

Right Nor Wrong

by kellychambliss

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But he sees a great deal all the same. Told from Filch's pov; eventual
Snape/McGonagall. Set during OoP with guest appearances by Umbridge and Mrs
Norris.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 3

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A/N - - I've always been fascinated by the character of Argus Filch. On the surface, he's presented as a cartoonish curmudgeon, a caricature of school-janitor stereotypes. But I sense hidden depths in him: his concern for his cat, his willingness to stay in a job that it doesn't make sense for him to hold (surely his work could be done much faster, better, and more cheaply if the school hired someone with magical ability). So I've been wanting to explore his story, and this fic is the result. And of course, there's a Severus/Minerva pairing (eventually), too, because they make everything better.

Someone else who made this story much, much better is my superb beta-reader, The Real Snape. Thank you!

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"I can't tell you, Mr Filch, how good it is to find someone here at Hogwarts who has the right way of thinking."

That's what Professor Umbridge -- no, *Headmistress* Umbridge now -- had said earlier that afternoon, and Argus Filch paused in his endless floor-mopping to let those words slide through his mind once more:

"The right way of thinking."

She'd invited him into her office, the Headmistress had. Not the official Head's office with all the portraits, the room Dumbledore used -- it weren't cosy enough, she'd said. But Argus had heard the talk in the staffroom about how Dumbledore's office wouldn't let her in. Sealed itself against her, it had.

Argus understood why she might want to hide that fact from him, but she didn't have to: it weren't nothing to be ashamed of. Dumbledore were a great man, true, but even great men could be out of touch. The old Headmaster didn't understand, the way the new Headmistress did, just what things was like on an ordinary day in the school; he weren't dealing with them kids one-on-one. Dumbledore were too soft by half, so of course he were going to disapprove of the new Headmistress's ideas on discipline. Only stood to reason.

So Dumbledore's office wouldn't let the new Headmistress in, and Argus understood. Didn't agree, but understood.

Still, at first he hadn't felt quite easy in Professor Umbridge's office, not with all them cats on the wall -- he preferred his cats alive, thank you kindly. But eventually he'd relaxed a bit, after she'd given him tea and chatted about this and that.

Then she told him he had "the right way of thinking."

Well, he didn't know about that -- "the right way." Those sorts of words reminded him too uncomfortably of that long-ago conversation from his seventh summer, the conversation that had changed his life.

His grandmother Filch had come to visit, but she'd barely spoken to Argus and his older sister Jessa. Instead, she's stayed cooped up with their mother, and there had been talk and tears, arguments conducted in tense whispers, long sessions behind closed doors. Somehow Argus had known the talk were about him, and finally one night, he had crept downstairs to crouch outside the lounge door and listen.

"Now, Alma, you know the boy's not right." It were his nan's voice, low, but confident and sharp, the way she always were. "No good will come of denying it."

"But he's such a sweet lad. . ." Argus's mam, tearfully.

"That's never the point, and you know it. Sweet lad or no, the sooner you send him to live with the Muggle side of the family, the better for everyone. Having a Squi. . . a brother like him won't make it easy for Jessa to find a husband, you know. And the boy will be happier with his own kind, you know he will. It's not right to keep him here, where he'll never fit in. Do you want him to be seeing every day how there's summat wrong with him?"

"No, of course not, but I. . ."

"You mustn't be selfish. Think of Jessa. Think of the lad. You're without your man now Josper is dead, and you say you're not wanting to take another. Fair enough. But a boy needs a da or an uncle or summat. Send him to the Muggles, Alma. Do the right thing."

Argus had slunk back to bed then, not wanting to hear his mam agree that he weren't right and that sending him away were.

Of course, not hearing it didn't make it not true. In the end, he'd been taken to live with his Muggle aunt and uncle, and it hadn't been too bad. They had been kind to him in their own way.

No, it hadn't been bad. But Argus still didn't know if it had been right.

And he didn't know about the Headmistress's "right way of thinking," neither. To Argus's mind, there weren't really no "right" about it. Just common sense, that's all. Students -- boys especially, but all of 'em, truth be told -- they was careless and didn't consider nobbut themselves. It were the way of youth. These days, specially. It had been different when Argus were young. Kids then had been better, more respectful, like. But nowadays. . .

Point was, whether the brats was just thoughtless or whether they was genuine nasty pieces of work -- and a damn lot of them was just that -- they needed to be taught their place. Their minds wasn't fully-formed yet, so it were no good reasoning with 'em. You couldn't *tell* 'em nothing -- they had to *feel* it. That were the only way.

His uncle had said it, many times: "Not everybody can make sense of word talk. But there inn't nobody don't understand pain talk."

He'd been a hard man that way, Uncle Stan, but he'd had Argus's best interests at heart; that were something Argus had never doubted. Uncle had understood: what touched you, what hurt you. . . well, you didn't forget that in a hurry. You learnt. Stood to reason.

That's how it had been in the old days at Hogwarts, too. Thumbscrews. Whips. Paddles. Argus saw them all, in the dusty dungeon store rooms. The implements. He kept them oiled, polished, at the ready. Some day he were going to need them, and he didn't want to be caught unprepared.

Now, Uncle Stan, he wouldn't of held with no implements, Argus knew: the flat of his hand had been enough, or a belt, maybe, for the worse offenses.

But wizards was different. Harder, meaner. Argus saw that every day. Specially some o' this current lot. Too many entitled brats. Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff -- didn't matter, they was all the same. They all thought they was better than most everybody. Whether it were that Malfoy boy lording it over all and sundry, or them slapdash Weasley twins what thought they was Merlin's gift -- all of 'em believed the rules didn't apply to them. They ignored Argus's posted list of restrictions even though the Headmaster himself pointed it out every year, at the Start-of-Term feast. They tormented Mrs Norris every chance they got. Talked bad about the teachers. Lied.

And at night, they was constantly sneaking out of bed to indulge their filthy little habits. Oh, Argus saw them at it, that he did. All the time. All the time.

This lot needed the language of pain, real pain, and the new Headmistress understood that.

"I'll pass a decree, Argus," she'd said. "May I call you Argus?" He'd nodded, although he thought she were rushing things a little bit; Dumbledore hadn't called him "Argus" for several years after he'd started working as Hogwarts' caretaker.

At least she hadn't asked him to call her "Dolores." He'd of drawn the line there, he would. He wanted the proprieties to be observed. He had his place, and she had hers, and he wanted her -- and the rest of the staff -- to respect his limits. Which, he had to admit, most of them did, except for that poofter of a "Call me Gilderoy" Lockhart.

They wasn't his friends, and they didn't want to be, and he didn't want them to act as if they was.

Except perhaps for young Severus. But that were completely different.

