

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

THE  
HOGWARTS  
FACULTY MASCOT

IS A  
COBRA

BY  
POTIONPEN

THE  
BOOK  
HOUSE  
OLIVE  
BOROUGH  
FINDER  
FOUR

THE  
BOOKHOUSE  
EST. 1993



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THE BOOMERANG EFFECT: an attempt at persuasion had the effect opposite from what was intended. Witness the response to Umbridge's attempts to create a Ministry playground out of Hogwarts.

THE COBRA EFFECT: attempts to solve a problem made it worse, such as when the British Government tried to reduce the number of cobras in Delhi by offering a bounty for every dead cobra, thus giving birth to a cobra-breeding industry.

THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT: a Slytherin faced with a problem has heard of both these things.

## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

It's 1985, and Hogwarts's most junior (permanent) faculty member may have slightly underestimated his influence on his admiring students. ...No, seriously. It's, like, a problem.





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“YOU HAVE TO PUT A STOP TO THIS!” Poppy demanded, storming into the staffroom with wisps of hair escaping her kerchief.

Once it had been made clear to a surprised Severus (by means of looming over him and tapping her foot very loudly) that she was talking to him, he put down his crossword on the stack of essays in front of him that wasn't whimpering and bleeding red ink. “No going ahead while I'm being yelled at,” he announced, peering around at everyone suspiciously until they'd all put their own copies down.

Silvanus, hitting the hourglass with his wand to stop the sand falling, looked the most irritated by the interruption, and Filius the most as though he expected the new diversion to more than compensate. Bathsheba seemed to be of his mind, and Minerva to be withholding judgment. Septima complained, “That's not fair, you'll be finishing in your head the whole time.”

“So will you,” parried Severus haughtily, “and I'll be distracted.”

“No one will be distracted!” Poppy shouted, glaring at him so hard that if their positions had been reversed, something would probably have been on fire. Or at least wished it was.

“Well-will-you-look-at-the-time,” Silvanus said flatly, an eyebrow raised at her (not the one bisected by the Valcore-claw



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scar). "I'm sure I must have something that needs feeding."

"It's less than an hour since lunch," Severus pointed out, just as flatly, not so much protesting his desertion as highlighting its cowardice.

"I'm sure Hagrid's hatched something dreadful under his sofa since then."

"Oh, did Hagrid get a sofa?" Bathsheba asked, too quickly, and dragged a grateful Septima up with her to the door. "We'd better go have a look. He's so bad with upholstery, he'll have covered it in stoat fur from his sandwiches or the like."

"Ermines!" Severus craned around Poppy to shout reproachfully after them.

"...Ermines?" Filius had to ask, because it was clearly an accusation, not a correction. He could have waited, but Poppy was looking so distracted from her ire by her own confusion that it was probably safe enough.

"I was going to say 'weasels,'" Severus explained, "but it didn't seem diplomatic. Ermines are considered to be more attractive, I believe; better fur. Or are we supposed to treat everyone *exactly* the same now? I can't keep up with all the schisming mini-waves of feminism and the unchecked feral pop socioeconomic psychopathology —"

"You mean psychology."

"I do not, I mean bloody self-indulgent self-destructive preachy lunacy anyone with a grain of common sense or head-

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ology wouldn't give two pins for unless it was to stick them in the authors. I can't keep up with all that *and* all the craft journals; I just know what Mam would have thumped me for."

"Speaking of which," Poppy said ominously, before ruining the effect by sagging into Silvanus's abandoned armchair.

"What did I do?" Severus asked plaintively, and then added a sharp, "Oi!"

Minerva pulled an innocent face for a moment, then waved a hand at him dismissively. "Don't be ridiculous, Severus, no one will be keeping track after this. And I should prefer not to correct essays if you two are going to have a set-to; it's distracting."

"Very sensible," Filius agreed gravely. "Much better to have a crossword in hand than an essay, if the dictaquill should suddenly write down 'bwahahahaha.'"

"It isn't funny," Poppy said, sounding so tired that he looked repentant.

"But I haven't *done* anything!" Severus insisted. Warning bells went off for everyone as he began to hunch into the defensive vulture they didn't see much of anymore, his hair starting to slide down in front of his face.

"No, dear," Poppy agreed, reaching over to pat his knee. He shifted, embarrassed, retreating even further behind his hair, and various hidden things about his person clinked. "But you've got to put a stop to it all the same."

Severus uncoiled instantly, glaring, to more glass noises.



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"Why me?" he demanded. "Why is it always my students?"

Minerva murmured, "*Plus ça change...*"

"No!" he declared, rounding on her sharply. Clink, clink, grind. "Those of my classmates who were out of control were out of control because *they were not controlled! And they were not alone in that!* My students know damn well they're for it if they start trouble, and they *don't!* We didn't win the cup last year over Quidditch, we won it because they stopped losing the points they win in class every five minutes!"

"Bloody right you didn't win it over Quidditch," Minerva agreed. If it hadn't been for the cliché factor, they would have considered her to be practically purring, and checked her teacup to see if it was pure cream.

"Our Beaters got nobbled!" Severus said defensively, but not in the worrying way. "Smythwycke had dragonpox, for Salazar's sake. We had to put in both reserves, and one of those was a second-year!"

"Nobbled?" Minerva repeated, arching an eyebrow dangerously. "You can hardly say that a player's been nobbled because they've fallen ill, Severus. Surely you're not accusing anyone of giving Smythwycke dragonpox? That would be a most serious —"

"*Smythwycke fell ill,*" Severus agreed sweetly. "*Pevensie just fell.*"

"Well, there you are."

"*There was oil on the stairs!!!!*"

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"Which brings us nicely," Poppy interjected swiftly, "to my point." She reconsidered. "Not nicely. She will be back with us next term, Severus?"

"Possibly," Severus said shortly. "Her family's considering Salem and Walkabout." He eventually filled the silence with, "They feel a foreign school might be safer for a Slytherin, but they do realize that even if she's not with the form she Sorted with, here she would have the House for air and armor, and that everyone would be looking out for her particularly now." He didn't exactly glare at Minerva, but his eyes had chilled.

"You have no cause to believe that wasn't an accident or an even more than usually irresponsible act of Peeves," Minerva said, stubborn but sobered.

"She would have been on the pitch in two days and it took place on the Astronomy tower stairs, where she was sure to be hurt if she fell and there are no portraits to tattle," Severus said, very quietly. "One of the best ways to discover what was intended is to look at what happened. Peeves? It's just possible, but the Baron would have gotten it out of him if the Headmaster couldn't, I really do think, and what sort of accident would have taken technomancy-grade lubricant up there, to be left where it spilled but leave no shards of glass or crystal? It won't do, Minerva. It won't stand. The girl broke her neck. Among other things. If it wasn't for the blood alarms, or if the Headmaster couldn't



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apparate on the grounds, she'd be dead. A muggle would be cut off from the use of her body for life after an injury like that. These things aren't whimsical little accidents, and they're not *pranks*, and behaving as if they are is *obscene*."

Filius floated over (it made more sense for him than jumping off and onto couches) to sit next to him and put a hand on his wrist. "It does you credit to feel it," he said sympathetically, "and more to try and stop it, but you mustn't take it so hard, Severus. These things happen, in Quidditch — no, close your mouth, you'll catch flies. We've had a quite safe stretch, these last few decades, but Quidditch has always been a rough sport, on and off the pitch. You played; you know."

Severus rubbed his eye in baleful reminiscence. "That was different," he argued. "That was personal."

"Par for the course when I was a boy," Filius told him. "I'm not one of those who says it was better when it was all *carpe jugulum in dies*, but didn't you know it was going to be like that, when you played?"

Severus's mouth thinned, and he looked down.

Filius pressed, "Don't you make sure they know what they're letting themselves in for?"

"I can't help it if some of them are crazy," Severus muttered, shoulders hunching again, as though the problem was that some of his students played ball in spite of him and he stood accused of being insufficiently discouraging.

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"Oh, yes," Minerva drawled, "that's exactly why they play." His head jerked up to glare real shocked outrage at her callousness, not his usual annoyed snarlyface at all, but the knowing sympathy in her expression left him wrong-footed and baffled.

"What Minerva means is," Filius explained, grinning, "she wants to know whether they actually brought the House Cup to you last summer full of star-grapes and kumquats, on a white-gold platter studded with green diamonds and pearls and heaped high with chocolates and presented it to you on bended knee with, perhaps, trumpets."

"Talk sense," Severus instructed him witheringly.

"They mean the children know you care about them, dear," said Poppy, "and they want to bring home lion-skins for you."

"I meant they have a healthy and natural spirit of competition!" Minerva protested, looking at her askance and rather repelled. "I'm sure you didn't have to put it like that."

"You must admit it sounds more heroic than bringing home a feathered cape or a badger-skin," Severus suggested, in a better humor now he had something to bicker about that didn't involve the idea of anyone looking up to him. "Although badgers have much the worse tempers."

"And they fight for themselves instead of sending lionesses to do it for them," Filius said, with a gallant little bow in Minerva's direction.

"On that subject, how are those inventories coming?"



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Severus asked her brightly. "That's what you're working on, outside of the classwork, isn't it? And then, what would it be, parent bellyaching? Detention schedule review? New list of things to outlaw or ways to string students up by their thumbs from Filch? Sorting the I-know-they-really-wanted-you-for-Minister-please-send-me-advice mail from Fudge?"

"Now that," she said severely, "was out of line, my lad." It was, however, accurate. Mostly. She was sure he'd only left out the budget to stop her thinking of using it to get back at him for whatever he was about to do next, because he also had a distinct air of carping the diem with a gleaming oculus for the jugulum.

She was going to work out how to head him off without assigning detention one of these days.

"The Headmaster," she went on, sternly, "has never taken any office he wasn't asked to take, and not all of those. We're very fortunate it's him in the ones he did take, and not half a dozen other witches and wizards I can think of who'd cut off their ears for those jobs."

"They do sound unstable," Severus was unable to resist agreeing, his mouth quirked. However, when he went on, it was with the slightly poisonous silky-sweetness which had, by his graduation, taught fear to several DADA teachers, swayed Horace to usually call on Lily Evans instead, and made several History classes almost lively. "But I do think that, whether or not one has *condescended to accept* a

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job, once accepted one should *do* it. Don't you?"

The natural answer to this was so clearly 'well, of course,' that everyone looked at him suspiciously.

Apart from Poppy, who sighed, and said, "Severus, I'm not *blaming* you, I only said it's up to you to stop it." She answered the that-didn't-follow stares, "I'm preemptively striking out against the preemptive strike."

"I don't think I ought to be pleased about this," Severus remarked thoughtfully, looking as proud as if he'd taught Poppy strategy himself. Which he very nearly had, although not on purpose. She'd simply had him tied down (never physically but sometimes magically) in her infirmary, arguing with his friends about who was going to exact vengeance, too often not to have picked up a few things. Mostly from his friends, as they failed to convince him the answer was 'us, while you have an alibi, you manebrained maniac,' while using very small words, enunciated clearly and loudly.

"Of course you should," she said briskly, "I'm saving you no end of time and a screaming row."

"Suppose I want a screaming row," he posited, not as though he especially did but as though it was an interesting hypothetical that ought to be tested.

By way of cutting straight to the logical conclusion of either a row with Minerva or arguing with him over the advisability of having one, Poppy briskly bopped him over the head with his crossword.



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"Point taken," he allowed graciously.

"Thank you," she returned in kind. And meant it: if he'd wanted to push his point, he would have.

It was safe, though, to let Severus wander once you'd dropped the suggestion there was something he'd mucked up or ought to fix. He was much more cooperative if he snarkled all the knee-jerk defensiveness out of his system first and came back to the subject of his own accord than if you held his feet to the fire, and he never could leave an idea like that alone.

*Thank you*, Minerva mouthed at her fervently. Various people had told her, over the years, that they suspected she reminded Severus of his mother. Which she frankly did not appreciate, though she was a few years older. They might both have had black hair, but she did not consider herself to look anything like Eileen Prince, and was quite grateful not to have been cursed with eyebrows or a surly attitude like that.

If it was the case, though, she gathered that while Severus had probably been a loving son, in his way, and might or might not have been a good son by the lights of anyone whose business it was, he certainly had not been an obedient or quietly respectful one, nor thought it expected of him. And while she wasn't entirely sure where he'd been heading with all that (Merlin knew Minerva barely had a moment for anything but work, communal sanity breaks aside), she was sure she was grateful he hadn't been allowed to arrive. Noisiness had seemed likely.

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"If we're not blaming me," Severus asked Poppy reasonably, "why am I the one putting a stop to it?"

"What are we talking about?" Filius asked the room generally, frowning. "It's been quiet the last week or so, hasn't it?"

They looked at him with universal expressions of polite incredulity, and then Severus realized, "He wasn't at breakfast."

The witches chorused a brief duet of enlightened ohs and ahs.

"No, I was up late with a grant plea. One of my alumna trying to convince Barty Crouch," Filius said, the slight souring of his generally cheerful voice inserting an unspoken expletive before the patronym (Severus's arm spasmed a little and, rubbing his hand, he made a noise like he wanted to spit), "to reconsider that embargo on flying carpets. The Persian Magical Satrapy's made wonderful strides —"

"I thought we were talking about carpets, not seven-league boots," Severus feigned confusion with wide eyes.

"— when it comes to safety, and they've such potential when it comes to group and family travel," Filius ignored him tolerantly.

"Anyway, aren't they calling themselves the Empire of the Crescent this year?"

"Fertile Crescent, isn't it?" Minerva asked, frowning.

"Just Crescent, but it's Emirate, I think. I think it's supposed to suggest a moon and scimitar, too," Poppy said uncertainly.



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"Does anyone else suddenly want a *pain chocolat*?" Filius pondered.

"No," Severus said, crinkling eyes a glaring mismatch with his very pained and disapproving mouth, "but I am suddenly curious whether the yes-everyone-caught-your-terrible-croissant-pun would boomerang were I to throw one at you."

Well practiced in ignoring boys being ridiculous, Poppy threw up a hand while Filius was explaining that yes, all right, but he really did want one now, and then coming to his senses and calling an elf instead to explain to instead. "We should just call them Iran, like the Muggles."

"Only Whatever-they-are-today is rather bigger than just Iran and has even less to do with their local Muggles than we do," Severus pointed out. He had one of his looks that said he knew he was risking getting thumped with the cross-word again and was refusing to care as he chanted, "If your heels are nimble and light, you may get there by candle-light."

"Floo candles don't *work*," Minerva groused. Like everyone else, she had no idea why he thought he was going to get thumped, and she wasn't going to ask. Besides, since they were all in the dark, it was probably just Slytherin conditioning against admitting he knew muggle poetry.

"Not if you just use *one at a time*," Severus drawled.

"No, they were in a circle—yes, Severus, at the recommended intervals. They still don't work."

"You weren't just sprinkling powder on the flames, were

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you?" Filius asked her, frowning, and looked enlightened by her nod. "Ah, well, that makes it tricky. You have to use quite a wasteful lot of powder if you're just using ordinary candles, but if you use wicks soaked in a potion ..."

"If you want to call it that," Severus made a face. "Potion' generally implies more complexity than 'make an infusion,' this century at least."

"I've never known anyone like you for complaining because something doesn't give you trouble," Minerva observed, her smile less than usually starched.

"That's usually because *it's planning something*," he said darkly, eyes squirrelling around the room, and let his lips quirk once they'd laughed.

"Go on, then," she encouraged. "How does one make Travelling Tea?"

He shrugged. "You just dissolve one part floo powder in ten parts cool distilled water and leave the wicks to soak under moonlight in a bowl of hazel wood. Open moonlight, mind; if there's enough cloud cover to interfere, do it another night. And, if possible, make sure the candles are raw beeswax and the wicks pure and undyed linen. To remove the risk of interference by additives. Silk's better if you care to spend on it, and you can use cotton if you don't mind a rough ride. Fiber a mammal grew is, er, not advised. No blends."

"Why hazel?"

"Well, ruled by Mercury, and then there's the Celtic



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association with salmon, who know how to go home, so..." he shrugged.

"Ah! For sure travel, I see, but then why is the moon important?"

Severus would come back to problems set to him, but Filius was distractible. Poppy therefore said, with just a tinge of scold in her tone, "Because people sleep under it, Filius, and then they don't miss Sunday breakfast."

"Note to self," Severus said sourly. "Do not sleep under the moon: miss breakfast."

"Seconded," Minerva agreed, equally sourly.

"Gracious, what happened?" Filius blinked.

"Food fight," Minerva told him, pinching the bridge of her thin nose in headachy memory.

"Flying platters," Severus elaborated glumly. "Goblets everywhere. Often not emptied first. I don't know why we have to use bloody *golden* flatware," he complained, rubbing his shoulder. "Sodding *heavy*. And Gryff-centric," he added as an afterthought.

"Oh, don't start, no one got *you* in the unmentionables," Minerva groused, not rubbing her chest but shifting a bit as though she wanted to.

"No, they always go for the nose," he sighed. And grinned. "Stupid, really. It's not as if anyone with two neurons to rub together couldn't imagine I know they're going to. Even if I didn't own a mirror, there is such a thing as learning from

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history. And painting targets on the armored points, and armoring the natural targets with shields most aggressive..."

"Do you own a mirror?" Minerva asked, diverted and unable to entirely keep a mischievous smile off her mouth.

"Of course I do," Severus blinked at her. "Talking by floo's a pain in the knees."

They all shot him pained looks or groans, because a) this was the sort of self-deprecating nonsense they were trying to train him out of, b) he was clever enough to use a cushion or cushioning charm if he needed one, and c) he was far too young a wizard to be talking about pains in the anything.

"What?" he demanded. "You get soot everywhere. It shows up worse on black than on anything, what with being greenish and *sparkly*, and the magical residue makes it hard to clean by wand, and then the elves give me sad looks. Have you *seen* them when they give you the sad looks? Bit worrying! They have eyes the size of snitches; I keep thinking they're going to fall out and I'll have to do something about it. Preferably before they land on the floor and scratch up their corneas. Always wondered how the Fates managed, squeezing theirs in and out of the orbital surfaces and careless heroes juggling them about. Probably in sandy gauntlets, certainly not sanitized properly since the last monster."

"Ah," Minerva uttered dryly, and turned to Poppy. "I didn't think anyone had been badly hurt, though."

"Not badly," she conceded, "but it wasn't just bumps and bruises,



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you do realize. Those flying platters and the silverware — ”

“Goldware.”

“Severus.”

“ — left some nasty cuts. I had to regrow one of Mr. Leacock’s ears back together, and there were some broken bones and gashes from falls and landing on things with corners. Not to mention, you are aware there were hexes and jinxes flying all over the place?”

