

The Headmaster

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 1

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This story was written for the "Bring Back the Bastard" fest at deeply_horrible. The prompt was, *"He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the burden of being a man"* (Samuel Johnson).

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His office was quiet, which was exactly as the new Headmaster expected it to be.

When he had assumed leadership of Hogwarts a fortnight ago, he had stood before the portraits of the previous headmasters and headmistresses and announced that he expected them to speak only when their advice was directly sought. Otherwise, they were to remain silent.

"But Headmaster Snape," one of the portraits had protested, a woman with long silver curls that gave her a vaguely ludicrous air, "sometimes you won't even know when you need information. There are any number of questions you might not think to ask."

"Dilys is right," nodded a red-faced man. "You'll need to hear from us. Dumbledore always encouraged us to speak out. You know, Albus..."

"Is dead," the Headmaster had interrupted. "Dead by my hand, in case you need reminding. Albus is gone, and..." he waved a dismissive hand towards the sleeping portrait of Albus Dumbledore..."he does not appear interested in returning. In any event, what Dumbledore did or didn't do is not longer relevant. I am the Headmaster now, and you are bound obey *my* orders. Which, I repeat, are these: you will speak only when I address you. The rest of the time, you will be mute."

He had turned his back on them then, uninterested in their outrage and unwilling to listen to any further comparisons to his predecessor. The Headmaster was dead.

Long live the Headmaster.

Or at least, let the new Headmaster live until this whole wretched business of war was concluded, and he could die in something like peace.

In the two weeks that had passed since that confrontation with the portraits, they had by and large obeyed his orders for silence, though he was always aware of them shifting uneasily in their frames and giving each other fraught, meaningful glances.

No matter. They were quiet, which was all the Headmaster cared about. He particularly didn't need any inane chatter at this moment, for he was expecting Professor

McGonagall.

Since his return to Hogwarts, the Headmaster had avoided his colleagues as much as possible, which was not difficult, since they had shown no more desire for his company than he had for theirs. He had called an initial meeting to apprise them of rules and expectations they would face under the administration of Headmaster Snape, and thereafter, he had left them alone...except at meals and during the random, unannounced inspections he conducted in their classrooms and offices. They must not be allowed to underestimate him.

Still, there was no avoiding Professor McGonagall, who was continuing in the position of Deputy Headmistress. The Dark Lord would have had her eliminated as too much of a danger, but the Headmaster had made a careful case for her usefulness. He'd pointed out that she knew a great deal about Dumbledore's plans; someone with the Headmaster's skills in Legilimency could plumb her mind as a resource. "And many in the wizarding world trust her," he'd continued. "When the war is over, and you are the victor, my lord, she can be Imperiused and used to calm the masses."

At length, Voldemort had been convinced, and the Headmaster had felt a moment's relief. Professor McGonagall's death might still be necessary at some point, but in the main, he did not wish her harm. In their previous life here at Hogwarts, she'd been...well, in his weaker moments, he would have called her almost a friend, though he did not delude himself that she continued to hold him in regard.

There had been a time when the loss of such regard might have caused the Headmaster pain, but that time was past. It belonged to the days when he had been foolish enough to think that he could be Severus and she could be Minerva, friends who happened also to be colleagues and war veterans.

He knew better now and mocked himself for ever having thought otherwise. He was Headmaster Snape; she was Professor McGonagall, his Deputy. And in five minutes, she would be in his office, for a meeting she had requested. School business of some sort, he assumed, and no doubt she wanted to complain about the behaviour of the new Death-Eater staff members, the Carrows.

Well, if she wanted the Headmaster to control them, she would have no luck; he had more significant things to worry about than petty sadists. If the Heads of Houses couldn't find ways to keep the Carrows in line, then they had no business being in positions of leadership.

Professor McGonagall arrived at his office punctual to the moment and came to stand before his desk. He did not ask her to sit down; theirs had always been a relationship of power negotiations, and he intended to begin as he meant to go on: he would make it clear to her that he was in charge.

"Professor McGonagall," he said, and waited. She had requested the meeting; let her begin it.

