

Gifts

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On the day of his return to Hogwarts as headmaster, Severus Snape settles some old scores and makes some offerings. Chapter One offers Professor Sprout's pov.
Possible dub con.

Sprout

Chapter 1 of 4

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Sprout

"...what I think would be best that is, if you agree, Pomona..."

Start-of-school checklist in hand, Minerva McGonagall disappeared around the corner near the Charms classroom, her voice fading as she left Pomona Sprout farther behind. Pomona sighed and tried to hurry her short legs a little faster: when Minerva was in this "organizing" mood, there was no persuading her to slow down. Oh, she'd make the effort for a minute or two, but then energy and purpose would drive her on at a speed all her own. It was easier just to puff along in her wake as best one could...

But when Pomona turned the corner herself, she nearly cannoned into Minerva, who was standing rigid in the middle of the corridor.

She held up a hand to stop Pomona's advance. "The wards...they just shifted..." she whispered.

Pomona stood silently. Minerva had always been more attuned to the magic of the castle than Sprout had, and now that she was Headmistress, McGonagall had even more access to Hogwarts' secrets. As the new Deputy Head, Pomona had gained some powers, too, but she hadn't felt any change in the wards just now. She hoped the castle wasn't trying to tell her she wasn't up to the deputy's job. Not now, only a day before the students arrived for the new term.

Finally Minerva shook her head, frustrated. "Someone's got into the Headmaster's office, I'm sure of it," she said. "But I can't sense anything more; it's very strange..."

Even now, weeks after Albus's funeral, Minerva didn't call the Head's office her own, and she spent as little time there as possible, mostly only when she needed to meet official visitors. Pomona assumed that Minerva stayed away because she couldn't bear to be surrounded by painful reminders of Dumbledore and their long friendship, but when she'd said as much, Minerva had replied, "Yes, there is a great deal of Albus in that office."

In thinking about it later, Pomona saw that this answer was more open to interpretation than she had initially realised. She put it out of her mind, though: Minerva would take over the office when she wanted to and not before, and in the meantime, they had more important worries. Like the one facing them at this moment an intruder? Last time there'd been intruders in Hogwarts, the Headmaster had died. Please let this be just a mistake, Pomona thought. Please.

"Come." Shrinking her checklist to pocket-size, Minerva turned and headed in the direction of the Head's office.

"Minerva, wait!" Pomona called. "Don't you think we should get someone to go with us? Just in case..."

McGonagall swept on, without pause, without reply. Sighing again, Pomona hustled after her.

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When Sprout reached the office, the door next to the stone gargoyle was already open, but the circular stairs were unmoving. Minerva had flattened herself against the wall next to the opening, her wand out. Waiting just until Pomona fell in behind her, she began cautiously to ascend, using a mirror charm to see the stair beyond her as she climbed.

They reached the top without incident. "Ostendo," Minerva whispered, and the heavy oak door slowly grew transparent.

As far as Pomona could tell, the office looked exactly as it had when Albus had been alive. No one seemed to be present; nothing had been disturbed.

"There was someone here, I know it," Minerva said, in closer to her usual tones. Waving the wood back to its normal state, she held her wand before her as she opened the door a crack and slipped through.

Convinced now that it was a false alarm, Pomona followed, in time to hear Minerva cry out, "You!"

Turning from one of the cabinets on the side wall, his face a mask of disdain, was Severus Snape.

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"Professor McGonagall. Professor Sprout. What are you doing in my office uninvited?"

"Your office?" Pomona gasped. She was surprised she found breath enough to speak, her heart was pounding that fast. But Minerva, made of sterner stuff, was able to say nothing; Pomona couldn't help but admire her control.

Ignoring Pomona, Snape handed Minerva a parchment bristling with the sort of Ministry seals charmed to open to only one wand: hers, apparently. She touched each one quickly and read the official-looking scroll with a mix of emotions crossing her face: surprise, anger, and finally a bitter amusement.

"I see," she said at last, looking at Snape. "Your office, indeed. Let us go, Pomona." Without another word, she turned to leave.

"Wait," Snape ordered. "I want to make a few things clear."

Minerva turned back. "Yes, Severus?" She kept her voice even, although Pomona thought it probably cost her some effort.

"You shall address me as 'Headmaster,'" said Snape, equaling her uninflected calm.

Pomona choked. Headmaster?

Minerva's lips twitched, as if she found this pretension funny, but she inclined her head solemnly. "Headmaster," she agreed, and waited silently for him to continue.

Amazing, Pomona thought. If she were in Minerva's situation, she'd be chattering like a nervous flitterbird, she knew she would. Ousted from her position by Severus Snape? Who was now apparently the Headmaster of Hogwarts? How on earth could that be?

"The Ministry expects you to remain as Deputy Headmistress, Minerva," Snape announced. "And as Headmaster, I expect your complete loyalty and obedience, even if I am" here he smirked "Dumbledore's murderer."

