

To Cure a Curse

by linlawless

When Dumbledore is struck with an unknown curse, an unlikely alliance forms in an effort to find a cure. Rating is for later chapters.

Cursed

Chapter 1 of 11

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A/N: This fic was written in response to a prompt from Itchyfoot, who won the bidding at the TPP auction on LiveJournal. I offered to write a fic of up to 25,000 words for the high bidder. The prompt Itchyfoot provided was: "I'm envisioning an adventure/quest story with Snape as mentor to Hermione and maybe some other kids from Hogwarts. It would be nice if it extended to beyond the school years and even became friendship(s). All right I imagine any friendship with him would be angsty but that's the charm in knowing him. I'll let you and your muse decide on the level of romance." I don't think this came out entirely true to the prompt, but it's what the muse came up with, and hopefully itchy will like it regardless. It came in at around 20,300 words. Reviews, as always, are much appreciated.

Many thanks to Cat (quaffswinegaily), for the Britpick. Any errors are, of course, mine.

Chapter 1: Cursed

Severus stormed through the corridors, sending Gryffindors ducking behind whatever suits of armour they could find and forcing Hufflepuffs to dive out of his path with frightened shrieks. What *could* the Headmaster want with him that couldn't wait until after classes finished for the day? It wasn't as though the Dark Lord could have returned yet again not after that mess five years ago. Unless the Golden Trio had somehow missed a Horcrux ...

Well, no matter, Severus thought. As usual, the Headmaster called and Severus came running in response, even in the middle of a NEWT-level Potions lesson.

Reaching the gargoyle, Severus spat out the current password ("Sweet Tart") and swept through and up the stairs with barely a pause. He gave a perfunctory knock; upon hearing the Headmaster's call to enter, he swept into the room, robes billowing satisfactorily behind him. "What is so urgent, Albus, that you required me to dismiss my pupils forty-five minutes early? Their potions are ruined, as I'm sure you must know, so I don't want to hear complaints about the budget when I request replacement of the ingredients ..." Severus trailed off as he realized that Albus looked unusually serious. "Well?" he demanded.

"Patience, Severus," Albus said gravely. "We must wait for everyone to arrive, as it is unlikely that I shall be able to repeat what I must tell you."

"What do you mean, 'everyone'?" Severus asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "Who exactly are we waiting for?"

Just then, a knock sounded on the door, and Minerva let herself in without waiting for Albus to respond. "What's so urgent, Albus? My first years were just about to attempt their initial transfigurations when you called." She looked nearly as disgruntled as Severus felt.

"I must ask you to wait a few moments, Minerva. All shall be explained to your satisfaction shortly, I assure you," Albus said. A short silence ensued in which Minerva and Severus exchanged glances, each ascertaining that neither knew more than had yet been said. After a moment, Albus broke the silence, asking sombrely, "Would either of

you care for a lemon drop while we wait?"

"Who are we waiting for?" Minerva asked, and Severus had a strong feeling *otrějá vu*. At least she appeared to be just as mystified by Albus's strange behaviour as he himself was. The Floo flared to life and the last three people Severus would ever have wished to see again tumbled out in quick succession. Granger came first, stepping rapidly aside and brushing stray ashes from her robes as she deftly avoided the fate of her two companions, who landed unceremoniously in a heap on the floor, a tangle of arms and legs that took a few minutes to sort out.

When they had finally righted themselves, Potter removed his glasses to clean the soot that was smeared across them as he asked, "What's the emergency, Professor Dumbledore? We came as soon as Hermione said you'd Flooed, of course, but we just couldn't think what could be so urgent. Things have been so quiet since we defeated Voldemort."

"I'm afraid a problem has arisen," Albus said seriously, "and I will need assistance from all of you to solve it. I appreciate that you have responded so quickly to my summons, but there are two more persons we must await before I explain everything."

Potter looked about to protest, but Weasley beat him to it. "Can't you just tell us now, Professor? We can fill in the others when they arrive ..."

But Albus just shook his head sadly. "No, I'm afraid that won't do, Mr Weasley," he said firmly. "I shall likely only have the strength to say it once, so we must wait for everyone."

Severus frowned as Granger, sounding alarmed, asked, "Are you ill, Headmaster? Should we send for Madam Pomfrey?"

"Thank you, Miss Granger, but she is already on her way."

Granger subsided and silence fell again. Severus examined the people in the room, trying to discern what sort of problem would lead Albus to call this particular group of people together. Potter and Weasley were both Aurors they had entered training immediately after Hogwarts. Once that was complete, they had immediately joined the Dark Wizard Apprehension and Retention Fellowship, a subdivision of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that spent all its time hunting rogue Death Eaters who had possibly escaped punishment after the war. Their jobs were made somewhat more difficult by the fact that, upon Voldemort's final demise, the Dark Mark that would have made initial identification easy had simply vanished from everyone who had had the misfortune or bad judgment to have one.

So perhaps this had something to do with rogue Death Eaters, Severus thought sourly. Would they never be finished rounding them up? But though that might also explain his own presence, it didn't clarify in the least why the two women were here. Minerva, for all her work with the Order of the Phoenix and her efforts in the final battle, would have nothing unique to contribute to the hunt for Death Eaters. And Granger technically, Unspeakable Granger had joined the Department of Mysteries rather than the Aurory after the war, so she was unlikely to be called in on a simple DWARF mission. Unfortunately, Severus had no idea what Unspeakable Granger actually did in the Department of Mysteries, so he was fated to remain in the dark until the other people arrived. He shied away from considering what it could mean that Poppy was expected to join their number. Though Albus often elicited a distinct urge for Severus to hex him, Severus knew that the old man was as close to a father figure as he would ever have. He wouldn't think about the possibility that the old man was sick ...

Eventually, Severus's deliberate not-thinking about what could be wrong with Albus was interrupted as Poppy came bustling in. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting! Martin Anderson accidentally transfigured Mary Jameson into a toad they were practicing for Transfiguration lessons, they said and I felt I ought to reverse that right away."

Albus assured Poppy that he wouldn't have expected otherwise. Moments later, Horace Slughorn arrived, grumbling about how tiring it was for someone of his advanced years to navigate all those stairs. Severus pondered what all of this could mean even as Albus cleared his throat and began to speak. "I know you're all wondering why I've called you here. It is my grave duty to tell you that I need your assistance most urgently all of you because of an incident that seems to have occurred in Hogsmeade mere hours ago."

"In Hogsmeade?" Weasley interjected, as a general murmur of bewilderment seemed to echo amongst the gathering. Albus generally was not known to leave Hogwarts in the middle of a school day.

Albus said, "Please, save your questions until I have finished, if you will. Now, as I was saying, I was on my way out of Hogsmeade, having just left Honeydukes, when I began to feel the effects of what I can only surmise must have been some sort of Dark Magic. Of course, I looked around immediately to see if I could identify anyone as the source of the curse or jinx or whatever it was, but perhaps it was something slow-acting. I saw nothing out of the ordinary, unfortunately, and so cannot give you more information about who was responsible or even exactly when it hit me. That being the case, I deemed it best that I come immediately to Hogwarts and assemble the people who are best qualified to determine what happened and to reverse the effects."

He fell silent; for a moment no one spoke. Then, predictably, Granger asked a question. "If I may, sir, what precisely are the symptoms you are experiencing?"

Albus sighed. "That, my dear, is rather more difficult to explain than you might expect. It's a feeling that something is *missing* some integral part of myself, or perhaps of my magic, is just gone. Either way, I have felt myself weakening since the event occurred. In addition, my usual optimism has deserted me and I can only assume that, if a countercurse is not soon found, I shall simply fade away."

Potter jumped in. "So, you wish us to determine who has cursed you?"

"I had hoped you and Mr Weasley, along with Professor Snape and Unspeakable Granger, might undertake the task of finding the wizard or wizards responsible and determining the remedy for this situation." The Golden Trio was nodding emphatically. Severus restrained the urge to groan. Would he never be free of them?

"What of the rest of us?" Minerva asked sharply. Severus recognized that her less-than-pleasant tone was symptomatic of her worry, and Albus did, too, apparently.

"Well, Minerva, I had hoped that you would manage my duties as Headmaster. Horace, someone will need to teach Potions while Severus is occupied with this task; may I count on you?" Slughorn nodded, looking grave. "And Poppy, dare I hope you'll be able to assist me with managing any symptoms that might appear while a cure is sought?"

"Of course, Headmaster," Poppy said. "Severus, if I might consult with you briefly before you begin your investigations?"

Severus wasn't sure what help that would be, as he had no idea what sort of Dark Curse might have had such effects, but he agreed anyway. "Very well. Albus, perhaps Poppy and I should settle you in the Hospital wing now? Miss Granger, Mr Potter, Mr Weasley, if you will remain here, I shall return shortly and we can determine our best initial avenue of investigation." He stood and took Albus's arm.

Weasley interrupted. "Harry and I should go down to Hogsmeade and try to find witnesses."

"No, Mr Weasley, you should do no such thing until we have had an opportunity to confer about this," Severus snapped. "Rushing headlong into the breach will do us no good and might set us back if you muck things up as you usually do." Honestly, if it were anyone but Albus in this predicament, he would leave them to their own devices. But it was Albus, so he would find a way to work with them, one way or another.

"Hey!" Potter cried. "That's not fair, Snape! We've been very successful "

Severus was about to snap back again when a surprising voice took his side. "Professor Snape is right, Harry. We have no idea what we're dealing with, and we should try to determine what we can before you go haring off to question people." Weasley started to protest again, but Granger glared at him. "I'm not kidding, Ron, you and Harry should stay put until Professor Snape gets back and we have a chance to discuss strategy. You wouldn't start a chess game without at least a start of a plan, would you?"

Severus was surprised and reluctantly impressed with how quickly Weasley and Potter both subsided. They both looked sulky, though, so Severus said, "While I'm gone,

perhaps you would begin to formulate a plan of some sort, Miss Granger?"

Granger nodded, and Severus assisted the Headmaster as they left the office with Poppy.

Plan of Attack

Chapter 2 of 11

The investigators view Dumbledore's memory of his morning in Hogsmeade and formulate a plan.

A/N: Thanks to everyone who has reviewed. I'm behind on answering but hope to catch up soon. Also, thanks again to quaffswinegally for the Britpick. I tweaked some things after she sent it back to me, so if any Americanisms snuck back in, I apologise.

In case it wasn't clear last chapter, I do have a complete, Britpicked draft of the story, and I will upload new chapters as I finish reviewing and tweaking them. There are a total of 11 chapters.

The usual disclaimer applies the characters and many of the concepts belong to JKR, and I'm not profiting except in the form of your enjoyment and (hopefully) reviews.

Chapter 2: Plan of Attack

When they were alone, Hermione braced herself for what she knew would happen, and sure enough, Ron and Harry did not disappoint. Apparently, their agreement had been only for so long as they would have to argue with more than just Hermione. "I don't know why Snape should be in charge," Ron said petulantly. "*We're* the professional Aurors. If anything, he should be taking direction from us. Think of all the time we're wasting sitting around while whoever did this is probably Apparating halfway around the planet."

"Be reasonable, Ron," Hermione began, but Harry interrupted before she could say more.

"Ron's right, Hermione. *We are* the professionals," Harry said, his tone so self-important that Hermione wondered for a moment whether she was really looking at a Polyjuiced Percy. "What's the point of us sitting around doing nothing? *We're* just giving the perpetrators more time to cover their tracks." He stood. "Come on, Ron. Hermione, you can just tell Snape "

Hermione stood, too, losing her temper at their continued insistence on rushing headlong into action without formulating any sort of strategy. "I'm not telling *Professor* Snape anything other than that he was apparently right in thinking you're both arrogant *prats* who can be counted on for nothing so much as *tomuck things up* because you refuse to take a minute to think them through." She pointed at the door. "Go ahead and go, then. Professor Snape and I will figure this out without your dubious assistance." They stared at her, apparently gobsmacked. "Well, what are you waiting for? *I* certainly don't need your help. After all, Professor Snape probably *forgot* more Dark Magic long before you were even born than either of you has ever learned. He's also likely spent more time *with* the perpetrators, whoever they are, than you've even spent *thinking* about them. Go do whatever you want to do while Professor Snape and I figure out what actually happened here. Just don't expect any assistance from us when you get into trouble. We'll be busy helping the headmaster, and we won't have time to save you from your own idiocy."

"Well, er ..." Ron said, exchanging a sheepish glance with Harry as he tried to placate Hermione. "Perhaps we spoke a bit hastily. It might not hurt to have some strategic assistance in the investigation, eh, Harry?"

"All right, fine," Harry conceded, though with less grace than Hermione would have hoped. "What do you have in mind?"

Slightly mollified by their acquiescence, Hermione sat down and replied with as much grace as she could manage. "It seems to me that the most obvious place to start would be to obtain Professor Dumbledore's memory of the event, but I'm sure Professor Snape has thought of that, so hopefully he'll bring it when he returns. After that, I would think that my best contribution would be to attempt to determine exactly what sort of spell was used, and to try to find or develop a countercurse." She paused. "Of course, once we have a better idea of who we're looking for, it makes sense for you and Ron to go and begin questioning people. I expect Professor Snape will have ideas about what role he should play, so we probably ought to wait for him before going any further."

The boys agreed, but still seemed restless, so she decided to distract them. "Perhaps a snack while we wait? You won't function well on an empty stomach."

"Good idea," Ron agreed, looking marginally happier, as usual, at the thought of food. Hermione quickly called a house-elf.

