

# Old-Aged Pariah

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## OAP

Chapter 1 of 1

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He looked around his office one last time. It seemed odd that his collection of seventeenth-century sarcoma suspensions could ever be considered as making a place look *homelike*, but in their absence, the room looked stark and strangely unfinished. It was no longer his space, but that of a stranger. Next year there would be a new Potions master, some chap from Sweden that Minerva had been waxing lyrical over since his interview. He was older than Snape, but unlike him, he could still be trusted to cut daisy roots without the knife skittering from his grasp. Unlike Snape, he didn't need to keep the fire by his desk lit at all times, including the summer. Working in the permafrost of the dungeons was no joke when your nerves had been shredded by magical venom.

Retirement at his age seemed ridiculous, but when you relied on someone with the constitution of Professor Slughorn to carry your slack, you knew it was time to quit. Recently he'd been relying on Horace more and more. Both of them could use the rest. And if he were being honest, he knew that the students deserved more, too.

His trunks and other belongings had been sent on ahead. His rooms were emptied of the possessions that had somehow accumulated over the last twenty-five years, and his office was stripped of his books and ornaments. After one final check of the drawers, he placed the heavy key upon the desk. He wondered if he ought to leave a note, warning about the hidden compartments, but no one came to Hogwarts without some foreknowledge of the castle's penchant for playing tricks. Learning his way around his quarters had kept him entertained for the first five years of his tenure, and it seemed sad to deprive his replacement of the same experience. He could find out about the plumbing on his own, too.

He nudged the key, making sure that the straight edge was perfectly in line with the edge of the table.

After thirty seconds' contemplation, he pushed it back into an angle, just in case lining keys up was likely to come across as being a bit obsessive. Leaving the store cupboard in a state of meticulous order was expected of a Potions master; try it elsewhere and everyone just thought you were odd.

Realising that there was nothing more to do, he stood, straightening his robes. He felt as if he had been waiting for something, some sign that it was time for him to leave. Nothing and no one had appeared. Perhaps that was sign enough.

Closing the door behind him for the final time, he turned and began the slow ascent to the ground floor.

The torches flared to life as he neared, illuminating the dark stone, but he saw no one as he climbed. The students had left that morning, filling the air with laughter and tears as they crowded around the carriages. It was rare to see a child shy away from the creatures between the shafts now; time might have stood still for him, but enough years had passed since peace was restored that few could see the thestrals patiently standing there. Time enough for Hogwarts to have recovered from the events of *that*

night. Almost time enough for those left to recover from the events of *that* year.

There was no one in the hallway. The sun streamed through the ceiling-high windows, illuminating the dust that spiralled gently through the air. The castle already had the too quiet feel of an empty school.

No one had come to say goodbye.

He had expected that someone would at least be on hand to make sure that he left the premises, but apparently his formal interviews with Minerva were all the ceremony that would mark his quiet departure.

It was probably better this way.

He took one final look around at the old place. He had lived there far too long not to be affected by leaving, but too many of his memories were of the difficult variety for him to feel true affection for the castle. It had been home, yes, for more years than he cared to remember. It had also been a prison, an oddly beautiful purgatory, and a terrible place to convalesce.

It was time to go.

As he neared the great doors, he felt a light wave of magic pass over him and watched in interest as they slowly swung to a close and the bolts slid home.

He reached out with tentative strands of his own magic, intrigued by the complex little bit of charmwork that ensured that he would not be able to leave. Unless he was mistaken, it had been keyed to him alone. Fascinating. He would miss working with people who could deftly complete such intricacies.

As he pondered the reason why he was being detained, a voice called from behind him.

"Not yet, Severus." It was Minerva, standing at the top of the stairwell in her smart green robes. She looked much the same as she had on his first day, smiling sternly at the assembled first years. Now, as then, he was mindful that she was to be obeyed. "There's one last thing."

He followed her slowly up the stairs and down the aching familiar corridors, back into the heart of the castle, wondering what was to come. Ritual tar and feathering, perhaps? Defenestration without a wand?

*Please, he thought, don't let it be a carriage clock*

They stopped outside the staffroom, and Severus was surprised to find that he was both nervous and almost excited. He had hoped he might be excused from making his farewells after Minerva had called attention to his imminent departure at dinner the previous evening. He had presumed that everyone was as eager as he was to finally be rid of his guilt-worn hide.

