

# Before We Know Our Liberty

*by Deverted*

Severus Snape attends an academic conference and begins an unexpected collaboration. SS/OC

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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**Note:** I'm calling this AU to give myself freedom: I started reading fanfic just before OotP came out, and my imagination was strongly influenced by what I read at that time. I aim to comply with the events of books five to seven to the extent that it's convenient to my story. The rating will be higher in later chapters for sexual content, rape, and other violence. Note that I don't glorify rape in the slightest, but the fic as a whole won't be unmitigated angst!

**Disclaimer:** I neither own the characters and their universe nor write about them for profit. The story's title comes from the final stanza of Robert Herrick's "Corinna's Going A-Maying."

Prologue

October, 1995

McGonagall contemplated her drinking companion with open concern, unperturbed by the degree to which her worrying annoyed him, just as he remained unaffected by the awkward silences that so irritated her. She had increased her efforts to be friendly with Snape, after all, out of concern following the Dark Lord's return at the end of the previous school year. She had started out as a reluctant substitute for Albus, who currently lacked the time regularly to counsel all members of his staff, but she had grown to feel confident that tough love and alcohol was to this man generally a more palatable medicine than Albus' Muggle sweets and equally saccharine, dotty wisdom.

"I would gladly leave you to mope in solitude were it not for the fact that I myself require a stiff drink, and it is indecorous to drink alone."

"If you are truly alone, I see no call for ceremony."

"A statement belied by the fact that I find you, here in your private quarters, not having unfastened a single button since dinner."

"Ah, but I *have* unlaced various laces." He extracted his feet from beneath the squat oak coffee table and placed them very indecorously indeed! on either side of McGonagall's bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky. His socks were of an uneven texture and a hideous shade of yellow-orange they betrayed signs of once having been a brighter possibly neon hue, but the color seemed to have dulled from excessive use. An irregular pattern of violet and green lumps caused Minerva to squint and inspect her colleague's feet more closely than her better judgment advised. "Is that..."

"Aconite flowers, yes. And the shade of orange was once exactly the color Wolfsbane potion ought to be at the moment they are added. If you care to count, which I would not recommend, there are also exactly the proper number of blossoms. Albus knit them himself in... gratitude for my services two years ago, and as it appears he genuinely believes they constitute adequate compensation, I feel compelled to get as much use out of them as possible."

"Perhaps you and I ought to take up knitting as a means of combating awkward silence! Irma and Poppy seem disinclined to include me in their weekly 'stitch-and-bitch' "

sessions." He sneered and wiggled his distressingly orange toes too close for comfort to the bottle of Firewhisky. "Perhaps not, then. Shall we be forced then to resort to wizard chess?"

He extracted his feet from the table and hesitated for a moment, not actually smiling but seeming to enjoy a private joke, and barked, *Accio Castiglione!*" just as she was contemplating a strategy for breaking another awkward pause. A small, very old volume floated into his hand from a location he didn't seem to expect after it wriggled out from behind several larger tomes, which nearly tumbled off the shelves as this one broke free. Ignoring her as she sought out tumblers and poured them each generous portions of whisky, he pursued an extended search for a specific passage.

He located the passage. "I read something once, about chess, that struck me as sufficiently astute that I find myself loath to address the subject in my own words *it is truly an honest kynde of enterteynmente and wittie...*"

She found herself doubting whether her colleague believed any confluence of wit and honest entertainment were possible.

"*But me think it hath a fault, whiche is, that a man may be to counying at it, for who ever will be excellent in the playe of chestes, I beleave he must beestowe much tyme about it, and applie it with so much study, that a man may assoone learne some noble scyence, or compase any other matter of importaunce, and yet in the ende in beestowing all that labour, he knoweth no more but a game.*" He paused, looking equal parts relieved to have found the passage and satisfied that it expressed his sentiments so effectively. He tentatively sipped his drink and wrinkled his nose. "Isn't this what the likes of Lockhart and fifth-year boys drink to try to put hair on their chests?"

"Indeed. I don't want to have to worry about you catching cold here in your dungeon lair... or I could hint to Albus that you are in need of a new winter sweater."

"Perhaps abundant chest hair would be preferable." He took a much larger swallow but did not disguise a look of distaste.

McGonagall glimpsed the book's title, *The Book of the Courtier*, and snorted, but she did gracefully refrain from commenting on the degree to which her arrogant colleague failed to accord with any definition of courtesy she'd ever encountered. Nor did she draw attention to the fact that they were, at the moment, hardly trading time studying chess for the pursuit of anything resembling a "noble science." But indirection, it seemed, was not going to get them to the topic she wished but was hesitant to discuss; if she didn't act fast, he'd be reading to her from Machiavelli next.

"Albus told me about your trip. I'm very pleased for you; it sounds like it will be just the thing." She savored a slow sip and added more whisky to her glass, a little more than she quite desired to drink that evening.

He scowled slightly as she settled back into her chair, waiting, she knew, for more clues as to her object in raising the topic.