The key to the next several minutes was to keep the boys occupied, so Hermione forced herself to start a conversation she knew they wouldn't be able to resist. "So, how are the Cannons doing this season?"

In the hospital wing, Severus had already looked for traces of any sort of familiar Dark Magic, but found nothing, so whatever was affecting Albus must either be very esoteric or, hard as it was to believe, not truly Dark. They had agreed they should extract Albus's memory right away, though Poppy was waiting impatiently to have her turn to attempt diagnosis of the mystery ailment. Severus said, "All right, Albus, if you're *sure* you can't do it yourself, I shall have to do it. Call to mind the incident, if you please."

"All right," Albus said, and when he nodded, Severus put his wand to the older wizard's temple and withdrew a long strand of silver. He put it carefully in the flask Poppy was holding for that purpose. After confirming that he had the entire memory, he magically sealed the flask and stepped aside to allow Poppy to run her diagnostics with her wand. He watched closely, trying not to think about how disturbing it was to see Albus without the twinkle in his eye that was always there, even in the most serious of situations.

When she was done, Poppy looked worried, but all she said was, "Get some rest, Albus. I'm going to see what I have in the storage cupboard for you." Severus, in response to Poppy's silent demand, followed her into her office. She shut the door behind them. "I don't want to worry you, Severus, any more than you already are, but I must tell you that I think the situation is very dire, indeed. It appears that someone has rent his magic, which is slowly draining away. This would be serious at any age, but at his age, his magic is so entwined with his life force his *chi*, if you will that if the magic isn't returned, he will waste away and die."

"Can you at least stop the continuing drain?" Severus asked.

"Yes, but enough has been lost already that it is unlikely he'll recover if we don't return at least some of what's been lost." Poppy shook her head. "It won't do, Severus. I doubt he'll want to live without use of magic for very long, and I am about to put him on restriction no use of magic at all because the more he uses it, the more rapidly he'll drain his *chi*. In fact, now that you have his memory of the event, it's probably best that I put him into a magically induced coma, so that he won't use magic out of sheer habit. Meanwhile, I shall consult with St. Mungo's to see if they have any other ideas."

"All right," Severus agreed reluctantly. "What will you tell Albus?"

"The truth, I suppose," Poppy said, sounding unhappy. "Unlike *some* people I've treated, Albus will take my advice and allow me to treat him according to my best judgment."

Severus had no doubt she was referring to him; he had, throughout the war, frequently ignored her instructions in order to get on with his duties sooner. He didn't comment, however. He simply said, "All right. I must get back to Albus's office before Miss Granger loses whatever tenuous hold she has on Potter and Weasley and they run off to do something foolish."

When Professor Snape arrived in Albus's office, he looked surprised to find Granger sitting quietly, nibbling on sandwiches and sipping tea while her companions discussed the Chudley Cannons. Hermione spoke quickly lest he get the wrong impression. "We outlined a basic strategy, then thought it best to wait to see the Headmaster's memories before going any further. To save time, we decided to eat now that way we'll be ready to go as soon as our plans are in place. I assume that's ready for the Pensieve?" She nodded toward the flask he held.

Professor Snape nodded, tapped his wand once on the flask to release the seal, and poured the silvery strands into the Pensieve. Then he turned to glare at them, snapping, "Well? Are you just going to sit there, or do you actually want to see what happened?" Hermione jumped up to join the professor; Harry and Ron did the same. Within moments, they found themselves observing the street outside Honeydukes.

Dumbledore came into view, munching happily on what appeared to be cockroach clusters. He looked just as he always had, spry and fit and resplendent in purple robes with sparkly gold spangles and incongruous hot pink trim. Glancing around, Hermione saw a few people loitering here and there, but no one who appeared to be paying any particular attention to the headmaster. A middle-aged man was sweeping the walk outside the Apothecary down the street, while Rosmerta was levitating some rubbish to the alley behind the Three Broomsticks. At the bookshop, a wizard in his twenties was brandishing his wand, apparently rearranging the window display. In the other direction, toward the residential section of town, a child who looked to be a few years too young to go to Hogwarts was playing hopscotch in the street, while nearby, a toddler who looked enough like the older one that he must be a sibling was brandishing a wand and singing joyfully to himself, with sparks flying here and there. Suddenly, Harry gasped and grabbed Hermione's arm. "There! Did you see that?"

Hermione looked and saw Dumbledore righting himself as a pair of youngish-looking men hurried past, glowering over their shoulders at him. One said, sounding distinctly foreign, "Watch out, old man! You cannot just block the doorway like that!" The pair hurried off. Meanwhile, Hermione's eyes were drawn to a hard-looking woman loitering in the doorway of what looked to be a gentleman's club. She was smoking a cigarette and eying Dumbledore in a disturbing manner as he walked toward the path to Hogwarts. A man joined her, coming from inside the club, and she said something to him, then they both cackled. Before following Dumbledore to the path, Hermione heard a wail and glanced back at the children, only to see a harried-looking woman shepherding them both toward one of the cottages. The younger one appeared upset as he reached in vain for the wand that the woman had apparently taken from him.

Forcing her attention back to the relevant part of the scene, Hermione and her three companions followed Dumbledore up the path. Hearing a sound off to the left, she saw two nondescript men and a woman in a clearing. One of them smiled grimly and pointed his wand toward Dumbledore, sending a blue light in his direction. But just as the light might have hit, Dumbledore must have Apparated, because he disappeared from the path, and the memory ended.

By mutual agreement, Granger made comprehensive notes about what they had seen, then they all looked in the Pensieve several more times until everyone was satisfied that nothing had been missed. Granger tapped the parchment three times, making identical copies for each of the men present. The younger men resumed eating as they perused their copies. Without any apparent thought or effort, Granger casually refilled their tea with a wave of her wand and conjured a cup and plate for Severus as she read through the notes once more. Severus was unwillingly impressed by her ability to do that while clearly focused on something else, but he supposed spending as much time with teenaged boys as she had in years past would have made that a highly useful skill. Eventually, Potter broke the silence. "Right, then, I suppose Ron and I ought to be off looking for all these people to question." He paused. "Did anyone recognize any of them? Aside from Rosmerta, I mean?"

"I've seen that man working at the bookshop on a number of occasions," Granger said.

"The man in front of the apothecary shop is also a long-time employee," Severus added. "The woman in front of the gentleman's club works there, I believe." Granger gave him an odd look, so Severus added, "She's been there for years, and she was a sympathizer of the Dark Lord. I believe Lucius Malfoy used to visit her frequently in the bad old days." Granger's expression cleared and she nodded.

"So she's someone to look into. Did you know the man with her, Professor?"

"Not that I can recall," he said. "But one of the men in the forest looked familiar. Not the one who threw the hex, but the other one."

Weasley spoke up. "The men who knocked into Dumbledore looked familiar to me, I think, but I can't place them at the moment. I'm sure I'll remember eventually, though."

"All right," Granger said, tapping her latest list three times and floating copies to each of the men again. "Here's what we know about the people. Harry, Ron, unless Professor Snape objects, I suppose you may as well go see what you can learn from them. Professor, I thought I'd go to the library and see what I can discover about that hex we saw, as well as learn what I can more generally about the sort of spell that might cause Professor Dumbledore's symptoms, so perhaps you'd take a moment to tell me what Madam Pomfrey said?" Severus nodded in agreement as she continued, "I'll leave it to you to decide where you can most efficiently direct your efforts."

Potter and Weasley stood. "We'll leave you to it, Hermione, Professor," Potter said.

"Be careful," Granger admonished them. "Good luck."

"Thanks. You, too," Weasley responded, and then they were gone, leaving Severus and Granger staring at one another.

A New Spell

Chapter 3 of 11

Severus and Hermione work to identify the people in the Pensieve; Severus learns something shocking about Hermione's past.

Chapter 3: A New Spell

After a moment, Severus broke the silence. "I believe you wanted to know about his symptoms. The situation is very grave, indeed." He went on to tell her what Poppy had said about Dumbledore's condition.

Her expression grew more worried as he spoke, and he found himself mentally approving her apparent understanding of what they were up against. When he had finished explaining what he knew, she asked wryly, "I don't suppose you know of a spell that would do all that off the top of your head?"

He smirked without humour. "No, unfortunately, Miss Granger, I have never seen such a hex or jinx or curse before. Furthermore, I am undecided as to whether I ought to be flattered or insulted that you think I might have."

Turning pink as she realized her gaffe, she said gamely, "Oh, flattered, sir, most certainly. I have a tendency to assume that you know more than most wizards about most things."

He wasn't truly offended – insulting teachers had really never been Granger's style – and they had more important things to focus on, anyway, so Severus changed the topic. "I believe I shall focus on trying to learn more about the identities of those individuals none of us recognized."

She seemed to take that as a dismissal, standing and beginning to gather her things. "All right, Professor, I'll leave you to it. Shall we meet in a few hours to discuss our progress?"

Severus forestalled her, though, as another idea occurred to him. "Actually, before you go, you might assist me with making sketches of the individuals I'm trying to identify."

"All right. How?"

The opening was irresistible, really, Severus thought. "Something the know-it-all doesn't know?"

She turned pink, but all she said was, "There are many things I don't know, sir, which is why I always ask so many questions."

Severus nodded, sobering as he refocused on the task at hand. "All right, the spell to do this requires two people. One goes into the Pensieve, and signals the other when the target individual is directly in sight. That individual holds a wand to the back of the skull of the individual in the Pensieve just here –" he demonstrated the correct location "and taps the parchment with a second wand, using the incantation '*duco*'."

"All right," Hermione said slowly. "Does this mean one of us must use the other's wand? I don't carry two."

Severus smirked. "I do, as it happens." He leaned over to retrieve it from its location inside the buckle of his dragonhide boot, then murmured the spell to enlarge it to its usual size. He had never lost the habit of carrying a spare, even all these years after the end of the war. He had the thing – it had been a necessity during his spying years, as he could never have risked being caught wandless – so he may as well keep it handy, he reasoned. "So, if you'll trust me to perform the spell, you can look in the Pensieve."

"All right," Granger said. He was a bit surprised at the ease with which she agreed. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Make sure you're focused on the face, Miss Granger. The spell will transcribe whatever you're looking most intently at."

"Yes, all right," she agreed. "Ready, then?"

He Summoned a small stack of parchment; at his nod, she entered the Pensieve. After a short silence, she said, "Now."

"*Duco*," Severus intoned, and one of the foreign men appeared on the first piece of parchment. He quickly moved it aside, then said, "Next one."

"Now." The next face appeared, and they repeated the procedure several more times, until each of the relevant persons had been sketched and added to the pile. Granger exited the Pensieve and looked through the stack. "Nice spellwork, sir," she murmured, sounding impressed.

He was tempted to snap at her – what sort of world was he in where one of the Golden Trio expressed anything positive toward him? Instead, he forced himself to be courteous in the interest of Dumbledore's health. "Thank you. Now, I shall escort you to the library to ensure that Madam Pince doesn't give you any resistance. We shall meet in my office after dinner to discuss our progress."

Hermione agreed, then pulled a coin from her pocket and tapped it. At his questioning look, she explained succinctly, "Protean charm. We'll need to know what Harry and Ron have discovered, too." He nodded reluctantly; though he wished he didn't have to see them again anytime soon, they did need to keep one another informed about the course of the investigation.

Hermione spent the remainder of the afternoon in the library. She forced herself to exhaust all its resources, but as she had expected (having read most of the books in the Hogwarts Library at least once already over the years), she found no references to a spell that would create the sort of symptoms Dumbledore was exhibiting. She had focused initially on spells that cast in blue light, even though it wasn't entirely clear if that spell had actually hit Dumbledore or if he had Apparated away a split second too early and been missed entirely, or perhaps caught just a part of it.

Of course, it was also possible that one of the other individuals had cast something – maybe the foreigners who had knocked him over had hit him with a spell as well. Or possibly someone else had found a way to disguise the light of the spell, or from their angle, they had missed seeing it entirely.

Closing the last of the books in her stack, Hermione sighed and stretched. She had taken a lot of notes, of course, but the most useful things in them were the titles or authors of other books where she might find information to assist her. Unfortunately, they were rare or obscure books that Hogwarts didn't appear to have, even in the Extra-Restricted Section – a magically concealed alcove behind the Restricted Section that housed a number of the more rare, obscure, or dangerous texts. Apparently, the wards only revealed the existence of that section to those who had both the power and the control required to ensure they could use the books contained therein without damage either to their own persons or to the books themselves.

Sighing again, Hermione was surprised to see how late it was. She was actually at risk of missing dinner. She quickly used a Shelving Charm to return the books to their proper locations. If she hurried and the stairs cooperated, she might just make it to the Great Hall before the meal ended.

Severus glowered from the Head Table at the overly boisterous students at Gryffindor's table. As usual, the other three houses were all better behaved than Gryffindor. He decided to ignore them for the moment, as he had more important things than ill-behaved pupils to worry about. He had spent the afternoon Floo-calling a number of contacts to see if they recognized any of the individuals from the Pensieve. He hadn't learned much, except Viktor Krum knew both of the foreigners. They were former members of the Bulgarian Quidditch World Cup team, and since retiring nearly a decade earlier, they had been liaison officers from the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic. Krum thought their job involved 'something in sport,' but he wasn't sure what.

Weasley and Potter hadn't appeared at dinner, which didn't surprise him much as they would likely expect to be able to get refreshments at their meeting later. Well, he had no intention of going out of his way to feed their arrogance. Let the prats fend for themselves.

