

Tickled

by richardgloucester

A few years after the end of the war, Severus comes back to Hogwarts to teach - but he's in for a nasty surprise.

Huge thanks to my beta-readers, Annie Talbot, Subversa, and Machshefa, who hold my hand and tell me nice things.)

One

Chapter 1 of 4

A few years after the end of the war, Severus comes back to Hogwarts to teach - but he's in for a nasty surprise.

Huge thanks to my beta-readers, Annie Talbot, Subversa, and Machshefa, who hold my hand and tell me nice things.)

Tickled chapter 1

"Horace! What on earth are you doing here?" The headmistress was clearly surprised to see Slughorn back on the premises, bustling round the staff room as if he owned the place, lifting up piles of other people's things in the search for something or other.

"Why the surprise, Minerva, my dear? Surely you don't think I'd start the year's lessons unprepared, and the potions cupboards half-stocked? Much to do, don't you know. Much to do!" He beamed, his false teeth glistening under his moustache like glow-worms in a bush. "You'll have to tell me all about your holidays, but I'm afraid I can't stop ah, there it is as Poppy's expecting me upstairs to discuss the infirmary's needs. Toodle-pip!" And off he went, every footstep setting off seismic wobbles under his green velvet smoking jacket.

McGonagall shut her mouth with a snap and her eyes with a sigh. "Oh, Merlin ..."

"Anything I can help with, Headmistress?" enquired Hermione Professor Granger from the window seat where she sat curled like a cat in the sun, a large book open on her lap.

"What? Oh. No, thank you, Miss Granger. Professor Granger, sorry."

"You seem a little distracted, Headmistress. Are you sure ...?"

"Quite sure. Join me later for tea, perhaps."

Hermione watched the door close behind Professor McGonagall. It was unlike her to be so preoccupied, but then the burdens of the Headship must be considerable, and she was not a young woman. Perhaps Hermione would offer to help with something, if the opportunity presented itself. For now, she had to work on updating the Runes curriculum, and also wrap her head around the dirty jokes that tended to crop up in the most unexpected places in these old texts it gave her an edge in dealing with the sixth- and seventh-year boys if she could demonstrate that thousand-year-old double entendres still worked. It didn't hurt to imply she had a dirtier mind than theirs, either.

The castle was a lovely place in the summer. On fine days, the house elves took the opportunity to open all the windows and air the whole place out, so every passageway seemed filled with light breezes and the scent of heather. When it rained, the absence of students meant that Hermione could appreciate the sound of water pattering on the roofs and windows, and watch the drops chasing each other down the panes. What staff remained at the school or chose to return early tended to be busy with their own affairs and preparations, so she was free to enjoy the peace undisturbed, as much as she wanted. If the days tended to stretch a little long, and the silence weigh a little heavy from time to time well, there were always strategies for dealing with that, and, on the odd evening, a trip down to Hogsmeade to chat with Aberforth. Compared with the Burrow, it was bliss.

Hermione still spent the first week or two of the summer holidays there, but she did find it rather stifling never having a moment's peace. The whole family might no longer live there, but they were in and out almost as much as if they did. Even when Molly shooed all the children and menfolk out so the women could talk freely, there was still a whole silent cacophony of eyes, looks, hopes and expectations rattling around inside the walls. Hermione detested being female if it meant being reduced to definition by relationship status. And, no matter how many other topics she discussed with Ginny, Molly, Fleur, et al, she still felt that she was the girl who hadn't-married-Ron-so-we'd-better-find-her-someone-else-hadn't-we-so-she-doesn't-moulder-away-with-all-those-abstruse-old-books. Not that most of them would use the word "abstruse" in everyday conversation.

And not that any of them would know how exciting her work really was.

Hermione was the girl in sadly plain clothes who would end up a dried-up spinster like Irma Pince, walled up in a cell of books.

She huffed in amusement. Irma Pince was an expert in certain branches of magic that were anything but dried up. Positively soggy, in fact. Squelchy, even. And it was generally Irma who found the really filthy jokes that evaded Hermione's ken.

The August sunlight had reached an angle that was becoming inconvenient for study, so Hermione placed the tome's favourite bookmark coated with the anchovy paste it preferred inside and closed it with a pat. The pages gave a happy rustle and fell still. Most of the books didn't need any sustenance beyond what was provided by being read, but there were a few, particularly among the older ones, which had developed an appetite for more substantial fare. If it was mildly unpleasant to be confronted with a whiff of fish (or worse) on opening a volume, the compensations provided by the content were rich indeed. Feeding the books also ensured that one was less likely to be mauled in the Restricted Section. They respected a person who knew her way round the condiments cupboard.

Hermione was about to call for a cup of tea when she remembered McGonagall's invitation. Making a detour to leave her books in her quarters where she admonished them and Crookshanks to leave each other alone she set out for the Headmistress' tower, ready for a little intelligent company and willing to be useful. The long, vacant corridors were more temptation than she was prepared to resist, so, after an instinctive check for patrolling teachers (*I am a teacher, idiot!*), she set off at an exuberant run past the tutting portraits, only to be brought up short by a barked "OY!" that turned her, skidding, into an instant twelve-year-old.

"No running in the castle!"

"Sorry, Mr Filch!"

"So you should be," grumbled the caretaker, "scampering around like that as if ... Oh. Professor Granger." His brows lowered as he fought to suppress his tirade. "I was forgetting ..."

"Well, so was I. Obviously." Hermione shuffled in the awkward silence that followed. It wasn't any more comfortable being the object of Argus Filch's scrutiny now than it had been when she first set foot in Hogwarts. "Um," she said. "Er."

She was rescued, most unexpectedly, by Filch's cat, who slipped past her master's legs and sat neatly in front of her, looking up with an expectant chirrup.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Norris," said Hermione. "Oh! But you're not Mrs Norris!" She crouched down to caress the silky fur of the cat's head and cheeks. It broke into a raucous purr. "What a gorgeous tuddy pat, my angel! What a fluffy darling!" The purr expanded to unladylike proportions.

Hermione looked up to see Mr Filch wearing a besotted expression.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he said proudly.

"What happened to Mrs Norris?" asked Hermione, moving her fingers to tickle under the cat's chin. It dissolved into a bliss lump.

"The old girl passed on," sniffed Filch. Hermione turned her eyes back to the cat, embarrassed by the old man's sentiment. "She was a good cat the best of all the Mrs Norrises." He drew a shaky breath. "This here is Mrs Norris the tenth aren't you, my sweet?" He reached down and the cat promptly abandoned Hermione to leap onto his shoulder. "I've been teaching this clever girl her way round the castle."

Hermione wondered briefly who the original Mrs Norris had been to inspire such adoration.

"Well, I must be off," she said as she got to her feet again. "It was nice to meet the new Mrs Norris."

"Wait a minute, Professor!" Filch dug in his pocket for something. "You was the person I wanted to see." He hemmed.

"Yes, Mr Filch?" Hermione had rather hoped he would busy himself about some other perfidy so she could escape to her nice, civilised tea in the Head's office.

"It's just that, well, you see." He held out an old cat collar, embossed with runes for protection and stealth, long life, and others that were less basic in their implications. "Professor Babbling used to make these for me, and now she's retired, well, I have to ask you if you wouldn't mind. The students, you see, they aren't always what you'd call, well, pleasant towards my cat, if you get my drift." He thrust the collar towards her again and she took it automatically, noticing as she did so that he wore a whole selection of old collars buckled round his arm under his sleeve. "They has to be keyed to the individual cat, Professor Babbling says,"

"What? Yes, yes of course, Mr Filch." Hermione had never before stopped to consider how the unpopular cat might be at risk from the students. And if the cat was in danger, then the caretaker ... It struck her forcibly how vulnerable he was, reviled and disregarded in a building awash with magic that the weakest child could use against him. No wonder he wore the old collars. No wonder he was so cantankerous. He was stroking the cat and looking at her hopefully, with a pugnacious set to his jaw. It must be galling to ask for help from someone like her. "Give me a day or so to study what went into this, and I'll make a new one. I'll come and find you when it's ready for the final adjustment, shall I?"