“Yes,” Severus and Minerva chorused, flat and dire. “Oh, yes,” Minerva added, wincing. “Five minutes is a long time, with wands out. We could have shut it down in thirty seconds, if it hadn’t been for Peeves.”

“So very, very aware,” Severus agreed, clutching dismally at his coffee. “I thought I even heard a few curses in the mix, although I *pray* none of them were that stupid.”

“Pray harder,” Poppy told him. “Or better yet, as I was saying, do something about it. It wasn’t just jelly-fingers and pepper breath, either, there was an ear-shriveller and a flagrante and a conjunctivitis — and one I thought was one of yours, till I was able to mend the cut without calling you or Filius in for an incantation.”

Severus went white. He started, so choked he sounded as if he had sand in his throat, “I have obliterated every surviving — ”

“I was able to mend it,” she repeated, slowly and clearly. “But it wasn’t the only one I didn’t recognize, Severus. It

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looked to me,” she went on, looking between the two of them, “as if the majority of the Slytherins attempted to exercise some restraint towards the beginning; they’d taken on more mess and more minor damage. Probably more damage overall, counting by quantity.”

Minerva sighed, and said, “Right,” grimly. Poppy was satisfied with the promise of her disgusted and purposeful look. Unfortunately, not everyone was looking. Or would have been equally satisfied, she knew, even if they had been.

“You’re telling me they’ve been getting creative,” Severus preempted Poppy, more grimly yet. She supposed it made him feel marginally more in control.

“All surprised parties,” Filius droned, nudging Severus’s arm with a sympathetic shoulder, “hands up.”

Severus shot him suspicious knife-eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” he drew out, smiling with kind eyes, “Slytherin is fond of its traditions and its stories about itself, isn’t it.”

“So?” Severus demanded, more suspicious yet.

“I imagine you know, or think you know, all sorts of things about what Bellatrix Black-as-was got up to at school, for example.”

“Well, she was our lead prefect my first year,” Severus admitted cautiously, eying him. “One tries to find things out about Authority. Especially Reputedly Unstable Authority With A Temper Who Comes Across Sweet As



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Sugar Quills. And she was something of a House legend. You say 'for example,' but I don't know of anyone else who got whispered about like that." He thought for a moment, and repeated, with emphasis, "Not like that."

"Hmm," Filius hummed, summoning his tea from across the room, with a little smile that looked liable to give Severus an aneurism from sheer mistrust. "House legend, yes, that sums it up nicely. I wonder, Severus, if you can think of any authority figures with a temper that, if your Slytherins researched them with, say, their parents and cousins, would turn out to have, oh... fought openly with Gryffindors at every apparent opportunity with no apparent regard for the numbers, odds, or audience, or hung irritating first-years from the ceiling like cocooned caterpillars?"

Severus stared at him, and eventually sputtered at his growing grin, "That — that was prefect-approved! And only for mass disobedience!"

"Or invented curses to shut people up, and turn them upside down while they're going for their wands, and knock them on their bottoms with their own toenails?" Poppy put in, also grinning.

"Those are hexes and jinxes!" Severus protested. "And the levicorpus was an emergency necessity-is-the-mother invention to fish Lockhart out of the lake! The way the dimwit was thrashing around, he was going to have drowned himself sucking in water to scream with before

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the squid could help him out. The upside-down bit's just wandwork, I ironed that out later when I was finished with stopping the idiot from the drowning. Which I think you'll agree was a sufficiently pressing circumstance to excuse the first draft being a little rough around the edges!"

"Mmm, yes, stopping him from drowning after you pushed him through the window into it in the first place, I heard," Minerva commented idly, pouring some cream into her tea. "With green lightning."

"*He kissed me!!!! On my FACE!*" He pointed with a hand gone stiff and clawed with outrage at his cheek, which was a furious, humiliated red.

"As opposed to?" Minerva asked, fascinated.

"*Not on my person at all!!!!*"

Then the wrath broke apart on a rock of helpless proto-laughter, and he added, sounding barely a step away from collapsing into (hysterical) giggles, "Please understand: he had, just previously, said — I cannot, with alcoholic or obliviational help, forget this — that I was a whiz-bang top-hole smartypants every day (please do not ask me which hole) and thank-me for dear *Christ* you do not want to know what I was helping the idiot with, and if I wanted he could find me the very best shampoo and skin crème in all the land — he pronounced it with the accent grave, really he did, as for pastry — but I couldn't take it out in trade because he had a boyfriend. As if his wretched boyfriend hadn't paid



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me to help and not kill him in the *first* place. *Explicitly* for the betterment of their — do you know what? I'm going to stop talking now, because honestly, you *don't* want to know. I didn't want to know. I still don't want to know!"

"But then you chucked him out a window?" Filius pointed out, bits of his face twitching as he tried to keep the whole of it straight.

"Tolerating personal contact from hairball-brained mental cases who use cologne for mouthwash was decidedly not part of the bargain. And I didn't kill him."

"Ah. So if you hadn't invented the spell, you would have had to give back the money?"

"Exactly!" Severus pointed at him victoriously, and also rather manically.

"And you're quite sure Slytherin knows only the sensible parts of the story, are you?" Filius asked in a reasonable voice.

"There were some?" Minerva asked Poppy, sotto voice, as Severus's face fell like Hagrid after his third barrel of ale. Louder, she mentioned, "And then there was the time someone who shall remain nameless set the Gryffindor table on fire..."

"Oh, that is not fair!" Severus scowled indignantly. "You're making it sound as if I did that on purpose. I don't even know I did do it, you all just *say* I did."

"You... don't know you did it," she echoed, staring at him in flat disbelief.

"I was very upset," he explained, shrugging. "I saw first-

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years spitting out their teeth from petrified candy apples and bats coming out their noses, and they were *scared*, and then I was stabbing Lockhart with a fork because he was enthusiastically threatening — er, offering to try to put the fire out himself and *anything could have happened*, that's all I know." He paused, but not because of their incredulous looks. "No, wait, I tell a lie, he didn't need stabbing that time. Our table was all over ice; I just had to trap his wand hand in it."

Poppy patted his knee again, and pointed out, "You're not helping your case, dear." Severus sagged.

"I heard a rumor you invented an area-silencing charm that works in the dormitories, too," Filius commented. "Always meant to ask you about that."

Severus blushed. Not flushed; this one was very clearly a blush. No one had ever seen him do that before. "Er, no," he muttered. "Not a silencing charm... anyway, I have a Talk with all their relatives, and there are other precautions running; none of them can cast that one, believe me."

"Would you like to lay odds they don't know you did it, though?" Minerva asked, amused.

"And aren't doing their best to reproduce it?" Filius tacked on brightly. "My money's on Aster Benvolion."

"I would have said Tiberius Moriarty," darkly opined Minerva. "Motivated, you know."

Severus silently buried his face in his hands. Then he reconsidered and, moving his face to the table, wrapped



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his arms around his ears. In a slightly muffled voice, he announced, "I shall be remaining just here for the foreseeable future. Kindly direct all enquiries to my office."

"What do you mean, motivated?" Poppy asked Minerva, worried she was about to get More Work.

"He's fifteen."

"That'd do it."

"I think I *was* fifteen," Severus dolefully informed the table.

"And motivated?" Filius winked.

"Look," Severus sat up, miffed and evidently done with blushing, "one of my roommates had a snore you could saw wood with, all right, and one of those thick gulping voices that sounds like it's full of bubotuber pus, once it broke, and he did not seem to notice that he was courting swift death by pureblood aesthete every time he went to sleep or brought a girl back or, er, shook hands with himself. And if anyone had died in our year, *everyone would have blamed me*. Yes, I was motivated."

Minerva hummed skeptical 'agreement.'

"I hate everybody," Severus informed the chandelier.

"Only because you understand my point now, though, am I right?" Poppy prodded him, not unsympathetically.

"Not only..."

"Severus..."

He sighed, shoulderblades sticking out like a moulting crow. "I suppose."

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"Good, because I could go on, you know."

"All afternoon, if necessary," added Filius cheerfully. "I've got a little list."

"And you'll none of you be missed," Severus growled. Filius pulled a mildly disappointed face over that having come out in his speaking voice, but took it philosophically. He never had managed to get the student Severus onstage, even with (empty) threats of drumming him out of Music Club. Sighing again, "Fine. What exactly is it you want me to do?"

"Make them stop," Minerva suggested.

"You first," he snapped.

"And then bicorned pegasi with rainbow wings will descend from the moon on bridges of sparkling fairy dust and convince Binns to re-work his lesson plans," Filius cooed, batting his eyes ridiculously, before Minerva could do more than take a breath to start snapping back with.

"...That's disgusting," Severus said after a moment, clearly struggling not to smile. "I don't like fairies any more than anyone else, but making walkways of their ground-up wings seems a bit much. I mean, you'd have to kill or cripple billions, considering the distance from the moon, maybe trillions; they don't shed them nearly quickly enough for a natural gathering."

"Then if we're agreed that no one's asking for the utterly out-of-the-question-impossible?" Filius looked at Poppy expectantly.



## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

"If you could just get them to stop making up attack spells," she nearly begged. "When there was only one feud running in one form, I'll admit it was an interesting challenge, other considerations aside. But it's endemic now, and I just don't have the time to puzzle out countercurses every day. People do get sick and have accidents and play quidditch and muck up their assignments, too, after all."

"But I *want* them thinking things out and experimenting," he protested, and appealed to Filius. "Don't you?"

"Severus, how many of your spells were designed as weapons?" the Charms professor asked patiently.

Severus had to think about that one. Finally he said, "The green lightning, I suppose, but that wasn't so much designed as one of those *aargh* spells. And I've used it for post-CPR defibrillation."

"I beg your pardon? One of those which?" Minerva asked, cup of tea halfway to her lips.

"You know," he waved a hand vaguely, "they just sort of come. When you're full of *aargh*."

"I can't say that I do," she informed him, eyebrows up and hiding her mouth behind the cup. "Are you telling me the cutting spell wasn't a weapon?"

"Of course not," he scoffed. "Knives are tools. Of course they can be used as weapons, and one can, admittedly, fixate in bad moments, what with the potential for detail work, but look." He took an apple from the fruit bowl on

## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

the sideboard and set it on his saucer, leaving his coffee cup hovering in the air and seeming not to notice the way everyone had choked on *detail work*.

"Sectumsempra," he cast, and peeled the apple. He displayed the peel: the inside was as red as the shiny outer skin, no fruity flesh clinging to it. "Sectumsempra," he cast again, and Filius began to look interested as he noticed that the wandwork was different. The apple divided neatly in half, although he had to pull the two halves apart.

He cast Minerva a mischievous, challenging look and cast the spell again, clearly slashing the line of it over not only the apple but his hand. The witches gasped, but when he moved his wand hand away, not only was his other hand unhurt, but the apple was unsliced. Only the seeds had been laid open. He told them, "It's not that it can't kill someone, if you do the wand motion for skin-and-veins, but it was *meant* for a safety blade. Even the skin-and-veins combination was meant for cutting leather and so on; you can't get through large areas of skin without hitting capillaries."

"Why make it so hard to heal, then?" Poppy charged him with a skeptical frown.

"The *intention* of the incantation was 'always cuts,'" Severus answered, looking a little embarrassed. "I started developing it when I got my hands on a length of dragonhide and didn't want to queer all my knives. And," he shifted shiftily, "er, one enjoys bad puns at fourteen and



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also alliteration, especially if it evokes one's House — ”

“Yes, we've all noticed the way that ended when you were fourteen,” Minerva noted innocently.

Severus shot her the stink eye. “And in brief — ”

“Too late. It was always too late when he wrote it into his essays, too,” she told Poppy, who tried to look, if not absent from the room or uninvolved, then at least as much like Switzerland as possible.

“*And in brief*,” Severus repeated, glaring, “that translation of ‘always cuts’ also means ‘separates forever.’ Additionally, muggles have a brand of knives called Staysharps. So: will forever make its cut every time, was what I meant. Only, it's only the Dark Arts that care what you *mean*, and only some of them.” He spread his hands in a slightly sullen there-you-have-it gesture.

“‘Separates’ forever?” skeptically pressed Minerva, who also did the Latin Sunday Crossword race, when she had time.

“*Separates forever*,” Severus repeated firmly, in an I Am About To Storm Out Or Start Snarling At My Seniors To Sod Off tone.

“The toenails one?” Filius asked eagerly, not just to change the subject but because, well, charmsmithing.

“Someone had hexed mine off,” Severus explained, settling with a few suspicious, tail-end-of-sulky eye-flicks towards Minerva that faded as he warmed to his subject. “Hurt like blazes, and I'd heard an old wives' tale they only regrow nat-

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urally once. It was another Slytherin and I hadn't worked out how to dodge questions yet, so I couldn't go to the Infirmary about it. United front and all. They only grow to absurd lengths if you put power and intent behind it.”

“...Was there a lot of that?” Poppy asked after a moment, disturbed.

“Not for long,” he purred, steepling his fingers smugly.

“What about that curse that switches a person's hands and feet,” Minerva challenged him sternly.

“That's not a designer hex,” Severus told her, eyebrow raised, “it's just a switching spell. You taught it to me yourself. In class.”

“It's not meant to work on bits of people!”

“It does, though, if you know enough about anatomy.”

“You are a very disturbing young man,” she informed him.

“Water hovers in vaporous formations between the earth and ozone layer,” he informed her.

“What about the one that covers people in bees,” she accused. “For weeks, if it's not removed, as I recall!”

“It doesn't ‘cover people in bees,’” he said patiently, “it powerfully attracts the bees of a previously-primed hive to a target. Honey and mead are the bases for hundreds of simple potions, most of which can even be legally sold to muggles, but if they're to work it's vital to use honey made from the right sorts of pollen. Pure strains. Not to mention that honey made from different sorts of flowers tastes



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different, and so makes different flavors of mead as well. I make good money off that spell in the summers. It bought all my set books after third year."

"You keep bees at home?" Filius asked. "I didn't know that."

"Certainly not," Severus shuddered. "I'd like to like the idea, but hive minds with toxic stingers and expendable drones, no thank you, had quite enough of that. Besides, there's no place for them at the house. No, I sell the service to various beekeepers, and then I get a discount on the honey and sell the mead and potions."

"No flies on you," Minerva said dryly.

"The first cleverboots to make a spider joke gets coffee up their nose," Severus hurried to forestall everyone.

"Or a Scottish misers joke," Minerva agreed, on consideration.

"Don't be waspish," Filius urged piously, terribly pleased with himself. "It's too mean." Everyone groaned.

"*My point is it's a waste of time directing mental energy towards inventing weapons,*" Severus said, still giving the unabashed Filius a pained *you are tapdancing right on the line, Mister* look. "Practically any tool can be used to incapacitate or misused to do harm; why bother?"

"...You sounded moderately less disturbing right until then," Minerva noted.

He shrugged. "It's wasteful making something that can only be used to one purpose, that's all I'm saying, when practically everything that isn't meant to harm has at least two uses."

## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

Filius patted his elbow and advised, "Stop digging."

"But I haven't made her eye twitch yet," Severus pointed out reasonably. "And she was going to keep on with the crossword after the rest of us had implicitly agreed to stop." Everyone stared at him, and he gave them one of his deranged alligator grins and toasted them with his coffee. "Q.E.D: now all present understand the principle, while punishment commensurate to the offense has been dispensed. Up efficiency."

"You're just trying to catch up on five-year-old detentions," Minerva accused, crossing her arms. They could very nearly see her shadow's tail lashing.

He raised an eyebrow at her and didn't bother to point out that he'd graduated seven years ago, or that the percentage of his school troubles that had involved his teachers had dropped off sharply well before that. "How do you do it, Holmes?"

"Well, I can see you'll get no use from him while the Head of my House is here," she snapped at the other two, and banished her teacup. "I'll be in Pomona's office if I'm not in mine."

"Was that necessary?" Poppy chided when she'd gone. Then she wished she hadn't, because Severus turned his *I Am About To Be Blunt And You Have Only Yourself To Blame* look on her.

He said, meeting her gaze calm and clear-eyed, "Yes. She was spot on. You're both giving her and her students a pass, at least in front of me, for what they do to mine regularly."



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And all right, yes, she's even-handed post-incident but *she doesn't even try to master them*, which is just the same as encouragement as they're concerned: when it comes to pushing against the law and when it comes to cruelty and intolerance, the silence of authority is consent."

He took a breath and let it out slowly, but clearly wasn't done. "You've let her save face in front of me today — which you all usually do, and I understand that seniority and having sat her classes means I'm not going to hear whatever anyone says to her about it, but *nothing changes* — but you've been most imbalanced in your overt blaming today, so as to make an alliance with her in aid of your demand that I... in fact, I still don't understand precisely what you want me to do. The clemency may be temporary and/or in exchange for the aid, but regardless, I resent it. And only a hundredth of the resentment is on my own behalf."

Though his face didn't change, his voice hardened. "I concede your argument about my ultimate responsibility and won't ignore the matter, but you shouldn't have involved her, or even allowed her to witness the request. It was clumsy and unkind, a bad use of power and an abuse of your seniority." He took another slow breath and seemed to thaw, looking at her curiously. "Did you realize?"

"No!" Poppy exclaimed, shocked and upset. "Severus, I'm sorry, we didn't think you were —"

"I did," Filius corrected placidly, coring Severus's peeled

## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

apple with a tap of his wand and picking half up to eat.

"What the hell was that about, then?" Severus demanded, but he still looked more curious than angry.

"You're head of Slytherin. You may be supposed able to cope with a little boardroom maneuvering and friendly teasing, even from former class-masters, now you're well," Filius said, gesturing peacefully with his naked apple half. "And you weren't well, the first few years; you're only just getting, if I may use the expression for a serpent, your feet under you. It would be remiss of me to deprive you of a naturally-occurring opportunity to work on your micropolitics; Horace said that isn't your strong point. Besides, I missed the food fight," he added, aggrieved.

Severus rolled his eyes at the complaint, despite hearing perfectly well the unspoken layer of *I wanted to see how you'd jump, young grasshopper with regrettable tattoo*. He considered the rest of it, noted, "Granted, but in that area I think I explain better than I perform," and took a bite from the other half of the apple.

"Q.E.D.," Filius chuckled.

"That'll do, then," Severus decided clinically. "For the students' purposes, at least. What did you want me to do, then, Poppy, exactly?"

She was looking between them with a *wizards from the cool-colored Houses/men-generally are insane* expression, and shook her head expressively in case they'd missed this



## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

opinion. "I don't know, exactly," she said. "I thought you'd know best what would work with your students." Now you're awake enough to get to know them rather than arching over them collectively and hissing like a rabid, overprotective vixen, she didn't add.

