

# A Change of Plans

by Squibstress

A frustrated witch, a lonely wizard, a chance meeting in the staff bath— a story about how these small events change the lives of Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape and alter the course of the Wizarding War.

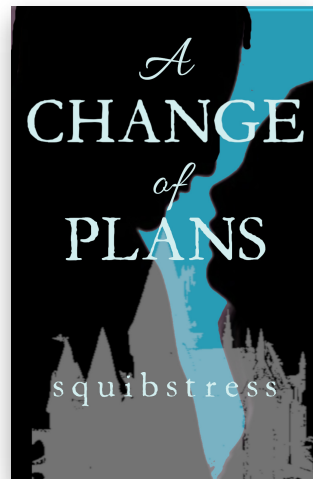
## A Change of Plans

Chapter 1 of 1

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Minerva McGonagall liked sex. She liked fucking and she liked making love. She also liked banging, screwing, canoodling, making the sign of the humpbacked hippogriff, as well as most variations thereof.

Most people who knew her a little...which was most people who knew her...would have been surprised to know this, and normally, I would not stoop to sharing such

personal information about so private a woman, but it is crucial to our tale that you understand this, or you will not believe me when I tell you the rest of it.

In any event, Minerva had an inquisitive nature, which prompted her to experiment and seek out new experiences. She found that she enjoyed men and women, and though she would never have considered children...gods, no!...she had skated dangerously and inadvertently close with a second-string Bulgarian Beater in the broom shed at the 1994 Quidditch World Cup. It was the only time she had ever had sex with a stranger, and although it was exciting as an idea, she decided such things were overrated in the actual practice and never did it again. When the fellow appeared with the Durmstrang contingent for the Tri-Wizard Tournament at Hogwarts two months later, she realised with considerable dismay that she had assumed the strapping young man was older than he, in fact, was. She was relieved to find out through subtle inquiry that he was eighteen, and thus within the limits of both the law and her personal moral boundaries. But just barely.

None of this is to say that Minerva was promiscuous. She was careful, and particular about her lovers, but catholic in her taste. She was discreet and kept her personal life separate from her Hogwarts life. Her love affairs and dalliances were conducted far from the school, over holidays and weekends off. Her students and colleagues generally considered her the picture of prim, spinsterish schoolmarmery, and as such, she was respected and pitied in nearly equal measure.

The one exception was, curiously enough, Severus Snape.

I say "curiously" because Snape was the last person anyone would have expected to notice any hidden fires of passion, given his reputation for utter uninterest in and disdain for the individuals who surrounded him on a daily basis.

But most of the individuals who surrounded him were as mistaken in their estimation of Professor Snape as they were in their assessment of Professor McGonagall.

Snape watched, and the thing he watched most, beginning at a very young age, was people. His home life was such that reading the subtle and often unspoken signals they gave off was essential to his health and well-being. Thus, Severus became a keen observer of what the people around him liked to keep hidden. The skill came in extremely handy later. It was part of what helped him stay alive, after all, but more than that, it was a way of being connected to other people. His upbringing and his experiences at school, sad to say, had stunted his ability to form relationships with others. Snape was never the beneficiary of whispered confidences, nor soft shoulders to cry on, nor tender and secret endearments, nor any of the other experiences that allow most of you to learn how to behave in co-equal relation, more or less, to the important people in your lives. He wanted these things...yearned for them, in fact...but he seemed destined to be the outsider, the observer. In terms of the necessary daily interactions with others, he had to, as they say, wing it.

This was how Snape was able to recognise in Minerva McGonagall the longings beneath the surface of her tightly-controlled, tartan-clad exterior. A lingering look, a sigh, a feverish grasping at the hem of a robe, the feline dart of a tongue over lips...these were the signs that told Severus that there was more to the woman than ginger newts and Quidditch. Also, there was the smell of her desire, unmistakable to the Potions master's over-large and sensitive nose.

This is all background, however. The meat of the thing is the event I want to tell you about, because it changed the course of the war and thus, the history of your people.

It started one evening when Snape made a mistake. He didn't make many, by most accounts, but this was one. He was late to a meeting...a very important meeting. You remember the night of the last task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament? The night that boy...what was his name?...was killed and Voldemort returned? If you don't remember it, you've read about it.

Anyway, the newly corporeal Lord Voldemort summoned his followers as soon as he had his body back, and Snape delayed joining him by a few hours. Normally, this would have cost him his life, but he explained that he had hung back at Hogwarts knowing that his cover as a loyal Dumbledoreian would be valuable to Voldemort, and I suppose the Dark Lord was in a good mood, what with having a newly-minted body and all, so he only Cruciated Snape until the man could barely walk.

When Snape staggered back through the gates at Hogwarts, the matron was there to meet him. She had been alerted by Dumbledore that the Potions master might be in need of her services upon his return, and the Headmaster was quite right.

Snape had any number of superficial injuries, but the worst was a badly torn ligament in his left shoulder. Madam Pomfrey was able to repair the tear, but the scar tissue that formed made it stiff and painful to move.

Few people are aware of it, but there is a staff bath at Hogwarts. Like the prefects' bathroom, it was a leftover from the time when communal bathing was the norm, and ensuite bathrooms were unheard of. While contemporary prefects are enjoined from using their bath as a meeting place, no such stricture inhibits the staff. In fact, it had become rather a tradition for some of the more social of the staff members to take a soak together...in respectable bathing costumes...on Friday evenings before going off to enjoy or endure whatever their weekends would bring.

The incident we're concerned with here happened on a Sunday evening. You see, Madam Pomfrey had recommended to Snape that he take advantage of the healing properties of the hot water, mineral salts, and whirlpool in the staff bath to help ease the pain in his gammy shoulder. While the idea of a communal experience with his colleagues filled him with existential angst, he had to admit that, on this particular Sunday, the prospect of some relief from the ache in his shoulder was inviting. And, being Sunday, he could reasonably hope to have the place to himself.

So it was that he found himself standing outside the door to the staff bath, slippers on his feet and a hastily-Transfigured bathing costume covering his meat and two veg. He stood there for a minute, trying to make up his mind to give the password and go in.

