

Not Entirely Tedious

by MMADfan

Young Professor Severus Snape shows up for a meeting, but the only other person there is the Deputy Headmistress. He wants to leave and return later, after the other participants will have arrived, but Professor McGonagall explains why that is impossible. Cross about having his plans for the day disrupted for a meeting that's not taking place, Snape resents having to spend the afternoon with McGonagall. She doesn't seem very pleased, either, but is content to relax and wait. Snape isn't so patient, and soon manages to annoy his companion. Written for the LJ community HP Friendship Fic Fest 2013. (Prompt at end.)

Somewhere in Wales, Friday, 8 April 1983

Chapter 1 of 1

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Note: Canon-compliant, more-or-less, with the books. Not Pottermore compliant. Presumes an older McGonagall, born c. 1924, and a contemporary of Riddle.

Written for the 2013 HP Friendship Fic Fest; the prompt is at the end of the story.

Friday, 8 April 1983

Brow furrowed, Snape stared expectantly at the tattered pink ribbon clutched in his hand. The clock ticked its way to two o'clock. Nothing happened. Snape's lips compressed and the corners of his mouth drew down. What was wrong with the bloody thing?

He hated Portkeys. But Side-Along Apparition was a worse prospect, so Severus had accepted the Portkey Dumbledore had given him just before leaving for a few days of holiday during the Easter term break.

Severus scowled. He didn't understand why the meeting couldn't have been at the castle as usual. Much easier for Dumbledore to return to Hogwarts than for him and Minerva to go kiting about the country...not to mention Filtwick and Sprout, who were supposed to be in residence at the castle for the whole of the Easter holiday. McGonagall had had to arrange for all their absences as a result of this blasted meeting. Better her than him, anyway, Severus thought.

Just as he was beginning to think that Dumbledore hadn't charmed the ribbon correctly, the sucking, swirling sensation of Portkeying overcame him and his kitchen vanished. His stomach felt as though it lurched first to his toes and then to his tonsils before it finally settled more or less back where it was supposed to be.

After regaining his balance, Severus saw that no one else was there yet. Or else they were inside the house. He'd landed in an overgrown garden in front of a small, grey

stone cottage. Slate steps were framed on one side by rose bushes and by rhododendron on the other. It was not a pleasing combination to his eye. Other flowers and herbs grew willy-nilly in scattered beds, and a Muggle garden gnome, painted in once-garish colours, waved up from a patch of scraggly, bug-eaten cress.

His face set in a slight-but-immutable frown, Severus stepped up to the door and knocked. Despite his decisive rap, there was no stir of sound within. He felt his scowl deepen. Damn Dumbledore and his daft plans. He was half-tempted to Apparate back to Hogwarts and let Dumbledore come looking for him if he wanted him, but then a crack of Apparition razored the air. Severus turned to see Minerva McGonagall. At least his wasn't the only holiday interrupted, Severus thought, noticing her cheerful green-and-white print dress beneath her lightweight spring cloak.

"Professor Snape," McGonagall said with a nod. She stepped up and knocked on the door.

"I did that already," Snape said. "Did you think I'd just hang about on the doorstep?"

Minerva raised an eyebrow, then drew her wand and Summoned a large skeleton key from under the plaster garden gnome. "Might as well let ourselves in," she said, turning the key in the doorlock. "Topsy-turvy."

"Late, anyway," Snape grumbled.

Minerva snorted a half-laugh. "That was the password, not the state of affairs, Professor."

They stepped into a cosy sitting room, replete with cushions of various sizes and colours scattered about the armchairs and the sofa. Two oversized garnet-coloured cushions rested before the hearth. Minerva picked up a piece of paper that lay folded atop a stack of books on the coffee table. Her name was scrawled across it in violent orange ink.

"Please make yourselves at home, my dears!" Minerva read aloud. *"I have been called away to the Ministry, but I don't expect to be long. There's a tin of biscuits in the kitchen if you feel peckish, or help yourself to anything in the pantry."*

"Lovely," Severus said, slouching into a chair after having tossed two of its cushions onto the sofa. "He interrupted our afternoon and no one's even here."

"Now, Professor, *we're* both here, and I'm sure Dumbledore won't be long. You should do as I plan to...make yourself comfortable."

To Snape's surprise, the witch sent her cape flying to the coat tree, then slipped off her shoes, pulled a book from her skirt pocket, and lay down on the couch to read, ankles crossed, bare feet resting on a floral needlework pillow.

"What are you doing?"

"Making myself at home, as Dumbledore suggested. And as you noted, it is a holiday afternoon. I am going to read my book."

"Hmpf." He unzipped his jacket. He should have brought something to read. He glanced at the titles of the books on the coffee table, but none were in English except for one titled *The Caprine Spirit: a manual for all wizards who love goats*. His eyebrow raised, he snuck the book out from the middle of the pile and began to leaf through it. Sadly for Severus, the volume held nothing that would compromise the integrity of a respectable wizard, as the title had led him to suspect. It was a book of goat husbandry, though sentimentally rather than scientifically written. The only pictures of wizards and goats in the book were perfectly dull photographs. Of course, perhaps with the right spell ... Severus sighed and put the book back. He couldn't very well start casting decrypting spells on the book with Minerva right there.