"You needn't flatter, I realize you didn't corner and pressure me from malice-and-callous," he told her, irritated.

"Just because I didn't mean to hurt you and I want something from you doesn't mean I'd stoop to soft soap, you juvenile curmudgeon," she said tartly. "It is your responsibility, and most of it still would be even if it were only a matter of being your job."

"Oh, all right, then," he said, happier, ignoring the way Filius was snickering into his apple. "So: to dissuade my students from using spells in hallway brawls that you can't be expected to know the cures for, do I have it?"

"That's right. Not that I'd complain if you *could* stop the brawls themselves..."

"Hm." He tapped his mouth with a knuckle, thoughtfully, and eventually said, "No, there is absolutely no method of tackling this head-on which would work in any way whatsoever and leave me still with real control of the House. Ergo, there's nothing I can do here that you're going to like."

"You can't do it?" she asked, deeply disappointed but somehow unsurprised, and resigned herself to getting no sleep at all for the rest of her life.

## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

"Of course I can do it," Severus said calmly, and sipped his coffee. He clarified, "Just not in any way you'll approve. Consider yourself warned. Do you want me to proceed?"

"What are you going to do?" she demanded, alarmed.

"For pity's sake, I don't know! I've had approximately four and a half seconds to think about it since having the problem defined. I have the beginnings of a few ideas. They all want refining and I haven't decided what direction will be best to take. You'll hate everything, and whatever I do might take some time. Do you want me to proceed?"

Well, Poppy thought, he regularly said *he* hated everyone, which he clearly didn't. Besides, Filius, who seemed to understand him better than she did now he was out of that horrible fugue state, looked entertained, not alarmed. She said, "Yes. I do."

"Sucker," Severus noted, lips quirking. "I can pensieve that for evidence now, you realize." He steepled his fingers again, then laced them behind his head and leaned back, pursing his mouth, the humor falling away as he thought. "Let's see... it's all got to be tacit, but easily identifiable as a message from me. Have to let them know I'm not hypocrite enough to try to stop them entirely, just laying down some unspoken rules and limits; Slytherin understands there are things that are Done and Not Done... and provide positive incentives; if they're not bright enough to realize there will be negative ones they'll need the lesson... make sure to underline the Marquis of Queensbury's being imposed for



## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

a reason that's on their side, and make it tempting, and make them laugh a bit, only not too clever because they've *all* got to take the hint..."

Poppy looked between him and the deeply interested Filius, not sure whether to be worried or not. When Severus nodded abruptly and stood up, she asked, "Where are you going?"

"Library," he said, banishing his cup and plate. "I need a thesaurus and the really good Greco-Roman dictionary."

"May I come with?" Filius asked, eyes gleaming.

"I think not," Severus judged cheerfully. "You might be obliged to disapprove."



It was barely two weeks into the next term before Minerva chafed her way through the General Faculty How's The Term Starting Off Meeting's Old Business and, the minute New Business was invited, slammed a book down on the table. "I confiscated this," she gritted, "from a first-year Hufflepuff. He told me he'd bought it in Flourish & Blotts."

Albus picked up the book and examined the colorful, glossy cover. "Curses and Countercurses," he read out in his mild voice. "Foil your Foes with the Very Latest in Disarming Spells, Revenge Hexes, and Much, Much, More! By Professor Vindictus Viridian."

There was a brief pause until everyone had remembered viridian was green and joined him in looking at Severus. Not everyone looked as incredulous as Minerva was furi-

## THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT

ous, but no one quite matched Albus's expression of quizzical curiosity with the judgment reserved, either.

Severus, by the time Albus had finished speaking, had leaned back to rest his neck on laced fingers and crossed his ankles with his boots on the table. Which was not at all the thing. His face was very bland, but to those of them who'd had him in classes since he was eleven (not thirteen), it was evident that he was desperately trying not to laugh.

Aiming his face in Poppy's general direction, his deep voice trembling almost inaudibly and his eyes fixed on a corner of the ceiling as though it was fascinating, he mused, "I thought about putting the hexbreaking spells in the back for the ones where a finite won't do it. But that's contraindicated, due to the extra work for you when they inevitably muck it up. I've got your copy of the Parents' and Teachers' Companion in my rooms; I'll bring it by the Infirmary tomorrow, if you like, or I can pass it over at dinner if you'd rather not wait."

Her jaw dropped. "You — ! *This* is what you...!!!"

"Mm," he agreed dreamily, still looking at the ceiling. "Genies, monkeys' paws, and Slytherins: it's so important to be careful what you ask for, I always think..."

— FINIS —





La Mandragore - plante

# BIANNUAL SENIOR FACULTY FALL TERM CLUSTERSPARKLE '92

Albus believes in knitting as hugs, friendship as armor, laughter as a weapon, love as power, the redemption of Death Eaters, and, today, sadly, basilisks. What he can't believe is what one uninvited DADA teacher has done to his usually serious and important end of term staff meeting. Or that he, y'know, employes these people.



## THE MINUTES

Hogwarts: 2nd Primonthly Senior Staff  
Meeting, December 18, 1992

Present: HbM Albus Dumbledore presiding,  
2HbM HbG Hb Minerva McGonagall,  
HbHbHb Pomona Sprout,  
HbS Hb Severus Snape,  
HbR Hb Filius Flitwick sec.,  
Fawkes masc., Gilderoy Lockhart

While this was a regularly scheduled meeting,  
usual procedures such as Old Business, Budget,  
Hbead/H Prefectural Report, and Reminding  
Professor Lockhart Hbe Is Not Actually Senior  
Staff were delayed by mutual unspoken consent  
due to the pressing nature of recent events.

7:30: Meeting assembled in the staff room  
and Minerva made tea.

7:32: Severus asked if [Harry P.:YRG;  
found by Peeves in presence of petrified YR Hb

## THE MINUTES

Justin FF and Sir Nicholas] was able to  
shed any light on events. Albus said no, he was  
involved and shaken but hadn't said anything  
clarifying. Gilderoy wasn't surprised to hear  
Harry P. didn't know anything about it, and  
mentioned one of his books.

7:33: Severus expressed concern that this  
second attack made it more likely that the  
writing on the wall at the first ["The  
Chamber Has Been Opened"] was accurate.  
Gilderoy brought attention to his (Gilderoy's)  
smile, and Severus suggested it might be easier  
to appreciate when still. Albus asked for  
a brainstorm re: connecting the two attacks.  
Gilderoy reminded the room that Sir Nicholas  
is already dead, and connected the circumstance  
to one of his books.

7:35: Albus asked about the progress of the  
mandrake crop and Pomona reported good



## THE MINUTES

progress. Some discussion of whether the scarves etc to keep the mandrakes healthy in winter would be donated by Severus or knitted by Albus (game point to Severus this time, I think), and whether cashmere mittens like Gilderoy and his male companion used in their greenhouse in Spain (Spain!) were required. Pomona assured Gilderoy she would consult his botanical expertise if necessary.

7:43: Albus asked Minerva if Justin FF and Sir Nicholas had been seen safely to the Infirmary, and was told that Justin FF had, while Sir Nicholas was still being helped there by JLFb Ernie Mac. Gilderoy suggested we all buy one of his books to benefit from a relevant chapter, and Minerva gave him a cup of tea to shut him up. Some discussion of whether Minerva had put [Amortentia?] in Gilderoy's tea and whether and under what circumstances

## THE MINUTES

Severus would poison him.

7:45: Albus attempted to call the meeting to order. Gilderoy talked about goats.

7:47: Gilderoy suggested the Heir of Slytherin report to his Head of House. Severus ruined a perfectly good cup of coffee.

7:48: Largely incomprehensible discussion on the subject of Gilderoy, Severus, the Heir of Slytherin, who had and might let who win during yesterday's Dueling Club meeting and more generally, and consultation on matters of technique [spellcasting, one dearly hopes]. Personal history being referenced, one suspects. Note to self: suggest to Albus that, once the curse has eaten this one, we don't hire any more DADA teachers who attended Hogwarts within at least six years of Severus's form.

7:50: Albus called the meeting to order.



## THE MINUTES

Minerva noted the probability of the public and Board assuming GR/RotR Rubeus Hagrid implicated in the attacks.

It became necessary to assure Albus of the senior staff's support for Rubeus, especially after Gilderoy expounded on his compassionate understanding of how tempted to violence Rubeus must be by his giant blood.

7:54: Speculation concerning the identity of the Heir of Slytherin, largely by Gilderoy.

Candidates considered due to power and [in the latter case, former] attractiveness: Gilderoy and Albus. Candidates rejected due to youth: Gilderoy and Severus. Writer suspects Albus of telepathically stopping Severus from turning Gilderoy's eyes into raisins on the spot.

8:00: Minerva complained of student body treating Harry P. 'like a pariah' since yesterday's club meeting. Gilderoy stated Harry

## THE MINUTES

P has been hearing voices. Severus raised the possibility of using the time bought by Harry P.'s widely-alleged implication in the attacks to see about helping Rubeus and, after resulting misunderstanding resolved, expressed concern that Rubeus would be scapegoated and imprisoned. Albus assured him he would try to prevent it. N.T.S. suggest at next meeting that we find a way to effectively explain to Severus that no one will burn his office to the ground if he ever forgets, while, trying to be helpful, to pretend he isn't; he won't listen but set-to the suggestion sparks should give Pomona and me a chance at the sandwiches.

8:04: Severus questioned Gilderoy re Harry P. hearing voices. Gilderoy repeatedly attributed it to being 'made a bit batty' by his [Gilderoy's] presence despite Harry P.'s being 'otherwise heroic,' to Severus's disgust and despite



## THE MINUTES

Albus's opinion that Harry T was hearing something real. Albus and Minerva re-emphasized the importance of not jumping conclusions. Pomona was distressed by the idea of a student's hearing things. Severus reminded her that the phrase 'hearing things' can apply to objective reality, also reminding us all (yet again, but briefly, at least, today) that Harry T 'does not need coddling.'

8:10: Albus pointed out that we can't do anything about Harry T's voices until we know for sure what their source is, and Severus wanted to know if we should even try to stop them. Gilderoy's interpretation of the conversation as a request that he leave the castle ended in Minerva hitting Severus with the sugar tongs. Filius asked why Albus thinks the alleged voices are real, and Albus connected them to Harry T's show of

## THE MINUTES

Tarseltongue during the dueling club.

8:12: Filius asked that said show be confirmed for those who had only heard of it from overexcited students, and Severus summarized the incident while Gilderoy inexplicably tried to hide behind him. Gilderoy expressed the belief that Harry T had been showing off for him by using Tarseltongue instead of the blocking spell Gilderoy had demonstrated.

8:18: Filius asked that the widely held student opinion that Harry T had asked the snake to attack Justin FF be addressed. Gilderoy repeated his opinion re showing off by attacking Justin FF, and Minerva and Albus expressed doubt. Severus agreed reluctantly with doubt, explaining that Harry T had seemed surprised not to be generally praised for his display.



## THE MINUTES

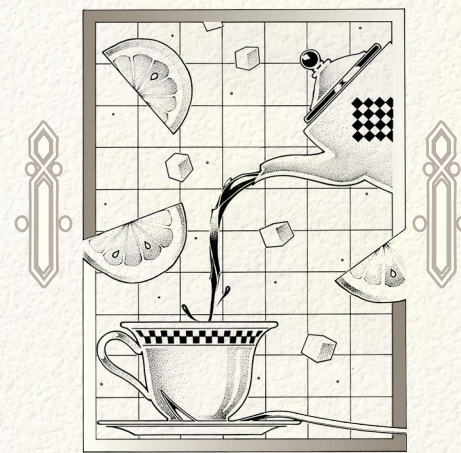
8:20: Gilderoy suggested Harry P had attacked Justin FF out of thoughtlessness, and stated that he had allowed Severus to "save the day" so that Harry P would not be further embarrassed. Severus was adamant that the day had not needed saving, and demanded that Albus express confidence in Severus's unlikeliness to have let the situation get out of his control, which Albus did. Gilderoy commented on the impossibility of controlling Malfoys [re the conjuring of the snake in the first place], and considered taking Harry P under his wing as the boyishness of the powerful should have mature supervision.

8:23: Minerva asked for confirmation that Albus believed Harry P's alleged voices linked to his Parseltongue abilities, and Albus said he considered the possibility a "highly plausible explanation for why Harry [P]"

## THE MINUTES

would be hearing voices that would go unnoticed by most everyone else."

8:25: General gloom broken by Gilderoy's assertion that that Harry P is joined in his 'confused crush' by JRG Fhermione G. Meeting dissolved and hastily dispersed before Min could take more than offense. Will resume tomorrow over tea, making sure to begin with Argus's term record of cleaning offenses if Gilderoy follows Severus in again.







## THE MEETING

**A**LBUS STOOD IN THE WARMLY APPOINTED staffroom, slowly hanging up his outer robe. It had been a most troubling day. He could imagine what poisonous rumors were already winding their way through the cool corridors of his great lady.

He could also imagine what explosive shouting was about to take place in this very room, and so he thought he had, perhaps, better assign seating himself. He didn't generally bother with this, as his senior faculty were all *nominally* adults, but at least two of them were likely to be tiresome today.

He therefore placed Minerva's restrained red and gold teacup between Pomona's, its twin except for being in Hufflepuff colors, and his own very snazzy purple and yellow one. Filius's fanciful blue and brown went next to Pomona's, and the serpent-and-dove mug he'd given Severus next to it, at Albus's left hand.

Each cup placed, an armchair sprang up behind it like a squashy, colorful mushroom. That is, most of them had armchairs, and Albus's and Filius's were colorful. It was sensible of Filius not to stick to House colors in everything, Albus felt. The cheery red suited him. Mona liked her colors earthy and Minerva liked hers severe, and, on the subject of severe, Severus's mug almost always manifested a backless, swiveling bar-stool.



## THE MEETING

For instant mobility, Albus assumed, which made him sad. Then again, Severus not only used the mug Filius had given him but used it in semi-public. That was a far cry from the hollow-eyed shell of the early eighties, who had reliably out-jittered Alastor Moody and could only transfigure in grey.

His deputy was the first to arrive, sweeping in and nearly stumbling as she stared at him.

He nodded at her gravely. "Minerva."

She eyed him, mouth thin. "If you're trying to distract us all, it won't work."

Albus frowned. "My dear Professor, I intend no such thing. Why would you think so?"

She pointed right at his heart and said distastefully, "That jumper."

He beamed. "Fetching, isn't it? A gift from Alastor. He's only just gotten the knack of cables again now his hand's mended."

"It's... it's *neon peach*."

"Brings out my eyes," he said airily.

"You've got feathers *in your beard*."

"Fawkes was shedding," he said, smiling. On a day like today, if he could distract any of them for five seconds together, he'd count it a win. Since she'd mentioned it. "He's so territorial at this stage. And the colors do go rather well together, you have to admit."

"I do not."

"Odds Severus nicks them before the meeting's over?" a

## THE MEETING

high tenor pondered idly from around Albus's thigh region.

"No bet," Albus and Minerva chorused. Pomona, just come in with Filius, chimed in right along with them.

"Where is Severus?" Pomona went on, hanging up her cloak and taking the Charms Professor's (even now they didn't call him the Charms Master, as a rule, because it had sounded so disreputable when Horace said it).

Minerva checked her pocket watch. "He isn't late yet."

"No, but doesn't he usually get here early to whinge at the Headmaster about something or other?"

"Now, now," Albus said peaceably, smiling because once Severus was actually present it would have been Minerva twitting him for sluggishness (she would have used that word, too, to make his eye tic) and Pomona speaking up for him, if only for the sake of quiet. "The upkeep of Slytherin morale and the potions budget are both rather fraught. Ah, there you are, Sever... er."

This trailing off was because not only was Severus striding towards them in full-on thundercloud mode, long legs eating up the hallway like something he dared not show fear in front of was stalking him, but he whipped around *twice* on the way, first demanding, "Why are you still talking?!" and then pressing out between gritted teeth, "This is the *senior faculty* meeting."

It had no effect. Nothing ever did.

Gilderoy Lockhart bounced in, beaming affably at them



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all, and took his imperial purple and gold-monogrammed mug out of the rosewood cabinet, sliding it deftly between Severus and Filius's chairs. He settled himself in the imperial purple and gold thronelike affair, in his violet and gold suit, with his burnished golden waves of hair and lilac eyes. Beaming toothily at everyone.

No one either banged their head on the table or tore their hair out, even Severus. His stool, however, turned into a rocking chair and started swaying sneakily towards the door. He kicked it. It turned into a beanbag in gunmetal-grey camouflage, and began to inch stealthily under the table. He kicked it again, looking quite ready to start snarling out loud, and it settled sulkily into one of those wingbacks that curls protectively around the head region. Black, of course.

Severus regarded it critically for a moment. Finally he shrugged, predictably finding something that would let him hide his face acceptable. He shot one of his patented *you can't actually laugh at me out loud, I work here now* not quite-glares around the table and sat, resigned.

That look never worked. He got smiled at for being Severus, not because they all remembered him as a troublesome and surly student. The glares only ever made it clear that he was completely and consistently missing the point, and so got him smiled at more, usually until he threw up his hands and hurled himself into a corner chair to glower. Obviously no one was going to pat his head in front of a

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DADA placeholder who wasn't even taking the school seriously, though, so Pomona was tucking her smile behind her hands and Filius his behind the Record Book.

Minerva, fetching the tea tray from the sideboard, had missed the whole thing. She scowled questioningly at Albus as she turned with it: wasn't he going to kick Lockhart out?

On balance, he decided, he wasn't, and not only because it would be more trouble than it was worth. The man had been a witness to yesterday's fracas, after all. One of only two adult witnesses. He could rely on Severus to be meticulous and exact and even, with no students or parents around, as just as the boy could manage. If Severus's feelings were such that he couldn't bring himself to speak or even snarl justice, he would give it to Albus eye to eye. However, with Slytherin's legacy and Harry Potter both involved, he had skin in the game, and not shed skin. He might not see clearly in the first place. Lockhart was *not* reliable, but he was comparatively (Albus felt the underside of his eye twitch just thinking it) objective.

"Well," he said mildly, when everyone had the tea or coffee they wanted. "Ready, Filius?"

"All ready," Filius said, dipping his quill again. They could have used a dictaquill and kept a transcript, of course, but Filius had pointed to one or fifty particularly painfully dull and repetitive meetings as a good reasons to take the minutes instead. Since he was willing to do it himself, Albus



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had no objection. "Biannual Senior Faculty meeting, December 18, 1992. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore Presiding. Deputy Headmistress Head of Gryffindor House Minerva McGonagall, Head of Hufflepuff House Pomona Sprout, Head of Slytherin House Severus Snape, Head of Ravenclaw House Filius Flitwick secretary. Fawkes mascot in abstentia."