"Rubber ducky," he practically moaned. (In case you don't know, Albus Dumbledore, who set the password, had a sense of humour that ran to the whimsical.) When the door opened, he peered in, and seeing nobody, he stepped in.

By the time he spied Minerva McGonagall, it was too late to retreat without losing face. She had been obscured by steam, but there she was, sitting at the far end of the large tub, all white shoulders and damp, black hair, which, surprisingly, was clipped in a rather haphazard way on her head rather than in the tight bun that was the emblem of her spinsterhood.

"Hello, Severus," she said. "This is a surprise."

"An unpleasant one, no doubt," he replied, but made no move either to go or to join her.

"Not at all. I'm glad for the company."

He seemed to be frozen in place.

"Are you going to get in, or are you just going to stand there gawping?" she asked, and he could have sworn the maddening twinkle in her eye was borrowed from Dumbledore. "I don't bite."

"I've heard otherwise," he retorted.

*Where the hell did that come from?* he thought.

The twinkle redoubled itself. "Why, Severus, was that a joke?"

"No. I'm merely repeating what I've heard from your students," he said, cautiously stepping down the stairs until his calves were under water.

She was quiet as she watched him slowly submerge up to the chest in the hot water and hesitantly seat himself on the bench opposite her. He slid down until only his neck and head were above the water.

"Is your shoulder hurting, Severus?" she asked with sympathy.

"A bit."

She turned, rising out of the water enough that he could see the top of her bathing cossie, a modest cut, but held in place with surprisingly thin straps. The thing was tartan-patterned, of course. The knobs of her spine were visible as she stretched, reaching for a bottle; it made her seem frail for a moment. He found it oddly attractive.

"Would you like a little wine? An admirable pain-killer, I find," she said, proffering the bottle for his inspection. It was an Alsatian Riesling, and Severus nodded his approval.

"Thank you," he said.

She conjured a glass and poured, handing it to him, then put the bottle back on the side of the tub. They sat sipping and soaking for a few minutes until Snape, tongue and curiosity loosened ever so slightly by the wine, asked, "Do you do this every Sunday?"

"No," she replied, "only when I need to . . . unwind."

"And what has you wound up today?"

She hesitated, as if considering if she should tell him. "A change of plans."

"Oh?"

"Yes. As it turns out, my summer holidays will not, in fact, be spent on the Isle of Mull, but in the castle of Hogwarts," she replied, and from the over-careful cadence of her speech, Severus suspected that the glass of wine she had just finished had not been her first of the afternoon.

"I'm sorry to hear it," he said. He paused a moment before adding, "Lovers' quarrel?"

Had the situation been different with regard to their location and her sobriety, Severus might reasonably have expected to be on the receiving end of a signature McGonagall tongue-lashing for his presumption. As it was, he was merely subjected to a tight smile.

"Something like that," she said, Summoning the wine bottle and pouring herself another glass. She held the bottle out to him, then noticed that he was still nursing his first glass.

"I take it you don't wish to talk about it?" he asked with a slight smirk.

"Your powers of observation are astonishing as always, Severus," she responded, returning them to the familiar terrain of acerbic banter.

A surprisingly comfortable silence followed this exchange.

When Snape had finished his wine, he held out his glass, enquiring, "May I?"

"Be my guest," she answered.

He Summoned the bottle and refilled his glass. The combination of the warm water and the wine was beginning to help him relax...inasmuch as Severus Snape could ever be said to relax...and he considered with surprise how at ease he felt in Minerva's presence. Of course, he realised, she had been the closest thing to a friend he had had at Hogwarts since coming to teach there, fresh from a horrific week in Azkaban, his Dark Mark creating an invisible wall of suspicion between himself and the other staff. Oh, Dumbledore trusted him, all right, but only because the older wizard knew he held the thumbscrews. Snape loved the old man (hated him, too, for that matter) and he supposed Albus had come to care for him, but they were never friends. Their relationship was built on mutual need...well, more like *utility* on Severus' part...a fact that precluded any but the most necessary of intimacies.

At first, Minerva had trusted him simply because Dumbledore had ordained it; Snape knew that well enough. Eventually, though, he had sensed her requisitioned trust melting into something like real regard, and ultimately, tacit affection. As I've said, Severus was a perceptive observer of people, and while Minerva was never obvious or effusive with her tenderer feelings, neither was she one for pretence.

Which is why Severus found himself, against his better judgment, actually enjoying sitting there with the witch in what he would otherwise have found an intolerably intimate situation. What's more, he would have wagered several Chinese Fireball eggs that she was enjoying it, too.

Maybe it was the unaccustomed feeling of mutual contentment that made him say what he said next.

"You know, Minerva, maybe staying at Hogwarts over the summer won't be so terrible."

"How so?"

"It can be . . . tolerable here without all those dunderheads running about. And the grounds are rather pleasant in summer."

"Perhaps. But it is somewhat lacking in stimulating company," she said.

"Well, Dumbledore pops in and out all summer; I'm sure you can tempt him to a few rousing games of chess."

"Hmm. Pleasant as chess is, it wasn't *quite* the kind of diversion I was looking forward to," she said, somewhat wistfully.

"Not stimulating enough?" Even he wasn't quite sure if he meant it like it sounded.

"Oh, stimulating enough for the mind. Especially the way Albus plays. But I was rather hoping for a broader range of amusements than the Headmaster can offer me." She closed her eyes for a few seconds, and her deep sigh, coupled with the way she held her cool wine glass to her cheek for a moment, helped him imagine the sorts of stimulation she had been looking forward to.

"I will also be here; perhaps I can arrange some pleasant diversion," he said, thinking simultaneously *The wine. It has to be the wine . . .*

"Really, Severus? You mean you would be willing to give up some of your precious solitude to . . . divert me pleasantly?" Her face had abandoned its momentary wistfulness in favour of a slightly amused smile. That, and a rather becoming flush.

"I could be persuaded," he said.

"And what sort of diversion might you be persuaded to provide, Severus?" she asked, her serious tone somewhat belied by the upward quirk of her mouth.

*What indeed?* he asked himself.