"My office has a Floo," he said curtly and turned away. She thought she heard a mumbled "Even if I can't use it."

"Well," said Hermione. Filch's footsteps died away and she was left in the empty passage again. A couple of portraits snoozed in the lazy summer sun and an insect of some sort was battering around inside a suit of armour. Birdsong drifted in from a nearby window. The breeze whispered in the castle's stones. "Well," said Hermione again, feeling that a polite conversation with Argus Filch was possibly the most bizarre thing that had ever happened to her in all her time at the school. She shook herself and tucked the collar into her jeans pocket. Time for tea and, she hoped, nothing more extraordinary than ginger nuts.

The gargoyle, subject to the relaxed regime of the summer holidays, submitted to a pat on the cheek and let Hermione mount the stairs without recourse to any passwords. Just as well, really, as McGonagall tended to pick couplets from Burns and Hermione rarely got the accent right. The office, when she entered, was awash with golden light, and she was momentarily blinded.

"Over here, dear it's a little less overwhelming," said the Headmistress. Hermione squinted and saw that tea had been laid on the desk in the depths of the room where sunlight could not penetrate. Tidy piles of paper and files had been pushed aside to make room, and McGonagall was gesturing for Hermione to seat herself in a squashy chair. Everything seemed perfectly comfortable, but Hermione thought she detected a brittle edge to McGonagall's courtesies.

"Tea, Professor Granger? Good. And do have some millionaire's shortbread."

Uh-oh, thought Hermione. *She's brought out the big guns something is definitely up. I hope I haven't done anything wrong.*

They chatted amiably for a while, but there was clearly something on the Headmistress' mind.

"And are you happy to be taking on the whole burden of teaching Runes now that Professor Babbling has left us?" asked McGonagall.

"Yes, indeed, Headmistress. You know I've always been fascinated by the subject and, well, there aren't that many students who choose to take it on, so it's not the most arduous of courses to teach. There'll be plenty of time for my own research and projects and if I may?" she hesitated.

"Yes, dear?"

"I was wondering if I could be of any help to you. You seem a little ..." she gestured expressively. "Stressed?"

McGonagall was silent, staring at her for so long that Hermione began to wonder whether she had gone too far, been too pushy. "I don't mean to imply that "

"No! No. It's fine. It's just ..." The older woman jumped nimbly to her feet and began to pace briskly to and fro, winking into translucency every time she crossed into the blinding light, and returning to substance in the shade. She whirled and leant on the desk, her palms flat on the shining wood. Her piercing grey eyes fixed on Hermione's face, serious over the top of her glasses. "As you know, Hermione, I am not prone to making mistakes." Hermione nodded. "However, when I do make a mistake, I tend to do the thing properly."

There was a brief pause, then McGonagall reached forward to pluck a folder from the top of a pile. From it she drew two sheets of parchment, which she laid side by side in front of Hermione. A glance told her that these were standard Hogwarts teaching contracts. Frowning, she began to read the detail while the Headmistress waited, arms folded.

"You see the problem?" she demanded after a few minutes.

Hermione sat back, a contract held in each hand. Her eyes flicked from one to the other and back again.

"They both seem watertight," she hazarded.

"They are," replied McGonagall grimly. "That's the problem. I honestly thought Horace was retiring at the end of last term, but there you see that he has another year to go, and there is no way to push him out of his job he is obliged to complete his tenure, as I am obliged to have him here."

"Obligations which seem equally binding in the other contract," said Hermione, gesturing with it.

"And neither of them would ever consent to share the position not that I would suggest it. I prefer to think of the potions laboratories *not* reduced to rubble!"

Hermione studied the problematic document again.

"Well, there *is* one piece of wiggle room. The contract doesn't actually specify that he will be teaching *Potions* ..."

"But what else could he possibly teach? What would he *want* to teach?"

"I'm surprised he *wants* to teach anything at all," muttered Hermione.

This garnered her a stern look, but McGonagall answered anyway. "I was agreeably surprised myself. His reasons are his own, I suppose he wouldn't tell me but what was most important was to secure the best." She sat down heavily in her chair and closed her eyes. "And now ..."

"Well, ordinarily, one would suggest he take on the DADA post ..."

"Except that I have already engaged Mr Potter for that," snapped McGonagall.

"Have you?" said Hermione, pleased and temporarily diverted. "That's wonderful! He's been getting so fed up with the Ministry eating up his whole life!"

The Headmistress snorted. "Wait until he experiences the demands made on a teacher."

"Hmm," Hermione agreed. "And we still have the problem of what to do with ..."

"... the man for whom the word 'difficult' was coined. Quite."

There was another short pause, during which Hermione sipped some tea and nibbled the corner of her third piece of shortbread and McGonagall tapped her fingers irritably on the desk top.

"Are there *no* other positions free this year?"

"There is one," the Headmistress answered slowly. "One member of staff is taking a well-earned sabbatical year, and I have not yet found a satisfactory replacement, since Wilhelmina retired."

"You mean ..."

"I do."

"Well, there's your answer!" Hermione said slightly hysterically.

"I fear you may be right."

"May I ask a favour, Headmistress?"

"Go ahead it can't be any worse than this mess."

Hermione's voice shook. "I would very much like to be there when you tell him."

McGonagall glared at her for a moment, but could not keep the twitch from her own lips. "I think I will almost certainly need reinforcements on that occasion, Hermione." And then their laughter broke through.

Finally wiping the tears of mirth from their faces, the two women tidied the tea things back onto the tray and gazed at the contracts again.

"I can't help but notice the level of reimbursement," Hermione remarked.

"Yes, you may have a raise," said McGonagall wryly. She tapped another folder. "It was on the cards anyway. Now off you go and let me get on with the paperwork. Thank

you for your company this afternoon, Miss Granger."

Hermione accepted her dismissal and made for the exit, pleased that there was so much to think about and to anticipate. She grasped the ornate door handle, but then hesitated.

"Headmistress? I was quite serious, you know. I'll be there if you need moral and, erm, material support when you tell Professor Snape he has to be Hagrid for a year."

Two

Chapter 2 of 4

Severus' first day back at the school does not go as planned. *Heartfelt thanks to Annie Talbot and Subversa for beta reading; to Machshefa for stalwart alpha work!*

As it happened, Severus gave Minerva no chance to woman the barricades. He arrived four days after The Mistake came to light, full of plans for the curriculum, the labs, the stores, the undoing of Horace's depredations all ideas he had worked on during the many solitary leisure hours the last few years had offered him to be confronted with *this*. If nothing else, Minerva's confession provided an opportunity for a tantrum of epic proportions and a mutual screaming fit which, though nothing was actually said about his year as Head, cleared the air considerably of much built-up resentment and guilt on both sides.

By the time weariness forced them both to draw breath, Severus acknowledged wryly to himself that so far, his re-induction onto the Hogwarts staff had been remarkably therapeutic.

He swooshed up and down the office a couple of times while he prepared the next installment of his tirade. Turning to face the Headmistress again, he found her standing with her hands on her hips and her head bowed, an attitude he hoped presaged the concession of defeat. She blew out a long sigh and raised serious eyes to his.

"Severus ..."

He braced himself. "Severus, please," seemed in the offing, and it was unlikely to win the utterer any house points, even less, cooperation. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Dumbledore's portrait nodding benignly, the old git.

"Severus, for Merlin's sake, just pack it in, you silly boy!" snapped Minerva. She folded her arms firmly across her chest. "I'm not going to apologise any more. It's only a year, you'll be well paid, *and* who knows? You might even learn something. I remember you used to rather enjoy that."

