

## Faces

"Now you pick one, Professor Snape!"

It was a minor irritation in a life filled with minor irritations that nearly everyone he knew called him Professor.

It was a sign of respect, of course, at least of a sort; and he couldn't very well ask someone like Bill Weasley or Nymphadora Tonks to call him Severus. They'd been his students, after all, and it would be awkward, especially now as they'd fallen into the habit of Professor.

Severus Snape glanced up from where he was picking at his food. Molly would scold if he didn't eat, though he generally wasn't very hungry in the evenings. She scolded Remus Lupin, too, and they'd finally found common ground in their mutual dislike of being adopted as two more honorary Weasley brothers, badgered and scolded and cared for by Molly.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked.

"Pick a face," Tonks said, leaning forward and grinning. "Everyone else has had a turn."

"A..." he drew his eyebrows together, then realised what she meant, and returned to contemplating his plate. "Pass, thank you."

"Come on, there must be something. Green hair? You know you like green hair -- "

"No, thank you," he said sharply. She opened her mouth, and he set his fork down suddenly. "If you will excuse me."

"Severus, you've hardly -- " Molly began, but he stopped her.

"I am not hungry," he growled, and left without bothering to listen to any further protests anyone cared to make. He'd sat civilly at the dinner table for a good half an hour, which he felt was nearing the limits of what could be peaceably asked of him, especially with Tonks putting on a ridiculous display of her silly, superficial talents.

"I'll speak to him," he heard Lupin say, quietly, as he passed into the hallway, and footsteps followed him up the stairs.

"Don't be bothered, Lupin," he said, without turning around. The footsteps stopped about halfway up the stairs.

"I'm afraid if I didn't it'd go very hard for us with Molly," Lupin called up.

"Then do as I do, and don't let her in your rooms," he answered, closing the door and locking it.

It was difficult to hear through the heavy old door, but he was nearly sure Lupin's footsteps descended the staircase again; after a few moments, he crossed the room and dropped into the old, musty chair he'd appropriated from downstairs.

Some days merely being around other people was all he could manage. Being required to play their silly parlour games was simply too much.

His hand drifted to the book on the nearby table, touching the cover, but he wasn't in the mood for reading; he wasn't in the mood for much of anything except sitting quietly. He never could manage more than a few minutes of that, either, before the urge to be up and moving about overwhelmed -- there was never any lack of work in his life, for which he was grateful, but sometimes it was difficult, wanting to be still and not being able to.

He forced himself to pick up his book and read a few paragraphs. There was, at least, a decent library in this mausoleum of a house. Usually, if he could get through a page, the world would fall away...

When he looked up from the book, it was dark enough that the window afforded him no illumination, and he was forced to rise and light the candles, using the tip of his wand and a muttered word in Latin, so ingrained now as to be habitual. He could hear the creaks and clangs as the house settled, after the warm summer day's heat faded.

A knock on the door startled him, and he glanced at it, lighting the last candle in the wall-bracket before saying, no louder than necessary, "Come in."

The lock slid back at the words, and the knob turned, admitting a slim shape, who stood indecisively just inside the doorway.

"The draft will blow out the candles," he warned, and Tonks shut the door quickly, nearly slamming her fingertips in it. The nearest candle flickered and rose back to its normal upright flame.

"Did you want something?" he asked, turning away to close the window and secure the heavy drapes.

"I uh...I'm sorry if I offended you at dinner," she said, and he heard the strain in her voice. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"You didn't offend me," he replied.

"But you left..."

"I was tired of company. I wanted to be alone," he said, darkly.

She didn't take the hint.

"Well, anyway, I'm sorry we were bothering you at dinner. Next time we won't. Bother," she added.

"Thank you."

"And Molly wanted me to give you this," she said, holding out a wax-paper-wrapped package. He turned to take it, looked down, and sighed.

"She makes very good sandwiches, usually, when she remembers to put mustard on," Tonks said helpfully. He set the package on the table, next to the book. "You should eat it while the cheese is still melted."

"Thank you, I will take that under advisement," he drawled. "Your job as deputy caretaker is discharged."

