

Of Rhinos and Men

by kellychambliss

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 3

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Chapter One

**July, 1999**

Everything about the boy was thin: his wispy blondish hair, his lanky body, his worn anorak, the soles of his cracked and dirty trainers. The package in his arms, though, was anything but thin. It was oddly-shaped...bulky, with bits sticking out...and oddly-wrapped, in what looked like an old tartan blanket tied closed with a strip of torn cloth. The boy clutched it tightly, as though he feared that if he relaxed his grip, the thing it might try to escape of its own accord.

He wasn't much to look at, the boy, and neither was the dingy shop he stood in front of. Though made of the same yellow Cotswold stone as the shops lining the nearby High Street, this building had escaped the make-over that had turned the rest of the formerly-dying village into a tourist's fantasy of the quaint and the twee. This stone was still covered with the soot of centuries, and the grimy windows would probably have sneered had anyone dared front them with the profusion of aren't-we-cheerful geraniums that spilled out of the High Street window-boxes.

Behind the windows was less a display of saleable goods than seemingly-haphazard piles of junk: Victorian tools for tasks no longer done, moth-eaten clothing faded to colourlessness, carved bits of wood with no discernable aesthetic or practical function.

"Curiosities," read a small sign over the door. Had the boy been of an imaginative turn of mind, he might have realised that the word applied equally well to the building, the merchandise, and himself. But he seemed too preoccupied for such flights of fancy and scarcely glanced at the sign as he shifted his bundle to his hip and took a deep breath. Opening the door slowly, he stepped into the gloomy interior.

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At first the room appeared empty, but then a figure straightened up from behind an old-fashioned counter, the movement sending dust motes swirling in the dim light.

It was a man, pale, hawk-nosed, and severe. Dressed in a black frock coat and high collar, his dark hair brushing his shoulders, he looked as if he might have been standing in the same place for a century, for all that he didn't seem to be old.

"Yes?" he asked sharply, and the boy flushed. Without speaking, he shoved his parcel onto the crowded counter, knocking aside a tarnished candelabrum and a hair

wreath.

"How much?" he asked finally, after the proprietor made no move to touch the tartan-wrapped object.

The man curled his lip. "I suppose I am to conclude from that articulate and effective sales pitch that you wish me to purchase this...ancient horse blanket and a rag."

The boy's flushed deepened. He was young, perhaps only fourteen or fifteen, and he seemed momentarily too scared to move. Then his hand darted forward to tug on the wrappings, and the old blanket fell open.

Atop it lay what appeared to be a miniaturized stuffed rhinoceros...not a children's toy, but an actual animal, preserved as a poor example of the taxidermist's art. The stretched grey skin had begun to crack, and sawdust had trailed out onto the blanket. One of the glass eyeballs appeared to be missing. A leg had been broken off, a stick of wood dangling from the torn end. Although about half the size of a real baby rhino, this one looked like an elderly adult, complete with horn. Its vaguely sour odor appeared to reach the prominent nose of the proprietor, who wrinkled that appendage fastidiously and narrowed his eyes.

"Where did you get this?"

The boy began to back towards the door. "Don't remember," he mumbled.

Before he could take another step, the man had rounded the counter and grabbed hold of his jacket. "I asked you," he said smoothly, "where you got this?"

The pulled fabric must have been uncomfortably tight against the boy's neck, but he didn't appear to notice. All his attention was on the slim black wand being pointed at his throat.

"I...I....they said you would buy the dark things!" he burst out, flicking terrified eyes toward the man's face.

"Who said so?" demanded the man. "Where...?"

At that moment, the rhinoceros began to glow an eerie green, and a pungent black mist streamed from its eye socket and broken leg. The smell of dark magic lay thick in the air as the man turned sharply to look at the smoking beast.

Instantly the boy broke free of his grip and pelted for the door, flinging it wide with a crash and hurtling to the pavement outside. The man raised his wand toward the fleeing figure, and his lips had even begun to form a hex when, behind him, the rhinoceros exploded in a shower of green flame.

His frock coat billowing, the shop owner spun toward the sound as flakes of fire soared and then burned themselves out one by one. The fog of dark magic was cloying, choking, and for a moment the man could do nothing but cover his streaming eyes and try to still his coughs.

Then a voice cut through the murk.

"Severus Snape," it rasped. "As I barely live and breathe. Well, don't just stand there, boy. Come and save me."

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Three hours later, Snape stood in the spare room above his shop and looked at the figure lying on the bed.

Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody.

Auror *extraordinaire*, scourge of Death Eaters, pillar of the Order of the Phoenix. Held by popular legend to be as dangerous as the villains he tracked. Morally ambiguous, physically frightening, devastatingly effective...

And dead.

Or at least, so the wizarding world had believed. It was one of the indelible stories of the war...how Moody and a host of others had gone to smuggle Harry Potter from the home of his Muggle relatives to the safety of the Weasleys' Burrow. How the rescuers had taken polyjuice potion so they could all look like Harry and could confuse Voldemort and his followers. How Moody had been hit by a curse from Voldemort himself and had fallen from his broom, plummeting to certain death.