She wasted no time. "Why did Albus want you to kill him?"

Years of practice enabled the Headmaster to keep his countenance impassive no matter what the provocation, but he could not remember the last time he had been so close to feeling taken aback. Damn Albus. He'd insisted that his ridiculous scheme would work and that no one would doubt Snape's identity as both murderer and Death Eater. Dumbledore had assured Snape that his undercover position would be secure, and now here he was, being challenged at the very start of his tenure.

Though fuming inside, the Headmaster gave Professor McGonagall a bored stare.

"I have no time for games," he said. "If you have school business to discuss, pray begin. If not, I must ask you to leave. I have work to do."

"You're the one who is playing games, Severus," she said, rounding the desk to stand over him. "Did working with Albus teach you nothing? How many times did you and I agree that his secrecy was counterproductive, no matter how well-intentioned it was? And now you're doing the same thing. I know you didn't murder Albus, and I insist..."

Careful to give her no warning, the Headmaster lunged to his feet and was gratified to see her take an involuntary step backwards. "You are in no position to insist on anything," he informed her. "Understand this, Professor McGonagall: I will tolerate no insubordination from my staff."

He sat down again without looking at her; he had no intention of lowering himself by engaging in a staring contest. "Since you appear to have no substantive business to conduct," he said, "you will show yourself out."

Then he waited a beat, so that the insolence of his next command would be clear.

"Now."

He fully expected her to stay where she was, at least briefly, as a show of independence. Instead, she turned away at once.

But at the door, she paused. "This isn't over, Severus," she said. "We are not finished."

And she left before he could decide how to respond.

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The quiet in the office continued unabated as the Headmaster pondered his course. He knew Minerva McGonagall: she would be as good as her word. She would let nothing rest, not the issue of Dumbledore's death or anything else. She had always been perceptive, not to mention doggedly stubborn, and she would press and agitate and argue until she ended up undermining Dumbledore's entire war plan.

Of course it was an insane plan, depending as it did on that idiot Potter, but it was a plan the Headmaster needed. Potter, for better or worse, would see the thing through to its end...to his death... which would mean that the Headmaster's journey could end, too. He could finally lay down the burden that he had been shouldering since that long-ago night in the Slytherin dormitory, when Mulciber had asked him if he wanted to attend a meeting that would "help put the right people in charge of our world."

He'd wanted many things then, but now, he wanted only to end the madness. Thus if Dumbledore's plan had even a remote chance of working, Professor McGonagall must not be permitted to jeopardize it.

The Headmaster would have to find a way to deal with her.

Accordingly, on the following evening, he took himself to her quarters at a few minutes after midnight, thinking that the late hour would disconcert her. He'd given considerable thought to the best way to approach the problem of McGonagall's interference. To control her, he would have to keep her uncertain and on edge; he would have to unsettle her, disrupt her mind.

The solution, he had decided, was to do exactly the opposite of what she expected.

If she expected the students to be in danger, then he would make her believe that their safety depended primarily on her.

If she thought that he was still working for Albus and the Order and expected that he would protect her, then he would cease to protect her.

And not only that, but he would deliberately hurt her.

It would be unconscionable, of course, but how could he do otherwise? If he was to succeed in the path that had been laid out for him, he couldn't simply *pretend* to be a heartless bastard. The stakes were too high for playacting.

No, he had to *be* that heartless bastard.

For his own sanity, he had to be. Decent human beings couldn't or wouldn't do the things he was required to do...ergo, he couldn't be decent. It was too much to ask, even from Albus, who was willing to force people to give their very souls. But for Dumbledore to expect the Headmaster to act the monster without *being* the monster...?

It was too much.

So the Headmaster had to be despicable, and he would start with Professor McGonagall. He needed to control her anyway, and he needed to prove to himself that he really was the person everyone thought him. He had no other choice. How else was he to do what he had to do?

He arrived at McGonagall's quarters.

And knocked.

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Her wards would have told her who he was, and clearly, she was in no hurry to admit him, for she was slow to open the door. When she finally peered into the corridor, she looked tired and frowned at the sight of him.

