

Wounded

by phoenix

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 11

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A/N: This story was written as part of a non-romantic OC challenge. For the challenge, Severus is to befriend an attractive, single, female character, but there is to be no romance in the plot. This is set after HBP and I hope you will enjoy the look at Severus' potential future.

All feedback is appreciated.

Prologue

Severus Snape tried to open his eyes. He wasn't sure if it worked or not; everything was still dark. He then tried to move and found he couldn't. Panic began to set in as he wondered if he was bound and blindfolded, a prisoner. He could feel his awareness of his surroundings increasing and decided to wait a moment before trying to move again.

While he was waiting, he tried to determine where he might be. It felt like he was on a bed. The question was, where was that bed? Searching his mind, he tried to remember the events leading to his current predicament. He knew the battle had begun, but found he had little recollection of what actually happened. Had Dumbledore or the Dark Lord won? Or perhaps the battle was still raging? He couldn't remember.

Testing control over his body, he found that he could wiggle his fingers and toes. At least he seemed to be whole. Unfortunately, he still couldn't see anything. He felt a little stronger and decided to see if he truly was restrained. Experimentally, he jerked his arm and found resistance. That meant he must be a prisoner, but for which side? He truly wished he could remember. He continued to test his bonds, hoping to break free.

"He's at it again. Get the syringe," called out a woman's voice.

Looking around, he tried to identify the source of the voice, but found he still couldn't see. Had he lost his sight? This thought terrified him. How could he continue as a Potions master without his sight?

He could feel people holding him down, and he struggled harder. Whatever they were going to inject him with, he didn't want to permit them. He tried to tell them to leave

him alone, but all that came out of his mouth were indistinct grunts.

"Wait! I think he might be awake. Get Aurelia," the woman said again.

He continued to struggle and attempt to speak, but to no avail. He heard a new voice in the distance, and it was approaching quickly.

"Are you sure he's awake?"

"Yes. His eyes are open. He's never opened his eyes during one of his fits before," replied the first woman.

He felt hands on the side of his head. Instead of a crushing squeeze, it was a gentle touch that encouraged him to turn his head.

"Severus? Can you hear me? I need you to stop struggling. I need you to calm down," said a soothing woman's voice.

He didn't seem to be in any immediate physical danger, so he acquiesced.

"Calm. Take deep breaths. Can you hear me?" asked the soothing voice.

He tried to speak, but all that emerged were grunts.

"Nod if you can hear me," she ordered.

He hoped that he was nodding. It felt like he was nodding. He tried to speak again. "Ngaaaa aaaaaadddd?" he asked indistinctly.

"Why can't he speak?" asked the first woman.

The second woman, who he assumed was Aurelia, apparently ignored her coworker. He could feel the warm tingle of a diagnostic spell.

"Since you can hear me, I need you to answer some questions for me. Do you remember what happened?" Aurelia asked.

He thought her voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. At least it was friendly. He shook his head.

"You were poisoned and brought to St. Mungo's. You have been unconscious for nearly three weeks. You are still weak from that. Your speech should return soon. Do you understand?"

He nodded slowly. *Speech? I don't care about speech, you infernal woman. I want to know about my sight. And what poison? How could someone have poisoned me?* He tried to speak again, but it was still indistinct.

Aurelia considered her patient. There was something not quite right about him. She quietly moved around the bed to stand on his other side. His eyes remained focused where she had been standing. She frowned as she cast a more complex diagnostic spell. There were still remnants of the poison in his system. Hopefully, that was what was affecting his speech and vision.

"Severus?" she asked and watched his head snap around toward the sound of her voice, confirming his blindness. "I'm going to release your restraints, but I will need a promise from you. I need to you stay in bed. You are still weak from the poison. If you don't follow my orders, I will be forced to restrain you again. Do you understand?" she asked firmly.

He slowly nodded.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" asked the first woman.

"We only had him restrained because of the thrashing while he was unconscious. Now that he is awake, I won't keep him restrained. He's a patient, not a prisoner."

Severus could feel the restraints being removed, and he raised his arms in relief. Unfortunately, he found that he was still very weak and quickly dropped his arms back to his side.

"Bring some food," Aurelia ordered. Once her assistant was gone, she began speaking. "I know that you can't see. I think it may be a side effect of the poison. I'm still working on analyzing the poison; it is very complex. I don't think your loss of speech has anything to do with the poison. I think that's a result of being unconscious for so long. I know you have many questions. Here, let me help you sit up." She helped him to a sitting position, propping him with pillows. "I want you to sip some water," she said.

He felt a cup against his lips and tried to raise his hands to hold it.

She reprimanded softly, "No. Let me do it. I don't need you spilling water down your front."

He wanted to gulp the water, to sooth his aching throat, but she only trickled small amounts of water into his mouth. While he was drinking, he could hear someone approaching. He assumed it was the other witch returning.

"Did you need anything else, Healer?"

"No, thank you. Return to your reports," Aurelia replied.

Severus thought his throat felt better and decided to try speech again. "W-w-who?"

Aurelia strained to understand what he was saying. "What? Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Aurelia MacLean, Healer-in-Charge of the Augustus Winters Poisons Ward. It's good to see that your speech is coming back. Start small. Here, have some more water."

The cool water helped his throat, and he began to feel more normal. He continued to try to remember what had happened to him and how he had ended up here. When she pulled the cup away, he asked, "How?"

She sighed. "I was hoping you could tell me. You were brought to the ward already unconscious. Thankfully, Poppy Pomfrey had administered a general antidote, which slowed the progress of the poison. I've used several experimental potions to try to counteract the poison. Now that you are awake, I hope to be able to use your input to fully purge the poison from your system."

While he was listening to her, he tried to fill in some of the holes in his memory. Instead of recalling the recent past, he found himself trying to recall the distant past. Her name and voice were familiar to him, but the memory remained just out of reach. "Do I know you?" he asked weakly.

She could barely hear his question. She laughed softly. "I would hope so. We were at Hogwarts together." She could see the look of concentration on his face. Gripping his hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze, she said, "Don't worry about it. I'm sure the memory loss is temporary. It's not uncommon in people that are unconscious for a long period of time. Do you think you're ready to try some food?"

While he was hungry, he hated the idea of someone feeding him. Common sense overruled pride and he replied, "Yes."

After eating, Aurelia put him through a series of physical tests. By the time she was finished, he was panting and exhausted.

"Good. Much better than I had expected," she replied cheerfully.

"Better?" he asked weakly. *How could it be better? I performed miserably, failing more tests than I passed.*

"One does not instantly recover from a three week coma, Severus. I'll take what I've learned today and see if I can help with the blindness. Get some rest." She gave his hand a reassuring pat before leaving.

He was now left alone with his thoughts, his incomplete thoughts. Aurelia had said they were at Hogwarts together, but he couldn't remember her. Of course, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he was having a hard time recalling the names of any of his classmates. While a student, he had been a loner, never really forming any strong friendships, but socializing just enough to hopefully advance his social status. Even remembering all that, he found names slipping through his fingers.

Lying back on the bed, he switched his thoughts to the battle that had lead to his poisoning, hoping to remember what had happened. As memories returned, he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Severus had just heard incredibly disturbing news; the Dark Lord's forces were preparing to attack Hogwarts. It had taken years of research, but they had finally found a way to defeat the anti-Apparition wards, something more foolproof than Malfoy's Vanishing Cabinet. He knew he had to slip away and warn the Order; they had long known that Voldemort had a deep interest in Hogwarts, and the ancient magic hidden within its walls, but that magic had been protected behind the wards. Unfortunately, everyone was being watched closely; the Dark Lord did not want to risk word of his plan reaching anyone's ears.

Mere minutes before the attack, he was able to slip away. Minerva raised the alarm and sent for reinforcements. Severus could only hope that he had been in time. He remembered hiding in the shadows as the battle started. While he was fighting the Dark Lord's forces, he could not be seen to be doing so. As the battle raged, he could feel his strength waning.

Sound took on a distant quality, the explosions seemed to come from farther and farther away, but he could still see the flashes of spells. Raising his wand to fend off an attack, he could feel the world closing in around him, becoming smaller. The last thing he remembered was darkness enveloping him.

He cried out and fought against the darkness. There was someone trying to strangle him. He thrashed wildly, trying to throw off his attacker.

Aurelia grabbed his wrists and said firmly, "Severus, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

The darkness didn't disappear, but he heard someone talking to him, calling his name. He tried to focus on the voice. "Aurelia?" he asked nervously.

"Yes. Do you remember where you are?" she asked cautiously.

"St. Mungo's," he replied absent-mindedly, as he tried to hold onto the memories from his dream.

She could tell that he was lost in thought. "And where were you?"

"Hogwarts, at the battle," he replied soberly. In his memories, he could see bodies lying in the hallways, parts of the castle damaged or even destroyed.

"Can you tell me what you remember?" she asked softly.

How much could he tell her? How much did she already know? For that matter, was she even alone in the room? No. He couldn't tell her anything until he knew more. He had always been a survivor, and in order to survive, he had to know which side had won. "It's all fuzzy. Nothing distinct. Perhaps if you told me what happened, my memories would become more clear?" he asked hopefully.

She replied sadly, "I would rather not. Anything I tell you might influence your memories. The more clearly you remember the events leading up to your collapse, the better opportunity I have of helping you."

He knew she was right. Her accounting of the events might create false memories. "Can you at least tell me who won?"

She considered his question for a few moments before replying, "Voldemort was vanquished."

"Truly destroyed or merely driven away again?" He had to know.

"He is no more. Don't ask me any more than that. In time, you will learn the whole truth. If you remember something, anything, no matter how trivial, let me know. The smallest detail could be a clue."

She had a very trusting voice. He only wished he could remember something about her. She claimed she was trying to help him. For that matter, how did he know she had told the truth? What if the Dark Lord had won, suspected him of being a traitor, and was trying to prove it? If only he had his sight. Then he could use Legilimency to determine the truth of her words. "I will," he replied in a calm voice.

"There is always a Healer in the ward. Call out if you need anything. I'll be back later to ask you some questions and, if you feel up to it, I'd like to see if you could take a

short walk around the ward. Healer Brock will be by with your lunch shortly." She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

He held her hand tight when she started to pull away. "What time is it?" He had thought it was late at night when he first woke.

"It's shortly after one o'clock in the afternoon on the seventh of May. You woke around eight this morning. Is there any improvement in your vision? Perhaps starting to see some grey?" she asked optimistically.

He shook his head. "No. It's still completely black, there is no pain, and no headaches." He knew enough about poisons to know this was the sort of information she needed.

He could hear the confusion in her voice as she replied, "That's odd. Well, if you remember anything else, let me know."

He thought his first walk around the ward had not gone well. He was resigned to using a walker and found he could only take a few steps at a time without having to pause and rest. Aurelia seemed quite pleased that he was able to do this. He hated feeling helpless, and this was the most helpless he had ever felt. He couldn't see, couldn't walk and had no wand.

"Good, very good," she said cheerfully as she helped him back into his bed. Once he was seated, she placed a cup in his hands. "Drink, it'll make you feel better."

He thought he was getting water. Involuntarily, he grimaced at the bitter taste. "What is this?"

"Come now. Severus Snape, Potions master, has no idea what that is?" she teased.

He thought he could hear the smile in her voice. "Restorative Draught?" he asked cautiously.

"Very good. It will help you get your strength back more quickly. Once you're stronger, I can experiment some more."

"Experiment?" he asked nervously. All he could think of were some of the experiments he had done for the Dark Lord.

She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Nothing bad. I've had some ideas for potions that might help you, but you're still too weak. Now, get some rest."

He marveled at the idiocy of that statement. What else was he going to do? He couldn't see, which meant he couldn't safely go anywhere, even if he could walk more than a few steps. He thought he knew where the door to the ward was, but that didn't do him any good. "You were in Slytherin," he announced as he started to remember her.

"I told you that already," she replied.

"No, you merely stated we were classmates." If he recalled correctly, she had black hair and pale blue eyes. He already knew she was tall from when she had walked around the ward with him. She had been the one Slytherin of his year who might be his intellectual equal. For this reason, he had thought of befriending her, but he had been too intimidated by her beauty. Because of her beauty and intelligence, she had been very popular. Of course, her 'friends' were interested in her only because she had helped them earn passing marks. He had known that he was ugly, and she would reject him, so he had admired her from afar. Obviously, she was married since she had gone by Aurelia Carter during school.

Like his other classmates who had not become Death Eaters, he had no idea what happened to her after graduation. He was surprised to learn that she had become a Healer; it was a very un-Slytherin profession.

"So, you remember who I am? That's a good sign. Hopefully, you'll find more of your memories returning." She still hoped that he could provide her with more information about the early symptoms of the poison; that would help her isolate and neutralize it.

"Hopefully," he replied. Already, he had constructed a fairly good memory of the battle. He just wasn't quite ready to tell her about it.

After four days of therapy, he was feeling quite a bit better. She was still making him use the walker, much to his dismay. "I no longer need this infernal device," he growled.

She was pleased that he seemed more like his normal self. She laughed softly. "Humor me. I'd hate to see you lose your balance and fall."

"You expect me to believe a witch of your caliber could not catch me before I hit the floor?" he asked sarcastically.

"Keep treating me like you do and I may not want to," she teased. Stopping him, she appraised his condition. "Perhaps you are ready for something more than walking around the ward."

"Where others can see me?" he asked uneasily.

"Ah, yes, I'd forgotten, you don't like to show weakness. All right, take my arm." She looped her arm in his and led him clear of the walker. "Now then, we'll take it nice and slow."

As she led him out the door and down the hallway, he asked, "Why is the Healer-in-Charge spending so much time with me?"

"Because none of the other Healers have the kind of experience necessary to help you recover. The more time I spend with you, the more I learn about your symptoms."

"You are young to be the Healer-in-Charge, aren't you?" He still wasn't entirely sure he was being told the truth. His suspicious nature had kept him alive this long, and he wasn't about to let down his defenses.

"Well, this is a relatively new appointment," she replied sadly. Her predecessor had been killed only months before, a victim of the war. "Besides, weren't you quite young to be appointed Potions master at Hogwarts?"

"Point taken," he replied. He could tell from her tone of voice that this was not something she really wanted to discuss. "Why St. Mungo's?"

"Why not? I didn't want to work for the Ministry, and none of the more prominent Potions masters were taking apprentices. I didn't want to work for someone of lesser skill, so I applied here. How are you feeling?" She normally didn't answer that sort of question from her patients. Of course, none of them had ever asked.

"Reasonably well, though I think I would like to return to the ward." He still found it disconcerting to walk around without seeing.

"Good. I think I can try some potions out on you now. I'll bring the first one by after lunch. I don't want you taking it on an empty stomach."

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"Perhaps. Though it may be best if you don't know. I'm not used to having a patient as knowledgeable as you. But don't worry, if I haven't poisoned you yet, I probably won't."

"Probably?" he asked.

She grinned slyly, knowing that he couldn't see her. "It all depends on how agreeable a patient you continue to be."

"You wouldn't?" he asked incredulously.

"You never know. Here we are. I'll be back after lunch."

He was reasonably certain that she was joking with him.

Severus was sulking. He had been awake more than a week, and his sight had still not returned. None of the nine potions he had tried had helped. While she would not tell him what was in a particular potion before he took it, once she had assessed its effectiveness, she would generally tell him what he had drunk. She had even solicited his input. What he really wanted to do was go into the lab and work on the antidote himself, but he knew that was not possible without his sight.

The one bright spot in his day was that the interrogation the head of Spell Damage had given him was over. In that esteemed Healer's opinion, his blindness was not a result of a hex or jinx. Unfortunately, that was very perplexing. Aurelia said she could find no trace of the poison in his body. And he did have to admit that other than the blindness, he felt healthy; his strength had returned, and he was no longer exhausted from walking around the ward.

Without his sight, his hearing had become more attuned, and he heard Aurelia approaching; she had a very distinctive gait. "What foul potion are you going to give me now?" he asked derisively.

"None. Are you sure you don't remember any way that you might have been poisoned?"

He could hear a sense of urgency in her voice that he had never heard before. "I've already told you I don't." He still could not bring himself to fully trust her, not until she told him more about the end of the war.

"Without any more information, there's nothing more I can do." She paused, wondering how to continue. She was almost positive that Severus was every bit the loner he had been as a student, especially since no one had come to visit him in the last month, and he didn't seem at all surprised by that fact. "Do you have somewhere you can go?"

"Whatever do you mean?" he asked.

"There is no reason to keep you here. The poison has been purged from your system, and you aren't suffering from spell damage..."

He interrupted and said tersely, "Are you insane? I can't see!"

"Severus, calm down. Loss of sight is not a debilitating injury that requires hospitalization." She had expected him to take the news of his discharge poorly.

"Not debilitating? Could you do your job without your sight?" he snapped.

She was used to delivering life-changing information to people. "Severus, calm down and listen to me. And I mean really listen," she lectured. She watched him cross his arms petulantly. "Yes, your life has changed. I have not given up hope. I am continuing to research blindness brought on by poisons, and I hope to find a cure. In the interim, you will be assigned a caseworker that will help you adjust to your blindness and find a suitable occupation."

"You have not given up?" He had assumed from her tone of voice that she was done with him.

She took his hand in hers. "No, I would never abandon one of my classmates. I like mysteries every bit as much as you do. Now, do you have someplace to stay?"

"Yes." It wasn't much of a house, but it had been unscathed when he last saw it. He still couldn't believe he was being abandoned in such a manner.

"All right. I'll let your caseworker know. Whenever I have any new potions to test, I'll come by." She gave his hand one last squeeze. "You'll be fine."

Severus had been home a week, one miserable week. Today was his first day on his own, and it had already been a dismal failure. He had given up on shaving after cutting himself three times. He could only imagine what he must look like. Making tea had not gone much better than shaving. He had burned his hand on the water. None of this would have happened had his caseworker taken him to get a new wand like he had asked. It seemed that his had been destroyed in the battle.

He was not looking forward to making lunch. His caseworker would be coming by at dinner, and while he had been given a magical mirror to summon aid, he was too proud to admit he couldn't handle living on his own. As he tripped over an offending piece of furniture, he wished he had a wand so he could have the satisfaction of blowing it to bits.

When there was a knock at the door, he shouted, "GO AWAY!" He didn't want anyone to see him like this.

"Severus? Are you all right?" asked Aurelia.

"Come in," he called as he leaned back on the sofa. He supposed he could tolerate her presence. Perhaps she had a new potion?

"How are you feeling?" she asked so that he could tell where she was. She noticed that he had attempted to shave and frowned.

"Like an invalid. What did you expect?" he replied bitterly.

She had seen this before. Sitting beside him, she said. "It will get better. It will just take time for you to adjust."

"I don't want to adjust. I want my fucking sight back," he snapped. "Unless you have a potion for me, just go away."

She could tell that he definitely wasn't adjusting well to his new situation. "Actually, I came to bounce some theories off you." She could see him perk up at the possibility of being useful. "If you wouldn't mind coming with me, I have a small laboratory at my place so I can test new theories right away." Actually, she had talked with the caseworker and learned that Severus shouldn't be living alone. As a fellow Slytherin, she was probably the closest thing he had to family, even though they hadn't been close in school. She also knew he was too proud to accept her charity, so she decided to disguise it as an opportunity to do something productive.

"That is an acceptable arrangement," he replied.

"Good. Where is your bedroom?"

"My bedroom?" he asked cautiously.

"I'll pack some clothes for you. Just in case you have to stay overnight. We have no idea what sort of side effects any of the potions might have." She was actually planning on packing most of his clothes and toiletries, but he didn't need to know that.

"Of course. And your family won't mind you bringing me home?" When she didn't immediately respond, he asked, "Have I said something wrong?"

She wiped the tears from her cheeks, thankful he couldn't see her. "No. My children are at Beauxbatons."

"And your husband?" he asked cautiously.

Right now, she was most definitely glad that he couldn't see her. "Henry was an Auror..." she had to stop as her grief threatened to take control.

He realized her husband must have been killed in the war. Many Aurors had died. "I apologize for being inconsiderate."

She blew her nose on her handkerchief. "No, it's all right. I have to learn how to talk about it. He fell two months ago. We lost a lot of good people. I'll go pack some stuff for you."

He pointed to the far wall. "There is a hidden staircase behind the bookshelf. First door on the right." He realized they were more alike than he had thought. She was burying herself in her work, trying to hide her pain, something he was all too familiar with. He would have done the same in her position.

After working together for three days, Severus had learned some more information about the outcome of the war. She had told him that the students had been evacuated. Minerva and Filius, along with that dubious student organization Dumbledore's Army, had fought against the Death Eaters, buying time for the escape and for reinforcements to arrive. She was reluctant to say any more and refused to say anything when he asked about casualties.

"I have been having memories about the night of the attack," he announced over dinner.

"That's great. What do you remember?" she asked anxiously.

"I was working as a spy, as you probably know." He assumed this was the case since he was not under arrest. Obviously, while he was in his coma, someone testified on his behalf that he had followed Dumbledore's orders. "The night of the attack, I was with the Death Eaters. Before we attacked, the Dark Lord briefed us that he had found a way to defeat the anti-Apparition ward at Hogwarts. Before the attack, we all drank from a ceremonial chalice."

She interrupted, "Wait? You all drank from a chalice?"

"Yes. Is that significant?" He had seen nothing wrong with it at the time since everyone was drinking from it, and it was unlikely the Dark Lord would poison his most loyal followers.

She thought a few moments. "It might be. How much do you remember before your collapse?"

Now that he had begun his recounting of events, he felt more confident to continue. "I was able to get away a few minutes before the start of the attack. During the attack, I hid in the shadows and did what I could to slow the Death Eaters without revealing myself." He had dreaded revealing that information. He knew there would always be those that continued to question his loyalty, and that would only feed that fire. There was no one to report on which side of the battle he had fought. "As I attacked, I could feel my strength failing until I eventually collapsed." He finally started to make the connection. "The poison... It was something to ensure loyalty, wasn't it?"

She exclaimed triumphantly, "Yes! Now we have a starting point. Do you have any experience with this sort of poison?"

"Unfortunately no. And it disturbs me greatly. It shows the Dark Lord did not trust me." At least he thought he was the intended target, though it was possible it was the Dark Lord trying to ensure that his followers did not desert him again. He wondered who the Dark Lord would have found to brew this poison. It was obviously very old and very obscure if he had not heard about it.

She reached out and squeezed his hand. "Well, it doesn't matter now. He's gone. This will give me a starting point in my research."

"I wish I could help." He inwardly cursed himself for his stupidity and his weakness.

"I might be able to help with that. I know a spell that will read books aloud. My grandmother went blind and refused to see a Healer. She used this little spell all the time."

"There is only one problem with that, I no longer have a wand," he replied sullenly.

"Well then, we'll have to go on a shopping trip. Then, while I'm at work, you can go through some of my books." She smiled when she saw the change in his expression. For Severus, he looked downright ecstatic. "We'll go tomorrow since I have the day off."

A/N: I know, I'm abusing the Potions master. And for that matter, I am aware that he wasn't the Potions master when he left Hogwarts, but he held that position for so long, I can see Aurelia using that to tease him. This story was initially started before HBP came out and there was some minor reworking needed to keep it HBP compliant.

As always, feedback is appreciated.

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Severus was glad to be getting a new wand, but incredibly nervous about appearing in public. He had a reputation to maintain, and part of that was never showing weakness.

Aurelia came to his room, to escort him, and saw him sitting in the chair, nervously tapping his foot. "Is something bothering you?" she asked gently.

"No. Yes." He sighed. "I have a reputation to uphold."

She thought she understood. "I wouldn't worry about it. The odds of you running into someone you know..."

"Are actually quite good," he finished. "I have been teaching for nearly twenty years, and many of my students are now passing on their knowledge to their offspring. If they were to learn of my condition..." He still wasn't sure what he would do with his life now that the Dark Lord was gone, or even if he would be welcome to return to Hogwarts, but he wanted to keep his options open.

"Severus, don't worry about it. We'll Apparate straight to Ollivander's and straight back. Since it's early June, I wouldn't expect you would run into anyone there." She didn't want to tell him that if they could not cure his blindness, he would not be teaching anymore. It was best not to think about that. She moved over to where she could take his hand, and pulled him to his feet. "Come, let's go. I'll Side-Along Apparate you."

He started to pull away from her. "I am still capable of Apparition," he said defensively.

"Oh? And where are you going?" she retorted. He had not argued with her when they left his house, so she took this as a sign that he was feeling better.

He was once again reminded of how helpless he was. He had no idea where he was, and especially where in relation to Diagon Alley he was. "Very well." He let her pull him close and took hold of her arm.

After the crack of Apparition, she released him. "We're here," she said quietly as she discreetly led him to the counter.

In short order, they heard Ollivander's happy voice. "Ah, Severus, what a surprise. Come for service on your wand?" After the war, the old wand maker had returned to his shop, explaining that he had gone into hiding rather than risking being impressed into You-Know-Who's service.