Yet evidently the history books were wrong. Somehow Moody had managed to go from being a dying Auror high in the air above Surrey to being a stuffed rhinoceros in an out-of-the-way shop in the Cotswolds. The details of this little transformation remained a mystery to Snape; he'd been too busy bringing Moody back from the edge of the Veil to enquire into particulars.

The ex-Auror had not been exaggerating when he'd said that he barely lived and breathed: it had taken all of Snape's skill with potion and healing spell to stabilize him, and even now, there was no guarantee that the old warrior would make it through the night. With broken bones and internal injuries and the sort of neurological disruption that only a strong curse could cause, he'd need careful dosing and monitoring if he were to have even half a chance.

Gathering vials, instruments, books, blankets, and a small decanter of good firewhisky, Snape settled down for a long vigil.

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Three days passed before Moody regained consciousness, and then he did so suddenly and fully and with his customary charm.

"I need the fucking loo," he barked, sitting up abruptly. "Now."

Snape didn't appear startled; he simply stood, pulled a chamber pot from beneath the bed, and offered it silently.

Moody pushed it aside. "I said the loo, boy," he snarled. "I'm not about to do my pissing in a damned pot."

"You'll get up when I say you're able to get up, old man, and not before," Snape replied, meeting snarl with snarl as he held out the chamber pot once more. "Here. I'll help you."

Scowling, Moody struggled to the edge of the bed. "No, you bloody well won't. I haven't needed anyone to hold my dick since I was two. Well, not for pissing, anyway. Now, where's the loo? I can levitate myself."

"Be my guest," said Snape and put down the pot. "Oh, wait...you already are. Please...allow me to continue to extend my hospitality." Stepping to the table of supplies that he'd set up next to the bed, he extracted Moody's wand from amid the clutter of bottles and jars and handed it to him, then watched impassively as the other man tried, and failed, to cast a levitation charm.

"What's the matter?" Snape asked after a moment, raising a sardonic eyebrow. "Finally realised that you don't have a leg to stand on?"

"Dammit!" Moody roared. "What's happened to my magic?"

Snape shrugged. "Temporary loss of magic is a common side effect of trauma," he said. "Yours should return in time, as you heal."

"Should? There better not be any 'should' about it." Moody leaned back and glared. "Now are you going to give me the bleeding piss-pot or not?"

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Snape left Moody to his own devices, and when he returned to the bedroom, it was with tea and a newly-transfigured eye-patch. Moody, his face ashen, lay back on his pillow, but he'd stowed the chamber pot under the bed and smoothed the quilt. He opened his good eye as Snape entered.

"Yes, I could have poisoned this," Snape said, handing him a steaming mug. "So feel free not to drink it; it's up to you whether you want to die fairly quickly of poison or slowly of dehydration."

Moody took a hefty gulp and sighed with pleasure. "There'll be no poison in this, boy. You're not a dark one, no matter what mark you wear. You're one of us. Didn't believe it before, but I do now."

"Why?" Snape gave Moody the eye patch and watched as he adjusted it over his empty socket.

"Do you think I would have de-rhino'd for just any one?" Moody demanded, lifting his mug again and tossing back the rest of the tea in a single swallow.

"De-rhino'd?"

"Transfigured back into myself. Shuffled off the rhino coil, to borrow a phrase. Yeah, that's right, *Hamlet*. Don't look so shocked, boy. You're not the only one round here's heard of Muggle plays."

"You transfigured yourself into a stuffed rhino." Snape didn't need to sneer with incredulity; his sardonically-raised eyebrow indicated his scepticism with elegant efficiency.

"That's right. A stuffed rhino with only one leg and one eye, which should have been a clue if you'd been paying attention. But clearly that bit was too subtle for the likes of you. Here," he said, thrusting his mug toward Snape. "I could do with another cuppa."

Snape didn't move. "First, I require some answers. How did you come to be transfigured into that moth-eaten bag of sawdust? There was dark magic in it, old man. I could smell it. And how did said dark, moth-eaten bag of sawdust come into the possession of the unappealing yob who brought it to my shop? And finally," he said, Summoning a high-backed chair and sinking into it, "you will tell my just why is it that you now believe I am to be trusted."

Moody frowned. "No one is ever completely to be trusted. Thought you'd have learnt that by now. But to the extent that I do trust you...that moth-eaten bag of sawdust was charmed to respond only to Order members in good standing and safe circumstances. When that kid brought me in here, I could feel from across the room that you were suitable. And it was about fucking time; I was beginning to think I was going to spend eternity as a fat grey blob with a horn sticking out of my head."

"That's it? You could 'feel that I was suitable'?"

"You want to hear more? Tea, then. Or I don't say another sodding word."