Neither had Granger appeared, which likewise wasn't a shock, as she had probably got involved in her research and lost track of time. Now, he had to decide whether to provide refreshments for her. He wouldn't even consider it, except his limited experience with women suggested it was best not to allow their blood sugar to dip too far they had a tendency to become irrational and emotional, which he preferred not to face if he could possibly avoid it. And anyway, she had provided refreshments at the earlier meeting, hadn't she?

He reluctantly concluded that he ought to at least bring her a sandwich. Just as he was about to request one of a house-elf, she hurried into the Great Hall. She glanced around and, spotting him, she made her way to the empty chair that separated him from Filius. "May I sit?" she asked.

He nodded acquiescence. "You're late," he said tersely. "You nearly missed dinner."

"I know," she sighed. "I got caught up in research and lost track of time." She tucked into the plate of roast chicken, potatoes, and carrots that appeared before her. "Unfortunately, I believe I've exhausted what Hogwarts has to offer without learning anything useful."

Severus looked at her thoughtfully. "Perhaps if I accompany you tomorrow, you'll find some additional resources."

She took a sip of water and looked at him sidelong before saying quietly, "If you're concerned that I missed the Extra-Restricted Section, I didn't."

He was only a little surprised. She was, after all, an Unspeakable, so she had to be reasonably powerful. Still, few people attained the necessary control before reaching their thirties or forties; by his calculation, she was no older than twenty-three or four. He nodded impassively. "All right. We'll discuss the next step at our meeting, then." He was hoping to speak with one more contact before their meeting, so he took his leave. "I shall see you in my office in half an hour. I have some things to attend to beforehand."

When Hermione arrived at Professor Snape's office, she found him in the midst of a Floo call with Lucius Malfoy. The professor nodded a greeting and gestured vaguely toward a chair, so she took a seat.

Malfoy didn't acknowledge her presence; whether he didn't see her or he considered her beneath notice, she couldn't have guessed. He was saying, "All right, Severus, if you're certain she can handle it, you may bring her along. But it's your responsibility to ensure that she doesn't get hurt; I won't have you leaving her alone and then blaming me if you were overconfident."

"Don't worry so much, Lucius. You're turning into a mother hen in your dotage."

"My dotage?!" Lucius sputtered. "I'm not yet fifty! I'm in my prime, I assure you." Hermione smirked at how affronted he sounded.

The professor was smirking as well, Hermione saw. *Interesting dynamic between those two*, she thought. "If you say so," Severus conceded mockingly. "In any event, you may expect us first thing tomorrow."

"Fine," Lucius said, then took his leave.

"What was that about, Professor?" Hermione asked without preamble.

"We shall be visiting Malfoy Manor tomorrow, Miss Granger."

"What?" Hermione asked, surprised and a little anxious. "Why?"

"Because the Malfoy library is certain to hold a number of texts that will be useful to you in determining the nature of this curse."

"Oh," Hermione said in a small voice. "All right."

The professor fixed her with a stare. "What's the problem, Miss Granger?"

"Oh ... er ... it's nothing, really," she hedged.

"Obviously not nothing," Snape replied. "Your Gryffindor recklessness appears to have completely deserted you. Out with it."

She sighed. "Well, it's just ..." she paused, steeling herself. "I haven't been back there since the war."

"And?" Snape sounded impatient.

Hermione found herself irritated by the total lack of compassion for her situation. She snapped, "And it's just a little daunting to go back to a place that holds such bad memories for me, all right?"

He frowned, looking confused. "What on earth are you on about? The war didn't take place at Malfoy Manor."

Hermione stared at him. Could he really not know? She said tersely, "But Bellatrix Lestrange's gleeful and excessive use of Cruciatius on me did."

A/N: According to an online translator, 'duco' is Latin, meaning 'draw'.

Rethinking and Regrouping

Chapter 4 of 11

As they assess progress and plan next steps, Severus and Hermione find themselves also reassessing their opinions of each other.

A/N: Many thanks to everyone who has reviewed. Hopefully, I'll catch up on answering soon. Also, deepest gratitude to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for the very helpful Britpick.

Chapter 4: Rethinking and Regrouping

Hermione's words echoed in the air between them for what seemed an eternity. Professor Snape paled, looking shocked. His usual smoothness appeared to desert him. He sputtered, "You were ... She used ... Why was I never told of this?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Hermione said. "I assumed you knew."

"I assure you, I had no idea, Miss Gr ... Hermione," he said, sounding extremely remorseful and just a bit awkward. "Are you all right? No lingering aftereffects?"

"Nothing I can't handle," Hermione assured him, feeling surprisingly touched at his obvious distress. "It was pretty bad for the first year or so, but I rarely feel it now."

"What did they give you for it?" Snape asked, still looking concerned.

"Primarily, a muscle relaxing potion to take whenever the spasms occur. I don't need it very often anymore. Massages have helped, also I've been getting them monthly for years since shortly after I joined the Department of Mysteries."

"Massage has never helped me when I've had post-Cruciatius spasms," Snape commented.

"Oh, no, Professor," Hermione explained. "I don't attempt it *during* the spasms. They do seem to help as a prophylactic measure, though, if you get them on a regular basis. I go to a spa in Muggle London. I'd be happy to give you their contact information if you like."

Snape looked thoughtful. "Perhaps," he said, adding absently, "Call me Severus."

Hermione was surprised, but she managed, "All right, Severus. Thank you."

"Will it be a problem for you, being in Malfoy Manor again?"

"I hope not. It's probably best that I avoid the drawing room, though."

"Well, if it's any consolation, Lucius is too fond of his freedom to allow any harm to befall a war heroine on his property. And in any event, I shall be with you the entire time. I will ensure your safety as needed."

Hermione smiled, relieved. "I appreciate that, Severus. You've always been an excellent protector, even when none of us knew or appreciated it." After a short pause, she admitted with some chagrin, "Even when we actually made it more difficult for you to keep us safe."

To Hermione's surprise, Severus's lip twitched. He asked wryly, "When exactly did you *not* make it more difficult for me to protect you and your friends?"

Hermione felt her cheeks grow warm. "Well, I think ... that is, I suppose ... when you weren't around to try to protect us in the first place?" she said at last.

He gave a short bark of laughter, causing Hermione to jump at the unfamiliar sound. He said, "Well, apparently we agree on something, then." He changed the subject. "When do we expect the Dubious Duo?"

Hermione glanced at her watch. "They should be here shortly, I suppose. Will you be able to do what you need to from Malfoy Manor?"

"I'll have to," Severus said. "Even if I were inclined to leave you to your own devices, Lucius won't permit it. It's probably best that way, anyway, as some of his books are not fond of Muggleborns."

"Not a surprise. I'm fairly sure I could handle it, but I admit I'm glad I won't have to."

Ron and Harry chose that moment to arrive through the Floo. "Oi, Hermione, sorry we're late," Ron began before pulling a sandwich from his pocket and taking a large bite. As an afterthought, around a mouthful of sandwich, he added, "Professor." Hermione just managed to keep from rolling her eyes at his total lack of manners.

"We stopped off at the kitchens since we missed dinner," Harry added, before he, too pulled out a sandwich. "Have you learned anything?" he asked.

Hermione said, "Nothing specific, no. I've exhausted the Hogwarts Library resources, so tomorrow we'll go to Malfoy Manor and see what's there."

Harry started at the mention of Malfoy Manor. He looked worried. "Are you sure you'll be all right? Maybe Ron or I should go along, just to be safe."

Severus interjected, "I am perfectly capable of ensuring Miss Granger's safety in the unlikely event that it becomes necessary."

Ron swallowed the last bite of his sandwich and said, "What do you mean, unlikely? Malfoy has always hated Hermione."

Hermione almost laughed at Severus's 'you are such a dunderhead' look. With exaggerated patience, he said, "At the moment, Lucius Malfoy loves his freedom significantly more than he hates anyone or anything. He's highly unlikely to jeopardize that by allowing harm to come to an invited guest."

Harry argued, "But Hermione, that's where ..." he trailed off at the glare Severus turned on him, then continued determinedly, "Even if you're physically safe, are you sure you'll be all right?"

Hermione smiled; it was rather sweet how Harry worried about her sometimes. "I'll be fine, Harry. It's been five years. I can handle it, I promise. And anyway, this is important. Severus says if anyone has books likely to be of use to us, it will be Malfoy."

Both of her friends glanced warily at Severus, looking shocked at her use of Severus's given name. Hermione was amused to see they appeared prepared to disarm him in case he tried to hex her. But he merely said, "There, your friend has assured you she'll be fine, and I have promised to protect her if necessary. Now, I believe we have additional business to discuss, as I certainly have no intention of allowing this meeting to drag all night. What did you learn in Hogsmeade?"

"Nothing much," Harry admitted. "We questioned everyone we were able to identify rather extensively. All the shopkeepers seemed surprised to learn that anything had happened. The woman at the gentleman's club wasn't very forthcoming, but she eventually admitted that she hasn't seen Lucius Malfoy in years apparently, his reformation included a decision to be faithful to his wife. She didn't seem to know much of anything says she's seen enough trouble to last a lifetime already and doesn't need to bring more down on herself by harming one of the most revered wizards of our time. She wouldn't identify the man we saw with her something about client confidentiality but she did agree to owl us the next time he shows up so we can question him, as long as we promise not to let on that we're specifically interested in him." He paused, pulling a sheaf of parchment and flipping through it before adding, "That's all we've got so far. I don't suppose either of you suddenly recalled the identities of anyone else we saw?"

"As it happens, Mr Potter," Severus said, "the two foreigners were Ivan Milanovic and Jan Bresnik. Given your obsession with all things Quidditch, I shouldn't need to remind you they're both former Bulgarian Quidditch stars who currently hold political positions?"

"That's why they looked familiar!" Ron exclaimed. "I *knew* I recognized them! It's been driving me crazy that I couldn't place them! Thanks, Professor," he added, sounding more sincerely grateful than Hermione had ever before heard him when he spoke to or, for that matter, *about* Severus.

Severus looked suspicious, but he merely said, "You're welcome, Mr Weasley." He paused. "I have, as yet, had no luck with the others. However, I have several resources yet to examine, so I remain optimistic that I shall quickly discover their identities."

Harry nodded. "All right." He frowned suddenly. "Hermione, how did you exhaust the entire Hogwarts library in a single day?"

Hermione felt her cheeks heat. "Don't forget I've read most of what's there at one time or another, Harry. I simply skimmed through the things I've read before then perused the Restricted Section and the Extra-Restricted Section more closely."

"The Extra-Restricted Section?" Ron asked, sounding confused.

"An area of the library that I doubt you shall ever see," Severus said dryly.

"I go to libraries," Ron muttered, apparently not realizing where the actual insult lay. Hermione decided not to enlighten him.

Severus, however, said sarcastically, "Yes, I'm sure you do, Mr Weasley, but the Extra-Restricted Section contains nothing at all related to Quidditch."

Honestly, did Severus have to behave like an immature twelve-year-old? It had almost seemed like they were all getting along for a minute there. Sadly, the fleeting détente was already gone, as Ron retorted (rather lamely, in Hermione's opinion), "Well, at least I'm not a stupid bat of the dungeons."

Hermione interrupted before they could really get going. "All right, can we focus, gentlemen?" She glared at each of them in turn, adding, "It doesn't really matter if Ron goes to the library or not, does it, since I already looked there and didn't find anything helpful?" To her surprise, all three of them including Harry, who hadn't even been provoking anyone nodded, looking shamefaced. Taking advantage of their silence, Hermione issued instructions. "All right, then, if you three would all just *behave*, we could wrap this up for the night. I, for one, am tired." Once again, they all nodded sheepishly. "Severus and I will work together at Malfoy Manor; Harry and Ron, you'll continue interviewing potential witnesses. Here are sketches of the individuals that we couldn't identify perhaps if you show them around Hogsmeade, someone will know them." She handed them each copies of the sketches.

"Where'd you get these, Hermione? I didn't know you could draw this well." Harry sounded impressed.

"I can't," Hermione said brusquely. "Severus used a spell. Now, as I said, Severus and I will be at Malfoy Manor, most likely all day tomorrow. If you need us for anything, you should be able to Floo-call, I would think." She looked at Severus, who nodded confirmation. "Shall we plan to meet back here after dinner again tomorrow if nothing comes up in the meantime?"

Everyone agreed, and they adjourned for the evening. Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their leave, heading toward the various guest rooms they had been assigned. Severus also left the office, warding it securely behind them. Hermione wondered where he was going, but then he took the staircase that usually dropped people off outside the infirmary, and she realized he was likely going to check on the headmaster's condition.

A short while later, as she prepared for bed, it occurred to her that she was discovering that he cared far more deeply about people than she had previously realized. She wondered if this concern was new, or if she was just noticing it for the first time. Probably both, she supposed. She had always suspected he cared deeply for Dumbledore especially when she had learned the elaborate measures he had taken, to ensure that Dumbledore's planned death wouldn't actually occur. At the end of the war, it had come out that he had hired a Squib who worked as a stunt coordinator in the Muggle film industry to convincingly stage the headmaster's death, then sent Dumbledore into a secret-kept hideaway for the remainder of the war. This ruse might have been less successful if the Purebloods who made up the crew of Death Eaters who had been present on the Astronomy Tower had ever even heard of Muggle cinema, but as it was, they believed what they saw with their own eyes.