"Severus? What is it?"

"Let me in."

Wordlessly, she pulled the door wide and stepped back so that he could enter. If she hadn't already been in bed, she was clearly ready for it. She wore a tartan dressing gown that was far from new, she'd removed her glasses, and her hair hung in a careless plait down her back. As soon as she shut the door, she wrapped her arms around herself and said, "What do you want? It's late."

The Headmaster let the silence lengthen; then he said, "A report has reached me that you interfered today when Professor Carrow attempted to discipline a student."

"Severus, he had already hexed one child, and he was actually threatening to use the Cruciatus Curse on another! Of course I interfered!"

Hesitating only a moment, the Headmaster pointed his wand at her and spoke: "*Crucio!*"

She barely had time to cry out and drop to her knees before he lifted the Curse and then watched as she struggled for breath, leaning forward to steady herself with one hand on the floor. When she raised shocked eyes to his face, he shrugged.

"*Quid pro qua*, Professor McGonagall. If you keep a student from a deserved punishment, you must take it yourself. It's only fair."

"Fair?" Her voice had returned, and she stood up...rather shakily, to be sure, but she did it without using either sofa or table for support. It was an impressive display, the Headmaster admitted. And pointless.

"Yes, fair," he replied. "More than fair, in fact, because I don't have to offer you any exchange at all. In case you haven't noticed, I'm in charge now. I could punish every person in this castle every day before breakfast, if it pleased me to do so, and you couldn't stop me. But instead, I'm offering you a choice. You endure the Cruciatus Curse yourself, and you get my assurance that the students will receive no serious injury. Oh, they may suffer a bit...it's war, after all...but nothing lasting. I'll see to it."

She would agree, he knew. She was a Gryffindor: meaningless sacrifice was their stock-in-trade.

Instead, she narrowed her eyes and demanded, "Why? Why would you make me any offer, if I'm as powerless as you claim? And why would you be willing to protect the children, if you're as dark as you would have me believe? Why not just use the Cruciatus to torture the lot of us into insanity and be done with it?"

The Headmaster felt his irritation rise. He'd saved the damned woman's life, and still she couldn't seem to see how her persistent refusal to accept his Death Eater cover was endangering them all. She simply *had* to be made to understand.

Whatever she might believe about his allegiances, she needed to stop challenging him. She needed to recognise that regardless of which side he supported, he would do whatever it took to succeed. No matter who suffered.

Reining in his temper with an effort, he tried once more.

"You foolish Gryffindor," he snarled. "Can't you see that the reason you are powerless...and the reason Dumbledore is dead...is that neither of you has ever understood what the Dark Lord stands for? You insist upon trying to cast him as a maniac who acts solely from the love of evil for its own sake, when nothing could be further from the truth."

McGonagall closed her eyes, and the Headmaster pressed his advantage.

"Don't you see? The Dark Lord is more rational and thoughtful than Dumbledore ever was. He realises that the only way for wizards to survive is to build a world of purity. Do you think he would consent to the destruction of pureblood minds? Of course not. He is even willing to offer half-bloods like you and me a place in his regime."

The Headmaster took a step closer to his deputy and tapped his wand against his palm. "The Dark Lord is not interested in needless suffering. But he does not in the least object to even purebloods being taught necessary lessons. I'm offering you the chance to ensure that those lessons are no more painful for the students than they need to be. It's a show of good faith, Professor McGonagall...on my part and on yours. You behave yourself, you take some of the punishment on yourself, and the students will receive less. *Quid pro quo*."

He waited for her acquiescence, but she remained silent. And when she finally looked at him, it was with an expression of revulsion such as he'd never seen from her.

Though the Headmaster had told himself he needed and wanted his deputy to feel the sort of hatred he now saw in her face, the ferocity of it briefly shook him. Then the anger that he'd been holding at bay took over, and he was blinded with rage: at himself, at Dumbledore, at Voldemort, at his entire absurd fate.