"Actually, no. I have come to purchase a new wand. Twelve and a half inches..."

"Oak with dragon's heartstring core," Ollivander finished. If there was one thing he hated, it was rushing a wand purchase. "Well, you will forgive me if I insist on measuring you again. As you know, the wand chooses the wizard, and while that wand suited you then, each is a little different."

Severus knew that if he wanted to purchase a wand, he would have to allow the old man his games. Fortunately, Ollivander did not mention his infirmity.

Aurelia had taken a seat and watched as Severus tried out several wands. By the sixth wand, he was growing quite impatient. After the tenth wand, she thought he might hex Ollivander with whatever wand was in his hand.

Finally, Ollivander handed Severus a rather unusual looking wand. "Ebony and dragon's heartstring, thirteen inches." He watched expectantly, and finally saw the green and silver sparks shoot from the end of the wand. "Excellent. You see. The wand chooses the wizard. That heartstring is from the same dragon as your original wand. None of the oak wands had a core from the same dragon. It seems the dragon has chosen you. Of course, he was a particularly cranky Hebridean Black."

Aurelia couldn't suppress the chuckle at Ollivander's description of the dragon.

"Does something amuse you?" Severus asked snidely.

"Nothing in particular," she replied. "Come, I know you didn't want to stay out long." She waited for him to pay Ollivander for his replacement wand before grasping his arm with her hand and Apparating them to her house. She tried to pull away, but he held tightly onto her wrist.

"What was so amusing in Ollivander's?" he asked in a voice that compelled an answer.

"Oh, just the thought of you being tied to a particularly cranky black dragon. It's quite fitting, really." She couldn't help but laugh at the scowl he gave her. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go get lunch ready."

He followed her to the kitchen and took a seat at the table. "And when will you teach me the book spell?" He was impatient to learn a spell that would give him a measure of independence.

"After lunch. I hope that it will be helpful for you. I'll have to take a look at my books, write up a list of ones that might be useful, and the parts of the book you should look at. You will need to be patient. The one downside of this spell is that you can't skim through books." She paused for a few seconds. "Severus, we really need to consider the fact that there might not be a cure."

"Now that we know what caused it, we will find a cure," he replied gruffly.

She had let him live with his denial for long enough. He was getting around her house quite easily now, though she had to remind herself not to move anything around. He had even agreed to use a cane to prevent him from running into furniture and walls. "I'm serious. There are some maladies that cannot be cured. Now that you have a wand, I'd like to bring a therapist over who can teach you how to cast spells that will help you function without sight." She watched him lean back in the chair, cross his arms, and scowl at her. She knew he found this subject incredibly upsetting. "Be reasonable, it could take some time for you to regain your sight. This would help you learn to be more independent."

"So you can get rid of me," he snarled.

"No, I don't want to get rid of you." She had enjoyed his company. He was intelligent and interested in many of the same things she was. Ever since Henry had been killed, she had dreaded coming home to an empty house. Having Severus here had changed that. There were times when he filled the role as big brother and others when she was the big sister.

"Then why am I here?" he had been thinking about this much more frequently the last few days. He was beginning to suspect that she had not invited him here merely to work on the cure.

"I told you, it's easier to work on the potions with you here."

"Why am I *really* here?" he asked.

Knowing the lunch was taking care of itself, she sat across from him. "After Henry died, I buried myself in my work. I didn't want to come home to an empty house full of memories. The children offered to stay, but I didn't want them in Britain. It wasn't safe here. I didn't have any family to stay with me, they all had their own families to look after, so I'd been considering looking for a roommate for a few weeks. As you can imagine, it's incredibly tedious interviewing people to ensure that you can get along. As much as you don't want to admit it, you needed a roommate, too. Since I knew you, and that we could get along with each other, I figured it would be mutually beneficial."

"You deceived me," he stated simply. A part of him had to admire her for taking such a Slytherin tack.

"Yes. I know how proud you are. Combining what I knew of you from school and the stories Julia told me, I knew that you would not accept my charity. You really intimidate the students, you know."

"That is the entire point. Julia was a Ravenclaw, wasn't she? She's a very bright girl."

"Thank you. I think she'd be surprised to hear that from you."

"Why should she be surprised? She always received the highest marks in my class," he stated simply.

"Perhaps she'll realize that this summer. I'm hoping you can be Severus and not Professor Snape around them. They'll be home in a few days."

He had forgotten about her children coming home. "Perhaps I should leave before then."

"Why? Is it your pride? Honestly, you have to get over that. If you resume teaching in the autumn, I'm sure they will realize it's in their best interest not to mention the fact you were blind. If you don't, it won't really matter, will it?" She got up to finish lunch. "Besides, do you think you are really ready to live on your own?"

He sighed, realizing he had lost. "No. And I will resume teaching in the autumn," he said insistently.

She smiled sadly as she placed the plates on the table. She was not very hopeful that he would regain his sight, but the optimism he displayed made him easier to live with.

After lunch, she led him to the study to teach him the book spell. "Now then, it's a somewhat tricky spell. It took a while for me to learn it, so if you don't get it right the first time, don't worry." She realized that he would not be able to see her wand movement to mimic it. "I need you to stand up."

"Why?"

"I need to show you the wand movement." She stood with her back to his front. "Place your hand on mine." She pointed her wand at a book on the table, performed a rather ornate flourish, and said, "*Libri dico*." The book then began speaking the words. "*Finite*," she said to stop the book. "Did you need me to demonstrate it again?"

"Perhaps once more," he replied.

She demonstrated again for him and then moved away. "Now, give it a try."

Severus brandished his wand and said, "*Libri dico*." Nothing happened.

"Well, that wasn't bad." She stood on his right side and wrapped her hand around his. "Like this," she said as she demonstrated the flourish again. "Try just the flourish."

After half an hour, Severus was quite sullen that he had not yet mastered the spell. "This was a stupid idea," he proclaimed and sat in a chair.

Aurelia was perplexed. His flourish was now perfect and there was nothing wrong with his pronunciation of the spell. "Severus, try to summon the book," she ordered cautiously.

"Why would I want to do that?" There was no point in summoning something that he could not read.

"Humor me, please." She hoped she was wrong. After all, it was a complex spell to make a book speak, and she had been the only one of the grandchildren to master it.

"*Accio book*," he said and held out his hand, expecting the book to fly into it.

Aurelia frowned when nothing happened. She had been afraid of this. "This is not good," she said softly as she began to pace.

"Not good? That's a bit of an understatement, wouldn't you say?" he asked angrily.

"Try another spell. A simpler one, something we learned first year. Try Levitation." She watched expectantly as he tried to levitate the book. Again, nothing happened.

Severus threw his wand across the room. "This is useless. *I'm useless. I have no sight and no magic.*"

Aurelia summoned his wand. "It's not useless. It's another clue. This might help narrow down the search."

"And now I am completely useless to the search," he grouched.

"Not completely. Once Julia comes home, she can help you during the day. It will be good for her. Granted, she won't be here all day, but you can get a couple of hours of searching done each day. I don't think Helen should help you. She's too young."

"Now I am relegated to babysitting children," he said bitterly.

"Just like at school. You wanted to feel useful, right? This will give you something to do. Now that we have an idea of what we are looking for, you can give Julia a great deal of direction in her search. You've already admitted she's quite bright."

"Fine," he replied gruffly. He hated the idea of relying on a student to do his work.

For two days, Aurelia spent all her free time searching through books for any clue on the poison. She delegated most of her duties in the ward to the other Healers, supervising them as necessary. She was sure the loss of magic was an important part of the poison, but she had no idea how it related to the blindness.

Severus had become more sullen, and she made a point of involving him in the search in the evenings, frequently asking for his opinion even though she didn't really need it. She knew that any disability had the potential to cause severe depression. She was very concerned that was happening with Severus. While he might have been able to accept the loss of sight or magic separately, she wasn't sure he could handle losing both.

Checking the clock on the wall, she saw it was time for her to go pick up her children. She had tried to imagine how Julia would react to the news that she had chosen Severus as her roommate. Well, she would find out soon enough.

When Julia and Helen arrived from the International Floo Network, they ran over to Aurelia and gave her huge hugs that nearly knocked her down.

"Mum, I've missed you," said Julia.

"I love you," said Helen.

"And I love you both. Let's collect your bags and we can be on our way home." She was so glad her children were safe. She had initially fought against Henry's desire to send the girls to Beauxbatons, but after the battle that nearly destroyed Hogwarts, she was glad she had listened to him. While they were waiting for the bags, she said, "The two of you need to know something about my roommate. Julia, you know him."

"Him? You never said it was a guy," said Julia suspiciously.

"Don't worry. He's not there to replace your father. He's one of my old schoolmates, who found he needed someplace to live after all the fighting. I want the two of you to be

nice and polite to him. And you need to know that he was injured in the fighting. He's lost his sight and his magic."

"Oh, that's horrible," said Helen.

Aurelia paused. She knew that she had to tell them who it was so they could be prepared, but she knew that Julia would probably be quite upset. "Yes, it is. Julia, it's Severus Snape. I think you know how you need to behave around him."

"That's a joke, right?" she asked incredulously. "I mean, you didn't really take Snape as a roommate, did you?" How could her mother befriend the man who killed Dumbledore?

"Yes, I did. He is not an evil wizard, I'm sure you read about in the paper. And I'm going to need you to help him this summer. We're trying to find a cure to the poison that did this to him. You'll spend a few hours in the morning helping him search the library. No complaining. And neither of you are to bring up his loss of magic. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Julia replied sullenly. While she had read the article about the hearing that had exonerated Snape, it was very hard to forgive the man who killed Dumbledore, even after reading about Dumbledore's memory, where he admitted he was dying from a particularly nasty curse, and wanted Snape to be able to retain his position as a spy and thus ordered his own death.

"Can I help, too?" Helen asked.

"We'll see what you can do to help." Aurelia knew this would be a tense situation for a few days. Even while he was a patient at St. Mungo's, there had been those that had a hard time accepting the fact he had been spying on the Death Eaters and had remained loyal to the Order. When he had first been brought into the hospital, some of her colleagues had actually suggested she not help him.

When they returned home, they found Severus listening to the Wizarding Wireless Network. That was how he spent most of his days, since there was little else he could do. Aurelia led the girls into the living room. "Severus, we're back. I'd like to introduce Julia."

"Good afternoon, Professor," Julia replied politely.

"And Helen."

Helen ran over and gave him a big hug. "Hi, Professor. I hope you feel better soon."

He had no idea how to react to this sudden embrace. As a rule, children feared him. "As do I," he replied uncomfortably.

"Helen, what did we discuss?" Aurelia asked.

Julia was doing her best not to laugh out loud.

Helen pulled away. "That I should be polite. But that's what I was doing. You always tell me that hugs make you feel better."

"That may be true, but Professor Snape doesn't like to be surprised."

Helen turned back to Severus. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Now, upstairs with the two of you. I want everything unpacked neatly before dinner."

Severus listened as the two of them made a commotion running upstairs.

"I apologize for Helen's behavior. She's always been a very friendly child. I think she'll end up in Hufflepuff. Plus, she's always excited to meet new people."

"As long as she realizes that behavior is not acceptable," he replied.

Aurelia was relieved that he didn't sound upset. "Can I get you anything before I go work on dinner?"

"Actually, I have prepared a roast for dinner," he replied.

"A roast?" She unconsciously checked to see if he had all his fingers.

"It is time I do something to earn my keep."

"Well, I guess we'll find out how good a cook you are. Thank you."

Severus was adjusting to working with Julia. At first, she had been quite aloof, mostly due to the fact he had only recently been acquitted of being a loyal Death Eater, but over time, she had become more relaxed around him. While Helen was not helping in the search, she would read her own books on the floor of the library. Whenever she had questions about the meaning of a word, she would ask him. She also delighted in telling him about whatever she was reading. Right now, it was magical creatures. He found his personality softening due to the fact that he did not intimidate her.

Julia proved to be as bright as he had believed. She was one of the rare people that seemed to have an intuitive grasp of Potions. While he had not found anything specifically relating to his poison, he was learning a great deal about potions that had similar properties. He also felt useful answering Julia's many questions. Perhaps his life was not over.

Aurelia smiled as she saw everyone in the library. "Good afternoon, everyone. I've brought some books home for tomorrow. Did you find anything?"

Julia waved Aurelia over. "Professor Snape found one that he wasn't sure about, but he thought you might find it useful."

Aurelia looked at the book. "This is interesting. Julia, can you cook dinner tonight?"

"Yes, mum," she replied.

"What is it?" Severus asked.

"This has given me an idea. One I'd like to test out."

"Do you require my assistance?" he asked.

She knew he liked to be involved in any new potion. "If you wouldn't mind."

Severus and Aurelia lost time working on her latest theory. They were disturbed from their work when Julia poked her head in the door.

"Mum, are the two of you coming to eat dinner?" she asked impatiently.

"What? Oh, my. Has it been that long?" Aurelia replied.

"Yes, mum. Dinner's getting cold."

"All right, we'll be up in a minute." She turned to Severus. "I think that after we add the powdered dragon's liver it will be okay to simmer for a while."

"I concur," he replied.

After dinner, the two of them returned to the laboratory to finish the potion. After many lengthy debates about which ingredients to use and how to add them, it was nearing completion. "I like the color," Aurelia said.

"What color is it?" he asked.

"A brilliant azure with a hint of deep indigo when I stir it." She couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice.

"That's what I expected. I think a half hour should be sufficient?" he asked.

"Yes, that sounds about right." She couldn't believe they might actually have the answer.

"Mum? Are you still down there?" Julia called from the basement door.

"Yes, dear. We're still here."

Julia walked into the lab, wearing her bathrobe, and her hair tousled from sleep. "Have you been up all night? You know it's nearly seven-thirty?" she asked.

Aurelia checked the clock on the wall. "My goodness. So it is. I'm going to get ready for work. Julia, please make breakfast."

"You surely aren't considering going to work without any sleep, are you?" Severus asked.

"I have to go into work. I'll take a reviving potion and I'll be fine. You might as well clean up and eat, as well. We'll have time to try the potion before I have to leave."

Neither one of them was particularly interested in eating breakfast. Both were wondering if the potion would work.

"Do you really think you did it?" Julia asked.

"Are you going to cure the professor, Mum?" asked Helen.

"I certainly hope so. We'll find out here in a little bit. I need the two of you to be quiet today. Julia, no visiting friends unless Severus gives you permission, understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Julia replied sullenly.

"One day spent with your sister won't kill you. Now, the two of you do the dishes and the floors need scrubbing today. That should keep you busy."

Severus found himself smiling at the fact that she was not lax with her children. They grumbled about being given chores, but she did not relent.

"Now then, let's check on that potion," she said before leading Severus back down to the basement. She gave the potion a gentle stir and announced, "The indigo is gone. I think it's ready." Ladling some into a glass, she applied a quick cooling charm and handed it to him. "Well, give it a try."

He held the glass nervously; this potion would either be yet another failure or the answer they had been looking for. Finally, he worked up the courage to drink it. At first he felt nothing, then he doubled over in pain.

"Severus? What's wrong?" she asked as she knelt at his side.

He replied through gritted teeth, "Sharp, stabbing pain in my stomach."

She quickly cast a diagnostic spell. The potion they had brewed should not have been poisonous. She was relieved to see that it did not seem to be killing him. Normally, she would have given him a painkiller, but she didn't want anything to interfere with the potion. "Just lie still. I'd like to see if it passes before I give you anything."

He only nodded as she helped him to his side. After several minutes, though it seemed like an eternity, the pain began to dissipate. He found that he could once again breathe in something other than panting gasps. Rolling over onto his back, he tried to catch his breath.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

Cautiously, he flexed his fingers and toes, making sure he still had use of his limbs. "There doesn't seem to be any change." He still couldn't see.

"Did you feel anything other than pain?"

"Shortly before the pain started, I felt a brief wash of warmth, but it was quickly overpowered by the pain."

She stood and retrieved his wand from a drawer in the workbench. "Why don't you try a simple spell?"

He tried Levitation three times, and after failing the third time, threw his wand across the room.

Aurelia caught it before it hit anything. "I would ask you not to do that again. There is too much potential to break something. Besides, it was not a complete failure. The parchment did waver," she offered optimistically. While he had not regained his magic, this was the first positive improvement she had seen.

"That could have been from a breeze," he replied sullenly.

She knew it wasn't. There was no breeze in this room and the parchment was no longer moving. "I have an idea, a very radical one. What would you think about adding powdered Black Hebridean eggs to the potion?"

"I would think you are insane."

"I'm serious. I've just started thinking about your wand. Both your wands had the same core. What if you are in some way connected to that species of dragon?"

"Dragon's eggs are not used in antidotes," he replied sharply.

"And what do you have to lose? The potion did not work. Nothing would be wasted by giving it a try."

"You intend to feed me that vile concoction again?" he asked. He had no interest in suffering through that pain again; it had rivaled the pain of the Cruciatus Curse.

She ignored his question. "Since you aren't dying, I need to go to work. I'll bring the dragon's eggs home with me. Think about it."

He listened to her climb up the steps. He got to his feet and slowly approached the cauldron. After giving the potion a quick stir, he raised the ladle to his face and sniffed the potion. *She is truly insane for considering adding dragon's eggs* While he was used to going without sleep, the latest potion had taken a lot of energy out of him, and he decided to go upstairs to bed.

A/N: Thank you so very much to those that have taken time to review. It's always nice to know that people are reading and enjoying a story. I know. I'm continuing to abuse Severus, but at least he does have his snark back.

libri - book

dico - speak

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

A/N: Well, thanks to ancientgirl and chyara who caught that I had uploaded this chapter to the wrong story. I think it will make much more sense in this context. This is a warning not to do things while tired. :)

Chapter 4

Following a brief rest in Paris, they arrived at Malfoy's hidden villa in southern France. It was secluded in the mountains, and it was very unlikely that anyone would ever find him there.

Aurelia asked, "Are you sure he's here? It looks deserted." Actually, it looked like a ruin, one that had been abandoned long ago.

"He will be here. He has nowhere else to go. I'm sure he's enchanted the villa so it looks like it has not been inhabited for some time." He began walking toward the villa, leaving Aurelia to follow.

They both shivered as they approached the villa, having obviously passed through some sort of warding, as the villa now appeared as though it was inhabited.

"I don't like this," she replied. "What if our magic is affected?"

"I have not heard of a ward that would permit one person's magic and forbid another's. I think you will be fine," he reassured.

Even before they could knock at the front door, a house-elf was waiting for them. "Master is waiting for you," it told them before leading them to a sitting room.

They did not have to wait long before Lucius entered the room. "Severus, you've survived." There was only the smallest hint of surprise and disappointment in his voice.

"As have you. I was quite surprised to see that no one from your family was listed among the casualties."

"Well, the list was not entirely accurate. I fear the stress of the whole ordeal has taken a toll on my poor Narcissa. None of the Healers have been able to do anything for her," Lucius replied sadly.

Aurelia unconsciously gripped Severus' sleeve. She wasn't sure she could help, but her Healer instinct compelled her to do something.

Lucius finally took notice of her. "You must forgive Severus' appalling lack of manners." He reached for her hand. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am Lucius Malfoy. And you might be?"

"She is Aurelia MacLean," Severus replied without considering the ramifications of giving her name to Malfoy.

"Miss MacLean, a pleasure to make your acquaintance. How is it you have come to travel with Severus? He isn't normally very social."

Aurelia was about to speak, but Severus spoke first. "She is a classmate of mine from Hogwarts. We have renewed our friendship since my injury." He knew there would be no point in hiding that as it had been well publicized.

She wasn't content to leave it at that. Malfoy might have been a Death Eater and, for all she knew, so was Narcissa, but she was still a Healer. "If I might be permitted, Mr. Malfoy, I know something of the healing arts and would like to tend to your wife."

Severus tried not to react to her statement. He did not want to be left alone with Lucius in his vulnerable state, but she had left him with no choice.

"Of course, my dear. The elf will show you the way. This will give Severus and I a chance to catch up," he said far too smoothly. He kept the smile on his face until she was gone. "Should I assume this is something less than a social call? Does she work for the Ministry?"

"It is somewhat less than a social call, but she is harmless," Severus replied nonchalantly.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Have you finally found a plaything?" he asked slyly.

Severus ignored the question. "I have reason to believe I am the only one that knows you are here. I think the Ministry would be very interested in knowing where you are."

Lucius scowled. "And what of it?"

"Do you recall that drink we all shared before the final battle?"

"Quite refreshing, wasn't it?" asked Lucius as he poured a glass of cognac. He raised the bottle toward Severus who waved off a glass. "What of it?" he asked innocently.

"We both know that was something more. There was a poison in that drink."

Lucius feigned innocence, "Was there? How intriguing since we all survived, at least temporarily."

"You should know that Aurelia is an expert in potions and poisons. Narcissa will not survive the night if I give the word." He was counting on Lucius thinking that as a Slytherin, Aurelia would be more than willing to do this.

Lucius didn't care if it was a bluff or not and waved his hand dismissively. "Is that supposed to mean something to me? She's been dying for weeks. Better to finally get it over with." She was no great loss. He had his heir and, in time, he would regain his place of prominence.

"You also know that we were left alone in this room for a few minutes. I know of your love of cognac," Severus hinted.

Lucius suddenly paled and set his nearly empty glass on the table. "What do you want?"

"I want to know about that poison. I know it was formulated to guarantee loyalty. As I'm sure you are aware, I failed that test."

"Yes, I was quite surprised to see you alive. I did see you fall and was sure that was the last of you."

Severus gritted his teeth. "If you wish to survive the night, I will know where you got that poison. I know that you are the only one that would have been trusted to run that errand. If you cooperate, I will see that you are given the antidote before we leave. If not, Draco will be an orphan tomorrow morning."

Lucius scowled. He hated losing, but it seemed that Severus had won this round. "Yes, then you can turn me in to the authorities and regain your place in society," he snarled.

"That matters little. My name has been cleared as much as it will be. I want to know about the poison. Give me that information, and you will never see me or hear from me again. I will not turn you over to the authorities unless that information is false. Of course, I doubt you would remain here in that case. But rest assured, I found you once, I can find you again."

"How did you survive the poison? It was supposed to be completely fatal." His intellectual curiosity was getting the better of him.

"I did not lie when I said that Aurelia was an expert in potions and poisons. She saved me. Now that I have survived the poison, I wish to know more about it." He gave Lucius a penetrating glare, hoping his old friend would think he was trying to read his mind. There was no need for Lucius to know that he was still not fully recovered.

Lucius forced himself to look away. He was about to respond when Aurelia returned.

"I can do nothing for her. What ails her is mental, not physical. Physical maladies I can heal quite easily. She has lost her will to live."

"Well, Lucius? Your decision? Do you join your wife?" Severus asked.

Aurelia tried to keep her face neutral. She had not expected violence or the threat of it.

"As you leave me no choice, I have the information in my study." He rose and waited for them to follow him. Once in his office, he unlocked his desk drawer and pulled out a vial and an envelope. Taking a clean sheet of parchment, he copied an address from the envelope. He handed the parchment and vial to Severus. "That is the apothecary that made the poison and the last remnants. Now, will you give me the antidote?"

"One more thing, Mr. Malfoy," Aurelia interrupted. "I will require a blood sample for testing."

"I really must protest at my treatment," Lucius said.

"Do you want the antidote?" asked Severus.

Reluctantly, Lucius removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. Out of her bag, Aurelia produced what she needed to take a blood sample. In less than a minute, she was done. "I think we have everything, Severus," she said.

Severus rose and bowed. "Lucius, always a pleasure." He then spun out of the room and escorted Aurelia toward the door.

"What of the poison?" Lucius nearly shouted.

Severus turned back and smirked. "There was no poison, only your imagination." He then led Aurelia out of the villa and through the wards.

Once in Paris, Aurelia decided they should get something to eat and rest. Side-Along Apparating over long distances was quite taxing. "Did you really lead him to believe you had poisoned him?"

"It wasn't a difficult thing to do. He is quite paranoid and he knows that I specialize in undetectable poisons. I have found that fear is an easy emotion to manipulate. Since he was so cooperative, I hope that we can develop an antidote."

"So there's been no improvement from yesterday?" she asked.

"Not as of yet. This seems to be a very complex poison, and it is probable that your antidote will only partially neutralize it."

"Well, we'll see if we can solve this mystery. There isn't much left in that vial, but it should be enough. And he did give us the name and address of the apothecary."

"I somehow doubt that will be useful," he replied dryly.

"What do you mean? Surely you don't think?" she asked nervously.

"I have no doubt that he did. While it is unlikely we could interview the apothecary, it is probable he left notes. I would like to investigate that as soon as possible, just in case Lucius decides to thwart us."

While it was late, she could tell from the tone of his voice that waiting until tomorrow could be a mistake. "We can head there next."

