

Because it is Bitter, and Because it is my Heart

by Squibstress

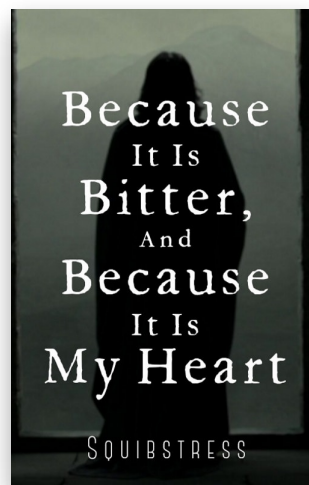
If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

The Gathering

Chapter 1 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

A/N: With apologies to Joyce Carol Oates, who first used the title of Crane's poem for her fine novel.



*I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter...bitter," he answered,
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."
~ Stephen Crane (1895)*

Chapter One: The Gathering

"You would be wise to stop interfering," Severus Snape said to the tall witch standing before his desk.

"You know me well enough," she answered, "to know that I will never stand by and allow the students in my care to be abused."

"I know you well enough to trust that your wisdom will overcome your stubbornness, despite your unfortunate affiliation with the House of Gryffindor," replied Snape smoothly.

"Your definition of wisdom differs considerably from mine," retorted the witch.

"Perhaps. But know this, Minerva McGonagall: Every act of defiance from you can result only in greater suffering for your students and trouble for yourself."

She was about to reply when a sudden burning sensation on his arm prompted him to cut her off.

"That will be all, Professor."

As he automatically placed a hand over the place where the Dark Mark burned, McGonagall smiled unpleasantly. "Your *master* is calling his lapdogs?"

"Good day, Professor," he said sharply as the door to the Headmaster's study opened with a slight bang.

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About two dozen black-robed figures surrounded the ornate...throne was the only word for it...intricately carved with intercoiling snakes.

The former man in the chair spoke in a high, haunting voice vaguely reminiscent of the *castrati* of the Baroque period.

"I believe it is time to make my presence felt more acutely," he said with pronounced sibilance.

"The Ministry is, of course, under my full control, as are Azkaban and the Dementors. Hogwarts is secure, with my trusted lieutenant at the helm," continued Voldemort with a brief nod in Snape's direction. "Yet there are troubling pockets of resistance, and it is time to crush them."

Bellatrix Lestrange's eyes sparkled at this last.

"What would my Lord have us do?" simpered Peter Pettigrew.

"I will appear at Hogwarts to address the students," replied the creature in the chair. "You will all accompany me. Children are so impressionable, and I have no doubt that they will carry my message back to their families most urgently."

Snape frowned. This did not bode well. "Will my Lord allow me to prepare the school for your arrival?" he asked.

"That will not be necessary. The surprise of my sudden appearance will unnerve the traitors," said Voldemort.

"As you wish, my Lord," said Snape, bowing his head.

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Headmaster Snape's voice rang suddenly throughout the castle and grounds.

"All students and staff will report to the Great Hall immediately. Latecomers will be severely punished."

Minerva dropped her quill on her desk and sighed, rubbing her temples. It would be another late night grading essays, she thought as she stood and moved toward the door of her classroom.

The students milled anxiously about the Great Hall, murmuring quietly. The House tables had been removed and the High Table replaced by a large, raised dais, which was ringed by dark-clad figures. The teachers and other staff huddled like nervous animals near the back of the platform.

One of the dark figures had collected the wands of students and staff alike as they entered the hall. When Professor Flitwick objected to surrendering his wand, the man had growled, "Security measure. You'll get 'em back later; now shove off."

"I have a very bad feeling about this," whispered Flitwick to Professor Slughorn as he joined the other staff on the dais. "I wonder what kind of dark mischief is afoot?"

He didn't have long to wait.

The doors to the Great Hall suddenly flew open with a loud clang, startling everyone, and the students parted like the Red Sea as a tall, hooded figure strode toward the dais, flanked by several more of the blackrobed Death Eaters. They mounted the dais, and the figure removed the hood. A collective gasp was heard from the students, along with several cries.

The face of the creature was preternaturally smooth, with no nose and only slits for nostrils. The eyes were red, punctuated by reptilian pupils that narrowed to ellipses in the bright lights that illuminated the raised platform.

"Students of Hogwarts," he began, raising cries of fright from the assembly, most of whom had never heard his voice before. He inhaled deeply, savoring their terror as another man might a fine Burgundy.

"I am pleased that the taint of impure blood has at last been purged from this great institution," he intoned. "Nevertheless, I am troubled. I have heard reports of disobedience and rebellion within the ranks of both students and teachers. This must not continue."

Snape sensed danger. "My Lord," he said, stepping toward the creature. "I take full responsibility. I assure you, it will be handled more forcefully in future."

"I am confident that you can manage any difficulties that arise," Voldemort continued. "Yet I believe teaching by example is considered a valuable pedagogical methodology, is it not?"

"Indeed, it is, my Lord," answered Snape, trying to mask his apprehension.

"Very well. Which miscreant shall serve as our teaching aid this evening?" The assembled students and staff held their breath as one. Ah, but their terror was sweet! Voldemort allowed himself to bask in it a few more moments before turning suddenly.

"Minerva McGonagall!" he screeched, wand arm outstretched. "Come forward."

Minerva stepped toward the creature, her chin thrust forward, demonstrating a bravery she did not feel. She forced herself to look into its red eyes.

There was nothing but madness behind them.

"You have repeatedly defied the dictates of your Headmaster and interfered with the rightful discipline of the students of this school. Now you shall receive your just punishment."

The silence in the Great Hall was profound.

Minerva felt her wrists wrenched upward, held above her head by invisible chains. Gasps broke the silence, and several staff members surged forward, but were forced back by a phalanx of Death Eaters, several of whom shot Stunning Spells at Hagrid, who collapsed to the floor. Madam Pomfrey hurried to the fallen half-giant, but could do nothing other than ascertain he was still breathing.

The reason for disarming everyone was now quite clear.

Voldemort moved in so close to Minerva that she could smell his breath. It smelled of rotting meat. She could not suppress a shudder as a skeletal finger caressed her cheek. The creature smiled and stepped back.

Minerva closed her eyes, steeling herself for the agony that was sure to follow.

But it never came.

Instead, she heard words that made her eyes snap open, suddenly alert as a rabbit that senses a wolf on the prowl.

"Bella, my dear, perhaps you could help Professor McGonagall with her clothing?"

Another collective gasp erupted from students and staff alike. Minerva felt her stomach drop.

Snape nearly shouted aloud, but gained control just in time. He closed his eyes momentarily to steady himself. He had witnessed enough Dark Revels to know what was coming.

Bellatrix stepped forward and pointed her wand at Minerva. "*Disrudio*," she hissed, smiling into the other woman's face.

A wave of nausea passed over Minerva as she felt the cold air shock her suddenly bare skin.

The hall remained in stunned silence for a few moments, then Minerva heard a lone wolf-whistle from the corner where the Slytherins had been gathered. A smattering of tentative applause followed from the same direction.

"Be silent!" thundered a bass voice from behind her. She recognized it as Snape's.

"Who will begin the lesson? Perhaps you, Amycus?" inquired the creature.

A short, sweaty wizard stepped forward, leering at his prey. Minerva felt that her very skin would scream if he touched her.

Before he could think, Severus shouted, "My Lord! May I speak?"

"You may, but be brief; Professor McGonagall is waiting," said Voldemort.

"As Headmaster of Hogwarts, would it not be more appropriate *forme* to administer discipline to the staff?" he inquired, speaking carefully to maintain control of his voice.

"Ah, Severus," replied the creature. "Naturally it would, but given your past reluctance to indulge in the more *tangible* pleasures of your position, I had assumed you preferred to delegate the current task."

"A very wise assumption, my Lord," replied Snape. "Nevertheless, when duty calls I must answer, must I not?" he continued, as if he were discussing the grading of Potions essays.

"As you wish, Severus, as you wish. Amycus, step aside for our Headmaster."

The shorter wizard shot a poisonous look at Snape and backed away.

As Snape approached the helpless Transfiguration teacher, he thought, *My gods, what am I doing?*

The Lesson

Chapter 2 of 20

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Chapter Two: The Lesson

Minerva felt acrid bile rise in her throat and swallowed hard to keep from vomiting. *This cannot be happening*, she told herself.

Harsh reality, in the form of her former student and colleague, intruded on her panicked thoughts. He was now right in front of her, inches away. She saw his lips moving, but heard nothing.

If he tries to kiss me, I'll tear his tongue out with my teeth, she thought savagely. Good, anger was good. If she could focus on her fury, she might survive this. She focused her gaze over the heads of the assembled students, unable to look at them.

Her ears told her that many of the girls—and a few boys, she thought—were sobbing. *Be strong for them*, Minerva told herself. *Show them how to face down tyranny*. She clenched her jaws, hoping she looked strong as the stone on which the castle was built. Inside her head, she was screaming.

Snape parted his outer robes and unzipped his fly. He grabbed Minerva's left leg and wrapped it around his waist, pulling her towards him. He held her thigh in place with one hand while the other disappeared inside his trousers. She felt a hand on her right hip, and suddenly, he was inside her.

Minerva had been bracing herself for the pain of his first thrust, but she was curiously numb. She felt only pressure and a vague warmth between her legs as Snape moved rhythmically against her. Her body jerked with each thrust, and she concentrated on maintaining her footing. She silently willed her assailant to hurry his release.

After a minute she heard Snape grunt as he sagged against her, releasing her leg and withdrawing his penis. He adjusted his clothes and stepped away from her.

Minerva was bitterly thankful for the magical chains that held her; her legs would not have supported her. She bit down hard on her tongue to keep the nausea at bay. She tasted blood and focused on its metallic saltiness. *One moment at a time... inhale... exhale...*

She heard the loathsome, high-pitched voice: "Now that you have all seen what disobedience can bring, I expect no more resistance from you or your families. Remember this lesson well. I trust you will not need another. Severus, you may dismiss your students." With that, Voldemort swept from the dais, closely followed by his Death Eaters.

As he passed Minerva, Amycus Carrow sneered, "Ta, love. Maybe next time, eh?"

Once the Dark procession had disappeared through the doors, Snape announced evenly, "Everyone will return to their Houses immediately. Staff may adjourn to their quarters. Your wands will be waiting for you there."

The students filed out, some weeping, some in shock. The staff, still at the back of the dais, did not move. Snape glanced at them, then pointed his wand at Minerva. *Finite Incantatem*, he intoned, and silently walked out of the hall.

As soon as Snape had released the spell, Minerva felt the tension in her wrists release and sank to the floor. A moment later she felt a cloak drape gently over her shoulders and heard the voice of her friend, Poppy Pomfrey, murmur next to her ear, "It's all right now, they're all gone. Come on, Minerva, let's get you out of here."

She felt strong arms under hers, helping her to stand, and looked up at Pomona Sprout, who was gently supporting her as they dismounted the dais. "Thank you," she whispered, not trusting her voice with more.

As the three women made their way out of the hall, the male staff members, who had stayed back, not knowing what to do or how to help their comrade, set to work carrying the still-unconscious Hagrid out, followed by the other female staff and Professor Slughorn, who made no move to help.

Aftermath

Chapter 3 of 20

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Chapter Three: Aftermath

"At least let me give you a sleeping potion," pleaded Poppy.

Minerva sat at the edge of a cot in the infirmary. "Fine," she whispered. She stuck the phial Madam Pomfrey handed her in the pocket of the robes her friend had conjured for her.

These sleeves are too short for me, Minerva thought.

Pomona Sprout appeared with a cup of tea. "Drink this, love, it'll help," she said, secure in her belief that a hot cuppa was the balm for all hurts. Maybe she was right.

Minerva took it without looking at either of her two friends, who exchanged anxious glances. They were silent while she sipped the steaming tea.

Poppy broke the silence. "Minerva, I should examine you for injuries," she said quietly.

"I'm fine," Minerva said, her voice stronger. "My wrists are sore, but I have healing balm back in my quarters."

"That's good," Poppy replied gently, "but I need to make sure you have no internal injuries."

Minerva looked at her friend for the first time since the rape. "I'm fine," she said more forcefully than she intended.

"Minerva—" began Pomona, then stopped when she saw her friend's chest begin to heave. She shot a panicked look at the mediwitch, who quickly conjured a paper bag.

"Here, breathe into this... that's it... nice and easy," she said, holding the bag over Minerva's nose and mouth. Gradually Minerva's breathing slowed and her heart rate returned to normal.

The three women sat in silence for a few moments. Then Minerva summoned her strength and spoke.

"I don't believe I am injured, Poppy," she said quietly. "I would just like to return to my quarters and rest. If I notice anything... amiss... I promise I'll let you know right away." She silently pleaded with her friend to let her escape the ordeal of an internal exam. All she wanted was to take a shower.

Poppy looked at her. Feelings of friendship grappled with her professional judgment. "All right, Minerva. But I don't want you to be alone tonight. Maybe Pomona could stay with you?"

"Pomona's place is with her Hufflepuffs," replied Minerva. "They may need her now." Her heart lurched as she realized that her Gryffindors were alone. She knew she couldn't face them. She had no comfort to offer. Not tonight.

Her eyes filled with tears that she willed not to fall. "Pomona, would you see to my students, just for tonight? I don't think I'm strong enough for that just now," she said, her voice threatening to break.

"Of course, Minerva."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking of the students," said Madam Pomfrey. "I should be here in case anyone needs me. Minerva, I'm afraid I have to insist you stay in the infirmary tonight."

"Poppy, I really need the comfort of my own quarters. I'll be fine on my own, really," insisted Minerva.

"Would you allow Rolanda to stay with you? As a compromise?" Poppy pleaded.

The flying instructor was hardly the first person you'd turn to for a shoulder to cry on thought the mediwitch. But she was reliable and fiercely loyal to Minerva, who loved Quidditch almost as much as Madam Hooch did.

"All right," breathed Minerva.

"Good. Pomona, could you Floo over to Rolanda's and ask her?"

"Of course," said the Herbology teacher. As she got up, she took Minerva's hand and kissed the back of it. "We'll get through this," she said, her voice quavering. "And kill the bastards," she added fiercely as she left. She waited until she was out of the room to let her tears fall. They wouldn't help Minerva, who had yet to shed her own.

In the Dungeons

Chapter 4 of 20

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Chapter Four: In the Dungeons

Snape closed and warded the door to the Potions classroom. He was fairly certain Slughorn wouldn't come down there that evening orking after hours was not a habit of Horace's ut he wanted to ensure he would not be discovered. Besides, he thought, every student and staff member (save for a few Slytherins) would welcome a chance to catch the Headmaster alone and unawares.

Even more now, he thought bitterly.

He tried desperately not to think of what he had just done to a woman who, while she had never exactly been a friend, was someone he greatly admired and who had never shown him anything but kindness ntil he killed Dumbledore, that is.

His thoughts raced as he searched the potions storeroom uch less orderly than when he was in residence here, he noted or the correct container.

*First murder, now rape. What more will you ask of me?*he silently railed at the gods he no longer believed in.

Enough. He had no time for self-pity. When had he ever?

His eye seized on a label, and he took the bottle from the shelf.

He uncorked it and brought it to his lips, then paused.*Maybe I should just let things take their natural course*,he thought. *I deserve it.*

As if in answer, his swollen member throbbed painfully.

He knew the effects of allowing the Engorgio Charm to go unchecked; he had seen the Dark Lord use it as a form of torture often enough t was what had given him the idea. Without a Deflating Draught, the blood that filled the spongy tissue of his penis would eventually clot, cutting off circulation to the organ, which would begin to die after a few hours. Within several days gangrene would set in, then septicemia, and ultimately death.

It was a supremely ugly way to die. Snape shuddered and downed the potion.

He had taken a great risk in using the charm; if he had not found the right potion to counteract it, he could not have concocted one fast enough to save function in his penis (he wondered idly why he even cared). Engorgio was not intended for use on human tissue, but there was no way he could have gotten an erection any other way under the circumstances. Failure on that score would very likely have resulted in disaster for him, and worse for Minerva.

Worse than what I did to her? he asked himself savagely.

A prickling sensation told him that the Deflating Draught was working and that normal blood flow was being restored to his member.

He hoped that the numbing and lubricating charms he had quickly and silently performed on Minerva had worked, and that she would suffer no ill effects as they wore off, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

He stood silently for a few moments, willing himself not to think of her. Then he removed the wards he had placed on the classroom and walked quickly away from the dungeons and his thoughts.

The Dam Breaks

Chapter 5 of 20

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Nobody was very surprised when Professor McGonagall didn't appear in the Great Hall for breakfast.

As a matter of fact, noted Horace Slughorn, he had never seen the room so empty at mealtime. "Ah, well," he sighed *Nothing has ever been solved by starving oneself*, he thought, as he bit into a savory bit of banger. *I wonder where Snape has got to?*

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The Headmaster paced the room like a caged panther.

"What more do you want from me, old man?" he screeched at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore that hung on the wall behind the desk. "What do I do now? You'd better have an idea, you son of a bitch, because I'm all out."

"I'm sorry, Severus. Truly I am," replied the painted Dumbledore. "But you must continue on your current path. If you give in now, everything you've sacrificed will have been in vain."

"I don't care anymore," Snape muttered.

"And everything *she's* sacrificed?" the portrait asked quietly.

"You bastard, you bloody bastard!" howled Snape. He seized the nearest object at hand—a large, crystal orb—and hurled it at the painting. It struck home and shattered into tiny pieces.

The other Headmasters' portraits scurried off to the safety of other paintings. Dumbledore's image stood there a moment, then said, apparently without irony, "You'd better clean that up before somebody gets hurt," and walked out of the frame.

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Minerva woke with a sharp intake of breath.

What time was it?

A shaft of sunlight shone through a gap in the drapery, hinting that she had slept the night through.

Well, thought Minerva, *at least the Draught of Dreamless Sleep works as advertised. Thank Merlin for small mercies*, she added sardonically.

She squinted toward the antique clock on the wall, but couldn't read the time without her glasses. She groped for them on her bedside table, then remembered they had disappeared along with her clothes last night.

Suddenly she needed another shower.

When she emerged forty-five minutes later, she found Rolanda Hooch still perched on the settee in her sitting room.

The younger witch eyed her appraisingly. Minerva certainly looked better than she had last night, Rolanda thought. Her face was no longer ashen, and her hands did not shake as they clutched at the folds of her robes. Her hair was secured in its customary bun, not a strand out of place to betray the horrors its owner had endured only twelve hours before.

There's no one like Minerva McGonagall, Rolanda thought with admiration. "How did you sleep?" she asked.

"Well, thank you. And you, were you able to sleep at all?" asked Minerva.

"You know me, I could kip anywhere," answered Rolanda, hoping to re-establish some of their former easy camaraderie.

"I'm glad. Thank you for staying," Minerva said quietly.

"How are you?" asked Rolanda, feeling awkward.

"I'm fine," answered Minerva, wondering how often she would be required to repeat that hollow reassurance over the next few weeks. "You can let Poppy know that everything seems all right."

"Are you hungry? I could get a house-elf to bring you something," said Rolanda, searching for something concrete she could do for her friend.

The thought of food immediately soured Minerva's stomach. "No, thank you." She added, "Maybe later," when she saw the look of concern cross Rolanda's face.

I wonder if I'll ever be hungry again mused Minerva to herself. *I will never go back to the Great Hall*, she thought suddenly and fiercely. The thought made her long for another shower, but she stood her ground.

"You should go, Ro," she said. When the other woman did not react, she added, "You need to eat and rest."

Rolanda sighed and looked at her friend. "I'll come by later," she said finally.

Please don't, thought Minerva. "Thanks, I'd like that," she said.

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"Are you sure, Minerva? I don't mind watching over your Gryffindors until you're ready," said a worried Pomona Sprout. "They're a breeze now that the Weasley twins aren't there to make mischief," she added with a levity she didn't feel.

"Thank you, Pomona, but no. If I don't face them now, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to again," answered Minerva truthfully.

"You are an astonishing woman," said the Herbology teacher. She didn't add, *If it were me, I'd have run screaming from the castle and never looked back.*

"Or a very stupid one," retorted Minerva with a weak smile.

Pomona smiled back. "All right. But you know where to find me if you need me," she said.

"I do, thank you," said Minerva. She watched her friend disappear down the hallway.

Her heart pounded as she turned toward the portrait guarding the entrance. *Nunquam alieno*, she said firmly. The portrait-hole swung open.

"Welcome back, Professor McGonagall," said the Fat Lady gently.

Minerva took some deep breaths, then stepped into the Gryffindor common room.

All conversation stopped when the Gryffindors saw their Head of House appear.

This was a mistake, thought Minerva immediately as perhaps two dozen pairs of eyes stared at her as if she were an apparition.

It was Neville Longbottom who broke the tension by doing the bravest thing he had ever done to that point: He walked up to Professor McGonagall, threw his arms around her and hugged her hard.

The spell broken, several other students followed suit, while still others began to applaud.

The outpouring of love from her cubs finally broke through the dam she had erected around her emotions since the events of the previous night. As she accepted and returned their embraces, she did something she hadn't done in all her years of teaching and mentoring her students.

She cried with them.

Once More Unto the Breach

Chapter 6 of 20

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After all their tears had been shed and handkerchiefs passed 'round, Professor McGonagall stood and motioned for the assembled Gryffindors to quiet down.

