

Killing Time

by Lariope

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

One

Chapter 1 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

A/N: This story, complete in eleven chapters, was written for ScatteredLogic in the 2010 SS/HG Exchange. I was delighted and honored to get to write for her, and her prompts were delicious and inspiring.

This was the original prompt: After taking her NEWTs, Hermione moves into a crowded wizarding boarding house where she's expected to share a bathroom with her next-door neighbor. To her surprise, her neighbor is Severus Snape. Why they're living at a boarding house, and how they adapt to living in such close proximity is up to the writer. (EWE, romance or at least friendship preferred.)

I want to say thank you to my tireless beta, OpalJade, for her work on this story. She read every word...multiple times...and spent countless hours on the phone and email, helping me untangle all the narrative threads. If you have a beta, I hope you have one like mine, the kind you trust with everything...not just the finished product, but the ugly, partial drafts, the things that just aren't working, the terrible insecurity of writing something that will be read by others. Thank you, OpalJade. I couldn't write a word without you.

He did not Apparate, though if Potter were to be believed, he could have. Nor did he Floo, though the house had almost certainly been connected to the Floo Network. He walked...because he was angry, because the trip was long, and because he did not, in fact, want to reach his destination.

He had set out from St. Mungo's carrying a battered, gray suitcase in one fist and Potter's missive clenched in the other.

The Healers at St. Mungo's had been kind, if kindness could be defined as not kicking him out on his arse immediately upon his waking. They had tiptoed around him for the first several days, urging him to drink liquids, to walk from his bed to the window, and to perform childish spells with his wand. When he had done these things to their satisfaction, they had, apparently, deemed him cured, and a young Healer had come to him with a list.

He had ignored it for nearly a week. This had not been out of the simple wish to thwart them, though such an impulse could not be denied, but because his body had still felt strange to him, new and hesitant. He had been held in an enchanted sleep for nearly sixteen weeks, and though the Healers had taken care to ensure that his muscles did not atrophy, his body had not felt like his own. And it had seemed to him that perhaps a few more weeks recuperation were not too much to ask, given all that he had endured. It seemed to him that he was *owed* this bed in the Dai Llewellyn Ward, if not forever, then at least until he'd had time to plan. But before six days had become seven, the young Healer had returned and said, not unkindly, "Mr Snape, there are patients waiting to be admitted to this ward. Have you chosen a facility?"

A facility. The list of *facilities* had begun with Harry Potter's name, circled in red. From there, it had gone on to list the names of six other witches and wizards who, it seemed, were offering services (he could hardly bring himself to think the word *charity*) to those who had been left homeless after the war. Halfway houses. Shelters. The entire notion had filled him with disgust.

It was not living among others that troubled him, he thought as he strode toward Grimmauld Place. He'd lived in a castle stuffed with bodies since the age of eleven. It was

the implication that he was destitute, *left over*, so much human detritus after the events of the second war that gnawed at his mind, and if he was honest, it infuriated him most because it appeared to be true. Why had so much effort gone into saving his life if he was to be unceremoniously turned out into the street?

The red circle at the top of the page had seemed to indicate Potter's hand in all of this, and the feeling that had left in him went beyond fury into something far blacker and more complicated. Had the imbecile deliberately created a scenario in which he, Snape, would be forced into Potter's debt, owing his life and his very shelter to Potter's *goodwill*? It could not be tolerated. Impossible.

He'd requested a quill and carefully composed a letter of inquiry to the latter six.

Three had been returned with polite rejections: *So sorry, no vacancies; if only you'd applied a week/a day/a year/a lifetime earlier* Two had not been answered at all. And one he had burned immediately, as he could smell the contamination of the paper as soon as it entered the room, tied to the owl's leg by a much longer string than necessary for a small bit of post. Singed feathers were what he smelled now when the impotence of his situation overwhelmed him. For what had there been left to do but the thing that had clearly been the only option from the start? He had written to Potter and packed his bag.

He had expected Potter's return owl promptly, but when it had arrived, it had born a message requesting a meeting. A meeting. Not a letter of acceptance or welcome, but a meeting; surely one in which Potter could name the terms of the debt he had manufactured.

If a meeting is what you desire, Mr Potter, Snape had replied, then a meeting you shall have. Perhaps you would care to visit St Mungo's? I assure you, my schedule is wide open.

Mr Snape, Potter had returned. It seems to me that the outcome of our meeting is a foregone conclusion. It is simply a formality in terms of ironing out the conditions of your lodging. Therefore, there is no need for me to visit you at St Mungo's. I will expect you at number twelve Grimmauld Place at your earliest convenience.

Snape snorted to himself as he walked. If Potter had written that letter, he would eat the owl that had delivered it. A foregone conclusion? The Potter he had known would have stammered and reddened and finally shouted that he intended to put him up, for Merlin's sake, there were simply a few rules.

I imagine there are more than a few high profile residents of your... abode. Snape had written in reply. *Unless you have foolishly removed the Fidelius Charm from the house, I will need to be apprised of the secret and password before we can, as you say, iron out the conditions.*

Potter's response had frightened him, though it was difficult for him to say why. *I think you'll find things much as you left them. HP.*

Was it truly possible that Potter had not changed the enchantments protecting Grimmauld Place?

He rather hoped it was a lie. He'd walked all this way, in fact, clinging to the belief that it was a lie, that he would arrive at Grimmauld Place, tired and lightheaded, to find that number twelve Grimmauld Place did not exist at all, that number eleven sat snugly and implacably beside number thirteen as surely as it would if he were a Squib. He hoped for this because (and he did not delude himself on this point; Snape prided himself on keeping his secrets from others, but being brutally, nearly terrifyingly honest with himself) if Potter had *insulted* him, if he had brought a convalescent all this way and then refused him, then he could go on hating Potter in relative peace. It would erase all debts and render the balance of power acceptable once more.

Snape turned the corner onto Grimmauld Place, unprepared for how his blood would rush when he saw it. It was not just the heat, or the fact that he'd just walked nearly a kilometer after having undertaken nothing more strenuous than a trip to the loo in months, but the simple fact of number twelve Grimmauld Place, looking as he had never seen it. He had always arrived at headquarters under the cover of night, and though he knew the building, could pick it out easily, he had never known it to look quite so sharp and present. It did not seem to him a relic of an old world that had been decimated and was now clawing its way back to vitality, inch by inch, but a new thing entirely.

He climbed the steps to the front door, but found he could not raise his hand to knock, nor speak the word that he had known as the password. Somehow to stand here, asking admittance to this house, still standing so improbably... to whisper the name *Dumbledore* in broad daylight... seemed--and then his indignation found him all at once. Well, it seemed exactly as Potter had probably intended for it to seem. He took a step back.

The door opened suddenly, and Snape nearly tumbled down the step behind him in surprise. Harry Potter stood on the landing, looking stringy and disheveled and important.

"Snape," he said.

"Potter," Snape said, recovering himself.

"Come in."

He hesitated for a moment before it became clear that having come all this way with a suitcase in hand, it would simply look foolish for him to refuse, and so he followed Potter into the house.

Walburga Black's face greeted him immediately as he stepped into the entrance hall. Snape was astounded to see the portrait uncovered, the heavy black curtains tied back. Mrs Black sat in the same high-collared navy robes and cap that she'd worn since death had ensconced her in the portrait, and her posture was as stiff and formal as ever, but her lips were pressed together in a thin white line. She saw him, of that there was no doubt, and her eyes narrowed as he and Potter passed by, but she said nothing.

Potter looked back over his shoulder as if to check that Snape was following along obediently. Snape stood, his head tilted back, staring openly at the portrait.

"Yes, we shut her up at last," Potter said lightly and then nodded his head toward the sitting room. "Come on, then. You don't want to get her all worked up."

Snape could not explain why he felt so discomfited by Walburga's silence. He certainly had never cared for the old woman, nor taken any pleasure her insults, but she had always seemed to him to be a fundamental part of the house, as essential to it as the plaster of the walls, and it made him feel that everything he had ever understood had changed.

The sitting room, to his relief, was still furnished in threadbare chintz and moldering velvet, but it was infected with life in a way that it had never been as the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Books were scattered across the sofa, and two cups of tea sat half-finished upon the coffee table. Potter crossed the room to a wall that had not been there previously and had the markings of hastily thrown up spellwork. He opened a door, and Snape followed him through it.

"Have a seat," Potter said and seated himself behind a large desk almost totally obscured by clutter. There were towering inboxes and stacks of newspapers, bags of owl treats, and a large, unlikely sculpture of a house-elf sitting off to one side. Potter shoved several piles out of his way.

Snape did not want to sit opposite Potter's desk. The dynamics already felt completely wrong, and he was furious to find that he'd somehow been called to Potter's office like a schoolboy. He stood somewhat awkwardly beside a large potted plant and tapped his fingers against a bookshelf.

"Who writes your correspondence?" he asked.

"Er... my correspondence?" Potter replied.

"Your letters, Potter. You can hardly expect me to believe that you use the phrase, 'at your earliest convenience' in daily life."

Potter looked slightly chagrined, and Snape awarded himself a mental point. Three more, and he would allow himself to sit down.

"Erm, yes. Well, Hermione sometimes answers a bit of the mail--"

"Granger is your *secretary*?" Snape asked.

"What? No! She--well, she runs the Foundation, you see, and she likes to keep involved in all the different--"

"Granger is your secretary," Snape said and chuckled.

"What--whatever," Harry said, trying and failing to dismiss this line of questioning. His neck was beginning to turn red.

"Is there something you wished me to sign?" Snape asked. "A promissory note of some kind, perhaps?"

"No! I mean, there's no charge for living here, Snape. That's not what this is about."

"Then what, pray tell, is it about? Do you intend to ask for references? Because it seems to me that my last two employers--"

"Stop," Harry said firmly. "There's no need... no need for that. Let's begin again. Please."

"Whatever you like, Potter," Snape said, taking the seat opposite Potter's desk and leaning back.

"There are only two rooms left in the house," Potter said. "I'm not giving you a choice about which one is yours. There are other residents--six of them, in fact, including myself--and I expect you to be decent to them. This is their home, and they will not be terrorized in it. The same rules will protect you."

"You anticipate that you will need to protect me from the other residents?"

Potter sighed. "No. I don't. But the fact remains that there are people out there who are not your biggest fans. I assume that's why you're here."

"What, and not because you bribed some poor St Mungo's employee to give a list with your name at the top circled in red?"

"You're mad if you think I was actively trying to get you to live in this house, Snape. I hardly need the extra headaches or the publicity. What I'm trying to tell you is that no one will be welcome in this house that cannot treat you civilly. And I expect you to return that favor. I am keeping you off of the floor of the house that Neville lives in--"

"Heavens be praised," Snape interrupted dryly, and Harry shot him a dark look.

"--in the hopes that you will have no reason to speak to him at all. Unfortunately, that leaves you on the fourth floor, where the only available room shares a lavatory with another resident's room."

"Charming," Snape said. "And with whom will I have the pleasure of sharing a loo?"

"Hermione," Harry said.

Snape spared this news hardly a thought, as he was quite caught up in the game of points he was conducting with Potter. "With your secretary!" he exclaimed with mock enthusiasm. "What an honor."

"Call her my secretary to her face, and I imagine she'll show you a thing or two about honor," Potter muttered.

"Beg pardon?"

He began again, more vehemently. "You will not harass her, belittle her, or badger her in any way. No insults. You will not complain about noise. If the plumbing wall affects the acoustics of your room, you will cast your own Silencing Charms. I don't want to hear about it."

"I'm sure if I had any complaints, I wouldn't trouble you with them. Surely, your secretary--"

This appeared to be Potter's breaking point. His color had been steadily rising, and his voice had reached an untenable volume. He snapped forward suddenly, his hands landing flat upon his desk, sending scraps of parchment flying.

"Do you need me to say it?" he said in a vicious whisper. "Fine. Fine, I'll say it. Thank you, Snape, for all you did. The war could not have been won and I could not have survived without you, and I know it. But that does not mean that I want to live with you, now or ever. Hermione is the one who offered you a room here and insisted that she could handle living beside you. It was her letter you received because it was Hermione who fought for your inclusion. So show her some respect."

Snape struggled with this information for a moment--Hermione Granger had been the one to contact St. Mungo's-- before settling on a response.

"Oh, I'm certain we'll be the best of friends," he said, crossing his legs and smirking slightly. "I'll invite her round for tea at once."

Potter looked defeated as he settled back into his chair. "Look--what do you intend to do here, Snape?"

"Do?"

"As in a job. I assume you won't want to live on the charity of this household forever."

Snape inwardly flinched at the word, but he parried all the same. "Is the room conditional upon my employment?"

"No," Potter said wearily. "No. I suppose you could sit up there and knit scarves for house-elves all day if you wanted to. Our bylaws say nothing about your employment. I was just curious--"

"--about how long I intend to remain as your tenant?" Snape arched an eyebrow.

"Yes. How long do you think you'll be with us?"

"Until Hogwarts reopens," Snape said at last, his face blank. "Until then, I am just killing time."

Snape knew immediately where he was heading when Potter led him up the staircase to the topmost landing, and it was difficult to hide his shock. Potter had mentioned that he would be on the fourth floor, but he had not associated it to the room he knew sat at the top of the house, the room that had belonged to Sirius Black. Why would Potter give him this room? If he'd been asked, Snape would have ventured to guess that Potter lived in it himself or had preserved it as some sort of shrine.

"Here it is, then," Potter said, gesturing at the door. He seemed unable or unwilling to look directly at it. "I, um, hope you'll be comfortable. There's a weekly chore list inside; I believe you've got the library this week."

Snape said nothing.

"Right. I'll just be off. Meals are at seven and seven. You know where to find me if you... need anything."

Snape snorted derisively. "Yes, run along now," he said.

Potter turned and began to descend the stairs, but Snape remained in the hallway. He would never have said so, but he shared Potter's reluctance to open the door to the room. Would it be changed? Would he be expected to live among velvet hangings and Quidditch posters? The last time he had entered this room... well, it was difficult to meet that memory head on, as it was colored with the stress of that year, the amber haze of firewhisky, and too many sleepless nights... but he could still remember the nearly suffocating sensation that time had stopped inside that room, that somehow the Blacks had succeeded in freezing their son forever at the age of sixteen, mummifying him inside those walls, imprisoning him there.

He turned the doorknob, expecting to be greeted by a large, ornately carved bed and a picture of a scantily clad Muggle female astride a motorbike, but the room was empty. Well, not empty, but bare in comparison to what had been. The walls were a sedate cream, the moldings a shade lighter. In the corner of the room, there stood a double bed, unadorned by canopy or carving, and beside the door, a desk. In what Snape recalled as a rather large closet, there stood a tiny kitchenette, complete with a two burner stovetop and small refrigerator. Well, that was a relief. At least he would not have to venture into the main part of the house simply to have a cup of tea.

Snape wondered where Harry had stored all of Sirius Black's belongings. Surely there could be no more use for his Muggle girls or his Quidditch pennants, and yet Snape could not imagine Potter tossing them out. No, they were stored somewhere, as carefully preserved as this room had been. Snape did not know why that image made him shudder.

He had brought little, as there had been little to bring. Inside his suitcase, there were only the things that Minerva had sent over from the castle--two spare teaching robes, a few books, his potions journal--all of it useless. It struck him that he was a man of frighteningly few personal possessions. There had never been any need to own his own sheets or furniture, plates or even books. The castle had provided all he needed since he'd been a child. There had been that one year--but that was all. And he'd had... others... to provide for him then. He turned his mind away from that.

In any case, there would be no need to unpack here; whatever he needed would have to be acquired. He had some money; not a great deal, but perhaps enough to live on until the reopening of the school. He tried to imagine, for a moment, what he would require and found that he had very little idea. Perhaps the brat next door would allow him to glance around her room. That thought led him to the loo.

He had never lived beside a female before, never stepped into one of their secret spaces. He found that he was very much looking forward to seeing exactly what women stored in the toilet, to getting a glimpse of whatever strange rituals they performed there. Of course, Granger was just a schoolgirl--he doubted that she yet had much knowledge of these things herself, but he was interested all the same.

The room itself was spare enough: white with white tile, but there were bursts of color here and there. A basket sat on the countertop filled with tubes and jars of various sizes and descriptions, holding small amounts of colored potions that Snape had never before got to examine. He held one up to the light. Reddish pigments swam in some kind of liquid base. Strange. There was a bright blue bathmat on the floor beside the shower, and the shower itself contained no less than five bottles of what Snape could only assume were shampoos of some kind. Why anyone would need so many was utterly beyond him, and he shook his head and closed the curtain. He opened the cabinet beneath the counter. Inside there was loo paper, extra bottles of the (already copious, so far as he could see) shampoo-like products, and a box of something not immediately identifiable, which he put back, coloring slightly, a moment later.

The small room smelled of her; well, perhaps not *other*, he supposed, but of the things in the shower and on the sink. Female things. The air was perfumed slightly with talcum and something floral--peony? Violet? It was a wonderful smell, a nearly edible smell. Snape felt that he would like to put it in his pillows and fall asleep breathing it. Which was, perhaps, the most asinine thing he had thought all day and simply proof that the journey from St. Mungo's to this dratted house had taken more out of him than he'd thought. Still, he took one of the bottles from the shower and popped open the top. Not it. Nor were any of the other four.

There had been no noise from the adjoining room, nothing to indicate that Granger (or any of the other residents, come to think of it--the place had been surprisingly desolate for a building supposedly housing seven people) was home. He considered it briefly and then tried the door to her room. The knob did not turn, which was both a relief and an annoyance to him. Did she usually lock the door to the bathroom, or had she done so to prevent him from entering her room? As if he had any interest in poking through her things. No, that sort of nonsense was best left to Gryffindors, which was surely why she had suspected him of it. She'd done a fair amount of snooping and thieving herself through the years, if memory served.

Snape returned to his own room feeling slightly out of sorts. He had nothing to unpack, and Granger had ridiculously barred him from her room. He decided to look about the house to see if he could learn who else was living here. Surely all comrades of Potter. He would probably be tripping over Weasleys on the way to dinner. Potter was not above adding his own friends to the mix despite the fact that they all had a proper home to go to and had no business in a home for the displaced to begin with. Granger herself had no right to be here, come to that. She had family. He was occupied with these thoughts when he nearly ran into Pomona Sprout as she descended the stairs. He swallowed his surprise. Pomona Sprout! He'd always thought she'd come from some large pureblooded family, with siblings spread all about the country, owning inns or restaurants or something. Where had he gotten that idea?

Snape knew Potter had said that no one would be welcome in the house that could not treat him civilly, but he was suddenly quite uncomfortable. He had been guaranteed his reception by Potter, he felt. The red circle on the hospital list had told him that, but beyond it, he'd known simply because it was not in Potter's nature to overlook sacrifice. Harry Potter had never needed a trial to tell him which side Snape had been on, but he was very likely in the minority. He could not imagine how Pomona would receive him now.

"Slumming it, Pomona?" he said, and she nearly fell down the remaining few steps.

She reached the bottom and turned all in one fluid motion that belied her size. "Great Merlin! Severus! I had no idea you'd been released from St Mungo's!"

"Come now, I'm sure you attended the house meeting on whether I could be tolerated as a resident," Snape said archly as he followed her to the landing.

Pomona smiled with weary familiarity. "No, no, it doesn't work like that, you daft young man. Now, come into the kitchen with me and have some tea where I can get a look at you."

Snape was filled with relief to learn both that Pomona welcomed him and that he had not landed among a group of teenagers pretending at being homeless. And yet, pleased as he was to see a familiar, *adult* face, he was immediately, as he had always been, reduced to a child himself in her presence. It had been more than odd, it had been damn near impossible, to do what Dumbledore had asked of him so long ago, joining the teaching staff a mere year after leaving school himself. Those he should have counted as colleagues had taught him themselves, and enough time had not then passed to erase the memories of his tempers and detentions from their minds. Pomona Sprout was a kind woman, and they'd known each other more years as fellow instructors than they had as professor and student, and yet Snape always had the vague, disquieting feeling that Pomona meant to pinch his cheeks.

"How long have you been here?" she asked as she bustled between the cabinets.

"Several hours, no more," Snape replied. "And you?"

"Oh, since... since the final battle, give or take. I went to see Minerva settled in her family home in Derry. I made some condolence visits. But then I had to admit to myself that there was no resting place without Hogwarts, and I came to see Hermione."

"Everyone speaks of Granger as if she runs the place."

"Harry runs the actual house," Pomona said. "And it's no small job, either. Especially with Argus and Draco. I'm certainly glad it isn't me. Still, he's a good boy, and he does a good job of it. And there's Kreacher to help him."

"Beg pardon--did you say Argus and Draco?"

"Well, unless Mrs. Norris has had a litter somewhere that we know nothing about, Argus has no family to go to," she said over her shoulder. Then she put down the mug she'd been holding. "Gracious, that was a dreadful thing to say. I'm sorry I said it."

"I'll overlook it," Snape said dryly, and without waiting for her to respond, he charged ahead to the matter he was truly interested in. "But Draco--you said Draco Malfoy?"

"Forgive me; I forgot that there are things you wouldn't know," Pomona said, turning to face him. "Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were sent to Azkaban. And Malfoy Manor--well, there was a lot of... I don't even know the word for it. Looting? Vandalism? There were a lot of bad feelings, and people... people did things they would be ashamed of now, I think. In any case, where was Draco to go?"

"Into the home of Harry Potter would not have been my first guess," Snape said, and Pomona gave him a look that plainly said she wished he did not have to be so petty. He was reminded again of how small she could sometimes make him feel.

"Well, it's a different world now," she said. "Are you planning to return to Hogwarts?"

"I've exchanged a few owls with Minerva," Snape said.

"I figured that you would have. Argus will, naturally. I intend to go back myself. The greenhouses are destroyed, of course. It will take years to get them back to the way they were. Maybe longer than my lifetime. Longer than my teaching career will last, certainly. I'd like to go back now and begin working on them, at least during the daylight hours, but they say it's still too dangerous. In any case, you should start looking for a good apothecary now. I won't be able to provide you with all I once did."

"I'll keep it in mind," Snape said. Pomona handed him a steaming cup of Darjeeling. He took a sip. Watery and thin.

"You mentioned that Kreacher is still here," he said. "If that is the case, why have I been assigned 'library duty,' whatever that might mean, and why on earth are you making your own tea?"

"Harry prefers that we stay active, contribute to the household," Pomona said. "And Hermione is absolutely insistent that Kreacher not be asked to do personal favors for us. She says he's to keep the house exactly as he would have before we moved in. That means that the extras--the library, the garden, Harry's office, meals outside of the two he serves--they're up to us."

"Could someone please explain to me why Granger has such a say in all of this?" Snape spat. "Potter spoke about her as if she were the reigning queen of everything, and now you tell me that she dictates the behavior of even the house-elves?"

Pomona gave him a rather odd look. "Hermione is the head of the Foundation," she said.

"And what, pray tell, is the Foundation?"

"You'll have to ask Hermione for a proper explanation; it's too complicated by far for me to tell it all. It's part charity, of course--it provides for the upkeep of this house and one more, so far as I understand it, as well as various other rehabilitation projects. It's got fingers in Hogwarts and in the Wizengamot, though strictly as a pressure group, you understand. Hermione is quite adamant that she does not work for the Ministry."

"We're speaking of Hermione Granger, are we not? An eighteen year old girl without even a complete education to her name, let alone the kind of money that such a thing would take."

"Severus, I'm not going to defend the Foundation to you. You live under its roof." Pomona's tone was short, and although Snape was fairly bursting with indignation and unanswered questions, he let the subject drop. He had nothing to do for the foreseeable future except to tend to a collection of Potter's schoolbooks and to wheedle information from the other members of the household. He rose to leave.

"Thank you for the tea," he said stiffly. "I hope our stay here will not be unnecessarily protracted."

"You know," Pomona said, turning back to the stove, "it sometimes occurs to me that there are four orphaned children in this house. And they are the only ones not waiting to get back into Hogwarts."

That night, Snape lay upon the mattress in Sirius Black's old room beneath the plain white sheets that had dressed the bed when he'd arrived. He refused to ask Potter for a blanket, though he was fairly certain they would be provided if he asked. He could purchase his own tomorrow. Still, there was no point in spending a load of Galleons on things that he would not need in only a few (God willing) months. Perhaps he could corner the house-elf and discover where such things were kept.

He slept thinly, as he always did. He was accustomed to waking at the slightest sound because he had often been visited in the middle of the night by his Slytherins to settle disputes and attend to minor curse damage, and he had liked to give them the impression that he never slept. When Granger arrived home, it was after midnight. He could hear the clack of her heels in the entrance hall, and though he tensed, waiting for the portrait's shrieks, none came. It was very difficult to imagine that Hermione Granger would not be thoroughly loathed by Walburga Black. That she, too, seemed to follow the girl's orders set Snape's teeth on edge.

She clattered up the stairs and shuffled about endlessly in front of her own door. Finally, blessedly, she gained entrance and set immediately to rending the air with the wireless. Perhaps he should suggest to her in the morning--*respectfully*, of course--that there were others in the house trying to sleep, and that perhaps she could keep her musical tastes to herself until after breakfast. He listened intently to the soft sound of her footfalls as she walked back and forth across the room and started when she entered the lavatory that separated his living quarters from hers.

He could hear the sounds of her brushing her teeth, which struck him as bizarrely intimate. He had not heard that sound since his own schooldays, and it seemed strange to be sharing it with a student. He turned onto his side and watched the strip of light that seeped under the door of the loo. From time to time, he could see the shadows of her feet as they passed. She sounded no larger to Snape, no different from the girl he had known to stretch her fingers out full length toward the ceiling, as if the relative height of the hand raised were the ultimate guarantee of being called upon.

He fell asleep to the whisper and hiss of the shower and the soft strains of a Celtic wizard ballad behind it. Though he did not know it, the scent he had so admired filled the air, carried to his room by steam, and he burrowed more deeply beneath the sheet and dreamed.

Two

A/N: Thank you very much to OpalJade for her betaing and hand holding, ScatteredLogic for the prompt, and RedOrchid for reading and encouraging.

Weeks passed, and Snape saw neither hide nor hair of Granger--face to face, at least. This was partly by his own design and partly because she rarely spent her daylight hours in the house. She woke each morning two minutes before five o'clock, though he never heard an alarm of any kind, only the sound of her feet as they hit the wooden floor. He heard her speak softly--the same words, day after day, although he could not determine exactly what she'd said. At first he'd thought it was "Cooks got the teacher;" however, that made no sense at all.

He'd listened carefully each day to this strange statement, trying on various combinations of words (Took ago creature? Look at the feature?) but none ever seemed to fit. Finally, after several days of creeping out of bed and casting a subtle Sonorus Charm, he determined that she said, "Crooks, go to Kreacher," which was nearly as nonsensical as anything else he'd landed on. It frustrated him that he could not determine the meaning of her morning pronouncement, and he was certain that it was the reason he remained interested in Granger's habits and routines.

This strange ritual complete, there would be a slightly muffled thump and scuffling, and she would proceed to the toilet. Her showers were, in his opinion, unnaturally long. He often wished to point out to her that if she spent less than twenty-five minutes in the shower, she might rise at a less godforsaken hour, but then, of course, he would have had to explain his habit of timing her showers, or perhaps his own habit of rising before the sun.

The loo would remain occupied for an additional thirty minutes while she completed Merlin alone knew what task. Often the bathroom would suddenly become spell-silent, the kind of quiet that made his ears feel hollow with nothingness, and he assumed she was using the toilet and casting a Silencing Charm out of modesty. It made him blush each time it happened, and then he would feel unreasonably angry with her. Did she expect him to do the same? To creep about and pretend that he did not live and breathe here beside her in this room? It was a childish and unreasonable expectation, he felt, and he often stood up and walked about his room at this point to remind her of his presence.

Once her toilet was complete, he would hear the soft, muffled sounds of her dressing, and then the clack and fall of her footsteps as she locked her door and descended the stairs. Snape would sit at the desk by the door and wait for the sound of her to pass into the kitchen. Then he would read or use the loo himself, anticipating the sound of the front door closing. Often he went to the window to catch a glimpse of her as she departed. He never saw her for more than a split second before she disappeared into the swirl of Apparition, but he was always struck by the way she looked.

Her robes were the thing that jarred his mind and brought him to the window most mornings. He felt as if he were looking at two images somehow superimposed upon one another--one of the girl he'd taught for six years, and one of a strange and powerful young witch that he did not recognize. It was a trick of the mind that he knew intimately. When he had joined the staff of Hogwarts at nineteen, Dumbledore had taken him to Twilfit and Tattings for a lengthy consultation, and it was there that they had designed the teaching robes that he had worn from then on. His robes had been tailored to give him the appearance of height and bulk that he had not yet earned and had been created with intimidation in their very seams. Snape had never given much thought to the clothes he'd worn before that day, but it had seemed to him that his teaching robes had provided him a kind of armor of adulthood, and they had infused him with the necessary presence to take on the task he'd been assigned. It did not hurt that the image of stern, almost malevolent, authority they had given him had later allowed him to walk a somewhat finer line, to perform a rather different assignment. He thought now that Dumbledore must have known it on that August day as they'd stood in the back room of the shop in Knockturn Alley, Snape virtually melting with the heat as they had buried him under mounds of black wool.

Whoever had designed Granger's robes had done so with similar care. They held her ramrod straight, whether by magical or structural means he did not know. But they gave her height and refashioned her sturdiness as strength. The robes were cleanly tailored in the front, but were pleated ingeniously in the back so that they gave an impressive billow when she turned to Apparate. He was surprised that Granger had known who to see for such robes, surprised even that she would know that she *needed* such robes, and that fact alone added to his sensation that he was seeing a stranger through the window.

When she was safely gone from the house, he would attend to the library *Library* was, perhaps, a generous term for the room he'd finally found on the second floor. It was not as abysmal as he had feared; though it did, in fact, house both Potter and Granger's schoolbooks, it also held a great number of books from the Black family collection, as well as those brought by Malfoy and Sprout. There were spellbooks worthy of the Restricted Section, extended treatises on wizarding history, a vast array of both Muggle and wizarding law books that he could only assume belonged to Granger, and a rather healthy selection of guides to magical plants. What the *library* lacked was any sort of organizing framework. Books were piled about the room haphazardly, as if they'd been dumped there when clearing the bedrooms for their new residents.

For the first few weeks he had only sorted, which did not feel much like work at all, as he accomplished nothing except moving the stacks from place to place. He had deliberated for quite some time whether to organize the library by subject or by title. On the one hand, there simply weren't enough books to justify using the Bonefolder and Quire Method. There would be gaping holes in the system, as he had at least thirty- four books that would go into the Spellbook section, and nearly twenty for Magical Law and Government, but only five for Theory of Magic, three for Wizarding Literature and none at all for Magical Devices. It would look, he felt, ridiculous when it was shelved. On the other hand, this was a project of Granger's, and he felt certain that books would be added along the way. Organizing them alphabetically would only mean that he would spend the next... however long... reshelving in order to accommodate the newcomers. Provided, of course, that Potter kept him on library duty indefinitely, as he seemed wont to do.