He found himself once again amazed at how helpful she was being. A part of him kept wondering what she hoped to gain, but he reminded himself that for once in his life, he actually had a friend. He stared at her, really seeing her for the first time since they had left Hogwarts as teenagers. She had matured into a beautiful woman, and

motherhood had only enhanced her beauty. She was no longer the boyish slip of a girl he remembered, but a voluptuous beauty. Her dark hair was cut short, but it was still beautiful. He found himself unable to look away from her blue eyes. He normally didn't care for light colored eyes; he found them too cold, but hers were not.

She grew uncomfortable with his stare. "Severus? Is everything all right?" she asked cautiously, afraid the he might be relapsing.

He forced himself to look away. "Yes, I am well," he replied with the slightest hint of embarrassment. She lost her husband in the war. It was wrong of him to think of her that way.

"You were lost in the past, weren't you?" She had seen that look on people before.

"If you must continue to pry, yes, I was," he replied tersely. "Are you ready to depart?"

"Of course. I just didn't want to rush you." Something had clearly made him uncomfortable, but what?

They left the bistro and moved to a secluded alley so that they could Apparate to the apothecary. They arrived on a muddy street outside a very dilapidated house that was more accurately described as a shack.

Aurelia released him as soon as they arrived. "Well, shall we see what we can find?" she asked as she pulled her wand out of her sleeve.

The two of them walked up to the shack. Severus knocked on the door and was not surprised when there was no answer. Cautiously, he pushed the door open. The building was dark and smelled of death.

"It seems you were right," she said soberly.

As they walked deeper into the building, Severus heard a noise and attempted to hex the source of the noise. His spell was not powerful enough to have any effect. He scowled at his impotence.

Aurelia spun around, looking for a sign of danger, but only saw a mouse crawling through the detritus of the apothecary's life. There was no sign of anything in the living room or kitchen, but the smell was getting stronger.

Severus carefully pushed open the door at the back of the kitchen. It led to the lab, and the smell was strongest there. He wrinkled his nose, and they both saw the partially decomposed body. "We know who killed him and no one has obviously missed him. If you wouldn't mind?" he asked. Normally, this was something he would have done himself.

Aurelia was more than happy to dispose of the body. While she had seen death before, the stench rising from the body was making her cough, and she thought she might be ill. "*Incendio*," she said sharply, and waited until the body was ashes before ending the spell. Thankfully, the laboratory floor was dirt and there was little danger of burning down the building. While the smell of death still hung in the room, it was greatly reduced with the body gone. She saw that Severus was already searching for notes. Assuming that this poison was one of the last things the man had brewed, she started examining the ingredients he had on the counter. While the house was little more than a shack, his work area was quite well organized.

"Ah, wormswort!" said Severus triumphantly.

"For the poison or the cure?" she asked. Wormswort was a very rare ingredient, one with which she was not very familiar.

"In the poison. Do you recall what neutralizes wormswort?" he asked. He was quite disappointed this knowledge was escaping him at the moment.

"I know I've read it in the past, but it's not something we commonly see." She started perusing the ingredients on the wall, hoping to jog her memory. Severus continued his own search of the workshop.

After ten minutes, neither of them had found any clues to what neutralized wormswort. "Did you hear that?" she whispered urgently, and picked up the parchment that Severus was reading.

"Hear what?" he asked quietly.

She moved next to him. "I think we should go. Right now."

"We haven't finished searching..." he broke off when he heard the sound of someone moving in the kitchen. Before he could say anything else, she had wrapped her arms around him and they Disapparated.

"Did you find anything before we left?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. I'll see what I can find at work. Who do you think that was?"

"I suspect Lucius sent someone to destroy the building before we could learn anything. I think he would have seen it as a bonus if he could have gotten rid of us as well. How would you feel about making a trip to Hogwarts? I may have information there on what may neutralize wormswort."

She saw the stack of mail on the desk, including a letter addressed to Severus. "It looks like you received a reply," she said as she handed him the letter.

He opened the letter and was thankful when Aurelia left him alone.

Oh, Severus, it was so very good to hear from you. Poppy was quite afraid when she saw you and that there was nothing she could do for you. She says your recovery is nothing short of miraculous. There are some very skilled Healers at St. Mungo's, and for that we are grateful.

The rebuilding is progressing. The west wing survived almost intact and we are configuring it for classes this autumn. The Slytherin and Ravenclaw dormitories are also intact, making it much easier for us to find temporary housing for the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. Unfortunately, your dungeons were not so lucky. The area has been sealed off.

He stopped reading. A part of him knew that his dungeons would be attacked. For that reason, he had placed numerous protective wards every time he left. The only question was, how much protection had they provided?

Applications are arriving for new staff. Not as many as we would like. The Ministry would prefer to have a new headmaster appointed and let that person make the staffing decisions. I haven't heard whom they are considering. The staff was interviewed, but we all declined. I think none of us feel we can fill Albus' shoes. Even after a year, his presence is missed. For me, I much prefer my greenhouses.

If you decide to return, send an owl, and I will arrange quarters for you.

Pomona

He was quite surprised that she had not mentioned anything about his supposed betrayal or role in Albus' death. He had always gotten along reasonably well with her, especially since their disciplines overlapped. She had always looked for the best in people, and he was not surprised that she would be one that believed he had acted for the greater good.

He found Aurelia in the kitchen preparing a light snack. "It seems the search may be more difficult than initially anticipated. Pomona reports that the dungeons were hit hard, and I'm not sure how many of my possessions survived."

She was far too interested in finally solving this mystery to give up. "Well, it can't hurt to take a look. I have the day after tomorrow off, and I'm sure Michelle will keep the girls."

"I'll probably stay a couple of days to see what I can salvage, but I would appreciate your help. I believe I know which book I am looking for. If we find that book, you may be able to begin work on the antidote while I continue to sort through my dungeons."

This told her how worried he was. Of course, she would probably feel the same way if everything she owned was destroyed. "Do you think Lucius knows that you are still suffering the effects from the poison?"

"I have no idea. He didn't appear to suspect that when we confronted him."

She felt a sudden shiver run up her spine. "If he sent people to either destroy that shack or to find us... You don't think he would send someone here, do you? I mean we gave him my real name." She wrung her hands in worry.

"I will teach you how to put up protective wards that will keep out intruders. I don't think he will send anyone here, but it never hurts to take precautions."

He spent the next two hours teaching her how to protect her home. By the time they finished, she was exhausted and went to bed.

Severus wrote a short note to Pomona letting her know to expect him tomorrow afternoon. While he dreaded confronting the destruction, he knew that he could not escape it forever, would not escape it. He also knew he would have to face his former colleagues at some point. From the tone of her letter, she seemed to have accepted the truth of his situation.

He went to bed, but could not fall asleep. Once again, his mind drifted to the night of the attack. He could hear the screams and blasts of destruction all around him. As usual, he was not able to decipher specifics; it was all a blur of memories running together. Even worse, they were now coming to him when he was awake. Before, they had just come when he was asleep.

At five o'clock he decided he needed something else to occupy his mind and went down to the library. Perhaps one of her books had mention of wormswort.

Aurelia made her way to the kitchen, bouncing off the walls the whole way. She hadn't gotten much sleep; thoughts of her house being attacked had kept her awake. After she put the kettle on, she noticed the light coming from the library. She leaned against the doorway. "How long have you been up?" When he faced her, she thought she had the answer. "Couldn't sleep either, huh? I've put the kettle on." When he didn't answer, she continued, "Have you found anything?"

"No, but given your unfamiliarity with wormswort, I was not surprised." He closed the book. "Let me help you with breakfast." As they started work on breakfast, he said, "I have a few tests I'd like to run on the remnants of the poison. Perhaps it would help with finding a cure since we could not find the complete formula."

"Sounds like a good plan," she replied as she stifled a yawn.

"Will it be safe for you to go to work this morning?"

"I'll be fine. After work, we can head to Hogwarts." A part of her was curious to see if it was as bad as it had looked in the *Daily Prophet*. The other part of her really didn't want to see it, but wanted to remember the school as it had been.

"Hopefully, I will have more information by then," he said.

By mid-afternoon, he had run as many tests on the poison as he could with the equipment she had. Her laboratory was more oriented towards the brewing of potions than the analysis of potions. He assumed she did most of her analysis at work.

He decided he would go to Diagon Alley for supplies, and then he could meet her at St. Mungo's. Since he couldn't Apparate, he took the Floo Network to The Leaky Cauldron. The trip was uneventful, and there was enough activity at the tavern that his presence went unnoticed. He preferred that. Had someone noticed him, they may have questioned why he was traveling by Floo. This was a question he did not want to answer.

His purchases at the apothecary were not unusual for him. The proprietor did remark that it had been some time since he had seen Severus, but other than that, nothing remarkable happened. Since it was now half past four, he decided to head to St. Mungo's.

The poisons ward was quiet. Of the three patients in the ward, one had visitors, one was reading a book, and the third was sleeping. There was a Trainee Healer sitting at a table at the end of the ward. "May I help you?" she asked.

"I was looking for Healer MacLean. She is expecting me," he said curtly.

"Yes, sir, Professor," the trainee replied nervously and ran back to the office area.

Severus tried to place the young woman. Obviously, she had been one of his better students. *Spinnet. Alicia Spinnet. A Gryffindor, but then again, she was in the same year as the Weasley twins, and they had drawn more attention than any of their classmates.*

"Severus, what a pleasant surprise. What brings you here?" Aurelia asked cheerfully.

"I came into town to pick up supplies and noticed that your shift was almost over. I thought it would be more efficient to leave from here."

"Of course. I have some paperwork to finish up. Why don't you go up to the tea room, and I'll meet you up there in ten or fifteen minutes?"

"If you don't mind, I would prefer to peruse some of your reference books," he replied. He had developed some new theories, and there were things he needed to look up.

"Of course." She led him back to her office.

He read quietly as she finished up the day's reports. There were the patient status reports, trainee status reports, medicinal expenditures reports, a seemingly unending list of reports. This was the one thing she hated about having been promoted; more of her time was spent on administrative triviality than treating patients. The only time she treated patients was when the case was especially difficult.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Severus placed the book back on the shelf. "After you."

Chapter 3

Chapter 5 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

A/N: Let me apologize again for all the problems with getting the chapters posted. The first time, it was loss of presence of mind. The second, lack of time and coffee and a half awake mind first thing in the morning. So, this should straighten everything out.

Chapter 3

Once again, he was haunted by dreams of the final battle. Time after time, he was forced to kill either former students or those that had been his Housemates. With each attack on one of the Dark Lord's minions, he felt his strength waning. By sheer force of will, he went on, unwilling to let the Dark Lord win, until he succumbed to the darkness.

He woke up shaking and in a cold sweat. After leaving the hospital, the dreams had stopped, but the last couple of days, they had begun again. Did it mean anything, or was it only his mind tormenting him? He had done all that he could, more than was expected of any one man. He decided to shower, and then he would have Julia help him with his research.

While it always started as research, her intellectual curiosity invariably turned it into a Potions lesson. She asked him the types of questions that never even occurred to most of his seventh years. He found it very refreshing to be teaching someone who was not only interested in the subject but was not an insufferable know-it-all.

"Well now, you're not completely useless, now are you?" Aurelia asked proudly.

"It seems you have managed to make your point," he replied.

"Good. And have you thought about the dragon's eggs?"

He sighed, knowing he had lost. "As you have said, there is nothing to be lost in the attempt. I would recommend letting the potion simmer overnight for full potency."

She nodded her head ever so slightly. "You're the Potions Master. Now, I'll let you two get back to your lesson. Helen, help me with dinner."

Severus could hear Helen giggling at something as the two of them headed to the kitchen. He realized that over the last couple of weeks, he had been accepted for the first time in his life.

"Professor, you were telling me about pain relieving potions," Julia prompted.

"Of course. I believe we were discussing powdered root of asphodel? I know your mother has an encyclopedia of potions. What is special about asphodel in a pain relieving potion?" As he heard her flipping through the book, he reflected that perhaps he could work as a private tutor, for the right student, of course. If his charge were as eager and intelligent as Julia, it could be an enjoyable experience.

It was late and the house was quiet, but Severus was lying awake in bed, afraid to sleep lest the dreams return. He did not want to hear the screams again. As he was lying alone with his thoughts, he heard the floor creak. Aurelia was going downstairs. He knew he shouldn't follow, but he wondered if she might be doing something with the potion.

Quietly, he crept downstairs, straining to hear where she had gone. As he approached the library, he could hear her speaking.

"Henry, you would be so proud of your girls. Their marks were excellent this year, though Helen could have done better in Transfiguration. I think she gets that from you. I'm glad I let you talk me into sending the girls to France. You were right that Hogwarts would become a focal point. So many were lost. So many who were too young. We all cried when we saw the names in the paper. They are rebuilding the school now. While it will be several years before repairs are complete, they hope to have enough of the school repaired to start the term on time. Since the war is over, I want to send the girls there next year. I know Julia missed her friends, and it will be good for Helen to go to school with her sister, though I'm not sure Helen will be sorted into Ravenclaw. Besides, I want them closer to home.

"It was in the *Prophet* today that they are accepting applications for Hogwarts. I'm sure they'll choose an excellent staff, though they will have very large shoes to fill. They died protecting the children, giving the innocent time to get away."

Severus leaned against the wall and slammed his eyes closed to fight off the tears. He had known there would be losses, he just wondered who? He knew that he should not be listening, that he should leave, but he was afraid to make any noise that might attract her attention.

"I'm sure you remember Severus Snape, I don't think anyone could forget. He's one of the professors that fell. I know you missed his redemption, and you would call me insane, but he did what he had to for the greater good. He was poisoned by You-Know-Who. He had nowhere to go after he recovered, well, he hasn't totally recovered, we're still working on finding a cure. Anyway, I invited him to be my roommate. He's been a wonderful friend, and we think we might be close to the cure.

"Having him here has been good for the girls. Helen doesn't bother him too much. Though, honestly, I think he only pretends to be annoyed. And he's been wonderful with Julia, teaching her many things about potions. In that way, I think it's been good for him, too. I was afraid he was going to succumb to depression, but they've been good therapy for him. Of course, he hasn't had to deal with the public, yet, but I'm hoping they will choose to believe that he fought on the right side.

"I think they see him as an uncle, I know I sometimes treat him like he's my little brother. He's really become a part of the family. Perhaps this is what your brother would have been like if he had chosen to be a part of our family." Henry's brother, Allen, had been so disgusted that Henry was going to marry a Slytherin that he had cut off all contact. They had tried to reason with him over the years, but he had been unrelenting in his prejudice.

"Well, I just wanted to let you know that we miss you and love you. Before the girls go back to school, we'll come to visit. I suppose I should try to sleep. It's been hard for me to sleep without you."

Severus could hear the chair scrape the floor and knew that he would be discovered if he stayed where he was. In his haste to get away, he had forgotten about the chair against the wall.

"Severus? Is that you?" Aurelia asked.

"Yes." He knew there was no point in lying. He couldn't get away before she found him.

"What are you doing?" she asked cautiously.

"I heard a noise and came to investigate. I...forgot about the chair." He desperately wanted to ask her about those that were killed in the final battle.

She saw through the lie. "How much did you hear?"

"All of it," he admitted.

"And I'm sure you have questions now. Come on. I might as well answer them." She sounded tired as she returned to the library and unlocked the liquor cabinet. "I think you might want a drink," she said as she poured two large drinks. By the time she had them poured, he had taken a seat in his usual chair. With a quick wave of her wand she lit the fire.

"You asked me what happened at Hogwarts. I wasn't there, but I was on duty that night. Specialties were ignored; we all did what we could to save as many lives as possible. It was the most horrible night of my life." She paused to take a sip of her brandy. "The wounded and the dying were brought in more quickly than any of us could handle. There were more dying than wounded. The Death Eaters were quite efficient." She paused again, trying to vanquish the images of that night and concentrate only on the facts.

"Professor Flitwick was one of the first casualties I saw. He didn't survive very long. Sinistra was fortunate; her spell damage was easily reversed and she was released. Madam Hooch was another unfortunate victim. They said she was taken down by *Avada Kedavra* as she was protecting the students that were fleeing. Not surprisingly, Slughorn was also taken down by the Death Eaters." Pausing again, she knew the next part was the hardest.

"Go on," he prompted gently. Not really wanting to hear what she said next, but knowing he had to hear it at some point.

She took a rather large gulp of her brandy before continuing. "McGonagall was the worst. They knew she was leading the Order and tortured her. She arrived alive, but I'm sure she wished she were dead. She survived three days before succumbing to her injuries."

Severus let the pain sink in. While their Houses had been the fiercest rivals, he always had a great deal of respect for Minerva, and she had been one of his closest friends.

"And the students?" he asked soberly.

"Most of them got away. Some of the older ones helped in the defense and many of them lost their lives. As you can imagine, some joined their parents. Most of those were killed or are in prison now. I haven't memorized their names, but I have the list. I don't know why I've kept it. Perhaps I thought you might one day want to see it."

He really didn't want to see the names on that list, but he knew he would be confronted with it soon enough. "Have they chosen a new headmaster?" he asked.

"If they have, they haven't publicized it. Perhaps you should write Professor Sprout. She may know more about what's happening at Hogwarts." She suddenly realized what she had said. "Oh, I'm sorry. I could post a letter for you."

He upended his glass. "Perhaps your potion will finally put an end to my dependence." Rising from his chair, he slowly shuffled toward the door.

"Severus, wait. Did you have any more questions?"

He stopped. "No. You have answered all that you can." After several long seconds, he asked, "Do you really see me as family?"

"Yes, we do. Especially Helen since she never had you as a teacher. I have seen your collection of drawings when I clean your room. I've told her you can't see them."

"She helps me see them," he replied softly. "She traces my finger along the drawings, and describes them to me. Now if you will excuse me, I'll go to bed."

She smiled at his retreating back. Severus Snape had a soft side.

Aurelia was up early as was the case most mornings. After dressing, she went to the basement to check on the potion. As she had expected, Severus joined her about ten minutes later.

"How does it look?" he asked.

"Pale violet," she replied.

"That's...unexpected."

"Very," she replied as she stirred the potion. Ladling a dose into the glass, she sniffed it before handing it Severus.

He also sniffed it, but could come to no immediate conclusion. Knowing that most potions tasted horrible, he quickly downed it.

"Anything?" she asked.

"No," he sounded disappointed. "Wait!" He could feel warmth spreading through his body. His fingers and toes started tingling, and he could feel himself getting light-headed.

She saw him start to sway and hurried to his side. She lowered him to the floor before he could fall. "Severus? Are you in pain?"

He tried to clear his head. "No, there is no pain. It's...very hard to describe. I think I should lie down." He couldn't stop the feeling that the room was spinning, and it was incredibly disorienting with no visual input.

Aurelia reached out with the diagnostic spell, but could find no dangerous reaction occurring. All she could do at this point was wait.

After several long minutes, Severus opened his eyes. The room had stopped spinning. Instead of the black he had expected, he saw a grey haze. Slowly, he sat up and started looking around the room.

"Severus? Can you see?" she asked hopefully.

He continued looking around the room. He thought that he could make out areas of dark and light, but it was still indistinct. "Somewhat. My vision has not returned to what it was, but I can see light."

"*Lumos*." She lit the tip of her wand and moved it in front of his face. "Follow my wand with your eyes." She was quite pleased when he did track her wand. "Well, this is a definite improvement." She helped him to his feet. "Shall we get something to eat and give you a little while to see how much this potion will help before we give your wand another chance?"

While he was anxious to see if his ability to use magic had returned, he was also afraid of yet another failure. "Yes, I think that would be best."

When they arrived in the kitchen, they found a disaster.

"Good morning, Mum. I wanted to surprise you with breakfast," Helen said cheerfully.

Severus could smell the burning food and suppressed a frown.

"So I can see," Aurelia replied dryly. "Can I lend a hand?" she asked hopefully.

"No, it's my breakfast," Helen insisted.

"What in the name of Merlin happened here?" asked Julia as she entered the kitchen to see flour everywhere.

"Your sister has made us a nice breakfast...that we will all enjoy." Aurelia's tone indicated this was an order and not a statement. A very sullen Julia took a seat at the table.

They all sat at the table and politely ate the breakfast Helen had cooked. She was incredibly proud of her first solo meal.

"It's very good, dear. You're well on your way to being a world-class cook. Now, why don't you and Julia do the dishes and clean up the kitchen?"

"Yes, Mum," they answered in unison.

Aurelia led Severus back to the basement. "Sorry about that breakfast. I had no idea she was going to do that."

"I don't think I have ever seen a mess quite like that," he replied.

"You could see that?"

"My vision has been improving. I still don't have much peripheral vision, but I can see straight ahead reasonably well. I'm ready to try my wand again." With his improved vision, he felt more confident that his magic had returned.

She handed him his wand. "Good luck."

With a quick swish and flick of his wand and a nervous incantation of, "*Wingardium Leviosa*," they watched in anticipation as the piece of parchment on the table slowly fluttered into the air.

Once the parchment drifted back down to the table, she gave him a quick hug. "That was wonderful."

"It seems you were correct about the dragon's eggs," he replied simply. While he was overjoyed, he was not one to display emotion.

"Why, thank you. I would assume that just as your vision is returning slowly, your magic would do the same. In case more doses are needed, I'll bottle up the rest of the potion."

"I know you are expected at work soon. I can bottle the potion and clean up the work area." He felt as though a great weight had lifted. After he cleaned up, he would write Pomona and ask her about the status of Hogwarts. "Aurelia? Could you leave the list for me?" he asked quietly.

She stopped in the doorway. "I'll leave it on the desk."

As he walked out of the basement, he saw that the girls were still cleaning up the mess. He found it hard to believe that one little girl could have made such a large mess. He stopped and watched them. They both took after their mother quite strongly, though they both wore their hair long, there would be no doubt in anyone's mind they were sisters.

Julia noticed him standing at the door to the basement, and asked, "Professor, Mum says you can see. Is that true?"

"My vision is returning," he replied.

"Will you be back at Hogwarts?" Now that she had accepted his loyalty to Dumbledore and the Order, she would like to have him as a professor again. Of their Defense Against the Dark Arts professors, he had been the best.

"You would be the first student that has ever looked forward to my class," he replied dryly, before continuing on to the library. On the desk, he saw an issue of the *Daily Prophet*. It must be the one that had the casualty list. Slowly, he walked over to the desk. He had to know, but he knew it would be painful. Crossing the room to the desk seemed to take an eternity.

As he reached out to pick up the paper, he noticed his hand was trembling. On the front page was a picture of Minerva. The headline proclaimed she was gravely injured. Flipping to page two, he saw the casualty list. He saw far too many familiar names; many of them belong to people under the age of twenty.

Many from the Order had fallen. Kingsley, Tonks, and Fred Weasley. Looking down the list, he saw the Weasley family had been hit hard. Ginny, Percy and Bill had also fallen. He saw no other names from the Hogwarts staff. There were many Slytherin names on the list. Noticeably absent were any Malfoys. It appeared that once again Lucius had managed to avoid mortal danger, though the Crabbes and Goyles had not been so lucky. He was pleased to finally see the Lestranges on the list along with Walden Macnair. Macnair had been one of the worst in terms of sheer cruelty.

He let the paper fall from his hand. It was finally over. From the list of names, there were very few high-level supporters of the Dark Lord left alive. It was unlikely they would go through a period of surviving Death Eaters struggling for power. It was over.

Setting up parchment and quill, he penned a letter to Pomona. It was short; he had never been one for socializing either in person or in missive.

Pomona,

As you no doubt have heard, I have recovered from the poison. I have heard that the castle is undergoing reconstruction. Will classes be convening on schedule? Additionally, have any of the vacant posts been filled?

Severus

He stared at the letter. *I don't have to teach. My debt to Albus has been repaid. Besides, they will whisper behind my back, though that is nothing unusual. I could become a tutor, and then I would never have to teach dunderheaded students again. Or I could go into business. I have enough savings to open an Apothecary.* He was on the verge of crumpling it up. *No. I will not run and hide. I have a chance to resurrect Slytherin's reputation. No one else can do it. No one else will do it.*

He rolled up his left sleeve and saw that his skin was unmarked. The Dark Lord was truly gone. Rubbing his arm, he was still amazed there was no trace of the Mark. He was finally free.

Before he could change his mind again, he sealed and posted the letter.

Since the girls were still cleaning up the kitchen, he decided to peruse the library.

When Aurelia returned home, she thought the house was entirely too quiet. "Severus?" she called out.

"In the library," came his reply.

Aurelia saw that he was alone. "Where are the girls?"

He closed the book he was reading. "They wanted to go over to the Parkers. I saw no reason they couldn't go."

"How are you doing? Is your vision any better?"

"Somewhat. I still have not recovered my peripheral vision."

She moved across the room to examine him and could find nothing exceptional. "I still don't know why it worked. Perhaps we should try another dose?"

"It seems logical," he replied before pulling a phial out of his pocket.

"Have you taken any other doses today?" she asked suspiciously.

"No. I was waiting for your professional opinion."

Knowing how independent he was, this surprised her. "Thank you for the respect. Go ahead and drink it. I don't think it will hurt."