"My chil—" she began, then stopped. She began anew. "I was about to call you 'my children,' but sadly, I can no longer call you that. Over the past weeks you have all seen more than enough to rob you of the innocence that, by rights, should have been yours for at least a few more years.

"I know that many of you pity me for what happened last night. But the crime that has been committed against you all is so much worse, and for that, I can never forgive those who perpetrated it. I will speak to you about it now, and then I hope we can all put it in the past and move forward with the work that must be done to defeat evil and ensure that it never is allowed to flourish again."

Her voice seemed to drop an octave, and the group had to listen closely to hear her next words.

"What you witnessed last night was an act of violence, no more, no less. It had nothing to do with sex, and even less to do with lovemaking. No doubt it was Voldemort's intention not only to frighten you into obedience, but also to ensure that what should be an act of love is forever associated in your minds with violence and humiliation. It is his purpose to try to sully everything that is good and beautiful because he is incapable of experiencing or creating it.

"When the time comes for each of you to fall in love and experience the joys of expressing that love physically with another person, I hope that you will remember what I am saying to you now rather than what Voldemort and his thugs hoped to scar you with last night. Love is miraculous, and I have been privileged to have experienced that miracle. The memory of it sustains me through the dark times, and it is stronger than any terrible thing I have ever, or will ever, endure. If you are able to give and receive love, you are already far more powerful than Voldemort can ever hope to be."

Never had they loved her more.

Before she excused them, Professor McGonagall asked them to share the message with their friends in Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and, she added, those in Slytherin who would listen. She almost gagged on the name.

Before the evening was over, Professors Sprout and Flitwick had heard the story from their students, and both stopped by Minerva's private quarters to congratulate her for her courage.

Filius kissed her hand then dabbed at the corners of his eyes with his handkerchief. Pomona, more practical, brought a bottle of the best Firewhisky she could find, and together they raised a toast "to love." Minerva enquired about Hagrid, and was reassured when Filius told her he had recovered with no sequelae from the Stunners.

When they parted, Pomona left the bottle.

Finally alone, Minerva poured herself a large glassful and sat gazing into the fire. As she felt the potent liquor hit her bloodstream, she realized two things: one, she had forgotten to eat anything that day; and two, she desperately wanted a shower.

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Several days passed relatively uneventfully. Colin Creevey endured a savage beating at the hands of Amycus Carrow after spitting at Snape's feet. When a sheepish Colin returned from the hospital wing, Professor McGonagall warned her students against "pointless displays of rebellion." She admonished them to save their acts of heroism for moments in which they might do some good. Nevertheless, she kissed Colin on the forehead, making him blush beneath his bruises.

She resumed her classes, determined to act as if nothing had happened. She ignored the smirks of a few Slytherins—whose Transfiguration homework mysteriously "vanished" from her desk, earning them failing marks—and handed out a detention requiring the author of a particularly disgusting limerick to clean Moaning Myrtle's bathroom with a toothbrush. Other than that, Minerva's week went better than she had anticipated. Work had always been a good tonic for her.

She and Snape had managed to avoid one another. She did not return to the Great Hall for meals, and he, everyone assumed, was holed up in the Headmaster's office or off doing whatever horrible things Death Eaters did in their spare time. As long as he wasn't doing them at Hogwarts, Minerva couldn't bring herself to care.

She had taken to transforming into her Animagus form when her classes were over for the day. It was easier; she could slip through the corridors unnoticed and unmolested by either well-wishers or smarmy Slytherins.

As it tends to, life went on despite everything.

Minerva was showing her third-year Hufflepuffs how to change a pumpkin into a bathtub with running water when a house-elf appeared just inside the classroom door.

"Thank you, Trixie," said McGonagall evenly as she took the note the little elf held out to her. When she saw the seal, however, she felt the blood drain from her face.

As nausea threatened to overcome her, she hoarsely told her students to continue practicing and quickly left the room. She managed to make it into a stall in the nearest girls' lavatory before she vomited.

After she washed her face and rinsed her mouth of the bile she could still taste, she warded the lavatory door, conjuring an "Out of Order" sign from a paper towel, which she magicked onto the outside of the door.

With trembling hands she broke the Headmaster's seal and read the message:

Professor McGonagall,

Please see me in my office at 5:00 this afternoon. I need to meet with you privately.

S. Snape, Headmaster

The dread words echoed in her consciousness for the twenty minutes it took her to slow her breathing.

"I need to meet with you privately."

"... privately."

She crumpled the note and Transfigured it into a small bird. As the creature flew towards the window, a stream of flame burst from her wand and immolated it.

Accept and Serve

Chapter 7 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Chapter Seven: Accept and Serve

At ten minutes to five, Severus was still arguing with the portrait.

"This is insane!" he growled. "She will never agree to it. How could she?"

"Minerva is far stronger than you give her credit for," replied Dumbledore's portrait.

"And me, Dumbledore? How do you expect me to follow through with this obscene charade?"

When the portrait didn't answer, he laughed hollowly. "Oh, I see. I am beyond consideration. I'm just a loyal lapdog, meant to jump and rut at the command of my two masters."

"No," replied the portrait simply, "you are a man."

"And you are an arrangement of pigment," Snape spat. "And you have forgotten what it is to be a man, a living man. How could a man do what you suggest?"

After a moment, the portrait said, "You could do as other men do... what you have never in your life done before: you could share your burden with someone else."

Snape blinked, unbelieving, at the picture of the former Headmaster.

"You are insane, old man," he said quietly.

"Lean on her, Severus. Let her lean on you. You need each other."

The living man buried his face in his hands.

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Minerva stood trembling outside the entrance to the Headmaster's office.

It was two minutes to five.

Whatever happens, he cannot take anything more from you, she told herself, then gave the password before she could change her mind.

"Accipite et servite."

The gargoyle guarding the entrance nodded as the stone doors rumbled open. Minerva mounted the spiral staircase, her dread increasing with each step.

Whatever she had expected, she was utterly unprepared for the vision that greeted her when she arrived at the doorway to the Headmaster's study.

Snape stood in the center of the room, head down, with his hands over his face. His lank, black hair hung down like a curtain, obscuring his forearms.

Her step alerted him to her presence, and he looked up at her imploringly.

"I... didn't... mean... I didn't... want... I... can't..." he sobbed brokenly.

Minerva stood silent, rooted to the spot.

The only sound in the room was the man's heaving breath, which came in great, choking gulps.

She waited. Did he expect her to comfort him?

As his breathing grew quieter, she said tonelessly, "You wanted to see me, Headmaster?"

"I'm so sorry, Minerva," he whispered hoarsely once he had regained control of his voice.

She stared at him unblinking. She was an alabaster statue.

After a moment, she inquired coolly, "Will that be all, Headmaster?"

"You must believe me. I never wanted to harm you."

"What you want or don't want doesn't interest me."

When he removed his wand from his robes, she felt a frisson of fear. It turned to puzzlement when he lifted the tip to his temple and drew out a thin wisp of silvery vapor, then walked over to the Pensieve and deposited the memories into it.

"Come here," he told her, a little of his old authority returning to his voice. "Please," he added more gently.

She approached the Pensieve warily.

"Look," he instructed.

She swallowed her apprehension and bent down to the swirling, roiling vapor in the Pensieve.

When she had seen what he wanted her to see, her head rose and she looked at him. Tears wet her lashes.

"Oh, Severus," she breathed.

He started at the sound of his first name. She hadn't called him by it since the death of Dumbledore. Nobody had, he realized, except the Dark Lord.

"It was all planned," she said helplessly.

"Yes," he said, inwardly flinching at the pain that was etched in her face.

"Why didn't Albus tell me?" she asked, speaking more to herself than to him.

"I think he thought you'd try to stop it," Severus answered softly.

Minerva didn't know if Dumbledore had been right or wrong about that.

"Why didn't *you* tell me?" she asked.

"Would you have believed me?"

"I don't know," she answered truthfully.

They looked at one another for a full minute.

Then she asked him the question she'd wanted to pose since she had entered the room to find him distraught.

"Why did you rape me?" she asked softly.

He couldn't look at her. "I thought I could protect you."

"What do you mean?"

"I know what the Dark Lord intended. He would have turned the wolves loose on you... Carrow, Yaxley, Macnair... all of them. I thought I could prevent that much and make it less painful for you."

"You did something, didn't you... so I wouldn't feel it?" she asked, suddenly understanding.

He nodded slowly. Then he was seized by a terrible thought.

"Minerva, I didn't enjoy it. Please believe me, there was no pleasure in it for me."

"I know that. You couldn't help how your body responded to..."

"No!" he shouted, startling her. "You don't understand. I couldn't."

"Then how did you..."

"I used the Engorgio charm," he said, speaking over her question.

"My gods, Severus, you could have injured yourself!"

"I didn't know what else to do. It was a calculated risk. I found some Deflating Draught in Horace's stores afterwards. It worked."

She looked at him, shaking her head slowly in disbelief.

After a moment, she asked quietly, "So you didn't..." She couldn't complete the thought.

"What?" he prodded.

"Finish," she said, remembering her confusion when she had finally retreated to the sanctuary of her bathroom. She had dreaded having to scrub the sticky reminder of him from her thighs, but when she had removed her borrowed robes that night, she had been surprised to find nothing. At the time, she hadn't wanted to examine the mystery too closely, but the reason for that small mercy now became clear.

"No," he answered. "It was pretense."

"Thank you, Severus," she said gently.

"Don't!" he barked.

She looked at him, understanding that he could not brook any gentleness. Not from her. Not now.

"There's something else," Severus said, unable to look at her.

"What is it?"

"The Dark Lord wants more."

Minerva felt goose bumps rise on the flesh of her arms. "What do you mean?"

"He has requested that I entertain him... that I...*make use* of you for his enjoyment," Snape said, nearly choking on the words.

Minerva felt the all-too-familiar nausea well up in her throat. "But why?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

"Because he is a sick fuck!" Snape exploded, causing Minerva to startle violently, catching her elbow on the corner of the table.

Severus instantly regretted his outburst when he saw the tears spring to her eyes. Whether because of his news or because of the blow to her elbow, he didn't know. He only knew that he was the cause.

When they had both caught their breath, he continued more calmly. "As his madness has grown, the Dark Lord has become quite a voyeur. He enjoys watching his henchmen violate women at his bidding. Until the other night I had always declined to participate. He allowed it, I suspect, because he liked the idea of me as his token monk. My asceticism pleased him, I believe, because he is no longer physically able to indulge his proclivities."

"And misery loves company," quipped Minerva with a grim smile.

Snape was amazed that she was able to find any humor in the situation, but he quickly realized that it was her way of whistling in the dark. "Precisely," he said.

He continued, "But my status as his alter-ego seems to have had consequences. When he watched me with you that night, it excited him more than any of the other bizarre scenarios he has orchestrated. He has decided I can serve as his stand-in better than the other apes in his inner circle. And that you are the ideal sacrificial lamb. I don't know why, other than he is drawn to power, and with Dumbledore gone, you have the most powerful magic in Britain."

"He thinks he can destroy me, and by forcing you to abandon your self-enforced celibacy, he can neutralize some of your power," Minerva mused, almost as if she were discussing an especially thorny point of Transfigurative philosophy.

Severus was astonished to see the ghost of a smile begin to play at the corners of her mouth.

"What does he expect you to do?" she asked calmly.

"It doesn't matter," Snape said quickly. "I'll tell him I can't."

"And then what, do you expect him to just let you off?"

"It doesn't matter," he muttered.

"Yes, it does, Severus," she retorted forcefully. "It might matter very much."

"How?"

"Merlin's beard, man, don't you see? I thought Slytherins were meant to be cunning," she said cuttingly.

"Minerva, I fail to see how what happens to me if I refuse him could make any difference to anyone," he answered miserably.

It was Minerva's turn to explode.

"And just what do you think you've been doing the past seventeen years if *not making a difference*? Playing a game? Were we all playing games? When my husband arranged for everyone to believe you murdered him...including me...was that a game? If it was, I wish somebody had informed me. *You* may not assign any value to that sacrifice, but I assure you that I do. And I will not stand by and allow you to throw your life away simply because of some quaint notion of chivalry. I will not make it that easy for you, Severus Tobias Snape. No, that I will not."

The most powerful witch and wizard in Britain stood glaring at one another.

It was Snape who broke first.

"Memories," he said softly.

"I beg your pardon; do speak up," Minerva said, more loudly than necessary.

"He wants me to bring him memories."

"Memories of me."

"Yes."

"Memories of you... *using* me."

"Yes," he growled thickly.

He was horrified to see that the faint smile he had glimpsed a few minutes earlier was now given full play across her face.

"Well, Severus, we must give him memories, mustn't we?"

"Minerva, you cannot be serious!"

"Oh, but I am."

He turned away in disgust, but she caught his sleeve. Her voice this time was kind.

"Please, Severus. Look at this clearly. We have an opportunity. It may not be one we particularly wanted, but we should take it. You are probably not aware of it, but there may be another reason Voldemort is so eager to hurt me."

He waited for her to continue.

"At one time, he thought...he hoped...I might be persuaded to bind my power to his. Back when he was just Tom Riddle, he tried to court me."

"When you were at Hogwarts together," Snape said.

"Yes. And afterwards, too. I had graduated two years ahead of him and thought that would be the end of his attentions, but Tom was... persistent. When I began my apprenticeship as an Auror, he seemed to withdraw from me, and I was glad of it. He frightened me, even then.

"Years later, the night he applied for the Dark Arts position, he discovered that Albus and I were planning to marry. I had been with Albus at the Hog's Head, and he saw my Animagus form when I left after Albus. It was foolish of us to take the risk of being seen together when Albus was newly Headmaster and I first-year teacher, but we were so besotted with one another, I'm afraid we threw caution to the wind."

She smiled wistfully at her private memories for a few moments, then continued.

"I didn't realize it, but Tom had been keeping his eye on me all those years and knew when I registered with the ministry as an Animagus. After Albus turned him down for the position, he waited and followed me when I left the Hog's Head. He cornered me and threatened to tell everyone about my affair with Albus. He told me my talents were wasted on teaching, and that he could offer me power that Albus Dumbledore could only dream of. I laughed at him. I told him that I planned to marry Albus that Christmas, so he was free to tell all and sundry about us. I never heard from him again until the troubles began all those years later."

Severus exhaled loudly. "I never knew any of this."

"No one did, not even Albus." She smiled like the cat that caught the canary. "You see, even I have my secrets."

"So it would seem," said Snape, smiling back at her for the first time since their strange meeting began.

"I believe we may be able to *make use* of me in a way Voldemort doesn't anticipate," she said wickedly.

Severus reddened, but said evenly, "Tell me."

Preparations

Chapter 8 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Chapter Eight: Preparations

"Minerva! How delightful to see you again!" chuffed Horace Slughorn as the Transfiguration professor took her seat at the High Table.

His words echoed noticeably through the Great Hall thanks to the hush that had fallen over the room when she appeared at breakfast.

"Thank you, Horace," she said brightly. "I see my absence did nothing to diminish your appetite," she added, referring to his plate, which was nearly overflowing with scrambled eggs, bangers and mash, and assorted pastries.

Pomona Sprout let out a snort.

Hagrid leaned down and whispered in Minerva's ear, "Good on yeh, Perfessor."

She smiled up at the large, scruffy face and asked, "Would you be so kind as to pass me the currant jelly, Hagrid?"

Seeing that Professor McGonagall seemed perfectly at ease, the students nearest the High Table slowly returned to their conversations. The rest of the room gradually followed their example.

Minerva breathed an inward sigh of relief. She hadn't been sure what she would feel upon returning to the Great Hall, but it was turning out to be easier than she had anticipated. It helped that in the bright Scottish morning, the room looked nothing like it had the last time she had been in it.

Having a renewed sense of purpose gave her the courage to do what she would have thought impossible only the day before, despite her apprehension about the plan. It also helped that Severus had told her he took all his meals in his chambers, preferring to limit his interactions with students and staff to the absolutely necessary. Although she no longer despised him, she knew everyone would be watching the two of them intensely if they appeared in the same room.

That, she thought, would certainly destroy my appetite.

Poppy Pomfrey walked alongside her as she left the hall after finishing her meal. "I'm so happy to see you eat!" she exclaimed. "It's really nice to see a bit of the old Minerva. We've missed her."

"Thank you, Poppy. So have I," she replied.

"Oi! Minerva!" called Rolanda Hooch.

Minerva waited for the cropped-haired flying instructor, who was walking with Pomona Sprout, to catch up with them.

"Care to place a little wager on today's match? Looks to be a good one. Ravenclaws are down one Chaser thanks to that incident with the Venomous Tentacula, so they've got to start a rookie. Evens things up a bit with the Hufflepuffs," the woman added conspiratorially. "Come by my rooms after and we'll have a drink and you can collect your winnings from Pomona," she said with a grin.

Pomona, who had puffed along behind the spry Madam Hooch, shot her an annoyed glance. The Head of Hufflepuff was not especially fond of Quidditch; nevertheless, she didn't like to hear her House team disparaged.

"I'd love to, Ro," Minerva answered. "But I've got a stack of essays to mark, and I just got the reviewers' comments back on my article for *Transfiguration Today*."

"Ooh, I know how that is," exclaimed Pomona. "It's always the damned third reviewer. Sometimes I think they pay them extra to find fault. That bloke they had on my last paper for *Review of Theoretical Herbology* sent the blasted thing back *four times* for revision," she said irritably. "As if he knew his *Mimbulus mimbletonia* from his..."

"Indeed," interrupted Minerva. "So I'm afraid I'll need to beg off for the day."

She hated deceiving her friends, but she and Snape had agreed that it would be better if nobody else were privy to their arrangement. She had to admit, however grudgingly, that Albus' penchant for cloak-and-dagger secrecy had its advantages. The fewer people that knew about a thing, the fewer the opportunities for its discovery by the wrong ones. Moreover, she thought, it wouldn't do much to improve Snape's image.

In any event, she wanted to be alone for the afternoon to prepare for the evening's meeting.

Despite the resolve she had felt while she and Snape were hatching the plan, now that the thing was looming, she was unsure if she had made the right decision.

The Order hadn't heard from Harry Potter since he, Ronald and Hermione had embarked on whatever quest Albus had set them on. When Ron had suddenly reappeared at the Burrow, he reported glumly that he thought Harry wasn't making much progress. Everyone was worried, but there was nothing to do but watch and wait.

Given this state of affairs, Minerva didn't know how much information...or rather, *misinformation*...she could feed to Voldemort via Snape's memories. Anything she said was just as likely to be true as untrue.

In the absence of any direct way to mislead the Dark Lord, she and Snape had agreed that their scenarios should at least be arranged to provide maximum distraction. To that end, they had decided that they would not establish a regular schedule; he would alert her when he believed the time to be advantageous to their side. Of course, this added an element of uncertainty to what was already a difficult task, but if they were going to go through with it, she thought, they should make it count. She had to believe it would make a difference.

As she paced her sitting room later that day, she allowed herself to think about Albus for the first time since her meeting with Snape.

What would he have thought of what she was about to do? How would he have counseled her? She wondered then if Snape had discussed the plan with Albus' portrait. *Very likely*, she decided. The portraits were created and bound by magic to provide the current Head with the wisdom of his or her predecessors.

Albus had always been steadfast in his belief that Snape's position as a spy must not be compromised. Her husband had, in effect, given his life for that belief. It was almost a certainty that the portrait-Albus had urged Snape to do as Voldemort demanded.

All at once she was furious. Albus had abandoned her twice: first when he allowed...*no forced*...Severus to end his life, leaving her to face the Dark without her partner and helpmeet; and again now, this time to endure the violation of her body at the hands of the man who, however unwillingly, had ripped him from her life.

How could he? she thought, angry tears forming in her eyes. How could a husband simply pass his wife's body on to the next man like a cloak he no longer needed; a body he had loved and protected, warmed when it was cold, soothed when it ached, enjoyed with his own?

She knew that the portraits were only imprints of their subjects. They were imbued with memory of the wisdom and experience the Heads had had in life, and this gave them a façade of their living personalities, but no more. They were without souls and did not love. Nevertheless, Minerva could not help being furious with the portrait of her dead husband.

Against her will, tears began to spill from her eyes .

She rubbed her sleeve over her face roughly *Of course, the living Albus Dumbledore never shied away from sacrifice...his own or others'* she thought bitterly.

"Stop it now, Minerva Sigrid Aithne McGonagall," she told herself aloud in her well-practiced schoolmarm voice. *Speculation in the absence of evidence leads to faulty conclusions*, she thought, recalling a favorite saying of her father's. Thorfinn had been a supremely rational man, and she needed his analytical detachment now more than she ever had.

She looked at the clock. Twenty minutes to six. She had only twenty minutes until she would find out what she was made of.

Help me, Da, I'm not sure I can do this, she pleaded silently.

She needed a distraction, she decided. Then she smiled glumly. *Minerva, my girl, you might well consider how Russell's paradox applies*, she thought, echoing in her head her father's manner of speaking.

It was twelve minutes to six.

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Severus Snape sat at the massive, claw-footed desk, unmoving. Anyone who happened into the Headmaster's office just then would have assumed the man was under the influence of an Immobulus Charm, so still and unblinking was he.

However, the wizard was not enchanted. He had been sitting for the past ten minutes trying to clear his mind and calm his body in preparation for the evening's undertaking.

He was not entirely successful.

