

Adventures in Fanfiction

BAGHEERA'S

FIVE

moments  
of DELIB†



A RED HEN PUBLICATION



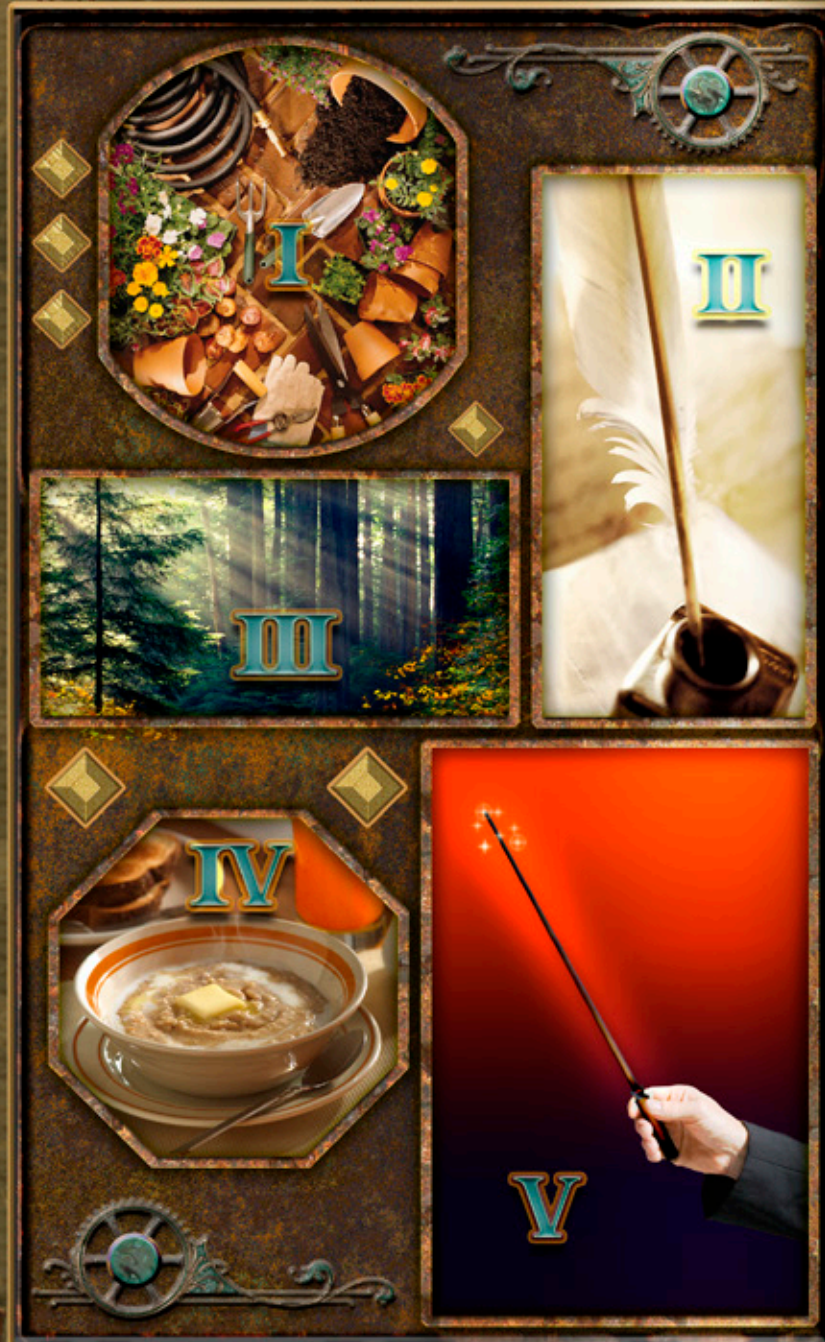
AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION  
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BAGHEERA'S

FIVE

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◆>> 1 <<◆



**N**ATURE SEEMED CLEAR and clean on this fall morning, the sunshine young and the sky, a fragile blue, was infinitely far away. The mountains were clear and crisp, and the forest, blooming in fire colours, seemed to have crept closer to the green houses over night, no longer kept at bay by the smell of lazy summer nights, bringing with it a scent of old earth and fallen leaves, mushrooms and mist.