"How very reassuring," he replied dryly before drinking the dose. This time he did not feel as lightheaded, though there was some dizziness. The fact he was sitting helped.

Aurelia waited a few moments before asking, "Any change?"

"It's hard to tell," he replied.

"Stand up," she ordered and then performed a quick peripheral vision check. "I'll do that again later and we can compare. I'd appreciate it if you could start dinner while I go get the girls."

"Of course. Thank you for leaving the paper out for me."

"I know it had to be hard to see. Did you write Pomona?"

"I did, though I'm not sure how quickly she will respond." *Or if she responds at all* he added silently. He had no reason to believe he would be welcome at Hogwarts.

She turned back to face him when she got to the door. "Did anyone else who drank the poison survive?"

"Why do you ask?"

She crossed her arms and tapped her lips in thought. "Well, if there is someone else that drank the poison, but was not affected, it's possible I could get a sample of the poison from their blood. Since it's still affecting you, it doesn't seem like something that would quickly dissipate."

He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of this before. Of course, prior to this morning, he had not known if any of the others survived. "Lucius Malfoy."

"Hmmm...Was there anyone else?" she asked.

"Has he died?" Severus wondered if he could be that lucky. Lucius had always kept an annoyingly close eye on him and knew far too much about him for comfort.

"No. We just don't know where he is. No one has seen him or his family since the final battle. He always was sneaky, wasn't he?"

"I may know where he is hiding," Severus replied quietly.

"Then we should turn him in."

He began pacing. "Normally, I would agree with you, but what we really need is information on the poison. He is our best source. I am willing to trade information on the poison for his freedom. It is unlikely he will attract any followers. I don't think he will be dangerous if left free."

"And you think he will have information about the poison?" she asked cautiously. He had made excellent points, but she still didn't like the idea of letting a Death Eater go free.

"He was the Dark Lord's most trusted advisor. He made many of the arrangements through his numerous contacts. It is likely that he knows who brewed the potion."

"I'll come with you," she offered.

"You most certainly will not."

She crossed her arms defensively. "You aren't going by yourself. You could barely levitate a piece of parchment and you expect me to let you meet with a Death Eater by yourself? I don't think so. Besides, you'll need my help to get where you are going."

He could have argued the first point, but the second was unavoidable. "Since I have no choice, you may accompany me. I would prefer to leave sooner rather than later."

"I'll pop over to the Parker's. I'm sure the girls would love to spend the night and I know Michelle won't mind. Why don't you fix some sandwiches, and we can leave after I get back?" The Parker girls were the same age as Julia and Helen and had formed close friendships.

While he didn't particularly care for her coming along, it would be nice to have someone watching his back. Especially when he wasn't entirely sure he could defend

himself.

After eating, he gave her directions to where he suspected Lucius was hiding. This retreat was a villa that only Lucius' closest friends had known about. Lucius had very carefully hid his ties to the property. Severus was almost positive that everyone who had known of the villa, other than him, was dead.

Aurelia looked at the map. "We will have to do this in two stages. I can't get us both there in one jump."

"Understood." He moved closer to her so she could Apparate them. One way or another, he would make Lucius tell him about the poison.

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Chapter 5

Severus and Aurelia stood at the front gates. Even from that distance, the destruction was clearly visible. Gryffindor Tower had collapsed, as had the Headmaster's; the Great Hall was exposed and piles of rubble littered the ground.

Aurelia took hold of his arm for support. She had seen pictures of the damage in the *Daily Prophet*, but she was still not prepared for the enormity of seeing it firsthand. Knowing this was the first time he had seen it, she was concerned about his well-being. "Are you all right?" she asked quietly.

He thought he had prepared himself for the worst, but seeing it in person was still quite overwhelming. "I'm fine." He strode up the path, forcing her to jog a bit to catch up to him.

As they closed on the castle, they could see that only one door remained on the entrance, and that one hung open at an awkward angle.

It wasn't long before Pomona joined them. "Severus, so very good to see you," she said cheerfully.

He could tell that she wanted to hug him, so he crossed his arms and scowled to discourage her overt display of emotion. "I am likewise pleased to see you." He gestured towards Aurelia. "This is Aurelia MacLean, Healer."

Pomona considered the Healer a few moments before extending her hand. "Healer, how good to see you again, though you went by Carter at the time, didn't you?"

"How good of you to remember me," Aurelia replied politely.

"I couldn't forget one of my best students. I'm glad you decided to be a Healer. It's a good profession for you. What brings you here?" She was quite surprised to see her, or anyone for that matter, with Severus.

"We're conducting a research project, and he wanted me to help sift through the debris to see what we could recover from his library." She hoped this would be suitably vague to protect Severus' reputation.

Pomona smiled sadly. "Yes, well, I wouldn't get my hopes up too much. That part of the castle suffered heavy damage. I wish you the best of luck. We serve lunch at the regular time over at the tents." She gestured behind her. "Well, I'll let you to it," she said quietly. She watched him for several seconds more, as if there was more she wanted to say, before walking back to the construction area.

They stood in silence for several minutes, just staring at the ruins. When Aurelia looked at Severus, she was almost positive that he was lost in his memories. She thought about disturbing him, but she decided that letting the memories play out would help him more.

After almost ten minutes, he walked up the steps and into the ruins of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Aurelia was left to follow in his wake.

It took nearly fifteen minutes to find a way down to his dungeons. The main stairs were destroyed, but like everywhere else in the castle, there was more than one route. Neither said anything. Thankfully, all signs of death had been cleansed from the castle.

Severus surveyed his domain. Pomona had been correct; his dungeons had suffered severe damage. The destruction in his office and private lab was almost complete, but what he was looking for wasn't there. He would return to his office later. The door to his quarters was blocked by debris, and through part of the ceiling, he could see daylight. "Would you mind?"

Aurelia pulled her wand out of her sleeve and carefully began moving the rubble. She knew the fragile state of the castle and didn't want to risk the ceiling coming down on them. It took her nearly five minutes to finish clearing his door.

Once the door was clear, she watched him approach and put his hand against the door. "The wards are intact," he said quietly, the smallest trace of hope in his voice. "I will instruct you on how to remove them."

After following his direction and removing the wards, she stepped back to give him privacy to enter first.

He stood with his hand on the doorknob, afraid of what he would find. His logic finally reasoned that time would make no difference to what he would find, and he opened the door. The room was dark, since debris was blocking the windows from the outside. Slowly he raised his wand, and said, "Lumos." In the weak light from his wand, he could see books and furniture strewn across the room. Everything was covered in dust and there were chunks of stone lying about the room. The damage was not as bad as what he had expected, given the state of the castle outside his quarters. His wards had been effective.

"Aurelia," he called, letting her know she could enter.

She carefully slipped through the door and added her wand to his in providing light. "It could have been worse," she offered.

"Much worse," he replied. "I suggest we pile all the books together and begin going through them."

"That's easy," she replied cheerfully, and with a quick wave of her wand, books flew into neat piles in a clear part of the room. She noticed that some of them were scorched, but the damage looked minor. After the books were stacked, she started looking for some lamps that had not been destroyed. Reading by wand light was not easy.

He couldn't help but feel jealousy at the ease with which she had organized the books. That was the reason he had asked her to come along; he didn't want any of his colleagues to know how impotent he was.

Once the two lamps she had found were lit, they started sorting through the piles of books. The literature could easily be separated from the other books to be searched. The number of Muggle classics surprised Aurelia. She would have thought that he disdained anything to do with the Muggles. He had the complete works of Shakespeare and Dickens among others, but now was not the time to comment on his literary tastes.

It took them nearly an hour to divide the books into four piles: literature, history, potions and herbology. "I think it is more likely that we will find the answer in herbology," he announced.

"Agreed," she replied. After levitating one of the lamps to a small table, she righted and cleaned a pair of chairs. They both got lost in the books.

"Hello? Severus, are you still down here?" came Irma Pince's voice from the hallway.

"Yes, Irma." He wondered why anyone was looking for him.

She poked her head in the room. "Oh, good. Pomona was worried about you when you didn't show up for dinner."

"Dinner?" asked Aurelia.

"Yes, it's nearly seven o'clock." Irma surveyed the damage. Severus' quarters seem to have fared much better than her library. "Well, I guess I can't chastise you for hoarding books anymore. We've saved dinner for you, if you're interested."

Aurelia realized that she was quite hungry and, from a medical standpoint, knew that Severus should eat but, from a practical standpoint, realized that he wasn't likely to appreciate her suggesting he should eat. He didn't look like he was interested in leaving his books. "I think a bite to eat would be a good idea," she announced and set down the book that she had been reading. Severus showed no sign of leaving so she resigned herself to bringing him a sandwich.

When Aurelia returned from dinner, she found that Severus had not moved from his chair, though the stack of books was gone. "I assume you haven't found anything yet?"

"No. This is the last of the herbology books. You should begin going through the potions books."

She pulled a sandwich out of her pocket. "I brought you something to eat. As it is getting late, and I somehow doubt you will eat regularly once I leave, I would appreciate it if you would eat it."

He took the sandwich from her and began eating it without really paying attention to it.

Aurelia shook her head and gathered a small stack of potions books. "I asked at dinner and neither Irma nor Pomona could recall reading anything about wormswort."

"You asked them?" he inquired tersely.

"I didn't tell them why. They thought nothing out of the ordinary about my inquiry. After all, they are academicians and used to having people ask them questions. And considering I specialize in poisons and their antidotes, there is no reason they would connect that question with you. Quit being paranoid."

He put down his latest book. "If word were to get out that I'm half-blind and have almost no magic..."

"No one is going to find out. Besides, once we find that information on wormswort, it should be a moot point. At any rate, you don't believe in all that 'foolish wand waving,' do you?" she teased.

"How did you hear about that?" he demanded.

"Julia wrote home about your welcome to Potions speech, if you want to call it that. You worry too much. Well, let's see if we can find what we are looking for tonight." She dug back into the stack of books.

Aurelia was starting to get a headache from staring at the books. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to make it go away, to no avail. "What time is it?" she asked. When he didn't immediately respond she tried again. "Severus?" She waited for him to look up. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to eleven," he replied tersely.

She put down her book. "As much as I would love to stay, I'm going to have a splitting headache if I keep going. I'll come back tomorrow to help." Noticing that he was holding the book much closer to his face than he had earlier, she asked, "Is there something wrong with your vision? Is it getting worse?" He ignored her. "Severus?" She tried louder. "Severus!"

"Be quiet, woman!" he snapped.

She was shocked, but held her tongue. Perhaps he had found something.

He stabbed at a page in the book. "Here it is. Essence of Lethifold."

"You're joking, right?" she asked. She could not think of many things more dangerous. There was no record of anyone actually ever catching a Lethifold.

"I would never joke about this. It could be worse, it could be something from a Nundu," he replied.

"Oh, yes, but at least you can subdue one of those. Might as well be Re'em blood. Just about as impossible to obtain."

"I will continue to search through my books. There may be some account of capturing a Lethifold. I will require your help," he stated simply.

"You aren't serious, are you?" She examined his expression. "You are. I have responsibilities here. I can't just run off for weeks at a time. I also have a family to think

about."

"Aurelia, please, there is no one else." He hated begging and hated sounding desperate, but she already knew about his infirmity. "I cannot let the others know. I have trusted you to keep my secret." He reached out for her hand. "I cannot live like this. I am barely more than a Squib."

She could see the desperation in his eyes. "I'll see what I can do to rearrange my vacation. I think I can shift the second week earlier. I'll talk with the girls and see how they feel about losing out on the trip to Greece. I'm not going to make any promises, though."

"Thank you." After a few quiet seconds, he asked, "You can conjure a Patronus, can't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, nice of you to ask first. And before you ask, it is a fully corporeal Patronus. Are you sure there is no one else you can ask? I would like to have another."

He knew why she was saying that; it was because he was useless. He also knew there was no one else. "No. There is no one."

She sighed. "All right. I'll come by tomorrow and let you know if it will work. Do try and get some sleep tonight," she suggested before leaving.

"The wards are still down. You can Disapparate from here," he said simply.

"Ah, right. That's useful information. See you tomorrow," she said before disappearing with a crack.

He had no intention of following her suggestion. He was no longer in her medical care. At some point in the past, he was almost positive he had read about Lethifolds before. He only hoped it had been in one of his books, and not one from the school collection. From what Irma had said, he got the impression that a majority of library had been destroyed or badly damaged. Switching his search to the pile of history books, he settled into his chair for a long night of reading.

Pomona knocked on the dungeon door. "Severus? Are you still in here?" came her tentative voice from the doorway.

"Yes," he replied curtly.

"You missed dinner and breakfast. I thought you might like something to eat. Is Healer MacLean around? I didn't see her leave."

"She left last night."

She could see that he was busy and knew that he had a tendency to get lost in a project, so she placed the food on a nearby table. He would eat it at some point. She looked around his dungeons and found them surprisingly intact given the amount of destruction to the surrounding castle. "Did you get any rest last night?"

"Unless there is a purpose to your questions, I have work to do and wish to be left alone," he said tersely. He watched her wavering in his doorway. "In or out, Pomona."

"I just wanted to say that I was relieved to see the...the testimony. We were all shocked... I'm glad we were wrong, Severus," she finally said.

He had wondered when one of his former colleagues was going to bring up his past. "Is there anything else?" he asked tersely.

"Someone from the Board of Governors is coming this morning. It would be best if you were there with the rest of us when he arrives."

Without looking up from his book, he asked, "And when exactly is this representative coming?"

"Any time now, though I cannot say for sure."

He knew that it was best for him to be there to keep up appearances, especially if he wanted his job back. "I will be there shortly," he replied. While he hated playing the political game, he knew it was best for his reputation. If he proved to be uncooperative, he might find himself looking for a new job. He wasn't exactly sure he wanted to do that. Hogwarts had really been all that he had known.

When he emerged from the castle, he found the others working on clearing of the rubble around what was left of the library. Even without getting too close, he could see that many of the books were completely lost. That needless destruction disgusted him. Of course, most of the Dark Lord's minions had not been academics or even remotely interested in knowledge, but it still did not excuse the wanton destruction they had wrought.

As he approached, he saw a familiar, and unwelcome, form. "Lupin, what are you doing here?" he asked disdainfully.

"I've come to help. We've salvaged some stuff from the ruins, but not much. Glad to see you on your feet again. I had heard that you were a casualty of the battle." His voice trailed off as he realized this was an uncomfortable topic.

Severus snorted and decided to examine a different part of the library, not wanting to be anywhere near the werewolf. He did find it surprising that so many accepted the fact he had acted on Dumbledore's orders. He had expected to be ostracized from the wizarding community. Instead, everyone here seemed to believe his intentions had been noble. Of course, all of them were those that had known him. He still had no real idea how the rest of the community would accept him.

Thankfully, the Ministry representative arrived shortly after Severus emerged from the dungeons. The representative approached and introduced himself. "Ah, Snape, good to see that you have returned. I heard that you might be here. I'm James Brock, Board of Governors."

"Mr. Brock," Severus replied politely.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to speak with you privately before I address everyone." Brock gestured towards a secluded part of the ruins.

"Of course." Severus wondered if Brock knew the extent of the injuries he had suffered, and if that would have an impact on his position. It was a matter of record that he had been blind upon his discharge. Of course, he had partially overcome that hurdle. He did not know if Aurelia had recorded his magical difficulties in his patient record.

"So, your vision is fine?" Brock asked.

"Obviously," Severus replied dryly. Not quite the whole truth, but there was no way for Brock to prove otherwise.

Brock shifted uncomfortably, unaccustomed to Severus' brusque manner. "Yes, well, that's good. Are you planning to reapply at Hogwarts?"

"That is my current plan, assuming the school will be back in session this autumn." He watched carefully to see what Brock's reaction would be. He was quite surprised that Brock did not seem to oppose this notion.

"Good, good. That's what I like to hear. We'd like to keep as much of it as close to normal as possible for the children. The more professors we have return the better. It'll give them a sense of continuity."

Severus thought the man was daft. Normal? There was nothing normal about this. The school was more than half destroyed, and the Headmistress and two Heads of House had been killed. No, there was no such thing as normal anymore. He decided nothing would be gained by questioning Brock's sanity, and replied simply, "Of

course."

"Well then, as part of that, we are looking for a new Deputy Headmaster, as I'm sure you are aware. In the past, the Deputy has always been someone that was on staff, someone who understood how things were run at the school. We'd like to continue that. As a Head of House, you have an understanding of how things work and background into the administrative details. This makes you particularly well suited to the job. And your experience would be invaluable to the new Headmaster."

This was the most roundabout job offer Severus had ever heard, and most surprising one. He had fully expected everyone to be suspicious of him, and that he would no longer be welcome at Hogwarts. Instead, Brock was acting as though the events of the last year had never happened. "Surely, Pomona Sprout would be a better choice. After all, she has been here longer than I." He didn't want Brock to think he was too eager for the job.

Brock shifted uncomfortably. "Well, yes, that is true, but she has expressed an interest in restoring the greenhouses. As you know, they were all destroyed and she feels that would take too much of her time."

"You mean to say that the Board cannot find another herbologist to take her place?" he asked snidely. He could tell the Brock was getting nervous.

"Well, no, that's not all. She just doesn't think she's particularly well suited to the job." He was searching for a way to placate Snape.

"So, I am your second choice?" He was thoroughly enjoying watching Brock squirm.

"Now, there's something you have to understand. We wanted to return things to normal as quickly as possible, you were hospitalized, and there was the question of your past..."

Severus interrupted, "Mr. Brock, if there is a point, make it. I am a busy man. As you can see, there is much work to be done to bring the school back to working condition." He was inwardly pleased to see that he had not lost his powers of intimidation as Brock flinched. As for the question of his past, they had obviously begun the search before his name was cleared.

"All right. I won't mince words with you, Snape. You aren't exactly the first choice the Board had for Deputy. You have a questionable past, but you acquitted yourself commendably in the end. We also took into account the fact that your House does not have the best reputation. Now may not seem like the best time to have a Slytherin Deputy Headmaster, but you know the school and its inner workings very well. You have a strong personality that will be vital to the rebuilding." Brock seemed to be regaining his courage.

He knew that he had a mission to accomplish first. He could not accept this post if he was not himself. "I will consider your offer," he replied off-handedly.

Brock was surprised. He had expected Snape to jump at the offer, as it would serve as proof to the Wizarding world that he truly was forgiven. "This is an important and prestigious posting," Brock began.

"Mr. Brock, I know what this post entails. I will require time to consider this. As you know, my House has to be my priority. I will need to ensure they will be led in the proper direction. I will give you my answer after two weeks." This should give him the time he needed to find the antidote to the poison. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. This was something he had aspired to his entire adult life, the first step to being Headmaster. Now, it was practically being handed to him, yet he could not accept.

"But, two weeks? Surely this is something you have considered in the past."

"Mr. Brock, I see no reason this decision cannot wait two weeks. There is still ample time before the term to interview and hire new professors, and you have not, as yet, hired a new Headmaster, who may violently disapprove of my reinstatement at Hogwarts, not to mention my assignment as his Deputy. And this is a very important decision, one that should not be made lightly. Wouldn't you agree?" His tone indicated the he would brook no argument.

"Yes, of course. You're right; this is a very big decision. Perhaps you will make your decision sooner?" he asked hopefully.

"Perhaps. Now, did you have some reason to address the staff?"

"Yes, yes." He called louder, "Everyone, please gather around. I have some announcements." He rather quickly announced to everyone that funding and manpower were in place to ensure that Hogwarts would be open for the new term. He thanked them for their continued service and reassured them they were a vital part of recovering as many artifacts as possible from the ruins. His closing remarks were about the number of applicants for the vacant positions and how the Board was taking great pains to ensure that no one but the best would be teaching the children.

All in all, Severus found it an utter waste of time. He wanted to return to his dungeons and see if he had any literature on Lethifolds.

It was late afternoon when Aurelia arrived and found Severus buried in his books. They were piled haphazardly. "Have you found anything?" she asked.

He tossed the book he was reading to the floor. "No. I know that I have read something about Lethifolds, but I have been through these books twice and have found nothing."

"Perhaps it was from the school library. We could see what they have recovered from the wreckage?" she offered.

He snorted. "Not likely. I was there this morning and most of the books recovered will require extensive restoration if they are to be useful."

"Well, I'm going to go up and see what's been recovered. We could get lucky." She turned to leave and paused at the door. "By the way, I was able to rearrange my vacation. The girls were upset about missing out on Greece, but I've promised them something nice for Christmas. I've also arranged for a Portkey on Monday."

"Aurelia," he called as she was leaving. Once she turned to face him, he continued, "Thank you. I'll be up shortly."

When he arrived at the library, he found Aurelia digging through the ruins. The main reason he had not wanted to return to the library was that the others were using magic. He knew that he could not assist in the search.

"Ah, Severus, I've placed the latest finds over there." Aurelia pointed at a pile of books. "You know what you're looking for better than I do."

He gave silent thanks for the way she covered up for him. He began going through the pile of burnt and battered books. Most he could rule out without opening, because he knew he had never read them. A few he had, but none of them were the book in question.

As darkness descended, he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Are you ready to call it a night? The girls should have dinner ready, and you could use a good meal and decent night's sleep. I can bring you back in the morning before anyone's moving. Healer's orders."

His eyes were sore, and he had a throbbing headache from trying to read in the waning light. "You saw fit to discharge me so I am no longer under your medical care," he replied dryly.

"Well, I'm leaving. You can come if you'd like. I'd prefer you did so you can get some rest. Once we leave, I doubt we'll get much rest; especially if it's just the two of us." She paused for a few seconds, trying to determine how best to phrase her question. "Are you sure you don't know of anyone else?"

"You have a suggestion?" He knew she was up to something, but he didn't know what.

She sat across from him. "Well, I was talking with Remus Lupin, and he used to teach Dark Arts. He seemed pretty knowledgeable about other creatures and defensive spells, and he can conjure a Patronus."

"Did you tell him what you are doing here?" he asked defensively.

"Not specifically. He doesn't know about our Lethifold search."

"Then how did the subject of Patronuses come up?"

"He brought it up when he was telling stories about Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter," he sneered. "No. I will not invite Lupin." The last thing he wanted to hear about was the *great* Harry Potter, and he was sure that Lupin would be unable to resist retelling stories of the heroics from the battle that destroyed the Dark Lord.

"Think about it. He might be useful. It really would be much better if we traveled with three. Well, are you coming?"

He set down the book; it was now too dark for him to read. "Very well." As they walked away from the others, he said, "You are quite the mother hen."

"Why thank you," she replied smugly. "Since you don't look after yourself, someone has to."

The following morning, he stared at the ruins of the castle. He had no idea what he was doing back here. While it was true he needed to look through the books, he knew there would be too many questions if he started rooting through the library. He sighed and swallowed his pride. In one of these books, he had read how to capture a Lethifold; it was just a matter of finding the right book.

"Good morning, Severus," came Lupin's cheerful voice.

This was truly going to be a long day. "Lupin."

"Will you be helping with the library this morning?"

"As my research permits."

"Aurelia didn't say what you were looking for. I wondered if I might be of assistance?" Lupin offered.

Severus gritted his teeth. He hated the thought of admitting he needed help, especially from Lupin. "No," he said sharply.

"Well, if you change your mind," Lupin offered before walking away.

Severus stared after him. If Lupin thought that for one moment that he would ask for help, that werewolf was sorely mistaken.

After a couple of hours, Severus had gone through the books that had been salvaged. None of them had been the book he was searching for. If only he could have remembered the title. Now, he was faced with a dilemma. He only had one more day in which to find the book he needed, but he couldn't really do much to help in the search for more books.

Unfortunately, he took too long to consider his options. Lupin approached him again. "Severus, something is bothering you. You've been searching through these books like your life depended on it. I know we have never gotten along particularly well, but we did fight together with the Order. Whatever it is, you can trust me to be discreet. Let's put our pasts behind us, and let me be your friend. Let me help. What are you looking for?"

Severus scowled and swallowed his pride. "There was a book in the library that discussed the capture of a Lethifold. I believe it was a history book. That is the book that I am looking for."

"A Lethifold? Why would you want to capture one of those?" While Remus didn't know a lot about them, he knew that they were not the type of creature people generally had any interest in.

"Does it matter?" Severus snapped.

Lupin knew this as much information as he would get out of Severus. "No. Well, if it was history, I have an idea of where to start looking." He thought about asking Severus to help, but he had the distinct impression Severus was hiding something, and that's why he had been reluctant lend a hand with the search.

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Chapter 6

As daylight waned into dusk, Severus had to admit that Lupin had been quite helpful. But even with Lupin's help, he had not found the book in question. Knowing his luck, the book had been destroyed. About the only thing known about Lethifolds was that the Patronus charm was the only spell that seemed to affect them, but that spell drove them off. He had also searched his memory for any spell that might be useful for capturing one, but even with all his knowledge of Dark magic, he could not think of one.

He rubbed his eyes, trying to focus on the book in front of him. He wasn't sure if his eyesight was getting worse or if he was just tired. If it were not the latter, he could be in trouble.

