

# Bricks and Mortar

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A series of chance meetings in St. Mungo's gives Severus something to think about.  
Pre-SS/HG

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Chapter 1 of 1

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He was really unsure as to how he'd let it happen again. Although, if he thought hard enough over the past couple of weeks, he could probably identify a chain of events, or maybe *instances* was more apt, which had led to the situation he was in now. Such an examination was infinitely more preferable to Severus than reflecting on the reasons *why* he'd let it happen again. Yes, those thoughts were best left undisturbed and unacknowledged; it was easier that way.

However, the girl was still standing in front of him, expectantly waiting for an answer to her completely nonsensical request. What should he say? Actually, he knew exactly what he *should* say, but did he really want to say it? The metaphorical box where he locked those thoughts best left undisturbed and unacknowledged rattled, and Severus immediately tamped down on it. He couldn't face those right now.

Perhaps he was reading too much into it, though; her request, while eminently nonsensical, was also rather innocuous. But Severus knew that it was a slippery slope, and he'd already slid right down to the bottom once before. He would decline. He would leave her with no doubt in her mind that he really was as distant and as unpleasant as many would profess him to be, and while studying her face for a moment, Severus wondered if maybe they were right in the first place. Could he really say it was an act? Truthfully, no; somewhere along the way, he had become his persona, and he was too set in his ways to change now. Yes, he would decline. It was easier that way.

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**Two weeks prior**

Severus took his time answering the knock at his front door. He knew precisely who it was; his wards recognised the magic of the person currently standing on his doorstep. However, knowing that it was not some renegade Death Eater or disgruntled ex-student seeking retribution did not mean the person would be greeted with any more enthusiasm. He might have been tempted to ignore the knock, were it not for the undeniable curiosity he felt at someone actively seeking him out at his home.

'Minerva,' he stated blandly as he finally wrenched the door open. 'What a pleasant surprise.'

'Severus, sorry to call unannounced, but I wonder if I might have a word?' The old witch peered at him through her spectacles.

Severus shrugged. 'If you like.'

He moved to let her inside and directed her into his living room, noting with a little impatience her obvious appraisal of her surroundings. Making for his armchair, he indicated for her to sit on the only other option available, a battered old settee. He didn't offer her anything to drink.

'Why do you still insist on living in this place, Severus? You're surrounded by Muggles, and well, the area is a bit, ah...'

'Drab? Dingy? Run-down? It's a house, Minerva; it's a roof over my head. It does the basic functions I need for my continued existence. What else do I need? A garden where I can tend to my many flowerpots and window boxes? Or maybe four bedrooms to house my bustling family?' The narrowing of her eyes and the thin set of her lips told Severus all he needed to know; he'd annoyed her already.

'All right,' she huffed indignantly. 'Well, I notice your voice seems better.'

Severus shifted in his chair. It was perhaps his one claim to vanity that he felt self-conscious of the mess that blasted snake had left of his throat. Several years after the fact, his voice no longer held the raspy quality it had had directly after the War, but there were prolonged bouts where he sounded like he had a bad case of tonsillitis. It felt like it, too.

'I've developed a potion that gives me temporary respite, but it has gradually been improving on its own. So,' he continued briskly, 'I'm sure you haven't come by merely to pass judgement on my living quarters and assess my physical condition.'

'On the contrary, Severus, I am always concerned for your well-being... '

Severus raised an eyebrow.

'But yes, I have come here with a purpose in mind. You see, Hagrid has contracted a bad case of Dragon Pox, and he's very ill at St Mungo's.'

Severus rubbed a hand over his chin. Dragon Pox was highly contagious and potentially life threatening. 'I'm sorry to hear it, but what do you want from me? I can't imagine it's to take over Hagrid's Care of Magical Creature classes. It's not, is it?' He fixed her with a glare.

Minerva shook her head with a rueful smile. 'No, no, indeed not. It's the Healers at St Mungo's. They never expected a half-giant to be struck down so badly, and, well, he's not responding to the usual method of care.'

Severus observed the sudden glassy sheen in the eyes of the woman opposite him, and he lowered his gaze. He had faith, however, that Minerva knew better than to subject him to tears. 'I'm not a mediwizard, Minerva.'

'I know, well, I thought... Look, no one knows potions better than you do, Severus, and I wondered if you might be willing to have a look at the case. They've tried simply upping the dosage it didn't work, and without a precedent, they are unsure as to how to proceed. Hagrid's Healer reckons that if the potion could be modified to accommodate Hagrid's physiology, then he might be healed.'

Snape sighed. 'Minerva, Gunhilda of Gorsemoor created the immensely complex Dragon Pox potion well over four hundred years ago. For my own part, I am not sure I can contribute anything original towards it, and as I said, I am no mediwizard.'

'I know, Severus, but if anyone can do it, you can. Hagrid's Healer is happy to help with the biological side of things.'

It wasn't that he felt any particular affection for Hagrid, but still, it was Hagrid, and he could hardly say no. Minerva would never forgive him, and he'd made himself into enough of a pariah as it was without adding a refusal to help a dying half-giant to the long list of aberrations. With a brusque nod, he indicated his acquiescence.

'Thank you. I knew I could rely on you, Severus.'

Snape ignored her thanks. 'How did he even contract Dragon Pox? It's increasingly rare in the British Isles these days.'

Minerva gave an impatient wave of her hand. 'Oh, he went traipsing off to the continent with that bloody brother of his...something to do with their mother...and brought it back with him! As soon as I saw the greenish tinge to his skin, I told him to get to St Mungo's immediately before half of Hogwarts went down with it.'

'Bumbling idiot,' muttered Snape irritably. 'I hope you were careful; you're no spring chicken, after all.'