"Just burned," Albus beamed in explanation, brushing the feathers he'd tucked into his beard-tie. Filius and Pomona smiled, and even Severus managed to defrost a little. Minerva, evidently still hung up on his jumper, massaged her temples. She'd be by with cinnamon sticks and chili seeds over the next week, of course, just like the rest of them.

"Gilderoy Lockhart..." Filius wrote and read on, and trailed off in an exquisitely polite question.

Anyone but Lockhart would have read the *yes, what the hell is he doing here?* in it. Lockhart himself looked terribly modest and said helpfully, "Order of Merlin Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League — "

"Thank you, Professor Lockhart," Albus cut in, smiling gently at him, before he could get to the Witch Weekly award. Again. "For Professor Flitwick's purposes, 'witness to an incident on the agenda' will do for the moment."

"Which was bad enough," Minerva said, her pent-up steam finally bursting out, "but this is *dreadful*. Even the ghosts!" Pomona scowled at her, and she elaborated, "Well, we *know* what we can do for Finch-Fletchley, Professor Sprout. He's

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not the only one who's been petrified, you know."

"You just spoke to the boy, I believe," Severus noted to Albus, heading off a round of Who Doesn't Care About Who Else's Students before it could get started. It was a magnificent piece of tragicomedy, how quick he was at that when his own students weren't involved. Ravenclaw, for example, had been in a two-front war against what they (still, privately) called the Jockstrap houses until '85, which was about when Severus's post-Dementor syndrome had really started to dissipate. "I don't suppose he had anything useful to contribute."

"Severus, really," Minerva snapped, focusing in on his slight lip-curl on 'useful.' It was too bad, when he'd been so careful not to say 'brat,' but no one ought to be surprised that Minerva was spoiling for a fight.

Severus, evidently, wasn't, and asked Albus, "Well, did he?"

Thoughtfully, he said, "Harry *has* rather managed to entangle himself in this situation. He was shaken, as might be expected. He had nothing to tell me which could have helped explain the attacks." And knew nothing about them. Of that Albus was sure, after looking at him, speaking to him. But the divining instruments in Albus's office were just as sure he had the key to the answer, whatever he knew that he knew. And speaking to him had left Albus equally sure that he was holding back, and knew that what he was holding back was important, overwhelming, and might crush him.



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"Of course that poor boy doesn't know anything at all about what happened," Lockhart said sympathetically. He went on thoughtfully, "What this reminds me of is a time that I was in Mongolia, doing a bit of research that you might remember from my book, *WEEKEND WITH A WERE-WOLF*, a book in which I won utter acclaim and the Best Author award from *WITCH WEEKLY*!"

"The second attack's effect on Sir Nicholas," Severus spoke over him, "increases the possibility of the writing's having been an accurate account, I should think."

"Of course," Lockhart went on, undeterred, "the award was also for my general appearance, for which I can hardly blame the readers! Just look at my sparkling smile."

Severus actually did turn and look at it, giving it the same assessing look he'd given the chair while Lockhart preened, taking the attention as his due. Pomona froze like a rabbit, and Filius leaned forward avidly. "We can't look at it properly," Severus decided eventually, with a critical frown, "if it's moving."

Albus coughed, and asked the table hastily, "What connections can we determine, now that we've witnessed two attacks?"

"Three," Pomona reminded him. "Mrs. Norris, poor thing."

Lockhart smiled brightly, as if to reassure Severus he was wrong. "Isn't Sir Nicholas dead?"

Minerva bristled at the implication that her House's spectral patron didn't matter. It was a sensitive point.

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People often got this idea about the genial Sir Nicholas, whose tendency to gripe about his botched decapitation in public rather lessened his mystery and awe factor. But he was kind and friendly and helpful whenever he could think how to be, and his loss wasn't only the loss of a friend but of a partner and helpmeet. Between her class work and her responsibilities as Deputy, she simply didn't have the time to be as hands-on a Head as Pomona was, and didn't have the nervous energy to sacrifice sleep for it the way Severus (who'd looked around and realized no one else was going to take partnering Filch on the nightly rounds seriously by his standards) did. Like Albus had, and did now on a larger scale, she'd come to rely on her House ghost and portraits to help her keep her finger on the pulse. "And now petrified as well, poor man. I'm not sure whether to hope he's as comatose as the boy or not."

"...Do," advised Severus. She turned to glare at him, but then didn't glare. He'd turned greenish pale, and it was clear to everyone that, far from being callous, his morbidly vivid imagination was telling him a nightmare story of conscious immortal paralysis (while, Albus added, those around you who'd you'd thought were friends lost interest and gave up hope of a cure. He could always follow Severus on that extra step of ghoulish empathy Severus called realism and everyone else called paranoid, maniacally-depressive misanthropy).

"Yes," Gilderoy agreed, "but dead, still. This reminds



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me,” he continued, increasingly brightly, “of when I was doing my research for YEAR WITH A YETI. Only, it wasn’t a ghost, it was a fox, and it wasn’t petrified, but sleeping, but the moral to that story was that I once again saved the day!”

You could have heard a pin drop. You did, in fact, hear Minerva’s teacup click onto her saucer. For a silver(-green) lining, Severus was staring at Lockhart in such dropped-jaw train-wreck fascination, presumably over his complete and unSlytherinly lack of social consciousness, that he was clearly no longer in a depressive spiral over Sir Nick.

Albus wondered if they’d hear his eyes roll onto the table in a moment. They’d gone that wide. Before the hysterical laughter could start, he asked, “Severus, Pomona, you two have consulted about the Mandrake crop?”

They exchanged a glance, and Severus turned a palm up. Pomona was trying not to laugh herself, but she was merely amused with Lockhart, and it seemed to be no effort. “Oh, yes,” she said, “it’s coming along quite nicely. There are a few precautions I’ll need to take to make sure we get the best crop we can manage once the worst of the weather hits, but the progress has been excellent so far.”

Albus felt a prickle of eyes on the side of his head, and turned in minor dread to meet Severus’s gaze. “Pomona was saying, Headmaster,” the boy said, rolling the words out slowly, as if tasting each one, “the mandrakes will be requiring scarves and mittens and the like, as this is turn-

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ing into rather a cold winter.”

They stared at each other. “Socks,” Severus added, all gravity and businesslike checklists, and slid into Albus’s mind the image of all his favorites, their gaiety stretched by mandrake roots and irretrievably stained by ground-in dirt, well watered. Albus narrowed his eyes. Clearly, it was on.

“You know,” Lockhart said chattily, “back on my trip to Spain, we had our own greenhouse and we fitted our mandrakes with only the finest in cashmere mittens and scarves!”

Pomona had one of those *I suppose that ought to be funny, but really it’s just too odd* looks. “I don’t think cashmere mittens are entirely necessary.”

Looking like he knew he’d regret asking, Filius asked, “In Spain, really? Mittens? You *wintered* in Spain?”

“Oh, yes,” Lockhart confided, “between writing TRAVELS WITH TROLLS and BREAK WITH A BANSHEE, I was staying with a male companion in Spain. Juuust friends, mind you,” he added with a huge wink and an elbow to Filius’s ribs that spilled his oolong, “but he kept the most marvelous greenhouse there, which I helped him in improving. So really, Pomona, if you’ve anything to ask, I know *all* about Mandrakes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Gilderoy,” Pomona told him sedately.

“Wintered, in *Spain*. Think he knows all about skiing?” Filius whispered to her.

“I know all about Black Diamonds!” she whispered back, grinning at him and rolling her eyes.



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"Switch the slope signs," Severus suggested, sotto voice and lisping a little so the esses wouldn't hiss and carry. He stretched, and as his hands rose above his head his fingers wiggled in a quick suggestion of bunny ears. The other Heads stifled snickers in their teacups, even Minerva, who also shot what looked like mild stinging charm at his wrist. It must have been a very mild one, because he didn't even look chastised.

He really *ought* to be chastised, though. Albus decided to take Shot #759 at finding out whether the walking skeleton was, as one facet of speculation had it, padding his bones under his thousand buttons and crisp shirts with his thousand jumpers. People had used to give them to him because they assumed he must be freezing down in Slytherin, and to coax him out of what they all assumed was perpetual mourning. You had to show people you were wearing their presents at least once, to be polite, yes? No: Severus had apparently not heard of this rule.

He still got them when 'twas the season for gag gifts. Albus thought he was the only one who still gave Severus woolenwear that wasn't either twice his monthly salary (Severus mournfully insisted that this was because Lucius Malfoy had no sense of proportion and Narcissa Malfoy just couldn't bring herself to buy things that weren't custom because if it wasn't made *for* someone it was thoughtless, obviously, and that the stupidity of their gifts weren't actually intended to be an insult or to buy him) or meant to be entertainingly

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awful, although it had to be admitted that he and Severus were never going to understand each other's taste.

He therefore suggested, "Severus, I'm sure you have a muffler or two that you've yet to find use for?"

Sliding him amused eyes, Severus said, "Those are sized for people, though." Innocently, he went on, "In any case, I should simply hate to ruin anyone's *fu* — interfere with anyone's ability to tell the Board of their personal contributions towards the end of unstoning the castle's residents."

*Click-click, click-click*, went Albus's needles in the black depths of his eyes, while his paperwork piled up on Minerva's desk until she flayed him alive with her sharp little claws, and licked them clean.

"Severus," Albus said gravely. He put his hand on Severus's bony wrist and shot him back a Severus bundled up in so much wool he looked like a colorful snowman, cuddling a black, copper, and turquoise scarf Albus had made for him once, "if you wish to admit that you'd rather not part with your mittens, I don't believe anyone would think less of you."

To his astonishment, he caught a flicker of a caught-out feeling about the scarf before Severus jerked away from his hand and mind, scowling. Albus was actually grateful for Lockhart's babble, filling in the awkward moment. It was mostly awkward for Severus, who couldn't bear being *seen* when he hadn't been ready; Albus was rather warmed, himself.

And pleased to *finally* know what yarn he ought to stock



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for the Potions master. He'd had everyone else's palettes sorted out before they'd been teaching two years.

"Oh, if the clothing needs resizing," Gilderoy nattered on confidently, "I can do that, as well. In my autobiography, *MAGICAL ME*, you'll not that I spent some time living with a tailor before writing *HOLIDAYS WITH HAGS*."

"No one is even slightly surprised, Lockhart," snapped Severus, worse than Minerva for using the nearest irritant as a scratching post when he felt vulnerable. Still sullen and aggressive, although reaching (ineptly) to regain the lightness now he'd gotten the first snarl out, he said, "And no, Headmaster, I'm sure no one who lives above ground-level would care to comment on dungeon-level winterwear in any capacity." His eyes glittered coldly for a moment, then went sardonic, his head tilting in a cool challenge. "Nor would anyone esteem you less were you forced to admit you had... misplaced? your needles."

*Can you do it all?* his eyes jibed. *It would be a coup. Such good PR. All you'd have to do is not-delegate, micromanage, overwork yourself and then, in the end, everyone else. As usual.* He did not go so far as to suggest precisely where his employer might 'lose' his needles, even through a raised eyebrow, but Albus had the distinct sense he'd been setting that up from the start.

"Thank you, Professor Lockhart, for all your offers of assistance," Albus said loudly. Severus settled back in his chair, back relaxing. Albus wasn't entirely sure how he was

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scoring that. Was it Severus 1, Albus 0, or Hogwarts 1, Gryffindor 0? He really had to get Severus to understand that full-throttle damn-the-torpedos thinking wasn't the enemy. One of these days. They certainly had a different enemy today. "Our recent attack victims have been delivered into Poppy's care?" he asked Minerva.

"Well, it's why you brought me here," Lockhart said before he'd finished, "I'm sure! You know, I think there's a chapter in *GADDING WITH GHOULS* that deals with the petrification of ghosts. Perhaps you should all buy a copy to read at your leisure to in order to help Sir Nicholas," he suggested piously.

Minerva filled his monogrammed mug with tea, and shoved it into his hands with the *You Drink That Right Now Young Man* air Albus so admired in her. "Mr. Finch-Fletchley has, Headmaster. Mr. MacMillan was still in the process of fanning Sir Nicholas up when I left him."

"Why, thank you, Minerva!" Lockhart sparkled at her, and winked. "There's nothing," he winked, "*extra* in here, is there?"

Severus stared at him levelly. "I've been sitting over here while she was pouring it."

"Doesn't mean she can't have desires of her own, Severus," Lockhart said with a much larger wink, wagging a finger at him like a wag. "But you've called bagsy on poisoning me, I know!"

Minerva had refilled Severus's mug, and was shoving it into *his* hands before he'd finished mouthing *bagsy*? He



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hmped at her, and grumbled, "I'm not going to kill him in *front* of people." After taking a sip of coffee, he blandly added, "Probably." Minerva rolled her eyes at him, and he grinned at her, just with his eyes. She gave him the Look that wasn't-but-meant a sort of cross between grinning back and smacking him upside the head.

Severus might have recovered enough to be able to whistle in the dark about the idea that he might (personally) kill anyone, but Albus couldn't take it so lightly. If this kept up, the Ministry was going to want at least one scapegoat, and might decide to take both the known Death Eater and the convicted manslaughterer into soul-destroying custody for safekeeping. And then there was the 'this' itself. Last time it hadn't ended until it had ended someone. Albus knew of no one today who could be influenced to stop it, certainly not by anything so petty as the prospect of a Christmas at home.

"Perhaps prudence is called for in this case, Mr. Lockhart," he said curtly. It was a slip, but the man had just, however innocently, accused his right hand of being a sexual predator and his left of plotting murder. He might have thought he was being playful, but just at the moment Albus couldn't feel he was part of the school. "The danger that we're facing," he couldn't quite hold himself back from adding, "has clearly proven itself to be real."

Settling down, Severus asked, "Then we give the writing credence?"

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"I feel certain that the writing on the wall represents the truth of the matter," he said grimly.

"Oh, no," Gilderoy protested earnestly, and when they looked at him in question, explained, "Severus would have me all to himself if we let him." And winked.

Severus made a little strangled noise Albus would have thought his voice was really too deep for, and the cords of his throat stood out. He settled for burning vicious holes in the table with his eyes (not literal ones, at least so far) and digging his nails into the arms of his chair.

Gilderoy sailed on blithely, oblivious. "Any road, yes, the danger is quite real, but it's nothing we cannot face. I had a similar situation happen to me during the writing of *TRAVELS WITH TROLLS*, only then it turned out to be a possessed goat." He elbowed Severus jocularly. "Could've used Aberforth for that one!"

"I doubt he would have been of much help," Albus said dryly as the black velvet under Severus's nails started to rip. Pomona pressed her lips together, eyes sparkling, and refilled her cup.

"Dumbledore," Minerva spoke up, looking deeply uncomfortable.

"I thought he was a goat expert?" Gilderoy blinked. Minerva had been rather quiet, so Albus gave him the benefit of the doubt. He waved Aberforth away. "Never mind that. So the heir of Slytherin is about? Perhaps he should report to his head of House!" he laughed heartily, and elbowed Severus again.



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"Severus, you're leaking, I believe," Albus pointed out mildly, because Severus, a muscle standing out in his jaw, had moved his gaze to his coffee, and it was converting rapidly to steam. It made the room smell exquisite, but if Severus was actually losing control of his magic, that was not good. Everyone here, possibly including Gilderoy, who'd been twelve, remembered Hallowe'en of '73. Albus liked this room. It had lovely engraved scrollwork on the teacup cabinet, and all manner of little touches like that.

"Yes," Severus agreed from between gritted teeth, "I think it best." Considering the way his hands were flexing in little spasms on the chair arms, Albus supposed he was probably right. And as long as he was doing it on purpose he could be allowed to get on with it.

Filius, however, either from natural talent or because his height had forced him to learn to work without the gross leverage that permitted the grand gesture, had an eye for detail and a gift for the delicate touch. He held his wand over Severus's coffee, and allowed a couple of conjured ice cubes to drop into it.

Severus blinked, and blinked again, and a few more times as his face went all bemused and then, Albus would have sworn it, nearly laughed. Filius winked at him. Severus made a horrible face back, and then sedately sipped his coffee.

Either clueless or impervious, Lockhart rattled on, "But Severus had better beware! I don't think the Heir of Slytherin will be quite as generous as I was during dueling

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club and let him win!"

Filius seized at his quill in breathless anticipation, but Severus only said, quite softly, from behind the rim of his mug, "The Heir of Slytherin was not known for *letting* anyone win."

Albus was going to have to work out what exactly he'd meant by that later, possibly by asking with eye contact. It wasn't going to be now, because Lockhart was, clearly, rewriting the universe in an effort to save face. How odd. Did he think they couldn't see him doing it? "So you see my point, Severus! I think with just a bit of practice, you'll be a real threat! But until then, do feel free to consult with me on matters of technique."

Severus would have taken that as an honor coming from himself or Filius, so long as it was in private, Albus thought, wincing. Again, though, the expected explosion didn't come. Instead, Severus slid an inscrutable look at Lockhart and purred, "Ah, yes, I do remember a tradition of consultation on matters of... technique."

Every face around the table instantly mirrored Albus's fervent *Oh dear Merlin, SLYTHERINS, I do NOT want to know!*

"It doesn't seem," Severus continued, all black treacle and sorrow, "to have taken. Nonetheless," he added with a bland smile, "I shall be sure to practice, just as you suggest. Very, very hard."

Lockhart didn't seem to have the sense to be terrified, but he did at least have enough shame to look slightly



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embarrassed before turning his attention to toying with his hair. Miraculous. Maybe Albus *did* want to know.

"Professor Dumbledore," Minerva insisted, having by this point moved from uncomfortable to impatient.

The aforementioned Professor Dumbledore, similarly, had removed his spectacles and was pinching the bridge of his oft-broken nose. "Minerva?"

"Hagrid," she said simply.

And there it was. And while they'd long been co-workers and friends, she'd been a student at the time, and he'd never yet had hard enough proof to make it worth spoiling her memories of a charming young man she'd admired. While she surely thought no malice of Hagrid, it didn't follow that she also thought him guiltless. Softly, he emphasized, "Do please consider before continuing, Minerva, that Hagrid remains in my trust, as he always has."

She didn't, he was cautiously pleased to see, appear to be inclined to argue with him. "And I am sure that of every one in this room," she began firmly.

"Oh, giants!" Lockhart interrupted, like a boy beginning a ghost story. "Well, there you're dealing with a fairly unsavory bunch." Sympathetically, he added, "I'd imagine being half giant gives him over to all manner of compulsions he must fight hard against!"