Snape was in the middle of sorting through several biographies of the Black family when there came two sharp raps upon the door. No one had ever approached him when he was working in the library before. In his heart, he knew immediately that it was Granger. No one else was ever moving about at this hour, and she'd taken so long in the kitchen that he'd decided to chance a trip to the library before he was certain that she'd left the house. Well, this was what came of being hasty. Probably she'd come to chastise him for moving her copy of *Centaurs of Note* the day before. She likely thought it was her God-given right to leave books open on the sofa for days.

He opened the door. "Miss Granger," he said icily. "Perhaps you've come for a lesson in the finer points of the Bonefolder and--"

He stopped. Granger was wearing dungarees. And a large yellow hardhat.

"Yes, hello, Professor," she said. "I was wondering if you might cast a Shield Charm on me."

Snape was momentarily dumbstruck. "A Shield Charm?" he managed at last.

"Yes, I find them more effective when someone else casts them," she said. "Harry usually does it, but he's still asleep."

"And you found me to be a suitable replacement?"

She gave him a long look that made him feel profoundly ill at ease. She seemed to be asking him with her face not to be so bloody dense. And since when did Granger approach him with such composure, as if their meeting were no less out of the ordinary than taking tea with breakfast?

"I knew you'd be awake."

"And why is that?"

"Because I live next door to you, and the walls are so thin that I can practically hear you breathing," she replied. "Are you going to cast the charm, or shall I go and wake Harry?"

"I'm afraid I still don't understand why you would require--"

"All right, I'll spell it out for you, because I'm in a hurry and I can't go back and forth like this forever. I'm going to Hogwarts today. You might recall that it sustained pretty serious structural damage during the Final Battle. I'd like to wear a Shield Charm to protect me in case the ceiling decides to come down on my head while I'm there." She paused. He made no move to interrupt her, and so she continued.

"Harry's Shield Charms seem to work better than my own. I'm sure that you will believe that is because my skill at Shield Charms leaves something to be desired. That may very well be the case, however, at this point, I'm more concerned about not being hit by falling rocks than about whether my charmwork is up to snuff. I believe that you would do good job of it, and if I were to trust my safety to someone else's work, I'd prefer it be yours or Harry's. Clear enough?"

Snape swallowed. He raised his wand. "*Protego*," he said.

"Professor, I don't mean to be pushy, but you're as familiar with the building material of Hogwarts as I am, and I--"

"*Protego Totalum!*" he said, slicing his wand through the air before her.

She smiled. "I think I felt that one in my toes. Thank you, Professor." She retreated through the doorway and started down the hallway.

"Miss Granger," he said, and she stopped.

"Yes?"

"What business do you have at Hogwarts? And why are you wearing that ridiculous hat if you have my Shield Charm on?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Come round my room when I get home, and I'll answer whatever questions you have about Hogwarts," she said. "As for the hat," and now she tipped him an almost saucy smile, "you can never be too careful. Goodbye, Professor. Have a good day."

It was impossible for him to return to his tasks at the library after such an encounter, and yet there was really nothing else for him to do at present. The rest of the house did not rise until seven, and even then, very few of the other residents emerged to take breakfast. Snape did, however, each morning, not in the hopes of seeing other faces, but because he did not intend to spend time or money on food if food were being provided.

Kreacher was in the kitchen when Snape entered, and he handed him a mug of tea without a word.

"Thank you," Snape said, and Kreacher gave him one of his odd little bows. Snape took a seat at the table.

"Kreacher is not serving breakfast until seven," the house-elf said somewhat reproachfully.

"Yes, I know. However, unless my presence somehow prevents you from preparing it, I would like to sit here and wait," Snape said acidly.

"Mr Malfoy comes in at seven," Kreacher replied, and Snape was not sure if this was meant as encouragement to emulate Draco, or as a warning to him that there would be others about. They lapsed into silence.

"What is a crooks?" Snape said at last. If he had to endure the company of an admonitory house-elf, he might as well get something out of it.

"Kreacher does not understand your question, sir."

"Each morning, Miss Granger says, 'Crooks, go to Kreacher.' What is a crooks?"

"Ah. Crooks is not being a what, sir. Crooks is being a who. He is Miss Granger's kneazle. When she rises, he comes to nest with Kreacher, sir."

Snape digested this for a moment, and let the thud and scuffling he heard each day take on meaning in his mind. Finally, he looked at the small, gray-skinned old elf who was busily preparing eggs and paying him no attention whatsoever. It was not possible, was it, that Kreacher made his nest in Granger's room? Pomona had said that Granger had strict rules about Kreacher's duties, but Kreacher would belong to Potter, to the House of Black in which he lived, not to a bushy-haired Muggleborn with delusions of grandeur. Snape felt as if his very being were rejecting this idea. Was there nothing left in the world not subject to the whims of Hermione Granger?

"Do you belong to Miss Granger?" Snape asked.

Kreacher's ears twitched slightly, and his skin took on an odd pallor. "Harry Potter is my master, sir, if that's what you are asking." The room began to fill with the smell of scorching eggs.

At that moment, Pomona Sprout--not Draco Malfoy, after all--bustled in. "Kreacher, don't listen to a word that cantankerous young man says. Severus, are you trying to ruin breakfast for everyone?" she asked breezily. She took a mug from the countertop and poured herself some tea, waving Kreacher's fingers away.

"I can do it myself, Kreacher, dear. But thank you for offering."

Kreacher returned to the eggs, looking both mollified and more uncomfortable than ever. Snape did take note, however, when breakfast was served, that Pomona's portion was much larger than his own.

"Where have you been hiding yourself?" Pomona asked him. "I asked Draco, and he claims he hasn't seen you either."

"Perhaps if any of you chose to pick up a book, you might find me," Snape said. "I believe I told you that I have library duty."

"Yes, well, you're perfectly at liberty to do other things, you know. No one is demanding slave labor," Pomona replied.

"No? I think your beloved Granger would say differently," Snape said, glancing in Kreacher's direction, but Pomona ignored him.

"Listen, Severus, there's something that you can help me with, if you can stand to get out of that library of yours for a moment," she said. "I have some dirt that needs moving and some bulbs to get in, and I'd like to get it done before the first frost."

Snape wondered what Pomona was playing at. She had plenty of help. He'd watched her from the window in the library most evenings as the afternoon sun turned to dusk and he'd declared himself finished for the day. Longbottom was always two steps behind her, like a small male shadow, carting earth and hauling water, clipping things back and moving them from place to place as she gestured.

Snape enjoyed watching the earth turn from brown to burnished red in the waning sun, but more than that, he liked knowing what to expect, liked knowing where the other members of the house spent their days. This was not solely for the purpose of avoiding them, although it helped, but because he had found in his weeks under the Foundation's roof that he missed the regiment and routine of castle life, and watching the others marked the hours of the day in a way that felt useful to him.

Being asked to replace Longbottom as an errand boy was not something he had expected.

"And where is your lapdog?"

"I beg your pardon?" Pomona asked politely. From the set of her face, Snape could tell that she was forcing him to rephrase.

"Longbottom," he growled. "Your shadow. Surely he would be eager to help you."

"It's Sunday, Severus," Pomona said. "Neville visits his family on Sundays."

Sunday! It was so strange without lessons to mark the passing of the days. Here each day seemed to bleed into the next without seam or marker. And what was Granger doing at Hogwarts on a Sunday?

Pomona was staring at him expectantly, and he was forced to abandon this line of thinking.

"Yes, fine," he said--and then more pointedly, "Though I've been meaning to ask you--why do you only plant Muggle flowers?"

"I knew you'd been watching," she said with a slight smile. "Because I don't want to risk cross-pollinating Magical specimens with Muggle ones in the neighboring gardens. They may not know we're here, but the wind does not stop at the borders of the garden."

"But surely you could erect some kind of shield--" he began.

"And who would maintain it when we are gone? I'd rather not risk it. Besides, I think it is good for Neville to grow things only for their beauty, for the joy of watching them flourish, rather than for their usefulness. He got to do so little of that at Hogwarts."

Like the house, the gardens seemed to expand once he entered them, to defy what he could see from the outside. There were two main plots with a path in between them, but back behind these, there was a small pond that Pomona must have added, and in it, a water garden brimming with four-leaf water clover, like a strange pool of luck. It was on the other side of the pond that she wanted to put the bulb garden.

"How far back will they go?" Snape asked.

"I think I'm pushing the boundaries of the Fidelius Charm as it is," Pomona replied. "But I figure, in for a Knut, in for a Galleon. I'll go back as far as it will let me."

She worked him all day long, as he had known she would. First it was, "Severus, move this pile of earth from here to there." Then it was, "Severus, sort these bulbs into piles."

Severus, plant the entire bloody garden by yourself.

He marked the ground and used a trowel to dig the bulb holes. Because Pomona had chosen an entirely non-magical garden, no spell could contaminate the soil or water that the plants used. While it was interesting to work without a wand, to imagine for a moment what sort of person he might have been without the pulse and throb of magic in his veins, it was not something that he would want to do day after day in the hot sun. He did not envy Longbottom digging out that pond, nor lining it, as he must have done.

Though it was late October, it was hot enough that he was sweating freely, and he took off the outer layer of his robes and left them in a wheelbarrow beside the earth he'd set aside. He rolled his sleeves to the elbow and undid his collar fastenings.

"Well, now, look at you," Pomona said. "And here I always thought your head might fall off if you loosened your collar."

"Shut it, woman, or I'll leave you here, and you'll have to do all your chores yourself," Snape said with mock severity, but he let himself smile down at the dirt as he worked. It was pleasant out here, pleasant to feel the layered skin of the bulbs beneath his fingers and the sun on his back.

He planted crocuses and daffodils until his back ached and his fingers felt tight and dry with dirt. Then he sat at a small table and separated the roots of a flat of pansies, but finally there was not enough sun to work by, and he rose to bid Pomona farewell.

"You've got a nice touch with the flowers, Severus," she said. "I knew you'd have some skill, given how meticulous you are about your plants for brewing, but I admit, I was pleasantly surprised. You should come back."

Snape retrieved his outer robe from the wheelbarrow. "Don't go getting ideas," he said. "You've got plenty of help, and I have the library to attend to."

She smiled at him in the fading light. "Well, perhaps next Sunday," she said.

It was possible that he had overdone it, he thought. He'd barely been able to touch Kreacher's vegetable soup and had managed little more than a bit of bread and butter. No one had yet appeared for dinner by the time he had abandoned the table and begun dragging himself up the stairs to his room. Four flights. Merlin, but Potter was a sadist.

He stripped off his robes and left them on the desk. Kreacher could attend to them when he picked up the linens. He lurched into the loo, hoping that a hot shower might strip away the dirt that his Cleansing Charm had missed and soothe some of the muscle aches that had already left him stiff and graceless.

He stood beneath the stinging spray, as sharp and hot as he liked it. His head fell forward, and he let the pressure tingle against his scalp. Sometimes he understood why Granger would want to stay in here for so long. He remembered the showers of his childhood, how eventually the water would go lukewarm and finally icy, and he was grateful to be a wizard in a wizard's shower after a long day of work.

He'd brought no shampoo of his own--and when, exactly, had he been supposed to run out for supplies between the demands of the library and now the garden?--so he always used Granger's. It was pink, and it smelled of grapefruits and always made him feel aggressively clean.

It was while he was working the lather through his hair that he heard her door shut. At first he told himself that it was impossible to hear anything of the kind when surrounded by the pounding of water against tile, but then he heard the scrape of drawers opening and footsteps.

She had never been home while he had showered before. Suddenly, he knew why she cast those Silencing Charms. It was...well, it was mortifying to stand here ~~marked~~ with Granger only on the other side of a flimsy wall. She could hear him! She knew what he was doing. She might even picture him naked. That idea made him flush painfully. He had certainly never pictured her naked--she had no right! And yet now that he'd thought of it, he knew he would not be able to unthink it, and the next time he heard the thunder of the water starting up, there she'd be in his mind, taking off her... He shut off the water. It was ridiculous that she was home so soon anyway. He'd never known her to return before he'd retired for the evening. And now she had destroyed his shower.

Snape stomped back into his room and put on the underlayer of one of his other teaching robes without even drying his hair. That was the problem with communal living, he told himself. If other people were not willing to be *respectful*, then there was no hope of anything even so simple as a decent shower. Now, he could hear her infernal music starting up next door. It was one of the type that he thought of as "Granger's traveling songs."

Her music came in two types. One sounded as if it had been recorded by wandlight in the heart of the Forbidden Forest by a choir of the peaceful dead. It was ethereal and strange and crept beneath the door in haunting tendrils. The other type reminded him of motion, of high speed travel, of open plains rushing past train windows and galloping horses, urgency and foreign lands. Snape could not understand these as musical choices--flight or death--for although they were not depressing, they were certainly not relaxing, and listening to them always made his chest feel swollen with the conviction that there was something that remained unfulfilled, some great journey yet to be undertaken, and he feared the way the sounds made his blood rush and his fingers itch for his wand.

He moved toward the door, where their rooms were not separated by the bathroom, but by a hollow part of the wall. He rapped his fist against it, one, twice, three times.

Back came his knocking in Granger's hand, as if she thought it had been some kind of *greeting*.

Seven strides took him through the loo and her unlocked door.

She lay face down on her bed, propped up on her elbows, a book spread open on the pillow in front of her. Across from the bed, a fire crackled in the grate, and above it, on the mantelpiece, was the blasted wireless.

"Granger!" he bellowed.

She'd looked up in surprise when he entered, but quickly rearranged her face into a look of polite interest.

"Well, that's one way to make an entrance," she said. "I came home early so that we could talk, though I admit I wasn't expecting you for another half an hour or so." She glanced at him pointedly, and for the briefest moment, he was ashamed of his dripping hair and furious expression.

"*Talk?*" he said.

"About Hogwarts," she replied. "You asked me earlier--"

"I was at Hogwarts before you were born, Miss Granger. I feel certain that you have no new information to provide me on the subject."

She paused for a moment, not uncomfortably, but as though she were waiting for him to regain his senses. "In that case, may I ask, Professor, what you are doing in my room?"

Snape scowled at her. Why did it always seem that she was gaining the upper hand? Was this how she had subjugated all the others?

"I am here to tell you to turn off the bloody wireless," he spat.

"No," she said and turned back to her book.

"No?" he asked imperiously.

"No. You know how to cast a Silencing Charm. Silence your room. This is my room, and I like the wireless."

"Clearly, as you begin polluting the air with it the moment you return home in the evenings--or should I say mornings, as you often return after midnight. Other people prefer to *sleep* after midnight."

"Other people, as I've said, know how to use a wand. Goodnight, Professor."

Apparently *dismissed*, he turned and marched back into the loo, slamming the door behind him. Bloody Granger and her bloody stubborn-mindedness--couldn't honor a single request in the name of peaceful living. Just because she had everyone else in the house responding to her every whim did not mean that he would be too cowed to tell her to turn down the wireless.

He cast a violent Silencing Charm at the back wall of his room and felt it pass through him as it rebounded toward the front wall, taking every whisper in its path. He lay down on the bed and extinguished the light, though it was only eight o'clock.

He hated to use Silencing Charms in this way, if truth be told. It felt unnatural to touch things without their accompanying sounds, no matter how small. His chair did not scrape, his bed did not creak, even his breath made no noise, as if he'd died or vanished from the room entirely.

And for a man who had never had much in the way of companionship, it was strange, he thought, how lonely the silence made him feel. How cut off from everything and everyone, entombed in his own mind. His thoughts chased each other like angry mice, and in the background, on an endless loop, played Granger's traveling music. Stuck there indelibly, it seemed.

She could think again if she thought he would spend his days casting spells to accommodate her behavior. He did not come to live here in order to be subject to the lifestyle of one Hermione Granger--whose *Foundation* would not be doing so well, he imagined, when her tenants began complaining about her. She had no right to make him feel this way, as if he were relegated to living in a sterile box, away from the rest of society.

He closed his eyes and shifted in the bed, hating the lack of rustle to mark his search for comfort. The pillow felt heavy and flat without anything for it to muffle--and what was the point of Silencing everything if he was going to hear those fucking songs in his head anyway? He groped blindly on the bedside table for a moment until he located his wand. Then he lifted the charm and felt, with relief, all the texture flooding back into the world.

Hermione Granger would not deprive him of sounds. Not even the sound of her goddamn traveling music.

Three

Chapter 3 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

A/N: Always, my thanks to OpalJade.

Snape took to fleeing his room before Granger woke in the morning. This served the dual purpose of avoiding any unwanted imaginings and allowing him to check his Traces on the library before anyone had the opportunity to corrupt them.

For although he had no interest at all in the woman with whom he shared the loo, he remained interested in whatever this *Foundation* was that everyone was so overawed about. By leaving a mild Tracing Charm on the books, he was able to determine--sometimes down to the pages, if she'd been up late enough--which books she had been

perusing.

Occasionally the Trace yielded nothing of interest; he hardly needed a charm to tell him that Hermione Granger had been poring over *Hogwarts: A History* again. He'd rarely seen her without a copy during her schooldays. Nor was *House Proud: the History of House-elves in Modern European Culture* a particular surprise. But he was interested to note that she'd been browsing the Pureblood genealogical texts, and that she seemed to have particular fascination with the biography of Nagnok included in *Great Marble Halls: Gringotts Bank Through the Ages*.

It was during one of these fact-finding excursions that he finally came across Draco Malfoy early one Saturday morning.

He opened the door to his library to find Draco browsing at the shelves.

"You realize that there is nothing at all here worth reading except what I brought myself," Draco said in lieu of a greeting. "And what in Merlin's name are you wearing?"

Snape swallowed his surprise and slid easily behind the desk he had created for himself at the head of the room. It was wonderful to be spoken to this way, with no deference or caution, as if he had stepped back to a time in which everything made sense.

"I hadn't realized there was a dress code," he said smoothly.

Draco glanced down at himself, seeming to indicate his own simple robes and raised a pale eyebrow. Then he said, "Let's go to my room and have tea like civilized people."

"Indeed," Snape said and followed him out.

Draco's room was nothing like he had anticipated, although why he should have expected it to look like the Slytherin boys' dormitory, he had no idea. He supposed he had simply thought that Draco would want things to be as he had known them.

Instead, it was rather modern looking, with a dark, unadorned armoire against the far wall and a small table with two chairs beside the kitchenette. The table was covered in a pale linen cloth that perfectly matched the covering on the bed. The walls remained standard-issue cream, but over the window, Draco had hung a curtain of heavy brown velvet. Apart from having far more pillows than any young man should find appropriate, the room was warm and inviting, and Snape had the brief thought that it would be pleasant to return to such a place at the end of the day. He wondered how one went about creating such a thing.

"I must know," Draco said over his shoulder as he prepared the tea. "What is it like living beside Granger?"

Snape reveled in his tone and in the company of someone who still said 'Granger.'

"She has appalling taste in music," Snape said. "But she is rarely home, so I suppose I should consider myself lucky."

"She has become something of a big deal," Draco said nonchalantly.

"So I've gathered. From the way everyone goes on, I've been expecting her coronation any day now."

Draco huffed with amusement and arranged their tea things on a tray. They fell silent.

"I thought perhaps you didn't want to see me," Draco said at last as he approached the table. "You've been here over two months, you know."

"I'm well aware of how long it's been," Snape said. "But you haven't exactly been beating down my door, have you? I've assumed that you've been working outside the house."

"I have," Draco said, taking his seat, and that seemed to be all he was willing to volunteer.

Snape decided to bide his time. Draco had an impressive ability to keep silent when he wanted to, Merlin knew, but Snape had an idea that Draco was only feeling him out, waiting to know how receptive he would be to whatever it was the boy was doing.

"Severus--may I call you Severus? It seems a bit passé to call you Professor--I hate to beleaguer the point, but ~~why~~ are you wearing your teaching robes?"

"Minerva sent what remained of my possessions from the castle," Snape said archly. "I assume that you heard of the burning of my family home. *Impertinent little bugger*. He refused to either give or deny Draco permission to use his given name. Technically, he supposed, he was no longer Malfoy's Professor, and what was the alternative? Uncle Severus? Good God.

Draco looked at him unflinchingly, appearing to size him up as he had done in the library.

"Do you know what I remember best from Slytherin house?" he said in a seeming non-sequitur.

"Hmm," Snape said.

"Your speech to us on my first day at Hogwarts. You said, 'Behave as if you deserve only the best, and nine times out of ten, people will believe that you do.'"

"Wise of me."

"It was. These days I find myself repeating it before I leave the house. Except that I say, 'Behave as if you have every right to be here, and nine times out of ten, people will believe that you do.'"

"I hope you do so within the confines of your room," Snape said. "You wouldn't want word to get around that Draco Malfoy goes about muttering to himself."

"Surely not," Draco said and smiled slightly. After a pause, he went on, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to be terribly rude now."

"It will be quite difficult for you, I'm sure."

"Is it a question of money? Because if it is--"

"I assure you, Mr Malfoy, no charity is required. I live here because I saw no reason to line Tom Leaky's pockets with my life savings while waiting for Hogwarts to reopen."

Draco laughed. "I'm sure he wouldn't know what to do with it if you did. Honestly, you'd think that the 'doorway to Diagon Alley' might invest in a bit of a clean up."

Snape shrugged. The décor of the Leaky Cauldron interested him not at all, and he had the uncomfortable suspicion that Malfoy felt the same and was simply humoring him.

"Anyway," Draco went on, "It's just as well that we finally ran into each other this morning. I have to pick up a pair of spare robes today. Perhaps you would accompany me?"

Inwardly, Snape blanched. First off, shopping with Draco Malfoy was not on his list of things to do, now or ever, and he was appalled by the way that Draco seemed to be implying that he would need help with such matters. The fact that he had chosen not to do so was no indication that he *could not*, if he so desired, and being goaded into it by a pushy young man with too many pillows was beyond the pale. Secondly, he had no inclination to turn up in the middle of Diagon Alley and leave himself open to the opinions of all and sundry.

"Come on, then," Draco said. "I'm not going parade you about the streets of Diagon Alley. We can Apparate directly into the back room of Tine and Sheetings."

Instead of soothing him, this left Snape with the impression that Malfoy had either become a rather accomplished Legilimens, or worse, that he, Snape, had become alarmingly transparent.

"It seems you've lost none of the Malfoy habit of acquisition," Snape said. "I'm afraid I never had a taste for it."

Draco's eyes lost their look of friendly cajoling. "Do you think I find it easy, leaving the house each morning? That it wouldn't be simpler to hole up here among the few who feel bound and determined to accept me, despite the fact that they don't particularly like me?"

"While I appreciate that rather charming assessment of my life, Mr. Malfoy, in the future, I'll thank you to save your opinions until I ask for them. I am *not* *toling up* anywhere. It may have passed beneath your notice, but there was a rather minor incident involving a snakebite. I have limited energy, and I would prefer to spend it working on the task that has been assigned me, rather than flitting about from store to store in pursuit of sundries."

Draco smiled a terrible, triumphant smile. "Then it could not be luckier that my appointment is at Tine and Sheetings. They have absolutely everything--no flitting required. I'll have you back in your library by tea time."

They landed in a large room filled with boxes. The walls were dingy grey, and there was a film of wood shavings on the floor, as if from years of unpacking crates. Beside them, Snape could hear the crack of Apparition and concluded that, for all Draco had implied that he had special privileges, this was a fairly common way to enter.

Snape knew where he was, though he had never set foot in the place before (and despite Draco's insistence that he had business there, Snape suspected that he had never darkened its doorway either). Tine and Sheetings sat across from Ollivander's on the far end of Diagon Alley. He had passed its storefront countless times throughout the last thirty years, but had never had any reason to enter. It seemed to him now that, over time, he had begun to believe that no one should need to enter. Most of the wizards that he knew required only the specialty shops in the main part of the village to meet their needs--books, paper, robes, wands, brewing supplies--academic items that seemed (he thought somewhat ruefully now) to bespeak a higher level of society.

It was only through his tenancy in the Potter household that he had come to realize that this shop was likely as necessary to the wizarding public as Ollivander's itself. For he supposed that unless one had the money or inclination to purchase bed linens embroidered with one's family crest at Madam Malkin's, or silverware inherited from one's great aunt Bathsheba, everyday items would have to be purchased *somewhere*. He could hardly imagine the likes of Molly Weasley attempting to negotiate a Muggle department store. Indeed, from the number of witches and wizards milling about and popping in and out of existence in the back room, Snape had been in the minority all these years.

He glanced warily through the door to the main showroom. The shop was divided into departments: clothing and linens on one side, furniture and housewares on the other, and toward the back of the shop, specialty toiletries, cleaning products and other notions. Snape thought briefly of the look on Narcissa Malfoy's face if she were to discover that her son was shopping in an establishment that sold both items of clothing and cooking pans. He smirked and turned to whisper something cutting to Draco.

But Malfoy had not lingered beside him, to Snape's relief, and had already disappeared into the bowels of the shop in pursuit of God knew what. Snape doubted it was spare robes, though he supposed anything was possible. But this left him free to take in the selection of wares at his own pace and without Draco's judging glances, and for that he was profoundly grateful.

It was astounding the number of items he seemed to need, and the more he chose, the more he felt he wanted to choose. It was all well and good to have his own tea things and a modest set of dishes and silverware. Likewise, he was not overly dismayed at having to purchase shampoo, though he did wish it did not have to smell quite so aggressively of bergamot. At Hogwarts, he'd have brewed his own, but as Potter's home was obviously not equipped with a Potions laboratory in the basement, this would have to do.

But in the linen department, Snape began to doubt himself. He did *not* need towels nor sheets. The plain things that were provided (by whom? Snape suddenly wondered. By Potter himself? By the Foundation?) were perfectly adequate. And yet, a small part of him longed for something like the *familiarity* of Draco's room--or, if he were perfectly honest, of Granger's--something chosen and warm and purposeful. He felt the thick terrycloth on offer, the soft cotton. Why should he be denied these things? They were not extravagant; he had not even ventured toward the more high end items. There was no reason that he should not have linens that suited him. It was not, after all, *Azkaban*, was it? It was a boarding house, and if Snape wanted to feel at home, he bloody well would.

A salesperson in long blue robes approached him. Snape stiffened. It was not that he had not been noticed, heretofore. He could feel the eyes on him from the moment he'd stepped foot into the showroom. But he had done as Draco had suggested, squared his shoulders and shopped as if he had been stopping in for decades. And it seemed that the boy had been right, though he would certainly never tell Draco so, because after a time, he'd felt the staring abate as people returned to their own browsing. He had no idea whether to be offended or pleased that he was ultimately less interesting than self-cleaning stoneware.

Now, however, he braced himself for a confrontation. Should the salesman ask him to leave, would he do so quietly, or would he protest? And where in Merlin's name was Draco, who had seemed, back in his rooms, to have offered his presence as a kind of safeguard against just this sort of situation?

"Sir," the clerk said.

Snape turned very slowly and acknowledged him with a lifted eyebrow.

"Sir, you have a number of purchases there."

"All the better for you, it would seem," Snape said.

"Ah, yes." The clerk laughed nervously. "I only wondered--would you like me to put those behind the counter so that you can--er--browse more easily?"

It took a moment for Snape to absorb the meaning of the man's words. "Indeed," he said after a moment, handing over his parcels to the anxious looking young man.

"And the name?" the clerk persisted.

He paused. Considered. Reached inside himself for the words that had been his shield. *Act as if you have every right to be here...* "Snape," he said.

The salesman let out a quick breath. "I thought it was you, sir. And I just wanted to say--well, I just wanted you to know--"

"I can assure you that you have nothing to say that has not been said by countless others before you," Snape said acidly, turning back to the rack of hand towels before him in which he had absolutely no interest.

"Tine and Sheetings thanks you for your business," the clerk said all in a rush. "If there is anything you need--anything at all--do not hesitate to call on me." This having been said, the man took Snape's purchases and fled, leaving him dumbfounded and absurdly grateful in the midst of the toweling.

Gradually, he made his way to the clothing section. He easily located several plain black robes in his size and folded them over his arm. He chose himself a cloak, as winter was coming, after all, and moved toward the back wall. He could use a pair of boots--dragonhide seemed a bit much for everyday use--but then he saw the thing he had been looking for, though he had not quite got around to admitting it to himself. Beside the cobbler's bench, there was a small doorway with a sign above it reading "Muggle Attire."

"Denims, Severus?" Draco said with amusement, appearing from behind him and nearly making him leap out of his skin.

"I garden on the weekends, not that it's any of your business, you insufferable boy," Snape hissed.

"Be that as it may, you won't be wearing those anywhere. They'd fall right off you," Draco said. "I'd peg you at about a thirty. Here." He handed Snape two pairs of trousers. Then he turned, riffled through a pile of Muggle tee-shirts, and pulled out two white ones. "No sense in having denims if you have nothing to wear them with," he said, and though he was not smiling, Snape did not like the light in his eyes.

For a moment, he toyed with the idea of putting everything back. He needed none of this; he'd been getting along perfectly well without it for over two months. It was a ridiculous waste of money and time, and he had no idea how Malfoy had ever convinced him to come on this fool's errand.

"Now, are you quite finished?" Draco said. "Perhaps you'd like a nice potted plant? A pair of tongs? Some Muggle sleepwear?"

Snape glared at him. He would not give Malfoy the satisfaction of abandoning his selections now. The boy probably had sixteen sets of robes and twenty pairs of shoes. He had no right to ridicule him for his meager purchases. And besides, Draco would likely be mocking him over this trip for months to come whether he came home with anything or not. Better to have something to show for it.

"I believe I have finished," Snape said with dignity.

"Excellent," Draco replied with equal solemnity. "Tea?"

"Perhaps something stronger," Snape replied, and Draco laughed, a high, haughty sound that transported Snape back in time and carried him to the counter with the last of his items.

They adjourned to the Leaky Cauldron, Snape having been buoyed by his successful negotiation of Time and Sheetings. Draco found them a table in the back corner of the room without being asked, and Snape, feeling rather magnanimous at that point, offered to buy the drinks.

He was shocked when Draco requested only warm Butterbeer, but he said nothing until he had returned to the table with their drinks.

"Have you become a teetotaler in your old age?" he asked, leaning back in his chair and surveying Malfoy with something that looked like boredom.

"Of course not. But I have no desire to see the headline *Draco Malfoy Drowns his Sorrows* on the front page of tomorrow's Prophet."

Snape sat up abruptly. All day, Draco had given no indication that he had thought they were being watched.

"And you don't think my company would prove more damaging than a glass of Ogdens?" Snape asked.

"Come now, you're a Ministry favorite. Surely you know that. You've received the invitation to their little party, haven't you? Frankly, I expected to find you picking out dress robes, not denims. Not that I wasn't terribly amused, you know."

Snape glared at him. He had, in fact, received an invitation to the Ministry's awards banquet. Just the sight of it on its heavy cream parchment made him feel ill. He'd stuffed it under *The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, Volumes One Thirteen*, where it wouldn't be looking at him all the time.

"I have no idea to what you are referring."