Minerva laughed sharply. 'Thank you, Severus, I hadn't noticed.'

'You're welcome, Minerva.'

'We had to inform the Ministry, and they immediately sent mediwizards to sterilise everything Hagrid had come into contact with since re-entering the country, which wasn't much, thankfully.'

They lapsed into silence for a moment before Minerva spoke once more, rather tentatively. 'I've, ah, arranged for you to meet Healer Glossop at one o'clock, tomorrow.'

'Very well,' he acknowledged somewhat reluctant. He hated St Mungo's, and Merlin only knew how often he'd be going back and forth there now.

Minerva stood up. 'Thank you again, Severus, I appreciate the trouble you will be going to. I know you've been living the, that is to say...'

'The life of a recluse, Minerva, is that it? Do you think I've suddenly developed agoraphobic tendencies? Or that I've forgotten how to function in the outside world?' Severus gave her an impatient look. 'It is fine; I'll let you know what progress we make.'

Minerva nodded and took his words for what they were: a dismissal. Once she'd left, Severus allowed himself to relax and put a hand over his eyes. Maybe she was right, in some small way, at least. He didn't leave his home unless absolutely necessary; he had no need to, and now this would put his routine all out of sync. But still, he wasn't going to make a big deal out of it.

His mind turned to the potion, and that eased his thoughts somewhat. He hadn't had such an enticing challenge to occupy himself with for a while. It was a complex potion, but he knew it by heart, having brewed it occasionally for St Mungo's in the past. He would have to dig out his notes because, of course, despite what he'd intimated to Minerva, he had, at some point, set down his own ideas for improving the potion.

First, he had more pressing business to attend to. He took a swig out of the vial of potion he kept within his robes and closed his eyes gratefully as the liquid began to work. He wasn't used to talking for any length of time, and his bloody throat hurt like the blazes.

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The following day, as the time steadily approached one o'clock, Severus entered what appeared to be a dilapidated, old department store and found himself in the reception area of St Mungo's. He swallowed a grimace at the brightness and cloyingly sterile stench that permeated the air.

'I'm here to see Healer Glossop about Rubeus Hagrid.'

The receptionist looked up, and Severus immediately noted recognition in the widening of her eyes, but the girl asked for his name, regardless.

'Unfortunately, there was no room to fit Mr Hagrid into the Magical Bugs and Diseases ward, so he is up on the fifth floor, in room 562.'

Severus nodded and made for the lift to transport him up to the fifth floor, whereupon he skirted the hospital shop and tearoom to find a corridor of mostly vacant rooms. Just as he was reaching room 562, a rather short and stubby man appeared around the door, dressed in the requisite lime-green Healer robes.

'Mr Snape, I presume? Welcome! I'm Healer Glossop, but you may call me Ted.'

'Severus,' muttered Snape as he shook the proffered hand.

The little Healer directed them away from Hagrid's door and into an office opposite. He clapped his hands together and looked around the room brightly. 'You may use this room whenever you like. Now, before we do anything, you'll have to change your robes.'

Snape fixed the man with an unblinking stare. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Yes,' replied Ted smilingly, 'Hagrid is highly contagious, and we can't risk you transferring any of the disease to, well, anywhere, so you'll have to wear Healer robes when coming into any contact with our patient.'

Snape grimly turned to the set of robes the Healer pulled out of a cupboard. He had to be joking. Merlin, the lime-green was hurting his eyes just looking at it. Of all the... !

'They are specially designed and charmed to protect against contagious toxins, as well as a multitude of other factors.'

*But they're lime-green,* thought Severus. He hadn't signed on for this; Minerva would owe him one, and Hagrid, too, if he got better. He could hardly refute the logic the Healer expounded, but he had one last straw to cling onto.

'I'm not a Healer, surely...?'

'Oh, don't worry; you'll have a badge to indicate you are a visitor. It's a crime to impersonate a Healer, after all!' Glossop chuckled. 'Join me in Hagrid's room when you are ready.'

He disappeared in a flash of green, and Severus eyed the garish robes forlornly; there was nothing else to be done. He unclasped his black robe and removed it, pulling on a white linen t-shirt. He swapped his black trousers for... Well, he wasn't actually sure what they were, but they were very lightweight. They were green, of course, but no matter; shrugging on the long over-robe covered them completely, with more green. Severus caught his reflection in the glass of the bookcase and sighed. His dignity hadn't been compromised like this in a long time.

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Hagrid was lying prone upon a significantly enlarged and reinforced hospital bed. His skin was almost the same colour as Severus's robes and marred by angry pustules.

'Does he have moments of lucidity?'

Healer Glossop nodded thoughtfully. 'Sometimes, but the fever makes them few and far between.'

'How long do you think we have before it is too late?'

'To be frank, Severus, I am not sure. If this were a normal case, then at this stage of the disease I would suggest a week, but in Hagrid's case it might be longer. We just have to be thankful the brewing process for the potion is not a drawn-out one.'

'Yes,' murmured Snape in agreement as he studied the fallen half-giant. Hagrid was indeed lucky that the potion did not need a long time to complete. 'All right, ah, Ted, I think I've seen all I need to.'

'Excellent, we shall adjourn to the office to discuss matters further.'

Once ensconced in the office, Snape spoke up once more. 'Does Hagrid seem to be responding to any of the potion at all?'

Glossop shook his head. 'No, as it stands, the potion just doesn't seem to be potent enough to work with Hagrid's build. And of course, the longer it is left, the more advanced the disease is becoming.'

Severus nodded slowly. 'Well, we'll need to discuss what ingredients will be safe to add in increased amounts to Hagrid's system without compromising it.'