"Oh, yes," Severus drawled, catching Albus's eye, dry as dust, "being half-blooded *definitely* does that."

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Albus instantly dug around in his pockets for his bag of lemon sherbets. It wasn't a compulsion (or whim) he felt particularly inclined to fight against, especially if it was going to make Severus groan at him. Any muggle-made sweet would do to straight-man the deadpan, of course, but they were his favorites... ah! He offered them around, but only Filius took one. He got the eye-roll he wanted from Severus and a pained *did you really HAVE* to look from Minerva, though, which fully recharged his twinkle.

Pomona looked around the room warily. She wasn't quite as good at telling when someone was being sarcastic as the rest of them. Sarcasm hadn't really been something she'd grown up with, and she didn't teach her badgers to do it. She knew Minerva and Poppy quite well by now, and Severus tried to remember to ham it up for her, but her success rate still wasn't 100%. "I've never observed any sort of behavior that would lead me to believe anything of the sort about him."

Minerva sighed at everyone, not patiently. "I'm sure that no one who knows you or him would doubt your judgment in the matter, Professor," she told Albus briskly, "but rumor is spreading just as wildly now as it did fifty years ago. It may not be up to us."

"If the rumors were centered around him then," Severus pointed out, "they aren't, now." He sounded almost hopeful, and it sounded rather odd on him.

"As clever as this Heir fellow is," Gilderoy put in, "I'm



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rather surprised the rumors aren't spreading about me!"

"Not within the school, perhaps," Minerva said, ignoring him. "Those rumors are patently absurd."

"Although," Severus mused, frowning, digging a knuckle into his lips, "not, perhaps, *that* absurd."

"Though," Gilderoy mused, too, "I am far too young for that sort of speculation. Still. Clever!"

"Very nearly!" Minerva glared at Severus. He startled, seemed to review the last couple of seconds, and (Albus could see it happen, like the turning of a switch) turned from Intelligence Agent to House-Partisan Tease. His whole face changed, and he gave her wide, what-can-you-do eyes.

Wearily, Albus mentioned to them, "I'd prefer our meeting not to descend into speculation and finger-pointing."

While Gilderoy babbled, "You know, I wonder if the Heir is attractive! Then I'd be a definite candidate. Well, other than being far too young," Severus, back on task, shook his head.

"Not speculation, Headmaster. A related matter."

"Please explain, Severus," Albus invited, but had to warn him that Lockhart was enough chaos for one meeting and he didn't need Snakes v. Lions Round Eight Million. "Have you begun taking your students' gossip to heart?"

"While I admit it's tempting," Severus began in regretful confession.

Pomona, however, either thought he was of the resisting-everything-but-temptation school or was too upset to have processed

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that he had something real to say. "We have to stand by Hagrid," she said firmly. "We all know it couldn't possibly be him."

Severus looked at her, gave a little shrug with mostly his eyebrows, and sat back in his chair, waiting for the moment when anything that came out of his mouth would actually be heard. Slytherins were good at meetings, although Albus wasn't sure how Severus had become good at them. Horace hadn't had him in the Slug Club, which was where most of them learned. They'd tried that exactly twice, and it had ended in tears, detentions, and Argus scrubbing multicolored fur off the ceiling.

"Quite right," Minerva nodded sharply. "I'm concerned for hi —"

"Yes, powerful, clever, and good-looking. That would be me to a T. I wonder if I am the Heir of Slytherin and I just don't realize it?"

"As we all should be," Pomona agreed, looking around for everyone's agreement. "He may need our *protection*, in times like these."

"But will we be able to give it?" Minerva asked, grimly, in the way that meant *I know the answer and so do you*. "Some of the parents remember the last time. And the grandparents."

"Oh, but listen to me, on about myself when I'm far too young to have been there before! It would have to have been someone who was at the school back then. And attractive. I've heard you were once quite the looker, Albus."



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Severus, finally caught, turned from Pomona to give Gilderoy a look of unadulterated incredulity.

"You're not old enough, either, Severus," Lockhart said, not unkindly. "But yes," he added, generous, "you're very intelligent."

Severus turned again, and met Albus's eyes. He wasn't a good or disciplined Legilimens, but he had a natural flair both for improvisation and for mind-magic that didn't require him to convince himself he wanted mental intimacy. He had no more trouble with these shallow communications than he'd had with making his Patronus into a messenger (once they'd forced enough cocoa and Heartsease Potion into him that he could even start to try the base charm).

*Can I, he begged, expel someone from my house post-graduate? PLEASE?*

*Better not,* Albus returned, regretfully judicious. He always found it hard not to push too far in when they did this, but challenge was the spice of life, especially when it wasn't a spice that involved politicians and gave one wind.

*Even after that 'once quite the looker' crack?* Severus tempted him, full of carefully crafted nonsense horror at the offense to Albus's silver fox status. And, below it, where Albus wasn't supposed to see, actual stony outrage that this feather-headed piece of flash-in-the-pan fluff would swan in and call Severus's master by name, as if he had the right to flirt and try to bring Severus's master down to his

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distasteful, sequined, weaselly little level, as if they were on a level and intimate already, a feather boa with a dragon.

Oops. He really hadn't meant to go that far in. Also, and more importantly, oh, dear. Even though the sort of mastery Severus was associating with him was largely somewhere between a craftsman and a knight's lord, there was a definite flavor of samurai's daimyo floating around in there. Albus had really thought they'd all gotten Severus back to thinking of himself like a human being again, and thinking more or less like one. If 'back' was really the word.

And yet, even now, while he groaned and teased and whined and fumed and played, the cold devotion of that naked blade hovered in his still waters, standing fast, hilt ready for Albus's hand.

And Harry was at Hogwarts, the Prophecy creeping up on them. This was a terrible thing to learn, and Albus could fight it in Severus, as he had before. But Harry was at Hogwarts, so no, he couldn't.

Severus smirked at him as he pulled out of the dark eyes, *an I felt you weakening there, we both know you want to let me, come on, it'd be so satisfying* look. Albus smiled a little, managed a twinkle. He'd been managing his face for decades, was confident it didn't look rattled, or sad.

Thought was faster than sound, and Pomona was still insisting, "They would only need to meet Hagrid to see that he's completely incapable!"



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"The current confusion surrounding that... person," Severus put in, making a little face and leaving it vague whether he meant the Heir or Harry or whoever had been painting the walls, "may at least buy Hagrid some time. Is there any way we can use it?"

"And that's another problem, Dumbledore," Minerva said, lips tight, while Albus stared at Severus. Fraught over Harry, yes, he knew Severus was that, but to even consider stirring the poison-pot around a twelve-year-old! "Half the school's been treating that poor boy like a pariah since yesterday, and now that he was the one to find Finch-Fletchley and Sir Nicholas..."

He nodded, but really, he'd scarcely heard her. "Severus," he said sternly, "regardless of your personal feelings, I find the accusation of one innocent person a less than admirable way of going about helping another."

Severus looked absolutely slapped, and as though the ringing in his ears matched Albus's. After a moment of really awful silence, face stiff, he said coolly, "I meant, Headmaster, that we might, perhaps, use the *time*."

Oh. Oh, well, that... made more sense. Clearly Albus was more rattled by the reminder that who they'd had to be once was still waiting for them than he'd thought.

"He was hearing voices," Gilderoy prated, "but fame can be difficult for some to deal with. Perhaps if he spent a bit more time with me, I could show him the ropes! Get him

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used to that sort of life."

Far more gently, Albus said, "I don't think that will help, Severus. I've already heard from the Ministry: more than one enquiry about Hagrid."

"They'll take him back if they're not stopped," Severus said, jaw tight, not meeting Albus's eyes. "They'll want a scapegoat."

"And I will," he assured him, "exercise my considerable influence to keep that from happening." They were, of course, only partly discussing Hagrid. There had been owls about Severus, too. Albus wasn't terribly worried about him yet, not with Malfoy so firmly in power, but the specter of the island loomed.

Hagrid had come back shaken and cowed, cried buckets over his changed life, made friends (only some two-legged) ferociously, and been reasonably steady by September, even in the face of the crueler students. Severus had gone sweetly and gently insane by anyone's standards after half a week with the Dementors, earnestly droning muddled lists and verses and notes of things he'd never cared about at questioners, swaying, giving every indication he really was trying to answer, really thought he was.

By the time Albus had gotten him out, he'd been so *stubbornly* catatonic that Albus had had to ask Perenelle Flamel for help. Lily Potter had had to taunt and coax and stupid-question him into some truly inspired brewery before he'd invented himself something that broke through his own



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fog even a little, because chocolate and sunlight hadn't begun to do the job. It had been years before anything like the boy who'd gone in had started to show again in the indifferently willing tool they'd gotten back. The losses hadn't helped, of course, but Albus thought Severus might prefer to die than go back there even for a day. He only hoped he wouldn't be so hard-pressed, in the instance, that he'd have to tell him no.

Shaking off that looming shadow, perhaps, Severus turned to Lockhart, mouth tight. "These voices."

"Oh, yes, the voices." Lockhart was, Albus thought, not flattered but pleased at his expertise finally being acknowledged. "Well, I expect that growing up as he did, being around a real celebrity left him a bit overcharged, don't you think?"

Severus stared at him again, this time flat-eyed. "Try to make sense."

"I am making sense!" Lockhart protested. "The boy was overexcited! Thought he was hearing things!"

"It is possible that Harry was overexcited, of course," Albus allowed, "but I fear, in light of recent revelations, that Harry may truly have been hearing something that others were not."

Pomona gasped, but Lockhart waved his hand dismissively. "Well, of course he was! He was seeing me! That kind of contact is likely to make any young man a bit batty, no matter how heroic he might otherwise be!"

Severus looked sourly at the table, but didn't speak. Or

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gag. In appreciation of his restraint, Albus cautioned, "We should not, however, jump hastily to conclusions."

"Regardless of how popular the activity is among the students," Minerva said, with a pointed emphasis that was mostly for Severus, but a little bit for Pomona.

"But if he's hearing things..." Pomona wrung her hands. "Oh, that poor boy..."

"I'm hearing things as we speak," Severus pointed out reasonably. "Namely, you lot. Voices. Hearing them. An indication of what? Functioning ears. That boy doesn't need *coddling*."

*He needs listening to*, Albus filled in for him, which Severus was never ever going to say out loud. Or rather, Severus might say it, in the form of *he needs to be exhaustively interrogated with thumbscrews and red-hot poker...* no, that was more a Filch daydream.

Albus was, perhaps, a little frustrated by Harry's refusal to talk to him.

"How can that boy not need coddling?" Pomona was asking hotly. *She* was a little frustrated by her Hufflepuffs having supported Justin in a way that identified a little boy as an enemy. Especially when she didn't think the evidence was there and even Severus had told her (because *obviously* Christmas was a filthy lie or at least had it in for Severus) that the timeline said it wasn't. Albus had found her after breakfast, during her cancelled class period, already planning what she was going to say to them after the holiday,



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if they'd still been at it. And that had been before the poor boy had been found... by the other poor boy.

Thinking it best not to give Severus a chance to answer that one (for only the fifty-ninth time or so that term), Albus said, "I'm afraid there is little we can do to stop Harry from hearing things when we don't yet know the source."

"And if there is a source," Severus asked, his dispassionate Intelligence Agent face back on, "is it *wise* to try and stop him from hearing it?"

"Are you asking me to leave the castle?" Gilderoy gasped.

Severus turned to Albus at once. "Oh," he uttered, in dead earnest. "Please." Minerva reached over to smack his hand with the sugar tongs, and he smirked.

Filius, who'd been scribbling like a madman and occasionally giggling under his breath (Severus staunchly maintained he was writing erotica when he did that, despite the strong correlation with his own bouts of sociopolitical ranting and shouting matches with Minerva) looked up and asked, "What leads you to think he's hearing something real, Albus?"

"I wondered myself, at first," Albus said cautiously, "whether the voices that Professor Lockhart heard Harry complaining of were real. Now, this revelation of Harry's Parseltongue ability strikes me as no coincidence."

Filius's bushy eyebrows shot up, and then farther up as Lockhart's eyes widened. He eyed Lockhart cautiously as the boy clutched at his cravat and went pale. "That story

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wasn't made of pure overexcitement, then?"

"Then what could he be hearing?" Pomona frowned.

Albus gestured to Severus. "Professor Snape?"

Severus opened his mouth to explain, looking rather sour, but then he stopped. He looked at Gilderoy, whose thronelike chair had grown wheels and who was inching closer to him, and raised his eyebrows inquiringly. Gilderoy took this as an invitation to very nearly huddle. It rather looked like he was hiding behind Severus, who leveled a *what the HELL do you think you're doing* glare at him.

Albus, across his Potions Master from Lockhart, very-nearly-accidentally caught a flicker of *That kid might be crazy and who's going to save me?! in the lilac-slate eyes*. He caught up his tea and coughed into it. Sweet little Harry who saw his mother in the Mirror, the Frothing Rabid Menace, complete with fangs and claws. Lockhart was thoroughly ridiculous. Even without considering what he'd been hired for.

Severus rolled his eyes and shoved Gilderoy's chair back into position with his foot. "During the first meeting of the dueling club yesterday," he quirked a cynical eyebrow, the emphasis on 'first' suggesting he suspected it would also be the last. Gilderoy, wide-eyed, had gotten back up and was sneaking back over behind him. He went on, "following a disastrously precipitate first exercise, *Professor Lockhart* deemed it — don't even THINK about it — wise to —"

Lockhart froze, but was clearly thinking about it.



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"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Pomona expostulated.

Severus narrowed his eyes warningly at Gilderoy. "Deemed it wise," he repeated, each word a silky but unsubtle threat, "to stop the proceedings and demonstrate a blocking spell." Heavily sarcastic, he explained, "No doubt the, er, spell he chose to demonstrate was some tremendously complex procedure learned from some high muckety-muck of the this-that's. But if so, it was considerably too complex for even," this even more heavily sarcastic, "so *advanced* a second-year as Potter to replicate on one demonstration. His partner for the exercise, Malfoy, cast a Serpensortia. Potter spoke to the resultant snake in Parseltongue, with effect."

"He seemed capable!" Lockhart protested, defending his tremendously complex procedure.

"No doubt he failed to grasp the delicate way dropping his wand was meant to be integrated into the swish and flick," Severus suggested smoothly.

Even Lockhart couldn't ignore that one, although the way Minerva had suddenly started snorting bubbles into her tea might have had something to do with it. Tilting his head up, Lockhart declared, "Clearly the boy was show-boating for me."

"Clearly, Gilderoy," Filius patted his arm.

"Regardless," Severus said, inclining his head, seeming to consider honor satisfied as long as Lockhart at least *noticed*. Which was quite understandable. Severus could give Sisy-

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phus a run for his money any day, or any Hufflepuff, but when he wasn't completely off his head he could also prioritize. Back in his normal voice, only more resigned and tired, he went on, "Potter used Parseltongue instead, with predictable results: drivel-brained panic." He sighed.

"The kids are saying he was egging the snake on," Filius noted. "That's not true as well, of course?" Severus snorted. He did expressive contempt so well, Albus thought—fondly, although he had enough self-awareness to realize he wouldn't have felt that way if Severus had meant something else by it.

"Oh, I really couldn't say what was going on in the boy's mind," Lockhart sparkled, seeming not to realize the question had already been answered. "Perhaps he thought it would impress me if the snake attacked the boy. Boys of that age can be quite brutal, as you know."

"I highly doubt it, Miste—Professor Lockhart!" Minerva rapped out, her mouth barely more than a thin line.

"Indeed," Albus agreed. Mostly but not entirely for the record, he stressed, "The stigma surrounding the use of Parseltongue has no doubt fueled rumors, but I doubt that Harry's intentions were harmful."

"Boys of that or any other age," the serpent at his left hand murmured, quiet and silky cold, his voice pitched to carry and his eyes very carefully nowhere near Minerva, "can be *extremely* brutal." He let that hang, and then said, with a shrug and an ironic little twist of a smile, "But



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he seemed to expect to be lauded—all surprised parties, hands up—so in this case, I *deeply regret* to say that I,” he made quite a production of struggling to choke out, “I... I doubt it as well.”

Minerva threw a sugar cube at him. He blocked with a spoon so that it ricoched and dropped neatly into his coffee. He looked down with an annoyed *now I’m going to have to drink this?* expression. Minerva smirked. Albus didn’t see how one little sugar cube could possibly make a difference to coffee the way Severus took it. Quite possibly it didn’t and he was evening the scales with her after what he’d just said, or complaining for the fun of it, but it was hard to tell with Severus.

“Oh, I think boys of that age can be quite thoughtless,” Gilderoy said seriously. “Perhaps he hadn’t thought the situation through?” It was the first thing he’d said all day that sounded like he was in contact with reality, so Albus was willing to listen. Then, though, he went on cheerfully, “But then Severus saved the day! I, of course, allowed him to. I didn’t wish to embarrass Harry any further.”

Severus looked shocked and dizzy for a moment, and then his genius for finding the insult in an Order of Merlin came to his rescue. “The day didn’t need *saving*,” he protested indignantly. “Headmaster, you don’t think I would have let Malfoy use a spell in school whose effects I couldn’t manage?”

“Of course not, Severus,” Albus patted his hand, amused.

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Severus subsided with the indignantly grouchy look of the vindicated falsely accused.

“Oh you can’t control a Malfoy, not really,” Lockhart said, and won a sour, agreeing little huff from Severus. He grinned impishly. “In any case, I’m sure Harry was just a boy being a boy — a powerful boy being a boy, but still just being boyish. I should take him under my wing, perhaps...”

Looking rather jittery, Minerva pressed, “You said ‘no coincidence,’ Professor?”

He had, and if he was right, they faced a terrible prospect indeed. A creature that petrified, that had killed, that could live at least fifty years, that could be heard only by a Parseltongue... Gravely, he nodded. “Indeed. We now have a highly plausible explanation for why a student — namely, why *Harry* — would hear voices that would go unnoticed by most everyone else.”

“Yes well,” Lockhart said, equally grave, “I don’t think Harry is the only student bearing a confused crush. I believe his friend Miss Granger bears watching as well!”

Albus would not have imagined it possible for this particular meeting to devolve.

— FINIS —





# HOGWARTS PREFERS THE MONGOOSE

... Yes, even Slytherin does.

At the end of ORDER OF THE PHOENIX, Severus is not, in fact, gloating about Sirius's death. He has someone else's destruction to celebrate, and Minerva is with him all the way.



## HOGWARTS PREFERS THE MONGOOSE



“WELL, SEVERUS,” MINERVA SAID smugly, looking down at the broad, slack face which was twitching slightly on the hospital bed in front of her, “your Slytherins *will* be disappointed.”