"I think you do," Draco said, looking fondly amused, which annoyed Snape even more. "But to return to the point, I work for the Ministry. It could hardly be damaging for me to be seen in the company of their hero du jour."

Snape decided that he would abandon all other lines of questioning, if Draco were prepared to reveal his mystery job. Perhaps it was his reward for enduring today's journey through tedium.

"You work for the Ministry?" he said as if it were not at all unusual.

"I do, indeed."

"What branch?"

"The Aurory. I've been in training since August."

Auror Training? Snape struggled to keep his face expressionless. "Do tell," he said.

Draco shrugged. "What is there to tell? Mother and Father are in Azkaban, as you know. I only narrowly escaped it myself. I have to do *something*, and I would prefer to have it be something that helps restore the name of Malfoy to--" He paused.

"You do not have to toe the party line with me," Snape said quietly. Although he had enjoyed falling back into the old manners and mannerisms of the Slytherin House with Draco--the quiet battles of wit--those same customs had little use when it came to saying what one meant. "I've known you since you were a child, Draco. And I'm hardly in any position to judge you."

"I'm not like you," Draco said after a moment's pause. "I don't have some secret history of goodness and sacrifice to reveal. All my life, I've had my name to fall back on. Now that name is gone. Whatever will become of my reputation, I will have to earn it. If my mother and father were ever released, I would want them to have... something to come back to."

"Whatever you have convinced yourself that my situation entails, you are mistaken," Snape said, hating Draco for forcing him to reveal this, but also moved by a kind of awful sympathy for the boy. "Six other residences refused me before Potter offered me a space at Grimmauld Place. I have hardly become, as you seem to think, some kind of public darling overnight. People are... notoriously hard to win over. However, you are a free man, are you not? Nothing that you have ever done has been so very--"

"No?" Draco said, and he twitched his left arm slightly. Snape flinched.

"So you think I am being foolish," Draco said.

"No, not foolish. It simply sounds to me as if this were an attempt at reparations of some sort."

Draco's eyes were direct and challenging. Snape thought that had Draco been a Gryffindor, their glasses would have already lain smashed upon the floor.

"And if it is?"

"I would only tell you that I think it is a difficult task to set yourself, to make amends to the whole world. In my experience, all you can do is choose one person to whom you've... one person. And try to pay them back."

Draco smiled a twisted little smile and took a sip of his Butterbeer. "Wasn't it lucky for you that the person you chose to repay involved the saving of the entire world."

"I was not repaying Potter, if that is what you think. I--"

But Draco spared him the end of that sentence. "I fight with Potter on the weekends; did you know that?"

Snape could not contain the look of horror that passed over his face.

"Not physically; keep your hair on," Draco said. "He comes to my room and insults me until I take the bait and insult him back. Then we shout at one another until we're tired, and we have a drink and say goodnight."

"What possible purpose--" Snape sputtered. "Why?"

Draco laughed. "I wonder what he would say if you asked him. For my own part, I think it is because it is a last thread of familiarity in an unfamiliar world. It's as if we grew up overnight, you know. School and the war ended at nearly the same time. Now we find ourselves in the world of adults, and everyone is so bloody polite and careful to one another all the time. So we tell each other all the most horrible things that are true, but that no one else would say."

"Like what?" Snape asked faintly. The entire notion of this game disturbed him, though Draco seemed to find it quite charming. Enjoyable even.

"Oh, he tells me what a stuck up prick I am, and how I needn't act as if I'm better than everyone else when all I've got to my name are two parents in Azkaban and a condemned old mansion. And then I tell him how pathetic it is that I'm the one in Auror Training, that the *savior* of the Wizarding World is little more than a landlord, and I ask him when he's going to get it together and do something real--and then we throw things at one another. Poorly, you understand. No one's trying to relive the incident from sixth year. Actually, I bought some things for us to throw today," Draco said, smiling and patting the pocket that contained his shrunken purchases. "*Reparo* only works so many times on pottery, it seems, before it stops giving such a satisfying crash."

"You're mad," Snape said. "You worry about a glass of Ogdens? Potter could go to the press--"

"Oh, he never would," Draco said with blitheness that astounded Snape. "It's perfectly safe."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Because there's no hate behind it. I don't say those things to him because I want to hurt him. I say them because I can. And the same goes for him. We're just blowing off steam."

"I doubt you have any idea what Potter truly thinks of you. Do not assume that just because *you* do not hate him--"

Draco laughed. "We're on the same floor. I bump into him in the hallway after he's brushed his teeth. He leaves on the hall light on Wednesdays, because he knows that I work late on Wednesday, and otherwise I always run into that damnable troll leg."

"Your point?"

"My point is that we can't hate each other. We know each other too well now."

"I think your logic is faulty. I certainly do not like all those whom I've had the misfortune of getting to know."

"I never said I liked him. I only said I wouldn't want to hurt him. You can't live with someone and want to destroy them. It's the same principle that Granger keeps harping on about to the Board of Governors."

"Beg pardon?"

"Granger. In the great quest for equality and understanding," Draco snorted. "You know, it's not even that I object to what she's attempting; it's just that I wonder if she realizes that all these people that are paying her so much attention now will not give her the slightest consideration when it comes time to actually make a decision."

"Perhaps you'd care to explain to me *what* she is attempting? Everyone else has mumbled a few words and begged off."

"I can't believe that you don't know this," Draco said. "I assumed McGonagall at the very least.... Granger wants to eradicate the house system."

Snape nearly spit out the sip of firewhisky he had taken. "She wants to *what*?"

"And she wants to do it now, while the rebuilding is still on. Rearrange the dormitories, et cetera."

"She's mad. Hogwarts has always operated under the house system. Always. And I fail to see why an eighteen year old girl should have any say in the matter."

"Do you think it's a bad idea, then, or is your objection that it is Granger making the request?"

Snape sputtered momentarily. "I--I simply think--to change the castle, the entire system by which Hogwarts operates, and this from a girl who did not even complete her education there... She has no sense of the history involved, of the kind of upheaval for the students and the professors. She has only lived in this culture for seven years! What gives her the right to assume that she knows best?"

"A little of both, then," Draco said. "Well, I won't deny that that was my first reaction, too. But Granger approached me very early on and asked for permission to use my name in her presentation to the board."

"Whatever for?" Snape asked, feeling the now familiar sensation that he understood a grand total of nothing about the world.

"She believes that the house system is divisive and unfair, culturally prejudiced, and biased in the favor of the presiding Headmaster."

"I would not argue with the last," Snape muttered.

"Nor would I, but I was surprised to hear Granger admit it. Anyway, she said that she felt that because of the longstanding rivalries between *certain* houses, people were inclined to hate and mistrust each other based on very little interaction. She said she believed that by having the students live in dormitories based on their year alone, there would be less enmity between individual students."

"I'm afraid I am not seeing the connection to you."

"Don't play at being dense, Severus; it doesn't suit you. She told the Board of Governors that had we lived in dormitories by year, it would have been much less likely that Potter and I would have worked against each other."

"And this was supposed to convince them? That you and Potter might not have been enemies?"

Draco glared at him. "She suggested to the board that I might have, under pressure from fellow friends and students and a Headmaster that was not actively thwarting my house, joined the side of the Light. She pointed out how much more easily the Order of the Phoenix could have defeated the Dark Lord with my help or the help of others like me."

Snape fell silent. It was interesting, what Draco was saying, and Snape had to remind himself that he was listening to Granger's opinions. Granger's opinion that the Headmaster had favored the Gryffindors unfairly; Granger's opinion that Draco Malfoy, a Slytherin, had worth, would have been an asset. Granger's opinion that by changing the way the students slept and ate and took their classes, lives might be changed, if not saved. Which all made not one jot of difference, of course. No one in his right mind would listen to her.

"And you think that Granger is the best person to be making this... request?"

"No," Draco said quietly. "But she gave up her *family* for this world, and I can't help but--"

Snape shook his head. He did not need Draco to explain why that would move him.

"--and I admit that I am somewhat more at ease that she is, at least, all witch now."

"Has Granger been disowned? Is that why everyone refers to her as an orphan?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You really have been holing up in that library of yours. It was in all the papers--I recognize that you were ill, but I thought you'd at least be curious about what happened. Granger tried to send her family away before she and Potter and Weasley went on the run. She modified their memories, erased all evidence of herself from their minds. She tried to send them to Australia. But she was too late. They were taken in the airport."

"Good God," Snape said. He was glad he had not known that, wished he did not know it now. Strangely, some of his first thoughts were of her musical choices, which seemed far less inexplicable than they had. And then, of course, the guilt that he might have stopped such a thing if he *had* known, or at least not been so adamant about the wireless.

He set down his drink abruptly. "I should like to make one more stop before we return," he said.

Snape unloaded his purchases quickly; he had been anxious all day to see them in his room, to look about and be surrounded by his own things, things that he'd chosen for himself. Well, except for the rug. Draco had slipped that to him just before they parted in the front hall of Grimmauld Place, telling him that he'd bought it to spare Granger the sound of his pacing.

"I do not pace," Snape had said. "I have no idea what would have given you that idea."

"No? Because there was a ring around your desk in your office at Hogwarts three shades lighter than the rest of the rug. If we hadn't already been in the dungeons, I'd have worried that you would fall right through the floor."

"I am flattered that you would trouble yourself," Snape had said archly.

"Yes, well, see that you don't trouble Granger," Draco had replied, and then smiled, nodding his head slightly, and disappeared down the hallway.

But once he'd laid the rug and set out the dishes and changed the sheets, there was, disappointingly, very little difference in the room. In fact, it looked nearly exactly as it had been, except for the navy and butter-colored rug on the floor.

He sat down on the bed. What made Malfoy and Granger's rooms their own? Who had taught them how to create such things? Something in his surroundings still felt bare, unfinished. He had hoped for comfort, but the room was as sterile as before.

He pointed his wand at the wall. But what color would he choose? Brown would seem to emulate Malfoy, which he did not wish to do. Green was much too Slytherin--he'd lived with that color for years and did not want to replicate it here. Reds were most certainly out. Granger had stolen the yellows; her walls were the pale, warm yellow of the rising sun. Blue seemed to be what was left to him, and he felt perversely angry about it, that he should have come so late that even the colors he chose would be leftovers.

He was anxious and out of sorts and decided to venture to the library. He had purchases to place there as well.

Snape removed the last shrunken bag from his pocket and returned it to its normal size. He withdrew a hardbound copy of the International Statute of Secrecy and placed it on the shelf in the Magical Law and Government section. Beside it, he placed *Purebloods: A History of Traditional Wizarding Thought; United Without, Divided Within: Magical Bloodlines in Wizarding Society* and a small university press copy of *Sorting by Blood: The Hogwarts House System*. On an empty shelf, he placed *Vargot the Renegade* and labeled the shelf 'Magical Creatures.' This having been done, he felt peaceful enough to attend dinner in the kitchen.

That night as he lay in bed, waiting for Granger to return, he thought of Malfoy. For all the boy had spoken of reparations, Snape thought that what he was truly saying was that the world had changed and that he, Draco, intended to have a place in it. Why was it so easy for him, Snape thought, to imagine himself forward into this foreign world? How had he so easily infiltrated the Ministry, this house, Granger's confidence? Snape supposed that once Hogwarts reopened, he would feel on more even ground again, that he might slip back into his former command of things as he would into his teaching robes.

He drifted to sleep remembering his quarters in the dungeons and imagining his new possessions fitting into them. Mentally, he moved the rug from the bedroom to the sitting room, but it was not quite right in either place. Perhaps his office?

He woke briefly after two to the sound of Granger's knock upon the hollow part of the wall, which he took to mean that she had accepted his ersatz apology.

Good.

Four

A/N: A big thank you to my beta, OpalJade.

Several days later, Snape found in the bathroom sink the following note.

Professor,

I have greatly appreciated your recent additions to the library. I hope I am not being presumptuous in assuming that they were chosen with my work in mind. Would you be available to discuss them with me this evening? I think I can arrange to be home at a reasonable hour.

Hermione Granger

Snape read the note from its resting place in the bowl of the sink. He turned back toward the door, the first thought in his mind being to ignore it. If Granger couldn't accept an apology like a normal witch, he certainly did not need to spell it out for her. On the other hand, it was possible that some of the works he had chosen exceeded her academic skill. If she thought he was going to prepare a lecture for her on traditional wizarding blood bias--well, he had no time for such things. He snatched up the parchment and returned to his room.

The problem with Granger was that she allowed instinct and *feelings* to cloud her judgment. If he was to tell the absolute truth of the matter, she had been gifted with a fine mind for logic, a tenacious attitude, and no ability at all to reason when anything that she perceived as 'injustice' entered the picture. He thought of the house-elves during her fourth year. How several had, bowing and twitching and intermittently beating themselves with the fire poker in the staff room, appealed to Dumbledore to make the Gryffindor witch *stop*.

Dumbledore had only smiled and asked them whether they would like to be reassigned to another house's common room.

Which was exactly why Granger never learned from her mistakes. She had been coddled by that old wizard, who had no doubt found her 'charming' and 'precocious.' Well, she would find no such reception in him. If she wanted to discuss her work, he would give her the unvarnished truth.

Knock when you are prepared to receive guests he scribbled onto the back of the note and returned it to the sink.

Snape found himself utterly unable to do anything all day except argue with Granger in his mind. He had no interest in shelving the books she'd left out, instead settling onto the sofa and poring over those sections that she'd highlighted, trying to imagine what on earth she had decided she needed to discuss with him.

She'd made note of a section on the International Statute of Secrecy which detailed the strange case of Wendelin the Weird, who had allowed herself to be caught and burned at the stake forty-seven times. Beside the text, Granger had scratched, *Learned this from History of Magic in third year. Hardly esoteric. Besides, the entire point of the story is that witch burning is ineffective. What possible threat is perceived here?*

Snape nearly reached for a quill with which to answer her notation, but reminded himself that he could do so this evening. This was such a common misconception among Muggleborn witches and wizards--they were simply unable to recognize this very basic truth about the people that they'd come from: Muggles feared and hated magic. It did not matter if the methods that they had used to try to eradicate it in the Middle Ages had been ineffective. Wizardry itself had been its infancy then. The point was that if Muggles had been allowed to remain aware of magic, they would have continued and perhaps succeeded their attempts to squash and kill it. Look at his own father, who had broken his mother's wand after they'd been married, or that shrewish sister of Lily's who had come to despise her simply for being magical.

In the margins of a chapter on the creation of the sorting hat in *Sorting by Blood*, she'd written *Hat belonged to Gryffindor. Sorting biased from the very first?*

Snape made a humphing sound. In the countless years he'd had to listen to that worthless hat's songs, he'd heard the house of Slytherin referred to as power-hungry, ruthless, and cunning; while Gryffindors were described as brave, courageous, daring and chivalrous. Was it possible that Granger simply *hadn't noticed* the difference until now? Of course the hat had been biased from the first. It spoke in its owner's voice, which had been raised in anger when the hat had been created. Had the hat called the Slytherins, "ambitious, clever, culturally and socially gifted," they wouldn't be having this discussion, would they? He hoped that the evening would not be spent in these sorts of 'revelations.'

Privately, he was glad, however, to see that she had not become obsessed with trying to revitalize the image of the Slytherin house. There was hope that she'd grown out of some of her wide-eyed idealism if she could recognize that nearly one thousand years of inequality could not be repaired with a change in vocabulary. Better to scrap the whole system and try again.

Not that there would be any opportunity for that, he thought. This was all a waste of effort, as Draco was absolutely right; the Board of Governors would pay her no attention whatsoever. Snape had no idea why he was even participating in this charade. What difference did it make whether Granger understood the history of the struggle between the Purebloods and the Muggleborns? It was not his job to cushion the blow that was sure to be dealt to her.

He checked the time before turning back to the book.

Snape waited impatiently in his room for her knock. Granger had arrived home thirty minutes before, which was more than enough time to prepare for company, he felt. He paced agitatedly, not bothering to keep to the rug, until finally, at ten after eight, he heard her knock upon the wall.

He debated for the briefest of moments whether to enter her room by her front door or through the lavatory, but decided that habit dictated the lav, despite the fact that habit was just the single time.

He turned the knob and found it unlocked, which seemed to him to confirm his choice.

"Miss Granger," he said formally as he entered her room.

Granger did not rise, but continued to sit cross-legged on the bed. "Professor," she answered, indicating the chair at her desk, which had been turned to face the bed. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

"I do not see that I will be able to make myself as comfortable as you obviously have," he said.

She smiled. "I don't often receive visitors here, so I'm afraid the accommodations are not the best. If your room is better equipped...?"

"This is adequate," Snape replied.

"Good," she said. "I want to thank you for the additions to the library--and for the library itself. It's becoming a very pleasant place to research."

Snape nodded to acknowledge her praise. Anything more, he felt, would only contribute to her obvious belief that he was going to all this effort in order to aid her cause.

For the very first time since he had come to know her in this house, he saw Granger look slightly uncomfortable. He gave himself a mental point for unbalancing her.

"Would you like some tea?" she said.

"Will you prepare it, or will the house-elf?" he asked.

"I will, of course. As you know, Kreacher is only asked to do the jobs that he would already be doing to maintain this house if Harry lived in it with a family."

"I am aware of that, Miss Granger," Snape said, "but I am also aware that the house-elf does not nest in the kitchen, nor with Mr Potter, but here with you. I was uncertain as to whether you received special privileges."

Granger did not flush, as he had hoped, but her eyes hardened and her posture stiffened. He was sorry to see it, in a way. Though he was pleased to have rattled her, he had rather enjoyed the comfortable, feisty witch who had seemed ready for discussion or argument, whichever presented itself.

"Kreacher does, in fact, nest in the kitchen," Granger said, indicating the closet-cum-kitchenette identical to the one in his own room. "And it is true that he does so as a favor to me. But beyond that, I receive no more from him than any other member of this household."

"And how is that a favor to you?" Snape asked.

"You're aware, I'm sure, that I am interested in the rights of house-elves. You must be, or else you would not have got me the *Vardok*."

"Still shaking the collection tin, Miss Granger? Will you sell me a badge for a Sickle?"

"No," she said and shot him a withering look. "Which is rather the point. Kreacher and I came to a tentative understanding during the war--or perhaps I should just say we came to a grudging respect for one another. I asked him to live here with me because I realized that there is a great deal I don't understand about house-elves. And before you say anything, yes, as you were so fond of pointing out when I was in school, not everything can be learned from a book. I hope it will be an arrangement that benefits us both."

Snape inclined his head and gave a point back to Granger.

"And what *is* your arrangement?"

"Kreacher keeps his nest here with me. He works the same hours that I do--I had quite a time explaining to him why we were taking off early today, but perhaps he is listening from his cupboard and will appreciate that this, too, is work, in its way. Although he'll likely be angry that I didn't tell him it would be all right to darn Harry's socks or something in the meantime. Anyway, I pay him--well, the Foundation pays him--"

"You *pay* him?"

"Shhhh! Don't embarrass him. He doesn't accept it, of course."

"I'm afraid I don't understand how that qualifies as paying him, then."

"We went round and round about this," Granger said. "And finally, we agreed that I would put a modest salary--extremely modest, you understand. No human would ever agree to it--in a bank account in his name at Gringotts. That way, I feel that I'm paying him, which eases my conscience, and he says that he knows that he'll never open that vault, which eases his. He never even has to see what he calls 'the filthy wizard money.'"

"And what do you think you are learning from this little compromise, if you don't mind my asking?"

"About sources of pride. Kreacher will not take money for his work because of his pride in it--it would feel wrong to him to take money for doing what he feels to be right. He longs to do everyone's laundry--in particular, I believe he's mentioned an old pair of robes of yours that are for some reason caked in dirt and sitting on your desk?--but I'm coming to understand that this is how he feels he contributes to the well-being of the world. I can relate to that, I suppose. It's why the Foundation is nonprofit."

"Is that how you see yourself, Miss Granger? Saving the world for free?"

"I wasn't finished. Another thing I hadn't realized about house-elves was that they consider themselves--as they should--members of the household. Who takes money for helping their families? They would be ashamed to, yes, but more than that, it would *diminish* their role in the family--make them servants, rather than members. They are provided for, for the most part, by their families. Decent families, anyway. And the more respectful and inclusive a family is to its house-elf, the more loyal and hardworking the house-elf becomes. That has become clearer to me the longer I've lived with Kreacher. It's part of how he shows love, how he reciprocates love."

"You say they are provided for by their families," Snape said, intrigued in spite of himself, "which makes them sound like children. Traditionally, if I'm not mistaken, children grow up and begin providing for themselves."

"It's not a perfect analogy, but yes, I see what you're saying, which incidentally, sounds quite a bit like what I'm saying. And while there are house-elves who seem deeply fulfilled by their familial role, it is not an absolute. I'm sure you remember Dobby."

"I do, in fact, remember Dobby and also where he came from. So do you believe now, as they do, that the house-elf's duty is to serve? Are you implying that Dobby might have also been fulfilled had he not been a Malfoy elf?" he asked.

She smiled, and it seemed to Snape that it was a true smile, perhaps the first she'd given him since they had renewed their acquaintance in this household of misfits.

"You are beginning to see how tricky this is. Which, I suppose, is the point of living with Kreacher in the first place. A part of me thinks that yes, Dobby might not have ever questioned his role in life if he had been born into a family that respected and perhaps even loved him. And then there is a part of me that will always want to believe that Dobby was simply exceptional, that he saw the world outside what he had known and wanted his own--however small--piece of it. But the issue remains that according to the law, house-elves are property. By allowing them to remain uncompensated and without rights, they have no power to change their lives."

"Rights and power that they claim again and again that they do not want," Snape said. "Remind me, Miss Granger, who appointed you in charge of 'saving' a race that wants no help from you?"

She looked him in the eyes, long and slow, and Snape sensed the untapped power, the sheer determination, in this woman. "I cannot accept a situation in which one race of sentient, magical beings is subjugated by another. What I want is not to tell house-elves what they should want, or to force them to leave their families, or to be paid if paying would make them feel less valuable. What I want is for them to have a choice, to have legal and financial options should they decide that they want a different sort of life--for whatever reason. Hogwarts cannot continue to be the only option for house-elves that do not fit the norm."

Snape considered this for a moment. Granger was different than she had been. It was not just her willingness to imagine that she did not know all that there was to know about everything, although that was part of it. There was something slower and more methodical about her than before. He had the uncomfortable thought that it was much easier to be thorough without the threat of a dark and terrifying future approaching at the speed of an express train. Perhaps this had always been her natural inclination, and she was just now getting the opportunity to show it.

"And now we are back to Hogwarts," he said.

"Yes, and I have to admit, Professor, that I'm confused about the books you brought for me. The history of a renegade house-elf--that seems self-explanatory, if a bit perplexing given the conversation we just had. But three books on Pureblood thinking and a copy of the Statute of Secrecy? When I saw *Sorting By Blood*, I assumed that you were commenting on my hope to abolish the sorting system--but I confess that I cannot decipher your opinion."

Truth be told, Snape did not know that he *had* a firm opinion on the matter. In pure theory, he agreed with her. But despite the fact that he himself had been victim to the system she found so abhorrent, he felt it equally wrong to imagine Hogwarts so utterly changed.

Though he had not yet seen the destruction to the building. He'd been present for the explosion in the west wing, but after that... he'd spent most of the Final Battle bleeding to death in the Shrieking Shack. And since his release from St Mungo's, he hadn't the stomach to go and see the castle. So perhaps that was why he had trouble imagining such a fundamental overhaul of Hogwarts--it might have been somewhat easier if he could have seen that the thing he remembered as home no longer existed. Still, there was something to be said for tradition, even if he could not think of what it was at this precise moment.

"You flatter yourself in thinking that I have purchased these books to help your cause. Temporarily, at least, I am a librarian. I was simply adding to the stacks," Snape said.

"Really? In that case, you might want to focus on the Magical Devices section of the library for future purchases. As I recall, there are no books in that section, while we already had nineteen in the Magical Law and Government section. And if you'll bring me your receipts, the Foundation would be happy to reimburse you for your contributions to the library."

Snape grimaced inside and handed over the rest of the accumulated points. She was winning this discussion, and it was infuriating and completely unsettling.

"That will not be necessary," he said stiffly.

"The offer stands," she said. "But could we please talk about the Statute of Secrecy? What am I missing here?"

Snape looked away from Granger, who had, sometime during their discussion, made her way down the bed to the end closest to the desk. He focused on the wall above her, where there was a painting--a magical one, though not in the traditional sense. No figures lived inside the canvas, human or otherwise. It was simply a field, vast and sparsely vegetated. What grass grew there was patchy and golden, leaving mounds of sandy earth exposed. The only thing that indicated to him that it was a magical painting was that, the longer he looked at it, the more clearly he could see what had once been in the field, what might yet grow there again. It was a terrible painting, and he wondered vaguely how she slept beneath it.

"Professor?" she said, snapping him back from his musings.

"You have learned in your classes that the Statute of Secrecy was put into effect to protect wizards from Muggles."

"Yes, but I cannot understand what possible threat is perceived there. The Purebloods themselves insist that our magic makes us far more powerful than Muggles. The examples that are given in those early texts are laughable--Wendelin the Weird? She was never in any danger at all!"

"The Purebloods know that it is our very power that makes Muggles so dangerous to us--that is why the Purebloods hate and fear them. Tell me, Miss Granger, what you think would happen if Muggles were to discover magic. Take our wands? Make it illegal to sell or possess them? Steal our children before they have come into their full magical power and perform unspeakable experiments on them? Would they not try to discover the source of our magic and get it for themselves? Who would not want that kind of power?"

Granger looked disgusted, but she was scribbling furiously on a roll of parchment.

"Of course Muggles would be interested in where magic comes from, Professor," Granger said. "I myself am interested in where magic comes from, but I would never--"

"Because you have lived among us, yes? Is that not the basis of your argument for the Board of Governors? You know witches and wizards personally. We are too real, too human, for you ever to want to dissect a wizard and find out how he works. You are a witch yourself, in fact, and should the wizarding world become common knowledge, you would be in just as much danger as the rest of us--potentially more, as I'm quite sure that Muggles would love to discover how magic passes through their bloodlines."

She leaned back, away from her notes, and looked at him, and he tried to read the mood of her features. There was distress there and anger, too, but not at him, he felt. He waited, somewhat impatiently, for her to say something.

"I am a witch, as you said," she said slowly. "And I have lived as one, fought as one, for nearly eight years. Yet there are wizards who would still call me Mudblood and spit on me. I don't deny that there are Muggles out there capable of the things you say. But there are wizards capable of horrors, too--"

"You are missing the point, Granger. You're personalizing this when you should be looking at the larger picture. This is what I was trying to tell you with those books. Muggleborns are feared not because they have Muggle blood per se, but because they represent such an enormous threat to the Statute of Secrecy."

"How am I a threat to the Statute of Secrecy?" Her voice was shrill, yet she leaned toward him again, not in challenge, but in appeal.

"Stop saying, 'I.' This is not about *you*. I am not telling you that *you* are a threat to the Statute of Secrecy, though there are those who would most assuredly say that the further you press these ideas of yours, the closer you will get to putting us all in danger. I am simply saying that Muggleborns are perceived as a threat because they have such strong links to the Muggle world. They have families who know about us. Suddenly, we are forced to trust Muggles that we do not know to keep our secrets, and for many wizards, that is a terrifying prospect."

"But if, like you said, a witch or wizard is socialized in the wizarding world, then he or she would never endanger it."

"Let us first assume that you are right, that no Muggleborn witch or wizard would ever leave the wizarding community or betray its secrets. What of their families? What if Great Aunt Marge became tipsy at a cocktail party and simply couldn't contain any longer the crazy story her sister had told her about her niece?"

"People would assume she was insane."

"Yes, you are likely correct. And if she set out to prove it?"

"What proof could there be?"

"A wizarding photograph, stolen from the parents' house? It could be anything, Miss Granger. Once there are Muggles who know, who have been convinced despite their general blessed unwillingness to believe, then there remains the possibility that they could convince others. But now, back to our original assumption. What if the witch or wizard in question were to leave wizarding society?"

She sputtered for a moment. Her eyes were bright and alert, and Snape realized how very much he was enjoying this conversation, the high-speed, back and forth, parry and thrust of it.

"But we just agreed that--"

"We agreed to *assume for the moment*. And now I will ask you this: what if you had not befriended Potter?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Snape watched her carefully. She had flushed deeply, and he knew she took his meaning, though she was likely to make him spell it out.

"What if I'd had no friends, you mean? What if I'd never had the validation of my closeness to Harry to keep people from making fun of my hair and my teeth and my bookishness?" She looked dangerous as she sat there, eyes wild, and Snape admired her for a moment for her unflinching fury.

"Yes," he said. "What if all those things."

"Would I have left? Would I have moved home and showed you all by revealing your precious existence?"

"Would you?"

"Of course not," she hissed. And suddenly Snape realized the folly of his argument. He'd said himself that this could not be personal to her, that choosing her as an example would not be productive. He had intended to steer the argument back to Dobby, to the mistreated elf who had broken the taboos of his society...

"No, of course not," he said. And he knew that it was true, that wounded or not, Granger had too much damned honor to retaliate in such a way. "You would not. And perhaps therein lies the strongest part of your argument; if Draco Malfoy had ever known *you*, he would not have required your orphaning to make him comfortable."

Granger closed her eyes against his words, and he regretted them immediately. "Forgive me. I did not mean to speak of your family in such a way."

"It's all right. I wasn't even sure you knew, so it took me by surprise, that's all." Her voice was steady--light, even--but he knew he'd hurt her, just the same. And yet, with her few words, she'd managed to convey that she had never blamed him, that she believed that he had not known.

"I did not know until quite recently. My condolences, Miss Granger."

"You're an odd person," she said after a moment. "But I thank you. And please stop calling me Miss Granger. It makes me feel all of twelve." She laughed shakily. "And now you will have to explain what you meant by that."

"By what?"

"By saying that Draco--how did you put it?--required my orphaning to make him comfortable?"

"I should not have implicated him in this discussion. I only meant that Purebloods will see you as closer to 'all-witch' now. You have become less dangerous in their eyes."

"Well, that's a horrifying thought. The only way to assuage the Purebloods is to kill the families of Muggleborns?"

"I was not proposing any such thing. In fact, I meant only to say that you are partially correct in your argument that proximity might ease the tension between those who would hate each other on sight."

"I know what you meant, but it makes me feel slightly ill all the same."

Snape rose from his chair. The discussion had taken a turn somewhere and stranded him in the mire of politeness and emotion. He did not know how to soothe Granger, not that such a thing could in any way be construed as his job, and he did not know how to return to their argument about bloodlines. "The hour is obscene," he said stiffly.

Granger started and then glanced at the clock above his head. Surprise and disappointment danced over her face, and he was shocked to find that not only did she not wish for him to leave, but that he did not want to go.

She rose from the bed, seemingly out of politeness. "Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. You've raised a number of issues that I haven't fully considered, and it helps me discuss my ideas. I'll be interested to read the books you purchased for the library on Pureblood thinking, and I do hope that you'll continue to add to the library's collection if you come across other books that might be of interest."

"I am not a research librarian, Miss Granger--"

--Hermione."