Bravado left him like the air from a whoopee cushion.

"You'll owe me, Minerva," was the best he could manage under the circumstances, though the snarled delivery wasn't too shabby.

She rolled her eyes. "Hagrid has left his keys under a flower pot by his door, and I believe his lesson plans are on the table. He says he doesn't mind if his replacement wants to live in the house, but I imagine you will prefer to stay in the castle. You can choose whichever set of rooms you like as long as they are unoccupied," she added hastily in response to the evil grin he didn't try to suppress. "Now I suggest you go and start acquainting yourself with your new duties, Professor. I am sure you will muddle through. If you have any questions of import, you may make an appointment for tomorrow."

She waved her wand to open the door and sat at her desk, resolutely pulling some paperwork towards her. After a moment, she looked over the tops of her glasses at him. "Shoo."

On the way back down the stairs, Severus felt oddly reassured by the dismissal. It was almost delightful to be wanted but have no moral pressure exerted, no false praise of his unparalleled abilities, no promises of future greatness, no threats simply the assumption that he would do as he was told. Still, *Care of Magical Creatures*? As far as he was concerned, the best place for most creatures was broken down into component parts swimming in jars or depending on species and cut on his plate, swimming in gravy. Voluble complaint was required, and in any case, he very much wanted to see the only person in the castle to whom he had ever been able to grumble like one perfectly reasonable, put-upon, ill-used human being to another.

It was a trifle unexpected to enter Filch's office and be confronted with the spectacle of his old companion, bum perched on the desk, knuckles white from clenching, head thrown back, while, just visible past his arm, a woman knelt before him, apparently busying herself with the front of his trousers.

"Nnnngggghhh!" groaned the caretaker. "Nnnngggghhhhhhaaaaaarrrrrrgggghhhh!" Abruptly, he relaxed.

Severus was backing silently out, not wishing to begrudge any man his pleasures, when a voice he remembered all too well asked brightly, "There you go, Mr Filch! Does that feel better?" and none other than Hermione Granger, prissy know-it-all swot and sidekick of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Tolerated, scrambled to her feet and looked assessingly into Filch's face.

Tectonic upheavals in world-view seemed to be the order of the day, thought Severus, gamely attempting to stop his paradigms falling right off the frame by running away.

"Oh! Hello, Professor Snape!"

Curses. Too late.

Filch hitched his trousers, pulled his jacket closed, and turned round with what seemed an unusually relaxed expression.

Severus closed his eyes and clutched at the door handle. Clearly, whatever malign influence had led him into the job catastrophe had also left him completely deranged.

"Severus! Good to see you, boy!" rumbled Filch. "Thanks, Professor Granger. I'll let you know how it goes, then, shall I?"

By the scaly left tit of the Gorgon was Granger to be his *colleague*? He had a vision of endless, friendly requests for help and offers of 'assistance'.

"Yes, please, Mr Filch. We may need to do this again in a few days."

Granger walked towards the doorway with a jaunty step and a disgustingly sunny smile. Severus became uncomfortably aware that both his eyes and his mouth were now hanging unbecomingly open. He brought his teeth together with a clack and turned his gape into a glare. Granger seemed undaunted.

"Have you seen the Headmistress yet?" she asked.

"Yes!" he snarled. "Not that it's any of your business."

Her smile became a little fixed.

"Oh. I was hoping to accompany you up there."

"I don't need my hand ... or anything else ... held by you, Miss Granger," he said rudely.

She looked him up and down.

"Really?"

The door closed gently behind her.

"You'd never have known it when she was just some uppity brat running round the school," said Filch, "but that Professor Granger's a fine woman!"

"Argus, stop raving and make some proper tea. Tea that'd corrode a southerner from the inside out. Tea you can stand a spoon up in. A man cannot survive a day like this on the dishwater Minerva serves. Next thing I know, someone's going to tell me Potter's on the staff as well."

Filch busied himself with the kettle.

"You want a flapjack with that?"

*

Even the knowledge of what Granger had really been doing in the region of Filch's groin Severus flinched: Argus might be his friend, but there were certain words which could never be placed in conjunction without creating *some* sort of backlash did little to recover Snape's feeling of equanimity. Neither did the pulled shoulder earned in shifting what Hagrid considered a 'flower pot' and any right-thinking person would call a stone horse trough in order to find the key to a door that was, as it turned out, unlocked. Neither did the tardy realisation that a spot of wand-waving would have been both less foolish and less painful. Neither did the lesson 'plans', written out carefully in slightly childish writing on lined paper and laid out meticulously on the table. "First Years: autumn term pets and familiars" was all that was written on the first sheet. Snape turned it over, looking for the rest, and even tried a *Revelio* in case the page had received some pink umbrella treatment but no. That was it. Third years onwards earned, at least, lists of animals, and though the logic of what was chosen was baffling, it was nothing to the order in which they were studied. Lastly, a note for him.

"Dear Professor _____,

Here are my plans. Nothing's particularly dangerous (*Oh, really*, thought Severus, eyeing the fourth-years' schedule, which apparently included being fed to a Manticore), but it's all really interesting (*A good job I'm an expert in defensive magic, with all this 'interest' on offer* so the kids should enjoy their lessons (*Not if I can help it*). The beasts you can't find in the Forest you can get from Rotezahn and Kralle in Basingstoke on short loan. (*How convenient*.) If you want handlers, you'll have to talk to the Headmistress about extra budget. (*And trolls might fly*)

Have a good year.

R. Hagrid.

P.S. You're allowed an owl for your own use. Go to the owlery and one of them will choose you."

Ooh goody, a perk, Snape thought sourly as he rolled up the 'plans' and shoved them in his pocket. The paper was nice and absorbent and would be good for ... something, though certainly not the purpose that Hagrid had intended. Locking and warding the door behind him for who could underestimate the creativity of a schoolful of adventurous brats armed with bottles of Hagrid's infamous liniment? Severus trudged back up to the school. With a bit of luck, the library would have a record of Grubbly-Plank's plans, or even old Whatsisface who used to teach before Dumbledore went completely potty. He certainly wasn't going to write his own if he could help it.

*

Dust motes danced lazily in the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the library windows. Other than that, nothing stirred. The Hogwarts elves had been busy with their polish, undoing the effects of a year's hard use, and the tables gleamed. Beeswax scented the air. Severus recalled that he had always liked Hogwarts in the summer.

He made his way towards the cupboards where Madam Pince stored copies of the curricula and lesson plans a requirement of the school Board, though rarely checked only to find it, unlike Hagrid's hut, severely locked and warded. He experienced some surprise that the wards resisted his attempts to break them, but, instead of expending any real effort on burglary and earning himself the librarian's wrath, he thought he'd go for a pleasant wander among the shelves in search of the witch in question and maybe leaf through a couple of texts for inspiration.

By the time Severus reached the cast-iron gate to the Restricted Section, he had sent nine volumes whizzing to pile themselves neatly on the librarian's desk. A tenth, *A Guide To Your New Familiar* by Cray Pode and Schwette Katzenjammer, complete with glossy illustrations, "jolly little quizlets" and "tricks to teach your toad", would save him putting any thought at all into the forty minutes a week he would have to endure the first years. He made a mental note to have it added to the reading list. The gate was unlocked, and as staff, he was permitted access with a mere tingle as he passed through. He paced slowly past the shelves of restless books, looking down each aisle, searching for Madam Pince. There was no sign of her, and he was beginning to wonder if she was on a loo break when a muffled snigger reached his ear.

Let it be noted that there is no sound that sets off a long-time teacher's warning bells as swiftly and surely as a snigger.

Settling into a stealthy prow and casting a subtle Disillusionment charm on himself, Severus followed the suspicious thread of sound. It led him unerringly to the Restricted Section reading room.