Lupin sat beside him on the rubble, holding a few more tattered volumes. "Nothing yet?"

Severus slammed the book shut. Why did everyone insist on engaging him in conversation? "No," he replied tersely. He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"So, nothing yet? Well, there's still one more day," she replied sadly. Whether or not they found the book, she knew that they would still be going to New Guinea.

"I'm not sure how much more will be salvageable from the History section. These were the last remaining volumes I saw in that area," Remus said, holding up four heavily damaged books.

Aurelia grabbed the top one and carefully examined it. The cover was unreadable and she carefully opened the pages. She watched Severus do the same out of the corner of her eye, and she could see the fire had drained from his eyes. She pulled out her wand and cast a few spells on the book that would keep it together while she flipped through the pages. Noticing that the book in Severus' hand was in just as bad condition, she swapped books with him.

Severus clenched his jaw, hoping that Lupin had not noticed what happened. He could see the werewolf was careful paging through one of the other recovered books and gave no outward sign of having noticed what happened with the books. After realizing the book in his hand was not the one he was looking for, he slammed it onto the pile next to him.

"Careful, Severus. I've only made temporary repairs to that book. It can't take that much abuse," Aurelia admonished.

He glared at her for daring to chastise him front of someone else, especially Lupin.

She held his glare for several seconds before turning her attention to Lupin. "Can I help you make one last sweep of the History section before we lose the light?" she asked.

Remus placed the books next to Severus. "Of course."

As they walked through the ruins of the library, she asked, "Have you been through the Restricted Section?"

"That was the first part of the library we went through. None of us saw anything else worth recovering there."

"Well, if we have time, let's check again, just to be sure," she replied as she carefully picked her way through the rubble.

After fifteen minutes of searching, Remus asked, "Why is Severus looking for information on how to capture a Lethifold?"

"You'll have to ask him," she replied evasively.

"I have and he wouldn't answer."

While she hated keeping secrets, she owed it to her classmate to keep this one. "Well, I suppose he has his reasons for not saying." She met his eyes momentarily, silently pleading with him to ask no more questions.

After another ten minutes, that yielded only three more books, she asked, "Shall we move over to the Restricted Section?"

Remus gestured for her to lead the way. They worked in silence until Remus' curiosity finally got the better of him. "He's not fully healed, is he?"

"What makes you say that?" she asked in as casual a voice as she could muster.

"Several things. First, the way he rubs his eyes. I've seen him read for hours on end without being bothered, but now, he seems to tire easily. Also, I haven't seen him help much. Now, I know he's pretty self-serving, but he's been buried in that research very deeply, and I can tell he's nervous about something. Obviously, capturing a Lethifold is very important to him, yet he has not come to help dig books out of the library. If this was truly important to him, I think he would have rebuilt the library with a wave of his wand, but I haven't seen him move a single stone."

"You're very observant," she replied cautiously.

"I have found it to be a very useful survival skill, especially in the Order. I'm right, aren't I?"

"You will have to ask him," she replied evasively.

"Now, let's just say that my theory is correct. The two of you are planning on capturing a Lethifold. Actually, you are planning on capturing one for him. Now, staying awake for days on end isn't very practical. I think you need a third person on this expedition. As I'm currently between jobs, I have time to go on this journey with you. While I don't have any experience with Lethifolds, I do have ample experience and knowledge about anything else we might run into."

She considered his offer. Severus had already told her that he would not accept Lupin's help. "If I recall correctly, the two of you did not get along well in school. I believe you and your friends used to bully him whenever you found him alone. Why would you want to help?"

He looked away from her, ashamed of his past behavior. "In part, to atone for the past. I am in his debt for other reasons I prefer to keep private. If I can help in this endeavor, I hope he will consider my debt repaid. He might listen to you."

She continued to move stones around, stacking them neatly out of the way, searching for hidden books. "I will ask him again."

Severus looked up from the last of the books and scowled at what he saw. He didn't like to see the two of them talking. He couldn't help but think they were talking about him. Lupin was the last person he wanted to know about his weakness.

When they approached, he saw they each had a handful of books. "Well, this is the last of them, and they are in pretty bad shape. I'm going to talk to Irma about letting me take them home and see what I can do for them. I'll bring them back tomorrow. If you'll excuse me."

Severus and Remus stared at each other. Severus narrowed his gaze into a particularly harsh glare, willing Lupin to go away. Inwardly, he was impressed that Lupin did not back down. "What do you want?" he growled.

"I want to help. I want a chance to repay my debt to you," Remus offered.

"You have no debt to me."

Lupin flashed a disarming smile and sat on a stone next to Severus'. "I beg to differ. My debt has accrued over many years. Most recently for you brewing the Wolfsbane Potion for me."

"That was in the best interest of Order and at the behest of Albus," he replied indifferently.

"Well, yes, but you did it. There is also the way I treated you in school. I know that you are not completely recovered, and no, Aurelia did not tell me, I figured it out on my own. Others will eventually figure it out, as well. I don't know why you want a Lethifold, but let me come with you to capture one. I think you'll need my wand."

Severus looked away, afraid his normally stoic expression would betray him. "I don't need the help of a werewolf."

"Full moon is more than two weeks away. You need someone that can conjure a Patronus. I can do that. I also know a great deal about dealing with magical creatures. Unless I'm mistaken, you cannot currently conjure a Patronus. What if a Lethifold were to attack while Aurelia is sleeping?"

Severus was saved from having to answer by Aurelia's return. "She was actually happy to let me take the books home and repair them. It's a shame that so few have been recovered. There used to be thousands, and now..." she let her voice trail off as she realized what she was saying. The book they desperately needed had been in the library.

"Well, it's getting late, and I have to get home for dinner. Severus, did you want to come and you can look through the books after we eat?"

He welcomed this reason to leave the werewolf's presence. He knew he would have to face the same question again tomorrow, but by then he would be better prepared to deal with it. "That is an excellent idea." He followed her to an area that was out of sight of where everyone was working.

After dinner, everyone retired to the library. Julia was reading, and Helen was intently watching her mother repair the books.

"I spoke with Remus today. He has offered to help."

"I don't need his help," Severus replied gruffly.

She looked up from the book she was working on. "Through observing you, he's figured it out. I would feel much better about this trip if someone else was there. Since he already knows, you wouldn't have to tell anyone else."

"Knows what, mum?" asked Helen.

"Hush, dear. Mind your manners," Aurelia reprimanded. Turning her attention back to Severus, she continued. "Seriously. Three sets of eyes are better than two, and he can conjure a Patronus if things go poorly. Unless you have someone else in mind, I intend to invite him along."

"You wouldn't dare?" he asked sharply, anger tingeing his voice.

"I most certainly would. You need me, and I refuse to go with just the two of us."

He sat back in his chair and scowled. "Fine, invite your werewolf. You did know that's what he was, didn't you?" he sneered.

"Of course I did. It was in the newspaper. Do you think I'm a complete idiot? The moon is still waning, and we will be back before it's full again. Can I trust you to tell him tomorrow morning? I do need to go into work, and he might not be there when I drop you off. Besides, the others might be suspicious if I arrive with you since you haven't left without me."

He picked up the repaired book. "Fine, I will tell him."

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it?" she replied in a motherly tone and went back to work on repairing the books.

It was past midnight when she finished repairing the last book. The girls had long since gone to bed, and she was barely able to keep her eyes open. "I'm glad you showed me how to set those wards. Someone tried to get in the house today."

"And you are sure they didn't succeed?" he asked suspiciously.

"Quite sure. I ran through all the security spells you taught me. I do have to say that whoever it is picked a rather unfortunate spell to trigger. I've sent an owl to St. Mungo's asking to be alerted if a patient covered in boils arrives."

"I doubt your intruder would go to St. Mungo's."

"But he'll die," she said incredulously.

"His life is inconsequential. Through his death, Malfoy will learn that you are not defenseless. Since your house was not actually violated, we should do nothing. If we prove to him that we will indeed leave him alone, he should decide we are not worth the effort."

"Not worth the effort? This is my family he is trying to attack." She was getting quite emotional.

"I have given you the knowledge you need to protect yourselves. I know that he cannot break the wards I have had you set. Rest assured, you are better than him. You will be safe, you have my word."

She knew that he had been Lucius' close associate for many years and had no reason to doubt his assessment. "And when the girls are at the Parker's?"

"I have no reason to believe he is that interested in your family, and he will have a limited number of contacts and operatives in Britain. Some of the simpler spells should be enough to protect them there. I would not worry about leaving them. I believe Malfoy only wanted to scare you. If I find otherwise, I will see him brought to justice."

"Thank you, Severus." Watching him, she could see that he was spending a great deal of time rubbing his eyes and was holding the book quite close to his face. "How is your vision?" she asked.

"Acceptable."

"Well, I don't believe you. Get some rest. The books will be there in the morning, and the odds of finding anything else useful in the library are slim. You may be too tired to notice it if it is in one of these."

He knew she had a point, but he desperately wanted to find the information. Sleep seemed inconsequential. "I will be fine," he replied tersely.

With a wave of her wand she doused the lamps. "Well, good luck," she replied glibly as she left him in darkness.

"Relight those lamps," he ordered.

"No. Go to bed. The books will be there in the morning. Of course, unless you've learned to read in the dark, I don't think you have a choice. See you in the morning," she said smugly.

He hated losing and started trying to think of an appropriate hex for her once he was made whole.

When Aurelia woke the following morning, she found that Severus was already up and had prepared breakfast. "You aren't in a hurry to get out of here, are you?"

"I intend to use today to the fullest as we are leaving for New Guinea tomorrow morning," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Of course," she replied as she tried to enjoy her breakfast. She found it very difficult to eat a peaceful meal while being stared at. After she finished eating, she left a note for the girls, and he gathered up the books.

By now he had become somewhat accustomed to Side-Along Apparition, even if he didn't care for it.

"Let Remus know to meet us at my place in the morning. I'll come pick you up after I get off work," she said and quickly Disappeared before anyone noticed her.

Looking around, he saw that no one else appeared to be awake, so he took the books into the tent they were using for meals and began going through them. Even with the repair work Aurelia had performed on them, they were still quite fragile.

He was interrupted by an overly cheerful voice greeting him. "Good morning, Severus."

Severus looked up with his eyes and replied disdainfully, "Lupin." He returned his attention to the book and continued, "You are to be at Healer MacLean's house first thing tomorrow morning. If you are late, we will leave without you."

"Of course," Remus replied politely. It seemed that Aurelia had convinced Severus to let him come along. He picked up one of the books and examined it. "She has done a decent job of restoring the books." He began searching for hint of a mention about Lethifolds.

"Do you have a plan if you don't find the book?"

"Judging the creature's reaction to various spells will determine the plan. As I have found almost nothing written about Lethifolds, it is pointless to generate a plan ahead of time."

Remus knew better than arguing with Severus. "Of course." He went back to reading the book.

By midmorning, they had gone through the last of the books. Severus refused to believe the book had been destroyed. Slamming the book onto the table, he strode towards the ruins.

Remus followed at a discreet distance, curious, but unwilling to risk further chastisement from his reluctant traveling companion. He was not at all surprised to see Severus moving towards the part of the castle that was the Headmaster's tower. "This part of the castle was hit harder than most," he said quietly as he saw Severus looking around the ruins.

"Make yourself useful and start moving stones," he ordered. Since Lupin knew of his weakness, there was no point in pretending.

Aurelia arrived a little earlier than usual. She had been able to get away from work early, having turned over all her duties for the next couple of weeks. She didn't see Severus in the library ruins or the encampment. Irma was the first person she saw. "Did Severus bring the books back?"

"Yes, he did, dear. Thank you for what you did to them. They'll need some more preservation, but at least we can tell what they are now," she replied gratefully.

"Glad to have helped. You haven't seen him, have you?" she asked as she continued to scan the school grounds.

Irma pointed over her shoulder. "I saw them over on the south side."

"Thanks," she replied and headed in the direction Irma had indicated. She saw quite the strange sight as they came into view. Remus was attempting to stack stones while Severus was digging through the ruins, presumably searching for more books. She tried to remember what might have been in this part of the castle, but could come up with nothing. "There's an easier way to do that," she offered.

Both men looked up at her, and Remus nearly dropped a large stone on Severus.

"Be careful, you imbecile," Severus snapped.

Remus muttered an apology in reply.

Aurelia brandished her wand and said confidently, "*Munio!*"

Severus and Remus watched in amazement as forty or so large stones levitated from the top layer of the ruins and quickly rearranged themselves to form a neat wall.

"What was that?" Severus asked.

Aurelia shrugged. "My father was a master mason. I used to work with him during the summers. I can do a lot more bricks at once, but these stones are quite large and some of them are irregular. It's a shame he can't be here. He would have loved to help rebuild the castle. Well, tell me what part of the ruins you are interested in, and I can move the stones out of the way for you."

"We aren't exactly sure. The Headmaster's study was in this area, but when the tower came crashing down..." Remus left that sentence unfinished. Time had seemed to stand still when the tower slowly collapsed. None of them could believe the castle was being so thoroughly destroyed. It was one thing to blast holes in passageways, quite another to take down walls and towers.

"Well, let's figure out where I should concentrate. It's an exhausting spell when dealing with objects this heavy."

They spent the next hour probing through the ruins, looking for any signs of books. Once they pinpointed the most likely location of some of the Headmaster's private library, Aurelia began clearing some of the stones. Thankfully, these books were in better condition than those in the library; at least none of them had been burned. Severus was able to sort through them with a glance. When he stopped and began paging through a book, Aurelia and Remus moved over to his side.

"Have you found it?" she asked quietly.

"I think that I have," he replied without looking up from the book.

She noticed the light was waning and lit her wand to provide him with more light.

"Yes! This is it!" he said triumphantly. "I need to take this back to your library where the light is better."

"Of course," she replied. "Remus, would you care to join us?"

Severus glared at her.

"I think we should all be familiar with the contents of this book." She hoped the two men could work together on this trip. After giving Remus the address, she and Severus found a secluded area where they could Disapparate.

Once they arrived at home, Severus spun on Aurelia. "I can't believe you invited that...*man* here this evening."

She crossed her arms. "Look, the two of you are nearly forty. Anything that happened, happened twenty years ago. Let it go. We are going to be traveling together for some time, perhaps as long as two weeks. I'm not going to spend my time refereeing childish arguments between the two of you. If you can't behave, then we will come home."

"You are treating me like one of your children," he said snidely.

"Only because you are acting like one. No, that's an insult to my girls. They are much better behaved. Now, we are going to have a nice civil dinner this evening. After dinner, I'll take the girls over to the Parker's, and then we'll go through the book and devise a strategy for capturing a Lethifold. Go get cleaned up for dinner," she ordered.

He was not used to being addressed in this manner, but then again, most people did not stand up to him. She was one of the few that he did not intimidate. That might have something to do with the fact that she had seen him at his absolute weakest. Knowing that he was absolutely filthy from his work digging in the ruins, he went upstairs to shower and change before dinner.

When he came downstairs, he could hear Lupin talking with Julia and Helen. Entering the living room, he saw Helen sitting next to Lupin showing him her latest drawings. Severus felt a twinge of jealousy.

Helen saw Severus enter the room, jumped up and ran over to him. "Look what I drew for you," she said proudly. "Mum told us you were helping to make the castle better."

Severus sat in a chair and Helen climbed onto the arm of the chair and began showing him drawings of him rebuilding the castle. "These are very nice, Helen," he replied. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lupin smiling at him. "Do you have something to say, Lupin?"

Remus wiped the smile from his face. "No, nothing at all." He had always suspected Severus had a softer side, but he had never suspected a child would bring it out.

Severus was saved from further scrutiny when Aurelia entered the room and announced, "Dinner is ready."

Over dinner, Helen and Julia peppered Lupin with questions since he was the new arrival. Severus took perverse pleasure in watching Lupin attempt to explain what he did for a profession. Julia was too young to have had him as a professor.

"Right now, I'm in between jobs," Remus replied.

"Do you know what you are going to do next?" Julia asked.

"Well, I've applied at Hogwarts. I taught there years ago, before you were a student."

This comment caused Severus to nearly choke on his dinner. He could only imagine that Lupin would once again be applying for Defense Against the Dark Arts, the position Severus had last held and hoped to hold again. He had not considered which class he would be teaching this upcoming term if he did return to Hogwarts, and Brock hadn't mentioned it either. It was something he would have to address when he returned.

Naturally, he would prefer to teach Defense, but depending on the applicants, the new Headmaster might want him to return to Potions.

"Something wrong, Severus?" Remus asked, fully aware of how much Severus wanted to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts again.

Severus had stopped coughing and sipped his water. "No, nothing at all. Do you honestly expect your application to be seriously considered?"

Remus really didn't want to get into a sparring match with Aurelia's children at the table. He shrugged. "It can't hurt to apply." He thought his chances were better than Severus'.

Aurelia picked up on some of the tension between the two men and wondered if she had been insane to insist Remus come along. Obviously, she had underestimated the animosity between the two of them. "Well, then, since we're short on time, I think we should finish up dinner. Girls, after we're done, I want you to clean up the dishes and finish packing."

"And you promise a shopping trip into London when we get back?" Julia asked.

"Of course. The two of you will need school robes and books. Hopefully they'll have the book list out by then. Now, since you're done eating, start clearing the dishes." She watched as the girls reluctantly carried out their orders. "Shall we adjourn to the library?"

She hoped that the two of them could be convinced to behave. Otherwise, this would be a very short trip. She noticed that Remus and Severus took seats on opposite sides of the room. "Okay, look, I have no interest in refereeing the feud the two of you have. I don't care how it started, either. I've already told Severus that I won't put up with childish behavior. Capturing a Lethifold is not to be taken lightly. Let's take a look at this book and see what we can learn." She opened the book and began reading aloud the passage on Lethifolds:

Lethifolds are greatly feared creatures. This is due to their manner of attack. They will smother a sleeping person, giving them no opportunity to attack. They also move silently and can slip through the smallest cracks in doors and windows. As they seem to have an ability to detect when a person is sleeping, and will not approach when someone is awake, they have been incredibly difficult to study.

Additionally, they have only been seen at night when attacking their victims. All attempts to follow Lethifolds have been thwarted due to the speed at which they can move through the thick jungles they inhabit.

They generally prey on witches and wizards and seem to avoid Muggles altogether. This has led to speculation that there is something about magical persons that attracts them. The only defense against a Lethifold is the use of the Patronus Charm. Lethifolds are instantly repelled by a Patronus. Readers are warned that only a fully corporeal Patronus will affect a Lethifold.

To date, only a handful of Lethifolds have been captured. Those that were captured did not survive long in captivity and likely died from starvation. There is no indication of how often one must be fed. Attempts to feed them animals have failed. It appears that humans are the only beings a Lethifold will eat.

The essence of Lethifold has shown some promise as an ingredient in antidotes, but due to its rarity, it has not been studied extensively. The essence is extracted through magical distillation by boiling a Lethifold in water. Of the Lethifolds studied, only one had eaten recently, but that did not seem to change the composition of the essence.

The following spell will produce a net that will capture a Lethifold. This is a very difficult task since they will not enter a room where an occupant is awake. It is best to

capture one in a room, where it will have limited means of escape. The attack must be made immediately, as Lethifolds are easily startled.

"Charming creatures," she said dryly. She could tell that none of them felt too optimistic about their chances at success. While there was a capture spell described, there was no picture showing the motion. Learning wand motion from a written description was always difficult. She handed the book to Severus. "Why don't you check our movement to the description?"

After Aurelia and Remus had tried the spell a half dozen times with no result, Severus slammed the book down. "You have the wrist movement all wrong, both of you." He stood up and demonstrated for them. "It should be like this." He stood, gave his wand an elaborate flourish and said, "*Comprendo lodix*."

They all looked on in amazement as an incredibly small golden web emerged from the tip of Severus' wand, exactly like the book had described.

"This is wonderful. The one of us that doesn't have the power to cast the spell usefully, is the one who figures it out," lamented Remus.

"No, this is good," replied Aurelia. She held her wand at the ready. "Direct me through the motions," she said.

Severus placed his hand on hers and guided here through the complex motion. "It's that final twist of the wrist that you aren't getting right. It's very subtle." He guided her through it several more times, until he felt that she had mastered the twist. He then stepped back and watched her attempt the spell again. As before, nothing happened. "It's a twist, not a flick," he said in irritation.

"I know it's a twist, that was what I was doing," she insisted.

"No, you weren't," Severus argued.

Remus could tell the tempers were getting stretched. "Look, it's getting late. Why don't we finish getting the supplies together? I still have to go home and pack. I'll be back early tomorrow morning."

"Excellent idea. Severus, give me a hand getting the tent out of the attic and then we'll pack the food." Once they were in the attic and she was digging through the boxes looking for the tent, she said, "You know, I think I'm glad I didn't have boys."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Severus asked snidely.

"It means that boys are petty and childish. I've warned you about arguing. I'm not going to play mother to the two of you. We need to work together in order to capture a Lethifold. I'll talk to him in the morning, but I want the two of you to quit antagonizing each other.

"You know, considering I'm your only friend, I'm surprised you would ostracize someone actually offering to help you." She knew this was hard for him to hear. "Severus, the world has changed. You need to change with it."

He stood up from the box he was searching. "I am aware of that fact. Don't you think I know what Dumbledore's death did?" He paused. "Making friends has always been difficult for me."

"You seem to have done all right here. I think we all consider you part of the family. I know, a difficult concept for you. Just, act the same way around Remus that you do around us. I don't think he means you any ill will. I think he genuinely wants to help you. Given the fact that he is a werewolf, I think he knows what it's like to be alone."

"I will be civil. Now, where is this infernal tent?"

"It's here somewhere. It was about four years ago that we last went camping." She buried herself back in the boxes before she was overcome with emotion.

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Chapter 7

By the time Remus arrived, the supplies were packed and waiting in the front room. "Severus," he said politely and nodded his head in greeting. He received a small bow of the head in return. "Where's Aurelia?"

"Dropping the girls off at the Parker's," he replied.

"Will she be long?"

"I expect not, but it is hard to say where children are concerned."

They waited in uneasy silence for several minutes before Remus said, "I wanted to thank you for letting me come along."

"I didn't..." Severus recalled his conversation with Aurelia. "You're welcome."

They returned to silence. Severus continued reading his book, and Remus began to examine the photographs on the mantle.

When Aurelia returned, she saw the two of them sitting in silence. *Well, it's better than them arguing.* She held up an old tennis racquet. "I've got the Portkey. Whenever you are ready."

They both stood and nearly tripped over each other trying to get the packs, eager to be out of the confines of the house.

Once they were all touching the racquet, she said, "*Portus*." After a few moments of disorientation, they found themselves in the middle of a jungle in late afternoon. She

quickly vanished the tennis racquet, not wanting to litter.

"Didn't we need that to get back?" Remus asked.

"No, we'll pick up a new one from the local Portkey Authority when we're done. It's probably a good thing they are eight hours ahead of us. We should be ready to stay up all night. Well, except for you, Severus."

He still didn't like the idea of being the bait, but he was the logical choice. "I suggest we find a settlement and set up camp nearby. We can ward the camp to keep any Muggles away. With luck, we'll make contact with a Lethifold in the next few days. I also think it would be prudent to continue to practice the capture spell."

The sun was getting much lower in the horizon; there was maybe an hour until sunset. "Couldn't we have arrived closer to a village?" Remus asked.

"This isn't a Muggle village nearby, and I thought it would be a bad idea for the local wizards to know what we were doing. People are very superstitious about Lethifolds," Aurelia replied.

It was nearly dark by the time they had the campsite set up and secure. Severus and Remus had pitched the tent, while Aurelia saw to the wards. "Should we draw straws for who cooks dinner?"

"I'll do it," offered Remus, and he headed to the kitchen area of the tent.

Aurelia went to check the bedrooms, to make sure they had everything. She noticed Severus was following her. "Thank you for being civil. I think you should take this room since it's the only one on the first floor. We can watch for it from the living room."

"You should practice the spell some more," Severus replied.

"After we eat. Remus should be involved, too."

"If you can master the wand movement, you can teach it to him." He wanted as little do with Remus as possible.

"Fine," she relented. He coached her through the proper wand movement over and over.

"You aren't getting the twist right," he insisted.

"I'm doing it exactly like you instructed. If I have it wrong, why don't you show it to me again."

He stood behind her and wrapped his hand around hers, guiding her through the movements. "Like this."

"That's what I was doing," she insisted.

Remus' voice came from the door. "Are you two ready to eat?"

"One last time, and then we'll eat," she said.

Both men watched her flourish her wand and speak the incantation. A brilliant gold web shot out of her wand. She smiled at the satisfaction of a job well done. "Thank you for your help, Severus. We'll work on this some more after dinner."

He was pleased by her praise, but also felt guilty about the feelings standing behind her had elicited. She was his friend, and he was sure she did not have any romantic feelings towards him. If he admitted his feelings, he was sure it would destroy their friendship.