He shifted in his seat and examined his nails. His cuticles were a mess. He bit one off. Frowning, he rooted in his jeans pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to wrap his now-bloody finger in. Heaving a sigh, Severus flicked open his pocket watch. Two-fifteen. Gods, time was dragging. He crossed his legs. His Doc Martens had some mud caked on the sole. A wand-swish loosened it, and dried red mud flaked to the floor.

"Honestly, Severus, can't you sit still for two seconds?" Minerva frowned. "And I don't think the Headmaster will thank you for cleaning your boots in his lounge."

Severus waved his wand and the dirt disappeared.

"Make us some tea if you need something to do."

"If you want tea, make it yourself," Severus snapped back. He might only be a few years out of school, but he wasn't her errand boy or house-elf.

"I should have realised that your Potions skills don't translate into putting a kettle on to boil and steeping tea leaves in the resulting hot water," Minerva said, sitting up. She wiggled her toes.

"I am perfectly capable of brewing tea!"

"Well, if you don't want any," Minerva said as she walked away, back towards the kitchen, "you needn't partake."

Severus jumped up and followed her. "I'll make my own."

"Foolish notion, Snape. We'll make a pot."

Minerva, apparently well acquainted with the kitchen, busied herself filling a big copper kettle with water, then putting it on the Charmed hob to boil. Using her wand, she Summoned five cups and saucers from an upper cupboard. She put two of each on the scrubbed oak table next to the biscuit tin, left the others on the counter, then pulled down the teapot from its shelf.

"The tea is in the cupboard behind you, if you would deign to get it out."

Severus didn't manage to restrain his eye-roll in time, and Minerva smirked as he turned to the cupboard. He selected a black tin of Earl Grey tea. He wasn't particularly fond of Earl Grey, himself, but he knew that Minerva thoroughly disliked it. She'd said that bergamot made tea taste like washing-up liquid. He set it down innocently beside the teapot.

"Not the Earl Grey, please. One of the others."

"Hmpf." Severus took great pleasure in acting put out. "Should get it yourself then, if you don't like what I pick." But he chose a wooden box of Irish breakfast tea instead...half expecting Minerva to say that it wasn't breakfast time.

Minerva made no such comment, however, and simply used her wand to warm the teapot before scooping some tea into the pot. The water in the kettle was hissing and bubbling already, but Minerva waited a few more minutes until the water was clearly boiling before she poured it over the leaves.

"Where are Flitwick and Sprout, anyway?" Severus asked. "Dumbledore has an excuse, but those two..."

"Will be here at five," Minerva interrupted. "Dumbledore had a few things to discuss with the two of us before the Heads' meeting, apparently."

"Five o'clock?" Severus exclaimed with dismay. His entire afternoon and half the evening would be shot, and he'd wanted to brew that day. The celestial and atmospheric conditions were perfect for a new pheromonal-altering notice-me-not potion he wanted to try. He'd never have time during term, even on the off-chance that the Scottish weather would ever cooperate with the proper phase of the moon and the position of Mercury.

"Aye. He thought we could have dinner together after," Minerva replied. "He said something about a Jamaican restaurant he knows."

"No."

"No?"

"I'm not going to any blo any Jamaican restaurant." Dumbledore wanted to hijack his holiday, and he only had three days off. Bad enough he had to teach at Hogwarts, and that this was the first time off he'd had since September, but he was not going to go play nice with Dumbledore and the other Heads of House when he was supposed to be having a few days for himself.

"Suit yourself," Minerva said, unfussed by the prospect of losing his company for dinner. She poured them each a cup of tea.

"And I don't see why we have to hang about here waiting for Dumbledore to get back when the real meeting doesn't even begin until five. I should just leave and come back. In fact, that's what I will do. Right now. If the Headmaster returns, tell him I'll be back in..."

"You will not leave."

"I don't see why I should stay, or what say you have in the matter."

"First, if you Disapparate from within the house or garden, you will Splinch. Not fatally, I'm sure, but no doubt messily, and I'd rather not have to deal with that. So you would need to leave from the road, which is a half-mile walk away. Second, you cannot Apparate back here on your own because there are other Anti-Apparition wards that extend even further than that. You'd have to Apparate into the village and walk from there...provided you are acquainted with Garthgwynffrwd, of course. I have no intention of fetching you to give you a Side-Along back from wherever you would prefer to be. And as for me, I do happen to be the Deputy Headmistress and generally do have some say in staff matters."

Severus yanked a chair out from the table with a bang and slammed down into it. "It's all right for you. You didn't have anything better to do...and you brought something to read."

"And you know that I didn't have anything better to do exactly~~how~~?" Minerva asked. "That is a supposition with no basis. Now I will go back to my book. Stay here if you like." She took a few biscuits from the tin and put them on her saucer, then carried them out with her.

Well, she'd tried, Minerva thought. She could only make so much of an effort; Snape had to meet her halfway. But if he wasn't ready to be sociable, Minerva felt it was a waste of time to try to cajole him into it...and Snape had never been the "cajorable" type. He'd just as likely get his back up if he thought she was trying to entice him into going to dinner with everyone and being minimally sociable.

It seemed to Minerva that regardless of how she treated him, Snape persisted in behaving petulantly, rudely, snidely, or belligerently...sometimes all of them simultaneously. It was hard enough welcoming a former Death Eater onto the staff, and as the youngest Head of House in centuries, but he had made absolutely no effort to fit in or to be even minimally courteous. It was as though he was miserable, was determined to remain miserable, and got perverse pleasure out of trying to make the others around him miserable as well.