'Exactly. We will also have to make sure any traces of previous potions are completely gone before adding another.'

'All right,' replied Severus, his mind whirring already. 'Let us go through some of my ideas.'

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When Severus entered the hospital tearoom, he was relieved to see it appeared mostly empty for such an early time in the morning. He bought a cup of tea and two slices of toast and made for a space in a quiet unoccupied corner. He enjoyed a few moments of peace before his ears began to pick up on the increasingly worried tones of a young woman, sitting a table or two away.

'Dad, please, it's this way; we are going to be late.'

Severus, grateful to let his mind wander for a bit, glanced over to where the young woman was trying to placate the man who was, apparently, her father. She had her back to him and was leaning slightly over the table. Even from where he was sat, Severus could see the blank expression in the eyes of the older man.

'No, no, I have patients to see, my love, I must be off.'

'Dad, no, no, we have an appointment to go to. Please, come with me.'

Severus looked away from the rising distress evident in the woman's voice and turned his attention to his toast. Hopefully, this potion would have an effect on Hagrid, and he could get out of these ludicrous robes...for good.

'Dad, please!'

'Where's Liz? I have patients to see!'

Severus looked up again and saw that the two had now moved away from the table, with the woman still imploring her father to follow her. A Healer got up nearby and approached the woman. They spoke quietly together for several moments before the young woman was patted gently on the arm, and the Healer turned her attention to the confused father. The daughter watched as her father was led quietly from the room, and raising a hand to her head, she suddenly turned, as if unable to stand the sight any longer.

Severus quickly found his gaze locked with hers, and he knew he was not imagining the blank surprise on her face. In hindsight, he reckoned he might have deduced who she was from her hair. But no, it was too late before he realised he was staring at Hermione Granger.

A mixture of surprise and lingering distress was frozen on her features, and Severus abruptly lowered his gaze. Of all the people to bump into! He wondered what the odds

were of her approaching him, although the shadow that fell over his table implied they were pretty high. He leaned back in his chair and looked up with resignation. He noted she seemed a little, well, frazzled around the edges.

'Professor Snape, I, ah, well, what a surprise; I had no idea you had become a...'

'I am not a Healer,' he interrupted briskly. He observed the slight widening of the eyes as she heard his voice for the first time and then the look of abstraction as she contemplated the difference. At least she had the sense not to draw attention to it, unlike some he'd had the misfortune to encounter.

'Well, then...?' She pointedly eyed his green attire.

'If you must know, though I fail to see why it is any concern of yours, I'm here to assist with the treatment of Hagrid.' Severus picked up his tea, took a sip, and immediately wished he hadn't; it tasted like dishwater. He frowned when the girl flopped down into the seat opposite; he should have stuck to being a Healer and left it at that.

'What's the matter with Hagrid?' asked Hermione, deeply concerned.

'Hagrid has contracted a virulent strain of Dragon Pox; he's not responding to normal treatment.'

'Oh, Merlin, I had no idea,' she whispered, her gaze dropping to the tabletop in shock. 'Well, do you have an alternative to 'normal treatment'?

'Not yet, and by the way, Hagrid is *not* allowed any visitors, so when you inform Potter, as you undoubtedly will, tell him this time he can't come bounding in on his charger to save the day.'

The girl frowned deeply at him. 'But you can? Save the day, that is?'

Her tone was more hopeful than accusing, and Severus felt slightly uncomfortable. 'I did not say that,' he replied quietly.

Hermione was still for a moment before she tiredly rubbed a hand over her cheek. 'Poor Hagrid,' she whispered.

Severus remained silent, focused on tracing the rim of his teacup with the tip of his forefinger. He only ceased when she abruptly stood up.

'I must get back to my father... ' Hermione cleared her throat. 'Good luck, sir, with Hagrid; I'll come and see how he's doing the next time I'm, ah, here.' She nodded and walked off in the direction of the lift.

Severus watched her departure with a little interest...she had looked tired and stressed. Fleetingly, he wondered if perhaps he should have been more tactful where the news of Hagrid was concerned. Well, it was done now. Still, her presence was intriguing; what could have possibly happened to her father, a Muggle, which warranted treatment at a magical hospital?

Severus got up and headed back towards Hagrid's room, where Glossop was currently monitoring the effects of his first attempt at a modified cure. He had more pressing matters to turn his mind to than former students and their relations.

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It turned out the potion had no significant impact on Hagrid's condition, but Severus wasn't deterred. He had several avenues yet to explore, and he was confident that he would hit on something successful soon. Two days later, he was back in his green robes and administering another concoction to the half-giant. Hagrid was partly awake, but didn't seem to recognise where he was or whom he was with. That suited Severus just fine; he and Dumbledore's most fervent supporter hadn't exactly been on the best of terms when last they'd crossed paths.

Severus gazed at the supine body for several moments as if expecting the potion to have an instantaneous effect, all the while knowing full well that it wouldn't. He nodded at Glossop and left the room, crossing the corridor and entering the office. Sitting at the desk, he Summoned from his robes the potion for his throat and swallowed a dose. Pulling his notes towards him, he realised that if this second potion had no obvious effect on Hagrid, then he would have to consider some more complicated solutions.

He examined his list of ingredient ratios. He'd increased the quantity of dragon heartstring in the previous potions, so maybe if next time he included more powdered snake fangs...? No, too much of those might prove detrimental when combined with the Murtlap Essence. Maybe if he changed the...

A knock on the door arrested Severus' attention, and he looked at it in annoyance. Who would disturb him in this quiet part of the hospital? He got up and pulled the door open; it was only through years of practicing exceptional emotional control that he managed to hold in the pained groan that automatically lodged in his throat.

