

Accommodations

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 1

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The windows have not changed, of course. The dawning sun still hits the panes at the same angle, still floods the foot of the headmaster's bed with almost-painful light.

Severus thinks how easily this morning could be any one of the miserable mornings he'd spent as headmaster of this place. Of Hogwarts. From what he can see through the bedcurtains stone floor, antique rug, small table against the wall nothing appears to have changed since those days. If he looks only at the windows, he can make himself believe that the war still rages, that Voldemort still owns him, that Potter is still out there somewhere, in the wilds, bumbling ineffectually about the countryside while the Death Eaters rule and Hogwarts looms as more of a prison than Azkaban ever dreamed of being. Everything is the same.

Except that nothing is the same, not really. In reality, the war is over, Voldemort is dead at Saint Potter's hands, and Severus, to no one's shock more than his own, is still alive.

He's alive, and for the first time, he's lying in the headmaster's bed without the sour taste of bile at the back of his throat, without the roiling gut and the sense that an ice pick is stabbing endlessly into his temples. For the first time ever in this bed, he can take a breath without feeling a vise around his chest and can contemplate the day ahead without either dread of living or hope for death.

And also for the first time, Severus is not alone in this headmaster's bed.

He's not even in the headmaster's bed, not any longer. It's the headmistress's bed, and she Minerva is in it with him. Or rather, he's in it with her. It's her bed now.

He turns over to face her, moving carefully so as not to waken her. He's not quite ready yet for the full reality of the morning-after. He isn't sure what she'll say to him, and he certainly doesn't know what he'll say to her.

It had been easier last night, in the dark, when they'd let their hands and lips and bodies do most of their talking. The warm curves of her waist and breasts had felt familiar and safe to his touch, and only then had he let himself realise how much he had wanted this reunion with her.

They'd been on-and-off lovers for several years before the return of Voldemort it had been a heady, competitive relationship, spiced with satisfying verbal duels and yet always edged with tension, even during sex. Perhaps especially during sex.

Last night had been different, somehow. Not the quality of the act, which had been fine neither spectacular nor disastrous, but fine. No, what was different was the *nature* of it. They'd been... not more tentative, exactly, but more careful with each other. Softer. Some of their usual edge was gone, and Severus finds that he is not sorry.

He looks at Minerva as she sleeps. The morning sun shows just how much the strain of these last few years has aged her: the furrows in her brow have deepened, and the glare emphasizes the many lines etched around her mouth. Severus traces them with a light fingertip and then slides his thumb along the sharp edge of her jaw; her skin is warm and soft.

She'd been restless in the night. He'd been aware of her moving and shifting, and now she has one bare arm outflung, her hand against the pillow, fingers relaxed and curling over her palm. He watches the pulse beat in her thin wrist, sees the veins blue under her skin, and suddenly he is gasping with the knowledge of how vulnerable and temporary everything is.

To anchor himself in the present, Severus focuses on Minerva's hair: the feel, the reality of that long, grey-streaked mass. He's always liked to touch it when it's loose; he likes to see it disheveled and wild: her hair is wanton, the way *she* is when they make love.

The thought makes him pause. "Make love." He can almost hear Minerva snort and tell him tartly that they have never "made love." "Fornicate, Severus," she'd said once. "We fornicate."

"We fuck," he'd replied, partly because he knew she disapproved of that word and partly because saying it to her made his cock twitch.

Mostly, though, he'd said it because he'd needed to create distance between them. He had never let himself think of "making love," either.

But suddenly he understands: that's what they'd done last night. That's what had been different. They had made love.

He leans back into the pillows, feeling oddly disturbed. He has no idea what this might mean, if anything. He's used to thinking of himself as unloved and unloving; he's not sure he knows how to feel anything else. Or whether he wants to. He certainly doesn't know whether *Minerva* wants to.

Why would she? In the past, Severus had never quite been able to believe that Minerva actually *wanted* him, with all his bony ugliness and his Death Eater history. He'd told himself that he was simply convenient for her—a man available and willing and with a certain semi-youthful stamina. Because really, what other options did she have in a place like Hogwarts?

In his worst moments, Severus suspected that Dumbledore had ordered Minerva to bed him for the cause. "We need Mr Snape to be tame and distracted, my dear," he could just hear the old man saying. "A few good fucks will keep him under control."

On one angry, anguished night, Severus had gone so far as to accuse Minerva of just this tactic, and she'd slapped his face. They hadn't touched for a month afterward.