"All right." She turned to go, and he watched her fingers curl around the doorknob, before she stopped.

"You know, if you tried to be nice to people you might find they're nicer to you," she said, turning almost reluctantly to look at him.

"I don't require niceness," he said, biting off the hiss on the last word.

"Well, nobody requires it," she retorted. "I guess you're above such silly human things as good manners and pleasant conversation."

"I ask nothing of others, and could only wish they'd ask nothing in return."

"Don't you want to have friends?" she said.

He swallowed. It was ridiculous to be affected by the question, but she had been so plaintive and he recalled his own voice, two decades before -- younger even than she was now --

"Nonsense, I haven't time for friends."

"Yes, your busy schedule wouldn't allow it, I see," she said, eyes sweeping the tidy, book-lined room.

"You may go," he said firmly. She leaned against the door, back to it, hand still on the knob.

"He's lonely, you know. Just as lonely as you are only he hasn't got a job, either. And I always -- when you were my teacher -- "

"Oh, for Merlin's -- "

"We both know you're smart. It wouldn't take so much for you to be nice -- " she faltered, and then dropped her eyes. "Look, the thing is, if you wanted, either one of us'd be more than happy to -- "

"Thank you, Tonks, I hope you don't mind letting yourself out," he said swiftly.

"Wasn't there any face you wanted to see?" she asked. "I mean, I like doing it. I like making people laugh with it, Merlin knows not many people laugh when I use it on the job..."

He sighed, and glanced heavenwards.

"I could care less what you look like," he said, slowly, hoping it would help her finally get it. "I'm not interested in it. Turn your hair green, pink, striped, what-have-you. It doesn't matter. If there is one lesson I have learned, it is that our appearances are the least of our worries."

He found that his right hand had risen and was clenching his left arm, above the place where the Dark Mark had appeared -- still was -- never really had faded entirely.

"Get out," he said quietly. She was staring at him. "Did you not hear me? Get out of my rooms."

She opened the door without turning, and slipped out, stubbing her toe on the way. He bowed his head, forced his fingers to release his arm, and leaned forward on the table.

What stung more than knowing one was disliked was knowing that one was not only disliked, but pitied for it.

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And the worst of being pitied for it was that Tonks could not take a hint even if it was forced upon her.

The very next day, as he was returning from an errand to Diagon Alley, he ran into her on the doorstep of 12 Grimmauld Place -- quite literally. She was leaving the house, turning to laugh at something someone inside had said, and he attempted to dodge, but she moved precisely the direction he'd hoped she wouldn't, and a second later he was sprawling against the railing, and she had fallen over it.

"Tonks?" Lupin called, from inside, pushing past him. "Oh -- Severus..." he put out a hand to steady his shoulder, and the taller man shrugged it off, gathering himself and turning.

"I think I've broken my arm," Tonks said cheerfully, from below. "Not a problem -- ow -- who'd I knock over?"

"Me," Severus replied, as Tonks managed to get to her feet, left arm crooked at an odd angle.

"Oh -- are you all right?"

"Fine."

"Really, Remus, I'm okay," she said, as the brown-haired man hovered. "Listen -- will you go let Kingsley know? He's waiting for me, but I think I'd better see to this -- it's nothing important, he doesn't really need me for this one anyway..."

"Of course -- will you be all right?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'll be fine. Go."

He nodded, and with a backwards glance at Severus, hurried off.

Severus felt a sharp stab of brief jealousy at their short, amiable interaction -- not an unfamiliar sensation, in a life with few friends and fewer close confidantes. It was commonly thought that Remus and Tonks were seeing each other, but he'd never paid much attention to rumour.

"Help me inside?" she asked. "My ankle..."

He held out a hand from the top of the steps as she hobbled up them, and she took it with her right hand, limping inside and sitting on the nearest chair. Assuming if she needed anything more she'd have asked for it, he turned to go, but she hadn't let go of his hand.

"Would you have a look at my arm? I'm awful at healing spells," she said, with an innocent smile he didn't buy for an instant. It would, however, probably satisfy her if he gave it a cursory glance, so he knelt in front of her and slid the sleeve up, feeling for breaks in the bone under her skin and muscle. When she winced, he nodded.