'Potter, what are you doing here?'

Severus brazenly studied the erstwhile bane of his existence: same glasses, same scruffy hair, same gormless expression. As he stared down his nose at Potter, Severus realised they could almost be back at Hogwarts, that is, were it not for Potter's Auror robes and his own ridiculously green ones.

'It's been a long time, Snape.'

'Has it?'

'Look, I'm worried about Hagrid, and I just want to know how he is.'

'Considering he has not had the courtesy to make a miraculous recovery overnight, he's the same as yesterday...exceptionally ill.'

Harry turned with a huff and moved towards the window that looked into Hagrid's room. He peered in closely for several moments. 'Apparently, my paternal grandparents died of Dragon Pox.'

Severus pressed his teeth together. Why was he telling him this? He was damned if he was going to stand around and lament with Harry Potter, of all people. 'I suggest you speak to Hagrid's Healer.' With that, Severus swept off down the corridor to the tearoom. Perhaps he'd try the coffee instead, this time. Picking up a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, he sat down to bide his time until it was safe to return.

'Professor Snape?'

Peace was obviously a lost cause. 'What is it, Miss Granger? It is still Miss Granger, I take it?'

Hermione nodded. 'May I?'

Severus folded up his newspaper and shrugged. 'As I've already told Potter, Hagrid still hasn't improved.'

Hermione sat down. 'I didn't really expect he would. So Harry is here, then? *Did* tell him to leave his charger at home.'

Severus noted the rather wan quirk of her lips. 'Well, he appears to have listened, for once.'

A rather awkward silence descended, and Severus wondered why she'd approached him, if not to enquire as to Hagrid's condition. There was something curiously different about her than what he remembered of her as student, and he wasn't quite sure what it was. Though, in all honesty, he couldn't say he was in any particular hurry to find

out. Unusually, she didn't seem to have any urge to speak; she just sat there concentrating on stirring her tea, with that impossible shroud of hair falling forward over her shoulders. She appeared to sense his surveying of her, and she looked up uncomfortably, clearly searching for something to say.

'Your, um, voice. It sounds different today. What happened?'

Severus sighed heavily. 'I haven't the time for this, Miss Granger.' He made to leave, but she interrupted him.

'I'm sorry; I don't mean to pry. Look, I disturbed you, so/ should go.'

Severus said nothing; what did it matter to him, either way? Hermione gathered her cup and saucer together, pushed her chair back, and moved to another table, sitting so her back was to him. Severus picked up his paper, but quickly dropped it with a huff. Banishing his own cup to the sideboard with his wand, he got up to leave. Unwittingly, he caught sight of Hermione Granger once more, and he paused. Staring intently into her teacup, as if it held the answer to everything, she presented a rather forlorn picture. Not really sure what he was about, he deliberately made to pass her table as he left the tearoom.

'It's a relic of the bite I received to my neck. The potion I take temporarily eases the, ah, scratchiness of my voice.'

Her head snapped up in surprise. 'Oh, I see. Is it painful?'

'Slightly.' Severus narrowed his eyes, half-expecting her to exhibit some sign of triumph at her dreaded ex-Potions master's suffering, but still, he wasn't really surprised when she didn't.

'I'm sorry.' The corners of her lips lifted tentatively.

'Yes, well... I shall bid you good day.' He inclined his head a fraction and moved quickly away. He was infinitely glad to see that when he returned to Hagrid's room, Harry Potter was no longer in evidence. He had to be grateful for small mercies, he supposed.

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After a day away from St Mungo's, Severus returned on the next with his third concoction. While the second had been fundamentally unsuccessful, Glossop seemed to think it had positively affected the greenish pallor to Hagrid's skin...so that was an encouraging sign to work from. It had nearly been a week since he'd started testing potions on Hagrid, and it was cutting it close to the edge to only now see any indication that they were moving in the right direction.

He entered the office and contemplated Transfiguring his robes so that he might go into Muggle London for some breakfast; at least that way he could avoid running into his old pupils at every turn. He'd just removed his wand from his sleeve when he became aware of a movement outside. He stepped back slightly, so he could see fully out of the small window in the door.

For the love of Merlin!

Severus flung the door open and glared at a startled Hermione Granger. 'Why are you lurking outside Hagrid's door, Miss Granger? *to/d* you that you could not go in, but fine, you can brew your own bloody cure when you're struck down with Dragon Pox!'

Hermione scowled. 'Look, I wasn't about to go in! Harry said I could still see Hagrid if I wanted, through the window.' Saying this, she moved towards the glass and leaned her arms slightly on the ledge. Severus grimaced, though why, he wasn't sure. He should be used to Gryffindor sentimentality by now.

'I've never seen anyone with Dragon Pox before, except in books; he looks very green.'

*Don't we all*, thought Severus grimly. 'We might cure him of the ailment, but he might not ever fully lose the green tinge.'

'Oh, dear; well, I'm sure it is a small price to pay, in the long run, and besides, it's not as if you can see much of his face with all that hair anyway.' She turned towards him with a small smile.

Severus only twitched his eyebrow at her rather feeble attempt at wit. She turned back to the scene before her, and he watched as her shoulders suddenly slumped and her head rested on the glass for the briefest of moments, and then she was moving as if to leave. At the bleakness of her expression, he could not help but be aware of the elephant in the room...the very reason she was in St Mungo's, seemingly every day, in the first place.

'Merlin, what *is* wrong, Miss Granger? You're always wandering around this hospital looking for all the world like some curly-haired, female Atlas!'

