

Antidotes

by WriterMerrin

EWE. Hermione is trying to redefine herself in the post-Voldemort era. So are the Malfoys. Helping Snape regain his life gives Hermione hope that she can save her own.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 9

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~ Prologue ~

When Lucius Malfoy appeared at the edge of the clearing, Death Eaters made way for him, either out of habit or distaste for his current status.

Severus Snape observed that his friend seemed troubled by more than the lack of knowledge of his son's whereabouts.

"Severus, a word."

Some gasped this time. Severus had been elevated in rank, and Lucius hadn't even his own wand. But the recently displaced Headmaster motioned him closer and cast an advanced form of the Muffliato charm that he had invented in his youth.

"What news?"

"You are summoned." Severus reflexively glanced at his left arm, but Lucius continued. "He's in the shack, awaiting Potter. He means you no good, my friend."

An objection on his lips, Severus' heart clenched with the truth. He knew about the Elder Wand. He knew that the Dark Lord could see him as a threat.

"I have only one hope, Lucius. If he uses the snake, I may yet live. Make me one oath."

Lucius didn't hesitate; a wand oath--with a wand not even his own, no less--was not as binding as a vow.

"Lucius, brother, swear to me that you will not let my body remain in the shack."

"Body? But Severus--"

"I may appear dead, but even if you have to scream it as they drag you to Azkaban, tell them. Make sure Poppy knows where I am. Dumbledore's portrait will confirm it; he will plead leniency for us both."

"Why should they listen to me?"

"Draco will turn in the end. And even if he doesn't, the idea that I'm still alive is sure to inspire some Gryffindor to take me to Poppy. She is honor-bound to give me the

antidote.”

Severus grasped Lucius' wand, and the blond man did likewise. “To my last breath, I will plead for your life as though you were my blood. I swear it.”

A small surge of magic passed between the men; then Severus prepared himself for his last stand.

Lucius held Narcissa and Draco in his arms, whispering words of reassurance to his wife as their son sat strangely silent. Trying to remain unobtrusive in the Great Hall as the victorious Light mourned their losses, he wished Narcissa could kneel beside her sister's body and bid her farewell, but he didn't want to draw attention to the inevitable connection. He would stay. Not only for Draco's best chance at acceptance, but also for the oath he had made to Severus. His heart had clenched when the Dark Lord had confirmed Severus' death, but he felt the compulsion to fulfill the vow to his friend.

He looked about the hall for Potter, but he couldn't be seen. Lucius was considering seeking out McGonagall or Pomfrey when Potter's friends--he recognized them--entered. The boy returned to his redheaded family, but the girl listlessly walked the perimeter of the large room.

Thanking the fates for this opportunity, he asked Draco for the girl's name. Then, as she drew closer, he called softly, “Granger.”

She looked startled and wary, but must have seen something sympathetic in Draco's face because she approached. “Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, Draco.”

“Miss Granger, I cannot apologize enough for your treatment whilst you were in our home.”

Her eyebrows rose, and her expression turned wry. “What do you want?”

“Severus Snape.” He paused when he saw her face contort with sadness. “Do you know how he... died?”

The young woman took a deep breath and drew herself up. “Nagini.”

“It wasn't the Killing Curse, you're sure?”

“I'm sure. He gave Harry some memories before--” Tears began falling from her eyes.

“Then he may yet live.”

“But... but I saw him.”

“I believe it was induced by a potion. I would go myself, but I don't want the attentions of those Aurors. You could ask Dumbledore's portrait.”

“I was just there. He didn't say anything.”

“Rarely in life did he give up information unasked. Perhaps if you and Draco go to the shack and bring Severus to Madam Pomfrey, she can provide the correct antidote.”

Hermione's eyes scanned the room. “I'll ask Neville to come with us.”

After what appeared to be a tense discussion, Hermione and Neville returned. The three left the hall, Hermione in the lead and Neville keeping an eye on Draco.

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This story is completely written and will be posted as it is beta read.

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 9

Once Severus is again safe in the dungeon, another Slytherin is revealed, and Hermione gets her brewing list.

~ Chapter One ~

Hermione was heartbroken at the desolation of the grounds. As the three approached the Whomping Willow, Hermione saw that many of its branches lay scattered. It barely resisted the trio of invaders.

Arriving at the shack, Hermione performed the diagnostic charm she'd been too shocked to perform earlier that morning. It confirmed that Professor Snape was alive, but showing only minimal life signs.

Speaking as little as possible, the three were soon returning to the castle with Draco in the lead, levitating a Disillusioned Professor Snape. Draco had insisted he be the one to take the man to his dungeon. Now, removed from the pool of blood and resting on a sofa in the Slytherin common room, it was easier to believe that Snape was only under the influence of a potion.

While Draco stood watch over his mentor, Hermione and Neville returned to the Great Hall. The crowd had thinned considerably. McGonagall told Hermione that many had gone home and many others, having no home to return to, were staying in the castle, which had recognized McGonagall's authority. Some had been Floo'd to St. Mungo's, and the dead had been carefully placed in waiting for their proper burials.

Except for Ginny and Ron, the Weasleys had returned to Shell Cottage.

“Where did you go?” Ron tiredly asked as he pulled Hermione into his arms.

“I'll tell you later,” she answered quietly. “Sorry I kept you waiting.”

“It's okay. I told Ginny to let Harry sleep, but she went to get him anyway. I'm headed back up to the tower now. McGonagall's going to let us Floo from there.”

"Okay. Tell Harry I'm staying here."

"Aren't you coming with us?"

"No, I think you need your space. Owl me soon, though--maybe after a good sleep."

"We could all do with some sleep," Madam Pomfrey interrupted.

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione answered, pulling away from Ron. "But I need to ask you something... or tell you." She looked between the matron and her friend. "Go ahead, Ron. I'll see you soon."

When Ron was out of earshot, Pomfrey began again. "Mr. Longbottom informed me that someone needs care in the dungeon, but would not give me any more information. Would you care to?"

Looking around her again, Hermione answered. "It's Professor Snape."

"The Headmaster?"

Hermione nodded. "He didn't die, but he might have taken a potion. Mr. Malfoy was under the impression you might have the antidote."

Pomfrey shook her head. "Most of my potions store was lost in the attack. I've yet to take an inventory, but I'd be surprised if any remained intact."

"But you know what he took?"

"I have a good idea. Let me see him before we start making plans."

After being the sensible one for so long, Hermione was relieved by Madam Pomfrey's calm assessment of the situation. She quietly followed the matron down the steps and watched her use a complicated wand movement to enter the Slytherin common room.

Pomfrey performed a much more complex set of diagnostic spells before declaring that he had a preventative antivenin in his system, as well as a standard dose of the Draught of Living Death.

They decided to leave the professor where he was since the Malfoys had already committed to remaining with their comrade until his situation was resolved.

"What if--" Hermione stopped herself, suddenly aware of who was with her. "What if the Slytherins know a way in here?"

Before Lucius could answer, Pomfrey harrumphed. "There isn't a way that any student can use."

"How do you know?"

"You students all think that I must be some kind of Hufflepuff, but I was a Slytherin and Head Girl to boot. There aren't any secrets of this room that I don't know. Professor Snape has a passageway, but no one will be using that whilst he is lying here."

Draco found his voice to ask about the antidote, but Pomfrey reassured him. "The Headmaster is in no immediate danger. The Draught is keeping him in a deep sleep, almost like stasis. We'd all be better off getting some sleep. He'll keep. It would be a much greater danger to wake him before we have the proper potions that he'll need. I would also be concerned about an attack on his person if I wasn't positive that the dungeon would seal itself from invaders. The castle will not allow the Headmaster to come to harm in his sleep."

Hermione, who had never heard Madam Pomfrey speak so much all at once, suddenly realized that the adrenaline was draining from her system. As she grew tired, her body began to ache--she'd noticed that remnant from her bout with the Cruciatus.

She trudged up to Gryffindor Tower to find McGonagall nearly asleep at a table in the common room.

"I'm surprised that you're staying, my dear. Molly assured me that you were welcome to join them, but Mr. Longbottom said you'd want to stay."

Hermione appreciated Neville's consideration that she would want to share the news personally. "It's Professor Snape." Hermione dropped herself in a chair. "He's alive."

McGonagall pulled herself up straight. "Alive? But Mr. Potter reported--"

"We were wrong," Hermione interrupted, a mark of just how long a day she'd had and how much she hurt. "We were so stunned by what we saw, I couldn't bear to look at his body; I didn't even think. I had Dittany; I could have done something, but Madam Pomfrey said it was Living Death. He's stopped his bleeding and kept the poison from spreading through his body. She thinks he even took some antivenin ahead of time."

McGonagall started for the door. "I must go to him at once."

"Professor." Hermione caught up with her. "The Malfoys are taking turns keeping vigil. Madam Pomfrey insisted we all sleep."

"She's right, of course. Let me show you to your room. I've had an elf make up the Head Girl's room for you for as long as you choose to remain. It should have been yours, but you were better off away from here..."

The heavy silence stretched between them.

"Thank you, Professor. I'll probably see you at supper. I want to help in any way I can."

When Hermione entered the Head Girl's room, she felt a pang. She'd read about it in *Hogwarts: A History*, but for it to be hers, even temporarily... If things had been different, she might have spent her final year here, studying and perhaps sneaking off with Ron. If Voldemort could have just had the decency to die the first time! Well, if he had, there wouldn't have been a troll in the girl's room her first year--their first battle.

She prepared for bed, mulling over the what-ifs in her mind. She and Ron had finally kissed, but what did it mean?

A small bottle labeled "Dreamless Sleep: 4 hours" stood on the nightstand. She knew she needed much more sleep than that, but was glad she wouldn't be spending the entire day in bed.

As she lay down, her back twinged. Her last thought was that she needed to ask Madam Pomfrey what was good for lingering Cruciatus pain.

She woke up to find that six hours had passed. Her clothes had been laundered, and there were some plain robes in the closet.

She surveyed the damage on the way to the Great Hall and was pleased to see she hadn't missed supper. Four long tables had been arranged in a square, illustrating unity. She slid in near Professor McGonagall and was rewarded with a status report of much of the Wizarding world. She handed Hermione a note from Ginny while explaining that the Burrow had taken heavy damage, but Shell Cottage was being used as temporary housing for all of the displaced Weasleys.

Molly had issued Hermione a written invitation to come soon, and Ginny's letter repeated it. She reported that she was writing from Harry's lap. Hermione had thought it

would have taken longer for them to reunite but conceded that exceptions must be made for that epic kind of love. She pictured her friends cuddled up, then tried to picture herself in Ron's arms. It didn't seem quite the same thing--maybe because Harry and Ginny had been nigh inseparable for those weeks the previous year.

The elves had prepared comfort food: shepherd's pie and hearty stews, warm bread and fragrant pastries. Soon, she was immersed in the conversations around her: O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s for those who had experienced another abbreviated school year, whether Shackbolt would remain Minister after the vote, repairs for the castle and replacements for the staff. No one mentioned Professor Snape, but Madam Pomfrey appeared whilst Hermione ate a warm apple turnover.

Getting a nod from McGonagall, the two of them followed the matron out of the hall. Hermione nodded as they descended the stairs.

"How much sleep did you get, Miss Granger?"

Hermione dutifully reported her hours, trying not to resent the intrusion, then added, "Was there any of the antidote in stock?"

"No, and none in the Headmaster's personal stores. It seems giants were throwing things around the hospital wing; I'm just glad that none of the potions combined to make toxic fumes."

"I also wanted to ask, is there a potion that eases the after-effects of Cruciatus?"

Pomfrey's eyes widened, then softened. "There is a balm. With proper hydration and rest, the pain should subside within a week with daily use. I daresay if you know your potions, you can prepare it yourself."

"What about the antidote for Professor Snape? Is that hard to brew?"

"If we had all of the ingredients, it wouldn't be a problem. An improperly brewed draught or the incorrect dose would take a Potions master to counteract, but I can't imagine our patient was anything short of meticulous. The standard antidote will do."

Hermione was cheered by the thought that Madam Pomfrey deemed her capable of brewing the needed potions, but her thoughts were refocused as they entered the Slytherin common room. The Misters Malfoy were picking at plates of food whilst Mrs. Malfoy slept in a large chair at Snape's side, his hand clasped loosely in hers. Hermione pondered the longstanding friendships represented in this room whilst the men rose to meet the ladies.

"No visible changes, Poppy."

"Thank you, Lucius."

The movement nearby woke Mrs. Malfoy, who apologized unnecessarily. Then, Pomfrey and McGonagall took turns holding the Headmaster's hand and speaking to him. McGonagall indicated that Hermione should as well.

Shyly, she took his hand and said, "We'll do what we can--all we can to help you, sir."

Pomfrey then declared it was time to move him. She and McGonagall opened a portrait door, and Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy levitated the Headmaster through it.

Hermione followed into a private study. She was interested to discover that even as Headmaster, he'd wanted to stay close to his house. They went through the study to his bedroom, Hermione and Draco waiting in the doorway, listening to intense whispering. Then McGonagall gestured for them to back away whilst Mr. Malfoy shut the door behind him so Pomfrey and Mrs. Malfoy could bathe Snape and dress his wounds.

Hermione watched as Mr. Malfoy summoned an elf. Apparently, the three were going to set up housekeeping in Snape's study rather than in the dormitory.

McGonagall led Hermione through another door in the study that led to his unused public office, which led to the classroom. "I'm going to establish a password you may use to access the classroom and store cupboard."

When McGonagall had done so, Pomfrey entered and handed Hermione three scrolls. "You will have access to everything you will need. The ingredients with checkmarks are those we have. Those without can be found on the grounds. I will procure the blood-replenisher from St. Mungo's, where I will be assisting starting tomorrow, but Sprout should be able to help you gather most of the ingredients in the morning."