Rising early has always been worth going to bed early. Pomona Sprout hadn't gone to bed early the night before — she, Poppy, Filius and Minerva had spent half the night in Minerva's chambers, discussing these dire times, discussing the fact that Dumbledore's murderer had been appointed Headmaster of the school. Minerva had been livid with anger, brittle and hard with it, her voice and gestures sharp. Pomona worried about Minerva. She and Snape never got along, although once it had seemed like an affectionate rivalry between the heads of two houses and also two very proud and sharp-tongued people, but now it had taken a dangerous turn.

They were afraid of Snape, of what he would be like now that he no longer had to hide his true allegiance. Little lanky foul-tempered Severus Snape, Pomona thought as she wheezed down the stairs, shaking her head. She had taught him in these very green houses. Knew every answer in every book and then some, and still never had anything but derision for the gentle keeping and caring of plants.

Pomona had a hard time disliking people — at most they exasperated her or made her want to avoid them. Snape was always the latter kind, a most unpleasant youth and an even more unpleasant man, and his fast, eviscerating wit always left her a little speechless, unable to defend herself or her students. But unpleasant was one thing and being a murderer another. The thought of him, sitting up there in Albus' office, behind that very desk, that cold and soulless sneer on his face — it made her shudder and try to think of other things. The little mandrakes had to be brushed this morning, the toadstools harvested, the enchantments around the gillyweed patch down by the lake renewed. That had been their decision last night: carry on as usual. Avoid confrontation with Snape or the Carrows. The students' safety came first, and they couldn't protect the students if they were sacked, or worse, sent to Azkaban.

She walked past the greenhouses to her shed, to get her gloves and other things, and as she passed green-

house number three, there was a tiny movement, a shadow that didn't belong, that made her stop. Greenhouse three... plants that needed it dry and warm. Could be a house-elf looking for kitchen herbs. But she turned around again and narrowed her eyes, squinting at the milky glass.

It was a person, someone taller than her, and there was a moment of pure dread when she just wanted to turn around and leave and pretend she hadn't seen anything. Instead she cast a silencing charm around herself. She didn't like doing so, it seemed unfair to catch students that way, but this could very well not be a student at all.

She made no sound as she rounded the greenhouse and still she held her breath when she pressed down the handle and slowly, inch by inch, pushed open the door. Warm, dry air wafted out of the building, and the heady scent of herbs, thyme and lavender, sage and bay leaves accompanied it.

The first thing she saw was the hem of a black robe, then the heel of a polished black boot. She took a step closer, drawn in by horrified curiosity. There was a split second of stupid relief when the stranger stepped into view and proved to be just Snape, but then she remembered. He was the enemy.

Don't meet his eyes, Minerva had warned them, but Pomona suspected that she would stare at them like a terrified rabbit at a snake if he spotted her.

For now, though, he didn't. He turned around and bent over the next row of potted plants, facing away from her. He had his black hair tied back in a little ponytail to keep it from falling into his face, but it was just as long and greasy as she remembered. His neck and face were pale as bone, and he had a gaunt, stooped look about him, as if he had aged years since she last saw him: at supper, the night before Dumbledore...

Her heart was hammering, and if she had tried to use her wand, it would probably slip from her sweaty fingers. Snape. The traitor, the murderer — in her greenhouse, picking herbs!

Well, he is a potions master, silly old girl, she reminded herself. That won't have changed.

She couldn't help risking a look at the willow basket hanging around his left arm, the assortment of plucked herbs. She wasn't half-bad at potions making herself, so maybe she'd be able to guess — Merlin, what if he was going to poison someone? That fear, though, subsided immediately as she studied the herbs and plants in the basket. Their very sight was soothing.

Thyme. Flowering lavender. Figwort, verbena and hops. Poppy seeds, dried rue and green rowan leaves. A small jar full of earth and a vial full of clear water — dew, she would bet, collected from thistle blossoms at dawn.