Working with any former Death Eater wouldn't be a picnic, Minerva acknowledged, particularly knowing too much about what atrocities the Death Eaters had committed, but there were likely at least some who could behave with a veneer of civility and graciousness. Minerva didn't expect Snape to self-flagellate, or even to display any gratitude or humility, but she had expected him to behave civilly and maturely. Her expectations had remained unmet.

Dumbledore was concerned that Severus wasn't fitting in, wasn't happy, and wasn't comfortable, and, to Minerva's annoyance, the fact that Snape's colleagues had to put up with his nasty personality and that they weren't comfortable, didn't seem to bother Dumbledore nearly as much as Snape's unhappiness. Albus had a point, Minerva supposed, in that the rest of the staff had their routines, their friendships, their settled lives at Hogwarts, and Snape couldn't entirely disrupt all of that. He had also noted that if Severus were more content, he'd be less of an irritant to others.

Minerva wasn't insensitive to Snape's unhappiness, and she was also concerned about his state of mind, but she was impatient with what she saw as the young wizard's self-indulgence, even if it took the form of wallowing in his own misery. When Snape had first come on staff, Minerva had made a determined effort to put aside her own discomfort and to try to make him feel welcome. She had once been the youngest member of the teaching staff...though a good bit older and more experienced than Snape was...and she knew that it might be difficult to work beside people who had taught him just a scant few years before. He had not only rebuffed her friendly overtures, but was often downright hostile to her. In the intervening year and a half, his hostility might have subsided, but he could scarcely be said to have mellowed.

Albus thought that spending some time with Snape in an informal setting with no set agenda might allow him to relax. "The boy just needs to see that he's welcome, my dear," Albus had said when he informed her of his plans. "A little time just with a few of his new peers. He's at a loss, I'm sure, with no idea how to behave with us. He's still young; he can change if given the chance."

Minerva had been sceptical, but since they needed to have a Heads meeting over the Easter holiday anyway, making it into a quasi-social occasion wasn't a bad idea. There'd been many occasions over the years when holiday meetings had become impromptu parties, or had ended in a visit to a pub. One year, Slughorn had even brought them to the public room in his Slytherin club. It had not been the most fun they'd ever had, but it had been interesting, and Minerva had had the best Scotch she'd ever tasted, and having a father who was a connoisseur of Scotch, she thought she had a basis for comparison.

If the conversation she'd already had with Snape was any indication, Minerva doubted that this occasion would be as enjoyable; although if he didn't accompany them to dinner, the rest of them could have a good time. Despite herself, Minerva found she was disappointed that Snape wouldn't be joining them. For one, she liked a staff that was on collegial terms with each other, and for another, she couldn't imagine Snape spending year after lonesome year being miserable at Hogwarts. It wasn't necessary, particularly when the people around him *wanted* to welcome him if he'd let them. As hard as it was for Minerva to forget that Snape had been a Death Eater, she also remembered him as a lonely, isolated boy, and she hoped that he wouldn't spend his Hogwarts career feeling isolated and unhappy. At least, not if Albus was right and Snape really *had* betrayed Voldemort and was now loyal to the Order. Minerva might not like everyone in the Order, but she repaid loyalty with loyalty, and that extended even to Snape.

She would definitely have words with Albus later, though. When she'd agreed to meet with Snape before the Heads' meeting, in a "casual" atmosphere, she'd done so believing that Dumbledore would be there, as well. He hadn't warned her he was going to do a bunk and leave her on her own with the man.

Severus sat and glowered into his teacup for a few minutes and tried to feel sorry for himself. McGonagall was probably glad to have him stay in the kitchen, and happy that he wasn't going to go to dinner with them all. Stupid, cheerful, *normal* bunch. If they knew the kinds of company he was used to ...

He pushed away from the table with a sigh and drew his wand to Levitate the teapot, biscuit tin, milk, and his own cup and saucer into the sitting room.

Minerva looked up as he came in, and she pushed some books aside to make room on the coffee table for everything.

Severus sat and sipped his tea. Minerva was on the couch again, legs curled under her, teacup in one hand, book in the other. The book was small, with a dark leather cover. He couldn't see a title or author on it.

"What are you reading?"

"Hm? Oh, just something light."

"What's it about?"

"My cousin Elspeth loaned it to me," Minerva said irrelevantly.

"Is she a Transfiguration mistress as well?"

"Nae, she owns a cheese shop."

Severus frowned. He didn't really care what Minerva was reading, but it irked him that she hadn't answered his question.

"So what book is it?"

"Just a novel. Nothing you'd be interested in."

"How do you know?"

Minerva raised an eyebrow. "I doubt you'd be interested in *Hieland Wizard*, *Hieland Warrior*, *Hieland Lover*."

Severus couldn't help the laugh that burst out. "*Hieland Lover*?" He paused. "No, you're having me on." Now he scowled. She thought him a complete chump. He was certain that not only wouldn't Professor McGonagall be caught dead reading a trashy romance novel, but she wouldn't even have a passing interest in something like that. Everyone knew how straitlaced she was. "What is it really?"

It was Minerva's turn to glare. "I can't enjoy my book if you keep prating on like that."

"All right, don't tell me." What did he care. It was probably some tedious esoteric treatise on Transfigurative conversion at the fundamental level or some such thing. "A lie is nothing new to me."