Everything between them had ended, of course, with Voldemort's return. By the time Severus assumed the position of headmaster, the only relationship he had with Minerva had been one of hostility on her part and growing resentment on his. He'd been stupid enough to hope that she'd be able to see the truth about his real allegiance, even though the rational part of him knew that he and Dumbledore had worked hard to ensure that she would do no such thing.

So he'd spent the year living with the hatred in her eyes, and even when his dueler's instinct told him, in their final confrontation, that she was not fighting to kill, he had no doubt that she wanted to see him dead.

When the war ended and he'd recovered from his wounds, he'd faced a Ministry trial. Minerva had testified in his defense, but he'd attributed her eloquence to her passion for justice, not to any personal regard. He hadn't tried to speak to her.

He'd been pardoned, and pensioned off, and was ready to leave Britain for...somewhere else, when he'd got her owl yesterday, asking him to call at Hogwarts.

He'd hesitated. If she wanted to upbraid him, he didn't want to hear it, and if she wanted to offer thanks or sympathy, he wanted to hear *that* even less. Plus, the idea of returning to the castle brought back the all bile and bitterness of that last year, and he'd almost said no.

Almost.

Without thinking about it, Severus has been stroking Minerva's hair and cheek, and his touch seems to have awakened her: she is gazing at him now through still-sleepy eyes.

"You're still here," she says, and he draws back, stung. He can't stop himself from lashing out.

"Oh, was I supposed to leave after I'd serviced you?" he asks, sneering as of old. "You should have said. Or better yet, just left the payment on the bureau. I'd have got the message then."

He half-expects her to slap his face again, but she doesn't. She merely rolls her eyes and sits up, pulling the bedclothes to her chest; Severus resolutely looks away from the white swell of breast above the dark green of the duvet.

"I can count on one hand the number of times you've spent an entire night in my bed, Severus," she says. "It's unusual, that's all. Not unwelcome."

He opens his mouth to offer a neutral reply, but instead says, "Why did you ask me to come here? The truth, this time."

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He'd asked her the same question when he'd arrived yesterday afternoon.

"What's this about, Minerva? This summons to Hogwarts?" he'd demanded after the house elf had taken him to meet her in the walled garden behind the castle's south wing. It had been two years since he'd stood on these grounds, and he'd sworn to himself that he would never return.

"I'm not going to apologise for anything," he continued, "and if you're going to ask me to return to teaching, the answer is a resounding NO. I don't need your pity jobs."

Her eyes had flashed, but whether with anger or humour, he couldn't tell. "Well, and hello to you, too, Severus," she'd said, sitting down on a stone bench in the sun. "I'd say how good it is to see you, but given your charming greeting, I'm not sure it's true. Then again, if you'd behaved otherwise, I'd have had to suspect polyjuice." She was definitely smiling now. "Join me?" she said, touching the bench beside her.

He'd remained standing. "What do you want?" he asked. "Merlin, I hope *you're* not going to apologise."

"Whatever would I apologise for? For doing what had to be done in a war? Don't be silly. And of course I'm not going to ask you to return to teaching. I know how you hate it. As for pitying you...well, I think it's your students who'd be more deserving of pity, don't you?"

Severus had felt himself relax into the familiar routine of their insult-edged banter. "Admit it, most of the time, you think they're little horrors, too." He'd sat down then, the better to avoid eye contact. Seeing her was affecting him more than he'd expected. "I haven't forgotten your staffroom anecdotes about idiot Transfiguration students."

"They're children, Severus. Learners. A certain level of idiocy is to be expected."

"Hmmpph." He didn't really want to talk about students, and she either agreed or sensed his mood, for she changed the subject.

"I asked you to come here because Kingsley told me you intend to leave the country," she said. "I wanted to talk to you before you went. To say *bon voyage*."

"And you didn't think of coming to me? You had to drag me back to this godforsaken pile of rock?"

"Well, I..." She sounded unsure for the first time since he'd arrived. A moment passed, and then, out of the corner of his eye, he could see her lift her sharp chin in her trademark gesture of Gryffindor bravado. "I wanted to see you, but I wasn't certain that you would want to see me. I thought that if you agreed to come to Hogwarts, it would mean you did."

He had been surprised enough to turn towards her. "Why did you think I wouldn't want to see you?"

She'd seemed equally surprised. "Why would I think you *would*? We spent a solid year being vile to one another, didn't we? Or was that just business as usual for you?"