"Hairline?" he asked, and she nodded. "I suppose you'd like me to fix it."

"I'd like that very much," she said, flashing another entirely too innocent smile. He sighed, and concentrated for a few minutes on the healing spell, running his other hand down to her ankle to fix that into the process, though it was complicated to heal both at once. He liked challenges.

When he looked up he found her face very close to his.

"Thank you," she said. "I appreciate it."

"Hardly an effort," he answered brusquely.

"Still, considering I'm the one who ran into you..."

He stood, examining his hands -- pale, yes, and thin-fingered, but deft and workmanlike for all of that, with burns and callouses that were the evidence of his craft.

"Come have something to eat?" she said, standing, testing the strength of her ankle. He shook his head. "Do. Then you can use it as an excuse when you don't want to eat dinner again, and I can use it as an excuse for staying in and keeping off my ankle."

"I don't need an excuse, I'm a grown man," he replied.

"Are you?" she asked, with a grin.

"And what am I supposed to draw from that?"

"Well, you don't act like one, sometimes. At the moment, for example, you're acting like a sulky little boy."

He stared at her.

"Well, you are," she said. "But my offer still stands."

"Offer...?" he inquired. It seemed safe to simply ignore the entire question of sulkyness.

"To be your friend," she answered easily, vanishing through the doorway that led to the kitchen. He followed, now out of outrage more than anything.

"And I suppose you'd want some grand gesture of friendship," he growled, watching as she reached into a cupboard and took down a flimsy box.

"Well, I won't ask you to spit-shake or anything..." she offered him a cracker, and he waved it off. "For god's sake, take the bloody cracker."

He accepted it, turning it over in his fingers. She watched him.

"It's not as though I'm asking for a confession of your deepest secrets," she said finally. He looked up sharply. "Most friendship's made up of really stupid things, you know. Go on." She leaned one hip against the counter. "Tell me what colour my hair ought to be."

"I could care less," he said honestly. "I've told you that."

She sighed. "Listen, it's fun."

"Perhaps you find it so."

"Well, what do you base value on?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

She took the cracker in his fingers and broke it in pieces, eating half. "What do you look for in someone you'd want to spend time with?"

"Silence," he answered, before he'd thought about it. She burst out laughing.

"You don't ask much, do you?"

"I've found the less I ask, the less I am disappointed."

"What a shame," she said, and he saw the pity in her eyes again. He turned to go, but she stopped him with her left hand on his sleeve.

"What would it take?" she asked, and he glanced over his shoulder at her. "Be serious, and I will too. See? Serious face." She made a grave face. "For us to be friends."

He turned to her, fury rising in him before he could stifle it. "Do you want to know what I appreciate? It's not beauty or...or "unique" hair, or stupid things that friendships are supposed to be based on. You can't appreciate someone unless you really know them, know inside them, know who they are and what they think. How many people do you suppose want to show that to me? How many people do you suppose I'd find worth taking the time to find that out? Do you not understand that I do not, and could not, care less about your stupid game of changing-face? What should I care? You don't want to show that much to me and I certainly don't want to show that much to you, you...mischief-maker!"

She looked stunned for a moment, then blinked. "Mischief-maker? That was the best you could come up with?"

"Infuriating woman!" he cried, turning to leave, but she wouldn't let go.

"No, wait -- please -- "

"Let me alone, that's all I want!"

"Please..."

The plaintive note had crept into her voice again, and he stopped, breathing deeply to calm himself.

"What is it?" he demanded, without turning.

"Nobody's ever said that before," she said. "About faces and that, I mean."

"Well, then it's about time -- "

"No, I mean..." she circled so that she was standing in front of him, blocking the doorway. "Plenty of people have asked me to change for them and plenty have said I was pretty and would I not change, but...nobody's ever just not cared."

He waited. There didn't seem to be anything he ought to say.

"Please stay," she said, putting a hand on his chest -- he flinched inwardly at the contact -- and gently pushing. He went back a step, then two, then three, until his back touched the counter. They stood there for a minute, until she pressed again, a little, and then backed away.

