How foolish! he chided. *Jumping at shadows like a child!*

Inhaling and walking back to the sofa, he sat down and pulled the blanket over his legs. It seemed that he wasn't the only one feeling or being made to feel like a child... Neville was asking for his mother again: the same plaintive whisper that he had cried out earlier. It was said that soldiers dying on the battlefield asked for their mothers, and he knew that those in great fear and pain also uttered that plea. He had heard the cries for mothers far too frequently, and he could only imagine the cries of the mothers.

Oh, so maudlin! he thought dismissively.

But he knew why Neville's crying for his mum was making him feel so sick and filthy.

"They're the best target...the others are either too well guarded or too powerful to approach." Bella's voice was harsh, stifling the possibility of contradiction by sheer force of will. There were a few mumblings, but no one openly disputed her decision. "Frank Longbottom was the Auror in charge of the investigation at Godric's Hollow; he would know more than anyone about what happened to our Lord that night." Her dark eyes glittered in the candlelight, and her lips were parted. She had acquired fear and respect while thriving in her Master's shadow, but now, she was experiencing the delicious drug that was power. It flowed through her, seeping from her like honey, and he

could see how his comrades drank deeply, becoming as addicted to her as she was to the new-found power. "We have a way to encourage him to be honest with us." Her pale lips curved up in a subtle, vicious smile, and her tongue flicked out to moisten her upper lip. "He has a young son."

Head fit to explode and lungs burning, Neville shrieked and sat bolt upright in bed! His fingers scrabbled at the covers, trying to clutch at the fading traces of the nightmare. As always, he was left to suffer the fear while the cause danced away. Luckily, the light bulb in the room was not so potent that it had the capacity to seemingly sear his retina, but it encouraged him to squint which rendered the room down into indistinguishable shapes and shadows.

Hotel room... In Wales. The soothing thought began to relax him, and his heart slowed its rapid tempo. *Red duvet. Bedside cabinet.* He frowned at that observation; something wasn't quite right. As the source of his consternation settled like thunderclouds over a parade, he looked again at the duvet still held in his fierce grip. *Red duvet. Snape's room!*

Licking his lips and glancing around the room, Neville tried to see where Snape was lurking. *How could I have fallen asleep? What was I thinking? What had Snape thought? Oh Merlin! What has Snape done while I slept?* It was quite a creepy thought, and Neville felt incredibly nauseous; it didn't help that he had no idea where his former professor was. As far as he was aware, he had earlier humiliated Snape, and the man had reacted... well, quite interestingly really, but as of yet had not exacted any revenge as such. What form would Snape's reprisal take? Suddenly, the idea of having detention with Snape lost all fear-inducing capability; the thought of being in a room with Snape and no one knowing that he was there was far more worrying.

Neville's frantic eyes homed in on a shape on the sofa, and as his mind sorted out the curves and angles, he realised that the collection of shapes equalled the outline of Snape hunched on the settee. It was quite awkward; he felt a constant shift from embarrassment to dread and back again. Should he apologise? Was conking out in someone's hotel room considered relatively okay, or was it a complete no-no? Just how badly would Snape tongue-lash him? *Oh crap! Did I cry out? Did he hear?*

The man in question stood, cast him an indecipherable glance and walked over to the table. Neville watched in mute fascination and quiet dread. He no longer knew if he trembled as a result of the nightmare or due to whatever was about to happen. It was a remarkably unpleasant experience. *So much for being the one who had stood up against Voldemort!*

"You're probably thirsty," Snape said in a manner that suggested if Neville hadn't been thirsty, then he should now be practically gasping for some water.

"Yes," he replied happily, knowing that he was in complete agreement with Snape. However, he still had to stomp on the flicker of suspicion as Snape held out a glass of water.

"I haven't done anything to it," snapped out the Potions master. "Many of the rumours about me are quite untrue," he continued less harshly.

Neville grinned sheepishly and reached out to take the glass. "Of course."

Snape watched Neville take a few cautious sips...*foolish boy!*...and then, the young man greedily gulped down the last few mouthfuls, much to Snape's envy.

"You suffer bad dreams frequently?"

The question punctured the uncomfortable silence and created an uncomfortable expectation. Neville inhaled slowly, and his gaze slipped from Snape's cool expression to the glass held in his tense fingers. It still puzzled him that Snape was demonstrating something akin to concern...oh! He knew that Snape had almost died for them, but that didn't mean that the man had to be nice! This 'concern' was unexpected and although not entirely unpleasant, it still made him uncomfortable.

But given that, he was willing to shove any bad feeling to the side; his parents meant more to him than the easing of his mild discomfort. Besides, if he was honest, there was something about this Snape that drew him... After all, it hadn't been completely necessary to have followed and watched Snape as he had relaxed by the river. Shaking his head, he grinned ruefully and looked up.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Almost every night."

"A Dreamless Sleep potion would ease some of your nightly distress," Snape suggested.

"I've tried them," Neville said softly, his grin fading. "I find that taking them frequently just makes me lethargic during the day."

"Yes," agreed Snape kindly. "They do have that rather annoying consequence, and unless you want to take more potions to alleviate the fatigue, then you either have to face the nightmares or drink endless cups of coffee... which has its own nasty side-effects...especially as you age."

Neville nodded slowly; it seemed that Snape not only understood what he was going through but was also sympathetic.

"I have, in part, grown accustomed to them."

Snape tutted and folded his arms across his chest. "They're not something to grow accustomed to, Longbottom," he said sharply. "You grow to accept and deal with them; accustomed suggests... that they pop round uninvited for a cup of tea and a chat, and you have to humour them... and stop grinning like that," he interjected sternly at Neville's growing smile.

"Pomona once said pretty much the same thing," he explained, humour lacing his voice. "She said that visiting you was an ordeal that she had grown accustomed to."

Snape felt his own lips twitch. The impromptu visits had been quite frequent at first, and Professor Sprout's bubbly enthusiasm had been almost overpowering; if someone could be accosted through sheer goodwill, then Snape had been at risk for several months after rejoining the fold. "I recall that she tried to encourage some discussion about topical events... under the guise of asking about combining sections of the Herbology and Potions' syllabi...it was an excellent idea, I may add...but she was so... *persistent* about other things...as if I really have or want... an opinion on the success of the Chudley Cannons or the latest column in *Witches Weekly*." He raised his arms to highlight his exasperation and sauntered back to the sofa; exhaustion gripped him as it was wont to do when he was enthused and momentarily forgot himself. "I grew... to quite admire... her strength of character."

Neville gave his first honest laugh in months. "How did you manage to dissuade her from visiting? I've tried various tactics, and none of them have been successful."

Snape turned to him, looking surprised at Neville's inadvertent confession. "I was under the impression... that you were fond of Professor Sprout?"

"Oh, I am," said Neville hastily, his expression panic-stricken. "I just... it's just that..." he faltered, his mood becoming morose. "Sometimes, I'd rather be left alone and not have my life picked apart in the name of good intentions."

"Wouldn't we all," mumbled Snape under his breath, the image of a certain Scottish Headmistress springing to mind. Turning to Neville, he continued in a louder voice, "It is my experience that to actively discourage such things... only encourages them to be more... determined. The most effective way... is to assure them that they are not needed. Some women like to feel that they are needed... deprive them of that... and they feel quite unwanted... something that they dislike." Minerva's smirking face danced into view, but he had covered himself by saying 'some women'.

"That works?" Neville asked with bewilderment.

"On *some* women," Snape confirmed. "I have the greatest of respect for Professor Sprout... there are not many wizards who could get a Whomping Willow to bow to them. She is a strong woman." He shifted so that he could face Neville proper. "She just likes to be useful and dislikes being reminded that she isn't."

"It sounds less... erm... sneaky than what I've been doing," admitted Neville sheepishly.

"What have you been doing?" Snape asked, intrigued at the thought of Neville being sneaky.

Neville's guilty expression intensified, and he bit his lower lip. "I cast a Disillusionment Charm and pretend I'm out."

Snape looked quite blank as he processed his confession, and Neville felt his guts roll unpleasantly, but then, the strangest sound erupted...Snape was laughing! It was more a strange rumble rather than a hearty laugh; only the merest of sounds actually escaped from his damaged throat, but it was clear by the way the shoulders shook that Snape was having a good old belly laugh. Neville wondered how Snape would have sounded if he hadn't been injured; it seemed that his laugh would have been rich and deep.

"That's priceless!" Snape finally managed to announce in between wheezes. "The boy... who beheaded Nagini... and told the Dark Lord... what he could do with his plans... hides from his sweet, old, Herbology professor!"

"I never said that I was pleased about it," Neville countered sulkily. "It's just been the most effective method thus far."

At any other time, he may have been more wounded by Snape's reaction, but he was quite relieved that the conversation had shifted from his nightmares to his minor dilemma regarding Pomona. It was also actually far more interesting than upsetting to see Snape laughing about his troubles...who would have thought that the man had a sense of humour? And it was fairly pathetic that he had resorted to hiding. Neville felt the laughter bubble up, and pretty soon, he was chuckling alongside his former tormentor. It was quite pleasant.

When he had last laughed like this? Years? Decades? It felt so good, even with the pain in his throat and fatigue pressing down on him. It felt wonderful. Snape was also gratified to see that Neville had sloughed off his despair and was just as amused. But he knew better than most that some things were worn as a mask, and he suspected that Neville had been wearing a mask for many years.

But he didn't want to think of masks, and he didn't want to have to face the memories that were clamouring for attention, so he held onto the unfamiliar humour and feelings of camaraderie. It was quite easy to forget that Neville Longbottom had been a former student of his; in truth, the young man laughing on his bed was almost unrecognisable... almost a stranger.

Up to that point in time, only McGonagall had been able to see past the sting of his comments to see the point of his words, and he had been rather content with that arrangement...it kept many of his colleagues and students away unless there was a certain degree of necessity, and that helped maintain a certain level of peace. The idea that he could be sociable if he made some effort was something that McGonagall had tormented him with. She had thrown the notion in his face at every opportunity and invaded his loneliness at inopportune moments: after sleepless nights, during bouts of depression... his birthday. *Frustrating woman!* he thought fondly.

So, sitting with Neville and realising that he was enjoying the company was quite the revelation. It was made all the more astounding by the fact that Neville had had to make barely any effort to achieve such a state. In her bid, Minerva had: spent Galleons on fresh tea and Ginger Newts; dedicated precious personal time to the task; and invested heavily in relaxation therapy before Snape had relented and admitted that she was his friend. Although, they had both known the truth of their relationship the day she had visited him at Spinners' End to tell him that he 'could have his old job back, if his social calendar would permit'. The memory of that conversation still had the power to warm him.

The smile curving Snape's lips weakened; he and Minerva had nurtured a friendship based on a variety of factors...mutual respect, sense of humour, similar opinions, and some that they never dwelt upon but quietly shared...but what had drawn he and Neville into this bizarre acquaintanceship? The smile completely deserted him. Was it that *thing* within Neville that he had caught a glimpse of which connected them? Neville had stopped smiling and was looking at Snape with an appraising expression on his pale features. *No*, thought Snape as he looked into the silvery-grey eyes; they had and were suffering something very similar: an obligation.

"Why did you seek me out, Mr Longbottom?"

The pale eyes flickered, but the features remained immobile. "I need your help."

It was simple and honest, just like the Neville he remembered, but just as the man before him was enigmatic, so the answer hid a multitude of complexities and troubles.

"In what way?" Snape asked cautiously.

Neville looked away. "I have been working on a potion for the last ten years, give or take a few months, and it keeps failing."

"There are people who could help you, for a modest fee," Snape said flatly. The risks of working against the Ministry had to be outweighed by what Neville needed; otherwise, it would be akin to tickling a sleeping dragon...bloody stupid! Snape had to be sure that he really was Neville's last chance.

"I've tried," Neville snapped out, lunging from the mattress to pace the small space between wall and bed. "I've tried them all! They all say that it can't be done."

"Sometimes, popular opinion *is* the right answer."

"No!" Snape stiffened at the vehemence in Neville's voice and expression. "They are lazy and untalented. I have come so close so many times, and I'm the dunderhead!"

"That still does not mean..."

"Granted!" interjected Neville abruptly, rounding on Snape with an almost manic grin. "But I know that it can work; I just need the fine touch of a Potions master."

Shaking his head and reining in his own eager need to leap up and accept, Snape stood and spread his arms apologetically. "The term is nothing more than a job title. I have no formal qualifications beyond NEWT level potions." The crushed look on Neville's face was terrible to witness, but Snape *had* to be sure that helping Longbottom was worth the possible ramifications. "But I have often quibbled over the so-called skill of those who profess to be experts."

"So," began Neville tentatively, "it is possible that you may be able to do what they say can't be done?"

Snape inhaled slowly and crossed his arms. "Some things just cannot be done, Mr Longbottom," he said firmly. "It may be that I only confirm what the others have said." At his crestfallen look, Snape decided...rather impulsively, he thought...to help the boy out. "It may also be that I find a way to make it work."

~X~

The black book had never been so thoroughly examined. Had it been capable, it would have almost been embarrassed at its shabby cover, dog-eared pages and strained spine; it may have sought sympathy for the tea stains and the blobs of ink that had nothing to do with its quality of manufacture, and it may have wagged its slender, ribbon bookmark in joy as Snape slowly drew his fingertip across the best bits.

"All very well presented," Snape said after an hour of intense perusal.

Neville wiped crumbs from his lips and hastily swallowed his last mouthful of tuna melt baguette. "Would it have gotten me an Acceptable in Potions?" he asked glibly.

Snape turned the page and ignored the question; if Neville had generated such work in the classroom, he would have surpassed Granger. He felt a flicker of frustration... Why couldn't the pupils work like this while in school, rather than seeing the value of it afterwards?

"There is a common theme in all these ideas and methods."

Neville felt all playfulness vanish...he should have known! Snape would have easily seen through the plans to the end result, and he would have to explain. But it was so hard! Perhaps Snape saw his inner distress because he bookmarked the page and closed the book.

"I can start work with what you have here," Snape said generously, letting Neville off the hook. "The only problem is that we'll need to discuss this at regular intervals. Your knowledge of what has been successful and what has not is in your head and in these pages. I have no intention of wasting time going over what you already know."

Nonplussed, Neville frowned and turned to face Snape. Discussing the contents of the book shouldn't pose any problems, so Neville couldn't see any difficulty. "I have Floo access and no commitments; communication isn't an issue."

Snape stiffened and flashed Neville a humourless grin. "Whereas I have no Floo access, and I am very limited in what I can do," Snape said softly. "In fact, Mr Longbottom, I should not be helping you at all."

Gobsmacked, Neville thought back to the Aurors, and something slithered down his spine. "You'll be breaking the law to help me?" At Snape's nod, he grimaced and his head dropped into his hands. "You were the last, you know," he mumbled after a strained pause. "I had almost given up hope and then, there you were." He gave a bitter laugh and lifted his head to study the face of his last and now lost help. "It was almost like it had been designed." Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair. "Fate is a cruel bitch."

It was shocking to hear Neville curse with such vitriol. "Do not be rude to the lady," Snape chided gently. "I don't recall saying that I wouldn't help you." Neville's bemused and hopeful expression made a return. "It just means that we have to be prudent."

"How?" Neville asked and then blushed as Snape's scrutiny intensified. "Stealth isn't a requirement of a Herbology enthusiast," he explained defensively.

Snape was thinking back to much earlier: he knew that Longbottom would live to regret the term 'assistant'. "You already know the answer to that question, *Professor Longbottom*," Snape said with a rather evil smirk.

"I do?" After a few minutes the penny dropped, and he felt the torrent of excuses tumbling over themselves to be expressed. "I can't."

The terror of his school days leant forwards, those deep, black eyes boring into him, and the mouth curving up into a smile. "It is the only way that both our goals can be achieved. If you want this to work, then you will make Professor Sprout's year and agree to take over from her as Herbology professor."

Lips flapping uselessly as he tried to think up some reasonable excuse, Neville felt his late supper stir menacingly, but he knew that Snape was right. Besides, he had wanted the job for years, the only impediment being Snape. He sniggered at that. The 'impediment' was egging him on to join, welcoming him with open arms: how surreal!

"Okay."

"Well done, Longbottom," Snape said rather too benevolently. *At least now with you in school, he thought to himself, I won't have to lock my office door and pretend that I'm not in when Professor Sprout does her rounds.* "As far as I can recall, the job has not been offered to anyone else; apply now, and you can join the staff before the start of the Autumn term."

"But that's in four weeks' time!" he flustered. "I can't possibly teach a class. I have no idea what to do or say."

"Calm yourself," Snape soothed. "Due to the uncertainty about the role, she has settled to do the first term. I daresay that she would be thrilled to have you by her side, learning the ropes." Neville looked unconvinced, and Snape's temper flared. "I face Azkaban for helping you; you will face a classroom of dunderheads. Is the potion worth it?"

Neville's cheeks flushed and those odd, metallic eyes narrowed; Snape had to tame his emotions so that his concern would not seep across his face. "The potion is worth that to me!"

Snape almost shuddered at the coldness and sincerity of the young man's affirmation: *what would cost too much?* he wondered. But it confirmed that his rash decision to help was certainly worth it.

"Very good," Snape uttered softly as he walked to the door. "Goodnight, Mr Longbottom."

Neville nodded and moved towards the door, slipping past Snape into the hallway. "Goodnight, Professor Snape."

Snape moved to close the door, but Neville's hand shot out to stop the door. Startled, Snape looked up into the silhouetted face.

"Thank you, sir," Neville said firmly.

Snape nodded, but the hand remained flat against the wood, halting the progress of the door, and the silence seemed to threaten a torrid expression of some sorts. They both held their breath. Snape was sure that Neville was about to say something, but then, the palm slid away from the door with the merest hiss of skin against wood, and the young man was heading towards his own room. Frowning, he closed the door and plodded back to the rumpled bed; never had a 'thank you' seemed so full. As he worked on his buttons, Snape wondered just what Neville was thanking him for.

Author's Notes: The italicised section featuring Bella is taken from *Sweet Sanctuary* which will act as a companion piece to this story. However, it is not necessary to read that story to follow this one. If you wish to read the story, you can locate it on this site and under 'sweetflag'.

Bloom and Gloom

Chapter 5 of 22

Snape settles into his role with relish, and Neville discovers that his dream job comes with a few nightmares.

"I am so thrilled you changed your mind," declared Professor Sprout while brushing her soil-encrusted hands down her leather apron. Grinning at him, she strode over and gripped his biceps as though he was a flighty dryad. "I had almost given up hope that we'd find someone like you, Neville. I was worried about retiring and leaving them in less than ideal hands, but you," she said while sliding her hands to his, "have the hands of a true master herbologist."

"Thank you, Pomona," he said. He felt his cheeks burn with the inevitable blush; they obviously hadn't been paying attention when he'd lectured himself on the need for maturity. It was a mild disappointment...he saw it as a portent of his imminent gibbering in the staff room when McGonagall introduced him to the other staff members! Sighing, Neville felt the blush subside and smiled.

"I'll give you a quick tour, and then, we can have a nice pot of tea in my office."

Neville glanced around the greenhouse while Pomona pulled off her apron. Everything was just as he remembered before it all went to hell. The windows were just as grimy, even though he knew they had been smashed out during the battle. The two long benches were as solid and just as marked: 'Tez woz ere' was still etched into the wooden worktop. The tentacular plant was a familiar sight, coiled in the corner, ready to unfurl its barbed vines at the unwary, and the place still smelt of peat and musky homeliness. It was so *cosy*.

It could be so easy to forget that anything from that terrible time existed at all. Could the very place that had held and almost broken him be the place where he would feel the safest? He didn't have the chance to ponder the paradox; Pomona's clean hand gripped his, and he was led on a tour.

He had thought the idea of a tour to be unnecessary, but some parts of the castle had been altered since the battle. New stone seemed to grow out from the older weathered rock, and some new features had been added: unfamiliar towers erupted from the earth, one at each of the corners of the inner courtyard, creating a rather pleasant cocooning effect. Several paths cut across the courtyard, dividing the area into smaller garden sections. Oh! And a fountain was slap bang in the middle. It represented the Houses. An eagle with her wings spread seemingly circled a heraldic rampant lion, around which a snake was coiled, and at his haunches sat a badger looking wise and attentive. A column of water shot up between the beasts, magic twisting it into beautiful patterns, and droplets rained down upon the symbols of the Founders. Beautiful and functional: slender channels had been cut into the stone slabs, which ran from the fountain to the soil. The fountain worked to irrigate the gardens.

"You get the full effect of the garden from the towers," Pomona said as they walked past the fountain. "Each section grows different potion ingredients, healing herbs and flowers dedicated to the Founders."

Neville nodded and studied the flora. There were plants aimed at aiding intellect; those for increasing stamina and strength; sedatives and restoratives; and those used in cooking or potions. It was a lovely feature: what a way to unite the Houses!

Strolling across the courtyard took them towards the doorway to one of the new towers. He had expected the shift from sunlight to tower would be disorientating, but vines growing along the walls cast a subtle and calming light in the shadowed tower. The effect was beautiful. Awed, he studied the luminescent blossoms, admiring the delicate petals and the golden hearts. He knew these flowers: Clematis luminenta. But they were notoriously difficult to cultivate.

Turning to Pomona, he saw her face split into a wide grin, and she bounced from foot to foot as if fit to burst due to his unasked question. He raised an eyebrow; it was all that it took to make her pop.

"I know!" she said. "It took me three years to get the hybrid right. It's beautiful, isn't it?" She ran her hand lovingly over the shimmering blooms. "I never had the time while teaching to carry on with all the things that I wanted, but the year off while the castle was being repaired, my convalescence, and the decreased work load when the school reopened allowed me to pick up where I'd left off before teaching." Her exuberance waned, and she fell into a rare melancholy. "Strange how so much can come from so much grief and pain."

Neville felt that he'd been in some stagnating mire since Hogwarts, and he couldn't quite sympathise with her personally. He reached out to trace his fingertips over the petals, and he suddenly felt useless: while he had struggled, others had moved on to do great things. Had the last decade been a complete waste?

"Of course, it was Severus' contribution which made this a reality," she continued. "If he hadn't been able to devise the potion to speed up their growth, enhance their luminosity and facilitate food absorption, then they would be a pet project in my greenhouse."

"Professor Snape helped you with this?" he asked. "What he's managed to do is staggering! Look at the length of the stems," he declared, gesturing up the staircase. "They'd never be able to thrive on capillary action alone. The phloem must be magically enhanced to transport the nutrients along...what?...several hundred yards worth of stalk?"

At his question, Pomona nodded eagerly, her grin widening as he both demonstrated his knowledge and extolled the wonders of the flower. It was a delight to see him so enthused; last time they'd chatted, she had been concerned about the reclusive young man. Whatever or whomever had brought him out of himself needed some thanks.

"Six hundred, from root to tip, to be precise." She positively bristled with pride.

"The potion is mixed in with the fertiliser." His fingers stroked the velveteen flower, and he could picture the whole process in his mind; it was a glorious mix of Potion's know-how and Herbology wisdom. The potion surged along the plant's thin veins, suffusing each leaf and nourishing each bud. It coated the phloem and xylem to make them more able to transport nutrients and water along the myriad twisting veins. It was simply brilliant.

"Yes. Then, and this is the clever bit, it's distributed throughout the plant so that each flower has enough to make it glow all the brighter." She needn't have explained; Neville was lost in it, divining the theory and the results of Snape's work.

"Remarkable!" he sighed. "To think that a Potion's master could have done this."

"Severus has done a lot in the time he's been here," Pomona said almost in defence of the Potions master, and Neville couldn't help but smile.

"I didn't mean I'm surprised that Professor Snape did this," he said while raising his hands apologetically. "I'm amazed that anyone outside of Herbology could have been so insightful regarding plants."

"We all underestimated Severus."

Neville caught a glimpse of Pomona's pained expression. He could sympathise unreservedly with that sentiment.

"Well, we'd best not dawdle," she piped. "The meeting will be starting soon, and I'd still like that cuppa before we get there."

~X~

The staffroom had emptied quickly after the initial staff meeting and introductions had finished. Those familiar with the proceedings tended to be swifter about exiting when an opportunity arose, leaving the newcomers and those with no choice but to stay. In the good old days, Snape would have legged it too, but this time, he had a reason to stay. He felt in some way responsible for Neville's predicament, and also, as a senior member of staff, he was obliged to stay...even if he had wriggled out of it in previous years.

Neville was not the only new face at Hogwarts. A new Arithmancy professor had joined the ever-growing list of newcomers to the job, which was almost as jinxed as the Defence Against the Dark Arts position had been: of course, the reasons for leaving were not nearly as dire or as terminal these days.

Randal Rhine had presented himself as a more than competent Arithmancer, and although something about the wizard irritated Snape, he had enough academic acumen to easily secure the position, and Minerva had hired him almost on the spot. Minerva had asked it of Snape to keep an open mind about the newcomer, and for her, he would leave it slightly ajar. It could be that he was just naturally wary of tall, handsome, charming and broomstick-loving wizards with perfect teeth.

While he underwent the rituals of the 'First Day Back', Snape's eyes were predominantly on Neville. He had expected a degree of uncertainty or unease, but the man was handling the onslaught that was the 'Staff's Welcome' with amazing serenity. It rankled that someone half his age was coping better than he had: he recalled the sedatives and anti-emetic taken before his introduction as the re-instated Potion's master.

"Stop glowering," whispered a voice in his ear, and he turned to face Minerva.

"I'm merely warming up for the start of term," he replied dryly. Sitting back in his chair, he picked up his coffee cup and returned to watching Neville as he chatted to Flitwick and the new recruit.

"What have I told you about first impressions?"

"You only get one; they will come back to haunt you; they last; never trust them; make a good one..."

"That's the one!" she said sharply, interrupting his sarcastic drone. "You will be mentoring Professor Rhine for the first term; you could have least made his first few hours more pleasant so he wouldn't be terrified at the prospect."

"He's a good Arithmancer; he can divine the overall outcome of our meetings from his charts." He grinned at her. "He should know that he has nothing to worry about if he does his job well."

Minerva tutted and leant away so she could sip her tea. "You still have some doubts about Rhine?"

"As a teacher? No," he said simply.

"But?"

Gulping down some coffee, he shook his head and, through his long fringe, watched the man in question laugh out at something Neville had whispered in his ear. His thick copper hair shimmered in the sunlight as he threw back his head, laughing and exposing those dazzling pearly-whites...*jammy bastard!*

"I suspect that it is merely a personal matter. After almost sixteen years of teaching various Weasley's, I may have grown to be cautious about redheads. And he does remind me of another professor."

Minerva chortled at Snape's glib observation and patted his arm affectionately. "He does have a certain charm," she said in agreement, "but it stops far short of Gilderoy's suicidal ego. I think that he'll settle once he's taught a few classes and met some of the more rambunctious pupils." She took a dainty sip of tea and gently motioned to the far corner of the staffroom with her saucer. "And what about Neville?"

"I have no doubts about his passion for his subject, and I know that he will do well as a teacher."

"You sound as thrilled about that as you did for Rhine?" She studied his profile, noting the stern line of his lips. The teacup paused en route to her lips. She felt frustration flare; any problems with the new employees should have been addressed after the interviews and not during their first day. As if sensing her gathering dissatisfaction, he turned to her.

"Professors Longbottom and Rhine are fine candidates, and any problems will be erased by experience," he soothed.

They sat in silence, sipping their beverages and watching the last few faculty members congregate around the buffet table. It was generally at these and similar events when everyone got to see who actually worked at the school. Many of the employees only appeared in the presence of food, scattering at the first hint if possible socialising. He had been amazed at his induction at the number of unseen witches and wizards who had a hand in the smooth running of the school.

"I wonder what made him change his mind?" asked Minerva. "Pomona was so sure that he would never take up the role." Snape remained silent. "Are you still happy to be mentoring him?"

"Oh yes," he breathed, his smile growing.

Minerva watched his expression change, and she tried to place the expression. "You haven't told him that you'll be his mentor, have you?"

"I thought that it'd be a nice surprise for him," he said innocently.

"For shame!" she scolded, but her twitching lips gave her away...her sense of humour could be just as vicious as his. "I'm sure that he'll be overjoyed. Just be pleasant to them both."

Looking hurt, Snape placed his palm over his heart. "I am as pleasant as I need to be, Minerva. Trust me, when I'm overly pleasant, it just seems to worry people."

"It just worries the people who remember you, Severus." Minerva smirked and straightened her glasses. "They think you're plotting something."

Behind them the fire popped in the hearth, and as he twisted to face Minerva, his chair creaked. "Do you think that I'd be that transparent if I was plotting?"

Minerva sobered and her teacup rattled against its saucer. The firelight danced on the rim of her glasses, and behind the frames, her blue eyes scrutinised him. "No," she admitted gently. "But you are up to something." His features hardened, and his eyes narrowed; the playful smirk evaporated. "None of my business, I'm sure," she added, nonchalantly taking a sip of tea. "I just feel that a bit of plotting for the greater good, every now and again, does no harm."

Snape knew Minerva had received the letter from the Ministry. It grated that he couldn't keep his dependency upon the Ministry quiet. His only grace was that Minerva kept it secret, and she was a master at keeping secrets and disguising events. No one other than Minerva knew of his Ministry-induced plight. The fact that she had not asked to see him in her office should have indicated that the canny woman had seen something in his demeanour. Had he let something slip over the last few days? Or had she developed some hitherto unknown skill at Legilimency?

"I'll arrange cover for you for when you go to the Ministry."

Like a thunderclap, the words echoed in his skull; the force of them momentarily quietened every other thought. But he'd heard them before, and he'd never let any other kind of storm keep him down. He nodded in appreciation, but she paled and pursed her lips. It seemed for a moment she was going to say something else, but then she placed the cup and saucer on the table and stood. Snape quickly did the same.

"If by any chance you are plotting against this travesty that the Ministry has foisted upon you," she said in a harsh whisper, "then I wish you luck." Her eyes locked on his. "After all that you've done for us, Severus, I'll do whatever I can to help you."

Stunned by her response, Snape could only watch her as she strode away towards Neville and Rhine. In a way, he was utterly thrilled at her declaration of fierce support, but her acuity alarmed him. He had never thought that they had grown so close, and her ability to read him so easily generated a risk. He could feel a certain fire warming his belly...an excitement at the prospect of conniving once more...but he couldn't let it be known that Neville was involved. He hid his grin behind a sip of coffee: it was like the good old days, but without the constant threat of the Cruciatus and a horrible death.

~X~

He'd never thought that a pile of papers could be so big. It was daunting. Pomona had pulled out her lesson plans from when she had started teaching. On the table before him was a three-foot tall paper tower representing forty years worth of teaching. Sitting at the greenhouse workbench, he could barely see over it.

"The lesson plans will give you an idea of what needs to be taught, and over time, I've added to the lessons as my pedagogy has developed."

"Pedagogy?" Neville squeaked.

"It's basically the way you teach," she explained. "Every teacher has their own style that works around what is required to be taught. New knowledge always comes to light and the Qualifications Office is always meddling in the way we assess work, so we have to keep updating."

"Okay," he said while picking up the first inch or so of age-creinkled pages.

"You can use my plans until you get used to it, but you'll need to consider developing your own before I leave." She handed him a thin booklet, which he took warily, fearing that it would explode into another mammoth reading task. Studying the cover, he saw an impressive crest and the embossed lettering for the Qualifications Office. "That will give you guidance on grading pupils' work. It's fairly straightforward."

It was all rather overwhelming, and all he could do was nod. "When do you officially retire again?"

A gentle hand on his shoulder made him glance up towards Pomona's smiling face. "All of us found this to be terrifying when we first started. It's something that you can never really prepare for, and the best way to learn is to do. Don't worry about it so much. You're timetabled to stay with my classes, but I'd advise you to spend as much time in other teachers' classes too. You'll get to see different styles of teaching, and that will help you settle on one you'll find comfortable. Professor Rhine is new too, and he seems a nice chap, so I'm sure that you could chat with him about things."

"Thank you, Pomona."

"You'll do fine, Neville. Observe lessons, ask questions, take criticism, learn from others, and most importantly, show no fear." She squeezed his shoulder once more and then, sat opposite him. "There are some things that you should read through over the next few weeks: school policies, health and safety issues, the required teaching for Herbology, the assessment guide, the..." At his panicked expression, she stopped. "I know that it seems a lot, but they're fairly short and based on common sense, so you have nothing to worry about."

"I can't imagine Professor McGonagall or Snape being terrified," he said while dejectedly dropping the pages onto the work bench.

Across from him, Pomona chuckled, but left him to his thoughts as she began pricking out Mandrake into larger seedling trays. They were too young to be audible, and their faces were still unclear on the wrinkled root; they wriggled frantically as she transferred them, and he was sure that on a few, he saw tiny mouths open as they complained. He frowned as she soothed them...how odd, considering that when they matured, they'd be uprooted as potion ingredients!

Sunlight filtering through the leaves of the many plants lining the greenhouse cast beautiful moving shadows on the wooden bench, and the gentle gurgle of the irrigation pipes were so soothing, the tension just ebbed away, but that left him feeling rather empty.

This had been his dream job since before he'd left school, only the thought of Snape being here had kept him away. He sucked his teeth thoughtfully and wondered why he still felt uncomfortable and disappointingly apathetic. Shouldn't he be bursting with enthusiasm?

~X~

He knew magic could do it faster and leave him far cleaner, but that somehow seemed to contradict the idea of gardening. You should take your time, exert yourself, and be covered in soil no matter how neat you are: they were almost the rules.

The area to be cleared for planting had been quite rough, and without a decent rainfall in recent weeks, the soil had hardened into something akin to concrete. Whatever had thrived here had also leached most of the nutrients from the ground and had clung tenaciously to it: numerous dried roots weaving through the pale soil had added to the difficulty. But after a few hours of hard work, he had turned the earth, removed the unwanted stones and dead roots, and added fresh soil and natural fertilisers.

Digging out deep holes along the back wall, he prepared the ground for the tall honeysuckle; they would cling to the wall as they grew, offering a subtle fragrance and blooms for the cauldrons. At their base, he planned to plant a line of purple brooms for coverage; this would be a cheap and effective way of hiding the spell-damaged stone throughout the year as they were evergreen. A swathe of marigolds would lead down from the broom to the smaller groupings of violets that would line the path. The flowers would be harvested, thus increasing the number of flowers, and when required, they could be uprooted so that stalks and roots could be used. There would be enough plants to disguise any losses. The marigolds would also help to keep wasps away from the classroom windows.

"Neville!"

Straightening, Neville looked around for the source of that shout. Rhine was trotting across the courtyard, waving a piece of parchment around. Using the back of his wrist, Neville wiped sweat from his brow and bent down to stick his trowel in the fresh earth.

"Oh, sorry," Rhine said as he approached and saw Neville's tools and the trolley holding numerous plants on the path. "I didn't think that you'd be working on your second day back."

His green eyes darted over the equipment and Neville's appearance, and his lips pulled back in mild distaste. Neville had to admit that he probably looked a mess, and the natural fertilisers did have a rather piquant aroma. Obviously, Rhine was no gardener, and judging by his impeccable clothes and fashionable tastes, only the threat of personal injury would compel him to try.

"It's okay," he replied kindly. "The stock needs replenishing, and this is an ideal time to plant."

"Ah, the right season and all that."

Neville chuckled. "That and the fact that there aren't any kids running around and getting in the way."

Rhine grinned and nodded. "Well, I won't keep you long," he said. "I've just been given the mentor timetable from Severus, and I've made you a copy."

Neville stared at Rhine...had the man just said 'Severus'? The thought of calling Snape anything other than... well... Snape was as easy to swallow as tree bark. Had Snape encouraged him to use his first name? *What if Snape asks me to use his first name? How long would it take before my tongue cramps with the effort? Hang on! Mentor timetable!*

"There's just one mentor?" he asked in a voice a few semi-tones higher than normal. He knew how his luck went. *I can't possibly be that unlucky,* he thought. *I can cope working on the potion with him and knowing Snape will be a colleague, but as my mentor?* He shuddered.

"Yes," said Rhine holding out the sheet of paper. "Here you go."

"Thanks," he said while ripping off a glove.

It didn't look that bad at first glance. They had weekly mentor meetings with Snape until half term and then, one every fortnight to the end of term, when they'd be assessed by a board of five faculty members. After Christmas, the meetings would be once a month until the end of the Spring term, and they only had two meetings in the Summer term with another faculty assessment. At the end of the academic year, they'd have a final meeting with the full faculty, not just the five members.

"I've been meaning to ask you something since yesterday," said Rhine while examining his clean and perfect fingernails. "You are *the* Neville Longbottom who helped Harry Potter, aren't you?"

Neville's head snapped up from the sheet, and his narrowed eyes latched onto green, inquisitive ones. Rhine's question had come as a complete surprise. After all this time, he'd thought that all those pesky and pointless questions had stopped. He thought that it had all died down.

"Obviously that was a tactless question," Rhine said with a wry smile, his slender face paling. Taking a few steps back, he lifted his hand in way of an apology. "Catch you later, maybe?"

Neville flashed a polite smile and nodded. He watched Rhine walk back the way he'd come. Would that happen when the students arrived? Would they ask such questions? He winced and felt nauseous. He had been hounded by people eager for the details for years after he had faced Voldemort. A grateful public had sent him all sorts of bizarre gifts. A few had even proposed marriage or offered their daughters. The sheer manic nature of their thanks had been overwhelming and frightening. And he hadn't been able to escape it!

He suddenly felt hot and bothered. His lungs didn't seem to want to work properly either. Despite it being chilly, perhaps working in the mid-afternoon sun had been foolish. He moved to sit on the edge of the trolley to catch his breath. Rubbing his hand across his damp brow, he tried to stifle the rising dread with stoic pragmatism.

Rhine hadn't been in the country at the time; in fact, he'd most likely still been at Durmstrang, studying for his equivalent of NEWTs she thought to himself. *He may not have had access to much of what had been going on at the time. It had been an innocent question. But it had stirred up so much and hinted at more to come. How come just when I think that I have things sorted, something comes along and threatens it!*

Pensieves and Plots

Chapter 6 of 22

Snape has his appointment with the Ministry.

Sleep had been impossible. Snape knew from past experience that nightmares would follow him, and he had refused to take any potion in a perverse bid to thwart any external control over him. In short, he had not entertained the idea of slipping under the covers. The Dreamless Sleep was still on the bedside table in his long-abandoned room; on the plus side, it would be waiting for him when he returned and craved mental oblivion. He knew he was being foolish, but when you have little power, it becomes easy to wield what you do have with idiotic selfishness. Sleep would have helped him face the Ministry. Before it even began, he felt exhausted.

He gently shook the coffee mug, watching the flecks of cream bob on the surface. The myriad coffee rings on the table catalogued his activity for the last two hours: drinking coffee and sinking into a black despair. A few crumbs evidenced a concerned house-elf's attempt to nourish him; the sandwich had not been well-received, and the benevolent elf had magicked away the remains from the wall before gravity had conquered the sticking power of mustard.

This was a fairly common event for them too; the Potions master had been called away many times since his return, and the elves kept a special kind of coffee on standby for such occasions. It was a strange Muggle brew called 'decaf'. The Headmistress had demanded it, and they had complied. So far, Professor Snape had not noticed the difference. They weren't sure if there was a noticeable difference or if the man just drank the coffee without tasting it. Either way, things were slightly calmer since the Headmistress had gifted them the Muggle wonder.

In his personal potions lab, Snape continued to brood. At one time, this small room had been an escape from everything. Far away from the classrooms and lost in myriad twisting and turning corridors, it had been his sanctum. Glistening bottles and neatly arranged ingredients had lined the shelves, cauldrons had bubbled away, and he had mastered some of the most complicated potions known to Wizardkind. The curved table had cocooned him as he worked, the arc allowing him to easily reach the ingredients laid out on the table's surface. Muggles called it ergonomics; he called it common sense. It had been wonderful.

Now it was barren. The Ministry had decreed that his status as Potions master did not require such ancillaries. The shelves held nothing but dust, and the cauldrons had been sold. The closest thing to a brew in this room was his coffee. It had been an almost devastating blow, contrived by a Ministry endeavouring to destroy him, but they had failed to understand Severus Snape. His passion was not rooted in potions, but expressed *through* potions. Although the inability to delve into potions had been crippling, Snape had derived a significant amount of pleasure from his little Ministry-approved tasks and helping Professor Sprout with her gardens. It was his secret pleasure to walk through the courtyard late at night, listening to the insects, the flutter of bats' wings, and seeing the soft glow seeping from the windows in the towers. Certain Aurors would be irritated no end to discover that Snape was actually content with certain aspects of his existence.

The coffee scalded his lip as he took a hefty sip. If only he could find a way to free himself from the Ministry. He took another sip. It was impossible. The only way to escape Ministry control was to die. He wasn't quite prepared to go that far. A Dark Lord, the Order, Harry Potter, Dumbledore, vengeful wizards and personal despair had not managed to finish him off; he wasn't prepared to let some pencil-pushing, untested Aurors push him over the edge.

A patch of sunlight had slid down the wall and slightly to the left, marking out the start of the day and the passage of the last few hours. Despite the slow progress of the sun through the heavens, Snape felt as though it had purposefully raced ahead in a bid to further depress him. He'd have to leave soon. Feeling nauseous, he pushed the mug away from him and stood. Better get it out of the way.

The door closed with the smallest whisper and then blended into the wall, leaving no clue that a doorway existed. He stared at the hidden door...how easy to lock himself away! Shuddering, he straightened and turned away. He had duties.

Unsurprisingly, Minerva was waiting near the main entrance. He paused, taking time to study her. She was pacing back and forth past the door, her hands constantly discharging her distress by clasping each other, or straightening her hair, or smoothing her skirts. Knowing that she was nervous for him made his chest clench, and a wave of affection warmed him. Inhaling shakily, he continued, increasing the weight of his step so she would hear him approach.

"Severus," she said as she turned to him, becoming the pillar of strength that had supported him all this time.

"Minerva." He stopped in front of her and ignored the looming door to his right. "On my desk, you'll find the reading list and tasks for Rhine and Longbottom. They'll need to complete the set task under exam conditions."

Minerva smiled and gave a curt nod. "Filius said he'd mentor them today, and Pomona will collect the plants you need. I can go through your student list later today, but..."

"Minerva!"

His voice cut through her rambling, and she snapped her mouth closed, a delicate blush colouring her cheeks. "Yes, well. I'm sure you can sort that out when you get back."

"Indeed," he said softly, flashing her a smile. "If Professor Sprout could start harvesting, then that will be incredibly helpful."

The large grandfather clock thundered out each passing second, uncaringly bringing the appointment closer. Snape licked his lips, and while unspoken words hung

between them, he turned away to reach out for the door handle. A gentle weight on his arm made him look back, and he saw Minerva's white face: a startling contrast against the gloomy backdrop.

"Take care and hurry home."

He felt his eyes widen at her choice of words, and his breath stuttered *home!*

Home.

It was such a simple word; in itself, there was very little to it... you didn't even have to make that much effort to say the word...a mere sigh would be enough. Yet! The word hit him like a Bludger to the gut. It knocked the wind out of him... Even brought tears to his eyes. His lips flapped uselessly for a moment, and then, he smiled.

"I will."

~X~

He bent double, clutching his belly while his free hand scrabbled to grip the back of the chair. Retching, he rested his forehead against the chair back and focused on his breathing. Beyond the blood pounding in his ears, he managed to catch the sounds of the Healers scurrying to transfer his severed memories into the Pensieve. It was so horribly disorientating. They always took too much! He'd warned them about the risks; he'd even begged for longer sessions so they could take fewer memories at any one time. They hadn't listened; they enjoyed watching him suffer as his mind reeled from its rape, and they took pleasure in the notion that each time they ripped out his memories, he could lose parts of his mind and memories. They gloried in the slow destruction of Severus Snape.

"Get him in the chair, for Merlin's sake!" snapped out a voice. "We don't want him puking again."

Hands grabbed him, hauling him up to shove him down on the chair. The world span out of control, and he clung to the table to ground himself. Moaning, he gripped his hair, hoping it would stop his head from spinning and using the pain to focus his mind. Closing his eyes helped to alleviate the worst of his symptoms, but that horrible sensation of moving while sitting was still playing havoc with his emotions and guts. At least, he couldn't see them sneering at him. He loathed this! Despised it! Dreaded it! But he couldn't do anything to stop it. And that was far worse.

"Now, Snape," someone said with vicious sweetness, "you know what to do. Are you going to be nice, or do we have to convince you?"