“They’ll be as relieved as everyone else,” an unperturbed Severus replied. “In any case, most of them believe in the DADA curse. Do you think,” he added, squinting critically at the row of bottles in front of him, “I could get away with adding a drop of nettle juice to her Dreamless Sleep? We could tell her it was an old batch that must have lost its efficacy.”

“I’ll do it,” Minerva decided, holding out her hand. “She never got around to putting me on probation.”

“It was because you let her stand above you on the stairs,” opined her colleague as she delicately applied the eyedropper, smirking in a fashion that Minerva decided to take as an accolade with acacia blossoms and sage and chastely admiring poetry. “And gasped like a fainting auntie. And because she wanted no part of your in-tray.”

“It was because she assumed it was Sybil putting powdered bubotuber pus in her tea sugar,” Minerva corrected him.

“Ah,” Severus said, enlightened. “That explains why she never erupted over the tentacula venom I had the elves wash her sheets with; she must have attributed the effect to the tea.”

“Severus!” she exclaimed, appalled. “You involved the elves?”

“They volunteered!” he said defensively. “I told them



what to do if she complained! Besides, just because *she* says she's Headmistress doesn't mean the castle agrees and they've accepted her as their Head of Household."

"The Ministry said she was, too," Minerva pointed out.

"The school predates the Ministry," Severus said flatly. "And far predates the Board of Governors, for that matter. Hasn't anyone but me read *Hogwarts: a History*?"

"I know someone who has," Minerva informed him brightly.

"*That is taken as read*," Severus said darkly. "In any case, nothing counts as having been read by Miss Granger unless she can paraphrase it in a way that shows understanding."

"And yet her essays are more legible than the last ones of that length that crossed my desk," Minerva noted innocently.

Severus glowered at her. "Hogwarts predates the Ministry," he repeated with his most pointed emphasis, "and she wasn't built to be interested in what a drove of baby-kissing blowhards down in London want. Umbridge could have teamed up with your precious little prefect who's going to get herself in enormous trouble someday soon if she doesn't stop relying on her photographic memory — "

Minerva sighed. She wondered whether Severus would be less of a pain about every single student in the school if Albus gave in and let him have DADA so he could yell at them directly about all the ways they were terrifying their parents.

"— And given the elves all the clothes in Gladrags — "

"Oh, is that where you get your frock coats?"

He glared more. "*All the clothes in the store of your choice* and it wouldn't have done anything but provoke them to use her suite as a dustbin and suggest to Peeves that he make it his new bedroom."

"Hmph." Despite the appeal of this image, she gave him the fish-eye until he returned her the sneer he resorted to when he wanted to stick out his tongue. It did no one any good to encourage him when he took a hyperbolic turn. "In any case, you may claim they'll be disappointed, but I must say that, given how quick they were to support her. . ."

"Correction," Severus said, offended. "They were quick to avoid getting on her bad side, because I explained they'd have to be. Most of their parents are either employed by the Ministry at positions they do not wish to lose or on the Highly Suspicious To The Populace As A Baseline Due To Being Slytherin list."

Minerva sighed at him.

He gave her a you-know-it's-true look and finished, "They were *reasonably-paced* to support her because they're not blind and could see which way the wind was blowing. To wit, that she was steamrolling towards paranoid megalomania and would soon take even neutrality as an affront."

"How did *you* know?" she asked, a little affronted.

"Well, there was her charming thanks-for-having-me-I-appreciate-your-hospitality-and-the-honor-of-the-invitation speech," Severus noted, the side of his mouth kicking up.

"I grant you she showed her hand there," protested



Minerva, "but that didn't mean she was going to be *effective*."

Severus muttered something about bloody Albus and his bloody opportunistic puppeteering martyrdom.

"What do you mean?"

He scowled at her. "Well, obviously he decided he wasn't getting anything done fending her off all the time and thought he might as well knock off two Chasers with one Bludger. He's been remarkably close-lipped about the research he did while he was away. Then, even if Fudge hadn't been mortally embarrassed by the Dark Lord showing his face, he would have been bombarded by the owls of everyone related to... call it eleven twelfths of the school. And I do mean by their owls, not by letters, in most cases, although the people he generally listens to would have made their displeasure clear in more subtle ways. I don't care if she tucks him to sleep every night with a bottle of warm milk and stands behind him with a pitchfork to his back, he'd never have stood up to that much political pressure. Not Neil Fudge."

"...Probably not," she conceded.

He nodded with a brief grimace. "No, she wasn't going to stay long. Then Albus would have re-hired anyone who hadn't lasted the year, and we would have had a Minister that admits there's a real threat again. One way or another. I suppose Sybil *might* have had a problem if Umbridge had remembered she existed after 'defeating' the Headmaster, but the sort of sherry she drinks is inexpensive and

the Hog's Head would have been safe for her, whether or not she enjoyed it. Umbridge would have thought that enough humiliation to be going on with, and Aberforth Dumbledore is not without resource."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You two can be rather worrying at times, did you know?"

He leveled a gloomy you-only-visit-my-brain-I-have-to-live-here stare at her.

"Still, I have difficulty believing you got all that from Dumbledore's allowing her to speak uninterrupted." It wasn't quite an accusation, but 'skeptical' would have been an understatement.

"I did have some previous knowledge," he admitted.

"Malfoy?"

He smirked a little. "Not primarily, although he and Narcissa do call her a 'really delightful woman' with a very *particular* bland intonation. No, anyone who knows anything about the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures knows about Dolores Umbridge, so anyone who's had much to do with the Wolfsbane Potion does as well. She's always had a disgust for things that look a bit like wizards and aren't, and been quite willing to arm-wrestle anyone who's got in the way of her trying to, er, purify the citizenry."

He looked at Umbridge clinically, with particular attention to her arms, and amended, "Metaphorically speaking."

He went on looking a little longer and then, with an



expression of dark glee that barely flickered behind his eyes, cupped his hands and clapped them together in a cantering rhythm. She twitched and whimpered. With vindictive satisfaction, he informed her unconscious form, "That's for making my children blow up their carefully-maintained reputations to keep their families safe from you, harridan."

Minerva very nearly said *Really, Severus*. It was what she ought to say, but the trouble was that he'd know she was only jealous because he could get away with that kind of pettiness without much affecting his reputation. "What do you think they did to her?" was what she settled for.

"Well," Severus said, still glittering with awful cheerfulness, "she's acting violated, but centaurs are hardly satyrs and they think even the fittest humans look mutilated, as well as offputtingly bald in the trouser regions. Body-baldness in centaurs is a sign of disease. And she wasn't badly hurt. Personally, I'm hoping they held her down and licked her face."

He considered her a bit more and added, "A lot. And then lectured her on the impossibility of diverging planetary bodies from their appointed rounds for several hours and the inadvisability of attempting to do so. With detailed reference to what happens to those who get in the way of grindingly irresistible forces and breaks to snuffle at her hair and chew on her Alice band."

Now Minerva did say, "Really, Severus!" She was hard-put-to not to laugh, though, so there was no hope of him

being properly shamed by it. Giving up, she asked, "But when did you tell them? The children, I mean. It must have been quite early on or she would have found out."

"She wasn't that good," he said disdainfully, but conceded, "but yes. I don't know if you're aware, but some of us take our Head of House duties seriously —"

"Severus..."

"And take the time to ensure our students don't fail all their OWLs..."

"You know I don't have time for all those... little workshops you and Pomona hold," she said crossly.

"Do you imagine I do?"

"The amount of paperwork on my desk did not significantly diminish in size when Albus came back, I'll remind you. If anything —"

"But we have approximately the same amount of marking to do, you don't have to prepare ingredients before your classes or sterilize your equipment, and I'll be delighted to compare night-rounds schedules any time you care to. Oh, wait. You draw up all the schedules."

"You don't have any more rounds than you volunteered for, Severus Snape."

"If anyone else took them seriously and did them competently and without migraine-inducing amounts of whinging about how much work they have to do, to which I fully expect you to join me in replying, 'ahahahaha...'"



"Stipulated," she agreed, rolling her eyes.

"Well, someone has to do them. And you don't see me sacrificing my duty just to get a sane amount of sleep."

"Enjoy your youth while you have it, my lad. *I* hold office hours! One can't design even an informal syllabus while balancing the books, as I'd be *delighted* to let you find out any time you like, and I *know* you plot while you're doing night rounds. Don't think I haven't heard you cackling under your breath in the halls in the dark!"

"Does anyone ever join you in your office during your office hours without being sent for and, indeed, dragged kicking and screaming by the back of the collar?"

"On occasion," she insisted valiantly, because barely-true was still true. "And the nice thing about office hours is that *all* students are welcome."

"And the nice thing about mandatory biweekly House meetings are that everyone in the House attends and reaps the benefit," he retorted with an expression suggesting that, had he been Charity Burbage, he would have been licking a finger and drawing a score-mark in the air with it. Possibly while making a victorious little *tsssss* noise between his teeth. "Even the dullest at least gathers from them that the adult in charge of them is actively monitoring their studies and behavior."

"Filius doesn't —"

"Filius's students know that intellectual pursuits are their *hallmark*, and he does his marking in the common

room in fellowship with them, where they can see him at it and come up for help whenever they like." He was giving her the lowering, disappointed eyebrows. Again.

She sighed. They'd been having this argument for at least six years, and she suspected he'd only held off that long due to unease about his place at Hogwarts. "But what did you tell them?" she asked, hoping that the opportunity to brag combined with the impression that he'd won again (although, as smacking the reproachful look off his face wasn't worth never sleeping again, or letting either the school or her classes go to wrack and ruin, she had no intention of altering her schedule) would distract him. Slytherin or not, he was, after all, a man.

"I didn't *tell* them anything, exactly," he said, reverting to smug on cue. She didn't mind if he was patronizingly telling himself he was letting her get away with it, as long as he did let her.

"Severus..."

"Well, I'll show you, if you like," he said with the sort of magnanimity that explained very explicitly that he knew she wanted to strangle him and that was, in fact, the entire point. With a glint in his eye, he instructed, "Walk this way." Heading for the door, he left on soft feet, clip-clopping his hands together. Umbridge cringed in her sleep.

Mínerva glanced left and right, making sure that not only was Poppy nowhere to be seen but Dilys Derwent and



the other portraits were at least pretending to be asleep. They were. With the utmost dignity, she followed suit.

Behind her, someone burst out in incredulous laughter. She lifted her chin higher and kept clapping.

He took her through his common room. All the Slytherins looked at her in careful, politely respectful alarm — except for one third-year boy who threw himself bodily across the parchment and pile of books he'd been working on. Severus frowned at him and said, "That'll be twenty House points for the implosive *failure of stealth*, Mr. Macready."

Minerva thought she probably ought to investigate that, but it wasn't her jurisdiction. "House points?" she asked instead, raising her eyebrow.

It didn't sound quite as if he'd meant 'points from the House,' she'd thought. They didn't generally put it like that, and he certainly didn't usually take points from Slytherin in front of her. She knew he did it, although only in private and only if detentions and massive servings of loud shouting were failing to get through. The points math had been much less complicated before he'd shown up — but, to be fair, it was really that it had been much less complicated before he'd shown up *in 1970*, at which point he'd been more of a catalyst than an instigator. Which was no longer the case.

"It wasn't an offense against school rules," he explained, adding with a frown to Macready, "although it may in fact turn out to be and would then be addressed as such. It was

a failure to Slytherin."

"...Is 'Slytherin' a verb, Professor Snape?"

He ignored that. Haughtily. "He's just lowered his chances of being invited to a tea with Horace Slughorn over the hols — "

"Good heavens." That certainly explained why Severus's Slytherins were nearly as successful in getting brilliant placements as Horace's had been. She'd never understood how someone as violently opposed to schmoozing as Severus had been managing to trail Horace's track record so closely, even if most of his students did have well-placed parents to help them.

"Oh, Master Slughorn is effusively pleased to participate in the program, Professor," he assured her unnecessarily. Of course Horace would be. "It was, after all, the part of the job he was most reluctant to give up, after all."

"I can quite see that," she agreed, smiling approvingly.

He flushed very slightly and hastened on in a boring voice. It was actually a quite stultifying voice, almost Binns-like but more soothing. She wondered whether he'd learn to take a compliment by his centennial. "He's also lowered his year's chances for the end-of-year prizes."

Several of the other third-years had become unable to stop themselves giving Macready cool glances. The boy looked back at them all, offended and meaningful. Minerva assumed that meant his dive had been a diversion from someone else's mischief.



"All right," Severus allowed judiciously, "I'll give you five points back for a reasonable attempt to salvage the situation, and two more for succeeding at confusing your target audience. But I trust you realize *I* will be investigating you, your seatmates, and everyone on the other side of the room. To begin with."

"Yes, sir," Macready said miserably. The glares had, to put it mildly, not abated.

"What are the end-of-year prizes?" she asked, feeling rather sorry for Macready. She was tempted to offer him a nonexistent Gryffindor point if it turned out he really had thrown himself over the cauldron to cover for a friend, but of course he'd only have been insulted.

Which Severus would thank her for if he were reasonable, and in fact would not.

"First, second, and third choice of invitations to Master Slughorn's Lammas party, which in defiance of tradition he generally has at the shore, an afternoon of what Lucius Malfoy *will* insist on calling," his nostrils flared a little, "money and mare management,' though *I* call it 'financial self-defense and horse-flying lessons,' and one of the volumes of Salazar Slytherin's diaries and letters. I think it's letters this year. I have a deal with Obscurus books; they may not be actually first editions but they wouldn't embarrass any collector."

Half the room sighed longingly. The other half had sighed about the party. Blaise Zabini was giving Draco

Malfoy a look that suggested he, Blaise, was going to get an afternoon of galleons and Abraxans, whatever happened, or Draco was going to wake up one day with his nose sewn to his coccyx with leather cord.

She decided not to ask Severus when, exactly, he'd given up on the House Cup. Everyone knew, anyway. "Those are quite good prizes."

"They got better a few years ago," he said coolly. Although the younger students didn't seem to be affected by this comment, the top three years, without changing expression, were suddenly exuding an air of ugly resentment.

"I think it's a very good program, Professor," she said stoutly. If only because Slytherins competing with each other would have less emotional energy with which to obsess over non-purebloods and Gryffindors, which was possibly why Severus had begun it in the first place. "I might institute something similar myself if my students would be collectively tempted by anything that wouldn't drive Filch to suicide."

This won her some softening. There were even some snickers, and Severus silently awarded her what she assumed was a Slytherin point with his eyebrows. He said, though, "You could always take them to Fortesque's or a match between, say, the Cannons and Tornados. That shouldn't break the bank."

"It would if they broke the stadium," she said dryly.

Severus looked slightly alarmed. "The Weasley twins



would be out of the running, now, you wouldn't have to take them," he said smoothly, and just a beat too hastily ushered her down a set of stairs off to the left and into a cavernous room with stone walls covered in tapestries. It was full of armchairs and couches and poufs, but in a few places she could see where there had been chains on the walls once.

"What's the matter?" she asked, when he'd closed the door behind them.

"It unnerves them to hear a guardian insult her charges to others," he explained, shrugging a little. "They understand teasing, of course, but there has to be a very strong underlying layer of confidence, self-esteem, and trust in a relationship before an adolescent can have faith that affectionate abuse is made of pride, not mockery. Everyone's been having a difficult few years, of course, but... ours have been different. They think you meant it."

"I did mean it," she said, frowning.

"Yes, but what my students *heard*, Minerva, is that you don't care about yours."

"That's absurd!"

"Our difficult-last-few-years have been different from yours," he repeated, his mouth tight. "They've had an effect."

She sighed. Slytherin had had a chip on its shoulder and a sense of grievance or entitlement, depending on the student, even when Horace was running it. There was no use trying to argue Severus out of it. "I don't think I've been in

here before," she changed the subject.

"They call our area 'the dungeons,' but this actually was one," he said. "Or, at least, it was during the witch-hunting times. I don't think any spies actually made it into Hogwarts, though some got through to the Ministry—"

"That's why they moved to Whitehall, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Partially; Guy Fawkes rather worried them. They weren't the target of his conspiracy, but he made them realize they didn't understand Muggle weapons."

"I suppose it's just as well. Imagine what they'd think of themselves if they were still at Westminster!"

"I don't know," Severus said thoughtfully. "if they thought they were aristocrats rather than elected officials, we might suffer less from their nerves."

"But they'd think they could do as they pleased," she reminded him tartly.

He snorted. "They already do, they just understand the value of doing it behind closed doors and dressing it up in language that suggests they're doing grand things instead."

"Well," Minerva acceded with a shrug. It didn't surprise her in the least that Albus, who had a fine sense of self-preservation even if he neither needed nor cared to exercise it much, had run screaming from all suggestions he allow himself to be nominated as Minister for Magic. "And do you do grand things in here?"

"Hardly," Severus said dryly. "I show them home movies."



She did a double take.

He grinned the grin that came out as a smirk because he was a young idiot who wouldn't let himself grin. "An oversimplification, I admit," he allowed, still smirking. "We have Social Defense and last-resort Care of Magical Creatures lessons in here. Please don't tell Hagrid."

"...Severus, what have you done?"

He opened his hands resignedly. "You know he hasn't the confidence for teaching, Minerva. He lets the students' opinions upend his curricula. All his classes were doing flobberworms for the better part of a year. For Circe's sake, he even tried to get away with it with the NEWT year until they revolted. Some of my students will have estates to run when they inherit. Estates with working farms and often commercial creature-breeding programs. They *need* that NEWT."

She sighed. "Go on."

"I had a talk with Silvanus Kettleburn and he gave me some materials," he said with a shrug. "And he doesn't mind taking their owls when they have questions I can't answer, though I did take a NEWT in the subject and anyone who gathers his own ingredients has to keep up with the field to some degree. I do tell them to ask Hagrid first, but some of them simply won't trust or respect him for one reason or another, even when I tell them he's knowledgeable and quite enthusiastic when given the least encouragement."

"I wonder why they wouldn't respect him," she said, dry

in her turn.

"Draco Malfoy's hardly the only one who's been raised to be a godawful snob," he sighed. "It's only that he's also been dropped on the head by a house elf two or three times too often and gotten his discretion button jammed on Loudly Broken."

"You must be at your wit's end," she noted, still dry. "Imagine, a young Slytherin who communicates his opinions loudly. I'm sure no faces at all come to mind when I think of that utter impossibility."