He answered, "Whatever sort you please, Minerva. I cannot claim to be a master at chess, as is the Headmaster, but I can manage earnest discussions of current events, light banter about the chances of our respective House Quidditch teams in the coming term, or highly technical dissertations on the latest advances in Potions science. All of the that will be certifiably free of meaningless endearments or charming-but-deliberate obfuscation. I would also be glad to escort you for walks around the lake and to share an occasional meal, provided you refrain from mentioning The Boy Who Lived and The Wizard Who Failed to Kill Him."

He was gratified to see that he had surprised her. She quickly regained her equilibrium, however, and asked, "Just to be clear, Severus: Is this merely a friendly offer among colleagues, or are you saying you would like to get to know me on a more . . . *personal* level?"

"Define 'personal'," he said.

"'Personal', as in: that which could lead to interactions that are not strictly collegial."

"We have always been strictly collegial, Minerva," he answered. It was a stupid, obvious statement, but he was beginning to feel acutely uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. Although, upon reflection, he found that discomfort was not the only sensation he was experiencing at the moment.

"Yes," she said, kindly and unusually ignoring the obtuseness of his remark. "But I wonder, Severus, if you have ever considered the relative merits of being not quite so strict about our collegiality."

"I am considering them right now, Minerva," he replied, wondering where this unexpected detour from the path of sanity would take them.

The look on her face suggested to him that she was asking herself the same question. After a few moments, it became clear that she had come to a decision, and he tried not to care what it might be.

She never took her eyes off him as she released her empty wineglass and sent it floating off to join the nearly empty bottle. She moved through the water until she was directly in front of him, and carefully straddling his knees, she sank down until she was sitting on his lap facing him, her elegant hands resting on his bare and bony shoulders.

Severus caught himself before he could let out a very audible breath.

She searched his face for a moment, then, with what appeared to be careful deliberation, leant down and kissed him gently. "Perhaps you might take that into your calculations," she said softly.

Willing himself to *stop bloody thinking*, he let his hands fall to her waist and heard himself say, "I need a bit more data," as he pulled her closer, then reached up to guide her mouth to his again, this time tentatively probing with his tongue and sucking her lower lip between his.

He was rewarded for his efforts with her very slight look of surprise. Then she schooled her features and rewarded him further by moving herself closer against him, which felt far better than anything had in quite some time.

As his cock hardened, she smiled and asked, "So have you come to a decision, Professor?" The slightly predatory look on her face told him that she was treating this as a game; it was the same look she got when they were trading gibes over Quidditch, or House points, or the merits and lack thereof of various Gryffindors and Slytherins.

*Or maybe, he thought, that's what she would like me to believe.*

I think I have mentioned Snape's ability to penetrate the surface of a person to get at the kernel of truth beneath. At the moment I'm describing, however, it was more a liability than an advantage.

What he saw, for a fleeting moment, under her Quidditch-face, was desire. Nobody had ever desired him, physically or otherwise. People had *use* for him, yes, but *desire*? Never.

He nearly ended the game right there, so unfamiliar and frightening was the idea, but sod it, what they were doing felt so good...felt *saight*. Either feeling alone was a rare enough ingredient for any experience Severus Snape was likely to have, and having them simultaneously was altogether unheard of.

So he said nothing of consequence as she moved against him, leaning down to kiss him once more, her hands cupping his face, her tongue searching boldly for his, first in his mouth, then in hers when he had won back the territory his tongue had momentarily ceded.

After a minute or two, she released his mouth and cocked her head inquisitively at him, upping the ante with her silent question, her hips moving just slightly in a motion that was surely designed to make him spill himself in his pants like the teenager he had been when he first met her.

In the next moment, their clothes had vanished into the ether.

He waited to see if she would hex him into the oblivion he had so often longed for.

Instead, she smiled and said, "Wandless *and* wordless; I'm impressed, Severus." She whispered, "Very, very, impressed," moving herself against him to emphasize each word.

*Gods!* He had just had a naked, and evidently willing witch literally drop into his lap.

*Surely the world has stopped turning on its axis,* Severus thought through the fog of his lust. *Somebody, remind me what I'm supposed to do...do I ask her permission first, or take it as a given and just shove it in?*

A refresher course in the niceties of consensual sex turned out to be unnecessary, as she shifted herself up so that her entrance was hovering at the tip of his aching hard cock, and he waited. It was all he could do not to thrust upward to try to sheathe himself in her. In retrospect, he supposed he should not have been surprised at what she did next.

Instead of lowering herself down onto him, she swung her leg up and over his and got out of the tub. She sauntered to the corner of the room and took her dressing gown from a hook. As she moved to put it on, she turned, giving him an excellent view of her nude body...skinny, yes, in the blossom of youth, no, but he found it mesmerising just the same, just as she knew he would.

Moving to the door, she turned and said pointedly, "*Talaina Peithô*," before disappearing through it.

Now, anyone else might have been puzzled by her parting words, but as an apprentice Potions master, Severus Snape had been required to study Ancient Greek and thus knew perfectly well what the words meant. What's more, he knew why she had said them.

The phrase, which he recognised from Aeschylus, meant "perverse persuasion". Equally important...at least in Snape's mind at the moment we are discussing. *Peithô* was the Greek goddess associated with seduction. Minerva was clearly giving him an invitation, but it remained to be seen who was meant to seduce whom.

*The ball is in my court,* Snape thought, *but the game is entirely Minerva's.* He recognised with some surprise that he didn't particularly care.

He started to get out of the tub and realised she had left him in a bit of a predicament, given that he had only his thin dressing gown to cover his rather large problem. Severus was a talented wizard, but Transfiguration wasn't his strong suit, and it took him several tries before he was able to change his dressing gown into a robe that was sufficiently roomy to cover his jutting erection. His other options were, of course, to take matters into his own hands or to wait for the problem to subside on its own, but somehow, neither of them seemed nearly as appealing as getting out of the staff bath and heading to Minerva's rooms as fast as his legs and his dignity would allow.