"As you like it, *Hermione*. I do not have the time to be running about town addressing the gaps in your education."

"I'd be happy to provide some kind of stipend for your services, if you wish."

"I have no interest in your money."

Her face closed down, and he watched the process by which the polite, self-assured witch returned, leaving the excited, vulnerable thinker behind, with real dismay. Why was this all so difficult? Other men were able to navigate simple debates without finding themselves the source of pain and disappointment.

"I would be willing to discuss these matters again at a more reasonable hour," he said.

She nodded warily. "I would like that."

"You will contact me in the usual way?"

"Would that be by the bathroom sink or by knocking on the wall?" Her smile, which had been a bit stiff, turned genuine and amused.

Nearly against his will, he gave her a small smile in return. "Whichever you prefer."

And thus, Snape found himself in his room again, restless and unable to sleep. He had never made the points that he wished to about the Gryffindor and Slytherin houses--that it was not simply the bias of the hat that created so much enmity between them, but the history of the bloodlines of the houses. He had never explained that the reason she would fail was not because her ideas lacked merit, but because the Slytherins who sat on the board of Governors would see her attempts as the work of a Mudblood bent on destabilizing the last of their safety and strongholds. Without understanding those things, her chances went from extremely remote to impossible. And it seemed important in some vague, amorphous way that she understand that Draco had not truly thought her a contaminated, unworthy witch, now or ever--only a rogue factor, a danger. It had never been Granger herself he had hated, at least not in that way.

He lay down on the bed without turning down the sheets or removing his robes. He extinguished the lights with his wand, as he had been the one to complain of the hour, and so it would seem strange to her if he did not retire for the evening. The loo gave off a very faint glow from the light beneath her bedroom door; she would probably stay awake, scratching away at her parchment for another hour or so. He wondered if he had given her the impression that *he* feared and hated the Muggleborns. Just because he was explaining these things did not mean that he espoused them, he thought angrily, and he had the sudden urge to rise, knock on her door, and make that clear.

The light grew suddenly brighter, and he heard the door on her side of the bathroom open and close again. The water ran in the basin, and he could see her there with his mind's eye as clearly as if he stood beside her. Her hair was wild and loose for the evening, free of the pins and twists that bound it in the mornings, and she brushed her teeth with a blue toothbrush, baring her teeth to the mirror. She was a hollow panel of wood away, he thought. He could easily open the door and tell her the thoughts that would not lie quiet in his mind. He got so far as to swing his feet to the floor before he returned to his senses. He could not barge in on her in the bathroom, no matter the insane ideas she had taken away from their conversation. And to call out to her would be to admit that he knew she was in the loo, which he could not do.

He sighed. Why did it seem that everything involving Granger was so complicated?

Sleep would be a long time in coming.

Five

Chapter 5 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

A/N: For ScatteredLogic, with heaps of thanks to OpalJade.

Snape was putting the garden to bed.

He had been dragging out the task, as he did not really want to find another use for his Sundays, and he had come to appreciate the labor, the stiff feel of unfamiliar denim, and Pomona's company. But even Pomona herself was absent today, apparently spending the day with Minerva. Why hadn't she had Longbottom build a decent greenhouse?

Instead, apparently, he had been building winter composts all week, and Snape spent the better part of the morning removing spent flowers and tossing them into the bins. Next he planned to begin tilling. That was not a task he particularly looked forward to. To him, Muggle tillers looked like particularly imaginative torture devices and not very efficient besides.

Therefore, he was surprised, though not completely disappointed, when Granger turned up around ten, wearing her ridiculous Hogwarts getup with a cloak overtop. She would at least prove a temporary distraction from the tiller.

"Professor, you need a jumper if you're going to be out in this weather," she said, making no explanation whatsoever for her presence.

"I can dress myself, thank you," he replied. "Hard work keeps the body warm."

"It does," she said, "when the temperature is more than three degrees."

He turned and glared at her. "Do you have some reason for being here? Or have you simply come to offer your opinions on my wardrobe?"

She shifted slightly from foot to foot. "I'm going to Hogwarts today--" she began.

Snape retrieved his wand from his pocket. "*Protego Totalum!*" he said, aiming it at her rather haphazardly and turning back to his task.

"Yes, thank you. But I came because I wondered if you might like to come with me."

Snape froze. Go to Hogwarts?

"Whatever for?"

"Well, I find that visiting helps me to imagine the logistics of Hogwarts without the house system. When I can walk the corridors and think, 'All right, the third and fourth years will live here, and when they leave in the morning for first lesson, half will head toward the Charms corridor, and the other half toward the dungeon,' it all begins to make more sense. The more confident I am in my impressions, the better I'll be able to convince the Board of Governors that this could be a real, working possibility."

Snape could not deny that he was curious to see how she planned to resolve the problems of housing and scheduling, but the idea of just dropping in to Hogwarts made him queasy. He was not entirely sure that he was ready to return, but if he were, he would want more than a silly young woman in a hardhat for fortification.

"I hardly see how you would require my company for a stroll about the castle."

"I don't require it, no. I only thought--you don't miss it?"

"Miss what, Miss Granger?"

"Miss Hogwarts? I find I miss it so much that I dream of it at night. It was my home," she said simply.

Yes, of course he missed it, he thought impatiently. He missed it every time he had to struggle to fill an endless day, every time he made a cup of tea, or sat down to an empty table for breakfast. He missed the corridors to pace in when he felt agitated, the library with its seemingly unending supply of books, the familiarity and quiet of his rooms. He missed his classes, if truth be told, for the routine of them, but also for the brief moments in which someone did something truly exceptional, and he got the rare glimpse of what a student might become. He missed Dumbledore.

"A trip down memory lane? Is that what you're proposing?"

She turned away. "It was only a thought. I can see you're busy here. Have a good day, Professor."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Snape said. Anything would be better than the godforsaken tilling, and if he left it, Longbottom would surely attend to it tomorrow. "You said yourself I cannot go about in this weather dressed this way. If you can bring yourself to wait a moment, I'll join you in the entrance hall."

He did not wait for a response and brushed past her into the house.

They arrived at the gates of Hogwarts within seconds of each other. Snape had suffered a brief moment in which he was not sure whether or not she intended to Apparate jointly, but it had resolved itself when she'd spun away from the top step of Grimmauld Place without so much as a "see you when we get there."

His first impression Hogwarts was that it looked like a sandcastle that a child had kicked over in a fit of temper. His throat closed, and he was momentarily unable to say

anything.

Finally, he noticed that Granger was glancing up at him periodically and standing motionless by the gate, and he wondered how long she had been waiting here for him to compose himself. He cleared his throat.

"It's not as bad on the inside," she said quietly. "It's hard for me to look at it without the face and the front doors, but once you get inside, some of the magic takes hold, and there is more that was left untouched."

He nodded. She lifted her wand.

He thought for a moment to challenge her, to insist that he cast his own charms, but she was right that a Shield Charm cast by another was stronger, and he would prefer to have as much protection as possible if he were going in there. He'd wear a bloody hardhat if she had a spare.

He followed her though the construction site. Men in yellow coveralls were directing huge stone boulders with their wands, two or three of them to each slab of stone, while others milled about, drinking something steaming from paper cups and shouting to one another. Granger lifted her hand in greeting, and several raised hands in return, nodding as she passed. She stepped over what should have been the doorway, and they were inside.

It was quiet inside; perhaps it seemed more so in comparison with the noise of the men and the grinding of stone in the yard, but Snape thought that what he was missing was the sound of inhabitants. Had there ever been a time, even in the dead of night, when Hogwarts had been silent? Even the house-elves in the midst of their secret duties had bumped a fire poker here and there or shuffled on the stair.

Granger started up the main staircase, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Are the staircases sound?"

"They don't move right now. It took a dozen men to put a Sleeping Charm on them that would hold when the reconstruction began. They said it was too bloody difficult to be Levitating materials up to the third floor East wing and discover that you'd ended up on the fifth floor West wing."

Snape found that he could not climb it before casting a silent Sleeping Charm of his own. The moving staircases had always made him feel slightly ill, and the idea of one swinging out into nothingness gave him the cold chills. Ahead of him, Granger had turned back and laughed.

"I think most of us have done that at one time or another since all this began," she said.

"Where are we going?" he asked, refusing to acknowledge what she'd seen.

"I had hoped to walk the first floor today. I'd like to take a look at the classrooms. I've heard they're mostly finished."

Snape nodded his assent and took a tentative step up. "How are the dungeons?"

"They were the least damaged," she replied while climbing, "except where there were cave-ins, but predominantly, they fared well. They were obviously the first to be repaired--structural reasons and all that. The house-elves were able to live in them almost continuously. If you'd like, we can visit there next."

Snape did not know whether he wished to see the dungeons or not. It was not that he had not known that Hogwarts had sustained great damage; he lived at Potter's because of it. But somehow seeing it was very different from simply knowing it, and he already felt a bit shell-shocked. Still, it might be comforting to return to something that, if Granger were to be believed, was not completely alien.

"I suppose that will depend on how thorough an investigation you plan to conduct of the classrooms," he said dryly and climbed on behind her, careful not to look down.

But as it turned out, it did not matter whether Snape felt prepared to visit the dungeons or not. Following their tour of the renovated classrooms, Granger suggested lunch--in the Great Hall, no less, as if there were no more sensible place to procure food in all of Scotland.

"And trouble the house-elves to serve us?" Snape asked. "Miss Granger, I'm appalled."

"How did I know you would say that?" she replied with a slight smile. "It's not ideal, I admit, but I will pay them, and they are cooking for the construction crews anyway, so it isn't as if they aren't preparing food today. Besides, I want you to see this."

She opened the door to the Great Hall, and it was all Snape could do not to gasp. The Hall appeared untouched, from the four long house tables to the winter blue of the enchanted ceiling. The high table stood on the dais, clothed in gold as it had always been. He stood for a moment inside the doorway and took it in. Here was something he understood at last.

"Gryffindor or Slytherin?" he said finally, an eyebrow raised.

Granger huffed. "How I wish it could be neither," she said, but she steered them toward Slytherin.

"You see how pervasive it is?" she said once they were seated. "You can't even have a meal without involving politics, loyalty, tradition. Shouldn't we, as two adults, simply be able to sit down?"

"Tell me how you would have it."

"I would have it that students are not defined as people by a hat at the age of eleven!"

"So I gathered," Snape said. "How would you have the *tables*, Miss Granger? So far as I can see, despite your plans, there are four tables here. Four tables corresponding to four houses, four dormitories."

She seemed to settle into her chair then, her shoulders relaxing slightly, and there was a small smile playing around her mouth. Snape wondered if she knew how pleased she looked when she shared her ideas, how much at ease. Though she did look a bit as if she wished she could draw him a diagram.

"I'd like to see it divided by year. First and second years in what was Gryffindor Tower, third and fourth in Hufflepuff, fifth and sixth in Ravenclaw, and seventh alone as eldest's privilege in Slytherin."

Snape said nothing immediately, but fell to contemplating the room. Eldest to youngest, he thought, trying to imagine this room filled with students of descending height. The staff would have to have eagle eyes, he thought, as the youngest students would create the most obvious mayhem, but the oldest students would take advantage of the distraction. Not that that hadn't always been the case, simply with other names.

Granger seemed willing to leave him with his thoughts for the time being. She knocked smartly on the table, and two plates of beef and potatoes appeared. Snape pushed his food around with his fork. Although he had been hungry before, he found now that he was consumed with memories, of his own sorting and of those he had witnessed; of small, frightened-looking students running gratefully toward cheering upperclassmen; of speeches from heads of house, both given and received.

"You don't think something would be lost?" he asked at last.

"Lost?" she said. "Without question, something would be lost." She was quiet for a time, her face far away and dreamy, and he waited, somewhat impatiently, for her to speak again.

"I remember my own sorting," she said. "I'd thought for weeks about what house I'd want to be placed in, reading about Hogwarts from home. From there, it all seemed like a game, like something I could strategize and win. Ravenclaw was what I had decided on. But on the train, there didn't seem to be anyone I could look at and sort on sight. Everyone was lazy or stuck up or dull. I couldn't imagine anyone fitting into any of the lofty ideals of the houses I'd read about, and I certainly couldn't imagine anyone being my friend. And I know... I know how I seemed to them. By the time we'd reached Hogwarts, I had convinced myself that I was making a terrible mistake, that there was nothing extraordinary or magical about any of these people and that I'd be better off at home where at least I might attend a school based on academic merit." She paused.

"So why didn't you?"

"Why didn't I go? Well, because of the Great Hall, of course. I had never seen anything more beautiful, more strange, in my entire life, and I knew I could not leave a place that created such things."

Snape knew what she meant, though he would not have worded it in quite the same way. Even now, in the midst of the rubble and confusion of the castle, the Great Hall stood alone like a jewel, like a testament to magic itself.

"And for the first time, I began to understand that magic was not going to be anything like the world I'd known. That I'd never be able to control it, or win it, or own it. And I knew that, no matter what, I did not want to leave. So I just gave myself to the hat and let it put me wherever it would."

Snape considered her for a moment. "Do you think it made the right choice?"

"Do *you*?" she said pointedly, but did not wait for an answer. "I don't know if there was a right choice to be made. It gave me a family. As you so delicately pointed out the other night, it gave me friends for the first time in my life. It gave me a purpose and something to fight for. If those things make up a right choice, then I suppose it did."

"Hmm," Snape said, willing neither to agree nor disagree. "As a professor, I can only say that I find it a chilling thought, all those first years running amok without the tempering influence of the older students."

She smiled, but it did not reach her eyes, and he knew that the point he was trying to make was being lost.

"When I was a student," he began, and he watched as Granger nudged her plate to the side and leaned on the table with her elbows. She looked as if she had come to attention, and he realized a bit uncomfortably that she was interested in his childhood recollections. "When I was a student," he began again, "I remember the confusion of those early days, of never knowing how to get from the side of the castle I was *in* to the side of the castle in which I needed to be. The way the staircases seemed almost to chuckle as they delivered you to the wrong floor, the way corridors that you *knew* led to Charms somehow delivered you to Defense."

She laughed, nodding in fervent agreement. "I thought I was going mad."

"And I remember the relief I would feel when I saw another flash of green amidst the populace, that there were these older students duty-bound to point me in the right direction. I was not a child particularly gifted at friendship," he said and paused. He had no idea what was prompting him to relate these thoughts to Granger. Perhaps it was the Great Hall itself, infecting him with nostalgia, or some charm she'd set upon him. "But I knew which Quidditch team to cheer for. I knew where to sit at meals."

"You knew where you belonged," she said, and instead of being irritated at her interruption, Snape was relieved that he did not need to go on.

"Yes."

"And the loss of that belonging--for people like us--would be crippling, I know." Her head tipped back, and she seemed to regard the thin white clouds that drifted far overhead. "Of course I know. But it crippled us in other ways. It told us that to love our own place, we had to hate another. And I don't know how to undo that without taking the whole thing away. I don't think hundreds of years of assumptions can be changed. I don't think that we can just come in and say, 'All right, you Gryffindors, stop hating the Slytherins. Slytherins, same goes. And Hufflepuffs have value, and Ravenclaws aren't heartless and clinical. That clear? Excellent. On with you, then.'"

"I do not disagree," Snape replied. "Nor do I disagree that harm has been done over the years. But you are obsessed with your own ideology, Miss Granger, and I think you are failing to consider the practical ramifications of a strictly chronological system."

"Like what?" she said, reaching into her robes for a quill.

"First off, no professor could handle an entire year's worth of students at once. The groups would still have to be subdivided in some way. Would that be done on academic merit, or by some other system?"

Her quill scratched furiously at the parchment. "Secondly, there are," and he grimaced as he said it, "matters of school spirit to contend with."

She glanced up, looking startled and slightly amused.

"School spirit?"

He glowered at her. "The matter of Quidditch, for instance, or the House Cup."

"I cannot believe we are about to discuss Quidditch as it relates to equality and fairness," she said.

"We are not about to discuss Quidditch as it relates to equality and fairness," he said. "We are about to discuss Quidditch as a game played by students at boarding school. Like it or not, Quidditch is beloved by the grand majority of the student body and a fair number of the faculty. It is, Merlin help us, the most popular wizarding past time, and it will not simply go away because it doesn't fit your worldview."

She huffed, blowing a few strands of hair out of her face in the process, but she jotted something down all the same. "It isn't as if we couldn't form four Quidditch teams."

"Certainly," Snape said. "But you could not do it by age. Which one would get the best players? Would tryouts be held all at once, or would students apply to each team individually? How on earth would you keep friendship and legacy out of it? What if all former Slytherin players applied to a single team?"

"I--I don't--"

"Yes, I know; you hadn't thought about it. And the reason that you hadn't thought about it is that it doesn't matter to you, but what I'm trying to tell you, Granger, is that if you are serious about this, it *must* matter to you. Because it will matter to the Board of Governors, and it will matter to the students."

"So what do you suggest?" She did not look angry, only open.

"A house system to which students are assigned at random. Take away the names and the colors and the blasted animals, move the dormitories all to the same floor if you have to, but leave the house system in place. Do not be so obsessed with numbers and fairness that you take away the part of Hogwarts that was home."

Granger looked floored. She wrote nothing, said nothing, did nothing but stare. He had the feeling that she was not so much staring *at* him as she was climbing the staircases in her mind, opening doors to dormitories that no longer bore the colors she remembered and following faceless students to classes and Quidditch matches.

Suddenly, he found that her eyes were locked with his and that she had returned from her wanderings and was very much present at the table.

"No House Cup," she said, as if it were a challenge.

Snape opened his hands, palms up, as if granting her this stipulation, although it was not up to him.

"I want the all the dormitories in the towers, identically outfitted. Divination and the Owlery will simply have to be moved. No more students living in the dungeons."

This stung him slightly, but he understood it, and knew that there were Slytherins who had felt they'd been relegated to the dark and damp rather than gifted with it.

"I'll credit you, of course, with this."

Snape suddenly felt deeply uncomfortable. "It was merely a thought, not a plan for a revolution, Miss Granger."

"Hermione," she said distractedly.

"Whatever," he replied.

She laughed, a tired and mirthless sound. "Months of work and pacing these corridors, and you come up with this over lunch. Perhaps I haven't learned as much as I thought I had."

This seemed to be the moment in which he should step in and assure her that her simple wish to bring Slytherin back into the fold was proof enough that she had learned from the war. He knew there would be plenty of those who would propose cutting Slytherin altogether and going on with three houses, as if it were the seed of all discord, and by excising it, they could cut off darkness like an offending limb. But he did not know how to begin to say such a thing without it sounding like a platitude.

"As I said, it was only an idea."

"Well, it was a bloody good idea. And I cannot understand why I didn't come up with it."

"Because the moment that you sense any injustice in the world, you seize onto it like a bulldog and refuse to let go. Sooner or later, you will have to look beyond the trouserleg in your mouth."

She snorted. "Thank you for that lovely image."

"My pleasure."

They sat in easy silence for a while. Snape managed to eat a few bites of his lunch while Granger made notes.

"What on earth would they be called?" she said suddenly.

"Beg pardon?"

"The houses. What would they be called?"

"How should I know? As you might recall, this is not my proposal," Snape said and forked in a final bite of roast beef.

"True," she said. "And you haven't said a single thing of value yet, so I hardly know why I'm bothering to ask." She gave him a funny half smile.

Snape felt his neck turn hot at her backward praise. "Keep at it, Granger," he said. "I'm sure you can come up with something if you really try."

She laughed and caught his eyes, as if she meant to transmit her pleasure to him. He looked away.

She rose. "Shall we go to the dungeons?"

"I think not," he said. It seemed to him that he had dined sufficiently on memories for the day, and had no wish to be flooded with more. And besides, it seemed to him that if all were about to change—for he thought Granger had far more chance of swaying the Board of Governors with a modified house system than a sacked one—then he would rather let the dungeons exist as they did in his mind.

"Oh," she said, looking vaguely disappointed.

"Come now, you've seen the dungeons. What, were you hoping for a tour of the secret Slytherin inner sanctum?"

She gave him a withering look. "Of course not."

And then it came to him that she would have marched him straight up to Gryffindor Tower if he'd asked—or if such a place currently existed. She would have given it to him in the spirit of this... whatever it was. Cooperation.

"I'm afraid I have left the garden in a deplorable state. Perhaps you would be so kind as to help me with it, seeing as you've traipsed me all over creation and stolen all my ideas?" he said.

"It does seem the least I could do," she said, and he wondered why in Merlin's name he should be so relieved that she seemed mollified.

Darkness fell early on the November night. To his extreme pleasure, Granger had known what to do with the tiller, and he had spent the afternoon weeding and sorting newsprint to lay over the beds, removing the glossy advertisements and setting them aside to be Vanished. Around four, Kreacher had arrived with tea, and they sat outside and watched the evening settle into the garden. Granger's hair was plastered to her head with sweat and the imprint of the hardhat, which she had not, for some reason, removed until they sat down to tea. Snape was cold—Granger was right; he needed a jumper—but he did not suggest going back inside.

"Heads of house," he said, apropos of nothing.

"Mmmm," she replied. "It wouldn't do to keep the ones we had."

"And yet you'll put me out of a job if you change them."

"It's true," she said. "I'll try to come up with something that would--"

"That was intended to be humorous," he said. "I daresay I wouldn't cry into my pillow over the loss."

"Did you hate it, then?" she asked.

Snape was about to reply when the back door to the house opened, flooding the garden with yellow light. The shadowy figure of Draco Malfoy stepped through and stopped before the white Adirondack chairs that he and Granger were currently occupying. Snape felt suddenly as if he'd been caught out of bounds. Granger sat back

slightly in her seat.

"Severus," Draco said, and then, with what seemed some difficulty, "Hermione."

"Hello, Draco," she said.

"Mr Malfoy," Snape said.

"We were going to play some chess," Draco said, addressing Snape. "I came to see if you wanted to join us."

"I think not," Snape replied without rising. "I have reading to catch up on."

"Well, I know you didn't ask me," Granger said, "but I'll play if you need an extra."

Draco grinned. "So long as you're prepared to have your arse handed to you, Granger."

She rose and stepped toward the house. "In your dreams, Malfoy."

He watched as the door shut, leaving the garden dark once again.

It was half eleven when he heard her reenter her room. Funny how someone with so much to do could waste so many hours playing chess against Draco Malfoy. As he recalled, Malfoy was abominable at chess, and he couldn't imagine that Potter was much better. Who had played the fourth, he wondered. Longbottom? Well, he was certainly glad he'd begged off.

He heard her enter the loo, and then, to his shock, there was a knock on his inner door.

"Professor? Er--Severus? Are you up?"

"No," he said.

The door opened.

"I said, 'no.'"

"Well, but.... If you're saying no, then you're obviously up, are you not?"

"Rendering the question entirely pointless."

"Perhaps," she said. "But it seemed more polite than just barging in."

"I would deem the politeness only nominal if you intended to barge in either way."

She turned and left, shutting the door behind her. *Damn it*, he thought. *What was the fucking secret to managing these things?*

He was on the brink of following her through the bathroom to comment on those who spent the day reaping the benefits of other people's ideas and *therepeatedly* leaving those people without saying goodbye, when she knocked on the door again.

"Professor?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"May I come in?"

He started to say, *Could I stop you?* but bit it back. "By all means," he said instead.

The door opened again, and she stood there at the threshold with her freakish hair and imploring eyes, unable to come through, as he was blocking the entrance; an unfortunate result of having been about to charge through the door himself. He took a step back, and she took a step forward into the room, and yet they were still standing far too close to one another, a situation that he did not know quite how to remedy.

"Can I call you Severus?" she asked. "It feels a bit ridiculous to go on saying Professor when even Malfoy calls you by your first name."

"Far be it from me to make you feel ridiculous," he said. Which might not have been the most asinine thing he'd ever uttered, but it was not out of the running, he felt.

"Well." She sighed. "Thank you for going with me today, Severus. And thank you for your thoughts, which were, as usual, very helpful."

"It was nothing," he said and then wished he hadn't. The air was becoming too thin to breathe, it seemed, and nothing was coming out quite right.

"Perhaps we could do it again sometime," she said.

It seemed safer not to speak, as he was choking on the strange tension in the room, and he nodded.

"I'm sorry about the garden," she said. "I thought you were going to go, and I was already figuring out how to come along, and then--"

She rose up onto her toes and kissed him, the slightest brush of her lips over his. He could feel her warm breath against his mouth, and it seemed to him that the room was becoming sharper again. He pushed back against her kiss, and their noses bumped.

She laughed breathlessly. "Well, um, goodnight, then," she said, backing into the bathroom. His last impression was of her blazing cheeks as she pulled the door shut.

"Goodnight, Granger," he said to the empty room.

Six

Chapter 6 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

A/N: My heartfelt thanks to OpalJade for the beta, and ScatteredLogic for the prompt.

The most baffling thing about the kiss was that it seemed to change exactly nothing. He'd woken for the first few days following his strange encounter with Granger to an unfamiliar sensation in his gut. It felt partly like the feeling of impending doom that he'd often experienced during the final year of the war, but also partly like the thrill of expectation. And though he knew quite well that she would likely apologize sooner or later, stammering and horrified at what she had done (and he'd planned several scathing responses to this), his true feeling was that he would like to do that *again*. He was not a man with great experience in being kissed, and he'd found it a rather pleasant, if unsettling, event.

But the fact that no apology or repeat performance seemed forthcoming left him feeling that he must have misunderstood the gesture altogether. Perhaps it was some strange custom of the young; perhaps she'd said goodnight to Malfoy and the lot of them in exactly the same way, and she was waiting for an apology from *him*. Well, she could wait for eternity before she'd get any such thing.

Still, it was strange that, whoever's misunderstanding it had been, Granger did not appear to be avoiding him in any way. In fact, his contact with her was becoming ever more frequent. Though he continued to vacate his rooms before she entered the loo in the mornings, more often than not, when he returned to his room, he would find a missive from her in the sink.

Once, it had been:

What do you think of naming the houses by color? Purple, Orange, Brown, Red? Chartreuse, Vermillion, Indigo, Azure?

To which he had replied:

I can hardly imagine a section of the populace screaming, "Go Orange!" The others do not merit comment.

Fine, she'd left the following morning. Animals, then? Bear, Hawk, Lion, Boar?

Boar, Granger? And I'd beware anything that seems too much like the former. Hawk and Lion are too reminiscent for my taste.

In seeming frustration, she'd written, *Nitwit, Blubber, Oddment, Tweak*, which he had Incendio'd and left in the basin for her to clean up later.

But this was far from their only contact with one another. She'd taken to leaving out her books in the library at night with notes scrawled to him on bits of parchment, sticking out willy-nilly from the text. And finally, nearly two weeks after their trip to Hogwarts, she'd come home early, burst into the library, and asked if he would join her for dinner downstairs.

He didn't know why he'd expected it to be just the two of them. Though he'd spent numerous meals alone in the dining room, experience should have told him that if he desired the others to stay away, they would flock to the table en masse. En masse this evening only involved Malfoy and Longbottom, but that was enough masse for Snape.

"Hello," Hermione trilled as they entered the room.

Draco looked up and nodded; Longbottom smiled and said, "Lo Hermione," through a mouthful of pot roast.

"Malfoy. Longbottom," Snape muttered as he settled into the chair beside Granger's.

Kreacher appeared with loaded plates, and both he and Granger set to eating before anything else was said. Snape was not sure whether she, too, had intended them to dine in private; though he knew that everyone was aware of her plans for Hogwarts, he was not sure whether they knew the details of said plans.

"I've decided on names," she said, turning to him at last. Not a secret, after all.

"Mmm?"

"Dragon, Hippogriff, Sphinx, Unicorn."

"Acceptable, though a bit dangerous," Snape said after considering them for a moment. "Magical creatures... Does that make this the Augurey?"

Hermione scowled at him, but Draco laughed.

"What are they names for?" Longbottom asked.

"New houses at Hogwarts," Granger replied, favoring her friend with her warmest smile. *See*, she seemed to say. *This is how normal people conduct conversations.* "Why dangerous?" she said to Snape.

"Dragons are a bit like serpents, and as they are forbidden, perhaps an equation will be drawn. Sphinxes associate to wisdom; Hippogriff sounds passingly like Hufflepuff. Although, as the Gryffindors can hardly be considered pure and gentle, I suppose the system breaks down there."

"It's impossible," Hermione said. "There are not four things in the world that will work."

"I said those were acceptable," Snape said. "They play well both as house and as team names, and each is either dangerous or coveted, so the students will be proud no matter the house they are sorted into. Correlations will be drawn no matter what you choose. You will simply have to be wary of it. Tell me, how do you plan to sort?"

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I was thinking that it might be wise to use a quota system."

"A quota system? Based on what?"

"Well, based on bloodlines."

"Is that a message that you want to send? That you are sorting according to bloodlines?"

"Don't twist my words around. Obviously, I wouldn't be separating the Purebloods from the Muggleborns."

"Yes, but isn't your point that the amount of wizarding blood a person has shouldn't matter? By basing your sorting on it, you seem to be saying that it matters a great deal."

"Ideally, no, it wouldn't be considered at all. But think about it--I'm not devising a house system based on personal characteristics in which bloodlines should be irrelevant. And we've rejected the idea of grouping by age. The entire point of this change is to make people more familiar with each other, and the issue of blood status is one of the most divisive in wizarding culture."

"So you intend there to be a certain number of Purebloods, Half-bloods, and Muggleborns in each house?"

"No, I'm not aiming for some magic number. I just think that if there are six Purebloods in an incoming class, each house should get at least one."

"As much as I hate to say it, old man," Draco said, setting his fork noisily against his plate, "I agree with Granger. What's the point of dismantling the old system if you aren't going to have the new one address the problem?"

"I don't recall asking for your opinion, oddly enough," Snape said, who was, strangely, most annoyed by being called 'old man.' "But since we are, apparently, opening this discussion to all and sundry, perhaps Longbottom has something to add."

Snape glanced at Longbottom, who was doing his best to blend in with his chair. He looked nervously between Snape and Granger, and Snape wondered for a moment which one of them he was more afraid of crossing.

"I am a Pureblood," he said quietly, after a moment. "If the system had quotas, the likelihood that Draco and I would be in the same house would be very small. I thought the point of what you were doing was to stop the hostility between the *houses*. There are Purebloods in every house as it is. I think... I'm sorry, Hermione, but I think a random system would be better."

Snape could not even properly take pleasure in having a supporter, as Longbottom's comment seemed to change the mood of the table to a somber one. Had he encouraged Granger to become too focused on blood status? He'd only meant to educate her on its underlying causes, but Longbottom had made him feel as if he'd missed the point of this endeavor altogether.

"How random is random?" Draco asked, seemingly unfazed by the atmosphere. "Are we talking about pulling names out a hat?"

Snape snorted at the metaphor and watched with interest as Granger opened her mouth and shut it again. He wondered what she'd thought of Longbottom's criticism. "I'd prefer some kind of Arithmetic equation, if it comes to that. Personally, I wouldn't mind a name-pulling of some sort, and I'd even go so far as to say that I'd like it if someone could draw names, lay them out, and make sure that chance hasn't grouped people together in an unfavorable way--"

"Unfavorable to whom?" Snape interrupted.