After a simple, yet delicious dinner, they moved into the living room to continue work on the capture spell. Remus still wasn't having any luck with it. After half an hour of verbal instruction and demonstration failing, Aurelia said, "Here, let me show you." She moved beside him and took hold of his wand hand. He pulled away as though touched with a hot iron. "What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing," he lied. He forced himself to be calm.

Severus was tired of watching her trying to teach the werewolf the spell. He most especially did not want to watch her holding his hand. "I'm going for a walk."

"I'd really rather you didn't," replied Aurelia.

"Muggles walk in the jungle all the time. Lethifolds only attack those that are sleeping so they can smother them. I'll be back in half an hour."

She didn't like the idea of him going out, but stopping him would cause more tension. Once Severus was gone, she turned her attention back to Remus. "Why did you pull back from my touch?"

"I...lost someone I cared very deeply for."

She smiled weakly. "I think we all did. My husband was an Auror. They killed him near the end. It's been very hard for me getting on with life without him."

He placed his hand on hers. "My...young lady was an Auror, too."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," she replied. They stood in uncomfortable silence, neither really knowing how to continue, but knowing they didn't really want to talk about the losses they had suffered.

"I think I'm ready now," he announced.

It was quite late when Severus returned, and he found the two of them still working on the capture spell. He wasn't sure why, but watching the two of them together bothered him. Aurelia seemed to have it mastered, but Remus was still struggling with it. "With the two of you on watch, I will get some rest. I trust you can stay awake?"

"With the two of us it shouldn't be a problem. I'll ward the other windows so it has to go in your window or through the door. We can watch both from outside."

"That will be acceptable." He was still quite nervous about placing his life in other people's care, but he had grown to trust Aurelia over the last few months. He knew that she did not want him dead. He drifted off to an uneasy sleep.

The three of them settled into a routine. Aurelia and Remus would sleep from sunrise until mid-afternoon. The afternoon and evening were spent working on perfecting the capture spell. When Severus went to bed, the two of them would move outside to keep watch for a Lethifold.

Aurelia found herself thankful that she had insisted Remus come along when she tried to keep herself awake. They were both settling into a lull, when Aurelia thought she heard something. Peering into the darkness, she thought she saw something. At first glance, it didn't look much like the flat shape of the Lethifold. She nudged Remus. "Do you see that?"

He looked where she was pointing. "That looks like a person," he whispered.

"That's what I thought."

Not wanting to chance their visitor getting away, Remus stunned him.

"What did you do that for?" Aurelia asked.

"What's going on?" asked Severus, who had run outside after hearing the commotion.

"I thought it best to stun him. Whoever is sneaking around here in the middle of the night probably doesn't have honorable intentions."

Aurelia lit her wand and examined the intruder. "Either of you recognize him?" she asked, after determining that he was merely unconscious.

Remus shook his head. Severus examined the body. When he pulled up the left sleeve he saw the Dark Mark. "We know what he is, but I don't recognize him. He must have been a lower level Death Eater."

Aurelia asked, "But why does he have the Mark? Yours is gone."

Severus unconsciously rubbed his left forearm. "I...don't know. Perhaps it has something to do with the potion."

"What potion?" asked Remus.

In order to head off an argument, Aurelia said, "Never mind. Severus, you don't suppose that Lucius sent him, do you?"

"Possibly. There is one way to know for sure. Do you have Veritaserum?"

"Severus! I'm not going to do that, even if I did have any. It's not allowed."

"Do you want to know if Malfoy sent him?" Severus asked tersely.

"What does Malfoy have to do with this?" Remus interrupted.

Aurelia chewed on her fingernails, unsure of how much to tell Remus. She may have unwittingly placed him in danger.

Snape replied, "None of your business."

"Severus, it is his business. We needed to get information on the poison. Lucius was the only one that we had access to..."

"Malfoy disappeared. He's dead," insisted Remus.

"I assure you, Lucius Malfoy is most definitely alive," replied Severus.

"Yes, he did disappear and everyone assumed he was dead because the entire family vanished. Severus had a very good idea where he would be hiding, so we went to pay him a visit," added Aurelia.

"And you didn't turn him in to the Ministry?" Remus was aghast.

"Let's not debate that decision now. From him, we learned enough about the source of the poison that is affecting Severus to find a cure, or at least, what we think will be the cure. At the time, we decided to trade that information for his freedom. Now, that's not looking like a good decision. We don't know why this man is here, but it seems likely Lucius sent him."

Severus drew his wand. "Revive him," he ordered.

"What are you going to do with him?" Remus asked nervously. He knew that Severus couldn't really do any magic, but there were ways to be cruel without magic.

"Since there will be no use of Veritaserum, I will find another way to extract the information from him. Is either of you capable of Obliviation?"

Aurelia shook her head.

"You can't just do that!" protested Remus.

"What do you suggest, Lupin? That we just let him go on his way and report to Malfoy what we are doing? Or would you prefer to keep him prisoner? A tent is not exactly the most secure location to hold someone. If we Oblivate him, we can send him on his way. You and your *friends* were capable of a wide array of unsanctioned magic is this a spell you can do or not?"

Lupin stared at Severus for several long seconds before making his decision. "Fine. I'll do it." He didn't like it, but it didn't seem he had a choice.

Severus' interrogation yielded little of use. The man had been sent by Malfoy to spy on Severus. When Severus was not at Spinner's End, the man tracked him to Aurelia's house. It had taken him two days to find them in the jungle.

The man had been told not to harm anyone, only to spy. If he determined that Severus was behaving oddly, he was to report that back to Malfoy. That was why he had approached the tent; he wanted to see what they were doing.

Severus, Remus and Aurelia sat around the table. The spy was unconscious in the bedroom. "Do you believe him?" Aurelia asked.

"I do. My reputation precedes me. I could see the fear in his eyes. He thought that I was in his mind."

"So, he wasn't here to kill you. What do we do with him now?" Remus asked.

"We carry out our original plan. I have no interest in Malfoy knowing what we are doing. Once you Oblivate him, you will give him the false memory of having failed to find us. He will report back to Malfoy.

"Why Oblivate him? He's not doing anything harmful." Remus was confused why they would be concerned about the spy reporting nothing.

"Because we don't know *why* Malfoy wants this information. He may decide that this expedition is a threat to him and send forces after us."

"How many followers can he have? We almost completely destroyed the Death Eaters. And why would he think this is a threat?" Remus argued.

"We have no way of knowing the answer to either," Severus replied.

Remus had the idea that Severus was holding something back and gave Aurelia a piercing gaze.

She decided to answer the question that Severus would not. "All of the senior Death Eaters were given the same poison that is affecting Severus. I'm sure he suspects that we are conducting some research on that poison, whether it be brewing it or creating an antidote. His blood still contained traces of the poison. If he thinks we are working on a cure, he would be very interested in it."

Severus glared at her during the entire explanation. "Now you see why it is vital we Oblivate this spy."

"What is this poison?" Lupin asked. Potions had never been his strong suit, but he hadn't recalled learning about a poison that would remain in a person's system.

Aurelia and Severus stared at each other. When she realized he wasn't going to say anything more on the subject, she replied. "This poison is very Dark Magic. It is either very old or an incredibly recent discovery. While we were not able to learn the specifics of how its delivery imbues it with its power, I have a theory. I guess I should say what it is, first. It is a poison designed to ensure the loyalty of those who drink it. You-Know-Who, ever paranoid, served it to those who were his most loyal followers prior to attacking Hogwarts. I believe that the fact he was the first to drink from the goblet and began passing it around with a toast is what imbued the poison with its power.

"This poison is designed to kill any that aren't loyal. Once Severus was somewhat recovered, we learned that Lucius is the one that procured the poison. I still have no idea why Severus survived the poison. Poppy was able to keep him alive long enough to get him to me at St. Mungo's. I can only assume that the power of this poison did not die with You-Know-Who. I am sure that's the reason Lucius fled the country. He knew about the poison and knew that he could not renounce You-Know-Who."

"That would explain Nott," said Remus. When they looked at him quizzically, he continued, "Nott was trying to confess to us and give us the names of other Death Eaters when he died rather suddenly."

"That is the poison," Severus said. "Now, you will Oblivate him and give him his new memory. Once that is taken care of, deposit him some distance from here."

Remus didn't look pleased at what he had to do, but did it without complaint.

Once he was gone, Aurelia turned to Severus. "What do we do? You say you believe he told the truth, but what if Lucius becomes more desperate?" She was concerned about the safety of her girls.

He reached across the table and placed a reassuring hand on hers. "I don't believe he will. Right now, he has no idea exactly what we are doing. With his suspicion that we are working on a cure, he would be unlikely to do anything to your girls."

"But what if he decides to kidnap them to secure my help?" She was starting to get hysterical.

"Aurelia, listen to me. He knows me. He's not sure whether I am powerless or not. He will not do anything. If he does, he will live to regret it."

She smiled weakly at him, still concerned about her family. "Thank you."

By the end of the first week, everyone's nerves were on edge due to lack of sleep. "Perhaps we should move camp?" Aurelia offered.

Severus protested, "No, I believe our best chance is if we remain here. You chose this location because there have been attacks here in the past. We know so little about Lethifolds that moving would be a mistake. If we wait, it is bound to find us in its territory."

"Fine. Whatever. I can't extend my vacation, so if we don't find one, we will have to leave."

"Don't you think I know that?" asked Severus. It was his life they were talking about.

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm just tired. I think I'm going to get some sleep before it gets dark."

Remus and Severus stared at each other in silence for several long seconds before Severus got up and went to his room without saying another word. Remus picked up a book to pass the time until dark.

As darkness descended, Aurelia joined Remus in the living room. "Anything?" she asked quietly.

Remus shook his head. "Nothing. Do you think this is a futile search?"

"No, but I think we need a new plan. I have a theory. I don't think that he's been sleeping. Though, I can't say I blame him. As much as he's going to protest, I think he needs to take a Sleeping Draught." She crossed the room and cracked open Severus' bedroom door. From her experience as a parent, she could tell by his breathing that he was not asleep. "Severus, I know you can hear me, so quit pretending to be asleep."

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

She entered the bedroom and closed the door. "Look, we both know that Lethifolds will only attack a sleeping victim. And we both know that you haven't been sleeping, not that I can blame you. I want you to take a Sleeping Draught."

"Are you insane? That would make me completely defenseless," he protested.

"Oh, yes, that's a marvelous Patronus you can conjure," she replied dryly and pulled a small bottle from her pocket and placed it on the bedside table. "Take it or don't. It doesn't matter to me. I'm not the one that needs a Lethifold. Though, if you aren't going to take it, I'd like to know so that we can end this trip now and go home."

"You wouldn't? You said you would help."

"I did say that I would help, but unless you are asleep, we are never going to see a Lethifold. Remus and I will take watch over both the door and the window if you take the potion. I have some Invigoration Draught that we will both take so that we don't fall asleep. Now, which will it be?" She crossed her arms and waited for his answer.

He didn't say anything, but instead picked up the potion and downed it in one swallow. "Happy?" he asked snidely.

"Thank you," she replied and left him alone as the potion took effect.

Remus was standing by the door. "That went better than I expected."

"You just have to know how to deal with him. Most times, he's quite reasonable, but sometimes he's worse than my children." She led Remus to the kitchen area and ladled a dose of the Invigoration Draught into glasses for each of them. "I'll take the watch outside, if you don't mind," she said.

"Not at all," he replied even though a part of him saw the outside watch as more dangerous and wanted to protect her.

She found a spot on the far side of the clearing where she could get a clear view of the window. After an hour, she was beginning to wish that she had chosen inside. At least there she could have perused a book or magazine. Out here in the dark, there was little she could do other than stare at the tent.

After three hours, she thought she saw movement out the corner of her eye. Focusing on the area in question, it looked as though something was moving towards the tent. She held her breath as she watched the dark, flat form of a Lethifold climb the outside of the tent and slip through the window.

Quickly and quietly she moved back to the tent and through the front door. Throwing open the door to Severus' room, she took aim at the bed and shouted, *Comprendo lodix!* The golden web shot out from her wand, but the Lethifold had already begun to make its escape. As it neared the window, she saw another golden web, flying towards it, but this one also missed. "Damn!"

"What now?" Remus asked.

"Well, I don't know if it will come back tonight or not. Most animals are spooked when attacked, and it may take a while for it to return to the scene of the attack. Of course, if it's a hungry animal and there's only one nearby source of food, starvation has been shown to change that behavior."

"We'll keep watch. I think we need to be sneakier next time. I think it heard the door opening. Perhaps by Apparating into the room we could catch it before it begins to escape?" he offered.

"That's a good idea. It can't hurt. I guess we'll keep watch tonight and talk to Severus about the possibility of moving camp tomorrow."

"If we're going to Apparate into the bedroom, I think we should both be outside to watch for its return. You can ward the bedroom door so that it can only enter through the window."

"That might be a good idea, but I don't like the idea of leaving the door unprotected. Let's switch places instead."

By the time the sun came up, Aurelia was fighting to stay awake. There had been no sign of the Lethifold returning. Unfortunately, they had no idea how intelligent it was. A smarter creature would be very cautious about returning. She looked up as she saw an equally exhausted Remus enter the tent.

He flopped down on the couch next to her. "The one good thing about being outside is that it's harder to get comfortable and easier to stay awake. How much longer until that potion wears off?"

She checked her watch. "Just about two hours. I was really hoping we would have caught it. It's been years since I've had to work night shift, and I've forgotten how disorienting it can be," she said as she tried to stifle a yawn. It was getting hard for her to keep her eyes open.

"Well, on the bright side, this will only last a few more days at most. I'm just going to rest my eyes a minute before going up to bed," he muttered, but there was no one listening. Aurelia had already drifted off to sleep.

Severus experienced the few moments of disorientation that were common after waking from an induced sleep. He was thankful that he did wake. Taking that potion had put him in a very vulnerable position, one he did not like. Grabbing his toiletry kit, he decided to head to the bath and get cleaned up. When he opened his door, he saw the most unlikely sight. Remus was leaning against the corner of the couch, head thrown back, snoring softly and a stream of drool running down his right cheek. Aurelia was curled up on the couch beside him, using his leg as a pillow. He slammed his door sharply, watching them both jump. "My valiant protectors," he said dryly.

He stalked towards the bath. What was it about that accursed werewolf that attracted women? He couldn't remember the last time he had felt this sort of jealousy. Of course, never before had he had a woman show him the kindness and affection that she showed him. Or was he merely imagining that it was affection?

When he returned from the bath, he saw the two of them sitting at the table, eating bacon and eggs. He took a seat at the table and glared at them. To say he was not pleased was an understatement. "One task. The two of you had one task, and you failed."

"You know, it's not that easy," defended Remus. "Lethifolds move very quickly. And we have a better plan for next time."

Severus leaned back in the chair, crossed his arms and glared at the two of them. He wondered if the two of them had truly been protecting him. From the position he found them in, he doubted it.

Aurelia tried to reduce the tension in the room. "Okay, yes, we screwed up, but we need to move past that. I don't know about you, but I didn't really expect to capture one the first try. This is a creature we know next to nothing about. Nothing in the writing we had available indicated how quickly they could move. Now we know. The question now is, do we stay here or do we move the camp? We don't know how intelligent they are and whether or not it would come back. I do believe that the Sleeping Draught is the way to go. I think that we proved that last night."

"Now that we have made contact, you suggest we move?" Severus asked.

"I do, but I don't know what we should do about that. I honestly don't know if it would be better to move or not. I don't have enough information on Lethifolds to make any sort of scientific decision. What do you think?"

Severus sat in silence for several long moments, analyzing the data he had at hand. "Perhaps we should move the tent to a nearby location and change the appearance slightly. This might lure the Lethifold back."

"Excellent. I'm going to get a few hours sleep, and then we can get on with the move." She slid her chair away from the table and headed up the stairs.

After she was gone, Remus looked at the remains of his breakfast and decided that it wasn't worth finishing. He pushed back his chair.

"And I suppose you will be going to sleep as well?" Severus asked snidely.

"Look, Severus, I'm not in the mood to argue with you. It's been a very long week, and I haven't gotten much sleep because I've been guarding you. This looks like it will be a very long day, and I'd like to get some rest. That way I stand a chance at being able to help in the capture. I know you really didn't want my help, and that showing gratitude is something you are incapable of. Not that I'm looking for gratitude. Just...ease off a little."

As Lupin was walking toward the stairs, Severus asked, "Why did you want to help?"

Lupin paused with his foot on the first step. "Because you helped me when you least wanted to, because Albus asked. He trusted you when others lost faith in you, myself included. He wouldn't want you to suffer like this if it could be helped, not after the loyalty you showed to him."

It was mid-afternoon when they moved camp. They found a clearing about a mile from the original campsite. Remus made some subtle changes to the tent's outward appearance that would hopefully confuse the Lethifold into thinking it was a different place.

They ate dinner in the final glow of the setting sun. No one really spoke much, still thinking about the failure of the previous night. At the end of the meal, Aurelia placed a

small bottle on the table.

Severus stared at. "Is that really necessary?"

"Will you be able to fall asleep without it?" she asked pointedly.

He frowned and picked up the bottle before retiring for his room.

Before Aurelia could offer, Remus said, "I'll take the outside watch tonight."

Remus found a spot across the clearing where he could lean up against a nearby tree and still remain in the shadows. As bright as the moon was, that was difficult to do. Even though he had taken a dose of Invigorating Draught, it did nothing to quell the incredible sense of boredom that came with staring at a window all night.

Time seemed to stretch on for all eternity. The only measure of the passage of time was that the moon was now low in the sky. He tried to keep his mind off his hatred of the moon and focus on the surrounding jungle. He thought he saw something moving towards the tent. In the waning moonlight, he thought he could see it go through the main door of the tent.

With a pop he Apparated into Severus' bedroom and was just about to cast the capture spell, when he noticed there was no Lethifold. He quickly scanned the room again to confirm that it was not there. Realizing there was only one place it could be, he had a sickening feeling and quickly Apparated into the living room of the tent.

He saw the Lethifold covering the couch.

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Chapter 8

Without hesitation, Remus cried out, "*Comprendo lodix!*" The golden net shot from the tip of his wand and quickly encapsulated the Lethifold.

Aurelia started coughing and sputtering as she could once again breathe.

After making sure the Lethifold was secure, he hurried over to her side. "Are you all right?"

She nodded her head, but was still coughing too hard to speak. She eagerly accepted the glass of water that Remus had conjured for her. "Yes, I think so. That was a very unpleasant feeling."

"What happened? Didn't you take the Invigorating Draught?"

"No. I forgot. Did you catch it?" she asked as she looked around the room.

"It's over in the corner," he replied.

She got up from the couch and stumbled on unsteady legs.

"Perhaps you should rest a little while?" Remus offered as he steadied her.

She shook her head and concentrated on maintaining her balance. "No. I don't want to remain here longer than necessary. I'm concerned about Malfoy, and what he might do when his spy reports back. I doubt his explanation of finding nothing will convince Malfoy to leave us alone." Freeing herself from his steadying grip, she walked across the room and looked at the captured Lethifold. The net had compressed it so that it was approximately the size of a Quaffle. "I'm going to wake Severus. Do you think you could start setting up the still?" She started to walk away, keeping her hand against the wall for balance. "Oh, I think it might be best if we don't mention the details of how you captured the Lethifold."

He smiled at her. "Of course. I'll start setting it up."

Severus became aware of his surroundings. He also noticed a strange taste in his mouth. Someone had revived him. "What's happened?" he asked.

"We've captured one. Remus is setting up the still, and I thought I'd come wake you."

He shot out of bed, fully dressed. "You've captured one? Where is it?" He tried to determine if he felt different and assumed they must have captured it as soon as it entered the tent.

"It's out front. There's really not much to see. I'm going to help Remus."

He followed her out of the room. Once he saw the glimmering of the net, he stopped and looked at the Lethifold. She had been right about it not being much to look at. He had a hard time believing that it was the key to his cure. By the time he made it to the kitchen, they had the still set up on the counter.

All three of them stared at the still in silence. Finally, Remus broke the silence. "How do we get it into the boiler?"

"The book didn't say," Aurelia said quietly. "Since you cast the net, why don't you help Severus try to get it in there, and I'll stand by to recapture it if it gets loose."

"That isn't much of a plan," said Severus dryly.

"I don't hear you offering anything better," she snapped back. This had been a very long trip, and as soon as they could distill the essence from the Lethifold, they could go home.

Remus summoned the captured Lethifold and held it in his hands, trying to determine how best to proceed.

Severus was quickly running out of patience. "Cut open the boiler, place the Lethifold inside, reseal the boiler and remove the net."

"Ah, that does make sense, doesn't it?" Remus replied sheepishly. After pulling the boiler away from the rest of the apparatus, he enlarged it, cut it in half, placed the Lethifold inside and resealed the boiler. "Did we have to add water?" He wasn't sure that the Lethifold would boil, as he was not entirely certain what it was.

Aurelia consulted the book. "It doesn't say, but that's generally a given when distilling something. What do you think Severus? Should we let it simmer a bit before bringing it to a full boil?"

"That sounds...acceptable," he replied. From the sink, he filled a pot with water and poured it into the boiler. Once the boiler was reconnected, he watched Remus remove the net.

Remus and Aurelia held their wands at the ready as the Lethifold thrashed about in the boiler, but the tube leading from the boiler was too small for it to escape. Once Aurelia was sure that it wasn't going to escape, she lit a fire underneath the boiler. "Remus, there's no need for you stay up. Severus and I can handle this."

He was really too tired to argue and headed upstairs.

"How long should we let it simmer?" she asked.

"I have no idea. Perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes? I wish that book had been more specific on how to obtain the essence," he replied.

"You and me both. I suppose if we get this wrong, we'll have to organize another expedition?" She had not packed all her potion making supplies; they would have been too cumbersome. The still had come out of necessity. They had no idea how transportable a Lethifold would be.

Severus was surprised that she would offer to capture another Lethifold.

After twenty minutes of watching the Lethifold simmer, Aurelia raised the flames to create a full boil. A dark, smoky substance boiled up and began percolating through the condenser. It kept its smoky properties as it collected into the receiver. It only took thirty minutes for all the color to boil away, leaving something that looked like a white dishrag in the boiler.

"I think it's done," Severus said.

Aurelia extinguished the fire and magically sealed the receiver to keep any of the essence from escaping. The essence did not appear to be strictly a liquid, but it was not a gas either, it was some mixture of the two. "I'll put this away for safekeeping. I would appreciate it if you could pack up the rest of the still."

"When are you planning on leaving?" Severus asked, eager to return to her house so he could work on the cure.

"I'll wake Remus and we can leave as soon as everything's packed up. I know you're anxious to return."

Within half an hour, the tent was packed up and ready to go. Aurelia had the essence of Lethifold packed safely in her bag, an Unbreakable Charm applied to the bottle. She waited for Remus to Disapparate to the New Guinea Travel Office before taking Severus' arm in hers and following.

They only had to wait about ten minutes in the Travel Office, though the witch at the customer service desk seemed disappointed they were cutting their travel short and asked numerous questions to ensure they had not been unhappy on their visit. After much reassuring that they had a wonderful time and looked forward to visiting again, she handed them the Portkey that would take them back to Britain.

Remus made it through British Customs quickly, as did Severus. When the Customs Wizard searched Aurelia's bag, he spent quite a while staring at the essence of Lethifold. "What is this?" he finally asked.

"Essence of Lethifold," she replied politely.

"Essence of...what? You're joking, right?" he asked incredulously.

She was in no mood to play twenty questions with a customs agent. "I'm not kidding. I acquired it in New Guinea for medical purposes." She showed him her St. Mungo's identification, hoping that would stop any further questioning.

He looked at her identification, as if trying to decide if he should just let her go. "Oh, I don't know if you can bring this into the country. I'll have to ask my supervisor."

She was trying very hard not to lose her patience. "Look here, my good man, I am a Healer, as that card clearly shows, and I have a patient in need of that essence. As you can see by the classification on my identification, I am allowed to transport Class IV hazardous material. I assure you, that bottle holds only a Class II or, at very worst, Class III material. Now, you will kindly return that bottle to me so I can be on my way," she said officiously.

He ignored her and called out, "Hey, Herb. I have something you need to see."

She watched the two wizards conferring in a whisper, just far enough away that she couldn't hear them.

Severus stepped up to her. "What if they won't give it back? I believe it is an unclassified material."

"They have to give it back. There isn't any reason for them not to give it back. And if they don't, I'll get in touch with Marcus Stillwater. I somehow doubt they would ignore an order from the head of St. Mungo's." She kept an eye on the two wizards as they talked about and examined the bottle. They started looking at the seal, trying to figure out how to undo it. "I wouldn't do that," she called out loudly. When they both stared at her, she continued, "That essence is incredibly valuable, and I would hate for the two of you to have to report how you lost some of it. And I somehow doubt your meager salary would cover it." She held out her hand, hoping that would prompt them to give her back the bottle.

They conferred a few more seconds before the one named Herb handed her back the bottle. "Of course, Healer. We just have to be extremely cautious with unknown items."