You might be forgiven for asking why Snape was so anxious to throw...*no, fling*...caution to the winds to have what would most likely turn out to be a short-lived and

potentially disastrous tryst with a colleague. The answer would be that, aside from the fact that their exchange in the bath had rendered him almost agonisingly randy...a feeling he had neither enjoyed nor suffered for too many a moon, by the way...he was curious.

Like Minerva, he was naturally inquisitive; unlike her, his curiosity had little opportunity to exercise itself freely, either in his professional role or his extra-curricular one. "Curiosity killed the cat" was an adage for a double-agent to, quite literally, live by.

Snape's survival depended on his finding out what he (well, Dumbledore) needed to know, and absolutely no more *More* was dangerous. *More* invited grey areas and complications. *More* was something Severus could ill afford.

Except maybe this one time. *Maybe*, he thought as he took the stairs to Gryffindor Tower by twos, *more is just what I need*.

He wanted to know what it would be like, just this once, to fuck a woman who had chosen him. His entire sexual history was encompassed by bored whores and resentful groupies who fucked Snape in hopes of getting closer to the Dark Lord. From what he suspected of Minerva McGonagall, she would be neither bored nor resentful; she would give as good as she got...if he were honest, probably better.

And he liked her. That alone promised a novel experience. That promised *more*.

When he arrived at her door and intoned the words she had spoken five minutes earlier, he was not surprised that it swung open to reveal Minerva, standing in the middle of the room, arms folded across her chest. He was pleased to note that she smiled when he stepped in.

The smile hardened into a smirk when she noticed his slightly-too-short, badly Transfigured robe, which still bore the slight sheen of a material more appropriate to a dressing gown than a proper wizard's over-robe.

The smirk quickly dissolved when he shrugged the robe off and strode toward her, his stalwart prick leading the charge. He seized her by the waist and pulled her against him, enjoying the feeling of her silk dressing gown rubbing against his skin as he said, "You have ten seconds to sober up and tell me to get out."

Her hand closed firmly around his cock and began to run it up and down through her fist with slightly more pressure than he found comfortable. He was on the verge of reaching down to still it when her touch softened and she pressed her thumb over the head. He shivered.

"All right then, get out," she said pleasantly, releasing him a bare second (he was quite certain) before his deadline elapsed.

They stood looking at one another for a few moments, then he drawled in his best Evil Professor voice, "No, I don't think that's what you want."

He moved forward, propelling her backward until she collided with the wall. Grasping her wrists and pinning them above her head, he ground himself roughly against her. He looked at her face, searching for signs of fear, or even hesitation, and saw none. Her features revealed only excitement and (*could it be?*) affection.

"I think *this* is what you want, Minerva," he growled, thrusting against her. "Don't you?" She didn't answer, and he thrust harder, causing her head to thud slightly against the wall. "*Don't you?*" he repeated. Still, she didn't speak.

"Is this still a game to you, Minerva? Is it?" he demanded, thrusting and thrusting.

"No, Severus," she whispered. "It's not a game."

He released her wrists and yanked the dressing gown down past her shoulders to expose her breasts. His fingers found her nipples, and he plucked and pinched them as he sucked hard on her neck just over the warm spot where her carotid artery was pulsing. She gasped as he worked her nipples harder, and he paused for a moment.

"I'm not a gentle man, Minerva," he warned.

To his surprise, she laughed. "Do ye not think I know that?" she asked.

He was confused. She had said this wasn't a game, but her sudden lightness made it seem like they were still sparring. The gruffness was gone from his voice: "What do you want, Minerva?"

"You, Severus. Just you," she answered, suddenly gentle. She cupped her palm around his bristled cheek, and the look on her face told him that she was serious.

All at once, he felt very exposed. His momentary impulse was to hurt her...really hurt her this time...to tear the gown from her body, force her legs apart, and thrust into her until she begged him to stop, until that tender, too-knowing look on her face was replaced with pain and terror, intimate terrain with which he was far more familiar.

Severus mastered the impulse and instead forced himself to look thoughtfully at Minerva. He saw a woman, not so young, not so beautiful, who was giving him a choice. He could stay and see where this would lead them, or he could walk out and, he had no doubt, never hear a word about it again.

He took her shoulders, gently this time, and asked again: "What do you want? Tell me *exactly*."

"Exactly?" she returned. "I want your hands on my body. I want to touch every part of you. I want your tongue in my mouth and your cock in my quim. I want us to fuck until we both come. I want you to lick me until I scream, and I want to suck you until you can't stand up. I want both of us to leave these rooms tired and sore, and I want us to remember this day for the rest of our lives, even if we never speak of it again."

He could no more form words at that moment than he could Transfigure Mars into Venus.

Sounding exactly like the stern taskmistress she was, she asked, "Are my request *sexact* enough for you, Severus? Or shall I draw you a diagram?"

Her expression of desire...for him!...and the coarse words coming from her thin-lipped, professorial mouth excited him as much as her hand on his cock had done. Rather than answer her aloud, he demonstrated his understanding of her requirements methodically, beginning with her first request, untying her dressing gown and pulling it the rest of the way off before running his hands over her, carefully reading each inch of flesh like an ancient rune.

Over the next hours, they worked their moist, sticky way through her roster of desires, as well as a few she hadn't mentioned but that he was more than happy to fulfill.

When they were both too exhausted...yes, and sore...to do any more, they slept in her bed. That alone was *more* for Severus; he had never spent the entire night in a woman's bed. His sleep was fitful, as tired as he was, both because his bad shoulder was painning him again and because he was unused to company as he slept, and it made him anxious.

In the morning when she woke, he wasn't sure what to expect. Minerva simply smiled and said, "Good morning, Severus," just as she did each day at breakfast in the Great Hall, as if she hadn't been whimpering and arching underneath him only a few hours prior, commanding him to fuck her harder, making him forget his miserable lot, and, in fact, everything but the feeling of his cock moving frantically in and out of her and his bollocks slapping joyfully against her arse.

This normalcy was, if anything, more surreal to him than the events of the prior night had been.

She kissed him gently before rising from the bed and asked what he wanted for breakfast. He told her, and she summoned a house-elf to place the request as he used the loo. When he had finished, she disappeared into the bathroom for a moment and reappeared with a phial of pain potion.