Snape rose from the Headmaster's chair to prepare the room for the task at hand. His voice pierced the silence:

"I have a request."

The portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black spoke for the group of paintings that lined the walls of the office. "Yes, Headmaster Snape, how may we be of service?"

"I would like you all to leave this room for at least an hour. You all have portraits elsewhere that you can visit, I believe?" Snape asked evenly.

"How tedious," Phineas Nigellus replied. "My only other portrait has been removed from the house of Black and now resides in a dingy container being transported I don't know where. It is most unpleasant to be tucked away in the dark, you know."

"My apologies for any inconvenience," Snape replied, "but it is necessary. I am expecting a guest this evening and do not wish to be disturbed."

"Do not wish to be observed, you mean," grumbled the painted former Headmaster.

"Quite," said Snape dryly.

"Young man, we all know who your guest is to be and what is to happen this evening," said the portrait irritably. "I don't see why we must all leave the comfort of our portraits here when you will be entertaining your *guest* in your private quarters."

"I intend to meet with my guest here," Snape replied calmly.

"Good Gods! Surely you don't mean to..."

"Yes, well, I think we can all certainly manage to provide Headmaster Snape with some privacy for one evening," interrupted the portrait of Armando Dippet. "Come, Phineas. Gentlemen... and ladies," he added, nodding toward the pictures of Dilys Derwent, Heliotrope Wilkins, Phyllida Spore, and Eoessa Sakndenburg, "let us 'shove off,' as the children say."

"Thank you, Headmaster Dippet," said Severus.

He watched the portraits disappear, Black muttering to himself, "Outrageous, completely inappropriate..." as he went.

Dumbledore's portrait was already gone, Severus noted.

He removed his wand from his robes then approached the now-empty portraits one by one. *Dissoludio*, he murmured, casting a charm on each, rendering the paintings' backgrounds blurred and out-of-focus. He doubted any of the portraits would attempt to sneak back into the room, but he intended to take no chances.

He and Minerva had decided that their meetings...as each referred to them...would take place in the Headmaster's office rather than in Snape's private quarters. For his part, Snape did not wish to introduce anything that would make their activities feel more personal. Although she hadn't said so to Severus, Minerva didn't want to carry out their scenarios in the bedroom she had sometimes shared with Albus, no matter how changed it might be from the time her husband was in residence.

Once the Disillusionment charms had been set, Snape began to feel uneasy again. He decided to do what he did on the rare occasions his powers of self-control threatened to fail him. He held his wand aloft, and said, "*Sonus*."

Woodwinds began to sound, *andante* and *pianissimo*, soon joined by the trombones, then the strings, combining in shimmering harmony and growing steadily in force and majesty. Severus began to forget himself and his predicament.

As the Pilgrims' Hymn gave way to the leaping strings, flutes and oboes of the Venusberg, Severus was far away, in an entirely different magical world...an intoxicating one that had been dreamt by Muggles.

He didn't hear the knock at the door.

The Rules of Engagement

Chapter 9 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

As she climbed the spiral staircase, Minerva heard some familiar music emanating from the Headmaster's study. When she entered the room, she recognized it as the Overture to *Tannhäuser*.

Snape was standing in front of the desk with his back to the door and hadn't heard her knock. She listened for a few moments, then spoke.

"I didn't know you liked Wagner," she said, alerting Snape to her presence. She suddenly realized she had known him since he was a boy, yet knew very little about the man.

He turned and said, "Yes. But if it bothers you, I'll turn it off."

"Not at all," she replied. "Albus and I often listened to opera." It felt good to say her husband's name aloud. "It brings back some lovely memories. He was especially partial to Verdi."

Snape said, "I would have thought Mozart."

"No. I think the epic sweep of Verdi's themes appealed to him. *Don Carlo* was his favorite," she answered.

"I'm not surprised," Snape said sardonically, then regretted it. The opera's libretto, in which an aging king orders the cleansing of heretics by *auto-da-fe*, and tortures himself with doubts about the fidelity of his much younger wife, was perhaps a bit too close to home. Whatever sins Snape thought Dumbledore had committed, he had no desire to tarnish Minerva's memories of him.

Snape's lapse in discretion apparently didn't disturb her. She said nothing. The pair stood listening as the music crashed and roiled its way to its conclusion.

"*Finite*," said Snape softly when the overture was ended. The sudden silence was overwhelming.

After a moment, Severus said gently, "You can still change your mind, Minerva. I won't think any the less of you." He realized he had just committed his second blunder in less than five minutes: Why would she care what he thought of her?

"Thank you, but no. I've made my peace with it," she replied, knowing she was lying. She hoped he wouldn't notice.

Snape just stood there.

"I think it would be best to just get on with it," she said without looking at him.

"As you wish," he said.

Third blunder. At this rate, he was going to be neck-and-neck with Weasley for the Imbecile of the Year Award.

To cover his faux pas, he asked immediately, "Would you like a drink before we begin?"

He had placed a bottle of Ogden's Firewhisky on his desk earlier that evening. He had thought she might need it. There was only one glass.

"No, thank you, Severus." On the whole, she thought, it would be better to approach this with a clear head. "But if you'd like one, please go ahead," she said.

"No." Severus would have liked the disinhibition the potent liquor might provide, but he knew it could interfere with his ability to carry out his part in the plan.

His apprehension suddenly got the better of him. "I'm sorry I got you into this, Minerva. I never intended to. I wish..." He stopped mid-sentence. He wasn't sure what he wished, and anyway, it made no difference.

"Wha canna be cured, maun be endured," she replied, using a pet phrase of her granny's. She gave Severus a wan smile.

He recognized it as more whistling in the dark.

"How do we begin?" she asked, gently prodding. When formulating the plan, they had spoken in general outlines, neither one wanting to examine the specifics too closely until absolutely necessary.

"I think we should set some ground rules first," he said.

The notion of rules gave both of them a comforting straw to grasp at.

"I will do everything in my power not to hurt you, but I'm sure you know what the Dark Lord expects," he said, forcing himself to look her squarely in the eyes for the first time that evening. She needed to understand what she was agreeing to.

"Yes, I do," she answered simply. "I trust your judgment; you know best what will please him. I know you can't be gentle."

Her words set an ache deep in his chest.

"I have become a consummate actor over the years," he said, "however, this kind of pretense is new to me. I have done some research into the practices of aficionados of sado-masochistic role-playing, and have found some ideas we might borrow." He spoke a trace too quickly.

Merlin help him, he's blushing, she thought. His embarrassment reminded her that he had years less experience in negotiating sexual matters than she did. The thought gave her a welcome feeling of control.

She smiled at him again, trying to ease his discomfort. "You are a man of many resources," she said. "What have you found to help us?"

He crossed to the desk and took a sheet of parchment from the top drawer. He handed it to her, still acutely uncomfortable.

"This is a list of activities that might make up part of our scenarios," he said. "I have left out the items I feel are inappropriate, but I think you should review the list and strike off anything you would not want me to carry out," he said.

She looked at the list with curiosity. It was rather short and mundane, she thought, given the infinite variety of human sexual expression. It didn't include many things she would have considered a part of normal relations between a man and woman.

"There's nothing I find especially objectionable," she said handing it back to him.

How can she be so sanguine about this? he wondered, returning the parchment to the desk drawer. He was still blushing.

She watched him and suddenly wondered if he had been a virgin the night he had raped her. She pushed that horrifying thought from her mind. In the week that had followed his revelation, she hadn't stopped to consider how that night in the Great Hall might have affected him. She couldn't afford to think about it now.

"Nevertheless, I think it might be advisable for us to agree on a safe word," he said, interrupting her thoughts.

"A 'safe word'?" She was unfamiliar with the term.

"It is a word selected beforehand that indicates one of the participants wants to stop the scenario."

"I see." The idea made great sense. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"I think it should be something that you decide," he answered. "It should be something that neither of us would be likely to say as part of the pretense," he added.

She thought for a moment. "How about 'Quaffle?'" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Seeing as we share an interest in Quidditch," she added, raising an eyebrow back at him.

And Shall I Couple Hell

Chapter 10 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Chapter Ten: And Shall I Couple Hell

"Quaffle," he repeated. "Very well." He didn't move.

"Severus," she said quietly, "I should like to get this over with."

"Of course. I'm sorry," he said, sounding pained. He forced himself to ask, "Do you need to make any preparations?"

"No," she said.

He swallowed hard, then said, "Would you like me to do as I did the other night in the Great Hall?"

She was confused for a moment, then realized what he meant. "No, thank you. I've taken care of it." She had decided against using the Anestheto Charm because of the chance it could deprive her of the use of her legs, but she had already placed the Lubricus Charm she knew would make things easier.

"Then if you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll ready myself," he said.

She nodded, and he disappeared through the doorway to his private quarters, which was concealed by a large, heavy bookcase to the right of the wall behind the desk.

She hoped he was not going to be foolish enough to use another Engorgio Charm. In fact, Severus had brewed a Potency Potion the previous evening; it was far safer. He went into his bedroom, retrieved a phial of the pale gold liquid and drank it. After a few moments, he felt it starting to take effect.

When he returned to the study, she was looking up at the empty portrait of Dumbledore.

"That was very clever of you," she said pointing to it, referring to the Disillusionment Charms he had used on the Headmasters' portraits.

"Thank you. I figured we didn't need an audience."

She gave a short, appreciative laugh. "No, emphatically not. What if Voldemort notices they're missing?" she added apprehensively.

"I doubt he will, but if he does, I will make the excuse that I threatened them with burning if they interrupted us."

"I assume I should leave the room in order to make it seem I am responding to a summons?" she asked.

"Yes. Just knock when you are ready, and we'll begin," he answered, sounding more certain than he felt.

She nodded and went out through the study door.

Snape stood in front of the desk, calming his mind. It was a few moments before he heard the brass knocker sound.

"Enter," he intoned.

"You wished to see me, Headmaster," Minerva said, head slightly bowed.

"Ah, Professor McGonagall. You are most prompt. I did, indeed, *wish to see you*." His inflection gave the last four words a sinister tone.

He removed his wand from his robes and cast a spell at the door. A deep rumbling sound told Minerva that it had been barred, preventing her from exiting until the Headmaster allowed it.

"Come here, witch!" Snape said forcefully, unfastening his cloak, and tossing it to the side chair next to the desk.

"No, please, no..." Minerva whispered. It didn't require any of her meager thespian skills to sound small and helpless.

Snape crossed the distance between them in three paces. He reached out and tore her outer robe open, pushing it from her shoulders. He held his wand to her neck and said, "Take it off."

The robe dropped to the floor. Her eyes were wide with terror. He had never seen her look like that, and it turned his stomach to know that he was the cause of it. Nevertheless, he grabbed her by one arm and jerked her toward the desk. He pinned her against it, her back to him. "Bend over," he whispered in her ear.

"No. You cannot do this," she begged.

"Listen to me, *Professor*," he hissed quietly, his lips right next to her ear. "I am Headmaster here, and you will serve me."

She had a moment of panic, not knowing what to say. Grasping for anything, she said, "You won't get away with this," realizing the foolish cliché came from the Muggle crime novels she had read as a girl.

"I beg to differ. You will service me in any way I choose. You belong to me, and I will use you as I like, or your precious Gryffindors will not escape their school year

unscathed, I'm afraid. Now, *bend over*."

She did so, bracing her arms on the desk.

"Good girl," Snape said, lifting his head away from her ear. "We both know I could compel your compliance with a Binding Charm, but it's so much more fun this way, don't you agree?"

She didn't answer, but he could see her back rise and fall as if she were breathing heavily.

She felt a hand caress the back of her neck and trace a path down her back and over the curve of her buttocks. She felt his hands on her bare calves. He moved them slowly up under her plain camel skirt, his fingers brushing the insides of her legs, until they came to rest just above the elastic of her knickers. He slid them down, letting them drop around her ankles.

"Give them to me," he said. She stepped out of them, and he picked them up from the floor, putting them in his robe pocket. "From now on, when you enter this room, you will be bare for me like this."

He leaned down to grab the hem of her skirt and lifted it, bunching it up around her waist. Another phrase she had read in a Muggle history book came into her mind: *Close your eyes and think of England*. She had to stifle a hysterical laugh.

He pushed a knee between her thighs to part them. She heard a zipper and felt his penis search between her legs for a moment. Then he found his purchase and entered her.

Despite the Lubricating Charm, it was painful. She gasped, and he stilled for a moment to allow her to adjust to him. He waited to hear the safe word, and when it didn't come, he began to thrust into her, knocking her thighs rhythmically against the desk. She knew he was being careful not to be too rough, but he grunted with each thrust as if he were riding her hard.

She squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, she saw a tiny droplet of moisture glistening on the surface of the desk; another fell and joined it. She moved her arm, wiping them away with the sleeve of her silk blouse, staining the cloth. Looking up at the blurred portrait above the desk, she wondered which of his several paintings Albus' image was visiting.

After another minute—or an hour, or a year—Minerva couldn't say which—he groaned and released her. She heard him breathing hard, then more slowly. She heard his zipper.

"Thank you, Professor, you may go," he said as if they had just conducted a curriculum meeting. He didn't wait for her to straighten up; he simply walked out of the room and into his private quarters.

She stood, massaging the place on her upper thighs where they had been pressed to the edge of the desk. She retrieved her torn robe and looked around for her knickers, then realized he must have taken them with him.

Just then, the door from his quarters opened and he came back in. He approached her, a stricken on his face. He didn't speak. Then he did something she didn't expect: he took her hand and squeezed it.

"How are you feeling?" he asked awkwardly.

"All right, I think," she answered, her voice stronger than she had thought it would be.

There was a long pause, then she said, "Severus, I need my underthings."

"Yes, of course," he said quickly. "How thoughtless of me."

He dropped her hand and retrieved her knickers from his pocket. As she accepted them, he noticed her hands were shaking. He felt as if all the Dementors of Azkaban had descended upon him at once.

"Minerva, I'm so very sorry," he said, turning around to give her a measure of privacy as she put her knickers back on.

"Shh, Severus. You don't need to keep apologizing to me," she said. "I know this is as hard for you as it is for me."

"Yes, but it's different—" he began.

"No, I don't really think it is," she interrupted.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked with great concern.

Her heart constricted painfully as she recalled the same words spoken long ago by another man in another room.

"No," she whispered hoarsely. "No," she said again, her voice stronger, afraid he would mistake the reason for her distress.

"I'm glad," he said quietly.

"Severus, I believe I'll have that drink now," she said.

Holiday Plans

Chapter 11 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Minerva didn't see Severus again for more than a month. She wasn't sure where he was; he might have been at Hogwarts most of the time, or somewhere else entirely. In general, nobody saw the Headmaster anyway. He allowed the Carrows to tend to disciplinary matters among the students, and the other staff and faculty more or less ran themselves. The Carrows had been slightly less enthusiastic about punishing the students lately, as most of them were still cowed by the sudden appearance of Voldemort and what had happened to Professor McGonagall in the Great Hall weeks ago, so there was far less mischief about.

The general atmosphere, at Hogwarts and in the Wizarding world at large, was one of watchful waiting and apprehension. It simply felt as if everyone was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Minerva certainly felt so. Since the night she and Snape had started their intrigue, she had been waiting for another summons, or at least a word from him, but there had been nothing so far. She wasn't sure what she expected, but it wasn't this silence.

After concluding the business of their last encounter, Severus had poured Minerva the drink she had requested, conjuring an additional glass for himself, and they sat drinking in awkward silence in the Headmaster's office. She had been just about to take her leave when a noise startled them both. It turned out to be Phineas Nigellus Black, returned from his other portrait...one hour to the minute from when he had been forced to leave the one on the Headmaster's wall...harrumphing and making a general fuss about having been Disillusioned.

"I say, Headmaster Snape, this is highly irregular. I have been pummeled about in the dark for the past hour at your request, and I return at the appointed time only to be blurred out of recognition. Now kindly put me to rights, young man," the portrait tutted.

Severus looked at Minerva, who cocked a small, amused smile at him and nodded. Severus pointed his wand at the painting, which immediately came into focus to reveal a scowling, dark-haired and bearded man in green robes and a green, peaked hat.

"Thank you," the portrait said, sounding not at all grateful.

Severus released the Disillusionment Spells on the remaining portraits, pausing for a moment to look at Minerva before pointing his wand at Albus Dumbledore's. She gave a small nod, and he broke the charm on the portrait.

One by one, the portraits refilled their frames. Dumbledore's was last, and as his familiar figure reappeared, he said, "Minerva."

"Hello, Albus," she said pleasantly, then turned to go. "Thank you for the drink, Severus," she said to the current Headmaster. He nodded curtly and opened the door for her. She disappeared down the staircase, her footfalls echoing slightly in the stairwell.

She hadn't thought about the encounter much since it had occurred, mostly through force of will. Whenever it threatened to intrude, unwelcome, into her thoughts, she pushed it away and paged through the vast library she kept in her mind. Aristotle, Paracelsus, Agrippa, Milton, Shakespeare: these and many others had been her comfort and company since her youth, and she turned to them now.

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It was two days before Christmas, and most of the students and staff had left immediately at the end of term. Poppy, Pomona, and Rolanda had all tried to convince Minerva to come home with them for the holidays, but she assured them that she preferred to remain at Hogwarts, which was true enough.

"This is my home, Poppy. I've lived here for forty-one years, and I'll be hanged if I can be chased out by the likes of Severus Snape and a few Death Eaters," Minerva snapped the third time the mediwitch invited her to spend the holidays.

"Yes, I know, Minerva. It isn't so much Snape I'm worried about; I doubt he'll show his ugly face around here during the holidays in any event. Anyway, you can handle him well enough when he's not surrounded by that bunch of thugs," Poppy said soothingly. She put her hand on Minerva's arm and added gently, "I just think maybe you shouldn't spend your first Christmas without Albus alone."

Tears suddenly stung Minerva's eyes, and she blinked them back forcefully. "You're a good friend, Poppy," she said. "But I want to be here, where he was. We spent almost all the Christmases we were married here in this castle, and it wouldn't feel right to be anywhere else." She felt the traitorous tears wet her cheeks and swallowed the sound that had been threatening to erupt with them.

Poppy watched her friend's struggle, and it ached her deep in her solar plexus. She had known Minerva since their school days...or more accurately, know~~of~~ her...when Poppy had been a doe-eyed first-year, in awe of the Quidditch captain, dueling champion, Head Girl, and possessor of Merlin knew what other accomplishments. They had briefly been in Hogwarts' wizard chess club together before Minerva had given it up after Christmas in her seventh year.

The two witches had become fast friends when Poppy had reappeared at Hogwarts years later, with her mediwitch license in her hand and eight years' experience in the Artifact Accident and Spell Damage Wards at St. Mungo's under her belt. Over the years that followed, she had come to know Minerva better than anyone except Albus; each knew the other's secrets and follies, and that was saying a lot because Minerva was an intensely private person not given to confidences. Each had provided a uniquely female brand of love and support to the other during the darkest hours of their lives.

Minerva had held her tongue when she met Poppy's husband, thinking him an arrogant, overbearing git with very little to back up his bluster, but she provided a soft shoulder to cry on whenever her friend discovered one or another of the wretched man's serial infidelities. It had been Minerva who picked up the pieces without an "I-told-you-so" when Poppy's troubled marriage had finally given way under the strain of her job and her roving husband's utter inability to accept his wife's power and independence.

For her part, Poppy almost never said anything when she thought Albus Dumbledore was taking Minerva too much for granted, but provided a sympathetic ear whenever Minerva had had enough and needed to blow off steam about the same. She had been Minerva's strong tonic, at turns professionally detached and gently maternal, in the long months during which the older witch was grieving the loss of her baby.

It was this shared history that made Poppy know without thinking about it that her friend didn't want sympathy or soft comfort at the moment. As much as the professional mediwitch knew that Minerva needed to cry over her husband's death and all that had followed it, Poppy knew that her dear friend couldn't afford the luxury of anger and grief just now, when everything was coming down around them. The world was a cold, hard place at the moment, and Minerva would do everything in her not-inconsiderable power to shelter the children in her care. That did not include crying over what was beyond healing. So Poppy would swallow her own rage over everything she had seen her friend sacrifice and endure; Minerva didn't need it.

"In any event, I won't be alone; we have twenty-two students on the list to remain at school for the holidays," Minerva said, briskly wiping her handkerchief across her cheeks as if brushing away an errant fly. She didn't have to add that this record number of stragglers was due to the disappearances and interrogations that had steadily increased in number since the fall of the Ministry. Many parents thought their children would be safer at Hogwarts. A few had simply vanished, leaving their children with no other place to go for the holidays.

"All right, Minerva," Poppy replied, "if you're sure. But you know my door is always open if you should change your mind...no notice necessary."

"I do, thank you," Minerva said, squeezing her friend's hand warmly.

Poppy charmed her valise to float along behind her as she turned to trudge down the path to the gate and the Apparition point beyond.

When Minerva returned to her quarters that evening, she found a note bearing the familiar seal lying on her desk. It gave her a shock; she had forgotten about Snape and their arrangement...almost.

She opened the note:

Professor McGonagall,

Please see me in my office tomorrow afternoon at 5:00.

S. Snape, Headmaster

Typical Severus, she thought. No indication of whether this was about their arrangement, or if it was some other kind of summons. She wondered if she should wear her knickers.

She had just tossed the note into her fireplace, when she realized that tomorrow was Christmas Eve.