When Hermione returned to her room, curiosity warred briefly with fatigue, but the ache gave weight to fatigue. She didn't open the scrolls until she was in bed. The first was a standard balm for muscle aches with fresh willow bark added in the second stage. She'd run out of the standard balm and had to brew more in the forest about five months into camping.

The antidote to the Draught of Living Death was more complicated, but most of the ingredients she needed for that were grown in the greenhouses. The ingredient sure to be the most trouble to procure was unicorn hair. Further study was definitely required.

The third potion was to heal Professor Snape once he'd been awakened. Once his metabolism returned to normal, they'd have to heal his wounds and continue counteracting the venom. Pomfrey was sure he'd taken an antivenin, but it could only slow the effects. She'd need to get the moss fresh from the forest, and the potion had a short shelf life, needing to be brewed fresh every forty-eight hours. Hermione imagined that after the first seventy-two hours or so, Snape would be demanding to brew his own potion; then she could move on.

Curiosity satisfied, she went to sleep.

A/N: When I wrote this, I had misunderstood the amount of time the trio had stayed at Shell Cottage. Though I now know that it had been weeks and not just days since Hermione was tortured, it was too important to the story for me to change, so we'll just call it AU ;)

More thanks to Lauren and Southern for rescuing the readers from my random spelling.

Chapter Two

Chapter 3 of 9

Hermione wakes up, having had nightmares of Bellatrix killing Ginny and Ron. While the other residents of the castle are rebuilding, she goes into the forest to gather ingredients and encounters unicorns.

~ Chapter Two ~

Only an hour later, she woke up having had nightmares of Bellatrix killing Ginny and Ron. Hermione hadn't taken the Dreamless Sleep and was haunted by Bellatrix's voice taunting her about her "vaunted cleverness."

She knew she'd have to find another way to control her dreams. She thought Ginny was probably sneaking up to sleep in Harry's arms. She remembered the comforting rhythm of Ron's breathing and considered Flooing back and forth from Shell Cottage. But the middle of the night wasn't the right time. She took another four-hour dose and tried to clear her mind before succumbing to its effects.

It was nearly four a.m. when she woke again. There had to be something she could do. She finally summoned an elf and, after apologizing for waking her up, asked for some chamomile tea.

As Hermione sipped her tea, she considered the unicorn question. The whole forest was probably in uproar after the battle. Picking up her wand, she Summoned her bag from the other side of the room. She was frustrated again by the less-than-precise response of Bellatrix's wand. She was surprised the thing hadn't gotten her killed.

She found the text Professor Grubbly-Plank had favored and opened it to the chapter covering unicorns. The professor had glossed over the exact criteria for being near a unicorn, probably feeling that human sexuality was an inappropriate topic for her class. Hermione had wondered if the legends were true and had added notes from her research.

Hair from a unicorn's tail wasn't difficult to find in unicorn-populated areas, but those in the forest were guarded by centaurs as well as patriarchal unicorns. She felt confident that the unicorns would consider her innocent enough but knew that the centaurs would recognize her and likely hold a grudge, especially considering the recent evil that had been among them.

Realizing that the subject matter was having opposite the intended effect, she closed her book and cleared her mind, then swished the light off and focused on an image of young unicorns drinking by a stream.

When she woke the next time, the sun was peeking into her window--another feature of the Gryffindor Head Girl's room.

She showered and changed into fresh robes. After being in Muggle clothes for so long, it felt odd to be in robes during her off-time, but she knew the witches she would be with wore robes, and she didn't want to draw attention to her heritage or youth.

The Great Hall held few people. Hermione stopped briefly by Neville and his Gran to ask their plan for the day.

"Our place took some heavy damage. Volunteer crews," Neville gestured to some others around them, "are going to spend mornings repairing the castle and afternoons repairing one dwelling at a time until they can all return home."

Hermione wished them luck and sat down near Professor Sprout, who was already eating breakfast with Professor Flitwick. Sprout informed Hermione that she could find them in the greenhouses when she needed them.

When a handful of owls arrived with the *Daily Prophet*, everyone gathered around to see the headlines.

"Dark Lord Defeated!" blared the biggest, with, "Shacklebolt In Charge" beneath the fold. There was the obligatory "Boy Hero" story, as though he hadn't been "undesirable number one" just the day before. The dead on both sides were listed as well as those in St. Mungo's and Azkaban. All of the political prisoners of Voldemort's regime had been freed; their names were listed, too. It was a thick issue, but no one tarried to read it all. There was work to do.

Of course, Snape was listed among the dead. Hermione knew that the number who knew his true status was necessarily small, but it caused a pang, and she gulped down her pumpkin juice so she could get to work.

Using her new password, she accessed the Potions classroom. Knocking on the door to the office, she was met by Mrs. Malfoy, who acquiesced to Hermione's request to say good morning to the Headmaster.

He looked better all cleaned up and in fresh pajamas. Hermione went to the bed, took his not-quite-warm-enough hand, and told him all about the potions she was going to brew.

Turning to leave, she said, "Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy."

The older witch stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm. "Please call me Narcissa." She then pulled away slightly. "I am capable of brewing those potions, but I sense that you need to more than I do."

"What do you mean?"

"Though I owe Severus a great deal, family is here with me, and I'd lose little by brewing those potions. But you have chosen to help him rather than return to your friends."

"They've lost a brother. You've lost a sister. There's little I can do. I think he deserves some consideration. I'd appreciate your help. I suppose I know where to find you."

"Yes."

The women shared an awkward silence until Hermione decided to take another leap of courage. "You can call me Hermione, too."

"I'd be delighted."

"See you later, then."

Hermione returned to the classroom and started the base for the balm. All of the necessary ingredients for the base were in stock, and that would require twenty-four hours of simmering.

Draco and Mr. Malfoy arrived as she was chopping Flobberworms.

"If you require assistance procuring ingredients, we are at your service."

Hermione felt as though Mr. Malfoy had been speaking another language for a moment before regaining her equilibrium. "Thank you. Professors Spout and Flitwick have already offered to help, but thank you."

She eventually located the professors in question by noting which greenhouse seemed to be spontaneously regrowing windowpanes. She entered to find Flitwick casting individual Reparos on each one. "Could do the whole thing at once, but this way they'll be stronger."

Sprout was seeing to individual plants and had been setting aside ingredients in a basket for her as she went. "You'll need Mandrake root from the next greenhouse. I'm afraid most of them were sacrificed in defense of the castle, but there should be enough left for you and cuttings for next year."

Sprout confirmed that Hermione could identify the plants already in the basket before adding a small cutting of yarrow. "This is for the balm. Who do you need it for, dear?"

Did they use it on Harry or Ronald?"

Hermione looked down slightly. "We were captured a few days ago. Bellatrix... It still aches." Her mouth went dry.

Sprout hugged her with one gloved arm. "You three did a good thing. It's good of you to stay here and help care for the Headmaster. It was rough going and we all doubted him, but we shouldn't have."

While Hermione helped Sprout tend the rest of the yarrow, she heard the door open.

"Oi, Hermione. You've let them put you to work?"

"Ron!" Hermione maneuvered around tables as fast as she could, flinging herself into his arms. "Thank you for coming. How is everyone?"

"Kind of a mess, really. Um, d'you wanna go for a walk or something?"

Hermione turned to Sprout. "What will I need from the forest?"

She handed Hermione a scrap of parchment. "This mushroom is best if you can get it from a Fairy Ring. You'll find the best moss growing on a willow. Remove it right with the bark. And, of course, the unicorn hair."

"Thank you. We'll pick up the basket on our way back to the castle."

"I'll leave it with Minerva if you aren't back by the time we're finished," Sprout assured her.

Flitwick added, "If you run into danger, remember we've reestablished the wards preventing Apparation onto the grounds, but not those preventing Apparation from place to place within the boundaries. Take care of yourselves and escape if need be. We can pay for those ingredients, but we can't replace you two."

Thanking them for the help and advice, Hermione and Ron began walking away from the greenhouses. "Actually, Ron. I'd like to see if Hagrid's home first."

"Sounds good." It seemed as though Ron was going to leave it at that, but he soon confirmed it was too much to hope for. "What are the ingredients for, just helping stock up again?"

"Actually, I'm going to be doing some brewing. Some of those staying in the castle need some potions that were destroyed during the attack." Everything she'd said was true. She felt a niggling of guilt at what she'd left unsaid, but knew that Ron would have a hard time keeping something like this from his whole family and Harry. She didn't know how Harry would take it and preferred to err on the side of caution until Professor Snape was able to defend himself again.

As Hagrid's hut came into view, they saw that a second, larger hut had been built beside it. "I guess we know where Grawp is," Ron observed.

Hermione nodded. She hadn't seen Hagrid in the castle since yesterday and hoped someone was caring for him. She doubted he'd be welcome at St. Mungo's, just because of the sheer amount of space he'd take up. When they knocked on his door, an elf answered. Hermione had developed a new appreciation for the creatures since Dobby's death. In the middle of her inquiry, she heard Hagrid's voice.

"Is that 'Ermione? Come on in."

As they entered, they saw Hagrid in his enormous bed, his face a bit puffy, but not too much the worse for wear.

"Hello, Hagrid. Ron's with me, too. We wanted to see how you're doing."

"Yeah, and Harry says hi," Ron added.

"Well, it's good ter see ya'. 'Aven't 'ad any visitors, but Tiffy here is looking after me and Grawp."

The elf gave a curtsey.

"That's lovely."

"Well, won' you sit down? How're all the Weasleys?"

They sat, and Ron related the damage to the Burrow and reported that Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes had suffered only minimal damage, which was more than could be said for those who had tried to loot the place. "I reckon I'm going to help George with the shop for a while. Angelina's at the cottage, and I think she'll be sticking around, too."

After having a midmorning snack, served by Tiffy, Hermione asked Hagrid if he had any advice for dealing with the unicorns.

"Ya' shouldn't have any trouble wi' 'em. Jus' have Ron hang back a bit. I've missed the unicorns. Used to love seein' the babies, but I haven' been able to these last few years."

Hermione decided to thank Hagrid and take her leave to spare them all the embarrassment before Ron decided to ask Hagrid why.

Both of them drew their wands when they got to the edge of the forest.

"We should be able to get the moss, bark, and mushrooms without much trouble. Let's do that first."

The forest floor was dappled with light this time of day. Hermione used a charm to locate running water, and she found the moss growing on a willow right away. After storing the moss and the bark, it didn't take long for Ron to spot a fairy. They followed it to a ring where Hermione carefully removed one large mushroom and left the rest intact.

The Fairy had led them deeper into the forest, and Hermione reached out with all of her senses. Ron balked when she slipped her wand into her pocket, but Hermione reassured him. "It's okay. I'll be less threatening this way, and besides, you've got my back. I can have it in my hand in a second if I need it."

They soon found the stream again and another stand of willow. As they got nearer, Hermione gasped softly at the sight of one white unicorn watching two little gold ones drink from the stream. The idea of two such magical creatures drinking from the same stream that fed the healing willow danced in Hermione's mind. She gestured for Ron to stay back a little as she contemplated how to cross to the other side without disturbing the foals.

She touched her wand in her pocket to carefully cast an Impervious Charm on her trousers, socks, and shoes before slowly wading in. On the other side, she was about to reach for the closest foal, just to stroke the fur, when all three startled and bolted.

Whipping her head around, she spotted Ron on the other side of the stream.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You did, since there doesn't seem to be any other danger." Frustrated, Hermione checked the nearby bushes and thankfully reached for a tiny gold hair and placed it in a vial. "Let's go before anyone else finds us."

Using her wand as a compass, she led him back upstream, her feet squishing in her shoes. "The Impervious worked on my trousers and shoes, but not socks. I need to owl Mr. Ollivander and see if I can't get a new wand soon. This is ridiculous."

A few more tensely silent minutes passed until Ron took Hermione's hand to stop her. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Don't worry about it." She turned from him.

"Well, I am worried. I'm sorry I scared away the unicorns, but you got what you came for, right?"

"This isn't the place."

"Why not? We've got a nice, long walk back to the castle. Why shouldn't we talk about it here?" He carefully placed his arms over her shoulders from behind, but she shrugged him off.

"I don't want to draw the attention to ourselves that raised voices would cause."

"Why should there be raised voices?" Hermione looked pointedly at him, and he continued in a softer tone. "Then let's Apparate back now. It's almost lunch time. We argue less after a good meal."

"Well, Merlin forbid I should stand between you and your desires," was her scathing whisper.

"What's that all about?" Ron continued their argument in his stage whisper.

Fist on her hip, she answered in kind. "I'm not going to talk about it."

The sound of hoof beats quieted them both; then Hermione took a deep breath, spun in place, and was gone.

She was mildly surprised to find herself under a tree by the lake. This had never been a particular hangout of hers, although she had spent some lovely afternoons trying to read while Harry and Ron argued about Seekers and Keepers. She thought she'd intended to end up closer to the greenhouses, but was just as glad that she didn't splinch since she obviously hadn't a clear destination in mind.

Peering down at the roots, Hermione remembered the memories she'd seen yesterday. She remembered the young Snape sitting under this same tree, looking over his O.W.L. exam paper. There was a kindred spirit. Ron and Harry never wanted to do that. But all of those memories were tinged with sadness. She wondered if Snape had ever sat under the tree with Lily, talking or reading. All the pictures she'd seen of Harry's mother had been taken in her adulthood, but the teenage Lily she'd seen in the Pensieve was younger than herself. Hermione reached out to touch the trunk of the tree, as though it connected her somehow to the friends now parted by death.

She'd put on a brave face for everyone, but she was beginning to feel the previous day's losses. Though, she hadn't been especially close to any of the lost but Fred, she missed Tonks and Remus. She imagined Remus had sat under the tree, too. The good and the bad, the light and the dark of heart—all kinds had passed through the halls of Hogwarts and made their marks on the grounds.

She had just decided to walk back up to the greenhouses when she heard Ron.

"Oi, Hermione!"

She'd have to walk past him to get to the greenhouses or the castle... Oh, no, she wouldn't!