She hadn't realized, however, that he might be upset by the idea of her someone he had never particularly liked enduring torture. He clearly had been, however, and his concern for her current well-being also seemed genuine. Based on all he had done in the past to protect her and her friends, she suspected he must have cared somewhat even then. So perhaps the only change was that with the war over, he had less need to carefully conceal his concern.

Apparently, he had hidden depths so well hidden that hardly anyone seemed aware of them.

To Malfoy Manor

Chapter 5 of 11

Lucius welcomes Severus and Hermione to Malfoy Manor; Severus is disconcerted to discover his thoughts of Hermione are uncomfortably kind.

A/N: Thanks so much to everyone who has reviewed. I'm glad you're enjoying the story so far. Thanks also to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for the Britpick. I'll admit that I mucked around with it a bit after she was finished with it, so I apologise for any egregious Americanisms that might have sneaked back in ...

Chapter 5: Malfoy Manor

Severus sat at Albus's bedside, watching the slow rise and fall of the old man's breath. Albus somehow looked frail and fragile in a way Severus had never before seen him. He was very worried if they didn't somehow find a cure soon ... He forced the thought away. Losing Albus was unthinkable.

He focused instead on the reassuring rhythm of Albus's breathing. As long as the man's chest continued to rise and fall, there was still time. He allowed his thoughts to drift to the team responsible for solving this puzzle. Part of him wished he could do it all himself that way, he could be certain it would be done correctly. Of course, doing it right wouldn't help if the solution came too late, which is why he continued to work with the three people he had once fervently hoped never to see again.

Thinking of each of them in turn, he tried to assess their strengths and weaknesses objectively, without regard for his prior experiences of them. Potter had, for the most part, seemed surprisingly focused on the task at hand. After his initial attempt to rush off half-cooked, he had calmed considerably and paid close attention to what Hermione said to him. He had even, for the most part, been relatively polite and respectful in his treatment of Severus. And the boy had, after all, survived Voldemort, so he must be either very strong or very lucky, mustn't he? Perhaps even both. And there was no doubting his devotion to Dumbledore; even after all these years, he still practically idolized the man. All in all, not a bad person to have on the team.

Next there was Weasley. He seemed not to have matured as much as his friend. Severus wondered if that was somehow related to the fact that he still had his family as a safety net. His mother probably still babied him he was, after all, the youngest son. He probably had no incentive to actually grow up, not when his mother was still perfectly content to see to his needs whenever he liked. Potter, by contrast, whatever his faults, had basically had only himself and his friends to rely on from very early on. Severus knew he shouldn't have been baiting Weasley earlier where Potter went, Weasley was sure to follow, after all, and antagonizing any of them wouldn't do their mission any good. Still, he had watched the easy familiarity, the total comfort of the interaction amongst the three friends, and he had felt like an outsider. Even after all these years, he didn't like the feeling, so he had lashed out just a bit, in a feeble attempt to align himself with Hermione to the exclusion of Weasley.

Which begged the question, why did he care if he was an outsider with these three, whom he had never, ever liked? Was it because he was seeing Hermione differently, knowing that she was both powerful and controlled enough to have access to the Extra-Restricted Section? Or because the thought of Bellatrix Lestrange gleefully torturing her when she was barely reaching adulthood nauseated him? Or because she had managed to move past it enough that she was willing to revisit the scene of her worst experiences in order to help the headmaster a man he suspected she was not nearly as devoted to as her friends were? And why did it suddenly bother him so much to know that Hermione and Weasley had once seemed destined for more than friendship? At the time, he had rather easily dismissed that piece of information, as well as Minerva's report of their subsequent decision to revert to platonic friendship, but now the thought of Hermione wasting even a moment of her time and energy on such an immature prat irritated him endlessly.

Or perhaps it was as simple as the fact that so few people trusted him implicitly, and he had discovered today that she might be one of them. She had allowed him to perform the *duco* spell without even asking what might happen if something should go wrong didn't she know that having a wand pointed at one's brain could be a recipe for disaster if the one holding the wand didn't know what he was doing? He suspected she did she was, after all, the brightest witch of her age, wasn't she? Which could only mean that she trusted him enough that there was no question in her mind that he would perform the spell without harming her. And she had clearly been relieved when he told her he would stay and protect her while she researched at Malfoy Manor.

These thoughts were getting him nowhere, Severus thought, still watching the rise and fall of Albus's breath. Even if she trusted him, that didn't mean she thought of him as a potential friend. *But by the end of the meeting, she was treating you exactly the same way she treated Potter and Weasley, wasn't she?* whispered a traitorous voice in his mind. *Bossing you around, telling you to behave yourself almost as if you were just another person she cares enough about to manage ...*

Pushing the thought aside, Severus stood. He looked at his mentor for a moment. Eventually, he whispered, "Good night, Albus. Hopefully we'll have some answers for you by this time tomorrow." He swept off to his quarters to get some sleep.

"Relax," Severus instructed Hermione firmly the next morning as they awaited admittance to Malfoy Manor.

"I'm trying," Hermione replied as the door swung open. A timid-looking house-elf beckoned them forward.

"Master say Tilly should take Master Snape and Miss Granger to the library. Master and Missy come this way."

They followed the house-elf, and Hermione made a point of not looking toward the drawing room, though she was tempted, as she wondered sometimes whether it still looked the same. Or perhaps the Malfoys had redecorated after the war?

The library, had it been in any other family's house, would have been the embodiment of Hermione's dreams. She had always thought the Grimmauld Place library to be wonderfully comprehensive for a private library, but this was at least three times the size and full of bookshelves from floor to ceiling on three full walls, even surrounding the doorway they had just entered. Only the wall with the fireplace at its centre wasn't packed with books, which Hermione could only assume was due to the risk of damage from the proximity to the heat. As she glanced around, trying not to look too impressed, Lucius Malfoy strolled languidly into the room. "Severus!" he said, sounding happy. "And Miss Granger, too, of course. Welcome to Malfoy Manor. May I offer you some refreshment before you begin your research?" Without waiting for a response, he continued, "Tilly, some tea for our guests." Hermione's worry must have shown, because he reassured her, "Don't worry, the books are all protected with various charms, so even if you spill your tea, the books won't suffer any harm. Now, Miss Granger, Severus is quite familiar with my library, so he can ensure that you find what you need without triggering any unfortunate problems."

Severus was apparently growing restless, as he interjected irritably, "Yes, yes, Lucius, we appreciate the access to your extensive resources, but I think we'd just like to get started if it's all the same to you." Hermione fought back a smile. Apparently Severus's low tolerance for social interaction extended to his friends, too.

"Of course, of course," Lucius said smoothly. "Just call Tilly if you need anything. Perhaps you'll take a break at lunchtime and join us? Narcissa tells me we're having poached salmon today."

"We'll see how our research is progressing," Severus said. "I did mention we're under considerable time pressure, didn't I?"

Lucius waved a hand dismissively. "I hardly see how taking time for a proper meal will interfere. If you starve yourself, your efforts are less likely to be efficient. I shall send Tilly for you both at one." He turned and left, nodding to Hermione on his way out.

One o'clock rolled around faster than Severus had anticipated. Hermione largely worked silently, methodically testing books for curses and hexes before opening them and examining their contents. She made copious notes, which was no surprise, and her occasional question or comment didn't annoy him, which was. Most surprising, though, was the way Severus found himself constantly aware of her, even when she was fully engrossed in her reading or her notes.

It was rather disconcerting to find himself watching her from the corner of his eye as he worked his way through Debrett's Wizarding Lineage looking for people who resembled the ones they had yet to identify from the Pensieve memory. Fortunately, the Lineage was self-updating, automatically inscribing births, marriages, deaths, divorces, and the like as they occurred. Better still, anytime someone in the Lineage was photographed, a copy of the likeness was automatically copied into the tome as well.

Unfortunately, that made for a rather bulky book, so Severus wasn't getting through it as quickly as he might have preferred. If not for the fact that he had woken up that morning with clear recall that the wizard he had been trying to remember was Beecher MacNair, a cousin of Walden, he would have felt he had made no progress at all today. He couldn't help thinking he'd have worked faster if Hermione hadn't been so distracting, what with her occasional murmurings as she made notes, and the way she sometimes absentmindedly pushed her hair back from her face or chewed on the end of her quill. Disgusting habit, that, Severus had always thought, so why was he finding himself so utterly *charmed* by it now?

He was just forcing his attention back to the Lineage for what seemed the thousandth time that morning when Tilly popped in to announce lunch. He begrudgingly stood to follow the house-elf from the room, offering Hermione his arm, since Lucius insisted on old-world manners in his home. Hermione asked, "Could I have a moment to freshen up before lunch?"

"Oh, yes, Miss!" Tilly exclaimed, looking distressed as she continued, "This way, Miss! Bad Tilly! Tilly should have offered!" She looked around wildly; Severus resigned himself to witnessing some dramatic self-flagellation.

But Hermione said, "No, Tilly, you must not punish yourself for not asking. If you had, I might have been insulted that you thought I looked like I needed refreshing." Tilly looked sceptical, but she subsided.

Amused, Severus murmured for Hermione's ears only, "That was positively Slytherin of you, my dear." He felt himself flush when he realized that not only had he complimented her, but had actually used an endearment.

Fortunately, she simply smiled with what appeared to be faux modesty and whispered back, "Thank you, Severus. I like to think I've learned *some* subtlety since the days of SPEW."

As she slipped into the small loo the house-elf had led them to, he thought, *Indeed, you have, my sweet* Then he realized he had mentally used another endearment. He was still scowling when she came out a few minutes later.

Progress

Chapter 6 of 11

Lunch with the Malfoys, followed by progress at last. But is it enough?

A/N: Thanks to everyone who has reviewed. And as always, thanks to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for the Britpick. Don't blame her if anything sounds too Yank I can never resist monkeying around with it when I'm getting ready to post ...

Chapter 6: Progress

Lunch was a rather more pleasant affair than she had expected, Hermione reflected later. Lucius and Narcissa had been the consummate hosts, charming, witty, and seemingly fascinated with their unusual guest. Hermione idly wondered whether they had ever had any sort of Muggleborn as an actual guest, rather than a 'guest' (read: prisoner or victim) in their home before today.

They engaged her in light conversation about the Ministry, while carefully avoiding any difficult topics. They asked politely after her family and friends, so she returned the favour and asked after Draco.

At some point, Hermione became aware that there was some sort of unspoken discussion going on between Lucius and Severus. It started when Lucius commented that he had heard good things about her work at the Ministry.

Hermione answered politely, "It's nice to hear that, Mr Malfoy, though I have no idea how you'd have heard anything about my work, considering it's all highly confidential."

Lucius said, "I have my sources, Miss Granger." He appeared ready to say something more, but Severus interrupted.

"This poached salmon is delicious, Lucius." Hermione was surprised by the abrupt change of subject. Turning to glance at Severus, she saw him looking at Lucius with an expression that could only be described as *warning*, as he continued, "Wild-caught, I presume?"

Lucius raised an eyebrow, looking rather surprised for a moment. Then he nodded so slightly that Hermione wouldn't have noticed it had she not been watching carefully for a reaction to Severus's unspoken challenge. "Naturally," Lucius said. "You know I serve only the best to my honoured guests." He then changed the subject again. "How are things at Hogwarts, then, Severus? Any new women on the faculty?" His glance slid quickly to Hermione and then back.

"No," Severus said tersely, glaring harder at Lucius. "Hogwarts is as it ever was, I suppose," he added after a moment.

Hermione glanced at Narcissa, who appeared to recognise the odd communication as well, but other than a single eye roll that seemed to say, "Men!" the older woman ignored it completely. Hermione decided not to bother trying to decipher what might have been communicated after all, they had probably been having silent conversations nearly as long as she herself had been alive, and if Narcissa wasn't worried, she wouldn't be, either. Especially since she knew Severus wouldn't allow any harm to come to her.

The rest of the meal passed in light conversation, without any more cryptic looks passing between the two men, and soon enough, Hermione and Severus were on their way back to the library.

Severus reminded her that he would be happy to assist her in any way she might require, then resumed his perusal of the Lineage. Meanwhile, Hermione spent the next two hours digging through volume after volume on hexes and curses. Periodically, she thought she felt Severus's gaze on her, particularly whenever she found herself forced to disarm a particularly recalcitrant book. She never quite caught him looking, though whenever she let her eyes wander his way (which was far more often than she cared to admit), he seemed thoroughly engrossed in his own reading. Beyond that initial comment about his willingness to assist her, he seemed perfectly relaxed and confident that she could handle the books on her own.

After a while, Hermione began to get frustrated. She felt nearly certain that she had discovered the nature of the blue spell; it appeared to be a relatively simple, though rather obscure, Sleeping Beauty Hex, dark only in the sense that someone would have to know to kiss Dumbledore to wake him had he been hit. The colour of the light in the photo of the hex appeared to match what they had seen. Just to be sure, Hermione had Flooed to the Headmaster's office to look in the Pensieve and confirm it; the colour did look the same, and now that she knew what to look for, she could read the incantation on the man's lips *quiesco complexo amor*. If she was correct, it certainly hadn't hit Dumbledore full-on, but perhaps it had glanced off him? The overwhelming exhaustion Dumbledore was experiencing might be related to such an occurrence, mightn't it?

But that particular hex seemed unlikely to rend someone's magic the way Madam Pomfrey seemed to think it had done to Dumbledore. When she Flooed back to Malfoy Manor, Hermione found Severus pacing expectantly in front of the fireplace. "Well?" he asked without preamble.