She packed the bottle back into her bag. "It wasn't unknown, I told you exactly what it was. Good day, gentlemen," she said coldly.

Once they were outside the customs area, she turned to Remus. "Thank you very much for your help. We wouldn't have been able to do it without you. *I'd be dead without you*, she added silently. "Good luck with your job application." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Severus bristle.

Remus shook her hand in return. "It was my pleasure to help, and thank you for your kind words." He turned to Severus. "I hope that essence is what your potion needs."

Severus watched Remus turn away and had not intended on saying anything until a sharp elbow rapped him in his ribs. He glared at Aurelia, who gestured towards Remus. "Lupin," he called, waiting for the other man to turn before continuing, "Consider your debt repaid."

Remus gave him a friendly smile. "You're welcome, Severus."

Aurelia shook her head and chuckled softly as she led Severus to a secluded area so they could return to her house. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"I don't need you to give me a lesson in manners," he said sharply.

"On the contrary, I believe you do. Come, let's get home so you can work on that potion." She took hold of his arm and was about to Disapparate.

"Aren't you going to help?" he asked.

"Eventually. I think I should get some real rest first. You do realize that I haven't had a proper night's sleep since we left, don't you? And unlike you, I don't work very well when I'm sleep deprived."

Once they arrived at her house, she handed him the bottle. "If you really need help, come and wake me, but I think I'd like to get a good ten hours of sleep to recover."

He held the bottle delicately. According to the directions, adding the essence was one of the last steps of the potion, a potion that would take two days to brew. "I will endeavor to allow you your rest. I did not see that any magic was required in the early steps of the potion."

He took the bottle to the basement and quickly set up the lab area to accommodate the potion he would be creating. He had never realized how useful simple magic could be in the brewing of a potion until he had to retrieve every ingredient from the shelf and move cauldrons manually.

Meticulously, he followed the instructions. The precision of potions making was one of the things he enjoyed most about it. Slowly and carefully he progressed from step to step, checking and rechecking the instructions, using his knowledge and experience to fill in the gaps in the instructions.

He looked up when he heard someone descending the stairs. "I thought you said you were going to get some rest?"

"You mean you've been working continuously since we got home? It's been a little over eight hours. Why don't you take a break, and we can get something to eat?"

"Work is progressing well on the potion. I would prefer to keep working," he stated simply.

She moved over to the worktable and pulled the book away. "Yes, you would work yourself to death, but I won't let you. I made it a suggestion the first time; this time, it's an order."

He moved toward her and stopped when she brandished her wand. "Give me that book, woman!"

"Or what? Once we eat, you can show me where you left off, and I'll work on the potion while you get some rest."

He crossed his arms. "I do not require rest."

She held the book possessively against her chest. "Oh, no? And since when are you a medical professional?"

All he wanted to do was finish this potion so that he could get on with his life. "Why do you have to be so difficult?"

She laughed. "Me? Difficult? Oh, that's rich. I'm looking out for your health, since that's something you seem to ignore. You have neither eaten nor slept since we returned. Other than the first night you took the Sleeping Draught, I know that you have not gotten much sleep over the last ten days. I was too tired to argue with you when we got home, but now... Well, you can get some sleep on your own or I will give you another dose of Sleeping Draught."

He glared at her for several long seconds. She had not only the book, but she was the only one that could open the bottle in which the essence was stored. He hated to admit defeat. He also hated to admit his own weaknesses, but he was quite tired and now that he thought about it, he was hungry. "Since you are being childish and refusing to relinquish the book otherwise, I will do as you request."

"Hello, Pot. I'm Kettle," she joked, before leading him upstairs.

He scowled at her back. He had never been one to appreciate jokes made at his expense.

After a light meal, she asked him where he had left off in his brewing of the potion and sent him upstairs.

Severus muttered to himself as he climbed the stairs and went to his bedroom. "Infernal woman. Mothering me like that. No, she's worse than that. Condescending. I'll be glad to get out of this house."

As he changed into his nightclothes, he began to re-evaluate his last statement. She and her family had welcomed him when no one else would. It would have been easy for her to abandon him after he was discharged, but she didn't. Not only that, but she had worked long hours helping him search for a cure, even going as far as taking him to France to find Malfoy. And he couldn't forget that she had given up her vacation to take him to New Guinea to capture the Lethifold. She had shown him friendship when most others would have shunned him, would have been unable to forgive his actions.

No, he wouldn't be glad to get out of this house. He would miss her friendship and the fact that she was willing to stand up to him. In a way, it reminded him of Minerva. He froze in the process of buttoning his nightshirt. He suddenly contemplated how different Hogwarts would be without Minerva, Albus and the others. Aside from having been much younger than the rest of the staff, his dark, brooding nature and sordid past had always separated him from the others. Those two had been the only ones to pursue any sort of friendship with him.

If he did return to Hogwarts, it would be a very different place. Pomona was the only remaining Head of House. He supposed that Sinistra or Vector would be offered Ravenclaw. If he returned, and if Brock could be believed, he would be Slytherin. That left only Gryffindor without a Head. He shuddered as he had a sickening thought. He knew of at least one Gryffindor that was applying. Banishing that thought from his mind, he tried to get some sleep.

He was pacing in Dumbledore's study, explaining the Unbreakable Vow. When he was done, Albus stared at him in silence.

"We knew that Voldemort wants me dead. This is no surprise."

Severus paced nervously. "Yes, but I have never been asked to do it. I did not expect Narcissa to extract that from me." That puzzled him, since he had probed her mind when she had arrived and had not seen that. "I cannot do it. Albus, I cannot kill you. You are the only one that believed I had changed and gave me a second chance."

"Severus, you know that the curse is killing me."

Severus ran his hands through his hair. "I know that, but there is still the chance that I could find a counter-curse." Ever since Albus had come to him that night, he had been searching for a cure.

Albus raised his hand in a request for silence. "We both know that is not likely. In the event that you don't, I will still die. By doing as I asked, you will make my death have meaning."

Severus fell to his knees next to Albus and clutched at the headmaster's robe. "Albus, I cannot. I've reformed. You can't ask me to do that. Ask me anything but that. I would rather die than be the one that kills you."

Albus placed his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Severus, I know this will be hard for you. We all knew that difficult choices would have to be made. We knew that you, in particular, would be asked to do difficult things. You have already sworn to follow my orders, no matter what. That you would trust my judgment."

Severus rose and began pacing again. "That was before you asked this."

"Do you want to defeat Voldemort?" Albus asked pointedly.

"You know that I do. I told you that long ago," Severus replied shortly.

"Then you will follow my orders. I am not asking you to do this tomorrow. We will know when the time is right. Before I succumb to the curse, I will need you to do this. Do you understand?"

He still couldn't believe that he was going to agree to this. "I do."

"Very good, my boy. Now, do what you can to build your stock amongst the Death Eaters. Only through this sacrifice will our side prevail. Now, if you will excuse me, I have quite a bit of work to do."

Severus shifted in his sleep, trying to forget his dream. He didn't want to relive these moments.

Filius threw his door open. "Severus, Severus! Come quickly! The castle is under attack. They're up at the Astronomy Tower."

Severus thought the time had come. Whatever Draco had been planning had finally come to fruition. He had no idea what he would find, so he decided to stun Filius. He would protect as many as he could.

Hurrying into the passageway, he saw Granger and Lovegood. "Professor Flitwick has fainted. Assist him and get him to Madam Pomfrey." There were two more that he had saved.

He followed the noise to the Astronomy Tower. There, he could see his colleagues and members of the Order fighting against Death Eaters. He noticed that there were no prominent Death Eaters. That was not surprising since the Dark Lord actually anticipated Draco's failure. The Dark Lord had been so upset with repeated failures by the father that he was willing to take out his anger on the son.

Noticing that he did not see Draco and that the door to the Tower was open, he knew they must be atop the Tower. Quickly slipping through the combatants, he hurried up the stairs. Hopefully, no one noted his passing and the fact that he had not fired off a single spell.

At the top of the Tower, he saw Dumbledore facing off with Draco, a handful of Death Eaters prodding him to finish off the old man. He took one look at the headmaster and knew that the time had come. Something more than the curse had happened to him, but it was clear that he was near death.

Snape awoke, panting and drenched in sweat. A dream, it was just a dream, he told himself. He stumbled out of bed and into the bath. Turning the cold water on, he splashed it on his face. After turning off the tap, he stared at his reflection in the mirror. He hadn't had that dream in more than a month. He had thought that he had finally come to terms with what he had done, that he had had no other choice and that he did what Dumbledore had wanted.

Now that he was awake, with no hope of going back to sleep, he decided to shower and dress. Checking the clock, he saw that six hours had passed since he went to bed. That should satisfy Aurelia that he had gotten rest.

He found her sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea and reading the newspaper. He forced himself to ask politely, "How is the potion?"

She checked the clock on the wall. "It has another hour to simmer before the next step. Would you like something to eat?"

"Allow me," he offered. "Did you encounter any difficulties?"

"No. I did make a few notes to the steps, much in the same way you did. It seems that the original potions brewer was not very meticulous with his notes. The good news is, that if it doesn't work the first time, we will have plenty of essence to try it again."

He looked up from his cooking. "I've been thinking about that. The essence is as much gas as it is liquid. I believe that some of it would escape when the bottle is unstoppered."

"Not if you cool it. I was testing that earlier. If I apply a cooling charm, it becomes liquid."

He was dismayed that he hadn't thought of that. "Ah, yes. Of course." He brought two plates of scrambled eggs over to the table.

"Did you actually get any sleep?" she asked.

"A little." He didn't want to tell her about the nightmares.

"That doesn't surprise me. I'm sure this will work, and then you can get out from under my scrutiny and mothering."

He considered her statement in silence. "I'd like to thank you for all the assistance you have given me. You didn't need to do that."

She gave him a friendly smile. "I think that I did. What would have happened to you if I hadn't extended my friendship?"

He shuddered to think about what would have happened. "Thank you, again."

"I'll keep that secret that you have actually shown someone gratitude. So, what will you do if the cure works?"

"Honestly? I haven't really put much thought into it. I intend to inform Mr. Brock that I am interested in returning to Hogwarts. If I am accepted, I will be returning to Hogwarts to make preparations for the upcoming term. If not, I think I have already shown that I can find employment."

"Well, if you are interested in employment in the Potions community, I would be happy to write up a letter of recommendation for you." She paused a few seconds. "You can stay here as long as you'd like. It's been nice having you as a roommate."

"Thank you for the offer. I have enjoyed your friendship. Even if I am accepted at Hogwarts, I would still like to visit from time to time. I have enjoyed our discussions, and, as you can imagine, there is no one else at Hogwarts that shares my interest in Potions."

"That's good. I'll remind the girls that Professor Snape is a very different man from Severus Snape. I know that Julia knows how you are at school, but Helen, well, you know how she is," she said apologetically.

"Yes, I do." Changing subjects, he said, "I believe we are ready to proceed to the next step."

The last rays of sun were coming through the transom window as the potion neared completion. All that remained was adding the essence of Lethifold.

Severus watched Aurelia cool and unstop the bottle. He found he was holding his breath as she carefully poured ten drops into the potion. As each drop hit the surface, the potion smoked and temporarily swirled black. As the last drop was absorbed into the potion, it returned to the deep mustard color and gave off a rather offensive odor. "That's it, isn't it?" he asked tentatively.

"I believe so. I think it would be best if you eat something and then take it upstairs. We have no idea what kind of effects it might have, and I'd prefer you were in your bed." She ladled some into a glass and extinguished the fire under the cauldron before heading upstairs.

Aurelia surveyed the contents of her kitchen. Since they had been gone for so long, there was very little food. "How about we pop out for a quick bite? There's a nice Thai place not too far from here," she offered.

"Thai?" He didn't recall ever eating Thai food. In fact, he tended to stay away from foreign food.

"Well, you'll need to change clothes, but I don't think it will kill you."

"This is a Muggle establishment?" he protested.

"Then you pick someplace," she offered.

Realizing he had little knowledge of her neighborhood, he acquiesced. "We will go to this Thai place." He headed upstairs to change. Why was it that she seemed to be able to win so often?

As they were walking back to her house, Severus had to admit that the dinner had not been entirely disagreeable. It had been a bit spicier than he was used to, but it was tolerable.

"I'll meet you upstairs," she said, once they were through the front door.

Severus sat on the bed and took his shoes off. He would maintain at least some of his dignity and decided not to change into his nightshirt. "Come," he said when he heard a soft knock at his door. Aurelia had the potion in one hand, and what he suspected was an antidote kit in the other. "Expecting something bad to happen?"

"I always expect the worst. Now, lie back and drink this." She helped him arrange the pillows behind his back before handing him the potion.

He sniffed it and crinkled his nose at the smell. That had not improved when the potion cooled. Anticipating it would taste as bad as it smelled, he quickly chugged the contents of the glass.

Aurelia stood back from the bed, wand at the ready, watching for any sort of reaction. After a minute, she asked, "Anything?"

He knew why she was asking. Most potions produced some sort of reaction. "No. There doesn't seem to be..." His words started slurring and he could feel unconsciousness tugging at him.

Aurelia cast a diagnostic spell to check his vital signs. They were strong. Whatever the potion did, it seemed that one of the effects was to induce unconsciousness. She made note of the time in her logbook and decided to sit with him a while longer to ensure that if anything adverse did occur, she could react. Now that he was unconscious, she thought that it might have been better to take him to St. Mungo's. If he took a turn for the worse, she could take him there.

She watched as he started mumbling. This was a good sign since it meant that he was not in a coma, just merely unconscious. Placing her hand on his forehead, she was pleased that his body temperature was normal. With nothing else to do, she went to the library and chose a book to read while she sat vigil at Severus' side.

A/N: Thanks again to those that have reviewed. There is finally a light at the end of the tunnel, or so it appears, for Severus being made whole again. :) For more information on what I think happened at the end of HBP to flesh out the dreams that Severus was having, check out [Thy Will Be Done](#)

And finally, a shameless plug. This story has been nominated in the Feb 2006 [Multifaceted Awards](#) for Best GenFic (Alliance) and Best OC (Identity). I encourage everyone to check out the other wonderful stories nominated. Voting commences 22 Feb.

Chapter 9

Chapter 10 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Chapter 9

Throughout the night, Aurelia drifted in and out of sleep. Every time she realized she had fallen asleep, she would get up and examine Severus. So far, there was no

change.

When the sun started to stream through the window, she decided to try to wake him. "Severus? Can you hear me?" When he didn't respond to her voice, she shook him gently. "Severus?"

She frowned at his lack of response. Deciding that it would be better for him to be at St. Mungo's, she conjured a stretcher and carried him downstairs. From the living room fireplace, she could Floo them both to the hospital.

When she arrived, one of the mediwitches hurried up to her. "Healer MacLean, how can I help you?"

"Help me get Mr. Snape to the Poisons ward." She didn't say anything else until she was in her own ward. "Angelina, prepare a bed. Mr. Snape is to be under constant observation."

"Yes, Healer. What's happened to him?"

"I was able to determine what poison he ingested. I've administered the antidote and it has rendered him unconscious. I need his vital signs monitored for any signs of change. I'll be in my office."

"Yes, Healer," Angelina said to Aurelia's retreating back.

Once in her office, the first thing Aurelia did was write an owl to the Parkers letting them know that she was back in the country and hoped to be able to pick up the girls soon. Thankfully, it was still a couple of days before they had expected her back. She hoped that everything was well, and that there had been nothing suspicious happening. Just thinking about the spy made her want to rush over there and ensure that everything was fine. The more rational side of her mind told her that a message would have been left at her house or office if something had happened.

After she posted her letter, she leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temples. Nothing about this poison had been straightforward. At every step, it went against everything she knew about poisons. She began to wonder if her previous attempts to cure Severus were having a detrimental effect on the antidote.

Deciding that the others could look after Severus, she crawled onto her couch to take a nap. Someone would wake her if Severus' situation changed.

When she woke, she checked the clock and saw that she had only gotten four hours of sleep. After a quick stop in the lavatory, she wandered out to the ward. She saw that Severus had been given the bed closest to the ward desk. "How is he doing?"

"There has been no change. His vital signs remain stable."

Wanting to see for herself, Aurelia cast a diagnostic spell and could find nothing wrong with him. Using her thumb, she opened his eyelids and was pleased that his eyes were responsive to the light. "I'm going out for an hour or so. If he wakes, let him know I'll be back."

"Of course," Angelina replied.

Severus gasped as he felt a cold wave rush across his body. His body then began convulsing, and he couldn't control it. It felt as though he had been dunked in ice water.

Angelina saw Severus thrashing on his bed. She rushed to his side. "Professor? Can you hear me?"

"Wha? Where? Johnson?" He was trying to make sense of where he was. What was Johnson doing at Aurelia's house? As the room came into focus, he realized that he was not in Aurelia's house. It had the distinct look of a hospital. How had he gotten there?

"Healer MacLean brought you to St. Mungo's early this morning. She's out right now, but she said she would be back soon."

"St. Mungo's?" Had the antidote gone that wrong?

"Can I get you some water?"

"No. Where is Aurelia?" She would know what had happened. Why would she abandon him?

"She'll be back soon. She went out for a little while." She handed him a glass. "Here, drink this."

"Is that something they teach to Healers? Always give your patient a glass of water?" he asked snidely as he took the glass from her hands.

"Well, water is always good for you. How do you feel?"

"Acceptable." He refused to discuss his condition with one of the lesser Healers.

Aurelia returned to the ward and saw that Severus was sitting up in his bed. Rather than going straight to his side, she went to talk with Johnson. "How is he doing?"

"Being difficult. He's refused to tell me anything other than he feels 'acceptable'. When he regained consciousness, he convulsed for a few seconds, but it was nothing major."

She placed her hand on Angelina's upper arm. "Well, thank you for doing what you could." She moved over to Severus' bedside.

He crossed his arms. "So, you have decided that I am important enough to speak with?"

"Oh, come now. It's nothing like that. How are you feeling? Has your vision returned?"

"It has. That is one good thing to report. I feel more like myself than I have since I recovered from my coma."

She cast a deep diagnostic spell and was pleased to see that she could detect no traces of the poison in his system. "Well, it appears the poison is gone, though I have thought that in the past. Watch my wand," she ordered as she tested his peripheral vision. "That looks good. Did you remember feeling anything?"

"Right before I woke, it felt as though I was being dunked in ice water. However, that sensation quickly passed." He refrained from saying anything snarky as she put him through a series of motor skills examinations.

"Well, I would say that you look healthy."

"Wonderful," he replied snidely. "Now what? Why am I here?"

"I brought you here because I was exhausted, and if something went wrong, I wanted to make sure you would receive the best care possible. Now that you are awake, there is no reason for you to remain here."

"You're going to discharge me? Just like that?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Technically, you were never admitted. Are you ready to go?"

He started to stand up and realized he was not completely dressed. "I have no shoes."

"It won't kill you to walk to the Apparition area in your stocking feet. Come along."

He scowled at her, but followed anyway, realizing that going with her was the only way he was getting to her house. As they walked back to the lobby, he asked, "Where did you go?"

"I had an errand I had to run."

"An errand that was more important than my safety?" he asked indignantly.

"Honestly, Severus, you are not the center of my universe, despite what you might believe, after all the time I have given to finding your cure."

"I see," he said coldly.

She could tell that he had misunderstood, but she wasn't going to start an argument in St. Mungo's and placed his hand on her arm. "I didn't mean it that way. Just hold on..."

Once they returned to her house, he asked. "And how did you mean it?"

She sighed. "What I meant was that I do have a life outside finding your cure. I think it's safe to say that we are both tired. Things I say may not sound to you like they do to my tired mind. I've enjoyed your company and your friendship, and I would hate to lose either. But I still need time to myself. I would not have left you if I wasn't sure you were in good hands. Aside from Johnson, there was a senior Healer on duty."

He knew she was right about being tired. He was still weak after the stress of the trip and the administration of the cure. Of course she wouldn't have left him in danger. "Now what?"

She sighed. She knew better than to expect an apology, but it would have been nice. Walking to the library, she pulled his wand out of her desk drawer. "I think you are ready."

Nervously, he reached out for his wand. He stared at a piece of parchment on the desk for several long moments. Finally, he worked up the courage and said, "Wingardium Leviosa." The piece of parchment fluttered momentarily before rising into the air.

Aurelia enthusiastically hugged him. "Congratulations."

"That was a small spell," he replied guardedly.

She could tell that she had made him self-conscious and backed away from him. "Well, I'm sure that if you can do that one, you can do others. Why don't we try some more?"

At first, he had mixed success on the various spells he tried, but as time passed, he became more confident.

Aurelia thought she could see a smile on his lips. "Well, then, it looks like we have found the cure."

"That it does. Thank you for all the time and effort you have put into helping me. I know that you have sacrificed a lot. Why don't you get the girls from the Parker's and I'll prepare dinner?"

She smiled at the fact that he had actually apologized. Placing her hand on his arm, she replied, "Thank you. I'll be back in a little while. I'm sure that Michelle will want to ask me questions about our trip before she will let me take the girls. That should give you ample time to make dinner." She paused before continuing, "I've been thinking, you may not want to Apparate quite yet. I think you should work on smaller magic first. I'd hate for you to splinch yourself."

"I have had that same thought. You have a market within walking distance; I can get what I need from there. Take your time."

By the time his two weeks were up, Severus was feeling more like himself. He knew that he owed Brock an answer, but he wasn't sure what the answer would be. He could hear Aurelia enter the library. It was late and the girls were long since asleep. He sipped the cognac he had poured from her liquor cabinet.

"Something is clearly bothering you. Would you care to tell me what it is?" She took a seat across from him after pouring herself a drink.

"My future."

"Well, that's a rather broad statement. Do I get any more details or do I have to guess? Remember, I'm not a Legilimens."

He was not used to having someone he could confide in. "Brock is expecting my answer on whether or not I will return to Hogwarts."

"Well, that's what you wanted, isn't it?" she asked. All through his recovery period, he had insisted that he would return to teaching at Hogwarts.

He downed the rest of the liquid in his glass and summoned the bottle. "That's what I initially thought. Now... I'm not sure."

She was pleased that he had been able to summon the bottle non-verbally. It seemed that his magic was returning to full power. "I don't think I can give you advice on that. You need to decide what path you want to take. I do know that your House had many that died on the wrong side of the war and someone will have to clean that stain off the Slytherin reputation. You're as good a candidate as any."

"That's one of the reasons I want to go back. But, I still worry about how I will be received. Even in my limited contact with the wizarding world, I have seen that not everyone believes Dumbledore's testimony."

She considered his words for a few moments. "Well, I have seen that your colleagues at Hogwarts accept you. Remember, I talked with everyone there. Yes, they questioned me a bit, but they all believe what was revealed in Dumbledore's memory. I don't think you will have a problem with them."

"But what of the parents? Those on the staff have known both Dumbledore and myself for years. The parents only know me by reputation or from when I taught them." It was hard for him to believe that he was seeing the offspring of some of his former students.

"Well, I will support your reinstatement, and if the staff also supports you, I don't think you'll have problems with the others. I think that I have a prominent enough position in the community that my acceptance of your redemption will have a lot of weight."

"Perhaps," he replied quietly. When she didn't continue the conversation, he said, "I have also thought of perhaps going into business for myself. It would be less stressful." He wasn't sure if he was trying to talk himself out of returning or not.

"You have to do what you feel most comfortable with. No one but you can make this decision. I don't think I've told you anything you hadn't already considered. Tell him what you feel in your heart." She finished her drink and left him alone in the room.

He considered her words: 'what you feel in your heart.' That was advice he had never used before. Nothing he had done in the past had been influenced by his emotions. Everything had been what was in his best interest. Now, he wasn't sure what his best interest was. The Dark Lord was vanquished. Dumbledore was gone. For the first time in his adult life, he didn't owe anyone anything.

Severus woke the following morning and carefully dressed. While his appearance had never been extravagant, it had always been neat and clean. He was not surprised that he was the last person down to breakfast.

"Good morning, Professor," said Julia cheerfully.

Aurelia looked up from preparing breakfast. "Good morning, Severus. How are you feeling?"

He still wasn't used to this question. "Better."

"And have you made your decision?" she asked.

"Are you coming back to teach?" asked Julia.

He was still surprised that she looked up to him and saw him as a mentor. He had never been close to any of his students, even those from his House. Maintaining distance was something he had learned from the Dark Lord. If you got too close to someone, that closeness could be used as a weapon. That had actually been the reason he had turned away from his life as a Death Eater. "I have not yet decided," he replied simply.

"I hope so. I've always learned a lot in your class. What would you teach if you returned?"

"That would be up to the Headmaster to decide." He would prefer to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, as he felt there was no one better qualified, but he also knew that there might not be any qualified applicants for Potions Master.

As he ate his breakfast, he listened to Julia and Helen tell Aurelia about what they wanted to buy on their shopping trip to Diagon Alley. This reminded him that the rest of the wizarding world was returning to normal and so should he.