This chamber, uncharted territory to the student body, was a remarkably pleasant space. A large circular chamber lined with bookshelves and lit by many windows above the shelves, it harboured no dark corners in which something untoward might lurk. The desks and lecterns occupied the centre of the room, at a safe distance from even the most determined tomes, and widely-spaced from each other as well, in order that readers' choices might not attack, infect, or interbreed with one another to deleterious effect. All the woodwork gleamed with polish and the patina of protective charms. Each study space claimed a single comfortable chair, except for the one currently occupied quite against the rules by two witches, one mature, bony and graying, one young, curvaceous and bushy-haired, both shaking with laughter over what seemed to be ... He looked more closely. Yes, judging by the slime puddling on the desk and the occasional tentacle making a bid for freedom, it was *The Lays of Shoggoth*, one of the most infamous texts in the history of wizardry, and certainly no laughing matter. It must be a case of hysteria and madness brought on by contact, decided Severus, readying himself to be heroic.

"Look at this one!" said Granger. She made a big effort to control her giggles and began to read, spitting out the guttural sounds with surprising fluency.

"Khrath'de nog Bel-tramin kha Zradji,

Wgh'flerch muh tre Phreithen an Schta-bri.

Q'l Bracht in Zha Xjinn

He ghoeb ak en kKzijn,

Llan drwb en-Schtul mrawdys tra ghra'Di!"

The two witches howled with laughter and clutched at each other. The book tried to join in, but Granger casually pushed the tentacles away, tossing them what seemed to be if Snape could believe his eyes a handful of chocolate buttons. She let the book absorb its treat before snapping it shut.

"Oh, thank you, Irma! That made my day," said the younger witch, when she had mastered herself once more. "I oh! Hello, Professor Snape! Again."

Drat. The incantation seemed to have undone his Disillusionment.

"Was that what it sounded like?" To be honest, he couldn't keep the curiosity out of his voice.

"And what did it sound like, young man?" enquired Madam Pince, rosy-faced from laughing, but still able to make him feel like a scabby schoolboy.

"It sounded like ... I can't believe I'm saying this. It sounded like a five thousand year old dirty limerick."

"That's exactly what it was!" said Granger, a little muffled as she was currently engaged in wrestling the ~~L~~ays back into their warded glass display case. "Behave, you! Or there won't be any more chocolate!" The tentacles withdrew and the book lay oozing innocence as well as ... ooze. Granger chucked in another handful of buttons and set about doing up the rune-embossed bolts and chains that kept the evil thing confined. "I just love the way the Ancients wrote down anything that crossed their minds, without any attempt at editing. The seventh-years are going to love that one." She shook her head, smiling. "Right, I'm off, as you clearly have business with Madam Pince, Professor. See you later, Irma!"

She scampered off with a cheerful wave.

Severus became aware that he was gaping again.

"So, Professor Snape, how may I assist you?" enquired the librarian. "Oh, and you might want to see to your clothing that particular verse has a deft way with one's fastenings if one doesn't take appropriate precautions."

Voluminous outer robes had their uses, thought Severus as he felt his trousers begin to slither earthwards.

*

With a gloomy feeling of inevitability, he inserted himself into the last remaining seat at the Hog's Head, which happened to be the one next to Granger at the bar. She was taking up far more than her fair share of the space, what with her pint, the patterns she was idly drawing in a puddle of beer, the book she was holding up in front of her face, and, of course, her elbows. Matters weren't helped by the backgammon board laid out before her. She seemed to be waiting for her opponent to take his turn.

She glanced away from her book to take in her new companion.

"Oh, hello, Professor Snape!"

"Must you say that every time?"

"What would you rather I said? Oy, Snape, you look grumpy?"

"I imagine it would be closer to the truth than your feigned pleasure at seeing me."

"You never know it might not be feigned."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

She gave it a moment's thought, long enough to take a pull at her beer.

"Well, I might have been harbouring a terrible crush on you all these years!"

He harrumphed.

"Unlikely, I grant you. Well, let's see," she mused. "I might be genuinely pleased that you've emerged from your totally unnecessary self-imposed exile ..."

"Granger."

"Or it might just be that I have good manners."

They looked at each other for a moment.

"What happens if I pick the first?" he enquired.

"Well, then I spend the next few months following you around and sighing gusty sighs of adoration, hoping that you will one day recognise your true feelings for me."

"And the second?"

"Ah for that one, I get to lecture you a lot and set about improving you and making you recognise that people actually do value you."

"I think I'll pick the third. Are you always this ... up front?"

"Only after a pint and a half of Aberforth's home-brew."

"Are you actually reading that book?"

"Nope. Just maintaining my carefully cultivated persona. The print's gone a bit wibbly, to be honest."

Severus pulled round the backgammon board and took Aberforth's turn for him.

"Does Aberforth still make the world's best chip butties?" he asked.

Granger closed her book and stuck it in the pocket of the jacket she had slung over the back of her chair.

"Yep. I'm waiting for one now. Bad day, huh?" She shook the dice and threw a double six.

"You have no idea. I just found out I have to design the whole curriculum from scratch. Hagrid took all the old lesson plans down to his hut to read and that damn dog of his

ate them." He paused. "No bright and perky offers of help?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Get stuffed. I'm having to do the same thing for Runes. After four decades of Prof Babbling doing the same bloody thing every year, I've got a curriculum of my own to design, not to mention ..."

Aberforth suddenly set down a plate bearing a mountain of chips unstably bracketed top and bottom by two thick slices of buttered white bread. He plonked salt, vinegar and ketchup bottles down in the puddle of beer.

"I love you, Aberforth," declared Granger. "It is a deep and abiding love which nothing can destroy." She lifted the top of the sandwich and drenched the chips with vinegar. "Professor Snape will no doubt evince the same passion if you bring him a pint and a buttie as well."

"Be quick about it, would you Aberforth?" said Snape, eyeing the girl's assault on her supper. "It looks as though I have some catching up to do." He threw the dice and took Aberforth's turn again while the old man slouched off back to the taps. Granger continued to plough her way steadily through her food and her pint in silence. Her eyelids drooped. Aberforth returned and she ordered another half. Severus found himself fascinated by the dedication she was bringing to her task.

"You're not going to drink more of that, are you, Granger? You can barely sit upright as it is."

"Of course I am. It's a tradition."

"Tradition?" One long pull at his beer and Severus' fingertips were already tingling.

"Once a month without fail. Helps me sleep."

"Why would you have trouble sleeping, Granger?"

"It's so noisy up at the school," she mumbled.

"It's the summer holidays. There's nobody there to make a noise."

She gave him a scathing look and slipped off her chair, catching herself as her knees wobbled.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Stop being martyred and spit it out, woman!"

"It's the castle," she stage-whispered. "It talks to me. All. The bloody. Time."

Three

Chapter 3 of 4

The morning after the night before. And Hermione takes some time off. *Loving thanks to Annie Talbot for beta reading.*
And to Machshefa, Annie, Subversa and a whole crowd of folks at Aeternitas for alpha-being-read-to!

With a week to go before the first of September, Hermione found herself at a loose end. Her lesson plans for the term were completed in detail; the curriculum for the year had been set out and approved. All that was left was to don her teaching robes and appear at the High Table for the Welcoming Feast, and even she felt that arriving seven days early was a trifle premature. So, with nothing of her own to trouble her and the ever-inescapable feeling that she ought to be doing *something* useful giving her a bad case of the fidgets, she set out to be helpful, knowing that the rest of the staff, now mostly returned from their holidays, would still be snowed under with preparations.

And, if truth be told, she was feeling a little lonely.

Pre-term turmoil was keeping everyone preoccupied, and she had exchanged barely a word with anyone for ages, not even Professor Snape who, she discovered, had taken over the suite of rooms on the other side of the corridor from hers.