It would have been her fortieth wedding anniversary.

Anyone listening would have been hard-pressed to say whether the sound that bubbled up from the Deputy Headmistress' throat was laughter or sobbing.

Honesty

Chapter 12 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Chapter Twelve: Honesty

When Minerva arrived at the Headmaster's office at the appointed hour, she still didn't know what he intended. Would they talk about the continuation of their plan, or would he expect to launch right into the next scenario?

She was no more enlightened when she entered the room to find him standing in much the same spot in which she had discovered him at their last meeting.

Gods! Did the man have to be so damned inscrutable all the time?

She decided to strike a neutral tone. "You wished to see me, Headmaster?"

Her question about his immediate intentions was answered when he spoke. "Minerva, thank you for coming." There was none of the oily *politesse* he normally exuded when he was in his Death Eater guise. She was glad she had opted to keep her knickers on.

"I'm sorry to call you here on Christmas Eve, but something has arisen that we may need to consider," he said, indicating for her to sit down on the chair next to the desk.

She did so, then exclaimed, "Severus, what on earth happened?"

She was referring not to his implication that something was up, but to what she had seen when he moved to join her in a neighboring chair. Rather than his normal, smooth gait, Severus walked with a distinct lurch, a grimace of pain on his face when he took a step on his left leg.

He sat with difficulty in the chair next to her and said, "Nothing serious. Just a fond reminder of my place, courtesy of the Dark Lord."

"Severus Snape, that is *not* nothing," she replied, suddenly his teacher once again. "You are injured. Have you seen Poppy or a Healer?"

"I suspect Madam Pomfrey would be more likely to supply me with a Castrato Curse than a healing spell were I to appear in the infirmary," he said, the smallest hint of humor in his voice.

"No doubt," Minerva allowed grimly. "But Severus, it looks to be serious. I'm no mediwitch, but I'd like to have a look at it, if you'll permit me. I had to patch up a few Aurors under the table way back when, so I might be able to help. And while I'm looking it over, you can tell me what happened," she said, sounding very much as if she were dressing down a student who had been injured while up to no good.

"As you wish, Professor," he replied with an amused cock of the eyebrow, and bent to move his robes out of the way and pull up his trouser leg.

The reason for Snape's long absence from public appearances was immediately evident. Minerva gasped when she saw the dark purple bruising that ran from just above the man's left ankle up and around his leg to the medial aspect of his kneecap. "Severus, this leg has been badly broken!" she said in distress as she gently felt and prodded her way around his tibia.

"It seems to be healing adequately, however," Snape replied, wincing at her ministrations.

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"Just after our last meeting, when I went to share the memory with him," Severus answered, grimacing as she continued to probe his leg.

"He wasn't pleased?" she asked, looking up at him. The idea that they had done it for nothing, or that the Dark Lord might require something even worse, filled her with sudden and acute anxiety.

"On the contrary, he was most... gratified. I simply made a blunder during our scenario, and the Dark Lord was kind enough to correct me," Severus said bitterly.

"What blunder?"

"I believe that, at one point during our exchange, I said that you belonged to me. That didn't sit well with the Dark Lord," he answered.

"I see."

Actually, Severus thought, the Dark Lord had probably been happy for an excuse...not that he was in the habit of making them...to punish him after viewing the memory. Severus knew that Voldemort had, in fact, been very aroused by his lieutenant's defiling of the powerful witch, and had needed to find an outlet for his excitement.

After he had finished viewing the memory, Voldemort had turned to Snape, saying, "Excellent work, Severus. It would appear our dear Professor McGonagall is at last learning her place."

"I hope so, my Lord," Snape had answered.

"You may go, Severus," the snake-man had said.

As Snape turned to leave, he was called back. "Severus?"

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Minerva McGonagall belongs to *me... Crucio!*" the creature had cried, and Snape was suddenly catapulted into a world of pain. His leg had shattered at minute five, and Voldemort had left him to drag his way out, borne along on an ocean of agony. He had remained in one of Malfoy Manor's many bedrooms for three days, until he was able to Floo his way back into his chambers at Hogwarts.

Severus' recollection was interrupted when Minerva asked, "Do you think we accomplished anything? Other than nearly getting your left leg cursed into Valhalla?"

"Perhaps not what we intended," he conceded, "but our efforts did have one very salutary effect."

"Which was?"

"They prevented the violation of a Muggle girl," Snape said quietly.

"Oh, Severus," she said, feeling her chest tighten. After she caught her breath, she asked, "How?"

"As we had hoped, our memory..." she noted the word 'our' "...provided a distraction at an opportune moment."

Although Severus made it sound as if it were merely a lucky turn, it had been a bit more than that. He had not intended to use the memory immediately upon being summoned by the Dark Lord. He had wanted to wait until the creature was discussing with them matters more important than a bit of Muggle-torture, but when he saw the terrified, naked teenager in the manor's drawing room, bound by magical chains, he was torn.

"Ah, Severus, I'm pleased you could join us," the creature had hissed, as if there were any choice. "Walden has kindly provided us with *aemuse-gueule* to enjoy prior to this evening's meeting." He walked over to the girl and said, "Thank you for the pleasure of your company this evening, my dear."

The girl had started screaming then, and Macnair silenced her with a charm. Her eyes continued to roll wildly from the creature to Macnair. When they had fixed beseechingly on Severus for a moment, he made a decision.

"My Lord," he said, "perhaps when Macnair and Avery have finished with the girl, you would care to see what I have brought you before we become absorbed in more serious matters."

The Dark Lord's red eyes had glowed with interest. "Severus, you have been hard at work with our dear Professor McGonagall, I believe," he said.

"Indeed, most assiduously," Snape had replied.

"Bella, the Pensieve!" the Dark Lord called.

Macnair and Avery looked very put out. "What shall we do with the girl?" Macnair asked hopefully.

"Kill her," Voldemort had answered off-handedly, no longer at all interested in the Muggle.

Snape had not reacted when the girl's eyes widened, just before Macnair's "*Avada Kedavra*" emptied them of life. Severus had had years of practice.

Minerva's voice once again brought him back to the present. "I'm glad you were able to save the girl," she said earnestly.

"I did not save her," Snape said, more sharply than he had intended.

"But you said..."

Severus interrupted, "I merely prevented her from enduring an hour or more of agony before she was murdered. She was dead the moment she was unfortunate enough to cross paths with Macnair," he said angrily.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Minerva said. "I didn't mean to imply that you failed. I know you did the best you could for the girl." She didn't add *just as you did for me*.

Severus could not bear the kindness in her voice. "Be that as it may, Minerva, it has no bearing on what I need to discuss with you this evening."

She waited, understanding that his sudden chilliness was a form of self-flagellation rather than anything to do with her.

"The Dark Lord summoned us yesterday to tell us he thinks he is getting closer to catching Potter," Severus said.

"Gods!" Minerva exhaled.

"He has set a trap, but has not deigned to share the details of it with me, nor, to my knowledge, with anyone else. He has asked his Death Eaters to make ready to receive Potter, should his plan succeed, and to that end we are instructed to take extra security precautions to prevent those close to the boy from doing anything to effect his escape. I am instructed, of course, to take *special* measures to ensure you are not in a position to help him." Snape looked at her steadily.

She felt herself shiver in spite of herself, but kept her voice even. "I understand. What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing more than you have already done," he reassured her. "If you are willing, of course. Aside from the Dark Lord's instructions, it might be advantageous to have a distraction ready should the Potter boy actually fall into his hands." Snape doubted even the allure of watching him violate Minerva McGonagall again could distract the Dark Lord from his quarry, but he was clutching at straws, and in any event, he would be expected to deliver on his promise to keep Britain's most powerful witch in line or suffer worse than a shattered tibia.

"I'm willing, Severus," she said. "Is there anything in particular you need me to do, or shall we follow the same procedure as last time?"

"I think same procedure will suffice. I will need to vary the scenario, of course," he said, indicating his bad leg. They both knew as well that the Dark Lord would expect variety in his entertainments.

"Of course," she answered. She wondered with a prick of anxiety what he was planning to do with her, but reminded herself that he had taken care not to hurt her in the past. "I trust you, Severus," she said.

"Thank you, Minerva," he said, moved more than he would have cared to admit. He thought to himself that she was the only person in his adult life who had ever trusted him without an ulterior motive. Albus Dumbledore and the Dark Lord had each had their own agendas and reasons for keeping him close, and they had little to do with his personal qualities. They had trusted him only because they held the thumbscrews. Minerva's faith in him was something else again. She trusted him because he had done what he could to help her and because she had found him, against all odds, to be a man of honor. That meant a great deal to him, he suddenly realized. It made him hate what he was about to do to her all the more.

"I'm ready whenever you are, Severus," she said.

"All right. I will need a minute to prepare," he said, his voice strangely thick.

"Of course. I'll be just outside the door. When you're ready, just tell me to come in," she said, relishing the miniscule hint of control it gave her to issue the instructions this time. When she got outside the door, she removed her knickers, stowing them in the pocket of her robes.

When he had taken his potion, he re-entered the room and removed his outer robe, so he was wearing only a plain white shirt and black wool trousers. He placed a chair in the middle of the room and sat down facing the door. "Enter, Professor McGonagall," he said loudly.

She came in, stopped just in front of his chair, and said, "You summoned me, Headmaster?"

"Yes, Professor. I find I am need of your particular talents this evening," he said.

She said nothing. He brandished his wand so she could see what he was doing, and Banished her robes to a side chair. She didn't move or speak. She wore her customary cream-colored silk blouse and a dark gray wool skirt.

"Lift your skirt for me," he said silkily.

Slowly, she bent and picked her skirt up, raising it to her thighs.

"Higher," he ordered.

She obeyed, lifting it to her waist, revealing her pubic mound.

"I see you have learned to follow instructions, Professor," he said. "Turn around. Slowly."

She did so, giving him time to look at her from every angle. When she had completed the rotation, his head was cocked to one side as if he were inspecting her.

"Very good." He used his wand to rotate his chair so it faced the desk, which he cleared of its papers and lamp with a Banishment Charm. "Get up on the desk."

She had trouble climbing on the edge, so he lowered its height with his wand. "Lie down."

She did so. The desk's polished surface was cold under her bare skin.

"Spread your legs."

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she moved her heels apart and opened her knees to him. He said nothing for a few seconds, ostensibly admiring the view, then rose to his feet. He was coming toward her, unzipping his fly, when he suddenly lurched and fell to one side, crashing to the ground with a terrible cry of pain, holding his injured leg.

She was immediately up, yelling, "Severus!" and knelt down beside him. "Gods! Are you hurt?"

He didn't say anything for a minute, just held his leg, breathing hard, with his face screwed up in pain. Then he muttered, "What does it look like, woman?"

She wasn't sure if he was still in character, until he caught her worried eye, and let out a snort of laughter.

Immensely relieved, both that he appeared to be unhurt, and that they had obviously interrupted their act, she gave a feline swipe at his shoulder. "You scared me to death!" she chided. "Is your leg re-broken, do you think?" she added worriedly.

"No. I just put too much weight on it and it hurt. It will be all right in a moment," he said. "I'm sorry to have ruined things. Perhaps we can just pick up where we left off. I can make some excuse for the gap in the memory," he said.

"Don't be daft, Severus," she said. "You are obviously in no shape to continue with this. Unless you think you could manage with me on top?" she said.

His eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline, then he realized she was serious. "No, I don't think so, Minerva. That would likely be worse, and besides, I doubt it would appeal to the Dark Lord." He was obviously surprised at her suggestion.

"No, I suppose not," she sighed. She helped him to his feet. "I suppose we should pack it in for the evening," she said glumly.

He was once again astonished at the woman's fortitude and determination. "Minerva, you are the most remarkable witch I have ever known," he said.

"You're not the first person to say that," she said primly to hide her embarrassment at the extravagance of the compliment, "but I have to wonder what brought on this sudden effusiveness?"

"It's just that your ability to focus on the mission, despite the cost to yourself, is quite beyond my experience of most wizards or witches," he replied.

"Rather a case of pot and kettle, I should think," she said.

"It isn't the same..." he began.

"You've said that before," she retorted.

Severus leaned against the desk to support his painful leg. After a moment he said, "In light of my disability, perhaps we should forgo the evening's work."

"Indeed," she said. As she picked up her robe, she said, "Poppy's gone for the holiday. I'll take a look in her stores for something for your leg. Do you have any requests?" she asked, knowing that as a master potion-maker, he knew far better than she did what would be beneficial.

"It's probably too late for any healing potions to be of use. Perhaps just something for pain? I used up my reserves and wasn't especially anxious to ask Poppy," he said with a grim smile.

"That shouldn't be too hard to find. I'll send a house-elf up with it, if that's all right."

"Thank you."

"Good night, Severus. No need to see me out, if you please," she tutted, as she saw him start to limp toward her.

"Good night, Minerva," he said and turned toward his private quarters.

As she watched him lurch painfully away, a thought occurred to her. "Severus?"

He turned. "Yes, Minerva?"

"What if you just had me...." She stopped, annoyed with herself. She had never had trouble saying the words before, but the strangeness of their situation made her uncharacteristically shy.

He raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"Fellate you," she forced herself to finish, the formal term feeling somehow easier to say to him than any of the more colloquial expressions.

"Minerva, that's utterly out of the ques..." he started, reddening, but she cut him off.

"I'd rather that than have you missing an arm or some other limb the next time I see you, Severus." When he began to remonstrate again, she added, "I assure you, it's no worse for me than the other. Besides, I'm sure the Dark Lord would be beside himself with joy if you brought him that particular memory." The thought that Severus might never have had that done for him suddenly unnerved her. "Unless you don't like it," she added quickly.

"It isn't that. I'm just not sure I could prevent myself from, er..." he stammered.

"Ejaculating?" she asked, suddenly the no-nonsense schoolteacher and very much in charge.

"Yes," he said, avoiding her eyes.

"Severus, if we're going to continue with this plan, I think we need to be completely honest with one another," she said, making a decision.

"I was unaware that we had been anything else," he said.

She looked at him intently.

"Severus, are you a virgin?" she asked.

"What?" he asked incredulously. He could not believe the turn this conversation had taken.

"I mean, were you a virgin before this?"

He opened his mouth to object to this preposterous line of questioning, then stopped. She was right. It was time for them to be open with one another. "No."

"I'm very glad," she said softly.

He just nodded.

"Was it Lily?" She hoped it had been. Severus deserved some happy memories, she thought.

"Gods, no!" he exclaimed. "She hated me," he added quietly.

When Minerva said nothing, he felt compelled to explain. He couldn't bear the thought that she might believe him capable of forcing himself on unwilling women. He realized he had told her he declined to participate in the Dark Lord's revels, but he knew she had heard the rumors of Death Eaters' other, extra-curricular debauches.

"There were plenty of women hangers-on in the early days," he said. "They were more than willing to... accommodate ... even the likes of me, if it would get them closer to the Dark Lord. After his disappearance, of course, they scattered like rats."

The few women who had actively pursued Severus Snape in those days were largely ex-Slytherins not pretty enough to snag one of the better-looking Death Eaters. They were hungry young women, excited by the idea of the Dark Arts, but unpleasantly surprised when faced with the reality. Snape had bedded them eagerly enough, but they had all become tiresome in the end, with their complaints and demands, and ultimately, their fears. After the Dark Lord's fall, Severus had taken a more economic view of things, and made infrequent trips to one of Knockturn Alley's brothels on the rare occasions when he felt the need to be touched by another human being.

"Thank you for being honest with me, Severus," Minerva said. "Now/ will be honest with *you*. When we broached the idea of implementing this scheme, I thought it would be... well, not easy, precisely, but..." She stopped, struggling for the right words, then gave up trying to find them. "I don't really know what I thought. But it has turned out to be harder than I imagined."

He looked pained. "Minerva..." he began.

"Not because of anything you did," she interrupted. "It's just the nature of the thing, I suppose. But what has made it more difficult, I think, is the way you and I have been pussyfooting around one another. Let's stop that. I do appreciate your concern for my feelings. When you showed me your list of possible activities, oral copulation wasn't on it. I need to know if that was because you preferred not to do it, or because you thought it might offend my sensibilities. Because if it's the latter, you needn't worry. My sensibilities are far less fragile than you might imagine."

Snape was rendered uncharacteristically speechless. When he saw her looking at him expectantly, he forced himself to find his tongue. "I assumed you would prefer not to," he finally said.

"Never assume, Mr. Snape," she said, as if she were correcting a student who had misstated the third exception to Gamp's Law. "Now, do you think we can manage to accomplish what we're here for, or should we give it up as a bad job?" she asked, beginning to fully inhabit her teaching persona.

She had found her power.

"I am willing to continue," he said slowly, eyeing this new, but somehow familiar, Minerva McGonagall appraisingly.

"Good." Using wandless magic, she moved the chair he had been sitting in back to its original position facing the door. "Why don't you have a seat, and we'll begin again. I'll follow your lead," she said.

When he didn't move, she said, "If you're quite ready, Severus?" A glance at his trousers told her practiced eye that the Potency Potion was still doing its work. "Or do you need a minute?"

"No," he said, limping to the chair. "I'm ready." And he sat.

She turned and briskly left the room.

Christmases Past and Present

Chapter 13 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Severus and Minerva were having what they would come to think of as their customary drink after having finished what they set out to do. When their work was ended, Severus had Summoned the bottle of Firewhisky and two glasses. They sat sipping the liquor in companionable silence, each lost in thought, when Severus felt the familiar burning on his arm. When he winced and moved his other hand to cover the spot, Minerva's eyes widened, and she whispered, "Severus, do you think...?"

"I don't know, but I'd better go," he answered, setting down his drink and standing with difficulty. He Summoned his cloak and moved toward the fireplace.

As he took a pinch of Floo powder, Minerva said anxiously, "Let me know as soon as you can."

He nodded, stepped into the fireplace, and was gone.

She walked back to where she had been sitting and picked up her glass. She didn't feel quite like returning to her own quarters yet. She felt very much alone, and it seemed right somehow to be here in Albus' (*Snape's*, she corrected herself) office. It was Christmas Eve. Her wedding anniversary.

After finishing her drink, she went to the side chair and collected her wand from her robe pocket. She went around the room, methodically breaking the Disillusionment Charms Severus had placed on the Heads' portraits, ending with Dumbledore's. She crossed over to the desk and poured herself another glass of Firewhisky, sat down, and waited.

After a few minutes, the portraits began to reappear, and once again, Dumbledore's was last to return. Minerva set down her drink and stood, facing his painting. Finally, she spoke: "Happy anniversary, darling."

"Happy anniversary, my love," the portrait answered quietly.

"Anniversary? Why didn't you say something, my boy? Many congratulations, Dumbledore, Deputy Headmistress! How long is it?" exclaimed the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black.

"Oh, pipe down, you old fool, and let the young folks have their moment," the painted Dilys Derwent tutted at him.

"Well, I must say..." began Phineas huffily, when he was shushed by several of the other portraits, who were watching the exchange between Minerva and her late husband's portrait with interest.

"Forty years." Minerva, undisturbed, answered Phineas' question without looking away from Dumbledore's portrait. "Do you remember our wedding?" she asked the painted figure of her husband.

"Of course. I remember how beautiful you were, and how nervous I was. But not you. You were calm as the loch on a windless day. I remember your father's toasts, and I remember you singing to me. What was the song, again?"

She surprised herself by starting to sing quietly:

"Amang the train there is a swain

I dearly lo' mysel',

But what's his name, or whaur's his hame,

I dinna care tae tell.

Ilka lassie has her laddie,

Nane they say, hae I,

Yet a' the lads, they smile at me,

When comin' thro' the rye."

The portrait Dumbledore smiled at her. "I remember how I loved you," he said.

"I remember that, too," she said softly. After a moment, she asked, "Why did you leave me, Albus?"

"It wasn't my choice to make," the portrait replied.

"How can you say that? You practically forced Severus to kill you," she said, angry with herself for arguing with a portrait, but unable to stop.

"I only chose the time and method, my angel. I was dying already."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to suffer. I didn't want us to spend our last months together worrying about what was to come," he told her.

"So you cocked up a scheme to get yourself murdered so I wouldn't suffer?" she asked in disbelief, two spots of angry color rising to tint her pale face.

"It seemed the best way. Voldemort had given the Malfoy boy the mission to kill me; Severus prevented it. And cemented his position within his inner circle in doing so. It was for..."

"For the greater good," she finished.

"Yes."

"Did you think of me *at all*?"

"Of course. I just told you, I..."

"Didn't want me to suffer, yes I heard you," she cut him off coldly. "Do ye not think *I have* suffered?" she asked, her brogue breaking through in her anger.

"I know you have. I'm sorry, Minerva. Truly sorry." She knew, of course, that the portrait couldn't feel sorry, but it was what the living Albus would have said.

"I didn't even get to say goodbye to you. After forty years, I should have thought you owed me that," she said fiercely, her voice low and rough in the attempt to drive back tears.

"I'm sorry," the portrait repeated.

"Did you think of me at all? At the end?" she asked.

"Every moment. It was always you," the portrait answered.

The tears began to spill from her eyes, though her voice did not break. "I loved you, Albus."

"I loved you, Minerva." She knew, still, that the portrait was merely repeating what its subject would have said; there was nothing behind it but the ghost of memory. But it made her feel better, somehow, to hear it.

She turned away from the portrait and transformed into her Animagus form. The tabby cat walked over to the hearth, turned around three times, then settled down by the fire to wait.