She focused more closely this time, Apparated, then found herself standing in front of greenhouse one. Turning around, she saw the back of Ron's head looking about and figured that he knew where she was going.

Looking up the row of greenhouses, she saw that they were all whole. She was hungry, and chances were McGonagall had the basket already anyway. Taking a discreet glance in Ron's direction, she ascertained that he was going to try to catch up on foot. Rather than Apparate again, she took quick strides toward the castle doors. She had quite the head start and could be down in the dungeon before Ron saw where she'd gone.

Heading down the familiar steps, she felt slightly bad. Ron had left his family to be with her for a little while; why wasn't she more grateful?

The unicorns.

She didn't know why she was so surprised. Hadn't she seen Ron and Lavender all over each other in public? Who knew what they were getting up to in private?

But the thought stung. Through it all, she'd foolishly cherished the idea that some day, they'd be together and that, though they weren't each other's first kiss, they'd be the first for other things.

She quickly stored the ingredients and noticed that McGonagall had left the basket in the store cupboard. The balm base looked just as it should.

As she headed up the stairs again, she remembered that she still wore damp socks. Deciding against walking all the way back to Gryffindor Tower, she found a girls' restroom and dried her socks, washed her hands, and tidied her hair a little.

Ron was already at lunch with the work crew, which now included Luna Lovegood sitting beside Neville. Making a quick detour to thank the professors for their help again, Hermione slid in beside Ron.

"Sorry," she whispered, running her left hand briefly over his thigh to let him know she meant it, and gave him a smile.

His mouth full, Ron nodded.

Hermione found that she was very hungry and tucked in heartily. Seeing Neville and Luna, heads together in conversation, reminded her that many of her schoolmates, especially those in the DA, had probably paired off during the school year. It's natural to seek that special comfort in times of great danger. She and Ron would have, but she'd urged Ron to wait, her rationale that it would be difficult for and around Harry. How many nights had they fallen asleep holding hands, dreaming of more?

Before they left the hall, McGonagall stopped them. "The schedule for funerals and memorials is posted on the main notice board. Your brother's is tomorrow morning."

"So soon?" Hermione asked, wrapping her fingers around Ron's.

"Approximately seven per day for a week. Of course, that's only for our side and for those actually lost in the final battle. I imagine the memorials for those missing will go on for a while after. Minister Shacklebolt is commissioning a memorial for those dead or missing, and there will be a ceremony where Orders of Merlin are presented."

"Thank you, Professor."

Hermione scanned the schedule and saw that Fred's funeral was scheduled for ten o'clock in the morning. Professor Snape's was on the final day, as was Remus and Tonks'. Ted Tonks' name was in parenthesis; Hermione reckoned because his death had been earlier. Hermione sincerely hoped that Snape would be up and around in time to preempt any discussion of his funeral.

Then Hermione dithered. Ron hadn't said a word since McGonagall had told them about the funeral. She thought the last thing he needed was the discussion she didn't

think they really needed to have anyway. She could tell Ron that she'd worked out her issue and she was truly sorry; maybe some snogging would help him believe her.

Hermione thought about tomorrow morning's potions schedule. She was going to have to take Narcissa up on her offer to help. She wished she could get started on the antidote right away. Turning to Ron, she asked, "When do you have to be back?"

"I told Mum I'd be back for supper. Won't you come with me? It's only a Floo away?"

Hermione contemplated spending the evening with the extended Weasley family and curling up with Ron on the sofa after a home-cooked meal. Then, she realized that there were a lot of people and only so much sofa. "I'll come for supper, but then I'll come back here."

"Now you've got the Head Girl's room, you aren't letting it go, are you?"

She gave him a playful shove. "No, it's just I don't want to be away from the potions overnight."

"Can't someone else watch the potions? Aren't the Malfoys here?"

Sensing the need for diversion, she changed the subject. "Do you want to see the Head Girl's room?"

"Am I allowed?"

"It's not exactly term time, is it? C'mon."

The two took the stairs at a jog, and Hermione gave the password to the Fat Lady. Then, approaching a door at the bottom of the girls' stairs, she whispered the password to the portrait of a former Head Girl, who gave a disapproving look at the young man, but did not say a word.

Just as though they were back in the tent, Hermione sat on the bed and gestured for Ron to join her.

"Are you finally going to tell me what you were so upset about?"

Wishing he hadn't dived right in, she tried to soothe him. "Yes, but we're finally alone. Do we need to talk right away?"

Ron took the barest of moments to ponder Hermione's words before leaning over and kissing her. Hermione opened her mouth to him for a few moments before gently pulling back. "I missed you last night," she said.

"Really?" Ron scooted closer and began fingering her hair.

"I had nightmares. I'm so used to hearing you and Harry breathing on the other side of the tent, and this room felt lonely."

"Ginny snuck into our room last night. I wished you were there, too." He pulled her into a one-armed embrace. "What was it with the unicorns, Hermione?"

"It was nothing. We've all been through a lot in the last couple of days, and I overreacted."

"No offense, but I've seen you overreact to nothing, but that wasn't it. Something is still bothering you."

She snuggled closer, hoping it would be easier to have the conversation with his chest instead of his earnest face. "How far did you go with Lavender?"

"Lavender? Hermione--" He pulled away to look down into eyes, his voice softened to a gentle whisper as he stroked her hair. "Hermione. Don't you know that it's always been you?"

"If it's *always* been me, then how come you couldn't keep your hands off her? The unicorns--the legends are true--they know who is a virgin."

"Hermione, I swear. We fooled around, yeah, but we never--" He took a deep breath. "I was so hurt. I thought you didn't have faith in me anymore. But it wasn't the same with her. She didn't know me at all. For Christmas, she gave me a gold necklace!"

Hermione began to giggle. "Did it have a charm on it that said, 'Won Won'?"

Ron cringed. "No, but it was almost as bad."

"What did it say, then?"

"Oh, no. You're not getting it from me that easily."

Hermione reached for a ticklish spot. "Oh, yeah?"

Ron retaliated, and before Hermione could catch her breath, she found herself lying back on her bed, partially pinned under him. He was kissing her face and her neck and whispering, "If those unicorns are so sensitive, I must have confused them with my thoughts of you. I wanted you so badly. So beautiful with the sun shining on your hair."

She was half listening, overwhelmed with the sensations of Ron's lips and a warmth that was gathering where it never had before. Suddenly, she wanted that elemental change for herself, something that would separate the woman from the innocent girl she felt she no longer was.

Her mind raced. She'd been in battle, seen and done things, been touched by the darkness, felt an Unforgivable Curse run through her veins, destroyed a portion of someone's soul. But the unicorns accepted her, would have let her touch them. The unicorns, the unicorns...

"Ron, stop. I can't."

He looked down into her eyes, his face tense. "Why not?"

"The unicorns. If something happens and I have to go back--"

"Potions ingredients can be bought."

"For over twenty Galleons, but that's not the point. I'm just not ready yet."

"Hermione, you're over-thinking it."

"Or you're not thinking about it enough."

"I don't want to think, not after the last few days." He rolled away, turning his back to her.

She reached out to rub his back. "I'm sorry." Ron mumbled something, and Hermione strained to hear it. "What?"

"The cottage is full of people, but not the right ones."

"Oh, Ron." She moved to snuggle beside him, but he maneuvered her head to his chest.

"Charlie and Percy and Angelina are alright, but they aren't you, and they aren't... Fred."

Hermione kept her eyes down, not wanting to intrude on Ron's tears. Several minutes later, Ron sniffled a couple more times, squeezed her briefly, and brought his lips down to hers again.

After the night she'd had, it shouldn't have surprised her that she fell asleep, but the sun was on the other side of the castle when she woke up with Ron. Standing up, she straightened her robe and realized she'd never even kicked off her trainers. "Ron, you need to be getting back. Your mum will be worried if you don't show up for supper."

She picked up her comb from the vanity to fix her ponytail. Ron came to stand behind her and frowned at her in the mirror. "You're coming, too, aren't you?"

"I don't think I should. I slept the whole afternoon."

"You needed it."

"I needed to get started on the potion."

"You have to eat."

"I'm not hungry yet. I'll eat later."

Ron gently turned her to face him. "You'll forget to eat."

Hermione dropped the comb in frustration. "Fine. But I have to come straight back after pudding."

"Then I hope it'll have to bake or something."

When they reached the entrance hall, Hermione braced herself for the next hurdle. "Why don't you go tell Professor McGonagall that I'm leaving, and I'll meet you back here as soon as I'm finished?"

"What do you have to do? You don't have time to start a potion."

"I know. I need to ask Mrs. Malfoy if she can take care of it for me. It will be at a critical stage tomorrow morning."

"Draco's mum is going to help you?"

"Earlier you said she should, and she did offer."

"Well, okay."

Hermione could feel Ron's eyes on her as she quickly descended the stairs.

When Hermione explained that the potion would need tending whilst she was away, Narcissa asked which one it was.

Hermione averted her eyes for a moment. "The only one I had the ingredients to begin was the muscle ache balm, enhanced for use--"

"To ease the Cruciatus ache?" Narcissa asked, and Hermione nodded. "It's for you?" Hermione nodded again. "I see. I've brewed that so many times, I could probably do it in my sleep."

"You like to brew potions?"

"I could probably write a book: *The HouseWitch's Guide to Potions* with a special chapter on the essentials for entertaining dark lords."

Her gallows humor suddenly made Hermione uncomfortable. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to remind you..."

"It's okay. We all have to live with who we are and what we've done, and that goes for both sides. I'm sorry for what my sister did, and I have a small tub of that balm in my overnight bag. Here's an idea! If we're going to be brewing together, we need to invest in some magical synergy. When was the last time you had a manicure?"

Hermione looked incredulous. "The day before... well, the day before the Ministry fell. My... boyfriend's brother was getting married, and all of us girls got manicures."

"That's been almost a year! Far too long. How about after supper, I come up to your room, and we have a girls' night in. I've been far too long with only men for company."

"Alright. I'm going to the Weasleys' for supper, but I'll stop by here when I return to let you know. I wanted to start the antidote tonight."

"Don't worry about a thing. Are the instructions in the classroom?"

"Yes."

"And you were able to gather all the ingredients without trouble?"

"Without too much. They're all in the store cupboard."

"Then I'll get started on it tonight. We're both going to be very busy for a few days; it's probably better that we're both working on the potions anyway. Now, off you go. Your boyfriend is one of the Weasleys?"

"Yes, the youngest son, Ron."

"Ah. He was with you..."

It wasn't a question, but Hermione knew she was referring to their "stay" at Malfoy Manor. "Yes."

"We are related, you know. It hasn't been the fashion to acknowledge blood tra--" She delicately cleared her throat. "Well, those sorts, but in this new era, perhaps I can recognize them as blood, no matter the affiliation."

A/N: The idea of Hermione interceding with the Unicorns on Severus' behalf was inspired by Bambu's "Saving a Death Eater."

<http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=6486>

Chapter Three

Chapter 4 of 9

Hermione meets Narcissa for a Girls' Night In and meets Severus in her dreams.

~ Chapter Three ~

Hermione returned to the castle later than she would have preferred, but there was still plenty of time for Narcissa's "girls' night in."

When she knocked on the door, a tingling feeling was closely followed by the door opening of its own accord.

"We added you to the ward. It seemed silly for one of us to keep opening the door for you." Narcissa kept writing with an elegant quill at Snape's desk whilst she spoke.

Hermione raised her eyebrows at the scene of domesticity. Draco was also writing a letter, and she could just see Lucius through the open door to Snape's room, sitting at the bedside and apparently reading aloud.

"Just a moment, and I'll be ready to accompany you." Narcissa smiled, but still didn't meet her eyes.

"Shall I check the potions before we go?"

"No need. I just did. They're both fine." And with a couple more decisive strokes, she sealed the envelope and added it to a small stack. "Draco, do take these up to the Owlery before it gets dark, or there will be no owls left."

"Yes, Mum. I'm almost done."

Hermione found it sweet that Draco could be so obliging to his mum.

As Narcissa turned to her corner of the room, she said, "Why don't you go in and say goodnight to Severus?"

"Good idea," Hermione answered, feeling it was only partially true. Mr. Malfoy stopped reading when she approached, and she mumbled, "Narcissa said I should say goodnight."

"Ah, you're on a first-name basis now."

"Yes."

"That's good. Well, don't let me interrupt you. It's good for Severus to hear the familiar voices of friends. It's keeping him grounded."

"I doubt he'd consider me a friend."

"Maybe not, but you certainly are familiar."

For the first time, Hermione felt self-conscious as she took his hand and began to speak. She knew people had done the same for her when she'd been Petrified. Had Harry and Ron 'grounded' her? She certainly didn't remember anything. Still, something about Mr. Malfoy's gaze on the back of her neck made her keep the visit short.

Emerging from the bedroom, she saw that Narcissa was levitating a small bag behind her. Of course, she wouldn't sling it over her shoulder like a Muggle.

It felt very odd giving the password to the Fat Lady in front of an adult and a Slytherin to boot.

She thought Narcissa must have had a similar thought because, as they settled in her room, the older woman said, "Perhaps you should take quarters in the Slytherin Head Girl's room."

"Wouldn't Pansy stay there if she comes to visit Draco?" Hermione was pretty sure Pansy's things were still there.

"Perhaps you're right. Still, rooms in the dungeons would be much more convenient."

"Well, I suppose I need the exercise." Hermione tried to answer lightly.

"Far be it from me to prevent a young witch from keeping herself fit. Now, where to start with you..." Narcissa tapped one perfectly manicured nail against flawlessly colored lips. "Have you ever straightened your hair?"

"Once. I startled myself every time I looked in the mirror."

"I see. I think we'll start there. Sit." She gestured to the seat at the vanity. "You'll use your wand as you would a flatiron, but instead of heat, the charm will keep the hair straight. Do you have any smoothing serum?"

"Not with me."