"I don't offer loyalty or obedience on command," Minerva snapped. "I'm not your pet dog. And you are not Albus's murderer."

Pomona felt her eyes widen. Not Albus's murderer? Of course he was. Harry Potter had seen him, up on the ramparts of the highest tower: Snape had sent a Killing Curse into the Headmaster in cold blood. Cold blood. Everyone knew that. Whatever was Minerva talking about?

Evidently Snape was wondering the same thing. His eyes narrowed. "Not his murderer? But didn't you hear Potter's report? Do you mean that you, of all people, don't accept the word of The Chosen One?"

"Oh, you killed Albus, without question. But I don't believe for a moment that you murdered him. I believe you did exactly what Albus wanted you to do, the way you always did. As too many of us always did." She shot a look at Dumbledore's portrait, and Pomona was shocked at the depth of hurt and resentment she saw in her friend's face.

"No," she breathed, reaching out her hand almost involuntarily...Minerva idolized Albus, everyone knew that, too. "Minerva, don't say that..."

But the others seemed to have forgotten Pomona's presence.

"Why would Albus want me to kill him?" Snape was asking Minerva silkily, and Pomona shivered at how dangerous he sounded.

Minerva, however, was unfazed. "Do you think Albus ever deigned to tell me why he wanted anything? Or what he planned? I was a tool to him, Severus, just as you are. Or you used to be. I don't know what you are now. You and Dumbledore are both playing some damned dark game of your own. You're treating this war as if it's a grand Wizard chess match for the lads. With the rest of us as pawns. It's the sort of sport Albus always liked best, but I'd hoped for better from you."

"No!" This was just too much. Pomona couldn't stay quiet, no matter how frightening Snape looked. He was just Severus, after all, she reminded herself; she'd known him since he was a child.

"No!" she shouted again, and at last her colleagues looked at her. "That's not true, Minerva. Albus wasn't like that. He cared about you, he cared about both of you, he did..."

"Oh, no doubt," said Minerva impatiently. She turned to the portrait. "You cared, didn't you, Albus?" she asked, grief and anger making her voice raw. "The way you'd care about a puppy. Because pets have their uses, don't they? They provide constant love. They can be trained. Made to heel. Even given simple tasks..."

"Minerva..." said Albus's portrait, and the pain in his voice just wrung Pomona's heart. "I'm sorry..."

"Enough." Snape sounded deadly now, and Minerva, too, was back in charge of herself. She stared at the new headmaster levelly.

Pomona twisted her hands together and looked at the floor.

"Professor McGonagall, I ask you again," Snape said. "Will you give me your unconditional loyalty and obedience?"

"I will do my job with the utmost professionalism, of that you may be assured. If that's not sufficient, then I will write my resignation letter now."

Snape shrugged, seeming unconcerned. "As you please. The choice is yours, Professor. You are free to go if you wish."

"I should hope so...Headmaster." She edged the word with just the hint of a Snapian sneer. "This is still Hogwarts, not Azkaban. Yet."

From the desk, she picked up quill and parchment, and Snape waited until she began to write before he said, conversationally, "Pride is such an...admirable Gryffindor trait. It sustains you well. I can only hope it will do the same for your students."

Minerva looked up sharply. "Meaning...?"

"If I have to replace you in Transfiguration, I shall hire Rodolphus Lestrangle. You were his teacher; I'm sure you know how well-qualified he is. And with the replacements in Muggle Studies and DADA, we will have three of the Dark Lord's supporters on the staff. They all believe in severe discipline for misbehaving or lazy students, especially for anyone not a Pureblood." He spoke slowly, watching her. "As headmaster, I wouldn't dream of interfering with the pedagogical methods of qualified teachers."

Minerva thrust the quill back onto the desk with such force that the point snapped. "Damn you, Severus," she said.

Snape crossed to her in two long strides and seized her wrist, pulling her towards him. "You shall call me 'Headmaster,'" he said, enunciating each word, "and you shall give me your total and unquestioning support. You are my subordinate, and you will be serving under me. In a variety of capacities. Do you understand me?"

Pomona wished she had the nerve to conjure herself a chair; she was shaking so badly she feared she'd fall right over. That couldn't possibly have been a sexual threat Severus had just made...could it?

Could it? Of course not, but...

But there had been a moment, some years ago now...only a moment, when she had wondered just fleetingly if Minerva and Severus had become something more than mere colleagues.

It had happened at Albus's annual Christmas social for the staff. There had been a great deal to drink. Albus was always a generous host and as they had all prepared to leave, Snape had helped Minerva to her feet. This in itself wasn't completely unusual, since Severus had several times disarmed Pomona with unexpected courtliness.