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She was right. The Dark Lord was nearly undone when he saw the latest memory Snape brought, and it made a difference.

When Severus arrived at Malfoy Manor after the summons, he found the Dark Lord in a state of high excitement.

"Severus, it appears my plan is unfolding just as I anticipated. Potter is doing exactly what I expected of him, the fool, and he is walking right into my trap."

"Excellent news, my Lord! Would my Lord like to tell me of the plan now that it is coming to fruition?" Snape asked.

"All in good time, Severus."

Other Death Eaters were appearing one by one, either through the door, having Apparated, or emerging from the fireplace, as had Severus. When the entire inner circle was assembled, the creature addressed them.

"I have called you all here so that you may witness the culmination of our work. Tonight I shall kill Harry Potter and fulfill the prophecy and my destiny." The Dark Lord's eyes held a manic glow that made Snape extremely nervous. "In a few minutes," he continued, "I expect to receive word that the brat has been trapped, then I shall go to retrieve him myself."

The assembled Death Eaters murmured their approval.

"My Lord, would it not be wise to allow some of your faithful servants to accompany you to get the boy? In case he is protected?" Snape asked.

"He is alone, accompanied only by the Mudblood girl. Unless, Severus, you are suggesting that my faithful servants have not carried out the tasks I required of them?" the creature asked.

"No, my Lord," Snape answered. *If Granger was with Potter, the boy at least had the benefit of a few brains on his side* he thought, clinging to a thread of hope.

"I trust you have all ensured that the members of the Order of the Phoenix are otherwise occupied?" the Dark Lord inquired.

They answered collectively, "Yes, my Lord."

"And Severus, is Professor McGonagall accounted for?" the Dark Lord hissed.

Snape saw his chance. "Indeed, she is, my Lord. In fact, we had just been discussing a matter of discipline when your summons arrived," he said.

"Really? I am sorry to have interrupted it," the creature replied, his interest obviously piqued.

"The lesson had ended, my Lord. It was a brief meeting, in any case. In fact, if my Lord would care to view the memory now, it might provide an excellent entertainment while you wait for your trap to spring," Snape said. "I believe my Lord will find it most invigorating, and it will take only a few minutes," he added.

The Dark Lord seemed to be wavering, but his desire eventually won out. "Bring me the Pensieve, and hurry up about it!" Wormtail scurried over with the item, and Snape used his wand to remove a long, silvery tendril of memory from his head, which he deposited into the Pensieve. The Dark Lord leaned into it eagerly.

Snape was seated in a chair facing the door of his office. A knock sounded. "Enter," Snape said.

"You wished to see me, Headmaster?" said Minerva McGonagall, her head down and her voice toneless.

"You may approach me." She did so and stood in front of the chair.

"Kneel." She obeyed, dropping to her knees in front of him.

"Now we will find out whether that sharp tongue of yours has any useful skills," Snape said silkily. He unzipped his fly, opened the placket of his trousers, and freed his erect penis from its confines. "Put me in your mouth," he commanded. As she put her palms on the floor and leaned toward him, he grabbed her by the hair, and crooned, "Mustn't bite." He released her hair and pushed her head toward his member.

She took his half his length in her mouth and began to suck him, moving her lips back and forth, running her tongue along the underside of his shaft. His breathing began to get faster. She moved one of her hands to the base of his penis and began to stroke him as she moved her mouth over the head, circling it with her tongue. After a few moments, he grabbed her hand and moved it inside his trousers to cradle his testicles. He grabbed her head and pushed himself further into her mouth and down her throat. She gagged for a moment, then adjusted to him. He held her by the hair at the back of her head as he pumped in and out of her mouth. She whimpered around him and turned her eyes upward to see his face. His breath was coming in ragged gasps, and he was trembling as his orgasm built. When she moved her tongue so that it brushed the sensitive ridge at the tip of his cock with each thrust, he could stand it no more. He released her head and pulled abruptly out of her mouth, shooting bursts of

warm semen into her face.

She stayed perfectly still while he shuddered his last. When he was finished, he brusquely removed her hand from his trousers, put his now-flaccid penis back, and zipped up.

"Did you like that, whore?" he asked. When she said nothing, he shouted, "Answer me!"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Yes, what?" he asked.

"Yes, Headmaster."

"Good. Go wash yourself. You're filthy."

She rose and looked around for something with which to wipe her face. Snape reached over to the other chair and tossed her her robe. "Use this." She hesitated, then used a corner of the robe to wipe his come off her face.

"Now get out," he said.

She folded the robe over her arm and left.

When Voldemort bent from the Pensieve, his reptilian eyes were glowing with excitement. "Severus, you have tamed the wildcat beyond my expectations! And so quickly!" he exclaimed in delight. Speaking in a soft hiss that made Snape's flesh crawl, he asked, "Severus, how did it feel?"

"Exquisite, my Lord. She has talents that have been underappreciated at Hogwarts... until now," Snape confided.

"That old fool was, no doubt, too high-minded to take full advantage of them," cackled the creature, referring to Dumbledore.

Snape could see the Dark Lord replaying images from the memory in his mind. Humiliation, subjugation, terror... these were what the Dark Lord saw and relished. It would not have occurred to him that such an act could be anything else. Snape nearly pitied him.

In his excitement and delight at the memory, Voldemort failed to notice Nagini trying to penetrate his mind, and by the time the snake had found her way into his consciousness, it was moments too late. The Potter boy would escape once again.

When the Dark Lord returned from Godric's Hollow, his wrath was uncontrollable. Every Death Eater in the room...including Bellatrix Lestrange, who was usually exempted from his shows of temper...suffered from it. Curiously, Snape, who had fully expected to bear the brunt of his anger, was spared the worst, and sustained only a broken nose and numerous bruises and contusions. He concluded that it was because the Dark Lord wanted him relatively whole and unbroken in order to fulfill his role as Minerva McGonagall's surrogate tormentor. The creature needed his body and his memories.

When the Dark Lord finally dismissed his attendants, Snape Floo-ed back to his office. Stepping out of the fire, he almost tripped over the tabby cat curled up asleep on the hearth.

"Minerva?" he queried as the cat woke and stretched its paws. A moment later the cat had become Professor McGonagall once again.

"Severus! Thank Merlin you're back. What happened? Does Voldemort have Harry? Is he all right? Have you been hurt?" came her fusillade of questions.

"Give me a moment to catch my breath, Minerva," he replied, limping over to the chair.

"I'm sorry, Severus... Oh, your nose!" she cried, having espied the blood on his face and the odd shape of his already misshapen proboscis.

"It's nothing. Hurts," he said wearily.

"Will you allow me to fix it?" she asked, picking up her wand.

"Not worth fixing, probably. But be my guest..."

"*Episkey*," she said crisply. The spell was followed by an ugly crackling sound and Snape's grunt of pain. "*Scourgify*," she added, and the blood was cleansed from his face and collar.

"Are you injured anywhere else?" she asked.

"No."

She looked relieved. "So tell me, what happened?" she asked anxiously.

"Potter is safe," he replied, gently probing his newly adjusted nose with the pads of his fingers. "Or to be more accurate, he is not in the hands of the Dark Lord."

"Thank Merlin! Do you know where he is?"

"No. Only that he and Miss Granger were at Godric's Hollow, and that the Dark Lord expected it."

"Hermione was with him?"

"Apparently. Fortunately for them, the Dark Lord was detained and did not get there in time to capture Potter."

"Detained? How?"

"By you."

"Me?" she asked in confusion. Then understanding dawned. "The memory."

"Precisely," he said. "As you predicted, the Dark Lord found it most compelling."

Severus was watching her closely for her reaction. She was a difficult woman to read...always had been...but he thought he recognized some of the emotions flickering across her face: there was joy...at Harry's escape; pride...at having helped effect it; but also anger, shame, grief, and a host of other, less well-defined emotions for which neither she nor Severus would have had a name.

"Severus, he must have been furious when he realized he'd lost Harry. How did you escape serious injury?" she asked.

"There were many others there to absorb his wrath, and he needs me in serviceable condition," he said, still watching her closely.

She knew immediately what he meant. She nodded.

"It's late. I am tired," he said.

"Yes. I'm sorry to keep you, Severus. I was anxious to hear the outcome of your meeting. I hope you don't mind my staying," she said.

"Not at all." He knew also that she had stayed partly out of concern for him, worried about the condition in which he might return. The idea that someone was waiting for him...cared what happened to him...was novel. It was something he would have to examine more closely, but later, when he wasn't so tired. "Shall I see you to your chambers?" he asked.

She was amused. As if he were a suitor seeing her home from a particularly late date. "No, Severus. I'm perfectly all right on my own. Besides, it would look very odd if we were seen."

"True. I wasn't thinking." He sounded spent.

She pressed his hand. "Good night, Severus."

"Good night." As she headed for the door, he added, "Happy Christmas, Minerva."

She turned. She had forgotten. "Happy Christmas, Severus."

She stepped out of the office and made her way down the corridor toward the infirmary to look for the pain potion she had promised him. Something had changed between them, she thought. They had admitted, however tacitly, that they could be something more than just two victims of circumstance, clinging together out of desperation and resenting one another for it. They could be...not friends, exactly, but something near enough. In wartime, near enough would have to do.

Severus stood in front of the dying fire in his office, rubbing his temples. He took off his cloak and hung it on the peg in the corner. As he opened the door to his private quarters, the portrait of Dumbledore spoke.

"You did well tonight, Severus."

Severus went through the door, slamming it behind him.

Of Quaffles and Pawns

Chapter 14 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Minerva's days went on as before; the students and her friends returned from Christmas holidays, and classes resumed. Privately everyone thought that Professor McGonagall seemed very much her old self again, which could only mean that she was still in denial about what had happened to her. Publicly they told one another how brave, how remarkable she was.

She and Severus met three more times before she used the safe word.

Their routine, insofar as it was one, always began with a brief note inviting her to his office. She would arrive at the appointed time, meet with Severus briefly to exchange news and other pleasantries, then they would begin the scenario. They didn't discuss what they would do beforehand; after their frank conversation on Christmas Eve, it seemed unnecessary. She trusted him not to harm her, and he never did.

He had her on the floor, her skirt around her waist and her blouse open. He was on top of her, with his hands pinning her wrists to the floor above her head. He had entered her swiftly, and was thrusting, not hard, but pretending and grunting with it, when an image exploded into her mind with the force of a curse. It was a fragment from a long-ago incident: Albus holding her the same way, grunting on top of her, on a different floor in a different lifetime. She felt an insistent heat moving through her body, settling in her core. The suddenness of it, and the shock, took her breath. She needed air.

"Stop! Severus, please!" She was pulling at her wrists, trying to free them, then remembered the safe word. "Quaffle!"

He immediately rolled off her, releasing her wrists, and sat up. "Minerva? Are you all right? Did I hurt you?" he asked, his anxiety making his voice sharper than he intended.

She lay panting, still trying to erase the memory from her mind and the unwelcome feeling from her body.

"Minerva?"

"I'm all right, Severus. I'm sorry," she said, putting an arm over her eyes.

He pulled her skirt down to cover her and sat watching her anxiously. When she uncovered her eyes and looked at him, he gave her his hand to help her sit up. He stood, quickly fastened his trousers, then helped her to her feet.

"Are you hurt, Minerva?"

"No, I just... It was a memory. I couldn't continue. I'm sorry," she answered him. They had agreed to be honest, and she was a woman who honored her agreements.

He turned away while she buttoned her blouse, saying, "No need to apologize, Minerva. Never."

He knew they were done for the evening. He went to the desk and poured two glasses of Firewhisky, bringing one silently to her, magically moving two side chairs to face the fireplace.

They sat for a minute, sipping the Firewhisky, before Severus spoke. "Minerva, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course."

"Did Dumbledore ever hurt you?"

She stared at him for a moment. "Gods, no, Severus. He would never. He loved me." It felt good to say it to another person.

"I'm sorry. It was an unfair question," Severus said, averting his eyes.

"Are you asking because of what just happened, because of my memory?" she asked.

"It raised certain questions," he admitted. "But it is none of my business."

"Severus, please look at me."

When he turned his eyes back to her face, she continued. "Albus and I had a complicated marriage. It couldn't have been otherwise, I suppose. We had our rows and our disagreements, no question. But he *never* laid a hand on me except in love."

"I'm sorry I asked, Minerva. I had no right."

"No, you hadn't. But I'm glad you did instead of leaping to conclusions. It's important to me that you understand."

And it was. She couldn't bear the idea of Severus thinking of her as Albus Dumbledore's abused wife, meekly taking whatever he chose to mete out.

"I know you resent Albus a great deal...and perhaps you're right to...but don't you believe for a minute that he was capable of harming me or anyone else he cared for. After Ariana, I don't think he could have survived it."

"His sister?" Snape asked.

"Yes," she replied, feeling at once that she had said too much.

"She died under mysterious circumstances, I believe," he said.

"Yes. That, more than anything else, set Albus on the path he eventually chose. But please don't ask me anything more about it. It's not my story to tell."

Severus nodded.

"Now may I ask you a question that is none of *my* business?" she asked.

"It seems only fair," he answered, eyebrow raised.

"Did you ever confront your father about what he did to you?"

Severus took a sip of his Firewhisky, and she thought he wasn't going to answer, but he did.

"No. By the time I felt able to, he had left. How did you know?"

"I didn't, not with any certainty. I suspected... *We* suspected, but there was no proof. We hoped you might confide in Horace; as your Head of House he would have been the logical person for you to turn to, but he was, unfortunately..."

"Not the kind of man to invite confidences," Severus finished.

"No. I often thought Albus should intervene, but he was adamant that without proof, without a word from you, there was nothing we could do. It was the subject of one of our biggest rows, as a matter of fact," she said.

"You fought over me?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Oh, yes. More than once. I thought that if those infernal Marauders would only leave you alone, you might turn away from the path you seemed to be headed down. I hoped that your friendship with Lily Evans might change things for you, if only you had some space without those boys breathing down your neck all the time."

He said nothing.

"I often wonder if things would have been different had I succeeded in persuading Albus to expel Sirius after the dangerous prank he played on you about Remus. But I suppose, by then, it was too late," she said wistfully.

"You wanted to expel Black for what he did to me?" This was becoming an evening of surprises for Severus.

"Yes. When I found out about it, I was livid; not only at Sirius, but at Albus, for keeping me in the dark about it and for letting him off with a few detentions. I didn't speak to him for days, not until the Yule Ball..." She stopped, feeling the sudden flood of warmth again.

Severus watched the flush rise in her cheeks, perplexed. Then he remembered the Yule Ball all those years ago, and what she had worn, and how it had made him feel. It suddenly occurred to him for the first time since that night twenty years past why she had chosen that dress, and who it was for. He hadn't known about her and Dumbledore then; wouldn't find out until he was officially a Death Eater, when Lucius Malfoy mentioned it casually one night. At the time, it had given him another reason to hate the Great and Mighty Albus Dumbledore.

It was funny how all kinds of small things...impressions, omissions, a word said or not said...could suddenly coalesce and form the substance of a life, he thought.

He wondered what he should say to her. Finally he settled on: "But you forgave him."

"Yes, I forgave him," she affirmed.

"Do you forgive him now?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes." She hadn't realized it herself.

"How?"

"I love him," she said simply.

"That isn't always enough," said Severus.

"No," she agreed, "not always. But it was for me."

There seemed to be nothing more to say. They finished their Firewhisky, but neither made a move to leave.

Suddenly, she asked, "Severus, would you fancy a game of chess?"

"Chess?"

"Yes, surely you remember it. It's that game with kings and queens and pawns," she said wryly.

"Forgive me, but why do you ask now?"

"I haven't played in ages, and all I have to look forward to back in my quarters is a stack of first-year essays on the difficulties of trans-elemental Transfiguration," she said.

"That is a depressing prospect," he agreed.

"I remember you used to play with Filius," she said.

"Yes, and you with Dumbledore," he answered. "Some of the staff used to place wagers on the outcome of your Saturday night matches."

"Did they?" she asked, amused. She only felt a little pang of guilt when she recalled that, as often as not, she and Albus had simply flipped a coin to determine the outcome, too anxious to touch one another after a week parched of contact to spend time on a game. When they did play, the games could go on for hours.

"Yes, and as I recall, you beat him more than half the time. I'm not sure I'm up to your level," he said, smiling.

"Well, I'll go easy on you then, lad," she replied.

"All right. I think there's a set here somewhere," he said.

"Albus always kept one in that drawer there," she said, pointing to a square side table.

Severus opened the drawer and pulled out a small, plain wizard chess set. He opened the board and set it on the table. The chess figures divided themselves by color and took their places on the board, black snarling softly at white, who hissed back. He plucked two pawns, protesting, from the board, and held them behind his back for a moment, then extended his arms towards Minerva. She placed her index finger on his left fist, and he opened his palm to reveal a white pawn.

"The first move is to the lady," he said. And they sat down to play.

Nasty Ironies

Chapter 15 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Severus and Minerva played chess on several more occasions. He beat her once and found that she did not like to lose.

He had moved his knight, placing her king in check. She stared at the board intently, looking for a way out, then suddenly cried in disbelief, "Damn! Stamma's mate!"

Snape's white knight drew its sword, threatening her black king, who removed the crown from its head and placed it before the knight in resignation.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Minerva shouted, making the chess pieces cower as Severus watched her with surprised amusement. "And you can wipe that bloody smirk off your face this instant, Severus Snape, or I will hex you and your bollocks straight to Alcina's island."

"Why, Minerva," he said smoothly. "Such language! I would never have guessed you for a sore loser. You were always so gracious whenever Gryffindor lost to Slytherin on the pitch."

"It wasn't me doing the losing," she muttered, her temper calming only slightly. "And I'll thank you to keep your opinion of my character flaws to yourself," she added sharply.

"It wasn't an opinion, merely an observation," he said. He couldn't resist goading her a touch more: "Tell me, did you behave this way when you lost to Dumbledore?"

"If you're so interested, why not release the portraits and ask him yourself?" she retorted crossly.

"Perhaps I'll do that sometime," he replied, both of them knowing he wouldn't. "Can I pour you another glass of Firewhisky by way of a peace offering?"

"No, thank you, Severus. I should be getting on before I'm missed," she said. "Thank you for the game," she sniffed.

"The pleasure was mine," he answered as she gathered her cloak and wand to leave.

"Indeed," she said curtly. "Good night, Severus." And she was gone.

As he cleared away the glasses and chess game, it occurred to him that his parting remark might have been taken as a reference to what they had done prior to the chess game. Now it was Snape's turn to be angry with himself. He took no pleasure in acting out the Dark Lord's fantasies with Minerva McGonagall and needed her to believe that was so. He was pleased that they had been able to overcome the awkwardness of their respective positions to become companionable acquaintances. She was, and had long been, the most interesting person at Hogwarts in his estimation, and he had often thought over the years that, had things been different, they might have been friends. If things had been different...

Of course, things *were* different now...very different, and the irony of his recent quasi-friendship with Minerva didn't escape Snape. His life was, it sometimes seemed to him, composed of a series of nasty ironies.

Minerva, of course, knew he had been referring to their chess game, and *only* their chess game. She knew he still excoriated himself over what he was doing to her...what

he felt he was doing to her; she looked at it as a shared offense...by the way he could not look her in the eye afterwards, not until they each were holding the glass of Firewhisky that had become something of an amulet against too much feeling. She knew by the way he never allowed himself to complete the act...other than the one time she had sucked him for the benefit of the Dark Lord...that he would never permit himself any pleasure from the thing. She wondered if it pained him to stop before he could finish. He always excused himself for a few moments afterwards, and she allowed herself only a minute to speculate whether he was using a Deflating Draught or his hands to give himself relief. She suspected it was the former.

As she hurried down the corridor away from the Headmaster's office, she nearly bumped straight into Pomona Sprout.

"Minerva!" cried Pomona, almost dropping the hellebore she had been carrying to the infirmary.

"I'm so sorry, Pomona!" exclaimed Minerva. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

"No harm done. Got to get this to Poppy," she said, indicating the plant. "Firstie's gone and swallowed something from the Weasley twins' shop, and now the poor lad can't stop burping up slugs."

"A rather unpleasant lesson, I should think, but a memorable one," answered Minerva.

"Too true," agreed Pomona. "Now that I have you here, though, why don't you come by my rooms tomorrow evening after dinner? Poppy and Rolanda are planning on it...thought we'd have a bit of a jaw, just like old times, eh?"

"I don't know, Pomona, I've got so much work to be getting on with..." Minerva hesitated.

"Come on, love," urged Pomona. "We haven't seen you in ever so long. It might do you some good to spend some time with us old hags...a bit of girl-talk, a spot of tea...what say you?"

"Make it Firewhisky, and you have a deal," said Minerva.

"You bring it, I'll supply the glasses," said Pomona with a wink. "Eight o'clock-ish!" she called behind her as she hurried away with the plant.

Minerva smiled after her friend. She had been neglecting Pomona...neglecting all of them...of late. In truth, she felt uncomfortable around them now. They had been so good to her during the events of the past hard year, and she felt an awful stone of guilt settle in her belly when she thought of how she was deceiving them. *Another sacrifice made on the altar of the Greater Good*, she thought bitterly. She wondered how many it would take before she could consider her account with Albus settled.

In the end, she went to the small gathering in Pomona's quarters and enjoyed it, at least until the conversation turned to Snape.