It was ten o'clock, a reasonable hour for a business call, and Severus was standing in front of Mr. Brock's front door. He had left the house after breakfast and spent some time walking in the park, trying to make his decision. Never before had he had so much difficulty in making a decision. There had been a reason behind every other choice he had made, but not this time. Reaching out, he rang the bell.

The door opened and he was faced with a house-elf. "How can Minna help you, sir?" squeaked the elf.

"Severus Snape to see Mr. Brock." He knew that no further explanation was needed since Brock was expecting his reply. He followed the house-elf into the entry hall, where he was left alone while it reported to its master.

Looking around, he noted that the house, while fine, was not ostentatious like Malfoy's manor. He thought he could hear Brock in conversation with someone down the hall, but he couldn't be sure.

The elf hurried back into the entry hall. "Sir, Mr. Brock says he will be with you shortly. Can Minna get you anything?"

"No." He had never been particularly fond of house-elves, but in time had grown to accept their usefulness. Deciding that he had no idea how long he would be waiting, he took a seat in one of the wooden chairs against the wall.

After fifteen minutes, the house-elf returned and escorted him down the hall. In the parlor, he saw Brock seated with an elderly, though not ancient, wizard.

Brock rose as he entered the room. "Ah, Severus, good to see you again. I'd like to introduce you to Adrian Westmoreland."

The old wizard stood and offered a hand to Severus. "Snape," he said politely.

"Mr. Westmoreland." He was trying to recall if he had ever met the old wizard before. The name was not familiar.

"I'm glad you stopped by this morning, Severus. Mr. Westmoreland has agreed to be Headmaster. That's still pending approval by the Board, but I don't think that will be a problem. So, have you made your decision?" Brock asked expectantly.

Severus considered the look Westmoreland was giving him. It was not one that he would classify as approval. "I think that perhaps it would be best if Mr. Westmoreland and I had some time to get acquainted. After all, we may learn that I am not suited for the position."

Brock shifted nervously. "Yes, of course."

"James, why don't you leave us for a while?" Westmoreland asked in a tone that made it clear this was not a request.

Severus did not take his eyes off the old man, unwilling to show any sign of weakness. He only sat after Westmoreland had regained his seat.

"So, you're the Death Eater?"

"Many years ago. In recent years I was a spy, not truly loyal to them."

"That's what I heard," he replied in disbelief. After an uncomfortably long silence, he continued. "Why do you want to teach?"

Severus was quickly gaining the impression that Westmoreland did not like to waste words. "The students deserve a good education and I believe I can be a part of that."

Westmoreland snorted derisively. "Is that so? Last I heard, it didn't sound like you cared that much about the students."

He had not anticipated his teaching methods being criticized. "It is true that I have not coddled my students. Instead, I have held them to high standards of excellence and not tolerated those that cannot meet those standards. I have ensured that students graduating from my classes have the skills necessary to deal with failure and rejection. I will continue to maintain those standards. You may question my methods, but many of my former N.E.W.T. students have gone on to excel in fields requiring advanced potions making skills. In fact, you will find one, Angelina Johnson, apprenticed at the August Winters Poisons Ward. If I was a horrible and ineffective teacher I doubt one of my students would have been accepted into that program. Perhaps you should interview my former students before criticizing my techniques." As he finished, it occurred to him that this might not be the best way to interview for his job.

"As a matter of fact, I have done just that."

"And which, if you don't mind me asking, former students have you interviewed?"

"That's not important," Westmoreland replied dismissively.

"On the contrary, I believe it to be of utmost importance. If none of these students were in my N.E.W.T. classes, their assessments would be biased. Those that do poorly in a class tend to blame the teacher for their poor performance, rather than take responsibility for their failures."

"Is that so?" Again, they stared at each other in uncomfortable silence. "Which course did you want to teach?"

"I would prefer to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. It is a subject with which I am intimately familiar. Even though the Dark Lord is gone, that does not mean there will not be those who would use Dark Magic. My life experience would be invaluable."

"You seem to be more interested in the practicing rather than the defense, wouldn't you say?"

"Indiscretions of my youth. I believe you will find that the lessons I taught in my one year as Defense teacher provided vital preparations for those students. My advantage is that at one time I had descended to their level. It allowed me to teach them how Dark Wizards might think and how to better defend against an attack."

"Is that so?"

Severus was beginning to find this whole interview annoying and a waste of his time. He rose. "Mr. Westmoreland, it appears that you have no interest in hiring me. I see no point in continuing this conversation." He turned to leave the room.

"I didn't say that, Snape." He watched Severus turn to face him. "I want to make sure you are the right man for the job. As you know, this will be a very difficult time, what with the school nearly destroyed. Slytherin House suffered the worst losses and the greatest loss of reputation. Why should I hire you?"

"I am living proof that Slytherin can be redeemed. Everyone lost faith in me. It would have been easy for me to live up to what they believed, but I didn't. I persevered on the side of Light, gathering information vital to the Dark Lord's defeat, at great personal risk. Give me the chance to redeem my House, to prove that they are not a lost cause."

"Very well stated." Westmoreland rose and crossed the room to stand in front of Severus. "Welcome aboard, Severus. I'll review the other applicants and let you know what subject you will be teaching. I'll rely on you quite heavily in the beginning to help with the day to day running of the school, at least until I get used to the system. Your strength of personality will be very important to the rebuilding of the school. I assume you'll be moving back to the school to help the others with rebuilding?"

Severus was still confused by what had just happened. He wasn't entirely sure he would enjoy working with Westmoreland if this was indicative of the man's behavior. "Yes. My quarters are virtually intact, though I suspect rebuilding efforts may preclude my using them at times."

"Good, good. In the absence of a headmaster's office, I'll be interviewing applicants at my home. I'll send an owl when I'm ready to make my final decision so I can get some input from you. Been years since I've taught, but the whole academic role will come back to me." He could see the quizzical look Severus was giving him. "Despite the impression you may have gotten, I want us to work as a team. I just had to be sure that I could trust you. Albus Dumbledore was a good man. I always enjoyed our long conversations. I know that he trusted you and that should have been enough for me, but I had to meet you myself."

"Of course." Despite Westmoreland's assurances, he still found this abrupt change of behavior disorienting.

"Well, I'll trust you to take charge of the preparations for term while I try to fill out the staff. Send me an owl every few days to let me know what sort of progress you are making. I'll let you get on with your work while I finish up with Mr. Brock. Hopefully, in a day or two they'll make the announcement official."

When Severus left the parlor, he saw Brock standing in the entry hall. "So, have you made your decision, Severus?"

"I will be returning to Hogwarts. Mr. Westmoreland has placed me in charge of the rebuilding. Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do." He swept past Brock and out the door. Once outside, he decided that he might as well go to Hogwarts. He would tell Aurelia at dinner.

He found that a great deal of work had been done in his absence. Apparently, they had finished going through the sensitive areas of the castle and had felt confident enough to bring in a construction crew. Most of the rubble was cleared away from the castle and stacked for future use. The rebuilding seemed to be focused on the Great Hall. It was fitting.

As he approached the castle, he could see Pomona approaching him. "Good to see you back, Severus. Are you here to stay or to clear out your quarters?"

"I am here to stay. I chose to accept Mr. Brock's offer."

"That's excellent news. I'll have the staff tent rearranged..."

He cut her off. "That won't be necessary. As my quarters are intact, I will stay there. I will need to see a copy of the work plan and any drawings they are using for the rebuilding. Additionally, set an appointment for the foreman for first thing tomorrow morning. I will meet with the staff in one hour in the dining tent."

By the end of the day, Severus thought he had a reasonable idea of what the state of Hogwarts was. Pomona had been relieved to turn over leadership to Severus. He only had a handful of concerns about the rebuilding he wished to discuss with the foreman. In general, that plan was sound. While the main focus was on the Great Hall, a small crew was working on the dormitories. There was already enough useable classroom space and he was sure that Hogwarts would be ready to commence term on the first of September.

From the reports he received from the staff, he learned that the surviving books had been catalogued and many of the damaged ones had been sent for restoration. He had tasked Irma with compiling a list of books she would like to purchase for the library and a plan for requesting donations from the wizarding community. While the Ministry was being generous with the budget to rebuild the school, it was not limitless. He strongly suspected much of the gold was coming from confiscated Death Eater accounts.

The rest of the staff, he had set to cataloguing the surviving artifacts. He hoped that Westmoreland selected a new Charms professor soon. He would require assistance in setting up new protective wards. For an area as large as the Hogwarts grounds, one person could not do it alone.

For the immediate future, he realized his largest headache would be keeping track of the budget. Thankfully, this was one task that was well served by his meticulous nature.

Noticing that it was nearly dinnertime, he decided to return to Aurelia's for at least one last night. At the very least, he had to pack up his belongings.

When he arrived at Aurelia's house, he could smell dinner and hear them in the kitchen. Upon entering the kitchen, she looked up at him.

"Ah, good, Severus. You're just in time. We just sat down to dinner and were wondering if you would be joining us." Once he was seated, she continued. "So, how was your day?"

"I met with Mr. Brock and accepted a posting at Hogwarts. It will be up to the new Headmaster to decide which course I will be teaching."

"Do they have a new Headmaster?" Aurelia asked.

"Not as of yet." He took a few bites of dinner before continuing. "I will be moving back to Hogwarts so that I can oversee the rebuilding."

Simultaneously, Julia and Helen protested, "No."

"Hush, girls," Aurelia reprimanded. "That's good news. You know that you will be welcome to stop by anytime as your work permits."

"Of course, and I appreciate that very much. I will try to stop by as often as I can."

The rest of the meal passed in subdued silence.

After the girls were in bed, Severus and Aurelia retired to the library. "I've been thinking," he started. "While I have not seen the applicants, I would not anticipate there are a large number of applicants with potions experience. I think you would make a fine addition to the Hogwarts' staff."

"I'm flattered by the offer, Severus, but I don't think I can leave my Ward. They sort of need my leadership and experience there. Besides, don't you think it would be awkward for me to teach my children?"

He tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "Of course." He had hoped that if there were another highly qualified applicant to teach Potions, he would be given the Defense position. Not to mention the fact he enjoyed her friendship.

"Do you not want to teach Potions?" she asked cautiously.

"I enjoyed teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. It is the subject I always wanted to teach, the one I feel I am best suited to teach. I fear that unless there is another applicant to teach Potions, I will once again be forced into that position."

She considered his words. "Well, the Defense position has gained quite a reputation over the years. There has been more turnover in that post than any of the others. How do you know there will be applicants for that post? I have heard of the difficulties in getting anyone to teach that subject."

"Lupin wants to teach again and that is the subject he taught in the past. I have surmised that is what he wanted to return to teach."

She could hear the bitterness in his voice. "You don't know that. There are a lot of openings: Charms, Transfiguration, and History in addition to Potions and Defense. What's to say he hasn't applied to one of the other postings?"

He sighed. "You have made your point. If we end up with the Headmaster I met, I will have some input into the hiring of the staff, but he has reserved the rights to make final appointments. One of the new hires will be a former Gryffindor; it is the only House without a Head. Sinistra has been recommended for Ravenclaw, and I believe she is an excellent choice."

"Yes, she is a good choice." She reached over and placed her hand on his knee. "It will all work out for the best. Now, don't lose any sleep over this. You have a very important job to do."

They sat in silence for a few moments. When he thought she was getting ready to leave, he asked, "Will you be all right with me gone?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean with Malfoy sending his spies out. I somehow doubt you've seen the last of them. And there is a possibility that he has learned more. After all, everyone at customs knows about the essence of Lethifold. And we have no idea if he has spies at St. Mungo's."

"We'll be fine. I mean, we learned that he's trying to figure out what we are doing, not that he's up to anything malicious."

"That could change if he learns we have developed a cure. I will be protected at Hogwarts, but for now, neither you nor the girls will be protected."

"We have the wards that you taught me how to set. And if there's anything else you would like to set now, you can do so. I've told the girls to be careful, and I don't let them go anywhere alone."

"Cancel your trip to London."

She was shocked by this order. "I most certainly will not. I already cancelled their vacation. I will not cancel this trip. I'll be careful and keep them with me."

"Aurelia, don't underestimate Malfoy. I know him and I know what he is capable of. He has always preferred working through intermediaries so he can maintain his innocence."

"I do plan on being careful. We won't stay out late, and I'll make sure there are lots of people around. I appreciate your concern, but I can take care of myself."

"Don't be overconfident. If they want to capture you, they will use Dark magic, magic which you may not be able to defend against."

She smiled and reassured him, "We'll be fine. I've picked up some of your paranoia. Besides, there's still a very strong Auror presence in Diagon Alley. If it will make you feel better, I'll send an owl when we get back."

"I would appreciate that." He could tell that she wasn't going to back down and this was the best reassurance he was going to get. Deciding that if he kept speaking it would only cause trouble, he took his leave to return to Hogwarts.

Epilogue

Chapter 11 of 11

The final battle is over. Unfortunately, Severus was a victim. Can he overcome his injuries? Will he allow others to help him on the road to recovery? The Character Death warning is for the victims of the War; none of the canon characters

used in this story will die. The rating is for potentially tense situations and one or two instances of profanity. **Nominated in Feb 2006 Multifaceted Awards for Best Genfic and Best OC**

Epilogue

The school year was getting ready to start. Severus had sent out the letters and found himself wondering how many of those students would be attending. The *Prophet* had maintained a surprisingly neutral stance on the announcement of his reinstatement and promotion.

The staff was almost complete. As he had dreaded, Lupin had been appointed as the new Defense Professor and Head of Gryffindor. Their new flying instructor was a former Chudley Cannons star; that was sure to sit well with the students and had actually received more publicity than any other posting. The new Charms professor, Grindelwald Tappen, was an older woman who had grown tired of running her own business, though Severus had warned her teaching would be more stressful. She had brushed off his concerns, stating that if she had kept seven children and thirty grandchildren in line, she could handle teaching. In a way, she reminded him of a combination of Molly Weasley and Minerva McGonagall. For the first time in half a century, they had a living History Professor. It seems the destruction of the castle had finally allowed Binns to release his grip on his half-terrestrial existence. Brandon White was a young, idealistic man who would hopefully find a way to interest students in a previously ignored subject.

He set aside the Defense curriculum. He grudgingly had to admit that Lupin had been quite thorough. The trip they had made to find the Lethifold had cleared much of the air between the two of them, but he doubted they would ever be 'friendly' toward each other. The only work as Deputy he had to do was with Transfiguration. Unfortunately, they had not found a suitable replacement. Those who had applied for the job would have been able to teach the first few years, but none of them had been qualified to teach the N.E.W.T. students. He had chosen the best of the candidates to be hired on a temporary basis to teach the lower levels. He, Lupin and Westmoreland would teach the N.E.W.T. students. They were still looking for a qualified applicant. In fact, Westmoreland had left him to deal with the administrative burden while the headmaster went recruiting. A part of him resented Westmoreland's freedom, but he knew that the headmaster was not well suited to organizing the start of term.

Severus looked up from his paperwork and realized the he would be supervising the Sorting Ceremony. By some minor miracle, the Sorting Hat had survived. In fact, since the headmaster's study had not yet been completed, it sat on the shelf amidst his specimen bottles. He had never cared for the Hat. The academician in him had to admit it was a brilliant idea and a very well executed spell, but he could not forget the words that Hat had told him when he had been sorted.

"Ah, Eileen Prince's son. You have your mother's intellect. She was difficult to sort, too, but I think your intellect will be served best in Ravenclaw."

"I don't want to be in Ravenclaw, you stupid hat. I belong in Slytherin."

"So, you think you belong in Slytherin? Even given what you are?"

"They don't need to know. That is where I belong. That is where the power is."

"Not all forms of power. Do not underestimate the power of intellect. Your intelligence would be respected in Ravenclaw."

"If you do not place me in Slytherin, I will hex you into so many pieces scattered around the world, that it will take them more than a century to put you back together."

"No need to be rude. If you are sure you want Slytherin..."

"Yes, you infernal talking hat! Are you stupid? Put me in Slytherin."

He glared at the Hat. It was nothing but an archaic artifact. It had tried to talk to him when it had first been placed in his office, but he had once again reiterated his threat to hex it to bits, and it had not said another word. He supposed it served its purpose, but he would not be the one to change it. At least, not yet.

He picked up another piece of parchment. Spells. The castle had been protected by a complex web of spells, most of them lost to history. Lupin and Tappen were still researching the enchanted ceiling, hoping to have it in place for the Welcoming Feast. Most of the protective spells had been restored, including the anti-Apparition wards. That had taken Lupin, Pomona and Westmoreland's assistance. He had a feeling many of the other spells would require the assistance of others as well.

Over the last month, he had been so busy that he had only once had time to leave the grounds. That trip had been spent spying on Aurelia and the girls during their visit to London. Thankfully, it had been an uneventful trip, and he had begun to wish that he had revealed himself. A part of him had not feel comfortable intruding on what was their abbreviated family vacation.

He felt guilty about not finding the time to visit Aurelia and her daughters, but he had received an owl from them wishing him well and hoping that he did not find his new duties too taxing. That owl had made him laugh out loud. Minerva had made it look so easy, and he was beginning to wonder how she had accomplished that. Perhaps she had received more help from Albus. In his defense, she had not had to rebuild the castle. For not the first time, he was beginning to question his decision to return to Hogwarts.

He looked up when his door slammed open. Naturally, it was Westmoreland. The new headmaster took the approach that everyone should have an open door policy in their offices. Be that as it may, Severus would still prefer a courtesy knock. "I take it from this disturbance that you have found a Transfiguration professor?"

Westmoreland took the seat across from Severus. "Indeed I have. Sadly, none of the Animagi were interested, but I did find an incredibly brilliant witch, about your age. She turned me into the most amazing bird of paradise."

As fascinating as this diatribe was, he had better things to do than listen to Westmoreland ramble. "Term begins in two days, when will she be here?" Severus asked. At least they had a rough idea of the syllabus for at least the first part of the year.

"First thing tomorrow morning. I have a meeting with the Board of Governors, so I'd like you to meet her and show her around."

"Given the amount of work I have, I would prefer to delegate that task to one of the others. Perhaps Lupin? He has finished his preparations for the school year." He hadn't really liked any of the other professors and thought this task was best pawned off on Lupin.

Westmoreland shrugged. "If you feel that's best." He picked up a small box from the desk and began examining it. "I have to commend you on the wonderful job you are doing. I don't think I could have done it without you. Now that the staff is complete, I'll take on the Headmaster duties that you have been doing in my absence."

Severus reached across the desk and took the box from Westmoreland's hands. "Thank you for having faith in me to do the job." He shoved a stack of paper across the desk. "These files should give you the information you need. Ask if you have any questions, though I'm not sure how much time I will have as I have final preparations to make for my own classes." That was not entirely true. He had perfected the Potions curriculum over the years, but it was the best excuse he could give to get the man out of his office.

Westmoreland picked up the files and began flipping through them. "Thanks. I'm sure you've been quite thorough." He closed the file. "Everything is in order for the start of term. Take the rest of the day off. Get some rest."

"Pardon me?"

"You've been working yourself to the bone. Take the day off and relax. I want you ready to go for the term."

Severus was continually confused by this man's behavior. Of course, he had not had any better understanding of Albus' behavior, but at least he had grown accustomed to his mentor's erratic nature over time. He did have to admit that he was caught up on his work.

The old Severus Snape would have scoffed at the idea of taking time off. Of course, the old Severus had not really had any friends or family. He was contemplating on how much his life had changed since the Dark Lord's defeat. He had always known it would change. Of course, he had believed there was a greater than fifty percent chance that he wouldn't live that long, and he nearly hadn't. Perhaps belonging to a family wasn't as bad as he had imagined. Since he was being forced to take time off, he would finally pay a visit to Aurelia and see the girls one last time before the start of term.

After ensuring his office was neat, he left for one last evening of 'normal' before the start of term, and the ensuing chaos.

When he arrived at Aurelia's house, he paused with his hand on the doorknob. He had been about to enter, but it occurred to him that he didn't technically live here anymore. Instead, he knocked on the door.

He was met with Julia's smiling face. "Professor, glad to see you, again. Have you come for dinner?"

"I have. May I come in?"

Julia moved out of the way. "Sorry about that. Mum's in the kitchen." She then turned and shouted down the hallway, "MUM! Professor Snape is here."

Severus smirked. Even after spending sixteen years around teenagers, he still didn't understand them.

Aurelia came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "Finish up with the vegetables, dear," she told Julia. She then gave Severus a friendly hug. "It's good to see you again. I was beginning to wonder if you would find time before term started. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you. My duties have kept me very busy. We finally hired the last member of the staff this afternoon. The more time consuming task has been ensuring the school has adequate living and classroom space along with setting the protective wards. I would prefer not to discuss it."

"Of course, that's perfectly understandable. I assume you have had no relapses of your symptoms?"

"No. Everything is normal." He couldn't believe that they hadn't seen each for nearly a month and that was what she asked him.

"That's good. I take it work has been busy. Are you ready for the school year to start?"

"For the most part. Westmoreland finally hired a Transfiguration professor this afternoon. He's given me the impression he wants me to work with her."

"Her?" she asked.

"Yes. I've told him that she can work with Lupin. I don't have time deal with another new teacher. If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about it."

"I'm so sorry. I know you must be sick of everything at Hogwarts. Let's just enjoy a pleasant dinner."

"One last thing, I have arranged a private sorting ceremony upon arrival for any of the second and third years that have not been at school before. I thought it best if it didn't happen with the first years."

"Very considerate of you. Why don't you give me a hand setting the table?"

"You could do that with magic," he replied.

She gave him a friendly smile. "I know. I like to do things myself every now and then."

They enjoyed a pleasant dinner. He found he didn't have much opportunity to speak, as both girls were busy telling him what they had been up to in his absence. But he didn't mind. He found he had missed this.

Following dinner, they played a Muggle game called 'Parcheesi'. Severus enjoyed the fact that it was a simple strategy game that allowed them all to play. He was dismayed that it was Helen who won. A child should not have been able to beat him at a strategy game, though there was an element of chance with the dice.

"Congratulations, Helen," Aurelia said proudly. She noticed Julia pouting on her side of the table and shook her head. She knew Julia hated losing to her younger sister.

Severus noticed Helen watching him, and said, "Very well played."

She beamed at his approval. "Thank you, Professor. Did you want to play another game?"

They played two more games before Aurelia sent the girls to bed. Julia had won the second and reacted quite childishly by sticking her tongue out at Helen. Normally, Severus did not find that sort of behavior amusing, but in this case, it took a great deal of self-control not to laugh.

He had almost won the third. A four, all he had needed was a meager four. The odds were heavily in his favor. What did he roll? A three. He frowned as Aurelia rolled the eleven she needed win.

She gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I guess you weren't meant to win."

He glared at her. "Do you realize how slim the chances of you winning were?" Of thirty-six roll combinations, only three would have led to him not winning. The same number there was for her to win. This was why he disliked games of chance.

"I must have good luck. Now, girls, say goodnight."

Julia gave him a quick handshake and headed upstairs. Helen hugged him tightly.

"What's that for?" he asked as he uncomfortably wrapped his arms around her. He still didn't understand why she seemed to like him so much.

"Because I won't be able to do that at school. Mum said I have to act like I don't know you."

He hugged her tightly and closed his eyes to fight back the emotions. It only took a second for him to regain control. "Sleep well and I'll see you in a couple of days."

Aurelia stared at him with a small smile on her face once Helen was gone.

"What?" he asked defensively.

"Nothing," she replied before turning her attention to putting the game away. "Would you like to adjourn to the library?"

He thought quickly about this question. He did want to stay, but thought it might be best if he left. "It's getting quite late and tomorrow promises to be a busy day. We still have the final protections to establish and I must ensure that the construction areas are properly cordoned off."

"Of course. I'm glad that you could stop by before the start of the year. It really meant a lot to the girls."

And what about you? he added silently after hearing a hint of disappointment in her voice. "It was my pleasure." He rose and moved to leave, but paused before he got to the door. "I was wondering if you would be interested in publishing what we learned about Lethifolds?"

"I think that would be a good idea."

"I'll send you an owl when I am available. Good night, Aurelia."

"Good night, Severus."

After Apparating outside the gates, he spent a long time walking the grounds, trying to make sense of his life. This was now a true second chance with no strings attached. It was a glorious feeling to be his own man, beholden to no man. For the first time, he could make decisions based on what he wanted out of life. Now, all he had to do was determine what that was. For so long he had been concerned solely with his survival.

This would require more time than he had tonight, but for now he could be happy with his new position in life. So far, he had not received any letters from parents irate at his promotion. The incoming class was the same size as previous years' classes and many of those that had left over the last two years were coming back. It was a time of rebuilding, for everyone.

A/N: I hope that everyone enjoyed this story. It was a great deal of fun for me and quite a challenge to have it as a non-Romantic story. Many reviewers on the various boards have told me how much they enjoyed the interaction of the original characters with Severus and I was talked into writing a sequel that has no constraints. I'll start posting "Beholden to No Man" in a couple of days.