Swallowing the bile, Snape opened his eyes. He wished he could summon a glare; he'd even be pleased with something approaching disdain, but years of this had ground him down. He couldn't even curl his lip. The Healers had left; they'd done their deed. In the room were three Aurors: one was the Auror from the river, but he wasn't in command here... The old man sitting across from him was in charge.

"I know... what I have to do," he whispered. Using the table for support, he stood, mentally threatening his legs not to buckle.

The old man watched him. He rarely spoke, relying on his second to snap out orders and dish out insults, but there was something about the thin wizard that bothered Snape immensely. The mouthy Auror was just hot air, but Auror Cross was something else.

In the centre of the table was the Pensieve. It shimmered, and the stolen memories swirled inside. Such a device had spared him so much grief and shame in the past, hiding those memories which plagued him, but now, it was his own personal hell. It revolted him.

"Today," Cross said in that steady and slow voice of his, "I want to go back to the discussion between Riddle and Snape, regarding Dumbledore's execution."

Snape heard, and his heart skipped a beat before plummeting to his stomach. Without the specific memories, he had no clear idea what Cross was referring to, but he knew that he had killed the Headmaster; repeated images of the old man falling from the tower scurried through his mind. Supporting memories informed him that the Dark Lord had arranged a meeting with the view to assassinating Dumbledore, and he recalled admitting to Bella that he had accepted the task. But when the time came, what had he done? How had he felt?

"And then," he continued remorselessly, "we shall study the Burbage murder."

His mind reeled again: *Charity's murder? Was I there when it happened? Did I see it? Waves of nausea burnt his gullet; he knew that he had, even if he couldn't remember. Disturbed memories of Minerva's ashen face and a devastated faculty paraded through his thoughts. I don't want to know!*

Snape glanced across at Cross; he didn't care if his expression was pleading. Cross knew how Pensieves worked and knew how to make them work on individuals. The old man was acutely aware of how to use the memories to break a man's mind.

When memories were taken, any directly associated memories and emotions were cut off, isolated from the conscious mind. However chains of memories could still be accessed and followed, but without key elements, those memories could be damning and confusing, generating false notions and suppositions about what had happened. Using Pensieves this way was akin to brainwashing.

Added to that, the memories were usually simply scooped back up into the mind, so the impact was not as noticeable...just a mental reshuffling as the brain reintegrated the memories...since there was no real need to 'experience' the memories again. However, in Cross' method, the owner of the memories enters the Pensieve, experiencing everything as the scene unfurls. You can't dissociate either. Just as you can't sever a missing limb to ease the phantom itch, so you can't stop the reaction to what is observed. It is simply impossible not to feel what you felt at the time. It all comes back, just as it had been... almost as if experiencing it for the first time: all the emotions fresh and raw.

It was cruel and barbaric. The Ministry had worse things than Dementors these days. His fellow cell mates had screamed themselves hoarse before collapsing in exhausted heaps. They had screamed out their guilt and remorse for things they'd never done: all because their Pensieves had convinced them otherwise. It was the highest form of torturing for confessions: effective, legal and irreversible.

The chatty Auror grinned and shoved his fingers in the swirling mix of memories; his fellow subordinate did the same, but without the smile and the same vigour. Cross placed his clipboard on the table and stood. Snape knew that a rearing cobra would be less terrifying.

"After you," Cross said, politely gesturing towards the bowl.

Snape felt lightheaded and sick to his stomach, but he managed to straighten himself and extended a trembling hand towards his hated memories.

Merlin help me! he thought desperately as his mind was drawn into hell.

~X~

Neville admired the honeysuckle; his professional eye was searching for the colour shift as the flowers aged. Already, he could see the deeper shade of yellow, which would lead into the orange, maybe a subtle pink if they were lucky. And he had picked a good time to check the health of the plants; the scent was increasing in intensity as the evening drew in. Butterflies still nipped between the flowers, eager for the last sips of nectar before the evening chill sapped their energy, and it looked as though an optimistic bird had tried to build a nest in the lower stems. All in all, it wasn't a bad job.

Satisfied that one thing had gone to plan, he plucked a flower, twirled the delicate yellow flower between thumb and forefinger and then daintily sucked out the nectar from the bloom's throat. Smiling, he tucked the empty flower in a free buttonhole on his jacket. He let out a chuckle; in this part of Scotland, the honeysuckle was said to help

keep witches away. And he hadn't been surprised to discover the flower had been banned from the school grounds during Dippet's tenure. Obviously, Pomona either didn't hold with the notion of the flower inciting 'inappropriate thoughts' in young women or knew that the girls would be thinking about such things with or without the flower.

He let the scent soothe him as he walked around the garden, checking on the recent planting areas. It had been a strange day. He had spent much of last night, worrying about his first mentor meeting with Snape, only to discover Professor Flitwick had taken over the role for the day. Somehow, the worry had shifted from meeting Snape to, paradoxically, not having the meeting with Snape: where was he?

All through his school days, Snape had not missed a lesson as far as he could remember, so what had dragged him away today? While pondering, he checked the leaves on the hellebore for slug damage, but the ragged edges looked like they had been torn rather than chewed: the copper strip along the edging stones seemed to be keeping the slimy pests out.

There was nothing wrong with the garden. He knew that beyond doubt; he just felt drawn to it. He spent much of his time here, either working or relaxing. It had occurred to him to ask Minerva if he could arrange for some seating. He guessed that about eight stone benches could fit around the outer edge. It would be a lovely place to sit and recharge. Suddenly feeling sheepish, he knew he stayed in here because it was completely new. He had no memories associated with this place; no one had died here, no one had wept or screamed. He wouldn't see some mark and know that it represented some intense suffering.

He paused. Was that why so many of the teachers had added something to this garden? Snape and Pomona had done the planting and related Herbology tasks; Flitwick had charmed the fountain to affect the water as it did; Minerva had designed the fountain itself, which Hagrid had built and connected to the underground stream. He was sure the others had added something to this remarkable place. Was this their mark upon this place? Was this their phoenix from the ashes?

Sniffing, he dug in his pocket for his hanky. The longer he stayed in it, the more precious it became. He felt foolish for putting off coming here. His reasons for staying away had been nothing but excuses. Sighing, he wiped his nose. The years of anguish trying to do the impossible had been a waste; he could have done what everyone else had done and combined his needs with his life, rather than letting his need take over. He knew that his project to cure his parents could not possibly have been delayed...he was no closer now after ten years of solid research...if he had immersed himself in teaching when Pomona had first asked him. However, the dark days... weeks... would not have swallowed him whole.

He looked down at the base of the fountain, studying the quarter-circle that had been set aside for Slytherin. The flowers, herbs and plants had been sensitively planted to complement and support each other. Knowing that Snape had selected and planted these made him appreciate it more. The blooms were subtle, the scent barely evident, the arrangement gentle and unassuming, but the plants themselves were powerful. They had rich cultural heritages, and were strong plants for potion ingredients... It neatly illustrated deception. He smiled: how Slytherin!

But there was something odd about it. He felt the smile slip as he delved into the mystery. There was nothing odd about the choice; nothing really out of the ordinary about the way they'd been planted... but there was something! Did one of them seem out of place or....

"Neville!"

Rhine's voice shattered his contemplation. Stifling the frustration, he looked up and waved.

"Do you want a butterbeer down in Hogsmeade? Hagrid and few of the others are going down... Apparently this is the last chance to kick our heels up before the students arrive."

"Sounds good," he said. The conundrum of the flowerbed was forgotten, but Neville planned to work on it later. It wasn't going anywhere, after all.

~X~

"Clean him up!" demanded Croft.

"Come 'ere, Snape," someone said gruffly.

Before he had chance to act upon the orders, rough hands grabbed him by the hair and hauled his head off the table. Wincing and protesting weakly, his head was pulled back until his throat flared in pain and the internal scarring seemed to close off his windpipe. Gurgling, Snape frantically patted and pulled at the hand ripping hair from his scalp.

"We're just trying to clean you up, mate," said Croft's accomplice. "No need to get all fidgety; you ask anyone, and they'll say that cleaning you up is part of our duty of care." There was another vicious tug on his hair. "Preventing us from performing our duty of care will only result in us being firm, do you understand?"

"Let him go, Burke," said the other Auror.

"Come on, Peters," griped Burke, "I'm only doing what I'm paid to do."

The hand let go, and Snape fell forwards, swallowing rapidly to moisten his dry throat and massaging it in a bid to ease the pain. He couldn't care less about the pieces of partly digested food clinging to his hair.

Peters glared at Burke before casting a quick glance towards Croft; the old man was making notes on his clipboard. All he ever did was make notes. What was the point? Snape had nothing more to give them. Peters shuddered. Sometimes, he wondered just what these two were after.

"Snape, can you lift your head for me?"

Burke tutted and folded his arms. "Don't mollycoddle him," he spat out.

Snape lifted his head, but couldn't focus on the Auror standing in front of him. Everything was blurred, and sounds came to him as though he were underwater. A hand cupped his chin and lifted. It wasn't gentle, but it did Snape no harm.

Peters lifted his wand to Banish the vomit and blood from Snape's face; he had bitten down on his tongue while watching his own memories. When the tip flared, Snape reacted. Peters lunged back when Snape lifted his arms to protect his head and tried to scurry away over the chairs. Burke burst into laughter, whooping and egging Snape on; in the far corner, Croft's clipboard clattered to the floor when he stood to better observe Snape's panic.

"All I did was start the spell," Peters said frantically. He reached out, trying to stop Snape from falling over the furniture, but such was his momentum that Snape hurtled over the obstruction and cracked his head against the wall. The dull crack echoed around the small room, but the injury wasn't severe enough to knock Snape unconscious. Whimpering, he curled up into a ball, and cradled his damaged head.

Peters stared, his mouth agape and his heart hammering. Licking his lips, he ran his fingers through his hair and looked around for support. Burke was snickering and watching Snape with vicious glee, and Croft was taking notes. *What is it with these people?* Peters thought angrily. Taking the initiative, Peters yanked the chairs out the way and rushed over to assess Snape's condition.

"Perhaps giving him the memories back will help?" he suggested. It had been mentioned in his training that such trauma could be due to forced memory extrications and eased by their return. He stood and pulled the full Pensieve towards himself, ready to scoop the memories back into Snape's scull.

"It won't," said Croft tonelessly, but his gaze was intense when Peters looked up.

The young Auror frowned and shook his head as he processed Croft's declaration. It didn't make sense.

"In this test," Croft explained patiently while sliding the bowl away from Peters, "we do not return the Pensieve memories."

That went against everything he'd been taught! Peters gaped at the explanation. Croft smiled benignly and withdrew his wand. To Peters' horror, Croft aimed the wand at the memories and said something which left him weak at the knees, breathless and terrified.

"Evanesco!"

"Now," said Burke with a feral grin, "you said that you understood what was going on in 'ere. We are conducting 'ighly important research which will benefit the Wizarding community. Snape, 'ere, volunteered 'imself, quite gallantly, to 'elp us out." He paused and placed his hand on his chest. "I admit that I was a bit rough, and I could 'ave been more sympathetic, but I'm not used to 'aving people resist me... I was a Warden for nearly eight years, and that leaves a mark on you."

As Burke spoke, Croft lifted his wand again. Peters' eyes were locked on Burke's face; he never saw it coming.

"Obliviate!"

"I wish we didn't have to keep doing that," Croft said with genuine remorse. "Pretty soon, his memory will be permanently affected."

"Well, when you finally crack on with things, maybe you won't 'ave to."

"I need time to break down his pre-existing memories, Burke. There is no point in generating false memories if he has strong contradictory ones," he said irritably.

Burke grunted and grabbed hold of the young Auror. "Just so long as you remember that we want what 'e knows about the Dark Lord and the spells 'e taught 'em all. Snape was closer to 'im than any of the others. The little maggot should know more than all the others put together. Your plan comes second, you 'ear?" he said firmly. "Come on, lad." He led Peters out of the room and into the brightly-lit corridor.

Croft watched them leave and then Stunned Snape before levitating the limp wizard into the chair. He cleaned the vomit away and healed the bruise on his forehead; he even repaired and tidied Snape's clothes. By the time Snape was conscious, it looked as though nothing had happened.

"How do you feel?" Croft asked.

Snape blinked and looked down at the pen hanging expectantly over the clipboard. "Empty," he replied honestly.

"I suppose that you cannot elaborate upon that," Croft said sadly while scratching out something on the board. "What about your Pensieve?"

The dark man looked nervous and paled dramatically. "I... I... spoke with the Dark Lord; we discussed Dumbledore's murder."

Croft nodded slowly, inwardly smiling as he caught sight of Snape scratching at the remains of the Dark Mark beneath his sleeve. "Did you have any other similar conversations?"

Snape frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't think so." He straightened and shook his head. "No, that was all."

"No conversations with anyone else?" He held Snape's gaze; he knew from past experience that Snape was weaker after these sessions: Legilimency was infinitely easier. So when Snape lied and said no, Croft knew that the man had spoken to Dumbledore and Bella Lestrange about it. He made notes about the next set of memories to eliminate.

"Now, onto Charity Burbage's death," he said swiftly, delighting in Snape's grimace and the beads of sweat gathering on his brow.

The questions went on and on. Croft had to admit that Snape was by far the strongest of them. The others hadn't resisted for quite this long. Burke wanted it over and done with, but had been mollified by the snippets Snape had divulged about the Dark Lord and the magics he had possessed. No doubt, he had spent time perfecting the new curses he'd learnt via the remaining Death Eaters. Once Snape's memories of the Dark Lord's teachings had been found and shared, then he could focus predominantly on his own goal: Snape admitting he had served the Dark Lord faithfully and his pledges to the Order had been a lie. He wanted Snape to spend the rest of his life plagued with regrets and hates: friendless and despairing.

Author's Notes: I'm trying to write with a more active voice; up until now, I've been using a lot of passives. I'm still unsure whether I have grasped the concept or not, so any comments regarding that would be greatly appreciated. Thank you for reading.

Firewhiskey Folly

Chapter 7 of 22

Minerva reflects upon what she and so many others are willing to do and risk for Severus Snape. Neville discovers something about Rhine and possibly about himself.

Neville had never been one for large gatherings. He disliked the noise and the constant nudging and bumping, and the hoarse throat cultivated from having to yell above the din rounded off a miserable night with an equally miserable morning. If he had known that so many of the locals would also be taking advantage of the last night before students inundated the place, he would have begged off and stayed in the calm of the garden. But he hadn't, so here he was, sitting between Pomona and Flitwick and opposite a rather exuberant Rhine, who seemed to be revelling in the atmosphere. Feeling grumpy, Neville wondered why he'd thought this a good idea several hours ago.

When he was much younger, The Three Broomsticks had been so alluring and charming, but now, it was a rather out-dated and tired tavern. The air felt dry, and he swore blind that the smoke from the fires and torches made his eyes itch. It was just a bit too much, and after many years of almost absolute solitude, it was bordering on painful.

He looked around at the gathered professors; they chatted and smiled, laughed and teased each other. For them, this was the last chance to relax before the mantle of professionalism settled upon their shoulders. Feeling even more miserable because of his sour mood, Neville took a deep sip of Butterbeer and hoped the warm, sweet mixture would lighten his mood. While waiting for the miraculous mood change, he noted someone's absence.

"I thought Hagrid had asked you to come down with him?"

Rhine's tankard paused en route to his mouth, and he frowned while casting quick glances around the crowded pub.

"He did," Rhine said after one last look. "I guess that he got held up."

Neville shrugged his shoulders and then grinned. "We're lucky in a way."

Rhine licked froth from his top lip and fixed Neville with a bemused stare. "How so?"

"The pub is packed! Can you imagine what it'd be like with Hagrid in here?"

Rhine let out a laugh and raised his tankard. "To absent friends!"

Neville smirked, toasted absent friends and took a swift swig. Perhaps the Butterbeer had done its job, or maybe Rhine's cheerfulness was infectious, but Neville began to feel slightly better. In a way, he was glad of the distraction; he would have most likely moped in his room about meeting the students the following evening. It still seemed ridiculous that he was about to start teaching. Was he really cut out for the role? Another sip settled his stomach. Whether he was cut out for the role or not, he had no choice. Somehow, the thought was quite reassuring.

"He's not the only absent friend," said Rhine, dragging Neville out of his thoughts. "Professors McGonagall and Snape aren't here either."

Neville had already noticed their absence, but he had attached no importance to it: Snape had been away all day, and McGonagall always seemed so busy. Besides, he wanted to preserve this mellow mood, so he was loathe to ruin it by thinking about missing professors. He smiled and nodded, acknowledging the comment, but not encouraging discussion. Rhine must have understood because he settled on draining his mug before gesturing to Neville.

"Want another?"

Neville glanced down into his mug, and upon seeing the frothy dregs, he weighed up his option. He could stay and let his mood seep out to corrupt his colleagues, or he could leave and fret back in the castle, or he could grow up and use the time to strengthen his bonds with his new colleagues. He made his decision. Looking up, he extended his arm and smiled.

"Yes, thanks, and I'll get the next round."

~X~

Several Butterbeers later and things were looking far rosier: Rhine's left cheek being the most notable. Neville sniggered into his tankard.

"It wouldn't have been so bad," Rhine said while dejectedly staring at the froth in his mug, "if she hadn't shrieked first." He sulkily lifted his drink and took a deep gulp. "Did she really have to get everyone to look over before she slapped me?"

Neville forced his features to appear sympathetic. "I guess it's a woman thing," he offered. He was about to drain his drink when he recalled how Hermione had once attacked Ron with a flock of canaries. He shuddered. "I try not to annoy to them: far safer."

Rhine sniffed and pulled a face. "I wasn't trying to annoy her." He sagged on his stool. "It was going rather well, but I always do something that ruins any chance with them."

"What did you do this time?" Neville asked, looking around for any lingering bad feeling in the loitering patrons.

Rhine grimaced and flushed; the handprint glowed all the brighter. "I offered to buy her a drink, which seemed a fairly innocent offer. She decided on a *Fancy Goose*, which seemed more like a Transfiguration spell gone wrong...part bird and part wineglass...but in fact, is a new and rather expensive cocktail." Rhine sighed and shook his head. "I admit that picking the most expensive beverage wasn't exactly polite, but her response to the misunderstanding was almost rude."

Intrigued, Neville leant forward. "What was the misunderstanding?"

Rhine straightened and flashed Neville a sheepish grin. "The cocktail has a peculiar effect, which, as the bartender later highlighted, is written in the small print at the bottom of the cocktail list. It seems the reason the drink is called *Fancy Goose* is because it acts as a lesser potion. In this instance, it causes the body to experience the sensation of subtle touches."

Neville frowned while he pondered the possible outcome of such a drink. A potion which mimicked... oh!

Rhine saw his expression and nodded grimly. "Apparently, she didn't know of these effects, and when she felt them, she blamed me."

"She thought that you'd..."

"Oh yes!" Rhine said before leaning forwards and pointing back over his shoulder with his thumb. "*Fancy Goose* has kept our kindly bartender amused for most of the night. She pointed out to me the single and similarly red-faced gentlemen who had also unknowingly bought the drink for their dates."

"Oh," Neville said softly. "But it's hardly your fault," he soothed.

"I guess," Rhine muttered glumly. "If it's not me, then it's something else. I'm either clumsy or boring. Someone once said that I was too cautious, which was later translated as meaning completely ignoring the point of playing hard to get." He drained his mug. "That's what women should come with, you know: a translation guide."

Neville laughed and nodded in agreement. "It would make things a damn sight easier. Probably wouldn't help in many cases, though."

"Why not?" Rhine asked, his eyebrows arching up. "I'd find one incredible useful."

"Would you sit down and read it?"

"Good point," he conceded after a thoughtful pause. "Although," he added enthusiastically, "my uncle Varga found the instruction manual for a Niffler deterrent device most useful. He beat the beast over the head with it until the bugger ran off. We never had any bother from it again."

"Nifflers aren't that much of a nuisance," Neville said.

"They are if you have a mouth that is more gold than tooth."

Neville let out a laugh and shook his head. It was silly humour, and he got the impression that Rhine was making an effort to cheer him up, not just for popularity, but because... well... maybe just because he sensed that someone needed some light to chase the shadows away.

"Thanks, Randall."

"What for?" he asked with genuine surprise.

"For dragging me down here."

"Oh," Rhine said with a smile. "No need to thank me; I'm just glad that you accepted. I was terrified at the prospect of being here alone with the illustrious Faculty of Hogwarts."

He had spoken jovially enough, but Neville wondered if the jest held more truth than could have been expressed directly. Rhine was obviously more British than not...the lack of foreign accent was a strong indicator that he had only been educated abroad...but he had still left behind everything that was familiar to him. The change must be daunting. Neville felt that he could repay the favour and help Randall settle in.

Neville harrumphed and made a hyperbolic study of the empty seats next to them. "If only you'd have known that they'd have all scarpereed just after ten, eh? I feel like a third wheel now," he said, feigning hurt.

"I didn't mean to offend you," Rhine said, playing along until sobering and sliding his mug onto the table. "Look, I have a bottle of Firewhiskey in my room; why don't we go back and celebrate our last night properly?"

It didn't require much thought, and Neville readily agreed. Just as they left the table, they were startled by a high-pitched shriek, and then, before the shrill echoes faded, an unmistakable 'slap' rang out. They looked at each other and had to clench their teeth to stifle the laughter.

~X~

Minerva paced her office. Her anxious footsteps unknowingly tracing the same path that Dumbledore had marched when he had been restless and forced to pace to relieve his tension. Occasionally, she would pause by the window and peer into the gathering shadows, cursing the sun for taking the light with it.

Experience had taught her that Severus disappeared for most of the day; just as it had taught her that Severus was left a wreck. He hid it well enough from the others. They suspected, but never had enough evidence to bring up their concerns. Even if they did, they would be honest concerns: too many owed Severus something to be anything but concerned *for* him rather than about him. But nothing the wizard did could hide it from her. She had made it her business to know Severus Snape almost as well as he knew himself.

His situation pained her in abiding ways. There was nothing she could do to stop what was happening. The Ministry insisted nothing untoward was going on, and they had effectively slammed the door in her face. And then there was Severus. He never complained about it! The silly sod went to the Ministry as though he could do nothing else. She wished she knew what hold they had over him; she'd snap their bloody fingers if their grip was anything less than noble!

The whole thing was infuriating, and her only solace was the Faculty's unwavering intention to help Severus Snape, whether he wanted it or not. When she had discovered what the Ministry were doing...the rummaging through stolen memories...she had consulted Filius, who had immediately leapt into action to save the mind of the man who had once kept him out of harm's way. The diminutive Charms professor knew only too well the risks of repeated memory extractions. The plan in itself had been so simple. The plan in action had been far from it.

It had taken months to figure out how they'd do it, and a further three months to construct the Pensieve; they had lost track of how long it had taken to draw together all the memories they could scrounge up about their irascible Potions master. Dumbledore's repository of memories had been a treasure...the Holy Grail of finds...and Snape had left a few in his own Pensieve that had been 'borrowed' by concerned colleagues. Filius had copied the memories as accurately as he could and placed the copies back in the shimmering bowl, storing the precious originals in specially constructed phials. It had been made all the more difficult by keeping Severus in the dark about their objectives.

She stepped over to the window and stared down into the inner courtyard. The fountain was right in the middle of her field of view. From this position...and no other...she could see the softly shimmering, pearlescent liquid, which swirled so innocently. The fountain built and sustained by so many individuals was Severus Snape's Pensieve. It was a collection of every gathered memory regarding the life and times of Severus Snape. It was now an on-going project to store the essence of a man in the hopes that should they fail in stopping the Ministry, he would not be entirely lost.

The only black cloud to her silver lining was, oddly, Neville Longbottom. The boy was sharper than he looked, and he had spent an excessive amount of time in the garden. She frowned and folded her arms across her chest. Neville and Snape had barely tolerated each other in school. Would his lingering animosity encourage him to side with the Ministry if he discovered too much? Shaking her head, she cast off her gloom. Neville was a noble man; he would do nothing which went against the school. Besides, she recalled that Severus and Neville seemed to be getting along quite well, if the last two weeks were anything to go by. The Pensieve was as safe as it always had been.

~X~

"Maybe my father was right," mumbled a dejected Rhine. He sat cross-legged on the rug before the fire, his back resting against the leather chair. He held his empty tumbler in his lap and stared apathetically at the light glinting off the cut crystal glass.

Neville lay on his back on the sofa; he was wonderfully comfortable amongst the soft cushions, and the Firewhiskey was permeating his body, soothing the muscles and relaxing the mind. Rhine's morose words cut through his delightful languor, and he twisted onto his side to study the young man.

"What was your father right about?" he asked carefully. His tongue felt sluggish, and he had to blink several times to coerce his eyes into focusing on the target of his concern.

Rhine sighed. "He says that I don't make enough effort."

Neville frowned. "You don't make enough effort to... get a girl?"

Neville found it difficult to concentrate. They'd been talking about the mystery that was *woman*, forayed a bit in their shared concern and dread over teaching, and discussed why it was that no matter how you packed a suitcase, what you needed first was always at the bottom of the case. Neville was also almost positive that they'd both happily shared the idea that the whole concept of flying on brooms was ridiculous when you had the Floo-network and legs, and they'd reached some consensus on the fact that Pomona was short. Beyond that, his slowly marinating brain was lost.

Rhine snorted. "It's not the effort put into getting a girl, Neville, it's..." he tilted his head back and closed his eyes "... complicated."

Neville wasn't sure whether to try to prise out the source of Randall's sudden despair, or to leave it and see if it was just the Firewhiskey talking. It wasn't as if they really knew each other or were friends... even if he had just downed four glasses of Randall's expensive liquor...oh hell! Frowning, Neville tried to rally his remaining neurones.

"My Gran was always saying that I needed to settle down and... have a family." He propped his head on his hand. "It was as if I had to live to someone else's agenda to find happiness." He hiccupped and then frowned. "Wasn't just her either," he added miserably. "Pomona's just as bad. What is it with old women and marrying people off?"

He looked back across at Rhine, who now looked even more miserable and was re-filling his tumbler. His insides squirmed unpleasantly. Neville knew he should have left it; he'd never been any good at offering advice and support.

The bottle grated against the hearth as Rhine clumsily deposited it to take a deep gulp of the fiery drink. He winced as it burnt a path to his stomach and squeezed his eyes shut as a wave of dizziness hit him. He knew he should have kept his mouth shut; he'd never been any good at trying to discuss his so-called *problem*.

Using the alcohol to batter his gloom, Rhine grinned and shrugged as nonchalantly as he could. "I guess that it's got something... *hic*... to do with them being interfering busybodies...*hic*... or they're pretty bored with all the other whatsits... you know... hobbies," he said while waving his hand in the air: amber droplets flying from the glass.

Neville swung his legs off the side of the sofa and sat up; his head suddenly felt as though it were trying to twist off, and he gripped it to stop the sensation of spinning. He snorted at his sudden regret: it was a little too late to consider just how much Firewhiskey he'd downed.

"And the worst thing is," Neville said with the intense concentration peculiar to tipsy individuals attempting sobriety, "they work in teams."

Neville shuddered at the surfacing recollections of his Gran's coffee mornings; he was sure that the only things separating those coffee mornings from intelligence debriefings at the Ministry were better crockery and table manners.

"Oh they do!" Rhine agreed emphatically. "And you'd be amazed at their information gatherer... ing skills. Nothin'... absolutely nothin' is... you know... secret... oh no! Not when great Aunt... hic... Pru... Prudence was within earshot. She revelled in holding things over your head and blabbing about... hic... personal choices."

"Choice?" Rhine continued morosely after a thoughtful silence. "As if I had any choice." He threw back his head and emptied the tumbler. Seemingly disgusted that the glass had held so little, he reached out and clumsily poured himself another. "And as if I have any choice now." Sighing, he turned to Neville and squinted up at him. "Do you think it is so wrong to love who you want?"

Neville frowned. "No," he answered softly, watching Rhine as he swayed a little. "But being with the one you love can be... a bit... you know... not quite as simple," he finished in a strained whisper.

"It should be though," said Rhine passionately.

The remaining liquor-induced lassitude was squeezed out of Neville by the melancholy crushing down, and he slumped in his seat. *It should be though*, he thought to himself. Of course, it should be! But it wasn't.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't notice Rhine move to sit next to him. The bottle came into view, and he straightened with an empty grin. He lifted his glass and was forced to chase the bottle neck around as Rhine tried to pour. Neville sighed and grabbed Rhine's hand to steady the bottle so that the tumbler actually caught some of the whiskey. Rhine grinned sheepishly before placing the bottle on the floor.

"You're a good man, Neville," Rhine said, breaking the comfortable silence.

Neville flashed a smile. He didn't feel like a good man; he felt like a failed man.

"You don't seem to think so," added Rhine gently.

"Leave it, please," Neville stated simply.

The evening wore on, and sitting on the sofa in the dimly-lit room, talking and even laughing with Rhine restored most of Neville's good mood. Rhine had been a balm all evening, and Neville realised that he was actually having a good time; he was opening up and talking about things that had stayed walled-up inside after graduating. Nothing of the darkness that loitered deep within was discussed, but he spoke of his dreams and ambitions, even mentioned about his parents languishing in St Mungo's. Not even his closest friends from school had been told quite as much. Neville felt calm and at peace.

Randal was also a patient and very attentive listener; such focus would have normally disturbed Neville, but Neville felt almost safely cocooned within that dark and intent gaze. Neville also found that he didn't even mind the gentle nudges and touches. There was something pleasant about the hand on his arm and the playful nudge in the ribs; something soothing in the way Randal touched the back of his hand when he spoke about some of the more painful things that had happened in his life. But when Neville began to return that tactile show of support, Randal's smiles became fewer and the young man looked uncomfortable...all hot and bothered.

"You don't look too good," Neville said after anxiety had prodded him into asking. "You're flushed. Are you feeling feverish?"

"You're hot," Randal mumbled.

"What?" asked Neville, not catching Randal's response.

"Are you hot? I'm hot. It's hot in here," Randal said in a gush, as he lunged from the sofa. "I need a glass of water. I could give you one?"

"Pardon?" Neville queried, concern giving his voice an edge that must have alarmed Randal because the man suddenly paled and backed away, mouthing silently and pointing over his shoulder.

"I could *get* you a glass of water... that's what I meant: get you a glass of... uhm... water," he said, faltering.

"I'm fine, thanks."

Neville stood, and still in the thrall of Firewhiskey, he wobbled and held his head...it was spinning again.

"Oh dear," he mumbled. "How much of that stuff have we drunk?"

"Too much," said Randal sadly.

"I need to lie down," Neville groaned as he collapsed back onto the sofa.

"You can stay here."

The fire popped in the hearth, and then, it seemed as though a heavy silence settled, smothering the pleasant atmosphere. There had been something behind those words; just as the clatter of small pebbles heralded something bigger and far more dangerous, so those words suddenly seemed all... portentous. His drink befuddled mind pieced together the evening, putting things into a different context, but it... no... couldn't really be like that... could it?

Neville lifted up onto his elbow and studied Randal as he stood silhouetted by the firelight. There was a tension in the previously relaxed wizard, and Neville swore that he could see the shoulders tremble ever so slightly, and as the silence stretched, so the trembling increased.

"I'm sorry," Randal blurted out. "You must think I'm a... creep or something." Randal dragged his hands over his scalp and sighed. "I didn't invite you back here to... ermm..."

"Have your wicked way?" asked Neville.

Randal gave a nervous laugh. "It may look... I wouldn't... I mean that's not to say..."

Randal stopped talking, and his hands dropped limply to his side. In the silence, Neville could hear the man's rapid, shaky breaths. Although the Wizarding world was aware of such affairs, it would never condone it openly. It seemed that so long as birth rates and bloodlines were preserved, then such dalliances could be tactfully brushed under the carpet as a peculiarity. There was no active persecution, but it just wasn't the *done thing* to declare your love, set up home together, and live happily ever after. Families exerted the most effective and repressive forms of control, so society never really had to concern itself with such 'oddities'.

Neville thought back on the evening's conversation, and Randal's expressed bitterness towards his father hinted at years of unhappiness and oppression, and Neville saw a man trapped between duty and personal fulfilment. It didn't stem from the same source, but they shared the same pains of imposed expectations, duty and crushed hopes.

"It's okay, Randal," Neville soothed.

"Will you tell McGonagall or Snape of my...?" asked Randal; his dread obvious in each syllable.

"I see no reason to," Neville said.

There was a hesitant pause. "Are you...?"

Neville almost choked on his tongue, and he spluttered as he gathered his thoughts. "Er... no," he replied.

"Ah, okay," said Randal rather flatly. "Well, thanks for being so open-minded."

"No worries."

"Gee... I'm rather embarrassed now," Randal confessed with a tremulous laugh.

Neville laughed good-naturedly. "At least I didn't slap you in the face."

"There is that," Randal agreed. "I suppose that we should call it a night."

Nodding, Neville stood, rather clumsily, and shuffled over to the door, with Randal on his heels. Randal gripped the doorknob, but didn't twist it. He seemed to be cogitating over some complex issue.

"I had a good time tonight, Neville," he began carefully. "I'd like to think that you did too." He sighed and looked across into Neville's eyes. "I'd still like to consider myself a potential..." he shrugged and grinned "... friend of sorts."

Neville hesitated, and he saw Randal's Adam's apple bob as the man took nervous swallows. The green eyes which usually sparkled with some inner mirth were dark and serious... *quite fascinating*, thought Neville before blushing. Randal's stance was somehow different; it was less... flouncy, more direct and noticeable. Neville frowned; most of Randal's life had been one act after another: hiding what he was, disguising his reactions, enjoying what he didn't want. Here, Randal wasn't anything other than himself: no pretence and no disguises.

"I enjoyed myself," Neville confirmed honestly, and his lips twitched into a gentle smile when Randal exhaled in relief and slumped against the architrave.

"Good," said Randal. "I promise that it'll be tea from now on." He drew a cross over his heart and grinned impishly.

Neville laughed. "It'll have to be; we're teachers now," he said with mock piousness.

They both hesitated. Randal knew why he didn't want Neville to leave, but Neville wasn't sure why he wanted to stay. He wasn't.... No, of course not; he wasn't... *interested*. But...

Randal had had far more encounters in the same vein of this, and although this one had ended rather happily, he was used to people leaving, and so, he smiled and opened the door. It was easier to let people go than pretend something could happen. Despite Neville's words, he suspected...and feared...that Neville would keep his distance. It was best to do these things quickly.

"Goodnight, Neville."

~X~

"Come on, Severus." Minerva spoke with more enthusiasm than she felt. "Almost there."

Next to her, the wizard grunted and tried to straighten himself so that his weight wasn't entirely on the older woman's shoulder. If her grip around his waist was anything to go by, she was strong enough to carry him, but he had his pride... even if it had been battered down and now whimpered like a whipped dog.

Snape was exhausted. And he ached... and he had this terrible feeling of having left something important behind. Even his forehead was too tired to frown, so he sighed and shuffled along the corridor to his room. Minerva always met him. He hoped she would be there, yet wished she wouldn't be. The impact of these 'appointments' crippled him, and although some basic part of him needed human contact and affection, another part hated the knowledge that someone saw him so weakened. In truth, he'd wither without her by his side, and he wished that he could gather the strength to tell her openly how he felt, but he wasn't. Lily had been the last to hear such words.

"Just a few more ste..."

Her words died on her tongue, and she stopped dead. Door hinges had creaked up ahead. Peering along the corridor, she tried to see which door had opened. Closer than she would have liked, she saw a shadow fall onto the tiled floor as a figure moved to stand on the threshold of one of the rooms. Dragging Snape against the stone wall, she cast a Disillusionment Charm upon them both and watched with wide eyes.

Who could possibly be up and about at this hour? she thought with some exasperation. The shadow shifted, and Neville of all people staggered into the corridor. Clutching his head... *obviously not from Butterbeers!* thought Minerva wryly... he turned back as Rhine appeared in the doorway, looking as equally uncomfortable.

Snape snorted softly and whispered, "Who would have thought it?" He let out a dry chuckle. "The receptionist was right about him."

Minerva tutted and ignored Snape's cryptic comment; she was focused on the muted conversation between the two suffering wizards. She was directing all her energies into mentally hurrying Neville along... *honestly, how long does it take to say 'thank you and goodnight'?*

The room was always cold. She tutted under her breath and helped Snape down onto the settee. It was as far as he would let her help him. Flicking her wrist, she lit a fire in the hearth and Conjured a blanket. She was gratified to see him scowl. If he had the energy to sneer, then she knew he'd recover.

Snape knew better than to resist...her tactics for ensuring compliance had succeeded months ago...so when she dragged the blanket up, he allowed her to tuck him in without fuss.

"I'll expect to see you at the Great Feast tomorrow," she said firmly, which translated as, 'you'd better rest until the Great feast, or else!'

Snape nodded and Minerva left. He waited until the door clicked closed, and then he curled up on the settee, clutching the edge of the blanket up to his nose. Trembling beneath the woollen cover, he tried to recall what had happened earlier that day, and to his horror, he couldn't remember.

Sorting and Surprises

Neville finds something unusual and shocking in the Slytherin's flower bed, but everything is put to the side when the students arrive.

Neville walked towards the fountain that had teased his curiosity the day before. It would be his last chance to walk in the courtyard before the students swarmed through, and he wanted to savour it. His eager eyes darted over the flowers and herbs as he walked around the gently babbling structure. The early morning sun warmed the nape of his neck when he came to crouch before Slytherin's bed, and he reached out to gently stroke a sage leaf.

Whoever had planted the sage had fallen back on old superstitions: they made sure it wasn't alone...it was boxed in by neighbouring herbs. Somehow, though, it defied its companions and dominated the small bed. Frowning, Neville plucked a silvery green leaf and nibbled it. He'd lingered in this area for the majority of his stay...drawn by the fountain...and he couldn't recall seeing flowers during that time. Judging by the thick mass of sage, the flowers had been harvested with some enthusiasm. He felt a brief surge of disappointment: this sage had beautiful, purple blooms.

Nestled against the sage was a small clump of rosemary, and rising up behind that was a swathe of feverfew: daisy-like heads nodding lazily in the gentle, meandering breeze. Using his Herbology knowledge, he knew the plants supported each other magically. Somehow, a plant could either support or diminish the magical potential of another. It was akin to weeds throttling plants or clover providing vital nutrients for the following crop. In this bed, the herbs supported each other...Neville couldn't think of a more powerful arrangement. But this wasn't used to supply the infirmary or the potions lab, and the house-elves would have no need to use such potent herbs in their cooking. Why would someone go to the trouble of tackling such a range of plants for an added magical benefit which was seemingly never used?

It was a puzzle. The thought caused a smile to curve his lips: *just like the head of the house it represented*. He knew the gathered plants all related to the mind...soothing and enhancing its power...and memory. They were all tied to intellect and keeping it in balance... and Severus Snape was all about the mind and its power. A shiver danced down his spine as his mind dallied over some of the lessons he'd had with Snape...recalling the man's words, his voice... his eyes.

He idly stroked the leaves, feeling the varied textures beneath his sensitive fingers. As the stems bowed under his caress, he saw something glittering in the dark soil. Frowning, he delved between the leaves and flicked aside the soil. Slowly, a phial emerged from the earth. Not just any phial. This was a needle phial. It was much smaller than the common phials used in potions and for holding medical draughts; it was as about as wide as the shaft of a quill and as long as his little finger.

He whistled at the sight, gently wiping small clods from its smooth surface. Such a thing was expensive, and to find one lost in the dirt was almost shocking...but not as shocking as the contents. Inside, something shimmered. It held a memory: how apropos in a garden for the mind.

~X~

The water was glorious as it ran down his body in hot soothing rivulets. He closed his eyes and relished the water pummelling his shoulders before caressing his skin. Slowly, tense and aching muscles began to unknot and relax. His mind soon followed suit, but he knew his thoughts would gather together like spilt mercury, running into a poisonous mass as soon as he left his cocoon. But for right now, he used the water to wash away his woes and dreads. He needed this to help restore balance.

The bathroom was chilly, so he hastily wrapped a towel around his waist and slipped into his bedroom where a fire crackled and popped amiably. Despite the warmth drying his skin, he wished he could towel himself dry and dress quickly, but his limbs felt heavy, and even the smallest of movements made him ache. *Was this how it felt to be old?* The thought depressed him. He hadn't hit middle-age, and yet he felt weaker than Dumbledore had ever looked. To be old for the majority of one's life seemed cruel.

With his shirt and trousers on, he threw off his mood and settled into the soft chair in his parlour and lifted up the little black book that Neville had temporarily gifted him. The feel of it, the smell of it, the weight of it reassured him, and deep in his gut, something stirred pleasurably. This coming year held more promise than the last ten combined. Inhaling deeply, he sank into the cushion and began to read the immaculate notes again.

A gentle chime interrupted his reading, reminding him that in an hour Hagrid would be leading the new first-years up to the castle for the Great Feast, and since it was his duty to greet them before they joined the rest of the school, he was required to check that everything was in its proper place and the older years were escorted to the Great Hall. Slipping the book back between seat and chair arm, he hauled himself up and plucked his frock coat from its back.

The Entrance Hall was silent when he arrived and took up his post on the stairs. A cold wind played by the open doors, scattering a few dead leaves that had drifted in. Above him, the stairs creaked as they resettled into new positions after the other students had descended to enter the Hall; he could hear them talking and rekindling friendships beyond the closed doors. It was like the dull roar of a distant waterfall. His thoughts lingered over Neville and Rhine sitting at the High Table, experiencing the onslaught of students for the first time.

A smile tugged at his lips; the onslaught was fast approaching: he could hear the crunching of feet upon gravel and Hagrid's booming voice hurrying them along. Within minutes, they poured in, filling the available space, their heads spinning wildly in the effort to see everything.

"Now, this 'ere is the entrance 'all," Hagrid said, instantly quietening them. "An' this is where I leave ye. Professor Snape is the deputy 'eadmaster, an' he'll be lookin' afters yer from now on."

With a nod of his great, shaggy head, he shuffled out, careful not to catch any of the children, some of whom pressed into their peers to get out of his way, their eyes wide and reflecting so many emotions...fear being one of them.

Snape let them mutter between themselves, scanning the group for any signs of burgeoning animosity, but from his vantage point, he could see nothing extraordinary. Slowly, he began to descend the stairs, emerging from the shadows and suffocating their hushed conversations. They were facing Snape. Their parents had trembled and recounted terrible stories of detentions and lessons with him. Even the pure-bloods looked pale and uneasy. It was a peculiar kind of inherited knowledge, and Snape had no intention of disabusing them of their ideas regarding the Greasy Git.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," he intoned solemnly, letting his dark gaze sweep over the attentive crowd. "I am Professor Snape, Deputy Headmaster of this school." He paused, allowing this dire information to settle in their brains. His physical presence often crystallised a rather vague impression into a much... sharper one. To his satisfaction, some of them shuffled away.

"In a few moments, you will be allowed through those doors..." he said, waving a hand gracefully in their direction, "... and into what will become your home for the time you are here. In the Hall, you will be Sorted into your houses. You will not dishonour your house in any manner, or you shall have to deal with your head of house... or me." Their wide eyes flickered from his face to the doors and back again. "Live up to the expectations of this school, and your house and you will do well here."

As he spoke the last dictum, he stepped back towards the door and hammered on it twice, the sound rebounding grandly in the hall. Without so much as a creak, the doors opened inwards, slowly revealing the splendour of the Great Feast. Behind him, dozens of gasps unified into one overwhelmed sigh. He turned and glowered, killing their gasps in their throats.

"Up ahead is your Headmistress, Professor McGonagall. You will walk in *silence* and stand before her. The Headmistress will call out your name, and you will be Sorted." He watched them as they absorbed his words. When he heard the soft sound in his ear, he knew Minerva was ready for them. He straightened and stepped aside, waving them through. Slowly, cautiously, they entered the Hall.

~X~

Neville sat at the end of the table, next to Pomona. She had shared much of her time talking and laughing with professor Flitwick and flashing him reassuring glances, but when the main doors opened and the influx of black-clad children began, she and the others shifted from...for want of a better expression... people to teachers. As the students entered, brimming with energy and bringing with them a tremendous wave of noise, he felt butterflies swarm in his guts. This was it!

He looked along the table towards Randall. He was...selfishly...disappointed to see him sitting with all the confidence of the veteran teachers. Settling back, Neville watched Minerva place the stool on the dais...how long ago had he sat on that very stool?...and pick up the brown, wrinkled Sorting hat. After what felt the length of a heartbeat, the Headmistress called the room to order and the main doors opened again. On the threshold, he could make out the shapes of the new intake, standing hesitantly. Off to the side, he saw Snape usher them in. They were so small! Had he been that small once? He certainly must have looked as flustered and... lost.