Argus thought that maybe the Headmistress wanted to be his friend, and he were of two minds about that. She were going to need supporters, what with the very Castle being against her. Not to mention the rest of the staff. The teachers was all hostile to her -- just the sight of her, and Minerva McGonagall crackled with so much angry magic that Argus kept expecting to see scorch marks on the backs of her chairs. And Severus -- Argus had rarely heard his voice sound as smooth as it did when he talked to Headmistress Umbridge. Dangerous, that voice were, as Argus well knew.

So the Headmistress could use a friend, and Argus weren't necessarily opposed to being it. The school needed her sort of new ideas. On the other hand, he weren't comfortable with how close she seemed to the Minister.

The Minister. Argus curled a mental lip. Little fussbudget of a stuffed-shirt of a man, that Cornelius Fudge. Argus didn't trust him, and no more did Mrs Norris; hissed every time she saw him, Mrs Norris did. Man like that, he'd have no use for Argus's kind -- a Squib, and a working man.

Argus knew when he were being looked down on, and Fudge generally acted like Argus were one o' them heathen servants in the old movies his aunt used to watch on telly, the kind what wore turbans and was always made to salaam their so-called betters. Politicians was all alike -- only out for themselves and to stab the working person in the back.

So Argus didn't like that the new Headmistress seemed to be in the pocket of a man like that. And even worse, she appeared to fancy the bloke. Went all girlish -- well, even more girlish than usual -- when Fudge were around. Simpered and smiled and patted his arm all fluttery-like. Argus wanted to tell her to stop; he thought it unseemly, a grown woman acting like that.

But then again, it weren't none of his business. What he cared about now were the fact that the Headmistress understood about the need for discipline. Finally -- finally -- these damned kids was going to be taught some useful lessons that couldn't be got in no classroom.

He thought again of the Headmistress's words: "I'll pass a decree," she had said. And she'd given Argus permission to bring the disciplinary implements from the dungeon.

Corporal punishment. At last. It were finally going to happen, and it would be legal.

Argus needed it to be legal. Oh, he liked to threaten the brats with a taste of leather, liked to show them the shining manacles hanging in his office, but he wouldn't never of followed through as long as it were against the law.

Respect for the law were one of the lessons Uncle Stan had made sure Argus felt. Posh people always assumed working folk didn't have no regard for law and order, but that were codswallop. It were folk like him what most needed a world they could count on, where you knew what were expected of you and of everyone else.

Dumbledore, now -- say what you liked about him, say he'd gone barmy or gaga or what-you-will, but he were a man always stuck by his word. People said he broke the rules, were a law unto himself. . . well, all Argus could say were that he'd never seen it. Dumbledore set up the rules, told people what were expected of them and what they could expect of Hogwarts, and that's the way it always worked out. Argus hadn't never been done wrong by Dumbledore.

But still. Soft with the students, he were, Dumbledore. Much too soft.

Well. Things was going to change now. Not right, not wrong. Just sense. Just the way of the world.

Stood to reason.

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"Argus? If you could give me a moment?"

"Right you are, Headmistress."

It had got to be a ritual, this taking-of-tea in the Headmistress's office. At least once a week, she'd invite him in and give him a good strong cuppa and a custard cream, and she actually *listened* to his ideas. And now that he'd got the hang of ignoring them kittens on the wall, he enjoyed these teas very much.

He sat down on the pinkish-coloured settee near the fire and watched as the Headmistress settled herself in a matching armchair.

"You've been at Hogwarts a good many years, haven't you, Argus?" she asked, using her wand to send a cup of tea in his direction. He took it without spilling a drop and snagged the little milk pitcher she'd floated alongside him. But he wished she wouldn't. Just because people could do magic didn't mean they had to use it for every blessed little thing. Still, he were used to it by now; most of the time they didn't even know they was showing off.

"I been here since old Apollyon Pringle retired," Argus said. Now, *there* were a man who'd known how to handle students. Them what was punished by Pringle didn't never forget it -- some of them, Argus knew, bore the scars to this day. And they was much the better for it, Argus were bound.

"Were you here when, ah, Professor Snape was a student?" said the Headmistress, tilting her head to the side and smiling and blinking her eyes very fast. For an uncomfortable moment, Argus thought she might be flirting with him, but he decided not to notice. Better that way. He needed his wits about him, if he were going to have to talk about Severus.

"Aye," he said carefully. "I knew him then."

"He appears to be a brilliant man," the Headmistress continued. "His knowledge of potions is extraordinary."

She didn't seem to need a response to this statement, so Argus didn't make any.

"And I'm most impressed by the way he's earned the respect of the students. Unlikesome of the incompetent staff here," and the Headmistress gave a sniff, "he puts up with no nonsense. There's no misbehaving and whispering in *his* classroom, let me tell you. In fact, the students have a good deal of healthy fear of him."

Argus nodded. He were glad she understood that fear could be a healthy thing. But he still didn't know what she were after, talking about Severus like this, so he judged it better to stay mum.

"So of course you remember when Sev -- when Professor Snape joined the staff?" She hadn't changed her expression, but Argus suddenly had the feeling that her gaze were much sharper.

"Aye," he said again. 1981. There weren't much he forgot about Severus.

"And what can you tell me of his years here, Argus? Has he always been the sort of man he is now, silent and broody and mysterious?" She gave a little giggle, and her cheeks matched the pink of her cardigan. "I can assure you that I have good reasons for asking; I wouldn't want you to think me a gossip."

It's Severus she fancies, not Fudge As soon as this thought entered Argus's brain, he knew it were true.

This sort of thing happened to him, sometimes. Squib he might be, but that didn't mean he were without magic entirely. It were there, deep inside, shifting occasionally like murky sludge. Sometimes he felt it like a shock, like when he'd been a boy and had shuffled his feet across the carpet so he could touch his aunt on the shoulder and startle her with the spark of it.

And sometimes, like now, the magic showed up as a spurt of Legilimency, so that he knew with certainty what others was thinking.

What he knew at this moment were that the Headmistress wanted to have sex with Severus Snape. Argus could feel the desire pulsing from her in hot waves as her eyes glittered at him and the tip of her pink tongue made darting motions over her lips.

"I'm trying to understand him," the Headmistress said. "I think he might be like us, Argus; I think Professor Snape might have the right way of thinking, too. I need to get to know him." She gazed at Argus expectantly, and he knew he'd have to answer her.

"Snape's a deep one," he said finally. "Quiet. Don't no one know him very well, I don't think."

"But he must have *someone* he spends time with. Talks to, at least occasionally. Has a drink in the Broomsticks with."

Argus shook his head. "I wouldn't know, Headmistress. I don't frequent that establishment."

"Well, but. . . he's a man, Argus. He must have. . ." She lowered her eyes and spoke in a breathy whisper that had Argus straining to hear, "he must have. . . needs. I do hope you understand me, for I'm just not able to be more direct. I don't like to be. . . indelicate. But I need to know who his confidantes are."

Argus tipped back the last of his tea to gain a bit more time to think of something to say, but nothing came to him. He settled for repeating himself.