"No problem. I do. You are about to experience a closely held Malfoy family secret. Take your wand--use your wand hand." When Hermione did, Narcissa blanched. "That's Bella's."

"Yes. She broke mine." Hermione refused to meet Narcissa's eyes in the mirror. Dealing with Slytherins in private life was turning out to be more of a minefield than a battlefield.

"Have you found it difficult to use?" Hermione nodded. "Well, that is hardly surprising. Bella's wand has always been for dueling and dark arts. I suppose yours was used mostly for charms and transfiguration."

"How--"

"Don't fret. I leave it to Severus to delve into the minds of the unsuspecting, and I'm not for Divination either. I do have a knack for auras. Bella's was dark; yours is bright. Mine is somewhere in the middle. This particular charm might be just the thing. May I hold it?"

Hermione couldn't remember another witch ever asking to hold her wand, but this was this woman's sister's wand to begin with. "Okay."

"Now I can feel it. You've not been using it to its potential because you are afraid of the darkness. Let's see if we can't do something about that. As I run it over your hair, it will be my energy transferring through Bella's wand into your hair. It can't but improve the synergy."

As Narcissa began running the wand over small sections of Hermione's hair, Hermione asked her to explain synergy.

"When my husband and I cast a spell together, such as the Mobilicorpus we used yesterday, the energy produced is greater than just the sum of our individual power. Either one of us could have performed the spell alone, but casting together is... Let me try this another way.

"If any two random wizards attempt to cast together, their auras might conflict or might be neutral toward each other. Neutrality is usually the best one can hope for, although on rare occasions they might find true synergy in the first attempt; that's called affinity if you want to look it up."

Hermione fought her instinct to nod. "But why aren't we taught about this?"

"Anything involving auras is usually sidelined into the realm of Divination. Since you missed your N.E.W.T. year--"

"Oh, I dropped Divination years ago."

"Well, there's your answer, although it is not always taught in Divination either. Teenage girls tend to romanticize it, although it's not so much a way to find your partner as it is to enhance what already might exist between you. And it works the same way in any relationship, such as between friends or siblings, a mother and her child. That's why the potions your mother made--sorry, I'm not sure if there's a Muggle equivalent. Witches often find that their potions work best for their own children. The potion will work as intended for another child who has the same illness, but it may work faster, require fewer doses, or even taste better to her own."

"I suppose Muggle comfort measures are the same way. Even babies know their own mums' voices."

"Right, except instead of her voice, a witch can be identified by those close to her by her aura. They may not do it consciously, but that closeness you feel to your friends may be more than you realize. When you find someone that you 'just click with,' it's your auras that are 'clicking.'" She gave the wand a quick flick and set it on the vanity. "Take a look."

"I've been watching you the whole time, but it's still kind of surprising."

"And the finishing touch." Narcissa squirted a floral-scented potion at Hermione's hair, then ran a comb through it. "That will last until you wash it, which you won't have to for an extra couple of days because the serum and the straightening charm work together to absorb your head's natural oils. It actually looks better the second day."

Hermione remained distracted whilst Narcissa showed her a variety of nail polish and picked the one she thought best, but couldn't let the topic go altogether. "So, what does synergy have to do with potions?"

"Have you ever studied Potions Theory?"

"You know, up until about half an hour ago, I thought I could take the N.E.W.T. in any subject, but now I'm realizing that there is probably more than what was in my text books that I'd need to know."

"That's true, although Potions Theory isn't really something anyone but Potions masters have to know. I only know as much as I do because Severus ate many a meal at our table during his apprentice years, and I couldn't help but absorb from his outpouring of enthusiasm."

"Enthusiasm?"

"Oh, yes. You must have imagined all these years that he stalks around in his personal life as he does in the classroom, but he is different with people he doesn't feel he has to prove himself to. And when he was young, in our glory days before... I suppose your side saw it differently, but those were exciting times for us. We were all so idealistic, but then reality crashed in around us harshly when they started sending us to Azkaban. Anyway, Severus was enthusiastic, eager. He looked the sullen young man to others, but he came alive when there were just a few of us around, and he couldn't wait to share his knowledge.

"He knew I had a knack for auras, and it began as several weeks of discussion on how they related to Potions Theory. The idea is that potions are more than the sum of the ingredients. Willow bark has pain-relieving properties by itself, but it isn't the chemicals in the bark alone that will cause your balm to work. The brewer's own aura encourages the ingredients to perform as intended, and the recipient's aura performs the last little bit."

"Let me see if I can take this to its conclusion," Hermione said, finally starting to connect the dots in her mind. "Potion-making is like casting a series of spells. Usually, it is just one person casting all of them, but if people take turns, it wouldn't work as well because their auras might conflict?"

"That's the general idea. Most auras are somewhat neutral; any natural incompatibilities can be smoothed out just by the practice of two people working side by side and having a common goal. In time, compatible auras can begin to reach out toward each other. Look at that, I'm all done with your nails, and I still haven't really been able to explain it, but it really has to be experienced. Next time I see you with your boyfriend, I'll take a peek at how your auras interact. It might be easier to explain with yourself as an example."

Hermione excused herself to change whilst Narcissa put her beauty supplies away. When she returned, Narcissa applied the balm to Hermione's back. "You shouldn't have any pain until tomorrow night when we'll apply the fresh brew."

Hermione put a robe on and escorted Narcissa out through the common room before returning to try to sleep. The balm was working, and Hermione felt certain her nightmares would be easier to control without the physical reminder of what had happened to her. She cleared her mind, then focused on the image of the tree by the lake.

Her dreams were confusing and exhausting. She was running through the castle, dodging hexes. She was being chased by centaurs. Suddenly, a dark-cloaked figure swept her into his arms. "Keep still, Hermione."

She was stunned to hear that voice use her first name like that, but a moment later, he had Apparated them to the tree by the lake. They stood, his arms keeping her steady for several moments. "Can you stand on your own?"

Hermione looked up into dark, concerned eyes and whispered, "I think so."

He released her and stepped back. Removing his cloak, he revealed his pajamas. At Hermione's giggle, he scrunched up his face until his customary black outfit emerged. "Highly amusing, Miss Granger," he said in a tone indicating he thought it was anything but. Then he sat elegantly on the cloak and gestured for her to join him.

Making sure she wasn't in her pajamas, she sat on the opposite edge, keeping as much space as possible between them. "Thank you for rescuing me."

"I suppose I could say something of the same nature to you."

"I didn't really do anything. It was mostly Draco."

"Still, you are here."

"Are you real?"

"If I weren't, would I know the difference?"

"I suppose not. Still, you seem mostly like yourself, except that you called me by my first name earlier."

"You can thank Narcissa for that. She talks about you a lot."

"Do you visit her dreams?"

"No, her dreams are otherwise occupied."

"Mine should be as well, but you seem to have taken over. Not that I'm complaining. That is... Thank you."

"You've already said that."

"My, but you don't relax your standards for anyone, do you?"

"The mind of Hermione Granger should be sharp in sleep as well as wakefulness."

"Well, the tongue of Severus Snape is just as sharp in sleep as it is awake." She suddenly blushed. "You aren't going to remember this, are you?"

"I think not. I imagine at the most I will have something of a fond memory of you, and I might accuse you of lacing the healing draught with Amortentia."

"Thanks for the warning." She met his eyes until the intensity caused her to look down. "This is a fond memory?"

"A beautiful, young woman was in my arms, and now she sits beside me under a tree by the lake. There is no one around to mar this idyllic image."

"It is peaceful. Is that what you've wanted all this time, just some peace?"

"Peace is harder to come by for me than you can imagine. And by the by, you won't remember this either."

"Why not?"

"Do you ever remember your dreams in such detail?"

"I suppose not, but I will remember you."

"I'd like to think so... Hermione."

A/N: Thanks again to Lauren and Sunshine for keeping me on my toes!

Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 9

A funeral, a potion, a dream, and Hermione takes a downward turn.

~ Chapter Four ~

Hermione woke with a sense of well-being. She wondered if the balm had some unadvertised properties or if it was something else. She thought she'd dreamed of Professor Snape.

Her charmed memo pad was blinking on her nightstand. She'd awoken before its verbal alarm had activated. She knew what it said, but read it anyway: *antidote stage two, 6:45a.m.* Dressed in denims and a jumper, she dashed down to the dungeon to find Narcissa waiting for her beside the cauldron.

She was greeted with a chipper, "Good morning," from a made-up face and perfect hair, despite the early hour.

"Good morning. What still needs to be done?"

"I thought I'd go ahead and perform this stage, and you could prepare the ingredients for this afternoon. You will be available at two forty-five to complete the potion, correct?"

"Yes, I should be back in plenty of time."

A charmed hourglass alerted them that they had five minutes. Hermione went to get the final ingredients from the store cupboard.

When they were done, Narcissa said, "Let's sit for a few moments before you go," and led her into the study. Hermione felt self-conscious about the idea that the men might still be sleeping but saw that they were enjoying their paper with breakfast. She supposed it shouldn't surprise her that they could get the *Prophet* a full half hour before the rest of the castle.

Sitting, Narcissa asked, "Did the balm work?"

"Oh, yes, I slept very well."

"Good. I'll bottle up your batch when it's complete. The healing potion will take about three hours of intense brewing. I thought we'd begin around seven tonight."

"I'm so glad we'll be done soon so Professor Snape can get on with healing."

"We all do. I am quite anxious to be home again. Go on in and tell him about your plans for today."

Hermione felt an odd sense of *déjà vu* when she saw him in his pajamas but shook it off and took his hand. She felt an illicit thrill from calling him by his first name but thought he'd rather like it. She told him about the funeral she'd be attending and about the potions they were planning to brew later that day. She mentioned Narcissa's ideas of synergy and was just working up the nerve to mention the dream when Narcissa knocked on the doorpost and reminded her that she would soon be late for breakfast.

"What are you wearing today?" Narcissa inquired.

"I'm going to transfigure shoes and stockings from ones I have, and Madam Malkin is sending dress robes."

"What time are you leaving?"

"Ron's coming to fetch me at nine fifteen."

"Why don't you come down around eight forty-five and I'll do your hair and make-up?"

"You really don't have to."

"Nonsense. The press will be there. It's time for them to see you as more than the brains and hair." At Hermione's bewildered expression, Narcissa continued. "This is your moment. How the world sees you for the next couple of weeks will set the tone for years."

Hermione couldn't shake the feeling she was being set up, and Narcissa must have seen it in her face. "The key to living with Slytherins is to realize that you are always being manipulated. Just make sure it's in your favor."

Somehow, that didn't make Hermione feel any better.

She found the hall already full of people when she arrived for breakfast. The table in front of Professor McGonagall was crowded with owl post.

"You weren't here, so the owls left your package with me."

Sure enough, there was a large box with her name on it. "Must be from Madam Malkin. Mrs. Weasley sent her my measurements."

"Very good. I was also hoping you could deliver something for me. If you don't have time, I can have an elf do it."

"What is it, for whom?"

"These arrived in my care for Mrs. Malfoy this morning. I assume they are the R.S.V.P.s for the meeting she's having this afternoon."

Resisting the urge to ask about the meeting, she agreed. She ate little of her eggs and toast, and when she rose from the table, she considered whether she should carry her box up first or deliver the letters. Deciding she'd been wand-shy for long enough, she levitated the box and carried the letters. She did decide to leave the box in the classroom, figuring that eight forty-five would be soon enough to hear Narcissa's opinion of her new robes.

Opening the door just a bit, she called out, "It's Hermione," figuring it was better manners than just walking in unannounced.

She didn't see anyone, but heard Narcissa's voice from the bedroom answer, "In here."

Narcissa had apparently been reading from the *Prophet*. Professor Snape was dressed in what looked like a grey nightshirt.

"Professor McGonagall asked me to give these to you." She handed the envelopes to Narcissa, who quickly flipped through them. "Where are the men?"

"An Auror came by to escort them to the manor so they could survey the damage."

"Oh, I guess that's good."

"It's good that the Ministry is allowing house arrest in most cases for now. The last time, they just locked up all of the suspected Death Eaters for weeks until they could be tried or simply shipped off. But the Ministry is going to have difficulty distinguishing who was really working with the Dark Lord this time and who was only trying to keep their jobs."

"Forgive me if--I shouldn't ask."

"Out with it. You don't have much time to get ready."

"I was just wondering about whoever's coming to your meeting this afternoon."

"The Ministry has graciously allowed a short-term Floo connection to be made between certain homes and Hogwarts so I can host a tea this afternoon. Widows and wives. We have to see to our own funeral details and so forth. Professor McGonagall has been very kind to us."

"The Ministry doesn't suspect that you are going to try something, opening all of those Floo connections at once?"

"There will be an Auror guarding the Floo."

"It's a good thing you don't have ill intentions, or one Auror wouldn't have a chance."

Narcissa laughed, then shooed Hermione off to get ready.

Retrieving the box, Hermione levitated it up several flights of stairs, thinking that it was starting to feel heavier, thinking that an elf could have done it in a moment, and thinking that it really was starting to feel more difficult to keep the box aloft. She finally resorted to carrying the box the final flight.

Arriving in her room, she dug her shoes, stockings, and dress out of her beaded bag. The dress, she hung in the closet, the stockings took the charm coloring them black very easily, but the shoes were another story. They had been magically dyed and apparently resisted color-changing charms as a measure against a witch saving money on shoes. Of the options presented to her, she decided to transfigure her trainers into black pumps. They looked slightly worn, but she hoped very much that Rita Skeeter wouldn't personally be there to run a fashion report.

Opening the box, she saw the reason it was so heavy. There wasn't just one black robe in there. In addition to two black dresses--one knee-length and one tea-length--there was a black robe with velvet accents and a black cloak with a hood. Hermione was baffled by it all, but reasoned that Narcissa was correct in this. People would be taking pictures of her at every public event she attended, and Madam Malkin was apparently determined that the heroes would do their mourning in style.