"Try not to look so suspicious," the Headmistress cautioned him, her hand on the door.

The door swung inwards, and he was bemused to find that the comfortable room was crowded to capacity. Those inside looked up as the door opened, their faces alight with expectancy and interest as they shuffled inelegantly to their collective feet.

"Surprise!"

They spoke the sentiment rather than shouting, for which he was grateful. They were all well aware that a more boisterous display (or heaven forbid, having darkened the room first) was likely to see him draw his wand. As it was, he gripped it tightly inside his sleeve as he looked around in mild terror.

Perhaps a carriage clock might have been preferable.

"You didn't think we'd let you sneak off, did you?" Minerva demanded, her hand firmly on his elbow. "Now come and have a drink."

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It turned out that the only drinks on offer were Butterbeer or sherry, and that someone had already eaten all the chocolate biscuits, leaving just the custard creams and the eye-watering Ginger Newts that Minerva was so fond of. And the Butterbeer was warm.

Snape also discovered that it was fairly impossible to stand in the corner and pretend that you weren't actually there at your own retirement party. Everybody insisted on talking to him. Some went further than talking. Pomona came perilously close to tears. Filius, wheeled in from his own retirement in Dorset, heaped on his blessings. Poppy Pomfrey, whom he had secretly worshipped since he was eleven, openly wept on his robes.

When Minerva renewed her grip on his elbow, it all became too much. Although not the recluse that most of the world seemed to believe, he had never been comfortable with emotional displays and had little idea of how to react to the sentiments being expressed. Thankfully, searching frantically for an escape took enough of his concentration for him to block out much of what the Headmistress and his former Nemesis-in-Chief was saying. He heard "terrible time", "so much to give", and "return for the memorial service, of course" and redoubled his efforts.

He was in danger of becoming very overwhelmed very quickly.

His skin had begun to prickle under the wool of his robes. He only maintained thin Occlumency shields these days, and they were beginning to buckle, no match for the uncomfortable swell of emotions beginning to churn beneath his ribs.

Couldn't they just drink their sherry and go?

There was just too much touching. Too much warmth. Too much of everything. Everybody was looking at him, speaking to him, wanting to shake his hand or pat him on the shoulder. The Butterbeer was doing nothing to relieve the tightness in his throat or the growing thirst that gripped him. It was suffocatingly warm in the little room, and the press of bodies was making him claustrophobic.

Minerva nodded to someone over his shoulder and finally released his elbow. Hoping for a moment's relief from well-wishers, he turned, only to be confronted by the new Charms mistress.

She peered up at him in concern. He tried to find the energy to glare.

"Don't worry," she soothed. "I'm not here to weep on you. I thought you might appreciate a little help in getting out of here." When he failed to respond, she nodded her tilted head to the side. "This way."

The lure of escape was too tempting, and he allowed her to shuffle him carefully towards the wall opposite the door.

"Try not to look so suspicious," she cautioned him. "I've arranged for Neville to cause a distr..." There was a quiet pop (she, too, knew no one would have enjoyed the effects of a loud bang), and the air was suddenly thick with the smell of boiled cabbage. As heads turned towards the door in mild interest, Professor Granger caught his hand.

"Lean against the wall," she whispered.

Snape hoped she hadn't noticed that he had grasped her proffered hand like a lifeline and did as she instructed. He didn't know what she had planned, but anything had to be better than another five minutes of this torture.

The wall was oddly yielding, swallowing them slowly. It was a bit like sinking into a pan of toffee, he decided, quietly refusing to panic. Granger was pressed against his shoulder in the tiny, dark space, her hand still caught in his. If she wasn't worried, then he probably didn't need to either. Gryffindors had qualms about dragging other people into danger.

*Didn't tend to stop them, though.*

Before he could decide if panicking really was an option, there was a squelching noise, and the wall spat them out onto the corridor beyond.

"I was terrified that I might get stuck halfway when I tested that yesterday," Granger noted conversationally. "George has grown up immeasurably these past few years, but he still has the oddest sense of humour."

Finding out that a Weasley had suggested their escape route suggested that panic, even the belated variety, probably wasn't such a bad idea.

"Let's just rest a bit, shall we?" she added kindly.