Despite his nerves, the evening passed quickly, interspersed with cheers as new housemates were welcomed, announcements, and a feast to rival those of his youth. He was mildly surprised to find his goblet filled with pumpkin juice rather than something more mature, but he found that it soothed him. Besides, he wasn't a big fan of wine. The familiarity of it was a balm to his unsettled mind. How could he not be content here...he knew this place... for good and bad, he knew he could belong here.

It was quite late when the last of the students left to their dormitories, and Neville felt sleep tugging at his eyelids. Pomona was the first to leave, wishing them all luck and a good night. She saved a warm smile for Neville and patted him on his shoulder before slipping away. To his left, Snape and Minerva were talking quietly with each other. He wasn't sure whether he should just leave or if there was some unknown etiquette to it. To idle away the indecisive moment, he watched Snape's pale face.

The eyes that had been so hard and cold when he had been a student had softened somewhat. The mouth that had always been compressed and tight was relaxed and smooth, curving up into rare fleeting smiles as he spoke. His nose was still the same, but it didn't look as hooked or as... big. He'd lost some weight off his face, making him appear a bit too gaunt at times, but when he smiled, he looked...Neville coughed around his mouthful of pumpkin juice. Had he really just thought that Snape looked... good?

Thankfully, his choking fit passed unnoticed, and he hoped the same could be said for his flush. Taking another sip to help the previous one down, he decided he'd just go and sleep off whatever delusion he was experiencing. He knew he'd been working too hard in the run-up to the school opening, and he was now paying the price. Herbology was first thing in the morning, and he wanted to get some sleep before he faced his first class. For the time being, the small phial was forgotten.

Snape had felt eyes on him all evening. Some came from the new Slytherins, glancing up at their new head of house, wondering if they'd gotten the better deal; some from the old Slytherins, wondering if he'd be as strict as last year. Some had come from the other tables, but mainly, they had come from Neville. Snape thought back on their experiences as teacher and pupil, and he felt chilled. Had Hogwarts reminded Neville of how it had been? Was this the start of a burgeoning and devastating animosity? He knew he'd resign before allowing a crack to develop between the teachers. Hogwarts was too important an entity to suffer the egos of two teachers. A mouthful of pumpkin juice helped to smother the burning dread climbing up his gullet.

Minerva must have either sensed or seen his moment of unease because she began drilling him with a stare and asked him what he thought about the new pupils. Knowing Minerva, she probably assumed he had a default emotional state...depressed and bitter...and worked to change it whenever he slipped into it. He inhaled slowly; she was probably just saving time by not bothering to ask how he felt. She was right, in her way. His injury and bond to the Ministry were instigators of grief and misery, but secreted between their crushing influences, he was generally content. Bitterness didn't rule him, and the reason for his thoughtfulness and sombre mood over dinner was Neville.

Neville's curious glances had been... disturbing, and more so because he couldn't determine why he found them to be disturbing. Perhaps it was the shift from one relationship to another? After all, this was the first time a former student of his had joined the High Table. He could still remember Neville as the nervous, clumsy boy who had never succumbed to his fear, but never ousting it either. He had existed in a state of perpetual anxiety, doing what he had to do, and although that merely entailed being in a lesson, Snape had quietly, very quietly, admired the boy for his depth of character. Neville had lost that anxiety during his final year, tempering it into an unbreakable weapon. He had twisted his fear into anger. And it had been magnificent.

When Neville choked on his juice, Snape had snatched the opportunity to study him. It was undeniable that he had developed into a handsome young man, and a fascinating one at that...those whispered snippets shared by Pomona and his own fleeting glimpses into his memories attested to it. In the mountains, Neville's imagination and strength of character had undeniably impressed and affected him... as had Neville's collapse and nightmare.

While Severus spared Minerva half an ear, he pondered Neville, realising that he had enjoyed the quiet chats and the time with him. Neville had made him feel some of the strength and power he had experienced an age ago. He knew he couldn't deny that the urge to help Neville was based on selfishness, but now he wondered if something else had been prodded into life at Neville's passionate plea for help.

Minerva harrumphed, and he immediately focused on her with an innocent expression.

"Don't give me that," she clipped. "I know you weren't listening...I teach too, remember?" She sniffed disdainfully and turned to pluck up her goblet. "I know the look."

Severus smiled warmly and leant back, using her hat to block out the source of his distraction. His gaze swept over the hall and the merry detritus that was the end of the Great Feast: paper streamers, cake wrappers, piles of food, empty cups. It was a joyous mess. To his left, he heard a few of his peers mutter sleepily and saunter away to their beds...they loved this as much as the students, but good food tended to go straight to their eyelids.

The sounds, the food, the good company helped to alleviate the stress and horror that had smothered him merely a day ago...it seemed so far away now. He cast Minerva a quick glance; he owed her his life, his soul, his peace of mind. It would have been impossible to survive this if she hadn't extended her hand all those years ago. On impulse, he reached out and clasped her hand, gently squeezing it.

The feel of his hand made her jolt and want to turn to him, but she held herself still, knowing in some way that he would release it if she moved. His fingers tightened and her heart lurched deep in her chest. Warmth flooded her just as tears stung her eyes, and fierce love rose up, thundering down her veins. Slowly, as if turning to face a timid deer, she swung her gaze upon him. There was a fragility in those dark depths, as if this were more terrifying for him than confessing a sin. Her earlier instinct was proved right, and he flinched, trying to draw his hand away, but she placed her other hand on top of his, returning the subtle sign of affection.

It was wonderful to see him relax and smile awkwardly. She mentally scooped up the memory, cradling and cherishing it. And then his warm hand was gone, and he was standing, preparing to leave.

"Goodnight, Minerva."

"Goodnight, Severus."

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Learning Lessons

Neville has his first bitter-sweet taste of teaching, and he finds himself savouring the experience.

"How do you feel?"

Neville blinked slowly, inhaled deeply, opened his mouth, and then closed it. How did he feel? It was hard to describe. He'd trembled while waiting for the lesson to start, felt almost crippled with fear when Pomona had handed him the lesson, and then... then a young Hufflepuff had asked him why there were earmuffs on the bench, and that had been that. Herbology had taken over, giving him speech and thought, and keeping his dread cowering in the corner. He'd smiled as they'd laughed at his stories, felt relief at their stern...and slightly fearful...faces when he warned them about the Mandrakes' cry, and he'd rejoiced in their keen gazes fixed on him.

When a quiet tinkling in his ear reminded him to end the lesson, he had felt his breath snatch with disappointment. It had been the best experience of his life. So, when Pomona asked him how he felt, he was at a loss to define such a feeling. He looked up at her, speechless, but his glowing and enthused features must have conveyed something, because she smiled knowingly.

"Like that, eh?" she teased gently. "I knew you were a natural." Giddy on the feeling, he swayed happily in the chair. "After lunch, we have third-year Hufflepuffs and Slytherins; want to take the lesson?"

Some of the elation evaporated. It may have been easy to keep a first-year group, awestruck with all that Hogwarts had to offer, under his spell, but third-years were slightly more jaded. He swallowed, but nodded. Pomona and he had planned their lessons over the last few days, and he knew most of the activities and objectives without needing any notes or prompts. And no one knew his subject better.

"Don't worry, you won't be alone," she assured gently. "No new teacher is left alone: Randall will have Septima, until her maternity leave starts." Settling into the chair opposite, she slid a fresh cup of tea towards him. "And everyone was new once."

"Even Professor Snape?" he asked before he could clamp his lips shut.

She tactfully ignored his blush. "Even Severus," she answered firmly, her expression giving nothing away.

They sat and sipped, thinking about the lesson that had been and the one to come. Neville felt a thousand questions squirming in his mind and guts, but he squashed them down... after all, what could be worse than his looming mentor session with Severus Snape?

Those questions and doubts made a peevish return when the greenhouse began to fill with...teenagers, but he rallied behind the fact that he had the element of surprise...they didn't really know who he was. He watched them sit and whisper to each other, their eyes lingering on him. He risked a glance at Pomona, but she was watching the group with something akin to suppressed mirth and knowingness and stepping back into the shadows. Neville was on his own.

He quickly looked around him. Twelve Slytherins and nine Hufflepuffs...not the most terrifying thing he'd ever encountered, but...

"Welcome to a new year of Herbology." He allowed himself a small smirk at the traditional groan from the far corners. "I'm Professor Longbottom." He saw a few faces snap around to his own, but he ignored their curious expressions. "And over the next few lessons, we will be focusing on harvesting techniques."

A few of the Slytherin boys pulled a face and slumped back; Neville felt a mix of pique and dark humour: how could they not like Herbology? And he'd found his first group of volunteers.

"You're as pathetic as my dad said you were," muttered a bitter voice from the back of the class.

The barely heard comment had the same impact as a hiss in long grass. Everyone stiffened pensively and backed away from the source, watching their step while beating a hasty retreat. Neville had no difficulty in spotting the widening gulf between class and agents provocateur. From the corner of his eye, he saw Pomona puff up and step forward. Something gripped him, and he surreptitiously waved her to relax. This was his test... this moment defined him. He had no choice but to tackle this head on... and carefully.

A trio of boys sat sullenly at the back, their ties were slightly askew, and they affected an air of sheer belligerence and stubbornness. Pomona had mentioned those students who were... challenging, and the threesome, sitting sullenly, were the most challenging. For various reasons, most of the staff seemed to find them a handful. He eyed the boys and examined the tactics and strategies Pomona had shared. With a rather evil smirk, he recalled the tactic of bringing the students into the lesson...making them a part of their learning. Who said that he couldn't make this learning curve slightly steeper than Herbology could manage?

His lesson plan went out the window, along with the last of his nervousness; this was a challenge, a battle, and one thing Neville had become an expert at was fighting. They wanted warfare, he'd give them a war.

"You may consider Herbology to be a safe topic... nothing dark or explosive about it, is there?" His question prompted a round of non-committal grunts, but he caught the puzzled, suspicious flicker on a few of the Hufflepuff faces. "I daresay that Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions are far more thrilling than potting plants and picking flowers, eh?"

As he spoke, he pulled on a pair of hefty dragon-hide gloves, earning a few surprised and curious glances. The dismissive boys raised their game to a sneer, but still exemplified boredom and petulance. Sucking on his teeth thoughtfully, Neville exaggerated making sure the gloves were on and then sauntered into the store room-cum-staff room adjoining the greenhouse. He grinned darkly as he reached out to gather up his chosen weapon.

Pomona caught his eye on the way out; she knew what this plant could do better than most, and he could imagine the small battle waging within her conscience. With a gentle inhale and a lifting of the eyebrows, she allowed Neville to proceed.

The class erupted into giggles when he returned. And who would blame them? Held in his protective mitts was the smallest, cutest plant possibly devised by Nature. Delicate, oval shaped leaves curled like cowlicks over the edge of the pot and huddled together into a soft green mound of gently glistening leaves. From this, slender stalks stood proud to wave five delicate white trumpet-shaped flowers a full two inches in the air. Despite this, Neville carefully placed the pot on the table as though it were likely to explode.

The Slytherin trio snorted and folded their arms across their chests, then one of them offered himself up for sacrifice.

"I could teach this class better than him," he sneered.

"Ah," Neville sighed, beaming. "Perhaps you could share with us your knowledge of how to harvest the flowers from this plant?" he asked with perfectly pitched challenge. Finally, he realised who the boy was: Phineas Crabbe, Vincent's much younger and twice-removed cousin.

With the class watching him and his friends smirking, Crabbe found himself agreeing and standing. His hubris carried him over to the plant, and he snatched the secateurs from Neville's gloved hand. Pride was making him a fool, but it hadn't completely robbed him of his wits.

"What is this thing, anyway?" he asked snidely.

Neville leant forward and whispered reverently, "Aside from the tentacular in the corner, this is the most dangerous plant in the greenhouse...it's a mini hosta."

The boy frowned, glancing between teacher and plant as if deciding what was the more ludicrous. "Never heard of it," he mumbled.

"That may be because it's predominantly found in Muggle gardens."

Neville was relieved to see the revulsion roll across the young man's face...not because he was thrilled that such prejudice existed, but because he knew his weapon had been loaded and sighted. All that was needed now was the pull on the trigger... and there it was!

"But," he interjected quickly before Crabbe became trigger happy, "you should know that this plant defends itself." Neville took a step closer so he could speak to Crabbe sotto voce. "If I were you," he said gently, "I'd realise that looks can be deceiving and learn to respect what you don't know."

Crabbe paused, contemplating the advice, then flashed Neville a disgusted look. He plunged the secateurs towards the slender stalk with malicious glee, but the blades snapped around air...the flower had moved! Puzzled and sneeped, the Slytherin tried again, but the white blossom swayed to the left with an almost mocking laziness. With a grunt and a bitter glance at Neville, Crabbe held the flower in his fingertips and re-aligned the blades, his lips curling up as he felt the flower strain futilely against his hold.

Neville counted down: three, two... one...snap!

"Ow!"

The flower had twisted out of its prison, and the petals were now happily and firmly clamped on the fleshy part between thumb and forefinger. On instinct, he jerked away, but the whole pot went with him, swinging under his frantically waving arm. His classmates, studious to the core, stood for a better view of the lesson.

To free his hand, he brought down the scissors, intent on cutting the pot loose, but the other flowers reared back like angry snakes, snapping at his hand and fingers, defending their brother with vitriolic and accurate determination. A particularly accurate nip on his inner wrist sent the clippers clattering to the floor. Those standing close enough could swear they heard the blooms hiss, as though laughing.

Crabbe reached under the pot to pull it free, but two of the biting heads lunged down and latched onto his hand. With a shriek, he realised that now both his hands were stuck, held by a very angry plant. Herbology suddenly didn't seem hazard free. To add to this was the painful realisation that while he was trapped, the plant still had two free mouths. He glared at it, and he thought he saw the petals curve up in a smug smile. The bloody thing was gloating!

"What the hell is this thing?" he yelped.

"I told you," answered Neville calmly, "it's a mini hosta, found typically in Muggle gardens. This one comes from Japan and is known to be particularly responsive to magic. Class!" he called out, catching their attention. "As you can see, this species also defends itself extremely aggressively when threatened."

Crabbe lunged at his nearest classmates for help, but they leapt back as if avoiding a Boggart. With a grimace, he rested against the bench and tried to wedge his foot between his wrists and on the pot to kick it loose. The class formed a tighter circle; this was the best Herbology lesson they'd had in years. As casual observers, many of them could see the inherent flaw in Crabbe's plan...one of the flowers had slipped under his hem. With much elbow-nudging and grinning, they watched and waited.

"Ow!" he snarled, hopping and cursing as he tried to extricate his foot. "The bloody thing bit my ankle."

"Hostas such as these," Neville continued, ignoring the scuffling and occasional giggle, "were used for ground coverage around Wizarding properties."

"Why?" screamed out the tormented Crabbe, now that his foot was free and he had less to worry about. "Were they insane?"

Neville flashed him a tight smile. "The hosta was used to protect a Wizard's property from magical animals and other wizards. In the presence of magic, they become very... agitated." Crabbe supported this by suddenly yelping. "The idea was that if something magical entered the garden, the hostas would react and... distract the trespasser."

"Is it distracting you, Crabbe?" a Slytherin shouted snidely.

"Surely, the point was to alert the wizard to the trespasser?" someone mumbled from the back. "I mean, Crabbe's making enough noise to put many wards to shame."

"So," Neville interjected, "clever idea?"

Based on Crabbe's predicament, they all answered, "Yes."

"No, not really," deadpanned Neville. "You see, hostas reproduce asexually, which means they send out specialised roots...rhizomes or stolons...that develop into new plants. These roots can extend quite far, and it wasn't unheard of for a wizard to wake up with something nibbling determinedly on him." Nervous giggling followed. "For some, this wasn't an entirely unwelcome experience, but for the owner of this species, it could be a severe impediment."

"Crabbe seems more inconvenienced than hurt," an unsympathetic classmate pointed out.

"Oh," Neville replied dismissively, "you have just one plant here... imagine a whole bedding area suddenly sprouting up and finding you interesting." As a collective, the class winced. "And I will remind you that this is a mini hosta."

"So, hostas are dangerous?"

Neville sighed and tilted his head, deep in thought. "There are more dangerous plants out there, but in sufficient numbers and in the right anatomical areas, they could do some serious damage, yes."

Crabbe stopped struggling and stared incredulously at his teacher. Inhaling sharply, he swung the pot downwards...missing Neville's rapid attempt to stop him...and smacked it against the edge of the bench, shattering the pot, but not dislodging the peeved plant. It did, however, free the roots, roots that to his horror moved to wrap around his hand and wrist.

"Oh dear," sighed Neville, earning eager looks from the class and a frantic desperate stare from the Slytherin.

"What?" he whimpered, trying to grab the stringy roots whilst avoiding the two angry blooms. "Oh.... no! No!" he moaned, grabbing at his conveniently baggy sleeve. "No! Oh... come on!"

"Ah, now this is interesting, class," Neville uttered excitedly, urging them closer. "Here, you'll see that its stolons...those long, slightly thicker roots... can wrap around objects, in this case the arm, to help pull the plant along."

"Oh Merlin!" screamed the volunteer, stiffening and urgently patting at his forearm. "It's gone up my sleeve!"

The class strained for a better look, catching sight of the last of the shuddering leaves disappearing under the shirt's cuff and a slight bulge sliding smoothly upwards. A curious pinched expression crept across Crabbe's face and he stiffened. A few of the class winced in sympathy, but Crabbe had...over the years...been a blight upon everyone's school days, so he was getting limited help. Besides, this lesson was too rewarding.

"It's in my armpit," he squeaked, suddenly turning and twisting as he tried to evade the biting flowers and the tickling tendrils. It looked like he was the victim of a powerful *Tarantallegra*, if someone had modified it to also focus on the arms and the face. It was quite possible, judging by his expression, that he was also occasionally enjoying some of the plant's attentions.

"It moves fast!" gasped one of the Hufflepuffs.

"Oh yes," Neville replied. "It's advised when counting how many discrete plants you have in a bed to mark them as counted in case one should move; they can be quick little beggars."

"But," murmured a shy girl, "my Aunt has mini hostas, and they've never moved."

Neville smiled gently. "Muggles have generated over three thousand cultivars, and only a very few behave like this...I'd say that your aunt most likely has the inert variety. Also, they only respond in this manner in the presence of magic. In non-magical areas and around Muggles, they are just as you'd expect a plant to be."

"So," continued the girl, "how would you stop them from... attacking?"

"The mini hostas' magical response resonates sympathetically... do you know what that means?"

A number of heads shook; the rest were fixed in place, watching Crabbe twist and giggle.

"It means that whatever you're feeling, the hosta will respond in kind...it shares your intention."

"So, because Crabbe tried to take its head off, the plant is attacking him?"

"Precisely!" declared Neville with a satisfied grin.

"But...?"

"Yes?" Neville encouraged.

"Crabbe's had enough... It's still going for him."

"I doubt that very much," he replied, just as Crabbe emitted a squeal. "Hostas have no mind as such, so they cannot do anything other than what their...for want of a better term...teacher guides them to do."

The class turned to Crabbe as he pirouetted and tittered, thinking about what his intentions and needs would be. Neville could see the answer blossoming on their faces...Crabbe wanted it to leave him alone, so the plant wanted Crabbe to leave *it* alone, unfortunately, the plant was stuck under his shirt. With their epiphany, their lips clamped shut. No one wanted this to end prematurely... Crabbe owed them.

Neville rested back against the workbench and folded his arms. "Sometimes, we get back exactly what we put in, eh, Crabbe?"

Crabbe tried to glare and laugh at the same time: it didn't quite have the impact he desired. It was made worse by the fact that he just wasn't allowed to stand still; looking like a marionette in the hands of someone with the shakes did not help maintain the image he had spent two years refining. He just wanted to hide in the dark.

Neville straightened and pulled off the gloves, replacing them in a drawer underneath the bench. As far as he was concerned, this particular lesson had been learnt, and it was time to end it.

"Argghhh!"

The thin, high-pitched whine filled the sudden attentive silence until it ended with a defeated squeak. Neville looked back quizzically, and a young boy with spots and glasses supplied an answer with all the glee of one seeing vengeance unleashed upon a foe.

"It's just gone down his trousers, sir."

Meaningful Mentoring

Chapter 10 of 22

Neville and Snape have their first mentor session, which gives Neville more to think about than teaching.

The lesson turned just after the plant had sojourned down his trouser leg. Surrounded by his laughing classmates, blushing and frustrated, Crabbe also turned. Neville, who hadn't found the whole thing amusing, had watched Crabbe carefully, so he'd caught the emotions marching across his face. Shame and anger dominated the arena. Some would say that he should have ended it there and then, but hard lessons were sometimes the most valuable. So instead of rescuing Crabbe and scolding his classmates for their lack of generosity of spirit, Neville had stepped over to the struggling boy and whispered in his ear.

No one knew what he'd said, but Crabbe had straightened and relaxed. At first, it looked as though he'd been defeated, but then the plant had peeped out from under his hem and slowly pulled itself up towards his hip. The class watched with a mix of bitter amusement and expectant interest as the small bundle of leaves nuzzled his hand and crawled into it. Crabbe seemed more surprised than anyone, letting out a shocked laugh. And then, Crabbe had become the teacher, taking centre-stage in the lesson.

The boy had seemingly tamed the mini hosta, and he made the flowers sway and dance. He even made them have a mock battle...much to the delight of the boys. The girls had 'ahhed' and 'ooohed' when he'd somehow managed to get the petals to move as though blowing a kiss. He coaxed the bundle of roots and leaves across the table, asking it to do tricks like a gentle puppy, and he'd sought mild revenge against those two Slytherins who had mocked him, making them clamber up on their stools for safety as his plant snapped and scurried after them. It had been a good lesson, even if the original objectives hadn't been met.

Herbology was the last lesson of the day, so Neville was able to ask Crabbe to stay behind after class. Pomona tactfully busied herself with the seedlings in the store room, but Neville knew she would be listening carefully.

Neville sat opposite Crabbe and slid an empty mug towards him. When Crabbe looked up, he lifted up the small teapot and waggled his eyebrows. A small frown momentarily ousted his moody expression, but then he nodded slowly.

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Yes... two, please."

The sound of tea being poured and the clink of spoon against crockery filled the awkward silence.

"I neglected to mention to the class that the strength of the hosta's response is proportional to the strength of the wizard."

Crabbe almost spilt tea down his front when he lifted his head in surprise, but the feeling was almost instantly squashed beneath some deeply held... sentiment. Neville took a careful sip, feeling a corresponding despair...why did Crabbe think it impossible that he was strong? Bullies tended to feel powerless and weak, terrorising their peers in a bid to feel strong.

"If I'd known of your strength, I wouldn't have... volunteered you," he added. Behind his cup, Crabbe looked pained. "Your patience with the class afterwards was also quite admirable, and I..."

"Stop it!

Neville reared back as Crabbe leapt to his feet and leaned over the table. He was prepared for the sulking and the moodiness, but the pained anger was something quite unexpected.

"Just give me the detention and let me go," Crabbe added tonelessly, returning to his seat and curling up around his tightly held midriff. In the strained silence, Neville studied the tense boy while Crabbe focused on his spilt tea creeping across the wooden bench top.

"I had no intention of giving you a detention." At his words, another perplexed frown flickered across Crabbe's face before fading into nonchalance. "But if you want one, you can help me weed the mini hosta bedding area later this evening." The sheer scale of Crabbe's apathy rankled Neville, and he'd spoken more tersely than he'd intended. The proposed punishment and Neville's tone caused the boy to pale and close his eyes. The shattering of his indifference softened Neville's response. "Or you can volunteer to help me harvest tentacular thorn?"

Crabbe fidgeted then looked up, careful to keep his emotions from his face. "But that's seventh-year stuff," he said with a sneer, although it lacked confidence and quickly slunk away.

"It is," Neville confirmed gently. "But it also takes someone with a particular skill...many seventh-years don't have it... and Madam Pomfrey will no doubt tan my hide if all my seventh-year Herbology students get sent to her."

Crabbe was intelligent, and Neville was not exaggerating the fact that the boy had some skill and power...even Pomona had been impressed. He had been fascinated by the way the flowers had danced and weaved around Crabbe, nipping hard enough to sting, but also being... playful. And the plant had moved fast! In the hands of any other student, he was sure the plant would have just lazily swayed... in the case of Crabbe's two associates, it would have most likely wilted. But for Crabbe, the flowers had waltzed and played.

Neville cleaned up the tea and righted the upset mug. "Do you like Herbology?" Crabbe twitched his shoulders in answer and Neville rolled his eyes in exasperation. "I'm not going to give you a detention, but I will ask you to help me harvest those thorns...Sunday at eight in the morning, outside Hagrid's hut." There was another non-committal shoulder twitch, which Neville accepted as confirmation. "You can go."

Crabbe stood quickly and rushed to the door, but a silhouette caused him to slow and swagger. Neville glanced across and saw two girls peer around the doorway; he grinned even as he pretended not to listen.

"Hi," Crabbe said rather suavely, but Neville caught the uncertain undertone. Barely an hour ago, the girls wouldn't have given him the time of day, yet they now clustered around him.

"What did Longbottom want?" asked one of them shyly.

"Oh, he gave me a detention," Crabbe answered blithely.

"Oh that's harsh," uttered one of them with a mix of awe and sympathy.

Neville's grin widened, and he cast them a quick glance as they walked away; one of the girls had linked his arm. Things were looking up for Crabbe, and all it took was a tetchy plant that knew his soft spots.

Pomona appeared at his elbow. "That was lucky, Neville," she said, the slightest hint of reproach: it could have gone terribly wrong. He felt a hand on his arm and turned to her, seeing her wide grin. "But well done, you!"

He smiled back. "Thank you."

"Keep an eye on Phineas, will you?"

"Of course," he replied firmly. "The tentacular is fairly sleepy this time year due t..."

"No," she butted in. "I mean, Phineas seems to have listened to you, which is something he hasn't done with any of us in a long time. He's hurting." She shrugged and inhaled slowly. "No one has been able to offer him anything to ease it."

Neville frowned and thought back on the hosta's response... it had been vicious, but it had also been... mischievous. The flower had picked up on his pain and desire for some salve to his wounds. It had lashed out and attempted to soothe.

"Oh, and your mentor meeting is scheduled for Saturday."

~x~

He collapsed on the bed, groaning and feeling like he'd ran a marathon, battled a dragon and been put under a Full Body Bind. His muscles ached and resisted all attempts to move. It had taken ten minutes to massage life back into his hand after his mammoth marking session, and he needed to arrange having his things left in the store room so he wasn't rushing between the main staff room and his greenhouses. Teaching was hard work!

After his first full week, he was exhausted and had resolved to: buy a Dicta-quill; learn voice-enhancement charms (his throat felt raw); find a short-cut from the greenhouses to the Great Hall (there had to be one because he couldn't imagine Pomona legging it across the lawns to get to lunch on time for duty); and he'd have to learn relaxation techniques, otherwise his blood pressure would hit critical. Despite it all, a smile bloomed on his face; not even the thought of his impending mentor meeting could curb it. It was also selfishly gratifying to see Randall looking as overwhelmed and knackered.

His clock chimed six... almost dinner, but he'd been excused eating in the Great Hall; apparently, only senior teachers and heads of houses were required to attend all evening meals. Rolling on his side, he sleepily wondered who would become head of Hufflepuff. The scuttlebutt was that Aurora Sinistra would take over; he knew from recollections of his fifth-year that she exemplified the qualities of hard work and perseverance: her homework had been monstrous. The memory of it was enough to enhance his drowsiness, and his mind began to follow his muscles into oblivion.

His eyelids had almost closed when a thought elbowed its way past his fatigue: the phial! It was better than Pepper-up, and he sat bolt upright, his legs swinging off the bed and his feet dragging him over to his desk. The phial sat where he'd left it, catching the candlelight and shimmering like a precious gold ingot. He sat down and gently stroked the smooth glass, wondering who to take it to. Filch dealt with lost property, but something about it made him balk at the idea. Perhaps Flitwick... or McGonagall? A gentle push sent it rolling in a soft arc. No one had reported it as missing... Something as valuable as a crystal needle phial? Did they know it was missing? It came to a

stop, gently rolling on its curved edge, innocently denying him the answers to his questions.

"If you were mine, I'd keep you close and safe... I'd check you were there every five minutes." He sat back and glared at it as if it was deceiving him. "Something as expensive as you would be reported missing...you're what? Fifteen galleons?" On impulse, he slid his wand free and cast a few simple spells. The magic glimmered over the glass, changing colours like the aurora, and then popped out like burned-up whiskey on a Christmas pudding. "But what's inside is priceless, eh?"

The spells had highlighted a number of protective charms; someone had taken pains to protect it and the contents. Judging by the volume, this was a very short memory indeed... perhaps mere seconds from someone's life. But whose? He knew he should have trundled to McGonagall and handed it over.... He should have at least thought about letting someone know, but for some reason, he plucked it from the desk and secreted it carefully in his drawer.

~x~

Snape still had the same office, but the office wasn't the same. Last time he'd been in it, strange jars and hanging plants had festooned the shelves, adding beautifully to the atmosphere. Now, the shelves were almost bare and held only the most basic...and boring...of ingredients and supplies. The closest thing to that cultivated gloom and doom of his school days was a spider slowly weaving its web between rafter and top shelf.

Snape hadn't arrived, but the door had opened at his touch, so he had... sauntered in. Combined with the difference in decor, he was feeling...paradoxically...unnerved. Inexplicably, he felt he was privy to the destruction of a work of art... that he was mourning the passing of something magnificent. His eyes moved slowly over the wreckage of his memories, and he knew why he felt as he did. This reflected the change in Snape; it was so reminiscent of the hostas...where the plant echoed emotions, this room reflected Snape's... reduction, diminishment.... He shivered. It was cold and empty... devoid of anything to make it belong.

"Don't bother getting comfortable," a smooth voice uttered from behind, "we're not staying here."

Neville gratefully turned and saw Snape silhouetted in the doorway. Tucking his paperwork under his arm, he gladly left the hollow office and slipped past his mentor into the corridor. When the door closed and locked with stuttering clicks, Snape glided off, pulling Neville like a tug towards their venue.

After a series of twists and turns and down some steps Neville was sure were new, they came to a doorway embedded in a stone wall... but with no apparent door. Snape placed his palm where the doorknob should be and muttered something. At his words, the stonework writhed and slowly took upon a wooden effect, finally shifting into something that looked very much like a door. With a muted pop, the knob burst from the surface, waggled around like a cat getting comfortable, then settled down to its job.

Snape grabbed and twisted the handle, pushing on the door with his shoulder. Neville followed Snape, and he found himself in a beautiful room. Five tall and arched leaded windows surrounded him, casting a wonderful clean and crisp light upon a pentagonal table and five chairs. To his left, a fire popped and crackled in a stone fireplace, its light reflecting off the rich, warm wood and the twinkling chandelier above the table. Snape slid his paperwork onto the table and swept round the room to a trolley nestled under the far window. Curious, Neville followed his mentor. On the trolley were cups, saucers, side dishes and an urn with complicated brass pipes that could only mean it had something to do with coffee. Beneath the other three windows, there were cherry-wood filing cabinets. Oddly, there were no bookcases; this would make a perfect reading room. It didn't strike him until he moved to stand by the table that Snape had taken him down deeper into the castle...which would have surrounded this room completely.

"Take a seat," Snape suggested while he gathered cups and saucers. "Coffee?"

Neville smiled and nodded. "Yes, thanks," he replied, hiding his surprise, before sitting down on the high-backed and cushioned chair. "Is this a new Room of Requirement?" he asked.

The dark man frowned and glanced across at him. "In a manner of speaking," he replied tonelessly. "We required it, so we constructed it. It's a *therapy* suite."

Neville frowned. The way he had accentuated the word 'therapy' made it sound as though Snape hated the idea. Before he could question him, he'd turned back to the brass piping and conducted a series of complicated actions to get steam billowing and a black liquid pouring from a slender spout.

"St Mungos devised them and oversaw their construction," he continued calmly after placing two cups on the table. "It was deemed necessary after the Great Battle."

"You disagree?"

Snape looked across, his gaze sharp and indecipherable. Neville shivered and hid his discomfort behind a sip of his... cappuccino by the looks of it.

"They were necessary; thankfully in recent years, they've not been needed. We use them now to conduct meetings and mentor students, and they're perfect for less... formal agendas, such as impromptu potion-making."

Neville's scalp tingled. He'd almost forgotten... the last few days had almost nudged his need aside.

"We'll be working here?"

"Yes. Can you remember the way here?" At Neville's confident nod, Snape relaxed and sipped his own drink...which Neville noted was a black espresso. "Your mentor meetings will run as planned...Minerva needs documentation...so your free time will be incredibly limited." Neville's expression made it clear that lack of free time was immaterial. "And you must find a way to get here without detection. Once inside, you're protected by powerful charms and needn't concern yourself."

"I understand," he said firmly.

Snape nodded and pulled his file closer, scanning the reports from Pomona and his own reflections upon his progress so far. They discussed his lesson planning and his manner with the students; they glossed over Phineas, with Snape reiterating Pomona's request. In the long pauses, while Snape read and took notes, Neville reconsidered his once dreaded Potions professor.

Those eyes had seemed like the fires of hell when he'd been a student, scorching a hole through his soul, but now they were reminiscent of endless black nights. That mouth had uttered vile words and bitter accusations... but now it stretched and relaxed, forming words of encouragement and advice. Those hands had once moved aggressively through the air around him, but now they flowed languidly and gracefully.

Neville concluded that Snape was nothing like the man he'd once been. Something flickered deep in his gut when the image of Snape's office popped into his head. He risked a long stare at the man, wondering if he was as empty as his office, if something had ripped as much out of him. Is that why he suddenly found Snape interesting? Was it because he was weaker... less? Lost in thought, he had failed to hear Snape's question or see the flicker of annoyance cross his pale face.

"Longbottom!"

At the sound, Neville jerked back. The tone had resonated with his inner child, and part of him quailed, but another part perked up at the challenge. Satisfied that he had reacquired his attention, Snape continued... in a quieter, yet somehow more pointed manner.

There was still some power, some force within him, Neville realised, but something was damming it, containing it. His mind drifted off, thinking about the strength Snape would bring to his mission to save his parents: all that skill and focus... all that pent-up energy. Neville had the urge to stop Snape's prattle about pedagogy and learning theories; he felt himself thrum with the thrill of it. He wanted to grab him and haul him off to the potions lab, but Snape turned to him with a questioning look and one eyebrow arched. Instead, he reached out a trembling hand for his beverage: his mouth had gone quite dry for some reason.

Lost and Found

Chapter 11 of 22

Neville's confused feelings and impatience are swept aside when a student goes missing, and he finds someone else who is lost in plain sight.

Randal didn't have much of an appetite, but as he'd been *advised* by Sinistra to show his face at the High Table from time to time, he tried to look as though the sausages and mash were appealing. The most frustrating thing was that he couldn't really identify why he was feeling glum. In fact, this was the first time in a long time that he'd made a pass at someone and they'd still talked with him afterwards; usually, they left in a cloud of dust... sometimes not even metaphorically. Neville was still being... nice and carrying on as though nothing had happened. He stabbed a piece of sausage and shoved it between his teeth, chomping down bitterly. Maybe if Neville had screamed and ran to the hills, he'd feel happier?

"If you carry on like that," Sinistra whispered gently in his ear, "you'll stab through the plate, get indigestion, or make the first-years cry."

He paused mid-saw and glanced down at his white knuckles gripping the cutlery. The muscles in his face suddenly felt tight, and he relaxed the scowl that had sneaked up and usurped his usual jolly expression. "Sorry," he mumbled, putting the knife and fork down and reaching for his pumpkin juice. He forced his shoulders down and breathed slowly, allowing his body to relax: he was so tense. Slowly, he calmed enough to offer her a sheepish smile.

"I didn't realise that I'd let it come to the surface," he muttered apologetically.

"It's difficult, but we can't let the students know that we have 'personal issues'," she said wryly before flashing him a grin and a wink. "However, if I were you, I'd cultivate that expression; should the higher years get out of hand, I can guarantee that your scowl will have them as meek as kittens in no time."

The laugh rumbled in his chest, ousting the last of his confused and heavy feelings. "I'll keep that in mind."

They chatted amiably until the last of the students left the hall, where Sinistra wished him a good night and hauled herself to her feet, cupping her lower back as the weight of her baby shifted. He smiled at the lovely curve of her belly; he could understand why so many wanted to place their hands on it. Inside there was a life... a pure and magical mystery. Perhaps it was the closest people could come to feeling a portion of the gloriousness of life?

He idled at the table, allowing himself to reconnect with the atmosphere he'd avoided. It eased him further. There were far more important things to concern himself with than his paranoia over Neville's understanding. He let out a wry chuckle. Why was he even seeing it as something to worry about? Couldn't he meet someone who was simply... nice?

After draining his goblet, he looked across at his friend. Neville was deep in conversation with Snape, and by the way his eyes narrowed and his hand waved through the air, they were talking about something more provocative than teaching. Snape's face was turned away, but there was a tension across the older man's shoulders. After a few tight-lipped words, Neville glanced away and shook his head stiffly. Snape threw his napkin down and rose to his feet in a languid move, as though nothing but professional banter had passed between them, and slipped away.

When Neville left the table, Randal followed and caught him up in the corridor leading to the teachers' staffroom. His approaching footsteps alerted Neville, who turned with a frown on his face. His expression slowed Randal's progress, but when the features lifted into a smile, he almost skipped over to his side.

"It's been a hard few weeks, hasn't it?" Randal began, seeing the tension and some unknown frustration twisting Neville's features into a scowl similar to the one he must have terrorised the first-years with over dinner.

"Tell me about it," Neville agreed, turning and continuing to the staffroom. "I ache all over...how does that work?"

Randal laughed. "Have you taken note of just how far you have to walk around this castle... and do you sit down when you teach?"

"No, I never even thought about sitting...I can't remember Professor Sprout ever sitting."

Randal nodded. "There you go then."

Neville smiled and opened the staffroom door for Randal, and they slipped inside. Aside from two dozing wizards, nestled up a corner, the room was empty, and they had pick of the better chairs. They'd been amused at the hierarchy in the staffroom. Some chairs seemed to unconsciously belong exclusively to certain teachers: for instance, no one sat in Snape's or McGonagall's chair, even when they were absent from the castle. But the other, soft leather chairs were open to claim on a first-come first-served basis.

With a contented sigh, Randal slipped into the soft confines of a chair close to the fire and fought the urge to toe his shoes off. The meal sat delightfully heavily in his stomach, tugging on eyelids and slowly smothering him ready for sleep. It was Friday night, and all he could think about was collapsing. Where was that energy that had once pulled him out to commit mischief? Next to him, Neville was still wrapped up in something unpleasant.

"When's the next holiday?" Randal asked hopefully.

"Christmas," Neville answered with a moan.

"I'll never survive."

Neville laughed and looked across at Randal sitting sleepily in the dark leather chair. The firelight caught his face, turning his hair into liquid bronze and darkening his eyes. The words he'd planned to speak melted on his tongue, and he found himself wondering, for the merest moment, if he'd actually been that shocked about Randal's drunken... offer. He swallowed hard and wondered if it was wrong of him to not have been that shocked. He frowned and glanced back at the dancing flames. Was there even a scale to weigh up the appropriateness of his response? Too shocked and he was a bigot, not shocked enough and he was unconsciously *interested*? It was confusing, and his brain was of no help.

Either way and whatever it implied, the frustration and anger that flowed through him was drying up. With chagrin, he realised his argument over dinner with Snape had been more about himself than the task. But the eagerness to begin had welled up within him ever since Snape had shown him the room, and now he felt as though it strained to escape, pushing against his skin, leaving him breathless and giddy. He wanted to begin; he wanted to feel the ingredients beneath his fingers and make something spectacular.

Severus had been less enthusiastic, citing a myriad of inconsequential reasons for delaying until the holidays. In the cosy confines of the staffroom, he realised the wisdom

of waiting, and he inwardly groaned at the prospect of meeting Snape tomorrow for the mentor meeting. He could imagine Snape's satisfaction on hearing his apologetic acquiescence. Another feeling bobbed to the surface; Snape had looked haggard, not that you would have noticed unless you had the advantage of sitting next to him, and he'd pestered until Snape had chosen...perhaps been forced...to leave. Closing his eyes, Neville sank into the cushions, feeling a complete bastard and not knowing how to remedy it.

He was saved from trying to solve his dilemma by the door opening and Pomona walking in with a dark frown. When her eyes landed on him, her gaze hardened, and she strode over. "Neville, Randal," she said crisply. "We have a missing student, and your skills are needed."

Any fatigue fled, and they sprang to their feet, instantly alert. "Who is it?" Randal demanded.

"Selina Babcock: a first-year Gryffindor."

Neville groaned quietly: it had to be a Gryffindor...the other houses were either too sensible or the ones convincing Gryffindors to do stupid things. He wondered if a Slytherin was involved in some way.

"Randal, if you could help Aurora look in the Astronomy Tower and rooms, then that will be most helpful." Randal nodded and swept away. "Neville, if you could help Hagrid and Filius search the forest's perimeter?"

"Of course," he said quickly, eager to help, before speeding down the corridor to the entrance hall.

Hagrid and Flitwick were waiting on the edge of the looming forest, Hagrid looking hassled and Flitwick bouncing on his feet, obviously desperate to begin. Fang...Fang junior...sat at Hagrid's large feet, with slender, glistening drool stalactites indicating his excitement. When Neville clattered to a halt before them, Flitwick nodded and turned on his heel, leading them towards the towering, woody sentinels. Fang gave a low 'whumph' and padded after Hagrid. Clutching the stitch at his side, Neville gave Fang an answering sympathetic groan and followed. At the first junction, Flitwick went to the right, leaving the left to Hagrid and Neville.

They travelled in silence; Fang occasionally paused to sniff the air, only to shake his head, whine and continue with his heavy head low to the ground. The low-lying mist licked at his muzzle and paws as he ploughed onwards, seeking the girl's scent.

"It's a cold night fer a young'un to be out," Hagrid sighed. "I'm 'opin' that Pr'fessor Flitwick is right an' she's still up at the castle."

"Did someone see her come down here?" Neville asked, shoving his lucky hand in his pocket while waving his illuminated wand into every dark nook and cranny.

"Someone over'eard 'er talki' 'bout comin' down 'ere to prove 'er worth as a witch." Hagrid suddenly stopped dead, holding his breath and craning his neck to see into a thick web of criss-crossing limbs and roots. "Seems that she 'ad an idea she weren't a good enough witch to be at 'Ogwarts." With a disgusted growl, he straightened and carried on. "Thought I'd seen somethin', then."

"Who gave her that ridiculous notion?" Neville asked bitterly, his mind dredging up his own feelings of immense inadequacy in his first year at Hogwarts.

"Dunno," Hagrid answered simply. "Sometimes, I reckon ye can just sort o' convince yerself o' such rubbish."

They continued on in silence, starting at any sound and searching for any sign of the earth being recently disturbed, until the thing niggling at Neville's mind grabbed his tongue.

"Hagrid?"

"Yes, pr'fessor."

"Why don't we call out for her?"

Hagrid paused and wiped a finger under his nose. "Sorry, I shoulda realised that yer'd never done a search in 'ere before." His black eyes darted over the path and slowly, almost reluctantly, turned to rest on Neville's.

"There's things in these woods that're smart enough to know when we're lookin' fer someone. We call out, we get an answer... well that gives *them* a target. Ye scream in 'ere, and it ain't just a friend that 'ears ye an' comes runnin'."

Neville shuddered and crouched defensively against the dark and leering landscape. "So... we don't yell out." His eyes bored into the shadows, and his breath blossomed before him like smoke. He imagined a thousand eyes on him, while he was struck blind.

"When we finds 'er, we send up a flare."

"But how do we find her?" Neville whined, feeling the cold bite and the gloom smother him. "This forest is huge!"

"We 'ave Fang," Hagrid said proudly, giving the hairy mutt a friendly slap. "'E may not be as big as 'is dad, but 'e's good at sniffin' out what needs findin'. And Pr'fessor Flitwick 'as a Locater Charm."

"Shouldn't we have stuck together?"

"Nah!" Hagrid said, shaking his bushy head. "Take too long if we didna split up. When they've done the rooms up in the castle, the other pr'fessors will come down 'ere an' 'elp."

Neville nodded, and he hoped Flitwick was better than whatever should come skulking out of the shadows. He swallowed; he hoped that he and Hagrid were better than whatever they met!

"Besides, we're only on the edge," Hagrid added soothingly. "Not much 'ere to bother ye."

Neville missed a step. Just what did Hagrid consider to be only a 'bother'? He shuddered at the thought of meeting something that would fall into a category above.