Hermione looked at him with no small measure of surprise, apparently taken aback by his bluntness. For his own part, Severus wondered why he hadn't kept his mouth shut. Did he truly want to know about the trials and tribulations of Hermione Granger? His thoughts turned to confusion when the girl in front of him slowly began smiling and then gave a few self-deprecating laughs. Oddly, it was the most animated he'd ever seen her since they'd struck up an unfortunate habit of crossing paths.

'Oh, Professor Snape, you are a card, indeed!'

Snape reflexively straightened, unsure he would like where this was headed. Hermione shook her head good-naturedly before continuing.

'Only you, *only* you, in the space of one derisively delivered comment, can cut me down to size so effectively, and do you know what? I'm going to thank you for it. You're right; one would think that I have the weight of the heavens on my shoulders, and I'm grateful to be reminded that my problems are *not* the worst in the world.'

She'd got all that from one comment? Severus raised his eyebrows; well, he had had a lot of practice in shaving a few inches off people who deserved it.

'I mean, I'm wandering about feeling sorry for myself while Hagrid's in there right now, practically knocking at death's door!'

'You may want to say that a bit louder, Miss Granger, as I don't think Hagrid*quite* heard you.'

Hermione immediately twisted her head round to the window in concern. Severus smirked; there was no way Hagrid had heard anything.

'I'm sorry, I don't mean to be flippant about Hagrid's condition. It's just, I *have* been rather self-absorbed lately. I shouldn't let it affect me so...'

Severus wasn't sure he could take any more self-flagellation, and he interrupted her. 'I'm sure you have reason enough for your distraction.'

Hermione sighed. 'Yeah, maybe; still, self-pity isn't a good look, is it?'

'Perhaps you are mistaking self-pity for concern; from what I, ah, gather of your situation, it is understandable that it would be on your mind a great deal.'

Hermione fixed him with a stare for a moment. 'Yes, it is difficult, but I'm afraid a lot of the time I am selfishly preoccupied with my own guilt. It's my fault that my father is in the mess that he is.' She flushed slightly and lowered her gaze to the floor. 'I'm sorry, I am sure...no, I know you have better things to do than stand around here listening to my woes. I'll just...'

'What is the matter with your father, Miss Granger?'

Hermione froze for a moment, and she could not meet his gaze as she spoke. 'He, ah, he's suffering from spell-damage, a result of prolonged exposure to a Memory charm.'

'And how did he come by such a charm, being, as he is, a Muggle?'

She frowned slightly at his questioning, and Severus himself wasn't sure why he was pressing her like this. It appeared he was more intrigued than he'd led himself to believe.

'I cast it on him.'

Severus kept his face blank, but inside he could admit to feeling a jolt of surprise. So, Hermione Granger had wiffully practised magic on a Muggle, and it had gone wrong. The thought didn't give him any satisfaction, as perhaps some might assume.

'Maybe we could continue this conversation somewhere more comfortable, sir?'

Snape blinked, a small part of him internally baulking at the confirmation that, yes, he was willingly conversing with one-third of the Gryffindor Dream Team. Wordlessly, he opened the door to the office and gestured for her to enter. He had barely sat down before she spoke.

'I was protecting them from Voldemort.' Her palms were flat upon the table, and she was unconsciously leaning forward in an entreating gesture.

'You don't need to justify yourself to me, Miss Granger; no doubt you did what you thought you had to do.'

'I have justified it to myself hundreds of times but... you see, I had to hide them from Voldemort. I, well, I modified their memories...completely...and shipped them off to Australia.' Hermione lifted a hand to her hair and moved it away from her face uncomfortably. 'Merlin, it sounds so cavalier now, but it was a difficult decision to make. I could not risk Voldemort getting hold of them, and I could not risk them keeping me from going with Harry. They would have worried about me, had they known, and I would have been worrying about them; it seemed the best thing to do.' She paused and looked at him, slightly unsure of herself, as if she were hoping for validation from him. Severus said nothing.

'When I, ah, finally got to them and undid the charm I had placed on their memories, they, well, they were shocked and hurt. I didn't understand it at the time, but now I can see it from their point of view. I had taken advantage of them. I had *stolen* a year of their lives! A year of their lives they then could not remember living; they must have been so confused. I think it was really the first time they realised what magic is capable of, not merely the parlour tricks of Transfiguring a cup into a mouse, but being able to affect something so intrinsically personal and off-limits as memories. It shook them up.'

Hermione folded her arms across her chest defensively. 'I didn't realise at the time that I'd botched the removal of the charm from my father. Several months ago, he started forgetting simple things, little details, and well, we didn't think anything of it at first. Then, it became clear that there was a problem when he'd suddenly forget where he was.'

'How do you know it is magically induced?'

'Well, admittedly, we were not sure to begin with until one day he started talking about being in Australia. Immediately, I knew that something must have gone wrong with the spell. The specialist in the Spell-Damage ward confirmed it. She said there were residual traces of the spell still visible, but they had become so entwined within his memory that they could not be removed without damaging his memory irrevocably.'

'So, what are they doing?'

'They've since suggested some invasive treatment, sort of like Legilimency, in a way, to try and locate the remnants of the spell. So far, it hasn't been very successful.'

Hermione looked around the room distantly and sighed. 'I have done some research, of course, but the theory is so complex, I can't help but think I should leave it to the professionals; I've done enough damage as it is. I should probably have never attempted such difficult magic in the first place.'

Severus considered his next words carefully. 'What would have been the alternative? They are *exactly* the type of people Voldemort would have singled out.'

She looked at him in surprise, and he witnessed the comprehension dawning in her eyes. She knew what he was really saying: her parents *had* been singled out, and would have been targeted, had they been where they were supposed to have been.