Most of these were common herbs, used in potions as well as in cooking, but the vial of dew stirred something

in Pomona's memory. Yes, she knew this potion. It was rare and banned in Hogwarts, or rather, all texts describing it were banned or had been censored. If Snape used only what he had in his basket, the potion would be no more than an old wife's remedy, a brew for a clear mind and better concentration. But add a knife's edge of ground phoenix eggshells, and stir it three — or was it nine? — times clockwise in the light of the sun standing in its zenith, and you got a fine *Dissimulatum Draught*.

There were several things very wrong with this. First of all: phoenix eggshells only remained usable in the period of time between a phoenix's hatching and its incineration. And Fawkes had been the only known source for them in over a century. Fawkes was gone though, had left this plane presumably, at least that was what Pomona had heard. And phoenixes were intelligent and loyal, he would not let Snape anywhere near his eggshells if Snape had betrayed his master, not even as a freshly hatched and weak chick.

But more importantly, what did Snape need *Dissimulatum* for? Had he brewed it before Dumbledore's death, oh, Pomona would have questioned him immediately, his scorching wit and threatening demeanour be damned. *Dissimulatum* was the Liar's Drink, that old weapon of spies and assassins and those very close to an accomplished Legilimens. It was no secret among the staff that Dumbledore had been one, in fact he had warned them

all on occasion that sometimes he would forget to reign in his natural aptness for this art and it would be prudent to avert their eyes if they did not wish to share secrets. And it was also no secret that Snape was an Occlumens, perhaps the foremost master of this art, at least not now: Minerva had told all the staff when they had asked how Snape could possibly have deceived the headmaster.

But Albus was dead and Snape victorious. He did not need *Dissimulatum* to enhance his Occlumency. And one of the very good things about this otherwise despicable drink was that it wasn't addictive in the least, so it could not be that Snape had simply gotten used to having it. In fact, the side-effects were rather ugly: all emotions and sensations were numbed, turned into frozen blocks of ice, and in some cases, bad nightmares. It was for its side-effects that it was banned, not for its uses. No, he needed it, for himself or someone else.

Pomona suddenly remembered why she knew the recipe for the potion at all — Dumbledore had once requested her to collect these very ingredients, just about two years ago.

Her breath, which had been going fast in fear, hitched again, this time in shock. It was all it took to get her out of the spot where she had almost taken roots and flee, with a last glimpse of Snape, standing straight for a moment, rubbing the bridge of his nose with the heel of one pale white hand. The sight of it lasted all the way

up to the Great Hall.

She was the first teacher this morning, and she sat down in a random chair, ate and drank and stared ahead, much like many of the teachers and students on this gloomy first day of school. Snape hadn't come down from his office, but his presence hung over the school like a dark cloud.

As they got up and left, heading for their first classes of the day, Pomona caught up with the Transfigurations teacher.

"Minerva, a word, please —"

They ducked into an empty classroom, cool morning light and dust motes engulfing them. The patter of many feet on staircases rang through the door. Minerva looked haggard and tired.

"Yes?" she asked, her lips pursed, not at Pomona but at the day and world in general.

"Just a question, nothing of consequence, really, a... er... a student asked me and it's been bothering me."

"Out with it, Pomona, it won't do to be late to our own classes and set a bad example."

"Is You-Know-Who a Legilimens?"



"Detention," Alecto Carrow cackled cruelly as she dragged off Ginny with claw-like nails digging into her

shoulder, “with the headmaster himself!”

Ginny has never been afraid of Snape like Neville or loathed him like Ron and Harry. Not before. He was just this really mean and sometimes overly dramatic teacher, even when she knew he had been a Death Eater or when he was working for the Order. She laughed about him, actually, because she was always pretty good at Potions, and for some reason, she rarely got to feel his wrath. Maybe being good at Potions softened him up a little, or he had exhausted all his spite on her older brothers — although the thought of Snape ever reaching the bottom of his well of bitterness was laughable.

Not so much now. Now she had weak knees and a dry mouth and her heart beat like a hummingbird in her chest.

“Likes to see to students’ punishments himself, the old glutton,” Alecto Carrow sneered as she pushed Ginny past the stone gargoyle and onto the revolving staircase. They rose up into the office that had once been Dumbledore’s.