Snape didn't even bother with his wand; he simply waved a careless hand, and the cup replenished itself.

Moody gave a tight nod that might have been an indication of thanks. "The night we moved Potter. I saw you curse that Weasley boy, whichever one it was. Clear shot, you had. Could have killed him dead. Would have, if you'd been a real DE. So I started to have my doubts then. Not that I had long to think about it, not with You-Know-Who on my tail."

"You can say his name now. He's dead."

"Ah. Thought he must be." Moody paused, looking thoughtful. "Dead. Good. By Potter's hand?"

"By Potter's hand. More or less."

Moody waited, but Snape didn't expand on this terse response. "Details to come, eh? Fine. You can have my story first, if that's what you want. Right. Well, back to the night we moved Potter. I'd have been a fool not to know that my chances of coming back alive from that mission were piss-poor to none. And I don't think I have to tell you," he went on, managing a glare that would have done his old mad-eye proud, "I'm no fool.

"That's why I had several different contingency plans. When You- ...when Voldemort's curse hit me, I activated my soft-landing charm and hit the ground with only a couple of broken bones. But he'd done me some other damage, too, the bastard. I knew I wasn't going to last long enough to be found, assuming anyone even came looking for me. So I had to put myself in stasis. *Sustinere charm*. Had just enough strength left to cast it."

"A *sustinere* charm?" Snape said. He sat forward, his eyes narrowing. "But those are finite because they involve transfiguration. You'd have come out of it long before this. And your magic is damaged; you wouldn't have been able to recast..."

"There are ways, boy. If you know how, you can use the *sustinere* to keep someone under control for years. There's ways. Dark ways, maybe, but so what? Never denied they had their uses."

"What sort of dark ways?"

"What the hell difference does it make?"

"Are you serious? Moody the Auror? Moody the moral judge of the rest of us is asking *me* what difference the dark ways make? You know there's always a cost..."

"Aye, and I paid it. That's all you need to know. I fucking paid it, Death-Eater boy."

Snape was on his feet and at the bedside in one movement. "Don't," he gritted, his face mere inches from Moody's, "call me 'boy.'"

Not to be outdone, Moody levered himself up on his elbows and shoved his own face forward. "Don't act like a prat, then. We both know dark. We've both done dark. Leave it there."

They glared at each other, hook nose to battered nose, neither apparently willing to be the first to back off. Their eyes held, and the heat built, until gradually a flush stained Snape's pale skin, and Moody's breathing deepened.

If they felt a change in the air between them, they didn't indicate it. And if either felt a jolt to his groin, he no doubt wrote it off as merely a physiological reaction based on the other's proximity. It had, after all, been a long time for both of them.

Yet they both seemed stiff as they finally, slowly pulled away from each other, one settling into his pillows, the other returning to his chair. When Snape spoke again, a long moment later, his tone was neutral.

"So. You put yourself in long-term stasis. Do I want to know why you chose to be a rhinoceros?"

Moody's craggy face split in a wolfish grin. "Probably not. It was just a little joke for Minerva."

"Minerva?"

"Yeah, I expected her to be the one to restore me...Wait a minute." Moody's voice was harsh. "What's wrong? Did we lose Minerva? Tell me this goddamned minute."

"No, we didn't lose Minerva. She's fine. She's Headmistress now."

"Thank Merlin." The older man closed his eye and sagged further against the pillow.

Snape eyed him curiously. "I wasn't aware you knew her well."

"Oh, aye, we go back a few years. Quite a few. In fact, I got pretty shirty with Min over that business of Barty Crouch and the polyjuice; I thought she should have known it wasn't me. But she explained what he...well, never mind." The wolfish expression crept back. "Let's just say we patched things up."

"And you thought she'd be able to find you?"

"I told you I had contingency plans. I left papers, instructions. One parchment was for Min's wand only...telling her to how to look for a rhino if ever I went missing. Evidently she didn't receive it."

"What was the joke?"

"Eh?"

"The joke. You said you transfigured into a rhino as a joke for Minerva."

"Doesn't matter, boy. She'd have understood it; that's what counts."

"I said don't call me 'boy.' And you still haven't explained how your rhinoceros ended up in my shop."

"Well, as long as we're talking about explaining, *you* haven't explained why the hell you even have a shop. You mean you played Dumbledore's dangerous spy game, you took your life in your hands, you did your bit to save the world from the forces of darkness...all so that you could run a damned *shop*?"

Snape rose and walked to the window; Moody followed him with his good eye and rubbed the skin under his eye patch. And he waited.

"It's been just about two years since the night you went into stasis," Snape said finally. "And the war has been over for a little more than a year. There was a battle. At Hogwarts. It ended with Potter confronting Voldemort and Voldemort dying from his own rebounding *Avada Kedavra*. In the course of the fighting, I was wounded in the Shrieking Shack and left for dead. When Minerva and Filius came to collect my corpse, they discovered that I wasn't quite one yet. They arranged a quiet place for me to recover, and once I did, I found that I wanted to absent myself from wizarding felicity for a while."