Hermione sighed. "I really think that's the hex they used, Severus, but it doesn't explain his symptoms not completely." She fell silent for a moment, wondering where to go from here.

She jumped when Severus said irritably, "That's it? The woman who couldn't manage to write an essay less than double the assigned length has only one sentence to report on this hex?"

Frowning, she said, "I'm not sure what you want me to say, Severus. You always seemed to want me to get to the point back then. I'm telling you, the wizard cast a Sleeping Beauty Hex, but it doesn't explain his symptoms."

"In what way? And how certain are you?" Severus demanded.

"I'm as certain as I can be without having been there to hear the words. The colour matches, and the incantation fits the movement of his lips. As for the symptoms, the exhaustion he reported fits, but he should have fallen asleep. True love's kiss would wake him if he had, and one would expect he'd be back to normal. But that hex should *not* have rent his magic; it shouldn't have affected it in any way except possibly to put it to sleep along with him." She shook her head. "I don't know where to go from here. I can only assume this hex is either only part of the problem or it missed him entirely and I've been looking for the wrong thing from the start. Or maybe it just glanced off him somehow?"

Exhausted herself, suddenly, Hermione fell silent again. She wished she could just go home and have a good cry. All this time wasted, when they didn't have it to spare. Unexpectedly, Severus said gently, "It was the most obvious possibility, Hermione. It could just as easily have been the correct answer. We'd have been fools to start with something more obscure."

Hermione sighed. "I know. You're right, of course. I'm just frustrated and worried. I'll be all right in a minute, I'm sure."

Severus took her gently by the elbow and led her back to a chair. "Relax. We'll have some tea and consider our next step." He called for Tilly, who quickly returned with a tea service. "Have a biscuit, Hermione," Severus said as he poured some tea for each of them. Hermione was surprised that he seemed to know how she liked it.

He handed it to her and she took a sip. "Perfect. Thank you," she said with a small smile as she considered the restorative powers of tea. "Have you had any luck with identifying the other people? Besides Beecher MacNair, I mean?" He had told her of that wizard's identity at breakfast, so she had promptly informed Harry and Ron by means of the Protean Charm.

"Yes, actually, while you were gone, I realised that the one who cast the hex was Octavian Rookwood. He's a distant relative of Augustus who went to Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts. The woman appears to be his wife. She's not English, so I assume he must have met her at Durmstrang."

"Hmmm," Hermione said. "Should I tell Harry and Ron, do you think? Or is that a waste of time, given that it wasn't their hex, anyway?"

"It's not a bad idea for them to be questioned regardless," Severus replied. "Who knows what mischief they've been up to recently, even if the headmaster's situation isn't entirely their doing?"

"Good point," Hermione agreed. She nibbled on a chocolate biscuit, then Summoned her notes and began paging through them again. She began to think aloud. "I wonder if we ought to have someone kiss the Headmaster anyway ..."

"It would have to be true love's kiss, wouldn't it?" Severus pointed out.

"Perhaps, but perhaps not," Hermione replied absently. "Certainly, if he got the full effect of the spell, it would require true love's kiss to reverse it, but since it appears to have been a glancing blow, any kind of fondness might do ..."

"Who do you propose, then?" Severus asked.

"Perhaps Minerva?" Hermione replied. "She's probably known him the longest, and they've always seemed very close."

Severus nodded. "That makes sense," he agreed. "I'll Floo her to let her know."

By the time they had returned to Severus's office for dinner, he was thoroughly exhausted and running out of ideas. Rather than making more small talk at Malfoy Manor, or putting on a good front for the student body, they had elected to share a meal in private and discuss what they had learned so far. For the moment, though, they were both eating quietly. It was rather soothing, Severus thought with some surprise, to share a quiet meal with a pleasant companion.

Having finished identifying everyone they had seen in the Pensieve, Severus had begun to assist Hermione with her research. Between them, they had nearly exhausted the resources of the Malfoy library. One more morning would probably do it, he thought. In some ways, that was good, he supposed, because time was slipping away.

Minerva had, indeed, kissed Albus, and when Poppy had checked him afterward, she had said he was definitely stronger, so it appeared that at least part of the problem had been resolved. Still, though Poppy no longer feared for Albus's life, she was now concerned that if the countercurse wasn't applied promptly, his *chi* would rearrange itself in such a way that it would fill the gaps left by the rending of his magic. At that point, the countercurse's effectiveness would be limited because there would be no place for the restored magic to go. Not disastrous or life-threatening, thank Merlin, but it would certainly mean that Albus would be far less powerful than he had been before.

Eventually, Hermione pushed her plate away and broke the silence. "I keep feeling like there's got to be something we missed in the Pensieve. I know we looked at it until we all agreed we had everything, but there just has to be something else there. Do you think that we were perhaps a bit too focused on Rookwood and his hex?"

Severus thought for a moment. "Perhaps we were. As I said earlier, it seemed the obvious place to start. We could look again before Potter and Weasley arrive, if you like." Even as he spoke, the fireplace flared and the two young men tumbled out.

"Are we late?" Potter asked, after greetings had been exchanged all around.

"No, we saved you some dinner," Hermione replied. "How did things go today?"

"We spoke with everyone else in the Pensieve. The Rookwoods and Beecher MacNair were all arrested after we questioned them under Veritaserum. Rookwood admitted to casting the Sleeping Beauty Hex like you thought, Hermione. Did the counterhex work?"

"Yes and no," Hermione replied, after a quick glance at Severus. He nodded for her to continue; he was tired enough to be content with letting her lead the discussion. "The Headmaster is stronger, but he must have been hit with something else, as his symptoms can't all be attributed to that particular hex. We were just about to discuss what else we can try."

Weasley asked, "What ideas do you have?"

"We were going to look at the memory again. Now that we won't be focused so heavily on the three in the forest, maybe we'll see something we missed. What about the Bulgarians? Nothing there, either?"

"No," Potter said. "They voluntarily both submitted to questioning under Veritaserum and provided Pensieve memories of their interaction with Dumbledore. It matched what we saw; there was nothing hidden or non-verbal or anything." He paused. "I'm out of ideas, unless another look at Dumbledore's memory suggests something. I really thought that hex must've hit him."

Hermione said, "I know. I guess it must've glanced off him a bit, since the kiss did help." She paused. "I guess we look at his memory again. Other than that ... well, I suppose we can try earlier in the day ... Maybe it was slower-acting than we considered."

Weasley suddenly said, "Damn! I can't believe we missed that."

Severus finally spoke. "Missed what, Mr Weasley?"

Looking a bit nervous, Weasley replied slowly, "We should have realised from the beginning that the hex Rookwood threw couldn't have been responsible for all Dumbledore's symptoms." He looked around at them, shaking his head. "Remember what Dumbledore said? He felt the effects of the magic *before* he decided to hurry back to Hogwarts. With the timing of Rookwood's hex, he wouldn't have had time to feel it and decide to Apparate back if that was the only issue."

A/N2: According to an online English-Latin translator: 'Quiesco' translates to sleep; 'complexo' translates to kiss (literally, embrace); and 'amor' translates to love. Thus, the incantation 'quiesco complexo amor' is my attempt to express a spellcaster's intention to make the spell's target sleep until a lover kisses him/her. I'm quite certain that it isn't proper Latin, but it does have a nice ring to it, yes? ;)

An Answer?

Chapter 7 of 11

In the aftermath of Ron's realisation, Severus and Hermione engage in a heated discussion (and we finally earn our rating).

A/N: Sorry for the delay. Some of the things in this chapter happened a lot earlier than I originally planned, so I was trying to rewrite it. I didn't count on Severus and Hermione being so stubborn (they just wouldn't let me follow my outline).

Anyway, thanks to everyone who's been reading and especially to all who have reviewed. As always, gratitude to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for taming my rampant Americanisms (though some may have sneaked back in when I was trying to force Hermione and Severus to slow down!). Hope you like this chapter!

Chapter 7: An Answer?

Chagrined, Severus acknowledged the boy's point with a dip of his head, even as Hermione and Potter both groaned. "Damn!" said Potter.

"I should have seen that," Hermione said, sounding disgruntled as she slumped back in her chair. "I can't believe all the time we wasted!"

"It wasn't wasted," Severus said firmly, his urge to reassure Hermione winning out over the conflicting urge to lash out at Potter and Weasley (irrationally, since he hadn't recognised the timing problem, either). "He was hit by Rookwood, at least a little, so it's for the best that we solved at least part of his problem. Now we just need to deal with the rest of it."

Hermione seemed to take heart at his words, pulling herself together and sitting up straighter in her chair again. "Right," she said, nodding at him. "Thanks for reminding me."

"You're welcome," Severus replied with a small smile. Catching sight of Potter and Weasley's slack-jawed expressions, he frowned at them. Strangely, this seemed to reassure them somehow, as they smiled and returned to their dinners.

Severus glanced back at Hermione, who was watching him thoughtfully as she sipped her tea and waited for the rest of them to finish their meals. Catching her eye, he raised one eyebrow in silent question. In response, she flushed scarlet and looked away. *Interesting*, Severus thought.

They looked in the Pensieve several more times, but none of them had seen anything new. Hermione still felt certain that there was something more she was missing, but the rest of them agreed that if they had missed anything, they weren't going to find it by looking over and over again. The boys took their leave. After a short silence, Hermione said quietly, "Well, I suppose it's back to Malfoy Manor tomorrow, though I'm not sure what good it will do when we don't even know what we're looking for."

Severus replied soothingly, "We'll know it when we see it, Hermione. Don't worry."

"I can't help it!" Hermione cried in frustration. "If the Headmaster doesn't recover ..." she shuddered and didn't finish the thought. "We're running out of time!"

Severus said, "We'll figure it out. He'll recover."

Hermione glared at him. "How can you be so calm about this?"

"What good does it do to be otherwise?"

"Don't give me that," Hermione spat, suddenly irrationally angry. "We're missing something critical, and the Headmaster, one of your closest friends, is possibly never going to get well, and you don't care! *Why* don't you care?"

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. Or maybe the right thing, since Hermione had suddenly discovered she was very much in the mood for a fight. Severus's eyes narrowed as he obliged her. "Don't tell me I don't care, Hermione. I care more than you can possibly comprehend. Just because I choose to hold on to rational thought on the assumption that it will get us further than irrational raving doesn't mean I don't care."

"Well, then, show it!" Hermione yelled, knowing that she was being completely unfair but unable to stop herself. "Repressing everything can't be helping matters! It will cloud your thinking if you don't deal with it!"

"I *can't* deal with it!" Severus shouted back. "I don't have time! It's a morass, and if I try to deal with it now, it will drown me and I won't be any good to Albus or you or anyone else!"

"Well, then, what are we supposed to do?" Hermione yelled. It was suddenly too much for her and she wilted. She felt tears fill her eyes, and she impatiently wiped them away. She whispered her question again. "What are we supposed to do? I don't know what to do."

Severus's voice was quieter, too, when he responded. "I don't know, Hermione," he said softly, reaching out tentatively to touch her shoulder. She couldn't stop herself; she turned into him, sliding her arms around him as she hugged him to her. His arms came around her, and she leaned into him, drawing several shuddering breaths as she tried to calm down. She felt some of his strength flow into her, and suddenly she knew she couldn't be alone.

"Severus?" she asked in a small voice, without looking up at him.

"Hmmm?" he asked in a soothing voice.

"Can I stay with you tonight?" She felt him stiffen, but she rushed ahead. "I can't stand to be alone. You won't even know I'm there, I promise. Please?"

"Hermione " Severus began, but she cut him off.

"Look, I know you don't like me, but if I'm alone, I'll just worry and I won't sleep, and if I don't sleep I won't be any use at all tomorrow "

"Hermione," he interjected. "It's not a good idea for you to stay with me. Not because I don't like you," he added hurriedly. "It's just not a good idea."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, sensing that there was something he wasn't telling her. She pulled back slightly and looked up at him. To her surprise, his cheeks were flushed and he looked embarrassed.

"It's just not," he insisted. Hermione watched him for a long moment, gradually becoming aware of several facts. His heart was racing. He was holding her rather more

securely than she would expect to be held by someone who didn't like her, though he simultaneously seemed to be carefully keeping space between their lower bodies. He seemed to be avoiding her eyes.

Her own heart was racing. Her skin was tingling everywhere their bodies touched. She was suddenly aware of him as a man in a way that she had never been before.

Finally, the meaning of all these facts hit her, and she breathed, "Ohhh." He seemed about to pull away, so she made a split second decision. Stretching up on her toes, she tentatively touched his lips with hers.

He pulled back in apparent shock as his eyes flew to hers. He stared for a long moment as she waited, putting every ounce of her longing into her eyes.

Just when she was sure he was going to pull away, he asked softly, "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes," she began, but he didn't give her a chance to say anything more. He slammed his lips onto hers. After a stunned split second, she began kissing him back, allowing herself to be swept up into his kiss.

She vaguely heard him spell the door locked as he shoved everything off the desk and lifted her onto the newly bare surface. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I can't wait."

She tugged at his shirt and trousers even as he yanked at hers. "I don't care," she replied, and she didn't. She couldn't remember ever being so aroused in her life. Somehow, they managed to get her clothes off; his only got as far as hanging open. She stared who knew he would have such a gorgeous chest under all those buttoned up robes?

He whispered again, "I'm sorry," and he thrust into her. She could only marvel at how deliciously full and right it felt.

"Don't ... apologise," she managed between thrusts. "Marvellous."