Their search pattern brought them to another fork. Hagrid peered at it and then looked at Fang. The boarhound whined, huffed and then promptly fell to his stomach.

"I don't think she's anywhere near here," Neville declared exhaustedly. It wasn't the walking; it was the prolonged and excruciating focus. His head throbbed, and his eyes stung. "What could she do here that would prove her worth as a witch?"

Hagrid had no answer, but he nudged the dog with his boot and shooed him along the right-hand path, but Hagrid stopped after three strides, his shoulders drooping. "This way leads to where 'Arry met *Him*."

Neville stiffened at the emptiness in the half-giant's voice; he didn't need clarification of who 'Him' was. His eyes followed where Hagrid was looking and then snapped back. In the dim light, he couldn't quite see Hagrid's expression, but he thought he could work out dread and hopelessness: an echo of what he must have felt that day.

To his utmost relief, a red flare whistled up into the air and burst in the night sky. He had no desire to walk down to that place with Hagrid; he had enough of his own ghosts and terrible landscapes to haunt him.

"Hagrid," he called out gently. "Flitwick's got her; come on, let's go."

The giant gave a snuffle and a shudder. "Aye," he replied, beaming down at Neville. "'E'll be takin' 'er up to Madam Pomfrey."

They trudged back far happier; Fang seemed to share in the light-heartedness and gambolled around, stopping to chase his tail, then scampering ahead to toss up leaves.

"Look at 'im!" crooned Hagrid, smiling at the dog's antics. "Big softie, ain't 'e?"

Neville grinned and followed the pair back along the path, but he cast quick glances over his shoulder until he could see the subtle shift in light indicating the edge. Ferns whipped at their shins as they left the forest's leafy, cloying grip.

At Hagrid's hut, they parted company, and Neville trudged wearily to the castle. Without the trees that he'd hastily maligned, the wind was free to race around him, stealing what warmth he had and tugging maliciously on his coat. Grimacing, he pulled his coat closer and cast a charm to warm his chilled fingers. Not that it lasted long. He longed to sink into a warm bath and then under soft sheets. The mentor meeting was the last thing on his mind...although it niggled occasionally.

The entrance hall was empty when he finally slipped free of the tormenting wind, and he let his feet carry to his room. He smiled as he pondered that hierarchy again: students in their dormitories, the new teachers in their corridor, the teachers safely ensconced in their own private rooms. Or at least, he thought they were.

As the staircase shifted direction, he caught sight of a figure leaning against a wall on the upper floor. His fatigue evaporated, and he smacked the banister, hoping to convince the staircase to alter its motion. To his surprise and delight, the stairs complied. He raced up the last few steps, only to hesitate. He'd thought it was a student, out past curfew and up to mischief outside the girls' bathroom, but as he closed in, he recognised the outline. It was Snape.

Frowning and feeling anxious, Neville stepped closer, catching the sound of pained breathing. *His throat!* The horrid rasp spurred him on, and he hastened to the struggling man's side.

Snape looked dreadful: his eyes squeezed shut, and his trembling lips pulled back across a mouth held open in a grimace of pure pain. Sweat beaded his brow and ran down his temple. Pale skin was ashen grey, and he held his midriff as though he feared he would fall apart.

Neville swallowed hard, but he'd had to deal with enraged tentacular and the Whomping Willow, so he knew...at the very least...how to duck. He gripped Snape's bicep, and before the man could argue or respond, he tucked under his shoulder and pulled him close, wrapping his free arm around Snape's waist.

"Long...bottom, I do not... need your hel..."

"Of course not, Sir," he cut in smoothly. "I'm sure you'd find a student or another teacher much more helpful." In the gloomy corridor, Snape's eyes glittered, but without much venom...the man was close to collapse. "Now, where to?"

Bitterness, pain, fear swirled in the black depths, but after a few gasping breaths, Snape pointed along the corridor towards his personal supply cupboard. Puzzled, but not ready to question the professor's choice of destination, Neville took the man's weight and carried him forward.

At the door, Snape shuffled until he was free of Neville's assistance and waved his hand over the door knob. It twitched, and then the door clicked open to reveal neat rows of potion ingredients in their jars or hanging in bushels. Snape slipped inside, and Neville followed. It was quite cosy until the door closed behind them; then it became quite claustrophobic.

Snape muttered something, and Neville heard a series of clicks and whirs, ending with a heavy 'thunk'. Opposite him, the wall shifted, shuddered and then swung away, revealing a darkened space beyond. He may have felt obliged to let Snape venture in alone, but the wizard stumbled, and Neville felt his Gryffindor heritage kick in aggressively. He almost manhandled Snape through the opening and into... a very nice room.

While trying to take in every feature, Neville found a convenient armchair for Snape to collapse in with his shin, and amidst a few curses and moans, he settled Snape into the chair. Neville fell into a seat opposite and rubbed his leg: *why on earth were shins so... sensitive?!*

Trying to ignore Snape's weak smirk and the pain, he continued his quick perusal of what must be the potion master's personal quarters. A small fire popped and crackled to his left...pine, judging by the fresh fragrance in the air...and a walnut desk sat primly to his right. A few of Pomona's flowers glimmered above the desk, bathing it in creamy light, accentuating the animal skin appearance of the wood. He felt the urge to caress the smooth surface. His gaze travelled further round the room, catching three arched and leaded windows under which stood two chairs and a square dining table, then a wooden door and back to the fireplace. An oval low table squatted between the chairs, upon which a few books rested around the old, circular stains of many coffee cups. Aside from the elegant desk, it was just like Neville's room; he felt slightly disappointed... he'd expected something more esoteric.

"The desk..." Snape whispered hoarsely. "In the... desk."

That rasp brought his mind back to his current dilemma, and he almost leapt from the chair to seek what Snape needed so desperately. Only one part of the desk opened, and that was a wide section on the left. He opened the door and saw a leather box within.

"The... box."

Neville reached in and gently withdrew it. He straightened as he turned and almost fell to his knees to place it on the table before Snape. The wizard struggled to lean forward, but he waved away Neville's helping hands.

Trembling fingers bullied the latch, and then the lid opened. Inside, Neville could see several large phials...about the length of his hand and the width of his wrist. He frowned as Snape's pale fingers almost wrapped around one before the man gave a vicious snarl and jerked away, pulling a phial containing a blue liquid free from its velveteen slot. He downed it like his life depended on it.

Keeping his eyes on Snape's face as it twisted into pure loathing, Neville climbed back into the chair. He held his breath, wondering what was happening. The phial slipped from Snape's fingers so they could cup his face and hide the pain and despair.

Soon, stuttering gasps and breaths erupted from between those tight fingers, and Neville swallowed hard. He knew those sounds. He'd made them himself when everything had collapsed and his life lost meaning... when he realised the emptiness and futility of existence: when he needed pain to remind him that he was real and could still feel. It broke his heart.

Some part of him screeched that he should leave... that he'd be mortified if someone caught him in such throes of despair and emotional devastation; but another part, a quiet part that was usually lost in the melange of manic thoughts and emotions was whispering in his ear. How often had he secretly hoped for someone to find him and hold him.... to offer a light between himself and the dark place he was travelling through? He'd never had anyone... he'd made sure of that. But Snape... well, Snape had him.

Rising carefully from his chair, as though he knew any sudden movement would wake something terrible, he slowly crawled across to the trembling wizard. He could hear Snape's effort to contain it all, to keep it hidden from him... how his lungs and throat battled to keep the screams locked away. On inspiration, Neville cast a Silencing Charm around the room, recognising painfully how his spell struck one already in place.

Licking his lips and wiping his clammy palm on his trousers, he raised his arm and placed a gentle hand on Snape's arm. For the reaction he received, it may as well have been a white-hot brand. Snape jolted back, his wide dark eyes fixing upon the hand on his arm, and his teeth clenched until Neville swore he could hear his teeth cracking in their sockets.

"Severus..." he breathed. There was nothing, no flicker of acknowledgment. "What do you need?" Snape moaned and closed his eyes, letting his head loll back. "I'll get Pomfrey."

He tried to stand, but Snape had recovered enough to lunge forward and grip his shoulders, keeping him on his knees at Snape's side. The move had its consequence, and Snape's head fell forward onto Neville's shoulder. He could feel hot and rapid breaths and cold, slick sweat against his neck. Those thin fingers bit into his skin as if Snape hoped to leech some strength from his fleshy support.

"Not... Poppy," he hissed out.

Neville inhaled shakily at the sound and the sensation of Snape's lips moving over his skin. He felt overwhelmed and vulnerable. He didn't know how to deal with something like this. Snape was in agony, and he had no clue or skill to alleviate it. His own experience had led him to believe that it had to run its course, as a fever would burn through.

"Who?" he managed to croak out.

Snape shifted against him, almost falling into his arms. "No... one," came the mournful response. "Sleep."

Neville could cope with that. Sleep was good... it was simple. He stood, his thighs burning with the effort of lifting Snape with him. It wasn't as hard as he'd imagined: Snape was almost skin and bone. Together, they lurched and tumbled towards the door Neville had noted earlier. Neville caught the knob, twisted it and then kicked the door open. To his relief the bed was there... a few steps, and he could drop Snape into the soothing, linen arms of a good night's sleep.

He recalled how he'd woken months ago in a strange bed, the covers tucked up snug and thoughtfully around him. Wincing, he fumbled for his wand and used it to magic the covers down. Snape was in and out of wakefulness, his expression drifting between panic and pain and exhausted emptiness. Neville carefully lowered him onto the bed; he pulled off Snape's boots which he noticed were caked in soft mud and pulled the pale sheets and dark green blanket up around his shoulders.

His arms felt empty, and he crossed them over his chest. The whole evening had left him cold and fatigued... and confused. Feeling awkward and protective, he stood over the slumbering man as he mumbled and tossed, waiting for sleep to claim him. After what felt like an hour, Snape's breathing evened out and Neville felt at ease enough to leave his bedside.

The door swung shut softly behind him, and he padded over to the box of potions that Snape had been so eager to open. He couldn't determine anything from the glimmering phials, but his nose caught the soft scents of the potion Snape had gulped down so worryingly eagerly. For clarity, he picked up the empty phial and sniffed cautiously. His brow furrowed as he picked up the smells of a strong and all-too-familiar sleeping draught: Dreamless Sleep. Snape had craved mental oblivion... but why not an analgesic? The thought chilled Neville more completely than the forest and the wind had even hinted at. What tormented Snape's mind to the point that it physically pained him and made him desperate to attain ... nothingness?

Author's notes: many thanks to my patient and talented beta.

Drowsing and Dilemmas

Chapter 12 of 22

Snape wakes and ponders his rescuer... hopefully before Minerva has the chance.

Snape woke, wrapped in sheets and smothered in an undefined dread. Observations prodded mercilessly at him, indicating a strange and as of yet forgotten event. The clues hinted at something truly distressing: still in his clothes; echoes of pain licking at his muscles and chest; the bedroom door still open when he religiously shut it every night; his shoes up against the skirting board instead of under the bed; the lingering taste of Dreamless Sleep on his tongue; and the faint, muddy footprints on his rug.

Sensibly, he knew he wouldn't have invited just anybody into these rooms...a spare room that he used from time to time...so whoever it was must be an ally of sorts. It wasn't Minerva...the footprints were too big. It wasn't Flitwick or Hagrid, for similar reasons, and it wasn't a student...he'd have suffered death before needing help from a pupil. It couldn't have been just any member of staff, either, because they would have called for Pomfrey, and he'd have woken in the Hospital Wing with the matron fussing over him. So who...?

Oh no!

He flung back the sheets and rose unsteadily to his feet. An unsettling thought was skittering up his spine: was Neville still here? He hoped the boy had had the good sense to leave, but knowing his luck, Neville would be lurking around. Another thought lumbered into view like an iceberg from the fog: Minerva was due here at eight. Glancing across at the wall clock, he saw the minute hand vibrate, slicing off another minute of his time. He had fifteen minutes: that would be enough time to evict someone from his rooms before a perspicacious woman and her open mind started jumping to conclusions, wouldn't it?

Casting charms as he went, he refreshed himself and the room before stalking into the parlour. His current relationship with luck had held: Neville was still there. He'd been relatively calm until spying Neville. While he watched his slumbering rescuer, black memories bubbled up through his tarry memories of last night. He knew he'd left to search the dungeons and lower levels for the Gryffindor, and he could recall the crisp air attacking his lungs when he'd trudged down to the lake. His heart gave a flutter at the recollection of the flash of silver in the water: he'd been so sure it was pale hair caught in a murderous current.

If he concentrated, he could feel the echo of each pain-filled step back to the main entrance and up the stairs. But his mind was shadowy about where and how he'd met Neville. The only logical conclusion was that he'd been lucid enough to guide the young man to the potion cupboard and then into the spare room: no one could break the wards...no one but Minerva, that is. If so, then had he managed to get into bed by himself, or had Neville tucked him in? He groaned: the muddy footprints by his bed. The fact that he'd been discovered was bad enough; the rest was just bitter icing. The only saving grace was the thought of Neville's expression when he woke up.

His eyes drifted to the low table and the potions kit laying open, displaying its secrets. Letting out another low moan...Neville must have seen it...he swallowed past his sudden nausea and closed his eyes. It was only a moment of respite; it was always there... on the edge, waiting for weakness, for pain. The Dreamless Sleep had only sedated it. The need for that honey-coloured potion was his constant companion.

Scowling, he straightened and Banished the kit back to its hiding place. He wished he could smash it against the wall, but he'd need the potion soon enough; he could only use sleep as an escape for so long. Even now, his body ached and his throat burnt. The familiar pain was creeping along his nerves from his left forearm, the anxiety seeping through his veins. The need for the potion was stretching. Soon, he'd have to succumb and satisfy its lust.

He'd been foolish to push so hard last night; first the argument with Neville over dinner had caused a rebellious urge to flare, which crushing had cost him dearly...now was

not the time. And it was inexcusable to ignore the call to search for a missing student. He should have taken something before leaving the castle. A bitter laugh rumbled; how ironic that the products of his skill and profession were something he now avoided. He earthed his frustration by kicking Neville's shin, smirking at the sleepy, mumbled request for more time... a mantra shared by many after a busy evening. Eventually, Neville's face reflected that all the pieces had come together into a rather unpleasant picture.

Something had nudged his shin. Grumbling, he pushed at it and then turned over. It bothered him for a moment that the bed seemed smaller, firmer... and upright, but he shoved it aside. This was glorious.

"Five more minutes..." he mumbled, reaching for covers he knew should be there.

Grumbling again, he fumbled for the missing blanket, his frustration increasing as sleep slipped further away. He didn't want to wake. The blanket had obviously deserted him, and his bed was being awkward, but he hadn't slept this well in years, and he was loathe to let the waking world reclaim him just yet.

Sleep's delicious lethargy was creeping through his muscles again, usurping the real world's claim. Gravity no longer applied... thoughts and dreads no longer held dominion... the shocks that skin was heir to were earthed and nullified.

One aspect of the real world was less reluctant to have him escape so easily.

"Longbottom, get out... of my chair."

It wasn't loud, but the threat of something... unpleasant slithered around every syllable.

His eyes popped open, but his mind was still in the land of nod, trying to delay the inevitable. Slowly, he unfurled from his foetal snuggling and turned his head to the source of that spine-tingling voice. His eyes focused on the pale face looming over him. If he could think of a spell, he'd use it to sink through the chair back. As it was, he couldn't get his thoughts to coalesce into anything, so he merely gulped and tried to look innocuous while straining to dig his way through the chair with his shoulder blades.

"I'm in your chair?"

It was gratifying to see confusion and unease compete for control of Neville's face. Discomfort obviously liked company. The temptation to be cruel flicked a fin, but he batted it aside; the knowledge that he *could* have been swirled pleasantly in his belly. In fact, the more time he spent in Neville's company, the more like his old self he felt. The sense of power was undeniable and a soothing balm against a world that rendered him powerless and sought to break him. It would seem perverse, then, for him to feel a sudden and almost debilitating vulnerability: Neville gave him something he could lose.

"Yes, you are," he responded smoothly. "If you would... be so kind... as to sit here?"

He gracefully swept his hand towards the vacant chair opposite, and Neville nodded, sidling around the table to collapse in the cold leather. It was one of those moments where you relied solely upon the outside to provide clues on what to do: those moments where the brain was wrapped in either fluffy confusion or crippling fear. Although, some part of Neville was conscious enough to repeatedly kick him. He shouldn't have fallen asleep.

Snape slipped languidly into his chair. It was a skill he'd practised and perfected: the ability to look graceful and composed when close to panic or complete collapse. Snape used the scene to gather his thoughts and keep Neville on the back foot; he wouldn't tolerate being weak in his own territory. The tactic worked, and Neville practically squirmed in the chair. Obviously, he hadn't been in many social settings since graduating or...much to Snape's surprise...woken up in another's room enough times to develop an etiquette for hasty departures. Snape's mirth withered slightly; it reminded him of how similar they actually were. Of course, Snape had many years of being a bastard under his belt, and he would have just glared and stalked out.

"Erm... I apologise for..."

"No need," Snape interrupted firmly. "I can guess... what happened last night. I owe you thanks."

"I... you... well..." he floundered, trying to pluck the right words from the air to explain his involvement in 'last night'. He gave up. "You're welcome."

Snape smiled tightly. "Sometimes, the simplest response is the most appropriate."

"Look... I didn't mean to fall asleep," he added sheepishly, worried that Snape's temper was bubbling away beneath his pale and indifferent exterior.

"It seems to be... a developing habit."

Neville flushed and swallowed hard. "Hardly a habit!" he protested weakly.

Snape glanced away; he knew the only reason Neville fell asleep under such circumstances was down to him, either through choice or fate. He hoped Neville wouldn't come to the same realisation. What perplexed him the most was that he didn't really seem to mind; there was some comfort in the concept of waking up with someone, of having someone watching over him... not being alone. It suggested an intimacy of sorts. But it was ridiculous! Neville had secured his potions' knowledge, and he was using Neville as a means to cast off the pressure that had been crushing down. There was nothing else, no blossoming friendship, no connection: it was business.

"The fact is that... you did," Snape said softly, inhaling mid-way and grimacing. He usually didn't have to talk this much first thing in a morning, and it was a strain. A mischievous flicker made him cough in surprise: he usually didn't have someone in his room this early to talk to. "Go... into the bathroom and... freshen up."

"What?"

"Bathroom... freshen up. We may as well... have the mentor meeting now, considering that you're...here." Snape suddenly smirked. "Besides, Minerva... will be here in five minutes."

Neville's eyes darted from Snape to the door, then to the chair and finally down to his dishevelled clothes. He swallowed; he could picture her so clearly: the straightening of the spine, the pursed lips, the slight tilt of the head, and then her left eyebrow, arching. He'd never be able to look in her in the eye again.

Snape watched realisation dawn across his face, bringing a pink blush and blasting away the mental fog. The unspoken question was smeared across his pained face. Snape grinned, answering silently by pointing towards the bedroom door. Neville gave a grateful nod and sped from the chair as though the Grim were on his tail.

When Neville returned, his skin practically tingling from the cleansing charms, he saw Minerva and Snape seated by the fire. Minerva smiled and bade him a good morning, which he returned. Snape didn't raise his head, instead waving him towards the dining table and the pile of papers that had been arranged there. He snorted under his breath; how suave was Snape to trick Minerva? Playing along, he sat and pulled the file towards him to study the notes within. His eyes followed the lines while his ears strained to catch what they were discussing.

Minerva watched Neville take his place and leisurely peruse the pile of papers. For some reason, she felt a flicker of jealousy. Her once-a-month cup of tea with Severus had become a sought after highlight; the idea of sharing the Saturday morning was irritating. Snape had been apologetic, citing timing as the culprit, but she knew the man well enough to know that despite his regret at the interrupted meeting, he was secretly pleased about something.

Neville was still an unknown factor, so she wasn't completely at ease. His lingering presence around the hidden Pensieve had left its mark. Consequently, her gaze had frequently settled on Neville, and in so doing, she'd caught glimpses of his impact on Severus. It had lightened her heart to see Severus so... amused and self-assured. Severus drew strength from the young man.

Still, as strange as it seemed, there was some... sense in the idea. They'd both suffered and withdrawn from the world. They both battled something which existed within...Pomona had often shared her concerns and grief with her about Neville. Life had cut them in similar ways. Suddenly, she had the overwhelming urge to share a coffee with Pomona. No one knew Neville as well as she did. Besides, it had been far too long since her last coffee morning in the greenhouses.

"I shan't take up your time, Severus," she said smartly, putting her empty cup on the table. "I remember the strains of mentoring all too well."

Snape let out a dry laugh. "Only because I was your mentee," he replied smoothly.

"Is that what you were?" Minerva countered with a potent smirk. "As I recall, many of the staff referred to you as something else."

"But... they didn't really... know me."

The exchange soothed Minerva's ruffled feathers. His freedom of expression implied that Neville was no issue between them. If Neville had been, he wouldn't have teased her or allowed himself to be teased. She glanced across at the young man, sitting so stiffly at the table, and various possibilities buffeted her mind. She knew both of them were sharing some secret, and her thoughts drifted back to her chat with Severus in the staffroom about his plotting. Was this to do with the Ministry? Were they conspiring to thwart the Ministry's plans for Severus? The hope exploded in her chest, rushing down her limbs and lifting her spirits.

The two men stood when she did, and she caught the glance Neville flung Snape's way. Her lips twitched. She'd keep their secret, as Severus hadn't been this animated with life in a long time; the mischief was doing him good, and she knew both of them would be discreet...whatever they were up to. However, she had her own sense of humour and pride, and as Severus opened the door for her, she turned and flashed Neville a sly smile. Also, it wouldn't go amiss to remind them to be careful.

"Don't forget to clean your shoes too, Mr Longbottom. Argus won't be keen on mopping up Forbidden Forest mud."

The door clicked closed on his startled face, and Minerva hummed a merry tune back to her rooms. It was all well and good being generous, but you had to get something back for it at some point.

Author's Notes: Thanks to my wonderful beta, who I couldn't do without.

Musings and Missions

Chapter 13 of 22

Just when Neville gets used to the idea of patience, Severus finds that he can't wait any longer.

"Do you think he knows?"

Pomona looked up from the cake stand and over to the window, her brow furrowing delicately. Her thoughts skittered over the blunt questions, seeking purchase in their recent chats and aims. "About the fountain?" she asked, seeing the sudden tension in Minerva's shoulders and her jaw muscles flex. She'd often seen her young friend by the fountain, tending the beds. She knew it wouldn't be long before he began to put the pieces together. When she'd arranged the beds, she'd never anticipated a natural herbologist like Neville coming to the school. She shrugged and plucked a lemon finger from the stand; he'd see the power in the arrangement, but it was a big leap from that to knowing what the purpose was. "I wouldn't put it past him to have seen some pattern in the planting, but I can't see him knowing about the Pensieve, dear."

"I wish I could be sure..." Minerva drifted off as the ramifications of her distrust unfurled in her mind like black clouds.

Pomona bristled slightly. "Neville is a good friend of this school," she uttered unwaveringly. "Even if he were to find out, I know he'll feel as we do. He has his feet firmly planted."

Minerva sighed and moved away from the pane and back to her seat. For some reason, Pomona's words weren't as reassuring as she'd hoped. Too much rested upon Neville: Severus' secret... and now, it seemed, his happiness. Neville's parting expression had warmed her heart, but by the time she'd reached Pomona's rooms, she was less than certain and her amusement had petered out. Oh, she knew there was a risk in letting someone get close...she'd learnt that often enough...but she couldn't bear the thought of the level of pain that Neville could inflict with one careless word. The weight of it pressed down, and she sank back into the plush cushions. Usually, Pomona's fondness for pillows was an annoyance, but today, she leant into them, seeking some comfort and warmth from their soft, velvet embrace.

Potting plants and tending to seedlings taught you two things: patience, and the assurance that with care and diligence things turned out alright at the end. Armed with this, Pomona poured another two cups of tea and waited for Minerva to tell her the real reason for the early coffee-morning. It took less time than getting a flower from a seed.

"They seem to be getting on well," Minerva snapped out, almost as if getting it out sharp and quick would ease the sting. The words were there, hanging, and she hoped the answer to her unspoken question would fill the growing void between asking and getting. She jerked forward and gathered up her cup and a sandwich. It would excuse her silence.

The words stilled Pomona. This was where Herbology didn't offer much in the way of life skills. Plants didn't do subterfuge or drop hints; they didn't hide motives behind observations. They didn't watch you like a hawk, waiting on you to offer something that you didn't know you had. She swallowed and licked her lips. They also didn't give you the impression that you had to be careful about what you said next.

"They have a fair bit in common," Pomona said carefully, settling back to watch her friend; she couldn't fail to see the frustration flicker across her pinched features. Herbology did teach you to be sparing when it was in the best interests of the plant: some wilted when fed or watered too much. It would do Minerva good to rummage through her own feelings... doing her own weeding.

Minerva's lips writhed over each other as she chewed over her next words. They must have been bitter because she winced when she swallowed them. She had to wash them down with a sip of tea.

"Yes," she finally agreed, with an impatient wave and a hint of irritability. She knew this. Hadn't she already pondered their similarities? What had happened between Severus' spare rooms and Pomona's parlour? Muscles bunched and twitched beneath her skin, her breath was shallow, and she could feel a cool patina of sweat on her palms. What had her so riled and anxious?

Pomona was no help. She sat there with a calm air, sipping tea and casting discreet hungry glances at the iced buns, offering nothing to help resolve the mystery that was Neville. The frustration swirled in her belly, making her nauseous and pummelling her to move, to do something other than sit and drink. It was quite ridiculous.

For her part, Pomona was waiting. Observation was a prized Herbology skill. Plants couldn't explain their ailments, so the mark of a good herbologist was the ability to see

what was wrong before it damaged or killed the plant. She could see what had upset her friend. It was quite obvious... especially since she empathised with it.

"I imagine that Severus and Neville are spending quite a bit of time catching up on things."

Minerva glanced across sharply, her eyes narrowing as her lips thinned. Pomona couldn't help it. She could feel it building up under her diaphragm. The first chuckle rumbled out, quite unsure of itself, but the next burst forth without shame. Her vision blurred as tears of merriment dripped down her ruddy face; through whoops and hasty gulps of air, Pomona tried her best to apologise, but the stern, rather non-plussed, face just kept tickling her fancy.

After a few coughs and hiccups, Pomona relaxed back with a sigh, wiping tears from her cheeks and gracing Minerva with a sympathetic expression. "Oh, Minerva," she uttered gently. "Can't you see what's the matter with Neville?"

The Scottish witch bristled and lifted her cup and saucer defensively. "That's why I came here, Pomona," she replied stiffly.

"You're jealous."

Minerva scowled, but shrank back, as though the words had struck her. "Don't be silly!"

"Oh come off it!" Pomona snapped good-naturedly. "You've had Severus pretty much to yourself for the last ten years, woman!"

"Pomona Sprout, I have never heard such nonsense! I am not some love-sick fifth-year, pining away for some... some.... Such a thing is just preposterous. I'm old enough to be his gr...mother!"

Pomona had to bite her cheek not to laugh. "I'm not saying you are, dear," she soothed. "I felt rather put out myself. For some silly reason, I'd thought that Neville and I would hit it off, but I found myself being avoided, and all for a fountain and Severus." She sniffed and smoothed down her skirts, avoiding the almost pitying look flash across Minerva's face. "I was foolish enough to let it get to me."

The fire popped and crackled amiably, filling the silence and ousting the heavy atmosphere. They sat for a few moments, contemplating what they'd snapped out at each other.

"I had these grand ideas of sharing some research and my dreams with Neville," Pomona continued sanguinely. "I remembered a brave boy who lit up when in my classes and forgot that he'd grown into a man." She sank back into the cushions and let out a wry laugh. "I had wrapped myself up in the all possibilities and my imaginings of what it would be like that I just couldn't see what it actually was like. I'd sit in the greenhouse and wait, thinking that he'd just tootle in like he did when he was here as a student." She closed her eyes and sighed. "When I realised that he wouldn't, it... well, it hurt a little bit. But it was my fault... I assumed, and it made an ass of me."

The realisation had lost its potency, but Pomona could still feel a small, hollow place behind her ribs. The iced bun with its glistening cherry filled it quite nicely. While she chewed, she saw Minerva ponder. The only reason she knew that the woman was pondering deeply was the frown and the flaring nostrils. It was something teachers learnt quite early on: when posed with something difficult, look as though everything is under control and nothing can flummox or slow you down. No one did impervious supremacy like Minerva. But if you knew her, you could see the small chinks.

After a few moments of intense thinking, Minerva sighed softly, her features relaxing, and took a deep, fortifying sip of tea.

"You're perfectly right," she admitted gently, tucking a stray strand of grey hair behind her ear. "I am very fond of Severus, and I may..." her lips trembled and she glanced upwards, as if begging gravity to help keep her tears from falling, "... be seeing troubles where none exist." Her head dropped and she fixed Pomona with a piercing glare. "But Neville had best be careful," she said softly, but with the underlying hint of bad things should her advice be ignored.

Pomona snorted and arched an eyebrow. "I can say the same for Severus; it's not as if you'd be ecstatic should your child bring *him* home asking for your blessing."

"Oh merlin!" Minerva breathed, pressing a hand to her chest in alarm. "I can just picture Augusta's face...may-she-rest-in-peace."

They both sat for a moment, each playing out the scenario of Augusta meeting her grandson's intended. Minerva snorted first, and then the room filled with impish, healing laughter.

oOo

Neville sat in his rooms, his fingers drumming a steady beat on the desk. His eyes were aimed at the notes from the morning's mentor meeting, but his gaze was fixed on a memory by a gentle river along the Aberglaslyn Pass. It had been almost three months since he'd interrupted a gang of Aurors tormenting Snape. He'd never talked about that day, just as he was grateful that Snape had never talked about it either. He could still recall the expressions crossing his former Headmaster's face as he talked the Aurors down with the threat of Pergatin poisoning. It caused his lips to twitch. But he could also recall the weight of Snape's body crushing him against the rock in anger...or possibly fear...and his breath, hot and moist, on his skin as he held him at wand-point. Neville swallowed.

He could have passed it off as the heat of the moment, and his recent fascination with Snape as merely being due to the difference in the man, but Minerva's parting words and expression had pulled his deepest musings into something solid and defined... and into the public domain. He groaned and closed his eyes. Snape had found the whole thing amusing, that strange belly-laugh of his filling the room. Neville had been forced to smile and agree with him that their plotting had not gone unnoticed, but the idea that Minerva had meant something entirely different gloated at the back of his mind.

With a burst of pique he opened the desk drawer and brushed the papers off and into the gaping drawer. Still in the grip of confused irritability, he slammed the drawer shut. The bang was gratifying, but some small, tinkling sound punctuated the noise. His breath caught and his heart leapt behind his ribs. The needle phial! Carefully, he slid the drawer open and used his fingertips to slide the papers aside. Biting his lip, he silently prayed that the phial was intact. Light glinted off something and he gratefully wrapped his fingers around the thin and unbroken phial. He remembered the charms he'd seen on it and snorted at his sensitivity. The phial was well protected: a roll couldn't crush it.

Teaching and worrying had pushed all thought of the strange thing out of his head. He twirled it between thumb and forefinger, his mind dwelling upon the questions that had plagued him when he'd first seen it in the soil. Whose was it? What did it contain? Who to hand it in to? As he watched the pearlescent liquid swirl languidly inside, another question elbowed its way up through the throng: why hadn't anyone mentioned it missing?

What he held was an expensive and exquisitely protected phial. He knew it couldn't have been in there for long...he'd weeded almost religiously right up to the start of term, and he'd busied himself in the sage and feverfew, seeking a balm for his stress headaches since then. It was highly unlikely that it belonged to a student, which limited it to the staff, but aside from Pomona, he couldn't recall any other teacher paying the fountain much attention or having any reason to rummage in the soil. A small frown marred his forehead. It was precious to someone, and yet no one had even hinted at its loss. Either they weren't aware it was lost, or they didn't want anyone else to know that it existed. It still begged the question of whom to return it to... or maybe, who to talk to about it?

His musings were interrupted by the soft chime for lunch. Thoughtfully, he tapped his fingernail against the glass. He knew he should hand it in... to Minerva at the very least, but for some reason, the thing intrigued him, and deep down, he felt a protective instinct flare. This required protection, and just handing it in didn't qualify. The tempting idea to miss lunch flittered in his head, but he knew he had no reasonable excuse to be reclusive. He straightened and placed the needle phial in the drawer and gently closed it; he could play detective for a while. After all, it wasn't as if Snape was eager to start; this would be a welcome distraction to his almost unbearable impatience.

oOo

It was in these quiet, bridging, moments...the lull between events, things, thoughts...that he struggled, flailed. The path suddenly stopped before him, leaving him bereft and directionless in swirling, choking smog. His hands clawed at the emptiness, seeking something solid to keep him grounded and guide him. He felt himself weaken as he

seeped... dissolved into the greedy nothingness with nothing but eternity to restrict his dilution. It was the ultimate in loss.

A long time ago, his mother had played vinyl records when Father was away, and over time, they had lost their eloquence, tiny scratches causing the needle to skip so that discordant hisses and crackles punctuated the beautiful music. It had infuriated her. He'd silently laughed at her frustration, not understanding that it had been a fraction of bliss she afforded herself in an otherwise miserable life; to have it ruined was a stab in her already weakened sense of self and joy. For those mere seconds of discord, she was lost, the world turning on her and taking all that she had left. What he had seen as a petty nuisance, she had suffered as one more moment stolen from her, one moment closer to obliteration.

Snape closed his eyes and staggered, his breath coming in rapid and strained wheezes. Bile crawled up his throat, and sweat beaded on his forehead and chilled the skin down his spine. Fingers reached out for some support, and he collapsed against the side of the fireplace, clutching it as a falling man would cling to a ledge. One day, the needle had skipped and never restored itself, and his mother had died in all but body, never finding the next moment to continue in. The record-player had been sold by his father, and the woman had become lost between the last clear strains of a long-forgotten melody and her eventual death. A shell was all that remained: empty, hopeless... and pitiful.

With the door closing on Neville's back and the rising emptiness, he felt something akin to what he had witnessed in her eyes: lost. It was disorientating and destructive. An overwhelming sense of confusion and despair flooded him: *who am I? What am I doing?* It stole his sense of self. And it was happening with increasing and alarming frequency. Soon, he'd be a shell... empty and dead.

Fingernails bit into the mantelpiece as he tried to gather himself together, pulling on the vaporous tendrils of his thoughts, memories and dreams, weaving them back into Severus Snape. Every time he was forced to do this, he lost strands, and the cloth of his life and self was become increasingly fragile and transparent. He knew it was the Ministry and that damned Pensieve, but he couldn't draw up a single memory to suggest they were doing anything other than sifting through his most hated and disgusting memories and seeking a cure for the curse that Voldemort had left his surviving followers. It was all primal instinct. They were teasing his life from him just as those hiss-skips had leached his mother. A bitter laugh erupted from his scarred throat. If it wasn't the Ministry, then it'd be the leering and ever-patient Dark Mark.

Slowly, his careening thoughts coalesced into something solid and controlled. Straightening, he pushed all weakness down, hiding it under his wrath for all the ills and wrongs he'd suffered and using his bond with Minerva to keep his anger under control. It was madness. But sometimes, sanity just can't take the strain.

He didn't know how long he'd stood by the fireplace, weaving himself together, but the chime for lunch informed him that it was half past twelve. It was odd that this disintegration of self didn't affect his responsibilities or abilities as a teacher or deputy headmaster. His potions knowledge was as keen as ever; his manner with pupils and peers wasn't impaired or made him feel at risk. His duties wrapped around him like a soothing blanket.

An image of his mother cooking breakfast burst into his mind. She was humming tunelessly while frying bacon. All the tasks and duties ascribed to wife and mother were performed, but the woman was... just not there. Was that happening to him? Was he slowly disappearing? As if trying to escape his questions and dread, he lunged away from the hearth and stomped around the parlour. He wouldn't allow himself to become lost and empty. A mirthless grin stretched his lips. The music had stopped for his mum, but someone kept jogging the needle along for him. The irony of it made him chuckle; they had left him with the very skills that he'd use to defeat them. Neville's request was now something so much more than just a means to annoy and frustrate the Ministry; after all, weren't Neville's parents lost somewhere in their own minds?

The thought gave him energy, and he quickly tackled the small buttons on his collar. Their minds and identity had... escaped? Perhaps submerged? There was a kernel of something useful to himself in Neville's research. He must have seen it that first night but not connected it until he'd realised that his current plight mimicked his mother's collapse. It was thrilling and energising.

His fingers suddenly fumbled with the last button, and his breath snatched. He knew the cruelties of hope. It would be foolish to accept that this was the route to his salvation; better to just admit the possibility and live with that... for now.

Author's Notes: Thank you for your patience. I have a slight issue with my hands which is making typing rather hard work. In short, the updates are going to be slow-going. I can only apologise and hope that you can bear with me. Thank you for reading... it means a lot.

Banes and Beginnings

Chapter 14 of 22

The loss of something precious brings a little hope to those helping Severus. For himself, Snape finally decides what must be done and accepts the challenge.

Time. He was losing time. Days seemed to blur into one confused mess of activities, duties, monitoring wards and all other matters pertaining to an Auror's responsibilities. Only at home did time seem to follow some expected semblance of passing as it should. And his head ached intolerably. For weeks now, he'd been taking various potions and concoctions...even the Muggle thing called aspirin...but nothing seemed to oust the constant heavy pressure behind his eyes.

Perhaps having himself seen by a Healer would help shed some light on his predicament, but professional pride stopped him; after all, what sort of a medically-trained Auror was he if a simple headache was causing him grief?! But the pain was getting worse, and he knew it was affecting in him other ways... this sense of dislocation for one.

Just after his transfer to Auror Cross' department...Retrospective Investigation Department (RID)...he'd started to experience discreet episodes of disconnection. He'd find himself in a corridor and unsure as to how he got there, or in a room and not immediately clear on what was going on. His signature would be scrawled on documents without him having a clue as to what he'd signed. So far, these concerns had not developed into indiscretions or worse, but he felt a dread festering in his skull that soon, he'd make a very serious mistake.

It was at night that this suppurating fear did its greatest damage. Nightmares stalked his sleep, and he'd wake, screaming nonsensical pleas into the darkness. His sheets would be drenched and he'd struggle to the bathroom to purge himself. These nightly terrors had the same devastating theme: his disgust and angst as he participated in the torture of some poor, hapless, mindless creature and then terror as the torturers turned on him! He'd feel his mind pulled out, stretched into a Pensieve, where he'd witness his memories, his very sense of self, evaporating into terrifying nothingness.

And so it was that at three in the morning, he sat nursing a headache and a mug of warm milk, numb to his own mind and the chill of the room as the dregs of his most recent nightmare battled expulsion. In this stillness, where exhaustion was softening the terror, he could see the stark expression on the victim's face: white skin, wide black eyes and an open maw emitting a long, thin rattle of a scream through a curse-ravaged throat. He knew the face... recognised the stridor cry: Severus Snape.

Peters sighed shakily and downed the last few sips of his milk. This was beyond him. Whilst some portion of his fracturing mind knew it was all stress and dark fantasy, another part was adamant these disjointed and terrifying images were actual memories striving to be pulled back into consciousness. Even as he scoffed at his folly, he

was inwardly planning how to redeem and free himself. The training he'd received pursuant to being selected for his new Ministerial role had given him certain tools, and he now planned to use them to determine just what was going on.

The sharp peal of the alarm dragged him back from his musings, and he began the typical and reassuring ritual of preparing for work. From his pre-dawn planning, he knew what he needed to do to start examining his plight in a more critical manner.

oOo

She paced the space between chair and desk, her eyes directed at the pattern in the rug but her attention fixed firmly on her movements over the last month. Behind the desk, Minerva sat straight-backed, restraining both her temper and alarm.

"I've tried... tried and tried to recall everything," she muttered frantically. "I've even done a Pensieve, but I...I just don't know where I had it last."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, sit down!" snapped out Minerva, her nerves wearing as thin as the rug under Pomona's feet. "I've discretely spoken to Argus, and he hasn't found or confiscated such a phial from the students, and as it hasn't returned to you via Summoning, then it must be simply stuck somewhere." She drummed her fingernails on the desk and scowled. "And we can't simply rummage around or openly admit to its loss."

Pomona let out a snuffle and whipped out a hanky, uttering thickly, "I am so sorry."

Minerva waved her hand sharply in an attempt to oust her frustration and bat away an unnecessary apology. "Filius is on the stairs; he'll have some answers," she added just before a sharp rap on the door echoed in the office.

The door swung open, and the small wizard hurtled in, his cheeks flushed and his hair slightly askew. "I came as soon as I could," he declared breathlessly.

Minerva nodded and Transfigured a chair for the Charms master. "Thank you, Filius. Please, sit down. Coffee?"

"No, thank you, Minerva," he answered haltingly, seeing the tension on his companions' faces. "Good gracious! What's happened?"

"I've lost the needle phial!" Pomona blurted.

Filius blinked and adjusted his pince-nez. "Have you tried Summoning?"

"Yes."

"Has it been handed in?"

"No."

"Most unusual," he mumbled. "Most unusual, indeed."

"Unusual, perhaps," Minerva interrupted sharply, "but it is most inconvenient! Can you recover it without alerting suspicion?"

"Under normal circumstances, it would be here by now. As Summoning can generally circumvent most difficulties, unless you managed to plant it under the Whomping Willow, then it should have responded to your summons."

Minerva blinked and inhaled slowly, forcing down her rising ire. "But it didn't."

"Yes," agreed Filius. "Which is quite reassuring... in a way," he added, seeing Minerva's eyes narrow. "I placed a variety of charms on the phial in case it should become lost. If a student or visitor found it, it would... erm... encourage the finder to hand it in whilst appearing to be something quite insignificant. And if it were found by someone who recognised its importance, then we wouldn't need this meeting at all, so... uhhh... a third scenario must have been triggered."

"Which is?" demanded Pomona and Minerva.

"Well, I did consider it being found by someone who was unable to return it for some reason. In that case, it would encourage protective instincts until we could locate it."

"And?" the two witches hissed, their fingernails biting into the furniture.

"Well... then we'd use a Locator Charm." He glanced between them and blushed. "Didn't I mention you could do that?"

He coughed in the heat of their glares and pulled out his wand. "I'll just have a go, shall I?"

"Please do," answered Minerva with brittle generosity.

Filius flourished his wand, and from the softly glowing tip, a tiny, flickering, lilac bubble emerged. It was about the size of a Snitch and seemed to contain a swirling mist as it bobbed serenely near his head. He moved to whisper to it after which it gave a tiny shudder and seemingly blinked out of existence.

"It'll do a search and return momentarily."

Minerva arched an eyebrow. "An interestingly specific charm, Filius," she said with undisguised admiration. "You must teach it to me someday."

He smiled at the compliment and bowed his head appreciatively. "Before I designed it, I spent far too much time looking for my glasses."

While waiting for the little magical ball to sniff out the phial, they idly chatted and drank tea to help disperse the building tension. Pomona was silently berating herself for losing it in the first place, Minerva was inwardly fretting about the security of the project, and Filius was reflecting thoughtfully upon the charms he'd applied and why they had seemingly failed.

After twenty minutes, the pale purple ball flashed back into being, and while the witches leant forward expectantly, Filius sat back with a disappointed cry.

"It hasn't found it," he uttered dejectedly.

Minerva groaned and collapsed back in the chair, cupping her forehead and feeling waves of despair stirring up a dark sense of futility.

"Then where is it?" Pomona asked fretfully.

"Interesting question," he responded thoughtfully. "All charms should have worked for its return to us, and I can't see any reason for it not to be."

"Is it going to appear any time soon?" Minerva asked crisply.

The small wizard seemed to shrink even further under Minerva's glare, and she was struck at how unsure and frail he suddenly looked. A chill stole across her skin, tightening her spine and making her scalp tingle. Filius was not prone to bouts of uncertainty, and she was sure the apparent failure of his charms had churned his mind and guts into a barely concealed panicked frenzy.

"I may have caused this to happen," he admitted quietly. "But... if I'm correct, then the phial is safe."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Pomona tentatively.

Here, the Charms professor frowned and paused to clean his glasses. "Charms are quite clever little things, especially those that respond to or affect people...Confundus Charms, for example. The more complex the magical arrangement or the more layers, then the greater the likelihood of... ermm... competing objectives." He paused again and seemed to ponder something which left him looking perplexed. "I applied a fair few spells to that phial...given its importance...and I may," he halted and a flicker of pain crossed his face, "have enhanced certain elements through my own concerns and anxiety."