'I see,' said Hermione quietly. She didn't say any more, and Severus wondered if that information changed the way she felt about how things had turned out with her father. Did it lessen her guilt? Probably not, he reasoned; her actions may not have been in vain, but there were always consequences for one's actions, as he himself knew only too well, and they had to be dealt with.

'My parents have accepted why I did it, but it's hard to see my father like this, especially for my mother, who...' Hermione trailed off as if suddenly aware of who she was discussing such a personal matter with. 'Well, there it is.' She shrugged.

Severus remained quiet. What was there for him to say?

Hermione blinked and cleared her throat. 'I, ah, my father's session will be over soon; I must go and meet my parents.' She smiled awkwardly. 'Sorry for prattling on... um.' She all but scuttled out of the room, her hand moving up to surreptitiously swipe at her eyes.

Severus remained where he was, unmoving for several minutes, until he let out a noisy breath and got up to seek out Healer Glossop. Miss Granger wasn't his problem.

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'Chocolate or carrot?'

Snape looked up from his newspaper with raised eyebrows at this non-sequitor. Hermione Granger was standing by his table with two small plates in hand.

'What if I don't like cake?'

'Who doesn't like cake?' she reposted quickly with a quirk of her lips. 'Chocolate or carrot?'

Severus noted the way she surreptitiously edged the chocolate cake towards him. He knew a double bluff when he saw one. 'Thanks.'

He took the chocolate cake off her and almost laughed at the expression in her eyes when she looked at what she was left with. 'Why did you buy carrot cake if you don't like it?'

Hermione sat down. 'Oh, no, I do, it's just, well, there was only one piece of chocolate left... '

'Pity,' remarked Severus as he stabbed his fork into the sponge. 'Is there any particular reason for your bestowing me with confectionery?'

'Just a small token of appreciation, I suppose, for listening to me blather on the other day. It was nice not having to listen to the usual clichés, you know, "Everything'll be fine." I know they mean well, but it's wearying sometimes.'

'That's Potter for you: wearying.'

Hermione laughed weakly. 'I didn't mean Harry...'

'My mistake.'

'So, what have you been doing with yourself these past few years, sir? I heard you were no longer at Hogwarts.'

Severus blinked at the sudden change in direction of the conversation. He was tempted to tell her to mind her own business, but from the look on her face, that was what she expected. He didn't like to be too predictable.

'This and that,' he answered vaguely.

'This and that?' she scoffed.

'This and that,' he repeated slowly. 'Why do you want to know?'

Hermione shrugged. 'Just wondering.'

'Are you, indeed?' Severus could feel the rasp returning to his throat, and he removed his potion from within his robes, pouring a generous amount into his tea. 'Well, there is not much to tell. I brew potions, mostly. Commissions and the like; generally living it up, as they say.' There could be no doubt as to the irony in his tone.

Hermione smiled and looked pensively into her tea for a moment. 'You've probably been living it up more than I have. You know, I really don't know where these last few years have gone. I feel like I should have made something of my life by now, but I haven't. I started Auror training.'

Severus huffed a little, under his breath, but Hermione heard him nonetheless.

'What?'

'Nothing.' He should have known she'd follow her little friends into the often-glamourised career of Dark wizard catching when the reality of it was much different.

'I *didn't* like it,' she pressed, as if knowing what he was thinking. 'Oddly enough, it was a blessing in disguise when my father became ill. The training was too intensive for me to be able to be with my parents, and so it was an easy decision to quit. I help out in their practice now; they're dentists, although for obvious reasons, my father no longer works.'

'Well, I don't know what you are worried about. You can only be in your early twenties. You have plenty of time to worry about what you are going to do with yourself.'

Hermione nodded. 'I suppose.'

Severus noted she remained rather unconvinced, but he didn't press the issue. Besides, what was he now, some sort of therapist, like they had in the Muggle world? Or an outlet for careers advice? It was these damned green robes, he knew it; they gave people the wrong impression. Still, perhaps he should tell her it was commendable that she was devoting her all energies to her parents. On second thought, he didn't think she would appreciate being patronised by him.

'Hagrid's condition has improved somewhat; his temperature came down slightly earlier. It just remains to be seen if it stays like that.'

Hermione's face brightened. 'Oh, that is good news, indeed!'

Severus nodded, inwardly hoping that it would continue to be good news. With regard to the potion, his options were quickly running dry. He had one more card up his sleeve, but it would be a very long shot indeed, and playing it would acknowledge that things were getting desperate.

When he returned to Healer Glossop, however, the look on his face said it all. The potion had not managed to sustain its effects.

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The next day found Severus trawling through several tomes in his office at St Mungo's. In fact, it would be fair to say it was// he'd been doing since he'd left the hospital the previous day. Checking book after book on healing properties, and then cross-referencing different ingredients... He would make bloody sure this potion worked. He did not want to have to tell Minerva, or Hermione Granger for that matter, that he had failed. She was glum enough as it was.

Healer Glossop appeared around the door with a small smile. 'How's it going?'

Severus waved his hand impatiently. 'All right, I think.'

'So you are confident this technique will work? I don't think anyone's ever tried such a revolutionary...'

'Yes, well, it is our only option left,' interrupted Severus irritably. 'I don't know that it will work; we'll just have to wait and see.' Severus sighed and picked up the parchment he'd been working on. 'Can you send for these ingredients...to get here by this afternoon? I will brew the potion tonight, and tomorrow, well, then we'll know... '

Glossop nodded and took the parchment. 'Of course. I'll arrange it immediately.'