He glanced back towards Moody with a half-smile. "You see, I've read my Muggle plays, too. In any case, Minerva arranged with Shacklebolt...he's the Minister now...for me to get a special veteran's pension, and I set myself up here. Minerva is the only one who knows where I am."

This time, he looked Moody straight in the eye. "And now you."

Moody stared back. "Obviously there's a lot you aren't saying. Fair enough. Well, almost enough. You still haven't said why a shop."

Snape circled back to his chair and sat. "Constant vigilance," he said.

"That's my line, boy."

"So I've heard. The war may be over, Moody, but the darkness isn't."

"You think that's news to me?"

"Yes, yes," Snape said, waving away this belligerence with an impatient hand. "You've established your darkness-hating *bona fides*. Thus it should also not be news to you that there are any number of dark artefacts still in circulation. The temptation they represent can be irresistible, Moody. You know that. No one is immune. No one. Not you, not me, not Dumbledore. The lure of power is too strong. So I've made up my mind to remove the temptations when I can. That's why I've become a collector of curiosities. I let it be known that I seek out the dark objects. And sometimes, as with a certain broken rhinoceros, they come seeking me."

"And what do you do with them?"

"Hide them. Ward them. Destroy them when I can."

"By yourself?"

"Minerva helps sometimes. But mostly alone, yes. I prefer it."

"You always were a secretive cuss, Snape." Moody gave a single bark of laughter. "And now you're stuck with me."

"Indeed. It will be a few more days until you're up and around. And in the meantime, you're going to tell me about your life as a dark object."

Moody grunted. "Not much to tell. It's not like I was fully aware or conscious while I was in the rhino state, thank Merlin. Not even Crouch's bloody trunk was that kind of hell. I could sense certain things, that's all. Whether there was magic present. Whether it was dark or light magic. If people were there and whether they were male or female, adult or child. Whether anyone from the Order was around. And that's about it."

He held out his tea mug again. "Got a little nip to go in here?" he asked, after it had been refilled.

"If you tried mixing Ogden's Old with the number of potions in your system, you wouldn't need magic to move; you could probably levitate yourself through sheer chemical combustion. So, no."

"Dammit, boy! It's been two bloody years since I've even pissed like a man. The least you can do is offer me a little comfort."

"The least *you* can do, old man, is offer me a little gratitude for saving your sorry arse," Snape spat. "And if you call me 'boy' again, you'll be back to rhino-hood so fast that any kind of pissing at all will be just a happy memory."

Moody's face turned an alarming shade of puce, and he opened his mouth in what looked like the start of a roar.

"Fine, then," he said mildly. "Thank you for saving my sorry arse, you miserable fuck."

The sound that reached his ears was one he had never heard before: Severus Snape laughing.

# Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 3*

After recovering from the injuries he sustained in the Shrieking Shack, Severus Snape retires to the Cotswolds, opens an antiques shop, and finds himself in possession of some unusual merchandise.

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Chapter Two

It wasn't until after dinner and another round of potions and chamber pots that they returned to the subject of Moody's career as a stuffed rhinoceros.

"It was Muggles got to me first...a kid," Moody said, grimacing as he tried to find a comfortable position on the bed. "I'd lost my magic eye when I fell. My broom, too. Once I changed into the rhino, I was bloody helpless, but at least I wasn't dead. This Muggle kid happened along and spotted me. Took me home and kept me on a goddamn shelf in his room for what must have been months. Thought I was going to bleeding rot there. But finally his mum cleaned house, and I ended up on some kind of display table. Jumble sale or something. Mostly Muggles around, but every now and then I could sense a prickle of magic when someone passed by."

His face grew grim. "Then I felt the dark ones. Unmistakable. They could sense me, too. Picked me up. Two of them, man and a woman. Apparated home with me. In the end, I just exchanged one shelf for another. But I wasn't the only dark item they owned, not by a long chalk. Could feel others all around me."

"And the boy?" Snape prompted.

"The couple's son, I'd guess. They fought, the man and the woman did. I could feel the anger, the spite. Could feel the boy, too. He was afraid, sometimes. But cunning, crafty. He'd come in and mess with the dark things. They came and went, the dark items; I could sense the different magics. Then one day it was my turn to go. I could tell that it was the boy who brought me here; he was anxious and excited both."

Snape nodded. "He must have learned about me from his parents. He knew that I was in the market for dark artifacts. I wonder if I've met the parents on any of my buying trips? I'll have to track them down, go after their other dark objects. I don't suppose you have any sense of their location?"

Moody shook his head but didn't speak; he was clearly exhausted. His face was pale enough to be almost indistinguishable from the pillow, and Snape rose, dimming the candles with his wand. "I'll leave you to your rest. The pot is within easy reach, and I will return to administer your potions in another few hours."

"I can take my own damned potions," Moody growled.