Emotion gripped his throat, and the words dried up. He stopped talking and inhaled shakily, looking up at the arched ceiling to which he seemed to whisper. After a few moments, he lowered his head and stared at his knees.

"I... feel that I owe so much to Severus. He protected me when he... when he Stupefied me that day. For years I'd despised him...thought him a traitor and a murderer...yet he did so much deserving of respect, admiration and love. I cannot begin to think of a way to repay him." He found it difficult to continue, but when he glanced up, he saw tears in the women's eyes and knew they understood, and that shared understanding bolstered him. "I knew that particular phial was the most precious we'd been able to gather, so I put everything into those Charms. I believe I may have inadvertently directed the phial to find its own sanctuary."

Minerva frowned and eased forward, hugging herself to contain the panic coursing through her. "What exactly do you mean, Filius, because it sounds a bit like...." she drifted off, her heart clenching and her throat tightening at the implications.

"I wanted to protect the phial... wanted to preserve its quality and grace at all costs."

"But it ended as more than that," whispered Minerva, her voice breaking.

A sob burst past Filius' lips, and tears fell down his cheeks, reflecting the amber glow from the setting sun. He hesitated and squirmed in the seat, his lips twitching as they struggled to form the words he had to relay. He'd never discussed much of what pained him pertaining to that terrible time before, during and after the Battle of Hogwarts, and over the years, he'd allowed certain memories to drift away from his waking moments, but some things could never be forgotten, forgiven or fulfilled. And one of those unfulfilled things was his ability to convey his true feelings and thoughts to Severus, to remove the intangible wall between them. Sometimes, he wondered if it would have been more honest of him to still believe in the Slytherin's guilt...he'd never had any difficulty in expressing his fury and sentiments then!

Minerva had told him of her fears regarding Severus' trips to the Ministry just over five months ago: of their dubious activities. Whilst nothing could be proven, they knew they were losing Severus. With each Ministry visit and subsequent partial recovery, Filius had felt his heart fracturing. His every spare waking moment had been diverted to his task of securing Snape's memories and protecting the unique Pensieve, but as Snape had become more haggard and gaunt, more pained and haunted, Filius' subconscious had demanded a better outcome than a mere existence. The loss of the needle phial and its reluctance to be found crystallised his vague thoughts into a solid conclusion. With the witches waiting on his explanation, he felt raw and vulnerable... and a little proud of himself.

"I wanted it to be cherished just as I cherished it...perhaps more so. There is a power you derive when blessed by love. A strength and beauty which otherwise remains cold in shadows without love shining upon it; you can see it in the eyes or hear it in the voice of people in its embrace, and you can bask and feel content even in this glow from others."

Filius was openly weeping now, his voice a mere whisper as it battled against the emotion stealing his strength and almost paralysing his throat. Pomona slipped from her chair to fall on her knees by his side, and she wrapped her arms around his quaking shoulders.

"At its most glorious and terrifying," he continued in a strained whisper, "it can nullify the most powerful of dark curses. It makes you invincible and whole. It heals."

As his words fell upon her ears, Minerva's hand cupped her mouth to hold back the torrent of moans that threatened to breach what control she had left. They both knew what Filius was suggesting, what unconscious goal he had applied to the needle phial. Indeed, the phial may have intentionally 'lost' itself with a pure purpose.

"When I cast those charms... after I'd seen him return from his Ministry appointment," he muttered, disgust thick in his voice, "I knew... knew here," he declared hotly, thumping his chest, "that just preserving Severus would never and could never be enough, but I didn't know... couldn't begin to fathom... what I could do." His voice gave way, and he fell into Pomona's embrace.

"So you thought of love," Pomona finished for him.

"Yes," he mumbled. "I was so furious. I'd only caught snippets and hints of what they were doing to him from Minerva. It wasn't until he collapsed after the last day of school that I saw the true extent of his... torture. It was horrific. Voldemort couldn't have done better!" he snarled out viciously. "I felt powerless, and I must have prayed for something greater than myself to come to his aid."

Minerva sagged in her seat, her forehead almost touching the desk as the weight of the ramifications bore down on her. It was almost too much to bear. Memories of Dougal stirred in her chest, squeezing out air and exciting her heart to beat painfully against her ribs. Through her pain, she could see what grand error had been committed and why Filius was weeping and murmuring his regrets against Pomona. Such love as he had experienced and gloried in was rare. She knew this because no one would complete her as Dougal had. She would never feel that immense and glorious passion again, just a warm reflection of it. As such, the phial was currently lost to them. She straightened and ousted the dismay; from Filius' explanation, it wasn't all doom and gloom.

"Oh, Filius, I could... box your ears!" she snapped out.

"I know," wailed the small wizard. "But... it's not impossible for someone outside of our circle to care for him," he added petulantly.

"Well, what is done is done," Minerva continued more gently. "How potent do you think you made the charms?"

Filius sniffled and lifted himself out of the soft warmth of Pomona's embrace and faced Minerva. "I doubt they're on par with the Cinderella epic," he muttered thickly.

"Thank heavens for small mercies," Minerva countered wryly. "So, as we don't have the phial, then we can assume that it is safe... but unavailable to us," she finished lamely.

Pomona frowned and felt a blush creep up her throat to her cheeks as she realised she couldn't quite grasp what was being discussed. "But... why have the charms failed? Why can't we find it?"

Filius coughed gently. "I can only surmise that it has been found by someone who cares for Severus but isn't in our little, conspiratorial group."

Pomona suddenly stiffened, and she sighed at her moment of horrific revelation. "Ah... let me see if I have this. The phial has been found by someone it considers to be an ally because they care for Severus, so it won't encourage them to either hand it in or return it, but they can't return it anyway because they know nothing about us. And to cap it all off, the person who has it has been charmed to protect it at all costs."

"In a nutshell, yes," he squeaked.

Pomona looked ready to throttle Filius, but she calmed herself and stomped back to her chair to merely glower at him.

"I didn't do this intentionally," he said defensively.

"We know," Minerva offered generously. "But you know what this means, don't you?" she added with dark humour.

They looked at her blankly and waited for her to continue.

"We have Prince Charming, and all we need now is Cinderella to find the missing glass phial."

oOo

The secretary blinked, frowned, opened her mouth to query the strange request, stopped and then pulled her spectacles down her nose to peer at the young man standing before her desk. "You want all your requests and recommendations from the last two months?"

Peters flashed what he hoped was a charming smile. "Yes, Maud."

Maud inhaled slowly, as if combating some unpleasant shift in reality, and then righted the world by pushing her glasses back up her nose and tugging her navy blue cashmere shawl tightly around her shoulders. Her age-wrinkled lips pursed and rather dainty liver-spotted hands gathered up a piece of parchment and quill. Her slightly rheumy eyes fixed Peters with a startlingly piercing gaze and she poised herself to make notes.

"May I have something specific, or shall I trawl through the entire record?"

Peters paused and sucked thoughtfully on his teeth. He'd hoped she wouldn't ask for details. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.

"I'm completing the dossier on Severus Snape, and I require all records pertaining to him whilst under the care of the department."

The quill lowered and the piece of parchment was slid back to rest atop its brethren. "I see," she retorted crisply, waving a hand as if batting away her previous doubts.

For one terrible moment, Peters felt as though he'd just placed his neck on the chopping block; he half expected Aurors to come leaping out of the shadows, but Maud merely glanced to her left, eased back with a grimace in the rickety-looking chair and tapped the tip of the quill thoughtfully against her palm.

"Auror Cross informed me that he was personally overseeing the case, but given his workload, I think he could do with some assistance," she finally offered. "I'll have the relevant information floo-ed to your office by this afternoon, and I ask that you return them before Sunday evening."

Peters smothered his grin and hoped he didn't look as relieved and giddy as he felt. "Thank you, Maud."

Maud watched the slim form of the young Auror slip through the door of her small office, her mind running circles over his request and a recent correspondence from an old friend. A few weeks earlier, she may have dismissed Peters with a curt refusal and a short, sharp lecture on the proper order of things in the department, but Minerva's letter had been foremost in her thoughts since its arrival. Personally, she didn't know much about Severus Snape, but Minerva's affection practically burst from the page. The slyly concealed plea for help had also left its mark. They'd known each other through some very dark times, and Maud knew Minerva would not ask unless the need was great.

The sound of heels clicking on the marble floor brought her back to the present, and she hastily banished the wandless privacy charm she'd erected around her desk. Cross had transferred all Snape's files to his personal office some time ago, and although that wasn't particularly ominous, Maud had been a personal secretary to quite a number of ministers and officials over the years and as such had developed a sense when someone was being... too careful.

The owner of the heels flashed her a polite smile as they passed by her open door, and Maud listened for the soft click of a closing door. Rising up out of her almost torturous chair, she eased her joints into something approaching mobility and hobbled out. The corridor was clean and crisp with alternating black and white tiles and dark wood panelling, and when she'd first arrived here nearly forty years ago, she'd been overwhelmed by the sheer grandeur and luxury afforded the secretaries of the powerful. After several Ministers of Magic, various reshuffles, dismissals and scandals, she'd realised that it was nothing more than cosmetics. The whole place reeked of putrefying good intentions and desiccated high ideals. But... every once in a while, there were breaths of fresh air: a person who had the capacity to precipitate a well-needed deep clean.

There were others who felt as she did, who saw past the glamour and charm and worked, plotted, for the benefit of the Ministry as a whole: those who had in the past provided secret snippets, or let slip a confidential sentiment, or lost a sensitive file just when the time was ripe for change. It was to these people that Maud shuffled and limped. She smiled mirthlessly: one should always be either wary of or deeply appreciative of a damned good secretary.

"Hello, Maud," called out a cardigan-clad lady in slippers.

Maud smiled and hobbled over to the speaker and the tea urn, casting a quick glance around the small canteen.

"Hello, Agnes," she replied with a genuine soft smile. "I haven't seen you in here for a while."

"Me knee started to give me some gip, so I had a bit o' time off."

"Oh, dear. I heard that Norbert is away with his back."

"It were his other trouble: had awful time with it." Agnes let out a dark chuckle. "We've told security in the main foyer that if they see, they should send him home before he has a turn and the paint starts peeling off the walls." She handed Maud a cup of good, strong tea. "But you're not here to discuss the ravages of old age, eh?"

"No," she agreed softly. "I need some... information."

oOo

"Severus isn't due for another fortnight at the earliest," Cross said softly.

"Listen 'ere, Cross," Burke hissed, looming over the desk towards the seated Auror, "the only reason you can do your bit of... research is 'cos I say that the slimy bastard still has useful info. All I got to do is tell the man that Snape is no use to us, and you can't get at him. Got it?"

He eased back, not because he knew he'd conveyed his point, but because there was something utterly and inexplicably disturbing about Cross' complete blankness of expression. The man was seemingly unreachable when he wanted to be. This bothered Burke, as he overcame challenge through intimidation or manipulation...mainly the former...so Cross was a frustrating obstacle he couldn't begin to manage.

"I understand your frustration, Burke, I really do," Cross replied, his voice reflecting the same eerie calmness, "but we simply cannot arrange matters for Severus to come here on your whim. It will arouse suspicion, will it not, for him to require the potion more frequently than the others?" He sat back in the leather wing-back and interlaced his fingers. "Although, I admit your recent interaction with him in Wales was most rewarding," he concluded with a cold smile.

"Even so," Burke continued, "I want his secrets and him broken, just like the others."

"Now, now," Cross uttered smoothly while his blue gaze hardened. "You forget that I know why you want Severus; do not think me as easily fooled as Peters or the 'man'. Where I would be pleased to consider that some noble sense of retribution fuels your interest, it simple isn't the case. Is it?" he asked venomously.

Burke felt an unfamiliar sensation crawling up from his roiling guts to chill his spine and torment his gullet: unease, fear, dread. With that simple observation, he felt like he'd walked out to the centre of a frozen pond only to hear a terrible crack. He'd been a fool to let the old man become so cognisant of his plans and wants. He swallowed and subtly backed away. His next few steps had to be careful ones.

"I know ye ain't daft, Cross," he started smoothly, "but you must realise that we can't drag this out for much longer."

Cross sighed and nodded slowly. "I quite agree with you, but the memories you seek are buried beneath decades of repression. They cannot be easily excavated."

"You get the memories you want easily enough," Burke grouched.

Cross snorted wryly. "Severus is, for some reason, eager to part with them. He fears the memories you seek."

"Look," Burke muttered with a hint of desperation, "we have a month, maybe two, before we lose our claim on Snape. I 'eard the boss going on about the results no longer justifying the means."

"He is concerned about funding," Cross interrupted sharply. "Since the potion is now easier to brew, it has become more cost effective to simply give it away," he sneered, "rather than generate the costs involved in bringing them in for questioning...not that they'd need any incentive to come banging on the door for their fix."

"Fix," Burke repeated.

"A Muggle term," the old Auror explained. He paused and studied Burke for a moment before relaxing and continuing; Burke would probably guess the answer soon enough without his input. "A particularly clever addition to the potion makes it highly addictive."

A sly grin split Burke's square and unpleasant face. "So...," he breathed, "this little venture of ours may still be worthwhile."

"Oh yes, Burke," Cross added with the merest hint of reproach. "I'm sure an alternative source of the potion outside the Ministry would be of interest to them, but additional encouragement in this instance will not yield a faster harvest."

"Now don't be getting all 'igh an' mighty with me, Auror Cross," Burke snarled back. "You're up way past your neck in all o' this, ain't ya!" Some of his earlier smugness returned with the realisation that Cross had far more to lose if the endeavour became public. "If I see some additional benefit to this malarkey, then I'd be stupid to pass up on it, wouldn't I?"

Cross blinked and then looked away in disgust. "Profit, of course! How could I have been so foolish to think you wanted to merely expedite collecting Severus' memories."

The scold rankled Burke, and he latched onto a reasonable target. "Stop callin' him Severus! He's a monster... filth. He's less than a cockroach, and you say his name as though he deserves to be considered a person. He don't deserve a name. The only things of value are his memories of those curses what Voldemort taught him, got it?"

oOo

He'd had the files for four days...Maud had even let him take them home...but he couldn't see any pattern or red flag for concern. It all tallied quite well with what he recalled and what followed procedure... and tomorrow, he'd have to return them. It was frustrating him! He knew that something was going on; he just had no clue what it was.

Requests for the Interrogation room and the Healers were in order, as was the clean-up staff following the sessions. Timings all matched, as did equipment returns, and he could dimly summon up memories from all the interrogations. There didn't appear to be any holes or errors in procedure; there was nothing at all to suggest that anything untoward was going on. But he knew there was... there had to be.

He sighed and pushed the papers away from him, watching them rise like petulant mountain ranges before collapsing with a peeved susurrus. Perhaps a distraction would help shift his thinking. Food and a drink sounded pleasant, so he padded to his small kitchen and potted around making cheese on toast and a coffee. The percolator gurgled softly and the grill pinged while melting cheese bubbled and popped. He settled into these reassuring sounds and let the tension flow out of his shoulders.

Pressure had always been an incentive to him before, a great motivator and source of energy, but now it felt uncomfortably heavy. He knew why he felt so compelled to act; he'd found some pattern to his... episodes, and they seemed to involve Snape in some way. This was of course pure conjecture, but it was a good starting point as any. He just hoped it led somewhere and soon, as he doubted he could cope with the strain of investigating and the dread that he was simply losing his mind.

He rescued the cheese on toast and poured a strong cup of black coffee. Leaning back against the worktop, he looked through the kitchen window. His flat was on the fourth floor of a block of rather dilapidated flats in North London, and from his vantage point, he could see the silvery grey rooftops, towering flats, glowing industrial units and the glimmering sleek office blocks of Muggle urban sprawl. Brooding, bruised clouds hung heavily over the cityscape, snuffing out the weak autumnal sunlight, and swirling black swathes of chattering starlings and sparrows hurtled past. In a few minutes, the sky would darken and the myriad lights would sparkle into a celestial parody.

Returning to his table with a full stomach and a hot coffee, he felt surprisingly little enthusiasm for his task, and he idly plucked up the closest leaf of paper. Perhaps his eye had landed on it purposefully, as it was a darker shade of cream than the others. Flicking it over revealed it to be some minor complaints made against the department, and the merest flicker of annoyance flashed through his guts that in amongst his search for something specific he'd been handed something so superfluous and almost frivolous. He was about to cast it aside when a date and complaint from St Mungo's caught his eye.

Dear Sir,

*I feel it my duty to mention yet again the cleaning of the Pensieves. Due to the processes involved in preparing the Pensieves for new patients, the Aurors using them have been asked **not** to use spells on them directly due to imbalances this causes in later performance. The current advice is to merely return the memories to the donor and **leave the cleaning to the Healers***

Many Thanks,

Sidney Blakely

Peters stared at the comment, his mouth slightly agape and his chest tight; could this be a clue to what was happening? He'd been trained to only ever scoop the liquid memory back; using spells on the Pensieve had been expressly forbidden. He plonked his cup down and held the cream page as though it held the answer to the meaning of life.

*It is clear in the handbook that all patients must be supervised by at least **two Aurors**. This is hardly possible if two Aurors are seen leaving the interrogation room and walking down the corridor to the canteen!*

To avoid tripping the internal alarm, could all Aurors please inform Security as soon as possible when they realise the interrogation will pass the designated one hour slot, thank you.

Whilst we accept that some patients may become agitated and violent, we strongly urge any damage to furniture to be reported as soon as possible to the caretaker. Today, we had a report of a chair in room 15 being unfit for purpose.

And so the complaints went on...minor incidences that had only created the smallest amount of annoyance and thus remained off the radar, as it were. After a few minutes of intense scrutiny, he Summoned a pen and a clean sheet of paper and began to construct a timeline consisting of Snape's visits, Cross' requests, the complaints and his own bouts of mental aberration. As he carefully jotted down and cross-referenced and refined his work, he pondered which comfy chair to buy for Maud.

oOo

Winter was sneaking up on autumn, and on her way home, it seemed to have pulled a fast one. An icy wind tugged at her coat and hat, and what felt like sleet hit her numb cheeks. A deep ache resonated in her joints at the sudden change in weather, and Maud wished she'd taken the Knight Bus instead of floo-ing out. Usually, the five-minute walk from the floo-hub to home was quite invigorating, but today, it was a test of willpower. Glancing ruefully at the steel-grey clouds, she bent slightly into the wind and

followed the bridle path to her cottage. She could have Disappeared, but she didn't risk it as much these days; she worried that she'd subconsciously leave her dodgy hip behind.

The door opened invitingly as she marched determinedly down the path, and she could see the hall lights flicker warmly and welcoming. Within moments, she was ensconced in her cottage, unwrapping her coat and slipping her feet into snug slippers: bliss. A wave of her hand had the hob flare under the waiting copper kettle and a cup and saucer flutter down from a cupboard in readiness. The stew slow-roasting in the oven smelt lovely, and already the fire in the parlour was warming the old stones. Time had softened the loneliness, but she could still hear her husband calling from the kitchen, asking if she'd had a good day, and could still see his work boots left haphazardly in the hallway. And from the garden, she'd hear her son, Sam, whooping as he chased crows on his broomstick. Such memories no longer hurt, but they still tugged a fraction on her sense of longing. These melancholic thoughts dispersed as something grey and sleek darted around her ankles and meowed.

"You could have caught your own dinner," Maud scolded good-humouredly. "The mice have been at the rug again."

The silver tabby cocked its head to the side and gave a short hiss before winking and leaping. As it flew through the air, the body elongated and seemingly twisted upon itself, the fur altering texture and colour until a green-robed witch stood in the hallway.

"I stopped chasing mice years ago," Minerva clipped. "Besides, the stew smells far too good to pass up on for the sake of a few crunchy mice."

Maud chuckled and shuffled past her into the kitchen. "Best get the cutlery, then, while I dish it out."

They ate in companionable silence, save for the odd bit of polite conversation about work and some general chit-chat. Only when the dishes were away and they sat with a piece of sponge cake and a cup of tea did they discuss things of greater importance.

"Your letter said that someone had been making enquiries about Severus," Minerva declared, with the merest hint of eagerness.

"Yes, a young man by the name of Callum Peters." Maud took a sip and settled back in her plush, comfy chair. "He's one of those new Aurors what have been trained to study memories. He came by my office earlier in the week, asking about paperwork with regards to your young man, and I...well, I peeked, didn't I! Couldn't help myself, really." She sighed happily and grinned. "It's been such a long time since I had to do something like that; I felt all young again."

Minerva allowed her friend and confidante a few moments to revel in her high spirits, but her patience soon wore thin. "And?"

"His mind is a mess... an utter mess!" she continued crossly. "I've been through enough dodgy administrations to recognise when someone is being got at, and that poor boy has more holes in his head than Swiss cheese!"

"Who do you suspect is doing it?" Minerva asked fretfully.

"I have an idea, but it's not worth sharing just yet. I spoke with Agnes and met up with Norbert, and they've seen and heard some odd things. They got a list together of such oddities, which I passed on to Peters." She seemed about to offer something else, but thought better of it.

"You're not running any risks, are you?" Minerva demanded, concern making her tone harsh.

"Oh no, dearie," Maud soothed. "They always expect the hammer to fall from above, don't they? They forget the small people, the minor figures in the scheme of things; they think of such people as like house-elves, if they think about them at all, and as such consider them to be mindless and harmless." She smiled mirthlessly. "If you want to know what's going on anywhere, you don't speak to the management; no, you speak to the lowest of the low, to the invisibles who work in silence with their eyes and ears open to everything. Management only knows what those below it tell 'em, and so on down the ladder. It's those who clean up the messes that know the truth of things." Maud nodded firmly and leant closer to Minerva. "It's like that everywhere...it happens because that's how it works...and I'll remind you of it, as it's a kind of intelligence-wrought naivety to rely solely upon those you put in charge." She winked and grinned impishly. "But I know you know this because you were once a Prefect."

Minerva blushed and hid behind a sip of tea, politely ignoring Maud's deep chuckle.

"Yes," Maud continued, feeling all the better for recent, stimulating events. "I'll help your young man, Minerva, and I'll help this new young man of mine. It's about time that certain bad ideas got put to rest."

The fire crackled, sending out gentle, sweet wafts of cherry wood smoke, and a small ornamental clock on the dark mantelpiece chimed out the quarter hour. Minerva glanced across and noted the time, but it meant little; the TimeTurner against her chest granted her all the time she needed. And it had been too long since she'd last talked, face to face, with her friend.

"What's this 'young man' like?" Minerva queried gently, her mind conjuring up images of Severus.

Maud shifted in her seat and looked down into her tea. "Nothing like Sam, if that's what you're getting at, dear." When Minerva inhaled sharply, Maud looked up and smiled. "I know you meant no harm by your question. I remember a time when I was in a terrible state, knowing I'd lost both of them, but life and time march on: inseparable and uncaring when they choose to be, and sweet and glorious when they want. I know my little boy is gone and no one can or should replace him," she sighed sadly. "But I can tuck someone under my wing and put 'em on the right path, nudge 'em to their destiny, can't I?"

Minerva laughed and saluted the old woman with her cup; after all, she had no leg to stand on if she argued. "Of course, you can. But what I meant was..." She drifted off, not entirely sure what she wanted this potential saviour to do.

"From what I see and from what I know," Maud began, relieving Minerva from her moment of doubt, "RID is only surviving because it has a fairly powerful patron...not sure who he is, yet. Left to others, it would have been disbanded months ago."

"RID?"

"Retrospective Interrogation Department," Maud clarified.

The cup rattled in its saucer, and Minerva inhaled slowly to control her trembling hand. "They're going to close it down?"

"There's been rumours for a few months now. Oddly, they started not long after it was created."

"Why is that odd?"

Maud idly tapped a fingernail against her cup and seemed to stare off into space, and in this sort of daze, she answered. "You know RID started a few weeks before that Death Eater's potion was refined..." and there, she drifted off.

"Is that relevant?" snapped the younger witch, her heart beginning to pound uncomfortably. For her part, Maud was seemingly off with the fairies, so Minerva did some quick thinking.

Her head soon started to thump in time with her heart. There'd been an article in The Daily Prophet at the time, trying to incite some public wrath about the surviving Death Eaters getting quicker access to their free life-saving potion whilst so many of their crimes remained unreported and unsolved. In the same brazenly biased document, the new department had been mentioned as a force of vengeance for the victims, trawling through the hidden memories of the criminals and their victims, seeking the truth. Before RID, Severus and the others had only endured what had been laughably called voluntary verbal interrogations which, though exhausting and distressing, had never been toxic. Minerva had to give up; there just wasn't enough for her to formulate a motive, a reason for all of it.

"What exactly is the purpose of RID?"

Maud sucked thoughtfully on her front teeth. "The one doled out to the public is that they use memories to identify possible criminals and determine the use of, if it was used, the Imperius Curse." She gently shook her head. "It was bad last time when no one could trust anybody...the number of people wrongfully Kissed and the just cases that were thrown out because they claimed they were under that curse!" she finished despairingly.

"And the less official one?"

"This is where it gets a little tricky," Maud answered with a frown. "No one is quite sure what they're after, but they're not just after memorised conversations with Death Eaters and unwitting, cursed allies to help track down traitors or prove innocence." She took another deep sip.

"You can be sure of this?"

The old lady tutted in frustration and slumped in her cushions. "Can't be sure of anything, can we? And I'm not completely sure of what Norbert saw down in the unused offices, and he's not sure what he saw, either."

"You're not making sense, Maud!"

Maud seemed to slowly gather her thoughts from some dim and distant place, her eyes sharpened and her lips writhed over each other as though checking the ripeness of her words. Finally, she decided that bitter or not, they were ready to be tasted.

"Norbert says that down in the unused sections, there were several phials containing black memories." Maud grimaced and shook her head. "He can't be sure, though, because when he went down there the next day, there was no sign of them or of anything."

"Black memories...," Minerva mumbled. "Oh...!" She looked across at her perplexed host and felt equally as confounded. "I was under the impression they were a myth."

"Yes, well," stated Maud exasperatedly before turning her perplexed gaze upon Minerva, "that's why none of us are sure."

Minerva shuddered and wrapped her fingers tightly around her cup, stealing the warmth from it to oust the sudden chill. "Albus spoke of dark terrors from ages past that we had mercifully forgotten: terrors that Voldemort was trying to unearth."

Maud kept quiet and silently charmed the cups to refill. Things sometimes seemed less dark and burdensome when there was a good, hot cup of tea nearby. Besides, there was nothing she could add or say that Minerva wasn't already contemplating.

For her part, Minerva felt smothered and ashamed. She'd left Severus to the Ministry, thinking that the fairly recent war had cleansed the halls, but it had only revealed a new layer of filth. Somehow, she'd held onto the belief that it would somehow come good at the end. Maud's news that the department was facing closure struck a painful nerve, and her body echoed its violent strum. She knew all too well what people could do when pushed... when desperate, and Maud had said they were after something. A sob lodged in her throat as she came to the same conclusion she had months ago: she could do nothing directly to stop Severus' torture. She bit her lip and closed her eyes, trying to lock her distress inside where she could better battle it.

There was a pain in this hopelessness; it crushed her heart. She wondered how Severus endured it day in and day out. And then it hit her. Her arrogance...innocent and unintentional...had created her dilemma. Minerva McGonagall may not be able to do anything, but Severus Snape had spent decades refining such arts. Her eyes snapped open, and a sly grin parted her lips. If all she could do to aid Severus was provide resources and opportunity, then that is what she would do... and damn the consequences!

"I should have done this months ago!" Minerva snapped out harshly before turning to her ally. "I need a few more... favours, Maud."

"Anything, dear."

"Firstly, I need some Ministry permission slips; secondly, I would appreciate more 'unofficial' information on this department; and lastly, please send the recipe for that sponge cake to the kitchens at Hogwarts."

oOo

"How do I look?"

Neville wiped a hand over his cowlick and straightened his collar while Randal appraised him. This was their first staff meeting, and he wanted it to go smoothly.

"Ravishing," Randal offered playfully before spinning on his heel and marching away towards the door. "Now hurry up," he snapped over his shoulder. "We don't want to be late, do we?"

Neville smiled and tutted before catching up and following his friend into the corridor and on towards the staff room. It sometimes struck him as strange that after a very awkward start to their relationship, they had become such firm friends... and in a surprisingly short amount of time... but when he pondered deeper, he knew they were too similar to be anything other than companionable. Some trials in life created connections... an almost undeniable attraction.

Randal had also never made him feel uncomfortable about any deeper feelings, and Neville hoped that the redhead was as comfortable with him. He hoped so, as he valued their friendship. In a way, it was perhaps not that dissimilar to him harbouring feelings for Ginny: he hoped that she would have seen past his affection and maintained the friendship rather than let it wither due to some discomfort. Not that it truly mattered now; it all seemed so very long ago.

He brought himself back with a small shudder. Time was being duplicitous: years seemed like decades and weeks felt like days. It was half-term next week...although it was more a study break than a holiday...and Neville felt a paradoxical mix of growing anxiety and burgeoning confidence. With every positive comment from Pomona and critical review from Snape he felt as though he were home, and yet a terrible looming... something settled unnervingly upon his shoulders, as if his luck were running out.

They'd had five mentor sessions...albeit one with Professor Flitwick and another individually at the very start...and they'd used the time with Snape to share and refine ideas and compare experiences and build up their teaching repertoire. It still galled Neville that he just couldn't bring himself to say 'Severus' while Randal rattled it off as though he'd known the man since Nursery school. Their last weekly mentor session would be next week, and after that, they'd be having them fortnightly... and individually.

He'd also been rather grudgingly amazed that the workload and the thrill he was facing had almost ousted his initial desire for joining the staff at Hogwarts, but the raging fire that had burnt through him a mere month ago had now settled down to warming coals. His experience had tempered his patience, and in a way, he was deeply grateful; the almost consuming desperation and passion had become more of a companion than a taskmaster.

When they reached the staff room door, Randal fidgeted with his cuffs...a sure sign of nerves...and Neville felt a flicker of embattled camaraderie as they prepared to enter unknown territory. The meeting wasn't about them, per se, but he was sure their efforts would be focused upon as the others discussed student progress and reaching targets. At the thought, his stomach rolled, but it was too late to back down now.

They'd expected papers, documents, desks, pomp and severity, but the teachers were sitting in small groups, drinking tea and munching on finger sandwiches. A fire roared merrily in the grate and laughter rose up from the contented muttering in happy bubbles. The only thing to highlight that a meeting was going on was a slight rearrangement of chairs so they faced the chairs and desk that had been placed along the back wall. Oh, and the sherry glasses.

Neville and Randal shared a bemused look and then walked in, skirting past clusters of chairs and stepping over outstretched legs until they reached the far corner and the waiting comfort of the two remaining easy chairs. A few fellow professors muttered a greeting, but the general focus seemed to be on supper and gossip.

They sank into the chairs, only to be accosted by a silver tray zooming in at eye height. Two cups clattered in their saucers, and white sandwich triangles slid dangerously close to falling in their laps, but after a threatening wobble, it settled down. Randal relaxed from his defensive pose and plucked up a cup and sandwich.

Neville did the same and whispered into his empty cup, "White, sweet coffee."

Randal pulled a face at his earlier unnecessary panic and muttered into his own cup before nibbling on the roast beef sandwich. "This doesn't seem that bad," he said softly, using the remains of his crust to highlight the serene scene before him.

Neville nodded and gulped down his mouthful of coffee. "I had expected...well, I'm not sure, to be honest: hot coals, dribbly candles... screams."

"Not as bad as the mentor sessions, at any rate, eh, Neville?" Randal whispered with a smirk and a wink.

"Oh, I don't find them as bad as I did."

"Really?" Randal replied with genuine surprise.

The remark caught him unawares, and Neville turned to face the redhead to protest, only to be caught in a gaze of such intense scrutiny that he squirmed in his seat as though his soul were being evaluated.

"What?" he retorted defensively.

Those deep emerald eyes narrowed minutely before a flicker of mirth lit them, and Randal eased back with a snicker. "My mistake," he replied soothingly.

Despite his tone, Neville felt discomforted. He'd considered himself to be gaining confidence, but now it seemed he still looked like a bumbling novice. And if Randal thought he was still struggling, then what did Snape think? Inwardly, he groaned before slouching down and hoping the floor would open up.

He didn't have long to stew before the door opened and Minerva and Snape swept in, snuffing out the idle chatter. He could feel Snape's burning gaze on him as he stalked to the waiting desk, but Neville didn't dare lift his own above the man's black-swathed knees. Next to him, Randal sighed softly, then leant closer.

"Cheer up, Nev," Randal mumbled into his ear. "You're doing excellently... given the challenge."

There was that playful smugness again, the hint of some superiority that had grated on his nerves and precipitated his current sense of doom. Neville snorted and folded his arms across his chest.

"Oh, and from all accounts, you're doing incredibly well with the whole teaching thing, too."

Puzzled, Neville glanced across at his friend and opened his mouth to question Randal, but Minerva interrupted by chiming a small bell, and the room settled down to business.

oOo

It hadn't turned out to be that bad an evening; there was even an air of jollity as they'd ribbed new policies from the examining board, scoffed at relayed suggestions from the governors, and shared the antics of their charges. It was perhaps the single most encouraging experience of his stay, and Neville felt more a professor within the tight huddle of chatting staff than he had since his first lesson. He was a part of the staff... a member of the faculty; they had laughed with him and shared in their own trials and triumphs and Neville had felt utterly welcomed. He was so wrapped up in the comfort of belonging that he quite forgot Randal's perplexing comments and was thus left a little bemused at his friend's quiet and unobserved departure at some point during the meeting.

For his part, Snape had seen Randal leave. He'd felt the young man's eyes alight upon him throughout the evening, and although there had been no malice in the almost inconspicuous glances, Snape had felt a growing and undefined tension. After the bulk of the meeting was done and conversation had returned to gentle banter, he'd watched Randal slip away from Neville towards Sinastra and Pomona, where he'd charmingly entertained them. This hardly demanded concern or dark musings, but an equal number of piercing glances had struck Neville from between the laughing women. One particularly penetrating stare at Neville had prompted the young redhead to beg his leave, and Snape had watched him go.

He thought back upon the mentor sessions and could divine no reason for any bad feeling from their interactions, nor had he caught wind of any issues from the other teachers: Randal and Neville were close friends. The shift in behaviour was intriguing, and Snape wondered if his Legilimency was still as sharp as it had been. He idly tapped a finger against his lips and plotted. What would he find swirling in the Arithmancer's consciousness? The thought teased him, and he felt his lips quirk in a rare, mischievous smile.

"You're doing it again, Severus."

Minerva's voice disturbed his machinating and, he languidly turned to her, clearing his face and mind of his intentions. He could see humour and irritation flickering in the verdant depths of her eye. It was impossible to determine which emotion had the upper hand, and for safety, he assumed she was more cross than amused.

"Sorry, Minerva," he murmured gently. "What did you say?"

"No you're not," she scolded exasperatedly. "And you heard me well enough."

He grinned, catlike, and settled back into the rather uncomfortable chair. "I was merely reflecting upon the joys of mentoring."

"Well, try to look less... predatory," she muttered past twitching lips.

"I shall try," he responded with fake humility. "But... they have nothing to worry about... from me," he continued with more sincerity. "I may even... ask them to increase... the workload... given their success thus far."

He'd said it...inferred it. He'd planted the seed. At this point, this fulcrum, he could let his decision swing either way: towards sequestering Neville's time for 'professional reasons' and work on the potion, or abandon his campaign against the Ministry and leave Neville to his teaching and seeking his own answers.

On this cusp, held in Minerva's speculative gaze, he could enjoy a few more breaths free from the duties and obligations of making a choice. It was almost intoxicating; he could feel himself sinking into some inexplicable stupor as he came to realise what had only been pure fancy before. He almost laughed out at the unexpected euphoria creeping under his skin and delighting his senses. He'd never experienced such freedom... the capacity to actually choose.

"I'm sure that time could be allocated," Minerva said softly. "If you should decide to do so," she added sotto voce, while slipping something white and cool into his palm.

Surprised but too well trained to react to the impromptu gift, he flashed a smile and watched her leave the staffroom. With the closing of the door, he glanced down into his cupped hand and saw what she'd so carefully deposited. It was a collection of miniaturised documents, all bearing her seal as headmistress. He knew what they were, even as diminutive as they were. He'd suffered enough of them over the years. In his now subtly trembling hand was a collection of Ministry permission slips. In the past, he'd been forced to beg for these so he could take leaves of absence from the school or acquire certain pieces of equipment or ingredients for personal use in the fulfilment of his duties as Potions master.

And that was that! He knew without doubt he had the support of a dear friend and staunch ally. No matter what he decided, he would not be abandoned. True hope fluttered in his chest, blinking its eyes and stretching from its long sleep. Before, he'd only dared to consider the success and failure of a task as a statistical exercise, learning to cope with the outcome rather than build hope beforehand. Now, with his fingers closing around his precious gift, he could feel it burgeoning within his chest and

seeping down his limbs. It was glorious... it was terrifying.

Neville had watched the discussion between Snape and Minerva and now wondered why the witch was watching him with something like amusement dancing across her features. When Minerva realised that Neville had caught her gaze, she smiled and stood, smoothing down her skirts before leaving the staffroom. His eyes darted back to Snape, who was seemingly fascinated by something in his hand. However, there was a strangely empty expression on his face. Neville fancied he knew that look. He'd adopted it often enough when he'd visited his mother and father and spoken with the Healers. It was self-preservation. It was hard learnt experience of shattered hopes keeping new ideas and new hopes under check so to limit the pain. It was the dangerous place of having hope.

The realisation perplexed Neville, and he squirmed in his seat as his recollections and recent interactions squabbled in his head. Where was the terrifying demon that had taught him potions? Who was this man who seemed so... powerful yet vulnerable? Why did his lips now quirk in amusement at Snape's comments rather than his teeth biting his tongue to keep his fear in check? It was confusing. And then there were these odd feelings of understanding and connection. It was unfathomable, but Neville actually felt comfortable with Snape.

Suddenly, the quiet chatter became too loud and the room too stuffy, and as Randal had already departed, Neville rose to his feet and moved to say goodnight to Pomona and Sinastra. They smiled at him and wished him the same, before returning to their gossiping. At least some things remained constant, Neville mused good-naturedly.

The cool of the corridor was a welcome relief, and he slowly walked back towards his room. He idly thought about checking on Randal but thought better of it; they had already planned to meet up in Hogsmeade in the morning for supplies. A small flicker of irritation flared, and he wondered why Randal had sneaked away. And what had he been hinting at. He snorted and shook his head, ousting the petulance. It had been a pleasant evening, and he wanted to preserve that sense of belonging; it wasn't as if Randal should be required to tell him his every move. Inhaling softly, he relaxed and rolled his shoulders, allowing a wonderfully lulling drowsiness to seep through him; it had been a while since he'd had a good night's sleep, and he was looking forward to slipping under the linen sheets.

Lost in his thoughts, he nearly screamed when a hand landed on his shoulder. He whirled around, his hand automatically moving to his wand, which he resisted withdrawing with a monumental effort. His expression must have been as effective as a drawn wand, because Snape drew back with a wary look and his lips pulled back.

"Oh, I am so sorry," Neville wheezed out between hasty breaths.

"I should apologise," Snape muttered. "I had called out, but my voice..." he drifted off and waved a languid hand towards his throat.

"No... it's...don't worry," he responded clumsily.

Neville steadied himself and waited for Snape to continue, but the man seemed oddly reluctant. That same almost blank expression had settled upon the pale face, and Neville felt that peculiar mix of wariness and delight he experienced whenever he tried to decipher Severus Snape. However, as the pause lengthened minutely, his delight waned and another deeper, more primal emotion bloomed. There was something hard and greedy in Snape's eyes. Neville thought upon the purposefully empty expression on his mentor's face and felt his guts swirl. Was it time?

Perhaps Snape sensed his thinking, because he inhaled softly and spoke. "Minerva has given her approval for your timetable... to be extended." The older man straightened as though some weight had been lifted and continued. "You will be expected to attend... additional mentor meetings. You know where we will meet. See me tomorrow evening at eight, Longbottom."

With that, he swept past Neville and marched down the corridor until he was swallowed up by distant shadows. Neville grunted, and his lips twitched. The man's footfalls had made no sound upon the stone floor; the cunning bastard silenced his steps. A laugh bubbled out and exploded. And it had taken him until now to realise how Snape had always loomed up on him without warning. Another, softer laugh followed and he smiled fondly; he'd definitely have to remember to use the spell...sneaking up on his students would be a worthwhile skill to have in his arsenal.

The closer he got to his room, the greater his excitement grew. Not only did he have a secure life within Hogwarts, surrounded by friends and work, he also had his chance to do what he'd promised his parents over twenty years ago: rescue them from their madness. There was still no guarantee of success, but for some reason, he utterly believed in Snape. He frowned as he slipped under the warm covers. It wasn't as if he had absolute faith Snape could make the potion work, it was just that... he could only believe in his dream's hopelessness if Snape said it was so. Despite the thrill running through him, his eyelids felt heavy and began to close. His last thoughts were of Snape's silent steps and his warm hand upon his shoulder.

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Regrets and Revenge

Chapter 15 of 22

Minerva's interest in the Ministry and Norbert's ill-timed curiosity stir something embittered and powerful into action.

He knew what he'd seen. And because he knew, he'd called in sick and avoided all contact with the Ministry. No one had bothered to check up on him, although Maud had sent a bottle of good whiskey and Agnes had Floo-ed him some chicken soup: in the hearth sat five, neglected and cold bowls. To keep their minds at ease, he was sending regular owl posts, and maybe his barn owl sensed the duplicity, for the bird nipped at his fingers when he offered treats in payment for deliveries. He knew he was right. The less they knew of this, the better.

The last glimmering strand tugged free from his temple and clung to his wand-tip like fine cobwebs. These silvery wisps, as beautiful as they were, contained dark and dirty memories. He was glad to be rid of them. Their loss made him lightheaded and he sat down heavily, wondering if it was just the enormous weight of terrible memories being lifted or his heart that was making him giddy.

A cynical snort burst past his lips: his brain may have forgotten but his heart would never forgive what he'd done. It thumped angrily at his ribs, as if trying to escape the bitter and corrupted shell that trapped it.

He plucked up Maud's whiskey, noting with a scowl that only a few more shots remained. Uncorking it and pouring a generous measure, he sat back in the worn but comfortable arm chair and watched the world pass by his front-room window. This had been his habit since Agnes had substantiated his claims of sickness, but despite her talents, he suspected a certain someone wouldn't be fooled by his excuses. A part of him hoped that his antics in the old interrogation rooms had passed unnoticed, but deep down where his nightmares bred, he knew he'd been seen. His enemy was playing with him. And maybe in some macabre way, this was meant to balance the score. Penitence was beyond him...he'd done too much to even try...and they knew it, so Norbert's slow torture was the closest to satisfaction they could get.

The whiskey...a fine Muggle one...burnt a path to his stomach, leaving hints of oak on his tongue. While he drank, he pondered his chances of survival. It didn't look

promising. And maybe with the wounds that never quite healed and the memories that never quite went away, just maybe he was secretly glad that his end was coming. Perhaps, in this, there was penitence...and peace. A grim smile parted his lips and he saluted the future...whatever it would bring him.

A few hours later, when the streetlamps cast their amber glow and a drizzle blurred the outside into inconsequentiality, the future paid him a visit, sitting across from him and sharing a much better bottle of Muggle whisky. Norbert hadn't expected it to be quite so civil.

"I acquired a taste for Bowmore whilst enjoying the freedoms of a life with Muggles," the old man whispered, while pouring the precious whisky into Norbert's empty tumbler. "And given the occasion, I thought nothing less than a fifty-year-old would do."

Norbert snorted and nodded in complete understanding. "You're being remarkably generous."

His guest looked up, and Norbert stared into eyes the colour of storm-whipped seas, set in a face cracked with age and weathered by time and pain: eyes as endless and merciless as an uncharted ocean.

"I can afford to be," he replied sanguinely, before wry humour twitched his lips.

Norbert ignored the flicker of smugness on the face before him. He knew that in the man's victory there would be a bitter seed of dismay: he hoped so, anyway.

"We all got our desserts," he mumbled.

His guest flashed a harsh glare then settled back to watch the swirling bronze liquid in his glass. "That depends entirely upon what you deem palatable."

A warm flare of vicious satisfaction filled Norbert's belly. "Not as sweet as you thought, eh?"

His guest chose not to take the bait, instead taking a deep gulp. The haste made Norbert squirm, and it struck him as mad that he was marking off the last of his life with sips. He wished he had a bigger glass.