"I wouldn't know, Headmistress."

"Well, then, I'm going to ask you to find out." Her voice were stronger now, but still sweet. Argus felt like squirming, both for reasons that he didn't understand and some that he did.

"You're a resourceful man," she went on. "You'd have to be, to keep this big old castle running by yourself. You shouldn't have any trouble finding out who Professor Snape's friends are, or whether he has any. . ." Again she dropped her voice to a whisper: ". . . romantic attachments. And, of course, I know I can count on you to be discreet."

Then to Argus's astonishment, she suddenly reached over to take his hand and pat it; he tried not to wince as the edge of one of her sparkling rings hit his arthritic swollen knuckle. "Am I right in thinking I can rely on you, Argus?"

There were something hypnotic about her intense gaze and her soft little voice, and Argus found himself nodding.

"Good!" The Headmistress sat back, flicking her tongue one last time and fixing her pop eyes on him; though it felt disloyal to think it, Argus could understand why the brats called her "The Toad."

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Argus walked back towards his office, moving slowly, his bad knee stiff from the motionless hour he'd spent on the Headmistress's settee. So she wanted him to find out about Severus's "romantic attachments," did she? This were. . . this were. . .

This were something he had no words for, not at the moment. There was too many sensations rumbling around in his head and gut for him to sort them all out just now. He needed a good quiet think.

Two second-year Hufflepuffs went clattering past him, robes flying as they ran, shrill voices rasping his nerves.

"No running in the corridors!" Argus shouted after them, but of course they paid him no mind. Little bleeders.

The trip to his office had never seemed so long, and Argus covered the last bit in as close to a run as he could manage, so eager was he to close himself into one of the only two spaces in the entire castle that belonged to him and him alone.

The other space. . . well, maybe he'd visit it later.

The first sight that met his eyes after he shut his door were the gleaming pair of manacles hanging above his filing cabinets. They'd been given to him by his predecessor, Apollyon Pringle, on the day Pringle retired. Argus had spent a term with him, learning the ropes, and he'd admired the manacles on more than one occasion. The old man hadn't been allowed to use them for years, but he'd never got rid of them, and his last act before leaving had been to press them into Argus's hands.

"A talisman, my boy," he'd said, and after he'd gone, Argus went to the library to look up the word. Working with Pringle had been as much of an education as went on in any of the classrooms. Well-read, he'd been. No one expected it, of course, not from a caretaker. But Apollyon had learnt Argus any number of things that had nothing to do with being a janitor. Words like "predecessor." Things from books. Things like the fact that a "talisman" were an "object of magical protection."

And Argus had thought of the manacles as just that ever since: his protection, his connection to magic, his emblem of power and control. Just looking at them calmed him, made him feel strong.

Turning from them finally, he were greeted with a second pleasing sight: Mrs Norris, curled into Argus's favourite armchair near the hearth. She stretched a paw towards him and mewed a welcome, and suddenly Argus felt safe and at home.

Technically he were supposed to clean the Great Hall and the entry after dinner, a task that often took the better part of his evening: just thinking the amount of food and drink that routinely got spilled, thrown, and stepped-on during the meal made him feel tired.

But tonight, Argus decided, the Great Hall could get stuffed. Tonight, he were taking the evening off. He had better things to do than clean up after spoiled brats. And if the Headmistress were unhappy, well, he'd just tell her that he'd wanted to get a head start on looking at Professor Snape's love life.

As an excuse, it were perfect. It weren't even a lie.

He knew all about who Severus bedded. And he liked to look.

First, though, he needed a drink and a think.

Another five minutes found Argus in his armchair, a glass of firewhisky in his hand, Mrs Norris in his lap, and any number of pleasant and unpleasant thoughts in his head.

Part of him were rather chuffed that the new Headmistress understood that he, Argus Filch, were the best person to wrinkle out the truth about Severus's love life. Argus knew the Castle and its secrets better than anyone except probably Dumbledore himself, but few was sharp enough to recognise this fact. He were under no illusions about how most people saw him: a useless old Squib fit for nobbut scrubbing toilets and having the life tormented out of him.

So there were pleasure to be had in being relied upon. And he thought it might feel good to tell Headmistress Umbridge what he knew, to have someone to share his thoughts and interests with.

But.

He could just imagine what Severus would do if he thought Argus were telling personal details about him to anyone, let alone to the new Headmistress what all the teachers hated. And Argus were mixed up in his mind about whether he really *did* want to share the things he knew. Least said, soonest mended, Uncle Stan had always said. There was things in his life Argus didn't want to change, and talk might end up doing just that.

Plus, even if Argus told the Headmistress everything he knew about Severus's sex life, it wouldn't do her no good. She had about as much chance of getting Severus into her drawers as Mrs Norris had of becoming Minister of Magic.

He certainly didn't think any the less of her for being interested in Severus. Not at all. Severus were a man what made people feel things -- strong things, dark things, needy things. The Headmistress weren't the first person to want him. To want to understand him or save him or join in his righteous darkness. To want to share the power of him. To have him want them.

The way Argus had once thought *he* might want the lad.

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Severus had still been nobbut a boy when he came back to Hogwarts as a professor. So lean that his Muggle trousers could barely stay on his hips, if hips they could even be called. Bone handles, more like.

That were probably one reason he'd took to wearing long, sweeping black robes and cloaks. That and the fact that he needed some way to make the students mind him.

He'd always been a sullen, moody boy, and as a teacher, he were even more so. Curled his lip, and flapped around in them trailing robes, and let his long hair hang in strings. He looked frightening, Argus had to admit; he himself sometimes forgot that the new teacher were just that scrawny lad Severus. In no time, he'd become Professor Snape, Potions Master, and woe betide anyone what didn't give him his due.

Once Argus had thought about it, he realised that this teacher-version of the lad shouldn't of surprised him. Even as a schoolboy, Severus had inspired strong feelings in people. Them Gryffindor troublemakers, for instance, Potter and Black. They felt it, that power Severus had. Oh, they hadn't known what to do with it, of course; they'd just bullied him or made a joke of him, because that were the way they dealt with anything they didn't understand. Like Squib caretakers what wouldn't bow and scrape to 'em.

Though, when he were being honest in the privacy of his own head, Argus had to admit that he hadn't really recognised the nature of Severus's effect on himself, neither.

Not when the boy were a still a student, any road.

No, it weren't until Severus's first year teaching that Argus put a name to what he felt and acknowledged the stirrings in his groin for what they was.

He'd gone to the Potions classroom one evening on his usual cleaning rounds. Severus often worked late, but not in the classroom; he had a private potions lab in an alcove behind the supply cupboard, and he did his personal work there. Research and brewing potions for the hospital wing and the like.

It would of been as much as Argus's job were worth to go in there. He had strict instructions to "confine his janitorial activities" to the actual teaching space, and he were happy to oblige. He didn't need the aggro of more rooms to clean.