For the first time in perhaps the entire ten or twelve years he'd known her -- mostly as her professor -- he actually looked at her. Head half-bent, defiantly short purple hair hanging around her ears, eyes cast away, fingers twining with each other. She looked older than she was. Funny; he'd always thought such vulnerability made people look younger. And usually he'd taken advantage of the fact.

He cast about for something to say to fix the problem so that he could leave, but all he could think of to do was spread his hands, in a gesture that was really pretty meaningless, and say "Did you want to ask something more?"

"No," she said softly. "No, I guess not."

He took that for a dismissal, and left, gratefully.

When he came down for dinner, she was her usual bright, composed self, and it was a relief to be able to be annoyed by her cheerfulness instead of put at a loss by her sudden revelation.

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They didn't see much of each other, the next week; he was sent on a mission, and when he returned, she was working. It was just as well. Their conversation in the kitchen had discomfited him, and he'd found himself brooding on it while away from Grimmauld Place. Back in the horrible old house, full of irksome children and Weasleys, it was easy to dismiss it. A momentary lapse in judgement on his part.

Still, when she appeared at dinner again, he gave her a curt nod, and almost smiled back when she smiled a greeting at him. Then she was distracted by the choose-a-face game, which she played agreeably, making no request for him to choose one, though he had a smart, sarcastic reply at the ready should she try. He was almost disappointed that she didn't.

As soon as the meal was over -- Lupin was Molly's primary target tonight, as it was near the full moon and he ought to be eating more protein -- Severus slipped away, wandering up to the darkened library. He'd never been really comfortable in libraries except at night; it seemed wrong to be there during the day, for some reason he couldn't put his finger on.

"I missed you."

He stopped, in the middle of an aisle, shoulders tensing. Tonks' voice.

"I didn't ask you to join in at dinner, see?" she said, coming up behind him, circling until she was in his line of vision. She leaned on a shelf, crossing her arms. "I'm learning."

"I'd just as soon you didn't bother," he replied.

"Well, I think since I did, you ought to do something for me," she said. He sighed.

"Your voluntary acts do not indebt me in any way," he answered. "Do as you wish, but don't expect me to fall at your feet because you did so."

"Nobody's asking you to fall anywhere," she retorted. "Do you have to be so principled about everything?"

"Hardly," he said drily. "In case you'd forgotten, I'm the wicked one, remember?"

He held up his left arm, and she brushed it away, irritably.

"Do you think," she asked, "I'm one of those people it might be worth your time to understand?"

"If I hadn't, I wouldn't have -- " he said, and stopped himself suddenly.

There was a moment of breathtaking silence, wherein Severus Snape re-examined several of his basic beliefs about other people.

"Make your eyes blue," he said, instead of finishing his thought. She looked away; when she looked back, they'd gone from dark brown to bright, cerulean blue.

"Green."

Emeralds.

"Hazel."

A barely-perceptible darkening.

"Gold. Grey. Black. Brown. Darker -- Purple," he said, and finally she broke down laughing.

He moved forward and caught her face in his hands -- pale but workmanlike hands, with calluses and scars -- and kissed her, stealing her breath.

When he stepped back, cheeks flushing with shame at the suddenness of his movement and the inevitable rejection that would follow, her eyes were still purple.

She smiled.

"Do it again," she said.

"What?" he asked, confused.

"Do it again," she insisted, moving closer. He stepped back. "No -- "

Her fingers curled around his collar, and he found it hard to withdraw as she kissed him. They slammed backwards into a bookshelf with enough force to nearly drive the breath from him, or perhaps that was the way her body was pressed to his.

It had been a long time since anyone, let alone a beautiful young woman, had kissed him. He worried, vaguely, that he'd forgotten how it was done, but then the thought occurred to him that she could remind him.

He smiled, a true smile, into the kiss.

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Blue.

Gold.

Green.

Brown.

Hazel.

Darker.

Pink.

Blue again.

Darker.

Purple.

Now kiss me.

Yes...

END