The barn owl, Penelope, ruffled her feathers and they both turned to her, startled that something else existed in the dingy and dusty, and ironically dubbed, living room.

"You have a new owl," the old man muttered idly.

"You killed the last one, Albert."

Silence fell heavily between them, its weight crushing down. With the name that had been kept off lips for over eighty years came a torrent of memories, and both men seemed to sink in their chairs until its echo died away.

"It's been so very long since anyone called me by my name," Albert Bagshot sighed. "It almost sounds...alien to me."

Norbert inhaled shakily. He hadn't expected to feel this prickling remorse in his eyes and chest. "You should have stayed away from it, Albert," he mumbled sadly. "You could have kept yourself free and...clean!" he finished with a snarl. "Me and the others had stopped looking."

Pain flashed over Albert's face and he looked away. "You can't...shouldn't...lie to me, Norbert!" he uttered, his voice dead and cold. "You would never have found me."

"Maybe," he conceded kindly. "But what you started all them years ago was downright diabolical. And that you're carrying it on now is just plain inhuman."

The words stirred up wrath and those eyes turned dark and terrible. "Don't tell me what is inhuman!" Albert hissed out, exposing yellowing teeth and scarlet gums. "I've been studying it all my life, in *her* name and in *her* memory, because she kept telling me that only through history, through the lens of impartial recollection and examination can we ever truly be at peace with the incomprehensible."

The words hit Norbert like a Stunner, and he trembled, staring at a man who was either so insane that he had entered some bizarre sanity or stuck, humming the only sane notes in a mad cacophony. To his horror, Norbert felt his thoughts stir with the melody; he felt his sensibilities shudder as they shook off years of training and rigid idealism and vibrated in harmony with the new tune. He could see, understand, what Bagshot was sharing. But he knew it was false. Those memories he had recently pulled free would have made him retch at the possibilities. There were things that were best left alone until age or madness softly erased them.

"But how far do you need to go, Albert?" he pleaded. "There were eight of them jars.*Eight!*"

Gods! He could see them lined up like bottles of black ink. And if he'd been younger or naive, he would have left them as that: old ink bottles. But he'd seen their like before, a long time ago in Europe, when in thrall and under the whip of a madman, and he knew how many graves and souls had been violated to create just one bottle. His memory of that time was now safe inside jars, hidden where only Agnes would find them. He hadn't dared share them, but death made some decisions so very simple. Agnes and Maud would have to know... and he hoped they would at least consider forgiving him.

Albert smiled, a manic tilt to his thin lips. "Oh, there are more than eight...and I will have more," he added petulantly. "I'm close...so close to knowing the why of it all."

"Gellert had been short-sighted in his goals," Albert continued smoothly. "If he'd been keener, he would have realised that he hadn't need the stone at all."

"For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict," muttered Norbert, the implications of Albert's plans chilling him.

Bagshot smiled, accentuating his stained teeth and cragged, grey skin, until Norbert thought he looked upon the face of a stirring gargoyle spewing not water but vile effluence.

"Yes," he agreed breathlessly. "Luke, I believe. Bible studies didn't feature heavily in my exile." And just as quickly, he changed back into an old man, bent with age and vulgar wisdom. "I will know...I will understand, and no one will be able to hide behind lies or madness."

Panic gripped Norbert's guts, twisting them, and a cold sweat burst from his skin. He'd been foolish. He'd seen his death as an end to it, as a settling of old scores. But it was all wrong! This wasn't about transgressions and horrors from a war that many had forgotten and many more had never known; it was about a man so lost in his desire to know that he was willing to become what he hated in some vain hope to attain understanding and peace through what he deemed pure retribution. Despite the poor chances, he should have stood his ground and done his utmost to kill Albert. At least the ruckus would have sparked an investigation, but as it stood, this would be nothing more than an old man slipping gently away.

A manic laugh erupted past his lips. "I suppose I should say that you'll never get away with it, but you already have been for...what? A decade?" Bagshot nodded slowly, as if sensing some trap in his resignation. "I wonder what you will be when you have found everything?" he finished thoughtfully.

"Nemesis," Albert snapped back.

The retort was too quick, too hot and the eyes too hard for it to be the truth, but Norbert knew he wasn't dealing with a man who cared for truth. Despite his claim that he existed solely for the purpose of finding it, it was *his* truth, *his* certainty he was after...his desperate answer to it all. Albert Bagshot had died a long time ago; what sat opposite him, sipping fine whisky and letting ideas slip from his lips like pus from a wound, was something beyond recognition.

"You must have had help," Norbert mused, trying to find faults and flaws into which he could wedge doubt and weakness.

Albert grinned. "Of course I do, and I know your brain is dredging what's left of your memories to discern who." He knocked back the last mouthful of Bowmore. "And as you're about to die, I'll set your mind at ease."

Albert paused to genteelly wipe away the thin smear of alcohol on his upper lip with a nicotine stained fingertip. In the heavy and expectant silence, they could hear Penelope's talons clicking against her perch and the distant rumble of heavy traffic.

"I have my support and my dearest ally in the Ministry, and he in turn has the scapegoat," he declared simply before a wry laugh erupted from his throat. "He even made himself fit for the role; we didn't have to do a thing to place the noose about his neck."

Possibilities bloomed and withered in his head until he found two faces that fit: Cross and Burke. And as it grew in his skull, he saw how deeply into the Ministry Bagshot had delved and secured himself. He had become a lamprey. His teeth must have burrowed deep into the security arm of the Ministry, and then nibbled at the fiscal offices. He was the patron of RID! Bagshot was the 'old man' who was funding the whole department.

It was delightful in its execution: no one would suspect the staunchest seeker of justice for the survivors. No one would question he who had done so much to make sure the innocent were freed and the guilty punished. But Cross...well, Cross had benefited most from the 'old man's' generosity; he had been...perhaps naively, in horrified retrospect...granted access to those who had destroyed his family and life. And Merlin knows what he'd done with that privilege. Then there was Burke: a thoroughly dislikeable man who had spent far too long in Azkaban, where the Dementors had sucked out any human qualities he may have possessed. In short, Bagshot would walk away, wounded and offended at how his kindnesses had been used against him, whilst Cross and Burke took the fall and the Kiss.

Norbert sobbed and collapsed into the chair. "I should never have refined and taught him the process," he cried. "I should have told him it was impossible and suffered his wrath."

"Grindelwald would have found another to do his bidding."

Perhaps he meant it as a final kindness...to ease Norbert's guilt over something that happened a life-time ago and could never be undone, or maybe he was digging the knife in at how commonplace and replaceable he'd been.

"One thing I will never forgive you for," Bagshot uttered thickly, his eyes glittering in the meagre light and some of the harsh cragginess leaving his features, "is choosing me to be your apprentice."

Norbert tensed and leant forwards. "That's as may be," he snarled. "But you could have walked away like I did. You chose to carry on extracting Black Memories."

"My choice?" Albert whispered, leaning forward to meet Norbert's disgusted gaze. "You are so...*wrong!*" he spat out, thick spittle arcing like ribbons in the air. He breathed heavily between bared, clenched teeth: silvery beads bursting at the corners of his mouth. He stood, towering over Norbert, and aimed a trembling wand between his eyes.

"I can never forgive you for showing me the possibilities," he sobbed. "You showed me how to get the answers to unanswerable questions. After that, I no longer had choice." He paused and one tear tumbled down his cracked and pained face. "You *made* me."

Penelope screeched in alarm when a bright green light flooded the room, and she made mad circles on her perch, flapping her wings as if trying to bat away the terrible image of her master sprawled on the floor. But then, soft croons and gentle fingers soothed her, and she settled, satisfied to click her beak and flex her talons while her fear unravelled.

"I know he cast a dedicated Obliviate to stop me collecting his memories," he muttered softly. "Such a waste of effort, for you saw what he did with them, didn't you?"

And then she too was bathed in emerald light.

As the ambulance turned the corner, the neighbours began to shuffle back into their waiting homes and normality. One lady stayed on the street, her moccasins darkening in the rain and a cardigan pulled taut around her thin body. Before the closest neighbour slipped through the gate, she grabbed their elbow and smiled disarmingly.

"Did he...suffer?" she asked tentatively, her eyes piercing more than just her glasses.

The question disturbed the poor woman, who paled and shuddered. "I don't know what happened," she mumbled. "But I'll never get that scream out my head." Her wide eyes glanced over to the darkened windows of Norbert's empty house and she hugged herself. "Full of pain and despair it was: haunting and terrible."

Hope and Hunger

Chapter 16 of 22

Snape realises that he may no longer need to merely hope, but he fears taking what he wants. His life will become, once again, a walk through dangers and pitfalls, but he knows the prize will be exquisite.

To say he was disappointed was an understatement. His gaze loitered over every promising shadow, hoping to espy something related to potions, but the closest to a cauldron he could get was the gurgling brass coffee-maker in the corner. With a disgruntled sigh, he plucked up his cup and sipped the cappuccino. Coffee, cream and chocolate washed over his tongue, and he let the sensation oust his frustration. If he'd learnt one thing since being Snape's mentee it was that things happened...or didn't...for a reason. Another sip fended off a surprise counterattack of petulance, and then he relaxed, sagging bonelessly in the leather armchair. He was tempted to rest his aching feet on the low table, but he had a mental image of Snape's eyebrow twitching and Minerva pursing her lips, so he settled for merely extending them towards the crackling fireplace.

The location of the room was the same, but as with the Room of Requirement, it had morphed into one more suited to current needs, and Neville had needed a sit-down and a hot drink. Instead of the round table from his first visit, there was now a low table before a merry fire and two padded armchairs; the large arched windows had heavy drapes, which eased light gently into the room. It was cosy. The coffee-maker must be a set feature, he decided happily.

Behind him, he heard the wall clock chime out the quarter hour, and he pre-empted any rebellious upsurge of irritation by re-reading the scrawled note he'd found on the table. Snape had been held up with some school matter and would join him as soon as possible. His eyes followed the harsh slashes and the elongated loops, and he could imagine the author stabbing out the message as though paper had once dared to rebel at the prospect of being written upon. He had ended the note with a single initial, which mimicked a snake about to strike. Neville grinned and slid the slip of parchment back into his pocket.

While sipping, he idly wondered how they would start: would the room change into a Potions lab, or would they spend the first evening discussing options? The latter would

be disappointing, but he knew blundering in would be foolish. He sighed. Who was he kidding? He was so *eager* to begin that he'd happily risk losing his eyebrows! His palms practically itched. It suddenly struck him how strange his life had become. When he'd been here as a student, he had despised Potions, fretted before every lesson and hadn't dropped the subject fast enough. Yet here he was, silently begging for Snape to hurry.

An image of the black-clad wizard slipped into his mind, and he let his thoughts skip back over the last few months. It wasn't as though Snape was a completely changed character...a gaze, twitch of the lip or a single word could still elicit a shiver from him...but he was more accessible and less of a challenge. It was perhaps more a matter of the changes within himself over the years and his recollections of his school days armed with the knowledge of what had occurred behind closed doors and in secret. Either way, he realised with some degree of wonder that he actually enjoyed being in Snape's company...he even looked forward to it.

His scalp tingled. Surely this was because of the potion?! Snape had offered him a lifeline when he'd been at risk of drowning. This feeling of warmth and need was down to gratitude...surely! Neville relaxed and slunk down into his former slouch. When they started work on the potion, he'd be less awestruck and needy. It was just nerves and excitement. He just wished he could shift the nagging feeling that something else was lingering on the periphery of his thinking; it was most disconcerting.

He was debating whether to have another coffee or leave when the door opened and the fire guttered indignantly in the grate. Neville scurried up from his slouch and stood to greet Snape. The man looked haggard, the soft light paling his skin to an almost unhealthy pallor, and heavy shadows lingered beneath those dark eyes. It crossed his mind to ask if Snape wanted to postpone the meeting, but he bit his tongue.

"Coffee?" Neville asked, snuffing out the last embers of politeness.

Snape nodded curtly and stepped over to the furthest chair where he sat down with the smallest happy groan. As an afterthought, he tapped the low table and muttered something. In response, several platters appeared, laden with fruit, cold cuts, cheese and bread, accompanied by a pitcher and two goblets. Neville's stomach growled in appreciation.

"I missed dinner," Snape said brusquely. "We'll eat as we talk."

Neville's shoulders slumped slightly at the news that they wouldn't be starting immediately, but he accepted the wisdom. He returned to his seat, placing two coffees on the table. Snape nodded his thanks and then pulled out the battered black notebook that Neville had given to him. His pale, slender fingers caressed the supple leather, as though bidding it a farewell.

"I have no more need of this," he declared simply. "You have...exhausted all lines of enquiry...within."

It hadn't been meant as a criticism or scold, but some of the old Neville rose up in pained shock, but as Snape stretched and winced to offer the book, it settled back sheepishly. Snape had actually complimented his diligence and efforts. He had to fight to keep the satisfied grin off his face. The last vestiges of frustration and tension melted away, and he reached out to take back the precious account of his trials. His fingertip brushed over Snape's thumb, and he noticed the man's hand twitch as though the touch tickled. He smiled a quick apology.

"Thank you," Neville replied, tucking his book into his breast pocket. "I admit I have nowhere else to go potion-wise," he added while settling back with his cup. "I was thinking about using a concentrated tincture of Rosemary, but I'd need a powerful anti-emetic at the dosages required."

He continued in the same vein, offering suggestions and half-formed ideas, trying to draw inspiration from the air or purge himself of burgeoning possibilities. Snape listened attentively, nibbling on a sandwich and watching various expressions flit across the young face opposite. The passion for the subject was blatantly clear, the depth of knowledge staggering, and his energy quite exhausting to watch. Neville was a breath of fresh air in his currently suffocating world.

Despite the distance he'd endeavoured to maintain, they had attained a 'relationship' of sorts. Minerva would call it the stirrings of comradeship, or more alarmingly, friendship. This had happened quite rudely. It hadn't asked his permission or sought his approval; events had conspired against him to make Neville one of the few people who had seen him at his weakest. Fate had colluded to put Neville in the right place at the right time for him to feel an indefinable connection with the young man. The cosmos had given Neville the solution to all his woes and then plonked the boy right in his lap! And to make matters worse, Neville was...likeable.

He bit down harshly on the last bit of crust. In mentor meetings, Neville had been perspicacious, charming and relatively without fault. The other members of staff liked him, and the students respected him enough not to give him hell in class. The months had revealed a capable and dedicated man with a quirky and sometimes dark sense of humour, and what had impressed upon Snape the deepest was Neville's generosity of spirit and unquestioning support. Only Minerva had shown such unwavering and undemanding consideration of his well-being. And then there was this shared delight and irresistible challenge of striving for more: Potions and freedom. It was quite intolerable. Neville was running the risk of becoming important to him. And then there had been that subtle brushing of skin against skin.

He hadn't been able to ignore the electric jolt at the contact. He may have brushed it aside as a natural involuntary reaction, but then Neville had flashed him a gentle smile. It had somehow pierced all his defences and barriers. The last person to smile at him like that had been a lifetime ago when he'd told a girl she was a witch. Lily had smiled just like that. No judgment, no queries, no hidden agendas or promises, no tricks or catches: just the joy of a simple connection between two people. It almost hurt.

The more Neville shared with him...the humorous little anecdotes of potions with surprising consequences or hints of despairing times...the more he resonated in sympathy. He didn't like to admit it, but he felt a tremulous bond forming; their past strife and current plight connected them. His fears of having something he could lose or have ripped away from him reared up like a Dementor, leaving him sick to his stomach and reeling. This time it wasn't hope or a sense of escape, it was much worse. To hammer home what he could have...if his cautious hunch was correct...his skin still tingled from Neville's simple touch.

Snape stiffened in the chair. Part of him wanted to scream out, begging Neville to leave and never return, but another part stifled that demand, wishing to enjoy the rare wonder it was experiencing. In what had been an age of loneliness, hope was stirring and raging valiantly against self-preservation. What was life if it was careful? What was life if it was reined in? What was life if it was purposefully kept empty? He didn't like the answer.

Fear began to swirl in his guts. He'd lived with it for years, but this was different. The source of it wasn't outside in the shadows or on the end of a summons through his Dark Mark; it was within. His own thoughts and wants were the cause. The stimulus for it all was talking excitedly in the chair opposite, completely oblivious of their impact. A sudden thought made him blink and snort: had Neville felt something similar to this in every Potions lesson?

Neville stopped dead at the interruption and then sighed, looking dejected. "Yes, I suppose I was going off on a tangent."

The fear didn't completely evaporate, but it cleared enough for Snape to see some sort of way out. He was used to patience...knew her charm and wiles, her generosity and bitterness...and he knew how to deal with it. He'd use time and observation to ease his dilemma. Perhaps now he could actually nurture hope. Wasn't he owed?

"No," Snape uttered softly, his voice well-trained to disguise his true feelings. "In this case, all avenues are possible routes...to the destination."

oOo

The thing about spells affecting memory is that they tended to block rather than...as the spell name inferred...destroy. Peters knew this, although the mechanics of the spell eluded him. Therefore, he knew that with work, the affected memories could be restored. Oddly, their restoration wasn't the most immediate concern; he was more worried about making sure it didn't happen again. Working on the timeline had offered up only one possible scenario: he was being obliterated while working with Snape. Once this had filtered through his disbelief and repulsion, he had pondered the motives and possible goals of the offending parties. But his ruminations had only lead to one solid outcome: they wouldn't be pleased he knew.

It still baffled him as to what they wanted and what they were really up to. Snape always left in a relatively fit state...a bit confused but seemingly well enough to be released...so what happened in those odd moments of mental blackout was a mystery. The only thing of value Snape possessed was his memory, and he supposedly volunteered that as a condition of his release from Azkaban. Were Burke and Cross searching for memories beyond their remit? If so, he couldn't see why they would feel compelled to compound their crime with assaulting a fellow Auror. Also, it wasn't as though they had ever been given a formal range or types of memories to work with.

They had to be doing something that they perceived to be...dodgy.

Shaking off his circuitous thoughts, he followed the stream of fellow Ministry employees through the main doors and across the pale marble foyer. All he could do for now was wait until Snape was recalled and watch Burke and Cross as closely as he dared. Snape was a stubborn wizard who pushed himself to the absolute limits of the potion, so he guessed that he had about two weeks before things came to a head. He hoped it would give him time to discern some rhyme or reason to what was happening.

In all fairness he wasn't sure what he was going to do at the end of his investigation: who would he report them to? It wasn't as though he had concrete proof. His swirling guts had alerted him to some strangeness which had then led him to his conclusions, but his guts weren't admissible in court. He needed more than just hunches and headaches.

He slipped into the quiet canteen and grabbed a cup from a towering stack on the tea trolley. The urn gleamed in the sunlight; it was so well scrubbed it probably glowed in the dark. He muttered his desire, and as the hot water filled the waiting cup it turned black. Wafts of strong black coffee hit his nose and he inhaled appreciatively. Now he was armed with caffeine, he felt ready to head to the small room where he and the fellow low-level Aurors resided.

They had joined the department expecting challenging interrogations and exciting avenues of investigations, but most of the time, they say like forgotten tools in the shed. Only when they were needed were they summoned down to the interrogation rooms. They were considered trainees in the art of forensic memory examinations, but deep down they knew they were lackeys. It rankled, but they all had a passion for the work; they had all lost someone in the war. The chance to secure justice was just too alluring to give it all up.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the room was bigger, brighter and the atmosphere more warming, but it was too small, too dim, and it really needed better ventilation. However, they sat and worked in companionable silence, waiting for their cases to come in or some other summons from their mentors, all hoping that someday, they could host the interrogations.

At this hour, the office was usually empty, and it was a moment to cherish. It was silent, it was peaceful, and it felt proper. When the shift started, it escalated quickly to barely organised chaos, with paper darts zipping along corridors, secretaries chasing up tasks and Aurors dashing off for their meetings and assignments: complete madness. So it was with some flutter of annoyance that he noted someone was waiting in the room, disturbing his early morning routine.

"Hello, may I help you?"

The elderly man turned and smiled. "Yes, indeed."

Peters moved to stand behind his desk and plonked the cup down. As he did so he studied the newcomer. His age was evident from the deeply grooved skin and liver spots to the thin white hairs atop his head. He was tall, but age bent him down upon a black walking stick with a silver handle. Pale blue-grey eyes stared emptily back, and their lack of emotion disturbed Peters.

"My name is Archibald Stokes," he answered in a crackling, age-dried voice.

The name flicked a switch in Peters' head, and he wished he'd actually been late. Stokes was the man behind the department; the patron to which it owed its existence! His breath hitched and icy fingers played along his spine.

He let out a shaky laugh and extended his hand. "I am sorry, Mr Stokes," he muttered. "We had no idea that you'd scheduled a visit."

Peters felt his face flush. What on earth was *he* doing in this part of the department? No one had instructed him on what to say to the man in charge. It was nerve-racking! He'd worked in the Ministry for nearly ten years, and in all that time, he'd never spoken or been in the same room as the Minister; it just wasn't expected that the very humblest of staff members would ever meet the highest.

"Auror Cross is aware," he offered softly. "Although, I'm a little earlier than we agreed."

"Oh... er... would you like something to drink, sir?"

"No, thank you."

Peters' already limited amounts of idle talk dried up, and he frantically thought of something to say, but his mind was stubbornly blank. Gratefully, he was spared by the sound of the hearth flaring into life and the form of Cross emerging from green flames. While he adjusted his glasses, he flashed a puzzled glare Peters' way. Peters wondered if there was concern or guilt swirling in that quick glance.

"Ah, Mr Stokes," Cross began politely. "I was just informed that you'd arrived."

"Don't worry yourself," he replied generously. "I felt the need to see the fruits of my ideas and policies. Financing RID has brought me an immense amount of pleasure, but I was overcome with the desire to be a physical part of it...to have that tangible connection, rather than hold mere documents and reports."

Cross frowned and waved a hand towards the open door. "I can arrange a tour now, if you'd care to come to my office."

Stokes studied the small room with a fond smile, and then he seemed to deflate. "Of course, Cross, but first, I need to pay a visit to Maud."

"Maud Jenkins?" Cross declared with some confusion. "...yes, well, her station is on the way. If you'd follow me?"

"I have to inform her that a colleague of hers has sadly passed away," he added, ignoring Cross' hints to leave. "It will no doubt bring her great sorrow. And I believe Agnes Clewes will benefit from being informed. I would very much like to pass on my condolences to both ladies." Cross nodded and stepped closer to the waiting door. "Such a tragedy."

The old man turned slowly to face the door, his steel-grey eyes latching onto Peters for the smallest uncomfortable moment, and then he was hobbling away, his weight heavy on his black cane.

As he left, he uttered emptily, "But death will come to us all."

Promises and Prods

Various people decide that enough is enough.

It is a sad thing, but those who live through two terrible wars...more, if you include those revolving around Muggles...to a great age cannot cite luck as being the sole reason why. They survive because they possess skills, talents and character... and a pinch of luck; and they live because they have the mind to put such horrors in the corner, out of the way, out of sight. Suffice to say, it is those individuals who know how to do or survive terrible things who grow old. It was due to these skills, talents and presence of mind that both Maud and Agnes were able to sense some looming dread and confront it with only the smallest visible amount of worry.

It had been nine hours since a stranger had gallantly offered his sympathies and service to them in their time of grief, and they had continued to carry out their daily tasks and duties with utmost professionalism and attention. Perhaps around dinnertime in the canteen, they may have shared a perplexed and slightly fearful glance, but otherwise, they were granite: tough, hard and impermeable. If anyone had watched them throughout the day...and they suspected they had been...they'd have seen two sweet, old ladies doing their jobs. Beneath this smooth surface, however, their insides swirled as though the rock they resembled were being birthed beneath their skin: writhing, indescribable heat and terrible, crushing pressure.

But they were old and canny, and they knew how such things worked, so they bided their time, kept the gnawing and scratching impatience caged, and waited for a secure opportunity to talk.

Muggle pubs were fantastic places. Wizards tended to be far too snobbish at times, and they preferred to hold clandestine meetings in the most obscure forest, cavern or derelict building they could find. However, the best places were busy, Muggle public houses. There were several reasons for this: one, the mere thought of venturing into such areas was almost unthinkable to many wizards; two, the amount of technology that Muggles carried around with them these days was enough to disrupt all but the most sophisticated and fiddly of surveillance spells; and three, the atmosphere tended to be slightly better.

The Lamb was such a pub, and on Monday evening, it was heaving with people listening to a live band playing folk music. Maud and Agnes wove between the bustling listeners and settled onto a padded bench in the far corner, where they could see most of the lounge. They did so without so much of a drop being spilt. This wasn't down to any spell or charm, *per se*; there was just something about old ladies that resonated in certain people, and as such, the crowd unconsciously parted for them from some unspoken and mystical code of conduct. They took a sip of their drinks, sighed contentedly, then pulled off their hats and unwound scarves.

"I 'aven't 'ad a Bass shandy in years," Agnes muttered. "Shame that we're 'ere drinking to Norbert."

Maud tutted softly and took another dainty sip of her lager and lime. "He'd approve," she replied generously. "Although, I think he would have preferred us having something stronger...more refined, perhaps."

Agnes smiled sadly, tears glimmering against her lower lashes. "I can't stand whisky, me." She sniffed and dabbed them away with a hanky. "Even the smell puts me off." A pained sigh slipped past her wobbling lips. "Shame really, 'cos I always thought 'e were a 'andsome man."

"Oh, Agnes," Maud said gently, patting her friend's hand.

"I know, but such is life."

They drank in silence, listening to the odd strains of music filtering through the raucous crowd, until they were satisfied that no one had followed them or they were being overheard.

"The Ministry is treating the death as natural," Maud whispered with cold matter-of-factness. "No one saw anything to indicate spell-work, which is supported by the forensic team: no evidence of magic."

Agnes frowned and lowered her half-pint glass. "I can't say different," she mumbled. "The woman I questioned only 'eard a scream. No one actually saw it 'appen. I did a quick check, and I couldn't pick up anythin', either."

"Could it have been a heart attack?" Maud asked, and there was a hint of need in her voice.

Agnes sympathised. It would be so much easier and simpler if it had been; in that case, the man offering condolences would be just that. Agnes slowly shook her head. "I 'ave only that scream, but it's tellin' me it ain't right!"

Maud closed her eyes and nodded. Norbert's lungs had been all but useless; he ran out of breath just thinking about walking and, consequently, cast spells to help. With no magical traces, then he hadn't cast spells to aid his breathing, and if that were the case, then he couldn't have managed anything more than a strained rasping cry. That haunting scream lingering in their heads would have been beyond him. And if he had managed to howl, then somehow the magical trace of his spells had been eliminated. Either way, he hadn't died alone or naturally. At least, that was what their instincts were hinting at.

"Someone cast a spell then swept the place," Maud stated resignedly. "I can't think of many who would have the skill to do so thorough a job."

"They'd 'ave to know some of the tricks the forensics bods use," Agnes added just as dejectedly.

They paused and took a hefty gulp from their drinks. This was getting complicated, and the more Maud cogitated, the more she thought it had something to do with RID, Minerva's request and Peters. Somehow, they all connected. She hastily gulped down another mouthful.

"What exactly did Norbert say about those Black Memories?"

Agnes shuddered and went quite pale. "Just that 'e thought 'e saw a row of 'em down in one of the unused rooms, but when we went back down, there was no sign of anythin'." She took a fortifying sip and leant closer to Maud. "He said 'e was sure there'd been eight, but later 'e said 'e must 'ave dreamt it or somethin', 'cos there was nothin' there at all." She fixed Maud with a piercing glare. "Except dust!"

Maud returned the glare and snapped out in anger. "You went looking!"

"I may 'ave... but it were to put 'im right!" she replied tetchily, but then collapsed in upon herself and stared morosely at the tabletop. "'E kept 'arpin' on about somethin' not being right down there. So I went down there with 'im to shove 'is nose in 'is stupid paranoia; you an' me know that there *couldn't* have been them Black Memories down there!" she uttered emphatically. Or perhaps she was trying to persuade herself. "I missed it 'cos I was so angry, but Norbert must 'ave seen it. 'E went sick later that day, and I knew somethin' was wrong, but I was so mad at 'im for bringin' the past back." She looked up, her eyes wide, and she reached out to grab Maud's hand. "I'll never forgive meself for being so blinded."

Maud almost dropped her glass and felt her fingers tighten around Agnes'. There was something in her expression that made hairs stand up on end and her guts tighten.

"I may 'ave missed it altogether," she continued, fear tingeing her tone, "but they weren't clever enough; oh, 'e replaced Norbert's footprints in the dust and got rid of 'is own...even thought about the odd vermin traipsin' in...but they forgot about the door 'andle on the inside. When I'd grabbed it, it'd been thick with dust!"

Maud frowned delicately. "Norbert may not have touched the handle when he left?" she queried gently.

Agnes tutted and shook her head. "Don't matter, love," she said exasperatedly. "All door knobs in that Ministry are charmed to clean 'emselves when they're touched...somethin' to do with a spate of poisonin's back in the day from contaminated knobs...there's a load of dirty jokes scrawled in the men's lavvy about it. Anyway, if the outside is grabbed, then the inside gets a clean too. Norbert must 'ave seen the dust on me 'and and put it together."

"So, after Norbert went in there the first time, someone emptied the room, cleaned up, dressed the room in dust and footprints and Dis-Apparated out?" She studied Agnes carefully. "Are you sure no one saw you?"

Agnes rolled her eyes. "I was bloody good at infiltration back when we were fightin' Grindelwald, and I ain't changed... other than get old. I made sure I weren't seen."

"But... well, let's face up to it, we believe Norbert was killed for what he'd seen in the room, and I do believe they were exactly what Norbert claimed they were."

Agnes paled further and shook her head firmly, as though trying to knock out the abhorrent thought. "No, they can't be! They must be somethin' else... somethin' else that someone wants hidden. I don't even want to think about 'em!" she finished petulantly.

Maud was about to protest, but she knew Agnes would just dig her heels in and become stubborn. She decided to leave it; upsetting Agnes would serve no purpose. There was someone else who would benefit more from hearing about Black Memories, and she'd content herself to wait for then.

"Okay," Maud soothed. "But it would be more than fair to assume that anyone associated with Norbert will be scrutinised."

Agnes nodded and drank her shandy, still obviously unhappy about the direction the conversation had taken. Maud couldn't blame her. They'd come across Black Memories during their work against Grindelwald, and although they had only been whispered about, the mere concept had been enough to instil dread and nightmares. It was difficult to even imagine how the process worked and what it did without feeling nauseous and unclear. The knowledge that someone was actually collecting such memories was appalling.

"And I'm quite certain it's more than coincidence that someone like Stokes should come and convey his sympathies," Maud said tartly. "Did you know he finances RID?"

"No, but Cross looked nervous as 'ell, didn't 'e?" smirked Agnes.

Maud smiled wryly. "Yes, he did; and it'll do the smarmy bugger good to wriggle around a bit."

A giggle erupted from between Agnes' pursed lips, and her dark mood lifted a little. "I quite agree."

Maud paused, her mind whirling with plans and possibilities. They couldn't ignore this or hope that someone within the Ministry took up the challenge, but neither did she feel they were the ones to do such a tremendous thing. It was nerve-wracking. But a phrase sprang to mind: nothing is settled until it's settled right! If she left this, it would never be settled right, it would just settle. She really had no choice if she wanted to be reunited with her family and be able to hold her head high.

"We'll have to tread very carefully," Maud hissed out sharply. "We're not as...agile as we once were. If we err, it'll be more than us that suffers."

Her comrade nodded curtly. "I never liked what they were doin' down there. I sometimes think that what goes in doesn't come out...if you get me meanin'?"

To her shame, Maud acknowledged the comment and felt besmirched, dirty...almost culpable. "Well, it's about time it stopped."

"Right!" Agnes agreed forcefully, finding something more palatable to latch onto. "So, when are we goin' to look into the affairs of that Stokes man?" she asked with the slightest amount of glee.

"You're enjoying this aren't you?" Maud asked.

Agnes reared back, looking hurt, but then grinned. "You tellin' me that this 'asnt fired you up, woman? Merlin, I feel sixty years younger."

Despite herself Maud chuckled. "I believe it has."

"Besides," Agnes continued, a hard edge to her voice. "Someone killed Norbert, and in my book, that needs settlin'."

Maud nodded and lifted her glass. "It does indeed. To Norbert!"

The soft clink of glass against glass somehow managed to rise above the clamour of singing men and drums, and it had all the portent of the first gunshot.

oOo

Randal poked his porridge and sighed dejectedly. In between tasteless mouthfuls and glances to his right, he was trying not to let the inevitable bother him. When he'd drunkenly tried his luck with Neville, he'd spent the evening testing the waters, making subtle moves, reading signs. He knew Neville better than Neville knew Neville. He sighed and pushed a thick wall of soggy oats up against the side of his bowl. He would be lying if he said that he hadn't been crushed after his friend's gentle refusal, and he would be even more of a fibber if he said that he was completely overjoyed with current events. However, he knew better than to wish for things he couldn't have, and if Neville was attracted to Snape, then he wouldn't get in their way.

Jealous. Yes, he was jealous... and he was frustrated beyond words. He'd watched them over the last month and a bit...in mentor meetings, at staff meetings, at appraisals and at mealtimes...and the way they circled each other was driving him insane. He was half-tempted to lock them in the Potions cupboard and leave them to it until nature took its course.

Neville was in that confusing place of just trying to figure it out, but Snape... well Snape was an entirely different beast. He shuddered and pummelled down some unruly thoughts about the black-clad wizard; he doubted he could handle the Slytherin. A smile tugged at his lips; he'd enjoy trying to make sure, though.

He sobered and glanced across at Neville. Merlin, he could so very easily become lost in those silvery-blue eyes, but he knew he had no chance. At first, he'd suspected that Neville was in awe of Snape from his days as a student, but as time wore on, he came to recognise the symptoms. Unfortunately, Neville was utterly unaware of his condition. And perhaps it was this limbo that left him feeling so despondent and wistful: it opened up the possibility he could try to kindle something between himself and Neville. If Neville had turned him down and promptly run into Snape's arms, he'd have been gutted, but not left restless and ever-wondering.

Snape, on the other hand, had seemed to withdraw as far as manners would allow, and yet they somehow gravitated towards each other. He felt a flicker of sympathy for the Deputy Headmaster; there was no worse place than to feel an attraction and be unsure of its return. But the man would have to be blind not to see how Neville's manner changed whenever they were together! If Randal believed in fairy tales, he'd quite readily wish them a happy-ever-after. All Snape had to do was kiss sleeping beauty and wake him up.

He could just make out Snape's profile past Professor Sprout's hat, and he saw something like wariness on the pale features. From snippets he'd caught around the school and his memory of past events, he could hazard a guess that Snape was all about control and propriety and keeping 'in line'. Randal shivered. He knew all about keeping up appearances and being careful: about the sacrifices that had to be made and the opportunities mourned.

Admitting defeat on his breakfast, Randal sat back in the chair and surveyed the Great Hall. Most of the students had fled to their first lesson, and the remaining few, with bedraggled hair and fretful faces, gulped down eggs and sausages. He smiled as they rushed, knowing that he had the luxury of an after dinner start. With a thrill, he realised that Neville had most of the day off too. He smirked and drained the dregs of his pumpkin juice. If this was how it was, then he was damned if he was going to sit back any longer and watch them flutter around each other. It was high time that both of them realised what was happening. And if it came to Potions cupboards, then he was all for a helpful shove in the back.

Another day was neatly tucked under his belt, and he felt very happy with his performance to date. Pomona had informed him with a beaming smile that he was not only hitting all the targets for the term's work but he had managed to surpass a few. The students seemed to like him; his fellow teachers were now in that tetchy stage when talking to him, which in his scheme of things meant they had accepted him into their fold, otherwise they'd still be overly polite. He'd never felt quite so secure, and Snape

had finally started work on his dream, so all in all, he was very, fluffily happy. The next meeting was heavy in his mind, but he knew the week's workload would help time pass quickly. Nothing could scupper Neville's good mood.

Tuesday was a good day for him, as he had one lesson before dinner and then his timetable was clear until the last lesson of the day. It was an opportunity to collect ingredients and enjoy the glorious countryside around Hogwarts. After signing out, he took the main path down towards the jetty on the lake. It seemed a life-time ago when he'd docked there as an eleven-year-old boy, terrified and exhilarated. He smiled at the boats bobbing gently next to the wooden walkway and continued down to a small inlet where he'd noticed some interesting algae the week before.

The air had a nip to it, and by the water's edge, he felt chilled, but it was invigorating in a strange way: icy fingers pinching his cheeks, and cool palms slipping under his sleeves and collar to caress his skin. He wanted to raise his arms and let the wind curl around his body, but he thought it would be too much this close to the castle, so he lifted his chin and shook his head. The breeze obliged and ran through his brown hair, brushing over his throat and teasing the nape of his neck. He grinned. It was just the right side of naughty. And if anyone saw him, they'd just think him silly.

He indulged himself for a few minutes before plonking himself down on the thick grass and poking the collection of deep maroon and dark green algae with his wand. He wasn't sure as of yet what species he was examining, but such things had amazing properties, and he'd resolved to collect and study his find, to wring out every secret it possessed. His work comforted him, and he busied himself testing and harvesting, his eyes ever watchful for other interesting sample and specimens.

Across the lake, dark eyes were also watchful. It wasn't as though they had intended to spy, but while he'd been out collecting potion ingredients and seeking a moment of selfish peace, he'd noticed Neville. Their owner had not found Neville's moment of self-indulgence to be silly. On the contrary, it had almost been his undoing. Of course, they were heavily disadvantaged in their interpretations of facial expressions and the inviting tilt of a jaw. Snape had been almost jealous of the wind's freedoms.

Neville had developed into a remarkably attractive man, and he was wonderfully oblivious of such. Too many of Snape's former associates had known exactly what power they had and used it brutally at times. Neville's innocence was quite... soothing; it offset the almost heart-stopping terror of his allure. It also gave Snape a sense of power, and that was dubiously empowering and...erotic.

Decades ago, this had been so simple. He hadn't cared about consequence; the fear of not being close to the person he loved had been more devastating than anything else. He'd suffered the wrath of Gryffindors and the disgust of Slytherins, and it hadn't mattered. It had even made him beg at the feet of a Dark Lord and all that entailed, but nothing had mattered but her and the horror of living without her. Now, he could barely even admit to himself what he felt. When had he become so...cowardly?

While he ruminated on unfavourable and unwanted answers, he caught sight of Randal sauntering down towards Neville. A hot flash of something that he begrudgingly accepted as envy flared in his gut, and he wanted nothing more than for the handsome and charming professor to turn tail and run. Unfortunately, said handsome man saw Neville and practically skipped over. It was sickly sweet; there should have been rainbows and bluebirds. Snape felt his teeth crunch in their sockets as his jaw muscles bunched. If only he could get away with a hex...or small curse; he knew ways to hide spell-casting. His palm itched to hold his wand, but he resisted the urge: Minerva would only scold. From his vantage point, he settled for the next best thing and cast a spell to eavesdrop.

"Hello, Randal," Neville said with genuine warmth. Snape's insides turned to ice.

"Hey, Nev."

Nev? What an insult to shorten such a name!? Snape groused. Personally, he'd only ever tolerated having his name contracted by two people and only because he'd loved them: Lily and his mother. His icy guts suddenly turned to water, and he felt nauseous. Had he lost Neville even before he'd held him? He studied Rhine as a competitor, and his flagging spirits guttered. His body sagged, and he held onto the slender trunk of a nearby silver birch.

"Pomona said you'd be down here," Randal continued.

"I was going to classify this handsome chap and then see if it could be of use in the curriculum somewhere: there is a decided lack of aquatic plants on the syllabus."

"If you say so," Randal replied sceptically.

Neville laughed, and Snape revelled in the soft baritone rumble. If this was all he was going to get...these crumbs from someone else's table...then he was going to glut.

"You should give it a go," Neville chided gently. "There's something so...simple and honest about tending plants, watching something grow under your hands."

Randal sniffed and frowned. "I prefer reading."

Neville laughed again, and Snape's heart clenched. It was almost torture...or a punishment: a punishment for being a coward.

"Each to their own," he acquiesced with a shrug.

"So, you've been busy chasing down shrubs and things for the last few days and nights?" Randal asked rather too innocently.

Neville glanced up from his task. "I've had some extra work from Professor Snape, and the workload is always heavy at this time of year: seeds and flowers need more attention."

"Professor Snape?" Randal repeated smugly. "You mean 'Severus', surely?"

Even from his distant viewpoint, Snape could see a blush creep up Neville's neck. "Yes," Neville mumbled. "But.. well...it's difficult to explain," he added defensively.

Randal laughed, and it was full of mirth and mischief. "Still worried that he'll hand out lines or a detention?"

"No," Neville retorted sulkily.

"No concerns that he'll corner you like a child out after curfew and fix you with a dark stare while he numbers your sins? Hmm?"

There were undercurrents in those questions that swirled past Neville completely unobserved but caught Snape, almost sweeping him away.

Randal lithely sat down, his knee bumping Neville's in the process. Snape felt something pop in his ever-tightening jaw at their proximity; it was unseemly, inappropriate and jealousy burnt his chest. To his dismay and frustration, Randal leant in and loomed over Neville, his eyes hooded and undecipherable as he held Neville's perplexed gaze.

"Scared that he'll make your knees tremble and go weak?"

Neville tutted and turned back to the slippery plant. "I'm not scared of him."

Randal snorted and leant in further so that his lips were at Neville's ear. "You have no need to be," he whispered, his breath ruffling the fine hairs at his temple. "You're not a child anymore; you're a professor now, just like he is."

Snape almost snarled when Randal's pale, slender hand slipped up Neville's arm to rest on his shoulder, and fingernails bit into the smooth silvery bark when Randal moved to surreptitiously inhale Neville's scent. How could Neville be so godsdamned oblivious?! He had to grip the tree to stop himself drawing his wand. It was maddening to watch Randal do so easily what he longed to do so hungrily.

"I know that," Neville snapped rather waspishly.

Randal paused, then rolled his eyes and settled back with a fond smile playing about his lips.

"You're missing one hell of an opportunity," he sighed.

"What are you talking about?" laughed Neville.

"If I had been right about you," continued Randal light-heartedly, "and I were you, then Severus would have to be ever so careful around me."

Snape frowned and some of the tension eased; this change in direction was interesting. Perhaps Randal wasn't quite the predator after all, and he rested against the trunk, wishing that the spell could also enhance what he was seeing; he longed to observe what was flitting across Neville's face.

"The things I'd want to do and have done." He sighed as though savouring some sweet dream and closed his eyes. "I'd ache to have you look at me with eyes full of every delicious wickedness that could be done. I'd burn in that stare. Why, I do believe I'd even beg you to look at me that way," he said softly, opening his eyes and studying Neville's face. "And I doubt he'd want someone to cower before him. Oh no," he said conspiratorially. "He'd want me to fight, so there was no choice but to punish me... break me. He'd want to lick and touch, and bite and suck until he was my utter undoing, and I'd beg him *not* to stop."

His voice was so light and whimsical that Neville listened in befuddled disbelief. Snape, however, was listening to someone describing his most desperate wants. His breath caught in his throat, and he went lightheaded. It was all he could do stand upright. Just before Snape felt obliged to hex the young man, Randal was sitting back, idly caressing the stiff grass and looking as innocent as any first-year. Snape looked at Neville, who seemed in a daze, and he wondered just how Randal's little speech had impacted upon the Gryffindor. It was difficult to spot the signs that would have given him clues: his pupils flaring; the flicker of a pulse in his throat; shallow breaths over swollen lips.

"But he's a teacher!" gasped Neville, completely scandalised.

"You're not his student anymore, you know?" Randal teased gently.

What he wouldn't give to see Neville's face! Within the last few words, Snape's view of Randal had changed immeasurably. He wasn't completely sure what the redhead was up to, but the threat he posed seemed to diminish.

The blush intensified. "This is silly," Neville snapped out.

"Okay," he replied. "But you know you don't really want him to be just a teacher, don't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Neville asked exasperatedly.

"Oh come on, Neville!" he hissed out in frustration. "Don't tell me that you haven't noticed how...fascinating Severus is?"

The question rattled around in two skulls: Neville was trying to grapple with seeing Snape as anything other than a Potions teacher, and Snape's mind had temporarily shut-down. Both of them, however, looked at Randal as though seeing him for the first time. Neville eventually shook his head and shrugged, but his lips were firmly pressed together. Snape's eyes narrowed, and he longed to rummage around in Randal's head to determine what the young Arithmancer was playing at. It almost seemed that he was being helpful, but to what end, he had no idea: Randal could just be dead-set on driving them both insane.