Hermione thought Fred wouldn't have liked so much black and neither would Tonks. She made herself smile just a little at the thought of wearing a pink armband in Tonks' honor, but then she felt a few tears prick her eyes. Determined, she wiped the tears away. There would be time for that once she was dressed.

Having accomplished that, she carried the cloak down to Snape's study, where Narcissa approved of the whole outfit except for the shoes. "Still having trouble with the wand?"

"Yes, and I couldn't get my other shoes to take the dying spell."

"*Accio Hermione's dress shoes!* We'll get started on your hair."

Twenty minutes later, her hair was done, tear-proof make-up applied, and her shoes had bent to Narcissa's will. "Now, go show yourself to Severus, and we'll go to the entry hall to meet with your Mr. Weasley."

"But he can't see me."

"Then describe your outfit, but in under two minutes so you won't have to rush."

Hermione felt a little silly describing her clothes to Snape, so she did one better and ran his hand over the material of her sleeve so he could feel it. "After all, if you can hear me and feel my hand, you can feel the fabric, too. It really is lovely fabric. I'm just glad I won't be wearing it to your funeral. We're to finish your potions today, and by tomorrow evening, you should have the strength to scowl and criticize to your heart's desire." Impulsively, she lifted his cool hand to her cheek. "See you soon."

Narcissa and Hermione didn't have to wait long for Ron to arrive in his new black dress robes. Hermione kept her hug of greeting short, self-conscious at the thought that Narcissa was analyzing their auras. But as the two walked the grounds hand-in-hand for the five minutes until the Portkey would take them away, Hermione forgot all about her observer.

Sitting between Ron and Angelina at the funeral, she finally cried, succumbing to the overwhelming sense of loss. Ron put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her to himself as she flooded his robes with tears. She was barely aware it was Harry who pressed a handkerchief into her hand, and she didn't hear most of the eulogies.

She took deep breaths as George rose to speak of his twin brother, and by the time he was done, there wasn't a dry eye because he had reduced the whole crowd to tears of laughter. Fred Weasley's final send-off was the full line of Weasley fireworks, brilliant even in the sunlight.

In honor of Fred, the meal was interrupted by pranks from each of the six remaining siblings, even Percy, whose prank backfired, covering him in punch to the amusement of all in attendance.

It was nearly two o'clock when Hermione returned to the castle. Changing into a dark blue robe over her denims, she went to the dungeon. After verifying that the ingredients were ready, she began to look for a way to pass the next five minutes. A book on the desk caught her eye.

It looked as though Narcissa had been reading it and just neglected to return it. It was of the binding style particular to academic journals and theses, and the title was printed neatly on the front: *Synergy and Potions* by Severus Snape. Hermione knew that the book hadn't been left by accident. Narcissa was trying to tell her something, and she was using Snape's master's dissertation to do it.

She was still examining the outline when the charmed hourglass chimed. Two ingredients had to be added and the potion stirred seven times clockwise. The result was textbook perfect, and Hermione reset the hourglass for four more hours. Only two hundred forty minutes remained before the potion would be complete.

Hermione contemplated taking the book back to her room but decided that would be too much like stealing. Instead, she let herself into the empty study. The bedroom was likewise uninhabited except for the room's rightful occupant. She thought it was about time she took a turn keeping vigil but thought Snape wouldn't enjoy being read to from his own work. Instead, she pulled the chair even closer, took his hand, and started telling him about her day--not that much had happened since she'd been there last. She was excited for the brewing she was going to do that night, but she couldn't stay away from the book for long.

Curling herself up in the chair, she opened the book to the very first page. Besides the title and author, it gave the name of the master that Snape had worked for and two other acknowledgements: Narcissa Malfoy and the Flamels.

Now Hermione was really intrigued. Reading as fast as she could, she skimmed the introduction and outline again, looking for what she really wanted to see: a real example of synergy producing extraordinary results.

She'd expected the anecdotal chapter on Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel to read as dry science like the rest of the book, but it was quite an interesting and romantic tale. Both were potioners, though Nicholas was more interested in the alchemic aspects of the study. After five years of marriage, Perenelle was still barren. Nicholas was at a loss for how to console his wife until one day, he whispered to her that since they could not have any children to carry on the Flamel name, they would have to find a way to live forever.

In the process of experimentation to produce the Philosopher's Stone, they claimed that they felt their magical energies increasing when they cast or brewed together. The final production of the stone was a complete joint effort, every step performed in concert. They believed that the stone could only be produced this way because there was no use in living forever unless you had a soul mate to share forever with.

Hermione was moved to tears, and she was still teary-eyed when Narcissa entered the room.

"You would have loved to meet them. Even after helping conduct the initial interview and helping extensively with the editing process, that part makes me teary every time, too."

"Thank you for leaving this out for me, even if it was a set-up."

"Not very subtle of me? Don't tell Lucius. I see the potion changed color."

"Yes, it looks to be right on schedule."

"Good." Narcissa took Snape's hand and directed her next comment to him. "We have a fellow potioner here, Severus. Your life is in capable hands."

Hermione blushed and began to uncurl herself from the chair. "I'd like to take this back to my room."

"You intend to take a book from the Headmaster's personal library without his knowledge?"

Hermione stood and addressed the Headmaster in question. "Professor Snape, I wish to borrow your dissertation for a brief period of study." Then she turned to Narcissa. "Now he knows."

"Are you sure?"

"He can hear us."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why are you suddenly so certain?"

"I think he was in my dream last night and told me."

"You don't remember?"

"No, it was pretty hazy when I woke up."

"Hmmm. All the same, you have had an emotional day, and I think you know what Madam Pomfrey would recommend in preparation for tonight's brewing."

"Yes. Hydration and rest."

"Absolutely. Why don't you go have a nap, then come down and have supper with us."

"Thank you. I think I will. Good afternoon, Professor."

Hermione didn't realize how tired she was until her own voice woke her.

"Time to get ready for dinner with the Malfoys. Time to get ready for dinner with the Malfoys. Time to--"

"Got it," she mumbled.

As she dressed, she thought that the next time she saw Molly, she needed to find out where her school trunk had ended up. She had packed enough practical clothes, but nothing that seemed appropriate for dinner with the Malfoys. She eventually transfigured a pair of denims into some nice slacks and decided that it didn't really matter because it was all under robes anyway.

Dinner turned out to be pleasant after all, and by dessert, she was on first names with all three Malfoys. After months of monotonous conversations in a tent, she was beginning to remember what civilized company was like, and she relished the discussion and the food.

As was now customary before beginning any brewing, she went to Snape's side, took his hand, and told him what she'd be doing. Then, peeking over her shoulder to be sure she was alone, she cast a Muffliato and whispered, "I think I dreamed of you this afternoon. I think we were brewing together. Maybe it was because I'd been reading about the Flamels, but I woke up thinking we'd just brewed the potion together. Was that your last minute tutorial? Wish us luck, Severus."

They had decided that Hermione would measure out the ingredients and add them, and Narcissa would do the stirring. It was definitely easier not to have to count the series of clockwise and counterclockwise motions while adding a combination of three ingredients, as they did about forty-five minutes into the process. When the potion was complete, Hermione slumped into the chair at the front of the classroom.

She was startled by Narcissa's hand gently waking her. She opened her eyes, but didn't move to sit up. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was going to help with the bottling."

"That's okay. We got four perfect doses, but I'm more concerned about you. Your aura's looking a little thin."

"Does that happen when someone gets tired or uses a lot of energy?"

"Not to this extent. I think Poppy should come see you."

"No, I'm fine. I'll just--" Hermione cried out when she tried to move, and Narcissa gently pressed her back into the chair.

"You're not going anywhere until I've applied the balm. I still have it down here. Don't move."

Hermione didn't dare disobey. She thought the ache would be better, but this was worse than it had been since that first night. She didn't have the energy to even help Narcissa straighten her out to apply the balm to her spine. She couldn't give voice to objections that wished to make themselves known when Lucius carried her into the study. She drifted in and out of consciousness while Poppy and Narcissa discussed energy and auras and after-effects of Unforgivables. She obediently opened her mouth for a potion that cleared her head a little.

"Don't try to sit up yet."

"I feel better, Madam Pomfrey."

"You may feel better, but you are not better yet. You need to sleep to give the potion the best chance to work."

"I don't think I can walk up all of those stairs."

"You won't be walking," Narcissa explained. "You're spending the night in the Slytherin dorm tonight."

"What about Pansy's things?"

"We'll talk about that tomorrow. Until then, that's the easiest place for you to go. Lucius will carry you, and Poppy will check on you in the morning."

Hermione closed her eyes as a pair of warm, strong arms lifted her from the sofa. She sensed a flurry of activity, and it sounded as though McGonagall had joined them. Hermione was touched at the care she was receiving. McGonagall had attended three funerals that day, and it was certainly getting late. But Hermione could only breathe a soft, "Thank you," before succumbing to sleep.

In her dream, she was wandering, lost in the dungeon. She rubbed her arms to keep them warm whilst she searched. Finally, she saw him coming toward her from the other end of a long hall, and she picked up her pace.

"What took you so long?" she asked, shivering in the dim torchlight.

"I didn't want to leave until I'd heard the whole story from Narcissa. They are very worried about you."

"We finished the potion."

"Yes, I know that, too. Come." A door appeared in the wall, and they stepped through to find his study as it had been before the Malfoys had redecorated. This room was a little warmer, but even standing by the fireplace, she shivered.

"Do I ever wish I was the one in pajamas now."

"Your dress is very lovely."

"This dress," she looked down to see a velvet sheath, "is sleeveless."

He moved closer until she could almost feel his heat. "Then perhaps you need to be warmed up." He enveloped her in his cloak, stroking her back and arms until she relaxed against his chest.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"It was my pleasure. I've been wanting to touch it since you let me feel the fabric this morning."

"I was wondering if you would be able to feel it--which was the sleeve of my robe, for your information, not my leg or whatever you thought you were touching."

"Yes, I could feel it. I could even smell you, although you must be using the secret hair serum, because you smell vaguely like narcissus."

"You mean Narcissa's signature scent is narcissus?"

"It smells good on you, too."

"Thank you. We finished the potion."

"You've already said that. Fishing for complements?"

"I think it's just the dream-state. It's hard for me to keep up with the conversation. But I don't think you acknowledged it the first time."

"For the record then, I acknowledge that you have completed the healing potion. Perfectly, as Narcissa tells me."

"I'm glad it's done. Now we can safely wake you up."

He maneuvered her to a large chair and set her in his lap. "I'm going to miss meeting you like this."

"Why do we have to stop when you wake up?"

"Because the situation will be entirely different. Whilst I am in this state, I need someone to anchor myself to, and you are that anchor. Soon I won't need you anymore."

"So that's it? You don't need me so, 'Goodbye, Miss Granger'?"

"It would seem odd if I suddenly started calling you Hermione."

"It isn't odd here."

"Don't you have a boyfriend?"

The question made her pause. "Narcissa thinks you and I would be good with each other. She hasn't said it, but--"

"Narcissa thinks *you* would be good for *me*. Don't count on her having your best interests at heart."

"By admitting that, you've shown that you do."

"Or I'm further manipulating your mind. Don't underestimate me."

"I don't think I am. I think Narcissa's intention of my reading your book was to see the potential for us."

"That's wishful thinking."

"Well, she didn't say anything about Ron's and my auras, and I think she would have if it had shown something good."

"You've not known her long enough to count on her altruistic appearances."

"You are very cynical."

"No, I'm alive, and I wouldn't be if I depended on others to simply consider my welfare."

"You are also ungrateful." Hermione attempted to remove herself from his lap, but he kept her pinned to himself until she stopped fidgeting.

"No, Hermione. I am very grateful for what has been done for me and on my behalf--for what you have done."

"Then why--"

"Because my point still stands. Would you have thought to rescue me without Draco? Would Draco have done so without my having secured his father's vow?"

Hermione could not answer truthfully without feeling horrible because he was right. She snuggled against his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are, Hermione, but you shouldn't be. I've never given you any reason for you to have done as much as you have." He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, and once she'd turned her face to meet his, he kissed her mouth.

She hadn't many kisses to compare it to, but it seemed the most perfect kiss: tender, patient, coaxing her mouth open but never demanding.

When he gently pulled away, the smile on his face was even more surprising than the kiss had been.

"Severus?"

"Perhaps we can remain on a first-name basis. Now, you rest. I'll keep the nightmares away."

A/N: I haven't read it in a while, but the inspiration for the Flamels having to have a special bond to produce the Philosopher's Stone came from "The Amber Effect"

<http://ashwinder.sycophanthex.com/viewstory.php?sid=7597>

Which is actually a sequel to "The Amber Solution" also found at Ashwinder.

Special thanks to Lauren for shining this chapter up to its current sparkle and to SouthernWitch for reminding me about comma rules that I really should know.

Chapter Five

Chapter 6 of 9

Severus returns to consciousness, and Narcissa tells Hermione about her aura.

~ Chapter Five ~

Hermione blinked open her eyes, feeling groggy and achy but peaceful. "Severus kept his promise."

"What's that, Hermione?" Narcissa's face came into her view.

"Severus promised to keep the nightmares away, and he did. Where am I?"

"You passed out after the brewing last night. Poppy was alarmed by something in your magical signature and said you shouldn't be moved magically. This was the best place near enough that Lucius could easily carry you."

"Slytherin plot to get me to leave Gryffindor Tower."

"I've no doubt a Slytherin is responsible, but I highly doubt their intention was for you to receive the honor no Muggle-born has ever had and sleep in the Head Girl's room."

"Someone did this to me?"

"There is little question that there is dark magic involved, but we won't learn any more with the two of us chattering on. Can you sit up?" Hermione moved to prop herself up and cried out in pain. "I'll take that as a no. Let's see if you can roll."

With Narcissa's help, she made it to her stomach. "Okay." Her voice was pinched.

Soon, she felt the soothing warmth of the balm relax all of the muscles in her back.