If Snape had been doing anything at all but sitting behind his desk and staring off into space — gloating, probably — Ginny couldn’t tell. She remembered not to look him into the eyes.

“Miss Weasley,” Snape’s soft voice carried across the room. “Detention, I presume.”

Alecto grabbed Ginny wrists, making her stumble forward, and held her palms out to Snape. They were smeared with red and gold paint. She had been care-

less with her wand tonight, too nervous. “We’ve got the little vandal!” Alecto crowed.

“Indeed,” drawled Snape. “It shall be most enlightening to question her. You can return to your patrol, Professor Carrow.”

Alecto hesitated, as if reluctant to leave the site of a student’s impending doom, then scuttled away. The grinding of the staircase raised the hairs on the back of Ginny’s neck. Her eyes flickered up to Snape’s face. He was staring at her with cold disinterest, like she was a rather uninspired essay.

“Vandalizing school property and flouting Ministry decrees, Miss Weasley. Is there a method behind your misdeeds, or are you just indulging in the usual reckless love for destruction Gryffindors are so regrettably prone to?”

She gaped at him, denial dying in her throat. Clearly, in Snape’s world you were guilty until proved otherwise. And, well, she had done it.

Snape breathed in, an inaudible yet clearly exasperated sigh. “I’m asking you, girl, what you think you’re doing. Potter,” he spat the name like something rotten, “is your boyfriend, isn’t he?”

Ginny clenched her hands to fists, flicked back her red hair and could not help meeting his eyes, so angry was she now. “It’s none of your concern, *Professor*” But then she caught herself and did what she least wanted to do, because she had to, because Harry wanted her to be

safe, "Harry isn't my boyfriend. We — we split. I've got nothing to do with him anymore."

"Is that so."

Ginny could do it. She could lie with the best. She could outwit Fred and George when she wanted to. "He behaved like a prat! Like an arrogant git!" She meant Snape, and that made it easy to put feeling behind the words, but of course he took it to mean Harry.

"Well, then of course your reckless actions become a little bit more understandable," Snape said with an ugly smile. "You're not doing Potter any favours — you're harming his cause. A woman scorned and all that. But the school won't tolerate such selfish and destructive behaviour. This is not the time for such public displays of resentment. Smearing the walls with Pro-Potter Propaganda will only serve to make all our lives much more difficult. Why, your Head of House might even be blamed for it —"

"Don't you dare threaten Professor McGonagall!" Ginny yelled, then clapped a hand over her mouth when she realized what she had done.

Snape didn't budge. His face remained stony as marble, but the spark of interest that had, perhaps, been in his eyes a moment before, was now dead.

"Two-hundred more lines for your insolence, Miss Weasley." His smooth voice was barely a whisper, and at first Ginny thought she had misunderstood him.

"Lines?"

"Sir," Snape reminded her.

"Lines, *Sir*? You're making me write lines?" She nearly stuttered. Of course, it'd probably be something horrible, like what Umbridge had done to Harry.

"Is such base punishment below you? What has been good for generations of offenders shall surely suffice for you." Snape flicked his wand at the empty space to Ginny's right — and there was a lot more of it now than when the office had belonged to Dumbledore, all the friendly clutter gone — and a black desk and an uncomfortable stool appeared, as well as parchment and a quill. The quill looked ordinary enough, and there was what looked like normal ink. Ginny stared at it like it might leap at her.

Snape waved his wand again, and a book flew from one of the neatly ordered shelves, bound in black leather.

"Page 21 to page 86," Snape droned. "Neatly. Then add two hundred times, 'I shall pay my due respects.'"

With that, he reached for a parchment and quill of his own and started to work on a letter.

Ginny managed to lift one foot, then the other, and make it to the desk he had conjured for her. She sat down on the stool, ridiculously afraid that it would collapse under her like one of the twins' tricks, and stared at the empty parchment and then at the book. She glanced furtively at Snape, but he paid her no attention, scowling instead at his parchment and scribbling away furiously,



as if he was writing on the skin of the person who had offended him by requiring to be sent this letter.