They were talking about the latest outrages committed by Amycus Carrow, who had been teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. Minerva was aware that he was using students to demonstrate curses, but felt powerless to stop it. She had advised her Gryffindors to cooperate and laid in a supply of calming and healing potions, courtesy of Poppy Pomfrey, to dole out after DADA classes (and sometimes before).

"The way Snape just lets them have the run of the school sickens me," Poppy was saying. "If he were any kind of a man at all, he wouldn't..."

"Don't!" Minerva cried. She couldn't bear to hear his name mentioned in this company; it evoked too many emotions, none of which she wanted to experience at the moment.

The three women looked at her, then Poppy said, "Oh, Minerva, I'm so sorry! I wasn't thinking."

"It's all right, Poppy," Minerva replied. "I just don't want to spoil a perfectly good evening by invoking Snape and the Carrows."

"Here, here," said Rolanda, raising her glass in salutation. The others followed suit.

The rest of the evening passed in pleasant reminiscences and welcome laughter until Minerva felt too tired to sit up. She rose to excuse herself, and Poppy Pomfrey rose, too.

"I'll go with you, Minerva. I'm dead on my feet," said Poppy.

When the two witches had gotten a few yards down the corridor, Poppy put her arm on Minerva's shoulder, stopping her, saying, "Are you really all right, Minerva? You've been so distant lately...I'm a little worried, I must confess."

The guilt stone was back in Minerva's belly. "I really am fine, Poppy. I've been busy and preoccupied is all."

"No dreams?" asked Poppy.

"Dreams?"

"You know...about Snape and what happened," answered Poppy softly. "Sometimes, women who have been raped have dreams or flashbacks," she said.

"No, nothing like that," Minerva said a little too quickly. "Poppy," she said more slowly, "I know you probably think I'm repressing what happened, or some such, but I assure you I am not. I accept it, and now I'm doing what I need to do to live the rest of my life."

"And what is that?" Poppy asked.

"Work. Protect the children as much as I can. Help Harry Potter put an end to all this wickedness. Maybe when all this is ended, I'll fall apart and become a blubbing mess of an old woman, but I haven't the time for it now," she said forcefully.

"All right, Minerva," said Poppy. "But if anything changes, let me know. I want to be your friend."

Minerva put her arm around the shorter witch. "I know Poppy, you have been...a good friend. For more years than I care to remember."

She kissed Poppy on the cheek, and the two women went their separate ways.

To Rend and Sew

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Minerva flew down the passageway, unmindful of the few students who watched her pass in shocked amazement; Professor McGonagall almost never ran anywhere.

The oaken doors to the castle flew open ahead of her, and she burst out into the chilly spring air. She ran down the path toward the lake, her robes billowing behind her like a long, green wake. By the time she reached the promontory, she was breathing hard and had to bend over, her palms on her thighs, to catch her breath.

When she straightened up, her eyes adjusting to the late evening gloom, what she saw filled her with white-hot rage. The white marble sarcophagus had been split...not just split, rent...and the body within was laid askew as if it had been tossed haphazardly back into the tomb, which was, of course, exactly what had happened.

She was sullenly grateful that the shroud had not been damaged...at least around the head...and that she did not have to look at the face of the dead man within. She was an observant woman and noticed the missing wand, but assigned little importance to that detail. The *why* did not, at this moment, concern her; the *what* was enough to consume her for the time being.

She allowed herself only one minute of swirling fury before she raised her wand to correct the outrage. The air around her crackled as she used her wand to move the body back into position in the sarcophagus and re-seal the white marble of the tomb. It was not a perfect repair; a large crack still marred the otherwise smooth surface, but it would do until a new monument could be made.

She turned and strode back toward the castle. When she reached the Headmaster's office, she stood glaring at the stone gargoyle guarding the doors.

"Password?" the gargoyle inquired as expected.

"*Omnes relinquitte spes.*"

The doors began to move, and she didn't wait for them to open fully before slipping in and racing up the spiral staircase. She pounded on the inner door with the brass knocker, knowing that, if he were inside, Snape couldn't fail to hear it.

The door swung open, and she strode into the office. He wasn't there, but the bookcase-door to his private quarters stood open, and she went through it.

She didn't take time to notice the changes wrought in the room since she had last been in it. Her eye homed in on Snape, who was sitting on a sofa near the fireplace, a glass of Firewhisky in his hand. She approached and stood towering in front of him, her hands on her hips. Any other acquaintance of Minerva McGonagall's...except Dumbledore...might have run for his life or thrown himself at her feet begging for mercy when he saw the look on her face. Snape merely looked up at her, saying pleasantly, "My dear Minerva, what a pleasant surprise. Oh, dear... I haven't forgotten an important meeting, have I?" He sounded a little drunk.

She ignored his jibe. "Did you know?" she demanded, her eyes narrowed to slits.

"Of course. I know everything, after all. It is my role to *know* things for people," he answered, his words thick with resentment.

"What did he want that he didn't already have?" she asked him.

"What makes you think he wanted something?" Snape countered, apparently unconcerned.

"Stop it," she spat. "You know as well as I do that the Dark Lord didn't come here simply for the pleasure of desecrating Albus Dumbledore's tomb."

"No. Not when he has already had the pleasure of desecrating the man's wife."

Silence.

"After a fashion, of course..." he added, opening his arms slightly to indicate himself.

The glass in his hand exploded, spraying his face and shirt with sticky Firewhisky and cutting his index finger and thumb badly. A sliver of glass embedded itself in the skin just below his lower lip. For the first time, his eyes seemed to focus on his visitor. Her wand was nowhere in sight.

"If you're ready to leave off this pathetic display of self-pity, perhaps we can begin this conversation again," she said, her voice low and deadly. Snape wondered who had learned the tone from whom, she from Dumbledore, or he from her.

She gave him a minute to recover his equilibrium, then asked again: "What did he want?"

He regarded her warily. "The wand."

"Albus' wand?" She frowned.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He believes it to be one of the Deathly Hallows."

She was stunned for a moment. "The Deathstick?"

"Yes."

"Is it true?" she whispered.

"That, Minerva, is one thing I do *not* know." A small smile crept to his lips.

She thought for a few moments. "When Albus came back from Germany, he had a new wand. His original one had been destroyed in the duel with Grindelwald, he said."

"Did he tell you where he had gotten it?"

"You know, I don't recall. By the time we were on speaking terms again, I suppose it didn't seem important," she answered.

"You and Dumbledore had a falling out? When?" Snape asked, his curiosity about the woman in front of him temporarily eclipsing the subject of the Elder Wand.

"Before he went to Germany," she replied.

He frowned. "I didn't realize you were friendly that far back," he said, watching her closely.

"Mmm," she said, wondering how much she was going to tell him about her history with Albus Dumbledore. Secrecy had become such second nature that she sometimes forgot who knew what about the subject.

"You must have been a student," he said.

"Just graduated, actually," she said.

"But you knew him at Hogwarts?" There was no special inflection on "knew," but she understood what he was asking.

She chose her words carefully. "Of course. He was my teacher." She had insisted on honesty between them, but she discovered she was not willing to travel too far down this particular path with Severus.

"Of course, your teacher..." he repeated coldly.

"Severus..." she warned.

"Yes, Minerva? What did you want to say to me?" He was angry without quite understanding why.

She paused.

"We'd better take care of your lip." She pointed her wand at it, saying, *Excisio*," and he felt a slight sting as the sliver of glass was removed. "Fingers," she said crisply, indicating he should present them for inspection. He held his injured hand out to her, wincing as she probed the cuts.

"Muscles and tendons seem to be intact. *Collocutis*." The cuts sealed themselves, leaving only thin, red seams where they had been. She didn't apologize for having injured him, nor did he thank her for repairing the damage. Neither of them tried to clean the blood and Firewhisky from his face, sleeves, or collar.

"The wand, Severus...he has it now?" she asked.

"Yes."

She sighed, worry furrowing her brow.

"I'm not sure it matters much," said Severus.

"Do you not believe it to be the Wand of Destiny?" she asked.

"It is possible," he said. "But remember the legend, Minerva. The wand's full power can only be realized in the hands of one who has won it from its previous owner."

Understanding rocked her suddenly. "You! You are the rightful master of the wand!"

"If it is, indeed, *the* wand," he agreed.

"Why didn't you claim it after Albus died?"

"I didn't know about it," he said simply.

"He didn't tell you? When he made your... arrangement? Why?" She was incredulous.

"When did Albus Dumbledore ever deign to let any of us in on his grand schemes?" Snape exploded. "Oh, he had his reasons, and reckoned that should be enough for any of us to follow blithely along in his great footsteps, sniffing along in the mud for the clues he dribbled behind him like the dogs he thought we were."

He half expected her to hex him, but she didn't. She realized the man in front of her had been shattered against the rocks of Albus Dumbledore's monstrous pride much as she herself had been against her husband's love and need. The only difference between them, she thought, was that she had chosen to let it happen, whereas Severus had struggled and fought. He was still fighting.

"I'm sorry, Minerva," he said after a minute.

"Don't be." She put her hand on his recently healed one in an offering of peace.

After another minute, she said, "Would you like some more Firewhisky? I could do with a drop myself."

"Certainly. The bottle's on the table over there," he said, pointing to a corner of the room.

She went to the bottle, noticing it was almost two-thirds empty, and Summoned two glasses. She poured two fingers into each, then brought them back to where he sat and joined him on the sofa.

"I probably shouldn't encourage you; it looks as if you've had enough already this evening," she said, sipping her own liquor.

"I felt the need for fortification after the Dark Lord left," he said.

The glass stopped halfway to her lips. "You saw him?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "You would have, as well, if you had been a few minutes earlier. Actually, it was quite foolish of you to come without..."

He realized his mistake immediately.

"He was *here*? In the *castle*?" she asked, standing, her face reddening.

"Yes." He looked at his glass rather than her face.

"How could you permit it?" she cried.

"How exactly do you suggest I could have stopped it?" he countered angrily, standing to face her.

He saw that she was trembling. His voice softened. "Minerva, I swear, I would not allow him to harm you."

"Me?" she screeched. "You think I'm concerned about my own skin? What about the children? If any of them had seen him, there would have been chaos. After what happened the last time he made a personal appearance here..."

"I'm sorry, Minerva," he cut her off curtly. "In any event, he wasn't seen. He didn't intend to be."

"Thank Merlin," she breathed, her anger abating somewhat.

After a few moments, she said quietly, "Well, it seems the Dark Lord can do anything he likes, and we can't stop him."

"Despair, Minerva? That isn't like you."

"And what is 'like me?' Everyone else seems to know...Albus, Poppy, you...I wish someone would tell me, because I'm hanged if I do," she said, suddenly fierce.

"You are..." he began.

"What?" Her eyes were desperate.

"Astonishing."

"Ha!" she barked. "So I've heard. Forgive me if I can't quite agree with that trite assessment. The astonishing Minerva McGonagall, most powerful witch of the age..."

"You are, Minerva. You cannot run from who you are."

"I have never run from anything in my life, Severus Snape," she retorted throatily. "Minerva McGonagall Dumbledore, Sigríð Þórfinsdóttir, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, leader-by-default of the Order of the Phoenix, Elder Emerita of the Wizengamot...is not permitted to run from anything."

"Minerva, stop," Snape said, taking her by the shoulders.

"I would love to. Oh, how dearly I would love to!" she spat.

He pulled her against him, and they stood breathing against one another. He could feel the steady thrumming of her heart, smell the scent of honeysuckle and linden in her hair, and all at once he was fourteen again...before the Dark Lord, before Lily hated him and died for it, before all the choices that had led, inexorably, to this place...catching her scent as she knelt by him in the classroom. He had caught something else too: for the first time, on that day twenty-four years past, he had sensed the power she inhabited, almost as if it were an electrical charge coming off her skin, but from a far deeper source. He had felt it course through him for an infinitesimal moment while she held his wand hand in hers as together they Transfigured an object whose name was lost to him now, and he knew he wanted it. He had always been a little afraid of his own magic...his brutal father had seen to that...but at that moment in the Transfiguration classroom, he had recognized that his own power was, like hers, immense, and it had frightened and thrilled him at the same time. He wanted to ask her how she didn't burn with it, but of course, he had been a boy, and Professor McGonagall could hardly have been expected to tolerate such an impertinent question, could she?

Snape the man dropped his head to bury his nose in her hair...still so black, but shot through now with strands of silver...and she allowed it. After a few moments, she pulled back and looked at his face. He returned the gaze, unsure of what he was seeing. Without deliberation, he pressed his mouth against hers, and she allowed this, too.

"Severus..." she breathed against his lips.

He removed his mouth, thinking she was going to push him away.

Instead she said, "Let's make a memory he can't see. A memory just for us."

Eating Death

Chapter 17 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

"Greedily she engorged without restraint,

And knew not eating death."

John Milton, Paradise Lost (9.791-2)

Severus looked at Minerva, trying to read her. Was this really what she wanted, or was it to be just another sacrifice meant to assuage his guilt and pain?

If he had looked into her mind, he would have found that it was nothing of the sort. When he had pulled her close, then put his mouth on hers...not a kiss; you couldn't call it that...she had been seized by a sudden and intense longing. Not for his body, although that was there somewhere beneath the surface of it, but for something that could tether her to herself again. It had seemed to her, when she looked at the corpse of Albus Dumbledore lying askew in his ruined tomb, that she might have ceased to exist. Nothing was keeping her firmly on the earth; not Albus, not her friends, her students, not her work...it all seemed to have slipped away, and she didn't know quite how it had happened. Severus' touch had reminded her that she still had a body, and that it could need and want and ache, and she found that it was enough.

Severus hadn't answered her, so she took his collar in her hands and pulled him to her, pressing her own mouth to his again, this time parting his lips with her tongue searching for his. It took a moment for him to begin kissing her back...it was most definitely a kiss this time...and he wrapped his arms around her, their tongues dancing back and forth from his mouth to hers.

She moved her hands to his chest, running her palms over the plain, white shirt that covered him. He caught her wrists in his hands and brought them to his lips, turning them over to kiss each palm. He performed the spell to open the door to his bedroom and started to back toward it, gently pulling her along with him. He still hadn't spoken.

It had been nearly a year since she had been in this room, and the changes were stark. Gone was the large, heavy, four-poster bed that had dominated the room when Albus was its master. Gone were the blue and gold hangings...so gaudy, she had always thought...and of course, gone was the large painting that had graced the wall opposite the bed; she had removed that herself just after Albus' death.

The room now resembled a monk's cell. A single bed with a wrought-iron frame and a plain, cotton blanket stood against the center of the far wall. The bedside table held just a lamp, no books, no photographs, nothing to betray anything about the creature who presumably took his rest here. There was a table along the other wall that held a pitcher and a single glass, as well as a comb. There was no mirror. The wardrobe was tall and oak, the only substantial-looking piece of furniture in the room. The large

window, she knew, afforded a beautiful view of the grounds and the lake beyond, but it was now obscured by an opaque, black curtain.

Minerva took all this in at the moment they entered the room. She had that fleeting sense of untethering again, so she banished it by pushing her body up against Snape's, crushing her breasts against his chest, pressing her hands into the small of his back.

He had been silent the whole time, so she spoke: "Do you want this?"

He nodded slowly, and she caught one of his hands, bringing it up to her breast. "And this?"

He gave a thick-voiced "yes," and bent his lips to her neck, tracing its length with his tongue and teeth. He kneaded the breast with his palm and ran a thumb over her nipple, making her exhale raggedly. She let him explore both sides of her neck before she took her wand and banished first her clothes, then his. There would be no slow, tender unveiling of flesh here this evening. She unpinned her hair, letting it fall to just below her shoulders, the pins making sharp, metallic pings as they hit the bare floor. She sent her wand floating to the table, where it laid itself down next to the comb.

He had been shocked by the sudden rush of cool air that accompanied the loss of his clothes. Then he had been shocked by the heat of her bare skin against his as he pulled her against him again. She pulled away, and he thought for a moment that he had startled her with his erection, which he had pressed hard against her belly, but she was merely moving to lie down on the bed. He stood where he was and looked at her.

He had never seen her entirely naked, except for that awful evening in the Great Hall, and then he had not allowed himself to look. Now he drank her in.

Her skin nearly glowed in the shadows cast by the low lamplight, so pale was it. Her body was no longer that of a young woman, but it was still firm in most places. Her breasts were small and round, the nipples forming delicate coral peaks the circumference of a Muggle dime. Her bones were finely wrought; her clavicles and even her ribs were set in bas-relief against her flesh, and her iliac crests formed a sharp frame for the slightly rounded lower belly that was the hallmark of a slender woman in her middle years. Her legs were impossibly long...coltish, she would have been called in her youth...and still bore the hint of a musculature formed by long-ago Quidditch practices and broomstick rides. There were fine wrinkles in the skin at her neck and chest, and he could see a faint dusting of reddish freckles just above where her breasts met her chest wall. Two small, white, starburst scars marred the skin between her breasts; another two marked her left breast, one just above the nipple.

Her face was extraordinary. It could no longer be called beautiful exactly; time had chiseled away any extraneous softness from her prominent cheekbones and jawline, leaving the planes of her face slightly too hollow. There were furrows in her brows that signaled a life of worry and frowning, but these were accompanied by fine lines radiating from her eyes that hinted at joy and laughter mixed in as well. In middle age, Minerva McGonagall had become what is condescendingly known as a handsome woman. But the penetrating intelligence that informed her features as they moved was as striking as any beauty she had ever possessed.

Minerva had never been anxious about her looks or her body, and she was not now as he stared at her, despite the thirty-four years' difference in their ages. She regarded Severus' body with interest that bordered on the clinical. It had been many years since she had laid eyes on the nude figure of a man who was not Albus Dumbledore, and the differences were fascinating. The young man was as pale as she was, and almost as smooth. Albus had been bear-like, with a thick mat of hair on his chest running down his belly, and thick, muscular arms. Severus was lean, with ropy muscles running from his shoulders to his forearms. Where Albus had been soft, Severus was hard. She could see his ribs, and his abdomen was flat, as she remembered Albus' had been when they had first become lovers. Over the years, Albus had thickened around the middle, which she had teased him about, but had, in truth, found oddly attractive. He had felt substantial, both when she wrapped her arms around him and when he lay on top of her. She wondered how this smooth, hard man would feel.

The most startling thing about Severus' body, however, were the scars that crisscrossed his torso like thin vines. They were faded, but there were so many that it seemed there was not a square inch that was left unmarked. She wondered how many had been present even before Severus had ever met the Dark Lord and his temper, but knew she would never ask.

She had, of course, seen his erect penis before...had had it in her mouth...so she was not surprised either by its length or the fact that it curved slightly to one side.

He approached the bed and startled her by Accio-ing his wand. After a quick word and a swish, however, she felt the bed expand underneath her to become twice as wide.

"I thought we might need more room," he said, sitting down next to where she lay. He ran his hands down her shoulders and over her arms, then moved them to cup her breasts. He kept his hands still for a few moments, feeling her chest rise and fall underneath his palms, then bent to take one of her nipples in his mouth. She moaned, and he suckled her harder, flicking his tongue over the bud, then moved his mouth to the other breast. She was kneading his hard shoulders, encouraging him to come closer.

He moved his legs to the bed and stretched out beside her as she turned on her side to face him. She ran one finger down his chest and belly, then reached between his legs to gently palm his testicles. She heard him inhale with a hiss as she moved her hand to grip his cock, running her fingers up and down its length, letting her thumb brush over the sensitive tip. He took her by the back of the thigh and moved her top leg over his hip, then moved his hand down between her legs. When his fingers found her opening, he discovered she was very wet, and he wondered if it was a charm or a natural response. He slipped two fingers into her and felt her muscles contract around them as she pressed herself into his hand. He ran his thumb over her swollen clitoris, and she let out a cry that could have been pleasure or pain. Given the circumstances, he decided to assume it was the former. She kept stroking him, though, until he said in a husky voice, "Stop, Minerva... I'm going to come...."

"It's all right," she said.

"No, not yet," he said. He shifted her onto her back and knelt between her legs, still stroking her.

She closed her eyes and said, "I want you to fuck me."

He was glad she hadn't said "make love" because that's not what it was; they were not lovers. Minerva, he knew, valued precision in language as in all else. So did he. And he wanted to fuck her. He wanted to lose himself in her and make her forget herself for just the few minutes it would take. So he removed his hand from her sex and replaced it with his cock. He slid into her, marveling at how good she felt. He had been inside her a half-dozen times before, but never had he allowed himself to think about it. He had always tried to imagine himself someplace else...with limited success...but this time he could just be with this woman and concentrate on how good it felt. She was wet and she was tight, and it was so, so sweet!

She moaned again when he started to move and wrapped her legs tightly around his hips. When he looked at her face, her eyes were closed. He wondered if she was thinking about Dumbledore...imagining that it was the old man's cock moving in and out of her. He stopped and said, "Minerva, open your eyes. Look at me."

She did, and he asked, searching her eyes, "Who am I?"

She knew what his worry was. She took his face between her hands and said, "Severus. You're Severus."

He began to thrust harder, and she unwrapped her legs from his middle in order to lift her hips to meet him at an angle that provided the most friction to her sensitive nub. He was grunting and thrusting, just as he had done during their scenarios, only this time it was real, and he was fucking her hard, and she loved it. She moved her arms over her head to grasp the iron bars of the headboard, lost in the sensations he was producing in her core.