Granger shot him a look. "I'd like it if someone could safeguard that some bizarre chance hasn't got all the Muggleborns in one house or something, but I recognize that there is great danger in allowing any one person to make final decisions about who belongs where. So perhaps Arithmancy could divide the students and remove any potential meddling."

"And would the equation have blood status as a factor?" Draco asked.

Snape glared at him. He had no idea why he'd come to feel proprietarily about Granger's little project, but it annoyed him that Malfoy was asking the questions that he himself would like to ask.

"I don't know," Granger said, and she rested her chin in her hand. "I don't have enough time to get this proposal together properly. I'm due to appear in front of the Board of Governors in three weeks, and I'm still working out these very basic ideas." She sighed. "Which, I suppose, is what happens when you change horses in midstream. On the one hand, I'd like to see all kinds of things factored in: nationality, blood status, wealth, family background... but the more I think about it, the more it seems to me that Neville is right. Once all those things have been accounted for, what's the likelihood that the divide would be any better than just assigning every fourth student to Hufflepuff? And I don't want to open us up to all kinds of speculation as to why a particular student was placed where he was."

Snape had barely begun to feel affronted by the 'horses in midstream' comment--was he to be blamed if he'd had a better idea than she? His *most sincere* apologies--when Malfoy spoke.

"I have a few hours to spare tonight," Malfoy said. "We could make a test batch of students and run them through different equations to look at the split."

"Would you?" Granger asked, and she favored him with a smile of such grateful intensity that Snape wanted to hex that Malfoy prat into a steaming pile of hippogriff dung. But before he'd worked out the intricacies of such a hex, they were gone, leaving him alone with *Longbottom*.

He said nothing, but began to eat peas as if his life depended on it, chasing them about his plate with his fork and stabbing at them with the tines. How had all of this happened? Less than an hour ago, he had been working peacefully in his library, and now Granger was gone off with Malfoy and he was having dinner with Longbottom. Well, with any luck, the boy would flee the table directly.

"Professor," Longbottom said in a tremulous voice.

He'd never had a surfeit of luck, come to think of it.

"Yes?" Snape said shortly, as if he were quite engaged in the business of pea stabbing and resented the intrusion.

"Um. How do you know when the fangs of a Venomous Tentacula are ready to be used in potions?"

"Why?" Snape asked, dragging the word out slowly and imperiously, one eyebrow creeping toward his hairline.

"Because I... well, no reason. I was just curious."

"Why?" Snape repeated.

"I'd like to grow some magical plants; that's all. I love working in Professor Sprout's garden," he hastened to add, "but I miss Herbology."

"I see," Snape said. Well, he could hardly blame the boy. As oddly relaxing as he found Muggle gardening to be, pansies and azaleas could not hold a candle to the subtle vibration of a flutterby bush or the flight of a leaping toadstool. Still, Venomous Tentacula was a rather extreme example, and he shuddered to think of the notoriously accident prone Longbottom handling one. "If you would like to grow plants for potion making, I might suggest the Bobotuber," he said. "It seems a bit more your speed."

Longbottom flushed a deep red and stared down at his plate. Snape silently congratulated himself for deterring Longbottom from endangering the household and ending

the discussion at the same time.

"I was top of my class in Herbology; did you know that?" Longbottom said suddenly. Snape looked up and was surprised to see that the boy had laid down his fork and was looking at him with angry determination.

"Mmm," Snape said noncommittally. This was a very strange turn of events, he felt.

"I was. Professor Sprout says I was one of the best she ever taught. And if I want to grow a Venomous Tentacula, I will."

Snape leaned back in his chair and assumed a look of boredom. "Go right ahead, Longbottom. I'm certain that growing one of the wizarding world's most aggressively poisonous plants in your bedroom is a marvelous idea."

Longbottom stood abruptly, the legs of his chair screeching against the hardwood of the floor. "Come with me," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" Snape was utterly off balance. Was this the same Longbottom who so feared him that his Boggart had taken on Snape's own visage?

"Come on, then. I have something to show you."

Snape rose from the table, more from surprised compliance than any real desire to see whatever it was that Longbottom wished to show him.

Longbottom stomped down the hall, and Snape realized uncomfortably that they were headed for the boy's bedroom. What was he going to be shown? Framed Herbology marks? Longbottom's Shrivelfig collection?

Longbottom opened the door and ushered Snape in, hissing, "Sshhhhhhhh," and quickly shutting the door behind him. Snape looked around, struck mute by what he saw. Tendrils of Maidenglory climbed the doorframe and dangled from it, swaying gently in a breeze only they seemed to feel. The left wall of the room was covered from floor to ceiling in wooden shelves, each obscured by plants from Alihotsy to Flitterbloom; Snape thought he spied a Fanged Geranium in the mix, as well as Mallowsweet, Bobotuber and Fluxweed; Gurdyroot, Puffapod and Asphodel. Along the floor were the large, deep pots housing the vines. The Devil's Snare grew up full and thick in the southeast corner, climbing the wall and pressing its leaves hopefully against the magical barrier that Longbottom had erected around it. In another corner was the largest Mimbulus Mimbletonia that Snape had ever seen in Britain. He wondered vaguely why Longbottom did not constantly smell of stinksap.

But truly, the most amazing sight in the room was the greenhouse. It seemed, through efforts both magical and Muggle, Longbottom had enlarged the window in his room until it was equal to the size of the wall. As he had never noticed it from the outside, Snape assumed that Longbottom had somehow rendered the wall into one-way glass, a complex charm that he would not have thought the boy capable of. The greenhouse itself extended several feet into the room and was bounded by a glass-filled, wooden framework. Inside there were enormous blooms shaped like umbrellas; a purple, beating Heartflower; and a medium-sized, but very healthy looking Venomous Tentacula, gnawing diligently at a gigantic ham bone.

"Great Merlin," Snape said under his breath as he took a step toward the greenhouse.

"It's teething," Longbottom said, a note of quiet pride in his voice.

"Not for the first time, I assume," Snape said. He pressed his hand against the glass, and the Tentacula raised an inquisitive feeler.

"Only once before," Longbottom said. "I kept the fangs, but I don't think they will be worth anything. By the time I realized that they needed to be removed, some had fallen out on their own, and I didn't know how to preserve them, so...." he trailed off.

"May I see them?" Snape turned reluctantly away from the Tentacula. He had no idea how Longbottom could sleep in a room with that thing, no matter how well contained.

Longbottom opened his desk drawer and removed a heavily warded box. He touched his wand to the lid in several places and Levitated the top. Snape peered in.

"A bit overripe, as you said," Snape said. "But still useful. Take them to Arsinius at Slug and Jiggers. He will perform the necessary tests, but I imagine you'll get a tidy little sum."

"Or you could have them," Longbottom said.

Snape paused, confused. Aside from the fact that he had no brewing facilities, and hence no need whatsoever for Venomous Tentacula fangs, he had no idea why Longbottom would be offering him such a valuable gift.

"In exchange for what?" he said.

Longbottom looked slightly chagrined. "Just advice," he said. "When to harvest, when to prune, that sort of thing. You know, for potions."

"Have you offended Pomona in some way?" Snape asked bluntly. "Because I can hardly see why you are troubling me with this. Surely, she would be delighted to help her pet pupil."

Longbottom colored. "It's just... well, it's just that this is a gift for her. I'd like it to be a surprise."

"A surprise," Snape repeated.

"Yes, for Christmas. So I wouldn't need help for long, just a couple of weeks. Then she'll know, and she can help me herself. Though I wish... I just would like to do this for her, and for her not to have to do anything at all." He paused. "Do you know how much she lost?"

Snape said nothing. Yes, he knew how much she'd lost. A lifetime's worth of plants, a lifetime's worth of work. Much more than Longbottom could ever recreate in a boarding house room, magically enhanced or not. But he saw what the boy had been trying to do. And, much as Snape was loath to admit it, he'd done well with what he had; it smelled dank and loamy in here, and the humidity was nearly unbearable. Tiny rain clouds drifted over the shelves. A miniature thunderstorm rained down above the Flitterbloom, while a shroud of darkness engulfed the Devil's Snare. More charmwork than he could imagine had gone into this room, and all without help from Pomona?

"I assume you've been combing the Maidenglory regularly," he said. "Save whatever strands it sheds in a cool, dark container. You may braid its tresses if they begin to obscure the doorway, but cut off the entire braid if it begins to darken and store it separately from the other hair."

Longbottom sat down at the desk and began to write.

"How are you accessing the Tentacula?"

"There is panel that can be unspelled and lifted away," Longbottom replied. And I wear dragonhide gloves."

"You'll want to invest in graphornhide. I'll ask Granger to check the dungeons on her next trip to Hogwarts. There may still be a pair in the laboratory."

"Thank you, sir."

Snape waived his hand as if to silence an annoying insect. "Brush the fangs with a soft-bristled brush every two to three weeks. And keep giving it the bones--even as the teeth mature. When they reach an inch long, you may harvest them. I trust you know to Stun it before you attempt any such thing. How old are the Mandragora?"

"Still infants, sir."

"Good. Is their chamber sound-proofed?"

Longbottom glanced up from his parchment and gave Snape a look that suggested he might be somehow impaired. "Of course."

"Given your track record in potions, I could hardly fail to ask."

Longbottom huffed softly. "I think you'll find I'm much better with plants. They are less likely to loom over your shoulder, commenting on your failings." The last he said sotto voce, although it was impossible for Snape not to hear. It was hardly as if they were in the Great Hall. However, instead of being offended, he merely felt the same sense of dizzying disconnect that so often accompanied his interactions with his housemates. Who were these strange people? What had the last year *done* to them?

In an effort to regain some semblance of normalcy, he asked, "Who performed the charms on the greenhouse?"

"Sir?"

"As you've said, your talents lie in Herbology, not in Charms. Who designed the greenhouse?"

Longbottom looked away and sighed. "Hermione helped me with the wall," he said after a time. "And Mr Filch built the wooden supports."

Whatever thrill of victory Snape might have felt was obscured by the shock of this information. "*Argus Filch?*"

Longbottom nodded. "And Harry helped."

Good God. Snape felt he needed to lie down.

"Mr Longbottom," he said formally, "if it suits you, I will return next Thursday after dinner and each Thursday thereafter, provided that there are *nóncidents*." He turned toward the door, momentarily disoriented by the swaying of the Maidenglory.

"Wait--" Longbottom said, "the fangs."

"I have no laboratory here, as you might have noticed," Snape said. "Keep them. As I said, they should fetch a pretty penny at Slug and Jiggers."

"But sir, I don't feel right asking for your help without--"

Snape was struck by sudden inspiration. "Grow me a Phoenix Flower."

"Pardon?"

"A Phoenix Flower, Longbottom. If you can handle Venomous Tentacula, I should hardly think it any tax on your resources."

"It's not. I mean--it would be no trouble, sir. Just--why do you want a Phoenix Flower?"

Snape turned away and smiled slightly to himself. "For a surprise," he said.

Once back in his rooms, Snape decided to complete his evening rituals before Granger returned. It would not do to seem to be waiting up for her, he felt, and brushing his teeth, et cetera, now would ensure that they would not need to negotiate over the loo.

He looked at himself in the mirror and wondered what his dinner companions had seen when they looked at him. Did they still consider him their professor? Both Malfoy and Granger used his given name, but it seemed more than likely that they still said 'sir' in their heads, even if they did not say it aloud. He pulled back his hair experimentally, but he looked the same to himself, the same as he always had. Then he let his hair loose and decided that he must be going mad.

That, or he was overworked. Which was probably the case now that he'd added Longbottom's adventures in magical gardening to the library, Pomona's garden, and Granger's research. This house took over the life of anyone who dared to live here, it seemed. And yet, what better way to kill the time than to be constantly occupied?

Snape was cleaning his teeth when there came several furious knocks upon the door.

"Miss Granger, the lavatory is engaged," he said around a mouthful of toothpaste.

"Look, I can hear you brushing your teeth. Let me in! I have something I want to show you."

"Something that cannot wait until I have finished in--"

Snape stopped as he felt the tingle of *Alohamora* in the air, and before he could protest, Granger had burst in, eyes bright, and thrust a bit of parchment at him.

"What is *this*?" he said without looking at the paper. He briefly considered letting a gob of foam fall onto it.

"You were right! The split was actually consistently more favorable with the application of an equation designed to create a random yield than one that took various factors into account. Look--" she said, jabbing at the parchment. "We used the students from our own class. Eleven times out of twenty, Harry and Draco ended up in the same house. And you can see here that of the remaining times, Neville and Draco were placed together six times, and Ron and Draco, three times. "

Snape peered at the parchment. He saw what she so desperately wanted him to see, and he was pleased that he had been proven correct--perhaps even more pleased, in some obscure way, that she wanted so badly to tell him about it. But he could not help but notice that in many instances Granger herself had been placed in houses without Potter, and in some cases without both Potter and Weasley. And it seemed to him that her placement, as a Muggleborn, was just as important as anyone else's, although perhaps he was placing too much emphasis on blood status again. He scowled at Longbottom in his mind and spit into the sink.

"And your placement?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Only that in... what, eight cases? You were sorted away from your friends. Sometimes both of them."

She looked up at him, and he felt acutely uncomfortable, as if she'd seen something that he had meant to conceal.

"Are you asking if I mind that, in this new house system, Harry and Ron and I might not have been friends?"

Snape looked away and rinsed his mouth vigorously, as if she had never interrupted his washing up. "We have discussed the obstacles to friendship-forming in the past," he said.

She was silent for a moment. Snape glanced in the mirror and was surprised to find her looking back at him.

Snape dropped his eyes, trying to imagine a world in which Harry Potter would have had to save the world with Draco Malfoy and Justin Finch-Fletchley for sidekicks.

"Severus," she said, laying a hand on his arm and startling him into turning toward her. "You don't think I would have made other friends?" There was no anger in her tone, only a strange searching quality that made him think that she was asking just as much on his behalf as on hers.

He shook his head dismissively. "You don't think that perhaps the hat *knew*?"

"No," she said firmly. "I don't think that hat knew anything. I think we all put far too much stock in a bit of millinery and not enough in chance."

That was, he supposed, the heart of her argument: the power of chance.

"I wasn't meant to help Harry any more than I was *meant* to be a witch. I think you just... do the best you can with what you have."

Snape looked at her, trying once again to make sense of the woman before him. How had she accomplished so much growing up in so short a period of time? He could hardly reconcile the fact of her with the name on the parchment.

And then the thing that he had hoped for--the thing he had most dreaded--occurred, and she rose onto her toes and kissed him.

This time, Snape did not hesitate, but slipped an arm around her waist and dove into the kiss. The last fully rational thought that he had was to be grateful that he had just brushed his teeth and would not taste of this evening's pot roast.

Despite his enthusiasm, the kiss began haltingly. They separated several times, a simple pulling back to breathe, and Snape found himself with an intimate view of Hermione Granger's closed eyes and cheekbones, which he found not at all unappealing. She was flushed and warm, and her mouth tasted of mint. He wondered if she had applied some kind of Freshening Charm before entering the loo, and the thought made his stomach take an uncomfortable and pleasurable leap. He leaned in again.

Granger was stroking his lower back with one hand, and the other was slowly migrating its way up his chest. A dim part of his brain insisted that he should probably be doing something other than just standing there, so he touched her hair experimentally. He could feel her smile against his mouth.

There was a wet sound each time their lips shifted or realigned, and it was much too loud in the small space that was the loo. At first, Snape found it uncomfortable, but as the minutes stretched out and there seemed no end to this kiss, it began to signal some new sensation or experience, and he began to look forward to it. Now she had taken his bottom lip between hers; now she licked the roof of his mouth. She made him feel rather desperately inexperienced, but the events themselves were so pleasurable that he tried very hard not to mind. And he quickly learned that she was most likely to try what she liked herself; when he gently sucked at her bottom lip, she practically writhed against him.

This presented a new set of problems, as Snape had no desire to let her know that his erection was ready to burst out of his trousers. He'd been holding her firmly, but there had remained a space--however small--between them until now. He attempted a slight step backward, but she followed him, and he felt the soft press of her breasts against his chest, which made the entire situation worse. He tilted his hips away from her, but her hands snaked around him and pulled his pelvis firmly back into place, holding him against her.

He groaned, and her lips left his to press against the base of his throat. This was maddening, outstanding. He had never known anything quite like it. He ran his hands up her sides, felt her arms lift away to expose the sideswells of her breasts, and dared to run his thumbs over them, feeling her shift and shudder in response. She latched her arms around his neck and returned to this kiss, deepening it beyond its former boundaries, making him feel as if he were falling into it, a fall that would never end. His tongue moved against hers, and he tasted the sweet, rich warmth of her, and found he had no desire for it ever to end.

Except that she was trembling. It had only just begun, but he could feel the slight vibration under his hands and against his lips. It was possible, he thought, that she'd just come to her senses and realized that she was pressing herself wantonly against one Severus Snape, former professor and Death Eater, and that she was afraid and disgusted at the thought. Why didn't she run, then? he thought angrily. Did she think he'd hex her if she pulled away?

He broke the kiss. "You're shaking," he said almost coldly.

She looked down and smiled slightly at the floor. "... yes, well. You're very much taller than I am, Severus. My legs are getting tired."

Relief pulsed through him, touching all the spots inside him that desire had. He reached out to touch her again immediately, even though it was only a brush of her arm.

"Why didn't you say something?" he said.

"Because I didn't want to stop."

"I hardly think my height is an insurmountable obstacle," he said, his voice cracking slightly, much to his annoyance.

She looked up at him and gave him a sideways smile. "You're a very literal person sometimes; do you know that? No, I don't think your height is an insurmountable obstacle. I just knew that the moment we came back down to earth--for whatever reason--life would be filled with practicalities again. Like whose room to go to, and the fact that I have to be up early in the morning and should not spend hours snogging in the loo, and whether we were sure about this, and--" she opened her hands, seeming to encompass the bathroom, the house, the world, "everything."

"It hasn't been hours," Snape said, latching onto the one thing he felt he could argue about. When he had held her, everything had felt so certain. All the weeks of worrying about what she'd meant by kissing him that night had Transfigured themselves into so much ridiculous mental flotsam. Now he felt his hold on these things drifting away again.

She glanced at her wristwatch. "It's been over fifty minutes."

Had it? It had felt like ten. Or six. "I apologize for keeping you," he said.

She sighed and leaned forward, touching her forehead to his chest. "So prickly," she said under her breath. Then, in a normal tone of voice, "Can we do this again tomorrow?"

"I believe I am free after eight," Snape said, laying a tentative hand on her back.

"Good," she said. "I'll look forward to it." He could tell by her words that she was mocking him, but it seemed not to matter. They would be doing this again tomorrow.

"As will I," he said.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

A/N: Many thanks to OpalJade for the beta and ScatteredLogic for the prompt! Just for clarification...there's no sex going on in this chapter. Just teenager stuff. :)

Over the next several weeks, Snape learned a number of new things. He learned that Granger's long hours were mostly spent at Gringotts, where she performed a number of menial tasks for the goblins in the hope that she might make amends for the dragon incident of the previous year. He also learned that she hoped that her constant presence would allow the goblins to come to trust her, that she might eventually liaise between them and the Ministry in a series of negotiations for equal rights among magical beings.

He also learned how to anticipate the moment in which Granger was done discussing her theories and ready to begin the business of snogging. He learned that it was not his imagination when Kreacher suddenly disappeared from the room, or when her hand seemed to drift closer to his on the desk, and that the quiet space that grew into a strange, heavy silence was not a sign that he had offended her, but instead meant that it was time to put down his argument, however pressing, and cover that hand with his. He learned that she liked it when he nudged her face upward to meet his with his nose (wonders never ceased) and that she actively enjoyed having her earlobes bitten. That very thing, in fact, had moved them from desk to bed more than once.

Snape learned about the inevitable soreness involved in the kinds of activities they engaged in. Several times, he considered visiting Slug and Jiggers for Bruise Healing Paste, but the thought of spreading that smelly, yellow ointment all over his... well, he learned to appreciate the first painful press against her pelvic bone, the way it reminded him that he'd been here before, and the way the pain always seemed to fade as soon as she raised her hips to rub against him more firmly. He also learned that when all else failed, the hollow between her cunt and her thigh made an excellent place to grind himself without acquiring any further contusions.

He remembered how to wake on a hair-trigger, and he learned to listen for the sound of her door opening even in his sleep, learned how to go from dreaming to aroused in the time it took her to set down her handbag and shed her outer robe. He learned that one knock meant, "So sorry, I'm knackered," and two knocks meant, "Are you up?" He learned to survive on less sleep even than he'd had during the last year of the war.

Snape did not go about his business during the daytime in some kind of dreamy haze, however. In fact, one of the most interesting things that he learned was that rather than becoming blurry and indistinct, the world became so much sharper. The scent of Muggle petrol in the frosty air outside was so sweet and pungent to his nose that he stood out in the garden for whole minutes at a time, just smelling the air. The feeling of the swollen succulents in Longbottom's greenery was nearly obscene, and he found greater pleasure than ever in cataloging the books in the library. Every cross-reference noted on the individual cards left him feeling satisfied and... clear, somehow. Uncluttered. It was as if he absorbed some kind of deep sensory infusion from her touch that infected every corner of his world.

Snape learned that the smell he had once admired...so long ago, it seemed...was actually the smell of Granger's perfume, tinged with her sweat and the oils of her own skin. There were times, when he knelt above her, his face pressed into her neck, when he felt he could sink down into that smell and become a different animal entirely, one that subsisted on the smell of her, instead of air.

He learned that when she reached into his trousers and he felt her small, warm hand close around his cock, it took every ounce of his concentration to keep him from coming. He also learned that it was inadvisable to become suddenly, perfectly still, as this seemed to unnerv her terribly, and resulted in his having to assure her over and over again that she had not done anything to upset him. He could not articulate the truth to her, as it was not fully formed into words in his own mind; it was only the insatiable urge to find any orifice in her body and slam himself into it, to release himself in long ribbons of come to her mercy.

"Severus," she said one night in the midst of one of these sessions, interrupting a valiant attempt on his part not to explode in his shorts.

Snape had learned that when she spoke his name this way, it usually meant she was about to suggest something entirely undreamt of and wonderful, like the time she had requested that he lie on his back while she straddled his knees and had proceeded to rub her breasts relentlessly over his bulging trousers until he thought he would go mad.

Therefore, he was surprised and dismayed when she asked if he would accompany her to the Ministry awards ceremony.

"What?"

"The Ministry event," she repeated, looking up at him, strands of sweat-drenched curls clinging to her cheeks.

"No," he said vehemently.

She continued to look at him, her expression unchanging. "Why not?"

Snape struggled for a moment. The answer seemed so obvious to him that he could not imagine why she would ask, and yet, once again, when he tried to put it into words, it just swam around in his brain as unformed images.

"Because," he said. And when that felt childish, he added, "I have no desire to see a room full of people spend an evening gawking at Potter."

"Hmm," she said after a moment. "I think four months ago, I might have believed that."

It was exactly his luck, he thought, that the one woman in the world who seemed to enjoy snogging him was the same woman who never let anything go easily.

"Do you not want to be seen with me?" she asked.

"I am nearly insulted," Snape said. "Did you think it would be that easy?"

She gave him a funny half-smile. "It was worth a shot," she said.

"I'd have expected better," he said with a sigh of mingled amusement and exasperation. He rolled off her, filling the space between her body and the wall, and stared at the ceiling.

"No, you're right; it was cheap," she said and laughed. "But, in all seriousness, I know you were invited. It's not like you'd have to go as my date or anything."

"I am not in the least concerned about the evening as it relates to accompanying you," he said. "I only feel that... in the current climate... suffice it to say that I would not be looking forward to the mixed reception. At either end of the spectrum."

"Severus, I know you're reluctant to get out much--"

"I get out plenty hunting up the latest text you feel you will simply die without, do I not?"

--but if you'll admit it, your interactions have hardly all been negative, and this is an evening dedicated to *celebrating* our achievements. I think it would be... that is, I'd like to be there with you when they--"

"I did nothing worth celebrating," Snape interrupted. "I am pleased for you that your efforts will be recognized, but I will not watch as they award Potter a first class and you a second--which is what will happen, and I think you are intelligent enough to know it."

"I didn't do what I did for a medal, and I think you're smart enough to know *that*," she said quietly.

"Indeed," he said. "Which is why I don't care to dignify the whole thing with my attendance. Medals do not change what we did or why we did it, and ranking our contributions is... unsavory. Nor do I wish to be *celebrated*, as you say, for the despicable things I had to do--that we all had to do, Potter included--to win this war."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, and her curls tickled his neck. "Fair enough," she said after a time.

"Good," he said, and turning, bit her on the ear.

Much to Snape's continued bafflement, the situation did not end, nor did it seem to change. Granger did not demand that they 'define their relationship' or any of the things he'd heard men complain endlessly of through the years. She did not insinuate herself into every facet of his life; in fact, things continued on much as they had before. Occasionally, she would return home early and demand his presence in the dining room, but she did not attempt to hold his hand beneath the table or seem to want to indicate to any of the other residents that their acquaintance had... developed. She simply thrust parchment at him, argued her points with anyone that cared to participate and then dragged him off to the library to make a list of the new texts she wanted. Then, if he was lucky and she did not have another meeting to run off to, she might drag him off to her room to engage in activities far more enjoyable.

Only once did she break the pattern, and that was the morning that she was to appear before the Board of Governors. Snape no longer bothered to flee to the library at dawn. If he wanted to imagine her in the shower, he felt he was well within his rights, and she came to him that morning immediately following the sound of her alarm. She was dressed in a pair of gray flannel pajamas. She had not knocked, but had come directly through the inner door and stood in the doorway twisting a curl between both hands. Her face was pale, and she looked as if she hadn't slept at all.

He started to rise, and she shook her head. "Don't get up."

He began to ask, "Would you like me to just lie here, or was there some specific pose you were after?" and then thought better of it.

"Could I come and sit beside you for a moment?" she asked at last.

Snape found this question exceedingly odd, as they'd done far more than sit beside one another the night before, but perhaps it was because she was in his room that she felt the need to ask. He indicated the space beside him in response.

She perched on the edge, practically thrumming with nervous energy; Snape was nearly convinced that if he touched her, she would leap up and shatter.

"What are you afraid of?" he said.

"What do you *think*?"

"I am well aware of what day this is and how important it is to you," he said, slightly stung. "Answer the question."

She looked at the far wall. "I'm afraid to fail, of course. I'm afraid that I've pitched it wrong, that I'll mean to be fair and end up being insulting. I'm afraid they won't consider it at all because of my age or my Muggle blood, and even though I'll be up there, giving it all I've got, they'll be nodding and smiling along and hoping that I'll stop talking soon so that they can all have a drink. I'm afraid of the information I don't yet have, of someone asking about something I've never even thought to consider or have never heard of. I'm afraid--"

"That seems quite enough. No need to work yourself into a state," Snape said, not unkindly.

She opened her hands slightly, as if to say, "Well, you asked," but said nothing more.

"You are prepared," Snape said. "Go and do your best. Your fears seem, at heart, to be just two scenarios. In one, they do not listen at all. In the other, you find that you've missed something that makes your proposal inappropriate. In the one case, you are blameless--failure there would not really be failure, just a sign that another way must be found. In the second, you will simply learn and try again."

She found his hand and squeezed it, but her face looked no more settled than it had when she'd arrived, and she drifted back through the loo toward her room.

Snape let her be. He remembered what it had been like to dress himself on the mornings that he had to make a report to those he feared. The donning of mental armour was a complex process, he felt, and interrupting it would not be wise. But he did watch her as she left, as had been his custom during the early months of his stay in what he now (almost fondly) thought of as the Augurey.

Her robes were gray and long, unadorned but sharply tailored. Snape suspected she might be using a very slight Height Charm, and he smiled at the notion. He'd taught it to her to spare her legs. Her hair was pulled into a severe knot at the back of her head, and her arms were filled with rolls of parchment.

"Good luck, Granger," he said aloud in the empty room and was almost surprised to find that he meant it.

That evening, Snape found Malfoy in the kitchen when he arrived for dinner. Draco had already changed into his plain black robes from his Auror Training ones, and there was a glass of firewhisky dangling from his long, pale fingers.

"Severus!" he said, making Snape cringe inside. Perhaps it was the childish glee with which Draco said his name that made it sound so terribly inappropriate.

"Indeed," Snape said, sliding into the seat opposite the Malfoy boy. "I don't suppose you're sharing?" He indicated the glass with a tilt of his head.

"For my favorite former professor? Anything," Malfoy exclaimed, and a glass soared across the room and landed in front of Snape with a bang, spilling a few drops onto the tablecloth.

"And what is the occasion?" Snape asked without thanking him.

"Wednesday," Draco said, and Snape searched his face for a moment, looking for the cause of this unusual behavior. Malfoy looked tired. In fact, despite his antic demeanor, he looked exhausted.

"Are you well?" Snape asked.

"Well? I'm very well, thank you. I spent seven hours today in combat training. I don't know whether to be astounded that they seem to think we're capable of fighting for seven hours without a break or surprised that it was never required at Hogwarts. But I suppose the real question is how are *you*?"

Snape eyed him suspiciously. "I am fine," he said.

"Mmm? Granger treating you well?"

Inwardly, Snape sighed. He'd been afraid the manic bonhomie routine had been leading to something like this. He supposed that he and Granger occasionally appeared at dinner together, but there had never been any outward sign--had there?

"Whatever do you mean?" he said flatly.

"Oh, come on, old man. She tells Potter everything, you know."

Snape flushed. "Ah, yes," he said. "And I had forgotten what *bosom* friends you and Potter have turned out to be. I suppose that to tell him is to tell you?"

Draco laughed joyfully, making a show of spilling his whisky onto the table.

"Too easy!" he cried. "I expected to have to give you at least two more glasses before you'd admit it!"

Snape glowered at him. "There is nothing to admit."

"No? Nothing in the way that Granger practically runs upstairs the moment she arrives home? Nothing in the way that your shared meals seem to involve you preening and ruffling your feathers at every other male at the table?"

"I do apologize, Mr Malfoy, if you've mistaken my irritation at your table manners for something else, but if we are to be judged by our behavior at this table, perhaps it is *you* who has some secret design on Granger. As I recall, you've been very free with your time as of late--offering to run arithmantic equations and draw house logos?" Snape bristled. He did *not* preen.

Draco smiled smugly. "Fanning the flames."

"Whatever Potter may have told you, I assure you that--"

"Potter hasn't told me anything. I was just taking the piss." Draco laughed. "Although I'm quite sure now that you and Granger are illicit lovers and shall be telling everyone I see."

Snape's hand strayed over his wand in his hip pocket. "Malfoy--"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, let's keep the wands out of it, shall we, Severus?" Draco said, looking not at all alarmed and, in fact, quite amused at his little *bon mot*.

Snape sighed, and his hand returned to the table. "Let it be," he said quietly. And to his surprise, Draco shrugged, settled back into his chair, and did so.