As Ginny looked away, her eyes fell on one of the portraits, and she forgot to breathe. Perhaps she even made a sound. There, leaning against a painted window-sill, the sky blue behind him in the painting, was Albus Dumbledore. His white beard, his long hair and his half-moon spectacles were exactly as they had looked in life. His portrait hung over the door, across from Snape's desk, and one of the largest in the room. Each time Snape looked up, he would see it.

Ginny swallowed. Most portraits were feigning sleep, some empty, but Dumbledore was awake and present. He raised his silver eyebrows at her, then made a shooing motion with his hand, as if to remind her of her lines. Then he leaned back in the window frame and gazed down at Snape, calm and melancholy, as if he were seeing something quite different from his murderer.

Ginny realized that minutes must have gone by without her starting on her lines. So she picked up the heavy book and opened it. And immediately dropped it.

Snape looked up, clearly irritated. "Is there a problem?"

Ginny clung to her desk, staring at the monster in Dumbledore's chair. How could he? How could he be such a mean, cruel, horrible man? How could he be such a bastard when Dumbledore looked down on him all day? Oh, he had to be doing it on purpose, to ridicule

her and Dumbledore and Harry.

The book Snape had selected was, "ADVANCED DUELING – THE LAST TRICK UP YOUR SLEEVE SHOULD ALWAYS BE HIDDEN IN YOUR SOCKS" by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. It dated from 1953.

Once her shock subsided, Ginny realized that this book was probably banned from the library, just like a lot of other books by undesirable people. But Snape had access to it, of course. Ginny clutched the heavy pages, full of fury, and then made herself find page 21. She would write those lines. She would copy all sixty-five pages, which were three chapters of the book, and let Snape sneer and ridicule her. But she would take them all to heart. She would learn how to fight him better, the stupid gloating bastard..

Dumbledore must have had an editor, she thought after a few pages. What was in the book was actually incredibly useful, and not just a bunch of odd anecdotes. Although there were some of those, too.

Once, when her hands started hurting, she snuck a glance at Dumbledore's portrait and winked at him. He smiled back, a little sadly. Her wrist started hurting, then her arm. Then her back and her bottom. The chair was horribly uncomfortable, a real torture device. Soon her fingers would be raw without any magic, just from writing. And she was just at page forty-seven.

"Enough," Snape said suddenly. "We will resume this

tomorrow afternoon at quarter past four. For each minute you are late, there will be another chapter to copy. I have more important things to do tonight than watch you squirming in your seat.”

The end to their detention session came so abruptly that Ginny had no time to think until he had thrown her out of his office and she was hurrying away from the stone gargoyle, every joint in her body aching. Her head had gotten a little woozy during the last twenty minutes, but she thought she still remembered most of the text. She could hardly wait to tell Neville what Snape had done in his stupid arrogance, what a gift his punishment really was —

Ginny stopped dead in the corridor. She glanced over her shoulder uncertainly, but there was nothing but a suit of armour. No. He couldn't have. Of course not. He had killed Dumbledore, what more proof could there be.

The next day, she was precisely three minutes late. She got to copy the whole book before their detention sessions ended. The last lines she wrote with her fingers full of blisters, and her mind crammed with invaluable knowledge:

I shall pay my due respects.

◆»» 3 ««◆

“Don' trust 'im,” Hagrid muttered for what had to be the hundredth time, stomping ahead so fast they could

barely keep up with him, Fang panting at his side. He didn't even seem to notice the thorny brambles he was wading through. “Don' trust this. 'S too easy, is what it is!”

“You shouldn't,” Luna agreed, then added, because sometimes you had to spell these things out so people remembered, “because he probably wants us to be suffocated by Hayflingers. They're abundant in this season, I've heard.”

Hagrid stomped for a few more seconds, then stopped dead. Ginny and Neville bumped into Luna. Slowly Hagrid turned around.

“The whatsits?” Hagrid boomed, scratching his beard in bewilderment.

“Although it could be,” Luna mused, looking up and down the trees around them and the sunshine falling through the upper branches, “that Snape wanted us to have a picnic once we're done with our detention!”

“A picnic?” Ginny and Neville echoed.

“Hayflingers don't come out on sunny days, do they,” Luna reminded them, and smiled brightly as she opened her pack and showed them the bottles of butterbeer and the food she had snuck out of the castle. “And the Forbidden Forest is nice for a picnic this time of year.”