"Now that we've got you settled, I'm calling Poppy."

Hermione turned her head so she could see Narcissa kneeling at the Floo, but she couldn't hear the conversation. A few moments later, Pomfrey and McGonagall came through and made a beeline for her bed.

After helping her to sit up, Pomfrey ran her wand over Hermione, who didn't like the look on her face. "What?"

"Have you had trouble with your spell casting recently?"

"Yeah, but I thought it was just using someone else's wand."

"No, I think it has something to do with you. You say you slept well?"

"Yes."

"But after a good night of sleep, you are magically weaker than you were when I checked last night." She picked up the jar from the nightstand. "I think we need to keep you as isolated from magic as possible until we figure out what's wrong. We'll have to get you a Muggle pain remedy because something is draining your magic away."

Hermione was stunned. "Is it safe for me to stay in the castle?"

"I think the inherent magic in the castle is fine, but you mustn't cast any spells or have any more spells cast on you, including diagnostics or even potions. We'll have to observe you other ways."

"But--"

"But nothing." Pomfrey snatched up the wand from the nightstand. "I'll keep this so you don't accidentally use it."

Hermione didn't know what was worse, being told that something was stealing her magic or knowing that she couldn't use a wand, even Bellatrix's.

"What can I do?"

"You can read, study, but I don't want you helping with Severus' potions, even cutting ingredients, *evercarring* ingredients. I want you to stay away from situations where your inherent protective magic would activate; so keep out of dangerous situations for once in your life." Pomfrey sighed. "I suppose that was a bit harsh of me. I don't know what the last year has been like for you. Just, rest up. I don't think you should go out in public until we find out when and how this happened."

Hermione felt utterly defeated, but Narcissa put an arm around her shoulders and helped her to the restroom. "Go wash up. You can thank Severus for his help last night before we go in there with the potions, and you can have breakfast with Minerva."

Hermione felt very much like she was a child being left out of things, but the horror of what was happening to her balanced the petty feelings quite well. She walked through the common room and classroom to get to the study instead of using the Floo. Her soggy braid making the back of her robe damp reminded her of all the things, like hair-drying charms, she'd taken for granted.

When the ladies were done laying out supplies on Severus' nightstand, they gave her a few moments. When she was alone with him, she took his hand in both of hers and kissed it. "Severus, thank you for keeping your promise. I slept very well last night. Please be alright, and please remember to call me Hermione." Placing his hand down at his side, she leaned over and gently kissed his cheek.

As they passed each other, Narcissa gave Hermione a knowing smile. Hermione felt helpless as the door closed.

"Severus couldn't be in better hands," McGonagall assured her, guiding her to a chair and seating her with her back to the door. "Now, let's order breakfast. Rilly!" An elf appeared beside the table. "Hermione, this is Rilly. She has been serving Headmaster Snape all year, and she has agreed to serve you whilst you are unable to do magic for yourself."

"Yes, Mistress 'Mione."

Several thoughts at once made her cringe, but she managed a weak smile. "Thanks?"

"Is mistresses wanting breakfast?"

McGonagall made short work of ordering breakfast and gave Hermione a reassuring smile once the elf had popped away. "I know you don't approve of using a house-elf, Hermione, but you need to keep up your reserve. She has been fiercely loyal to Severus all this time and still will not hear of anyone calling him anything but Headmaster. When we asked for someone to serve you, she volunteered, overwrought as she has been these past few days."

The formerly overwrought elf returned with a tray, curtsied, then disappeared with a nod.

Hermione picked up a piece of toast. "I wonder how long we'll have to wait."

"I wonder when you'd like to take your N.E.W.T.s?"

Thus McGonagall segued into a discussion most likely to keep Hermione's mind occupied. She informed Hermione that the board had planned a tentative review session for the first two weeks of August followed by the week of testing for those wishing to take their N.E.W.T.s.

"Some departments such as the Auror office, magical maintenance, and the Department of Mysteries are offering to integrate a semester of remedial N.E.W.T. studies into their training programs for the incoming year to accommodate those who wish to begin training right away. Acceptance would be based on transcripts of years under Headmaster Dumbledore and some practical demonstrations."

Hermione slumped back into her chair. "What if they can't figure out what's wrong in time? What if I become a Squib?"

"Then you can go to a Muggle University, come back years from now, and teach History of Magic."

"I can't imagine leaving. What will happen to my parents?"

"I'm sure they'll be fine."

"Harry said he'd check on their property for me today. I wish we could check on them."

"Hermione, you've never been one to waste time wishing for things. Don't let this change you. We happen to have two of the foremost living experts on the Dark Arts at our disposal. That is, we will very shortly. I'm a little disturbed by something Mrs. Malfoy said this morning."

"What's that?"

"She said something about thanking Severus. First of all, I didn't know you were on a first-name basis with him, and second, how can he have helped when he's been asleep this entire time?"

"I can't really explain how he's been helping me, but it's like he's keeping the nightmares away."

"How can that be?"

"I don't really understand it. Lucius said something about us anchoring him when we talk to him. Severus said the same thing in my dream last night. I don't remember most of it, just that he calls me Hermione and I don't have nightmares."

"I see. And have you spoken to any of the Weasleys since the funeral?"

"No. Ron didn't want me to return to the castle, and I couldn't tell him the whole truth."

"Everyone will know soon. In the mean time, I don't think there's any harm in your making new friends, even if they are Slytherins."

Narcissa's aristocratic tones interrupted McGonagall's chuckle. "Thank you for the vote of confidence, Headmistress."

Hermione turned to see Narcissa and stood quickly. "Is he awake? Has he said anything?"

"He's said several things, most of which I will not repeat, but he is asking for both of you."

This earned Hermione another questioning look from McGonagall, but she didn't care, barely remembering to let the older witch go through the door before her. She was relieved to see him sitting up, his eyes open, and his face with some color; but she hung back, not knowing what his real-life reaction to her would be. McGonagall was apologizing over and over for not trusting him, and he was uncomfortably accepting her apology.

Turning to Narcissa, Hermione whispered, "Did he really ask for both of us?"

"I believe what I said, Miss Granger--" His voice didn't sound weak with disuse as she'd imagined it would, but deep with sarcasm in every syllable. "--is that if those two interfering Gryffindor witches were sitting with their ears to the door, then she might as well let them in."

Hermione temporarily forgot her pang at hearing him call her Miss Granger when she caught the smirk on his face. A slight hand motion beckoned her, and as she approached the bed, he raised his hand for her to take. Noticing out of the corner of her eye that Narcissa was leading McGonagall out, she took it in both of hers as she had just under an hour before.

"It's so good to see you Se--" She met his eyes and held them. "Severus."

"I'm very glad to see you with my own two eyes," he answered in a welcoming voice.

"Your hand is nice and warm."

"And I intend to keep it that way for many more years, decades even. May I have it back?"

Hermione blushed and released his hand but didn't get to say anything else because Pomfrey chose that moment to return. "Our patient needs his rest, and so do you--or at least fresh air and sunshine."

Severus spoke gently. "Just one more moment, Poppy." Turning his eyes back to Hermione, he whispered, "Thank you... Hermione."

She returned to find Narcissa having a cup of tea. "The Headmistress had to leave, but she told me that you should get a book to read and go outside."

Hermione wondered for a moment if all of her things had been moved or not. She was about to Summon her bag when she remembered she couldn't. Summoning Rilly instead, she shortly had the bag in her hand. Rummaging around in it, she saw the empty portrait. Removing it, she set it in front of Narcissa. "Severus might enjoy the company."

"There's no one there."

"Not at the moment. Phineas!"

"Do you mean to say--"

"I thought you were done pestering me," the voice from the portrait grumbled.

"I've brought you back to Hogwarts, to the dungeon, and here is a member of your family." Turning to Narcissa, she said, "This portrait used to hang in the house at Grimmauld Place. I'm sure you'll find the most appropriate place for it."

With that, she left the dungeon, heading for the great outdoors.

This time, she wasn't surprised when her feet led her to that particular tree by the lake. Considering all of the subjects she had to study in the next several weeks, she chose Arithmancy and leaned against the tree with the book in her lap. She soon became frustrated with it since even the simplest Arithmantic equations required magic to solve. Deciding she'd had enough of runes and Dark Arts for a while, she settled on History of Magic.

She was considering switching to *Hogwarts: A History* for diversion when she spotted someone in her periphery. Hermione could see it was a witch by her walk, and said witch was commanding a picnic hamper. Hermione quickly stowed her book and rose to meet Narcissa's greeting.

"Severus thought I'd find you here."

"That scares me a little."

"I think it scares him, too," Narcissa said, but didn't elaborate, instead swishing all of the contents of the hamper into order on a green and white blanket.

"Why is he scared?"

"Oh, he hasn't said it in those words, but he is certainly disconcerted by you. He seemed surprised that you'd told me about the dreams, and I was left with the distinct impression that you left some of it out."

"I truly don't remember them in detail."

"But?"

"But, well, when he was keeping the nightmares away, in my dream, I was sitting on his lap, and we kissed."

"Really."

Hermione didn't like the speculative tone in Narcissa's voice. "What did you see when you observed my aura with Ron's?"

"That's something I wanted to talk to you about. You said he's been your boyfriend since last summer?"

"No, really only this week. Or rather, that's when we first kissed, but we've been very close friends. Do you need to know the unpleasant details?"

"No, that was quite revealing enough. I asked Draco to jog my memory, and he said the three of you have always been friends, since your first year."

"We have. But I've never liked Harry that way, and he's had a thing for Ginny since before even he knew it."

"But you've preferred Ron for..."

"It seems like forever. A little third year, and a lot fourth year. I wanted to go to the Yule Ball with him, but he didn't realize I was a girl."

"I don't think even now he fully appreciates your femininity."

"Well, he sure was trying to appreciate it the other day."

"You've desired him for over three years, but that thought makes you uncomfortable."

"It's just—he had a girlfriend last year. He was mad at me and wouldn't talk to me for all that time whilst he was snogging her in the common room. I just needed to know that I meant more to him than that."

"Does he do that often, get mad for a long time?"

"Yeah. Nearly every year he's declared all-out war on either Harry or me."

"But he always comes back."

"Yeah, because it's like we belong together. And then there was Harry. We'd both promised to be with him to the very end."

"And you were."

"Yes. Even Dumbledore seemed to consider the two of us important to his whole scheme."

"This destiny and Dumbledore's plans—they must have weighed heavily on your young shoulders."

"They really did. Ron and I were mixed up in it all from our very first year of school. Ron had heard the stories, and I'd read about Harry in the history books they recommended to Muggle-born students. He was just a kid like us, and then he wasn't. He was our best friend, and then he was a hero. Madam Pomfrey wasn't exaggerating much about our propensity for trouble at school. I wanted to obey the rules, I really did, but the desire to *know* got me into trouble."

"And there you and Severus are very similar."

"I suppose you're right. Did you observe my aura with him?"

"I almost couldn't avoid it. Your aura had been a little off ever since last night's episode. I'd been keeping an eye on it throughout the morning, and when you entered Severus' room and got within the dim glow of his aura, something about you settled. Later, when he beckoned you in and held out his hand, both of your glows brightened. Just where your hands held, there was a brilliant peridot color where your gold and his green mixed."

"His aura is green? Is that a Slytherin trait?"

"It wasn't by mistake that the founders chose those colors for their houses. Many Slytherins have green auras. Lucius' is a deep, forest green. Severus' is like grass in the middle of summer."

"What color is yours?"

"Royal blue. When Lucius and I cast together, the result is aquamarine."

"What about Ron?"

"His is bright red."

"I suppose Godric Gryffindor had a red aura?"

"No specific documentation exists, but I suspect it was more like McGonagall's: orange, mixing the bold red and the loyal gold."

"Then red and gold are a good combination?"

"They are good traits to find in one person, but they don't always mix well in pairs."

"What does that mean?"

"When I saw your auras, I didn't see you as best friends or lovers. I saw two people who are each constantly trying to have their own way and then placate the other. Your natures conflict. It was like watching two stars, each threatening to consume the other in a violent explosion."

"Isn't a volatile relationship supposed to be hot and passion-filled?"

"Sometimes, but it's dangerous to experiment with volatile ingredients. Even as you shared the same space, in a hug or whilst holding hands, your auras never quite met. Each would in turn reach out to the other one and pull back. You've had to forgive him of much in the past. Do you think that will change easily?"

"We've both grown a lot this year."

"Well, I can't advise you there. I suppose Severus has warned you that I have an ulterior motive."

"He said something to that effect."

"I can't explain exactly when or why I first thought this was a good idea, but I still think it is. Severus can't fathom why, out of all the witches in the world, I'd pick for him someone so young, but he was always older than his years when we were in school. You're the same way. I hope both of you give this a chance to grow."

"I'll be a student again in August, if I haven't totally lost my magic by then."

"It's been twenty years since he last gave a woman a chance to forgive him and see past his faults. He'll wait a couple of months if you give him reason to." Flicking her wand, she oversaw the items neatly stowing themselves in the hamper. "Too much sun will ruin my complexion, but it looks good on yours. The men want to talk to you and try to determine what kind of curse this is."

Hermione was strangely grateful for the abrupt ending to that conversation, and she almost let Narcissa get all the way back to the castle before she remembered one more question. "What did happen to Pansy's things?"

Narcissa blanched. "McGonagall has been very understanding, but on that point she would not waiver. Anyone who actively fought against the school in the final battle will not be welcome back before they've shown true remorse. Pansy, Millicent, Gregory--they will never be students at Hogwarts again."

A/N: Thanks to Lauren for her help, especially with characterization. I know nothing about auras, but I had a lot of fun making up the information in this chapter; no offense is meant. I also must acknowledge "A Heart With No Companion" for lingering in the back of my mind as I wrote it. <http://ashwinder.sycophanthex.com/viewstory.php?sid=7032>

Chapter Six

Chapter 7 of 9

Severus and Lucius view memories that uncover the darkness draining Hermione's magic.