But then he'd put his hand, ever so briefly, on Minerva's waist. He'd meant only to steady her, Pomona had assumed not that Minerva had seemed at all *unsteady* but he'd placed his hand just that much too high, closer to her breast than her waist, actually, and there had been something about that touch, something somehow *intimate*, that had made Pomona think, could they be...?

But that was nonsense, of course; Minerva was at least three decades older than Severus, and he'd once been her student, for Merlin's sake. It had just been an innocent slip of the hand, quickly rectified, and Pomona had chastised herself for her own grubby mind.

And now here she was, doing it again, reading sex into things even at a time like this. Pomona Sprout! she told herself sternly. Pull yourself together.

But what had Severus meant by "you'll serve under me"? The way he'd spoken it had been more than just a reminder to Minerva that she'd be his subordinate. It was a threat of some kind, Pomona was sure of it.

A threat to a colleague! From a man she'd once trusted, even grown fond of. Dear God, what was happening to them all? She wanted to say something, to protest, but no one was paying any attention to her.

Snape was still looking at Minerva, tightening his already-punishing grip on her arm. "Do you understand?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said finally, glaring at him.

He pushed her away so abruptly that she had to catch hold of the desk to regain her balance. Then she simply stood and watched him.

Anyone else, Pomona thought, would have rubbed their just-twisted wrist. But not Minerva McGonagall. She wouldn't give Severus the satisfaction of knowing he'd hurt her. Pomona respected that sort of determination, she supposed, even though she herself preferred to be a little more flexible in small things it made life more livable in the long run.

But still. Minerva wasn't the only brave one around here. Pomona Sprout was a war veteran, too, after all, and it was time to show what a Hufflepuff could do. Taking a deep breath, she spoke up. "Sev...I mean, Headmaster. I think you're being..."

Snape stepped to the door and opened it. "Get out, Pomona," he said, his eyes never leaving Minerva. "The Deputy and I have some business to discuss."

Pomona glanced at Minerva, who gave her the briefest of nods before turning immediately back to Severus.

The tension and apparent hatred that swirled around her colleagues made Pomona feel slightly ill, and it was with a sense of guilty relief that she ducked quickly past the new headmaster and hurried out, certain and hopeful that he would forget about her before she was halfway down the stairs.

Snape, Part 1

Chapter 2 of 4

On the day of Severus Snape's return to Hogwarts as headmaster, he settles some old scores and makes some offerings. In Chapter 2, he begins to put his plan into action.

Snape

Snape closed the door and then extended his hands towards McGonagall.

"Give me the wards," he said.

McGonagall understood the procedure as well as he did, Snape knew: in the event of the sudden death of a headmaster or mistress, control over the castle's complex protective enchantments passed immediately and automatically to the deputy. But when a new, permanent head took over in a more conventional manner, the access had to be exchanged, in person, in front of witnesses. Often, the process was part of an elaborate installation ceremony, but Snape had no interest in useless pomp. The portraits would be adequate observers.

"The wards, Minerva," he snapped. "Now."

He stood unmoving, expecting her come to him, and she did, slowly placing her hands in his.

"Albus?" Snape called. "Phineas Nigellus? Are you paying attention? You're our witnesses."

Closing his eyes, he held McGonagall's fingers and let his mind reach toward hers. There was a brief moment of searching before their thoughts joined, catching and meshing like perfectly-fitted gears.

And then a rush of power flooded into him; he could hear it, smell it, sense it in sparkles of colour that he felt more than saw. His heart jolted suddenly he could feel the great castle as if it were in his veins, pulsing, almost breathing with him.

The colours swirling in his mind now shaped themselves into the bodies and faces of all the former Heads of Hogwarts, each of whom had left his or her mark upon the school they had served. He could actually see himself joining these former Heads: his mind became a corridor filled with the seemingly-living bodies of the portraits as they passed him in time-honoured order, all of them nearly corporeal. He could almost feel the touch of Phineas Nigellus's congratulatory hand on his arm, could almost smell the lemon of Albus's wretched sweets.

The last to pass was Minerva. Perhaps because she still lived, perhaps because she had held the head's position so briefly, she was the most wraithlike, but even so, as she approached him, he could see clearly the tense line of her shoulders, the fierce resolve in her face. Yet with each step, her image shimmered and grew more insubstantial until, just as she drew abreast of him, she disappeared.

"The exchange is complete. Welcome, Headmaster Snape of Slytherin."

Phineas Nigellus's proud voice brought Snape back into the Headmaster's office; he opened his eyes to see the real McGonagall standing before him, pale from the power drain, but otherwise composed. She dropped her hands to her sides.

"If there's nothing else, Headmaster, I'll be on my way," she said, stepping around him to open the door.

Again there was the slightest of pauses before she spoke his title; Snape could hear mockery beneath her surface blandness.

The adrenaline left over from the ward transfer shifted abruptly into fury, and he shot out his arm, slamming the door shut and then using his body to shove her against it.