Most of the time, Argus did his work in the solitude he preferred, with only Mr Pumblechook, Mrs Norris's predecessor, to keep him company. Only rarely did Severus ever enter the classroom while Argus were in there, and when he did, he merely passed through with a curt nod.

Until that night. That night, when Argus and Mr Pumblechook arrived, Severus were there working, moving swiftly among several bubbling cauldrons set up across the front of the room. He looked up as Argus paused in the doorway.

"Ah, Mr Filch," he said. Surly as Severus could be, boy and man, he'd never been one of them to torment Argus. Mostly, he were polite enough. "You needn't bother to clean the classroom tonight; I'll do it magically later. As you see, I have a great deal of work proceeding at the moment."

"Aye," Argus had replied. But instead of turning to leave, as he were sure he had intended to, he stayed put and watched as Severus leant over the cauldrons again.

The lad bent smoothly, effortlessly, with the sort of suppleness that you only knew you'd had once you was too old and stiff to have it any longer. And all at once, Argus had been seized by a vision of Severus naked, bending not over a cauldron, but in front of Argus, on hands and knees, offering himself.

Clear as if it was really happening, Argus could see the long line of Severus's back as it curved into his arse, could see the muscles tighten under the taut skin of his lean flanks as he lowered himself, could see his balls, rosy-coloured under coarse black hair, peeking between his invitingly-spread legs.

So real was this image that Argus had to look back at the front of the room to see if Severus were still there; he jerked his head so hard his neck hurt next day. And of course the lad were still there, working on without noticing Argus, his expression utterly absorbed, his long fingers moving delicately above the steaming surfaces of his cauldrons.

Barely daring to breathe, Argus watched him a moment longer before turning to hurry away, Mr Pumblechook at his heels.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 3

Argus gets a gift from the Castle.

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That had been the beginning, but it weren't the end.

Back in his bed that night, the light from the fire and candles carefully extinguished, Argus had started to jerk himself off, panting in the darkness, Mr Pumblechook banished to the sitting room in the interests of privacy.

He'd tried to empty his mind as he pulled on himself under the covers, but he couldn't get the pictures of Severus out of his head. The more he tried to concentrate only on the sensation of his hand on his shaft, the more he were swamped by thoughts of the lad's pale skin gleaming in the firelight, of what his cock would look like standing proud and tall, waiting to be stroked or for someone to suck deep ...

... that thought pushed him over the edge, and Argus felt his hips shudder and buck as though they belonged to someone else. It were like a jinx, he always thought, the way the feeling took you over. Helpless, you was. Helpless.

As soon as he could pull himself back together, he got up to clean himself, hobbling awkwardly so that he didn't dribble on the sheets or floor. Just habit; no caretaker ever made himself extra work. Besides, it were nicer that way. Argus didn't really hold with bodily fluids.

He had thought maybe taking care of his needs would also take care of his interest in young Severus, but no.

Images of that pale, skinny body seemed to take up permanent residence in his mind's eye. He couldn't hardly look at the boy without his imagination peeling off the long, black robes; couldn't be near him without feeling almost dizzy at the smell of him, a combination of potions fumes and something sharper, something that reminded Argus of woodsmoke and his uncle's pipe and the scent of cold night air that Apollyon would bring back with him from his Friday-evening visits to the Hog's Head pub.

It were the smell not just of a man, but of Severus, and it never failed to make Argus hard. It were embarrassing, like being a schoolboy again, and yet it filled him with something he couldn't name, something deep and delicious and wanting.

He took to spending more and more time in the Potions classroom, and Severus would often be there, too. He were a loner, that boy, like Argus himself. Though Severus never said a word about his colleagues ... barely said a word about anything at all, truth be told ... Argus didn't think the other teachers did much to make him feel welcome. Sometimes McGonagall argued Quidditch with him, or Professor Flitwick chatted about students, but mostly, they left him alone.

It were the same for Argus, and thus he felt a kinship with the awkward lad, even considered inviting Severus to his sitting room for a wee nip. But he never could quite bring himself to do it.

Still, he thought Severus must be lonely, not having even a cat for company. He were broody and sometimes got snappish, but when that happened, Argus snapped right back. He always made a point of giving as good as he got, Uncle Stan had taught him that.

Then came the night that Argus hadn't had to go looking for Severus; Severus had come looking for him. Well, if shouting for help counted as looking for him.

Argus had been mopping the corridor that led from Severus's classroom to the Slytherin common room when he heard a whoosh and an almighty crash. A dark cloud poured from the Potions room, and Argus had set out for it at a run even before he heard Severus bellow, "Filch!"

A cauldron had exploded. It turned out to be more messy than dangerous, but Severus had been that angry with himself. He'd scowled fiercely as he worked by Argus's side, using magic to clear away the poisonous parts of the debris while Argus mopped up the ordinary bits.

Finally everything had been set to rights, and the room looked good as new. Argus wanted to say something pleasant, something friendly, like, but his brain had never felt so empty, and he could do nothing but watch as Severus began striding impatiently towards his laboratory nook.

He'd just about reached the door when he turned back and spoke.

"Mr Filch," he said. "Thank you."

Now's the time, Filch, you idiot, Argus told himself. *Offer a drink, invite him to your rooms. See what it's like to have a friend.*

But then he chanced to look at the boy, and the sight of his pale face and crooked nose, the thought of his thin hands and the cock hidden under his robe, snug against lean thighs...

His own cock swelled, and his throat closed, and Argus couldn't utter a word.

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"You take care of the Castle, Argus, and the Castle, she'll take care of you."

So Apollyon Pringle had said nearly every day, and Argus found that it were true.

Somehow Hogwarts always knew what he needed, sometimes even before he did. Squib he might be, but that didn't signify to the great Castle. She provided her magic for him same as for any other ... gave him rooms that contained whatever he required, whether he knew he required it or not.

The first time it happened, he'd been in a remote corridor and realised he'd run out of WizKleen for the floors. Looking up in vexation, he'd seen a door in the wall where he'd of sworn there weren't no door just a minute before.

He opened it to find a cupboard full of cleaning supplies, several bottles of WizKleen in the very front. It were possible, he supposed, that this closet had been stocked by Pringle, and he just hadn't never mentioned it. But in his gut, Argus knew the gift came from the Castle: she'd put that cupboard there and filled it with just what he needed when he needed it.

And the supply closet were not the only door that Hogwarts opened for Argus Filch over the years.

There were also the door in the dungeon corridor, a door Argus were willing to swear no one but himself had ever seen.

After that night in the Potions classroom, he'd never again considered pursuing ...anything with Severus. He tried to tell himself that it were because of Mr Pumblechook. Having people to his rooms would of upset Mr Pumblechook's routine, and Mr P didn't like his routine upset.

And no more did Argus himself. He didn't want to upset his own routine, and ~~that~~ were the real truth of the matter.

That, and the fact that...