And it was. She lost all coherent thought as she became mired in the marvellous sensations of shagging Severus Snape. It didn't take long before she was screaming his name as she tipped over the edge into the best orgasm of her life. She was only vaguely aware of his hoarse shout of completion moments later.

Severus forced himself to stir sometime later, primarily because their position couldn't be any more comfortable for her than it was for him. She was still sprawled across the desk, with his rapidly softening cock still inside her as he slumped over her. He would be mortified at his state of half-dress later, he was sure, though at the moment he was too sated by the best shag he had ever had to care. Still, his back and knees could only manage this position for so long, so he dropped a kiss on her cheek and stood up. With as much dignity as he could muster, he righted his clothes.

Hermione didn't move right away, so he said, "All right, you may come and stay with me, though I recommend getting dressed before we make our way to my chambers."

She smiled slightly. "Give me a moment. Just now I feel like my muscles don't have the energy to coordinate themselves and move me."

Severus glanced at her, allowing himself a smug smile at the thought that he could relax her so thoroughly. The sight of her, sprawled bonelessly across the desk, with his come dripping out of her, was making him aroused again. "I could levitate you," he offered teasingly. Then suddenly it hit him. "Damn!" he said.

"What?" she asked, frowning as she slowly sat up.

He felt his cheeks flush. "Unless you want to risk the possibility of an unexpected addition to our lives, you'd better hope I have some contraceptive potion in my stores."

"Oh," Hermione said, flushing, immediately understanding his point. He liked that he didn't have to explain it to her. "We forgot to cast the charm." She stood and began dressing.

"Yes," he nodded. "And now it's too late." He was more concerned that she would be upset than actually upset himself. The idea of a child with Hermione wasn't nearly as worrisome as he would have thought.

"Right," she said. Then, tentatively, "What are the chances you have some potion?"

"Reasonably good, unless some miscreant or other found their way in and stole it." She turned pink.

"Right," she mumbled. "I can't believe we were so careless. You don't like children, and I'm not ready for them."

"Who says I don't like children?" Severus asked, frowning. "I like children. Except the dunderheads. *My* children, should I ever have any, won't be dunderheads. Nor, I would imagine, will yours."

She grinned suddenly. "I do believe that was a compliment, Severus." She finished dressing and turned toward the door. "Shall we " she began, but immediately cut herself off, her eyes flying back to the Pensieve suddenly. "That's it! That's what we missed!"

Severus frowned. "What is?"

"The children!" she exclaimed. "In the Pensieve, we didn't think anything of the children!"

"You think the children hexed Albus?" Severus asked sceptically. "For what reason? And what makes you think they have that much control over their magic?"

"That's just it, Severus! I *don't* think they have that much control over their magic. I think whatever they did, it was an accident!"

A/N2: As far as I can recall, there's no canon regarding contraception of any kind, so I figured effectiveness might be dependent on timing for some types but not others (just like some muggle methods have to be used ahead of time or in the moment, while others are effective up to a few days afterward).

Understanding

Chapter 8 of 11

Severus and Hermione discover the likely cause of Dumbledore's troubles, but Severus doesn't want to keep his mind on business.

A/N: Thanks to everyone who has read and reviewed (I hope to catch up on answering them soon). Thanks also, as always, to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for the Britpick. As usual, I was messing with it after she did her thing, so any errors are mine.

Chapter 8: Understanding

Hermione's realisation re-energised her, and she immediately dove into the Pensieve to watch the scene again. As she watched, she saw the spark that flew from the wand the toddler was waving and hit the sleeve of Dumbledore's robes. She could see that the child was singing as he waved the wand around, but unfortunately, she couldn't make out the song.

When she was finished, she glanced at Severus and said, "Let's go."

"Go?" he asked, catching her hand and halting her as she headed for the door. "Where exactly did you want to go?"

"To find the children, of course, and ask them about their activities yesterday."

Severus brought her back to reality. "Hermione, it's already ten-fifteen. Children that age won't be awake, nor is their mother likely to wake them to discuss this with you."

"Oh," Hermione said, deflated. "I suppose you're right. What shall we do, then?"

"Well," Severus said dryly, "Might I suggest we go check my stores for a contraceptive potion before it becomes too late to be worthwhile even if it's there?"

Hermione felt her cheeks grow warm. "Oh, right, we should probably do that." She was a little surprised that he seemed so sanguine about the whole thing, but she decided not to test his patience further. She headed for the door again, tugging Severus after her but not pulling her hand away. She half-expected he would let go when they reached the corridor, but he didn't. She found herself pleased, though she suspected his willingness to engage in such a public display was due to both lingering happy feelings relating to having just had a good shag, and the utter lack of people (or ghosts) anywhere in the corridor.

They arrived at Severus's private stores, and he disappeared inside. Moments later, he returned with a dusty flask. Hermione looked at it sceptically. "Are you sure that's still good? It looks rather old."

Severus sighed. "It *is* rather old, but it's all we've got and it's still within the standard shelf life."

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, really. It's fine," Severus said. "I thought you trusted me?"

"I do," Hermione said, and drank the potion, then made a face. "Ew, that's awful! Can't you do something about the flavour?"

"No," Severus said. "Now, I thought you were tired." He began herding her toward a door in the far wall.

"That was before I had an adrenaline rush. Now I'm rather restless. Maybe we should take a walk or something."

Severus didn't answer directly. Instead, he said, "My quarters are this way. I have a much better way to help you burn off your adrenaline, I promise."

When Severus woke the next morning, he found himself breathing into and out of a bushy mop of hair. This wasn't as awful as he might have predicted, since said bushy mop of hair was attached to a delightfully feminine figure that was half-draped across his naked chest. The stir of her breath across his skin was, however, giving certain parts of his body very definite ideas about what the first order of business for the day ought to be.

Unfortunately, when Hermione woke up moments later, she very clearly had different ideas about how the day should start. She sat up rather suddenly, narrowly missing hitting his chin with the top of her head. Glancing around quickly, she caught his eye and said, "Let's go, Severus! We have to go see the children today!"

She bounded out of bed with far more energy than seemed appropriate, given the myriad activities they had engaged in throughout the night, and hurried off to the loo. Sighing, Severus followed more slowly. *His* idea would have been a lot more fun, he reflected, but he supposed they should get this interview out of the way first. *Then again*, Severus thought, as he heard his shower start running, *maybe I can convince her of the efficiency of shared showers ...*

Forty minutes later, Severus was feeling significantly more cheerful about the day ahead. He had persuaded Hermione to slow down and enjoy their morning a bit by pointing out that showing up at the break of dawn would hardly endear them to the children or their parents. He had even convinced her that breakfast would be advisable before they set off for Hogsmeade. All in all, the day was going very well thus far.

As they approached the cottage they had seen the woman and children enter, Hermione began to feel anxious. "What if they don't remember what they did?" she asked Severus nervously.

"It was two days ago," Severus pointed out. "If they don't remember, surely their mother will."

"Maybe," Hermione said doubtfully.

"Relax, Hermione," Severus said, rubbing her back soothingly. "We'll figure it out. We've got most of it already. Now we just have to fill in a few details."

"Right," Hermione said, relaxing marginally. "Thanks, Severus. It's funny, you know. Usually, with the boys, I'm the calm, rational one. The voice of reason, if you will. I wonder why I'm so crazy now."

Severus's lip twitched. "Hermione, if you didn't fill the role of calm, rational one in your little trio, no one would. None of you would ever have survived your first year if you had relied on Potter or Weasley to do it." He shrugged. "With me, you probably fall apart because you know you can."

"That makes sense, doesn't it?" She stretched up to give him a quick peck. "It's really nice to be able to count on you for sanity, Severus. It makes for a lot less effort on my part, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I'm sure it does," Severus replied dryly. "Don't worry, I'm content to provide your voice of reason when you need it."

"Thanks," Hermione said, feeling much better. By now they had reached the front porch. Hermione raised her hand to knock when Severus forestalled her.

"Wait!" he whispered urgently.

"What?" Hermione whispered back.

"Listen!" Stilling, Hermione listened, and what she heard surprised her, because it seemed so trivial. Two young voices were singing a nursery rhyme that Hermione hadn't heard in years.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are!"

"Do you think ?" Hermione started to ask, but Severus stopped her.

"Shhhhh. There's more. Let's see if they know any other verses."

Apparently, they did, though Hermione had only ever heard the first one. Most of them seemed innocuous enough, praising the star for giving light when the sun was gone. But then they reached the last verse, and it was there that they found the answer to what had happened to Dumbledore.

"Twinkle, twinkle in the night
You must keep your light so bright
Now your twinkle starts to fade
So we offer you our aid!
Twinkle, twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are!"

A woman's voice called something to the children, and the voices fell silent at last, and Severus whispered, "Let's go. I think we know what happened, don't you?"

"Yes," Hermione sighed. When they were back in the street, she said, "Now that I think of it, it did seem that he was missing his usual twinkle more than anything. I just assumed he wasn't feeling particularly cheerful because of the seriousness of the situation, but no matter how bad things have been at times in the past, he always had that twinkle in his eye." She paused. "Do you suppose she stopped them before they got to a reversal stanza?"

"Perhaps," Severus said, "But if there is one, I'm sure we can find it elsewhere, and that way, we can make certain it's correct. Children sometimes muck up the words to songs, and we have to get this right in one try."

"True," Hermione agreed. "So, I suppose it's back to the library for us."

"Indeed."

When they arrived back at Hogwarts at mid-morning, Hermione said, "Where do you suppose we're most likely to find the actual song?"

"I would think a book of nursery rhymes would be our best bet. Perhaps Lucius still has Draco's children's books."

"Actually," Hermione thought aloud, "I'd be more inclined to think the Weasleys would have a lot of them. With so many children and so little money, I suspect they'd be inclined to hang onto whatever books they get. Bill and Fleur probably have the entire Weasley collection at the moment. And even if they don't, Bill is a possible source of information on this type of accidental curse, don't you think?"

"Hmmm," Severus replied. "Can you contact him? Is he even in Britain?"

"Molly said something about them being back at their cottage for a while. Fleur is pregnant again, you know."

"No, I didn't know. Where's the cottage?"

"It's in Cornwall, but it's Secret-Kept so that's all I can tell you. I can go and be back quickly ..."

"We should go together." Severus wasn't entirely sure he wanted Hermione spending any time with Bill Weasley. The man was too rugged for his own good.

"Surely you don't think I need protecting from Bill and Fleur?" Hermione asked, surprised.

Well, not from Fleur, anyway. Unless, of course, she decides you're trying to steal Bill from her ... She's probably vicious in defending her marriage, and anyway, she might have hormone-induced insanity ... Severus doubted Hermione would appreciate his actual thoughts, so he said instead, "No, but if we go together, they're much less likely to keep you longer than you need to be there. You're too polite. I'm not."

She looked like she wasn't sure if he was kidding, but she answered him seriously. "True, but if I explained the time-sensitivity, I'm sure they'd ..."

"It's a surer thing if I'm there," Severus insisted.

"All right, but Bill is the Secret-Keeper, so I guess I'll have to owl him and see if he'll come to us or send us a written direction for you."

"Fine. Do you need parchment? Ink? A quill?"

"No, of course not," Hermione said. "I thought I'd be taking notes at our interview with the children, so I have them with me. May I borrow your desk to write him?"

"Of course," Severus said smoothly. He thought briefly of their activities last night on that very desk. Perhaps he could persuade her to christen his chair, too, once her letter was on its way. They would have time to kill while waiting for a reply, after all.

A/N: FYI, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" has several verses, but I made up the one that Hermione and Severus identify as having caused all this trouble.

Competition

Chapter 9 of 11

Severus is less than thrilled when Bill Weasley arrives on the scene ...

A/N: Thanks to everyone who is reading, and especially to those who are reviewing. It always makes my day to get an alert that I have a review! Thanks, as always, to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for the Britpick. Of course, I once again tweaked it after she Britpicked, so please forgive any Americanisms that might have sneaked back in.

Chapter 9: Competition

By mid-afternoon, Hermione was relaxing in bed with Severus. He had somehow made it sound perfectly reasonable for them to spend the day shagging like bunnies while they waited to hear back from Bill. Severus was currently dozing beside her, apparently needing to recover for a bit after the activities of the past few hours. Slipping out of bed, Hermione pulled on his dressing gown, which she had spied draped across the foot of the bed. She was just heading for the loo when the Floo flared in the sitting room. Reversing direction, she hastily transfigured the dressing gown into a Muggle dress and went to see who was there.

Minerva called, "Severus?"

"Hi, Minerva," Hermione replied. "Severus isn't available just now. We were just waiting to hear back from Bill Weasley. How is the Headmaster?"

"The same, Hermione," Minerva said, sounding tired. Hermione was a little relieved. If Minerva hadn't been so weary, she probably would have wondered why Severus would leave Hermione alone in his private quarters. Hermione had a strong suspicion that such behaviour was unusual for the ex-spy. She forced her attention back to the Deputy Headmistress, who was asking, "Do you think Bill will be able to help?"

"We hope so. We think we've discovered what happened, and we think Bill may have more information about how to counter it."

"Let's hope so. Have you heard from Harry or Ron?"

Hermione started guiltily. She hadn't even thought to notify her friends that they had figured out what happened. Severus was proving to be very distracting. "No, I haven't. I should contact them so we can all get up to date on our progress." Her stomach growled, and she felt herself flush with embarrassment.

Minerva frowned. "Did you get caught up and skip lunch? You need to keep your strength up, Hermione."

"Yes, well, you know how I get when I'm involved in research," Hermione managed.

