

# Be Neither

*by moiramountain*

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## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 1*

"Assuming you have been sorted correctly..." Professor Severus Snape offers both advice and a challenge. A 2009 OWL Award recipient in the "Realm of the Half-Blood Prince" category.

Someone needed to attend to the professor's books, to pack them carefully and move them into the library. Certainly a great many of them would need to be catalogued into the Restricted Section, a task that would take considerable time, since there were so many. She was not really sure why she decided this should be her quiet tribute to a teacher who had generally either scorned her openly or disregarded her completely. Still, someone should do this on his behalf. Someone should take the time to show him this respect. He surely would have scorned any memorial gatherings or maudlin tributes, and would have disdained marble busts or bronze plaques lauding his name to the heavens. But his books... those he had treasured, cherished above all else. Perhaps because the printed page is not judgmental, does not malign, does not withdraw. It simply waits, ready always to reveal its secrets to any willing to read, to gather knowledge, to think.

She had returned to Hogwarts late in August, right before the start of the new term, and had been pleased to see how many repairs had already been completed by the construct-wizards. Her final exams had gone surprisingly well, and she had passed all with marks that far exceeded her expectations. She had even done well with Potions.

When she'd gone to the Headmistress, it had seemed a little odd to stand in that office and make such an unusual request. McGonagall had asked her why it even mattered to her so much, and all she could seem to do was stand gazing from the window and ask whether the professor had ever given the slightest indication whether he liked to look at the loch... did it remind him of the river back in Spinner's End... and in all the years he'd been at Hogwarts had he ever admitted to being lonely. She knew about lonely... and she knew about books... and the loch... how they made the loneliness feel a little less... real. The Headmistress had finally nodded and said she'd allow it.

"I wonder if perhaps he knew that you'd seen right through him..."

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One by one, she had pulled every book from the heavily laden shelves, preferring to do so by hand, rather than by magical means. Holding each one in her hands, feeling its weight, inhaling the scent of old paper and leather bindings, seemed more correct, more respectful. The soul of a man is reflected in what he reads, and she was surprised and awed by what these books revealed, finding that for every volume delving into ancient and dark magicks, there was another filled with profound thought, and timeless wisdoms. Laying each one into the proper crate, sealing each crate with the appropriate ward, seemed almost as personal as it would have been to prepare his body for its final rest, a reverent and sacred duty to be accomplished not with the casual flick of a wand, but with gentle and compassionate hands.

Days slipped by but she did not begrudge their passing. She recalled his face, his depthless eyes, his dark and brooding figure. He had always reminded her of the Thestrals. Would those who had witnessed death in this terrible war now see him as well... truly see him as they had not done before, as he had never permitted them to do?

It was not until she'd reached the last shelf, and was taking down the final books, that she'd found the small legacy he had left for her--an age-worn volume, with a simple linen binding--"In Search of Lost Creatures: A History of Magical Beings and Beasts Believed Mythical or Extinct" by Francis Quaestio.

She'd seen the book only once before... had noticed it lying on the professor's desk in his Potions classroom, and had spent the rest of the class time distracted, trying to summon the courage to ask if she might see it for just a moment. When class was curtly adjourned, as it always was, she'd ventured to the front of the room and politely offered her question.

"Professor, since I've not another class for almost two hours, I wondered... might I read your book? I'll sit here very quietly... or I could go to Hagrid's garden... although the snap dragons may be in a temper today from all the rain. I'm sure you'll be busy marking papers, and I'd have your book back to you before I went to Transfiguration... toadstools to parasols I think it's to be this time... Magical creatures of the Zambia might be useful to know about if you were considering research in Africa. I've never been, of course, but I'd like to be prepared you know, just on the off chance..."

He'd sat motionless for an eternal moment, scowling at her with a scathing expression, before reaching into a pile of completed parchments to extract her most recent Potions essay. Handing it to her with a smirk of derision, he'd folded his arms, waiting for her to read the comments he had scrawled in crimson ink across her work.

"A mediocre and unfounded hypothesis. Correct your theory for resubmission by Friday noon."

She remembered how she'd actually smiled at him. He was right of course. She was capable of far better work, but it was so easy to be diverted by life, its delightful mysteries and unending fascinations. Knowing there was no point to her request now, she'd glanced once more with regret at the book on his desk and begun to gather her things, only to hear his voice behind her, its modulated power more commanding than if he had shouted.

"Did you assume you'd been given permission to leave?"

She'd turned back at once, to see him standing behind his massive desk, tapping the spine of the volume she so longed to read in the palm of his elegant scarred hand, his face etched with a mocking sarcasm, but his eyes compelling absolute attention.

"Assuming you have been sorted correctly for exhibiting a keen mind, you are obliged to honor your House with more concerted effort. To do anything less is both unacceptable and unworthy. Be neither."

His eyes still boring into hers, he had concealed the coveted book in a pocket of his robes.

"Now you have been dismissed."

In the awful year just past, she had remembered his words. They had become her still small voice, her courage song. Be neither unacceptable nor unworthy... honor your House.

With tears clouding her eyes, she opened the front cover and saw an inscription, written in the same spidery hand that had slashed across that essay... this time in green ink, flecked with grains of silver.

"Miss L. Lovegood, Ravenclaw House, upon leaving Hogwarts. Having often observed you reading, I believe this book may be of interest. No doubt, there are many lost creatures to be discovered, some even worthy of being remembered. Perhaps you will do both. Professor S. Snape, Slytherin House."

Looking around her at the empty shelves, at the silent domain of her teacher who had only once deigned to speak with her, only once given her advice but in so doing had changed and shaped her forever, she carefully tucked the treasured book in a pocket of her own robes and smiled.

"I'll remember what you said, Professor... I'll not forget to honor my House... and yours." Her smile was sunlight refracting through the shadows. "And I'll make sure the snap dragons are not in a temper if I decide to read in Hagrid's garden."