She came, crying, "Yes! Oh! Yes, yes!" and he was right behind her, coming inside her for the first time.

"Ahhh, gods," he moaned as he shuddered, still pumping into her until he finally stilled.

When he had regained his breath, he moved off of her and settled on his back. She didn't try to snuggle into his arms, nor did either of them speak for a few minutes.

"Would you like to stay?" he asked without looking at her.

"It isn't a good idea," she answered.

"No," he agreed. Still, they lay together, neither making a move to get up.

In the end, she did stay and took what she needed from him over and over until they were both spent, and the dark had been beaten back for a few precious hours. They fell asleep, both slick with sweat and sex and reeking with it.

When Severus awoke as the sun was just beginning to slice through the gaps in the drape, he was neither surprised nor disappointed to find that she was gone.

He sat up and took hold of the pillow she had used, pressing it to his nose. It smelt of honeysuckle and linden.

Roads High and Low

Chapter 18 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

O ye'll tak' the high road and I'll tak' the low road,

An' I'll be in Scotland afore ye

~ "Loch Lomand" (Anon.)

Minerva often wondered what it would have been like had they had time to create another memory for the Dark Lord. Would they have been freer with one another? More awkward? Would he have allowed himself pleasure in the act? Would she? These were theoretical questions, of course, and not the kind Minerva usually indulged, but there was much about the past year that was unusual for her, to say the least. She wondered how much she had changed.

As things turned out, the next time she spoke to him was the night she drove him from the castle.

She was in her sitting room reading sixth-year essays when she was interrupted by a knock on the door. She opened it to reveal an agitated Filius Flitwick.

"Yes, Filius, what is it?" she asked when she saw the furrows in his brow.

"I'm not sure," he replied, "and I'm sorry to disturb you, but I thought someone else...on our side...should be aware. Amycus Carrow just had me let Alecto into the Ravenclaw common room."

Minerva snorted. It was unsurprising that the dull-witted Carrow woman could not answer the simple riddle that would permit her to enter Ravenclaw.

"Why?" Minerva asked.

"She wouldn't tell me. Her language was... well, you can imagine," said Filius, who disapproved of coarseness in language as in much else.

"Indeed," sighed Minerva. "It can't be for good. Was she looking for a student?" she asked with concern. If one of the Carrows was in search of a student, it could only mean a painful evening for the unfortunate Ravenclaw.

"No, I don't think so. When we entered the common room, the students that were there left in a hurry, and she didn't ask after anyone. She looked as if she was planning to stay for some time," said Flitwick.

Minerva was disturbed. She didn't like not knowing what the Carrows were up to; normally, they were utterly transparent, interested only in deriving maximum enjoyment from the many punishments they inflicted on the students. If something important was happening, she very much doubted the Dark Lord would entrust the information only to them. He was a madman, but he was not stupid.

Severus. She must see Severus.

"Filius, I'm very concerned about this," she said.

"As am I, Minerva," he responded.

"There's something I need to do," she said carefully. "Would you keep an eye on Ravenclaw Tower until I return? Don't go in, just wait near the stairway. If anything seems amiss, send your Patronus... to the Headmaster's office," she said, hesitating.

The man blanched. "The Headmaster's office, Minerva? Surely you don't mean to see him alone?" asked a very worried Flitwick.

"I think I have to," she replied.

"Minerva, why don't I go see Snape? You can watch over Ravenclaw," he offered.

"No, Filius. I appreciate your concern, but I am capable of dealing with Severus Snape for the moment, I assure you, and it's better if I go alone," she said. When he continued to look at her with distress, she added, "Please, Filius. I only want to find out if there is anything he knows. As Deputy Headmistress, it's within my purview. He will not harm me. Not without others to back him up."

"I doubt he'll tell you anything, Minerva," said Filius, still full of reservations.

"Possibly not, but I need to try. It will be fine, Filius. I'll meet you at the bottom of the stairwell to Ravenclaw Tower as soon as I've seen him. Try not to worry. I am rather adept at defending myself when I am not without my wand," she told him.

"All right, Minerva," Flitwick said hesitantly. "But if I don't see you very soon, I'm coming after you," he added.

His concern for her personal safety touched her. She put her hand on the shorter wizard's shoulder. "Thank you, Filius. I'll see you in a bit."

Flitwick left reluctantly, and Minerva put on her slippers. For a moment, she debated changing from her night clothes, then decided against it. If she met anyone along the way, she could tell them there was an urgent problem with one of her Gryffindors, and it would look odd if she were fully dressed at that time of night.

When she reached the Headmaster's office, she gave the password and went up the spiral staircase. She knocked on the door for only a minute before it opened.

Snape was fully dressed, including his black outer robes. "Minerva! What are you doing here?" he asked, obviously taken aback. They had not seen one another since the night they had spent together. He had considered writing to her, or even seeking her out afterward, but had thought the better of it. It would be risky, and besides, he believed that she would prefer not to refer to their brief coming together. Neither of them was under any illusions about what that night had meant.

Snape immediately gained control of his emotions...long years of practice made it almost automatic...and said, "Please, come in."

She stepped into the room and said, "Severus, Alecko Carrow is in the Ravenclaw common room. Filius says she looks like she's waiting for something. Can you think of any reason she might wish to do this?"

He didn't answer for a few moments, then said thoughtfully, "The Dark Lord believes Potter will show up in Ravenclaw Tower."

"But why?" she asked.

"I don't know. He has only told me that he is confident the boy will return to Hogwarts soon, and that he will eventually make his way there," replied Snape.

She registered his attire for the first time. "Does he think it will be tonight?"

"Possibly. If so, he has not informed me. I am only instructed to be ready at all times to intercept Potter," replied Severus. His eyes were, as they so often appeared, unfathomable.

"Why else would the Carrows want to be in Ravenclaw Tower?" she asked.

"I can think of no other reason."

She was becoming increasingly frustrated with his calm.

"How is it that Alecko and Amycus Carrow might know *anything* that you are not aware of? I thought you were his right-hand man." she said accusingly.

"I have the Dark Lord's confidence; however, there are others who are not so sure of my allegiances. Or who are envious of my status with the Dark Lord. It is possible they are aware of some indication of Potter's movements and chose to alert Amycus rather than myself. The Dark Lord has always encouraged petty jealousies and competition among his followers," replied Severus.

"Do you believe something is to happen tonight?" she asked.

"Tonight, or perhaps tomorrow. Unless, of course, Amycus and Alecko have blundered, which would hardly be unexpected. However..." he started.

"However?"

"The Dark Lord has been increasingly agitated of late. I believe...I hope...this means that Potter's quest has been fruitful," he said.

"Surely it would be madness for Potter to come here, though," Minerva said.

"Yes. However as little faith as I have always had in his judgment..." Minerva frowned at this "...I do not think he would be so foolish as to return to Hogwarts unless there were a good reason to do so," Severus said. "Do you?"

"No." She was already searching her mind, looking for ways she might help Harry achieve... whatever it was he was meant to. Damn Albus for his bloody secretiveness! *Why could he not confide in me?* she asked herself for the thousandth time.

Severus suddenly felt his Dark Mark tingle. "Minerva..."

"Yes?"

"He is coming."

"Potter?" she asked, wondering how he knew.

"No. The Dark Lord. The Mark..." He couldn't finish.

"Severus..."

"Go back to your quarters, Minerva. Stay there," said Severus without thinking.

"Are you mad? If the Dark Lord is coming, it means something is to happen. If so, I need to be there to protect the students," she said.

"You cannot protect them," he said, his voice louder and higher than he might have intended.

"I mean to try," she countered fiercely.

As you did that night in the Great Hall? he almost asked. It was, perhaps, a tribute to his odd friendship with Minerva that he held his tongue. It was his habit, when uncomfortable, to lash out, the best defense being a good offense, and offense being a strategy Snape knew how to play well.

Whatever was to happen tonight, he did not want Minerva anywhere near it. This was irrational, he recognized. Minerva, besides being Deputy Headmistress and bound to protect the children under her care, was... Minerva. He could not expect her to hide from a battle simply because he wanted her to live. Simply because he cared for her. It was the first time he had admitted it to himself. Minerva was the first person he had truly cared for since Lily. He did not love her...not as he had loved Lily, anyway...but she had become the closest thing to a friend he had had since his school days. Unfamiliar emotions suddenly washed over him like a rogue wave.

They were, he had mused in past weeks, like two survivors of the same terrible accident...that accident having been the unhappy concurrence of the egos of two powerful men...bound together by the understanding born of mutual pain. Now, although he knew he would likely not survive the next sequela of the initial impact, he was nearly desperate to ensure that she would. But of course, he could not.

"As you wish," he said finally. "You know I must fulfill my role, Minerva."

They both knew what he meant.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"In case we do not meet again, I want you to know..." His voice was thick as he struggled to find the words to tell her what she had meant to him. Perhaps there were none

in the language.

She saved him the final indignity of having to say it. "I know." She stepped closer and kissed his forehead. "Godspeed, Severus."

She walked out the door.

/***/

Flitwick was pacing in agitation in the hallway outside the entrance to Ravenclaw Tower.

"Minerva! Thank Merlin!" he cried.

"What is it, Filius?" Minerva asked.

"Are you... are you well?" the Charms professor asked, absurdly.

"Yes, yes, fine. Have you seen anything?" she asked, impatient with his solicitousness.

"You've just missed Amycus. He didn't see me, but..." Flitwick began, but his narrative was made moot by the sound of shouting from the stairwell.

"*I dunno, do I? Shut it!*" echoed Carrow's gruff voice from above. He continued pounding on the door and shouting to his sister.

Minerva said, "Filius, alert the other staff that there may be trouble coming, and make sure the students are all in their common rooms. I will send a Patronus if you are needed. This may be nothing, but I would like everyone to be prepared."

"For what?" asked Filius.

"Immediate evacuation," she said.

Flitwick paled, then nodded and hurried off, and Minerva went into Ravenclaw Tower.

When Harry Potter revealed himself after Carrow spat in her face, she was not especially surprised. She was, however, shocked when Potter used the Cruciatus Curse on the Death Eater. It frightened her to realize...to admit to herself...that Severus was correct in his estimation of Potter. Not of his motives...she would never believe Harry to be petty or self-aggrandizing...but his lack of judgment and inability to control his emotions. The realization terrified her: Albus had left their fates...the fate of the Wizarding world...in the hands of an impetuous boy.

Harry's assertion that he was searching for something in the castle at Albus' behest brought home another hard truth: they had run out of options. It was time to stand and fight. She would defend the school and her students with her last drop of blood, and she would give Harry...whom she loved as a son...as much time as possible to fulfill whatever destiny Albus had decreed.

As the events of what would eventually come to be known as the Battle of Hogwarts unfolded, Minerva had no time to reflect. She played her part well: She drove Severus from the castle, assuring he would be at the Dark Lord's side during whatever was to come; she oversaw the evacuation of the students and marshaled the staff; she battled...and killed...Death Eaters; she dueled Voldemort himself, much as she had during the dueling matches in their student days; however, this time the predatory gleam came from her eye as well as his.

Later she would be told that her actions were "heroic," but she remembered little about the battle, save for two things: the moment she saw Harry, evidently dead, in Hagrid's arms; and the moment Voldemort told Harry he had killed Severus Snape.

When Minerva saw what Hagrid held in his arms as he approached the entrance hall, she could not prevent the ragged scream that escaped her throat.

All for naught.

Harry had failed, and everything they had endured...everything *she* had endured over the past months...was rendered pointless. Severus' tortures and loneliness, her rape and subsequent acquiescence to a plan that made her a subject of prurient entertainment for the creature that had once been Tom Riddle, Albus' death...most especially that...and Severus' willingness to bear the name of his murderer.

Without Harry Potter, Voldemort would win. She did not know how or why this was so, but Albus had believed it, as had Severus, and she had believed in these two men at different times and in different ways, and their agreement on this one point made it, in her estimation, nearly beyond question.

Somewhere, from deep within the recesses of her memory, her father's voice sounded, clear and strong: *Great Brynhildr's ghost, lass, have I not taught ye to think fer yerself?* She nearly burst out laughing.

And then, it seemed, Neville was killing the snake, and she was dueling the Dark Lord, and Harry... Harry was alive somehow and, incredibly, debating the Dark Lord, who said, "I killed Severus Snape three hours ago," which was the last thing Minerva recalled hearing clearly.

The rest was noise.

A/N: The traditional air "Loch Lomand" has a dark history. It may refer to the fates of the followers of "Bonnie Prince Charlie," who were executed following the Jacobite defeat at the Battle of Culloden. Some historians believe the song's "high road" refers to the pikes between London and Glasgow on which the heads of the executed were displayed, while the "low road" refers to the streets and pathways their loved ones took on the long road home from the trials.

A similar theory is that the "low road" refers to the route the condemned's soul will take home to Scotland, and the "high road" the longer path tread by the living returning home.

Concerning Witches Who Copulate With Devils

Chapter 19 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

A/N: The chapter title comes from the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a Renaissance treatise used to persecute suspected witches.

Minerva sat on the witness bench of the courtroom, not really listening as the hearing wore on and on. She was only here because Harry had asked her to be. She found that she didn't really care much about the outcome one way or the other. Severus was dead, and whether he was remembered as a hero, a villain, or something in between would change nothing.

As Harry Potter sat in the witness chair and described the events surrounding Snape's death, Minerva thought back on that night.

After the battle, she had moved silently through the Great Hall, accepting congratulations and dispensing thanks and condolences almost by rote, as she scanned the conjured cots and made mental inventory of the living and the dead. As always, she was expected to play her part...tonight as leader of the battle, and in its aftermath nothing had changed. Everyone else, it seemed, was permitted to search the grounds and hall for the faces of their dear ones, and to rejoice or grieve accordingly once they found them. Minerva McGonagall was expected only to react appropriately...oh, always appropriately...to the emotions of others without the luxury of showing her own.

She had taken note of the faces as she walked the rows, just as she had taken attendance in her classroom. She saw Remus first and felt surprisingly little, until she saw Tonks lying next to him, still, and realized their child would be yet another hapless orphan of yet another pointless war. She thanked her private gods that she would likely be long-gone from Hogwarts before he became her responsibility. There was the Weasley family gathered around one of the cots, and she made an almost automatic calculation of heights to determine who was missing. One of the twins, she guessed after a moment. *Oh, Molly*, she thought, and allowed herself no more than that. Little Colin Creevey...*Detention, Mr. Creevey*, she thought absurdly, *you were not meant to be here*.

When she had come to Rolanda Hooch, she almost didn't stop. All that was recognizable of her dear, unobtrusive, unobtrusive friend was the compact build and spiky gray hair. When Minerva realized who it was lying neatly on the cot, the one remaining eye open and unseeing, she suppressed the first tears of the evening. She knelt down and stroked the less damaged side of the witch's formerly lovely face for a moment and bid her a silent farewell. She made a promise to herself to find Rosmerta...if she could be found...to inform her in person of Rolanda's death. Minerva was aware that their on-again-off-again romance had been waning over the past year, but she felt a kinship with the de-facto widow of her friend of more than 30 years; she could tell Rosmerta something of doing one's mourning in private. Grief, like love, would be a secret and lonely pastime for both women.

Minerva realized, as she paced her vigil, that she was searching for Severus. She silently cursed herself for a fool; of course he would not be here among the honored fallen. He was reviled here, and nobody would have troubled for an instant about his body. She would have liked to bring him in...to the only home he had known since he was a boy...but she didn't know where he was, and anyway, nobody could be expected to spare a moment for Severus Snape, even if he had turned out to be Dumbledore's man in the end, as Harry had claimed.

In the event, it was Harry who prevailed upon her to have someone retrieve his body from the Shrieking Shack, and it was Harry who convinced her to help him try to clear Snape's name officially a year later, when the Wizengamot finally turned its attention to matters of posthumous guilt and innocence.

When Harry had come to her with his phial of Snape's memories, she was taken aback. She hadn't known what he had, and when he showed up in the Headmistress' office three months after the battle, requesting to use Dumbledore's (now her) Pensieve to show her what Snape had given him, she was apprehensive. How much had Harry seen? The boy gave no indication that he knew what had passed between Severus and her over the months leading up to the final battle, although she had to assume he had heard about what Severus had done in the Great Hall that autumn, at least from Ginevra, who had been among the captive witnesses. She wondered what memories the boy had seen.

She was relieved when she saw that Severus had only shown Harry the memories from his childhood and his exchanges with Albus. Her heart bled for him a little when she saw him cast the doe Patronus. She was angry at herself for being shocked again at how easily Albus had manipulated the miserable young man, turning his guilt and self-loathing to his own purposes. She had known almost forever how capable the great man had been in using those who had loved him in service of the Greater Good. It was almost funny: She and Severus had both seen it so clearly, despite being helpless to ignore the pull of Dumbledore's power...and, yes, his love...yet Albus himself had been unaware. He had been an innocent in so many ways, she mused; his sometimes child-like behavior was not just an act, as so many assumed.

Minerva had then told Harry, omitting as many details as possible, about Severus' decision to protect her the only way he could on that November night in the Great Hall. She thought Harry deserved as much of the truth as she could stand to tell. Harry, who had been so brave, now seemed so conflicted in his feelings about Severus Snape.

And who wouldn't be? she thought. To find the man who had openly loathed you for years, and who had murdered your surrogate father in front of your eyes, had done it all because of an unrequited love for your dead mother and a promise to protect you...*yes, that has to be difficult to swallow* she thought. The boy needed a hero and had discovered almost too late that Albus Dumbledore did not fit the bill quite as neatly as anticipated, so Severus was nominated to take up the slack. It was why Harry had knocked on her door, demanding to show her the memories he had saved. So she had agreed to testify, more for Harry's sake than for Severus'. Harry needed to be able to live with the aftermath of his war.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard her name called.

"Minerva McGonagall," intoned Tiberius Ogden, who, by dint of age, experience and connections, had been selected to head the Council on War Crimes. "Please come forward to give your testimony."

Harry Potter, as he left the witness chair, gave her arm a squeeze as she passed him to take the seat in the center of the room. She looked up at the high bench and saw the familiar faces.

Well, they should be familiar, she thought. She had helped place some of them on the newly reformed Wizengamot, even while she herself had declined a seat. She was cautiously glad that Tiberius Ogden was heading the Council; during the time they had both been on the Wizengamot in years past, she had found him to be imperious, but intelligent and fair-minded.

There was no sound as she took her place, not even the normally ever-present scratching of Rita Skeeter's quill.

When she was seated, Ogden said, "Please state your full name for the record."

In a clear voice, she gave it...her full name, the one almost nobody in the room knew: "Minerva Sigrid Aithne McGonagall Dumbledore."

A loud wave of murmurs erupted from the spectators' benches.

"Silence!" boomed Ogden.

"Professor McGonagall," Ogden started. "Er... Or do you prefer to be called 'Professor Dumbledore?'" he asked awkwardly. She could see him chastising himself for not determining that before the hearing.

"No. McGonagall is the name I have always used," she replied evenly.

"And you are currently Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is this correct?"

"I am *Acting* Headmistress, yes," she corrected.

"Very well. Professor McGonagall, it is the understanding of this Council that you intend to give evidence in the matter of Severus Snape, is this correct?"

"Yes."

"And you give this evidence freely and of your own volition?"

"Yes."

"Very good. We will proceed with our questions, and then you may have an opportunity to make a statement, if you wish."

Minerva nodded.

Ogden asked, "When did you first meet Severus Snape?"

"September of 1971."

"This was when he matriculated at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

"Yes."

"And what was your relationship with Mr. Snape at the time?"

"I was his teacher."

The questions continued in this vein for the next twenty minutes, until they came to the day Dumbledore had hired Severus.

"Did you discuss Severus Snape with Professor Dumbledore?" Ogden inquired.

"Yes."

"And what did he tell you?"

"That he was confident Severus had turned his allegiance from Voldemort," she answered.

"Did he tell you on what his confidence was based?"

"Yes. He said that Severus had recognized that Voldemort was a madman when he killed James and Lily Potter."

"Did you agree with this assessment?"

She hesitated. "Yes, I think I did."

"You think?" Ogden asked sharply.

"I was not entirely certain, but I was aware of Severus' feelings for Lily Potter, and it made sense that her murder might turn him from the Dark Lord."

"Were you aware of any other reason?"

"No."

"So you accepted Dumbledore's interpretation of the matter?"

"Yes."

"Because he...Dumbledore, I mean...was your husband?"

"No. Because, as I stated, it seemed logical, and because I believed Severus to be an intelligent if misguided young man, capable of seeing the truth of the path he had chosen out of loneliness and resentment."

"Were you in favor of Dumbledore's appointing Snape to the Potions master position?"

She paused before answering. "Not entirely. Severus was young and troubled. I was unsure if he would make a good teacher."

"Yet you publicly supported Dumbledore's decision."

"Yes. I felt it was my duty as his Deputy, and ultimately, I trusted his judgment."

"And once Snape took up the position, how would you categorize your relationship with him?"

"We were collegial."

"But not friendly."

"No, not precisely."

"Did you ever have cause to doubt Snape's allegiances during the time you were both teaching at Hogwarts?"

"No. Not until he killed Dumbledore."

"You were aware that others doubted them?"

"Of course."

"And what did you make of it?"

"I believed they were not in full possession of the facts, and that their feelings were colored by Severus' behavior."

"And what was that?"

"He was unpleasant."

"Was he unpleasant to you?"