"Severus!"

Snape heard Dumbledore's outrage and took pleasure in ignoring it. "You'll serve under me, Minerva?" he asked, his face only millimetres from hers. "Did you mean that?"

She looked at him steadily. "You'll do whatever it takes to serve...whatever end it is you serve," she said. "And I'll do whatever it takes to protect the students."

"Even if the price of protecting them is fucking me?"

There were gasps and little cries from the portraits, but McGonagall didn't blink. "Even if."

"Prove it." Snape used his free hand to pull her hair slowly out of its bun, drawing the long mass forward over her shoulder. "On your knees, Minerva," he said.

Her eyes searched his face, but he made sure she saw nothing there but casual contempt. Finally, wordlessly, she sank to the floor, her robes pooling about her. Snape opened his trousers and waited.

Her fingers on his balls were cool, and then her mouth on his cock was warm, and he quickly grew hard under her touch. She was as good as he expected too good, he realised, as her hands and tongue brought him along much too fast for his purposes.

"No, you don't," he muttered, gripping her head and slowing her; he would make her take him at his pace, not hers. He thrust deeply, his hands in her hair, and yet still, all too soon he was coming, biting his lip to stay silent, watching the long line of Minerva's throat as she swallowed...

And then he was done. Stepping away, he buttoned himself up and turned his back on her, walked to his desk, sat down behind it. Picked up a quill.

"I'll expect a list of incoming first-years with their blood status records tomorrow, Professor," he said, writing busily, never looking at her. "And the staff's schedules. That will be all."

Not until he heard the door close softly did Snape raise his head.

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"Professor Snape!"

Severus carefully wrote another line before he turned to face Dumbledore's portrait. The old man was as upset as Snape had ever seen him, and he could feel the accusing eyes of the other portraits boring into his back.

"I would not have thought even you capable..." Dumbledore started, but Snape cut him off.

"Even I? You were happy enough to work with 'Even I' when it suited you, Albus. Even though you knew full well the sorts of things 'Even I' was expected to do on my evenings with the Dark Lord. Things far worse than this. So why do you profess to be shocked now?"

"Minerva..."

"For a spinster schoolteacher, that woman knows how to suck cock, Dumbledore," said Snape with deliberate crudeness. "Was that one of the many valuable services she provided you as your deputy?"

Only a slight narrowing of the eyes indicated Dumbledore's rage. As he had in life, he seemed calmest when he was at his deadliest, and the new headmaster was not sorry that the former headmaster now existed only in a frame on the wall.

"That comment deserves no reply, Severus," Dumbledore said quietly. "But for Minerva's sake, I will tell you that my behaviour with her was never other than professional and appropriate."

He gazed at Snape, his expression now quizzical. "What are you playing at, I wonder?" he said, almost to himself. "It's more than just trying to keep Minerva in line; you accomplished that when you threatened the students. She doesn't know you've sworn to protect them."

"And Death Eaters always keep their promises, do they?"

"You're no Death Eater. I'm sure of that if nothing else. Now what are you up to?"

"It's interesting to see how much death addles the brain, Albus. Because you seem to have forgotten that it was at your behest that I set out to make myself universally despised. For the good of the wizarding world, of course."

Dumbledore leaned forward. "You didn't need..."

"Damn it, Albus! Stop pretending to be naïve. Or do you really not understand that in order to be hated, I have to make myself hateful? Rewarding though they are, sneers and sarcasm alone do not a pariah make. Any more than pocketfuls of sherbet lemons make you a sweet man."

"Resent me all you like, Severus. I asked unforgivable things of you, I know. But I need to know the truth; there's too much at stake. I realise that you can't afford to have people suspect you of anything less than full loyalty to Voldemort "

"And unfortunately," Snape interrupted, "as you heard, Minerva hasn't been convinced by your grand plan to cast me as a murderous monster "

"Yes, as you say," Dumbledore agreed, talking him down firmly, "Minerva doesn't seem to believe that you are a murderer. But she already seemed angry with you, so do not try to tell me that the only way you could secure her enmity was through this sort of humiliation. There's something else going on here, Severus; what is it?"

After a moment spent looking at Albus consideringly, Snape said, "Several years ago, Minerva and I had a sexual relationship."

If a portrait could be gobsmacked, Dumbledore's was. "I...didn't know that," he said slowly.

Snape gave the dry snort that served him as laughter. "What's this? Dumbledore dumfounded? In less than an hour, I've managed to shock you, enrage you, and surprise you, Albus. I think that must be a record."

"Fifty points to Slytherin," snickered the portrait of Phineas Nigellus.

"You didn't know because we didn't choose to have you know," Snape continued, ignoring Phineas. "You weren't as god-like as it pleased you to believe. In any event, Minerva ended the affair when the Dark Lord returned."

Dumbledore peered over his spectacles. "And what you forced her to do today..."