Well, it were like this: When Argus had been a boy, there's always been cats around his aunt and uncle's house; his aunt had been partial to them. And there'd been this one old tom ... Mouser, he'd been called, except that he weren't one.

Oh, he'd catch mice, all right, but once he'd caught 'em, he'd never wanted to eat or kill them. Didn't seem to want to do nothing with them but watch 'em. He'd use his paws to keep them right there in front him, running back and forth until he lost interest or the little things expired from fright.

Argus had long known that he were like Mouser: he didn't mind catching a lad now and then, but he didn't want ~~to~~ nothing with them. He only ever wanted to watch.

Of course, he'd had his youthful sexual experiences, same as anyone. Had felt the rush of heat and need that made his heart pound and his head ring. Had felt actual hot hands upon his body.

But not for many years. Truth was, the hot hands of his youth had learnt Argus something: he didn't like to be touched. It made him feel like he couldn't stay inside his skin, like he might split open, his bloody organs laid out for anyone to see. Touches were like little bits of fire on his body, nice and warm at first but then too much. Too much.

At first he hadn't admitted it. He'd told himself that the reason he didn't have no one to warm his bed were an accident of geography. It were just his bad luck that he worked at Hogwarts among the wizards. Who'd have him there, Squib that he were?

But gradually he'd accepted the truth. He didn't like to be touched. Weren't no help for it. He preferred to look.

And it were men he liked to look at. Argus were bent; he knew that. Had always known it, really, and somehow it had never bothered him, although Uncle Stan would of pounded him to dust if *he* had ever twigged.

Most of the time, Argus did his looking in the Muggle world, in them peep shows where you put your coins in a slot and watched a little film in a booth just by yourself. It were safe and easy, and usually you could get in and out without having to talk to no one. He'd never felt a need to watch anyone he actually *knew*.

Until he'd had his vision of a naked Severus.

At first he wondered if he just needed a friend. He'd always thought he were content enough to be alone, but maybe he were wrong. It were possible. Lots of people had friends; maybe he could give it a try, too.

So he'd tried to imagine himself and Severus sitting by the fire in Argus's office, drinking, talking about their days...

And knew after the night of the exploding cauldron that this idea were a joke. He didn't need to make a friend of Severus. He needed to watch him.

It were two days after he came to this understanding that the Castle gave him the door in the dungeon corridor.

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Argus had been mopping and doing his once-monthly emptying of the magical rubbish bins, thinking of nothing in particular, when the door had appeared out of nowhere.

It happened just like with the supply cupboard, except that this time, there was no shelves full of WizKleen. There were only a tiny, dark space occupied by an armchair that sat facing a blank wall.

Argus squinted, not quite believing his eyes. The armchair weren't just any armchair: it looked like the comfy, battered one from his own office. In fact, as near as he could tell, it were the exact same one. He sat in it, just to test it, and sure enough, it moulded to fit his backside, just like his own chair.

And no sooner had he sat down than the blank wall in front of his knees began to waver and swirl, like water, and soon it were a wall no longer.

It were a window.

A window that looked into a small, sparsely-furnished bedroom. Argus saw a fireplace, with a wingback chair and bookcase to the left of it, a door to the right. A bed with a small table beside it. A wardrobe. A larger table, parchment-heaped, near the fire, with a straight-backed chair behind it.

He'd barely taken in these details when the door next to the fireplace opened, and Severus walked in.

In thinking about it later, Argus had been a bit surprised that he hadn't been surprised. But at the time, the entrance of Severus had seemed the most natural thing in the world.

Argus felt a rush of heat and some of that same hot shame mixed with excited anticipation that he'd felt as boy, when he'd sometimes awakened in what seemed like the middle of the night to hear his aunt and uncle on the other side of the paper-thin wall that separated his bedroom from theirs. He'd listen to the squeak of the bed, to his uncle's grunts and his aunt's giggles and her whispers of "shhhhh! You'll wake the lad!"

He'd loved and hated the sensations he'd had then, the flush in his face and loins that meant embarrassment and arousal both. He'd felt a similar jumble of feelings the night he'd seen Apollyon Pringle in a back room of the Hog's Head, bending one of the local farm hands over the scarred wooden table.

It had been the first time he'd seen two men together outside of one of them dark film booths in a Muggle sex shop, and this time, the shame he'd felt as a boy had become something more, something secret and hot and necessary.

And now, just the thought of possibly seeing Severus naked was shortening Argus's breath and stiffening him. This were the way he wanted it ... a little corner of quiet darkness where it could be just him, seeing what he needed to see and knowing what no one else knew. He slid his hand inside his trousers.

But Severus did not begin to undress. It were early, Argus realised ... too early to be going to bed, and Severus seemed to have no intention of doing so. Still in his long classroom garb, he used his wand to freshen his fire and then caused a few candles to come to light on his table. When he sat down in the wooden chair and took up a quill, Argus understood that he were about to mark essays.

Argus had often heard the professors complain about the tedium of marking, and if it were tedious to do, it turned out to be beyond boring to watch. He had felt heat in his privates at the first sight of Severus, at the thought that he might be about to see the pale skin and lean flanks he'd dreamt of, but after five minutes of watching Severus scrawl comments across parchment, Argus were as limp as a noodle.

The poor boy didn't even fortify himself with a glass of summat. He just went on, endlessly marking, his expression becoming darker and darker, his quill moving more and more angrily.

Argus's nook seemed darker and darker, too, his chair softer and softer, and without never meaning to, he fell asleep.

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When he woke, cold and stiff in ways that had nothing to do with his cock, the window into Severus's bedroom had become a blank wall again, and when Argus managed to heave himself to his feet and step into the silent late-night of the corridor, the secret door disappeared, too.

Damnation.

What if this had been his only blamed chance? What if he could never find the door again? The Castle looked out for him, but she were fickle, and she might take offense at his having nodded off instead of paying attention to whatever she'd wanted him to see.

Retrieving his mop from where it he'd propped it against the now-solid stones of the corridor wall, Argus jabbed viciously at a dark smudge that he hoped were a rule-breaking student or at least a mouse, but it turned out to be only a shadow, blast his usual luck.

To his annoyance, he didn't find a single brat lurking anywhere ... oh, what he'd of done to them ... and even Mr Pumblechook appeared to have deserted him. By the time Argus got back to his rooms, he were livid. Rot them. Rot them all. Rot everything.

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But as it turned out, Argus were wrong. He should of known better than to distrust his Castle. Fickle she might be, but like all great ladies, she were also merciful.

She offered him the secret door many times over the years to come. Always it were the same ... the door would appear out of nowhere, in the middle of what had been a thick rock wall just a minute before. Inside the tiny space would be Argus's armchair, growing more battered and comfortable as time passed, and as soon as he sat down, the blank wall facing him would shimmer and clear and become like a window.