He scowled at her. "Slughorn tried using subtlety in his modeling behavior and I've *lived* what comes of that," he said reproachfully. Defensively, really, but she decided to be generous. "I've come to the conclusion that the lower years need everything spelled out for them, slowly, so they can learn the rules before they ruin their lives failing to put them into practice. But regarding Hagrid, I think for most of them it was the flobberworms and the screwwts, really."

Minerva shuddered delicately. *Screwwts*. How Albus had kept Hagrid from being hauled back to Azkaban for unauthorized breeding had been beyond her even before that Rita Skeeter menace found out about them. "Fair enough."

"Have a seat, then," he said, sending most of the chairs to line the sides of the room with a flick of his wand.

Minerva, who'd had both the 'foolish wand-waving' and the 'silly incantations' speeches quoted at her before in many quite different shades of horrified, wondered if any



of the Slytherins had ever dared to call him on them. He did, at least, seem to genuinely prefer to cast silently, but really he was almost as quick to flick as Filius.

Of the two chairs remaining in the middle of the room, one was a low-backed, barely padded affair, very like the one she kept in her office. The other was behind a small table. It could have been taken from the common room upstairs, except that it appeared to be tilted very slightly forwards. Severus tapped his wand to the little table and went off to a large cabinet at the back of the room.

Out of the table's smooth surface unfolded what looked like one of Dumbledore's silver contraptions, though it had been painted Slytherin green. Minerva sat uneasily in the other chair, and asked, "What's that?"

"Filius made it for me, years ago," he said, sounding very nearly happy as he pored over the rows of folders and binders. "And one for himself, of course. I don't think the patent has come in yet, but what can you expect of the Ludicrous Patents Office. The design is similar to a muggle slide projector—have you had one of those inflicted on you?"

"Once," she threatened.

He looked wicked, but didn't reply directly. "This runs on magic, of course, and it shows Wizarding pictures. I couldn't get those to work just using the page-to-blackboard spell. I think the potion they're developed in interferes, although I admit I haven't tested the premise by any means exhaustively."

Minerva made a noncommittal face. She'd never thought to try that. It might be useful for her NEWT classes, when she needed to persuade them that human transfiguration was dangerous. "Hm."

"Ah, here we are." He came back with a folder and sat down. With another two turns of his wrist, the lights dimmed and the enormous tapestry taking up most of the wall at the front of the room, which had been showing what Minerva thought was Odysseus's much beleaguered Penelope at her weaving, surrounded by armed and avid suitors, turned white.

She heard him move beside her, there was a papery rustle, and a picture of a red-spotted toad, blinking complacently on a rock, appeared on the white tapestry. "Oh, I do beg your pardon," Severus said in a tone that meant the next thing that would come out of his mouth was a lie and he wanted her to know it. "Pink toads aren't at all the subject of this lecture, I can't imagine how this picture got in, how vexing. I suppose it only goes to show you can't tell a bean's taste by the color."

"...Right," Minerva said slowly, amused.

"This," Severus told her, changing the picture, "is a ratel. Do you know them?"

The animal was splayed out over parched grass as if it was dead, except that it was clutching a limp and savaged cobra like a teddy bear. "I can't say I do," she said, still slowly but now somewhat alarmed. The creature looked like a cross between a cat, a skunk, and a hyena.



## HOGWARTS PREFERS THE MONGOOSE

"You're likely happier that way," Severus informed her. "Still, they have much to be said for them, at least by Hagrid. Definitely one of his 'interesting creatures.' This one, for example, had been bitten by that cobra several hours ago. Watch."

The creature got up, shook himself (it was definitely a him), and wandered off, dragging the snake along in its mouth.

"Its magic," Severus said, changing the picture so that she saw a similar animal eating its way through a beehive, totally disregarding the swarm of angry bees trying to sting it to death, "lies in its indefatigability in combat and resistance to venoms of all sorts.

"It's also," he added, showing a picture of the creature chasing a rangy adolescent lion away from a dead gazelle, "quite fearless, and will do without hesitation that which other animals of its... stature... would never dare. It will take on anything, will ruthlessly take advantage should its quarry shrink or fly from direct confrontation, and any who do try to oppose it directly will find themselves brutally overwhelmed. This is of course not a magical property, nor is the looseness of its skin, which grants it mobility and makes it most difficult to pierce or be taken in a fatal or even very damaging hold. Nonetheless, in certain potions..."

Minerva tuned out his potions-lecturing voice as ratels tangled with wolverines, cracked open tortoises with their teeth, jumped on birds, ate jackals, disemboweled porcupines, and in one case very nearly shredded a black snake before chewing on

## HOGWARTS PREFERS THE MONGOOSE

it like a large stick of salt beef or melting rock. It was horrific and nauseating and impossible to look away from.

"Of course," Severus said blandly, "like most animals, the ratel rarely attacks humans unless provoked, although it will eat human carrion." She had to look away from that one, and decided to have a little talk with the elves about what meals would contain for the next few weeks. End of term feast or not, if she had to look at any meat in the near future she would end them.

"In fact, like some serpents and its muggle cousin, the skunk, while the ratel is of course a most ferocious predator, when it feels threatened itself, it is at least as likely to resort to a long-distance defense as to fly at its attacker and overtly eat its face off."

She looked at him incredulously.

"Very similar to the skunk, in fact," Severus said, clearly enjoying himself, "though as smell is the skunk's primary defense, it is somewhat more adept at dispensing it. The ratel does not spray over such a wide area, but its defensive odor is arguably worse. It has been likened to burnt skunk and called suffocating. Opinions are divided on whether magical paralysis of the throat occurs or the lungs in their entirety simply reject the option of allowing ratel-scented air into their premises. Suffice it to say that Zonko's stink pellets are derived from the anal gland of the ratel."

She stared at him in horror. The number that had been



## HOGWARTS PREFERS THE MONGOOSE

set off in this castle... some in her office...

"Much diluted," he added, as if remarking on the weather.

Minerva managed not to choke out loud. She was going to—well, if she couldn't take points off the Weasley twins anymore, she'd just have to write their mother.

"Would you care to summarize the lesson, Professor?" Severus asked, all innocence.

Firmly, she answered, "I may never eat again."

Caught off guard, Severus let out half a snort before forcing himself into a more dignified smirk. "Precisely," he said.

The picture changed to a four-square of an otter, badger, wolverine, and weasel, with a picture of a ratel nested in the center.

"Or," Severus said, "in other words: the badger has a good reputation in this castle, but it is a carnivore and a member of the Mustelidae family. Do not underestimate the Mustelidae. Otters are nasty, clever little sods, weasels are flexible burrowers, wolverines have a 95% kill rate, the badger itself is tediously indomitable."

He tapped the ratel in the center of the picture. It was cracking open another tortoise, and there were the remains of another (very large) viper stretched out next to it. "And the honey badger takes what it wants. Bother, I seem to have put that picture of the toad in at the back again; I really can't imagine how it keeps getting in there."

— FINIS —

## INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO (SCHEDULED DELIVERY, EVENT-TRIGGERED)

Some proposed curriculum changes to be enacted by the '98 autumn term. Well, I say proposed. Strongly advised. Dictated with waning patience, if you must know. (Or: Schrodinger's cat snarks like a bitchy boojum.)





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## INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO

TO: All faculty

FROM: S. Snape, Headmaster

Please find below the proposed adjustments to next year's curriculum. What I anticipate to be the first of many meetings to waste time arguing over them should be scheduled for no later than one week following receipt of this memo, depending on the state of the infrastructure.

Be advised that pages 1-2 are an in brevi summation of necessary alterations. Details to be found farther in as indicated or not at all. If you lot can't fine-tune your own subjects once the desirability of doing so has been brought to your attention, I wash my hands of the boiling of you.

Said Summations



Arithmaney: See below (Badly Needed Additional Subjects, Integrated Theory).

Astronomy: Acquire a goddamned planetarium. Keeping adolescents up till midnight results in disrupted sleep cycles, poor information retention, sleeping in class, and premarital sex when they can't get to sleep at their usual bedtime the next night. See related neurological / developmental data pages 50-52. Never fear, I have translated it into words of three syllables and below.

Care of Magical Creatures: Hagrid, you hypersensitive twit, sit your stubborn arse down with Grubbly-Plank and Hagrid out a stable seven-year curriculum that will cover creatures students might encounter in life and on their exams, whether or not you are personally entranced.

They like you well enough when your classes aren't boring them stiff or soiling their pants for them. Repeat five times before each meal: "I am not the Skrewt. They hate and tear the Skrewt, and I am not the Skrewt. I am not the Hobberworm..."

Charms: Standard Book of Spells series seriously outdated and does not focus on spells with effects useful in modern life. Seek alumni input, especially recent graduates and those managing households. I can't imagine why you don't show them what you can do, at least in the unclassified spheres, they all know about your dueling trophies anyway. Might I note also that the club wasn't a bad idea, with the gilded toothpaste-advert subtracted, and it would be much better all around if their first impulse were



to reach for charms before hexes and curses. There is after all, as I have always maintained, very little of practical use that one can achieve with an only-damaging spell that can't also be effected with an ordinary one.

### Custodial:

1) Minerva, although the elves do prefer cream, I have discussed possible outcomes with them. They understand we will be experiencing a budget crisis if significant rebuilding and reorganization are required, particularly if the confidence of the population in its institutions is shattered. They're willing to accept tribute in whole milk for the duration, although lesser, ex. denominations would feel like a hardship to some and a slight to others. Most of them will not fuss about species deriva-

tion, see Jenks for the exceptions. Do someone please explain life to Franger (see Badly Needed Additional Classes).

2) In the event that significant rebuilding and/or grounds repair is necessary, the elves have pre-existing orders to focus their efforts on the infrastructure, walls, roof, and such other work as wizards can do less lastingly and less efficiently. Certain elves will remain on-call to faculty and to distribute but not prepare meals (again, see Jenks), and I have assigned Wrangle and Winky to Poppy. Making a substitution for Winky is not advised, as she does poorly without a single master on whom to focus her attention; Wrangle has volunteered for this duty but will serve without fuss where instructed. Otherwise, the



students would be well-advised to consider doing without servants to be a community-building exercise. Or character building. Or life preparation. Or residual torture. I have no interest.

3) Filch is to be promoted to Custodial Supervisor or some such nonsense; someone take that bloody mop away from him before he gets himself lynched waving it about. As it continues preferable that the students should see that their lack of consideration and thoughtfulness has consequences that must be dealt with by someone, an assistantship to replace his presence in the halls might be advisable. See page 12 for low-budget options. Do not fail to note that any use of the post as any sort of rehabilitation must be anonymous and not known as such. See pages 13-18 for

anti-bullying measures.

DADA: Replace with Self-Defense. Continue to cover DADA material but include survey of martial arts, critical thinking, social defense (Horace will know who to ask if Mrs. Mattoy is unavailable), such skills covered in basic Auror training as footwork, stamina, quick-draw, terrain, strategy, assessment of clothed persons, microexpressions (Sybill will be useful here if you can twist her arm into admitting her expertise in carnice tricks, see below), etc. Liaise with Shackbolt or other less than moronic Auror (Hit Wizard to review suggested curriculum (see pgs 30-119). Enforcement agents who had difficulties in particular areas but did pass and survive in the field (e: Mrs. Lupin re stealth) will be valuable



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resources as they will remember their training in those areas clearly from having it repeatedly shouted at them.

Divination: Sibyll, you're not sacked unless you keep refusing to teach the cold-read and how to tell who in the room is the best subject for hypnosis and so on. You don't understand what the students actually learn in your class. Believe it or not, there is something (someone catch Irelandney before she faints). Speak to Mrs. Mattoy or, if she's unavailable, Miss Greengrass.

Firenze, (if you will not be returning to your family), your classes would benefit from more theory, more collaboration with Professor Sinistra, and fewer assurances to the students that it's entirely pointless for them to be studying your

INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO

subject. Suggestions that they are overrating their intelligence and ability to swallow the material by skimming and should therefore be working harder have, however, worked well for others in the past...

Flying: Why the hell do we have a live-in Flying-instructor year round to do nothing but teach the first years and referee games when there are students in their seventh years who would fall off a broom if placed on one for the purpose of emergency evacuation? Get off your arse, Hooch. Additionally, see page 1 for revision of Quidditch schedule. Sabbatical's over. Longchamps in Nottingham, who worked on the Silver Arrows line before his retirement, will be receptive to a reasonable deal regarding an overhaul of the school brooms, particularly a recurring contract, but you and Horace should both attend



## INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO

that negotiation if you would like to walk away with your shirts. (I presume Xiomara to at this point to be jumping up and down squealing like a toddler in a sweetshop. She is to be prevented from breaking anything, or kissing anything even remotely connected with me.)

Herbology: Popmona, please consider making Herbology elective-only after second year (see page 5 for Pre-Elective-Selection Career Guidance Sessions). It's not as integral to everyday life as it once was, and your time might be spent at least as valuably elsewhere (see page 9 for Proposed Additional Extra-curriculars Program)

History of Magic: Not understanding the patterns of the past got us here, and it will get you right back here in ten or twenty years if you don't FIX

## INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO

THIS. If Binns won't move on or retire he could be of great use teaching students research and library skills in a first-year seminar and as remedial work. Half of them don't have the first idea how to really use a library and even the ones that do are missing concepts (ex: Franger's complete inability to evaluate the credibility of a source that claims to be an authority or expert). He's solid on facts and skills, but hire a teacher who can summarize the dates into stories which will be remembered and cover more than one or two periods of particular obsession, or you are inextricably doomed. Again. And again. Ad eternum.

MUNDANE Studies: To be taught in future by someone who can function effectively in the muggle world. If no useful textbook can be



# INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO

found, to go the use of a textbook. Any such class which does not teach computer literacy is a waste of time. To be made mandatory for at least two years (not necessarily years one and two, see pages 120-126 for some possible schedules that do not require all students and faculty to wear time-turners) for those who don't test out of it. See Badly Needed Additional Subjects.

Potions: Horace, you're more capable than I am with the intermediate years where they primarily need patience while they practice, but you're rubbish at instilling basic safety and techniques and you had no business whatsoever in front of a class learning theory and experimentation even when your reflexes were faster. Besides, I want you mostly on extra-curriculars and hitting the Ministry over the head with Minerva for funds and

# INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO

goodwill. Good-Auror / Terrifying Dragon Lady, you know the drill. Get a junior instructor for 1, 2, 5-7.

Now.

AND STOP USING BORAGE.

Study of Ancient Runes: Rename it Spell-casting Languages and maybe you'll get more students than two blackbirds a year. The students look at the name and think it means 'dead alphabets of no practical use' even though they use runes on the damn Prophet.

Transfiguration: If you appoint Rita Skeeter to replace you just so you can have another animagus teaching the class, I shall either haunt you for the rest of your days or haunt you in order to continually sing your praises for getting her off the Prophet. I haven't decided yet. Do you want to risk it? You might wish to recall before making the gamble that



you haven't heard me sing (Filius, not a word.)

### Badly Needed Additional Classes

Pre-school program for the Muggle-raised:

Wizarding culture. Consult Muggle-raised current students and alumni re what no one taught them.

Consult purebloods re what behaviors in Muggle-raised peers shocked and pained them. Quill-use and walking-in-robcs instruction, introduction to cultures and manners of magical sentient.

Pre-school program for the Wizarding-raised:

Maths to standard of geometry and algebra needed for success in potions and arithmancy, rudimentary geography-with-cultural-history, basic tenets of biology, physics, chemistry, scientific method. Spelling and grammar. Test-out option in each subject for parents preferring tutors etc. acceptable.

but material must be covered. Especially bloody spelling and grammar.

(See page 121 for a pro/con comparison of pre-school classrooms made available in a few locations vs home-school tutoring by older students or recent graduates needing experience, connections or goodwill more than income. Horace can devise an attractive program of incentives to suit any budget. I have no doubt.)

Civics: If they don't know how it's supposed to work, or could work, or works well elsewhere, they'll keep doing what's been done here. See History (above). Include sections on economy, law enforcement, judicial systems, governmental systems, corruption, checks & balances, journalism (yellow and otherwise), cultures and manners of magical sapient, etc etc (see pgs 18-30).



Advanced/Integrated Theory: We all know the subjects all start running together at the advanced levels, and that advanced work is needed for many crafting and active careers. And we all know how often the NEWT students trip over their wands trying to wrap their tiny little minds around the idea of multidisciplinary magic. This was a school, last I checked, at least nominally.

Enrichment: Craftsmen buying things, including tickets, from each other keeps the economy purring along smoothly (an important consideration with the nation's primary employer thrown into chaos). Hobbies occupy desk-workers who might otherwise channel those energies into ambitions for which they are unsuited (you can tell because otherwise the hobbies wouldn't distract them). Additionally, can you

imagine how much less trouble such students as Sirius Black and Draco Malfoy would have made it they'd been able to jump on a stage occasionally and shout, "TA-DA!"?

≡

Do not underestimate the danger. I repeat: go on as we've been, and you'll find yourselves right back where we are. Are you enjoying yourselves? I'm not. Make it happen, my purblind plodders. (Again, potential schedules p. 120)

Of importance: Just as soon as you possibly can, get everyone inside, close the doors and shutters, and tell the elves, "Disable Operation Tartarus, authorization Victory Need Not Be Pyrrhic." Best to stay off the grounds and definitely out of the forest



INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO

till they report they're done. Master the temptation to inquire. Or ask for the blueprints. Or look out the windows. You don't want to know. Really.

The necessity of abandoning a prolonged and difficult job to others is somewhat embarrassing and not what I would wish. As the swindler cannot carry off his shell game if the mark learns that the shell has swapped the pea on the table for the pearl he's been flashing, the audience, too, must be gulled. I can only hope that in providing at least the bones of a curriculum you will consider that I have contributed to the renewal to the best of my ability in the time available.

As to my personal effects...



# INCONCEIVABLE!

Snape had been mostly-dead all day.

...The snake doesn't get him. I'm explaining to you because you look nervous.





“**H**ONESTLY, THIS ISN'T COMPLICATED” Severus told them later in the staff room, rolling his eyes over a cup of the tea Poppy had insisted he put a few drops of phoenix tears into. He'd let her, without arguing she should use everything Fawkes gave them for students worse off than he was. He hadn't even protested the blanket. That, even more than the way his voice had been rasping at the beginning of the pot and how undead he still looked, told them how much pain he was still in.

He was not, in fact, undead. A happy fact in most people's opinions, now that Harry had explained, although the pleasure sat uneasily and alongside a strong desire to box his ears (and the thought of the PR problems, even with Kingsley in charge, and sorting out how the school hierarchy was going to work next year simply *appalled*).