"Why on earth would I lie to you about what I'm reading? Because you would? It is one of Rachel McGinty's series of novels." She sat up straight, put down her cup, and pulled off the dark book jacket, revealing a picture of a broad-shouldered, long-haired wizard in a kilt, bare-chested except for a plaid that was slung loosely over one shoulder. He was in the act of catching a swooning witch with one arm as his opposite hand was raising a very long wand, threatening something or someone unseen.

"You read..." He'd been about to say *trash like that*, but caught himself. He stared at the cover. The witch's breasts were literally heaving and the wizard's muscles rippled. There was something fascinating about it ...

"I've been reading since I was three," Minerva replied, reclining again.

"Hmpf. Never thought you'd read anything that vapid," Severus said.

"Secret vice. Rarely indulged in. But it's not completely vapid. Elspeth saves the best ones for me, and besides, sometimes a bit of escapism is good, Professor. You should try it. If you're able." She looked at him with an expression that declared him to be devoid of any imagination or ability to relax.

"I have better things to do with my time."

"I'm sure." Minerva turned back to her book, but as she did so, she muttered something about *Death Eater revels*.

"What did you say?" Severus demanded.

"Just wondering to myself what you find fun, that's all."

"Certainly not that trash," Severus said. He stood and plucked the book from Minerva's hands. Before she could do more than sit up indignantly, he had flipped back through the pages and found a lurid passage. "*The rough wool of his plaid whispered its harsh caress against her delicately flushed bosom...*"

Minerva snatched the book back. "You have no manners, Mr Snape. I should have just said it was a book on organic Transfiguration."

"Why bother putting it in a plain brown wrapper if you aren't going to lie about what you're reading?"

Minerva took in a deep breath and let it out in a chuff. "That would be your first instinct, wouldn't it? Lie?"

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Well, you do it often enough. And covering that book..."

"I am not in the habit of lying, unlike some, and I keep the book covered because Elspeth gave it to me that way, and because the cover is rather distracting."

"I do not lie habitually."

"You lie just for the pleasure of it, even when caught red-handed. I remember your sixth year..."

"All right, fine, bring up my student years. That's fair enough," Severus said bitterly, feeling wronged.

"Aye, it is fair. You're not that long out of school, and we all know what you were doing until Dumbledore, for whatever reason, decided to pluck you from the mire you'd got yourself stuck in, and give you..."

"We are not discussing this."

"What, don't like the truth? Just goes to prove my point: you have no respect for the truth and would lie to me for any reason or no reason, just to get away with it."

"Ask me whatever you want, then, and I'll tell you the truth. I'll take a wand oath to tell the truth if you can't trust me that far."

Minerva looked at him for a moment. "Nae, no wand oath. Tell the truth with no consequences if you do lie, no consequences but how you feel about yourself and how I might view you. Tell the truth just because you are *honourable* enough to do so when you say you are, not because you may face some punishment if you don't."

"Ask."

"Anything ..." Minerva waited to see whether he wished to lay any conditions, but Severus only gave a slight nod. "All right ... have you ever murdered someone?"

"Murder is a legal term. I won't split hairs about whether I've committed murder...though I could, and truthfully deny it. But I have killed. And not, strictly speaking, in self-defence."

Severus watched Minerva's reaction. She paled slightly, but her gaze didn't waver as she took it in. "I suppose I knew that," she said. "I don't know as I wanted it confirmed."

"Why did you ask, then?"

Minerva twitched a shrug. "I suppose it's a thought that occurs to me on an almost daily basis. It's ... not easy working beside a known Death Eater, even one whom Albus

vouches for, especially after having lost ..." Minerva swallowed hard, and now she averted her eyes.

"Now you know. Will you be more comfortable now?" Snape asked acidly.

"Truthfully, I have no idea."

"Now you answer a question of mine...*truthfully*," Severus said.

"I already have, and more than one."

"You just don't want me asking a personal question. We have the time...Dumbledore's not here yet. I answered yours."

"Go ahead, then. Ask."

Snape looked at Minerva, then at her book. Minerva thought a slight smile flittered across his face...and not a very nice one.

"Have you ever been with a man?"

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "I am with one right now."

"You know what I mean."

"Old spinster teacher, reading trashy novels with the covers obscured, must be repressed and inexperienced and has to get her kicks vicariously, eh? That may be what you *meant*, but your *intent* was just to embarrass. That is a very personal question, but I'll answer it. I have been with not only a man, but with *men*, plural. Although admittedly, it was only one at a time, so I suppose I am rather staid by some people's standards." Minerva noted with satisfaction that Severus had the grace to blush. "Now I could ask you about *your* sex life, but I'm afraid I never went through the adolescent phase of being pruriently curious about the intimate lives of others, and as I'm well past adolescence now, and I truly have no desire to know anything about your sexual habits, I'll skip that, thanks." She shuddered.

Severus seemed about to say something, but then shook his head. If he'd been moved to apologise at all, the impulse was gone as quickly as it appeared.

"So, why did you leave the Death Eaters and You-Know-Who?" Minerva asked...again, something she genuinely wanted to know. Let Severus waste his questions on topics he likely didn't really care about; Minerva was going to take advantage of this opportunity.

Severus looked up at her, then looked away. "Most people wonder why I joined."