"Oh, never fear my prying about your mission, Severus, I understand this is a... joint assignment, and I would not presume to hound you for details that are none of my business. At least not where your *work* is concerned. I simply want to make sure that you do not, in your youthful innocence, fail to take advantage of the *full* range of opportunities an academic conference can provide." She continued more boldly when he seemed to let down his guard a little, "Quite frankly, jesting over novelty footwear aside, you've seemed to me... depressed of late." She failed to find a more tactful word.

"Compared to my usual good cheer?"

"Compared to your usual *curiosity*. You work excessively, indefatigably of course, but, it seems to me, out of nothing more than necessity."

"Given the circumstances, *necessity* is more than sufficient motivation." *These are the things we do not speak aloud*, he clearly conveyed with a glance. But McGonagall seemed to be ignoring that fact for the evening.

"You once made every effort to find the fascinating element in each necessity. I am, as a friend, simply advising that you use this trip to take a new approach to the problem of inspiration."

"My time in academic circles was mercifully brief, but it effectively taught me that inspiration is the last thing I should expect to find at such an event as the Cambridge Hybrid Magic-Muggle Conference, aside from inspiration never to venture forth from Hogwarts again. At least when Pomona prattles on about how her Leaping Toadstools have learned to skip, she doesn't see the need to try and publish a bloody monograph on the topic!"

McGonagall almost giggled. Snape glared. "Oh, I don't mean *intellectual* inspiration! Admittedly, I only attended a very few conferences myself, international Ministry affairs, not academic, and all of those in the sixties... but from what I understand things don't change much." She grinned mischievously, but Snape's schooled features gave no indication that he had yet caught on to her insinuations. "There are abundant opportunities for discreet amorous encounters."

"How enlightening. This, I suspect, partially explains why the intellectual content fails to inspire."

"I could tell you stories."

"And thus spare me the direct experience of academic courtship rituals. I invite you to proceed!"

"Severus! I hope you can recognize that if/ of all people am saying this, it's slightly more than the thoughtless prattle of a... female busybody. I had to work very hard to talk Albus out of breaching the subject with you himself oh *indeed* because we both know his suggestions regarding your well-being occur so frequently that you have become more than adept at dismissing them." She told herself to take it as a good sign that he had reverted to looking smug. But when he spoke in reply, more openly than she had dared to expect, she nearly wished he hadn't.

"Minerva." The gentleness of his tone managed to convey recognition of the extent of her habitual restraint but perhaps included a light threat stemming from the fact that she had forced him to acknowledge it. "If all I can hope for is meaningless assignments... well, it's simply easier when I refrain from placing myself in circumstances that remind me of such facts." He allowed, after a pause that included more Firewhisky, "Possibly that is not a normal attitude."

"Think of it instead as an *unnecessary one*. Well, perhaps I ought to cease imposing my opinions and simply implore you to keep an open mind."

"You know," he reached for the bottle, and McGonagall resigned herself as he added at least two fingers to her glass, "there are still a few things that don't often fail to bring me pleasure. Very good scotch is one of them. If we get very drunk, indeed this might become tolerable." Submitting that seizing the advantage sometimes involved conceding one's own vulnerabilities, Snape continued, "So. You were threatening to impart wisdom via anecdotes of your own youthful indiscretions?"

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It was several hours later, and well after midnight, that Snape finally showed his effortfully composed colleague to the door. He had spoken more sincerely than he intended. Then they had both drunk more than they intended, to provide a retroactive excuse for their candor. After that, the only thing to do had been to laugh at Minerva's uncharacteristically... silly reminiscences. More than he had intended. Their interactions on the face of things indicated a growing degree of trust, of closeness between them. But he wasn't so certain he didn't resent that, and severely, especially when he was alone and the laughter seemed no longer a comfort but an embarrassing indulgence. When they were no longer immediate, he strongly suspected these comforts were weakening him even as they did nothing in the larger scheme of things to prevent the ever-increasing bleakness of his outlook.

Before drinking the requisite potions and stripping for bed, undoing all his buttons without magic, he checked his personal stock to ensure he possessed a sufficient supply of noticeably better alcohol than McGonagall drank. Such competition might very well strain his budget, but one must maintain standards.

Standing in front of the bathroom sink, Snape found himself examining the reflection of his upper body, unflinching but undeniably grateful he did not possess a full-length mirror. He tended to rely on his height to make any necessary physical impression, and broad shoulders allowed him to dress in a manner that conveyed a much fuller physique than the mirror revealed him actually to possess. No one saw his scars, except some of the times when he acquired new ones. He had always been resilient, physically, but no one would describe him as strong. No one ever had. Tonight, however, he found the adjective "weak" rising to his mind with a persistence it had not done since his own days as a Hogwarts student, and with it came the heretofore unarticulated recognition that he was not living as a man who expected to survive the inevitable war. Yet perhaps that weakness was, after all, more psychological than physical. Little at present evidenced the boxer's build his father had boasted, but then of course he had always done everything possible to distance himself from the man, even to his own detriment. What muscle tone Snape possessed suggested his body would respond eagerly if he were to prompt it with appropriate diet and exercise. But he could think of absolutely nothing to motivate such an effort.

And when in the morning he awoke perplexed to the mild inconvenience of an erection, he found himself mostly able to ignore the fact that, as he attended to it, he failed to conjure the specific features of any woman, not even of Lily anymore, as if the bodily function were entirely redundant.