Sometimes the window looked into Severus's bedroom, sometimes his sitting room, depending on where the lad were. The sitting room were no more luxurious than the bedroom ... a fireplace, a mantel, more bookcases, an old sideboard that held a few glasses and cups a-top and some bottles of drink in the cabinet below. There were a desk piled with parchment and books and beakers. And a couple of mismatched chairs what no one ever sat in, or so at least Argus judged from the fact that they always seemed to be stacked with books.

In front of the fire stood a long sofa that Severus sometimes stretched out on, his hands behind his head, his eyes staring at nothing.

Over the years, Argus had many times got his wish of seeing the lad in the altogether. His body were as lean as ever Argus had expected, and talk about bony...sometimes in the firelight, he looked like he were nothing but ribs and hips and shoulder blades. But graceful, too, even if Argus did feel daft using such a word for a man.

Argus never tired of looking at the narrow back, the tight arse, the pale chest that seemed even paler under the black hair that lightly covered it and that started up again, lower down on his flat stomach, pointing the way to the cock that Argus also never tired of.

Oh, yes, he'd seen the cock ... seen it quiet and soft in its nest of short-and-curlyes, seen it (though not very often) being pleased by Severus's own hand. Seen it standing at attention, not huge or nothing, but definitely of a size to get the job done.

And get the job done it did. Argus had seen that, too. Seen and in his own way, done.

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The first time it happened had been a surprise. It were maybe the third or fourth time he'd found the magic door, so maybe a year after its first appearance. Truth be told, he hadn't expected this time to be any different from the other times, when he'd simply watched Severus sit and mark, or sit and sip one small firewhisky, or sit and read. Or simply sit and stare.

He'd almost been tempted to give up opening the door ... if he were only going to get to see Severus just sit there, he might as well do that in the Great Hall as in a dark closet. But then, he trusted his Castle, trusted her to know that a man needed something more. Or that Argus did, anyway.

And on this night, the Castle came through. The hour were late, and Severus were already in his nightclothes when the magic window cleared to show him in his bedroom, sitting in his wingback chair next to the grate, sipping from of one of them big brandy glasses and looking towards the fire.

After a time, he vanished the glass and leant his head back, his eyes closed. Then slowly, his expression changed: his lips twisted, his eyes scrunched, and for a shocked moment, Argus thought he were crying.

But then he noticed Severus's hand ... in his lap, moving slowly in a gesture that Argus were only too familiar with...up, and down, and up again as he stroked what Argus could now see were his stiff cock, the shaft palely visible against the dark of his nightshirt, the hand sliding up, then down, then moving faster...

Argus could feel it, could feel what it would be like, the slight ridges along the shaft, the smoothness, the coarse hairs against his skin as his hand travelled from tip back down to base...

He hadn't been aware of opening his own trousers, but he'd done so, and now his cock were the mirror of Severus's: stiff and ready, growing slick under Argus's sweaty hand. He tried to quiet his breathing, the wheeze that grew worse with each Hogwarts winter; he didn't want to miss the sound of Severus's deepening gasps; he could feel his cock jerk with every little moan that issued from the lad's now-parted lips.

Their hands were moving as one now, up and down, faster and faster, and without taking his eyes from Severus, Argus captured the drop of liquid pooling at the tip of his cock, spread it down the shaft...

Severus's hand were moving like a piston, pulling himself high and squeezing until Argus could almost feel the wonderful pain of it. Then the lad began fluttering the fingers of his other hand against his balls and the base of his cock, something Argus had never heard of before, his own fingers seemed to move of their own accord to do the same, he felt a surge, a jolt, a taste in his mouth almost like one of Dumbledore's sherbet lemons, he felt...he couldn't...

In front of him, Severus threw his head back and groaned as a small eruption of silvery come flowed from his cock, one spurt, then another, and a third, then a bit more, sliding down over his clenched hand as its stroking slowly stopped.

Severus, his eyes still closed, his chest still heaving, let himself relax against the chair back. The come glistened in the firelight, and Argus could hold himself back no longer. He came hard himself, as silently as he could, his eyes fixed on the sated man by the fire.

After just a moment or two, Severus sat up abruptly, his face wearing the same expression of irritated distaste that he usually directed towards students and half the staff. One twist of his wand were enough to clean his cock and hand thoroughly, and as soon as it were done, he tucked himself back under his nightshirt so fast it were like he wanted to pretend he didn't really have a willy.

In no time, he'd climbed into his bed and shut the curtains, the magic window had closed itself, and Argus were left alone in the cold, sticky dark.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 3

Argus makes his decision about what to tell Headmistress Umbridge.

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He'd felt odd after that, Argus had...like he'd not had quite enough dinner but couldn't think of nothing else he wanted to eat.

In the weeks to come, though, the vision of young Severus with his cock in his hand provided Argus with food for many a cold winter night.

But still, he knew that this sort of thing were not what the new Headmistress had in mind when she asked him to look into Severus's "romantic attachments." She didn't mean no romantic attachment to his hand, which the lad didn't really have too much of, anyway.

No, she wanted to know about real people, which brought Argus back to where he'd been when he'd sat down in his chair and starting having his think.

"So where have we got to, eh, Mrs Norris?" he said aloud, tipping another wee tot from his bottle into his glass. The cat, still on his lap, didn't respond beyond curling one claw into his knee, but Argus went on anyway, organising his thoughts in his head, systematic, like.

Point: the Headmistress wanted Argus to find out who shared the lad's bed. Point: he already knew. Point: he could easily tell her, could of told her this afternoon, could go to her office right now and tell her. It would get him in good with her, she'd rely on him even more, and it were about time he were taken serious around here.

But. Point: she would not be at all happy to hear what Argus had to tell her. Point: the lad would be even less happy. Point: Unhappy people tended to want to place blame for their unhappiness. And who better to blame than the Squib caretaker, what nobody but Mrs Norris cared about?

"Mwraww," said Mrs Norris, kneading his leg, and Argus thought that as usual, she had put her nose on the most important point. Trust Mrs N to ask the right question.

He knew what the Headmistress wanted and he knew what Severus would want.

But the question were, what did *he* want: Argus Panoptes Filch?

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There'd been a time when he thought he'd known what he *hadn't* wanted: he hadn't wanted to see what he'd seen on that night two or three years after the secret door had first come into his life.

'Course, every time the door appeared, Argus had it in the back of his mind that Severus could potentially have another person in his bed. But as time went on, and it didn't happen, he began to believe that maybe the lad were really as alone as he seemed. Or put it about elsewhere, like as not.

So accustomed had he become to seeing Severus alone in his rooms that, even though he knew it were perfectly possible that someone else might someday be present, Argus hadn't really been prepared for it to happen.

He thought back to that summer night not long after term had ended, 1985 or '86, it would of been, when the door had appeared as usual. Argus had sunk into his chair, watched the window-wall go all transparent...and found himself looking through the open bed-curtains at Severus's bare, skinny backside as it moved up and down.