Ginny blinked in astonishment for a moment, and Neville smiled weakly at Luna, then clapped her on the back.

“Yeah, probably,” he said. “Great idea, Luna.”

They had a picnic on a small clearing, yellow leaves floating down around them as they drank and ate. Ginny

demonstrated a couple of new jinxes she had learned when a giant spider came too close and they all cheered when it skittered away. On the way back to the castle, they met two centaurs. Luna would have liked to ask them if they had seen any Hayflingers, but they seemed more interested in news about the school and the war, since without Dumbledore, they hardly had any connection to the outside world, and seemed worried about the changes in the Ministry. Then Hagrid argued with them about showing a bit more support for the fight against Voldemort, and they went off, insulted and angry.

As they cantered away, Luna was sure she saw a bit of hay stuck in the older one's tail.

#### ◆◆ 4 ◆◆

After the Easter holidays, Neville was all alone. He had more friends at Hogwarts than he had ever had: he could not cross a hallway or enter the library without people nodding at him or catching his eyes, or people sticking their heads together and whisper in something like awe. It was like walking with Harry beside you, only it was just him.

But the people who mattered, the people Neville needed badly, were gone. Ginny in hiding, Luna kidnapped — and would he ever stop blaming himself for that? For letting her leave their compartment on her own to go to the bathroom and waiting a full ten min-

utes before checking on her? — and Harry, Ron and Hermione doing Merlin knew what.

Neville wasn't good at being optimistic. Things tended to go pear-shaped around him, and if there was one thing he was certain of, then it was that he was not a lucky boy. But Luna had always kept up everyone's cheer and hope. There was something unshakable about Luna, something no worry or misfortune could touch. Neville envied that, although sometimes it was a bit scary. Maybe it was better, safer to be realistic.

And Ginny was good at everything. Maybe she hadn't read as many books as Hermione or wasn't as incredibly lucky as Harry, but when she tried something, it always worked. She was even good at Potions. It was her who taught Dumbledore's Army new spells and jinxes, and her who came up with clever graffiti to smear on the corridor walls at night.

Neville was just sort of there. He knew he wouldn't betray Harry, or give up, not now that everyone seemed to depend on him, but what would he do without Ginny and Luna?

And how much longer could he safely stay at Hogwarts? It wasn't like his Gran was anyone important. They didn't need him to blackmail her. What if he just vanished one day?

Neville snuck into the Great Hall at Hogwarts and headed for Gryffindor table. Usually it was an exercise in defiance, in holding your head high and looking straight at the enemy's face — but today all Neville

could look at were the empty seats at Gryffindor table. The Creevey brothers were bent over a DAILY PROPHECY, their porridge forgotten. Neville sat down opposite them and looked at the food without any appetite. He caught others glancing at him furtively, and many faces grey and pale with fear. At the teachers' table, Professor McGonagall looked particularly sour this morning.

Colin Creevey looked at him, his eyes huge as a little boy's, his expression that of a man ten years older, and without a word passed Neville the PROPHECY.

Neville swallowed. Not again. His palms got sweaty as he tried to focus on the writing. Not Gran. Not Ginny. Please, not Luna.

"MOST LIKELY DEAD" — Ministry spokeswoman asserts that Undesirable No. 1, Harry Potter, will certainly be proved to be dead within the month. Read more on page 3."

Neville could not have read page 3 if he had wanted to. His stomach was knotted in some bitter mixture of fear and anger. No. Harry wasn't dead.

And what if he is, a treacherous voice asked him in his head, what will you do then?

Neville put down the newspaper. He was dimly aware of the Creevey brothers staring anxiously at him, of other faces turning towards Gryffindor table.

If Harry was dead, then there was nothing left to lose, was there? Then the battle they fought was already lost.

Neville was good at fighting lost battles. The trick,

when you were not an exceptionally lucky bloke, was not winning. The trick was to keep fighting.

He took a deep breath, paid the owl for his own copy of the PROPHECY that had arrived in the meantime, and folded it, almost without shaking hands. Then he pushed his spoon into his porridge and ate. One spoonful. No taste. Two spoonfuls. He felt vaguely sick. No matter, he needed to eat. Three spoonfuls —

"Harry lives!"