This discovery had been made alongside the not-so-new revelation that partaking of Aberforth's home-brew, while a good idea beforehand and a stroke of genius during, turned out to have been a move of catastrophic recklessness afterwards. The morning after that notable visit to the Hog's Head, Hermione had woken feeling a bit on the pasty side and wondering whether she had imagined weaving her way back to the school clinging to Professor Snape's arm and singing some stupid song about pixies. She cringed a bit when it came back to her how insistent she had been that he hear the song. She hoped she hadn't actually invited him into her rooms to put her to bed, but she had, unfortunately, a tendency to remember quite accurately everything she did while drunk once her brain started to reassemble itself. Thus, when she eased open her door and gingerly peered into the corridor, squinting against the dim light, she was relieved to see the door opposite firmly closed. Balancing her head carefully on her shoulders, she eased out and began the long totter to the lakeshore, which seemed like the best place to go (via the kitchen for a vat of coffee) to nurse her hangover. The sound of a door handle turning was not, at that moment, particularly welcome.

"Miss Granger."

She stopped and placed a hand on the inconsiderately swaying wall.

"Oh, hello Prof ..."

"Never mind that," he snapped. He looked intently at her for a second then whirled and stepped away, only to return before Hermione had screwed up enough courage to continue inching forward. He thrust a glass of blue liquid at her. "Drink."

"I really don't think I could, thank you, Professor," she choked.

"Whereas I, on the other hand, am convinced that you should and you will if only to spare me any more pixies. This will deal with the hangover and help protect you from whatever Aberforth's been dosing his beer with. Remind me to take a sample next time."

He strode off down the stairs, his footsteps offensively loud.

Hermione looked dubiously into the sparkling drink. She took a careful sip. It wasn't completely disgusting. "The trouble is," she said querulously to the empty corridor, "I don't actually know any songs about pixies when I'm sober." She downed the rest of her potion like a good girl, spelled the glass clean, and bent gingerly to place it on the floor outside Snape's door before taking the same path down to the main body of the school. "Hang on!" she said, stopping half-way. "There's going to be a next time?"

Since that encounter, however, she had seen only fleeting signs of Snape or, more accurately, she had ignored everything beyond her books. Now she was at a loose end, she wanted company and occupation, but it seemed none was to be found. She knocked on all her colleagues' doors with offers of help, but each time was effectively told to run along and play. Fair's fair, she told herself. She couldn't really expect the world to be at her disposal when she wanted it to be, but she couldn't help feeling a little disgruntled when even Argus Filch turned down her offer of fine-tuning the protective rune-belt she had made for him.

"I'll see how it goes for a few weeks, Professor Granger," he said, settling the belt firmly into place as he got up from where he was crouching. "What do the Muggles call it? A road test?"

Mrs Norris came to headbutt Hermione's ankles, as if to show off her pride in the matching green collar she wore. The runes inlaid into the leather gleamed with subtle enchantments.

"Fair enough, Mr Filch," Hermione sighed. She glanced at his toolbox on the floor; a crowbar was wedged into the corner of the lowest step in a flight of stairs that had been sticking from time to time. "Are you doing repairs?"

"Trying to see what the problem is," he replied. "Probably just a bit off-kilter. The whole castle's been a bit out of sorts since the battle. Hardly surprising. But the Headmistress wants me to have a look-see." He grasped the jemmy and heaved the top of the step out of place. "Mind your toes, Professor."

She stepped back as he eased the worn stone gently down, laying it on a bit of sacking. Peering closely, he hmphed.

"Gravel and grit everywhere. See that, Professor?" He pointed to the fine grit wedged into the seam of the step where it joined the banister. "I'm probably going to have to do the entire flight," he grumbled as he rummaged in the toolbox for a set of brushes and fine scrapers.

"I could lend a hand ..." Hermione offered.

"I prefer to work alone," Filch snapped. "I'm quite capable of doing this."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to imply that you weren't!" She was mortified.

Filch pulled a piece of cloth from his pocket and shook it out, upon which it puffed up into a thick pad which he dropped onto the flagstones. He glanced at Hermione, where she stood twisting her fingers together.

"Headmistress thought me knees could do with a bit of TLC," he grunted. "No offence taken, Professor. But you should get along."

He knelt on the cushion and bent to his task, teasing the grit out of the stair with all the care of an archaeologist. Hermione began to move away, but as she did so, light from a window behind her fell across the step, bringing out a pattern scratched faintly in the old stone. She frowned and knelt beside the caretaker.

"Professor," he warned.

"No no look!" She ran her fingertips over the marks, trying to work it out. Frustrated, she closed her eyes and the pattern leapt to life under her hands. She drew in a sharp breath. "Runes!"

"Yes," said Filch, bending back to his work.

"What? You've seen these before?"

He sat back on his heels.

"They're all over the place. And now will you let me work, Professor?"

She ignored his irritation and conjured some fine paper and a wax crayon, with which she made a careful rubbing of what turned out to be a vine-like design weaving in and out of itself like the movements of a dance. Eventually she sat back with a pleased sigh to look at something that would surely keep her happily occupied for a few days.

"Finished now?" Filch said acidly.

"Oh, yes thank you, Mr Filch. Thank you so much!" He blinked, disconcerted, as she beamed at him.

"Yes, well. Go on, then."

Hermione risked giving his arm a pat and then skipped off, her paper rolled up in her hand. A few productive hours in the library would see her right, she thought. However, as she raised a hand to pull the library door open, Minerva McGonagall appeared like a pantomime devil, from nowhere,

"And where might you be going, Professor Granger?"

"To do some research! I just found some ..."

The Headmistress pushed the door firmly closed and leaned on it.

"Oh, no you're not, Miss Granger!"

"Oh, yes I am, Professor! You see ..." Hermione, filled with enthusiasm, brandished her exciting find. The Headmistress extended her hand.

"I think I'll take that for now, Miss Granger."

"What? But ..."

"Hermione." McGonagall fixed her with a stern look. "Your dedication to your field of study is most laudable, I am sure, but you have not seen daylight for a week and it shows. You even, unless I am very much mistaken," she added critically, "have a spot."

"But ..."

"But me no buts, young lady. Just give me the paper. I will make sure you have it back. For now, however, I would prefer you to get some fresh air." This was said with the clear subtext: *proceed outside, proceed directly outside, do not pass Go, do not collect £200*

"But ..."

"Come, now, Hermione. It's a beautiful " she leaned sideways to look at the darkened window at the end of the corridor, " wet day outside. Perfect for a walk."

Sometimes one just had to recognise defeat.

Hermione surrendered her precious parchment with a bad grace and slouched back to her rooms for a hoodie.

Reluctantly, once outside, she found she had to admit that oxygen made a refreshing change. Fine misty drizzle more a hanging dampness in the air than actual rain lent a quality of stillness to the day, enhanced by the soft grey light that muted all the colours around her and eased the headache she realised she'd been carrying for days. She breathed deeply, shoved her hands into her pockets, and set off to walk the long path round the outside of the castle. Widdershins, of course, just for the hell of it.

She was nearly at the turn down to Hagrid's cottage, and feeling a little blue that she couldn't go down and beg a cup of tea from him, when she became aware of the sound of hammering. It seemed to be coming from a rocky dell on the far side of an outcrop that overlooked the Forest. Intrigued, such workmanlike sounds being rare in a magical environment, she clambered to the edge and looked down, to see that the floor of the hollow had been flattened and paved, and now a sort of open-sided barn was under construction. House-elves in waxed canvas wraps, and a couple of goblins seemingly indifferent to the weather, toiled with hammers and saws, and up on the roof, setting tiles into place was ...

"Oh, hel/o Professor Snape," murmured Hermione.