Stark bollocks naked, the lad were, and there were no mistaking what he were doing. Or the fact that he were doing it to another flesh-and-blood person, a person what was making soft moaning sounds and wrapping her equally-naked legs round Severus's thighs, one foot touching his arse.

Oh, it were a "her," all right. A woman's voice, a woman's thin limbs, a woman's...undergarment a-laying on the floor.

A woman, in Severus's bed, and he were...

Well, he were fucking her. No point in being namby-pamby about it. Call a spade a spade, Uncle Stan would of said.

Severus had a woman in his bed, they was fucking, and Argus realised with a start that he didn't mind.

He'd thought he would feel upset to see the lad having it off with someone, but instead, he felt that hot rush of arousal and shame that he used to feel as a boy, listening to his aunt and uncle. Then the shame turned to something else, something more, something delicious.

It helped that it were a woman with Severus, he had to admit. He didn't think he could of stood watching Severus be excited by a man, being taken by a man, or taking. It would of been real in a way Argus didn't want it to be real.

But this...this were more like the Muggle cinema or summat, and he settled back to watch.

So far, Severus had been silent, but now he began to add his sounds to the woman's, low grunts that sent a shaft of heat straight into Argus's privates. But before he could fumble his trousers open, Severus were coming, his head raised, his voice lifting in a drawn-out howl as he collapsed forward onto the bed, on top of the woman, who caressed his calf with the edge of her foot and ran her hands over his back and arse.

After a moment, Severus rolled over, drawing the woman half onto his chest and stroking her hair, so that Argus could finally see her face.

He were aware of only one conscious thought...that it were a damned good thing the Filches always had strong hearts.

Otherwise, the sight of Minerva McGonagall would of killed him straight dead.

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Minerva McGonagall.

Severus Snape were shagging Minerva McGonagall.

Argus said these words aloud to Mr Pumblechook every day in the week that followed the revelation in Severus's bedroom. The reality of that constant repetition were the only thing that kept him from being certain that he were mental, a barking, raving nutter.

Severus and that nag of a tight-arsed bitch. Argus still couldn't credit it. What could the lad see in that prune-faced harpy? She were older than his mother. She must of bewitched him; it had to be some kind of a spell or love potion, because no man would willingly put his bits into that...

Except, he admitted grudgingly to himself, say what you would about McGonagall...and Argus could say plenty...she weren't one to be dishonest in that way, using love spells and such. He didn't like her, didn't get on with her, suspected her of scratching Mr Pumblechook when she were in her cat form, but she were basically honourable. Argus respected honourable behavior, being as how he usually saw so little of it.

Still, to think of her rutting with young Severus...and who knew how long it had been going on?

On that night he first saw them together, Argus wouldn't of thought nothing could shock him after he'd seen who she were, but he were wrong.

It were a shock to watch Severus kiss her. It were a shock when the lad looked at her with an expression of...Argus didn't rightly know what to call it, except it were like a mask had been peeled off the boy's face, and he were showing the real Severus for the first time.

It were a shock when he saw McGonagall's naked body, saw that she weren't so dried-up as he'd assumed. And she had a pair of thrups on her like he wouldn't never of expected. Someone with a personality like that, all sharp and pursed and bony-like, he'd of thought she'd be flat as a board, but no. Full-breasted, she were, the way he knew a lot of men appreciated, though when Severus leant over to brush her chest with his fingertips, Argus had to look away.

And when the lad trailed his hand down her stomach, reached between her thighs, well, Argus had never left the magic room so fast. He couldn't remember the last time he had moved that quick, even before he'd started to get the rheumatism.

There was some things he just weren't ready to see.

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He thought he'd never go back to watching Severus after that night, but the next time the magic door appeared, he opened it like always. In the weeks since he'd first seen Minerva McGonagall in Severus's bed, he had a change of opinion about the relationship. Much as he still didn't like the battle-axe, she seemed to be good for the lad. He weren't no less sneering and sarcastic, but he seemed easier, somehow...not so tight-wound.

And often in the dark watches of the night, Argus let their images play in his mind, let himself picture Severus thrusting into McGonagall, making her moan. He could imagine the lad's arse tightening and his leg muscles flexing as he took her, filled her. The kisses that had so bothered him at first now caused his breath to catch at the thought of Severus's tongue in another's mouth, no matter that it were hers. And he liked the notion of that starchy McGonagall surrendering to the lad.

Soon he were watching them whenever he could. There was many nights when McGonagall weren't in Severus's rooms, of course, but over the years, he saw them together often. They didn't always shag: lots o' times they just talked or shared a drink; sometimes they sat quiet together on the long sofa, reading and occasionally touching.

And they bickered. Of course. They wouldn't of been Snape and McGonagall if they hadn't done. But it were a comfortable sort of thing, and Argus even came to find it relaxing to listen to them.

He remembered one night in particular, during that horrible year when Mrs Norris had been petrified. He'd been that worried about her, he couldn't hardly get no work done. He visited her as often as he could, but the sight of her poor, stiff little body usually sent him hurrying away again, before he could break down and start blubbing right there in the middle of the hospital wing.

The door appeared to him often that year, and it showed up this one night when he'd been feeling awful low. He'd rather hoped just to see the lad alone, but when the window cleared, there were McGonagall in the sitting room, too, curled into a corner of the sofa with her shoes off. Severus were pouring a dark, slightly-smoking liquid into two small, stemmed glasses, and she were reading to him from the *Daily Prophet*.

"Here's a tidbit you'd have been sorry to miss," she said. "Listen to this: 'Rumour has it the ever-popular Gilderoy Lockhart, author of the some of the best-selling titles in wizardom, will soon be adding to the spectacular success of *Gadding With Ghouls*, *Travels With Trolls*, and *Wandering With Werewolves* with a new book. *The Prophet* has learnt that Lockhart has signed a contract with Hippogriff Press to write *Hobnobbing at Hogwarts*, the true story of his experiences teaching at the prestigious school of witchcraft and wizardry. In particular, Professor Lockhart will describe how he taught duelling technique to the delectably-mysterious Potions master, Severus Snape, who..."

"*What?* Damned scandal rag! Give me that." Severus sent the drinks glasses zooming to a side table as he snatched the paper from McGonagall's hands and scanned it with furious eyes. Then he glared at her. "Oh, very funny. I knew you'd made up that last line. It's just the sort of Bludger-level humour that would appeal to a Gryffindor."

Fine, go ahead and laugh. Because when you've finished, I expect a neck rub."

Argus watched as Severus settled himself on the sofa, and McGonagall, still chuckling, got up and moved behind him to begin massaging his shoulders. The lad groaned as she hit a tender spot.

"Goodness, but you're tense, Severus," she said, her fingers digging deep into his muscles. Argus could almost feel his own shoulders relax.

"And so would you be, if you'd spent the afternoon trying to keep Potter and Longbottom between them from blowing up the entire Potions classroom. Not to mention having to talk to that damned Lockhart at dinner."