"At times."

"And this did not cause you to doubt his intentions?"

"No."

"And why not?"

"Because I am aware that words and actions do not always agree."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, Mr. Ogden, that a nasty demeanor doesn't necessarily signify an evil heart any more than a kindly demeanor does a beneficent one."

There were a few moments of silence before Ogden posed his next question.

"But you came to change your mind about Severus Snape?"

"Yes."

"And how did that come about?"

"He killed Albus Dumbledore."

"Professor, you have heard Mr. Potter's testimony regarding Professor Dumbledore's agreement with Snape regarding the latter's role in his death."

"Yes, I have," she answered. "I have also seen the memory of that conversation."

"Snape's memory?"

"Yes."

"Yet you were unaware of the agreement until Mr. Potter told you about it?"

"No. I was unaware of it until Severus showed me the memory himself."

"When was that?"

"Last November."

"When he was Headmaster?"

"Yes."

"And why do you think he showed you that memory at that time?"

"He wanted to prove to me that he had not wanted to kill Dumbledore, nor to harm me."

"Why then? Why not right after the murder?" asked Ogden.

"I believe he had promised Albus he would tell no one."

"Not even you...Albus Dumbledore's wife?"

"No."

"And Professor Dumbledore never said anything to you about the plan?"

"No, he did not." She was pleased at how strong and even her voice remained.

"Why do you think he kept this information from you?"

"He wanted to protect Severus' position as a spy."

"Do you think he did not trust you with the information?"

She was silent for a few moments, trying to maintain control of her emotions before answering. "I think he believed there was a possibility I might be captured by Voldemort's forces, and that I would not be able to withhold the information under torture or Legilimency."

"Why did he believe you might be targeted by the Dark Lord?"

"I was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, for one. And Voldemort was aware that I was Albus Dumbledore's wife."

"And how did Voldemort come to know this? Did Snape tell him?"

"No. Voldemort...Tom Riddle, as I knew him then...had been aware of it since we were first married in 1957. I had informed him of it."

"Why did you do that?" Ogden frowned.

"Riddle and I were acquaintances. He had guessed at the nature of my relationship with Dumbledore, and threatened to create a scandal."

"What kind of scandal?"

"Albus Dumbledore and I were lovers. The school's Board of Governors would not have taken kindly to the new Headmaster having a sexual relationship with one of his teachers."

There was more murmuring from the gallery, and the gavel next to Ogden pounded itself on the mahogany desk loudly, cutting off the noise.

"So you told Voldemort... er, Riddle... that you and Dumbledore were going to be married?"

"Yes. I thought it would diffuse the scandal."

"And did it?"

"I don't know. I don't believe Tom actually ever told anyone about it."

"Why would he keep it a secret?"

"I think he had more important things in mind than ruining my reputation. I also don't think he was ready for an open confrontation with Albus Dumbledore at that point."

Ogden paused for a moment and shuffled some parchment in front of him. "Turning back now to the night Severus Snape killed Albus Dumbledore, you maintain you were unaware of the agreement they had made to have Snape appear to murder your husband?"

"That is correct. I didn't know about it."

"And when you heard that it was Snape who had killed him, what did you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Professor, did you come believe then that you had been wrong about Snape's allegiance to Dumbledore?"

"Yes. It seemed obvious."

"And how did you feel about Severus Snape after that?"

"I hated him."

"And after the Ministry of Magic had fallen to the Dark Lord, and Snape was appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts, why did you agree to stay on as Deputy Headmistress?"

"I believed I could protect the students from him and from the Carrows."

"This would be Amycus and Alecko Carrow, the Death Eaters whom Snape appointed as Defense Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies teachers, respectively?"

"Yes."

"And were you at all concerned for your safety at this time?"

"Of course, we all were. But you'll recall that none of the teachers or staff left their posts," she replied with a hint of pride in her voice. Filius Flitwick smiled at her from the high bench.

"Did Severus Snape ever threaten you?"

"He warned me to stop trying to interfere with the Carrows' methods of discipline."

"And what form did this warning take?"

"He said my interference would only make things worse for the students and for myself."

"What did you take him to mean?"

"I wasn't sure."

"And did it persuade you to stop... 'interfering'... as you put it?"

"No. Not at the time."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall." He paused. "Now, I would like to turn your attention to the evening of..." He consulted his notes for a moment. "... 4 November, 1997..."

She kept her gaze steady and saw Arthur Weasley hurriedly approach Ogden, speaking quietly in his ear.

When Arthur went back to his seat, Ogden told the assembly, "We will break for a few moments while the Council confers. Professor McGonagall, you will please remain seated."

Filius Flitwick performed a Muffliato Charm to allow the Council to speak without being overheard by the spectators, whose murmurs built to a persistent hum that seemed to permeate the room.

There were a very few minutes of discussion before Ogden could be seen nodding his head in agreement. Flitwick ended the charm, and Ogden spoke.

"We will clear the courtroom of spectators for the remainder of Professor McGonagall's testimony. I would therefore like to call a ten-minute recess. Witnesses, Council members, please reconvene here at three twenty-five."

Rita Skeeter could be heard above the hubbub, complaining about being shuffled out of the courtroom as the packed spectator benches slowly emptied of people.

Harry joined Minerva as they slipped through the door at the back of the room into the area designated for witnesses and court officials. "Would you like some tea, Professor?" he asked.

"That would be lovely, thank you, Harry," she replied, sitting on a long bench as the young man went to a refreshment table in the opposite corner of the room. He returned a moment later with a cup of weak Irish Breakfast.

"Thank you again for doing this, Professor," he said after handing her tea.

"No need to thank me, Harry. It is the right thing to do. You were quite right to insist on the hearing," she said.

"But you didn't have to testify," he said.

"I know. But after all the other testimony everyone has heard, I think it's best that they hear the truth from me, don't you?" she asked.

"I know it can't be easy," he said.

She spent some minutes wondering how Harry would react to the testimony she knew she had yet to give when they were interrupted by Arthur Weasley, who had come in through another door from the courtroom.

"We're reconvening," he said.

"I assume, Arthur, that you were responsible for clearing the courtroom for the rest of my testimony?" she asked, rising.

"I thought it might be easier for you, Minerva," he said quietly.

"Thank you," she said. She had been prepared to say her piece in front of all the spectators, who would, in any event, read the transcript in the *Daily Prophet*, along with any lurid fancies the Skeeter woman chose to weave, but she had to admit that it was comforting to know that the only eyes watching her would be those of the Council and Harry Potter, who was the only other witness to testify today.

They returned to the courtroom and took their positions.

Ogden cleared his throat and began. "Now, other witnesses have testified that on the evening of 4 November, 1997, you and the rest of the staff and students of Hogwarts were called to a sudden assembly in the Great Hall, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Did you know the purpose of this assembly?"

"No."

"And when you entered the Great Hall, what happened?"

Minerva described the events that began her ordeal that night. When she described Bellatrix Lestrange removing her clothes with a spell, she could feel the tension in the room shift into acute discomfort. She herself was oddly calm.

"And when that occurred, what did you believe was going to happen?" Ogden asked.

"I believed I would be raped," she replied evenly.

"And did you know who your assailant would be?" Ogden asked.

"No. Not until Voldemort suggested Amycus Carrow to begin with." She suppressed a shudder.

"To begin with?"

"Yes. That's how Voldemort put it, as I recall," she answered.

"And what did you take that to mean?" Ogden asked.

"I took it to mean that I would be raped by more than one person," she answered. She saw Nigella Diggory, who was sitting just behind Ogden, close her eyes and put her face in her hands.

"And what happened then?"

"Severus Snape intervened. He volunteered himself for the task," she answered.

"And did he... follow through?" Ogden asked.

"Yes," she said. "To a point," she added.

"What do you mean?"

"He did not ejaculate." She saw the councilors exchange shocked looks, which rather amused her, given the testimony they had likely heard about other Dark Revels.

"And how... forgive me, Professor... how do you know that?" Ogden asked, obviously pained to have to request such a detail from such a proper witch.

"I found no evidence of it on my person. Also, he told me so later."

"You say he told you so?"

"Yes."

"When did that occur?"

"It was about a week, or a week and a half later."

"And where did this conversation take place?"

"In the Headmaster's office. He had summoned me."

"And you discussed what had happened?"

"Yes."

"What was Snape's attitude?"

"He was distraught."

"Over what he had done?"

"Yes. He told me he was sorry, and that he didn't mean to harm me."

"And you believed him?"

"Not at first, no. But then he showed me the memories...the ones I believe Mr. Potter has already shared with you...and told me why he had done it."

"And what reason did he give?"

"That he wanted to spare me any additional harm. He thought if he was the one to do it, he could keep the others away, and he could ensure I was not injured," she said calmly.

"And did you believe him then?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"After having seen that he was..." she chose her words carefully here "...coerced into the murder by Dumbledore, I concluded that he was not truly a Death Eater after all,

and that his intentions were honorable. Moreover, I realized at that time that he had done what he could to spare me any pain during the act by performing certain spells before he assaulted me."

"What spells?"

"I believe they were the Lubricus and Anestheto Charms."

She was annoyed when she saw Ogden's face color.

There were a few more questions about the evening and days that followed before the question she had been dreading came up.

"Professor, did Severus Snape ever assault you again?"

"No. Not exactly."

Ogden frowned. This was clearly not the answer he was expecting. "What do you mean, 'not exactly?'"

"I agreed to allow him to give the appearance of assaulting me."

The Councilors gave one another perplexed looks.

"Forgive me, but I'm not sure I understand," Ogden said.

"Voldemort had instructed Severus to continue abusing me, partly to try to control me, and partly for his own amusement. I allowed Severus to pretend to assault me, and he carried the memories back to Voldemort."

"When you say he 'pretended' to assault you, what do you mean?"

"I mean that he engaged in sex acts with me, and we made it seem that it was without my consent."

She heard a gasp from the high bench, but wasn't sure who it had come from.

"Are you saying that you did consent?"

"Yes. From that point on, Severus never did anything to me without my consent."

The room was silent, except for the low scritch-scratch sound of the Quick-Quotes quill used by the assistant.

"But why did you agree?" Ogden said, needing to clear his throat before he spoke.

"Because I knew that Severus would be punished if he did not comply with Voldemort's wishes, and because we believed we could provide misinformation and distraction to him via Severus' memories."

"And did that, indeed, occur?"

"I believe so. In one instance, Severus was able to use a memory to distract Voldemort long enough to allow Mr. Potter and Miss Granger to escape from a trap that he had set."

"This is...forgive me, Professor, but this is extraordinary information," Ogden said, staring at her intensely.

She stared him down. "I realize that. But it's the truth. And people sometimes do extraordinary things during wartime."

"Did anyone else know about this... arrangement you had with Severus Snape?"

"No."

Ogden spoke to Harry. "Mr. Potter, please approach the witness chair."

When Harry came forward, Ogden asked, "Mr. Potter, are the memories you have shown this Council...those you obtained from Severus Snape at the time of his death...are those the only memories belonging to Snape in your possession?"

"Yes," answered Harry with a touch of hostility in his voice.

"So Snape did not provide you with any memories that could corroborate what Professor McGonagall has testified today?"

"No." His voice was full of seething resentment...unnecessary, Minerva thought, but so like the boy. Getting angry on the behalf of others was becoming a specialty of his. She would advise him to curb the impulse, she thought. He would need to parcel out his anger as he processed all that had occurred over the past few years.

There was a brief silence. Then Ogden said, "I think it would be wise for the Council to convene briefly. Filius, if you would..." Flitwick cast another Muffliato Charm, glancing at Minerva as he did so; she couldn't read what was in his small, wizened face.

She felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Professor," Harry said very quietly, "I don't know what to say..."

"You needn't say anything, Harry," she answered. "It's all over and done with. And we have survived, have we not?" she asked, forcing herself to give him a small smile.

He nodded.

When the Council returned its attention to the witnesses, Ogden said, "Professor McGonagall, the Council would like to request that you allow us to view your memories pertaining to this issue."

"No! Why?" Harry shouted, and Minerva put a hand on his arm as she spoke calmly, "That would be acceptable, Mr. Ogden."

Harry looked at her with disbelief, and she squeezed his arm to signal to him to stay quiet.

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall. I feel compelled to tell you that our request does not signify that any of us believes you are not being truthful in this matter; it is simply that we want to reassure ourselves that your... perspective... on Snape's behavior and intentions is accurate. You know as well as I do that in stressful circumstances, one's perspective can be flawed."

The self-important git has a point, Minerva thought.

She nodded curtly and said, "I am prepared to provide the memories if someone can procure an appropriate container and return my wand." As Ogden signaled to the

assistant who had been taking notes, she added, "Mr. Ogden, I would ask that the memories be returned to me when you are finished viewing them."

"Of course, Professor," replied Ogden. The assistant approached Minerva with a phial and handed her the wand that she had surrendered, according to established Ministry protocol, when she had entered the courtroom. She nodded her thanks and removed the phial's stopper. She lifted her wand to her head and drew out the silvery strands of memory, then placed them in the phial and re-stoppered it. She handed it to the nervous assistant, who took it to Ogden.

"Thank you, Professor," he said. "I believe we should adjourn for the day to allow the Council time to view the memories. I would ask you, Professor, to return to this courtroom tomorrow at ten a.m. Mr. Potter, you are excused, but we reserve the right to recall you if necessary."

And with that, the Council filed out of the courtroom.

"Professor," said Harry, "you didn't have to give them your memories."

"It's fine," she replied. "I'm not ashamed of anything." *Oh, Harry, she thought, you don't need to be the world's defender anymore. Certainly not mine.*

"No, that's not what I meant. It's just... well, it seems very personal," he remonstrated.

"Yes and no," she said steadily. In truth, it made her a bit ill to think of the Councilors...some of whom she counted as friends...watching what she had done with Severus, but she believed it was the only way they would understand that it had not been some sick game he had played with her for his own pleasure. She had omitted from the memories most of the discussions they had had after they had finished their various scenarios...these were far more personal than the sex, she thought...and of course, the one private memory they had created just before Severus was killed. Now that he was dead, that was hers alone.

When she and Harry slipped out the back door to the courtroom to avoid the crowds of people that were no doubt waiting to see them, they found Kingsley Shacklebolt and several Ministry bodyguards waiting for them.

"I thought you could use an escort getting out of here," Kingsley said. "We'll go up with you, and you can Floo back to Hogwarts, Minerva. Harry, I'll take you to Number Twelve myself."

"Thank you, Kingsley... Or should I say, Minister?" she said, smiling at him. "I must say, I can't quite get used to calling one of my former students by that title."

Shacklebolt took her arm. "'Kingsley' will do just fine. And it's nothing compared with getting used to calling you by your given name. You'll always be 'Professor McGonagall' to anyone who's ever been on the wrong end of one of your dressings down."

"I'll second that," said Harry, grinning.

When she arrived back at Hogwarts, Filius Flitwick was waiting for her.

"Minerva," he sputtered when she had stepped through the fireplace and into what was now her office. "You were magnificent," he said.

"Hardly, Filius," she sighed. His effusiveness was tiresome to her.

"I'm sorry, I know you must be tired," he said, noticing her irritation. "I just wanted to tell you that I... Actually, Arthur, Nigella and I all argued against asking for your memories."

"Thank you, Filius, I appreciate that." She really had no desire to discuss the matter further today, and tomorrow promised to be long and unpleasant.

Flitwick paused, as if he wanted to say something else, but then just said, "Well, good evening, Minerva."

"Good evening, Filius."

As she crossed to the door to her private quarters, Dumbledore's portrait startled her by asking kindly, "How are you, my dear?"

She turned to face it with a wry smile. "How am I? I'm magnificent, of course." And swept into her quarters to be alone at last with her thoughts.

In the Gloaming

Chapter 20 of 20

If war is hell, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall are in the Ninth Circle. During Snape's awful year as Headmaster, he and Professor McGonagall draw closer as they are forced into a desperate arrangement.

Chapter Twenty: In the Gloaming

Harry re-applied his glamour as he trudged back over the grassy path to Hogsmeade. The charm wouldn't prevent anyone who looked carefully from recognizing him, but it would provide a measure of privacy from the inquisitive looks of casual observers. In any event, in the two years that had passed since the Battle of Hogwarts, interest in all things Harry Potter had finally started to die down again.

Once the final hurrah of the War Crimes hearings had passed, Harry had been able to settle into a more-or-less normal existence as an intern in the Auror Department. His co-workers had learned to be comfortable around him, but he was afraid there would always be a circle drawn around him, as indelible as it was invisible, that would keep him from getting truly close to anyone except Ron and Hermione. Even Ginny was ever so slightly outside the circle, not having been part of the so-called "golden trio" and their trials and tribulations in that final, surreal year of the war. Harry thought—he *hoped*—it wouldn't matter so much once they were married. *A couple could be in love and still not share everything*, he thought. *A husband need not be everything to his wife, and vice-versa.* He wasn't sure whether this knowledge was Dumbledore's last gift to him, or his last curse.

He wondered, as he walked, how Professor McGonagall was getting on. He hadn't called on her when he went to Hogwarts—hadn't even gone into the castle—but he had half believed he might run into her at Dumbledore's tomb. There were surprisingly few mementos and wreaths at the white marble edifice, given that it was the anniversary of the great man's death. Still, Harry reasoned, people tended to celebrate and remember their dead more on the anniversary of the final battle.

He hadn't seen the Headmistress in months. After the ceremony in which the heroes of the war had received their various commendations—including Orders of Merlin,

First Class for the golden trio, Neville Longbottom, and Minerva McGonagall, and Second Class for innumerable others—Professor McGonagall had seemed to shrink away. She rarely accepted invitations to the Burrow or Harry's flat, or anywhere else, as far as Harry knew, giving the excuse that the rebuilding of Hogwarts was taking all of her time and energy.

He supposed that was true enough.

It had taken longer than anyone had anticipated to get the school up and running again. In the aftermath of the War Crimes hearings, Professor McGonagall had become, inevitably, the subject of much private speculation and public gossip. She gave no interviews and made no public appearances, commenting only once in an article detailing the Council's finding that Severus Snape had been innocent of any war crimes, and had, in fact, played a heroic role in the prosecution of the war.

Her words had been typically terse: "I am very pleased at the outcome of the hearing."

The article that Rita Skeeter had written on the topic had been full of the usual innuendo and sugar-coated bile, suggesting that Minerva McGonagall had been held in some kind of unnatural thrall by the former Death Eater, or as an alternate hypothesis, that the woman had welcomed Snape's attentions as a way of satisfying her "unnatural physical desires" in the wake of Dumbledore's death.

Fortunately, few people seemed to take Skeeter seriously any longer (her column was dropped from the *Daily Prophet* shortly afterwards; Harry suspected Kingsley had something to do with that) and seemed to regard Minerva McGonagall either as a victim or a heroine. Professor McGonagall, Harry suspected, would have little use for either assessment.

In any case, there had been little objection when the Hogwarts Board of Governors had at last voted to install Professor McGonagall permanently as Headmistress. Augusta Longbottom, reported Neville, who heard it from the source, had effectively shut down any argument when she declared that anyone questioning Minerva McGonagall's judgment or morals would have to deal with the formidable old Longbottom witch's wrath.

As for Snape, people seemed disinclined to talk about him much. Harry was not surprised that the Wizengamot had passed him over for posthumous honors: angry, but not surprised. Harry didn't do anything about it, however. He was beginning to learn, as Minerva had hoped he would, that there were useful exercises in anger and pointless ones, and it was a wise wizard or witch who knew the difference.

Harry made a mental note to stop in at the Hog's Head to see Aberforth. The man would likely not have much time for him, as he had been managing the Three Broomsticks as well as his own tavern in the wake of Madam Rosmerta's sudden retirement. He had hired Lavender Brown right after her graduation to run the place on a day-to-day basis, figuring on continuing the tradition of having a good-looking, free-spirited barkeep to lure the customers in and keep them coming back. So far, it was working well, and Aberforth hoped Lavender would eventually save up enough to make a proper offer for the place.

Coming down the path behind the inn towards the small churchyard, Harry stopped. A tall, hooded figure was moving between the gravestones, and Harry didn't want to intrude on anyone else's private mourning. He watched as the figure came to the stone he himself had come to visit, and knelt down. The figure stayed there for several minutes, then Harry saw it take out a wand and affix something to the headstone with it. The figure then stood and made its way out of the graveyard.

As the figure passed Harry, it nodded. He nodded back, although he could not see the face inside the hood.

Harry followed the path the figure had taken and stopped when he found what he was looking for.

The stone read simply:

Severus Tobias Snape

9 January, 1960 – 2 May, 1998

Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry

1997-1998

The headstone itself was unadorned with any decoration or additional carvings, but there was a small, round object affixed to the front that had not been there before. Harry knelt down to take a closer look. It was a medal, and Harry recognized it as an Order of Merlin, First Class. It had been altered, he saw; although the magic was good, it was still recognizable as such. As he looked closely, Harry realized that the original name on the medal had been charmed off. In its place was the name of the occupant of this small patch of graveyard.

Harry stood, smiling to himself. He would visit her, he thought. But maybe not today. Today, he thought, she would want to be alone with her ghosts.

~FIN~

Note: Thank you for reading. If you enjoyed this story, you might be interested in [Winterreise \(1976\)](#), available here on TPP. It concerns the "Yule Ball incident" mentioned in Chapter 14, "Of Quaffles and Pawns."