This was not helping. Deliberately, the Headmaster harnessed his anger and focussed it all on Professor McGonagall. How dare she turn on him so fast? How dare she hesitate to accept his bargain? Did she think that preserving her scrawny body was worth the well-being of anyone else? Did she honestly believe he would do this if he could see any other way? He was making the only choice available to him, and it was about time she understood that she needed to do the same.

He stepped over to her and gripped her upper arms until she gasped. Then he unclenched his teeth to say, "I will be here tomorrow at midnight, Professor McGonagall. And many nights thereafter. Fight me, and the students will pay for it. Their safety is in your hands. Remember that."

Pushing her away from him, he took his leave.

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He hadn't really hurt her...the few seconds of Cruciatus that she had endured were nothing compared to what the Curse was capable of. But he had been a little surprised at how easily he had been able to do it. Though he was no novice with Unforgivables, he didn't use them often, for they unsettled him deeply...he'd had to stop in the Forbidden Forest to vomit after he'd used the *Avada Kadavera* on Dumbledore. Nor did he like the way such Curses required him to let emotion master his casting.

Yet tonight he had felt...not pleasure, exactly, but...satisfaction. Yes, that was it: he'd felt satisfaction at successfully Cruciating, even just briefly, the closest person he'd

had to a friend at Hogwarts.

Every morning, he had to face a new day without being certain that he could actually do the impossible things that were demanded of him. Each day, he required new proof, and today's validation had come as he'd driven Professor McGonagall to her knees in pain.

Tomorrow, perhaps he could sustain the Curse for a full minute.

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When he went to her room the next night, she simply turned away as soon as she saw him, leaving him to follow her in and close the door. Then she faced him.

"If a single student receives a single serious mental or physical injury," she said, "I'll see to it that you suffer far more than they. I promise you."

"Do what you feel you must, Professor," said the Headmaster. "And so will I."

He raised his wand.

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He visited his deputy in her rooms at least twice a week, sometimes more, though never on a regular schedule; predictability would lessen her fears, and fear was the whole point of this exercise.

Not that she submitted passively to his strategies. Oh, she kept her part of the bargain when it came to enduring the Cruciatius; she would never risk the students' welfare by renegotiating on her deal.

But she resisted in other ways. She protected the children by casting long-distance, untraceable Shield and Disillusionment Charms over them...advanced magic that the moronic Carrows never spotted. She Confunded the Carrows themselves so that the imbeciles never even saw half of what the students got up to. He suspected she'd even got Slughorn to brew her a pain-suppression potion, and though such a move would have been technically against the spirit of their agreement, the Headmaster did not confront her about it; after all, it wasn't as if such potions worked very well in the long run.

He did not employ the Cruciatius Curse on every visit, of course. He had no desire to cause any long-term injury to Professor McGonagall, nor was he eager to give her the opportunity to dismiss him as no more than a sadist on the brute level of the Carrows, someone who inflicted pain just for the hell of it. *He* was acting out of necessity.

Many times he simply sat in silence on her sofa, sipping firewhisky and letting her tension build unbearably, for the waiting could seem as bad as the actual Curse (a lesson the Headmaster had learnt first-hand from the Dark Lord himself). Sometimes he would sit for an hour and then leave without raising his wand or even speaking. At other times, he would administer the Curse almost casually, flicking his wand instead of reaching for his whisky glass, catching her unawares as she sat trying to ignore him and attend to her marking.

When the Curse hit her, she sometimes cried out, but she never screamed. It was a Gryffindor thing, he supposed...something she no doubt saw as noble or courageous instead of what it was: a foolish expenditure of needed energy on an unneeded silence. For what would it have mattered if she'd shrieked her head off?

It certainly didn't matter to *him*. That's where he had put *his* energy...into tamping down any emotional response he might once have felt. Fate might have decreed that he had to assume the mantle of "Death Eater," might have forced him to commit heinous acts, but he was not going to let anyone...not Dumbledore, not McGonagall, not anyone...make him bear the mental burden of it all.

Some might have defined his treatment of McGonagall as unforgivable, but he knew that *thereal* unforgivable act was the one that Dumbledore and the Order would have done to him: asking him to do the deeds of a Death Eater while maintaining the conscience of the humane man.