He'd ignored this question and asked one of his own. "The night of the battle," he said. "You weren't duelling to kill. Why?"

"Oh, Severus." Her voice had been both wry and pained. "Just because you apparently think I'm oblivious and credulous doesn't mean I *am*. Long before the battle, I'd realised that you weren't fighting for Voldemort. So if you were going to die in the war, I wasn't going to let it be at my hands."

He digested this. So she *had* figured things out well, some things, anyway. She hadn't wanted to kill him.

And now she'd apparently wanted to see him. He wasn't sure that he completely believed her, but he thought that he wouldn't mind spending an evening pretending to.

"Well, now that you've forced me to make this tedious journey," he said at last. "I hope you're at least going to offer me a good meal."

She'd done more than that she'd offered him her bed, too. He didn't know if she'd initially planned to, but as they'd finished their post-dinner brandy in her quarters, their desire had grown until the air seemed thick with it. Conversation had faltered, and when she'd turned towards her bedroom and held out her hand to him, he'd taken it.

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But now, in the unforgiving light of day, with no brandy to use an excuse, he's filled with doubt and suspicion once more. "What do you really want from me? Tell me the truth," he repeats.

He's angered her: he can tell by the tightening of her shoulders and the pursing of those stern lips. She reaches for her dressing gown and holds it in front of her, cutting herself off from him with a wall of fabric.

"Tell you the truth?" she snaps. "So you think I've been lying heretofore? Tricking you? Seducing you into my bed so that I can...can what, exactly? Trap you in the dungeons as my personal sex slave and potions maker? Blackmail you into teaching by threatening to expose you to the ridicule of the world for fucking an old woman?"

Her use of "fuck" tells him just how livid she is. He doesn't think he's ever heard her say it before; he knows she finds it base and demeaning.

He expects her to leave the bed then, but she's not finished. "You've gone too far, Severus, and if you were anyone else, I'd ask you to leave. But you're a damaged man "

"Don't you dare 'make allowances' for me," he interrupts fiercely. "I'm not some broken freak who needs accommodation. I won't be pitied "

"That's good," she interrupts in her turn, "because I don't pity you. You made bad choices, you faced them, you worked to hard to atone for the evil you'd done. There's nothing pitiable in that. You've earned some 'accommodation,' as you call it. To a point, that is. You're not entitled to endless offensive paranoia."

Severus looks at her, with her tumbled hair and set, angry jaw and bare shoulders, and somehow he doesn't want to fight any longer.

"How much?" he says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How much offensive paranoia *am* I entitled to?"

Her glare fades, and slowly, she begins to smile.

"You've probably got one or two more shots," she says, reaching out to touch his hand. "But don't push it."

He folds her fingers in his. He's willing to believe her now: she invited him to Hogwarts because she wanted to see him. She doesn't hate him, hadn't tried to kill him. She even still wants him in her bed.

It's a vindication he needed, one that finally balances out their long-standing competition: because in knowing that she has genuinely wanted him, he no longer has to feel stupid for wanting *her*.

Severus starts to tug the dressing gown from Minerva's hands. "Fine," he says. "But don't think *you're* entitled to endless obnoxious manifestations of Gryffindor martyrdom. I don't want to hear about how you have a duty to show up for breakfast at the high table or whatever. It's a Sunday morning in the summer hols. The Headmistress has earned the right to stay in bed."

She lets him take the gown, but still pushes aside the curtains and gets up. Then, before Severus has time to be disappointed, she turns. "You're right," she says, leaning down to brush her lips against his cheek. "Bed sounds lovely. The Headmistress promises to be back directly."

He leans against the pillows and watches her as she heads for the loo.

She'll be back. And so, he thinks, may he. He will go away as planned, for he needs that, but there's no reason he has to *stay* away. Maybe once he can breathe again, he'll think about returning to Britain. Seeing Minerva again, if she still wants to see him. Perhaps she will even want to see him wherever *he* is: India for a month or so, and then...wherever he fancies. He can take his time deciding, because now, at last, time is something he actually has.

Minerva returns, and he notices how much longer and more silver-streaked her hair is now than it had been before the war. It covers her breasts, and he looks forward to smoothing it aside.

"I'm back," she says.

Severus gives her his most pointed eye-roll and uses his driest possible voice to say, "Obviously."

He lifts the covers for her, and, smiling, she slides in beneath them