"I'm sure that's as dull an answer as any that your fellows might give...variations on a theme. But ... I think most stay or leave for one reason: fear," Minerva said. "I could see you staying with him out of fear, or out of inertia, but ... nae, your reason for leaving must be more complicated than that. And then Dumbledore defending you, as well, and accepting you into the Order? He never went into detail about why he would do that, why he trusts you."

"And I won't, or can't. Dumbledore ... he can speak about his reasons." Severus snorted. "Believe me, it wasn't out of any sympathy for me."

"But what made you leave? Or did you really? Did You-Know-Who send you to Dumbledore?"

Severus shook his head. "That would be the simple answer to give you, and easy for me," Snape admitted, "but no. It is true that the Dark Lord wanted me teaching at Hogwarts. He wanted me to spy for him, to undermine Dumbledore in petty but insidious ways, and to influence Slytherin students to join him. But ... the Headmaster had already rejected my application. It was only later, when I came to him because ... because of my own reasons, that he arranged to hire me and to give me the protection of the Order of the Phoenix. But I did join the Order freely, and not at the request of the Dark Lord or for his purpose."

"So, your reasons?" Minerva prodded.

"There were ..." Severus sighed and rubbed his eyes, suddenly seeming weary and much, much older. "The Dark Lord was pursuing an agenda that I could not. His aims, I came to see, were for himself alone...not for any of us, any of the Death Eaters. We were merely tools. And he hated purebloods as much as Muggle-borns and Muggles. I think that in a way, he hated purebloods even more. He wanted to grind pureblood society beneath his heel as much as he wished to revenge himself on the Muggle world. He only adopted the cause he did because it was a convenient means to personal power and revenge. I ... I grew to hate it all, and to hate myself." Severus took a swallow of cold tea. "I did consider another way out...a coward's way, you might call it...but there were still some advantages, some rewards, to being allied with the Dark Lord, and for a while, it was simply safer. I was not alone in believing that the Dark Lord would win. It's good to be on the winning side, particularly when being on the losing side would be so personally disastrous. So I stayed. Then he ... His targets became personal, personal to him. They were only minor threats in the big scheme. He targeted ... people I knew. Some whose lives I valued more than I valued his, and one who ..." Severus shook his head. "He still killed them. My defection did nothing, changed nothing. But now I can live for vengeance."

Minerva nodded. He must be speaking of Lily; they'd grown up together and had seemed to be friends. The Potters had gone into hiding almost immediately after Snape joined the Order. The timing was no coincidence, she saw now. And Dumbledore believed that Voldemort was only temporarily vanquished when he attacked and killed James and Lily...and tried to kill their son.

"You believe You-Know-Who will return, too, then?"

"I do. If he were gone, I would know it. His magic is weak, very weak, and I can barely feel his Mark on me, but he is not dead. He lingers, a shadow, but he lingers." Severus gripped his left arm with his right hand, his eyes downcast, his face still and unreadable.

Minerva sighed. "He's lingering in other ways, too. His effect on the wizarding world ... it's slow to heal, and if he returns ..."

"When he returns, we will be waiting for him."

"Aye, but so will his followers, and there are still those who preach his message, even if they don't name him."

Severus shrugged. "That message was not an invention of the Dark Lord, you know. He just knew how to exploit it, use it for his own ends. We can't stop that."

"We could try! And you, you're Head of Slytherin...you could counter it if you chose to."

"Really?" Severus asked with a snort. "Even if I wanted to, even if I didn't need at least to appear neutral so that I can rejoin the Dark Lord on his return...what use is a spy who can't spy?...it would be fruitless. The lessons are too entrenched; I could do nothing to change it even if I wanted to."

Minerva's jaw tightened. "You would just give up, then?"

"You couldn't understand," Severus said dismissively. "And as long as I can bring about the Dark Lord's downfall, play a role in his final defeat, nothing else matters."

"You complain that You-Know-Who's agenda was personal, but so is yours! You only want revenge, you only want to kill *Vahim*; you don't care about the wizarding world or innocent lives!"

"What I cared about ... it's gone. And I don't see that the wizarding world is caring about me; why should I care about it? Let it take care of itself."

"That is the most crude, the most heartless..."

"You asked for truth. Not pretty, is it?"

"I don't believe that you are that unfeeling about the rest of the world," Minerva said. "You may believe it, but I think you convince yourself of it." She shook her head. "But if you aren't careful, it will become you, if you keep going over it and over it, keep shoving away any warmer feelings, any compassion, any desire for justice...you used to believe in justice! You may have had your own ideas about what it meant, but you did believe in it."

"Justice is simply another name for revenge, used by those who are weak," Severus replied. "I cannot afford to be weak."

"But don't you want to be happy? How can you be happy if you allow yourself nothing but thoughts of revenge and alienation?"

"I've always been alienated," Severus said tonelessly. "And it remains an obvious fact of my life."

"It doesn't need to be ... you could have friends, relationships, *connections* that matter. Don't you want that?"

"You've already asked your question, Professor, and I've answered it and more."

"All right, so you ask me something else."

Severus let out a breath. He really was not interested in McGonagall. But she had him speaking of painful topics ... "You started to say something about losses, losses in the war against the Dark Lord. What losses?"

"My brother, two cousins, an aunt, numerous friends and former students, all dead ... and then Paulie ..."

"Paulie? A lover?"