"Your shoulder must be sore," she said as she handed the phial to him. "I'm afraid we rather abused it last night."

He downed the potion, automatically stifling his grimace at the taste. "Thank you," he said stiffly.

Ignoring his unease, she told him, "Breakfast should be here in a minute. I'm just going to freshen up," before heading into the bathroom again.

When they had eaten and showered...and having his hair washed by a witch who was not his mother was another in that twelve hours of strange and wonderful firsts for Severus...he dressed and bid her good day.

As he descended the stairs from her tower, he wondered if that was the end of whatever this had been between them.

As I'm sure you've surmised, there was more.

/\*\*\*/

The *thing* between Severus and Minerva continued all summer. The evening after the first time, Snape had been wondering what, if anything, he should do in terms of acknowledging the event: Should he knock on her door? Send her a note? *Flowers*? He shuddered and immediately dismissed the last notion, picturing the look on Minerva's face should a house-elf present him- or herself at Minerva's door with a bouquet of Pomona's best. He wondered what the *Daily Prophet's* agony aunt would advise.

*Dear Agatha:*

*Please help! I am in need of an appropriate expression of appreciation for a witch who practically sucked the polish off my broomstick. What would you suggest?*

*Horny in Hogsmeade*

As upon that decidedly not-dreary and not-quite-midnight, he pondered, a knock came. There really were only two possibilities as to who was on the other side of the door: Dumbledore, who would smile and bring him nothing but toil and trouble, or Minerva, who would probably smirk, and bring him . . . a bottle of Talisker eighteen-year-old, as it turned out.

He admitted her to his quarters for the first time since he had occupied them, and he could see by her grim smile that she was somewhat unimpressed.

To tell you the truth, despite Snape's having lived there for nearly fourteen years, the place was a shithole. It was dark, being in the dungeons, and there was no bit of colour, no fanciful hanging, no artful picture or soft carpet to break up the depressing bleakness. It was, he realised, a hard place.

Well, he was a hard man.

"I thought you might fancy a wee dram with me," Minerva said. When he hesitated, she offered, seeming unsure for the first time since this odd series of occurrences had started, "If you'd rather not, of course, there will be no hard feelings."

"Not at all, I was considering coming to see you," he answered, surprised at his own honesty. "A drink would be very pleasant."

"Well, then, can you tell me where I might find some glasses?" she enquired.

He was slightly embarrassed when he could locate only one glass. He knew she was aware that he was a solitary man, but he didn't like her knowing that he had never once in fourteen years had a visitor in for a drink.

"No matter," she said, picking up a beaker that had been on his desk and examining it for cleanliness. "I'll just Transfigure this into something suitable, if that's all right."

"By all means," he said.

She did, and they had their drink. He was again struck by how comfortable they were, even in the silence he generally preferred, but which seemed to make others nervous and prone to babbling to fill it. Of Minerva's many admirable qualities, he thought, one of the best was her aversion to small talk.

When she had downed the last of her Scotch, she put down her Transfigured glass and asked, "Do you want to continue this?"

Typical Gryffindor.

It was on the tip of his Slytherin tongue to turn the question back on her, but he realised that the time for such games had passed.

"Yes." He couldn't help adding, "Do you?"

"I think, Severus, you might draw that conclusion from the fact that I came down here."

*Oh, good*, he thought. The archness was back. It was comforting.

The aforementioned conclusion was reinforced minutes later, when Severus slid two fingers into her very wet cunt, having made the intriguing discovery that she was wearing no knickers.

Thus it was that the discontent, wintry Severus had the most glorious summer he had ever spent, despite the recent return of his Dark Lord and the rebirth of the Order of the Phoenix.

To the best of my knowledge, no one found out about Severus and Minerva, although Dumbledore may have guessed. The old man never mentioned it to Severus, and if Dumbledore and Minerva discussed it, I am unaware of it. But during that miraculous summer, Severus and Minerva took advantage of the castle's many secret places, as well as some not-so-secret ones, so the Headmaster would have had to have been nearly blind not to have suspected. Which, of course, he was not.

Severus surmised that, if the Headmaster knew of the liaison between his Potions master and the Transfiguration mistress, he was content to allow his spy a little diversion in order to keep him in line, and determined that his Deputy was the perfect vessel to provide it, given her loyalty and discretion.

Snape did wonder, however, whether the old man wasn't a bit jealous. There was talk that the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress were, or had been, more than colleagues and friends. When he finally worked up the nerve to ask her, she threw back her head, exposing that exquisite throat, and laughed.

"Gods, no, Severus! Aside from the fact that sleeping with the boss is generally a very bad idea, Albus is gayer than a gnome in a Horklump nest."

Severus' raised eyebrows must have spurred her to elaborate.

"I'm rather surprised that you hadn't guessed; I always thought the robes were a dead giveaway. Ah, well, he's always been discreet, and I don't know, but I suspect it's been some time since he's taken a regular lover. The last one I know of was before you came back to teach. He's a busy man, and he is getting on in years. Of course, I can't be sure what...or *whom*...he does when he leaves the school for his mysterious missions," she added with her wicked smile and impeccable grammar.

As the summer progressed, Severus asked her other questions, and she answered him with her customary forthrightness, which is how he came to know about the

Bulgarian Beater, as well as the general outlines of her other affairs, but not the details or the names of her lovers. He was surprised to learn that he was the first she had ever taken to her bed at the school.

"Why now?" he asked. "Why me?"

"I suppose I got tired of weekend trysts and holiday affairs," she sighed. "When my last relationship was broken off, I had to face some truths. She wanted more from me than I was prepared to give, but when I looked at it, I realised that I wanted those things too," Minerva told him.

"But not with her," Severus said.

"No, not with her," Minerva confirmed.

He said, "My second question still stands, Minerva. Why me?"

"You were there, Severus, at just the right moment, and you seemed like you needed a friend...or more."

"So I was useful, and you pitied me," he said resentfully.

"No," she countered firmly. "At first, perhaps, I was driven by simple desire," she said. "But it was never pity; it was . . . recognition. You needed more than you were willing to admit to yourself, just as I did. It happened that we both realised it at the same time. That kind of serendipity is a gift, Severus."