That night, Granger arrived home after ten. Snape had been listening for her. He'd known she had a meeting at Gringotts in the afternoon and several hours to put in with the files at the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and so he had known she would be late, but had hoped (fruitlessly) for some word of how it had gone. That none had come had made him restless. It seemed that the lack of a message boded ill--for surely she would have been overjoyed to report a positive reception. But then perhaps she did not want to seem to boast.

He knocked even before she was fully through the door and did not wait for a reply, barging through the loo as had become his custom.

He glanced at her face and read no turmoil there, and so he went on with what he'd planned to say. "Your messages today were much appreciated. So informative and frequent, I felt I was there in the room with you."

Granger paused in the setting down of her files and parchments and glanced up at him. "Lovely to see you, too."

"A summary, I take it, would be too much to ask."

She shook her hair loose from the bun and stepped out of her heels, cancelling the Height Charm. "Good God, that's better," she said. "I feel as though I've been on the rack."

"Granger," he said.

She stopped unbuttoning the outer layer of her robes and looked at him seriously. "Would it be all right if we didn't? It went fine. That's all I can say. I don't want to rehash it endlessly or I'll never have a moment's peace until I've heard."

He nodded, more to himself than to her. *It went fine*. Well, he supposed that was good enough. She was neither elated nor disconsolate, and he supposed that if the board were actually considering her proposal seriously, then that reaction was just about right. He thought briefly of Malfoy, of the strange grace with which he had agreed to cease his interrogation, and decided that he would not be shown up by a blond Auror.

"Very well," he said. He stood, prepared to go back to his room and wait for her knock, when he noticed that she was standing beside the dresser wearing only her underthings. He opened his mouth, waiting for some barbed pleasantry to come out, waiting for her to pull one of her oversized Muggle sleeping things on, waiting for her to do anything but look at him hopefully.

When she did not, Snape felt as if the room had quite suddenly run out of oxygen. He closed his mouth, as he was dimly aware that he was gaping at her like a fish, and he managed to turn slightly in the attempt to hide the bulge in his trousers, which had come on so instantaneously that he felt a bit lightheaded.

"Is it all right?" she said.

Was what all right? That she was standing there displaying winter white skin contrasted by the soft blue silk of her knickers? That he was quietly suffering some sort of coronary event?

"It is, after all, your room," he managed. "I don't suppose--"

She touched him then, encouraging him to lay his hands on all that beautiful exposed flesh, and he tentatively stroked her arms, letting his hands drift over her shoulders to her collarbones.

That night he felt, for the first time, the shocking warmth of her skin against his with nothing--well, not much, anyway--in between. He learned the feeling of her sweat on his chest, and once, for one fleeting moment, as he ground himself between her thighs, his cock, covered though it was by the fabric of his pants and her knickers, pressed against her opening, and he'd thought... for a second, he'd thought he was entering her.

Hours later, they lay side by side, resting. He knew he would return to his room in a few moments and allow them both some much needed sleep, but he did wish in a vague way that he did not have to move. It was not so much that he wished to be permitted to sleep in Granger's bed, but that it was such a hassle to pry himself from it in order to go to his own. His limbs, currently, seemed to be on holiday from the rest of his body, and he was bone tired in the way that only coming hard could make him. But he would have to find the energy. Kreacher was probably sequestered miserably under the kitchen sink or some such, and the last thing he needed was for word to get around the house that he was sleeping in Granger's room.

"Malfoy suspects something," he said in the dark.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "At work?"

"No," Snape said. "And he doesn't work yet, does he? He's only training. He suspects something about *this*. He asked me about it at dinner."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific."

"Don't be dense, Granger. About us."

"What did you tell him?" she asked. Snape strained for any hint of alarm or disgust in her voice, but found none.

"I told him to let it be."

"And what did he say to that?"

"Nothing, oddly enough. I felt a bit sorry for him actually. All bound up by those posh Malfoy manners."

She snorted. "Somehow I think he'd have dropped the niceties if there was something he really wanted to know," she said. "But you could have told him if you wanted to."

Snape thought her words over for a moment. If they were admitting to this... well, it seemed as if... it seemed as if she might be his girlfriend. Not that he would ever admit to having such a thought, nor to the rush of fearful pleasure that accompanied it.

"Mmm?" he said. "I saw no reason to discuss it."

"Well, I'm not about to take out an advert about it, but I don't think it's a secret. I asked you to the bloody Ministry ceremony, didn't I?"

"You were very clear that it was not meant to be a date," he said.

She sighed, rolled onto her side and threw an arm over his chest. "Good lord, Severus. I meant that you wouldn't be crashing the party on my arm or anything, that you'd been invited in your own right. I didn't mean it wasn't a *date*."

"Oh," he said. And he covered her hand with his and closed his eyes experimentally. Perhaps Kreacher could bunk with Crookshanks for the evening.

Snape had never bought a Christmas present for a woman before. He'd been much too poor to buy anything for Lily when they were at school. There was nothing that she would have liked that he'd have had the means to provide her with, and he never received anything worth sharing. He'd never felt the need to participate in the generic gift-giving that went on between the staff at Hogwarts--a dozen identical pens or bottles of cordial, self-pressing handkerchiefs or singing paperweights. He'd had a drawer where he kept such things and imagined that every other member of the staff did as well. There had been no need to deplete his meager salary with the buying of junk that no one ever used, and so he had not. For those he needed to impress, there had always been some rare potion to brew, and all Dumbledore had ever wanted were Muggle sweets. And so Snape found himself entirely out of water when it came to trying to choose something for Granger for the holiday.

Anything that might have been found in his drawer was out. No self-inking quills or planners, none of those blasted blank books that people had been so fond of giving him as if he were constantly in the midst of penning his memoirs. No books--it seemed he was constantly on one quest or another for a book for Granger--and no lingerie. The very notion of trying to acquire such a thing made Snape flush with (slightly aroused) humiliation.

The plant he'd asked Longbottom to grow for him was not nearly large enough to be passed off as a Christmas gift, and it seemed she had all the robes, kneazles, house-elves, music and shampoos that she could possibly desire. What did she want? What were wizards *supposed* to buy for witches? He thought about asking Malfoy, but the thought of being mercilessly dragged about the shopping village while suffering the boy's jokes made him feel vaguely ill.

There was a knock at his door--very unusual for a Sunday morning--and Snape suddenly decided that if, by chance, it were Malfoy, about to head out on some shopping expedition, he would swallow his discomfort and ask for help.

But to his astonishment, it was Potter. Snape had seen so little of the boy during the last three months that it was nearly impossible to imagine that he lived and worked here. Snape supposed there had been little need for them to interact--he had no complaints about the room, and he completed his library duty without fuss or incident--and yet it was strange that Potter had never turned up for a meal, never stepped outside to admire the garden.

"Potter," he said.

"Snape," Potter replied.

They stood there for a moment at an impasse. "Was there something that you wanted or have you just come to make sure I haven't died?"

"I--er--we were thinking of having a Christmas dinner. For the house. I wondered if you would come."

Potter could hardly look at him; instead he seemed focused on something over Snape's left shoulder. Snape made a show of turning to look in that direction and then turning slowly back, though he had the feeling that he knew exactly what was making Potter so uncomfortable.

What did Potter see when he looked at him? A lecherous old man? A pathetic, overgrown schoolboy? Someone no one had ever wanted who had somehow managed to attach himself to a kind-hearted girl who didn't know any better?

He wanted to rush Potter down the stairs, back to his office--anywhere, really, that was not here, making him feel so ugly and exposed. But he thought of Malfoy and his mantra. *Every right. Every right to be here.* In fact, it was Potter who was the intruder here, was it not? Interrupting his Sunday with his judgments and invitations.

He ignored the feeling that he was about to leap off a cliff and said, "Imagine that; I seem to be available. However, now that you mention it, I have a question for you."

Now Potter squirmed, and Snape held his tongue for a moment, enjoying his discomfort.

"Yes?" he said at last, and Snape relented.

"I find I am at a loss as to what to buy Miss Granger for Christmas. I don't suppose you have any ideas?"

Potter had never looked more flustered, which gratified Snape immensely. He stammered for a moment before saying, "Hermione's parents were dentists. She never got sweets as a child."

"Yes, fine," Snape said. "I had hoped for something a bit more original, but I suppose I should have considered the source." He stepped forward to force Potter back through the doorway, where he was lingering like an imbecile.

"So, we'll see you at Christmas, then?" Potter asked as he retreated.

"Given that I live here because I have nowhere else to go, I think it is fairly safe to say that I have not developed any sudden plans for the holiday. I will expect to have dinner in the dining room with the rest of the unfortunates."

"Excellent," Potter said, and he fled.

Yes, *excellent*, Snape thought bitterly. He had less than a week to come up with something better than chocolates.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who read this story in its early stages: OpalJade, Emmeline33 and RedOrchid. Your support was invaluable.

The day had arrived, and he'd come up with nothing more personal than chocolates. They were magical, yes--some changed flavours as they were consumed, and one that he had a particular interest in actually claimed to add an hour to the day, but in the end, they were chocolates, and he felt as if he'd failed some very basic relationship test.

He did not want to have to watch her open them and so he deposited the package in the sink where she left him her missives and set about dressing for the day. He doubted that Potter's dinner would be a formal occasion, and he wanted to spend the morning in Longbottom's room, making a final check of the health of Pomona's gift, so he dressed plainly. Frankly, it was not much different than being at Hogwarts for Christmas. The holiday had had no particular significance to him for years; he had no family or friends to visit. It was simply another working day, punctuated by a large turkey dinner.

So he was surprised when he heard Granger coming through the loo. She'd scooped up her gift in one arm and carried his under the other. She was dressed in a large pink shirt that she wore for sleeping, and there were slippers on her feet. Her hair was a mangled nest from having been slept on, and Snape wondered if it meant there was something deeply disturbed about him that he found the sight of her tangled hair so erotic.

"I had planned to visit the first floor--" he began before he saw her face.

It was brought home to him quite suddenly that this was her first Christmas without her parents. She had come looking for some semblance of tradition, for some small amount of pleasure in the occasion, and he sat down on the bed abruptly. "Happy Christmas," he said. This was not a phrase he was used to uttering, and he hoped that it did not sound as awkward as it felt.

"Happy Christmas," she said, and her smile was brave. "I've got you something." She held out a small package.

"I fear holiday traditions are not my forte," Snape said. It would be pointless to try to pretend otherwise, and the fact that he had no experience in such matters was not an indicator that he was unwilling to attempt them, a fact she should well know by now. "If there is some ritual to perform, you will have to apprise me of it."

She looked at him oddly. "No. No ritual. I see you've got me something as well--unless some other man has taken to leaving me gifts in the sink."

Snape gave her a look of consternation. "I should hope not."

"Well, then," she said, "the logical thing seems to be to open them."

Why was she making this so difficult? Snape wondered irritably. He was *trying* to humor her need for this little scenario; there was no need to make him feel like an idiot. "I was simply wondering if--" He glanced at her and saw that her eyes shown with unshed tears.

"I know. I just--now that I'm here, I realize that I can't recreate anything. It's silly."

"I am not trying to make you feel foolish."

She nodded quickly and swiped at her eyes, which had spilled over. "I know you're not. I hope I'm not making you feel badly. Oh, hell." She covered her face with her hands. "I can't believe I'm crying in your room. I'm sorry."

Snape was at a loss. He thought back to the morning of the Board of Governors, a situation in which he had been of no use. He had no skill at these things. He knew how to offer advice--solutions, perhaps; a bracing admonishment to get on with it--but there was no answer to this. Nothing to *do*. It was not that he did not understand that he should comfort her, but he had no experience in soothing words, nor any idea of how to begin. Was there some kind of manual that he had somehow failed to receive?

"Granger," he said and reached out to take her hand from her face. He felt terribly awkward and something like a fraud.

"It's all right. I'm fine," she said and used her free hand to wipe her face with her nightdress.

"It is perfectly acceptable not to be fine," he said and gave a slight tug to her hand. He was immensely relieved when she rose and joined him on the bed. Perhaps he was not mangling this absolutely. He put an arm around her, and she pressed her face into his armpit.

"Sometimes it is easy to forget all that you have lost," he said. "You give no sign of it, and if I have been remiss in... that is, if this is not the time to--"

She shook her head against him, and her arms crept around him and squeezed tightly. It was not comfortable, but then, he supposed, there was no need for it to be. He held her more tightly and fell silent. He could feel her tears seeping through his robes.

He thought of Potter then, just three floors away--hardly a vast, unnavigable distance. Potter, most likely, would know what to do with Granger's tears, would know exactly what needed to be said. And yet, here she was--again, though he had failed spectacularly the first time she had sought him for comfort. It was a bracing thought, a strangely thrilling thought, that there was something between them that she wanted, even when she was not interested in books or theories or snogging. He ran a tentative hand over her hair.

He had no idea how many minutes ticked by, how long he sat beside her, growing ever more uncomfortable and moist, but it seemed to matter very little. For whatever unfathomable reason, this was what she felt she needed, and he was determined not to make a mess of it.

Finally, she pulled her face away from his chest. The air felt cool against his sodden robes, but he would not for anything have embarrassed her by spelling her tears away. Her eyes were swollen and red, but she was trying to smile.

"Thank you, Severus. I feel... better isn't quite the word, but... cleaned out." She gave a half-hearted little laugh. "I suppose that wasn't the way you intended to spend your morning."

He said nothing, as nothing came to mind that would not make him sound like a fool. It had *not* been the way he intended to spend his morning, and pretending otherwise would only insult her. However, he was not sorry that she had come to him, and he hoped that his arm lingering about her would be sufficient to let her know it.

"Presents," she said at last. She handed him a small package.

He sat with it awkwardly in his hands. Was he supposed to unwrap it immediately? Who was supposed to go first?

Granger, however, had no such qualms, it seemed. She had already begun to slide the wrapping from her gift, and he watched as her face registered the confusion and disappointment that he had known would come. She stared down at the box for a few moments, reading the list of charms, and then something crossed over her face, and she looked at him, her head tilted to one side.

"Harry has given me chocolate every year for seven years," she said slowly. One side of her mouth was beginning to twitch upward into a smile. "He thinks I was deprived as a child."

"Mmmm," Snape said noncommittally.

"You asked him, didn't you? You asked him, and this is what he told you."

She closed her eyes, and Snape had the feeling it was because she was keeping further tears from escaping. He knew he should have never asked that good-for-nothing Potter for advice. He looked away, attempting to find any words with which to remind her that it was only polite to at least pretend to be pleased by a gift--that even *he* knew this--when he was brought back to attention by the fact that her face was inches from his.

"Thank you, Severus," she said and kissed him so gently that it seemed all other presents would be rendered irrelevant.

He cleared his throat. "You are welcome."

"This extra-hour one could be useful," she said, and finally, he allowed himself to smile.

"I had thoughts along similar lines."

"Open yours," she said.

Snape wished for a moment that he had unwrapped his as she had, because now she was watching him and he had to decide whether to be fussy about it or just rip the paper away. He opted for the latter. Inside he found a box containing two small bits of foam.

Before he could begin to decide how to handle the fact that he had no idea what she'd given him, she spoke.

"They're earplugs," she said.

"Earplugs," he repeated.

"I know you don't like Silencing Charms. I don't blame you; they're awful. They make everything feel *fake* somehow. But this way you can sleep while I'm up working."

He did not point out that he'd had no trouble sleeping as of late and that he hoped that this was not an indication that she planned to return to researching in the evenings. "Thank you," he said. And if he felt slightly smug that chocolates were, on the whole, more enjoyable than earplugs, he said nothing.

With Granger safely off to the Weasley abode for the morning, Snape proceeded to the first floor to check on the greenhouse.

Longbottom was in a state.

He had brushed the fangs of the Venomous Tentacula until its gums had bled, and it was sore and cross, waving its tentacles angrily at the magical glass. The Flitterbloom had been pruned inexpertly since last Thursday, and it looked a bit as if it had been on a bender. Longbottom was striding about the room, casting charms: adding rain here and snipping there--and he looked crazed, as if he'd been up for days. His hair stood up in muddy spikes about his head.

"Cease at once," Snape said after glancing around the room.

"Sir?" Longbottom said, freezing in mid-cast, his wand lifted and his eyes wide and surprised.

"Do you often set about destroying your Christmas gifts before they are delivered?" Snape asked. "If that is your intent, then by all means, carry on. You are doing a fine job of it."

Longbottom appeared torn between snarling and crying. "If you've come to berate me, I haven't got time," he said a bit desperately. "Professor Sprout is due to stop by at eleven, and nothing is ready."

Snape suffered a wave of annoyance and self pity. Would he be required to calm every member of the household before dinner? And what was he supposed to do with this fine mess? He could hardly hold Longbottom and stroke his hair until the crisis passed--he shuddered at the thought--but the boy must be stopped.

"What do you mean, 'nothing is ready?' Until your most recent bout of... attentions... everything was ready," he said with exasperation.

"But the Maidenglory looks limp, and I think one of the Mandrakes has started to get spotty, and I haven't had a chance to harvest all the beans from the Puffapods."

"You recall, do you not, that you *will* continue to tend these plants after today? It's not as if you're delivering them all to Hogwarts for immediate use. The only deadline you have is the one at which you tell Pomona what you've done and show her your progress." He fingered the Flitterbloom's decimated foliage. "Perhaps you could leave the plants intact until then."

"You're right. You're right," Longbottom said, but he raised his wand again and began to direct the storm to the Devil's Snare.

Snape reached over and plucked the wand from the boy's grasp. "Perhaps I was not speaking clearly enough," he said sharply. "Stop it, before you kill everything you've worked so hard to create."

"But the--"

"No."

"No?"

"No," Snape said, more gently. "It is a fine gift. Pomona will be delighted. Allow her that, rather than forcing her to smile at your 'efforts.'"

Longbottom sighed. "All right," he said and reached for his wand.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Should I, perhaps, keep charge of it until after her visit?"

Longbottom closed his eyes and smiled ruefully. "Not unless you think my hair suits me this way."

Snape gave him dubious look, handed over the wand, and left in what he hoped was an impressive swirl of fabric.

Snape's first thought was that he had rarely seen such a pitiable and mismatched group of people. Potter sat at the head of the table, with Granger at the foot. To her left sat Filch, then Longbottom and Malfoy. To her right, Pomona, leaving Snape the seat on Potter's left. Lovely.

He hesitated in the doorway to the dining room. It was not as if he had not set foot in this room since taking up residence in the house, but as they regularly dined in the kitchen, he did not come here often, and his memories of it had not been written over with the mundane routines of household life. As he stood there, he could almost see Dumbledore at the head of the table with Molly at the other end. The candelabra, a rendering of two entwined runespoors, was in the center of the table where it had always been.

"Glad you could join us," Potter said, as if Snape had been late, which he most certainly had not been. Choosing not to sit around making small talk for hours before a meal did not constitute lateness.

He took a quick glance at Longbottom, but the boy seemed relatively composed, leading Snape to believe that his gift to Pomona had been well received. In fact, the woman in question had a spray of Asphodel tucked behind her ear. It looked ridiculous set against the fraying gray strands of her hair, but her smile was genuine and bright, and Snape felt... pleased that she was pleased.

Nearly the moment that he'd taken his seat, Kreacher had arrived with a platter of roasted potatoes, and Snape's momentary warm feelings evaporated. Truly, it *was* not unreasonable to arrive at quarter of twelve for a noon meal. They need not act as if they'd all been sitting here starving and waiting for him to arrive.

The elf was different. This thought occurred to Snape so suddenly that it seemed disconnected from all he had observed since entering the dining room, and it took him a moment to decipher it. He looked at Kreacher again. The Black house-elf had always struck him as a little mangy thing, gray skinned and drooping, but he realized that this was either not now the case or had never been so. Old, he was, but also strong, with wide, flapping ears and black, mischievous eyes.

"Kreacher, do you need any help with the rest?" Granger said.

"No, Miss. Kreacher brings the food without any help."

"But you will join us when you've finished, won't you?"

Kreacher's thin ears began to twitch, and he shuffled from foot to foot. Granger looked at him with mock severity. "You *did* promise."

"Kreacher did promise, Miss. But the pudding will need--"

"I'm certain one of us can see to the pudding. And I've arranged a seat just for you."

Snape looked, startled, to his right, where there had appeared a chair between him and Potter. The chair was exactly like the rest in the dining room: same ornately carved back, same faded brocade seat cover, but it was tall and narrow, and would hold Kreacher at a normal height for conversation. She must have created it, Snape thought, as he had never seen anything like it in any wizarding home he had ever visited. It was a clever little charm.

Kreacher nodded and disappeared into the kitchen, where he remained until Granger fetched him out, pushing him out the door with one hand and carrying a bowl of stuffing in the other. He bore an enormous turkey to the table and looked up at her beseechingly when he had finished.

"There is vegetables," he said.

"And I will get them. Sit down."

Snape watched as Kreacher appealed to Potter, turning and flapping his enormous ears obscenely, as if he were batting his eyelashes. Potter, in turn, looked at Granger, who was firm. Potter shook his head at the elf, and Kreacher reluctantly climbed onto his chair.

"It is high in this chair," he remarked to Potter.

"Are you--that is, does it bother you?"

"Kreacher is not bothered by the height of the chair," he said pointedly, and Potter looked away.

The meal, while sometimes a bit surreal, could not be considered exactly boring. Malfoy harangued Potter constantly throughout it, pointing out that as host, he had not cooked the meal, set the table, or polished any of the elaborate silver that now adorned it. Potter retaliated by hissing, "Shut it, Malfoy," periodically, which struck Snape as oddly reserved.

Longbottom gave an excruciatingly long treatise on the amount of dragon dung necessary to grow a Venomous Tentacula, a dicey period during which the plant had contracted and then overcome powdery mildew, and the first harvest of its fangs. Pomona listened to each word of Longbottom's speech, nodding and gasping in the appropriate places, but even she looked slightly vacant, as if she'd left the table in her mind and was thinking of other things.

What was interesting, Snape thought, was that no one spoke up about it. Malfoy did not loose an attack of brussel sprouts onto Longbottom's person, Granger did not kick him subtly beneath the table, and he himself did not suggest that if Longbottom wished to discuss the excrement of dragons, it would be best done away from the dinner

table. All of them seemed bound, if not to appreciate Longbottom's topic of conversation, at least to tolerate it.

When Longbottom appeared to have finished, Snape struggled mightily for something to say that might turn the conversation away from Herbology. But before he could think of anything appropriate, Malfoy said, "So, I hear that the construction is moving along quite quickly at Hogwarts."

Everyone snapped immediately to attention, though Snape might have tested the water of Granger's face for a moment before turning back to Malfoy.

"You did? From whom?" she said. "I haven't been in the last week."

"That's the word at the Aurory anyway," he said, looking vaguely smug now that all eyes were on him.

"Do you think it's a bad sign?" Granger said.

"I doubt it," Snape replied. "More likely, they've received word to continue rebuilding the castle according to the original plans. Your proposal, accepted or not, would not require any structural changes to the building."

She looked vaguely mollified--more so when Potter added, "It probably made your ideas more attractive to them, Hermione, that they wouldn't have to wait."

Snape glowered. That had been exactly what *he* had been trying to say.

"Well, I, for one, will be glad to get home," Pomona said. "Not that your hospitality hasn't been wonderful, Harry, and I'm grateful to you. But I'm just itching to get back to my greenhouses. Especially since Neville has made me such a lovely start for them. I'm trying to look on the bright side. I can't count how many times I wished I could change something--move the water plants to greenhouse three, for instance--but then I'd think, oh, but it would be so much work, and everything's so well established here. Now I'll be able to."

"What has become of Peeves?" Filch asked, and Snape's head whipped around. Filch's voice was as gravelly and harsh as he remembered it, but it seemed an age since he had heard it last. Though he saw Filch about the house from time to time, they had rarely exchanged more than a nod.

Granger looked at him sympathetically. "I'm sorry to say that Peeves is well and has been inhabiting the dungeons. He's driven the construction wizards mad, of course, moving supplies around and pestering them with his nasty little songs."

Filch nodded as if he knew that he didn't have the kind of luck that would have seen Peeves ejected from the castle. "The ghosts as well?" he asked.

"They're about," Granger said. "Most of them, anyway. The Grey Lady hasn't been seen since the Final Battle."

"That's too bad," Longbottom said at the same time as Malfoy said, "She always gave me the creeps anyway."

"What do you think happened to her?" Potter said.

"She did whatever she was supposed to do, I suppose," Granger replied. "Whatever was keeping her tied to the earth. Perhaps she moved on."

Snape did not know what Granger was referring to, but there were those at the table who did, it seemed, as a somber mood seemed to envelop them all. There was nothing but the sound of chewing for several long minutes.

"Peeves once locked me in a closet," Filch said suddenly. "It was magic he used, and I couldn't undo it. I yelled myself hoarse for a day waiting for someone to come and let me out."

Granger looked pained, but Longbottom laughed. "He dropped a pot on my head in Herbology once," he said. "Knocked me clean out. We had doubles with the Slytherins that year, and someone just shoved me under a table. I came to a couple of hours later staring at wads of Drooble's Best Blowing Gum and wondering where in hell I was."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear!" Pomona exclaimed, but Longbottom shook his head and rubbed it ruefully as if it were still tender. "Don't worry about it," he said. "Just part of the Hogwarts experience."

"I heard of someone who claimed to have kissed Peeves," Malfoy said. "The rumor was that there were years when Peeves was too busy... erm, keeping busy... with some student to cause much trouble."

"Oh, my *God*," Granger said. "Can you imagine? No, wait--don't! Don't imagine! It's too horrible."

Snape had, in fact, heard the same rumor during his own school years and suspected that it was just one of those unshakable legends that haunted the castle as surely as the ghosts--as Peeves himself--did. So he was surprised when Filch said, "There were a couple years when Peeves was quiet." He said this with the air of a man remembering Eden.

"When?" Snape asked.

"Yes, when?" Pomona echoed. "Before my time, surely? I don't remember Peeves ever behaving."

"Oh, sure you do, Pomona," Filch said. "It was during the time when Hagrid was a student. Truth be told, I suspect that boy was keeping Peeves as some kind of pet. Always was good at calming things, that Hagrid. Bollocks at giving detention, though."

Snape had the unfortunate mental picture of a young Hagrid and Peeves, locked in some sort of unholy embrace, and he coughed and took a deep drink of his wine. Come to think of it, he had no idea what had become of Hagrid and made a mental note to ask Granger about it.

"The food is excellent, Kreacher," Potter interrupted, seeming to want to end any further speculations on the subject of Hagrid and Peeves. "Top notch."

There was a general murmur of agreement while Kreacher writhed uncomfortably in his seat. He beamed briefly around the table, stabbed at some carrots on his plate, and finally muttered, "Kreacher is glad you is liking it."

It occurred to Snape that Kreacher's diction became decidedly more house-elf like when he was angry or embarrassed. He wondered if Walburga Black had given her elves elocution lessons.

"Actually," Potter said, "since we're all here, I'd like to say thank you to all of you."

Snape cringed inside. Was this going to turn into some maudlin little speech about how much they'd all grown and contributed? Merlin spare him.

"You've all done more than your share in making this place a worthy boarding house," he mumbled. "The gardens, the library, all the daily repairs and meals made by Kreacher and Mr. Filch..."

"Notice how none of that has a bit to do with you," Malfoy said. "What is it exactly that you *do* around here, anyway, Potter?"

"And especially Hermione, who has given so much of her time to ensuring that this house is a safe place where people can find a home."

"Again--" Draco began.

"Malfoy," Potter shouted, throwing his fork down onto the table. Incidentally, Snape felt oddly relieved at this outburst. Potter's little speech and quiet tolerance of Malfoy's barbs had been making him nervous.

Potter made an exaggerated show of looking around the room. "If I'm not mistaken, this is not Malfoy Manor. It's *my* house, my money that buys the food and the books and the seeds; my influence that keeps this house unplottable and the press off our backs."

"Oh, so it's a monetary contribution," Draco said. "I'm glad you cleared that up."

"For fuck's sake," Potter hissed. "I admitted every one of you. I handled every scrap of the paperwork involved from having the Manor officially condemned to things as simple as changes of address."

Draco looked slightly stung at the repeated mention of the Manor. "We haven't had a new resident in months," he said archly. "How ~~have~~ have you been keeping yourself busy?"

Snape watched this exchange with some interest. Draco had insisted to him that there was no malice in the verbal sparring between him and Potter, but at the moment, both of them looked flushed and dangerous.

"Well, I'd hoped not to have to say this in the middle of Christmas dinner," Potter said, glaring daggers at Malfoy. "But I'm stepping down. So you won't have to worry about what I'm doing or not doing anymore, Draco."

Malfoy smiled nastily. "Funny how that follows the news that Hogwarts will soon be reopening," he said. "The prospect of vacancies to be filled have you ready to scarper?"

"Yes, that's it exactly," said Potter flatly. "How well you know me."

"Boys," Pomona said.

"Wait," Longbottom said, "are you closing the house?" And Snape was slightly dismayed that this had been his first question, too.

"No, no, of course not," Potter said. "The Foundation is set up to provide for this house in perpetuity--even in my absence. And as Malfoy is so fond of pointing out, the house is hardly going to fall down without me. I'll still live here, anyway; I'll be around if something comes up. I'll just have less time on my hands."

Malfoy looked at Potter with barely concealed interest. "Staying on, then?" he said. "Afraid you'd miss us too much?"

Potter gave him a strange smile in response. "Whatever would I do without your constant, *well-meaning* attempts to get me to better myself?"

Malfoy smirked. "Why don't you tell us what you're going to be doing before we decide whether you'll be bettering yourself."

Potter glanced at him and then back at the table. "I'm going to be studying healing at St Mungo's," he said.

"That's wonderful, Harry!" Granger beamed at him from across the table, looking--to her credit, Snape thought--only slightly panicked at the loss of her housing director.

He thought it over, pushing carrots from one side of his plate to the other. St Mungo's was not a completely unsuitable choice. It required one to be passably good at a number of things: Charms, Potions, Transfiguration, Dark Arts Reversals--without having to excel at any one thing. And it would appeal to Potter's world-saving instincts.

"I'm sorry to have blurted it out in the middle of Christmas, Hermione," Potter said.

"No, it's perfect," Granger replied. "We're already celebrating." She raised her glass. "To Harry."

Snape felt that a single toast to Potter in his lifetime was a toast too many, but he looked around the table and saw every glass held aloft, even Malfoy's. He thought of the shock that Granger had just received and wished to make things no more difficult for her than was necessary.

"To Potter," he said and raised his glass.

The pudding having been lit, extinguished, doused in hard sauce, and consumed, the residents of the Augurey retired to the sitting room for brandy.

The sun was setting outside, and Kreacher had lit a fire in the grate, and the room seemed warm and somehow forgiving, as if they all had permission to be their best selves, at least for the moment.

Granger Summoned mince pies from the kitchen and patted the sofa next to her for Kreacher to sit down. Snape sank into the armchair to her left.

"Did you have a happy Christmas, Kreacher?" she asked.

