

Ode to the Daimonic; or, Peace to Thy Gentle Shade

by juniperus

Neville comes to an understanding about Severus Snape: Snape has an understanding to come to, as well. This is a companion piece to The Language of Flowers. Written for celandineb, who won a story written to spec in the Live Long & Marry auction, a cross-fandom effort in support of marriage equality.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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I am cold, so cold.

It's dark...not like night, nor like the shadow of the Dark Arts imprinted on my soul, but like the deepest ocean chasm leagues below where the most tenacious beam of light is finally swallowed whole.

How much time has passed since I last felt warm? Has it been minutes? Hours, days,*years*?

I do not know.

This lack of knowledge does not frighten me like it used to.

Nor does the awareness that it does not.

I feel...do I feel?...yes, I feel rather like I am floating, suspended. Secure. Water around me and in me and flowing through me, holding me in its embrace.

Embrace...when was the last time I was embraced, I wonder? It was years before the battle...it was ... Albus. Albus, who swooped down upon me as I despaired, his hand dead and his body dying despite my best efforts to counteract the curse. Not counteracted, forestalled...he would die. He would die, and he would die by *my* hand. His embrace felt cold...it chilled me to my very soul.

"Are you saving this seat?" Percy asked nervously.

Neville startled and looked at the empty rows of chairs before him before meeting Percy's pensive gaze. "Y-Yes, of course, Percy. Please sit down." He had seen Percy briefly after the Battle, before he had left with this family, but not since.

Neville offered him a tentative smile and watched him fidget with his hands. Once his eyes rested on his own...still...hands, Neville slipped back into his reverie. He looked around at the mourners...there were certainly far fewer than for Professor Dumbledore. Fewer, even, than had come for the Memorial for all fallen students; fewer, still, than had come to pay their respects to Tonks and Professor Lupin.

Respect, paying respects. *That's why I'm here, isn't it?* Neville thought, caught between sadness and bewilderment. *To pay my respects.* He watched Kingsley Shacklebolt approaching the gathered chairs and snorted inwardly as he thought, *I wonder if the Minister can make change. I don't have a small enough denomination to pay mine.*

No, that's not quite true, he thought as the guilt over the pettiness of his comment to himself twisted his gut *Not quite.*

"I'm surprised to see you here, Percy," Neville commented, quietly, as he leaned in. "I didn't notice you at the other memorials."

Percy frowned before speaking. "We had our own service, you know, for Fred." He paused and cleared his throat before continuing, "And I just couldn't manage another."

Neville nodded, embarrassed that he hadn't thought of that himself.

"And I can't say I knew the Lupins very well, honestly, so it would have been false of me to stand among those who did," Percy said as he turned toward the officials and Hogwarts faculty milling around near the Minister. "But Professor Snape was one of my favorite teachers, and I would be very remiss, indeed, if I did not attend today."

Neville couldn't hide his shock. "But you were in *Gryffindor*!"

Percy looked thoughtful before answering. "Yes, I was, but for all his Slytherin bluster, he was a good teacher and I enjoyed Potions. Very much, in fact."

"Good teacher?!" Neville hissed. "Are you daft, man?"

Percy looked at Neville and raised his chin before replying, in a measured tone, "Did anyone die while you were in school? I mean, from a potions accident? Or was anyone injured badly enough to be sent home?"

Neville blinked once, twice. "No."

"Not in my year either, and not in any year after Professor Snape took the post. Before him accidents were commonplace, and serious accidents not uncommon." Percy turned back to the front. "I think they're getting ready to begin."

Neville stared at Percy a moment longer, then, too, turned to the front. He divided his attention between the Minister and a handful of speakers and his churning thoughts.

I am cold, so cold.

The dark has become mist, and the mist swirls around me like the eddies I watched from the riverbank when I was a child.

Before.

Before what? I find it more and more difficult to remember, but that does not frighten me. Perhaps if I could recall what it is I am losing, it might.

Or perhaps not.

I can see, in this mist. I see, now that the darkness has withdrawn, who I was ... if I concentrate. If I concentrate and move my hand in front of me, I see the outline of my fingers, a hint of a palm...my hand is no longer a hand, but an impression ... like the imprint left on a pillow by a sleeper long since risen.