The door closed behind the Healer with a click, and Snape rubbed a hand over his eyes. He was beginning to feel rather tired, indeed. Maybe it was time for a pick-me-up. He looked at his watch. It was usually around this time that Miss Granger... Severus quickly derailed that line of thought in abject horror. Was he really contemplating actively seeking her out? Was he so out of the loop that a chance meeting with an ex-student was something he actually anticipated? Minerva was probably right; he did need to get out more.

Suddenly, he had no desire to go in search of sustenance. He was fine.

But then, surely he was being ridiculous? It was only conversation, for Merlin's sake, and it was always so typically him to do something to spite himself. Severus stood up quickly and marched out into the corridor. Why shouldn't he get a cup of coffee when he so evidently needed one? He stalked briskly in the direction of the tearoom.

'Excuse me, I need your help...' came a worried voice from the direction of the hospital shop.

'I'm not a Healer!' he growled. Merlin, if that happened one more time... !

He pushed the doors to the tearoom open with perhaps more force than was necessary. Getting into the small queue, he collected his coffee and wondered briefly if he'd managed to avoid Miss Granger by the grace of Providence, except, he soon heard her voice calling him. He turned, reluctantly, and couldn't help but grimace at the sight of the redhead next to her.

'Come and join us, Professor.'

There was no way he was going over there. Hermione Granger was one thing, but Ronald Weasley was another thing altogether. He was about to ignore her when she spoke again.

'Has there been any change in Hagrid's condition?'

Severus gritted his teeth and grudgingly stepped closer to their table. He was gratified to note that Weasley avoided his gaze. 'There has not, I'm afraid.'

Hermione's face fell. 'Oh.'

Severus thought that summed up things pretty adequately, and he moved to leave.

'Won't you sit down, Professor?'

'No!' he was about to snap, except he caught sight of the swift, annoyed look the Weasley boy flashed at his friend.

'With pleasure,' he murmured and promptly took a seat opposite the two. Severus occupied himself with pouring a drop of milk into his coffee, inwardly smiling at the heavy tension and awkwardness that had settled between them all. At least Granger had the grace to look uncomfortable, he observed; it would serve her right for subjecting him to such company.

When the silence was beginning to become deafening, it was Ron who broke it. He cleared his throat and turned to Hermione. 'Look, I had better be off, or I'll be late otherwise.'

'Oh, all right, then,' replied Hermione, with surprise evident in her voice.

'See you later.'

Severus watched him depart and smirked. 'Something I said?'

'He received an injury at work a few days ago and has an outpatient appointment to get to,' she began and added in an undertone, 'in fifteen minutes.' She bit her lip to hide a smile before her expression became serious once more. 'It's been nearly two weeks since Hagrid became ill, sir. How long can you keep trying?'

'There's a good chance this may very well be the last attempt, Miss Granger.'

Hermione's eyes widened. 'But surely there's something...?'

'There is not, Miss Granger; all avenues have been explored, I assure you. This is Hagrid's last chance, and I feel I should warn you that this last potion will very much be a stab in the dark.'

'How do you mean?'

'Because it won't be the potion devised by Gunhilda of Gorsemoor, not technically, anyway.' He saw the slightly confused expression on her face and expanded. 'You see, the Dragon Pox cure was devised over four hundred years ago, but of course, ingredients that were available then are a lot different to what is around nowadays: new species of plants, new methods of harnessing ingredients, and indeed, new forms of preserving them. In the end, it all comes down to efficacy, which is key for the cure to work in someone of Hagrid's size.'

'So, you are going to substitute old components of the potion with new ingredients, which are more efficient? Well, that sounds great, the perfect solution...' She trailed off as Severus shook his head.

'No, on paper it sounds like the perfect solution, and if it was, then why did I not try this method from the off? That is because, in practice, things are not so clear-cut. I cannot completely change all elements of the potion; some ingredients have no other alternatives. Who is to say that the old and new will work well together? The theory may be sound, but there will be no way to test it first.'

Hermione clasped her hands together and sighed grimly. 'You'll administer the potion tomorrow?'

'Correct.'

Hermione nodded to herself. 'You know, if it doesn't work, at least we'll know that it wasn't for lack of trying, and that, well, if you couldn't solve the puzzle, then who could?'

Severus looked up sharply at this, a little surprised, and Hermione smiled gently in return. It was a change, indeed, to witness people having faith in his abilities, rather than doubt or suspicion, and it was comforting to know that at least one person wouldn't blame him if Hagrid died. Potter, who'd so eagerly pointed the finger in the past, would no doubt do so again, accusing him of not giving a damn... But then, things were so different now. Hadn't he already noticed the change in Hermione Granger? So much had happened in the years since Hogwarts that it was unlikely any of them were the same now as they were then, himself included. Near-death experiences did that to people, he supposed. Either that, or he was going soft in his old age.

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He'd stayed up all night and brewed three cauldrons of the potion. The potion was currently lined up in front of him, bottled and ready to go. Holding each one up to the light, there was nothing to distinguish between them in terms of clarity, and neither was there in smell. He was confident he could pick any of the three, and he would not be compromising on the potency.

Eventually, he picked the middle vial and handed it to Healer Glossop. The little man leant over Hagrid's face and poured the liquid down his throat, encouraging him to swallow as he did so.

Nothing happened, and yet again, Severus was left feeling rather anti-climactic. He took one last long glance at Hagrid's green and blistered face, before indicating to Glossop that he'd wait in the office. At least there he could pace in relative privacy. And pace about he did. It could take up to an hour for the potion to exhibit any sign of effect. 'It'd better bloody work, better bloody work...' he muttered to himself.

Throwing himself into a chair, he wondered what he would say to Minerva if it didn't. He should have been more forceful when explaining the limits to his assistance, but it was too late now.