He realised a moment too late that he was still holding her hand. He dropped it, taking half a step back, but she was already turning, apparently neither surprised nor dismayed by his faux pas. She probably hadn't even noticed; her friends were a ridiculously tactile bunch.

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Granger led the way through a side door into the little courtyard beyond. A light breeze was blowing, keeping the garden cool despite its southern aspect catching the late afternoon sun. A small table had been set up by one of the benches, and a tea service appeared as they sat.

"Please don't take this the wrong way," she said, pouring the milk. "But you look as if you could do with a nice cup of tea."

She was right of course. The tea was fresh and helped to wash away the last cloying traces of Butterbeer. Slowly he felt the tension that had gripped him begin to recede. Granger didn't seem to feel the need to talk, and they just sat there, sipping tea and listening to the wind gently rustling the tree tops.

He wondered if he should find something to say, but his unexpected rescuer seemed content with the silence. She was very different to how he remembered; over the years, her irritating confidence in her abilities had morphed into a gentle confidence in herself. It made the children respect her, despite her youth. It made him inclined to trust her, just a little.

The silence continued, broken only by the birds darting between the flowerbeds and the occasional clatter of teaspoon against china. He'd known about this courtyard had regularly discovered students dawdling under the ornamental cherry tree as curfew approached but had never really lingered there himself. It probably wasn't quite so peaceful during term time.

Her cup empty, his companion seemed to remember his presence. She stirred beside him, reaching for the teapot.

"What are you planning to do with your retirement?"

It was a fairly innocuous question, he supposed; Minerva had asked him the same thing. He'd given her some gumph about continuing his studies, but in reality, further academia was the last thing he wanted to contemplate. It was the easy answer, though. As such, it was with some surprise that he found himself telling the truth.

"It was time to leave." *Beyond time.* "I haven't really thought about what comes next."

He glanced up, oddly nervous of her reaction. She was leaning back against the wall, her eyes almost closed.

"It'll be a big change," she murmured, not looking up. "You've been here for most of your life."

Since he was eleven, with barely a break before his teaching career began. Despite fleeing the castle before the battle, he hadn't managed to get further than the edge of the forest. That he was still here, still haunting the corridors after all that had happened, well . . .

"It was ridiculous of me to stay."

He waited for her reaction. He expected the indignant denial, the unconvincing platitudes that Minerva had evinced, but they didn't come. She just shifted against the wall and sighed.

"No, it wasn't. It was natural that you wanted to recover in a place where you were loved."

He stared at her in mute shock, hastily revising his opinion of her. He had thought that she had grown up and was bitterly disappointed to discover that she was still mired in the overweening Gryffindor sentimentality that had defined her youth. Did she think it kind to pretend that she was unaware of the grievousness of his crimes? Or that her fellow colleagues could look upon the shuffling, shambling wreck that he had become and feel anything other than contempt? Sour vindication?

He wanted to shake her. The violence of the feeling surprised even him.

"I'm *not* loved," he whispered.

"Of course you are," she scoffed with the slightest wave of her hand. "What do you think the displays back there were about?"

He stilled. The tears and embraces had been horribly uncomfortable, uncomfortable enough that he had not considered upon anything more than his wish to escape them. Still, what she was suggesting seemed ludicrous.

"The war . . . that year . . ."

She sat up then, blinking as the sun hit her eyes, looking up at him even seated he still towered over her with the same expression of concern on her face as before.

"You think . . . ? Oh, Severus, don't you see? Most of them had known you since you were eleven they knew you weren't capable of such treachery! That's why they were so horribly confused and hurt when you seemed to do just that. They couldn't believe it. They didn't recognise you."

He'd never invited her to address him so casually, but then he'd never given her leave to touch him either, yet somehow his hand was once more caught in hers.

"They were so relieved when Harry revealed the truth. Not because it meant that you hadn't betrayed their secrets, but because it meant they hadn't lost you. They'd been mourning their Headmaster and their Potions master since that night."

He flinched. No one spoke about what had happened. No one spoke about any of it. It was so raw still, the wounds barely healed. She didn't stop, just gripped his hand tightly, her voice low and steady.

"The Aurors came for you, you know. Once the Ministry discovered that you'd survived, they wanted answers, but there was never any question of them arresting you. The

whole school closed ranks. You weren't even conscious, and they were already convinced of your innocence." Her eyes were bright. "You *are* loved."