Kreacher twitched his ears. "Kreacher has never celebrated Christmas before," he said, "and Kreacher does not know if you are his friends or his family, but he is glad that you was liking his food, and he likes this Butterbeer." This answer seemed to satisfy Granger, who sat back in her chair with both hands wrapped around the stem of her wine glass. She closed her eyes briefly, and a small smile played around her mouth.

Pomona stood at the makeshift bar by the fireplace. She caught his eyes. "Drink, Severus?"

"Indeed. Ogden's, if it is available."

A glass came sailing overhead, and he caught it deftly in his palm. The first sip warmed him and loosened the tension at the base of his neck.

Potter and Malfoy were setting up chess in the corner of the room. A tentative peace seemed to have settled between them. Their bickering was now of the friendly variety and chiefly concerned who was going to whip whose arse at chess.

Filch sat alone in a ladder-back chair beside the makeshift door to Potter's office. Without quite knowing that he was about to do it, Snape rose and crossed the room to him. "I wonder if you are aware," he said, "that there are potions that repel poltergeists."

"Can't be," Filch said, not quite looking at him. "Kind of trouble I had with Peeves, Dumbledore would have given 'em to me years ago."

Snape thought this over for a moment and decided that one more lie for the old man's sake would not condemn him to hell any sooner.

"The potions are experimental," Snape said. "Likely the Headmaster did not wish to raise your hopes with something that might fail."

Filch appeared to consider and then accept this. "But you'd be willing to try?" he asked.

"I would," Snape said. "Assuming that you would consider it to be worth the effort."

"Dumbledore was attached to the little bastard," Filch said doubtfully. "Never wanted to have him sent away."

"Dumbledore was a man of odd tastes," Snape said.

Filch nodded. "Truth be told, I don't think I could go back if your potions don't work." He said this as matter-of-factly as he might have reported the weather, but the gravity of the statement--Filch had lived nearly six decades at Hogwarts--rattled Snape.

"S only natural that the students dislike me. My job is to keep them out of where they shouldn't be and to keep their fancy magical toys out of the corridors. Most of them never realize I'm a Squib. But Peeves... I always felt like with Peeves it was personal. Breaking things he knew I couldn't fix, chattering at me all bloody night long, knowing I couldn't so much as Langlock him, torturing Mrs Norris... That time with the closet--I think he meant to leave me there."

"I'll begin the potion directly," Snape said.

"I'd be much obliged," Filch said.

They lapsed into silence. Snape listened to the sounds of clashing chessmen and the murmur and buzz of conversation in the room. He watched the firelight as it danced on Granger's face, illuminating her expressions as she chatted to Pomona and Longbottom.

Malfoy gave a shout of triumph as he took one of Potter's knights, and Snape closed his eyes. Bizarre as it might seem, he was home.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

A/N: My endless thanks to my beta, OpalJade.

On the day of the Ministry awards ceremony--New Year's Eve, incidentally--Granger spent most of the day preparing herself to be looked at, while Snape fumed in the next room. There was no reason, he felt, to do oneself up like a tart in order to receive a meaningless medal. Her shower, usually too long by half to begin with, was no less than three times its normal length, and spellwork flew from the loo in bursts of gold and peach that leaked beneath the door. The much-loved scent of her perfume got right up his nose, and he wondered who exactly all this was meant to impress. Did she even intend to stop by before leaving the house in a flourish of red silk and hair products?

In fact, he'd had no idea that she had even still intended to attend the idiotic function until this flurry of preparations began. He'd thought she'd agreed with his assessment of the ceremony as needlessly divisive--as if the sacrifices of those who had been left homeless or bereft needed to be *ranked*! If he were feeling fair minded, he would have admitted that even those who had escaped the war with families intact and no scars to show for it had not been unscathed. The war had been a wound across the chest of the entire wizarding world, and to award those whose contributions had been deemed the greatest was an insult to all who had--he cut himself off. There was no point in working himself into a froth over it. Apparently there were some who needed a framed bit of parchment and a glorified Knut in order to have *closure* or whatever ridiculous term they were using these days.

But while he was on the subject--did the 'Golden Trio' even need more adulation than they'd already received? The very fact of her, parading about the wizarding world like some strange agent of change, should have been enough to tell her that what she'd done had been valuable. And she herself admitted that she wanted no close ties to the Ministry until it had proven that it would not so easily join up with Dark Lords and their followers.

Snape threw down the book he had been pretending to read and felt irritated when it hit the bed not with a satisfying crash but with a muffled thump. And then he grew irritated at himself for having deliberately thrown it onto the bed so as not to indicate to Madam Importance that anything was wrong in his little hovel of a room.

He'd thought she was his *girlfriend*, for Merlin's sake, which was perhaps the most galling thought of all. Hadn't she come to him Christmas morning? Hadn't she nearly fucked him the night she returned from the Board of Governors? Hadn't they spent weeks working together? Hadn't he comforted her, touched her? Hadn't they... well, he had no idea what they were calling it, but wasn't there something between them? Forgive him for daring to believe that she might choose to spend the last night of the year in his company rather than in room full of her adoring public.

She knocked once on the hollow wall before she left and called, "Have a good evening, Severus!"

A good evening, indeed. Where were his glasses of champagne? His stuffed truffles? The laughing woman on his arm?

None of this, of course, stopped him watching her as she swept out of Grimmauld Place in the company of Harry bloody Potter. Her hair was gathered into a loose but elaborate knot of curls and her robes... oh, her robes made him want to weep with frustration. Crossing over her back, plunging down into her cleavage, exposing her shoulders and collarbones and... Goddammit. Goddammit! Why hadn't he agreed to go to this infernal party?

Snape charged through the house in a temper, nearly knocking Malfoy to the floor when he came suddenly around the doorway into the kitchen.

"So the Slytherins sit at home while the Gryffindors dance on the Ministry's Galleon?" he said viciously as Malfoy held on to the counter and struggled to right himself.

"If I'm not mistaken, you had a ticket to dance on the Ministry's Galleon, old man," Draco said calmly.

"If you call me 'old man' again, I will hex your precious Malfoy balls off," Snape said slowly.

"Mmm," Malfoy answered, apparently unimpressed. "She didn't go *with* Potter, if that's what has you in such a tizzy."

"I am not in the least concerned with Harry fucking Potter," Snape shouted, realizing that he had no idea whatsoever why he was in the kitchen at all.

"That's the spirit!" Malfoy said. "Fuck Harry fucking Potter and the whole fucking Ministry. Fuck New Year's Eve, while we're at it, and fuck the fact that with his master out of the house, I cannot locate that fucking house-elf anywhere and I want a fucking cup of tea."

Snape looked at Malfoy as if he'd gone mad. "Erm," he said. "Yes." He felt oddly diffused by the boy's outburst.

"Well, if that's settled, I think I'll leave you to it," Malfoy said and did just that, leaving Snape alone, purposeless and utterly furious.

Miss Granger, he scratched onto a bit of parchment, pressing so hard that the tip of his quill bent at an odd angle *It may have escaped your notice that you are not the only person using this lavatory. I should not have to clear the sink of your hair before attempting to use it. One would expect a war hero such as yourself to be more considerate in her habits. See to it immediately.* S. Snape. He underlined the word immediately twice, threw the parchment into the sink, and returned to his room to wait for her response.

He was not sleeping when she returned. How could he have done? Behind his eyes he saw her dressed in her scarlet robes, and when he blocked that image, all that was left was confusion and fury and dread over the loss that lay inevitably around the corner.

He heard her knock twice as she entered the room, and still he lay there, frozen in his bed, cold radiating out from his stomach. He heard the door to the loo open, and he heard, or imagined that he did, the rustle of the parchment in the sink. There was silence for a moment, and it seemed the whole house held its breath, as he heard no sound at all except the sickly beating of his heart. There was a metallic clang, the sound of her footsteps retreating and the door as it shut behind her. He lay still for a moment, unable to move, and then he got hold of himself, gained his feet and went to see what the sound had been.

Lying in the basin was an Order of Merlin, first class.

He threw open her door.

"And what is this supposed to mean?" he said.

"Whatever you want it to mean, I suppose," she said, her back turned to him. She was gathering clothes from her bed and piling them into a hamper, seemingly deliberately busy.

"I don't want it," he said.

"Yes, you've made that perfectly clear. However, as it isn't mine, I thought it would be best that I rid myself of it."

Snape paused. Her tone was light, but it bore none of her usual unconcern. In fact, she sounded furious, a fact which both unnerved and angered him. What right did she have to be angry? She was the one who'd gone off without him, without even so much as a proper goodbye, to a place he found objectionable and then returned with some kind of--and she'd never before--what exactly was he supposed to *do* with this situation?

"You enjoyed yourself, I presume?" he said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"Oh, yes, very much," Granger said, finally turning to look at him. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes shown dangerously in the light. "I can't imagine a more enjoyable evening. I spent it in the company of near strangers, rehashing what was undeniably the *best* year of my life, and then I had to make a speech, graciously accepting the second class award that, as you so thoughtfully pointed out, I should have known I would get. All this without the company of my... of the man... of someone who I might have thought would support me. Smashing. Really. Can't think of a better way to bring in the new year."

Snape sputtered momentarily. How in Merlin's name was this supposed to be his fault?

"I did not force you to attend," he said. "In fact, I seem to recall advising against it--advice I thought you had taken, incidentally, until your marathon fashion rituals commenced in the lav. Which might beg the question of whom, exactly, you were trying to impress."

"*Who I was trying to impress?*" She shouted, and Snape thought with no small measure of alarm that he had never seen her look quite this fierce before, perhaps not even in battle. "Well, I don't know; let me think. Could it possibly be that I've spent the last several months trying to impress the Board of Governors? Or perhaps the Wizengamot? Could it be, Severus, that I am a nineteen year old, Muggleborn witch, trying desperately to do the job of someone twice my age? Could you imagine for a moment that while I might agree with you about the relative merit of a Ministry award, I can use every ounce of validation and recognition that I can get right now?"

She turned away from him and continued her pointless task. She was no longer yelling, but her voice had not lost the ferocious quality of a moment before. "If an Order of Merlin makes those bastards take me seriously for even one second longer than they otherwise would have, then how can I turn one down?" Her voice broke, and Snape felt a horrible, traitorous urge inside himself to go to her. "This is my *job*, Severus. This is my life. I'm not in a position to act like John Lennon returning his MBE. And I--" She looked over her shoulder at him with an expression so pained and naked that it cut him clean through. "--I understood your reasons, so I didn't press the issue, but it would have been a fuck of a lot easier to take if you'd gone with me."

Snape stood there, his natural inclinations at war with one another. On the one hand, he wanted to yell at her that if she'd said any of this before, he might have known what to do and not made such an utter cock up of everything, that he was not a bloody mind reader and did not intent to be held accountable for things as if he were. It was that same hand that could not figure out how to say any of that with a shred of dignity and so was in favor of simply turning and marching coldly from the room. But on the other hand, her eyes and words seemed to be drawing something from him against his will, and he knew that no matter how terribly it pained him to do this, it was simply going to have to be done.

"I--" he looked at her, waited until he was certain that she was listening, gathered himself and tried again. "I apologize."

"You what?"

"I apologize," he said stiffly.

"Oh," she said and made a sound almost like a laugh, her posture breaking.

"I see now why you felt you needed to attend. And although I cannot promise that I would have accompanied you, I certainly would not--"

"--have been such an arse about it?" she sighed.

He pursed his lips. "Yes."

"I knew you were angry. I could practically hear you seething over there. I could hardly think of anything else all night, knowing I was going to have to endure that ridiculous parade of manners and then come home to this." She walked to the bed and sank down on it, ran her hands over her face. "I thought--oh, Christ, I thought we were going to *split up* over this, and I--"

He thought she was going to cry again, and it suddenly seemed imperative that he do anything to stop such a thing from happening. He walked to the bed.

"May I?" he said.

"Yes, you idiot," she said, and he sat down beside her. She leaned against his arm, and they sat quietly for a few moments.

"If it is at all helpful, I spent an equally miserable evening," he said. It unnerved him, having to say such things aloud. He felt naked, exposed to the elements, to the storm that had so recently passed through this room, leaving the air feeling supercharged and heavy, as if with ozone.

She almost-laughed again. "And my robes itch," she said petulantly, coaxing a small smile from him.

He considered replying that at least that portion of the evening's disappointments could be remedied, but he did not think that he should press his luck.

She nudged him slightly. "This is when you take them off me," she said, sotto voce.

"Perhaps in my room?" Snape said. "I find I am feeling increasingly guilty about the house-elf."

She did laugh, finally, and the sound eased him considerably, as did the sight of her as she walked to the loo, swinging her hips perhaps a bit more than she normally would.

There was something almost unbearably exciting about having her in his bed, about seeing her hair unbound and spread over his pillows, and he hoped that the smell of it would seep into his sheets. Her knickers were plain, in contrast to the elaborate robes he'd just helped her out of, and he was glad. It seemed that beneath all she had put on to show the world, the woman he knew still waited.

"Off with yours," she whispered, and Snape knelt on the bed and pulled his robes awkwardly over his head. They had never done this before, bared themselves in quite this way, and he felt defenseless as her eyes ran eagerly over his thin frame. He knew that he was bony, all harsh angles and depressions, and he leaned down so that his hair fell against his face and he would not have to watch her staring at him. But she ran her hands over his shoulders and down his chest, feathering her fingers over the hair that trailed up to his navel, dragging her nails lightly over his skin.

He settled beside her, and she squirmed against him, her thigh slipping between his and her face pressed into his neck, where she drew circles on his skin with her tongue. The feeling of her mouth on his neck always sent a terrible and pleasurable tingling down his spine and made him long to press against her from crown to toes and just rub himself against her body.

He slid his hand over the soft flesh of her stomach, pressing her gently back against the bed, and he felt her muscles quiver against his palm. He dipped his fingers beneath the waistband of her knickers and watched her in the semi-dark for a moment to see if she would protest. She did not, instead tipping her hips toward him until he found himself reaching deeper in, feeling the crinkle of her hair against his fingertips. His cock ground against her thigh.

"It's all right to touch me," she whispered, and ran a hand over his Y fronts as if to underscore her point.

His index finger slipped along her seam, and she nudged her hips upward again until he felt, he felt... something fundamental in his mind seemed to shut down. ~~He~~*felt* her, and there was no point of reference in his brain for him to compare it to. She was slick and warm, the texture of her skin there unlike any other place on her body. It was *secret*--that was the only word he could think of to describe it. Secret.

She reached inside his pants to circle his cock with her hand, and the way their arms crossed was awkward, he with his hand in her knickers and she attempting to inch up the bed so as to get a better grip on him. She took a sudden breath as his finger slipped upward, and she froze and then, almost imperceptibly, moved against his hand. *Fucking God*. Desire surged through him more strongly than he had ever known. She was... he was touching her, and she liked it. His hips bucked, and she made a little noise of approval and tightened her grip--*Merlin, woman, are you trying to get me to come in your hands?*--and then she said, "Wait--here--this will be easier," and tugged on his shorts.

He waited, unsure, for a moment, and saw that she was raising her hips, pushing her own knickers down her legs, lifting her knees to remove them. He complied more out of dumbfoundedness than anything else. Granger was *taking off her knickers*. He wondered vaguely if it was possible to die of good luck.

This task complete, she rolled toward him and put his hand back where it had been. This nearly undid him, the sight of her small hand guiding his back into place between her legs, the feeling of her fingers as they pressed down against his, showing him, helping him to feel her, to please her. She reached for him, and he whispered, "Don't--I need a moment. I just want to touch you."

She kissed him, her tongue darting into his mouth, as she had so many times, except that this time, she kissed him as he pressed a finger inside her, felt tight warmth of her around him. She lifted her leg over his hip to give him more room, and the heel of his hand came up against her. She moaned, and he very nearly moaned right along with her. He was holding Granger's cunt, burying his fingers in her, feeling her squirm against him, and every second of it was the most erotic second he had ever felt, each one building on the one before until there was nothing at all in his head but want. They might have been that way for hours; he no longer had any way of knowing. He was drowning in her.

She reached beneath his arm and pulled his hips toward her, dislodging his hand, but bringing his cock against her cunt. The pressure behind his eyes--the blood pounding in his head--was so strong, he thought he might pass out. He *felt her* with his cock--oh, God--they were *touching*. He leaned back slightly, took his cock in his hand and dragged it between her lips, felt his head against the smooth heat of her. She watched him, her mouth slightly opened, her breathing shallow and quick, and then she tugged on his shoulders, trying to bring him over her.

"It's good... yes, come on," she breathed.

Yes. Yes, she said. He was on his knees between hers when fear began to edge up on the lust. He had no idea what he was doing--she'd showed him the other, she'd showed him with her hands, but this... He wanted to, God, yes, he wanted to; he'd thought of nothing for the last hour but how badly he needed to get in her, but this luck of his was going to run out. He was going to fumble this somehow, and it wasn't going to be what she wanted. She probably thought that he was going to impress her, that he was going to teach her, that he knew something that he didn't know. And oh--he had never thought of it before but the idea was so strong it nearly knocked the wind out of him--what if she had fantasized, what if she had imagined that he--what if this was all some student-teacher thing?

He backed up on his knees, sat back and put his hands on his thighs, covering himself. "I--"

"Severus?"

He looked at her, and even in the shadows, he could see the confusion in her face, the way her brows furrowed over lust-shot eyes.

"I don't know what you expect," he said. "I am not--"

"I'm not expecting anything," she said. "I mean, I'm not expecting you to--"

"I have never done this before," he said, and as the words left him, he felt himself go cold.

She twitched her hand slightly where it lay against the mattress as if she were waving away a trivial bit of information. "Good," she said, and she sounded almost relieved. "Because I thought you wouldn't want to if you knew I hadn't."

He sat there for a moment, breathing. His thoughts raced around his brain. She hadn't? Should he even be the one to-- but it was good, wasn't it? Because she wouldn't be judging him. But if it went badly--

"I can practically hear the wheels turning," she said. "What are you thinking? Do you not want to?"

"No," he said quietly. "No, I want to."

"I want to, too," she said. "Come here."

He eased himself over her and braced himself on his elbows. "Contraception?" he said, and the word felt exotic and strangely dirty in his mouth.

"Taken care of," she said.

They kissed, slowly at first, and then the kiss deepened until he felt the return of that pulsing in his head, the surging of his blood, the need to feel her all over him. He felt her hand on him, felt her guide him into place, felt the hot flesh of her cunt against him, and he pushed.

His thoughts shook loose and scattered; his skin had been peeled away until he was nothing but the raw pleasure of being inside her, of feeling her tighten and grip him, the sweetest, most intense feeling he had ever known. It took all his concentration to come back to himself, to look to her face and measure what was happening there.

"All right?" he said hoarsely.

She nodded. "Yes," she whispered. "Good." He scrutinized her as well as he was able, but she seemed to tell the truth. Her body still reached for him, her hands still held onto his hips, pulling him in.

He moved slowly, so as not to hurt her, and because moving quickly was almost too much; he was so close to the edge already. He pushed himself up on his hands and looked between them, watched his cock as it disappeared inside her, and lost it entirely.

He felt as if something was being drawn out of him from the base of his spine, something that had his balls in its delicious grip, and he came into her, just coming and coming and coming.

"Fuck," he said. "Fuck, I couldn't help it."

She smiled broadly--pleased, it seemed, though he could not imagine why, though it thrilled him that she was. Then she buried her hands in his hair and kissed him so thoroughly that he could almost have repeated the whole performance.

That night, he lay wakeful for a while after she fell asleep, feeling the press of his naked skin against her back. This was allowed, it seemed. His cock could just touch her while she was sleeping. He felt himself going hard at the thought and fought to change the subject in his mind.

I am no longer a virgin, he thought with some wonder. He'd thought that would always be a fact of his life, like his nose, or breathing air, or wearing clothes to bed.

Granger made a muffled noise in her sleep, and he thought of her, of the realness of her: the flash of her eyes when she was angry, the way she bit her lips when she was thinking hard, her endless showers, her traveling music, the wet sound of her mouth when he licked it with his. She was real.

"Happy New Year," he whispered, before falling headlong into sleep.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

It changed everything and nothing at all. They did not moon about the house making calf eyes at one another, nor spend all day in bed. Granger worked the same hours that she had before, and they took the same number of meals together that they always had. Snape did not begin referring to Granger as his girlfriend, nor did they surreptitiously touch beneath the table. Neither one took to spending the night in the other's room, though they often met before bed, as they had done before that night.

But something fundamental *had* changed, and although Snape had no words for it, he knew it when he bought an alarm clock for his bedroom, so that on the rare nights that she did fall asleep before returning to her own room, she would still wake on time for her morning meetings. It seemed their late nights had destroyed her ability to wake two minutes before five each day. He knew it when an owl arrived to tell him that she'd been held up at Gringotts and would not be home until after ten. He knew it when he asked Malfoy to design a house logo for the Augurey that would complement the ones he had done for Granger's proposal to the Board of Governors.

He knew, in short, that whatever existed between them was not a figment of his fevered imagination, nor something one-sided and brief that she would cast off as easily as a new robe that did not quite fit properly. It was a strange feeling, entirely welcome but entirely unfamiliar, to be able to assume that his touch was welcome, that his space in her life was secure, at least until further revision.

It had been one of those evenings when Granger had drifted into sleep with her head pillowed on his chest, and he'd had no inclination to wake her and return her to her own bed, and so he'd set the alarm and settled into the task of trying to sleep beside her. They always lay together restlessly, tossing and turning, like small animals unused to burrowing together. Snape was often awakened in the night by Granger's kick to his shin, or to her elbowed demands to give back the blanket. And yet, he welcomed these bleary, half-conscious moments, for the reminder in the dead of night that she was there.

When the alarm sounded, Granger always shot from bed as if she were on fire, an act Snape continued to find amusing. She would frantically search for her wand on the nightstand, muttering, "Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop." This morning, he took pity on her and used his own wand to silence the thing. He picked up her wand from where it had lain beside his and handed it to her.

She smiled sheepishly. "It's loud," she said.

"That is what makes it an alarm."

She stuck her tongue out at him and laughed, and as she turned to go, Snape sat up and watched her. *That woman just came from my bed*, he thought, and the words had such physical force that he felt winded.

Snape spent the morning brewing. It was oddly difficult to return to; he didn't suppose there had ever been a time since he was eleven years old that he had gone so long without brewing *something*. But now the knife felt awkward in his hands, thought that was likely because it was not his own preferred instrument, but part of Potter's school Potions kit.

The facilities were not, perhaps, the best he'd ever worked with. He'd had to approach Potter several days into the new year, and while the boy had provided all he could, Snape could not help but feel that that was not saying much.

When he'd asked if Grimmauld Place had a basement that could be used as a potions laboratory, Potter had asked why Snape could not just brew in his room.

"What is the catalyst for change in a potion?" Snape had asked him, a disbelieving look on his face.

"Sir?"

Snape had raised an eyebrow. "What makes all the ingredients turn into a potion, Potter?"

"Oh, er, heat, I guess. Or stirring?"

"Heat, Potter. Heat is what causes the reaction between ingredients. Too much or too little heat will destroy a potion, rendering it impotent or far more potent than the brewer's intention. Heat at the wrong stages will create different combinations entirely, giving results that are not only not intentional, but possibly lethal. Heat must be controlled absolutely."

"And it's too hot in your room?" Potter had said.

"Six years of magical education," Snape had muttered. "What gives off heat, Potter?"

"Fire, sir."

"*Besides* fire."

"Uh, the sun, I guess."

"Exactly. Heat is given off by the sun. Which is why Potions are brewed in windowless rooms, preferably underground."

Potter had looked genuinely surprised. "I thought you just liked it down there," he had said under his breath.

Snape had glared at him. "I do. I like it because it is a good place to work. Now, about the basement?"

"Yeah, I think you can work in the basement. I'll ask Kreacher to--"

"That will not be necessary. I can do it myself," Snape had said. "Are there any brewing supplies in the house? A cauldron, even?"

"My school kit is in my room. I'll send it down to the basement for you."

"Marvelous," Snape had replied.

And so he found himself brewing a rather complicated Poltergeist Repelling Potion with sub par tools in a dank and dusty basement. He was skinning Shrivelfigs when Potter's knock came on the doorframe.

The knock startled him, particularly because it seemed so unnecessary. Was this not Potter's house, Potter's basement, as he'd been so quick to point out at Christmas dinner? But when he motioned impatiently for the boy to come in, Snape saw that he looked pale and excited.

"What is it?" Snape demanded.

"This," Potter said and thrust a sealed envelope at him.

Snape took it and glanced over it quickly. It bore the Hogwarts seal and was addressed to the Hermione Granger Foundation.

"Been going through her mail?" he asked.

"No," Potter said, glaring at him. "It just arrived. The owl delivered it to my office. I suppose that technically, the office is the headquarters of the Foundation."

Snape stifled a smirk. It seemed he'd been wrong all those months ago. Potter was *Granger's* secretary.

He turned the letter over in his hands. "It is brief," he said, "whatever they have decided."

"Yeah, I know," Potter said. "Do you think that's good or bad?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," Snape said, though inside, he was asking himself the same question.

"Do you think we should owl her?"

Snape thought this over. If he were the one waiting for news, he would wish to be contacted. And yet, if he knew Granger, she would feel duty-bound to complete her engagements for the day and knowing that the letter was here would only prove a distraction.

"I think not," he said. "She is meeting with the Goblin Liaison Office today. She will be unable to return home immediately and--"

"And that would drive her mad," Potter finished.

"Indeed," Snape said.

Potter held out his hand, and Snape realized that he meant to take the letter back. He made no move to hand it over.

"Oh," Potter said. "I mean--yeah. You can give it to her."

"She is, after all, in the next room," Snape said, and Potter blushed to the roots of his hair. He turned to leave.

"Potter," Snape said, and the boy turned back toward him.

"Yeah?"

"Do not run off and Floo Weasley."

"He's her friend," Potter said, bristling. "Just because he isn't here doesn't mean he hasn't been supporting her. He's been waiting as long as the rest of us to know."

"I am well aware of their friendship," Snape said. "And I'm certain that if the news is good, she will Floo him immediately. I only meant that in the case that the news is... less than favorable, it would not do to have a house full of guests, all waiting eagerly for her to open that envelope."

Potter gave him a long, searching look. "You're right," he said and then, after a pause, "I think. House only?"

Snape gave him a stiff nod. "House only. But if you would, ask that they wait for her to share the news."

Potter headed for the door again. "Thank you," he said.

Snape did not acknowledge this, but returned to his skinning. He knew that he was slightly unfair to Potter insofar as the assessment of the boy's intelligence was concerned. For whatever reason, Potter seemed to be reduced to a gibbering moron in his presence, despite the fact that, if others were to be believed, he was fairly competent outside of it. And Snape admitted that where Granger was concerned, Potter was at least not so bloody stubborn minded. He was pleased that the boy had agreed to wait before alerting the entire wizarding world to the presence of this letter. He was also pleased that he had not had to hex Potter into silence to secure that agreement.

The fact of the letter remained, however, and Snape quietly worried over it until he noticed that he had skinned more than three times the number of Shrivelfigs necessary for the potion.

In the hours before Granger returned home, Snape found himself dreaming up and casting away every more ludicrous scenarios in his mind. In one, he used an Unsticking Charm to open the envelope and accidentally triggered a charm that secured Granger's acceptance of a much changed proposal. In his imaginings, when he tried to explain that it had been he who had opened the envelope, he was imprisoned for tampering with owl post. He did not want to think about what such a daydream said about him.

By the time Granger arrived home, he was anxious and deeply out of sorts. When he heard her enter her room, he knocked rapidly on the wall in a heretofore unknown pattern, which he imagined clearly said, "Emergency. Coming over immediately."

When he walked through the inner door, he found Granger standing immobile in the center of her room, her handbag still clutched in one fist.

"It's here, then, isn't it?" she said.

"It came this afternoon," Snape replied. "I would have owled, but--"

"You knew I couldn't leave the meeting; yes, I see," she said. "Where is it?"

Snape drew the envelope from the pocket of his robe and held it out to her. "Here."

She took it and tore it immediately open. He watched her eyes as they traveled over the parchment, barely daring to breathe.

Without a word, or the slightest change of expression, she handed it to him, and he began to read.

Dear Ms. Granger,

Thank you for your proposal to the Hogwarts Board of Governors concerning the restructuring of the house system. It was clear to the board how much research and effort went into your ideas; however, we regret to inform you that we must reject your proposal for the upcoming school year.

As you are well aware, the wizarding community suffered an enormous upheaval during the last year. We, the Board of Governors, feel that stability and tradition are more important than ever as we reopen Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We further feel that by keeping the current house system in place, we will be best able to reestablish trust between parents and the Hogwarts staff, as the heads of houses with whom the parents communicate will be both experienced and known to them.

Thank you for your interest in Hogwarts School.

Most Sincerely,

Tristan Fallowring

for the Hogwarts Board of Governors

Snape resisted the urge to throw the letter to the ground. It was Granger's to do with as she wished, and he sensed somehow that if someone were to have a fit of temper, it should not be him.

"Granger," he said haltingly.

"I'm all right," she said.

"Why do you always say that?" Snape asked. "I don't recall ever insisting that you fail to react to disappointment or pain."

"I don't know," Granger said. "But honestly, I don't care to discuss it at the moment. I just-*fuck*. It's not that I didn't know this could happen--that this probably *would* happen. You've always taken great care to keep me grounded about what my chances were--"

"I certainly did not intend to thwart your endeavor."

"No, no, that's not what I meant. I simply meant that you've been helpful to me in understanding why it was such a longshot. But I really felt--that is, I hoped--I mean... I mean, *fuck*, Severus! I thought I had something workable."

"You did," he said.

"Yes, well, not according to the goddamned Board of Governors."

Snape's first instinct was to point out that the board had not dismissed her ideas as trivial or unworkable; they'd only said that *for this* school year, they were hanging their collective hat on tradition and stability. It was not the most discouraging rejection he'd ever read; and yet, somehow he sensed that this was not the time to look at the bright side. Nor did Granger seem to have any inclination to burst into tears or require comfort. So Snape decided to take a small leap of faith and do what he himself would prefer if he were in this situation.

"I suppose that is true; however, I prefer not to rely on the opinions of a bunch of bloody unqualified morons."

Granger's face had been tilted toward the floor, but she raised it slightly. "I know!" she said. "As if a one of them has ever taught a class or even spent a day at Hogwarts! I have no idea what gives them the right to make decisions about what's best for the students."

"Galleons, mostly," Snape said. "They buy their way on, most of them because it makes them look benevolent. A position on the board hides a multitude of extracurricular sins."

"Lucius *Malfoy* was on the Board of Governors, for fuck's sake," she cried.

"Indeed," Snape said. "And most of them are as eager as he was to keep up appearances. Which is why their little missive today has nothing to do with you or your work; it is only the chattering of men who care more for protecting their gold and their reputations than protecting children."

She sat down in her desk chair. "Thank you, Severus," she said quietly.

"For pointing out the obvious?" he said. "It hardly requires thanks."

She gave a slight smile. "Don't tell Draco what I said about his father. It wasn't kind... considering."