After a moment, she added quietly, "*You are a gift.*"

He snorted his discomfort away, and she smiled at that, and they said no more about it.

She never asked him about his past; he imagined she knew most of it already, and what details she didn't know, she didn't care to learn. He could hardly blame her for that.

When September came, and with it, the odious, toadious Dolores Umbridge, they continued their affair, albeit with much more caution and less frequency than before.

As much as they laughed together about the woman's stupidity and her appalling taste, Severus knew Minerva was troubled. Such a blatant attempt at interference by the hostile-to-Dumbledore Ministry added to the anxiety of the Dark Lord situation. As Deputy Headmistress, Minerva was the designated interference-runner between Umbridge and the other staff and the students so that Albus, as designated Leader of the Light, could keep his long-fingered hands clean.

Minerva was the one who had to make compromises and appease factions, and Dumbledore had made it clear that she was to remain in place to fulfil that role when he was ultimately forced out for his uncompromising defence of the Truth, as he knew would eventually happen. When it did, Minerva, who could not afford such expensive principles, became the Toad's Deputy, and she walked a fine line between keeping the school in enough order to educate its charges and permitting the chaos that, with any luck, would torment her tormentor into leaving.

More than ever, during those bleak months, Minerva needed the outlet that Severus could provide, and he was more pleased than he would ever have admitted that he was the one to provide comfort and succour to someone for a change. Another first in a season that was filled with them.

For his part, Severus had come to crave the companionship of this woman who was so at ease with him despite his dis-ease with himself.

When Minerva, alone in defending Hagrid, was struck down by the four Stunners on that terrible night near the end of term, Severus saw the event while on his rounds, which, by design, had taken him to Gryffindor Tower. Thinking her dead, he howled with the first grief he had permitted himself to feel since walking metaphorically away from the Dark Lord.

When Minerva had finally returned, weak and unsteady, to Hogwarts, and he told her about it, she told him, of course, not to be foolish, that it would take far more than that to kill a Scot, and a Highlander at that. He noticed her queer smile as she spoke, and the way her eyes became momentarily liquid.

It wasn't until later, when he was alone in his chambers, that he realised what he had confessed. In any event, neither of them mentioned it again.

I know what you are thinking. You are wondering, did Severus Snape, in fact, love Minerva McGonagall? Was she the lemon in his tea? The Scotch in his Rob Roy?

No one alive knows, and neither does your humble skald. I am not omniscient. I know only that she was the pep in his Pepperup Potion.

Anyway, it's immaterial to our tale. What's pertinent is what actually happened.

Minerva spent the following summer at the castle once again, ostensibly to recuperate from her Stunning. I don't suppose I need tell you, Reader, what she was actually doing.

Throughout that last, golden season, spent alternately at the scaly elbow of the Dark Lord and between the milky thighs of his dark lady, Severus had the sense that his time was being stretched out like a canvas.

When Dumbledore returned to the castle one June night...almost one year to the day from the date on which Severus and Minerva had joined up in the staff bath...and summoned his Potions master from his Deputy's bed via traumatised house-elf, Severus had a feeling that the end had finally come, that Dumbledore was throwing him to the tender mercies of his other master at last.

He was correct, but slightly premature. Looking at the blackened hand of his boss, Severus knew that Dumbledore's time doing Good Works on this plane was nearly over, and told him so. By the end of the interview, he knew his time was equally, if more comfortably, limited.

He spat at the old man, "If only you had summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!" However, the "you" that came from his mouth was replaced by an "us" in his mind's ear.

You see, Snape had believed his life forfeit since the day he had promised the old man his "anything" in exchange for saving Lily Evans Potter from the Dark Lord, and of course, his life was the only thing Severus Snape had to give. In the end, it hadn't mattered that Dumbledore hadn't kept his part of the bargain; Severus' path was laid before him, and he would walk it with thorny determination. John Calvin himself could not have believed more heartily in predestination.

And yet . . . that year of (dare I whisper the word?) *happiness*, or what passed for it in Severus' limited experience, had changed things. Hope, that bitter little imp, had taken up housekeeping in his scrawny bosom. Every hour he had spent in the arms of his not-so-coy mistress, gathering rosebuds while his willing soul transpired or whatever, made him slightly less certain of his eagerness to greet his fate.

To Dumbledore, he advanced the feeble argument that he had a soul, which the Headmaster predictably banjaxed by reminding him exactly how cheaply he had sold it.

To the best of my knowledge, Snape didn't make any effort to alter his prescribed course, but that didn't change the despair he felt when Dumbledore gave the thumbscrews a little turn and elicited Severus' promise to off him within the year. Providence, in the guise of a grandfatherly, sweet-addled wizard, was apparently content to pummel him along to the end of the farce, and so Severus fell back into line.

But he didn't break things off with Minerva, and although she noticed him growing increasingly tense and sour and waspish as summer limped along, she asked him nothing. Unlike Albus, who *would* not tell her anything, Severus *could* not tell her, as she knew perfectly well. Snape considered it one of the perks of being a double-agent.

Severus did his best to ignore the spectre of Dumbledore's coming martyrdom. Pilate-like, he hoped for the chance to pass the Galleon to another feckless functionary, but by the time he got caught in the middle of that endless squabble between the sisters Black, he knew the cup was firmly parked in front of his lips.

He spent most of the autumn and part of the winter trying to make Minerva drop him, but the infernal witch just wouldn't take a hint. It was as if her Scottish temper had been exchanged for a Swiss temperance, so non-combative did she become. Every scowl, every slight, every cutting remark was met with nothing sharper than her arched eyebrow.

Whether she knew something she shouldn't, he couldn't have said, and so neither can I.

Severus attempted, one last time, to beg off his assignment...believing it better for him to die with Minerva's good opinion (assuming, as we shall, that the fact that she was still giving him a bit of snog for a bit of stiff meant he still had it) than to live with her believing him the murderer of their mutual mentor and tormentor.