"You are under my care, and you will do as I say," Snape replied, heading towards the door.

Moody's eye glinted suddenly. "I'll take my medicine and like it, is that what you're saying? Like to be on top, do you, boy?"

Snape turned. His face was shadowed as he stood framed in the light from the passageway, and his shoulders were tight. But he said only, "Go to sleep, old man."

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Moody gained strength slowly but surely over the next few days. He slept a great deal and spent his waking hours carving a new wooden leg, the old one having been a casualty of the rhino transfiguration. When Snape offered to construct the new one magically, Moody declined.

"It needs my own touch," he said, "and it occupies my time. But I'm not going to stay cooped up here much longer, Snape. I've got to get moving, do something. Otherwise, I might as well still be on a shelf with a horn on my head."

"I believe it was your own decision to be a rhinoceros," Snape reminded him. "A joke for Minerva, isn't that what you said? So you've only yourself to blame."

"Fuck off," said Moody, but there was no heat in it. He'd been sitting up, but now he leaned back against the pillows, and a streak of red appeared on the linen behind him.

"What's this?" Snape demanded, striding to the bed. "You're bleeding. How long were you planning to keep this a secret?"

"Didn't know about it, did I?" retorted Moody, leaning forward so that Snape could examine him. "This is a yet another new pleasure for the invalid."

Snape ran gentle fingers over Moody's back. "Your skin is cracking," he said. "I should have expected this; stasis dehydrates you. I'll heat some oil and give you a massage."

"The hell you will!" Moody roared. "I've never had a massage in my damned life."

"Just consider it yet another new pleasure," said Snape.

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Not many who had known Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody in his Auror days would have been prepared for the sight of him lying face down on a bed, a towel folded over his naked backside and his head on a face cradle that had been transfigured from some of the junk in the shop. But beyond muttering, "I feel like a bloody wanker," he raised no fuss as Snape tipped warm oil onto his back and began to smooth it in with deft strokes of his long fingers.

And although Moody tensed visibly when Snape removed the towel and the long fingers slid onto his buttocks, he said nothing.

"The skin damage is extensive, but not deep," Snape noted, moving down to scarred thighs. "One or two oil treatments should be sufficient."

If he also noticed Moody's straining erection, he gave no sign of it.

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In the evenings, while Moody carved, he and Snape talked. Of war details at first; Moody had a good deal of history to catch up on. Old warrior that he was, he heard the casualty lists in stoic silence and nodded his approval of Snape's descriptions of some of Minister Shacklebolt's new policies.

And he listened without interruption on the night that Snape finally explained the story behind the death of Albus Dumbledore. When the younger man's voice broke on the words, "he begged me," Moody still said nothing. But he reached out to grasp Snape's sinewy arm.

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Gradually their talks moved on to other topics, Moody regaling Snape with lurid tales of his younger days in the Auror corps, and Snape eventually unbending enough to mention one or two of the difficulties of his own long tenure as Dumbledore's spy. They were more alike than either had realised: loners both, not given to trusting, but loyal to their very few real friends. Snape was intellectual and brooding, Moody practical and straightforward, yet both, in their own ways, were deeply thoughtful men. Though neither would have admitted it, they ended each evening's conversation feeling something suspiciously like regard.

The new leg was ready after about a week, and though Moody attempted to maintain his usual irascible expression, he couldn't completely conceal his joy at the chance, after two years of enforced paralysis, to move under his own power.

"Go on about your business, mother hen," he snapped when Snape positioned himself to walk beside him. "We're talking about, what? ten metres here? I can manage."

Snape rolled his eyes. "What you'll most likely manage is to fall flat on your face. And I don't feel like spending the rest of the day healing whatever bones you break when you do. Now I walk with you, or you don't walk at all."

Moody glared but gave in. "Suit yourself," he shrugged. "Far be it from me to keep you from showing your dom side." He grinned sideways at Snape. "Doubt that you get much chance to."

Snape's own grin was positively feral. "You've no idea."

Moody was still smiling, or perhaps just grimacing, when he took his first step.

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Yet the walk across the narrow room was difficult, and the trip down the corridor was even worse. Moody made it only halfway to the loo before he had to lean against the wall, blinking sweat from his eyes. He waved away Snape's offered arm with a snarl, but the very next step proved to be too much for him. He slumped into the other man's arms, and both pretended not to notice the support charm Snape was forced to cast.

Moody kept his head down as he stood there, breathing hard, and when Snape brushed a hand over his hair, he didn't shake it off.

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It was during the third massage that Snape took things into his own hands, so to speak, and moved Moody's convalescence to a new level entirely.

The late-afternoon sun had turned the small spare room into a warm, ochre-coloured cocoon when Snape entered carrying his beaker of warm oil. Moody was waiting for him, already lying face-down and apparently close to nodding off.