"I had no intention of doing so."

She looked up at him, eyes wide. "Everyone is waiting, aren't they?"

"The letter was delivered to Potter," Snape said. "I'll let you draw the necessary conclusions."

"I don't want to go down there," she said with a shuddering breath that tried to be a laugh. "I just--not tonight. Tomorrow, fine. But not tonight."

"I will let them know," Snape said.

"You will?" she asked. "Severus, you don't have to. I didn't mean for you--I can do it. I was just feeling sorry for myself."

"You have every right to one evening free of having to put a pleasant face on things. If you want to scream and throw things, I would not blame you." He crossed the room to the door. "I'll even cast the necessary charms."

She did laugh then; it was weak, but present, and Snape allowed himself the brief thought that perhaps he was getting better at this.

His assorted housemates were gathered in the dining room, minus Kreacher, who, Snape assumed, had gone to see to his 'Miss.' All eyes rose to his face as he entered the room, and it occurred to Snape randomly that this was as close as they were likely ever going to get to voluntarily making their relationship public.

Malfoy exhaled heavily. "Sod it," he said. "It's a no, then."

Pomona clasped her hands together with a troubled expression. "Oh, Severus, is she all right?"

"Granger is fine," Snape said. "As Mr Malfoy so cunningly deduced, the Board of Governors rejected her proposal."

Potter rose from his seat.

"I volunteered to tell you the news," Snape said, pausing awkwardly, "and to ask that you grant her some privacy for the evening. She knows you are interested and concerned, and I am certain that she will be happy to speak to everyone tomorrow."

Potter opened his mouth and then seemingly thought better of it and shut it again. He continued on in this charming impression of a fish for several moments before saying, "Look, when Hermione is upset, she likes company. And chocolate biscuits."

"Is that your answer to everything, Potter? Chocolate?" Snape snapped.

"I take it you won't be wanting me to finish the house logo, then," Malfoy said.

"Do not use the misfortunes of others to try to weasel out of a contract, Malfoy. I paid for that drawing, and I expect to have it," Snape said bluntly, and Malfoy gave him a slight smile.

"Is there anything we can do for her?" Longbottom asked.

"I imagine that Kreacher is seeing to her needs," Snape said. "However, there is something that I need."

"Sir?"

"Several months ago, I asked you to grow something for me, Longbottom. I will need it tonight."

"Bugger it all," Longbottom said. "I mean--excuse me, sir--I mean that the flower had its first burning day not two days ago. It looks pretty shoddy."

Snape sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Typical," he said. "Well, I'd best have it anyway."

He followed Longbottom from the room and waited in the hall for him to produce the plant. He did not want to risk entering the greenhouse and discovering something that needed to be attended to, as he wished to return to the fourth floor as soon as possible.

It was impossible not to hear, as he stood there, the mutinous mumblings of one Harry Potter.

"So we can't see her, but he can?"

"Leave it, Potter. You'll see her tomorrow," Malfoy said.

"Yes, but what right does he have? I've been her best friend for seven years."

"Which is not the point, and you know it."

"I'm just saying that he doesn't know--"

"Yes, I know what you're saying, Potter. It doesn't take a genius. And what I'm saying is that your friends are not always what you need when you're distressed." There was a rather pregnant pause. "No?"

"Fuck off, Malfoy."

Draco laughed, and Snape missed what was said next, as Longbottom shuffled through the door bearing what appeared to be no more than a pot of ashes with a single twig sticking out.

"Worse even than I imagined," Snape said. He considered abandoning it and returning upstairs empty handed.

"It might be all right," Longbottom said. "I mean, maybe it's for the best."

"I'm afraid I don't see how giving Granger a burned stick will be beneficial."

"Because--well, I imagine this is a bit like how she's feeling right now."

"Which I'm sure will be of great comfort to her," Snape said acidly, but he took the pot. "Thank you for your efforts."

Longbottom looked vaguely taken aback. "You're welcome, sir."

He approached the twin doors to his and Granger's rooms from the stairwell. He paused. It seemed more efficacious to enter her room here rather than through the loo, though he had never used the front door before. After a moment's hesitation, he knocked.

"Who is it?" Granger's voice said from the other side of the door.

He sighed. *Why is everything so bloody complicated?* he thought, but he uttered the words that rose to his lips. "It's me."

The door opened, and she stood there, looking at him, a small smile on her mouth.

"Whatever are you grinning at?" Snape said.

"You."

"I was not aware that I had done anything amusing."

"You haven't. 'It's me,' just wasn't a phrase I ever expected to hear you say."

This irritated Snape because he knew exactly what she meant. It had felt strange in his mouth. But why couldn't he get away with saying 'it's me?' Everyone else said it. And 'It is Severus,' had felt too formal--and this was exactly why he should have gone in through the loo.

"Yes, well, here," he said, thrusting the pot at her. "I asked Longbottom to grow it for you."

She looked dubiously at the flower, took the pot and set it on her desk. "I suppose it's the thought that counts."

"It is a Phoenix Flower," Snape said. "It just had its first burning day."

"Oh," she said and turned once more to the plant, fingering its singed bark. "In that case, thank you, Severus. It's lovely."

"I trust the message is not lost on you," he said, and she gave him the same wry smile of a moment ago.

"No," she said. "Message received." Her hand brushed briefly over his.

Snape was at a loss. His gift had not gone over as well as he'd hoped, and Granger's behavior was giving him no idea what to do next. He sat down in her desk chair. She flopped down on the bed.

"I don't know what to do with myself," she said. "I know I said I didn't want to see anyone. And I don't. The idea of having to gracefully accept everyone's sympathy tonight makes me feel exhausted. And I don't want to work. I know I should--get back on the horse and all that--but I tried transcribing my interview with Miknak today while you were downstairs, and I can't keep my mind on it. I wish I had some chocolate."

Goddamned Potter, Snape thought.

"I think I want to read," she said. "Do you mind?"

He rose awkwardly. "Certainly not." When she said nothing else, he added, "I'll leave you to it, then," and exited her room through the loo, feeling vaguely out of sorts.

In his own room, Snape drifted to the desk. He did not know what to do with himself any more than Granger did, it seemed. Heretofore, he had been glad for any moment he'd got to spend alone, away from the demands of communal living. It seemed there had been any number of things to do, although now the only ones he could remember were reading and arguing with Granger in his head.

Reading it was, then.

Snape ventured briefly to the library where he chose a slim text on recent research concerning the effects of potions on ailing Merpeople, which he brought back to his room. He flicked on the bedside lamp with his wand, stripped off his robes, and climbed into bed. It was pleasant, he told himself. It had been several weeks since he'd read himself to sleep. He stretched his legs. And there was adequate room--and blankets.

He opened the book and read the foreword, which had been written by an officious little prick by the name of Quentin Snick. Snick seemed to be of the opinion that generalizations could be made on the reactions of various species to common potions based on an arithmantic equation that calculated the difference between their DNA and that of wizards. This seemed very unlikely to Snape (Did the man believe, for instance, that a potion intended to cure boils in a wizard would achieve the same results on a vampire, as they shared nearly identical DNA?) but he would have liked to ask Granger before he dismissed it outright. Her skill at arithmancy--as loath as he was to admit it--exceeded his own, and might be able to provide an explanation for the results Snick was achieving.

He turned over onto his side, and the book fell slowly closed. There was really no point in continuing until he had resolved the matter of the equations. He wondered if Granger were awake and turned out the light. It would not do to seem pathetically unoccupied, if she were, he thought. It was not as if his entire world revolved around her. Still, he would have liked to have known how she was getting on.

Snape closed his eyes. It was ridiculous to take up the business of being lonely now. Thirty-eight years seemed well enough time to have established some habits, and feeling as if the day were somehow unfinished if he failed to say goodnight to someone was not one of them.

The door to the loo opened, taking him by surprise.

"Severus? Are you awake?"

"I believe we have already discussed the stupidity of that question," he said dryly.

"Good," she said, climbing into bed beside him. He took her hand beneath the blanket.

After a few minutes, she said, "Severus?"

"Mmmm."

"Do you think they were right?"

He paused for a moment. Whatever he said now would have to be utterly truthful. She would know if it were not, and it was no place for false encouragements, here in the dark.

"No," he said. "I do not. I think that, as Pomona said about her greenhouses, now is the time to make the changes that must be made before everything becomes established again. However, I do not doubt that they think they were right."

"Obviously."

"No, not obviously. It would have been relatively simple for them to dismiss your proposal out of hand and then devise some verbiage to make it appear as if they had reasons for doing so."

"So you think they actually considered it?"

"I do."

"I don't know whether that makes me feel better or worse," she said.

He squeezed her hand. "They are notoriously hard to move. I do not think a single official change was made to the building or curriculum during the whole of my schooling. And the changes you remember were largely brought about by Umbridge, which is to say the Ministry, and were outside the control of the Board of Governors. I think you should be impressed with yourself that they considered it at all."

"Well, seeing that I failed, I don't feel quite up to being impressed with myself," she said.

Snape chose his words carefully. "Like many intelligent people, you think that you can make people agree with you by explaining your ideas. And you have been accustomed to getting your own way," he said. When Granger sputtered in protest, he interrupted her. "Come now, Potter and Weasley were hardly admirable opponents. Even when they disagreed with you, they went along, did they not? Not that I am implying that this was a poor state of affairs. I do not like to think of what would have become of Potter if you had not guided him. Even Dumbledore himself gave you a great deal of latitude in order that you might steer Potter correctly. And so, I think, you have become used to deducing the best course of action and then carrying it out with little opposition."

She said nothing.

"This will not happen overnight, Granger. The changes that you want to see in the world cannot be hung upon a name and an Order of Merlin, or even a good idea."

"So where does that leave me?" she said, almost angrily. "I feel like this is what I was supposed to do. Everything I've endured, everything I've lost, makes sense if I can use what I've seen to make things better."

He thought of her traveling music. He supposed that he had understood the imperative that she had created for herself the moment that Malfoy had told him she had lost her family. "I admire your willingness to... force your losses into service, as it were. But I think you are wrong if you believe that it is the last year that makes you want to bring about change."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's in your blood, Granger. You were haranguing Potter and Weasley about house-elves--however ridiculously--before Voldemort ever returned to his body. You befriended the world's most hapless hero at the age of eleven and stuck with it, despite the danger that it put you in personally. You stayed with the wizarding world long after it was safe to do so, and fought for it when it would have been much easier to go home and pretend you'd never heard of magic. You do these things because of who you are, not because of what you've lost."

He thought he heard the sound of her tears and wondered if he'd gone too far.

"I am not trying to strip away your comfort, Hermione, nor the way you find meaning in the loss of your parents. It only seems to me that if you take every setback as a blow against their memories, then you do a disservice to both yourself and them."

She clutched him tightly, silently in the dark. Long after he had thought she had fallen asleep, she said, "Can I stay here tonight?"

Snape snorted. "I hardly think that's worth asking."

"Well... most of the time when we stay it's by accident. Although I admit that sometimes I know I'm falling asleep."

"Much as it pains me to admit it, I know sometimes myself."

She pressed more firmly up against his side. "Severus, what should I do now?"

"That is the third in a series of asinine questions," Snape said. "You know the answer."

"Say it anyway."

He sighed. "Fine," he said and turned onto his side as if to prepare to sleep. "Just keep trying, Granger."

Her knees tucked up behind his, and he thought there was a chance, however small, that they both might rest that night.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 11

A coming-of-age story for a nearly forty year old man.

Snape woke to the muffled whisper of paper sliding under the door. It was quite early, and whoever had done the sliding did not knock or call out to him, and so Snape remained in bed until the sound of footsteps had retreated down the stairs. Then he swung his feet onto the cool wooden floor, padded to the door, and studied the paper. It was Malfoy's completed drawing.

It was done on thick parchment, and the boy had drawn a complicated and heavily inked border on it, framing the Augurey in the center. It was a fair representation--Snape had seen Augureys that did not look quite so bedraggled, but he supposed that he had not asked Malfoy for an ideal Augurey, nor did he suppose that such a specimen would have been appropriate.

The tear at the corner of the bird's eye seemed almost to glisten, and Snape wondered if Malfoy had not impregnated that part of the canvas with some sort of spell. The tear swelled to great proportion but never fell. Beneath the drawing, Malfoy had inked the words *The Augurey*.

It was good, Snape thought. Not quite so regal as those Malfoy had drawn for Granger's Hogwarts proposal, but true, somehow, to the spirit of the project, and Snape conceded grudgingly (in his own mind, if nowhere else) that Malfoy had some talent.

Part of him wanted to take the drawing downstairs and hang it in the dining room, for although he had bought the thing for Granger, now that he had it in his hands, it seemed to be something that the others would enjoy. However, the rest of them had not recently suffered such a crushing setback, and Snape hoped that this gift might be better received than the Phoenix Flower had been.

Still, she was resilient; he had to give her that, and she needed no gifts to console her. In the weeks that followed the Board of Governors' rejection, Granger had managed to organize a census of all house-elves currently living in Britain and a fact-finding committee on domestic violence inflicted on said elves, as well as looking into the purchase of another house outside London that might be used as a safe-house of sorts for those that ran from their families. She was drafting a proposal to the Wizengamot that would create laws to protect the elves from family violence, and at night, she often talked to him about the possibility of creating a cottage industry of elf-made goods--some way to employ those who no longer had families without resorting to dropping them off at Hogwarts. Snape found he enjoyed these discussions, particularly when Kreacher was present, as he always twisted his hands together with a sour expression on his face and made a low, muttering sound in his throat.

Just once, Snape had asked Kreacher if he had something to add to the conversation, as he was obviously listening to it.

"Kreacher is unhappy for elves that is not having a history," he had said. "To make things with elf skill is good, but those elves is not having a home. They is not knowing where they come from."

"Can't you know where you come from and still go someplace else?" Granger had asked him, but Kreacher had made no reply.

All in all, after her initial disappointment, Granger dashed off to her meetings with her customary enthusiasm, robes flapping behind her, rolls of parchment hugged to her chest. There were nights that Snape saw her Hogwarts files opened on her desk, and he knew that she often thought of her plans, but he did not know how to ask her what they meant to her now, or what she intended to do with them.

For his own part, Snape was enjoying brewing again. He was surprised at how much pleasure he took in the swirling changes in a cauldron, the sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet, scent of a potion taking shape. He'd brewed three variations on the Poltergeist Repelling Potion, just for the challenge of it, and when he was finished, he'd felt oddly disappointed. Subsequently, he brewed a nutritive potion for Longbottom's succulents, several attempts at Granger's perfume (he certainly did not tell her he was doing so, but considered it, privately, an exercise in breaking down the scent), and two cauldrons of Pepperup for general household consumption.

He decided on the spur of the moment, after tucking the drawing into his desk drawer, that he would like his own potting supplies. Potter's potions kit was less than satisfactory for complex brewing. Besides, he hadn't had a cauldron of his own since his school days, and although the quality and number of those at Hogwarts were undeniable, it still seemed to him that it would be satisfying to have decent tools to work with until such time as he returned there. He set out for Slug and Jiggers feeling almost excited at the prospect of sorting through the various materials and choosing the ones that would suit him.

Snape stood knee deep in stacks of cauldrons. He had narrowed it down to two. One was a pewter size nine with a copper bottom, and one was a lead size two, not much bigger than the one he'd used a first-year. He knew that the pewter was the more practical of the two. He could brew larger quantities in it, and the copper bottom would allow him better control of the heat, which as he had been so pleased to point out to Potter, yielded better results. But something about the lead one appealed to him. Perhaps because the very material it was made from spoke of the danger of the potions that would be brewed in it, or because its size seemed to rule out large batches of common potions and instead suggest small, experimental brews... perhaps because of the challenge that working with a small but thick cauldron presented, the delicate balance of the heat... Snape only knew that he wanted it. He surveyed the other items that he had chosen, which hovered behind him in a quivering group: a set of crystal phials; four silver knives--large, small, blunt-nosed, serrated; a pair of elbow-length dragonhide gloves; two decanters, one glass, one crystal; a pair of goggles; and a potioner's apron. If he gave up the gloves and retrieved his graphornhide ones from Longbottom (they were far more protective, anyway), he might purchase both. He tucked the smaller cauldron into the larger and sent the gloves away with a flick of his wand. It would be slightly more than he had intended to spend, but these were quality materials, he told himself. He'd still be brewing in these cauldrons when he was eighty.

Snape raised his wand, intending to Levitate the cauldrons, along with the rest of his purchases, to the counter, when an owl swooped into the room and landed on the shelf in front of him, flapping its wings importantly. It was a Hogwarts owl; Snape could tell by its features, and for one nonsensical moment, he was certain that it had come with some distressing news about Granger. The words 'but she hasn't been there in weeks' rose to his lips, and then he saw the envelope the owl bore.

Severus Snape

Aisle Five

Slug and Jiggers

Diagon Alley, London

It was a Hogwarts letter--a true Hogwarts letter, because it bore the charm that would find its recipient anywhere, and it meant they were calling him home. He took the letter from the owl's beak gingerly.

"Thank you," he said formally. "I regret that I have nothing to give you in return." The owl nipped his finger for his trouble and took off out of the shop. Snape held the letter in his hands for a few moments before he tore it open.

On a familiar piece of parchment bearing the Hogwarts seal were the words:

Professor Snape,

I am delighted to inform you that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will reopen for the 1999-2000 school year. School will begin on September the first, as is traditional, but all staff are asked to report back to the school beginning April the tenth. I expect that everyone will need time to settle in, recreate their classrooms and living spaces, and adjust their curricula as necessary to suit this post-war world. Please plan to attend an informational meeting Saturday, 10 April at two pm in the Great Hall. I look forward to seeing you very soon.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Snape let his purchases drift to the floor. His mind was curiously blank after reading these words. His heart did not quicken with excitement or dread, and his hands did not tremble as he carefully removed the lead cauldron from inside the pewter one.

The heft of it in his hand was as pleasing as it had been, but Snape no longer thought about the potions he might attempt in it as he set it back on the shelf. This and everything strewn behind him had just become superfluous. Hogwarts had all the brewing supplies he could ever need, and he would be back there in nearly two months time. To purchase these would be wasteful. Ridiculous. He fingered the delicate crystal wall of a phial. Why on earth did he still want them? Would he, when they were in use beside the rest, even recognize the ones that were 'his'? And what possible difference would it make if he did?

Snape took a step back from his would-be purchases. Surely the clerks could return them to their proper shelves; that was, after all, what they were paid for, and Snape was suddenly certain that if he touched even one of those items again, he would be unable to leave the shop without them.

The house looked peculiar to Snape as he reentered it, empty-handed. Granger had long since removed the mounted heads of house-elves past from the hallway walls, but the wallpaper where they had hung was several shades brighter than that surrounding it, leaving a number of long-eared silhouettes on the wall. Had she ever noticed? Come to that, had he?

Walburga Black looked out at him from her portrait, her eyes filled with mute, angry disdain. This is what comes of letting in your sort, she seemed to say, and Snape took in the house as if through her eyes. He saw the carpet runners, threadbare with age, yes, but dusty with use; the coffee table piled high with books and abandoned cups of tea that surely bespoke Longbottom, as Kreacher would have attended to them at once had they been Potter's. He saw his 'library' in his mind's eye--little more than a few shelves of books with far too many gaps in between--and the garden, which was not even *magical*.

He entered the kitchen. Pomona sat alone at the table with her own letter and a cup of her abominable tea. He was about to withdraw again--he had no interest in making conversation at the moment--when she saw him and motioned him over.

"I imagine you got yours today as well," she said.

"I did."

"Mine came while I was in the shower," Pomona said with a chuckle. "'Pomona Sprout, 1st bathroom on the left, 2nd Floor, 12 Grimmauld Place, London'. I'd forgotten that charm. It was many years ago that I saw it last."

"I was at home when my first one arrived," Snape said. "It simply came addressed to the house."

"Too bad," she replied. "There's something wonderful about knowing that you've been noticed, even if it is only by a charm. You missed out on one of the great Hogwarts experiences."

"Yes, well, I think I've had enough Hogwarts experiences in the intervening years to make up for it," he said.

"You have," she said. She looked at him searchingly. "But it is strange to me... how much time you've spent at Hogwarts, and yet you have never seemed to belong there."

Snape stiffened. "I am sure I do not need you to point out where I have not belonged."

"Oh, don't take offense, Severus," she said, shaking her head as if his feelings were a minor matter. "How could you fit in among us? Where were your contemporaries? Though it was never just a matter of your age. The men of the staff are all part goblin, giant or ghost, and the rest of us a bunch of frumpy old women."

"There was Dumbledore," Snape said.

"Dumbledore was a man who had no contemporaries."

Snape pursed his lips.

"Do not take that as a reprimand," Pomona said. "It was not meant as one. In fact, I think that he trusted you the most, in his way."

"I do not think that trusting me to kill him was indicative of his fond regard."

Pomona shook her head and looked into her teacup. "Someday, I hope that you will learn to accept my words in the spirit in which they are meant. I think you were the only person that he thought strong enough to survive such an experience intact."

Snape huffed. "*Intact?*"

"I was not referring to your survival, although yes, that. I meant--look around you. A man irreparably broken could not have created what you have here."

A prickly hot blush rose out of his collar to assault his ears. Was she, by God, referring to his relationship with Granger?

"The garden, the greenhouse, the library. As I understand it, you've been turning the basement into a laboratory! And everyone knows how much you helped Hermione to prepare her proposal. You could not have given so much of yourself to this house, to its residents, if you had fractured your soul."

Snape was silent. It had been his worst fear since the moment that Dumbledore had made his request, a fear so all-pervading that he could never look at it directly, nor ask himself afterward if such a thing had come to pass. A torn soul. The inability ever to be truly human again. When had he stopped carrying that fear around? In St Mungo's, when he had woken, confused and in pain, but fundamentally *himself*, fundamentally *still alive* after the war, after all, at last, had been done? Perhaps. Or perhaps it had been subsumed by household chores and arguments and the feel of Granger's skin. But Pomona's words, it seemed, made an end to that particular fear. He had not stopped in that moment, long ago on the Astronomy Tower. He had not splintered away and ended. He was intact.

"Mmm," was all he managed.

"Truth be told, Severus, strange as it is, I can better picture Hogwarts without you than this house without you."

"I thank you for your enthusiasm over my return to the teaching staff."

"Again, *in the spirit*. And do you even want to go back? You hardly seem overjoyed at the prospect."

"Are *you?*"

"I am, Severus," she said quietly. "It is all I have wanted since the moment the war ended. To go home. To go back to teaching children, to my plants. It is my life."

Was there something wrong with him, he wondered, that he did not feel the same? When he thought of Hogwarts, he thought of the things he loved, yes. The majesty of the Great Hall, the solitude of his rooms, the way the light hit the stacks in the library in the evenings. But he also thought of the endless piles of marking, the danger that the students would insist on putting themselves (and him) into in the classroom, the relentless monotony of it: teaching the same lessons at the same hours to what

seemed the same students, year after year.

"Do you?" Pomona said, startling him from his thoughts.

"Do I what?"

"Do you want to go back?"

The question was far too complicated to be answered with a simple yes or no, Snape felt. A reprieve from the suffocating newness this strange post-war world would be pleasant. But once he was back at Hogwarts, once things had returned to the way they always were...?

"No," he said, startling himself. He hadn't intended to answer her question at all. "No, I do not. I have been at Hogwarts nearly twenty-six years, and that seems quite enough. But my circumstances are not so different than they were when I joined the teaching staff. I have no where else to go."

"Rubbish," Pomona said after a moment.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's rubbish, Severus. I'll accept that you had no where else to go when you arrived here. But the situation has hardly remained static. No, now you have... here."

"Here? And live on Potter's charity ad infinitum? That is not an option."

"Harry's job is available, as I recall," Pomona said, and Snape stood abruptly. She was absolutely crossing a line *Potter's job*? It was one thing to admit that he was not pleased about returning to Hogwarts and taking up life exactly as he'd left it, and another thing entirely to suggest that he take a job that wasn't even really a job--just a glorified way to kill time until real life began.

"Spare me the meddling. I do not recall coming to you for career advice," he said, and swept from the room, nearly overturning his chair in his haste.

Snape looked around his room. It was not smart or stylish, he thought. He had never mastered choosing things that went together, and the rug that Draco had bought for him still stood out oddly against the cream colored walls and white sheets. In fact, he thought, everything in here but the rug was aggressively neutral. There was absolutely no need to feel attached to a plain white set of dishware that he'd paid less for than a pair of Muggle denims. The china at Hogwarts was far lovelier, or he guessed that it was, as he had no real system by which to judge the beauty of china. His room at Hogwarts had had ancient stone walls and ornate sconces and Persian rugs that had once flown across countries before they had been disenchanted. His laboratory had been filled with supplies and his bookshelves with books. And if none of it had exactly been his... well, he had found a way to tell himself that it didn't matter. Who else would ever live in those rooms? Those things may as well have been his. And yet, at this moment, those things felt like a costume to him, like something that he put on and claimed that it was his life.

Granger was home. He could hear her arriving. He could picture the disarray of her desk, her handbag thrown on top of it, the way she would sit on her own patchwork quilt on top of her own bed to remove her own gray heels. He heard her knock, and he knocked in return.

"I do not want Potter's job," he said to Granger as soon as she walked into the room.

"No, I didn't suppose that you did," she said, taking a step back and looking at him as if he'd gone mad.

"Well, I just thought you should know, in case you had put that ridiculous notion in Pomona's head."

"Severus, I'm afraid you're going to need to back up. Why would Pomona suggest that you take Harry's job?"

"Because our Hogwarts letters arrived today," he said irritably. Was it too much to ask that she stay on top of these things? For Merlin's sake, the woman knew what sort of stones they had used in the reconstruction.

"Oh," she said. "I see. When do you return?"

Snape searched her face. She truly hadn't known, then. It was possible that he hoped for a small measure of disappointment on her part, but her features were neutral.

"April the tenth."

"And I take it you're not happy about this?"

"Why shouldn't I be happy about it?"

She pursed her lips. "I don't know. Maybe because you are stalking around like an angry cat and Pomona is suggesting other jobs for you? Why, again, are we arguing? I just got here, and I feel I've missed out on my end of this discussion."

Snape turned away and pretended to be interested in something on his desk. Unfortunately, there was nothing in particular on his desk, and so he moved a quill back and forth over his blotter.

He could feel her take a step forward, although she was still not near enough to touch him.

"If you are feeling conflicted because of us, don't be. This isn't based on... proximity... Severus."

He could not reply. There was no way to express his relief without making it seem as if his confusion were based on the status of their relationship, which it was not.

"It's not as if I can't come there, and you will always be welcome here. I don't choose my partners based on their connection to the loo."

"It's not about that," he said.

"Then what is it about?"

"I have spent my entire life there. Teaching is the only job that I have ever known," he said.

"Yes, I know."

"I didn't choose it. I didn't hope, one day, to come back to Hogwarts and teach. I had no interest in it whatsoever," he said.

"I know that, too," she said.

He winced. There was something uncomfortable to him in how much she had either intuited or discovered about his obligations, about his life at Hogwarts. It was not exactly that he would refuse to share those things with her, or that he had never imagined telling her how he had come to be there--only that it amounted to more than a set of facts. Snape had no language for this. How did you explain that you could love a place and hate it, too? That you could love a place and never want to return there?

"It is not just the teaching," he said. "Hogwarts is a way of life. There is more attendant rubbish than you could ever imagine."

She came to stand beside him, then, and laid a hand on his arm. "I know nothing about jobs that take over your life, of course," she said smiling slightly.

"You chose this," he said.

"I did. I'm not complaining."

"That was not my implication," Snape said. "I only meant that--"

"I see what you meant. Have you known all along? That you didn't want to go back, I mean?"

Snape sighed. How could he answer that question? Had he known from the moment that he first wanted something of his own, even if it was something as inconsequential as a towel? Or had it begun the day he decided on the Bonefolder and Quire method for the library, the day he began brewing again, or only this morning, when a paper had slid under his door? He withdrew Malfoy's house mascot from his drawer and laid it on the desk. "This was delivered this morning."

She reached out and centered the drawing in front of her. "Oh! It's just like--"

"It was meant to be. I bought it as a gift for you."

She studied it in silence for a time. "It's a good representation," she said at last.

"I thought so, too."

"What does it mean?" she asked. "What are you saying?"

He looked at her measuringly. It was interesting to him that he did not feel as if she were fishing for compliments or playing at being foolish. He was certain that she was already drawing her own impressions, but it was as if she were avoiding leaping at the nearest answer.

"I meant to tell you that you had succeeded. That it does not matter what the Hogwarts Board of Governors thinks; your plans and your hopes were well founded. It is possible to take seven people of varying age, blood status and temperament and make from them... a house."

She looked down, and Snape had the distinct impression that she was gathering herself.

"Do you not see what a hand you had in it?" she asked.

"What?" This had been meant as a gift for her--a gift! He'd meant to compliment her, for Merlin's sake, and now she was upset--had somehow gotten the idea that he was trying to claim a part of her success?

"Do you know that Neville is drafting an application to Hogwarts as a grower?"

Snape was utterly flummoxed--what on earth did this have to do with him?

"And Filch--you heard him at Christmas--said he wouldn't even go back if your potions failed him. Which they won't, of course," she said. "This house--which had nearly nothing when you got here--now boasts a library, a garden, a greenhouse and a makeshift potions laboratory."

"Are you accusing me of trying to recreate Hogwarts in this house?"

"No!" she said, throwing up her hands in frustration. She shook her head almost angrily. "Sometimes you are the most infuriating person I have ever known. I am saying that you made this place more than a set of walls for people who had no walls. Severus, you took the things that were home to you--books and potions--and made them a working part of this house. And the things that are home to others--you supported them. How many nights have I said to you that what I want is not a place where people or elves *end up*? This house is not a dead end anymore. There are things to be gained here."

"Yes, and then it is time to move on, I suppose. As Potter is doing. And those for whom Hogwarts has reopened its doors," he said.

She spoke slowly, as if she were choosing her words very carefully. "For someone like Harry, it is time to move on. And for those who are eager to return to their homes, I am glad that we provided a safe place to be until that could happen. But I don't think... I don't think going backward is moving on."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Why do you want me to talk you into this, Severus? You're perfectly capable of making your own decision. If you want to return to Hogwarts, I will support you. If you want to remain here and create some kind of rehabilitation program, I will support you. It's not my job to argue you into one position or another."

No, he thought, it was not her job to tell him what he wanted his life to be. The time for all of that had passed long ago. Snape sat down in his desk chair and ran a hand distractedly through his hair. "I have been told that my teaching is more effective outside the classroom," he said somewhat ruefully.

She leaned against the desk and laughed. "If Neville is any indication, I would say that is an understatement."

"I would like to see the laboratory become more than just makeshift," he said.

"If you took Harry's position, you would have access to the house budget, and you could allocate those Galleons wherever you saw fit," she said.

"I wouldn't be like Potter."

"No. I would never expect you to be."

Snape nodded. He pulled the drawing toward him and watched the tear swell. Granger's hand closed over his.

"It's just--this is home now," he said, and she nodded.

"I know."