"Her choice."

Albus just looked at him. "This was your revenge on her?"

"Not at all. It was my gift to her."

Turning, Snape stalked out of the office without another word.

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Once he reached the corridor below his office, Severus slowed, feeling suddenly light-headed. The acrid taste of too much magic burned at the back of his throat; it appeared that adjusting to the castle's power would be more difficult than he had anticipated.

That power thrummed deep inside him, following the rhythm of his own heartbeat, and for a moment he was assailed by a claustrophobia that made him almost desperate to snatch a breath in counterpoint, to reassure himself that he was still a separate entity.

But then reason and years of control reasserted themselves, and he was able to continue walking with only a slight break in stride. The castle was a tool to be mastered, and Snape liked to think of himself as a master of mastery. He would learn, and he would cope, and he would be "Headmaster" in more than name.

Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to think that he had mastered Albus Dumbledore, as either man or portrait, but nonetheless, there was a good deal of satisfaction to be had in occasionally besting him, as Snape knew he had done this afternoon.

Even in death, Dumbledore wanted to be the one in control of knowledge, of secrets, of people. And yet even that wasn't enough. Albus wasn't content merely to with dazzle people with unexpected and theatrical displays of his omniscience, like a cheap Muggle stage magician. No, he wanted people to *know* that they didn't know. And that he *did*. And that they never would know unless he chose to tell them.

Snape relished the fact that his former mentor was now in that state he'd so enjoyed inflicting on others: ensnared in the frustrating tangles of conscious ignorance. Albus would be as unable to understand Snape's cryptic departing words as he was to leave his imprisoning frames.

Yes, Severus thought with savage pleasure, Dumbledore would spend his half-lit eternity never understanding the legacy that Snape was leaving to Minerva McGonagall.

And if all went according to plan, neither would she.

Snape, Part 2

Chapter 3 of 4

Snape reflects on his past and future with McGonagall.

Snape

As Snape reached the top of the main staircase, he again experienced a surge of the castle's magic. This time, however, he could discern differences: there were levels...flavours, almost, that hovered just beyond his sense of taste, colours just beyond his sight. He stopped, his hand on the banister, and closed his eyes, letting the feel of the enchantments wash through him. Sensations merged and then separated; if he concentrated, he could...see.

He could see the castle wards, arching over and around him, visible as bands of unbroken black all was well there. The school itself lay in his mind like a three-dimensional, transparent model. Some rooms contained a softly-glowing smudge of reddish warmth living people, he decided. Wispy trails of blue and gold snaked along some of the corridors and in some of the rooms; when he focused on them, he could feel the prickles of recently-completed spells and charms.

He wondered if other headmasters and headmistresses had seen the same visions, or if the castle manifested itself differently for each person. What had it looked like to her...to Minerva?

As he thought of her, he realised he could sense her specific presence. The image of the castle wavered and faded, until all that remained was a spot on his mind, like a bruise, where he could feel her, could feel her essential Minerva-ness, even though it was overlaid just now with layers of rage...pain...loss, sensations so strong that he couldn't tell if they were her feelings or his own.

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The entry hall was deserted as Snape passed through on his way out into the Hogwarts grounds. Normally he had little use for the outdoors, enduring it only when he needed to gather potions ingredients, but just now even the endless empty skies were preferable to the oppression of the castle and its portraits and its magic.

And its Minerva. He wasn't surprised to find himself still unsettled by her. There had always been something between him and Minerva, even in his student days. It had not been sexual then: Minerva never gave any evidence of finding adolescents romantically appealing, and Severus had never been one for crushes on teachers; no, he'd distrusted his professors along with nearly everyone else he knew. McGonagall he had distrusted both on principle and as Head of the House that sheltered Sirius Black and James Potter.

Yet she had disconcerted him in ways that the other professors had not. "You are not without ability, Mr Snape," she had said to him one afternoon in his third year, and he had known her well enough by then to understand that this was high praise. "Do not waste it."

After that, he'd often had the sense that she was pushing him, testing him. Sometimes, he knew, he failed the tests, and she would tighten her lips as if she'd made a bet with herself that he was causing her to lose. But as time went on, his failures became rarer, and her losses, however she defined them, far fewer.

He kept a sharp memory from his sixth year of his success with a tricky transfiguration that had earned him her best compliment "Exactly right, Mr Snape" and five points for Slytherin. He could still see how she'd looked as she'd turned away, her eyes glittering, her pointed face marked by a triumphant half-smile. He knew that he was participating in a constant competition that only she understood and whose score she never forgot.

That feeling had returned when he'd come back to Hogwarts to teach. Rumour had it that Minerva had opposed his appointment, but if that were true, her behaviour never hinted at it. During his first year, she treated him with unfailing, if distant, professional courtesy. But gradually he'd felt that old, challenging edge return, and soon he began to enjoy competing with her by his own choice, carefully keeping his own score.