'Come on, Hagrid, you great bumbling...' Severus paused when he heard a noise outside the door. Standing, he moved closer to the doorway. There it was again, a distinct laugh.

Who the hell...? Severus quickly pulled open the door and stepped into the hallway. Hermione Granger and her father were standing at the window, looking into Hagrid's room. Hermione turned around at his arrival, and there was a wide smile on her face.

'Professor Snape! Come and look!'

'What?' he uttered quietly, moving towards the window and hardly daring to imagine what he was going to see.

'He's awake, and he's moving.'

Severus gazed through the glass and felt the tension that had knotted itself up inside him loosen slightly.

'Dad, he's going to be all right!'



'I'm so pleased to hear it, my dear.'

Severus ignored them. He was content to watch Glossop perform complicated wand movements over Hagrid while the half-giant tried to sit up. He almost smiled at the irony that, of the two of them, Severus himself was now the most green. Peripherally, he was aware of the excitement beside him, and he glanced down sharply.

'Miss Granger, we don't know that Hagrid is fully out of the woods yet. I suggest...'

'Oh stop it,' interrupted a beaming Hermione. 'You've cured him, and you know it.'

Severus just stared at her, thrown slightly off-balance. He couldn't remember the last time someone had smiled at him like that, and he was grateful when she turned back to Hagrid.

'Excuse me, my dear, but have you seen my daughter?'

That recalled his attention, and Severus looked at his hands uncomfortably.

'Dad, it's me, Hermione, your daughter.'

'No, no, she's younger than you.'

Looking up, Severus caught Hermione suddenly turn her head towards him, except this time there was no glowing smile on her face, only an utterly helpless expression. He found himself strangely transfixed, and he shook his head slowly. 'I'm sorry, Miss Granger. I'm afraid I don't have the answer to everything.'

He really was sorry.

'I know,' she murmured after a time, the corners of her mouth uplifting briefly. Then she composed a bright countenance and turned back to her father, linking her arm in his. 'Come, I know where your daughter is. I'll take you to her.'

Severus observed their progress down the corridor until they'd disappeared. Then he pressed down on the handle to Hagrid's room.

'Ted... ?'

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So that was it, then. Glossop had confirmed that all the signs were pointing towards Hagrid making a full recovery; the green tinge was fading, and the blisters already receding. Hagrid was now sleeping normally, not the sleep induced by debilitating illness. The time was ripe for Severus to make good his escape...before Hagrid was swamped with various Potters and Weasleys. He'd send an owl to Minerva on the way, informing her of the good news. Removing his Healer robes, Severus placed them on the desk with some relief. He'd never have to step into them again; well, he hoped so, anyway.

Walking towards the lift, he also hoped he wouldn't be stepping inside the hospital anytime soon, either. It would be back to peace and tranquillity for him, just how he liked it. He was stepping out onto the street, to enjoy a lungful of fresh air, traffic fumes and all, when he heard someone calling him. He turned and was unsurprised to see Hermione Granger trying to catch up with him.

'Professor, I'm glad I caught you before you left.' She took in a few deep breaths, more from exertion, however, than enjoyment.

'Are you?'

'Yes,' she said earnestly. 'I didn't have a chance to thank you for what you did for Hagrid, and indeed, it strikes me that I never got to thank you for...'

Severus fancied he knew what she was about to say, and he lifted a warning hand. 'Pray, do not finish that sentence, Miss Granger.'

'Why not?'

'Because your thanks are not needed.'

She looked a little put out, but Severus remained firm. He had no desire to hear thanks for what he'd done in the war; he'd done what he'd had to do, and he wanted to forget it. Still, she was the first person to have the guts to try and thank him to his face, and he couldn't help but appreciate the gesture nonetheless. 'If that is all...?' He began to move off towards the Apparition point.

'Wait! Will I, ah, ever see you again?'

Severus froze on the spot, and he allowed himself a knowing smile. What was it about Gryffindors and their incurable sense of melodrama? He turned around to face her once more and raised his eyebrows. 'What an inane question; do you think that once I've Apparated from here, I'll disappear off the face of the earth? Or move to some God-forsaken land that no one's ever heard of?'

Hermione tugged at her jumper self-consciously. 'You know what I mean. Could we, well, could we keep in touch?'

*What a nonsensical request*, thought Severus, rather surprised. He could not see any reason as to why she'd want to continue their acquaintance, and yet, he could not deny she was genuine. Sighing inwardly, he realised he shouldn't have let it come to this; he would have to decline. It would do her no favours to become associated with him, and in the interest of self-preservation, it would be best for him to step away, too. It wasn't worth the hassle.

Yes, he would have to decline. It was easier that way.

'Miss Granger, I...' He trailed off and found himself staring at her. If he allowed himself to acknowledge that he *knew* he was making a mistake, then things suddenly looked rather different. She was obviously not 'Miss Granger' any more, not in the sense that he had once known her. Before him was not the student that he remembered, but a young woman who had her own problems and issues to deal with. And he, well, he was no longer 'Professor Snape'; maybe it was time for him to remember that.

'I cannot stop you if you choose to contact me, Miss Granger.'

'I know, but I would rather feel it was agreeable to you, instead of an imposition.'

Did he have the courage to do it? Severus averted his eyes briefly before meeting hers once more. 'Well... let us just say that I wouldn't find it *disagreeable* and leave it at that.'

'Oh, well,' began Hermione with a cautious smile, 'I'm glad to hear it.'

Severus nodded and once more moved towards the Apparition point. A second before he Disapparated, however, he heard her call out again.

'Wait! I don't know where you live!'

Severus appeared with a pop inside his home and smirked. Well, no one said he was going to make it easy for her.

FIN

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for her beta help : )