When Dumbledore told Snape that he was *only* a sacrificial lamb, not *the* sacrificial lamb, what little fight was in him drained out, much as his blood later did when his Dark Lord set that snake on him. Severus no longer loved Lily, if he ever truly had, but her death, and Potter's, were the only ones for which he had ever been directly responsible, and he was choked with guilt. You see, he had lied to Dumbledore when he told him he hadn't known to whom the prophecy he delivered to You-Know-Who referred. Oh, well . . . anyone who knows anything about Severus Snape could probably have told you that.

He was a sharp boy, young Severus, and putting two and two together was his specialty. In the half-hour between leaving the Hog's Head after overhearing that seer and delivering the news to Voldemort, he had figured out that there were only two possible candidates for the job of Dark-Lord-Exterminator. Your people aren't especially fecund, you know, Weasleys notwithstanding.

Severus had hoped that You-Know-Who would remove the appalling James Potter and his inconvenient sprog from the picture, but he made one of those rare errors I've mentioned: he overestimated his influence with his Dark Lord, inadvertently sealing Lily's doom.

Did Severus experience any pangs of conscience over selling a hapless, yet-to-be-born infant to Lord Voldemort, or was it only the loss of his would-be better-half that troubled him? Reader, I know not. It's ancient history and only touches our tale at the point where it intersects with Severus Snape's state of mind when he spoke to Dumbledore and then decided to end things with Minerva McGonagall. He was wretched and remorseful and frightened of what might happen, should things come to pass as Dumbledore ordained, to the only woman who had ever decided he would do.

Severus, being a Slytherin and himself, which is to say, a man who never laid all his cards on the table, said nothing to Minerva. He simply stopped coming to her rooms and made a point of not being in his when she was likely to come calling.

What Minerva made of this change, I cannot say. But she appeared to accept it at face value and carried on as if the man breakfasting directly to her left each morning had not sipped on her breasts at regular intervals over the past year and a half.

Was this her stiff upper lip, or did she truly not care?

Severus might have brooded over it, had he had time to indulge his inner Byron, but between his two masters he barely had a moment in which to take an unhindered piss, much less cogitate on the apparent fickleness of his Doña Minerva.

When he finally came face to face with the unarmed and clearly moribund Albus Dumbledore on the Astronomy Tower the night Potter came by the fake Horcrux, he was more than ready to be done with the whole farce. Whatever conclusions anyone would ultimately draw about his actions, the *Avada Kedavra* he hurled at the man was as heartfelt as any the Dark Lord had aimed and would aim again at the Potter boy. But more effective, of course.

When Dumbledore fell, Severus felt only relief, for, among other salutary effects, Minerva was now free to revile him without arousing suspicion at her sudden change of attitude.

It was a relief, also, to leave Hogwarts for what he mistakenly believed would be the final time. While he appreciated the magic he had learned there as a boy, his other experiences in the castle and its environs were almost uniformly unpleasant, notably excepting the time he had recently spent with Minerva McGonagall. When his Dark Lord told him he was going back to school, he had to bite his tongue to keep from vomiting.

It came as no surprise to him that the one person who had most cause to resent his return seemed the least impressed by it, one way or the other.

The staff were assembled in the Great Hall, tallest to shortest, Hagrid on one end, Flitwick on the other, as if in some strange family portrait that flew in the face of genetic science.

Minerva stood before them and calmly informed her colleagues of the Board of Governors' recent decision to replace her as Headmistress. The uproar when she subsequently let them in on who their new boss would be ceased abruptly when the door flew open with a crack, and the loathsome figure swept in, a scowl on his face and his robes flapping behind him as if nothing had changed.

Snape strode to the front, congratulating himself on being able to look each of his once-and-future colleagues in the face, until he came to Minerva. Her, he could not look at, so he focussed his eyes on the air just beyond her shoulders as if searching for something invisible there.

Without prologue, he intoned, "The wards, please, Minerva," and steeled himself for the familiar feeling of her hands, cool and smooth, on his own.

When she placed her palms on his, he gripped them hard enough that the muscles of his hands later ached, but she gave no indication that he was hurting her. As the power of the castle's protective enchantments flowed from her body into his, he tried but failed to look in her eyes, thus he missed the slight softening, the momentary mistiness that filled them. I do not know what he would have made of it; chances are good he would have chalked it up to pity...he knew her too well to have believed it to be sadness on her own account...and likely would have billowed away from her with even more force and ill will than he, in fact, did.

That first of his many unpleasant tasks as Headmaster completed, Snape repaired immediately to his new quarters, and as soon as the lock had clicked behind him, held his palms in front of his face and watched as they began to shake uncontrollably.

He didn't emerge for three days.

Over those cold, miserable months as Headmaster of the orderly Bedlam Hogwarts had become, Severus could not decide which was worse: the loss of Minerva's warmth in his bed or the lack of her customary coolness everywhere else. No longer did she match him barb for acerbic barb, but merely nodded curtly at his orders and carried them out, more or less. He sensed nothing stronger from her than indifference, and although he told himself he was glad of it, it niggled away at him late at night as he paced the stone floors of the Headmaster's tower office.

But now we come to the meat of the thing, and I will show you how that chance, damp meeting one afternoon in late June of 1995 changed the outcome of the war.

You see, Severus had failed to convince Minerva to hate him. She was a smart cookie and had spent enough time observing Albus Dumbledore to know...or at least guess...that everything was not as it seemed with regard to his death. The very theatricality of the event, if nothing else, would have been enough to convince her of it. Like Severus, Minerva was good at rubbing twos together and coming out with four where others might perceive five or three.

Thus, when the time finally came to eject Severus Snape from Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall made a tiny adjustment to her wandwork. You may not know this, but the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts had trained as an Auror and had nearly taken the trophy for Scotland in the All-Britain Wizard's Duelling Championship for 1951, and she had kept her skills well-honed since.

So it's safe to say that, had she intended it, Severus Snape would have been dead before he even saw her wand that night Potter broke into the school and the final battle



was fought. But Minerva broadcast her intention to Severus with the nearly imperceptible shifting of an elbow, a momentary and devious groping for her wand, and most especially, the meaningful flash of a beady, grey eye that caught the mote in his fathomless brown, giving him just enough time to cast his *Protego*.