Their eventual positions as Heads of rival Houses gave a plausible public face to the growing tension between them, but never did Snape believe that their personal contests were actually about Quidditch matches or House Cups. For a long time, he'd thought they were really about his history as a Death Eater and about Dumbledore's insistence upon trusting him.

He hadn't recognised the sexual possibilities until one night after he'd been teaching for several years. The Ministry had proposed a revision of the Potions curriculum, and Snape had gone to the Deputy Headmistress to object.

He'd found Minerva in her chambers, for it was late in the evening, and she'd sat on the sofa while he paced and ranted. At first she had listened carefully, but eventually she lost patience.

"Severus," she'd said tightly, "you cannot simply show up at the Department of Magical Education, sneer at the ministers and the Hogwarts Board, inform them that they are idiots, and then stalk out. Your billowing-robe routine is quite effective on children, but I don't think it will have much impact on people like the Averys. They're powerful and ruthless and will require tact and careful handling."

Snape stopped his pacing and stood directly over her, his lip curling. "You routinely let 12-year-olds get the better of your temper, and you're lecturing *me* about tact? And what do you know about 'people like the Averys'? Were you ever out there with them, father or son, while they happily did You-Know-Who's worst bidding?"

Minerva, he saw, had gone very still. "You're going to play 'Competitive Darkness' with me now, are ye, Severus? That's the plan, is it?" she asked, her voice brogue-thick and dangerously soft. "You're going to suggest that your few years of serving as sullen bad boy to a posturing lunatic have given you a worldly understanding that a pitiful, school-bound old woman can't possibly match? Well, think again, lad."

She rose and faced him, not yielding an inch to his looming bulk. "Don't you dare patronise me, Severus Snape. I have war stories that would make your Dark Lord weep."

Her eyes snapped with anger, and he could feel heat crackle between them. He was suddenly intensely aware of her the hint of her spicy perfume, the lift of her breasts under her robes, the sharp edge of her jaw. He wondered how that edge would feel under his thumb, and all at once he was harder than he'd been since his teenage years.

Minerva had been over sixty then, while Severus was still shy of thirty not the age gulf it would be for Muggles, true, but still quite a difference. Yet when Snape looked back at that night, he couldn't recall giving age or situation or experience a thought. What he remembered was the press of his trousers on his cock and the play of the firelight on her face and the fact that when he'd reached out to touch her, she had reached back.

They'd never made it to her bed, not that first time. He'd taken her there on the sofa, taken her from behind with one arm around her waist and the other across her breasts, one leg bent along the cushions and other braced on the floor to give him the force he needed. He remembered how tightly he'd held her and how hard he'd thrust, bending over her, feeling his sweat slick their bodies as he moved his hand to stroke between her thighs. He'd been inside her, but even then, he'd not felt close enough, he'd wanted to be part of her, to merge with her, to own her...

He'd settled for making her come first, exulting when it happened. She'd cried out and arched against him, her muscles clenching, her head thrown back, and he had leant down to mark her pale neck.

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The first time Minerva had bound his arms, he had found himself resisting, reminded too vividly of painful moments with Potter and Black and Voldemort.

She'd stopped at the first sign of his reluctance. "I will never do anything you don't want, Severus," she'd said. "It is your choice, fully. I shan't think any the less of you if you refuse."

Oddly, considering their constant competition, he'd believed her. Somewhere over the years, he had come to trust Minerva McGonagall. And as he thought about it, he saw that there would be satisfaction in yielding to that trust, a freedom in bondage, in turning over the decisions and the struggles and the roles to someone else, with nothing demanded of him but his own pleasure and hers.

Plus, it occurred to him that if he refused to submit to her in this way, he'd be showing her greater weakness than if he simply gave himself over to whatever she planned.

No, he realised, as his cock gave a twitch, he didn't want to refuse.

But neither did he want her to think she'd won too easy a victory, so he sat back and scowled at her. "You won't think less of me?" he'd said. "Right, and I suppose next you'll be trying to claim that James Potter was a wee nice lad. I'm not falling for it, Minerva. So go ahead; do your worst."

Her smile told him that he wasn't fooling her; she knew he wanted it.

"Fine," she said, and let the smile turn predatory. "We'll start with a little respite from that wagging tongue. Until we find something better for it to do."

Inexperienced as he'd been then, he'd expected her to use a Silencing charm, but she'd preferred a silken gag, in Slytherin colours, that she transfigured from his shirt and tied herself, slowly and tightly.

"Quite a charming picture," she said as she finished and stood back to look at him. "And what's more, you'll still be able to make a few wee nice sounds."

That time, her smile had hardly been a smile at all.

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She was so clear about what she wanted, and so at ease with her wanting, that he knew she was no stranger to other people's beds and games. For reasons of his own, it mattered to him who those other people had been.