It was an outrageous thing to ask of anyone, and the Headmaster had decided simply to refuse. He would do the deeds...but he would not feel them. He would not rue them.

Severus might have done so, but the Headmaster would not.

No.

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It was a bleak afternoon in late November when Poppy Pomfrey presented herself in his office. Aside from Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey was the staffer who knew the Headmaster best, since they'd worked together for so long on potions for the hospital wing. This year, she was one of the few who had shown no fear of him: she'd already come to his office once to protest the Carrows' treatment of the students. Now, as then, she was not only unafraid...she was furious.

"What are you doing to Minerva?" she demanded without preamble.

The Headmaster's black scowl would have given pause to almost anyone else, but Madam Pomfrey was having none of it. "Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about," she said. "Have you looked at her lately? Really looked? She's beyond skin-and-bone, Severus; the bone is almost all that's left. And her eyes have such dark circles under them that for a minute this morning, I thought she'd been beaten. The only reason she hasn't collapsed altogether is that she's Minerva McGonagall."

The Headmaster shrugged. "I hadn't noticed. She's old; perhaps you should offer her a tonic."

Madam Pomfrey snorted. "She's 72, Severus; if you think that's old, you're mad. She's like this because something is driving her to the breaking point, and whatever that something is, it's being done by you. It has to stop. "

"You will address me as Headmaster. And you will be on your way now, Madam Pomfrey. I'm busy."

She didn't budge. "Do you think you haven't been seen when you go to her rooms at night? Are you threatening her? Breaking into her mind? What?"

"She's the Deputy Headmistress; I have many things to discuss with her."

"At midnight?"

"I have a full schedule, Madam Pomfrey, one that does not conform to regular hours. I expect my staff to be available at my convenience. Now, get out. And tell Professor McGonagall that if she complains to you again, she'll answer to me."

"She's never said a word! Don't you dare accuse her. You know, *Headmaster*, once upon a time, she was your friend. And if it didn't seem like such a preposterous notion now, I'd have said you were hers, too. Oh, don't give me that look; the two of you didn't fool anyone with all your bickering. You were friends. So what on earth are you doing to hurt her now, and why?"

The Headmaster half-rose and lifted his wand, but even that didn't faze Madam Pomfrey, who merely rolled her eyes. "Yes, fine, I'm going. But I'm telling you again: leave Minerva alone. She can't hold on much longer."

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"Severus."

It was Dumbledore. The Headmaster ground his teeth and ignored him. While he had been able to compel the silence of the other portraits, he had not been able fully to control Dumbledore, whose portrait had deigned to awaken about a month into the term. Some of the prodigious magical power that the man had enjoyed in life had apparently been transferred to his portrait, and he simply overrode any attempts to quiet him.

Typical, the Headmaster thought, that even in death, the old man would play by no rules but his own.

"Severus," the portrait said again, and the Headmaster tapped his quill on the desk, to let Dumbledore know that he was listening but that his patience was limited.

"Is Poppy correct? Are you harming Minerva in some way?"

"It's a stressful year, Professor Dumbledore. I can hardly be held accountable if the deputy you selected isn't up to the strain."

"Don't equivocate. Are you doing something to Minerva that has led to the condition Poppy described?"

"Professor McGonagall's health is her own concern. I require only that she do her job, not that she be well as she does it."

The other portraits rustled and muttered, but the Headmaster ignored them.

"*Look at me!*" Dumbledore demanded, and though the Headmaster managed to conceal his start at the suddenly-fierce tone, he didn't bother to hide his disdain.

"What do you want, dead man?"

"I want to know what you're doing to Minerva. And why."

The Headmaster still did not look up he was not about to be ordered around in his own office...but he put down his quill, for he found his hands suddenly shaking with rage. *Why do you think? I'm being the person you told me to be!* he wanted to shout, though of course he did not. He had no fear of this enchanted bit of canvas. But his relationship with his staff was none of the old man's business.

"Answer me!" the portrait insisted.