The shout rang all through the gloomy hall, bounced off the walls, clear as a church bell. It was Dennis Creevey. Neville wondered why his spoon didn't bend, so hard was he clutching it as he ate another bite. Amycus Carrow panted across the hall, face red with anger, and dragged Dennis out of his seat, howling, "Detention!"

People flinched and ducked their heads everywhere, and Neville looked around, saw shining faces everywhere, hidden beneath bangs and behind cups of tea. They all seemed to be looking at him, and so was Dennis as Carrow dragged him away, beaming at Neville, even as he stumbled.

Neville ate another spoonful and willed them all to stay silent, to let this single scream, this powerful statement be enough. He didn't look forward to fretting over Dennis' fate all day, or to nursing cuts and bruises when the boy returned to Gryffindor tower. If he returned. The Creeveys weren't purebloods.

"Harry lives!"

Plates clattered at the teacher table this time, and before Alecko Carrow could even jump out of her seat, Crabbe had risen at Slytherin table and hexed Hannah Abbot. Her brave scream turned into a wail of pain and she toppled backwards, falling to the stone floor and squirming in pain by the time Alecko Carrow got to her. She placed a binding charm on Hannah, then yelled, "Anyone else longing for punishment this morning?"

There was a moment of silence, but now that a challenge had been uttered, Neville knew that someone would rise to it. Simultaneously, Padma and Parvati rose on Ravenclaw and Gryffindor table, their identical voices ringing bright and clear, "Harry lives!"

Neville saw others stirring in their seats, ready to jump, eager to reaffirm their beliefs. But there was a Dumbledore's Army meeting tomorrow night, and where was the point in having so many people hurt? The message had come across.

Harry lives, Neville thought and believed it. He dropped his spoon in his bowl with a clatter that rang noisily in the tense silence, and wiped his mouth, a signal for departure, for retreat, even as Filch and Carrow bustled to herd the offenders away to be punished. Everywhere, shoulders slumped in relief, and only a few defiant faces remained eager for confrontation. But the spell was broken.

Neville was not the first to get up, but one of the first.

He headed straight for his first class, knowing better than to talk about anything important under Snape's cruel and watchful eyes.

He could see Snape's face, stony and white as he gazed over the hall, and Snape saw him too and his lips moved in an unpleasant sneer. They looked eye to eye and although Neville had forgotten to walk, no one bumped into him, everyone respected his space.

There was something almost like grudging respect in Snape's expression. Well, recognition, anyways, of Neville as more than a piece of worthless, inept scum.

He turned away, laughing grimly at himself for imagining that Snape might think of him as an almost worthy opponent.

## ◆◆ 5 ◆◆

"Professor."

Severus' voice was thin and smooth as a very old parchment. He looked tired, although it was only in the lines and drained colours of his face. His posture, his rigid and controlled expression, was alert as always.

How he had changed, Minerva thought as she approached his desk, letting herself study him in detail, trying to reaffirm her decision. From an awkward, fragile boy to a furious and most intense young man, to this statue of a wizard, a man cast in cold stone. She thought she knew him, as well

as anyone alive, and what she saw in every line of his body was no different than it had been for the last seventeen years. Anger and hatred and sheer determination.

"Your suggestions for this year's O.W.L. questions, I presume?" Severus asked with a nod at the parchment in her hand. She put it down on Albus's desk, then conjured herself a straight-backed chair, and sat down. She put her wand onto the parchment and after adjusting her glasses, rested her hands in her lap.

"You will certainly find them satisfactory, as you have all my suggestions this term," she began.

He took in her wand with a spark of interest. She knew this expression well: it was the one he wore about once or twice in a game of chess, when she made an interesting or worrisome move. They hadn't played since Albus's death, of course. She was, to her knowledge, the only person who had ever played any kind of game with Severus while he taught at Hogwarts; Albus had always refused to play chess, claiming that games should be fun, dangerous or silly, and no one wanted Severus at the staff's weekly round of card games. Having played Witches Bridge with him as a partner once, Minerva knew why.