One foot on the rung of a ladder, and the other knee up on the edge of the roof, his legs and backside were perfectly moulded by a pair black jeans, while a damply clinging black t-shirt did nothing to conceal a long, lean back, strong shoulders and sinewy arms. Professor Snape in civvies was an unexpectedly cheering sight, Hermione decided. She settled down on a rock to watch the work. Every so often, Snape would impatiently tuck his hair behind his ears, but inevitably it fell forward into his eye again. At last, he shoved a hand into his pocket and yanked out a length of string all boys always have a length of string in their pockets with which he achieved a rough pony tail.

"Are you going to sit there gawping all day, or are you going to come down and impart the barrel-load of helpful comments that are no doubt clamouring to be heard?" demanded Snape without looking at her. He climbed down the ladder and stretched. "Tea break!" he called to his helpers. "Well, Granger?" he said, finally turning his beaky face up to her and raising an eyebrow. "There's probably a spare mug around here somewhere."

Hermione, uncomfortably aware of having been caught out, and conscious that her own hair under the influence of the Scottish weather was now at its disastrous worst a combination of mad frizz and untidy rat-tails scrambled down to where Snape was pouring tea from a thermos.

"Thanks, Professor Snape," she said.

"I think that, considering you've spent the past half hour ogling me in a wet t-shirt, you might drop the honorific," Snape said drily.

She blushed.

"I can hardly address you as 'Snape'," she protested. The warmth of the mug felt good to her chilly fingers.

"I call you 'Granger'," he pointed out. "And I think 'dearest, darlingest Severus' should be kept for special occasions, don't you?"

Her blush deepened to crimson.

"Sorry about that," she mumbled, studying the surface of her tea.

"You're an affectionate drunk," he replied indifferently. "There are worse things. Well, perhaps not in the case of Goyle senior. That was a night I'd rather forget."

Hermione giggled. "You're in a good mood," she said.

"Mmmm."

She waited in vain for some more conversation to happen, until at last the compulsion to fill the vacuum overcame her.

"Why ...?"

Snape smirked, victorious. Hermione huffed, but now she had started, she would finish.

"Why are you building this shed thing?"

"Most of the creatures Hagrid has on order are, regrettably, things it would be wiser not to take inside the castle. And I really don't see why I should have to teach in the rain, no matter what great and glorious traditions have dictated that resistance to pneumonia should be a prime qualification for this job I've been lumbered with."

"Seems reasonable."

"Not according to the Bursar."

"We have a Bursar?"

"She's usually called the Headmistress, aside from those times she's got her claws clenched tightly around the purse strings."

Hermione snorted. "Why are you building it like this, though? It's got to be more effort than ..."

"Magic? Of course it is. How were your COMC courses, Granger?"

"Inconsistent," she answered. "To say the least."

"So your knowledge of the field is ..."

"Inconsistent."

He nodded.

"So, would you know anything about the Giant Patagonian Lunar Bile-Moth?" She shook her head. "The Kensington Rat-King? The dwarf Lava Bittern?"

"Good lord! No, nothing."

"Neither did I until the suppliers sent me a copy of the order list," Snape said sourly. "'Motley' is one word for Hagrid's idea of a syllabus." He took a large swallow of tea.

"But why ...?"

"Because one thing all these animals have in common is a strong and unstable magical aura. I would rather not be teaching under an enchanted roof when a blast of magic decides to randomly undo the joists."

"Better to trust in nails, then."

Snape shook the last drops out of his cup and screwed it back on the thermos. "No magic anywhere in or near the construction until it's finished."

"Can I help?"

"No."

"Oh, but ..."

"No, Granger. You can sit here making snide comments, if you like, but your help is not required."

Hermione abruptly lost her temper.

"Why won't anybody let me *do* anything?" she snapped. "Anyone would think I wasn't wanted around here!"

"If it were up to me, I'd send you up that ladder like a shot and stay here where it's dry. However, the Headmistress' orders are clear ..."

"It's *her* fault? That's totally unreasonable! Why don't you just ignore her?"

Snape sauntered over to the foot of his ladder, where he turned and looked back at Hermione.

"Put it like this, Granger. McGonagall's threats may lack finesse but she's fully prepared to back them up, and given that I prefer not to have my balls grilled and served up to me on a piece of toast, I choose to take her seriously this once. She seems to think you need a holiday."

Hermione huffed and sat on a pile of tiles. "That's ridiculous."

"Why don't you bugger off and play with your little friends? They've seen nothing of you for weeks," Snape asked from the top of the ladder. All she could see of him was one foot, which quickly vanished up onto the roof proper.

"They're busy."

Snape's head appeared over the top edge of the tiles. "Are you telling me Weasley's actually managed to find something useful to occupy him?" he asked incredulously.

"I wouldn't go as far as 'useful'."

He disappeared again and a couple of tiles settled themselves into place.

"If that's a conversational gambit, it's failed. I'm not going to ask about Brainless and Gormless."

She giggled.

"That's how you think of them?"

"You don't?"

"Certainly not! They're my friends."

"Hufflepuff."

"There's no need to get nasty."

"There's always a need to get nasty."

"That's just entertainment not necessity," Hermione teased.

"Why don't you go away and knit, or something? Let a man work in peace."

"That's not a bad idea, you know."

His head appeared again. "You really knit?"

Hermione jumped to her feet. "I'll just run back and get it, then I can keep you company all day while you work!"

"Merlin preserve me," he growled.

"You can tell me all about Hagrid's order sheet."

A tile smashed to the flagstones below.

"I'll take that as a yes, then," said Hermione.

Four

Chapter 4 of 4

Term is about to begin and Severus' nose is out of joint. *Enormous thanks, as ever, to Annie Talbot and Subversa for beta reading.*

A nod was all Severus was willing to give as recompense for Granger's friendly smile and customary 'oh-hello-Professor-Snape', but that and the fact that he took the seat next to hers at the table seemed to satisfy her. An odd young woman. A week of knitting, reading, and intermittently talking at him while he worked on the barn seemed to have established, well, if not ease, then at least custom. He certainly hadn't made any effort to encourage her. When his natural lack of charm hadn't sufficed to drive her

away, he had tried out-and-out obnoxiousness, but the Gryffindor (clearly amused, for some reason) had refused to be chased away on any but her own terms.

And she had shared her sandwiches.

Of course, that meant he had to share his tea.

And yet, the fillings she chose were inspired ...

So Severus nabbed the *Daily Prophet* from her neat stack of papers, took his seat, riffled through to find the crossword, and proceeded to ignore her. For her part, she continued to doodle runes and flowers on a sheet of parchment as the rest of the staff drifted in for the pre-term meeting.

It was the thirty-first of August, and all of Hogwarts was getting ready to don tin hats and dive for the bunkers.

The noise level in the room increased exponentially with each new arrival. Severus imparted the odd grunt of recognition but kept his nose otherwise firmly directed to the puzzles page. Granger, for her part, dispensed cheerful greetings with a sad lack of discrimination.

McGonagall swept into the room and smashed an armful of files onto the table with a deafening crack. Trelawney squeaked and fluttered but then, under the headmistress' icy glare, joined the rest in silence.

"Good morning to you all," said McGonagall. "I am glad to see all of you back looking rested and healthy and fit to take on the new school year." Her gaze rested pointedly on Granger, who returned a mildly sarcastic smile. "Before I hand out your timetables and deal with any particular issues you wish to raise, I would like to alert you all to some welcome changes in staffing this year some of which are already known to some of you, I am sure, but bear with me." She paused. "As you know, Professor Babbling retired at the end of last year."

"About time," whispered Hooch to Sinistra. "Gone a bit bananas, if you ask me."

"Thank you, Rolanda," McGonagall said repressively. "To continue: now that Bathsheba is no longer with us, I am pleased to announce that Hermione Granger has acceded to the full professorship and all its duties."