I take it to mean that I am dead.

This conclusion does not upset me like I believe it might have.

Before.

Nor does the awareness that it does not.

The Ministry required weekly meetings with acting-Headmistress McGonagall to keep up with the progress of the massive reconstruction efforts necessary after the Battle. Percy asked acting-Minister Shacklebolt for the responsibility, and it was granted. In a letter to Neville he explained that he would be around on a regular basis, he explained his need to help...to contribute, to heal places within himself badly damaged by his own blindness...without noting that he had another reason to visit Hogwarts. The meetings were scheduled at tea-time on Fridays, so there would be no excuse to return to the office.

Neville read what was not said and he understood.

And so, on Fridays, Percy joined Neville and Harry in the Great Hall for dinner.

Recently, Harry had acquired the habit of flying after dinner to clear his head and to tire his body so he would sleep more soundly. Neville was still awakened by Harry's nightmares, but less often when Harry took to the sky.

Neville and Percy finished dessert slowly...sometimes they even went for seconds...as Neville talked about what had transpired that week. Neville's mimicry of the teachers as he told his stories made Percy laugh (Percy had not laughed in such a long, long time), and Percy's descriptions of what was necessary within the Ministry to clean the ranks, re-assign where necessary, and re-staff made Neville think (and it had been a long time since Neville thought of anything but the Battle, the Carrows, the last year and all it contained).

After dinner they walked the grounds...sometimes talking, sometimes not...and assessed the damage to the greenhouses and the gardens. They discussed Neville's plans to repair Hagrid's house once the greenhouses were in order, since Hagrid would be off relocating the giants (including Grawp) until well after the first snows. Eventually they found themselves at the gates, and Neville would bid Percy a good evening (both afraid that Percy might try to kiss him and hoping that he would).

I am cold, so cold.

As I pass through the mist, I can hear sounds. Shouts. Laughter. I long to hear the whisper of the wind in the trees, but all that reaches me are voices.

There are voices here that seem familiar, but they are like mist, too. They are like me. I cannot see the faces that once belonged to those voices, but I know they do not laugh with me. Those men, that woman...they do not call to me. I do not follow them.

I find I have no wish to. And this does not upset me like I think it...perhaps *should*.

Nor does the awareness that it does not.

Other voices reach me in the mist, but they are not like me. I can hear the life behind them.

I recognize some of them, or I think I do. Or should. As I wander the mist, I find that certain voices are calming, gentle ... and if I wonder whether I would have found them so before, I do not wonder long.

If I try, I can see through the mist. I watch lips moving and hear voices escape them. The gentle voices speak close to the forest, on the rolling greens, in the shells of buildings with twisted frames that reach to the sky. I do long to see the sky. There is a red one, and a brown one, and I know that once I knew the names of these living voices.

If I try, I can hear them. And between their words I can hear echoes of the wind whispering in the trees.

I follow them...there is nothing for me to do...and listen to their voices. They are calm, constant, the murmuring of a stream still too small to know the power of rushing to the sea. I listen as they call each other by name...Percy, Neville...names that feel familiar. Names that make me remember.

Some of the memories I am glad to revisit. Many others I am not.

These two...memories of them do not cut me or crush my insubstantial form under their weight of pain.

One brings bravery and strength to mind, and surprise, and the memory of failure...his, mine.

I failed him.

Before.

The other reminds me of intelligence, of stubbornness and a craving for recognition, of sadness and disappointment...his, mine. And finally, relief and gratitude.

Never had I wanted to see any of my children in battle, but when it came to that, so many made me proud. At the end, far beyond the point of no return, I did realize that my students were the only children I would ever have, and though it seems likely I would never have chosen to have any of my body, the realization was sobering.

So I follow these two...these two who I never would have guessed would find some kindred spirit in the other...and they become symbols of all I have lost, both before and after my death. I did not look for them. I do not look for others; these two, they come to me.

It is enough.

"Percy?" Neville began tentatively. He hadn't broached the subject of Professor, *er*, Headmaster, *er* ... *Snape* since the memorial, but what Percy had said that day had remained with him. He didn't understand, but he wanted to; and now that the trees were bare, money was raised, and planning was underway, he *needed* to understand.