Minerva snorted. "You are obsessed with my sex life, aren't you, Mr Snape? Nae, not a lover. The grandson of a close friend, a witch I was at school with. Paul Rosier, a few years older than you..."

"He was a Death Eater!" Severus remembered young Rosier, a tall beanpole of a man, quiet, his heavy fringe often falling in his eyes; he'd shove it back with long, slim fingers.

"I know. And that was a loss. He had so much potential. And now he's in Azkaban. Lost for life. As are so many other wizards and witches who could have made positive contributions to the wizarding world instead of trying to destroy it."

"He was a fool to have joined the Dark Lord."

"And were you?" Minerva asked.

"I ... had my reasons at the time. They seemed good ones." Severus barked a short, mirthless laugh. "And the funny thing is, one of the reasons I joined was ... was one of the reasons I left. Vengeance, you see. The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"Until you discovered otherwise," Minerva said.

Severus shrugged. "Maybe ... it is true that even ... even when I left, I didn't really want to save my enemy. It was simply part of the package."

"Means to an end?"

"Collateral damage," Severus clarified. "Or, in this case, it was supposed to be collateral rescue. Didn't work out that way."

"The Potters," Minerva said.

"Don't say that name to me!"

"Painful, is it?"

"You wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't I? Do you think that Severus Snape is the only human being ever to suffer?"

"It is what I experience. That is all I have. My own experience."

"That is a sad statement."

"It is what it is. At least I don't fake fellow feeling."

"Nae, but you don't let any of your natural fellow feeling develop. You may be a miserable man, Snape, but you're no psychopath, whatever you may pretend."

"It works for me."

"Not very well."

Severus restrained his eye-roll. "Why should you care?"

"Other than for your own good, I care because teaching beside you for who-knows-how-long in the future would be a lot more pleasant if you were at least collegial...and you'd be happier, too."

Severus snorted. "I'd be happier if the Headmaster would arrive." He opened his watch. "It's going on half past three. I should have just left."

"And then made one of us hunt you down and bring you back for the meeting?"

"You say you never lie, but you lied to me just this afternoon," Severus said with a start, as if suddenly realising something.

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "I did?"

"You said I couldn't Apparate back if I left, but you Apparated here. You didn't arrive by Portkey!" Severus said.

"I did Apparate here," Minerva said, laughing at Severus's tone...self-righteous, pleased, and indignant all at once. "Dumbledore's wards don't pertain to me. You don't think that he uses a Portkey every time he wants to spend time at his own home, do you? Obviously, the wards are adjusted to let certain people through."

"And he lets you just Apparate here?"

"Of course."

"Just how close are you two?" Severus asked. He certainly wouldn't give any of his co-workers admission to his wards, nor anyone else whom he could think of, not unless the Dark Lord ordered him to.

Minerva smirked. "We are very old friends, not just colleagues. My loyalty to him doesn't arise out of my position as his deputy. It's inextricable from our relationship. We trust each other. So naturally he would give me access and egress through his wards. It's also simply practical, since I visit often."

"Gryffindors," Severus said sourly. "You two always are hand-in-glove at Hogwarts. And you seem ..."

"What?"

Snape frowned. "Impenetrable. It's always as if a person has walked in on the middle of a conversation, and in another language, too. Excluding."

"Really? Hm! That's probably partly because you're new to the staff, Severus. You just feel like an outsider, but it doesn't need to stay that way. Isn't there anyone on staff you'd like to get to know better? Someone whose company you enjoy, someone you could imagine being friends with...or at least, friendly colleagues?"

"No."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "No one at all? Truly?"

Severus scowled at her. "All right. Perhaps there may be one or two who aren't completely unbearable." When Minerva just sat there waiting for him to continue, he sighed. "Flitwick is reasonably intelligent and entertaining. And he doesn't look down on me."

Minerva laughed. "Nae, that he wouldn't, would he? Not without a ladder!"

Severus gave a crooked grin. "I meant he seems to accept me. Doesn't seem to be hiding any disdain. Speaks to me as he does anyone, I suppose."

"He is a good wizard," Minerva said, nodding. "Anyone else?"

He shrugged. "You and I have had a few conversations that weren't entirely tedious."

Minerva hooted. "What an endorsement! *Not entirely tedious.*" She chuckled. "And today's conversation?"

"I have not yet decided," Severus replied.

"If you could become used to being truthful with me, I believe I would find our future conversations 'not entirely tedious'. Provided, of course, that you manage to avoid the temptation to bring up my sex life."

Severus smirked. "I thought that friends were supposed to be able to discuss anything."

"In the appropriate context, aye, that is ideal. You simply need to fine-tune your sense of the appropriate."

"And discussing my past as a follower of the Dark Lord is appropriate?"

Minerva shrugged one shoulder. "Not always, but sometimes. And it was good to discuss today. I think I might be able to speak more easily of other things with you now, have ordinary conversations without those questions hovering about unasked."

Severus nodded. "You said you lost friends and family to Death Eaters ..."

"Aye." Minerva waved her wand and rewarmed the tea in the pot, then poured some into each of their cups.

"I don't think ... that is, was I ..."

"My brother, aunt, and cousins were killed whilst you were still a student here, and it was term time, so even if you joined You-Know-Who as a student, you weren't involved in those," Minerva said, her tones clipped.