"I'll have the house-elves bring you something."

"Have them bring something for Severus, too, will you please? I don't think he thought to eat, either." *Unless you counted ... well, no, that certainly didn't count, did it?*

She forced her attention back to the conversation. "Certainly, dear. You two are so alike in some ways," Minerva mused aloud, with a small smile, then shook her head. "I'll let you know if Bill arrives. Please keep me posted on your progress."

"Of course, Minerva."

The older woman disappeared from the fireplace, and Hermione turned to go back into the bedroom, only to discover Severus leaning against the doorframe. He was wearing nothing more than black flannel pyjama trousers, and Hermione's heart skipped a beat at how utterly, perfectly sexy he looked. "Severus, you startled me!" Hermione said lightly. "How long have you been standing there?"

"A few minutes," Severus said, shrugging languidly. "Is that my dressing gown?"

"Er ... yes?" Hermione replied sheepishly. He raised an eyebrow. "Minerva was at the Floo and I didn't have time to get dressed. I'll change it back."

"Of course you will," Severus said. "Or I could do it for you." He straightened and took a step toward her. With a flick of his wand, the dress became a dressing gown once more. Then, with a flick of his wrist, the belt was tugged open.

"Again?" Hermione asked, caught off guard but amused and aroused despite herself. "You didn't tell me you were insatiable," she said, shivering slightly when he began nibbling on her neck.

"I could hardly be expected to tell you something I didn't know," Severus pointed out logically.

"You mean to tell me you were never insatiable before?"

"Never," he insisted against her collarbone. "Now, we probably have limited time before someone else comes looking for us. Do you really want to spend it on conversation?"

"No, I suppose not," Hermione replied as she pushed him back into the bedroom, leaving the much-abused dressing gown in a heap on the floor.

"If we don't appear at dinner, Minerva is sure to come looking for us," Hermione argued, once again adorned in his dressing gown as she stood, hands on hips, glaring at him.

Severus had every intention of appearing at dinner, but he was too thoroughly enjoying provoking Hermione to admit it just yet. Who could have predicted how much fun it would be to tease her like this? He said dismissively, "We'll tell her we're at a critical stage in our research. She's too worried about Albus to question it."

"No, she's not," Hermione replied indignantly. "She noticed we weren't at lunch and she specifically told me to be sure to take care of myself properly. She's sure to come looking if we aren't at dinner. And why haven't we heard from Bill yet?" she demanded, as though Severus was somehow to blame.

"I assume he's looking for information before he replies," Severus said. "Come back to bed."

She glared at him. "I'm not letting you talk me back into bed, Severus. We have to be ready when Bill replies. And what about Harry and Ron? We haven't even told them our theory about what happened!"

"They'll be here after dinner. We'll tell them then. In the meantime ..."

"In the meantime, we're getting dressed and going to dinner in the Great Hall," Hermione interjected firmly.

"I'm feeling rather wrung out," Severus said as seriously as he could manage. "You've been so demanding all day that I can't even muster the energy to get out of bed. I'm

not some young buck, you know."

"Severus!" Hermione protested; he half-expected her to stamp her foot. She must have caught the amusement in his expression, because suddenly she smiled slyly. "Severus," she said, in a cajoling tone that shot straight to his groin. "If you have any hope at all that I'll come back here after our meeting and get back in that bed with you, you'd better be ready to go to dinner in five minutes."

He stared at her, trying to gauge her level of determination. "All right, fine. I'll be ready in five minutes." Her smile turned smug. "But only because I always planned to go to dinner anyway," he added. Hermione just rolled her eyes.

Bill Weasley swaggered into Hogwarts in the way only a cursebreaker could carry off. He arrived just as dinner was winding down in the Great Hall; his entrance still managed to be dramatic, Hermione thought affectionately as she watched him pause in the doorway and sweep the room with his eyes until they lit on her.

"Hermione!" he called, making a beeline for her. She stood to greet him. "You should have contacted me earlier," he chided. He kissed her cheek and hugged her in greeting. "Where's my little brother?"

"He's due for a meeting in half an hour," Severus interjected, sounding annoyed, before Hermione had a chance to answer. "The headmaster assembled the team he wanted," he added.

"Still," Hermione said, shooting a warning look at Severus, "we're glad you're here now. Aren't we, Severus?"

Severus appeared to think about it, and Hermione was tempted to kick him. "It depends," he finally said. "Did you bring anything helpful?"

Hermione had to restrain herself from hexing Severus, but fortunately, Bill just laughed. "As sociable as ever, I see, Severus. Good to know that some things never change."

"Have you eaten, Bill? I'm sure we can get you something if you haven't," Hermione said.

"No, thanks, I'm fine," Bill replied. "Mum's been sending over more food than we know what to do with lately, what with Fleur not feeling up to cooking."

Hermione smiled. "Last I heard, Fleur didn't like cooking in the first place."

"She doesn't," Bill laughed. "But now she has an excuse Mum finds acceptable, so she's been milking it while it lasts."

Hermione laughed with Bill. "Good for her," Hermione said.

"If you two are quite finished *socialising*," Severus sneered, "we have work to do."

"Right. I probably ought to have a look in the Pensieve, so perhaps the Headmaster's office first?"

"We moved the Pensieve to Severus's office," Hermione said. "It was more convenient than running back up to Albus's office every time we thought of something else to check."

"Lead the way," Bill replied so cheerfully that it took most of Severus's willpower to restrain the sudden urge to hex him.

Severus watched the easy interaction between Bill and Hermione, wishing the cursebreaker anywhere else in the world. An odd reaction, he thought, considering he had always found the eldest Weasley to be the most tolerable of the lot. Rather acceptable for a Gryffindor, all in all.

Now, suddenly, he found himself disliking the way the younger man teased and flirted with Hermione, and the way she giggled and blushed in response. He had a nearly overwhelming urge to throw her over his shoulder and carry her back to his private quarters, where he would be pleased to remind her exactly who she should and shouldn't be flirting with.

He forced himself to remain outwardly impassive, however, since he knew Fleur Weasley kept her husband on a tight leash, and anyway, Hermione didn't strike him as the type to get involved with a married man or to flirt with someone while sleeping with someone else.

Still, they were too friendly for his taste. They had watched the Headmaster's Pensieve memory a few times already, and now their heads were bent close together as they examined Hermione's transcription of the song the children had been singing that morning.

Finally, Bill asked, "You're sure this is the exact wording?"

"Yes, Severus and I both agreed it's correct," Hermione replied confidently.

Bill glanced at Severus, who nodded confirmation. "We each wrote it out as soon as we got back to Hogwarts, then compared. We independently wrote identical verses."

"All right," Bill said, standing up. "Let's go back to Shell Cottage and see what we can find in the kids' nursery rhymes."

"Okay, let's go."

"Have you forgot we're expecting Tweedledum and Tweedledee at any moment?" Severus asked.

"Oh. Right," Bill said. "When are they supposed to be here?"

"Twenty minutes ago," Hermione replied, sounding annoyed.

"Well, only one of us needs to wait here," Bill pointed out. "Why don't two of us go ahead, and the third can bring them along when they arrive?"

Severus stood, determined that Hermione and Bill would not be going anywhere without him. Therefore, there was only one viable possibility. "Hermione should wait here, while you and I go ahead." Hermione appeared ready to protest, but Severus said, "For two reasons first, I've never been to Shell Cottage, while you have, so it makes more sense for me to go with Bill. And perhaps more importantly, it's never a good idea to leave me alone with those particular young men. Or have you forgot their behaviour in our recent meetings?"

"What do you mean *their* behaviour?" Hermione asked pointedly. "I'd say you were *all* acting like idiots. I don't know why I expected better from you." She glared at him. "However, your point is nevertheless valid. Go ahead and I'll follow with Harry and Ron, if they ever get here."

The Cure

Chapter 10 of 11

A solution to Dumbledore's problem is found and implemented. Does it work?

A/N: Thanks, as always, to everyone who is reading and reviewing. Thanks again to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for the Britpick. Errors are, of course, mine.

Chapter 10: The Cure

Severus was relieved that it hadn't required more argument to get their agreement to what he was certain was the only acceptable plan. Thus, when he and Bill arrived at Shell Cottage a short while later, after a quick walk to the Hogwarts gates and an equally quick Apparition to the coordinates Bill provided, he was in an unusually good mood. As a consequence, he was rather more courteous than usual as he greeted Fleur.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley, we appreciate your willingness to assist us in our research," he said politely.

"Of course we want to help. It's just horrid that the Headmaster is so very ill. I put the children down to sleep in a guest room for tonight so that your research would not disturb them." She led the way to the nursery, where she pointed out the bookshelves. "This is about half of what we have. The rest is in boxes in the attic. Perhaps you will start here, Professor, while Bill brings the rest down?"

"Certainly," Severus said smoothly. He very much preferred that option to mucking about in a dusty old attic himself. Bill and Fleur took themselves off, and he immediately cast a Summoning Charm. "*Accio* books referring to 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.'" Several popped off the shelves and flew toward him, so he quickly followed up with, "*Alveus*." After catching the books in the basket he had conjured, he carried them back downstairs to the sitting room, where he began examining each one in turn.

When Harry and Ron finally Flooed into the Headmaster's office a total of forty minutes late, Hermione was tapping her foot impatiently. "What took you so long?" she demanded.

"Sorry we're late," Ron said offhandedly.

"Yeah, the Director insisted on an update. We tried to make it quick, but he wanted every detail. He wasn't happy that none of the leads we've followed have gone anywhere," Harry added.

"Well, we have to get to Shell Cottage. We think we've figured out what happened."

"What?" Ron asked. "And why didn't you tell us?"

"We weren't entirely sure until Bill looked, too. And I'll tell you on our way to the gates." She hustled them out the door and down the stairs.

By the time they Apparated, Harry and Ron were up to date on everything they had discovered. Thus, when they arrived at Shell Cottage, they were eager (for once) to look through books to find an answer to their problem.

They found Severus and Bill in the sitting room. Severus was paging through a book while Bill was using enlarging charms on some shrunken boxes in the far corner of the room.

"Oi!" Ron called. "How's the search coming?"

Bill looked up and said, "It'll go faster if you get over here and help me with this." Severus glanced up but said nothing.

Harry and Ron hurried over to assist him, while Hermione approached Severus. "Which ones have you looked through?"

"Those are done," he replied, pointing to a stack to his left. "These are not." He gestured toward a stack on his right. Hermione summoned a chair and took the top book from the stack, wondering distractedly where Fleur was.

The five of them worked in silence for a while, until Fleur entered with a tea tray hovering behind her. Setting it down on a side table, she said, "I thought you might like some refreshments." Naturally, Ron was first to reach the food. Fleur asked, "Professor, may I bring you something?"

"No, thank you," Severus said politely. So politely, in fact, that Hermione's attention was caught by it. She certainly hoped he wasn't yet another male under the spell of the blonde beauty. She glanced at him to see if he was staring at the other woman the way every other male on the planet usually did. He must have felt her eyes on him, because he met Hermione's eyes and raised a questioning eyebrow.

Not wanting to admit that she might be feeling just a tiny bit jealous, Hermione shook her head slightly and returned her attention to the book on her lap.

Two hours later, when so many books were scattered around the sitting room that it was difficult to tell who had read what, Hermione finally found something useful. It wasn't in a children's book at all, but in a dusty tome about the history of magic that had caught her eye because it seemed so out of place. It was apparently focused on one of the many important topics that was never covered in the Hogwarts curriculum because of Professor Binns's obsession with the Goblin Wars.

The relevant chapter described how during the years of anti-witch hysteria throughout Europe and the Americas, some creative witches and wizards had discovered that their magic could be temporarily hidden away using seemingly innocent children's verse. "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" was just one example of this—the magic was literally hidden in the stars so there would be nothing in the aura that a witch-hunter could sense. Other songs transferred the magic to everyday objects, including such diverse objects as teapots ("I'm a Little Teapot"), toy spiders ("Itsy Bitsy Spider"), and jack-in-the-boxes ("Pop! Goes the Weasel!"). She scanned the page, looking for reference to how the magic was retrieved when the danger passed.

Three pages later, she finally found it. "Severus, look at this!" She pushed the book toward him.

He read through it. "Bill, come and see this."

Bill hurried over with Harry and Ron close on his heels. Taking the book, he paused to glare at his brother, who was trying to read over his shoulder while Harry watched expectantly. "Sorry," Ron said, "but hurry up."

"Give me a minute." Bill turned his attention to the book. When he finished, he handed the book to Ron, looking thoughtful as the two younger men read together. He said to Severus, "A very clever plan our ancestors had, wasn't it?"

"Indeed. Brilliant in its simplicity, really."

"I suppose we should go back to Hogwarts and see if conditions are proper to do it tonight," Hermione offered.

"Yes, that would probably be wise," Severus agreed.

"Who's going to do it?" Ron wanted to know.

"It will have the most power if we all cast it simultaneously. That's what we do at Gringotts with the most powerful curses, anyway. Let me just tell Fleur we're going." He hurried from the room.

As soon as he returned, they all Apparated back to the Hogwarts gates. As one, they turned to look skyward. Ron was first to break the silence, "It seems clear enough, doesn't it?"

"Looks good to me," Harry agreed.

Hermione was the first to begin striding toward the castle, calling over her shoulder, "Yes, but we'd better hurry. You know how quickly the weather can change in Scotland."

Severus caught up quickly. "I'll go get the Headmaster and Poppy if you'll try to find Minerva and Filius. One more would be even better, so we'd have nine."