Percy turned his head toward Neville and smiled. "Yes?"

Neville fidgeted and shifted against the trunk of the tree on which they both leaned, a tree under which they often found themselves in the late afternoon, taking advantage of the last weeks of clement autumn weather.

"A-at the memorial you told me Professor Snape was your favorite teacher ... "

"Yes." Percy's brow furrowed.

Neville sighed. *Sally forth, Gryffindor.* "After what Harry told us about the memories he's seen, I understand more about last year than I did when it was happening, but..." he turned toward Percy, "...but it's not enough. To *know* him, not really ... I mean, I don't think anyone alive can say they really *knew* him but that doesn't mean we...I...shouldn't try. To understand."

Percy considered Neville before speaking quietly. "He deserves that, I think. He always did."

Neville nodded, then frowned as the waves of dissonant experiences with the man crashed over him. It was so difficult to not be swept away...it had been only six months, after all.

Neville swallowed the bile that threatened to rise and took a deep breath. Harry had been the only person he had trusted with the events of the last year...the answers to Harry's questions whispered as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, rebuilding the common rooms right after the Battle...but now his need to understand was greater than his need to keep those memories locked away forever.

"Last year was ... was worse than the *Prophet* reported, than anyone imagined. We were all...teachers included...scared out of our wits. We were all jumping at shadows, afraid to pass alcoves or even go to the bathroom alone...even the boys...and listening for the Carrows before rounding corners or leaving classrooms and common rooms. The teachers tried to help, but when Amycus was bored and looking for someone to Crucio, there was no stopping him. Snape ... Percy, I *hated* him when I came back to school, I hated him *so much*. I swore I'd wipe that smirk he always wore right off his face, somehow. Only he wasn't wearing it. He looked terrible. He was thinner than ever, almost skeletal ... and his *eyes*, Perce." Neville paused and closed his eyes against the images burned into them. "He looked *schaunted*, hollow. I've never seen anyone look like that, except my parents."

Percy didn't speak, but rested his hand on Neville's arm. It was enough.

"There were almost-daily games of Ring-Around-the-Crucio, and a few of us started goading the Carrows when they were targeting the youngest students. Sometimes the distraction was enough to let them hide and we managed to escape, but usually we just ended up as substitutes." At Percy's shocked look Neville explained, "I can take a round of Crucio better than a first-year."

He sighed and continued. "Snape was *always* there, appearing out of nowhere. We rarely saw him walking the corridors, but it was like he was everywhere at once. I...I thought he was there for the entertainment, enjoying watching Gryffindor pain and humiliation, but ... " his voice cracked, "but I was hiding behind a tapestry, to get a good shot at Alecto as she was torturing a third-year Hufflepuff, when he stepped out of the shadows and ... and he *stopped* her. He chided the student for being caught out after hours until Alecto was out of earshot, and then he kneeled down. And he healed the little Hufflepuff and talked to her softly before helping her up."

Neville stared at Percy's hand as it gently squeezed, then swallowed audibly.

"He told her to 'be careful' as she hurried away, then he turned around and looked *right at me*, Percy, and said, 'you, too, Mr. Longbottom'. And then I realized...he was trying to *protect* us! He looked like he never slept because he probably *didn't*. Because he was always *watching* them, the Carrows, and I felt so bloody awful for everything we had done that made his job *harder*. I moved into the Room of Requirement the next day...one less Gryffindor to watch over meant he'd have time to sleep a little, or eat ...

... I didn't see him again after that."

Neville raised his head and looked at Percy. "I didn't understand it then, not really. And after Harry told me everything I ... I still didn't understand, though more things made sense."

"And you think I can help you understand?" Percy asked, gently. He closed his eyes as he paused. "I'll try. I don't understand all of this, myself ... but I'll try. And Neville?"

His eyes caught Neville's and held them fast.

"Thank you for trusting me. With all of that."

And as the sun began to set, Percy began to talk. He spoke of both the Snape Neville knew, and the Snape he could hardly have guessed at. He spoke until well past dinner hour, and what he had spoken of remained in Neville's thoughts as he quietly made his way down to the kitchens for a sandwich, as he undressed for bed, and it kept him from slumber for some time thereafter.

I am cold, so cold.