"I owe you no answers, Professor."

"And Minerva?" Dumbledore asked. "What do you owe her?"

The Headmaster rose. "Anything I owe or have owed to anyone," he said, "I pay with every breath I take."

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He strode through the corridors towards the Transfiguration classroom, letting the exercise cool his anger. McGonagall, Dumbledore, Pomfrey...none of them seemed to understand just what sort of pressure he was under, just what was at stake here. They were acting as if minor ills and individual concerns should be allowed to compete with the overall cause. Could they not understand how short-sighted they were?

Professor McGonagall, for instance: despite Pomfrey's concerns, McGonagall had little to complain about. She was getting what she wanted, for the Headmaster had been true to his word in keeping student harm to a minimum. The price she was paying, while not small, was not exorbitant, either. Yes, it was painful, but so were many things...as he could personally attest.

And of course, he always stopped short of inflicting any long-term neurological damage upon her.

In the Transfiguration room, he found Professor McGonagall Levitating hamsters into cages after the day's last lesson. He hadn't been paying attention before...he had other things on his mind, after all...but now he saw that Madam Pomfrey was right. McGonagall looked dreadful, her skin stretched taut over her cheekbones, her eyes deeply shadowed.

He stepped into the classroom and warded the door.

She looked up, startled. Her face paled, then flushed as she snapped, "If you're here for a bit of sadistic self-indulgence with Unforgivables, Severus, the answer is no. Neither I nor the hamsters will stand for it."

The Headmaster was amused despite himself. "You talk as if you have any choice in the matter."

She lifted her sharp chin in that annoying Gryffindor gesture of resistance and said, "I do have a choice. Our evening..." she waved her hand "...arrangement or whatever one calls it... that's something on which we've mutually agreed. But I will not be attacked in my own classroom when students are out and about. Raise your wand to me here, and I shall fight back."

He had not, in fact, intended to use the Curse here, but he could not allow her this sort of insubordination. Disobedience put them all in danger; had she *still* not accepted that? He thought he had succeeded in making her understand that no matter which side she believed him to support, he would allow nothing to stop him. Why did she persist in forcing him to prove it to her?

"I think you need to learn a lesson, Professor McGonagall," he said. "And where better than in a classroom?"

He reached for his wand, but before he could draw it, they heard students in the corridor.

"Where is she?" said a scared voice outside the door. "She was here just a minute ago."

"Well, you better not wait much longer," said a second voice. "You'll be late."

"But I can't go to detention without seeing Professor McGonagall!" wailed the first student. "She promised me a protection spell!"

McGonagall looked defiantly at the Headmaster, and he made himself smirk. "I know all about your protection spells, Professor. Did you think I didn't?" he said. "Do you think they would work if I didn't allow them to?"

They would, of course; she was a powerful witch. But she couldn't be sure he didn't have the ability to override her, and she wouldn't be eager to test him, not if it meant risking the children.

"I'm not interested in your pitiful spells," he went on. "I'm here to deliver a message. Madam Pomfrey came to see me today. She says you're being driven to the breaking point. If that's true, Professor McGonagall, then I suggest you get a grip on yourself. You and I have a bargain. For the sake of the students, you will want to keep it. And for the sake of Madam Pomfrey as well. She's becoming too curious, and if she continues to challenge me on your behalf, I may have to demonstrate to her just exactly why I come to your rooms at night."

The look she gave him was nothing short of murderous, and he knew he had won.

The threat to Pomfrey was the cliché; McGonagall would behave herself now.

"You had better see to the children in the corridor, don't you think?" he asked. "We can continue this conversation later. Tonight. In your rooms."

As he canceled the wards and swept out past the open-mouthed students, the Headmaster decided he was not sorry that the professor looked so ill. The weaker she was, the less threat she posed.

And in truth, he was asking relatively little of her, really, compared to what he himself had to give. If the war treated Minerva McGonagall no worse than this, she could count herself lucky.

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At three minutes to midnight, the Headmaster of Hogwarts left his office and headed towards Gryffindor Tower. It was time for his meeting with with his deputy.

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