~ Chapter Six ~

Narcissa was uncharacteristically silent until they reached the study, which had been largely returned to its previous state. "With Severus out of immediate danger, we're going to give him his space and return to the dormitory."

They found Lucius and Severus surrounded by a pile of books. Hermione fleetingly thought that she'd never seen anything quite so alluring as Severus sitting against his headboard with a book in his hand. With that idea in mind, she caught her breath when he nudged aside a stack of books and patted a spot on the bed. Walking around the bed, she toed off her shoes and tried to find the most ladylike way to scoot up beside him.

As she reached for a book, his hand stayed hers. "No, the magic in these texts may harm you in your current state. You may look but not touch."

Hermione glanced at Narcissa, sitting primly on the arm of Lucius' chair, and the older witch gave her a wicked wink. She was severely tempted to turn her hand and entwine her fingers in his but instead returned her hands to her lap. "Find anything?"

"It is difficult to know exactly what we're looking for. I'd need to see--could I review your memories of the battle?"

"If you think it will help. Do you want to see the ones of... at Malfoy Manor, too?"

"We'll try the most recent first."

"Are you going to use Legilimency?"

"No, that would be far too intrusive, and it would involve casting a spell on you. We'll remove the memories and view them in the Pensieve. Rilly!"

The elf popped into sight and curtsied so lowly that Hermione thought her nose almost touched the ground. "How may I serve Master Headmaster?"

"Go to the Headmistress' office and retrieve my Pensieve, please."

"Yes, sir!"

When the elf was gone, Severus explained. "She's still having a hard time with the concept that the office is Minerva's now."

"It doesn't have to be, you know." Lucius looked up from his book to support his assertion. "The board can be persuaded."

"Stop, Lucius. Minerva wants the position. She was born to it, and she should have it for many years. Goodness knows it's going to be a full-time headache this term. I'll have time to be headmaster when I'm in my eighties with nothing better to do."

"No ambition. And you call yourself a Slytherin."

"Perhaps my ambitions are simply--"

A pop interrupted his sentence, and he summoned his lap desk to set the Pensieve on.

"Thank you, Rilly," Hermione chimed in, causing Lucius to delicately turn up his nose.

She watched Severus gently swirl his wand in the silvery liquid until an image of a young girl and boy rose to the top. Apparently satisfied that they were his, he turned to Hermione. "Did you see these?"

"Yes. Harry only showed them to Ron and me. Do you want to be alone whilst you--"

"No." He reached around her with his free arm and pulled her against him. She wasn't sure if it was meant to be a comfort or to draw strength, but she relaxed against him. He whispered into her hair, "Thank you for staying."

The room was silent as Severus restored his memories. When he had regained the last one, he set his wand down and buried his face in Hermione's hair, which had dried into wild ringlets in the sun. She heard his breath catch a couple of times as he tried to compose himself after the onslaught of emotions. His first sentence was somewhat muffled by her hair. "You washed out the narcissus."

She looked up into his eyes, trying to see if there was a difference. "Madam Pomfrey said no potions or charms, and that was both."

"Alright, my clever girl, let's see if we can't find out who did this to you."

The sound of Lucius clearing his throat reminded Hermione that she and Severus were not alone. "If they survived the battle, we can remedy that for you."

"Lucius!" Narcissa gave him a delicate smack. "Talk like that will land you back in Azkaban."

"I was talking about hunting down a Death Eater. Isn't that allowed?"

"If the two of you don't mind, I'm about to perform some delicate magic."

Hermione's face reddened, and Narcissa rose. "Then we should probably give you two a moment alone."

Hermione didn't look up to see the looks that passed between the three Slytherins but decided that ignorance in this case was surely bliss. One arm still holding her securely to him, she met his gentle smile with one of her own.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then close your eyes for me. It will help you to focus and remind me not to accidentally attempt Legilimency. Do you remember being hit by anything?"

"No."

"Go back to the first time you were near any dueling."

After a moment, Hermione whispered, "Okay."

She felt a slight tingling coolness touch her temple, then shivered as he removed the memory.

It took several long minutes before Severus was satisfied that he'd gotten all he needed. "Good, now open your eyes. How do you feel?"

She yawned and snuggled into his shoulder as she had in a dream.

"Hermione?"

"Sorry. I know you used as little magic as possible, but it's worn me out."

"If you don't feel up to viewing the memories with me, I can ask Lucius to do it."

"Maybe you'd better. I don't think Madam Pomfrey would like it if I exerted myself that way--but wait! You might have gotten, at the beginning of one of the memories, I think you might see... my first kiss with Ron, but it's not anything."

"We can talk about that later, okay?"

"Okay." She closed her eyes, and before she drifted off to sleep, she heard Severus call for Lucius.

The next thing she knew, Severus was gently shaking her awake. "Hermione, wake up."

"Did you see anything?"

"We think we figured it out. Bellatrix sent something at you that seemed to hit your shield charm, but instead of just being absorbed, it seemed to travel back through your, or rather, her wand."

"So it was the wand!"

"Not exactly," Lucius answered. "I think I've read about a curse that fits the description, but I've never seen a curse actually work the way she did it. She probably altered it to work specifically against her own wand as a form of revenge."

"What now, then?"

"Now I'm going back to the manor to see if I can locate the books she must have used."

Severus reluctantly set her up and released her. "Whilst you were sleeping, Minerva arranged for escort."

"Did she see me?"

"Perhaps if you do not wish to be seen in a gentleman's bed, you should not fall asleep there."

Hermione decided that was the last innuendo she could take from Lucius and gingerly stood up.

"Careful," he said solicitously with a hand on her arm.

This time, she didn't miss the glare that Severus sent in his friend's direction. "Perhaps you will be so good as to help her to the armchair so she can put her shoes on and get her memories back."

"Do you have to? My dreams were so much calmer without them."

"I think you know that I have to." This time, Lucius responded to the glare by leaving the room while Hermione reluctantly replaced her shoes. Then Severus continued. "If you're worried about nightmares, why don't you go back to the Weasleys' for a few days?"

"I don't want to. I'd much rather stay here."

"I did see that kiss. It looked like true love's first kiss to me."

"How could you say that? It's was just the moment, the tension. We're all wrong for each other. Narcissa explained it to me this afternoon, and I know she's right."

"I vaguely remember having this conversation with you before."

"I vaguely remember how it ended." Hermione was frustrated by the sudden physical and emotional distance. Moving to stand beside the tall bed, she was almost at eye-level with him. "Perhaps you should refresh my memory."

"I'm rather sure I shouldn't. At least not yet. How about we compromise? You go take a nap, and I'll keep the Pensieve here, but then you have to come back for them. Next time you enter this room, you're getting those memories back."

Hermione realized that he had her pretty well sewn up with that deal. She didn't want the nightmares, but her desire to be near him was stronger than ever.

After her nap, she went to the Great Hall for dinner. She was delighted to see Harry and Ron there.

Sitting between them was joy after the agonizing day. She was happy to hear from Harry that her parents' home was intact. They surprised her by informing her that they'd gone with Lucius to find the books.

"Why are you so surprised?" Ron asked. "You know we'd do anything for you."

The twinge of guilt she felt for doubting Ron went away shortly after dessert when he nudged her into an alcove and she felt the chill of a Disillusionment Charm. "No! Take it off, quick! Ron, please!"

"Take what off, Hermione?"

"The charm, you idiot, I can't--" She felt herself falling, heard yelling, felt herself being lifted.

Then she was warm, waking up in Severus' arms. "I know I didn't fall asleep here this time. How did I get here?"

"I knew. I felt somehow that you were in distress. Lucius and Narcissa were dining here. I sent him after you. He said you were right where I said you you'd be; I don't know how. They took you to your room, but you wouldn't stop convulsing. Narcissa used a Muggle pain-relief cream that Mr. Potter had procured, and that helped a little, but you were still shaking and moaning. She had Lucius bring you here, and as soon as I touched you, you stilled. I held you until your breathing returned to normal, and then you fell asleep."

"Do you still think I'd be better off with him?"

"This is a temporary situation. We will find a cure, and you can go on with your life. You don't have to be a casualty of this war."

"You don't know how accurate that statement is." Hermione didn't look up to confirm it was Lucius' voice.

"What do you mean?" Severus asked. She could feel his heart rate increase.

"This curse won't just drain her magic. If it is allowed to continue, it will kill her."

Narcissa helped Hermione to Severus' bathroom so she could use the facilities and have a hot bath. She couldn't even be in the room whilst they were administering Severus' next dose of the potion. Once she had dried off and dressed in warm pajamas, Narcissa administered the Muggle remedy again. The smell reminded Hermione of when she was a little girl and her mother used to use it on her father when he came home from pick-up football games in the park.

She returned to the bedroom to see that a single bed had been placed near Severus' and her things were on a small vanity in the corner. "It is only a temporary measure," Pomfrey emphasized, but Hermione was just glad she could be near him. She was dying. Lucius said that something was eating at her like a cancer and she may not even live long enough to take her N.E.W.T.s much less 'get on with her life.'

Madam Pomfrey left a nightlight and gave Severus a death glare before leaving the room, the door ajar. Severus flicked his wand at the door, which shut quietly so as not to alert those in the study of the situation. "Our chaperone will eventually return, but I think we have a few minutes."

Hermione lightly rose from her bed and climbed up beside Severus. He drew her across his lap and stroked her hair. "I don't think I've ever been more afraid," she whispered. "Even at the manor, I was resolved, I was brave. I was tortured, but I was never afraid I was going to die."

"You aren't going to die. I'm not going to let you out of my sight until we find a solution, and then we're going to help you." He pressed his lips to her temple. "How have you bewitched me already? Last night you were a dream in my arms, and now you're here."

She met his intense gaze. "You needed me, and now I need you."

He answered her with a kiss. It was like the dream but better, and it went on far longer, until she was gasping for breath.

"Now go," he whispered, "before those busybodies come back in here and find us like this."

She returned to the smaller bed and fell asleep listening to him breathe. She dreamed of him but knew it wasn't really him with her. There were bad dreams but no nightmares. And she awoke with no residual pain from the previous evening.

In the morning, Narcissa hustled her out of the room so Severus could receive his potion. It was his third dose. It had only been twenty-four hours since he'd woken up. How odd time was when suddenly she felt she was running out of it.

Severus insisted on restoring her memories before breakfast, almost causing her to lose her appetite completely, but when she emerged from the bathroom, the sight of Severus eating in the study braced her. It was comforting to know that he felt well enough to walk around a bit.

Also comforting was the owl post. Harry and Ginny had co-authored a note of concern. Ron's letter was profusely apologetic.

In the end, it was Narcissa's cajoling that convinced Severus to release Hermione to her chaperonage. "You'll either have to let them see her here, or you'll have to let her out of your sight. You can't have your secret and eat your cake, too."

Though Hermione had the disconcerting feeling that Narcissa had mangled that particular Muggle axiom on purpose, she was grateful when the fastest Malfoy eagle owl was dispatched with an invitation for Hermione's friends to join her for an alfresco midmorning tea.

Hermione couldn't quite resent Narcissa's observation from under the protection of a wide-brimmed hat. She felt that Ron was less likely to physically assault her in any way under such stern chaperonage. Hermione was amused to see the woman she'd found a friend in act the part of the Slytherin Ice Witch.

When the two couples were granted permission to walk by the lake, Hermione knew this was the moment. She tried to ease Ron into the topic by discussing N.E.W.T.s and the future. She hoped desperately that he'd notice she had no desire to spend her life connected with Weasley's Wizard Wheezes.

He stopped talking long enough to place his hands on her face and draw her face up to his, but she flinched away. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"What's the matter?"

"Last time you tried this, you almost killed me."

"I didn't know about that."

"You might not have known the extent, but you knew that I wasn't allowed to have any magic performed on me, that it caused me pain."

"I'm sorry. It was just habit."

"Just habit? I wonder where those habits came from. We haven't been together long enough to establish habits like that."

"And whose idea was that?"

"You agreed!"

"I didn't have a choice!"

Hermione took a step back. "I thought our relationship was more than physical."

"It is, but can't it be physical, too?"

"Not anymore."

"You've been brainwashed."

"I won't deny that I've been influenced, but I'm also dying. It puts a different perspective on things. If I make it out of this, I want to do more. I want to study, maybe try for Unspeakable."

"I didn't know that's what you wanted."

"I didn't either. I'm finally not defined by my place in some war, and I'm learning new things about myself every day. We can always be friends."

"I guess I should be used to that by now."

Hermione threw her arms around him and sobbed. Thus the relationship with her school sweetheart was formed and broken within a week.

After she said goodbye to her friends, Narcissa said, "You did what had to be done, and you were splendid. However, I do not ever want to hear you say you're dying again."

Draco having been granted permission to visit the Parkinsons for the duration, it was just Severus and Lucius in the study when they returned. Lucius immediately swept Narcissa from the room, leaving Hermione standing at the table.

"I've been sitting in this straight-backed chair too long. Let us retire to the settee."

Severus stood, then walked to the settee, carefully placing himself against an armrest with Hermione curled against him. "Were you crying?" he asked her.

"Mmm hmm. I broke up with Ron."

"I would think that cause for celebration."

"Now don't you go being a prat to replace him. I knew it had to be done. I didn't want him anymore, didn't need him now if I ever had. But it's a chapter of my life closed."

"A short one."

"You are so mean, and no it wasn't, not really. But it suited me when I was a child. It doesn't suit me now."

"What suits Hermione Granger, the woman?"

"Intelligent, sarcastic, loyal, protective Potions masters. Well, just one Potions master with whom I feel safe and cared for." She wanted to say loved, and that startled her a bit. "I don't know what this is between us exactly, but I know it's powerful."

"Ah, you only want me because you want to become the next Perenelle Flamel."

"I'd much rather become the next Hermione Snape."