"Your skin is almost back to normal," Snape said as he smoothed the first handful of oil over Moody's back. His fingers dug deep into the knotted muscles, eliciting a moan or two of approval or pain from Moody, but Snape didn't react; he just continued, silently, to work his way down the battered body until he reached the joining of buttock and thigh. Then he paused. He touched the inner thighs lightly but deliberately and then paused again.

"I can stop here, if you like," he said, his voice as smooth as the golden liquid in his hand. "Or I can go on. Your choice."

He waited another moment and then said softly, "old man."

A long minute passed, and then, slowly, Moody opened his legs, exposing soft balls and a glimpse of hard cock above them.

"You'd best finished what you started," he growled. "Wouldn't want to impede my recovery, would you? Boy."

He sucked in his breath as Snape's slick hand grasped his cock and slid slowly along its length. Up, and down, and up again, the rhythm in counterpoint to the other hand now circling Moody's arse.

Time seemed to stop in the yellow-flooded room; there was only silence, and heat, and the soft sound of skin on skin, and then, at length, the jerk of Moody's hips as he groaned and came.

The silence returned and stretched out until finally, Snape straightened from his kneeling position and stood up. Only then did Moody turn and look at him.

"You...?" he questioned, but Snape shook his head.

"Another time," he said, and with an oddly-formal half-bow, strode quickly from the room.

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A few days passed without either man referring to their afternoon encounter in the sunlit bedroom. Moody continued to practice with his new leg, and despite the disappointing beginning, was able to improve each day. It wasn't too long before he could walk from bedroom to toilet to kitchen on his own, using only the antique walking stick that Snape had fetched him from the shop.

"Not dark, just old," Snape had said as he'd put the ivory-headed cane in Moody's hand.

"Where'd you get this, then?" Moody'd asked, squinting at it. "Fashions for Fops?" But he had hefted the stick in his fist appraisingly and thereafter didn't stir without it.

He'd been fairly steady on his pins for almost a week and had taken to joining Snape for breakfast in the small kitchen when Snape, sitting down one day with the black coffee that was his only concession to the morning meal, said, "I'll be going out later, but I'm confident you can manage on your own. I should return by dinner."

"Where do you think you're going?" Moody demanded. He'd leant his wooden leg and stick against the counter and was massaging his stump as he talked.

Snape's lip curled slightly. "What I *think*," he said, "is that where I go is none of your business."

"Yeah? Well, what I think is that you're going after that kid who brought me in here, to try to get a line on his family's dark artifacts. And if you think you're going to do that without me, you've got another think coming."

Had Moody been a con man trying to sell blatantly-forged antiques, Snape couldn't have looked at him with greater disdain. "As I believe I once told you," he said icily, "I prefer to work alone."

"Balls to that. If you're going to dig into the dirt of dark arts, you're going to do it according to basic Auror procedure. We work in pairs."

"I think not." Snape sent his coffee cup to the sink with a wave of one hand, and with his wand in the other, he Summoned Moody's leg and walking stick to himself, shrank them, and placed them in the pockets of his frock coat.

"What the... ? *Accio leg!*" Moody roared, whipping his wand from his own pocket. To the evident surprise of both men, the miniaturized leg actually soared out of Snape's coat to hover in the air briefly before clattering to the floor.

Snape bent unhurriedly to retrieve it. "Well, it seems that your magic is on the mend," he observed coolly. "It often happens that way...strong emotion will energeise it."

"Dammit, boy. Give me back my fucking leg."

"Do I have your word...as man and Auror...that you will stay here until I return?"

Moody slammed his fist on the table. "Aye," he snarled finally. "My word."

"Excellent," Snape said, returning leg and walking stick to their proper size and placing them next to Moody's chair. "Until this evening, then."

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If Snape had expected Moody to be sullen or angry when he returned, he would have been disappointed. The old Auror met him in the shop, having negotiated the stairs for the first time since his recovery, and was frankly gleeful.

"Watch!" he called, and began Summoning objects large and small from the counters and shelves. He sent them whizzing mere inches past Snape's head, shouting with approval as Snape stood unflinching, not moving even when an antique awl went sailing point-first within millimetres of his nose.

When everything had returned tidily to its original place, Snape started calmly towards the rear of the shop. "You've been practising," was all he said.

Moody roared with laughter. "You're a right Slytherin bastard, you know that?"

He stood for several moments looking at the door through which Snape had disappeared before he, too, started for the staircase to the upper rooms.

Snape was in his own bedroom untying his cravat when Moody clumped up behind him and stood within touching distance. Then he did touch, stretching out a hand to loosen the cravat himself. He let his fingers graze Snape's lightly and moved his mouth close to Snape's ear. The younger man was standing very still, breathing deeply, and into the silence Moody whispered,

"Ever been fucked by a man?"

There was a pause as their eyes met in the wavy mirror over the bureau. Then Snape smiled his feral smile.

"Care to find out?"

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 3

The boy and the old man pay a visit to Minerva.