"I didn't believe I was." She hadn't mentioned when her friends had been killed, though, Severus thought. He swallowed and shifted in his chair. No sense in bringing that up ...

"But you feared you might have been."

Severus's head moved in a noncommittal gesture. "Not afraid, no ..."

"What do you fear most, Severus?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen too much to be afraid."

"Really? So being a Death Eater and then a traitor to You-Know-Who is a cure for all fear?"

Severus snorted. "Of course not."

"I didn't think so." Minerva gazed at him expectantly.

"I suppose ... Gods, why did I agree to be truthful? I suppose I fear humiliation. And rejection. They seem to go together."

"That will get better as you get older, hopefully. And as you develop trusting relationships."

Severus rolled his eyes. "That is for you Gryffindors."

"Not just for Gryffindors..."

"And Hufflepuffs."

"For human beings, Severus. We all need them."

"I can't."

"I hope you change your mind about that."

"What about you? What do you fear most?"

"Losing ones I love," Minerva said without hesitation. "Especially having them taken from me violently."

"As you've already experienced."

"Unfortunately. And I worry about the ones I still have left. But since You-Know-Who has vanished, I've relaxed a wee bit."

Severus thought a moment. She had questioned him about his defection from the Dark Lord, and asked about whether he'd ever committed murder; she'd said that it had been on her mind. Despite her casual manner with him, perhaps she feared him, even with Dumbledore vouching for him.

"Do you fear me? Fear that I will kill someone while I'm at Hogwarts, someone you care about?"

Minerva shook her head slowly. "Nae. Not really. I don't believe you would now, but ... if Dumbledore were wrong about you, or if you changed your mind ... you might if you believed it expedient, if you thought it was in your best interest. But if Dumbledore's right to trust you, then ... I don't think you are likely to kill your colleagues in their sleep," she said, trying to sound light and dismissive.

"You are unsure of my character, and yet you urge me to be happy and make friends? That sounds quite contradictory, Professor."

"Does it? Aside from simply wishing you could be happy because ... because I have seen too much unhappiness, and because I don't remember ever seeing you truly happy, and that fact saddens me, aside from that, if you were happy, if you felt rooted and at home, you would find it harder to betray us." To Minerva, that sounded like a reason that a Slytherin could accept.

"Hmpf. I can't grow soft."

Minerva chortled. "I can't imagine that. But I think you could be happier, and you could belong. We all want you to, you know."

"Even you? With your fears of the Death Eater slithering about in the bosom of Hogwarts?"

"But you see, you wouldn't be that. You'd be just Severus Snape...if that's enough for you. It's whom I've been talking to this afternoon."

Severus shook his head. "It won't happen."

"Perhaps not," Minerva said softly. "But it was a thought ..."

A sharp snick came from the kitchen, and a moment later, Albus Dumbledore ambled into the sitting room.

"I do apologise for the delay. I hope the afternoon hasn't been too dull for you!"

"It has not been entirely tedious," Minerva replied.

Severus smirked at the bemusement on Dumbledore's face.

"I see you made tea."

"Aye, but there's little left, and it's cold. I'll make a fresh pot." Minerva stood.

"No, no, my dear. Allow me. I am sorry to have detained you so long. Thank you both for waiting!"

"Professor McGonagall explained to me that I had little choice but to remain."

"Good that you were both here to keep each other company then," Dumbledore said cheerfully, waving his wand and Levitating the teapot. "I'll be back in two shakes!"

"I'll help..."

"No need. Stay here and keep Severus company. Shan't be long!"

His expression dull, his eyes, unreadable, Severus watched the older wizard bustle out to the kitchen.

"Flitwick and Sprout should be here soon," Minerva remarked, looking at the mantel clock.

"I hope the meeting is a brief one," Severus said. "I have business to return to."

"It's a holiday, Professor. What business?"

"Brewing."

"Ah. Well, it will be a pity if you don't join us for dinner. It would be a good investment, you know."

"How so?"

"Oh, building connections ... I'm sure that you would find it advantageous in the future. But if you'd prefer to brew ..."

"Hmpf."

"I'm going to go see if Dumbledore has any biscuits besides these," Minerva said, standing.

"Where's the loo?"

"Up the stairs, first on the left."

Severus went upstairs; Minerva went into the kitchen. Albus was pouring boiling water over tea leaves. Darjeeling, Minerva noted with approval.

"It'll be ready in just a few minutes, my dear," Albus said, sending the kettle back to the hob.

"Mm, I just came to see if we still had any Ginger Newts left or whether you'd fed them all to Fawkes." She opened a cupboard and pulled out a crock. A few biscuits rattled within it.

"You do know how Fawkes likes a nice Ginger Newt after his burning day," Albus said somewhat apologetically. "I'll be sure to get you more."

"You owe me more than just a few Ginger Newts, Dumbledore," Minerva said, putting the few remaining biscuits on a plate. "You said we were meeting with Snape before the regular Heads' meeting. You said nothing about doing a bunk and leaving me alone with him."

"Well ... I don't believe I *precisely* said that you and I would both be here." Dumbledore busied himself pouring fresh milk into a small pitcher, not looking at Minerva.

"Albus Dumbledore! If you..."

"Now, now, Minerva," Albus said, "you know that Severus and I have a prickly relationship at its best. He'd hardly relax around me. He seems to like you. After all, you were one of his favourite teachers when he was a student."