Severus turned her toward him. "You don't mean that."

She lowered her voice. "I do. Maybe not right away, but if I'm going to keep sleeping in your bedroom, eventually I'm going to want the appropriate title."

"And to perform the appropriate function?"

"I don't think I'd take very much persuasion."

Severus "persuaded" her with kisses until he declared her on the verge of spontaneous magic and put a stop to it. "Actually, we have more than one reason to protect your virtue at this time."

"And those reasons are?"

"In no particular order, the already mentioned spontaneous magic--"

"I thought you were teasing about that."

"Your N.E.W.T.s and unicorn blood."

"Passing over my N.E.W.T.s for the moment, unicorn *blood*?"

Holding both of her hands, Severus took a deep breath. "Lucius and Narcissa are, at this moment, trying to gain from McGonagall the permission to use dark magic to save your life."

"Dark magic? Severus!"

"Listen to me. We found references to the curse. No one has ever been known to survive it. It is dark magic, and only dark magic can counter it."

"But how?"

"The curse is attacking you through your magic. It is not only feeding on your magic but on the energy of your physical and spiritual self."

"How can you stop it?"

"We'll starve it by convincing it that there isn't anything there to feed on."

"Wouldn't you have to kill me?"

"Worse than that, we'd have to separate your body, spirit, and magic from one another. There is a chance that you may come out of it alive but without your magic."

"But I'd be alive. Severus, could you still love me if I hadn't any magic?"

"Of course, I--" He cocked his head and glared. "Was that a trick?"

"No, I promise. It just came out, but I need to know. Would I be better off dead than without magic or you in my life?"

"Oh, Hermione." His voice was tinged with awe. "If we come to love each other some day, death itself would not be able to stop it."

AN: This was originally two chapters, but I decided that they were too short and y'all have waited long enough.

Thanks to SouthernWitch for the initial read-through and to Lauren for helping with flow and saving me from embarrassing spelling errors.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 8 of 9

Hermione and her friends find the unicorns again, and the final antidote is administered while her life hangs in the balance.

note: There is one blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment that a reader thought warranted a higher rating, but I've decided to leave the rating and add the warning.

~ Chapter Seven ~

Narcissa and Severus spent the afternoon brewing a very powerful Draught of Living Death. The dose they would be giving Hermione would all but kill her, leaving only the barest of functions to prevent her from crossing over.

Lucius studied every variation of magic-binding charm he could find, wanting to be sure he found one that was quickly reversible.

Just before she was to leave, Hermione knocked on the door to the classroom, and Severus met her. He held her tightly, wishing he were well enough to venture out of the castle and feeling certain that she wasn't. After kissing her, he held her gaze and opened his whole heart to her with a look. "For the unicorns, it will help. If they ask why they should spare your life, tell them, know without a shadow of doubt, that there is someone who loves you. It is only the glimmer of what it will someday be, but I do love you."

"I will remember. I love you, too."

Hermione, flanked by Ron, Harry, Ginny, Neville, and Luna, prepared to go into the forest to ask the unicorns for a freely given offering of blood. Professor Grubbly-Plank had brought a vessel used only for unicorn blood and shown Ginny and Luna how to seal it so it would be safe no matter what happened to it.

Lucius left his studying to accompany the young adults to the edge of the forest. He would wait on the outside and watch for signs of trouble. They took four broomsticks with them for a fast getaway in case of trouble.

They walked through the forest, the row of young men following the row of young women. Hermione was the only one who could approach the unicorns, the only one not carrying a wand, and the one that had the deepest need. As before, they followed the stream. Luna was the first to see the unicorns. This time the two foals were accompanied by a female and a large male. She gestured for the boys to fall back. They were only to guard against centaurs now. Luna and Ginny stayed within sight, but did not cross the stream to the other side. Depending on the boots Narcissa had given her to keep her feet warm and dry, she slowly approached and did not attempt to touch. Kneeling on the ground before the mother, she pleaded with her words, eyes and heart.

"Please, an evil has touched me, and only an offering of your blood will preserve my life."

Meeting the male's gaze, she knew he was searching her very soul and finding her unworthy.

"Please, there is someone who loves me. If you will not for me, then for my friends who came with me into the forest to protect me, then for the man who has almost died and now needs me? He has sacrificed much for the protection of the young."

Tears flowed down Hermione's cheeks, and she was startled to feel a tiny tongue lick the tears away. Looking up at the foal, she felt that she had already been blessed. Even if she didn't live to solve the mysteries of the world, she had been touched by something pure and sacred.

She watched as the adults faced each other, knowing that the horseish nuzzling belied deep communion between the two magical creatures. In a flash of understanding, she saw that, though the unicorns were thought of by all as the creatures most closely associated with virgins, they knew ardor in their hearts--that the two golden foals had not come from some base instinct, but they were pure creatures that came from the purest passion.

Now, their mother stands, head bowed.

Now, their father makes a tiny, precise cut with his horn.

Now, the supplicant raises the vessel made to hold the shimmering essence that can save one from the very brink of death.

When the precise amount had been given, Hermione closed the lid and watched, still mesmerized, as the male licked the cut until the blood stopped and the wound healed. This creature had known pain for the sake of Hermione's life, but she would not carry a scar.

"Thank you," Hermione said as the unicorns nodded to her and disappeared into the forest.

Ginny splashed across the stream to take the vessel and seal it. Handing it to Luna, she helped Hermione back. When they reached a clearing, Ginny helped Hermione onto Ron's broomstick. Luna riding with Neville, the adults newly minted by war left the forest with their prize and a very tired Hermione, who had bathed in elemental magic.

When she woke up... when she opened her eyes, she realized that she wasn't awake. She was surrounded by silvery mist. She wasn't hot or cold. Her feet didn't feel wet, in fact she didn't feel anything.

"What happened?" she cried out, but no one was there to answer.

She began to panic. They hadn't let her say goodbye to anyone. She wasn't ready. She hoped someone would inquire after her parents. She didn't know where she was. She wasn't supposed to be alone.

"Severus! Severuuuuus!" She fell to her knees in the mist, sobbing and crying out. He said he loved her. He had said she wouldn't be alone. "Severus, how will you find me?" she asked the mist.

She thought she heard voices. Standing up, she tried to walk toward them, but she was disoriented. The voices seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere. She wandered until she stumbled. Stumbled over nothing, over air, over mist?

"How will I find you?"

"There is no need, my love." Strong arms lifted her to her feet.

"Severus?" Those very arms lifted her off her feet and held her to his chest, to his heart.

"Yes. Did you doubt?"

He was carrying her through the mist, but she wasn't afraid anymore. He knew from whence the voices came, and he was taking her there.

"I was afraid. What happened?"

"Spontaneous magic. You didn't believe me, but your outpouring of love and gratitude manifested itself, and that was the last bit of magic you could handle. We'd planned so carefully to bring you to the point of death, but you always think you can do everything better."

"The antidote?"

"The antidote was for the Living Death. We didn't need that either. The unicorn's sacrifice caused your last outpouring of magic, and it is all Narcissa will need to bring you back at the right moment."

"What's happening?"

"I'm taking you to the room. This is what you did for me, though you did not know it. I followed your voice, and those of my other friends, back to my body. But you do not have as much time as I did, so I've come for you."

"How?"

"Dreamer's Sleep. Look, that's us."

She turned her head to see the bedroom emerge from the mist. There was Severus, looking peaceful in sleep. There was herself looking... dead. She shivered.

"It will be alright. We can hear them if you listen. Listen to Narcissa."

Hermione strained to hear through the mist. *"Her aura is reaching for him."*

"Is that what I'm supposed to be doing?"

"Yes. It would not be wise to release your aura into the ether for fear it would never find its way back. You need to reach for me with your aura."

"I can't see it. How can I do that?"

"See with your heart, my Hermione. Reach for me with your heart."

"How? I don't know what to do!"

Suddenly, Severus plunged them down until they were just hovering over his body. He positioned himself above his sleep-stilled form and then draped her over himself. "If you need a physical representation, then hold onto me here. Hold onto me with every fiber of your being until you don't know where you end and I begin."

Hermione clutched at him with her hands and then rearranged her hold until she was embracing him as tightly as she could.

"Now your legs, love. You can do it."

She wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles together behind him.

A disembodied voice cut through the haze. *"It's working. He must have found her. She's bridging the gap."*

"Closer, love. You must get closer. Lift your face to mine."

She instinctively obeyed, and he met her mouth in a searching, devouring kiss. He would have stolen her breath had there been any to steal. He caressed her in places his

real hands had not yet dared, but he needed to incite her desire. She gasped and cried out and kissed harder. As though suddenly frustrated with his lack of leverage, he rolled her over in mid air and took control. Clothes meant as little to them as cold or gravity or the hard ground. Though removed from their physical bodies, they were becoming one. Hermione felt him grinding against her, and suddenly he occupied all of her senses.

She had never seen her aura or Severus', but she suddenly found herself engulfed in that peridot glow that someone had once described to her and knew that their auras had fused.

She was suddenly very tired, as though they had physically joined. She felt the illusion of gravity asserting itself, but suddenly, he flipped them again, and she was again draped as though boneless over his body.

"You need to hold on a little longer. Your aura has anchored itself; now Lucius is binding your magic."

"I'm tired, Severus. I want to go back."

"You can't. Not yet. Stay with me. Focus on me." He shifted them until she was propped in his lap. "Look, you're so interested in synergy. Watch Lucius and Narcissa."

"Who?"

"Hermione, look. That is synergy, the magic that is produced by two people who have loved each other for decades."

"Some day we'll have that."

"I will need nothing more out of life when we do, my love." He held her to himself, and she began to relax. "No! Not yet. Stay awake. Stay with me. Watch."

Hermione pried her eyes open and was in awe. From her vantage point, she saw two fair heads bent over her body: arms and wands and voices in perfect unison. The power blew through their unbound hair, giving them an even more ethereal appearance. They reminded her of the two unicorns, two magical creatures living in one accord.

"Will we have children, Severus?"

"If you want them, we will."

"I will. I've been thinking I wanted to become an Unspeakable--to study love and synergy. I don't think I would really understand it until I've experienced it for myself."

"Well, do you think we can spend some time experiencing love and synergy before we start experiencing parenthood?"

"Absolutely. We're still young. We've got plenty of time." She leaned her head up for a soft kiss. Moments later, he took control of the kiss. She sighed in deep satisfaction, then felt a shiver. "What was that?"

"That was the curse. I didn't want you to see it."

"So they did it? It's gone?"

"It certainly appears to be that way."

"Now what?"

"Now they have to restore your magic."

With elegant sweeps and chanted words, Hermione's magic was restored to her body. It was strange to watch Lucius prop her up and Narcissa pour the unicorn blood down her throat, but she felt warmer somehow when they were done.

"And now..." Severus manipulated the ether and stood her in the air. Bending for the lightest of kisses, he said, "You may return to your lovely body and wake up."

"I don't want to leave you yet."

"I'm right there."

Hermione whispered into Narcissa's ear, "Put me back with Severus." She watched with satisfaction as Lucius picked her up and placed her at Severus' side. Squeezing his hand, she said, "Now I'm ready to go back."

Floating through the green and gold haze, she retook control of her body just as Severus regained control of his.

Hermione took gasping breaths as she reacquainted herself with the practice, then reached for Severus and fell contentedly asleep, knowing she was safe in his arms and secure in his love.

A/N: Tiny epilogue and many thanks to follow shortly.

Epilogue

Chapter 9 of 9

A summer day offers a glimpse of their happily ever after.

~ Epilogue ~

As a teenager, Severus had enjoyed sitting under this particular tree. Here he'd shared secrets with his childhood sweetheart when the leaves clung autumn-hued to the branches. Here he'd yelled nasty insults at her when the tree was full of hearty summer foliage.

He had thought it was her forgiveness he'd lacked all those years until another young woman stormed into his life and taught him that he was worth forgiving but that he

had to forgive himself. He had never before experienced the intensity of such unwavering, unconditional love. She wanted to study the magic of love, and he thought she was uniquely qualified to unlock the mysteries of that which had saved her life.

It wasn't in the study of essays, letters, or sonnets that she would gain insight into that unutterable magic. It was the way she knew when to argue and when to listen. It was kissing him even though he had morning breath. It was accepting his friends and standing by him even when the world didn't know what to do with him.

When the *Prophet* had announced that he was alive, her friends had figured out that her speech to the unicorns had referred to him. Ron had apparently turned uncomplimentary shades of red and green.

The Ministry had awarded Severus the Order of Merlin, First Class, then placed him under house arrest at Hogwarts.

Inhaling the breeze blowing off the Lake, Severus thought that he was only missing one thing that would make his 'incarceration' utter paradise.

And there she was in a yellow sundress, hair bouncing. He had suggested a conditioning formula to replace her Muggle one, and the result was simply magic. He couldn't quite see what she was brandishing, but her words floated down to him.

"Severus, I got accepted!"

"Which program?" he asked when she got closer, knowing only one answer would produce that level of excitement.

"Unspeakables. They liked my essay. I won't be taking my N.E.W.T.s until December, but I'll never have to return to Hogwarts as a student."

"That's too bad. I was thinking it was time for your private tutorial."

Pressing a light kiss to his lips, she gestured at the landscape. "I like the way you've decorated your office, Professor."

Severus suddenly found himself Disillusioned and under the faint buzzing of a Muffliato.

Their minds had reached out for each other; their hearts had touched. After days that felt like weeks, they had discovered synergy on a physical level, and Severus had had the honor of separating Hermione forever from the creatures who had saved her life. Neither thought it was a sacrifice.

~ the end ~

A/N: Yay, the end! Thank you so very much to everyone who reviewed! You're an amazing encouragement. I never imagined this story would end up on so many 'favorites' lists. Thanks for your patience, too!

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Thanks again to the whole fandom for providing so many neat ideas that I integrated into this story. I hope some of you readers have enjoyed the stories that inspired me as I wrote this.