He thought about asking her, late one night when they lay sated and quiet, but he was fairly certain despite the fact that mere minutes earlier, he'd been buried deep within her that she would deem such questions too personal.

So he waited until the upper hand was his, until he had her cuffed and naked, her hair streaming darkly over the ivory of her breasts, and then he had asked. Who? When?

She didn't reply.

"No answer?" he'd said, allowing himself a slight sneer as he'd tilted up her chin with one finger. "Are you going to use your safeword then, Minerva? Be the first to break?"

This challenge had got to her, as he'd known it would, and so, her voice tight with anger, she had told him. It wasn't a long catalogue, of course Minerva was discriminating, reserved, and of a generation that distrusted profligacy. So she hadn't listed many sexual partners, just a couple of men, and rather to Snape's surprise, one woman.

But the name he had feared wasn't there, and he let himself relax. She could have been lying, he supposed, but it suited him to take her word. He didn't want to let her know that it was important to him that she'd never had sex with Albus.

Yet it very much was. Albus Dumbledore had already taken enough from him.

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The affair with Minerva, occasional though it was and carefully concealed from literally everyone, became a touchstone in Snape's life. They met one Friday a month, Minerva being a woman of schedules. Snape looked forward to his submissive evenings as much as he did to his dominant ones: the chance to put all his responsibilities into Minerva's hands was as appealing as the chance to bend her to his will.

And then had come the final night of the Triwizard Tournament, the night that saw the deaths of Cedric Diggory and essentially of Barty Crouch, Jr., and, as far as Severus was concerned, of himself as well. The fact that he still breathed and ate and walked was of little matter: from the moment of the Dark Lord's return, Snape had felt the shears of the Fates touch the thread of his life. The only question remaining was when the "snip" would come.

They had closed a bit, those shears, on the evening after Diggory's death, when Snape had gone to Minerva's rooms to keep their regular assignment. She had invited him in, given him brandy, and then refused to let him touch her. "It's too dangerous now, Severus. Your mind and time will no longer be your own, and neither of us can risk knowing too much. We can afford no distractions."

She was right; he knew she was. He'd even considered saying something similar. It was too dangerous to continue seeing each other now; they all had too much to lose. Even he did.

Neither of them had ever spoken of permanence or commitment or anything like love. Severus wasn't in love with Minerva, and he had never expected their arrangement to last even as long as it had.

And yet, when she turned away from him, it felt like a little death.

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Outwardly, nothing changed. Professor Snape's public relationship with Professor McGonagall continued much as it always had; they treated each other exactly as the colleagues everyone thought they were. Snape prided himself on his ability to show only those emotions people expected of him, and Minerva, too, was expert at donning the professional mask.

Only once after the Dark Lord's return had they met as lovers, during the summer following Minerva's Stunning at the hands of High Inquisitor Umbridge and her Ministry stooges. In the castle one evening, it had been just the two of them at dinner, and somehow they had ended up in Severus's bed, making love with a gentleness he hadn't known either of them possessed. They had fallen asleep together afterward, curled around one another, but when he had awakened at first light, he'd been alone.

In the months that followed, the months leading to Dumbledore's death, he had scarcely seen Minerva. Oppressed as much by Dumbledore's demands as by Voldemort's, Snape had spent as much time as possible by himself, and the one time that he and McGonagall had spoken at length the day that Harry Potter used the *Sectumsempra* curse on Draco Malfoy they had argued bitterly.

Minerva had not questioned Snape's punishment of Harry, but the entire subject of Potter was too charged between them; neither could let it drop. One comment had led to another, the argument had moved from Harry to the always-festering sore-spot that was Lupin and Black and James Potter, to Dumbledore and Voldemort, and finally, to themselves.

Snape had never underestimated Minerva's skill with either wand or words, and he knew himself to be her equal. They had dueled viciously, verbally, their tongues cutting as deep as any *Sectumsempra*.

Only this time, there had been no healing incantation to stanch the wounds.

And yet...and yet underneath the acrimony and accusations, Snape had sensed her regret and his own. He knew that they fought not only about what they'd been to each other and what they'd had together, but also about what they would never be and would never have. And what they both missed.

There had been or they had taken no chance to make amends before the flood of Dumbledore's death had swept all before it, and Snape had been gone.

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Now he was back.

His walk through the grounds had taken him past the lake and the Quidditch field to the outlying hills, but the sun was setting, and he needed to return. As he reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest, he could no longer avoid the sight of the castle, of the hard reality of its hewn stone and mullioned glass.

As much of a sanctuary as Hogwarts had once been for him, Snape did not delude himself that he would continue to find protection within its walls. That he was entering the final phase of his life, he still did not doubt. And he had much to do.

Today, he'd begun his first task: he'd faced Minerva, driven her to her knees in front of him, and started the process of saving her.