"You like him?" Neville asked gently.

Randal snorted. "Do you?"

There was a tense pause in which Snape held his breath and Randal looked as nonchalant as a cat watching a canary.

"I think you're barmy," Neville said with a shaky laugh. "He's Snape."

That seemed to answer everything, and he turned back to harvesting the plant. Behind him, Randal sagged before looking up to the heavens as though seeking help. After a minute of determined gardening and silent hoping, Randal sighed and stood.

"I have to go back," Randal muttered despondently. "I have some marking to do. See you later for dinner?"

Neville nodded slowly, his head still spinning from the odd conversation. "Yes, sure." He suddenly rose to his feet and grabbed Randal's arm before he could walk away. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not sure I understand."

Randal smiled and cupped Neville's face tenderly. "I know."

Then he leant in quickly and pressed his mouth against Neville's, long enough for the shock to wear off but short enough that the mind hadn't quite settled upon a decision. With that, Randal turned on his heel and stomped rather forlornly away, leaving two very thoughtful wizards behind.

Misery and Misunderstanding

Chapter 18 of 22

Randal's bid to help backfires and Snape has to take another potion.

Randal had kept his distance since the encounter by the lake. He would have liked to have said that he was being noble and giving his friend time to adjust to the kiss, but in truth, he was protecting himself. That afternoon had almost ruined him, and Randall had needed to adjust. The motive for the gentle kiss was uppermost in his mind, and he kept it there, otherwise he feared he'd succumb to his own selfishness and sweep Neville off his feet. He just hoped Snape made a move soon; good intentions had a best before date.

Damn the man!

His thoughts shifted from Neville to the enigmatic potions master, and it suddenly struck him that maybe he should be focusing more on Snape than Neville. After all,

Neville was still feeling his way, as it were, but he was pretty sure Snape knew the shape of things. His lingering frustration dissipated like clouds under a hot sun. Was it possible to fan Neville's flames for Snape with some carefully placed jealousy? The thought had appeal...on so many levels. The problem was how to progress without jeopardising himself...or Neville. He nibbled anxiously on his lower lip. Love was many things...and it could hurt like hell. The question that followed him into a fitful sleep was whether it was worth the risk.

Good ideas never came at a good time, and when Randall woke, he did so to have his enthusiasm blunted. Through his window, he could hear the excited chanting of pupils as the morning built up towards the first Quidditch match of the season. Not being a fan of the sport meant that the preparations had passed unnoticed, and not being from Hogwarts, he had no particular allegiance to a House. He idly wondered if he should support Gryffindor or Slytherin, but the thought of sitting outside in the thin drizzle, crammed between supporters, did not appeal to him in the slightest. His plans to play Cupid would have to wait. From what he understood, Quidditch trumped everything...even love.

At breakfast, he saw Neville, wearing his House scarf and chatting excitedly to McGonagall. Later, Gryffindor played Hufflepuff, and although the outcome seemed fairly secure, there was still a buzz of excitement in the air. Such was the focus on the impending match that no one noticed him sit and eat, and Randall felt acutely isolated. He ate quickly and slipped away, comforting himself with the thought that he could catch up on his reading. It was a small comfort, however, as he walked along deserted hallways and heard distant snatches of gleeful laughter and whistles. Even the picture frames hanging on the walls were empty, the occupants securing better vantage points to watch the match. He would have laughed it off as the madness that sport engenders had not the weight of his sudden disconnection descended so heavily. He was almost bereft.

Feeling childish, he changed direction, heading for his room rather than the library. There was no reason why he couldn't join in. Quidditch couldn't be that bad. Besides, he was good at keeping up appearances. However, the closer he got to his room, the clearer an idea became. Everyone seemed nuts about Quidditch, and as deputy headmaster, Snape would be expected to attend every match. Randall was beaming by the time he entered his room and dug out his warm scarf. Having no House to support was suddenly a bonus. Quidditch was the arena in which he'd play, and Snape would be the Snitch. Even November drizzle wouldn't deter him.

ooOoo

It always amused Snape how friendly relations could disintegrate so quickly whenever Quidditch loomed. Just ahead of him, he could see the two figures of Pomona and Minerva walking along the path winding its way from the castle to the pitch. He couldn't quite catch what words passed between them, but their body language spoke volumes. The air practically sizzled. As they approached the base of the stands, he caught sight of Neville waiting by the curtain flap. He smiled at the witches, and Pomona was gallant enough to smile in return and give his arm a friendly squeeze before slipping past. Minerva paused to ask him something, then they too went inside. For some reason, Snape had stopped, his feet rooting to the spot. He convinced himself that he was merely giving them time to get settled in the stands...being polite.

"Hello, Professor Snape."

Years of perfecting indifference meant that he could turn to face Randall without so much of a flicker on his face. The young redhead was smiling innocently.

"Professor Randall."

"I was hoping to meet up with you."

The sentiment took him by surprise. He thought he'd disabused anyone of the notion that he could be approached sociably, but he couldn't deny the prospect appealed. Randall had featured in his thoughts repeatedly over the last few weeks, and especially since Tuesday. The urge to peer past those deep, green eyes pestered, but he restrained himself. On the face of it, Randall just seemed to want some company at the Quidditch match. What harm was there in that?

"Shall we?" he asked, waving his hand towards the gap in the curtain.

Randall nodded and stepped past, pulling the fabric aside. Snape nodded his thanks and walked through and up to his seat, acutely aware of Randall on his heels. As they wound their way up the wooden steps, it was as though Randall's body heat warmed his back, which was absurd, as he was wearing a coat thick enough to deflect spells. Nevertheless, it made his skin itch and spine tingle. A mix of frustration and delight squirmed in his belly, but a sense of vulnerability stained the feeling. It had been a long time since he'd dared to think of...

He stopped himself. Such thoughts meandered down dark and dangerous paths. Besides, it was still unclear what Randall's role and motives were in all of it. After all, a few days ago, it seemed that Randall was after Neville. Snape didn't like the thought that he was a poor substitute for the big prize. Sobering, he took his place, as did Randall. The teacher stands were not as packed as they could be, and Snape was grateful...it meant that they weren't pressed up against each other...and Randall was a polite distance away.

Throughout the match, Randall showed nothing but a keen interest in learning the basic principles of the game and how he could support Quidditch without alienating the students. Snape relaxed into the role, lost in the rules and regulations, strategies, fouls and penalties. He had never played, but as a youth, he had often proposed tactics to his house team. Some of that distant thrill strummed through him as he educated Randall.

Slowly, Snape warmed slightly towards the young man. If he were truthful, he was quite pleased: Quidditch did not appeal to him with the same vigour as his peers, so he found these matches almost tedious, save for Slytherin games. Randall helped pass the time rather pleasurably. It almost came as a shock when Gryffindor caught the snitch and with a roar, the match was ended.

Children sauntered out and back to the castle, excitedly discussing the highlights and bemoaning the failures. Randall sat and waited for Snape to stand, but the older wizard remained seated. From behind, Ravenclaw and Slytherin teachers chatted about the upcoming threat to their Houses as they left. Soon, only Snape and Randall remained. After a few moments, he realised why. A shimmering tabby sauntered into view, its tail high, almost grinning. Randall watched it leap up onto the balustrade and glide towards Snape.

"One hour and twelve minutes," she purred in Minerva's voice. "I hope your Seeker has been putting in some practise."

Next to him, Snape chortled softly. "Your Seeker was lucky. A shaft of sunlight at...the right time...hit the Snitch."

The cat sat and daintily licked a front paw, exuding innocence from every strand of fur. "Slytherin and Ravenclaw next time," she uttered smoothly. "Let's hope the weather is fine."

With that, she miaowed and faded away.

"I see the staff are just as devout as the pupils."

"Quidditch is...a large part of the school," Snape elaborated, standing with the smallest wince as his joints protested. "It connects us all. Professor McGonagall was...a keen player when she attended school."

"And you?"

Randall almost apologised for his question as Snape rose an eyebrow and thinned his lips. It had seemed innocent enough when he'd asked, but he sensed a load of baggage behind it. That eyebrow was remarkably expressive.

"Not all of us...are gods on broomsticks."

Sometimes, there are moments when someone's thoughts are chaotic and raw, and for a Legilimens of skill, these thoughts almost leap out, as if eager to be seen. Snape sealed his mind from the vivid thoughts, but not quickly enough to avoid getting a few confused snippets of memories. He saw a ring of leering faces, a broken broomstick,

felt warm blood on his face...the sting of humiliation. He swallowed against the savagery of it...and the familiarity.

"We usually have tea...in the staffroom," he added soothingly, to which Randall smiled and nodded gratefully, seemingly unfazed by Snape's bitter comment. Snape was impressed, as many people couldn't control the subtle emotions from skittering across their face or swimming in their eyes with such skill.

"That'd be wonderful."

ooOoo

Neville held the cup in his hands, using it to warm his fingers. He'd forgotten how cold it could get. His toes were jealous, but they'd have to wait. The staffroom was brimming with post-match excitement, and he found it rather strange that it bore a remarkable similarity to his days in the Gryffindor common room. He wondered what it would be like in here when the Cup was awarded. Pomona was extolling the skill of her team, which was fair, given the challenges of the game, and it was lovely to see her face beaming with pride. Now that the match was over, Minerva and Pomona were talking animatedly together.

His gaze drifted over the gathered staff, and he realised that Snape and Randall were absent. He was sure he'd caught a glimpse of Snape earlier, but he hadn't seen Randall since Tuesday. That afternoon had confused him, and even after several days of mulling it over, he was still unsure what had happened. A blush warmed his neck. He knew he'd been kissed, and he'd found it...nice. His lips had tingled for hours. Perhaps he should have been offended that Randall had done it, especially after the Firewhiskey incident, but he just couldn't summon any ire. If anything, he just found it all confusing. There had been nothing in his younger days to suggest this development; he'd pined after Ginny. She had been his everything. Afterwards, life had become...complicated. He snorted. Was it really possible to be this unaware?! He was old enough to be a professor, old enough to have demons haunting him, and old enough to be a father, yet he felt so...naive. He took a fortifying sip of tea. One thing he did suspect was that he doubted he'd mind if Randall did it again.

Speaking of the devil! The man in question just entered the room, followed by Snape. Neville knew both of them well enough to see that they were companionable, and he realised with a shock that he was a little envious of how easily Randall dealt with Snape. He watched them walk over to the tea urn, where Randall prepared cups for them. He chatted to Snape as though they'd been friends for years. Neville was irked to see Snape flash a smile, and when Randall handed Snape the cup, he really could have let go of it sooner. It looked as though he was purposefully holding onto it. It began to dawn on him that Randall had been discussing Snape on that interesting Tuesday afternoon. A delicate frown ruffled his forehead. He remembered asking Randall if he liked Snape. So did that mean Randall thought Snape wouldn't mind if he were kissed by...

His perusal was interrupted when Pomona gently touched his elbow. "Good match, eh? I knew it would be." For a moment Neville couldn't breathe; he wondered if such things were blindingly obvious and he was somehow completely blind! "Cooper has a way with him for getting the best out of people, and he's done wonders with the new Chasers." His breath came out in a soft sigh; it had nothing to do with Randall and Snape: everything was Quidditch.

"I was impressed. I think they'll give Ravenclaw a run for their money," he said enthusiastically, happy to be on firmer ground.

It was one of the things he loved about her: she always saw the individual effort and work and appreciated it. Everyone flourished under her care and guidance. He allowed himself to be caught up in her praise of her team, relishing her energy. She finished by giving his arm a gentle squeeze and congratulating Gryffindor on their victory. By this time, his tea was stone cold.

"Want a refill?"

Neville almost jumped out of skin. Laughing at himself, he turned and saw Randall looking sheepish. The confusion that had plagued him before melted away. It was impossible not to get along with the redhead. He couldn't help but cast around for Snape. The potions master had settled himself by the fire, nursing his tea and warming his feet before the flames.

"Not really," he answered. "I'd much rather have some coffee."

"Thank goodness!" Randall whispered. "I've been gasping all day, but everyone here only had tea. I thought it was sacrilege or something to ask for coffee during Quidditch."

Neville chuckled and lead him back to the urn. "I don't think you'll burn for drinking coffee, but you won't get any here."

"Oh...want to come back to mine and I'll brew some proper stuff?"

"Sure."

It was as though nothing had happened. They drank coffee, shared their recent classroom experiences, laughed, moaned about the protocols they'd had to learn and basically caught up. The bell for lunch caught them by surprise.

"Better go down for food, I guess," mumbled Randall. "I've been rather remiss of late."

"Me too," agreed Neville. "What with one thing and another, I've not been in the Great Hall since Monday."

"Come on, then," Randall urged, giving Neville a playful push on his back. "I'm starving!"

Neville laughed and grabbed his coat and scarf. "I'll meet you there. I'm going to drop these off and pick up some notes."

"Oh," Randall said with a frown. "You have a mentor meeting?"

"No, but I could do with popping into the library after lunch to brush up on some potions. Nothing important." Neville wished it could have been something more important, but recent weeks had proven too strenuous to carry on with his project, and until something clicked into place, he doubted they would start any time soon. The best he could do was refine what he currently knew and hope he had something good for Snape soon.

Randall shrugged his shoulders and flashed a smile. "Kind of glad I'm doing Arithmancy: less work by the sounds of it. Good luck!" he added impishly.

Neville blushed delicately and smiled back. "I should say the same to you."

Randall laughed bemusedly. "Why?"

Neville coughed nervously, feeling a little out of depth...he'd never even really egged on his friends at school for getting girlfriends: this was...awkward. "When you asked me about Snape, I didn't quite understand, but now I do. Good luck, you know, with Snape." With that, he patted Randall's shoulder and slipped out.

ooOoo

It had almost reached the two week mark prophesied by Cross. True to his prediction, Snape was reaching his limit. He had done well this time, in part to Neville and Randall. Both men had offered him something to ease the sting of his existence. However, dark curses cannot be staved off forever. His left arm ached. His throat burned. Minerva had seen his small decline, and they'd discussed his actions earlier in the staffroom. She hadn't liked to suggest the potion, but she had to put her role as Headmistress above her feelings, and she couldn't risk his deterioration affecting the students. True to his character, Snape had agreed, even if his lip had curled in disgust.

A protest had lingered on his tongue, but he'd reminded himself that Neville had come to his rescue in the corridor. It would be devastating if a student found him. He

detested having to plan his life and schoolwork around his need. Sometimes, he wondered if death would be a better alternative; it would certainly spite the Ministry.

The lunch bell chimed, but he had no inclination toward leaving his room. If he took the potion, he would be well enough to join them for dinner. Disgusted beyond description, he heaved himself out of the armchair and stormed over to his desk. In the soft candlelight, the wood glowed blood-red. He ran his fingers over the dark surface, letting the familiarity soothe him. This desk had been in his allotted rooms, almost waiting for him, on his first day as Potions master, when his life had ended and he began pretending to live another for the sake of a promise. It had been in a sorry state, dusty and battered. In a bizarre way, he'd seen it as a reflection of himself. He hadn't used magic to restore it, but time and effort. It had taken months just to sand it down, to remove the patina of neglect and abuse. Each curl and ridge along the legs, the carcass for the drawers, the drawers themselves and the desktop. His fingers had bled, he'd had blisters and splinters and the dust had aggravated his eyes, but he had worked until the wood was smooth as glass. Then, he'd applied a stain, turning the mahogany wood a deeper shade, watching in amazement as the stain made it glorious.

The grain of the wood had greedily soaked it up, creating sweeping patterns which made it seem a living, breathing thing. Then a layer of varnish and gentle sanding, another layer and another varnish, until he had something beautiful, clean and pure. Dumbledore had commented upon its beauty many times, and maybe he had shared in Snape's fancy that it was linked to his own soul. Either way, the desk reminded Snape that not everything that is ruined or rotten is completely lost.

He collapsed onto the stool...one from the Potions classroom...and ran a palm over the surface. It was no longer smooth as glass. It was marked by his usage: grooves from his nib pressing through paper, circles from the bottom of his mug, worn spots from his elbows, pockmarks from reagent spills, a burn from a spell cast in anger. Some would call it carelessness on his part, but the marks and his desk told the story of his life in Hogwarts. He had few possessions that he held dear, and the desk was one of them. It pained him sometimes that he had no one to pass it on to, that the desk would become lost and alone without him.

Inside the top drawer rested his potion kit, and with bitterness, he removed it. It was a replica of the one in his spare room, but this one had one more phial. The crimson bottle was small and innocuous...and it was his last resort. He'd held it many times, even brought it to his lips once or twice, but he'd never despaired enough or had the courage to drink.

His fingers lingered on it, but then moved on towards the clear pear-shaped phial and the amber liquid inside. It was beautiful, he admitted begrudgingly; not only for its complexity and the skill in preparing it, but for its colour. In the gentle candlelight it appeared dark, like a fine whiskey, and in the sun, it glimmered like sunlight caught in a bottle. It had no discernible smell, but when he drank it, he was reminded of peaches. He couldn't reconcile how something so beautiful and delicate could engender such terrible things in his life. With a soft sigh, he pulled it free from its snug and removed the stopper. In one hasty gulp, he swallowed it. A dubious lethargy spread through his limbs. He would sleep for a few hours, then wake feeling refreshed and full of vigour, and he would battle his sense of defeat and weakness for needing the potion. In a daze, he plodded from stool to bed, and with the scent and taste of peaches, he slipped into an empty sleep.

Author's notes: I am need of a beta for this story. If you're interested and can tolerate having all kinds of angst, pain, suffering and other evil things thrown at you, then I'd really appreciate your help :) Oh...and it's a long story.

Pensieves and Possibilities

Chapter 19 of 22

Old secrets come back to haunt Maud and Agnes. Snape has an interesting run in with Randall.

Stoke's visit had shaken Cross. It was undeniable, but he still couldn't discern the exact reason why. His role hadn't been threatened, his professionalism not questioned, but something lingered, like an unpleasant aftertaste. Combined with Burke's impatience, he was beginning to feel pressured. Snape was close to breaking, but to rush its conclusion would only destroy his mind. Cross still harboured the desire to crush Snape utterly. Burke could pluck all the Unforgivables and Unspeakables from Snape's mind as he wanted, but Snape belonged to him until he was a gibbering, broken wreck, begging at his feet, mewling and bawling, accepting his guilt. No Death eater was innocent; no Death eater was worthy of forgiveness.

Snape was stronger than he'd given him credit for, and his friends and allies were confounded to a degree he'd never seen before. The Dark Lord had obviously taught him some exceptional spells to befuddle and bewitch, but everyone cracked. The professors would be hurt for a while, betrayal always hurt, but in time, they'd be thankful for having Snape's veil lifted from their eyes. Perhaps when Snape was finally punished, RID would be suitably lauded and Cross could rest easy in the department's future. Then he could cast off such leeches as Burke.

As in if answer to his thoughts, a soft chime rang out. A potion had been used. There were still quite a few Death eaters left who required the potion, so his heart didn't flicker at the cue, but his breath caught and his heart lurched when he saw the patient number: one six nine. His thin lips cracked into a smile. Maybe soon, he could try some of the new tactics he'd researched. An automatic response was prepared. All that was required was a signature, and then Snape would be his. He settled back in his chair with a smile, his concern melting away as he planned the next session.

ooOoo

Agnes and Maud knew Norbert had lived a long and lonely life, but it still cut to the quick that they mourned alone and no one seemed to notice he was no longer around. They comforted each other with the knowledge that they were the best at their jobs, which is exactly why no one knew or remembered them. It was a bittersweet solace. And because they were good, they were now barely making a ripple, even though their insides squirmed unpleasantly, and the very walls of the Ministry seemed to drip with old and vile secrets. Today was different though. Agnes had done the dishes.

Norbert had been a sly one...a clever one. His plans and tactics had saved their lives on many occasions, and now his death had done the same. The uneaten bowls of soup that he'd placed so carefully in the floo grate had contained more than just cold chicken broth. When the investigation had closed and his property opened to family and friends, Agnes had been to the dingy house and collected what was hers: odd cups, cutlery, a few bits of crockery, the good teapot and the dirty bowls. Preservation spells cast at the time of discovery meant that nothing had altered since that night, and it had snatched her breath that the last bowl had still been warm.

Angry and hurt at his death...possible murder...she'd found the uneaten food an insult to her care and diligence. A bowl had met a messy end when it connected with a wall. As the contents had slid down, she'd caught sight of something glimmering. Curious, she had stepped over to see what was hidden within the broth. Norbert had bequeathed them what he'd seen...and more.

Acting quickly, she'd saved the silvery gifts and then sifted through the other bowls. In total, she'd found twelve distinct memories. Baffled, proud, anxious and determined, she'd contacted Maud, and they'd visited the Lamb to discuss their next move. After a shandy and stout, they'd planned to meet up again at the weekend, to give them time to see if anyone else was interested in cold chicken soup.

Now, almost two weeks after his death, they sat at Maud's kitchen table, staring at the pensieve and the swirling memories within. The old wall clock ticked away, and the house creaked as it settled. Within the small stone bowl swam demons and devils, and they were afraid to dive in, but they were Norbert's, and they knew they couldn't ignore it. Glancing at each, dread etched in their faces, they reached in and let the memories swirl around their trembling fingers. Within moments, they were drawn into

darkness and things long past.

It wasn't pleasant. To convey his conviction, he'd drawn out the memories from his time at Grindelwald's side, where he had worked on refining the concept of Black Memories, so that Maud and Agnes could find no escape in denial. Every evil thing he'd done was laid before them. In hindsight, his behaviour, evasiveness, loneliness and pain made more sense, became more pertinent and poignant. They were torn between a sense of keen betrayal and an intense longing to let him know he'd earned forgiveness.

There had been only one memory of immediate interest, and that had been when he'd first drawn a Black Memory. Despite what was displayed before them, they still found it impossible to believe that something so evil could exist. After the shock had dimmed to a dull ache, they returned to the memory to review it dispassionately, to learn all its secrets.

Norbert...young and wild-eyed...was bent over a corpse: it's skin dry and shrunken, the hair thin and wispy, lips shrivelled and pulled back. It was clearly long dead. It was laid out on a table, surrounded by stubby flickering candles and bunches of strange herbs and burning stalks sending oily curls of blue smoke into the air. In the flickering light, they saw him mutter a spell while moving the wand in a complicated sigil, air currents catching the smoke and directing it into swirls and odd shapes. Behind him, they saw the shadowy outline of another wizard, his face hidden but his stance tense and alert. Norbert continued muttering and swaying for several minutes, sweat beading his brow and his face contorting with effort. Contrary to the natural order of things, the corpse twitched, then the jaw moved. Fingers jerked and the scrawny feet kicked feebly. The stranger let out a rasping sigh, reaching out to clasp Norbert's shoulder. He leaned forwards to study the animated cadaver, and his face came into the light. It was Grindelwald.

Despite the shock, they continued, dreading the rest of the memory, but eager to learn all that Norbert wanted to teach them. Their gazes were drawn back to the desiccated face. The tongue had long since wasted away, as had the eyes, so it mouthed silent words while eyeless sockets drew them towards unfathomable depths. Wasted hands began to claw at the air and the legs spasmed.

"Quickly!" Grindelwald demanded. "You know what I need."

Norbert nodded and placed his wand at the thing's temple and began to tug. To their horror, they saw him spool out thin, viscous black strands. It clung to the wand like bitumen, glistening revoltingly in the candlelight. He lifted a bottle and eased the mass from the tip, watching it slide slowly down the glass like a fat slug. He returned to his task, each time pulling out the Black Memories, ignoring the plaintive struggles of the thing on the table. The reluctant witnesses were transfixed as he worked, pulling hours, then days worth of memories out of the corpse's empty skull.

Their minds couldn't quite fathom the mechanics of how it was working, the answers too abhorrent and sickening to contemplate, but they were forming an unsettling conclusion. Somehow, the soul's very memories were being pulled back into the decaying remains and Norbert was siphoning off what Grindelwald wanted. It was too much to take in, and they opted to leave delving too deeply into what was happening, otherwise they'd fear for their sanity. It was clear that whoever was on the table was suffering, and an intense pity burnt through them to the point where tears spilled down their cheeks. They couldn't help but wonder if the soul would come to look unknowingly upon their forgotten loved ones. The only succour in death was that it was supposed to be an end to suffering...and yet here that boon was rendered moot...it was cruel! It was hideous.

Grindelwald leant in closer and studied the bottle and the tar-like substance within. "Do you have it all?"

Norbert shook his head. "I cannot draw out what isn't there," he answered in a strained voice.

"Death restores everything," Grindelwald stated coldly. "You assured me that this method would bypass all attempts to keep secrets from me."

"If it was Obliviated, forgotten or extracted in life, then I can draw it out now in death." He paused and took several steadying breaths. "I cannot take what was never there," he repeated with as much frustration as he dared to show. "Rest assured that everything he knew in life regarding your need will be in this jar."

Maud clasped Agnes's hand and they cleaved together. The corpse seemed terrified, desperate to stop what was happening, its clawed hands trying to stop the tip from touching it. Grindelwald was laughing and urging Norbert on until half the bottle was full and the corpse had stopped moving.

"He's dry!" Norbert rasped, collapsing sideways, his face pale and clammy, and the bottle held up precariously.

Grindelwald caught the bottle and stepped away, his eyes fixed solely on the contents.

"Very well," he mumbled. "You've done very well, Norbert...very well." He placed the bottle in his pocket and looked back at the corpse. "The grave is no longer silent," he said softly before letting out a jubilant laugh. He then pulled out his wand and immolated the cadaver until nothing but powdery ash remained. The memory began to fade, and they saw Norbert, hauling himself back to his feet, his face wet with tears, trying to gather together the ash before it blew away. Maud felt Agnes' fingers bite into the back of her hand.

The kitchen was cold and dark when they emerged. Their hearts were beating fast and nausea clung thickly to their throats. Black Memories had always been thought of as terrible fancy...as the dream of a madman, but Norbert had cracked it. He'd pulled them out! They ran shaking hands over their faces, wiping away the dried tears.

"Ave you got anythin' to drink?" Agnes asked hoarsely.

Maud nodded and magicked a bottle and two glasses from the sideboard. With a shaking hand, she poured two shots. They drank the lot in one gulp.

"Sweet Mother of..." Agnes said hotly. "What 'ave I just 'ad?"

"Homemade peach schnapps," Maud offered wheezily. "My man used to make it. He said it could cure anything."

Agnes snorted and put down her glass. "Bet it takes paint off an' all!"

Despite that, they both had another glass, their minds too muddled to latch onto anything other than the sting and heat of alcohol. Slowly, they incorporated the memory into their own. What was done was done. They couldn't change that, and they knew how he'd suffered during the war. It seemed to them that in some way, perhaps it had happened the way it was supposed to happen. Norbert wasn't that infirm that he couldn't have defended himself, and he'd been canny enough to protect himself. Maybe he'd allowed his past to catch up. If they were honest, a deep and dark part of them...the part that still hurt and snarled from the war...felt satisfied. Norbert had desecrated the mysteries beyond death, raped the minds of the dead and damaged the soul. It didn't ease the sting of his death, though.

"Silly sod," Agnes muttered sadly, putting into words what they both felt.

Maud sighed and relaxed, turning her mind over the memory objectively. "How long would you say it took him to get those memories out?"

Agnes stiffened and pursed her lips. "I reckon twenty minutes...and he got about seven fluid ounces." Maud frowned and glanced at Agnes sceptically. At her look Agnes bristled. "I make a lot of jam," she snapped defensively.

"Okay," Maud retorted. "We know now he saw eight jars in that room."

Agnes' eyes fluttered a moment as she worked out her measurements. "About one hundred and twenty fluid ounces," she declared. "Give or take."

"So, that's about...five hours worth of work."

"If you say so," demurred Agnes.

"And it looked pretty exhausting."

"Not to mention that exhuming a body ain't exactly quick an' easy."

"And where would you set such a ritual up?"

"Need to be well ventilated," Agnes said thoughtfully. "All that incest stuff would have knocked 'im out."

Maud paused and then sighed. "You mean incense."

"Whatever..." Agnes mumbled dismissively. "An'..." her brow furrowed as she went back over the memory and her own. "Sandalwood, mugwort an' ...hmm...Solomon's seal." She drummed her nails on the table, as if the sharp tattoo would help her thinking. "An' lavender. Somethin' else..."

Maud was momentarily exhausted: her mind unfocused. She'd seen the flowers but Agnes seemed to have seen something else, some deeper significance. She knew better than to interrupt, so made tea while her friend was lost in thought. She stood by the window, filling the kettle, and saw her reflection in the dark glass, a ghostly face merging with the twisted branches and black, swirling clouds. The nights were drawing in fast as they approached December. Normally, despite the cold nibbling at her bones, she liked the cosiness that winter forced her to adopt. The fire would be burning in the grate, and the smell of stews or soups would greet her nose on coming home. She'd be baking shortbread soon for the local schools, and the robins would come and sing in her garden, This time, however, the outside was bitter and cruel. The clouds were heavy and threatening and the branches like talons, seeking to slash her.

The kettle, heavy in her hand, brought her back to herself and she shook off the gloom. She lit the gas, and rested the kettle on the ring gently. Behind her, she could still hear Agnes muttering, and she smiled warmly. It was nice to have the company; loneliness creeps up so softly that sometimes you don't even realise it's there with you until it's forced to leave.

"Bloody Althaea root!" Maud turned and saw the satisfied grin spread across Agnes' wrinkled and worn face. "I knew I knew it!" she said triumphantly.

The kettle began to whistle, intent on being dealt with first. Hastily filling the teapot, Maud sat back down across from Agnes. "Does that mean anything?"

Agnes' smile faltered. "I'm not sure," she said softly, reaching out to pat the back of Maud's hand.

The tea soothed them and they took rapid gentle sips while it was hot. They went over the memories they'd experienced. It was clear that the pensieve had acted as a teacher and a protection. He'd drawn out everything linking him to them. He'd known someone would go rummaging around in his head...and that meant...

"Someone else knows 'ow to get Black 'uns," Agnes said hollowly. "'E bloody well knew that someone were comin' for 'im!"

Maud shared Agnes' bitter frustration, but it softened as she thought deeper. "He didn't know who though." Her brow furrowed and the teacup paused en route to her quivering lips; something nagged at her mind. "His owl was killed," she whispered, her lips slightly ahead of her thinking.

Agnes caught on quickly and tutted. "Ye can get 'em from beasts, too?" She moaned, but then a vicious, victorious smile split her face. "That explains that scream!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm bettin' he couldn't get anythin' outta that owl...or Norbert," she said gleefully. "All that an' he got diddly-squat!"

Maud smiled. "Norbert was good at frustrating people."

"And helpin' us," Agnes added. "I think we're lookin' for someone as old as us...or thereabouts, who may 'ave 'ad somethin' to do with Grindlegums."

"And someone who can duplicate Norbert's ritual and spells."

"And 'as access to the Ministry," Agnes offered.

Both of them sipped tea and let their minds drift over strategies and plans. Several cups later and when the clock chimed out ten, they had settled on their plan of action. It helped ease their confusion and agitation. Despite Norbert's actions, there was still someone out there doing these vile things, and they needed to be stopped. Perhaps by the end of it, Norbert's last actions would be deemed purifying and grant his soul peace.

Over the next few days, they organised themselves to start the investigation armed with the knowledge from the pensieve. Agnes had taken over many of Norbert's duties in a bid to learn what made him investigate the room in the first place and who potentially could have trailed and killed him. Maud was going through the books, old accounts, anything to find something rotten in RID. There had to be a link between the processes involved in memory work and Black Memories. They both hoped to find something because the alternative was dredging up all their old memories and allegiances, and that was almost unthinkable. Sometimes, to catch devils, you had to become one.

Agnes mopped her way through most of the old storage rooms and long abandoned holding cells, and her duster poked into every nook and cranny in the dingy offices, but nothing had come to light. Cobwebs had faced her frustration, and a colony of Doxys had fled in the face of her consternation. She knew something had to be down here. No one was that careful. She'd wracked her brains trying to think who was still around, but as far as she knew, everyone was either too old or too dead. Norbert must have known them, though.

While clearing out the bins in Dispatch and Procurement, she casually had a good rummage around in the desk. Collecting such memories was a hefty task, requiring particular skills, reagents, materials and resources. Firstly, it required a corpse. Dispatch and Procurement was a rather strange name, but the department dealt with the collection and appropriate and respectful disposal of wizards residing outside normal conditions: those in Azkaban and disowned; the unknowns living in the Muggle world; the dark creatures; and for those where spells had rendered it...difficult for traditional funerary rites. Following a hunch, she wondered if there were any...stray corpses.

For her part, Maud was busy with her task and looking after Peters. The lad had promise. When he'd returned the notes, she knew he'd found something, and he'd had the good sense to keep it to himself. She tutted softly. Aurors just weren't trained to the same standards anymore, she groused. In her day, Aurors would have seen him and his suspicions a mile away. She saw it as a mixed blessing, though. It was vital that he finished what he started: Severus Snape was important to Minerva and she felt he was the key to cracking the Ministry open. However, Peters needed a little guidance before he put a target on his back and perhaps a push in the right direction. It was time to start calling in a few favours from the other secretaries. Firstly, she needed clarity on just how memory extraction and investigation worked. An unpleasant idea was forming in the back of her mind. Luckily for her, the Offices for Magical Research were just down the hallway, and a certain young secretary was about to repay a favour. Unfortunately, she felt that time wasn't on their side. This time, things would get...messy.

ooOoo

Snape slept slightly longer than usual, and as such woke past the dinner bell. Minerva wouldn't mind his absence, but it rankled him slightly that he'd missed a duty. Trying to disperse his frustration, he inhaled deeply, relishing the fact that he could do so without his ribs aching, and stretched, letting the tension out of his muscles. It wouldn't last. On Monday, he'd receive another summons from the Ministry, and then he'd have to face them before experiencing the rapid decline until his next potion. He was its slave.

Realising that he was on the way to despairing and self-pity, he got up and lit all the lamps. Next, he put his mind to a task. Neville's potion leapt into mind like an eager puppy. Guilt settled on his shoulders, and he slumped a little. The potion had been so important at the start, but the few meetings had only confirmed his initial suspicions: it just wasn't feasible. Neville had shown great skill and dedication, and as such had travelled all available avenues. There simply wasn't anywhere else to go.

He summoned a coffee from the kitchen and returned to his desk, where he pulled out his pen and paper. Something had caught his imagination back in Wales. Something had tugged at his interest. *Neville!* Snape snorted at the suggestion, but couldn't quite reject the notion. Unbidden, he recalled with excruciating detail the moment his anger and fear had bested him and pressed Neville up against the rock. He'd been so close to him, smelt him, seen his pupils flare as adrenaline coursed through his veins, felt the pulse beneath his fingers on the boy's throat. His mouth went dry when he remembered how Neville had wrapped his arm around him for support...and then that gasp when his wand had pressed a little harder. He could still feel the warmth of his body.

With effort, Snape cleared his mind. It wouldn't do well to dwell on things beyond him. However, it did give him an idea. Up until now, Neville had focused on reviving the memories lost or trapped behind the madness. Snape had to agree the memories were there, as nothing had been done at the time to eradicate or remove them. He would never disclose to Neville how he knew this to be true; only Dumbledore knew the truth of that night. No one else needed to know. Of course, that begged the question of what the Longbottoms would do when and if they regained their minds. It was a sobering thought, and one he cared not to ponder.

Returning to his original idea, he considered the possibility of withdrawing the memories of the event that had spawned the Longbottoms' mental decay in the hopes that the trauma could be excised. Would that give them the chance to gather themselves together and restore their sanity? It was an intriguing idea. It had been that one event that had shattered them. He'd witnessed how the Cruciatius could break memory charms, so could breaking the memories of the curse reverse the damage?

He knew from bitter experience how disorientating it was to lose vast chunks of memory, but if he'd learnt anything, it was the fact that you could recall nothing, it was a void, empty of thought and feeling...until it was force-fed back to you. The Ministry adopted a modified method for withdrawing memories. Normally, there was an echo of the memory left behind...a dim awareness of it. This meant that you were still familiar with it, like an instinct or emotional response. He'd used the memory charm often enough in the past to diminish their presence, such as when teaching Potter Legilimency or hiding them from Voldemort. In the case of his interrogations, every last trace of the memory was cut out. Associated memories collapsed away into confused snippets, like discordant harmonics in a song, or took on different aspects, sometimes scary, funny or strange.

Nausea crept up his gullet. He was surprised he could even contemplate doing to Neville's parents what was being done to him, but the idea was in his head, and it was germinating quickly. He had to at least investigate the possibility. If the consequences of his past were to catch him up, then he felt it better and apt that Neville should benefit.

ooOoo

Randall had had enough. Neville's parting words had been sweet and generous and completely infuriating! What was Cupid to do? If he thought they'd really help, he'd make a love potion and force feed them both. It was getting to the point where he was thinking about writing a 'How to...' guide...with illustrations. He'd caught up with Neville at lunch, but the seating meant that he hadn't had the chance to talk to the man, and by the end of the meal, fatigue had crept up on him. He was just too tired to attempt anything.

Flashing Neville a peeved glance, he sauntered off, ushering a few stragglers off to their dorms as he went. He was in two minds to finish marking homework or relax with a bit of Arithmancy...it had been a while since he'd actually applied his art. He could, if he focused, attempt to divine the future for Snape and Neville, but from experience, he knew it was a dubious thing. No, if he were going to do it, then he'd let himself become lost in the purity of the numbers. However, his mind drifted back towards the Neville and Snape dilemma. He was sure that should anyone else become aware of the situation, then they'd be as frustrated as he was. There again, why was he so wrapped up in this?

Neville was a lovely man, and he certainly deserved to be happy and loved...and Randal was almost positive that Snape could make that so...and Snape was just desperate for someone like Neville. It was so ridiculously simple! It wasn't just that though. Randal wanted those things too. Perhaps his efforts were more to help himself than either of his friends. If he couldn't be happy with Neville, then maybe being happy for Neville would be the next best thing.

To relax, he'd completed a basic chart, and was now sitting back, admiring the numbers and lines upon the page. A sudden thought gripped him, and he decided to complete such a chart for Sinastra, as a gift. It wouldn't be a prediction, but rather an arithmantic representation or history of her impact upon the school and him. The older styles of charts were now considered too florid and archaic, but Randall had always been partial to how artistic they looked. He could do one with numbers and linking lines in gold and reds and then frame it in a case, like they used to do when the study was relatively new and only secretive lords could afford the Arithmancer's rates. It wouldn't be too garish, as it would only be about twenty by fifteen centimetres; and he already had a gold-filigreed case to slip the chart into. He grinned at the thought, feeling pleased with himself. All he needed was a few details from the library to link in her birth date with events of the day to create a start point and then figure out where she'd been born. Simple. It would also distract him from Snape and Neville. Between the two of them, he was being driven slowly mad.

His research meant that he failed to hear the gong for dinner and worked late into the evening. The librarian walked around, ousting students, and when she met Randall, she nodded by way of greeting and left him to his work. So it came as a surprise when he finally stretched and checked the time. It was well past ten o'clock. He banished the books back to their places and carefully rolled up the scroll containing his rough calculations. The next step was to get some decent paper and brush off his best quills.

Sighing softly, he stood, pushed his chair under and pulled on his jacket. As he was leaving, he heard something coming from the shadowed aisles. Thinking a student was out past bedtime, he crept over, hoping to catch them unawares. It would be useful if he could cultivate the same skills as the teachers: stealth being one of them. He homed in on the furtive rustles of paper and cloth. His heart fluttered a little, and he couldn't help but smile at the role reversal. How many times had he been the kid out past curfew?

At the next aisle, he caught sight of shadows shifting over the bookcases, so he paused, took a deep breath and bolted round the corner with a snarled greeting. He wasn't sure who was more alarmed: him or Snape. Judging by the wand aimed at his face, Randal assumed Snape was.

"I'm really sorry," Randal professed hastily, his hands up. A trickle of cold sweat ran down his spine, and his heart hammered uncomfortably. "I thought you were a student." He swallowed, his throat unnaturally dry.

Snape merely raised an eyebrow, the wand still aimed.

"If I'd have known..." he trailed off. He wasn't sure how to finish. Several options sprang to mind. They ranged from the purely lascivious to simple survival. "Look," he added, "I'm not about to run off or deface the books, so could you lower the wand?"

Snape had been caught off guard. He knew Madam Westin had cleared the library and had assumed he was alone. His reading had been all consuming, enticing him, and rekindling the desire to work, to fight. When Randall had leapt round the corner, he'd reacted defensively. Initially, his heart had lurched from dread, but upon seeing Randal, it thumped for another reason. The delicious flicker of fear on Randal's face was delightful, and he was torn between guilt and pleasure. The beads of sweat glistening on Randal's upper lip, the dilated pupils, his tongue peeping out to moisten dry lips were very...distracting.

Snape was wiser than Neville. He knew what he liked, and he knew what Randal liked...hadn't he confessed his wants to Neville by the lake? And whereas Neville was confused and unsure of things, Randal was not. It was so tempting! It would have been easy. All Snape had to do was take one step closer, lean in, let his wand-tip slide slowly down the man's cheek, and Randal would whimper and beg. Yes, it was so incredibly tempting. He felt muscles bunching in his thighs, ready to move, but he knew this was just the potion, and he knew it could make him reckless. Tonight would be glorious, but tomorrow would be full of regret.

Randal had had time to see beyond the wand, and like Snape, he was keen enough to see what others tried to hide. He was no Legilimens, but he could read people well enough to hazard a guess at their thoughts and needs. Snape radiated something that snatched his breath. He shuddered at the prospect. It just wasn't fair. Randall knew all he had to do to push Snape was to gasp a little, or put a little pleading into his expression. To make Snape moan, all he had to do was mewl a little. Part of him was willing to fall down on his knees and beg Snape for everything he had to offer, but another knew it would be out of line. Another part wondered if Neville could cope with what Snape might offer. Besides, it would scupper his plans for Neville if he and Snape were to...Hell! It was so godsdamned tempting!

Snape was the stronger man and lowered the wand, sheathing it smoothly within his sleeve. "I should apologise, too," he responded smoothly, impressing Randal, who had lost the ability to even formulate words. "That was unprofessional of me."

"No problem," Randal croaked. "Guess I should make more noise next time."

"Indeed."

"Well," Randal concluded. "I'll leave you to your study."

But he just couldn't leave it. The seconds caught in Snape's gaze had burnt, and he wanted Snape to feel as branded as he. He just had to give him something to mull over, some hint of what could have been...and maybe what still could be. "I just need..." he said, stepping closer and reaching out for a book. He subtly tilted his jaw, exposing his throat, biting his lower lip at the effort of stretching. Former lovers had always found his neck alluring. As he walked away, he swore he heard Snape moan.

Collapsing Core

Chapter 20 of 22

A harsh revelation cripples Snape, but there's a hidden ray of hope.

Minerva hadn't been surprised to note Snape's absence over the weekend, and the letter from the Ministry informing her of Snape's next appointment was no shock, but both angered and brought bitter tears to her eyes. She wanted to wrap Severus up in her arms and incinerate the missive. No doubt an owl had already alerted him. He had a few days grace, the appointment being Friday evening. How generous of them to ensure it didn't clash with his job! Fuming, she slammed the parchment down and began to pace. Severus had spent his life paying for his mistakes; what the Ministry was doing was despicable. He had already paid his debt. It was cruel. She couldn't understand what they could possibly still want with him a decade after Voldemort's death.

She wished she could visit Maud in the hopes she had made some progress, but she knew it would be foolish. Besides, she had lessons today. The best she could hope for was retribution. Someone would pay dearly. The thought bolstered her, giving her strength, but she knew she couldn't live with this for long, and she vowed that Severus would escape the Ministry's hold while she still lived. It was sobering to think how short a time she had. She cast a curt spell and the letter erupted into very satisfying confetti before glowing like embers and vanishing.

When the school day finished, she visited Pomona in the greenhouse. It was nice to be out of the stone building and sit amongst the greenery, smelling the rich earth and hearing the musical drips of water. Today, wasn't quite as relaxing. While Pomona was busy making tea, Minerva's gaze was drifting over the letters, booklets, leaflets and files scattered across the workbench. They were job offers, retirement properties and contracts: the paraphernalia associated with impending retirement. It brought home quite sharply that Pomona was leaving. After Christmas, she would be somewhere else. Pomona would never desert her or stop helping Severus, but she wouldn't be staying, and they wouldn't be able to meet up with the same spontaneity. The Herbology professor had been making plans to retire in the years leading up to the war to fulfil her ambitions. Those ambitions had been put on hold almost twenty years. Minerva couldn't in good conscience encourage her to stay; Pomona would only agree, and her life's work would wither like cut flowers.