Most of the doubts on this subject had been allayed when the first thing he did, before he'd even begun to get his voice back, was to snatch up a quill with his good hand and take 'all the points' from Granger (Filius had, in slightly-hysterical relief, laughed himself nearly sick because they were just from Granger) for having a wounded enemy professional-spy at her mercy and letting him die instead of capturing him for interrogation. It had also helped that the second had been to wax acidic-enough-to-scorch-the-parchment about it possibly being a good idea to start



teaching basic first aid skills like *taking a pulse*.

Which had been more like getting back someone who'd been thought dead for a year than for a day. Even two years; he hadn't been himself since Albus's hand had blackened. Nothing could have reassured them Harry was right about him more than the relieved relish with which he'd relaxed out of his stiff-faced, black-hole-eyed corpse's mask in favor of Senior Faculty Meeting levels of snark the moment he was sure he wasn't going to be Kissed, killed, or strung up from the highest remaining turret in his pants as a graffiti wall.

He'd started gesticulating again, too, for nearly the first time since Remus Lupin had come to teach, although only with his right hand. Phoenix tears were miraculous, but Nagini had done a real number on some important tendons, as well as his throat proper. An only-professional potioneer like Horace with Severus's temperament might have risked being a terrible patient, but Severus would never risk either hand's functionality when he didn't have to.

He hadn't argued with Poppy about the sling, either. In fact, he'd been so docile about it she'd given him a black one without even making him ask. Filius had gone all sniffly. Minerva was trying not to be suspicious.

"We do realize you must have taken precautions," she began tartly.

"A few," he allowed with a grimace. "I expected it as a general act, but one couldn't predict the method of delivery

with any confidence."

Poppy and Filius glanced at each other. He hadn't said *snake, bite, cut, throat, attack*, or anything similar since he'd woken up. Severus was sufficiently wordy as a rule that they weren't sure whether anyone else had noticed how far he was going to avoid it.

"More pastimes than anything else, really," he went on with a good approximation of clinical detachment, "although I did think the need for an antivenin more likely than anything but an avada. I must remember to express appreciation to Arthur Weasley that his unfortunate experience provided the opportunity to develop one. Preferably while his wife isn't there to hit me repeatedly over the head with a large cast-iron saucepan. But I'd think *he'd* be glad it wasn't an ultimately pointless hurt, wouldn't he?" He looked to Minerva, presumably as the Gryffindor expert.

"I would imagine," she agreed, drolly enough that it sounded more like *you think?* Not every Gryffindor was that generous, of course. Arthur, though, might even have been glad the same day, let alone years later.

"Then you did expect it," Horace said shrewdly, leaning back in his favorite armchair and taking a Hobnob. He regarded it mournfully before taking a dejected bite.

The staff room was in a part of the castle that had been largely unaffected by the battle. The kitchens were not, and Hogsmeade was in a bit of a state as well. They'd had to



send Pomona, who could handle anything without fuss, to a grocery, aided by a passel of muggle-raised students. They were out on their third trip now, being able to buy only so much at a time without raising questions. The elves were very upset about it all. Especially the artificial preservatives.

"Of course," Severus agreed, eying Horace suspiciously.

"Bellatrix Lestrange harping at him, was it?" Horace asked sympathetically, patting his long hand, now practically skeletal, with a pudgy one. "I knew Harry must have gotten that part wrong."

"Oh, no, he never made me." Severus settled back in his own armchair, and took another sip of tea. This may have been a token effort to hide how smug he was looking, but it only hid his mouth, not his eyes or every line of his body. "He apologized."

Horace sprayed biscuit across the room.

"I regret it," Severus added coldly, in an accent and an octave not his own, still looking unutterably smug, and poured himself more tea.

"Then you knew about the wand when he called for you?" Minerva asked, looking on the verge of unstarching, pulling out a handkerchief for purposes of eye-dabbing, and possibly losing a hairpin.

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "If you say anything even remotely resembling 'perhaps we sort too soon,'" he threatened, "I'm throwing the sugar spoon at you."

She threw it at him, universal balance was restored, and the world breathed again.

"Hear, hear," Horace toasted him belatedly. "Percy Blakeney was Slytherin, you know. You don't get all the valor in the world, m'dear."

"Just all the thoughtless, heedless, careless, reckless, scatter-shot kind," Severus 'finished for him,' and then sighed as blissfully as if saying it had been the first coffee he'd had all year.

"But *how* did you know?" Filius asked eagerly. "Did Albus tell you?"

Severus rolled his eyes again. "I think it caused Albus physical pain to look out the window and tell anyone what color the sky is," he said sourly. "Grindelwald-related scars, I assume."

Filius and Horace, who remembered that war, nodded.

"This isn't complicated either," he told them. "I am a brewer. I go to conferences and talk with other brewers. Horace is an anomaly: mostly, we are the only people we like to talk to, because talking shop does not require social grace, and no, you need not keep a straight face at this juncture."

They tried anyway.

"The potions crowd," he went on, "has a massive overlap with the alchemy crowd, which is almost indistinguishable from the maniacs who quest for the Deathly Hallows. Nearly all of whom turn frothingly evangelical at the drop of a hat. And I knew the story from childhood anyway."



"I know about invisibility cloaks, and I've known for several years that the Potter family has one that has held up for far too long to be like any kind we know how to make today. Little twit left it up the Astronomy tower his first year, when he was sending off that dragon of Hagrid's. Should have just kept the damned thing."

"I would have," Horace commented. "Lost item, confiscated on rounds, perfectly fair."

"I know," Severus said mournfully. "Only Albus had *plans*."

"Ah."

"It wouldn't have been right," Minerva said severely. "Not something that valuable."

"It would have been *beautifully and poetically just*," Severus insisted, but sighed and made a face. "Well, there was that. And then, I know far more about that damned *ring*," he spat, hands spasming on his cup and his face changing color around the eyes. He pressed his lips together, and went on, measured again. "About that stone than I care to. And while I have no opinion on the existence of fate, destiny, deity, or coincidence, I do believe that, as the man said, one cloud feels lonely."

Most of them just furrowed their brows a little at that before working out what it meant. Filius, however, recognized the quote, and blinked. It wasn't a book he would have expected Severus, of all people, to casually reference like that. Not a muggle book about bunnies. Even if it was

a classic for a reason and only pretending to be a childrens' book. Severus and muggle fiction?

"And Albus always has been ridiculously over-powered." He paused. "Well, I suppose portraits aren't over-powered... no, I expect he'll find some way to manage it. Then, of course, I knew Riddle was fixating on wand-makers, and I knew he'd gone to Nurmengard."

"Oh, no," Poppy said dryly after a moment. "That's not complicated at all."

"Riddle," Minerva turned the name over in her mouth, beginning to smile, not nicely. "Are we calling him that now?"

"I am." Severus's smile was oily, cold, and flat-eyed, perfectly serpentine, and everyone in the room was in perfect sympathy with it. Filius held up his teacup, and they all clinked and drank.

"Well, all right," Horace said doggedly, "but how *did* you keep his confidence? No offense, m'boy, but Bellatrix had means of persuasion at her disposal that you, well, don't."

"Well, the reverse was also true, for one thing," Severus shrugged with his good shoulder. "Her buxom panting after him may have been reassuring, but there are enough similarities in our biographies that he never really thought of me as more than a younger, more malleable, and higher-strung version of himself."

There was an awkward silence.

This smile, while still serpentine, was wholly unlike



the previous one, and entirely sardonic. "I am aware," he answered what everyone was thinking. Or rather, had been thinking all year. "That was rather the point of the persona." He favored them with another long, sticky silence while he took more tea, then appeared to let it go.

No one was fooled. But that was fine, because he wouldn't be hearing the end of last year for at least the next five, either. Even with Kingsley and Horace to smooth over the real problems for him, at least with the public and the press.

"You said 'for one thing?'" Filius prompted.

"White noise," he answered.

Then there was a pause while Poppy explained that to everyone, with reference to crickets, breathing roommates, and, with a smile at Minerva, cats purring.

"But it needn't be pleasant things," Severus put in. "People who live in the city get used to all sorts of loud, artificial, man-made noises, and learn to let them fade into the background. And trying to sleep away from all that when you're used to it is just as bad as the other way around."

Filius looked at him curiously.

"No," he answered the silent question. "But I get most of the students from places like Knockturn, and I've had to stay in noisy places for long enough to get accustomed to it, at times. Coming back once you've got used to the noise is always a shock."

"I imagine you're not talking about crickets chirping

now," Minerva supposed trenchantly.

He looked just as dry. "Debatable. There was so much jockeying for power after he came back — well. Not even power. For favor. He was very different. Favor meant survival, theoretically less pain although in fact being noticed meant more, and most of them were parents, you know. I don't think there were any true believers, really, who hadn't spent the years in Azkaban and been freed by him. Oh, in pureblood supremacy, no doubt, but not in him. Most of them were simply trying to minimize the catastrophe that would fall on their children, with no good options to choose from between slavery and Bellatrix's wand, and perhaps save themselves. And when it comes to a choice between throwing one's compatriots or one's children under the Knight bus..."

He gave that one-shouldered shrug again. "Everyone was accusing everyone of everything from incompetence to outright treachery. And Bellatrix had never liked me. And Pettigrew had *certainly* never liked me. And every time Riddle went into my mind he saw Albus's Order showing me hostility and suspicion. The suspicion, the accusations, they all became white noise to him very quickly. I think people forget he started off wanting to be a legitimate politician, until Albus blocked him; insinuation and mudslinging wasn't exactly a new concept. He stopped paying attention to the fluff and looked at the evidence."



"And you showed him evidence of loyalty," Minerva said, her voice hardening.

Severus looked at her steadily. "That's what a mole does. I gave him a better than average ratio of information that did and didn't make him happy, but not a suspiciously good one. When it made him unhappy, I took my punishment without cavil. I didn't hide my annoyance with the others when I felt it, but I never accused any of his supporters without rock-solid evidence—often manufactured," he added, a sly half-smile flickering across his mouth, "but solid. I let him into my mind without any resistance he could detect. I showed him respect and a lack of fear and, again, took my punishment without complaint when the lack of fear went a hair too far. Which I made sure it occasionally did, *so I could show him that*. That is the face of loyalty within a strict hierarchy."

Horace had flinched once or twice, usually on the word *punishment*, but was beaming moistly. "I would never have thought you had it in you, m'boy," he said, and actually heaved himself up to hug Severus around the shoulders. "Never."

Severus colored, which didn't make him look significantly less skull-like. "Yes, well, you weren't supposed to," he muttered, giving his old Housemaster possibly the most awkward pat on the back in the history of the Empire. Which was saying something.

"All that shouting and raving," Poppy put in, her mouth

twitching. She'd heard more of it than most, because so much of it happened in her domain after one or more of the students had had a fight or an accident. Not that anyone was spared during staff meetings. "I don't think anyone would have." Horace nodded enthusiastically, fit to burst his buttons.

"No, we did hope not," Severus said, trying for humble and only managing insufferably pleased with himself again. Except that it was actually sufferable, because there was something sly and shy and bright-eyed about it. It was exactly the look he had when he refused to acknowledge one's birthday all day, and then one got back to one's room and found a bottle of something excellent laced to a very thoughtfully chosen potion, beautifully wrapped — shrunken and stuffed somewhere remarkably inconvenient he ought not to have had access to, like inside one's carpet slippers. "You really can't blame him for falling victim to one of the classic blunders."

Everyone looked at him with suspicious, narrow eyes. They Knew That Tone. The airy, offhand one. With the glittery, hidden-smirk-under-the-deadpan thing you couldn't call a twinkle, because no, and also because *evil*.

Finally, Minerva said, flatly, "No." It wasn't an agreement. It was a forbidding.

"Give in," Poppy said resignedly, while Filius frowned, racking his brain for that hint of familiarity. "What blunder is that, Severus?" she asked, half in weariness and half in dread.



"Well," Severus said, enjoying himself, "the most famous of them, of course, is, 'never get involved in a land war in Asia.'"

Filius frowned harder. It just sounded so... Oh, well there was that. "Didn't Albus do that once?" he asked Horace. "More or less Asia? Middle-East?"

"And won," Horace nodded. "Afghanistan. Before my time."

"Well, Albus," Severus said in a long-suffering voice, explaining the win.

They clinked teacups again.

"That's not the one you meant, though," prodded Poppy, who believed in ripping bandages off quickly.

"No, just the most famous," Severus agreed, standing up and stretching. He wand-folded the blanket down onto his armchair, saying, "Only slightly less well known is this: never go in against a Slytherin when peace is on the line."

It only took a moment before Filius's jaw dropped.

"Much though I hate to — " Horace began, looking as though he really, really did hate to.

"He started his own not-especially-noble House," Severus cut him off, in the very quiet voice that could silence the Great Hall with his bottled, ringing savagery. "And did his best to corrupt mine. Slytherin wasn't what he wanted, and he catastrophically misunderstood it, and if he hadn't it *still* wouldn't have been what he wanted. He got everyone else in the world to misunderstand it as well, including those it should have fed and sheltered. No. He was not

Slytherin. I've no idea when he left us; before I was born, no doubt, but he was not. He was Flight From Death: a craven, selfish, unambitious, unsubtle, parasitic House of one that was nearly the death of us."

He breathed out, one long, slow, white-lipped breath. Then he reached over and picked up his teapot, asking Poppy, who'd been nodding fierce agreement but was still trying to work out why Filius was looking gobsmacked, "To be drunk continuously as long as it hurts? The refilling charm will work even with the phoenix tears?"

"Filius did the charm," she confirmed, giving up on understanding his esoteric lunacy. Not an unusual reaction to a Severus who was being *Severus*. She couldn't quite help smiling at the renewal of an irritation that had been suddenly and brutally murdered along with so many less complicated victims it had never seemed right to mourn it. "Yes — keep sipping until you're sure you don't have to, then a half-cup every half-hour until you get a chance to see me."

He nodded briskly and turned to go, teapot in hand.

"You didn't really say that!" Filius blurted, eyes wide.

Severus turned in the doorway, and grinned like a shark. "Serpents of unusual wise?" he scoffed. "I don't think they exist."

— FINIS —





# AUTHOR'S NOTES





## NOTES

### NOTES RELATED TO THE BOOMSLANG EFFECT:

Additional notes:

◆ The book title: Harry saw the 1991 edition. Being (or at least looking) markedly different every year/edition is a marketing ploy. Lucius is very proud.

◆ Sectumsempra: as has been noted by others, the most facepalmy translation is 'Sever Forever.'

◆ Little lists: see *THE MIKADO*, by Gilbert & Sullivan. I mean, go see it, if you can. It's on Netflix now, though I haven't seen that version yet. But see it, because (snrk), and also music. Don't worry, you don't really need to know ancient Japanese culture to get the jokes; it's primarily a satire of... where the Dursleys are coming from, actually, if not quite the same people they parody.

◆ Candle-light: How many miles to Babylon is a nursery rhyme with which readers of Neil Gaiman, Diana Wynne Jones, Lewis Carroll, and many, many others may be familiar.

◆ Pop psych: Personally, I've found good insights there, if selectivity and critical thinking are applied. One must remember that peer review has been sacrificed for a prose style that does not make everyone's eyes cross.

◆ The latin crossword: as far as I know, the first person who had Severus and Minerva batting this back and forth was excessive(ly)perky in *THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT*.

## NOTES

◆ Muffliato: Severus was sixteen, not fifteen, when he perfected it, at least in my Subjectiverse, but he was fifteen for most of the year he was working on it.



## NOTES

### NOTES RELATED TO BIENNIAL SENIOR FACULTY FALL TERM CLUSTERSPARKLE'92:

HISTORY: This fic comprises two adaptations of a playing-out of the staff meeting in CoS following the Dueling Club and the petrification of Justin and Sir Nick. Players were myself, charlotteschaos, and dannybailey. Both adaptations both adaptations were done by me, with permission given at the time. I still base my Gilderoy and Albus off their versions, which were amazing. Love and props..

Chapter one is the minutes of the meeting, as taken by a rather entertained Filius.

Chapter two is the meeting in prose, which was written much later.

◆ I absolutely do not answer for Albus's thoughts being anything like what Danny meant when she wrote what he was saying. This chapter, starting from Minerva's 'this is dreadful,' is true to the chatlog we wrote together in, what was it, '06? with a very few edits for clarity and flow and fact checking.

So, just to be clear: credit for Albus's speech to dannybailey, Gildy's and Pomona's to charlotteschaos. Everything else, as far as I can I recall, is my fault.

◆ Whether these stories will fully join with my Subjectiverse is as yet undecided, but, but the Hallowe'en '73 incident Albus is referring to can be found in A KEY CALLED PROMISE.

## NOTES

### NOTES RELATED TO HOGWARTS PREFERS THE MONGOOSE:

◆ In the language of flowers, meanings for acacia include friendship, chaste love, and elegance.

Sage mostly means esteem.

◆ In my headcanon, a degree of Master of Brewing/Potions is distinct from a role as a school's Potions Master. Slughorn isn't accredited as highly as Severus, but he does have a degree equivalent (if it is, in Severus's estimation, from a Distinctly Inferior Institution) and Severus would no more dream of calling a former Hogwarts professor by a title like Mister than he would a former military general.

DADA temps don't count.

Especially not Lockhart.

◆ The ratel is, indeed, another muggle name for the honey badger. Don't say honey badger don't care: honey badger cares a lot, it will prevail!



## NOTES

NOTES RELATED TO INTERDEPARTMENTAL MEMO (SCHEDULED DELIVERY, EVENT-TRIGGERED):

PROCESS NOTES: Thanks to Daashi for the prompt.

CREDIT TO Didodikali for Diva!Draco and his TA-DA!

NOTES RELATED TO INCONCEIVABLE:

- ◆ WATERSHIP DOWN is by Richard Adams.
- ◆ THE PRINCESS BRIDE is by William Goldman.
- ◆ THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL, whose name was Percy Blakeney (Slytherin class of 1782), was written by Baroness Emma Orczy.

## COLOPHON

Layout was done in Adobe InDesign.

The Red Hen logo and other elements are adapted from the incomparable Marwan Aridi, modified in Macromedia FreeHand. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop. Photo of the ratel's claw is posted on the web, attributed to Dr-Koesters as photographer. Other photos are commercial stock photography from Thinkstock. Additional Graphics were provided from Thinkstock and Shutterstock.

Fonts used in this publication are: the Truesdell family, by Monotype for body text. Titling has been set in Broadley, by PYRS Fontlab and an adaptation of Typographer Mediengestaltung's Cruickshank. Other typefaces used in the project are Triplex Light Italic, P22 Monet, P22 Terra Cotta Extras, Lassigue DMato by Jim Marcus, Letraset's John Handy, and Bill's DECOrations.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book. Nearly 2 decades later this is still my first "go-to" resource.

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