He had told Dumbledore the truth, secure in the knowledge that the old devil would never believe him: threats and duress were Snape's gifts to Minerva, the only ones he had left worth the giving. With them, he would ensure her survival if he could, and he would spare her any further regret.

It had been a consolation to him, the fact that he knew she missed what they'd once had. But that solace was one he could no longer afford. Far better and safer that she despise him, as she must surely do by now. He would use all the means at his disposal to make certain that when he departed Hogwarts for the last time, she would not lament losing him. He would make sure that she could hate him clearly.

And mourn him not at all.

Snape let his steps carry him to the castle's heavy main doors. They opened soundlessly as he approached, recognising his position.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts stood for a moment at the threshold, looking back at the shadow-crossed grounds. Then he strode through the grand entry hall and began the long climb to his new office.

McGonagall

Chapter 4 of 4

McGonagall's thoughts about Severus's first day as headmaster.

McGonagall

Minerva McGonagall scorned the idea of using alcohol to escape the things one was afraid to face: pain or truth or oneself. Life had many pleasures, to be sure, but on the whole, to live was to struggle, to know sorrow and sting, and it was best simply to accept that fact and get on with it. To do anything else was simply weakness.

Yet here she sat, next to a half-empty bottle of firewhisky that had been full only an hour earlier. She'd opened it after she'd arrived back at her rooms to find Pomona waiting for her, dear, brave Pomona, her kind face pinched with concern, her shoulders squared in her determination to stand with Minerva no matter what the cost. Pomona rarely imbibed, so the swiftness with which she'd accepted the offer of a dram let Minerva know that it wasn't a drink she wanted so much as the normality of it, the chance to reassure herself that nothing had really changed. She'd wanted to be told that everything would be all right, and Minerva had even been willing to say it. But they had both known it as a lie.

Pomona hadn't stayed long after that; the truth hung too heavy in the air, and Minerva was left alone with her open bottle.

The whisky had been a present from Horace Slughorn at Christmas – the same gift he'd given to all those on the staff whom he deemed of no social use to him. It proved to be an inferior distillation, cheap and raw, an insult. It was a spirit unfit to consume except as punishment, and Minerva knew she was going to sit and drink it until it was gone.

Or at least until she could forget what she had seen in Severus's eyes earlier. Not his contempt or derision, although he had worked hard to make her think he felt them, and probably he did. She'd given him enough cause, in their last horrific argument, and he had done the same to her.

Still, she had missed Severus sorely these past months, had missed him, in fact, ever since their liaison ended. Missed him despite the lingering pain of their fight and the anger she felt over his obvious collusion with Albus in the latter's death.

Both the rage and the loss had filled her again today when she had looked at Severus and realised that he fully intended to die in the battles that were surely coming.

She knew, of course, that he had not really gone over to Voldemort's side. Her continued existence was proof enough of that. Had Snape been a genuine enemy, he would have taken the first opportunity, once Albus was gone, to neutralize the danger that she and the rest of the Order represented. A genuine Death Eater would have had her killed. The fact that he had not done so told her where he stood.

It was proof, yes, but proof she hadn't needed. Minerva knew Severus was not a true Death Eater because she knew Severus. She *knew* him, and not just physically. Sex was only the consequence of her knowing him, not the cause.

Which was not to say that she had any illusions about him, romantic or otherwise. He was not a kind man or a particularly well-meaning one; he could be cruel, vicious, chillingly indifferent, and he was mostly content to be so.

But for all that, he had a code that he lived by, a difficult code that had led him, ultimately, to worthy ends, and he had an equally worthy mind, and in any case, she herself was not so free of cruelty that she could afford to judge him.

So when he had ordered her to her knees, she had done it, because she knew the price he'd paid and that he still paid. She had dropped down and taken him in her mouth as of old, and a foolish part of her had hoped that he might recognise and accept her action for what it was: an offer of the only gift she had left worth the giving – her permanent submission (or as much of it as she could afford), the surrendering of her will to his, if only he would be prepared to live.

She should have known better, of course; one couldn't bargain with Fate, and even before she knelt at his feet, she had seen in Severus's eyes that he had already chosen his. He would let himself be destroyed, perhaps even welcomed his destruction, and there was nothing she could do.

Her glass was empty again, and she moved to fill it. It was weakness, she knew. But it meant that for tonight, at least, she didn't have to think or feel or imagine what this next year, spent under Severus, would bring. Or how it might end.

She lifted the whisky bottle and poured herself another substantial measure.

Coward, she thought, and downed the lot.

Her throat burned, though whether with the taste of the whisky or the taste of Severus, she couldn't have said.

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Outside, the late-summer sun had finished its slow descent. It had been a lovely day, this last but one before the students arrived for the new term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Around the castle's current occupants, the wards arched and circled and hummed, and darkness settled on the ceiling of the Great Hall.

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