Before she got too maudlin, Pomona returned and plonked down a mug of tea. "I can't offer biscuits," she apologised. "The tentacular got at the tin."

Minerva smiled and picked up her mug. "It ate them?"

"It ate the whole tin...metal and all!" Pomona corrected. "It's not as though it doesn't get what it needs..." she added tetchily, flashing a glare at the plant in question, "but I guess it'll be good for minerals for the next month or so."

"Oh well," Minerva said good-humouredly. "The tea is welcomed."

They both took hearty sips and just settled into each other's company. Outside, they could hear voices as children walked around the grounds. It was something Minerva missed. Being in the tower meant she was away from the hustle and bustle, distant from the heart of Hogwarts. There was something delightful in the laughter and words of children. It helped to ease her frustration and unease.

"So," began Pomona, "what brings you down here?"

Minerva inhaled deeply before waving her hand languidly. It seemed as though she were lazily batting away a fly, but Pomona had that funny pressure in her ears that signalled a Privacy charm being erected. She swallowed until her ears popped.

"Severus has another appointment."

Pomona gasped, pain lingering on her face. "When?"

"This Friday... seven pm."

The Herbology professor blinked back her tears and hugged the mug to her chest. "It doesn't seem that long since he had his last appointment," she mumbled dejectedly. Various emotions raged across her face until anger and despair fought alone. "I wish it would just stop."

Minerva sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyes shut until blue spots flashed in the dark. Letting the frustration burn itself out, she sighed as she sagged and opened her eyes. "Officially, there's nothing wrong," she snapped bitterly. "And Severus will not complain...damn the man!"

Pomona fidgeted and her fingers squeezed her cup anxiously. "Has he ever said what goes on?"

"No!" Minerva hissed with more venom than she intended. "No," she repeated softly. "He never discusses it, and when I did raise the issue with him, he made me promise never to ask again. I made a complaint of sorts to the Ministry, citing his visits affecting his role as deputy Headmaster, but they merely reminded me of the conditions of his release from Azkaban and his potion. Unless Severus lodges an objection, he is at their beck and call." She took a deep sip, relishing the burn of hot tea down her throat. It took some of the heat out of her frustrated anger. "All I can do for now is help him in whatever way I can...whether he likes it or not!"

A burst of laughter from outside infiltrated their gloom and both ladies straightened, casting off their mood. "So," Minerva continued more firmly. "We collect what we can and add it to the fountain."

Pomona nodded in agreement. "I'll let Filius know we could do with a few more recent memories collected. Severus has spent a lot of time with Neville and Randal, so we'll see what we can get from them." Her face brightened. "How about some critical self-reflection using penseives?"

Minerva smiled. "You're a devious woman, Pomona," she chided good-humouredly. "I know Filius uses a penseive, but never asked how he gets their memories..."

"Oh, it's a bit sneaky," Pomona began enthusiastically. "He uses a pensieve which is charmed to make copies." She paused for a quick gulp of tea. "Later, after the donor has retrieved their memories and gone, he sifts through the copies, picks out the appropriate sections and chains them to those he already has." She took another mouthful of tea. It's a bit like a ribbon of Muggle film...where you cut and splice it together to reel off just what you need." She missed the look of admiration across Minerva's face. "And the donors are nonethewiser because they have their memories back."

Minerva nodded approvingly. "Clever."

Pomona tutted and shook her head. "That's why the phials in Albus' office were so important. We can't get copies anymore. And they were such a great resource. I'm such a dunderhead for losing one!"

Minerva had almost forgotten about the missing, mysterious needle phial, but it had obviously eaten away at her friend. "It's safe, and I'm sure it'll turn up."

"I wish it would," Pomona mumbled sadly. "Filius seems to think that it wasn't Albus'."

"I thought all the memories in that cupboard were his."

Pomona bit her lower lip and shook her head slowly. "After that meeting, Filius needed a bit of cheering up, so we had a talk over tea, and we discussed the phial." She gathered her thoughts and idly tapped the side of her mug with a nail. "He doesn't know what's inside, as he couldn't open it." She saw Minerva's frown and added quickly, "He could only protect it with those Cinderella charms. I think he hoped to open at some point. I was taking it back to the office when I...misplaced it."

"So it could be something of vital importance...or nothing at all."

Pomona hummed an agreement. "I know Filius was having doubts about it being Albus'. He can't be sure, but he thinks the memory is from a young child...something about the shine and viscosity...but he does know that it's only a few minutes' worth. Three at most."

Minerva drained her tea and set the mug down, her mind pondering whose memory Albus had secreted amongst his own: Harry's? But what could young Harry know about Severus? Shoving her curiosity aside, she saw Pomona's expression...or lack of. The emptiness disturbed her.

"What's wrong, dear?"

Pomona stilled and stared morosely into her tea. "Do you think it'll work?"

Minerva wished she hadn't asked. It meant she had to address directly a dread that had loitered on the edge of her mind. "I really don't know," she offered sadly, "but we have to try. I can't sit by and watch him being slowly destroyed, bit by bit. I can see it, you know," she added hollowly. "When we talk, I can tell he's...diminished. His memories can be so vague about certain things. At first I thought it merely a reluctance to talk about the past, but there's a desperation in him whenever we get close to those terrible times. I get the impression that he's seeking something from me." She stopped, her eyes moist and her chin trembling. "And I don't know what he needs, Pomona," she whispered, her voice thick with pain.

Pomona wanted to walk around and hold her, but the greenhouse was too public. She was also acutely aware of the papers littering the table, and guilt wriggled uncomfortably in her stomach. How could she be so selfish, seeking a life beyond Hogwarts, when there was so much suffering here! The urge to banish the paperwork reared up and only Minerva's voice stopped her.

"Should the Ministry succeed and reduce him to one of the mindless creatures they've already created, I need to know that I tried everything to...rescue him. The theory is sound," she declared defiantly, "but the application is problematic." Sighing, she held her mug in both hands in a bid to hold back the tremors the thought sent through her body. "We're trying to put in memories that weren't originally his."

Pomona nodded slowly. "I never asked you where you got the idea."

"From Horace."

"Old Slugger?"

Minerva let out a laugh, quickly hiding it behind a hand, thankful for the break in her growing tension. "Yes. When Albus shared with me how Horace had manipulated a memory, it stuck with me for some reason: remarkable piece of Transfiguration. Anyway, I talked it over with Filius, and here we are."

"And here we'll stay until the job is done," Pomona added firmly.

Minerva blinked a few times, and then her eyes widened slightly. "Oh no, Pomona. You don't have to stay here to help!" she countered emphatically. "You can work on your cultivars and help us from wherever you are. I can't let you put your dream on hold."

"Tough tentacular teeth!" she replied. "I'm staying until it's done."

Minerva smiled. "And what about Longbottom?"

"Consider it an extended period of training."

ooOoo

Peters was very appreciative of Snape's fortitude. It kept him away from Burke and Cross. With a few excuses to his colleagues, he'd managed to secure himself time in which to research. To his complete disgust, the oblivates were permanent and he couldn't defend himself from future assaults. However, one ray of light in his mental gloom was the discovery that evidence could never be truly banished or destroyed. They were held in storage for future reference: every document, piece of evidence, verbal testimony, complaint and report was duly recorded and held...somewhere. And as the memories pulled out of Snape's skull were considered 'evidence', then they couldn't be merely thrown away: they were stored! It was a little known, long forgotten protocol. He doubted Cross knew about it.

His dilemma now was to figure out how to get access to stored material without Cross or Burke finding out. His first thought was to seek advice from his old colleagues in the Auror Offices, but there was a growing animosity between the departments, and he doubted they'd be too forthcoming with aid. The thought of trawling through the miles of bureaucratic scrolls wrung out a soft moan...maybe going insane from multiple Oblivates would be less painful!

ooOoo

Friday arrived far too quickly. Snape had purposefully avoided everyone since the end of school, wishing to spend the time alone; Minerva knew where he'd go, but she'd never intrude on his time. He descended down towards his old lab, glad that the hallways and stairs were empty. Once inside, he sealed the door, collapsing against it. This time it was too hard. His lips pulled back in a pained grimace, and he slid down to the floor, his limbs hanging limp and heavy. If he knew what they wanted, he'd gladly offer it. He just couldn't face it! His memories since the last visit were precious. The thought they would rip them out, spoil them, sickened him. But he had to be careful about what memories he hid. He had determined how much he could tuck away behind his occlumency without them realising he'd done so, and there wasn't enough leeway for him to protect the plans with Neville regarding the potion and his recent more personal encounters. He hoped when they rummaged through them, they'd just think he was watching his mentees.

A dry sob wracked his ribs. He had been ridiculously naïve. He could never have the life he wanted. The bastards at the Ministry would just pull it apart, corrupt it. Every beautiful, precious moment would fester in their damned pensieve. The last two months had been an exercise in futility, and he'd foolishly lived instead of just existing. No matter how he felt, he couldn't pull Neville or Randal into this. It pained him enough that Minerva and his colleagues were dragged through his foul mind. It was perhaps a

boon that he'd not given in to his childish fantasies.

His breathing was heavy, almost verging on laboured, and his chest felt tight. The walls seemed to press down on him and the air was thick as it poured down his throat. He knew he was panicking and tried to follow the breathing exercises Dumbledore had taught him. In time, his breathing eased and his heart slowed. His face was slick with sweat and tears, and he used his gown to wipe it dry. Pride, hard as diamond, made him stand and brush himself down, and he moved to sit at the curved desk. He summoned a black coffee and waited.

A nervous house-elf padded closer and gave him the mug. Snape took it with a thank you. The dark wizard thanking him was not new; when he'd first come back to work as Potions master, he'd been kind and polite to the elves...when the nasty others weren't nearby. He had once drunkenly offered the house-elves any item of clothing they desired in a bid to free them: they'd never been so terrified of a pair of boxers before! The house-elves of Hogwarts had politely declined his offer, but they remembered. What was new was the utter despair and defeat he saw in the red rimmed eyes. In the ten years since he'd been bound to the Ministry, just as they'd been bound to servitude, they had never seen Snape weep. It shook the house-elf to his core. He left the wizard to his despair and went to talk to his brethren in the kitchen. After much deliberation, they went to find Winky.

Recollections and Respite

Chapter 21 of 22

Snape has to face something from his own past, something that he'd hidden even from himself. He finds an unexpected ally. (Rated higher for unpleasant content)

Burke was not happy. Snape had been summoned, and he hadn't been alerted. He'd almost missed the interview. Peters looked more restless than usual, but repeated obliivates would do that: he was surprised the Auror could still remember his name. And the man of the hour was sitting by the small table, staring at his feet, that black hair of his hanging limply. He was pathetic. Burke had to admit that Snape had been incredibly useful so far, providing information on curses, locations of stashes, black markets and fences and suppliers of rare and illicit reagents and potions. He'd got more from Snape than any of the others, but there was something still in that rotten head of his. Voldemort had been as close to immortality as anyone could get, and he wanted to know how...it was worth a fortune! But he was getting impatient, and Cross was still pussy-footing around.

"Okay, Severus," Cross began softly. "Today, we're going to go further back than usual. Back to when Voldemort recruited you. I want you to recall the meetings you had: who was there, what was asked, what was done."

Burke suppressed a grin: did that mean Cross was actually going to give him what he wanted tonight? His bad mood dissipated, and he sat himself down on the free chair opposite Snape.

"We goin' to be more 'elpful tonight, eh, Snape?" Burke asked mockingly. "We can all get out o' 'ere in time for a pint."

Peters swallowed his rising disgust. He had to play along tonight to get what he needed. After catching up on charms, he realised he couldn't stop them from cursing him, but he could set up monitoring spells in the room. He cast the required spells over Snape to assess his physical health and documented the findings. Aside from being underweight and stressed, he was physically fit...according to Ministry guidelines...to be interviewed.

"You're all set, Auror Cross," he stated.

"Very well, Peters. Please set up the pensieve."

While Peters manoeuvred the bowl onto the table Cross walked behind him, and that was all Peters would remember. Burke led the disorientated Auror out and into a waiting room.

"We've been advised to check the allegiances of several of your peers from school," Cross continued smoothly. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but some of your housemates were arrested recently for their involvement in Death eater activities. They claim they were coerced and cursed. I want to check your memories to confirm or refute their claims. Do you understand?"

Snape didn't flinch, speak or nod. The Auror frowned. This passivity was troubling, but he'd seen it before as a tactic to resist their efforts. Time in the pensieve would better elucidate Snape's mental state. Burke came back, grabbed the chair and planted it right in front of Snape. He rapped his knuckles on the pensieve next to him.

"Goin' to help us catch some Death eaters, eh?" he asked gleefully. When Snape failed to respond, he grabbed his hair and yanked his head back. "I asked you a question, yer little shit."

"Burke!" Cross snapped.

He snarled, but let Snape's hair go. "Right ye are, boss."

Snape didn't let his head fall, but kept his gaze on some distant point beyond the walls. It gave Cross the chance to study him. The skin was pale and the lips tinged blue, and dark smudges hung under his hooded eyes. He watched Snape's chest rise and fall: the breaths were shallow and rapid. It was gratifying to see him afraid; it would only enhance his suffering later. It would also make him more susceptible to Legilimency and memory modification.

"I think we're ready to begin, Burke."

Cross withdrew his wand and approached, aiming for Snape's temple. As he neared, Snape flinched, at which cue, Burke lunged forward. He slipped behind and wrapped his forearm around Snape's throat, pulling back with slightly more force than necessary, and cast a partial body bind on Snape's legs. The wizard struggled, gasping and choking for air, his fingers scrabbling futilely against the arm.

"Careful! We can't get anything if he's unconscious."

Snape latched onto the information and increased his rate of breathing. If he could just pass out...

"Fine!" Burke spat, and relaxed his hold.

"Shush...shhh...", soothed Cross as he placed the tip against temple and began to draw out silver strands. "It's going to be okay...shush..."

With each pass, Snape's nausea and confusion increased, and with each shush, his fear increased. There was something sinister in Cross' croonings, something lurking behind it. Whatever it was, it bothered him...terrified him. This wasn't the normal dread from the terrible things he'd done. He felt as though something old and long-hidden was stirring. If he could face most of fears, then what lurked in the darkness that would terrify him so? Whimpers burst past his lips, and he struggled against Burke's arm with increased vigour. What would scare a Death eater? Burke sniggered and held tighter until the struggles weakened and Snape slumped.

Burke laughed and stepped back, letting Snape slip to the floor. "Look at the bugger twitch!" he laughed.

"Stop staring and help me turn him on his side. He'll choke on his tongue!"

Respite was short-lived. Burke and Cross had attended to him, sat him back in the chair and bound him. Burke was grinning and Cross looked disturbed. It took a few moments for Snape to realise why. His trousers were wet. A sob erupted without warning. He was done. They'd done too much to him. The tears came next: quietly at first, then in gulping whoops. He pulled his lips back in a silent scream and flung his head back.

"That's right," cajoled Burke, lapping Snape's humiliation up. "Let it all out. It can't be nice, sitting in yer own piss, bawlin' like a baby." He laughed out, harsh and gleeful. "Big man, weren't ye, and now yer nowt."

"That's enough, Burke."

Cross had watched Snape carefully. His belly had lurched pleasurably at the sight of Snape's collapse. His wife had cried like that. They'd cursed her until she'd soiled herself, then used her. After two hours, they'd killed her. Death eaters had done it. They'd bragged about it, hurling their spell into the air, so that the skull hung in the sky above his house. And they'd lied afterwards! They'd been under the Imperius...victims of the Dark Lord. They were not accountable. But this wasn't enough. Snape's destruction wasn't enough...but for now, it would have to do.

"Okay," groused Burke, but he was happy enough.

"It's okay, Severus," Cross uttered softly, as if speaking to a scared child. "We know this is painful, and we really appreciate the help you're giving us, but we have to know, we have to investigate. You understand that, don't you?" Snape howled before descending into stuttering sobs. "You were a big part of what went on. Your presence here is required for years to come. We can't let you go; you're too important to us."

Cross began to clean him up, casting spells to remove the source of Snape's shame. When he was satisfied, he sat down next to Snape and sighed softly.

"You should accept this as your penance," he continued. "I would have thought you'd be eager to help us catch and imprison those monsters. Why do you have to fight us? We're not the enemy here."

Burke watched in quiet amazement. This was the most he'd ever heard Cross say. He idly wondered what game the old Auror was playing, but he didn't really care, so long as he got what he wanted. The sight of Snape snivelling in the chair was simply delightful, and if this had happened back in Azkaban, he probably would have been paying Snape a late night visit after Cross left. Sometimes, he missed the good old days.

"Now, Severus," Cross added, reaching out to grasp Snape's hand, "we're going to look through these memories and pick out what we think is useful, okay?"

Snape had begun to plead, begging him to stop, but Cross ignored him, lifting the limp hand until he could lower it into the bowl. Burke nearly missed his chance and just managed to get his hand in before Cross started the session.

His face was less haggard and much younger, but it was easy to pick out Snape from the other teenagers. They wore black robes, not unlike habits, and were walking down a long heavily shadowed hallway towards ornately carved wooden doors. Weak light filtered in through fogged glass windows, barely making it across the hallway, falling in vague pools on the wooden floor. Cross recognised the hall from previous sessions: this was the Malfoy residence. Dark portraits hung on the walls, the faces hidden in shadow, and potted Tentaculars curled their fronds as they passed. The other boys were chatting excitedly, but Snape was silent, his lips pressed firmly together, and his eyes focused intently forwards.

The doors opened, and they stood in an antechamber lit by four sconces, one in each corner. The flickering torches filled the air with more smoke than light, so the figures in the room seemed to blend into the darkness, the pale faces like skulls. The air was cold, and it stifled conversation. The boys jostled nervously and then stilled as Voldemort turned.

He smiled, his eyes studying the gathered recruits. He spread his arms in welcome, and waved them in, as a caring father welcoming his family. The doors closed behind them, and they were encouraged to walk closer.

"Today," he began in his rich voice, "you take your rightful place in the wizarding world, realising your true value. The Ministry has decided to spend its energies, eroding your worth with soft lies and skewed philosophies. It is time you took your proper place. Your convictions have led you this far...you have to take one step...one mark."

There was a tense pause, and then a boy walked forwards, his face pale, but his eyes bright. He stepped up, lifting the sleeve on his left arm and thrusting it eagerly forward. Voldemort smiled and looked the boy in the eye. His smile faded, and he took hold of the pale arm with a reverence that appealed to the boys: Voldemort cared for their sacrifice, see how careful he was. He touched the unblemished flesh with his wand-tip and uttered the spell. Green light flickered like St Elmo's fire and the boy shuddered, his back arching and his head lolling backwards. He stepped back, almost tugging his arm free from Voldemort's grip.

"It hurts but for a moment," he soothed. "Pain cleanses."

A cry burst past the boy's lips, speaking volumes of the pain licking at his skin. Soon, it ended, and the first to receive the mark shuffled back, clutching his arm to his chest and sniffing.

"Thank you," he mumbled, his voice cracking. He then bowed and staggered away, disappearing through an archway, and then it was someone else. Each time, a scream echoed in the small room. Some dealt with it better than others. And now it was Snape's turn.

Come on! Cross thought desperately. Scream!

Snape offered up his arm. He was calm and showed no emotion. He looked into Voldemort's eyes, and after a moment or two, Voldemort nodded and smiled slyly.

"Impressive for one so young," he stated. "You actually posed a small challenge. What's your name?"

"Severus Snape."

"Ah... Severus," he repeated, elongating the consonants. "It's almost Parseltongue." He smiled and lifted his wand. "You're the boy Malfoy discusses." Snape remained silent as Voldemort's pale fingers wrapped around his equally pale wrist. If Voldemort saw the small scars on the skin, he said nothing. "Lucius speaks most highly of you," he continued. "When you graduate this summer, you must come here, to your new home. We're your family now."

Voldemort let his wand touch the skin and said the words. Green light exploded around the connection. Snape tensed, his face contorting, but he remained still, his eyes locked on Voldemort's. Cross saw something squirming under the skin, burrowing into the arm, part of it coiling into what would be the Dark Mark, and another part, crawling up the arm. It was almost over and Snape had not cried out. Cross felt cheated. The green light flickered out and Voldemort let go. Instead of stepping back, Snape just stared at the coiled red serpent glistening on his skin.

"Well done," Voldemort offered. "I expect we'll see each other soon. Now go and enjoy yourself. Abraxus is a generous host and will grant you whatever you wish."

The next room was a stark contrast. Here, there was wine, food, soft music, lush furnishings and Deathaters welcoming them to the family. Certain sections had been curtained off, and wizards lounged on plush sofas, drinking and smoking. The decadence was overwhelming. It was more akin to an exclusive Gentleman's Club than a Deathater's lair. His companions were given potions to ease their pains, and their sponsors...older wizards, fathers to many new recruits...patted them on the backs, elaborating upon the rewards their new status afforded, proud their protégés had not failed them. Feeling more comfortable, they followed their brothers to whatever delights lay in the curtained areas or sat on the couches, nursing their wounds and sipping wine.

Within the waiting throng, Cross caught sight of Mulciber. He knew from his investigations that Mulciber had worked in tandem with Lucius Malfoy to sponsor and prepare Snape. The strains of war hadn't yet ravaged him; he was still handsome, with black hair and blue eyes. Charming. That's what people remembered about him. Mulciber senior was of moderate interest...he was dead...but there was something in his stance that attracted Cross' attention. It was the way he was watching Snape as he walked through the room. Snape was oblivious and left through another set of doors into a cool, dimly lit corridor. Cross knew this place too; it led to a potions lab in Malfoy's basement. He'd witnessed many of Snape's memories in that room.

Once ensconced in what he considered his place...a square room with a battered couch, low table, workbench, potions equipment and small stove...Snape sat down and studied the brand on his arm. It was red and puffy, weeping like a burn, and it stung. He traced the outline with his finger, wincing slightly when the skin pulled. Already, he could see the skin turning dark. Soon it would be completely black, then fade away until awakened by Voldemort.

Cross looked up and saw Mulciber on the room's threshold. He held one of the potions the others had been given. Snape stiffened when he saw him, but relaxed slightly when he recognised his mentor.

"Hurts, doesn't it," Mulciber stated simply. "It will for several days. This will help," he said, giving the potion bottle a shake. Snape nodded and Mulciber walked over. "But look at you!" He declared with a disarming grin. "Barely a flicker. Lucius chose well with you, my dear. Shame he can't be here to celebrate with you." He extended the bottle. "Here, drink! It'll help with the pain and make you feel better." Snape took it and gulped greedily. "Good man," Mulciber said laughing, joining him on the sofa. "Finish it all."

When it was empty, Snape fell back against the cushions, his eyes closed and his face slack, which meant that only Burke and Cross were privy to the predatory expression on the dark man's face. The memory flickered slightly, and Cross frowned, examining the memory critically: some of the details were unclear...smudged. Burke had missed the subtle change...he was too focused on what was transpiring between Mulciber and Snape...but Cross saw hints of the memory being compromised. He suspected the potion was more than just an analgesic. His lips curled up in frustration: the whole memory sequence was flawed and useless for investigative purposes...but perhaps good for manipulation.

It seemed that Snape had nodded off, exhausted by his ordeal. Mulciber seemed to think so and sat closer, so his thigh bumped up against Snape's. There was a disgusting eagerness in his eyes, and his breathing stuttered. He leant in and raised his hand towards Snape's face. It hung there for a moment, trembling, then he ran a fingertip down Snape's throat. At the contact, Snape jolted, and his head snapped forwards, his mouth slightly agape and his eyelids heavy.

"Wha...what do you think you're doing?"

Burke chortled and nudged Cross. "This'll be good."

Mulciber smiled humourlessly and placed his hand flat on Snape's thin chest. "You're one of us, now, Severus...where you belong. We will never abandon you, hurt you or let you fall. I think it's important you remember that and realise a little give and take makes all of this..." he said softly, easing a little closer so he could whisper in his ear, "...better for you...better for me."

With a smile, he plucked the empty bottle from Snape's fingers and shook it again before vanishing it. Snape paled and tried to sit up, but it was clear he was weak. With a desperate sigh, he fell back against the cushions, panting with the effort of his failed escape.

"I know you, Severus," Mulciber affirmed calmly. "I've been in every dark corner of that delicious mind of yours...seen your deepest memories, your most secret thoughts." He leant in and pressed his mouth against Snape's only to back off with a frustrated frown as Snape turned his head to the side and cursed. "You know," he continued smoothly, "I have waited a long time for you. Longer than most." Mulciber paused to study the face before him: the eyes dark from the opiate, the lips soft, the blushed cheeks. "I normally just take what I want."

To prove his point, he dipped his head and bit down on the boy's cheek, his hand sliding down to cup and pummel Snape's crotch. There was a feeble attempt to push him away, but whatever had been in the drink was acting quickly. Mulciber eased back, his eyes dark and a laugh rumbling in his chest.

"You will learn to like this," he added brutally. "You will learn to beg for it, Severus."

Cross felt the smallest flicker of sympathy as Mulciber continued to grope, but it was easily crushed. He watched Snape moan and try to protest, using uncooperative hands to bat the hand away, but it was obvious that soon, he'd be incapable of anything. The colour was draining fast from the memory, and sounds deepened and slowed as though they were underwater. He glanced around again and noted how shadows shifted awkwardly, as though completing with each other, and small items blurred in and out of existence: a pillow on the couch, a bottle on the table.

In one particularly strong shift, Mulciber seemed to vanish, and he caught a fleeting glimpse of Snape sitting alone on the couch, still examining the brand on his arm, a book resting on his lap. Cross inhaled sharply and stepped back from the scene. He knew what this was. Snape wasn't lying to them, he'd been lying to himself. This was a repressed memory. His stomach rolled unpleasantly as various possibilities battled for attention: he could use this to break Snape faster, but he also found this coercion unsettling. Burke's perverse attentiveness was also making him sick to his core. Cross stepped back again, his gaze shifting from Mulciber's lust-filled face to Burke's disgustingly animated features. He no longer knew who the bad guys were.

"It'll be okay," Mulciber soothed, as he began to slide the robe up and over Snape's knees, exposing thin, pale thighs. "I'll look after you. Just be still...shhhh...you'll be okay."

He planted kisses on Snape's neck, so gentle and delicate that on first glance, they were lovers enjoying an intimate moment together. His hand slipped under the cloth, and he let out a deep moan when Snape mewled. He plucked and teased, barely touching and then squeezing.

"See," he breathed after a little while, his hand moving rhythmically. "I knew you'd like it. Hush now...just relax."

Burke whooped and nudged Cross. "I knew it...they're all a bunch of perverts." He grinned and moved around to get a better view.

Cross heaved and backed away. "He's being molested, you vile man."

"Not goin' soft on me are ye, Cross?"

Burke hadn't taken his eyes off them, so he hadn't noticed that he was now alone in the memory. He had hoped to see more, but Mulciber had left the robe over his hand. All he could see was the outline of Mulciber's hand and the tip of Snape's penis, hard despite the assault, under the shifting fabric.

"First you," Mulciber whispered, his voice thick and ugly. "Then my turn. You'll enjoy it." His face became manic, his breathing rushed and his hand working faster. Snape had seemingly given up; his hands rested limply at his side, but his eyes were squeezed shut. His jaw clenched and his breathing shallow and halting.

Burke smirked. "Being a good little boy, eh?"

Drugged, exhausted, suffering the ravages of the Dark Mark, Snape was incapable of doing anything but comply. His body was betraying him as it sought some comfort after the recent trials and agony of the brand. His mind was slipping away, protecting itself. For a moment, the memory went dark, where there was no memory to see. Burke growled out his displeasure, but he was rewarded a moment later when it restored itself and he saw Mulciber pushing Snape over the edge.

"That's it!" Mulciber urged. "Hush now. Just let it happen. That's my sweet...that's my boy."

Burke watched as the pale thighs began to bunch and tremble. Snape keened and writhed against the sofa, his lips pulling back in a grimace. Mulciber was nibbling his lower lip, his eyes fixed on Snape's face, drinking in the sight of him. Snape was weeping, silent tears ran in glistening streaks down his cheeks, pathetic whimpers leaked out between his clenched teeth. And then he was gasping, shuddering, crying out...and then nothing.

Burke had to shut his eyes against the glare in the interrogation room. He'd been booted from the pensieve. He roared out his frustration; he would have given anything to see Mulciber have his turn. Slowly, he shook off the dislocated feeling. Snape was still in his chair; his head bowed and chest heaving as he took in great sobbing gulps of air. Cross was standing over him with a strange, empty look on his face.

"That was interestin'," Burke stated maliciously. "Be fun this time to watch the memories go back in, eh?" The thought of watching Snape relive those moments, feeling everything he'd felt back then just like the first time, had ousted his frustration utterly. This job was never dull.

Cross had been lost in thought since he'd pulled himself out of the memory. During his tenure at RID, he had been involved and instrumental in the arrest and sentencing of many truly evil wizards...not all of them Death Eaters. He had witnessed many foul things: torture, murder, rape. In his meetings with Snape, he had seen him commit murder and torture, create potions that led to much suffering, learnt and cast Unspeakables, but he had never seen Snape involve himself in some of the more debasing things his colleagues had committed. Until now, he had never thought about it: even truly evil men had their limits, their boundaries, and he'd witnessed the so-called best of men commit secret, disgusting sins.

Watching Burke in Snape's memory had turned his stomach. He still wanted to destroy Snape, but this was something he would not use, not after what had happened to his loved ones. It would disgust them. He was a generous man; he didn't need this to complete his objective. If he couldn't grant Snape this respite, then he was no better than the monsters who'd left him a widower and childless. But the memory had to go back, and Snape would have to deal with it...and any others that surfaced now the barrier had fallen.

"Burke."

"Yeah?"

"Obliviate!"

Search for Socks

Chapter 22 of 22

Snape has not returned from the Ministry and Minerva is fretting. Laundry comes to the rescue.

"Where is my Potions master?"

She hadn't raised her voice, or drawn her wand...even though she ached to do so...but the face in the fire backed away as if in fear of their life. They had been in the Great Hall when McGonagall had retired Snape as Headmaster: such things tended to stick in your head.

"I shall find out immediately, Professor."

The fire snuffed out, but Minerva was still fuming. It was three in the morning, and Severus was still not home. She'd dispatched Hagrid to the back gate, Pomona was by the Whomping Willow, her patronus was patrolling the boat house, and she'd threatened the Giant squid with the concept of calamari to get it to keep an eye and tentacle out for him around the lake. She momentarily cursed Filius for being away on his memory gathering missions. Her fingernails bit into her palms, and her teeth cracked in their sockets. She felt as though she would burst into flame.

She had tried all the spells she could summon to locate him but drawn a blank. She had been reduced to pacing her office. Her heart hammered, her skin was clammy and she felt sick to her stomach...she'd box his ears when she found him! It was clear he'd done something to himself. Despite her best efforts her mind went back a decade to when she'd sought him out...offered him his old job back.

After his acquittal from Azkaban, Severus had disappeared. Albus had whispered his regrets from his portrait, encouraging her to find him. It had taken immense resources and time to locate him. There had been many influences hindering her: Severus being one of them. After almost a year, she'd found him, barely existing in a decrepit tower block in London. She recalled how she'd had to step through garbage, broken bottles, rusted shopping trolleys and the stench of urine to get to his block. His house in Spinners End was empty and clean, but he'd descended to the grimy back alleys of a neglected city to waste until death caught up with him.

Vagrants had mumbled as she'd walked past, huddling in the gloomy stairwells, clutching bottles to their chests, or staring vacantly as they pumped something into their veins. The more vocal and energetic ones, snarled or spat out disgusting words; they'd been quickly silenced with a sleeping charm. Working her way up the twisting stairs, she'd finally reached the top floor. The corridor was dark, no doubt the gloom amplified by Severus' mood or spells. There was a pervading stink clinging to the cracked walls and stained linoleum floor. Rooms led off to the left and right, and a barred window faced her. She could almost feel waves of repulsion forcing her back. She'd been close.

Pushing back the charms, she had walked purposefully towards his room. The wards were easy to break: her wrath alone would have incinerated the wood. Bursting in, she cast a defensive shield against his spells and words, and before he could muster himself, she retaliated. Severus Snape had felt the full weight of her might. Bound, silenced and panting, he'd been forced to listen to her as she commenced to tell him...calmly and oblivious to his room and depressing state...that his job was waiting for him. She recalled that his stubbornness had been almost insurmountable, but something she had said or done had broken him, and he'd collapsed, accepting anything and everything she said and did. It had terrified her.

She'd removed him from his toxic pit and had used the summer holiday to get him fit for teaching. It had been hard work, battling him and his demons, but after three weeks, they'd reached an understanding. If he didn't run away to die, then she wouldn't hunt him down. In the first three years, she had inveigled herself into almost aspect of his life, treating him as one her friends, even if he had thought otherwise. She'd known he had hated it... or rather hated the fact that he needed her presence. Slowly, he'd eventually settled into his role, accepted the friendship of his peers and reclaiming some semblance of life. It had been a long battle, and she wasn't about to let it go. Besides, he'd run away, so she had no choice but to hunt him down.

It pained and galled her beyond reason that he had been pushed by the Ministry to something akin to the disheveled and almost dead shell she'd found all those years ago. They were slowly murdering him. The carpet suffered her shoes one again as she resumed her ferocious pacing before the hearth. Her lips silently mouthed every curse she knew.

Her reputation was such that the fire flared into life no more than three minutes later.

"Professor McGonagall?"

"Yes."

"I've checked our logs, and professor Snape was discharged from our premises at nine forty. Aurors Langdon, Michaels and Widdicombe delivered him to Hogwarts at nine forty four." Sensing that the information was not helping to reduce her ire, he coughed and talked hastily to someone out of view. "Ah...er...yes. At the gate. I hope that helps."

"Good enough!"

She stormed out of the office and practically flew down the stairs and past the stone griffin. As she walked along the corridor, she summoned her broom, and within moments she was literally flying towards the gate. The air was frigid and cold rain stung her face, pushing her vision down to almost nothing. In the dark, she was relying on memory rather than landmarks. Through the shifting curtains of rain, she made out the figure of Hagrid, pacing back and forth past the gate. Fang followed his master, his head low and tail tucked under. She yelled out but the rain and wind swallowed it.

Pulling up sharply, she almost somersaulted in a bid to slow down. Twisting on her side, so she was almost parallel to the ground, she dug her left boot into the mud, using the ground to slow her down. Hagrid turned and saw her coming in low, walls of mud and water shooting up on either side, and he stopped, wondering where to go to avoid her. In the end, he stayed still, hoping that she'd miss him. There was no need to have worried. When her forward motion slowed and the broom lost power, she pulled it free and adopted a stance that would have made a surfer sigh. Hagrid opened his arms, to catch her, but she morphed from skid to walk without effort and bypassed him to approach the gate. He turned and followed her, wondering why she was here.

"Prof..."

"He was dropped of here," she interrupted briskly.

"But I were 'ere with Fang," he explained.

"It didn't matter!" she snapped with more bitterness than she intended.

She didn't wait for a response and missed the flicker of pain crossing Hagrid's face; she walked through the gate and cast lumos. "Severus!"

She strained to listen, but the rain hammered down, smothering all other sound...only her heart was louder. In desperation she studied the ground and churned up mud that could belong to Snape and the Aurors. Tracking was not something she'd trained to do, but she would try anything at this point...she'd even slit a rabbit's belly and become an haruspex. Hagrid joined her, confused and anxious.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I couldn't find 'im."

"Severus doesn't want to be found!" On seeing Hagrid's face, she softened. The skin between hair and beard was white, and his dark eyes glimmered with desperation. Rain clung to his beard and flattened his hair. "He did this a long time ago," she clarified. "He ran away and waited to..."

She couldn't finish the sentence. Instead, she turned away and lifted her wand. "Severus! You answer me right now!" Something rustled and she turned on it, but only a rabbit shot out. "Damn!"

"E couldn't 'ave got far," Hagrid offered after staring at the churned mud. "I think these are 'is boots 'ere... an' 'ere."

"Follow them, Hagrid!"

Minerva was beside herself. She could ask every member of staff, every student to come looking, but a wizard who didn't want to be found was worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack...because they could make the haystack disappear. They had been looking for almost twenty minutes, which meant Severus had been out in the rain, in November, at night, in his indoor clothes, for almost five hours.

Her tears mingled with the rain, but she wouldn't give up. Her wand trembled as she searched yet another ditch. Her fingers ached from the cold, and her clothes were heavy with rain. Later, she may dedicate some time to bemoaning her lack of foresight in not casting a charm to keep herself warm and dry, but for now, her mind was frantic. The chill air burnt her lungs, and her face stung, urging her to greater dread. She'd been out for mere minutes...Severus for hours. Weather like this could kill. A sound behind caused her to whirl around, and she came face to face with Winky, soaking and bedraggled, clutching a butterbeer bottle. Minerva shook her head as though sloughing off a dream, her mouth working silently as she studied the elf, wondering just what she was doing.

"I can help," she squeaked. "We elves has magic better than wizards's."

"Winky!" Minerva fell to her knees in the mud and sobbed. "He doesn't want to be found."

"You be getting up," Winky scolded. "I has to be cleaning that dress tomorrow."

"He doesn't want to be found, Winky!" she repeated, her voice breaking.

"I know...but we won't be looking for him."

Minerva sniffed and shivered, but the elf's words morphed her grief and despair into something approaching hope. "I don't understand."

Winky took a swig of beer and hiccupped genteelly. "Hundreds...thousands of socks," she said tipsily. "And we has to find 'em...and pair 'em."

Behind Winky, more house-elves popped into view, bobbing reverently before the Headmistress, their feet squelching in the thick mud. They cast hopeful, longing glances towards Winky. She was the only elf who could bend the rules. She was the only one who was free.

"He never thought wishing his socks away. We's looking for his socks."

Minerva burst out laughing and darted forward to hug Winky. At her words, the house-elves scurried away on their search, the sound of their feet slapping against mud emerging from the darkness. Only looking for socks...that way, they didn't have to report to the Ministry, didn't have to tattle-tail to the Aurors...could help the dark wizard. Must look for the missing socks. Within minutes, there came high-pitched squeals and cheers from a nearby copse. Minerva lurched to her feet and rushed over, slipping and cursing. The house-elves stood in a circle, but there was nothing in the middle...just mud. Winky tugged excitedly on her dress and pointed.

"His socks are here, Professor Minerva," Winky affirmed. "You got to get him now."

Minerva nodded and started to cast spells over the area, slowly, agonisingly slowly, she found the magical signatures which showed her the spells he'd used. The clever fool had made himself unplotable. Cursing him, she broke the spells, layer after layer, until she could see him.

Her heart broke. He was deathly pale, so still, soaked through and curled in a ball. She fell at his side and smoothed the sodden hair away from his white face. "Severus," she called, rubbing his cheek. "Severus," she repeated louder, slapping his cheek. "Oh gods, Hagrid!" she cried. "What have they done to him?!"

Hagrid had no answer, and Minerva's distress cut through him worse than hippogriff claws. He bent down and simply scooped him up like a child; Snape felt too cold in his

arms. He undid his coat and tucked Snape against his chest, as he'd done with cold lambs out on the hillside. The warmth offering more good than a cold stretcher.

"Come on now, Sev'rus," he wheezed out, his throat tight. "Ye gotta be okay."

He made sure his charge was safe, then started to walk smoothly but quickly back to the castle; he knew better than to jostle Snape: his heart could stop. Minerva shot past him on her broom a moment later to alert Poppy that Severus was on his way. She urged her broom to a speed beyond its specifications, and opened the doors from a distance so she could break the rules and fly in through the main doors and up the staircases. The stairs tried to move in response to her, but they only moved to catch the water droplets flung in her wake.

She slowed when she hit the required floor and stormed into the Hospital Wing. The matron rushed out of her office, her face set ready to reprimand whoever had burst in, but on seeing Minerva, she inhaled sharply and rushed forwards. Minerva banished her broom and in gulps and hasty breaths, told Poppy about Severus. Poppy promptly set to work to receive her patient. Only her years of training and experience allowed her to ignore Minerva's agitation and her own. She readied her spells, potions and warmed blankets, and she prayed under her breath that he wasn't as cold as she feared. It seemed an age before the hospital wing doors opened and Hagrid, dripping and exhausted, stepped in.

"Come quickly!" Poppy demanded, pointing to a bed near the door.

Hagrid nodded and rushed over, laying Snape gently upon the white sheets.

"Now. Out of those wet clothes!" Hagrid nodded again, having no energy to speak, and started to undo Snape's buttons. "Not him! You!"

The half-giant blushed and staggered away. He was past exhaustion, his eyes almost closing and his lungs barely able to cope. He sat down heavily on a spare bed opposite Snape and let his shaggy head drop. Dry sobs wracked his large body. The last time he'd carried someone back to the castle had been Harry, and that had damn near broken him...damn dark lords and the Ministry! Would it never end?!

"He's extremely hypothermic," Pomfrey stated simply. "I can't detect a heartbeat."

Minerva let out a stifled cry, her hands over her mouth and her eyes wide. Hagrid's moan drew her over, where she held his huge hand, drawing as much strength as she tried to offer. She ignored how his hand gripped, tight and painfully, as she had eyes only for Snape. She wanted to be closer, to call out to him, but she knew Poppy would not appreciate her hovering by the bed. She could only watch as Poppy worked.

Pomfrey's wand hovered over his chest, but her initial assessment remained. Her own heart fluttered in panic, and her guts churned, but she was a matron first and foremost: she could cry later. Her lips moved, silently uttering life-saving spells. It was currently unwise to try to restart his heart or breathing: his chest was too cold, which for the time being was a blessing in disguise. She continued to mutter, warming his blood slowly...just a little, bit by bit, warming him from the inside out. Too quick, and his own body would destroy him. The urge to work quickly was almost overwhelming, as he was distressingly cold under her hands, his temperature just above twenty degrees Celsius. Bodily functions had ceased, but he wasn't dead. He wasn't dead until he was warm and dead.

With agonising sluggishness, his core temperature rose a few degrees. Satisfied it was high enough, she charmed his heart. There was a flicker, a flutter, then a series of stuttering beats...then nothing. She swallowed her intense nausea and tried again. Her next attempt bullied his heart into irregular beats, but at least it was beating on its own. Another careful spell checked his heart until it thumped regularly...if weakly. Then a spell opened his throat, so she could charm warm air to circulate his lungs. His breathing and heart were controlled by her spells, and she purposefully kept it slow and steady. Finally, the warmed blankets were placed over and around him.

It wasn't over, though. Her trained eyes watched him, waiting for the first flicker of movement. Now he was warming up, his body would start its own remedies, which normally would be perfectly fine, but now, it would be dangerous: he was just too damned cold. Under the sheets, his abdomen lurched, then shuddered. The force of the contractions was beyond belief: aggressive and quick. Behind her, she heard Minerva whimper, but she ignored it. Wand raised, she cast spells to quieten the muscles, to stop the intense shivering. His arms were next, shaking violently underneath the blankets. She tried again, but before her spells took, he was jerking on the bed as though suffering a fit: a truly distressing sight.

Minerva was openly crying, her arms wrapped around Hagrid's arm. Her fingers gripping with preternatural strength. Hagrid's chest was shuddering with silent sobs, and he idly patted Minerva's hands where she crushed his bicep. He knew the little lambs...cold as death...would often wake up, but he'd felt his faith slipping as time dragged. For him, the sight of Snape shuddering was a mixed blessing: it hurt him to see him struggle, but he knew the man was warming up. And that meant life. His tears fell as he released the tension, the fear, and allowed hope to flare into being.

Poppy let out a great shuddering breath and straightened as Severus collapsed bonelessly against the bed, his intense shivering halted. Tears prickled and her own heart banged painfully against her ribs. She was barely satisfied, but she had done everything she could. It was still despairingly undecided. Remembering Minerva and Hagrid, she looked at them both, seeing the utter despair on their faces.

"And I told you two to get out of those wet clothes. If you think I'm having three of you in here with hypothermia, you can think again!" she snapped.

"How is he?"

Poppy sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "He's critical, but stable," she said softly. "He'll need constant monitoring over the next twelve hours or so."

"But he'll recover..."

Poppy walked over and smiled gently. "He's still in a dangerous place," she disclosed, her voice betraying the smallest hint of her own fear, "but he's strong." She gave Minerva's arm a reassuring squeeze. "Give him some time."

"Thank you, Poppy," Minerva said, grasping the matron's hands in gratitude.

"Okay, now go and get some rest yourselves. I'll let you know as soon as anything changes."

From between Hagrid's legs and under the straining bed, Winky nodded her approval and popped away...the others would want to know that the socks were safe.