The living are joining me in the cold now, but I'll never see the spring again as they will.

And this does not upset me like I think it...perhaps..*should*.

Nor does the awareness that it does not.

I wander among the yew, willing myself to remember the smell of the boughs, the crispness of the air, the sting of the wind on my face. I run my formless fingers along the trunks, recalling the roughness, the scent of resin that would escape as the logs cracked in the hearth, and I brought my fingers to my nose, wishing to smell that evergreen sharpness one more time.

But I cannot.

My two still walk the grounds at the edge of the forest and talk. They speak of the Ministry, of reforms and resistance. They speak of Hogwarts, and I feel relief with each name they reference, learning which students and former colleagues (not friends, never friends) survived the battle.

They speak of a memorial to be built in the spring. I grieve to hear the names of those who will be honored...who fought and died...too many names, too many children, too high the price.

I feel shock when they speak of me, of me in particular. I am wary of listening...I am unwilling to hear the insults and the accusations, whether accurate or not~~again~~.

I am unwilling to hear the voices of what have become (over the un-time in which I now travel) my sons.*mine*...speak words with edges sharp enough to tear my fragile formlessness to ribbons.

I have recalled much of my life by now: I recognize the irony in this.

I know I should not care, that I did not care*before*, but they are all I have, and rarely was there anything I could...I would have chosen to...call mine in my miserable life. Their words, however, do not cut. They speak of fear and of confusion, of striving and failure, of frustration and dislike, but also of respect.

I am ... amazed, shocked, chagrined, and embarrassed.

He told them all...I should have known he would, that he could not rest until he championed my cause...and now every secret, every small, treasured, moment I ever kept tucked safely away is out in the open. For all to see.

And yet ... and yet this does not upset me like I am certain it*should*, certain it *would* have.

Before.

"How do you think you did?" Percy asked as they walked the treeline.

Neville shrugged. "I'm sure I did well in Herbology. Harry talked me into taking DADA, and I think I may have passed that and Care of Magical Creatures, too. I didn't bother with any others." He shot Percy a look before continuing, "The only other subject that might have any positive impact for a future Herbologist is Potions."

Percy tried to hide his amusement at Neville's dramatic eye roll at the mention of that subject. "But you already have your apprenticeship, don't you?"

"Professor Sprout has overseen the work I've already done repairing the grounds and will include that in the final report she sends to the Ministry to record my qualifications. She thinks we can cut at least six months off the apprenticeship, maybe as much as a year."

Percy clapped Neville on the back. "Good on you!"

"And now that the exams are over, I can concentrate on planting the memorial garden." Neville glanced sidelong at Percy before continuing, "Would you like to help me, Perce?"

"I'd like that, Neville. I looked at the memorial earlier and it's truly magnificent. Dean did a wonderful job with it. You*all* have...I honestly didn't think you'd get this far, although I should have known ... anything Harry sets his mind to seems to work out in the end."

Neville's steps slowed. "Percy, when you arrived today, you approached the memorial stone with someone I didn't recognize...is the Ministry trying to get credit for Hogwarts' memorial?"

Percy stopped. "No, Neville, I was just showing a workwizard where the memorial was located. He had orders for an addition."

Neville gasped. "Has someone died?"

Percy shook his head. "Next to the last line, 'Headmaster Severus Snape, Potions Master'. Harry wants an inscription added, one he wrote himself. It will read, 'We...the past, current, and future students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...honor you for all you did to protect every child in your care, and for doing it so well we never knew how much you cared and sacrificed for us.'"

Like a dam breaking inside him, the emotion flowed forth with such force Neville dropped to his knees, arms hugging his torso as he bent under the weight of grief and, finally, *understanding*.

And he wept.

I am cold, so cold.

The living world is no longer cold, however.

The ground has thawed, the earth is dark...saturated with melted snow and early spring rains...its color reminds me of the small plot of shade-loving, non-native plants I planted each year under the gnarled pines in the deepest part of the forest. The soil rich, loamy, strong of scent and cold enough to numb my fingertips as I dug...non-magically...each shallow hole for each pale seedling. And the taste...oh how I *hated* the bitter taste of the neem leaves I would chew, lining each hole with the pulpy mess to discourage pests and encourage the rooting of my precious magical plants originally gathered a decade ago in the Anamala Hills. Once they matured, the oil I extracted extended the shelf life of Wolfsbane potion from hours to days. It was my secret, a secret I never recorded, never told a soul.