"I think he was flirting with you."

"He was doing no such thing. Ahhh, yes, just there...mmmmm. But speaking of flirting, Minerva, I've finally figured out why Albus hired that incompetent dolt."

"Oh?"

"Oh, indeed. The flaming old coot fancies a spot of gadding with Gilderoy."

Argus felt his eyes open wide, and he held his breath as he waited for McGonagall to go spare, as the students might say. Dumbledore weren't bent, and that prim, uptight old witch wouldn't thank Severus for suggesting he were.

But to Argus's amazement, she weren't fazed in the least.

"Interesting thought, Severus," she said, mild as anything. "But wrong. Oh, you're right that Albus wants something from Lockhart, but it's not that."

"No? mmmm, that feels good...What is it, then?"

"Fashion tips. Also, I suspect that Gilderoy gets him discounts on star-spangled designer robes."

For a moment, Argus forgot to worry about Mrs Norris in his wonderment at the spectacle of Severus Snape laughing.

When the lad quieted...the laughing didn't last long...he took hold of McGonagall's hand and brought her palm to his lips.

"So," he said, stroking her wrist with his thumb. "I'm 'delectably mysterious,' am I?"

"Oh..." She leant down to kiss him in between words. "...you don't...want to listen to... a damned scandal rag..."

They'd moved into the bedroom then, and Argus had been able to push aside the thought of Mrs Norris for nearly an hour.

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And of course there were the times Severus and McGonagall argued, each shouting at the other, pacing and pointing, Severus once hexing the teapot in his rage. Argus rarely listened to the substance of these arguments...usually about politics, they were, or sometimes about Dumbledore or the students, or more recently, that Potter boy. He just liked to watch the angry lines of Severus's body as he stalked about.

Often if Argus waited long enough, the anger turned into arousal, and occasionally they would shag right there in the sitting room. McGonagall would hastily transfigure the hearthrug into a large cushion, or there were the memorable time when Severus bent her over the sofa and took her like that, his hands on her generous breasts, his cock flashing briefly visible as he pumped.

Argus had made rather a mess of himself that night.

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And now the new Headmistress wanted to know all about all this.

Argus finished his drink and set the glass carefully on the floor. Mrs Norris, sensing that his think were over, hopped down from his lap and wound herself round his ankles.

"Come on rounds with me, old girl?" Argus asked, though he weren't really intending to do his rounds, not when he'd given himself the night off. He weren't easy in his mind about what to tell the Headmistress; he knew he needed to have another look at Severus before he decided.

Normally, Argus had no control over the appearance of his magic door; the Castle gave it to him only when he needed it, and he were the first to admit that he weren't always the best judge of when that might be. He trusted his Lady Hogwarts to know best.

But tonight, he thought he could ask a direct favour of her this once.

"Let the door be there, let it be there, let it be there," he muttered to himself as he hobbled toward the dungeon, as if the strength of his need could let a Squib's words work like a real incantation. His steps faltered only slightly as he reached Severus's corridor; he knew he could count on his Lady.

Nor did she let him down. As soon as he turned the corner, he could see his door, standing slightly open as if welcoming him. And the wall barely waited for him to sit down before it began to shimmer and clear.

The window opened into the sitting room, where Severus were pacing in front of the fire, looking as murderous as Argus had ever seen him.

"Yes, I understand perfectly," he were snarling. "You don't need *me* any longer, because you've got Albus to occupy your attention. Despite his having survived several wars and assorted maniacs, he apparently can deal with his current exile only if he has substantial support from you. And you think I won't need you any longer, because now the Dark Lord is back, I can satisfy my sexual urges by raping and pillaging with my Death Eater mates."

"Nonsense, Severus," snapped an equally furious Minerva McGonagall, who Argus could now see sitting bolt upright on the edge of the sofa. "I said nothing of the sort, and you know it. If you could stop playing the martyr for one moment..."

"Damn it!" Severus shouted. "If I'm a martyr, I'm one you and Albus have made."

"It's Albus and I, is it, who make you sneer and snarl at your colleagues in the staff room? Make you refuse every social invitation? Made you tell the editor *Potions Quarterly* that you've read more accurate articles in *The Quibbler*?"

"I do what I have to do, Minerva. I make what few choices are permitted me, and you must make yours. Evidently one of your choices is to leave my bed. Well, so be it. If you need to devote all your time to Dumbledore and Umbridge, then by all means, do so."

"Will you stop? What I need is for you to cease acting as if there are House points to be won by the person who is the most impossibly defensive. I will try to explain myself one more time, and you, if you please, will try to listen with at least the same level of attention and concentration as the average first-year."

"Now, then. First of all, if I believed for a moment that you would enjoy raping people as part of your association with You-Know-Who, I wouldn't be having this

conversation at all. I merely asked if it would be easier for you to meet that...that madman's demands if you had no personal entanglements. And I said I was afraid that we would be seeing less of each other in any case, now that we have to find ways to meet with Albus outside the castle and do what he needs for the Order."

Severus had stopped pacing, and McGonagall reached out a hand to him, her voice suddenly more human and uncertain than Argus had ever heard it. "I don't want to 'leave your bed,' as you put it, Severus. But I will give you up if that's what would best help you and help the cause. That's all I've been trying to say."

For a moment Severus wore what Argus thought were a strange expression on his face, a look that were wanting and hopeful and hopeless at once. But it were gone in an instant, replaced by his usual stone-face, and when he spoke, it were in that lightly mocking tone he often took. "Who's being the martyr now, Minerva, hmmmmm?"

Ignoring her outstretched hand, he moved around the arm of the sofa to stand behind her, and he started to take the pins of out her hair, extra slow-like, one by one. She didn't used to use no pins, just kept her bun in place by magic, but Argus knew she used them all the time now, for the lad. For Severus. He'd said he liked them, liked to take her hair down himself, the way he were doing this minute.

When he finished, and a curtain of black hung long over her shoulders, Severus went back to stand in front of her. This time, he held out his hand to her.

"I believe we need to be in my bed," he said, "before you can show me that you don't want to leave it."

McGonagall reached for him.

And Argus's window went dark.

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"Argus? If you could give me a moment?"

It were the first time High Inquisitor Umbridge had invited Argus to tea since the day she'd asked him to find out about Severus and his personal life. She'd said nothing about it since, and Argus thought maybe she'd forgotten about it, or given it up.

But no sooner had she poured the tea and floated the milk jug to him than she said, "So tell me, Argus. Have you been keeping an eye on Professor Snape?"

"Me and Mrs Norris done our best," Argus replied. Couldn't nobody argue with your best, Uncle Stan always said.

"Excellent." The Headmistress smiled at him and touched her hand to the pink Alice band in her hair. "And what have you found out about him?"

Argus put a bit of milk into his tea, stirred it, sipped it.

"Nowt, Headmistress," he said. "Nowt at all."

~ ~ Fin