"Ah," Severus said. "This is regrettable, but not unexpected. You have become rather predictable, Minerva."

"I will not have it any longer, Severus," she said, and tried to keep down that tremulous tone in her voice, "so you will listen to me. My wand is on that table because

if you wish to hex me, I am certain you will."

"How unlike a Gryffindor to forego a fight." She could not tell for sure if he was amused, if he was even capable of amusement any longer. At her back, she knew, hung Albus' portrait. It made her uncomfortable. Albus was a wizard you liked to have at your side, where you could keep your eyes on him.

"I am here to confront you, but not with wands."

"With words, then."

"With evidence." And she started, calmly and slowly, to lay down her theory, argument by carefully structured argument, proving each point with clear evidence. It felt like an essay she had written a long time ago, the words suddenly familiar a second after she had spoken them.

Pomona's suspicion about the Dissimulatum she did not mention, for it would have endangered her. But she mentioned a dozen instances over the year when Snape, who had always been swift and vicious in punishment, had been curiously lenient on the Pro-Dumbledore faction among the students, when he had subtly minimized the damage done by the Carrows, when he had issued threats that could just as well be read as warnings, when he had tolerated teachers who he clearly knew to be members of the Order. And had he not stayed at the school, as a teacher, a profession he had always hated, when he could have had any post as Voldemort's right hand man? From this, she progressed, without dawdling,

to last year's events, starting with Albus' withered hand and her suspicions about his state of health.

"He was dying all year, wasn't he? He knew he would die on that tower. You did not kill him, Severus."

He looked at her for a long moment. "So you do finally accept the truth the Ministry has proclaimed all year? Undesirable No 1 has killed Albus Dumbledore."

She sent him a withering look over her glasses. "Do not mock me, Severus. You did not kill him, and neither did Harry."

"But I did kill him, Minerva. I killed Albus Dumbledore."

He lifted a pale hand and waved it at the pensieve. "I can demonstrate, if you wish."

Minerva felt the blood drain from her face. There was a difference between a very good lie and the painful truth, and she recognized the latter in his words.

"I am exactly what you think I am," Severus went on, his voice dripping with bitter derision.

Yes, that had always been the crux with Severus, hadn't it? The people looking for hidden depths, for a soft core beneath the unpleasant shell, were sorely disappointed.

"You are, aren't you. This... this murder proves it."

And he would kill again, to fortify his proof. He was a most ruthless player, this much she had always known. It was all the more astonishing that he had risked protecting the students, who in his eyes were no more than pawns. Minerva reached for her wand, and he did not

stop her. She knew he had his wand in his sleeve.

She touched the wood gingerly, then offered it to him. "Obliviate me, Severus. But answer me two questions first."

He took the wand, which was all the assent she needed.

"Is this the first time we have had this conversation?"

"The fifth," he answered, and there was the tiniest hint of a smirk, an acknowledgement of irony, a sliver of respect for her.

She nodded. And hesitated, because she had asked only for two questions, and that was how many answers he would give. But there was so much she needed to know.

In the end, though, what did it matter? She would not remember.

"Is there hope, Severus? Is there a plan?"

"With our fate in Potter's hands? Surely you jest, Minerva. We are most certainly doomed."

She closed her eyes and sighed deeply in relief. Severus had no hope. But his answer was clear. There was a plan. Dumbledore had given Harry something to do, something that would matter.

Softly, he said, "Obliviate."

And softer even, he whispered to her in his serpent's voice, "Remember that you hate me, Minerva. I am a traitor, a liar, a murderer."

◆◆◆ FINIS ◆◆◆

# Colophon

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign.

Cover and interior graphics were created in Adobe Photoshop. Also used in this project were stock photography from Liquid Library (formerly Dynamic Graphics), a division of Getty Images. Additional graphics elements are from Antje's collections of steampunk resources, as well as the steampunk collection from Fontcraft's Scriptorium @ fontcraft.com.

Fonts used in the project are: The Priori families (both serif and sans), by Johnathan Barnbrook, distributed by Emigré foundry. Dingbats are from the Priori families, and Fontcraft's steampunk collection.

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