"Pah! I doubt that. And it was not the most relaxing afternoon...for either of us."

Albus sighed. "I am sorry, my dear. I thought that it might also be beneficial for you to spend a little time with him outside of Hogwarts. I know you haven't been very comfortable having him on staff, though you've done admirably in putting your personal feelings aside when you work with him. I hoped you might find him ... not congenial, I suppose, but at least you might find an easier mode of dealing with him."

Minerva's eyes narrowed. "Do not do this again, Dumbledore. I am not a child. I do not require lessons 'for my own good'. You should have...and could have...told me your intent right from the start."

"You are completely correct. *Mea culpa*. I will make it up to you, I promise. But ..."

"But?"

"Are you more comfortable now?"

"We shall see," Minerva said. She looked up at the sound of footsteps. Severus was coming back down the stairs. "We will discuss this more later."

"I am certain we will," Dumbledore said brightly, waving his wand and Levitating the fully laden tea tray into the sitting room.

Severus looked at the plate with its three lonely Ginger Newts, and declined Minerva's offer of one. Instead, he took a shortbread from the tin on the coffee table. He noticed that Minerva did not offer one to Dumbledore, but set the plate in front of herself. The Headmaster evidently either did not like Ginger Newts, and his deputy knew it, or the wizard was in McGonagall's bad graces at the moment.

"So, Severus, I wanted to speak with you about the next Quidditch match," Dumbledore began.

"You called us here early to discuss the *Quidditch* match? Three *hours* early?" Severus asked, put out.

"Not just Quidditch, dear boy, no, not at all, but since Professors Sprout and Flitwick will be here shortly, I thought this a topic we could cover in what time we have left."

"Hmpf. Very well."

After a discussion of the previous Slytherin match...which would have been considered rough and bloody even by professional standards...and some mild hints about what Snape's pregame speech might say about the values of sportsmanship, couched in the most Slytherin terms he could find, their attention was distracted by Flitwick's arrival. His Portkey must have been poorly tuned, or else Dumbledore had a peculiar sense of humour, since the Charms master landed right in a large verdigris bird bath.

Flitwick didn't seem in the least incommoded, however, and laughed brightly as he hopped down into a bed of daffodils. A wave of his wand, and the little wizard was quite dry again.

Albus opened the door to the newcomer. "Welcome, welcome, Filius!"

The Charms instructor stepped up to the door and grinned. "Thank you very much for letting me 'make a splash' with my arrival! I think I agree with you now: sometimes arriving quietly is preferable over arriving with a splash!" The two wizards chuckled over their mutual joke, and Severus made a mental note to watch his metaphors around the Headmaster, lest he end up off a deep end or on pins and needles or tenterhooks. He stifled a shudder.

Sprout arrived only a few moments later. She tut-tutted about the state of Dumbledore's gardens and offered her assistance with them, which Dumbledore appreciated but declined. Apparently the barmy old sod liked his gardens as they were.

An hour and a half later...and it could have been reduced to a half hour, to Severus's mind, given how many tangents they took, and how much joking about there had been...Dumbledore suggested that they adjourn to a wonderful Jamaican restaurant he knew. A few charms and Transfigurations to Flitwick's attire, and they'd all be set for a Muggle evening out. The other three seemed as enthusiastic about the prospect as Dumbledore was, and Flitwick cheerfully submitted himself to Minerva's eye and wand, which decked him out in an electric blue leisure suit several years out of date, but at least it was recognisably Muggle, and Flitwick was pleased with it.

Dumbledore slipped upstairs and emerged a few minutes later wearing what could be termed an "ice cream suit." White trousers, white jacket, a red-and-white striped waistcoat, and a white ruffled shirt, but with a garish red and gold bow tie. The old wizard was even wearing spats, of all things. They would all certainly attract notice going out like that, particularly with the witches still wearing their usual ankle-length skirts, and Sprout in an additional Hufflepuff-yellow over-robe.

Severus frowned. He really had not wanted to go out with them all, but Dumbledore had said it was his treat, and it would be foolish to turn down a free meal. The day was already shot. And he wouldn't need to adjust his clothing, since he was wearing black jeans, black Doc Martens, a grey shirt, and a cropped black leather jacket. Still, he hesitated to agree.

"If you wish to return home, I can give you a Portkey into Hogsmeade so that you can Apparate back easily from there," Dumbledore said, "but I think you'd enjoy the food. It would certainly interest the palate of any Potions master."

Severus's lips parted, but he couldn't agree or disagree.

"Come, Professor," Minerva said, stepping up to him. "I've been there before. I can give you a Side-Along. Let Dumbledore bring the other two. And since the restaurant's in Manchester, I believe it would be only a short hop home for you at the end of the evening, hm?"

"Oh, very well," Severus sighed. He needed to eat, after all.

Sprout and Flitwick both beamed at him. Severus suppressed his smile. Perhaps it would also be good practice in socialising with ordinary witches and wizards. He glanced at Minerva as she took his arm. He wouldn't promise to be truthful, though.

The room disappeared with a jerk and a crack.

Prompt: When one of the pairs listed above [Harry and Draco, Snape and McGonagall, Luna and Draco] find themselves trapped in a room for several hours, they decide to take turns asking questions, which the other promises to answer honestly. At first, the questions start out pretty barbed, but as the conversation continues, the two find common ground.

Prompter: igrockspock