Bill chimed in. "Shame Fleur is too far along to Apparate. What about Professor Sprout?"

Severus nodded. "Anyone will do, really. We have several powerful people already, so it's just a matter of rounding out the circle."

"All right, I'll go find Minerva, Filius, and whoever I can find for a ninth."

"Good. Harry, Ron, and I will make the circle while you two round everyone up. We'll see you at the Quidditch pitch."

They hurried off to complete their various tasks.

Hermione hadn't been able to find Professor Sprout, but she had managed to round up Minerva, Filius, and Madam Hooch. They arrived just as Severus was placing the headmaster in the centre of the circle.

"All right," Severus said. "Everyone please take your places. All we have to do is cast a powerful Summoning Charm simultaneously, directing the magic toward the circle. It should recognise and resume its proper place. The incantation is *Accio magus navitas*. Is everyone ready, or does someone need that repeated?" He looked around the circle. No one indicated any problem, so he continued. "First, we should try to raise our energy level as high as possible. The simplest way to do this is by deep breathing more oxygen equals more energy, according to the book we found." After several minutes of deep breathing, Severus asked, "Now, to concentrate our energies, please hold your wand in your right hand and touch the shoulder of the person to your left with your left hand." When everyone had complied, he continued, "All right, if everyone is ready, I'll count down and we'll all give the incantation." Upon their affirming nods and raised wands, Severus said, "On three. One ... two ... three!" As soon as he said the last number, the entire group called out, "*Accio magus navitas!*"

A bright gleam of light flashed in the sky and plummeted toward them. Hermione watched in awe as it streaked straight into the circle and into the headmaster's still form at the centre. Within seconds, he was sitting up. No one said a word; they all seemed stunned at how readily that had worked. "Well, that certainly feels wonderfully refreshing," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling.

A/N: According to an online Latin translator:

"alveus" = "basket"

"magus" = "magical"

"navitas" = "energy"

All's Well that Ends Well

Chapter 11 of 11

Dumbledore learns what happened, Severus and Hermione learn each other's thoughts about the future, and Harry and Ron learn something they'd rather not know ...

*A/N: Here's the final chapter. A final thanks to Cat (quaffswinegaily) for the Britpick, and to everyone who has read, alerted, favoured, or reviewed. I'm considering taking a reader's suggestion and writing a companion piece (what **could** Severus and Hermione be up to in the Extra-Restricted Section?!), so keep an eye out!*

Itchy, my friend, I hope you've enjoyed your story! Thanks for the prompt it was a lot of fun to write!

Chapter 11: All's Well That Ends Well

Everyone surged toward Dumbledore, surrounding him and exclaiming in delight at his clearly improved health.

Poppy called, "I must examine the headmaster, so please give us some room!" They largely ignored her.

"I feel fine, Poppy. Never better, in fact."

Still, Poppy alternately cajoled and bullied everyone until they finally assisted her in moving Dumbledore to the hospital wing, where she thoroughly examined him. She soon pronounced him in perfect health, though she still insisted he must spend the night in the infirmary so she could keep an eye on him.

As soon as the waiting group received word of his recovery, they hurried to his bedside, welcoming him back and expressing their delight that they had been able to restore him to health. Albus expressed curiosity about what had happened and how they had fixed it and why he had gone to sleep in the infirmary and woken on the Quidditch Pitch. To Severus's secret delight, Bill decided to leave the explanations to the others, saying he didn't want to leave Fleur alone for too long. Madam Hooch also took her leave, commenting she had Slytherin and Gryffindor third years in the morning, so she needed her rest.

The rest of the group began talking all at once, until Albus interrupted with a laugh, "One at a time, please. Severus, perhaps you would oblige?"

"Certainly, Albus. It all began with a pair of children singing a nursery rhyme while playing with wands they had somehow acquired ..." He explained as succinctly as possible, with the others occasionally interjecting additional information where they felt it warranted. He gave Hermione most of the credit for realising the children were involved, but he glossed over what they had been doing just before she had that revelation. He could only hope no one noticed that both he and Hermione appeared unaccountably warm when he described that part.

Eventually, upon hearing of the Summoning Charm that had restored him to health, Albus commented, "What a clever, strange way to do it, Severus. To draw the magic all the way back from the stars would require a lot of power. How did they manage if they had hidden all of it?"

"Apparently, several people stored their magic in smaller, more local objects, such as teapots or children's toys. The person who blended most effectively with the Muggles of the time someone who was perceived as beyond suspicion would retain just enough magic internally to be able to retrieve the rest of his or her own from the storage object. Then, once that person's magic was back in place, he or she would be available to assist others. Only the people who were most worried about being persecuted went so far as to hide their magic in the stars, since it took the combined efforts of at least three spells, and preferably three times three, to effectively retrieve it. We think it had such a negative effect on you due to both the imprecision of the wand movement and the Sleeping Beauty Hex that hit you so soon afterward."

"Fascinating," Dumbledore said. "I wonder what other forms of magic have been lost to legend and nursery rhymes over the years. Perhaps we should research it and add it to the curriculum ..."

Hermione interjected, "Oh, that would be wonderful, sir! I'd be happy to assist with the research should you decide to go forward with it."

"Of course you would," Ron said dryly, and everyone laughed, even Hermione.

"Perhaps we could work on that together," Severus suggested smoothly. He ignored the startled looks this elicited from everyone except Albus and Hermione herself. He didn't care what anyone else thought clearly, this was the perfect project to solve the problem he had begun puzzling over now that Albus was well: how to ensure that he would spend a significant amount of time in Hermione's company? "We did, after all, work quite effectively together on this problem."

"What a wonderful idea," Dumbledore agreed happily, and it was settled.

Eventually, people began drifting off to find their beds. Minerva left first, clearly exhausted after the strain of the last few days. Soon after, Filius and Poppy took themselves off as well, leaving only Severus, Dumbledore, Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Hermione wished the boys would leave, so she could talk to Severus alone, but they showed no signs of excusing themselves any time soon, and Hermione suspected they were planning to see her home on their way out. Finally, she decided to take things in hand herself. "I'm exhausted," she began. "I wonder if I might stay here at Hogwarts for one more night, Professor Dumbledore? If I Floo home now, I'll have a thousand things to do before I get to sleep."

"Of course, of course! No need to rush out. You know you're all welcome here any time you like."

"Great!" Ron said, standing. "We'll walk you to your room, Hermione."

"Oh ... er ..." Hermione stammered, trying to think of an excuse to go with Severus instead. She caught his lip twitching in amusement before he came to her rescue.

"Hermione, I believe you left your notes and some books cluttering up my sitting room. If you want them before you leave Hogwarts, you should get them now, as I will not be available to retrieve them with you in the morning."

Hermione just managed to restrain a conspiratorial grin as Ron muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "git" under his breath, and Harry glared at Severus. She said very seriously, "Oh, I really do need those. We should go now, if you don't mind, as I'm anxious to get to bed as soon as possible."

"We'll walk with you," Harry said, standing also. "Right, Ron?"

"Right."

"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione said firmly. "Your rooms are in the complete opposite direction. It's perfectly safe for me to find my own way."

They looked ready to protest, but Severus said, "Don't worry, gentlemen, I shall endeavour to ensure that your friend gets herself safely to bed."

"See?" Hermione said. "Off you go, then." She shoed them out into the corridor, calling a good night to the headmaster as she went. Fortunately, they were too accustomed to following Hermione's orders to continue to protest, and they headed off toward their quarters before Severus had finished saying good night to the headmaster and joined her in the corridor.

The entire walk to Severus's quarters was accomplished in silence. By the time they arrived, Hermione was beginning to wonder if she had misread the situation and he actually just wanted her to get her things and go back to her own quarters.

"So," she said a bit awkwardly, "I really should find my notes and books and things and ... er ... head back to my quarters."

"You'll do no such thing," Severus growled, herding her toward the bedroom as he began loosening the fastenings of his robes. "As I recall, we had a bargain. Something about you returning to my bed tonight if I was ready for dinner on time?"

She grinned, relieved. "Oh, I thought maybe, now that the headmaster is all right ... well ... I wasn't sure ... especially with everyone seeing us leave together ... Harry and Ron are going to be difficult about this if we ... well, you know ..."

"Upsetting those two dunderheads is hardly a deterrent," he said softly in her ear, making her shiver even as she protested the appellation.

"They're not ... ohhh ..." she moaned as he began nibbling on her neck. After a moment, she forced herself to try again. "... not dunderheads ..." She wrapped her arms around his neck and began kissing him in earnest.

She felt him smile against her lips. "We'll debate that later," he whispered.

"Much later," she agreed with a contented sigh.

As she drifted off to sleep (very much later), she heard him whisper, "Now that I've got you, I'm definitely keeping you, Miss Granger, whatever your dunderhead friends think. Or anyone else, for that matter." The last thing she remembered of that night was feeling him kiss her forehead.

Severus woke once again to find himself breathing into a bushy mop of hair. It was, like last time, attached to a delightfully curvy female form. Fortunately, there was no need to hurry out of bed this morning. While Hermione had been saying good night to her friends, Severus had paused to ask the Headmaster for a day or two to recover

from the stress of the past few days. Dumbledore's eyes had twinkled as he had happily agreed that Severus should take the rest of the week if he liked.

He began to lightly stroke Hermione's naked back, and eventually she began to stir. "G'morning," she mumbled, tilting her head back to look at him sleepily.

"Good morning," Severus replied. He pushed her hair aside and kissed her then began nibbling on her neck. Soon, she was writhing and moaning beneath him. He found himself rather amazed at his good fortune this pretty, smart, powerful witch responded so passionately to *him*, the 'greasy git of the dungeons.'

Yes, he was definitely going to do his best to keep her, he thought, as they dozed in the aftermath.

A while later, Hermione stirred again, propping her chin on his chest to look at him. "Did you mean it?" she asked without preamble.

"Mean what?" he asked, perplexed.

"Last night, you said you wanted to keep me, no matter what anyone thought."

Severus felt his cheeks grow warm. "I thought you were asleep," he grumbled. "And anyway, what if I *did* mean it?"

She smiled. "Then I'd say that's a very good thing, since I'm definitely planning to keep *you*."

"Then we're in agreement," he murmured, kissing her once more. Then he sighed. "I suppose the dunderheads will be looking for you if you aren't at breakfast."

She smiled. "They're not dunderheads, but yes, I'm sure they will." She paused. "What time is your first class?"

"Not until next week," Severus replied. At her questioning look, he added, "Albus has allowed me the week to recover if I like."

She grinned. "Want some company?"

"Most assuredly," he replied, pleased.

An hour later, as they sipped tea in bed, Hermione said suddenly, "There's something I've been meaning to ask you about."

"You have a question? I'm shocked." His voice was dry, but there was no sneer, so Hermione didn't take offence.

"I know, I expect I'll probably have to revive you with smelling salts any moment. Nevertheless, what I want to know is what all that was at lunch with Lucius the other day?"

"You'll have to be more specific than 'all that' if you expect me to have any idea what you're talking about."

"You and Lucius seemed to be having some sort of unspoken conversation. What was it about?"

Severus's eyes widened and he flushed slightly. "Nothing important, I assure you."

"Well, if it wasn't important, why won't you tell me?"

Severus muttered something under his breath.

"What was that? I didn't quite catch it."

"If you must know, he was trying to get you to unwittingly tell him about your work at the Ministry. He didn't really mean anything by it, of course it's just what he does. A habit, really."

"Oh, so you were warning him to stop? That's sweet."

Severus frowned. "I'm not sweet."

"Of course you aren't. Now, I'd like to have a shower. Care to join me?"

Severus agreed with alacrity, relieved that he hadn't been forced to reveal the rest of what had been communicated in that silent conversation. No, she definitely didn't need to know that Narcissa had been after him for months to find a nice witch and settle down, or that Lucius had apparently concluded Hermione was the perfect choice. After all, Lucius would be quick to realise he could only benefit if his longtime friend were to align himself *very* closely with a war heroine.

Severus *could* have told Hermione all this, of course, but why bother? She was satisfied with the other part of the conversation, and he couldn't have her wondering if his reasons for wanting to keep her related to anything other than true physical and mental attraction.

He'd much rather have her focused on other things for the foreseeable future.

They were just getting out of a shared shower when the banging started. Ron's muffled voice came through the door. "Snape! We know you're in there!"

"Let us in!" Harry added.

Severus looked at Hermione. "Are you ready for this?"

She shrugged. "We knew it was coming. Go let them in before they give me a headache with all that racket."

The banging and shouting continued as Severus approached the door. As he reached it, Ron called, "What'd you do with Hermione?"

Severus opened the door before answering. "I'd advise you not to ask questions for which you won't like the answer."

"What does that mean?" Harry demanded.

Hermione, with her hair still wet and once again wearing Severus's dressing gown, stepped out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. "He means that it's none of your business what he did with me. Or what I did with him, for that matter."

"You ... and ... and ... *him*?" Harry sputtered, looking shocked.

Ron turned ghostly pale, looking back and forth between Severus and Hermione and opening and closing his mouth convulsively.

"Yes, Harry. Severus and me. Now, if that's all, we'd really like to be alone. I'll owl you in a few days." She took advantage of their shock to push them back out into the corridor. As she was shutting the door, she heard Ron mutter something about needing to be obliviated.

Smiling fondly, she turned back to Severus. "Now, what did you want to do with your week off?"

His smirk was full of satisfied glee. "I believe I need rest. Lots and lots of rest."