There was a brief ripple of applause, and Granger's cheeks flushed delicately. She nodded at the rest of the staff before sinking down a little in her place. Severus was mildly surprised that she didn't seem comfortable with the attention, over-achiever that she was.

"I believe we have an addition in the Herbology department, Pomona?" continued the headmistress, waving a hand to give Sprout the floor.

Professor Sprout standing was not much different in height from Professor Sprout sitting the only clue that she was on her feet was the fact that she was bouncing on them.

"Yes! Thank you!" she gushed. "Yes! I've decided to take on an assistant this year!"

Severus started making a tally of exclamation marks. From the corner of his eye, he saw Granger take note and smirk.

"Yes!"

Another mark.

"Given the expansion of the greenhouses and we're now one of the foremost producers of rare plants in Britain!"

And another.

"and given that Herbology is one of the most popular subjects at school, I have been lucky enough to recruit ..."

That was a logical progression? scribbled Granger in the margin of her parchment. Severus' lips twitched.

"... a hugely well-qualified young Herbologist whom many of you already know well!"

Another ... Severus looked up in horror.

"Yes! Neville Longbottom!" Sprout bustled to the door and opened it onto the vision of a tweed-clad backside.

"Trevor?"

McGonagall hemmed.

Longbottom straightened awkwardly, toad in hand, face red. Some things never changed.

"Come on in, Neville," cajoled Sprout as the young man teetered on the threshold. Crowds of well-disposed and not noticeably unbalanced people were clearly more terrifying than giant serpents and deranged Dark Overlords.

Poor Neville. How on earth is he going to face even the first years? scribbled Granger.

Hide behind Sprout? Severus replied.

Her shoulders shook. Neville was at least twice his boss's height.

Sprout conjured a chair, and Longbottom, looming over her, followed meekly to take his place at the table.

"Neville will be helping me particularly with the rarer plants grown for Potions use," added Sprout, shooting a mischievous glance in Severus' direction.

"Splendid, splendid!" puffed Slughorn. "I'm sure I'll find lots of uses for them!"

Neville, whose horrified stare had been fixed on Severus' face, sagged with relief. For his part, Severus felt for the first time that there might actually be an advantage to *not* teaching Potions, since by now Longbottom had almost certainly developed the ability to explode cauldrons remotely.

"And now," McGonagall interjected, "I would like to move on to this year's appointment of a teacher to the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts."

There was an expectant hush, and most faces turned towards Severus.

"As you are aware, I have until now continued the tradition of reappointing to the post every year not because of any continuation of the alleged curse, but simply because I did not feel that we had yet been able to attract a professor of sufficient calibre; someone experienced in the theory, the transmission, and the practice of the discipline."

Another dramatic pause. Snape's name was whispered around the table.

"This year, I believe we have found our man."

Granger had gone very still and was avoiding Severus' eyes.

"Harry Potter."

Merlin on a motorbike. Severus seized Granger's quill and scrawled, "You knew?" dotting the bottom of the question mark with a ferocious splatter.

"Sorry," she whispered.

He leaned towards her, meaning to demand an explanation, but the thunder of applause and chairs scraping as people stood up drowned him out. He had to satisfy himself with a glare. Granger gave him an apologetic grimace and mouthed, "I'll explain later," before getting to her feet and threading her way to the doorway, where Potter stood drinking in the adulation. The smug display tightened Severus' lips. Try as he might (which wasn't saying much) to recognise what merits the boy had, he still got on his wick.

Potter toured the room and eventually ended up where Severus still sat looking unfriendly. He stuck out his hand.

"It's good to see you again, sir," he said simply.

Severus returned the shake as briefly as he could.

"Which brings me ...," the headmistress said shrilly over the hubbub, "if I may?"

The old cat still knew how to control a classroom.

"Which brings me," she repeated as quiet fell, "to the introduction or rather, welcome re-introduction of Professor Severus Snape to the staff of Hogwarts school." She hemmed. There was no round of enthusiastic applause rather, an expectant silence, with many glances ping-ponging from Minerva to Severus and back.

Severus sat back and laced his fingers across his stomach. He raised his eyebrows a fraction, daring the headmistress to admit her mistake. She lowered hers in riposte.

"As you know, everyone, Horace still has a year to go before taking his well-earned ..."

Severus huffed discreetly.

"... retirement, so a vacancy in the Potions department is not the reason for Professor Snape's presence here today."

"Then what ...?" said Potter, who was sitting quietly next to Granger, doing a passable imitation of an adult.

"Professor Snape has been kind enough to answer my appeal for a teacher to fill our final vacancy this year," said McGonagall.

Neatly done, Minerva, he thought sarcastically.

"He will be taking on the course in Care of Magical Creatures, and will, I am sure, make a fine job of it."

There was a slightly shocked pause. Minerva was becoming as adept as Albus at keeping things from people but then just as someone let out a giggle, someone else started clapping. Severus didn't have to turn his head to know that it was Potter, closely followed by Granger, already falling back into the habit of shadowing the Golden Boy's every move. His rancour deepened. He scowled and crossed his arms.

"Severus, thank you so much for helping out," McGonagall said, adding her own handclap to the sparse applause. "Very well. Now that's all over and done with, I think we might get on with business."

He kept his seat as his former colleagues got on with the nitty-gritty of schedules, supplies, and House affairs, but it was a close-run thing. He was aware of the lumpy cushion under his backside, the smell of the coffee cooling in cups here and there on the table, the changing angle of the sunlight through the windows, and most of all, Granger fretting at her quill next to him. It was a sorry-looking object by the time the meeting was over.

With another scrape of chairs, the staff got up to mingle, chat about the summer, for those who had not seen each other, or the coming year, for those who had. Potter had his circle of admirers, of course. Longbottom shadowed Sprout like a lost duckling. Lost giant duckling. Flitwick came over to express a greeting that was warm enough, Sprout already knew he was there, Trelawney flapped her scarves at him, though whether in alarm or delight it was impossible to tell, and the others seemed too awkward to want to approach.

He left the room, belatedly aware that Granger had been at his elbow the whole time.

*

The holding pens were a jumbled mess of shapes and sizes, cobbled together by Hagrid as and when he had had need of facilities for the various monsters he shipped in. There was no logic to their placement and no elegance to their construction they shunted up against each other, a random collection of huts, pits, caves, perches, cages and barns, an unsightly yet undeniably solid settlement located half a mile inside the borders of the forest.

Severus shouldered the gate of the Thestral enclosure open and made pretence of checking that everything was in order. A deep straw bed gave the animals a place to lie down, if they wished; the water troughs were full and fresh; stands bearing large hooks were ready for the carcasses that would be brought down later to summon the herd. Nothing needed doing. He considered reviewing the facilities for the first creatures to be delivered the following day, but knew it was a pointless exercise. He was ready. His course was ready. Everything was sodding ready. Or if it wasn't, he didn't care.

He climbed up the paddock fence and sat slumped on the top, facing the Forest with a gloomy frown. A faint howl drifted in from somewhere deeper in the trees. It matched his mood. Enough time passed that he began to get thoroughly narked at the wood-pigeons. Every time he got onto a really satisfyingly bitter train of thought about McGonagall's manipulations Albus had been right about Sorting *her* too early some bloody bird would softly coo, undermining the frigid resolve he was *attempting* to build, thank you very much, to *never* even *consider* having a good mood ever again.

Well, at least target practice might cheer him up.

"I thought I might find you down here."

"Sod off, Granger."

"No." He heard the Forest gate open. Her footsteps made no sound on the lush grass as she walked round and parked herself on the ground below him, cross-legged, a substantial covered basket next to her. After one glance, which showed that there was a whole bucketload of Gryffindor bravado overlaying something less brash at play, he turned his face away.