I think I would give almost anything to taste the neem one more time.

How odd that *this* is what I recall as I watch them planting, shoulder to shoulder.

Flats of plants surround the two as they begin work, at the base of an enormous slab of marble. I hover on the edges of the forest as it creeps up the hill, watching. Listening. Neville ... does not cease to surprise me. Each plant chosen with such care, described with such fervor, meanings explained in detail to the ginger lad by his side...dirtier than I have ever seen him in life, even as a boy...and in between expository interjections, he quietly relates stories, memories of each soul lost. Percy nods, occasionally blinks furiously, and clears his throat.

Too high a price, indeed.

Then, after the last flower is carefully pressed into the dirt, they stand. They stand, but do not leave. I am perplexed. Then, Neville collects a box that has sat to the side, waiting, and moves to the slope. As each single shrunken seedling is removed and carefully re-sized, a tale is told.

My tale.

Told by branch and leaf, through words sometimes halting, sometimes forceful, I am stunned to hear how this boy, this man...Neville...has come to regard me. Such interesting choices he has made ... I see he has developed far more subtlety that last year than I knew to give him credit for. If I could be warmed, I think that realization would.

Blossoms ... he chose trees for their *blossoms*. Clever. He has laid my soul bare, but so briefly do they bloom...it's as if he is trying to protect me at the same time.

It is enough to give me pause, although it's not as if I don't have time enough to pause at length.

Once all signs of what I so vehemently tried to hide all those years disappear, those trees will be as I was *available* ... available to nurture their bodies as I had always tried to nurture their minds.

I *did* try to nurture their minds and protect their bodies...especially my last year...no matter what they all thought. It is possible that in some cases I tried too hard, and in others not hard enough ... but I *tried*. I *tried*.

That is, if the children come close, choose to reach up and pick the fruit of my bones. No one will tell them, no one will show them...as it was ~~before~~...if they are unafraid to approach, all they need is available for the picking, a sweetness that waits only the tasting. *Before*, only my little snakes would...perhaps this time more children will avail themselves of what little I have left to offer.

Cherries, then peaches, then apples will grow ... and once they become too heavy with the sweet juices of life, they will fall.

I fell, but my heaviness had nothing to do with the sweetness of life.

Next year they will see me. They will *all* see *all* of me.

And this does not upset me like I think it...perhaps...*should*. Certainly, it does not upset me like it *would* have.

Before.

Nor does the awareness that it does not.

After the acting-Headmistress' teary address to all assembled for the Leaving Feast, after seconds of treacle tart, after the last tossed cap fell back to earth, Neville clapped Harry on the back, bussed Ginny on the cheek, and moved to the doors to escape the din. It had been a long year...two years, really, as one hadn't ended fully before the next had begun...and Neville was tired in ways that mere sleep couldn't assuage.

He had much left to do this day. While the others were preparing to leave for homes and families (*what might be left of them* Neville noted with a grimace) his belongings were moved to Hagrid's hut, where he would stay until his apprenticeship quarters were ready for next school year. The grounds still needed attention, there was one greenhouse left to repair and refit, and he wanted to finish his work on the hut before Hagrid returned in August.

Neville sighed. Even when Hogwarts looked again like it had *before*, it would never be the same. Lost in thought, he nearly ran into someone leaning against the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Percy!" he exclaimed, then broke into a grin. "You were able to get out of that meeting with the Minister, after all!"

Percy returned the smile nervously as he nodded and straightened his robes. "Congratulations, Neville! Do you still want help settling in?"

Neville's reply was a quietly spoken password (*for the last time*, he realized in passing) and a slight touch on Percy's elbow when the portrait swung open. Percy nodded to Neville, then he stepped through to the Gryffindor common room. Neville watched him take it all in, that which seemed so achingly familiar and along with the changes that would remind Percy that it had been years since this was his home.

Neville had experienced the same feelings as the months passed, this odd, eighth year. He was a Gryffindor, yet he had moved beyond Houses, he didn't belong anymore. He appreciated the presence of Harry and the small handful of others who had returned to take their NEWTs...it was all that kept him from imagining it had been nothing but a nightmare, a long nightmare from which he had only recently awoken.