Morning found each back in his own bed, and when they met in the kitchen for breakfast, there was no hint of the fire that had marked their couplings. If Moody were remembering the arousing feel of a pale, sleek flank under his hands, if Snape were recalling the kick of pleasure that had filled him as he filled Moody, neither indicated it by so much as the flicker of an eyelid.

Moody puttered about making tea and porridge. "Now that I've got my magic back," he said as he sat down, "I'm going to do something about the pitiful wards you've got on this place. They wouldn't keep a sodding kitten out."

"Excuse me," said Snape, "but I am able to manage my life quite well without any doses of paranoid interference. My wards are perfectly adequate."

"Bollocks," snorted Moody. "The greenest kid in Auror training could blast through your defences in no time. Don't worry, though; I'll work on it. Now, what about that boy who brought me here? Find any trace of him?"

For a moment, Snape looked as if he might not answer, but then he shook his head curtly. "No."

Moody didn't gloat. "Been thinking," he said. "Kid must be Hogwarts age."

"Early teens, yes," Snape nodded. "I've thought of that, that he might be a student at Hogwarts. But I don't recall ever having seen him before. He could easily have escaped my notice during my year as headmaster; I did no teaching then, and"...here his lips twisted wryly..."I had a few other things on my mind. But before that year, he would have been in my classes. And he wasn't."

"Remember every student, then, do you?" asked Moody.

"Yes. Unfortunately," Snape said. "At the very least, I would have remembered seeing him before. And I don't."

"Still. He's a school-age kid in wizarding Britain. We should at least check out Hogwarts."

"I agree. I thought I'd floo over there this afternoon. Talk to Minerva."

"Good." Moody *scourgified* his cup and bowl and sent them zooming back to the cupboard, a pleased look crossing his seamed face as they settled in without a sound. "I'm going with you."

"Out of the question."

"Dammit, boy. I said I'm going, and I'm going. You wouldn't deny me the chance to shock the hell out of Minerva, would you?"

"Don't call me 'boy.' You're not coming with me because I don't want to have to endure the endless explanations that Minerva will require about where you've been the last two years. Save your touching reunion for your own time. I have work to do."

Moody leered. "Don't you want to find out the punch line of the rhinoceros joke?"

"No."

"It's not as if you can stop me, you know. I've got my magic back. And my leg." He leaned forward, his leer now verging on the obscene. "And as you well know, I've got my fucking strength back. I can floo wherever I damn please."

Snape sighed and pushed his chair back with a screech. "Fine. Come along, then. But if Minerva hexes the hell out of *you* for shocking the hell out of *her*, don't expect me to heal you."

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The Headmistress of Hogwarts, her stern face and black hair nearly unchanged from Snape's student days, was working at her desk when his head appeared in the fireplace.

"Minerva?"

She looked up and smiled. "Severus. How are you? Is everything all right?"

"I am quite well. As to everything being all right, well...that's something you may decide for yourself, after you see who it is I'm bringing with me. May we come through?"

"Of course." She began to rise, but Snape cut in quickly, "Don't get up. You'll want to be sitting down for this."

"Goodness, Severus, you're being mysterious. Just how worried should I be?"

But Snape's head had already disappeared, and a second later the man himself was stepping into the room, closely followed by Moody, walking stick in hand.

"Hullo, Min," the latter said.

"Alastor?" McGonagall stared, the colour sliding from her face so precipitously that Snape took a step towards her in concern. But he needn't have worried; she was out of her chair and in Moody's arms before Snape could have reached her.

Moody hugged her tightly enough to rob her of breath and then after a long minute stood back and grinned, his hands still on her shoulders. "Miss me?"

McGonagall ran one hand over his rugged face and used the other to wipe her eyes. "Damn you for drama queens," she said, smiling through her tears. "The both of you. Well, go on...sit down and get comfortable, because you're going to be here until I have a satisfactory explanation."

"Get comfortable?" Moody glared at the straight-backed chairs ranged in front of the desk. "Who could be comfortable in these cast-offs from an Azkaban interrogation room?" With a wave of his wand, he changed one wooden chair into a plush armchair and sank into it. "Didn't you hear the lady?" he barked at Snape. "Sit down, boy. I've got a story to tell."

"Don't make a novel of it, old man," Snape said, moving away to examine a stack of books on a table in the corner. Taking one to the wide window seat, he sat down with his back to the others, while Moody, waving away the offer of tea, launched into his tale.

"Yep, a rhino," he was saying ten minutes later. "Complete with a ruddy great horn sticking straight out of my head. Standing at attention. That was for you, Min. For old times' sake. Get it?" And he cackled until he coughed.

McGonagall rolled her eyes. "Yes, I get it. More's the pity. Old times, indeed."

"Yes, well. Good times while they lasted, eh, Miss McGonagall?"

She smiled and touched his hand. "Good times, Mr Moody."

Snape continued to read, but he turned the pages with an annoyed snap that caused Moody to glance at him from under bushy brows. But then the talk turned from the rhinoceros to the boy who had brought it into the shop, and Snape came over to rejoin the conversation.