She spoke softly, but he could feel the weight of each word like a pressure on his chest. "How do you know all this?"

"How do you not?" She shook her head. "I was something of an outsider when I began teaching here still am to some degree. I wasn't here that year, so I don't have any uncomfortable memories of you as Headmaster. It makes me surprisingly easy to talk to about what happened."

She was right, again.

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"Gardening seems to be very popular. You could keep chickens."

"This is hardly filling me with confidence."

"You could take up with a younger woman. What?" She grinned as he choked on his tea. "It worked for my great-uncle Terrance. He's nearly seventy but could easily pass for late fifties. His girlfriend's younger than me. We all heartily disapprove, of course, but there's no denying that he's enjoying his retirement."

She had a very clever way of using small discomforts to distract you from the truly upsetting, he realised. It probably ought to annoy him, but for the moment, he was only too happy at being distracted. "Any serious suggestions?"

"Think of whatever it is that you enjoy doing the most, and do it," she answered simply. "And use the time to catch up on your correspondence."

"Letter writing? That's your idea of a worthwhile pursuit?"

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "I think there's something very satisfying about sending and receiving post, especially by Muggle means. I've kept nearly every letter I've ever had they're even better than diaries, really."

It was probably she who had charmed the great doors to alert Minerva and prevent him from leaving the castle, he realised. It was a nice piece of spellwork. He was almost tempted to tell her.

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The bench was becoming uncomfortable, and the breeze had begun to stiffen when she finally stood and Vanished the tea things. Reluctantly he followed her back into the school.

They returned to find that the others had begun the cake without them.

Everyone looked up as they entered, some guiltily with chocolate smears round their mouths, the rest in blatant curiosity. He suddenly realised how it must have looked, sneaking away with a younger colleague for over an hour. Someone wolf-whistled. Horace, he guessed, glaring at the room in general. To his surprise, beside him, Hermione blushed.

*Bastards, the lot of them. Cutting my cake without me.*

He was going to miss them, he realised. His feelings for the castle might be complicated, but there was no mistaking his fondness for his co-workers, even if he had not suspected their reciprocation. He wasn't sure how much of Granger's impassioned speech he believed, but it was impossible to miss the convivial feeling of being amongst those who were more than simply colleagues. Perhaps there were some conversations still to be had before he left the castle for good. Perhaps the idea of keeping in touch wasn't such a ridiculous notion after all. It would be a shame to lose contact with those who had been such a large part of his life, even if it was time for that part to end.

If he was being honest, he could admit that it was also a shame that he was leaving before really getting the chance to get to know Professor Granger. He'd had little contact with her before today, but he had found her to be intelligent, interesting and intuitive. If there was an "I" word for attractive, she'd be that too. Eye-catching wouldn't work, the clumsy alliteration aside. Hers was a very quiet sort of prettiness that one only noticed after really *looking* at her, soft and pleasing like her voice.

He cut a slice of the cake and passed it to her. She took the napkin carefully and smiled, pleased by his attentions. She had a very nice smile, he realised. Funny how you never realise these things until it's too late.

Perhaps he would come back to the events Minerva had mentioned. He would be sure to let her know that he could be called on should the new Potions teacher have any difficulties with the syllabus.

They carried their cake over to the chairs by the window and settled back to watch the rest of the staff as they laughed, bickered and got cake crumbs on the carpet. Every now and then someone would look up, catch his eye, and smile. Eventually, someone broke out the port and things grew quieter in the sleepy warmth of the evening sun.

Earlier he had been in a hurry to leave this place. Now he felt inclined to linger. Perhaps it was the port. There would be port in his retirement, he decided. And cake. He rather thought he was owed a little cake in his life these days.

The time for cold dungeons and unremitting danger had passed. He wasn't sure what his retirement would hold, but he knew that it would be on his terms. It would be rewarding, joyful even. The time for taking risks was over.

Well, almost.

"Tell me," he murmured to the pretty girl perched beside him. "Are you a faithful correspondent?"

She retrieved a neatly folded piece of parchment from the pocket in her robes and pressed it into his hand. It was too thick to simply be an address; he found himself hoping with sudden keenness that there might be a note as well. Her smile was soft, inviting.

"I thought you'd never ask."