To read most historians tell it, it was a seminal moment in duelling: a contending between two equally matched magical practitioners. Well, we cannot blame them for depending on the reports of the few and naïve eyewitnesses, to whom the fight no doubt looked equal and deadly. But that it most certainly was not. As Severus knew quite well, and Dumbledore could have told you had he not been mouldering in his tomb, seeing as he was the one who had trained her, Minerva McGonagall could have wiped the stone floor with Snape and anyone except possibly (and only possibly) the Dark Lord himself.

Did she spare Snape's life because she knew he had a further part to play in Dumbledore's little morality play? Or because she couldn't bear to end it? Who's to say? I only report what happened. And what happened was a duel mostly for show that each enjoyed more than they would have admitted, at least until Flitwick showed up, and Severus decided it was time to do his bunk.

And of course, you know what happened from there.

Was Severus thinking of Minerva when he lay exsanguinating in the Shrieking Shack? I cannot tell you. But it's a good bet.

/\*\*\*/

Minerva McGonagall liked solitude. She liked quiet, and she liked being left alone.

Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts and the subsequent rebuilding it required, she got precious little of it. Which was why most people who knew her a little...which was most people who knew her...thought she needed a break.

'Twas the night before Christmas, and the few remaining children had been stuffed like geese, the eggnog-addled fairies were blinking slower and slower on their branches on the trees, the house-elves were snug in their beds while visions of Argyle socks danced in their heads, and Minerva McGonagall was packing.

Her staff, which is to say Pomona, Filius, Hagrid, Poppy, Horace, and others whose names I have forgotten, had gone in together and got her a gift, the rotters. At the staff meeting (if you could call any gathering at which so much Rum Punch was consumed a "meeting") just before the beginning of the holidays, they had presented the Headmistress with a key and an old, spent Christmas cracker (which was, coincidentally, exactly how Minerva felt most of the time.) The key was to a small holiday cottage on Islay, and the cracker was, of course, a Portkey to take her there.

"We'll take care of the castle," was the chorus, "you just go and have a nice rest." Minerva was not especially keen to visit Islay, or any island for that matter, in the dead of a Scottish winter, but her pure-blood mother had brought her up to receive gifts graciously, while her Presbyterian father had frowned on waste, so on that Christmas Eve after the war, Minerva found herself dutifully Shrinky and packing a variety of books to keep her occupied during her maroonment in the Inner Hebrides.

Let us say, Reader, that it was a movement outside her window that caught her eye as she snapped shut her valise. It may have been that, or a flicker of light, or any number of subtle signals that alerted her to the possibility of another presence high in the sky above Hogwarts.

She went to the window and opened it, peering into the darkness. By the time she spied Severus Snape, it was too late to faint without falling out, so she didn't. He had been obscured by mist, but there he was, hovering outside her bedroom window, all greasy hair and great bat-like arms extended like wings, much as they had been the last time she had seen him swooping down from Ravenclaw Tower.

She stepped away from the window and bid him enter, which he did.

When he was standing, fully corporeal and warm, in front of her, he rasped, "Happy Christmas, Minerva," and that was when she knew Severus Snape lived and breathed, and that this was not just a ghost of Christmas past come to look upon her.

"Severus Snape," was all she said. There was no surprise in her voice, only affirmation, as if by speaking his name he would be fully incarnate, which, as you know, he was.

Severus, being Severus, was unsure of his welcome, and Minerva, being Minerva, did nothing to reassure him. It was his impulse to turn from her, to go out the window, the way he came in, and disappear, never to be heard of or from again. It would be easy enough; everyone thought him dead, and there were few enough who would be glad to know otherwise, he thought, posthumous Order of Merlin notwithstanding. The world prefers its heroes dead, particularly when they are hook-nosed and black-hearted.

If he left, he thought, he need never face her grief or her guilt, or any of the other messy emotions he had always carefully avoided engendering in others, and most especially that one emotion he feared and despised above all others, and no wonder, considering where it had got him in the past.

But then he remembered the last words he had heard her say before toddling off to his not-quite-death, and they rang in his ears now *Coward. Coward*.

The words kept him rooted to the spot because they had stung at the time, even with everything else that had been going on, and he had not had the chance to work out whether they had referred to his fleeing the castle or to his behaviour toward her the previous year. Severus Snape did not like unsolved mysteries, not when they concerned himself.

While searching for the right thing to say to her, he saw the valise sitting on her bed, and the words came to him, practical and unsentimental, and utterly appropriate as his erstwhile mistress.

"Going somewhere, Minerva?" he enquired, and she had to strain her ears to catch the susurrant that was the only sound left to Severus in his post-Nagini state.

"Islay," she replied.

"Finally taking that holiday," he asserted.

"Something like that," she said, not even the ghost of a smile curving her disciplined lips. "Unless . . ."

He raised an eyebrow in imitation of her way of asking a question without asking it.

". . . a change of plans is in order," she said. "Is it?"

"I think, Minerva," he whispered, "that you might draw that conclusion from the fact that I came up here."

Minerva moved with the same deliberation she had exhibited in the staff bath those many months before and put her arms about the non-apparition that was her once and future lover, and he was never certain if the name that escaped her lips as she crossed was *Severus* or *Lazarus*.

Was he glad, then, that he had risen from a comfortable grave? I turn the question back to you: Was Severus Snape a man ever to be *glad* of anything? His resurrection was not, after all, a tale from the estimable Muggle observer of English society, Charles Dickens. He did not, as the protagonist of Mr Dickens' Yuletide ghost story did, become giddy as a schoolboy. Neither did he become a good friend, a good master, nor a good man, but as he joined his lady in her bed, and when he met the little death that was as close to heaven as Severus Snape would likely ever come, like Scrooge's, his own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him.

And now, Reader, I shall draw a discreet veil over the scene, as we are in a lady's bedroom, after all.

Anyway, you know the rest of the story. And if you don't, it's all in *Hogwarts: A History*, revised edition, H. Granger-Weasley, ed.

I hear it's on sale at Flourish and Blotts, Diagon Alley. Makes a lovely Christmas gift.

Think about it, won't you?

~FIN~