"The boy is what brought us to you today, Minerva," he said, taking one of the hard wooden seats. "Well, that, and Moody's...not my...desire to dazzle you with his resurrection from the dead. I need to find that cache of dark objects that Moody says the boy's family has. He was Hogwarts age, but I don't recall ever seeing him here."

He described the boy in detail, and McGonagall looked thoughtful. "He doesn't sound familiar to me, either. Not all wizarding children attend Hogwarts, of course. But if he was born in Britain, he'll be in the birth book."

She stepped to a cabinet against a far wall and murmured an incantation over it; when its doors opened, she removed a parchment folio and spread it on her desk. "I'll include all the boys who turned eleven in the past four years and who didn't end up coming here," she said, occasionally stopping in her perusal of a page to tap a "copy" quill onto a blank sheet.

"Here you are," she said at last, handing the now list-covered parchment to Snape. "Almost two dozen. I've marked the ones to whom I spoke, though I don't recall any of them fitting your description. Filius visited the others. He's on holiday just now, but he'll return on Monday, if you want to question him."

"I do," said Snape, at the same time that Moody said, "We do."

The two men each eyed each other for a moment, until Snape smirked and said, stressing the pronouns lightly, *I* will be going now, Minerva; *I'd* like to get started. Moody, *I'll* see you this evening. Unless you and Minerva have more, er, catching-up to do? Some further discussion of rhino horns, perhaps?"

"Keep your shirt on," Moody grumbled, Summoning his stick. "I'm ready to go." Heaving himself to his feet, he put his hand on Snape's shoulder to steady himself and turned toward the fireplace. "I'll be back another day, Min," he said, not moving his hand. "And we'll talk. Meantime, I'm leaving with the potions master."

McGonagall looked from him to Snape and back again. Then she smiled. "I see. Like that, is it?" she asked.

"I think so, yes," Moody replied. Still with his hand on Snape's shoulder, he reached for the jar of floo powder.

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The flat above the shop seemed cramped after the spaciousness of McGonagall's office. But Moody moved about the kitchen almost cheerfully, whistling through his teeth. Snape leant against the doorframe and watched him with a mixture of irritation and sardonic amusement. Finally Moody thumped the floor with his wooden leg and snapped, "What?"

"The rhinoceros was a *penis* joke? What...you're regressing to adolescence in your old age?"

"A *penis* joke? No, boy, it wasn't a penis joke. It was a cock joke. A raging hard cock joke to remind Minerva of the good times we spent in her bed. Is that what you want to know?"

Snape scowled. "This is how you choose to inform me that you're romantically involved with Minerva?"

Moody shook his head and sat down. "Not involved. Not that way. Friends, is all. We've gone through a lot together, Min and me, one way and other. And yes, we've done the nasty...maybe half a dozen times over the years. War makes strange bedfellows; you take your comfort where you find it. Min knows that as well as I do."

"You're telling me that *Minerva McGonagall* goes in for casual comfort sex?"

The scarred mouth quirked. "I see you still haven't got to know her very well, have you? When it comes to sex, 'casual' is all Minerva ever wants; she's given her heart to her job. Besides, she knows my usual inclinations don't lie in her direction." He gazed at Snape steadily before continuing, "In any woman's direction. If you get my drift."

Snape didn't move from the doorway; he merely raised a slow eyebrow. "Like that, is it?" he asked, echoing McGonagall.

And Moody again responded, "I think so. Yes." But this time, he added, "If you're interested."

"You've had internal injuries, Moody," said Snape. "I'd be remiss if I let you leave my home before you were completely healed."

"Aye. And it's not as if *you* don't need someone to come with you on these scavenger hunts of yours. Fine, then. That's us sorted. We'll start on Minerva's list tomorrow."

"We? Hmm. I'll have to give that idea some thought. Tracking down dark artifacts is a subtle science, Moody, a thing of finesse and delicacy. In other words, the opposite of you. So perhaps you should just stay home. The last thing I need is a paranoid ex-Auror tramping around like a herd of...rhinoceros."

Moody got to his feet and stumped round the table to shove his dented chin into Snape's face. "The day will come when you'll be glad of a little paranoia on your arse," he said, his voice a low growl. "Death Eater or no Death Eater, you're a rank amateur when it comes to the dark arts, and don't you forget it."

Before Moody could finish his last word, Snape thrust his arm across the other man's chest and pinned him against the wall. "I think you'll find," he said, something tugging at his mouth that could have been either snarl or smile, "that there are a number of things neither one of us is going to forget."

Moody's good eye glinted; he could not have been unaware of the hard length of Snape's cock between them. "Trying to be the one on top, are you?" he asked, grinning and moving his hand to the other's hip. "Well, we'll see about that. Boy."

Snape leant forward and nipped the smirking lip. "Oh, yes," he said. "We'll see. Old man."

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