Well, perhaps it was that. But he could never...should never...forget that it was *real*.

He pulled himself from his reverie to gaze steadily at the man before him. Percy ... Neville's appreciation for *this* presence was far deeper than a mere reminder of the way Gryffindor House had been *before*.

Neville had shrunk his belongings before the feast, so all that needed to be done was to load their pockets and tuck a pot (that held his beloved Mimulus Mimbletonia and her brood) in each arm.

Spring had come unseasonably early to Hogwarts that year...as if Mother Nature herself was so relieved that the war had ended that she couldn't help but burst out in color. The year before spring had been cold and wet with her tears.

Neville and Percy loped away from the castle across the green, eyes squinted against the sun. Less than a week since solstice, the sun was still high in the sky even at that hour, and the light glinted off the surface of the loch. Side by side they walked, veering automatically to stop at Dumbledore's tomb in silence, and then proceeded to the memorial, where Percy waited at the bench while Neville slowly circled the planting beds, looking less at the physical condition of the plants than letting the reminders of the people for whom they had been planted wash over him.

Percy watched him approach the copse of trees...seedlings no longer, not with the arbor-growth serum and flora strengthening charms Neville had been applying daily...slowly, reverently. He couldn't help but smile as Neville wove through the trees, running his fingertips over the bark of each trunk, fingering leaves, looking around him soberly.

Making his peace.

Percy was still smiling as Neville returned to him, walking with steps lighter than the ones that had carried him away three-quarters of an hour before. He returned Percy's smile, and together they walked to the hut. After another hour of companionable silence as they wielded cleaning and other household charms necessary to turn the newly rebuilt and refurbished space into a home (Molly would have been proud...her Percy had always been so diligent at the Burrow, such a quick study), at last the day's labors were done.

After Neville built the fire, he joined Percy on the couch and twined their fingers. Percy scooted closer, and for a time they sat, knees and shoulders touching, listening to the crackle of the fire.

Percy broke the silence first. "I'm very proud of you Neville. Do you know that?"

Neville looked at him, bewildered.

Percy cleared his throat nervously before he went on, allowing his natural restraint a chance to catch up with his Gryffindor impulse to speak. "Not for what you think...although I would never diminish your actions at the last battle...no, this year ... this year you grew into more of the man I'd like to be than I may ever manage. You faced your demons and won, Neville. You've managed to see the whole of the person of someone who deeply injured you, you've found humanity where so few of us were able to, and you have forgiven all he had to do...and did not have to do...since the first moment he saw you. I...I don't know if I can ever forgive some of the people who have hurt me most, but you ... you inspire me to try." He blushed deeply, then looked a still-stunned Neville in the eye. "I'm proud to call you my friend Neville, and ... and I'd like to formally court you, if you'd accept me."

Tears sprang to Neville's eyes for only the second time since Kingsley spoke of Fred and the rest of the fallen students the previous summer.

"Oh, Percy! I ... " In lieu of words he had no hope of sorting out enough to speak, Neville threw himself into Percy's arms, peppering his face with kisses and knocking his glasses askew. Percy removed them, laying them carefully on the table behind him, then turned to hold Neville's face in his hands. He leaned his forehead against Neville's as he caught his breath, then slowly dipped his head.

The kiss was like no other they'd shared...still warm and still soft, but filled with promise. Filled with passion. Percy worried Neville's lower lip, teasing his mouth open with gentle nips until a breathless Neville allowed himself to be tasted fully. Tongue met tongue, quiet moans joined the snap of the logs as they tumbled forward to stretch out on the rug.

It wouldn't be the last night they spent entwined, it wouldn't be the last time they would whisper sweet nothings and deep declarations until the light of breaking dawn could be seen traveling the floorboards, but both would always cite it as the moment they knew it was love.

I am cold.

But they, *together*, are warm. Together in a way I had never been, I am sure...even if I might have thought I was, once. But this does not upset me like it once would have done.

Nor does the awareness that it does not. And I find this, in its own way, warms a part of me now that was never truly warm.

Before.

Either way, I am at peace.