"Shouldn't you be holding court with Potter?"

"I have neither reason nor desire to do so," she shrugged, ignoring Severus' waspish tone. "Everyone here knows me already. Besides which, I'd just distract him from all

his course prep."

"You mean you're not "

"I don't do anyone's homework for them any more," she snapped. "Especially not when they leave it until the last minute."

"Do I sense moral outrage, Granger?" He was looking at her now, concentrating on chasing away any signs of sympathy. "Finally managed to learn to let other people make mistakes?"

"Not really." She shrugged again. "It's a pointless exercise in Harry's case anyway. He'll just stroll into the classroom and wing it and be a huge success without having to make any particular effort."

Now *she* was sounding disgruntled. Excellent.

"So that's why you've stalked off here in a huff, then."

"Not at all," she responded, putting on an air of hauteur. "You left your timetable behind."

She lifted the lid of her basket and an enticing smell crept out with the clear intention of ensnaring his senses and enslaving his stomach. He ignored the loud rumble and reached down for the parchment Granger was waving.

"Oh *what*?!"

Granger's shoulders slumped.

"I know *she* did it to me, too. Fourth years, double lesson last thing on Friday. How I'm going to keep them awake, I have no idea."

"I'll swap you," said Severus grimly. "First year Gryffindors and Slytherins, followed by two sessions of third-year theory. All Friday afternoon. And why in Hob's name she feels she has to continue Dumbledore's insane notion of friendship through proximity, I don't know!"

"Yeah. Being in a class together hardly resulted in spontaneous love between Harry and Malfoy."

"More like spontaneous combustion."

"No *that* was Neville," she responded judiciously.

Snape snorted and felt his stomach gouge at his ribs.

"What's in the basket, Granger?"

"Yummy things."

"Your attempts to be enigmatic overwhelm me, as always."

"I'll share if you stop pretending to be a sulky crow and come down off your perch."

She looked directly up at him, her expression lightly teasing but her eyes serious.

"I suppose McGonagall told you to keep me in the dark."

"I don't believe in keeping secrets for secrecy's sake and I don't believe anything was to be gained keeping Harry's appointment from you. But on the other hand," she added, forestalling him, "I don't think you should blame him for someone else's decisions, either."

A heavy silence fell between them. Granger sighed and got to her feet, bending to pick up the basket, but Severus jumped down from the fence and blocked her path as she made to leave. She frowned up at him from her disadvantageous height.

"How about if I only blame him for his own stupid decisions, then?"

"I think you're being overly optimistic. Harry's grown up a lot, you know but I might consider sharing."

"Oh, honestly, Granger! What does it take to get a sandwich out of you?"

"A strong emetic?" She grinned. "Okay, okay. Conjure a blanket and we'll have lunch."

Some time later, the remains of their picnic scattered on the rug, a half-full bottle of Chablis resting in an ice bucket within easy reach, Severus and Granger fell into a comfortable silence. He lay on his back, ankles crossed, his wine glass perched on his stomach and one arm underneath his head while he watched the clouds through half-closed eyes. Summer had begun to wind down, and the air was comfortably heavy, overripe with growth and sunshine. A simple charm kept the ever-present midges away, and Severus could feel his resentment at the morning's events ebbing. Yet something was missing, though he could not put his finger on it. He rolled onto his side and looked at Granger, apparently going for the world record in daisy chains. That was a thing about her, he'd noticed her restlessness. Be it her mind or her hands, one or the other was always occupied, and usually both.

He sat up. Something was definitely missing.

"Granger, you haven't asked a single question since you got here. What's wrong with you?"

"Professor Snape Oh, all right! Snape ..." She looked desperately uncomfortable calling him that. Severus did enjoy putting people on the wrong foot. He smirked. She huffed.

"Very well, then. Snape *you're* bothered about stuff. I've enough wit about me to work some of it out, and I know for certain you wouldn't answer if I asked you to tell me the rest. I've read your timetable, so I don't have to ask you about that. I know you've done all the prep for term. And, well, I'm just happy enjoying the sunshine, really." She paused, then something caught her eye and she laughed. "No *here's* a question: are Thestrals supposed to eat hummus?"

A particularly huge Thestral *sneaky, cat-footed buggers* caught in the act, lifted its head abruptly, only to find that the hummus pot was wedged on its nose. It danced anxiously on the spot, its wings spreading in alarm. Severus rolled his eyes and got up to help the animal, humming low as he approached. He ran his hand down its scaly neck to calm it, then gently levered the pot off. A long, pointed tongue snaked out to clean the Thestral's nose before leaving a garlicky wet streak up the side of Severus' face.

"Stupid beast," he said, giving it another pat.

It snorted.

"Isn't that Tenebrus, Hagrid's favourite?"

"I believe so." He retrieved his wine. "No, you may not have any of this," he said to the curious Thestral.

It nickered mournfully then folded its wings and lowered itself to the ground as though invited to the picnic. Severus passed it the remains of the pâté.

"You're very good with him," Granger remarked.

He shrugged.

"Do we have any chocolate?" He rummaged in the basket, where he found not chocolate, but paper. "What's this?"

"Ooooooh! Yes! Give it here!" She lunged forward, narrowly missing the bowl of olives.

Severus held the scroll just out of reach. Tenebrus took the opportunity to sneak the end of Granger's abandoned daisy chain into his mouth.

"Oh, come on, Snape I was going to show it to you anyway!"

He relented and let her spread out the fine parchment on a clear patch of blanket.

"This is the one McGonagall confiscated?"

"Uh-huh. Oh, *look!*" she said happily, lost in contemplation.

"So this is what you found in the staircase." Severus bent over the swirling, delicate design, intrigued by the interweaving of runes and embellishments. "I can barely make some of these out, the pattern's so dense. May I?" He lifted the paper and held it up against the sun, which shone through the lines in the wax rubbing, flinging them suddenly into sharp relief. "It's ..."

"I know! I've never seen anything so complex. But it's graceful, too, isn't it? Look at the way the flowers and vines are woven into the incantation. It's just ..."

Severus recognised that trailing-off as the academic's equivalent of a bloodhound's bay something he'd experienced himself in the lab, and a feeling that would never grow old.

"And Filch says this stuff's everywhere in the castle!" she added with a fanatical grin. "No wonder I keep ..." She broke off.

"Keep what?" he prompted.

She looked away, suddenly uncomfortable. "You know the thing I told you down at the pub that night? And you thought I was completely barking? Well," she met his eyes again, challenging. "Well perhaps I am barking, but the castle does talk to me. Maybe it's something to do with the runes. Maybe it's something else. But, well, would you be prepared to try and hear it too? I mean, you're about the only person here who might take me seriously and not think I'm simply imagining things, and I know hearing voices isn't good, but it's not precisely voices as such, and now I think there might be a chance it's objective and ..."

"Breathe, Granger."

She deflated. "Would you?"

Movement between the holding pens caught his eye. Elves were bringing down carcasses to lure the Thestrals.

"Would you?" she repeated.

"Why me? Why not Potter, or McGonagall, or one of the others?"

"Oh, honestly as if Harry has an ounce of subtlety in his body, when this is subtle magic. And the headmistress just thinks I'm overworked and overwrought. You ... you're drawn to what's intriguing, to what's hard to explain. I remember your speeches for Potions and DADA so well Please?"

"Time and place, Granger."

She beamed. "Sunday, midnight, the Great Hall."

"Very well. Tenebrus." Severus poked the Thestral with his toe. It sucked the last of the daisy chain in like a piece of spaghetti and got clumsily to its feet. "Time to summon the herd. Carriage duty tomorrow."

"Talking of which, have you got a speech for COMC?" she asked.

"Oh, right, Granger. 'The subtle art and exact science of toad-husbandry.' It has such a ring to it."